The Murder of Maria Bickford: Fashion, Passion, and the Birth of a Consumer Culture

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The discovery of the charred corpse of a young woman, Maria A. Bickford, at a disreputable boarding house in the West End of Boston in late October 1845 led to the successive trials of a wealthy young rake, Albert J. Tirrell, for murder and arson. From the beginning, the affair aroused great public interest and excitement in Boston. The city's numerous daily newspapers and other local periodicals provided extensive coverage of the case over a period of many months; a number of biographical accounts of both victim and suspect appeared in the newspapers or were issued as pamphlets; and detailed trial synopses were reported in the daily press, in weekly periodicals, and in separate pamphlets. Those popular literary treatments of the case offer fascinating insights into the culture of antebellum America, illuminating issues of class, gender and especially consumption.[1]

Journalistic coverage of the Bickford affair was much more extensive and sustained than it would have been had the tragedy occurred just twenty years

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earlier. That heightened attention reflected the emergence during the 1830s of cheap urban daily newspapers, the so-called "penny press," that catered to a mass audience of middle- and working-class readers by offering greater coverage of local news, especially crime. For the first time, paid journalists were regularly sent out to cover local stories of human interest. As in contemporary British newspapers, the low tragicomedy of the daily police court and the high melodrama of major criminal trials, particularly those of prurient interest, were among the primary objects of journalistic attention. The rise of the "penny press" and related print ephemera, based in large part on the great marketability of crime accounts and trial reports as literary commodities, was simply one aspect of the much broader development of a mass consumer culture in antebellum New England.[2]

That new pattern of popular consumption was curiously manifested in published accounts of Maria Bickford. Since the murdered adulteress and prostitute was at once a criminal and a victim, it was initially unclear how the press would treat her. As it turned out, literary responses to the sensational case presented two sharply divergent images of the dead prostitute, each associated with a popular contemporary stereotype of the "fallen woman."[3] Sympathetic observers portrayed Bickford as a *sentimental victim*, while hostile commentators depicted her as a *depraved seductress*. Those divergent views of Bickford's character were, in turn, associated with correspondingly divergent depictions of an emerging consumer culture. Some accounts pictured the slain woman as a tasteful and sensitive consumer; others described her as a wasteful and undisciplined spendthrift. Much as antebellum commentators portrayed the female character as tending toward the polarities of pure virtue and complete depravity, so did published accounts depict Maria Bickford's consumerism as embodying either genteel taste or extreme vulgarity.[4] Yet even in offering radically different assessments, all commentators presupposed the literacy of contemporary readers in a new semiotics of material consumption.

Such an emphasis on the consumer habits of a victim, or an offender, rarely if ever appeared in New England crime accounts before the second quarter of the nineteenth century. The ministers who produced scores of execution sermons between 1674 and 1825 portrayed and judged their subjects on the basis of their past misdeeds and spiritual prospects, not on the cut of their clothing or the qualities of their commodities. The authors and editors of "last speech" broadsides and longer criminal (auto)biographies of the late colonial and early national years showed little sustained interest in the consumer habits of condemned offenders or their victims. Nor did the relatively skimpy newspaper treatments of crime during those earlier periods typically evaluate felons as fashion plates, or their prey as genteel consumers. In fact, the preoccupation with rampant consumerism evident in the Bickford case was something virtually unknown to crime coverage before the antebellum period.[5] The cultural implications of that attention to Bickford *as consumer* will be the subject of the following essay. But before addressing the Bickford affair itself, it may be helpful to describe the

economic, social and cultural transformations that provide an essential context for understanding both the life of Maria Bickford and the literary responses to her death.

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Many of the inhabitants of late eighteenth-century New England lived in *relatively* self-sufficient rural households that (with the help of neighbors) produced much of their own food, clothing and other material necessities. It was a domestic economy aptly symbolized by the crude homespun garments painstakingly constructed by countless farm wives and daughters.[6] However, during the first half of the nineteenth century, New England was transformed by a complex process of agricultural change and economic diversification, as thousands of young men and women, among others, left rural areas to pursue new economic opportunities in growing factory towns and commercial centers. Within just a few decades, the heart of a largely rural and agricultural region had become predominantly urban and industrial.[7]

The transformation of economic production achieved by the growth of commercial agriculture and industrial manufacturing was accompanied by an equally significant revolution in material consumption. As late as 1820, household production of clothing and other domestic necessities was the norm throughout much of rural New England.[8] With the onset of industrialization, that dominant pattern of home production and consumption rapidly disintegrated. Increasingly, such possessions as food, clothing and furniture were not objects produced by the men and women who used them, but commodities purchased from others outside of the home and only then deployed or consumed within the household. Habits of material acquisition once largely restricted to urban elites diffused both down the social scale to the middling and even working classes and across the regional landscape into rural communities and farm households.[9]

Those changes resulted in the widespread abandonment of home production throughout the region, a trend reflected in answers to a questionnaire on manufacturing distributed by Secretary of the Treasury Louis McLane in 1832. Respondents to the survey from throughout New England reported sharp decreases in household manufactures during the previous eight years, with many estimating declines of between fifty and ninety percent.[10] That trend continued during the following decades; between 1840 and 1860, the per capita value of household manufactures declined by an additional thirty-five percent in Massachusetts and by more than fifty percent in Maine.[11] The rapid abandonment of home manufactures and the corresponding influx of consumer products into farm households was a key aspect of the "extension of urban society to rural America," a development that Richard D. Brown has described (without reference to issues of consumption) as "one of the central events of the first half of the nineteenth century."[12]

Although textiles led the way, all sorts of household goods rapidly tumbled down the urban social scale and across the rural landscape. As one scholar has noted: "The evidence of material culture demonstrates a great expansion of consumer goods aimed at a middle-class market in the decades after 1830—ever more elaborate fashions, furniture, decorative arts, carpeting, china, glassware" and so forth.[13] That surge of consumer products was marketed by a correspondingly growing number of urban retailers who displayed and sold their commodities from increasingly elegant and imposing shops and emporiums.[14] The result was a revolution in consumption similar to that described by Neil McKendrick and others in regard to late eighteenth-century England.[15] It was, as Daniel Horowitz has suggested, nothing less than the "birth of a consumer society," that is, the emergence of a society in which the majority of inhabitants, both urban and rural, routinely bought the bulk of their household goods—and actively sought to purchase an ever expanding array of material necessities and luxuries.[16] Indeed, by the middle decades of the nineteenth century, the traditional "age of homespun" had largely given way in New England to an early phase of the modern consumer age.[17]

That transformation in the relationship between producers, consumers and commodities had a particularly revolutionary impact on the lives of New England women. As the processes of material production were increasingly removed from the home, many wealthy, middle-class and even working-class women gradually shifted from being experts in the production of household goods to being specialists in the purchase, deployment and consumption of an ever widening universe of material necessities and luxuries.[18] Even those young women of modest means who chose, or were forced by economic necessity, to transfer their traditional function as producers out of the household and into the burgeoning textile mills of the region seem to have been touched by the new consumer mentality. Stories written by the mill-workers themselves reflected a lively interest in the material trappings of an expanding middle-class culture, while old-fashioned moralists deplored the tendency of young female operatives to squander their wages on "gew-gaws and finery."[19]

Perhaps even more appalling to such moralists were those young women, often of rural backgrounds, who transformed *themselves* into saleable goods for the enjoyment of male consumers. Although Boston had long been notorious for its prostitutes, Barbara Hobson has pointed out that legislation enacted in Massachusetts during the mid-nineteenth century reflected "an awareness of prostitution as an increasingly commercialized trade with more middlemen and merchandisers."[20] At least one antebellum commentator also applied the language of modern commerce to fallen women by characterizing youthful prostitutes as a "marketable commodity."[21] Yet that image may convey too passive an impression of the prostitutes, who themselves increasingly acted like aggressive entrepreneurs. According to one outraged moral reformer, base women thrust their calling cards into the hands of young men in stores, while debauched candy vendors boldly solicited passing clergymen on the streets.[22] Overall, the pedlars

of sex in cities like Boston provided antebellum consumers with an ever expanding array of products and services, ranging from the vicarious titillation offered by prurient crime coverage in penny dailies, trial reports and other cheap pamphlets, to the more direct, and somewhat more costly, gratification promised by disreputable women in brothels, dance halls and houses of assignation.[23]

