Victorian Girls and At-Home Theatricals: Performing and Playing with Possible Futures

by

Heather Marie Fitzsimmons Frey

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies
University of Toronto

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2015

Abstract

During the long nineteenth century, amateur, juvenile at-home theatricals were a popular pastime in English middle-class homes. The scripts, the process of “getting-up” a play, and opportunity to perform a variety of historical, fairy tale, and “Oriental” characters offered young people, especially girls, opportunities to act agentically, to explore alternate identities, and to imagine possible futures for themselves that went beyond the conventional expectations for Victorian girls. These performances were especially potent in the mid- to late- nineteenth century because at that time social, political, legal, education, and career opportunities for girls were frequently challenged and gradually changing: at-home theatrical experiences encouraged and enabled girls to push at the increasingly porous boundaries that contained their daily lives.

I focus on English scripts (1850 and 1910) published for the young people’s home market, related fiction and newspaper articles, and a range of diaries, letters, memoirs, playbills, and juvenile newspapers written by children for their families.

Methodologically, following Doreen Massey (2005) and Rebecca Schneider (2005), I adopt a fluid conception of space and time in order to employ late twentieth and twenty-first century scholarship on girls, especially in drama education settings (Gallagher 2001; Hatton 2013; Neelands and Nelson 2013). Although girls today cannot speak for Victorian middle-class girls, recent experiences help to inform how nineteenth-century girls’ performer and spectator experiences might have stretched their imaginations regarding desirable identities and futures.

I lean on the following theoretical lenses: Jill Dolan’s “utopian performatives” (2006); object and thing theory (Robin Bernstein 2011; Bill Brown 2001; Andrew Sofer 2003); feminist reinterpretations of Orientalism and connections between adolescence and race (Nancy Lesko 2012). The analysis demonstrates that playwrights used
their scripts as vehicles to challenge and discuss contemporary socio-political issues, and through theatricals girls could expand their imaginations regarding their identities and their own futures.
Acknowledgements

Much like an at-home theatrical, a dissertation cannot be completed without a community of support. I am so grateful to so many people for joining me on this journey.

I would like to thank my advisor, Kathleen Gallagher for encouraging, challenging, listening, critiquing, and sharing this entire project with me. She reminded me to think of hope as a practice, not a possession. She has been an inspiration.

I am grateful for my tireless committee Stephen Johnson, Nancy Copeland, external examiner Kate Newey, and the additional support provided by Antje Budde and Paula Sperdakos.

Research librarians and archivists helped me in all the locations I visited: the Beinecke at Yale, the British Library, King’s College in London, the Sheffield Archives, and the Thomas Fischer Library, Toronto. Extra special thanks go to Geraldine Hunwick of Newcastle University, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and the invaluable staff of the Osborne Collection of Early Children’s Literature at the Toronto Public Library: Mary Bissell, Elizabeth Derbecker, Yuka Kajihara-Nolan, Leslie McGrath, Lori McLeod, and Martha Scott.

Thanks to Toby Heppel and his family for his generous online support, for inviting me to his home, hosting my family, baking my daughter a beautiful birthday cake, and sharing his private collection of the Corner/Heppel Family papers.

Thanks to Chris Thompson and his cousins for opening their family archive and sharing details about Clara Ryland and her daughter Sybil.

Thanks also to friends who enabled my research by inviting us to stay with them: Margaret Small and family, Jake Stupart, Minna and family, and especially Jessica Meserve, David Silver and their daughters.
Several scholars have supported my research en route, including, in very early stages, Lissa Paul, Martin Revermann, and Marlis Schweitzer, in friendly and productive conversation and at conferences, David Coates, Victor Emeljanow, Christopher Ferguson, Mary-Catherine Harrison, Sasha Kovacs, Marlene Mendonça, Kristine Moruzi, Jacqueline Taucar, Shauna Vey, Manon van de Water, Anne Wessels, Robin Whittaker, Belaric Zatzman and especially Mary Isbell and Jeanne Klein. Online I have been supported by generous scholars I’ve never met but who offered resources and advice, including Linda Hunt Beckman, Marah Gubar, Ellen Jordan and Megan Norcia.