Not surprisingly, then, the movement toward a consumer culture was seen by many contemporary social observers as an issue with profound moral implications. Not all antebellum spokesmen viewed the trend in the same light; on the contrary, there seems to have been a wide range of opinion. In the first chapter of his study of attitudes toward consumerism in modern America, Daniel Horowitz sketches the views of a number of representative antebellum commentators. At one extreme were such conservative moralists as Francis Wayland, a prominent philosopher and educator, who stressed the moral dangers of consumerism, particularly for the lower classes. Using such catch phrases as "reckless expense," "sensual self-indulgence" and "insatiable striving for more," Wayland portrayed rampant consumption as a slippery slope leading to both poverty and damnation. At the other extreme were such boosters of industrialism as Daniel Webster, who regularly assured their countrymen that the emerging system of consumer manufacturing could produce both "material comforts" and "moral development."[24]

In fact, the complex transformations of the first half of the nineteenth century were extremely disruptive of popular norms and collective values. According to Edwin C. Rozwenc, rapid social changes of the period between 1820 and 1850 not only altered "traditional conceptions of individual morality," but also "deranged the previously established bases of personal identification and social status."[25] In an increasingly fluid social world, Americans grasped uncertainly for new standards of behavior and new criteria of moral judgment. As Karen Halttunen has demonstrated, many middle-class Americans of the mid-nineteenth century turned to fashion as one key indicator of personal worth.[26] Antebellum arbiters of genteel taste, convinced that dress was a reliable "index" of character, sought to transform "the pursuit of fashion" into "a form of moral self-improvement."[27]

Literary responses to the death of Maria Bickford suggest that the use of consumer habits as an indicator of personal worth was not restricted to clothing alone, but could be applied as well to a wide assortment of material commodities. Published accounts of the dead prostitute indicated that consumer goods might serve at once as symbols of personal identity, measures of individual character and currencies of moral judgment. Such literary treatments illustrate Jean-Christophe Agnew's implied characterization of the birth of a consumer culture as a "process of cultural change whereby commodities become the unacknowledged reference points for the accounts we give of ourselves."[28] Along those lines, this essay will adopt a working definition of a "consumer culture" as one in which fundamental assessments of personal identity, character and worth become routinely, even instinctively, intertwined with images of commercial acquisition and material consumption. With that historical background and

conceptual framework firmly in mind, let us now return to the life and death of Maria Bickford.

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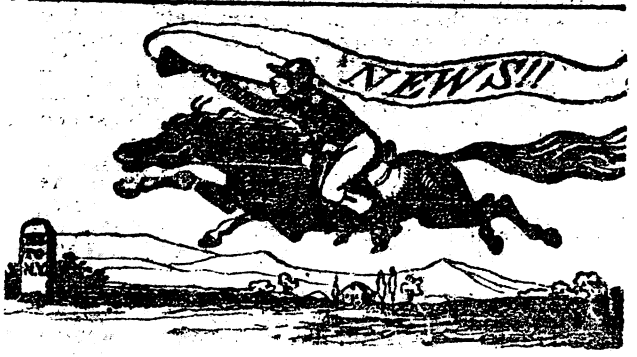
At about nine o'clock on the morning of Monday, October 27, 1845, the second edition of the *Boston Daily Mail* reported the initial details of a gruesome murder and attempted arson near the Beacon Hill section of the city. It seemed that a woman named Bickford had been killed several hours earlier at a house on Cedar Lane; the victim's throat had been "*cut nearly from ear to ear*" and her bed had been set on fire. Later that same day, at two o'clock in the afternoon, the *Mail* produced an "extra" edition, providing more sensational details. The disreputable dwelling where the mutilated body was discovered had long been occupied by one Joel Lawrence and his wife, who had used it in recent years as a "house of assignation." The victim was Maria A. Bickford, a young married woman from Maine, separated from her husband for some time; according to the *Mail*, she had been a woman of "slight, graceful figure, and very beautiful."[29]

At about five o'clock that morning, Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence and a girl living in the house had heard a shriek upstairs, followed by a heavy thud; immediately afterwards, someone had stumbled down the stairs and rushed out the door of the building. Bickford's body was discovered in an upstairs room shortly thereafter. The dead woman's jugular vein and wind-pipe had been completely severed, her hair had been partly consumed by fire, and her face had been "charred and blackened" by flames. A number of fires had been set in the room where the body was discovered, the walls of the room were splattered with blood, a nearby wash-bowl contained a quantity of bloody water, and a bloodstained razor was found at the foot of her bed. Some articles of men's clothing were found in the room, along with a letter initialed A. J. T. to M. A. B. According to the *Mail* reporter, the murder had almost certainly been committed by Albert J. Tirrell.[30]

Additional details that emerged at the coroner's inquest the following day only strengthened that inference. Tirrell had frequently visited Bickford during the days preceding her death. On the afternoon before the murder, one of the residents of the house had heard the couple exchange angry words. Although Tirrell subsequently left the house, he returned later that evening and was seen in Maria's room at about nine o'clock. At about five-thirty the following morning, shortly after the murder and arson, a man matching Tirrell's description arrived at a nearby stable, admitted that he had "got into a little difficulty," and asked for a horse to carry him out of town. Finally, a number of witnesses identified a vest and a cane found at the scene of the crime as belonging to Tirrell. On the basis of that web of circumstantial evidence, the coroner's jury concluded that Bickford had been murdered by her illicit lover, Albert Tirrell.[31] Unfortunately for the authorities, Tirrell had fled and was, for the moment, nowhere to be found.

SECOND EDITION.



MONDAY, OCT. 27, 1845—9 A. M.

Horrible MURDER and Attempted Arson in Boston!

A woman was murdered this morning about 4 o'clock, at a house in Cedar Lane, near Cambridge Bridge, recently occupied as a house of prostitution by the notorious Julia King. Of the present character of the house we are not informed.

The murdered person was a Mrs. Bickford; and her husband is now absent in the state of Maine. *Her throat was cut nearly from ear to ear*, and the bed set on fire in order to conceal this act of atrocity.

We are requested not to give further particulars until the holding of the Coroner's Inquest, which we trust will develop the mysteries of this horrid affair, and be the means of bringing the murderer to justice.

One of the first journalistic reports of the death of Bickford, which appeared in the *Boston Daily Mail* within hours of the crime. Illustration courtesy of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

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As the newspapers printed a succession of false rumors concerning Tirrell's whereabouts over the following weeks, they also began examining the life and character of his alleged victim.[32] Although all seemed to agree that Maria Bickford had been young, beautiful and fallen, competing accounts offered very different versions of her life and suggested widely varying degrees of sympathy. Significantly, a number of those accounts featured direct or indirect references to Bickford's consumer habits and possessions. Such, for example, was the early news account first published in an extra of the *Daily Mail* on the afternoon of October 27, less than twelve hours after the tragedy. Having already described the blood, fire-damage and horribly mutilated corpse at the murder scene, the reporter concluded his story with a very different picture of the victim's chamber.[33]

"Everything in the room occupied by this young, beautiful and fascinating, but fallen woman . . . testified to the sex and taste of its unfortunate occupant," he wrote. "A work-box, cosmetics of various kinds, a parasol, and a pair of white kid gloves, together with one shoe of delicate dimensions, lay carelessly upon the table as though their owner had but just left them. It was truly a painful spectacle, and one which will not readily be effaced from the memory of those who looked upon it."[34] The reporter thus sought to evoke sympathy for a murdered prostitute by artfully describing the consumer commodities deployed around her room. Bickford may have been a fallen woman, but she was nonetheless a woman of refined feminine taste and sensibility, as demonstrated by such consumer possessions as a parasol, a shoe of delicate dimensions, and a pair of white kid gloves; or so, at least, the reporter strongly implied.

An account of the murdered prostitute's life appearing a few days later, also in the *Daily Mail*, further elaborated on the image of Maria Bickford as a *sentimental victim.* The story claimed that Maria was an "unsophisticated girl" who had been lured into adultery shortly after her marriage by a depraved companion. Although her conduct and character had deteriorated thereafter, she had managed to pause before the brink of "utter degredation and ruin" and was about to be reclaimed by an old lover, who planned to elope with her to western New York, at the time of her sudden demise. Shortly before her death, Bickford bought "a new dress and a number of little trinkets," showed her new possessions to a female acquaintance, and announced that "she was tired of the way she had been living, and was resolved that her future life should atone for her past follies."[35] Bickford's determination to reform was thus linked in the reporter's narrative with her purchase of a number of consumer commodities.

The narrative continued with an elaborate description of Bickford's death chamber, as follows:

THE BOSTON TRAGEDY.

TIRRELL MURDERING MARY ANN BICKFORD.

Graphic representation of the alleged murder of Bickford by Tirrell from the *National Police Gazette*, a nationally-distributed periodical devoted to crime coverage, published in New York City. Illustration courtesy of American Antiquarian Society.

> She lay before us a ghastly and bleeding corpse. Her dishevelled hair and her torn and lascerated body, and the strange disorder of things near the bed, gave evidence of a dreadful struggle between life and death. A little distance from the bedside was a small work-table, the drawer of which was partly open, exhibiting several rings and trinkets worn by her the day before; and upon the mantel were arranged with the most scrupulous neatness, various costly articles of perfumery and cosmetics, used to add something to the attractions of that once beautiful person. A small open trunk stood beneath the mantel, in which were discovered a bundle of letters, which appeared to have been but recently received—several of them were adressed to Maria... and one was written in language the most endearing and refreshing to the soul, and signed, 'An Affectionate Mother.'... Upon the wall near the bed were hung a number of prints, in neat gilt frames; and over one of the pillows, yet wet with blood, lay a daguerreotype miniature of the deceased.... It was taken in a riding-dress and cap, and looked uncommonly lovely and innocent.
>
> Who knows the thoughts that but a few hours before filled that breast, now scathed by the element of fire! Who knows the joys, the promised hope, that revealed itself for future life, and whispered... peace and good tidings of great joy.... She was the victim of jealousy and revenge, and he who committed the bloody act, cannot go unpunished.[36]

Much more dramatically and elaborately than the earlier story, this second account portrayed Maria Bickford as a *sentimental victim.* And, once again, the reader's sympathies were evoked by an artful inventory of the consumer commodities tastefully arrayed throughout the room: the scrupulously arranged perfumes and cosmetics, the package of letters, the prints in neat gilt frames, and the daguerreotype miniature in which Bickford looked so "lovely and innocent." The clear implication was that those commodities were, at very least, evidence of refined taste and feminine sensibility, and, perhaps, even of aesthetic virtue.[37] The reporter apparently expected that at least some of the middle- and working-class readers of his penny newspaper would be willing to sympathize with a fallen sister *and* acknowledge her gentility.[38] More fundamentally, he must have assumed that his audience was attuned to a new semiotics of genteel consumption.

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Yet not all newspaper treatments were as sympathetic toward Bickford as the early stories in the *Daily Mail.* On the contrary, some accounts portrayed the slain woman less as a *victim* than as a *villainess* in her own right. For example, one story

in the *Boston Daily Whig*, a relatively inexpensive subscription paper that probably appealed to a slightly higher class of readers than the *Mail*, suggested that Bickford had been responsible for the deaths of at least two men.[39] One had allegedly been stabbed with a dirk and then cruelly poisoned, the other had been dispatched by unspecified means. The *Whig* reporter explicitly attacked the *Mail* for trying to drum up sympathy for the murdered woman.[40] Another later account, actually published in the *Mail*, portrayed Bickford as a villainess even in regard to her relationship with Albert Tirrell, the man who had presumably murdered her. According to that report, based on an interview with a relative of the suspect, Tirrell had been an "unfortunate young man" who was naturally "generous, warm-hearted and affectionate to his friends." Indeed, he would probably have become a "useful and respected member of society" had it not been for the "terrible . . . influence of a depraved and fascinating woman."[41]

The newspaper's informant provided anecdotal evidence in support of his claims. The person had accompanied Bickford and Tirrell on a trip to New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore the previous year and reported that Bickford had repeatedly forced "her unfortunate and infatuated paramour" to endure "the most reckless extravagance and dissipation." He went on to claim that Bickford's "selfish extravagance and riotous living" had eventually "despoiled her victim of every dollar of his patrimony" and to suggest that Tirrell, financially depleted and fanatically jealous, may have finally murdered Bickford in order to prevent her from becoming the mistress of another man. Here was an account that portrayed Bickford not as a *sentimental victim* but as a *depraved seductress*. Further, it suggested that Maria Bickford's consumer appetites and expenditures were evidence not of good taste and feminine sensibility, but of "reckless . . . dissipation," "selfish extravagance" and "riotous living," all leading toward financial ruin and violent death.[42] Such an account could only have confirmed the hostility of conservative moralists like Francis Wayland toward the symptoms of rampant consumerism.

The linkage between female depravity and unbridled consumerism was even more graphically illustrated in the trial of Albert J. Tirrell for murder. A few new details will suffice to set the scene. Recall that Tirrell had fled from the house on Cedar Lane early on the morning of October 27, 1845. Although he succeeded in leaving the state and crossing the border into Canada, he was finally arrested in December on a vessel off the coast of New Orleans. The following February he was back in Boston facing a murder charge. As they would on future occasions, the press took note of the suspect's fashionable clothing; at his arraignment, he reportedly sported a light mulberry dress coat, black pants, and a satin vest.[43]

At the March trial the prisoner's legal team, led by the former U.S. Senator and renowned criminal attorney Rufus Choate, offered a three-pronged defense to counter the strong circumstantial case against Tirrell.[44] First, Choate and his associates claimed that Maria Bickford had probably cut her own throat, since suicide was the natural death of a prostitute. Second, they argued that if Bickford had been murdered, she may have been murdered by someone other than Albert

Title page of the *Boston Daily Mail*'s pamphlet report of Tirrell's murder trial, with dignified portrait of the nattily-attired defendant. Illustration courtesy of American Antiquarian Society.

Tirrell. Third, they insisted that even if Bickford had been murdered by Tirrell after all, he must have committed the crime while sleep-walking and hence was not legally responsible for her death. But beyond those formal lines of defense, much of the evidence offered by witnesses seemed designed to sully the reputation of the murdered woman. Indeed, a succession of friends and relatives of Tirrell, called to the stand by the defense, recalled one incident after another that linked Bickford's unbridled consumerism with selfishness, extravagance and even violence. Here are a few excerpts from that testimony, extracted from contemporary trial reports, based on daily newspaper coverage, but later published as cheap pamphlets for a mass audience:[45]

> "I knew her for fifteen months.—She always had weapons in her possession, dirk knives and razors . . . . She drank intoxicating liquor to excess, and I have often seen her intoxicated. She took laudanum twice. . . . She was sometimes calm and pleasant, then all at once would be in a high state of excitement. In Congress Hall at Philadelphia, she threw a wash-bowl at Albert, and a decanter of liquor into the fireplace."[46]

> "She drank intoxicating liquors, and I have often seen her when I thought she was drunk. She had a great many valuable dresses, more than I ever knew any other woman to have; at my house she had a white satin dress which cost $2.50 a yard, a cinnamon colored satin which cost between 40 and $50, and a velvet dress, which cost $55, and a great variety of silk and other dresses—she said Albert bought them for her."[47]

> "She would often fly up and quarrel, and he [Tirrell] would say: 'Maria, don't quarrel, I will do anything for you.' When he bought grapes, if she did not like them she would throw them about the room. Could do any thing she pleased with him. At the Franklin house, in April, she took a $15 bonnet and stamped upon it, and said she would run a knife into him."[48]

> "While there one afternoon, in her room [at Exeter, New Hampshire], she was [wearing a white satin dress and] looking at herself in the glass, Albert spoke to me in a low voice and said—see her beautiful feet! see her beautiful form! see what a beautiful figure! She asked me how I liked her dress: [she] said she did not like it, and would have a blue black silk dress, and told Albert if she did not have all she wanted while she was with him, she would cut her throat."[49]