The cast and creative team of “The Frog Prince,” our “at-home” theatrical on the University Campus, deserve special recognition: Art Babayants, Simone Brodic, Peter Freund, Gabrielle Houle, Laura Lucci, Sarah Marchand, Sarah Robbins, Sebastian Samur, Brittany Stewart, Paul Stoesser, Orly Zebak, Stephanie Zidel, and especially Justin Blum.

Many friends have been very generous with their time and their ears: I’d like to especially acknowledge friendship and valuable conversation with Barry Freeman, Nikki Cesare-Schotzko and her family, Caroline Fusco, Xing Fan, James McKinnon, and Ruth Rosenblood and her family.

My PhD cohort have been supportive within the classroom and without, including Art Babayants, Natalie Frija, Laura Lucci, Caroline Reich, Cassandra Silver, Grace Smith, Isabel Stowel-Kaplan and especially the incomparable Seika Boye, who has intellectually and emotionally made this trip much richer.

And I would like to thank my family. I’d like to thank my inspiring mom Sharon Fitzsimmons, née Peterson, who planted the seeds of this project by starting her own “Wizards and Wings” drama in education PhD when I was in elementary school, who played the piano for and directed our family melodramas, and who, with my dad, watched and applauded countless
at-home theatricals and school plays. My wonderful dad, George Fitzsimmons, cannot be thanked enough, because he encouraged me long before I even applied for the programme, he has listened with interest to every proposal and every description of every dusty archive discovery, and he has asked a thousand productive questions. I would also like to thank my dad and his very special wife Helena, for their incredibly generous childcare assistance, offering their time, energy, and love, at conferences and while I did archival research in both Victoria and in England. Words are inadequate to acknowledge my husband, Rod, for reading and editing every word, for enthusing about my research, conferences and travel, for uprooting his own career, for his friendship and conversation, and for so much love. Finally, I would like to thank my four children Leif, Meredith, Celeste, and Piers whose presence has made my life more joyful and meaningful, and they have each helped in their own, often unexpected ways.
This dissertation is dedicated to my children Leif, Meredith, Celeste, and Piers, and
To the memory of my mother, Sharon Eloise Fitzsimmons.
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Chapter One: Victorian Girls and At-Home Theatricals: Seeking Possible Futures in the Past

Hagley, January 4th, 5th, 1857.

Oh, the whirlpool of excitement we are fizzing in. The PLAY is to come off on the 7th. The actors are to be [16 children between the ages of 3 and 16]….All these are getting up their parts in different ways; rehearsals are ceaseless, lessons droop, disorder prevails. – Lucy Lyttleton, age 15

Hagley, January 7th, 1857.

Behold! the excitement becomes dangerous and boundless. A last grand rehearsal, and I feel secure of my part. An immense amount of work is got through, and the dresses, which arrived last night, tried on and applauded. At last we go and get ready, soon after tea. The whole thing is to be in the gallery, behind the pillars, between which hangs the splendid dark red curtain, which draws not vulgarly aside, but right up. . . . I first went to the nurseries, where I saw the eight small fairies attired, winged and star-crowned; Mary Gladstone, the eldest, being the Queen, distinguished by a larger coronet and a star-tipped wand. They looked most aery in their short standing-out transparent skirtlets and spangled wings. – Lucy Lyttleton, age 15 (Cavendish 46)

Prologue: Victorian Girls and At-Home Theatricals

In mid- to late- nineteenth-century England, getting up a play to be performed by children and young people was a very popular family entertainment, especially in the dreary months near Christmas when it was often too cold to do extensive outdoor activities, and when relatives congregated together under one roof, resulting in lots of children who needed to be kept occupied. In December 1857, Lucy Lyttleton (later Lady Frederick Cavendish) writes in her diary that the relatives “poured into the house” there were 20 under the age of 17, and “the dear old house is choked, overflowing, echoing with children” (Cavendish 46). She explains “the meals are the fun” and then describes how children are seated and cared for by older girls, adding

The noise pervading the room, as much from scolders as scolded, from bellowers as bellowed at, from children, boys, women, girls, may be imagined, mingled with the clatter of crockery, pouring of tea, hewing of bread, and scrumping of jaws. (Cavendish 46)
A joint project that involved everyone was a way to channel the energetic mayhem. Pleasurable for performers and spectators alike, in this dissertation, I argue that at-home theatricals had the potential to be especially potent for girls, because, through leadership roles, and character roles, the activity invited them to explore and embody alternate identities and imagine possible futures for themselves that went beyond conventional expectations for their lives.