The dirks, razors, grapes, wash-bowl, decanter of liquor and many dresses described in such testimony suggested a very different moral evaluation of Maria Bickford's habits of consumption than that suggested by the one delicate shoe, tidy rows of cosmetics and neatly gilt-framed prints described in the early newspaper reports of her death. If those earlier accounts suggested refined taste, feminine sensibility and even aesthetic virtue, the later trial testimony suggested selfishness, extravagance, destructiveness and depravity. Sharply differing assessments of Bickford's character were thus linked with equally divergent images of material acquisition and use. The symbolism of vulgar excess contrasted starkly with a semiotics of genteel consumption. Although it is difficult to know how much weight was given to the various bits of testimony and lines of argument, it should be noted that, after a trial lasting four and a half days, the jury, consisting mostly of artisans and tradesmen of the sort that often read mass-circulation penny newspapers, deliberated only two hours before reaching a verdict of not guilty.[50] The vast crowds in and around the courtroom registered their hearty approval with loud cheers and applause.[51]

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Mediating between the polar images of Maria Bickford as *sentimental victim* and *depraved seductress* was a third view, presented most fully in a 48-page pamphlet entitled *The Authentic Life of Mrs. Mary Ann Bickford*, published in June 1846, nearly eight months after its subject's death.[52] It was an expanded version of an account that had originally appeared the previous December in daily newspapers and other periodicals.[53] As enlarged, the work consisted primarily of a series of letters between Maria Bickford and a number of correspondents, particularly her estranged husband, James Bickford, and her last lover, Albert Tirrell. The letters, reportedly provided to the editor by her husband, were linked in the pamphlet by interspersed biographical narrative, presumably also based on information provided by James Bickford. There is little reason to doubt the authenticity of the correspondence; in fact, several of the included letters from Tirrell had been admitted as evidence for the prosecution at his murder trial and identified in court as having been in the possession of James Bickford.[54]

Newspaper advertisements for the pamphlet packaged it as an exposé of urban vice and corruption. "The Truth Must be Told!," the notices declared in bold-faced print. "LET THE GUILTY SQUIRM!" The advertisers promised to "reveal to the world a mass of ASTOUNDING FACTS, implicating some well known individuals, conspicuous in the fashionable circles of Boston." They also vowed to "show conclusively that some of aristocratic and wealthy origin acted a prominent part in the scenes which led to her [Bickford's] final ruin and premature death." Such exposures of the "fashionable," "wealthy" and "aristocratic" would probably have appealed to the working- and middle-class readers of the penny dailies in which the *Authentic Life* was heavily advertised. In any case, the sensational compilation, priced at a mere twelve and a half cents a copy,

Sentimental depiction of Maria Bickford, appended to the *Boston Daily Mail*'s pamphlet report of Tirrell's murder trial. The sympathetic tone of this portrait contrasts jarringly with the relentlessly hostile image of Bickford conveyed by the judicial proceedings themselves. Illustration courtesy of American Antiquarian Society.

was clearly geared toward a mass audience; as one notice confidently declared: "All classes may be instructed and benefitted by a perusal of this singular pamphlet."[55]

On the paper front cover of the ephemeral biography was a large portrait of Maria Bickford, clothed in a stunning satin dress. A note underneath the illustration indicated that it was based on a daguerreotype miniature taken from Maria Bickford's trunk on the morning of her death. The blurb also reported that the "superb" dress depicted in the engraving had cost the remarkable sum of $100 and had been given to Mrs. Bickford by Albert J. Tirrell. The portrait of Maria so elegantly attired provided a fitting visual introduction to the story that followed.[56]

According to the pamphlet, Maria Bickford had been born under the prosaic name of Mary Ann Dunn in Bath, Maine, on June 19, 1824. Her father died when she was still young and she moved with her mother to Bangor. At the age of fifteen, she gained employment there as a domestic servant. In March 1840, at the age of sixteen, she married James Bickford, a shoemaker, in Brewer, Maine. The following year, she gave birth to a daughter, who died in infancy.[57] Shortly thereafter, in May 1842, not yet eighteen years of age, she went on an excursion that would change her life. Here is the pamphlet biographer's description of a young provincial woman's seduction by the social and material trappings of an emerging consumer culture:

> . . . several female friends of the family proposed visiting Boston, and invited Mrs. Bickford to accompany them—she accepted the invitation, and the party accordingly came here [that is, to Boston]. While in the city, she appeared highly delighted with everything she saw. The gorgeous jewelry and splendid goods of every description displayed for sale in the windows of the various stores on Washington street, she would often refer to, and as often express a strong desire to remain here permanently. On returning home, *Boston* was the all-absorbing theme of her conversation—fine houses; fine carriages; ladies with fine dresses; gentlemen looking prim; commotion, bustle, variety—all had fairly turned her head! Henceforth she became an altered woman, and seemed dissatisfied with her humble and retired condition in life. She was always passionately fond of dress; but the husband's limited means would not permit her to make the gay appearance she so much desired to do, and this was a great source of vexation to her.[58]

Several months later, in October 1842, Maria Bickford abandoned her husband and eloped with another man, traveling to Massachusetts, where she was soon abandoned by her lover. At first, Maria gained employment at a factory in

PRICE 12 1-2 CENTS.

HIGHLY INTERESTING WORK.

LIFE AND CORRESPONDENCE

OF THE LATE

MARIA A. BICKFORD.

The above portrait was drawn from a daguerreotype miniature, taken from the trunk of Mrs. B. by Coroner Pratt, on the morning of the murder, and engraved expressly for this work by Brown & Worcester, eminent artists of this city. The fac simile of the superb satin dress which she wore is executed with remarkable fidelity. This dress is reported to have cost $100, and was presented to her by Albert J. Tirrell.

BOSTON: FOR SALE AT THE PERIODICAL DEPOTS.

Front cover of *The Authentic Life of Mrs. Mary Ann Bickford* (1846), with a striking portrait of its subject and a caption focusing the reader's attention on her 'superb' dress. Illustration courtesy of American Antiquarian Society.

Newburyport, but found the work too hard. She soon became sick, fell into debt, and wrote her husband in desperation, asking for money. Over the next several months she lived at a brothel in Boston, presumably working as a prostitute. During that period, she repeatedly wrote her husband, complaining of various ailments, asking for money, and begging him to come to Boston to help her. James Bickford finally did come to Boston, found work in a boot factory and met with Maria. His wife promised to reform and they agreed to set up a household together in Boston. But within a matter of days, Maria had reneged on her agreement. "I could n't bear the idea of living so retired," she explained to her husband, "after seeing so much genteel company." Instead, she took up with a wealthy young rake named Frank, who may have supported her for a time as his mistress.[59] Here is a description of her new companion from a letter to a friend back home in Maine:

> Oh, I ride with the handsomest fellow that Boston affords; and we have three of the most magnificent robes that you ever saw; you don't have none of them down east, and he has got me a splendid foot muff, and, oh, such a splendid sleigh! and he drives two of the most splendid horses you ever saw .... I tell you we make Washington street tremble.... His coat is light velvet; there is not another in the city, and it attracts attention, I can tell you; he is immensely rich.... He is the richest man's son there is in Boston.... I shall bring my fellow with me when I come [to Maine]....[60]

Note Maria's ecstatic emphasis on such consumer luxuries as the robes, the muff, the sleigh and the velvet coat. Even her description of Frank suggests that he is a human commodity to be displayed, admired and bragged about. For this one provincial woman, at least, much of the allure of urban culture revolved around its possibilities for conspicuous consumption.

Maria's later description of her urban lodgings in a letter to the same friend in Maine reveals a similar infatuation with the material artifacts of a middle-class consumer culture, although in this case more privately assembled:

> I am keeping house, and am very pleasantly situated; I have four rooms, and they are all to myself; it is a tenement by itself, and no one is with me; I have a very pretty parlor, a parlor chamber and bed room, and a dear little kitchen. I have just got my house furnished; I have got a beautiful carpet and very handsome cane seat chairs and a rocking chair; a very large glass, and a very pretty card table, and covering for it. In my chamber I have a very pretty bedstead, two beautiful matrasses [sic] and spread, half a dozen cane seat chairs and a large chair, washstand and toilet table. My kitchen is furnished accord-

> ingly. The other day I had the present of a beautiful piece of sheeting. I have got two beds and every thing handy.[61]

Note, once again, Maria's enthralled invocation of such consumer commodities as the "beautiful carpet," the "very handsome cane seat chairs," the "very pretty card table," the "very pretty bedstead," the "two beautiful matrasses" [sic], the "beautiful piece of sheeting" and so forth. Even her emphases on personal privacy and specialized room use reflected contemporary middle-class values.[62]

The account went on to describe Bickford's stormy relationship with Albert Tirrell and her unsuccesssful attempts to escape from his obsessive attentions during the period leading up to her death. Overall, the narrative suggested that Maria had been neither a purely *sentimental victim*, nor a thoroughly *depraved seductress*, but rather a willful and frustrated young woman, at once vulnerable *and* seductive. After finding herself trapped in an unsatisfying marriage to a man of limited means, she had rebelled against social conventions, turned to prostitution, and plunged into a dangerous relationship from which she eventually sought to extricate herself, but which finally destroyed her.

If Maria Bickford was indeed a victim of seduction, her *Authentic Life* suggests that she had been seduced less by the lustful men in her life than by the material commodities that their sexual patronage allowed her to enjoy. Although the resulting portrait is *not* entirely attractive, it *is* more plausible than the *sentimental victim* and *depraved seductress* of other accounts. Perhaps it is even, as advertised, authentic. But whether accurate or not, *The Authentic Life of Mrs. Mary Ann Bickford* proved to be of great interest to Boston consumers; the first issue was quickly exhausted by a "tremendous" rush of purchasers and a new edition was at the periodical depots within a week.[63]

Several months later, at the end of December 1846, a traveling wax museum opened for business on Washington Street, just a few doors away from the Old South Church. Its statues and tableaus were reportedly exhibited to the clatter of drum, fiddle and banjo—musical instruments associated during the antebellum period with dancing-saloons frequented by prostitutes.[64] Two of its featured attractions were wax figures of Albert J. Tirrell and Maria A. Bickford. Advertisements for the exhibition in local papers focused particularly on the statue of the dead woman. "Mrs Bickford's figure will be dressed in the identical dress that was given her by Tirrell and which cost so much money," the press notices read, "also the jewelry and other ornaments worn by her in Boston; all of which have been obtained of Mr James Bickford . . . at a great cost."[65]

In order to acquire the consumer commodities that she so coveted, Maria Bickford had, by resorting to prostitution, turned herself into a commodity for the purchase and enjoyment of male consumers. In the end, as a sexual commodity, she was literally consumed by flames and by Albert Tirrell's fatal passion. Her posthumous appearance on Washington Street, as a wax dummy in an elegant dress and expensive jewelry—undoubtedly gaped at by hordes of Boston consumers and their country cousins—was simply the ironic culmination of a process

that Maria herself had set in motion more than four years earlier when, as a raw teenager from provincial Maine, she had gazed longingly into the windows of the fashionable shops on Washington Street, infatuated by the "gorgeous jewelry and splendid goods" placed there on display.[66]

To summarize, most literary depictions of Maria A. Bickford tended to cluster at either end of a spectrum of characterization ranging from *sentimental victim* to *depraved seductress*. Each of those polar views was associated with a correspondingly divergent image of Bickford's participation in an emerging consumer culture. Sympathetic observers described Maria as a tasteful, sensitive and feminine consumer; hostile commentators portrayed her as a selfish, extravagant and destructive abuser of purchased commodities. Mediating between those extremes was the *Authentic Life*, compiled with the help of James Bickford. According to that account, Maria had been a willful and vulnerable young woman who was herself seduced by the material trappings of a rapidly expanding consumer culture. Although moral assessments of Maria Bickford diverged widely in those various accounts, it is crucial to note that all of them hinged on the traits and values attributed to observed patterns of material acquisition, deployment and use. The producers of antebellum popular culture apparently assumed that their audience was literate in a normative semiotics of material consumption.

Although the various depictions of Maria Bickford conveyed sharply differing constructions of class, gender and (as emphasized here) consumption, it is difficult to find consistent patterns of polarization in press treatments of her case. After all, the same newspaper that first presented Bickford as a genteel consumer later portrayed her as a depraved spendthrift.[67] And the same penny daily that strenuously defended the jury's verdict in favor of a wealthy rake later carried a bold advertisement for an exposé of upper-class depravity.[68] While newspapers certainly catered to their primary audiences—for example, penny dailies were more likely than subscription papers to appeal to working-class sensibilities—one is left with the impression that editors and reporters generally responded to the case opportunistically and eclectically rather than dogmatically or programmatically.[69] They did not so much adhere to a fixed ideological agenda as pick and chose at will from a varied menu of popular, if often contradictory, cultural motifs. Literary devices, moral judgments and ideological affirmations were themselves commodified, strategically deployed to attract readers and boost sales.

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In recent years, scholars have explored a number of different periods and regions in their search for the origins of an American consumer culture. Some historians, finding significant increases in the number and variety of household goods in estate inventories as early as the late seventeenth century, have concentrated on the colonial period.[70] Other scholars, tracing much later de-

velopments in advertising and mass marketing, have focused on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[71] Researchers looking at both of those periods have certainly contributed to our understanding of consumption and consumerism as dynamic processes in the evolution of American society.

Yet I would argue that any adequate account of the origins of America's modern consumer culture should confront developments in New England (and elsewhere in the northeastern United States) during the first half of the nineteenth century. It was then and there, after all, that a traditional system of rural household production was virtually replaced, within a matter of only a few decades, by a predominantly industrial order based on commercial consumption. It was also then and there that Maria Bickford was depicted and implicitly judged in the popular press, at least in part, on the basis of her purchase, deployment and consumption of material commodities. As suggested by coverage of her case, cultural arbiters of the antebellum period increasingly used consumer habits as popular criteria for establishing status, determining identity, delineating personality and evaluating character. That was no trivial development. As Karen Halttunen has demonstrated in regard to fashion, the values ascribed to patterns of consumption were central to the "self-definition of middle-class culture" during its formative period in the mid-nineteenth century.[72]

Of course, judging by the often hostile literary responses to her death and by the jury's implicitly unsympathetic verdict, Maria Bickford may not have finally succeeded in establishing her claims to gentility.[73] However, the problem was not in her strategy of material acquisition, but in her emphatically *un*genteel handling of consumer commodities. It was not simpy that she drank liquor from a decanter, but that she drank to excess and then hurled the bottle into the fireplace when angry. It was not that she owned a fifteen-dollar bonnet, but that she stamped on it in a fit of temper. It was not that she wore many elegant dresses, but that she threatened to cut her own throat if she did not get another one more to her liking. Such behavior was obviously antithetical to a concept of middle-class gentility that stressed personal self-restraint as the essence of proper etiquette.[74] In the final analysis, clerks, artisans and tradesmen of the sort that served on juries and read penny newspapers could only have felt threatened, or disgusted, by Maria Bickford's gaudy pretensions to a gentility to which they themselves (and their wives) probably also aspired.

Although the account of Maria Bickford cumulatively conveyed in the popular press was by no means a success story, it *was* a story that tacitly hinged on her relationship to consumer goods. Sympathetic, hostile and ambivalent commentators all described and implicitly evaluated the murdered prostitute in terms of her habits of consumption. If we accept the idea that the birth of a consumer culture is a "process of cultural change whereby commodities become the unacknowledged reference points for the accounts we give of ourselves," then literary responses to the violent death of Maria Bickford neatly illustrate the emergence of a mass consumer culture in antebellum New England.[75] Bickford's troubling metamorphosis from woman to mannequin may thus symbolize a much

broader transformation in social values and collective identity, one that lies at the very heart of our modern consumer society.

Notes

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1. For a more comprehensive discussion of the Bickford case and of literary responses to it, see Daniel A. Cohen, "Pillars of Salt: The Transformation of New England Crime Literature, 1674-1860" (Ph.D. dissertation, Brandeis University, 1988), Chapter 10. For a perceptive scholarly treatment of the case, see Barbara Hobson, "A Murder in the Moral and Religious City of Boston," *Boston Bar Journal* 22 (November 1978), 9-21. For another modern account of the case, see Marjorie Carleton, "'Maria Met a Gentleman': The Bickford Case," in John N. Makris, ed., *Boston Murders* (New York, 1948), 15-39.