A “typical” juvenile at-home theatrical between the years of approximately 1850 – 1910, the time period addressed by this dissertation, is difficult to define; I discuss staging in detail in chapter one, yet I would like to paint a few pictures that may help to imagine the activity of Victorians getting-up a play. Home theatricals were sometimes called “drawing-room” theatricals because families could, relatively easily, convert their visitor-friendly drawing room spaces into performance spaces. In their suggestions, playwrights explain that staging a theatrical could be done in a middle-class home, using two rooms connected (ideally) by French doors. Either one room (probably the drawing room) could be the auditorium and the other the performance space, or, if the doors were not big enough, one could be for performance and spectators, while the other could be backstage. And of course, there would be a piano.

But other arrangements were also possible. Victorians sometimes created dedicated stage spaces in their homes. The George and Louisa Powell MacDonald family rented several homes at different times in their lives – they constructed a proscenium stage at the end of a large study in one of William Morris’s houses (MacDonald, George 386), one was an outdoor “removable” theatre (MacDonald, George 380), which the boys set up and tore down, and another was a “gaslit stage” in a converted coachhouse (MacDonald, George 384), and in Italy, they built a temporary stage in the drawing room, which they disassembled in order to have a dance (Lilia MacDonald 14 Jan 1882 to Cobden 1/1/56, King’s). The Gatty family did their performances in the children’s nursery while Charlotte Yonge’s fictional Barnescombe family did theirs in a second
“back drawing room” which was given over to children and young people during the festive season.

Older girls and boys, and sometimes a few interested grownups, participated in a flurry of preparation. A significant part of the fun of getting up a play was preparing set, props, and costumes, usually made up of found and modified pieces, but occasionally special items might be rented. In between other household chores and family demands, such as dressing for dinner, older girls drilled younger children in their lines, and helped them practice their songs and dances. As Lucy Lyttleton put it, “All these [children of different ages] are getting up their parts in different ways” (Cavendish 46). One person took on the responsibility of writing witty programs to distribute to their guests – all of whom they probably knew personally – and someone also had to invite them! The “social occasion” of home theatricals, emphasised by Florence Bell (xv), could be enhanced by keeping the lights up in the audience, serving lemonade and biscuits after the performance, and possibly having a dance afterwards, with the children still in costume.

Girls were almost always central to juvenile at-home theatricals and throughout this dissertation, I use the word “girl” the way Victorians did. Although both girls and boys could be involved, normally childcare and educating children fell to older girls, and as a result they were not only performers, they were more likely than boys or men to be juvenile theatrical project leaders or stage managers. The Victorian middle- and upper-class concept of “girl” was socially constructed by class and gender. A working class girl was seen as sexually mature at a very young age—perhaps fourteen or even twelve—while a middle class girl “came out” in her late teens or early twenties, but until she was married, she was seen as a girl. Furthermore, middle- and upper-class girls were dependent on father and family, while middle- and upper-class women were
dependent on husbands. Although some women had to work independently as a governess or lady’s companion, dependence was seen as both desirable and the norm.

According to Catherine Driscoll, in the mid-nineteenth century, discourse regarding girls, and especially “modern” girls became especially visible in 1868 when Eliza Lynn Linton published her diatribe “The Girl of the Period” (14) and she also notes how Linton’s article contains a

*recognizable* concern with what girls represented for industrialized democratic modernity and a certain girls’ life, which was unfolding in sometimes surprising ways under the influence of new legislative definitions of the adult citizen, new commodity cultures attached to newly diverse practices of labour and consumption... (Driscoll 14, italics mine)