2. See David Ray Papke, *Framing the Criminal: Crime, Cultural Work, and the Loss of Critical Perspective, 1830-1900* (Hamden, Connecticut, 1987), 33-74; Dan Schiller, *Objectivity and the News: The Public and the Rise of Commercial Journalism* (Philadelphia, 1981), 12-75; Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York, 1978), 12-60; Frank Luther Mott, *The News in America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1952), 50-51; Mott, *American Journalism: A History of Newspapers in the United States Through 260 Years: 1690 to 1950*, Revised Edition (New York, 1950), 215-252; William Grosvenor Bleyer, *Main Currents in the History of American Journalism* (Boston, 1927), 155-184. On the Boston "penny press" in particular, see Priscilla Hawthorne Fowle, "Boston Daily Newspapers, 1830-1850" (Ph.D. dissertation, Radcliffe College, 1920), 172-224.

3. On the competing antebellum stereotypes of the "fallen woman," with particular reference to the Bickford case, see Barbara Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue: The Politics of Prostitution and the American Reform Tradition* (New York, 1987), 70-75; or, alternately, Hobson, "Sex in the Marketplace: Prostitution in an American City, Boston, 1820-1880" (Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University, 1982), 88-96. On the negative stereotype, also see David Brion Davis, *Homicide in American Fiction, 1798-1860: A Study in Social Values* (1957; rpt. Ithaca, New York:, 1968), 165-170, 201-209.

4. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for suggesting this analogy. For antebellum assumptions concerning the radically bifurcated quality of the female moral character, see the editorial quoted in Cohen, "Pillars of Salt," 458, and the lawyer's statement quoted in William G. McLoughlin, "Untangling the Tiverton Tragedy: The Social Meaning of the Terrible Haystack Murder of 1833," *Journal of American Culture* 7 (1984), 81.

5. Those generalizations are based on my systematic reading of all crime non-fiction published in New England between 1674 and 1819, selected reading of such works published between 1820 and 1860, and extensive (if scattered) reading of newspaper coverage of crime in that region between 1704 and 1860. For another antebellum murder case's entanglement in issues of fashionable consumption, see *Report of the Trial of the Rev. Ephraim K. Avery*, 2nd edition (Boston, 1833), 71, 78; [Catharine Williams], *Fall River. An Authentic Narrative* (Boston., 1834), 77-78; for a very perceptive scholarly account of that case, see David Richard Kasserman, *Fall River Outrage: Life, Murder, and Justice in Early Industrial New England* (Philadelphia, 1986).

6. Although the notion that many early New England farmers were ever *entirely* self-sufficient has long since been refuted, self-sufficiency does remain useful as a *relative* concept. Rural New Englanders tended to be *more* reliant on home production of family necessities and *less* fully inte-

grated into commercial markets in 1780 than they would be in 1850. For a range of evidence and opinion in the ongoing historiographic debate concerning self-sufficiency, see Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard* (New York, 1990), 72-90, *passim*; T. H. Breen, "An Empire of Goods: The Anglicization of Colonial America, 1690-1776," *Journal of British Studies* 25 (1986), 479-485; Bettye Hobbs Pruitt, "Self-Sufficiency and the Agricultural Economy of Eighteenth-Century Massachusetts," *William and Mary Quarterly* 41 (1984), 333-364; Carole Shammas, "How Self-Sufficient Was Early America?," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 13 (1982), 247-272; Christopher Clark, "Household Economy, Market Exchange and the Rise of Capitalism in the Connecticut Valley, 1800-1860," *Journal of Social History* 13 (1979), 169-189; Gregory A. Stiverson, "Early American Farming: A Comment," *Agricultural History* 50 (1976), 37-44; Rodney C. Loehr, "Self-Sufficiency on the Farm," *Agricultural History* 26 (1952), 37-41; Percy Wells Bidwell and John I. Falconer, *History of Agriculture in the Northern United States, 1620-1860* (Washington, D.C., 1925), 115-131; Bidwell, "Rural Economy in New England at the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century," *Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences* 20 (1916), 241-399. For a recent detailed local study documenting the gradual integration of rural northern New Englanders into commercial markets between 1780 and 1835, see William J. Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life: Material and Cultural Life in Rural New England, 1780-1835* (Knoxville, Tennessee, 1989); concerning the late eighteenth century, Gilmore concludes on page 73: "Most Windsor District yeomen, husbandmen, and tenant farm families—a sizable majority of the population—engaged in a broad range of activities that satisfied a substantial proportion of their food, shelter, and clothing needs." For the use of homespun garments as a symbol for that earlier domestic economy, see Horace Bushnell, "The Age of Homespun," in *Work and Play* (London, 1864), 39-76.

7. See Daniel A. Cohen, "Lowell Fever!: Agricultural Change and Adolescent Experience in Rural New England, 1800-1850" (unpublished paper, Duke University, 1980); Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860* (New York, 1979); Clark, "Household Economy"; Hannah Josephson, *The Golden Threads: New England's Mill Girls & Magnates* (New York, 1949); Caroline F. Ware, *The Early New England Cotton Manufacture: A Study in Industrial Beginnings* (1931; rpt. New York, 1966); Percy Bidwell, "The Agricultural Revolution in New England," *American Historical Review* 26 (1921), 683-702. Statistics suggest the scale of the transformation; the population of Massachusetts was 15 percent urban in 1800, 31 percent urban in 1830, and 60 percent urban in 1860; see U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970*, Bicentennial Edition, 2 Parts (Washington, D. C., 1975), I, 29.

8. See Daniel Blowe, *A Geographical, Historical, Commercial, and Agricultural View of the United States of America* (London, 1820), 290, 299, 317, 334, 345, 355; also see *Vermont Historical Gazetteer* 3 (1871), quoted in Harold Fisher Wilson, *The Hill Country of Northern New England: Its Social and Economic History 1790-1930* (New York, 1936), 30; Rolla Milton Tryon, *Household Manufactures in the United States, 1640-1860* (1917; rpt. New York, 1966), 145-147; Bidwell, "Agricultural Revolution," 684; John Brooke Zevin, "The Growth of Cotton Textile Production After 1815," in Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, eds., *The Reinterpretation of American Economic History* (New York, 1971), 128; Clark, "Household Economy," 171; Jack Larkin, *The Reshaping of Everyday Life, 1790-1840* (New York, 1988), 25-27, 184.

9. On the diffusion of consumer commodities down the social scale, see Stuart M. Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900* (New York, 1989), 138-43; Larkin, *Reshaping of Everyday Life*, 51-52, 138-145, 188-191; Daniel Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending: Attitudes Toward the Consumer Society in America, 1875-1940* (Baltimore, 1985), xxv-xxvi; Stuart M. Blumin, "The Hypothesis of Middle-Class Formation in Nineteenth-Century America: A Critique and Some Proposals," *The American Historical Review* 90 (1985), 330-332; Lois W. Banner, *American Beauty* (Chicago, 1983), 18; Barry W. Poulson, *Economic History of the United States* (New York, 1981), 379; Lizabeth A. Cohen, "Embellishing a Life of Labor: An Interpretation of the Material Culture of American Working-Class Homes, 1885-1915" (1980), reprinted in Dell Upton and John Michael Vlach, eds., *Common Places: Readings in Vernacular Architecture* (Athens, Georgia, 1986), 262; Lance E. Davis, *et al.*, *American Economic Growth: An Economist's History of the United States* (New York, 1972), 83; Ronald D. Clifton, "Forms and Patterns: Room Specialization in Maryland, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania Family Dwellings 1725-1834" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1971), 197, 273, 281-282, 288, 290, 292, 296. On the diffusion of consumer goods into rural communities and farm households, see *New England Farmer*, July 20, 1831, 1; June 26, 1839, 406; Davis, *American Economic Growth*, 77; Banner, *American Beauty*, 18-19; David Jaffee, "One of the Primitive Sort: Portrait Makers of the Rural North, 1760-1860," in Steven Hahn and Jonathan Prude, eds., *The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation: Essays in the Social History of Rural America* (Chapel Hill, 1985), 103-138; Larkin, *Reshaping of Everyday Life*, 51-52, 138-145, 188-191, *passim*; and discussion on decline of household manufactures below. For possible literary evidence of the spread of "suburban" fashions into rural New England, see Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance and Fanshawe*, Centenary Edition (Columbus, Ohio, 1964), 197; I am grateful to Stuart Levine for bringing that passage to my attention.

10. See U. S. Treasury Department, *Documents Relative to the Manufactures in the United States*, 3 vols. (1833; rpt. New York, 1969), I, 87, 134, 136, 146, 151; II, 767, 789, 825, 845, 847, 911, 912, 918-920, 924, 940, 946, 954, 958-959, 962, 969, 977, 1000; for responses from rural areas where traditional patterns of household production persisted in 1832, see I, 2; II, 626, 629, 730-731, 744, 799, 812, 862-863. For scholarly generalizations made largely on the basis of the McLane (Treasury Department) survey, see Tryon, *Household Manufactures*, 290-293; George Rogers Taylor, *The Transportation Revolution 1815-1860* (New York, 1951), 211-212. Also see Larkin, *Reshaping of Everyday Life*, 187-189.

11. See Tryon, *Household Manufactures*, 308.

12. See Richard D. Brown, "The Emergence of Urban Society in Rural Massachusetts, 1760-1820," *Journal of American History* 61 (1974-75), 29-51, quoted at 51.

13. Faye Dudden, quoted in Daniel Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending: Attitudes Toward the Consumer Society in America, 1875-1940* (Baltimore, 1985), xxv.

14. See Stuart M. Blumin, "The Hypothesis of Middle-Class Formation in Nineteenth-Century America: A Critique and Some Proposals," *American Historical Review* 90 (1985), 319-320, 326-328; Banner, *American Beauty*, 28-44; Glenn Porter, "Marketing," in Porter, *Encyclopedia of American Economic History*, 3 vols. (New York, 1980), 391-392. On the contemporaneous expansion of shop retailing in provincial towns and cities in England and Wales, see David Alexander, *Retailing in England during the Industrial Revolution* (London, 1970), 89-109.

15. See Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1982).

16. See Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending*, xxv-xxvi, quoted at xxvi. The definition of a consumer society is my own.

17. For a characterization of the earlier period as "The Age of Homespun," see Bushnell, "The Age of Homespun," in *Work and Play*, 39-76.

18. See Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class*, 185. On a similar transformation in the roles of women in nineteenth-century France, see Whitney Walton, "'To Triumph before Feminine Taste': Bourgeois Women's Consumption and Hand Methods of Production in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Paris," *Business History Review* 60 (1986), 545-551.

19. For an example of such a story, see Lucinda [Harriet Farley], "Evening Before Pay-Day," in Benita Eisler, *The Lowell Offering: Writings by New England Mill Women* (New York, 1977), 162-172, especially 165-166; A Citizen of Lowell, *Corporations and Operatives* (1843), in *Women of Lowell* (New York, 1974), 53-54, quoted at 54.

20. Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue*, 42; on Boston's long-standing reputation as a "center of prostitution," see David J. Pivar, *Purity Crusade: Sexual Morality and Social Control, 1868-1900* (Westport, Connecticut, 1973), 21-23.

21. See William W. Sanger, *The History of Prostitution* (1859; rpt. New York, 1972), 454.

22. See *Friend of Virtue*, December 1, 1846, 362.

23. On the wide range of settings for commercial sex in an antebellum city, see William W. Sanger, *History of Prostitution*, 549-574; for two other types of sexual commodification in antebellum cities, see *Boston Daily Times* [cited hereafter as *Times*], February 24, 1846, 2, ("OBSCENE BOOKS"); July 21, 1846, 2 ("NUDE DAGUERREOTYPES").

24. See Horowitz, *Morality of Spending*, 1-9, quoted at 1-2 and 8.

25. See Edwin C. Rozwenc, *Ideology and Power in the Age of Jackson* (New York, 1964), xi-xii.

26. See Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven, 1982), 56-91.

27. See Halttunen, *Confidence Men*, 80 and 90.

28. See Jean-Christophe Agnew, "The Consuming Vision of Henry James," in Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears, eds., *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980*, (New York, 1983), 68.

29. *Boston Daily Mail* [cited hereafter as *Mail*], October 27, 1845, 4; October 28, 1845, 2. The story of October 28 is identified as having been taken from an "Extra" edition published the previous afternoon. Cedar Lane was also known as Pinckney Lane and Mount Vernon Avenue.

30. *Mail*, October 28, 1845, 2. The initial *Mail* account had placed the approximate time of the crime one hour earlier.

31. See *Mail*, October 29, 1845, 2; *Times*, October 29, 1845, 2; *Boston Courier*, October 29, 1845, 2; [Silas Estabrook?], *Eccentricities & Anecdotes of Albert John Tirrell* (Boston, 1846), 44-48.

32. For rumors concerning Tirrell's whereabouts, see *Times*, November 5, 1845, 2, 4; November 12, 1845, 2; November 15, 1845, 2; December 2, 1845, 4; *Mail*, October 30, 1845, 2; November 4, 1845, 4; November 29, 1845, 2, and so forth in other Boston newspapers.

33. See *Mail*, October 28, 1845, 2. See note 29 above on the original appearance of this story.

34. *Ibid.*

35. See *Mail*, October 31, 1845, 2. Much of this is probably pure fiction.

36. *Ibid.* On letter writing as a reflection of sentimental middle-class culture, see Halttunen, *Confidence Men*, 118-122; on letter writing as a reflection of an increasingly mobile and commercial-

ized mass culture, see Ronald J. Zboray, "The Letter and the Fiction Reading Public in Antebellum America," *Journal of American Culture* 10 (1987), 27-34. On daguerreotype portraits (among others) as symbols of middle-class identity in an emerging consumer culture, see Jaffee, "One of the Primitive Sort," especially 104, 113, 130-131.

37. On the perceived linkage between aesthetics and virtue in antebellum ideology (in a very different context), see Clifford E. Clark, Jr., "Domestic Architecture as an Index to Social History: The Romantic Revival and the Cult of Domesticity in America, 1840-1870" (1976), reprinted in Robert Blair St. George, ed., *Material Life in America, 1600-1860* (Boston, 1988), 539-541. According to Clark, housing reformers of the mid-nineteenth century believed that "Taste and the perception of beauty were intextricably related to the moral development of the individual" (Clark, "Domestic Architecture,") 539.

38. On the *Mail* as a penny daily, see *Adams's New Directory of the City of Boston* (Boston, 1846), 31. On the interclass readership of the penny dailies, see sources cited in note 2 above.

39. During the mid-1840s, the annual subscription rate for penny dailies generally ranged between two and four dollars; the annual rate for more costly subscription papers ran as high as eight dollars; the rate for the *Daily Whig* was five dollars; see *Adams's New Directory*, 30-31.

40. Because I have not been able to locate any copy of the relevant issue of the *Whig*, I have based my discussion of the *Whig*'s report on a reprint appearing in the *National Police Gazette*, November 8, 1845, 93.

41. See *Mail*, December 6, 1845, 2.

42. See *Ibid.*

43. See *Times*, February 17, 1846, 2; also see *Prisoner's Friend*, February 25, 1846, 30; *Mail*, March 25, 1846, 2.

44. For a more complete account of Tirrell's flight, capture, and trial for murder, see Cohen, "Pillars of Salt," Chapter 10.

45. Some pamphlet trial reports on the Bickford/Tirrell case sold for as little as 6 1/4 cents a copy, suggesting their intended mass audience; see *Times*, March 26, 1846, 2; *Mail*, March 30, 1846, 2; *Daily American Eagle*, March 30, 1846, 2; for a Tirrell trial report priced at 12 1/2 cents, see *The Trial of Albert John Tirrell, for the Murder of Maria A. Bickford* (Boston, 1846) [cited hereafter as *Skinner Report*], title page. According to Ronald J. Zboray, hardcover books sold for between $.75 and $1.25 during the antebellum period, while the "usual minimum price" for paperbacks was 38 cents and the "most common price" was 50 cents; only "a handful of paperbacks sold for as low as 12 1/2 cents"; see Zboray, "Antebellum Reading and the Ironies of Technological Innovation," *American Quarterly* 40 (1988), 74-75. Further evidence of the intended mass audience of the reports is provided by the *Mail*'s claim that their report would be produced in an edition of 20,000 copies (see *Mail*, March 27, 1846, 2); during the mid-nineteenth century, an edition of 10,000 indicated that a book was "a decided hit" (see Zboray, "Antebellum Reading," 65-66).

46. *Skinner Report*, 17-18.

47. *Ibid.*, 18-19.

48. *The Trial of Albert J. Tirrell, Charged with the Murder of Mrs. Maria A. Bickford* (Boston, [1846]), 23 (in the 37-page edition). Bonnets considered "stylish" and "expensive" could be purchased in mid-nineteenth-century American cities for as little as seven or eight dollars, about half the cost of Bickford's; see Wendy Gamber, "The Female Economy: A History of the Millinery and Dressmaking Trades, 1860-1930" (Ph.D. dissertation, Brandeis University, 1991), Chapter 4.

49. *Ibid.*, 25; also see J. E. P. Weeks, reporter, *Trial of Albert John Tirrell for the Murder of Mary Ann Bickford* (Boston, 1846) [cited hereafter as *Times Report*], 27.

50. On the occupational makeup of the jury, see D. Cohen, "Pillars of Salt," 508; the group included two housewrights, a mason, a mastmaker, a furniture dealer, a druggist, and a clerk. On the artisanal readership of penny dailies, see Schiller, *Objectivity and the News*, 51; more generally, on the readership of the penny dailies, see sources cited in note 2 above. Tirrell would also be acquitted on an arson charge in a separate trial the following January, but would finally be sentenced to three years in prison for the lesser offenses of adultery and lascivious cohabitation; see Cohen, "Pillars of Salt," 520-527.

51. On crowd response to the verdict, see *Boston Daily Advertiser*, March 30, 1846, 1; *Boston Daily Whig*, March 30, 1846, 2; *Boston Post*, March 30, 1846, 2.

52. *The Authentic Life of Mrs. Mary Ann Bickford* (Boston, 1846). Cover title: *Life and Correspondence of the Late Maria A. Bickford.* On the date of publication, see advertisements in *Times*, June 9, 1846, 3; *Mail*, June 9, 1846, 3.

53. See *Boston Post*, December 1, 1845, 1-2; *Times*, December 2, 1845, 1-2; *Mail*, December 2, 1845, 4; December 6, 1845, 2 (advertisement for *Weekly Mail*); *National Police Gazette*, December 6, 1845, 123; *The Hangman*, December 17, 1845, 149; *The Friend of Virtue*, February 1, 1846, 35-38.

54. Compare the letters from Tirrell in *Authentic Life*, 29 and 33-4 with the letters inserted into the trial record and printed in *Times Report*, 15.

55. See *Mail*, June 9, 1846, 3, quoted; *Times*, June 9, 1846, 3, quoted; *Boston Daily Bee* [cited hereafter as *Bee*], June 9, 1846, 3; *Boston Post*, June 10, 1846, p. [2]. All of those newspapers, except

the *Post*, were penny dailies; see *Adams's New Directory*, 30-31. On the readership of penny dailies, see sources cited in note 2. See note 45 for information on book prices during the antebellum period.

56. See *Authentic Life*, front cover.
57. See *Authentic Life*, 3.
58. *Ibid.*, 3-4.
59. See *Ibid*, 4-17, quoted at 17.
60. *Ibid.*, 17.
61. *Ibid.*, 20.
62. On privacy and specialized room use as reflective of middle-class values in nineteenth-century America, see L. Cohen, "Embellishing a Life of Labor," 266, 269-270; Edward S. Cooke, Jr., "Domestic Space in the Federal-Period Inventories of Salem Merchants," *Essex Institute Historical Collections* 116 (1980), 256-258; Clark, "Domestic Architecture," 535, 539, 542-544; Clifton, "Forms and Patterns," 281, 287-290, 292-293, 295-300.
63. See *Times*, June 11, 1846, 2; June 16, 1846, 2-3. An abridged "FOURTH EDITION" was also issued in Boston.
64. See Sanger, *History of Prostitution*, 563-564.
65. See *Times*, January 11, 1847, 2; January 13, 1847, 2; *The Daily Chronotype*, January 11, 1847, 2.
66. On the heterogeneous audiences for antebellum wax museums of this type, see Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The American Notebooks*, ed. Claude M. Simpson (Columbus, Ohio, 1972), 177-178. Cited in Patricia Cline Cohen, "The Helen Jewett Murder: Violence, Gender, and Sexual Licentiousness in Antebellum America," *NWSA Journal* 2 (1990), 377, n. 9.
67. See *Mail*, October 28, 1845, 2; October 31, 1845, 2; December 6, 1845, 2.
68. See *Times*, March 30, 1846, 2; March 31, 1846, 2; April 2, 1846, 2; April 8, 1846, 2; April 15, 1846, 2; May 2, 1846, 2; May 6, 1846, 2; May 11, 1846, 2; June 9, 1846, 3 (advertisement).
69. For an exception, see the sustained editorial dispute concerning Tirrell's acquittal between the boisterous *Boston Daily Times*, the city's most popular penny daily, which defended the verdict, and the "fashionable" and "highly respectable" *Daily Evening Transcript*, the only daily newspaper in antebellum Boston edited by a woman, which assailed the verdict; see *Transcript*, April 1, 1846, 2; April 3, 1846, 2; April 7, 1846, 2; April 8, 1846, 4; April 9, 1846, 4; April 14, 1846, 2; April 16, 1846, 2; April 30, 1846, 2; May 5, 1846, 2. The editor of the *Times* ridiculed the *Transcript*'s crusade in gendered terms, dismissing it as "NEWSPAPER TWATTLE AND OLD WOMANISM"; see *Times*, April 8, 1846, 2; for the rest of the *Times* sustained defense of the verdict, see citations in previous note. However, it should be noted that the *Transcript*'s attacks on the trial proceedings and verdict, including several excerpted from other newspapers, did *not* focus on issues of class, gender or consumption. Still, it maybe significant that the editor of the *Transcript*—following an out-of-town squib—later explicitly compared her newspaper to a fashionably-dressed young woman; see *Transcript*, January 19, 1847, 2. On the circulation of the *Times*, see *Times*, May 23, 1846, 2; on the character of the *Transcript* and its editor, see *Bee*, January 20, 1847, 2, quoted in this note above; on the two papers, also see Frederic Hudson, *Journalism in the United States, From 1690 to 1872* (New York, 1873), 386-387; Fowle, "Boston Daily Newspapers," 147-156, 188-201; Mott, *American Journalism*, 238-239. For the view that crime coverage in antebellum newspapers was highly politicized along class lines, see Papke, *Framing the Criminal*, 33-53 and Schiller, *Objectivity and the News*, 47-75.
70. See, for example, Cary Carson, "The Consumer Revolution in Eighteenth-Century British North America," colloquium paper, Institute of Early American History and Culture, October 1988; Breen, "Empire of Goods," 467-499; Carol Shammas, "Consumer Behavior in Colonial America," *Social Science History* 6 (1982), 67-86; Shammas, "How Self-Sufficient Was Early America?"; also see Horowitz, *Morality of Spending*, xxiv-xxv.
71. See, for example, the first three essays in Fox and Lears, eds., *The Culture of Consumption*.
72. See Halttunen, *Confidence Men*, xvii, 56-91, quoted at xvii.
73. For evidence of Bickford's self-conscious pursuit of gentility, recall her claim that she "could n't bear the idea of living so retired, after seeing so much genteel company"; she had earlier boasted to her estranged husband of living in "a very genteel house." See *Authentic Life*, 12-13, 17, quoted.
74. See Halttunen, *Confidence Men*, 92-123, especially 96 and 98; Clark, "Domestic Architecture," 535, 543.
75. See Agnew, "Consuming Vision," 68, quoted.