Linton’s writing is “recognizable” because the socially constructed concept of girls and girlhood continue to operate as a barometer for society’s health. I explain more about Victorian girlhood in the literature review in this introduction, and continue to address it throughout the dissertation, but here I would like to emphasise Driscoll’s comment that in contemporary popular media girls emerged “as an index of the problem of the present, and any side of a debate regarding citizenship and culture may habitually invoke “girls” to bolster their part of the argument” (14). In other words, anxiety regarding girls’ behaviour in relation to conservative or traditional social expectations in the Victorian era continues to be an issue in the twenty-first century. Girls’ health, behaviour, sexuality, morality, consumer behaviour, and legal status are regularly pathologised, monitored, scrutinised, and invoked to create moral panics, and are often central to the ways both contemporary and Victorian people discuss “girls today”, “anxieties about cultural norms and cultural change” and all those interrelated associated “familiar tensions” (Driscoll 13). The arguments are often “recognizable” and completely familiar, although the exact nature of the content is not the same.
The relationship between Victorian girl lived realities and those of the late twentieth and twenty-first century are significant in this dissertation and in the methodology section of this introduction I explain how I use recent girl voices to illuminate the lives of Victorian girls. The relationship is only rarely causal – which is to say that occasionally the discourses of the Victorian era do still influence the lives of twentieth- and twenty-first-century girls. Sometimes there is an obvious trajectory connecting Victorian girls to our present, in that twenty-first-century girls seem to have inherited some expectations from past discourses. In Laura Hensley Choate’s 2008 guide for counsellors Girls’ and Women’s Wellness: Contemporary Counselling Issues and Interventions, for example, she describes girls who have embraced “traditional” gender roles, and those traditions can be traced back to the “angel in the house” who reigned and was idealised in Victorian discourse, if not in everyday reality. More often, however, ways young people and girls in different temporal and spatial contexts discuss similar experiences in similar ways, suggests that when young people today answer questions that Victorian girls did not write about, there may be reason to believe twenty-first-century girl analysis of an experience would have resonated with Victorian girls. Occasionally, it is not really possible to assert that the worlds of Victorian girls and the other young people, whose experiences with drama education and cosplay I discuss, are similar at all—merely analogous. Nevertheless, in those cases, the more recent voices can occasionally still inform how we might read the voices, or lack of voices, in the past. As I explore in detail in chapter two, we cannot claim there is a single Victorian girl experience or even girlhood type, anymore than we can simplify the lives of girls today that way. But in spite of the specificity of lived experiences, and the wide range of material conditions and differing discourses around girlhoods of each place and time, I believe there are relevant similarities about girlhood, role play, and theatrical experiences that make it possible for some girls’ lives to connect across space and time.
Literature Review

Hope, Girlhood, Childhood, Adolescence, and Agency

As I explored the literary landscape relevant to Victorian girlhood, at-home theatricals, identity, and possible futures, I realised that this research, focussed on girls and the future, is nestled in hope. American nineteenth-century poet Emily Dickinson writes:

“Our” is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -

The so-called “thing with feathers,” an unidentifiable, yet undeniable singer, is central to my study because of my personal longing for expanded possibilities in the lives of Victorian girls. I anticipated discovering that when girls engaged in at-home theatricals, those experiences would contribute to the development of the very “tune without the words” that I expected some thespians would learn to hear, and even sing themselves. I hoped to discover that theatricals inspired girls to hope. Although I live at least one hundred years after the playwrights and young performers featured in my work, I am looking at their lives and their writings as full of potential and possibility. With the advantages of having experienced how recent history developed, I know that educational, social, cultural, and political opportunities for women changed radically in the twentieth century, and that the radical disturbances created and foundations laid in the nineteenth century, ultimately enabled girls today to realistically dream of a vast array of possible personal futures that were barely in the conscious thoughts of most Victorian girls. Both conservative and subversive ideas existed in nineteenth-century England, and the historical trajectory that brought women the vote, higher education, and a wide variety of legal rights...
cannot be seen as a foregone conclusion: in their own time, they were part of what was, for some imaginations, a vision of utopia (and for others, a vision of social collapse).

Perhaps not surprisingly, Jill Dolan’s “Utopia in Performance” (2006) has therefore been a keystone of this study. Dolan argues that very specific moments, shared between performers and spectators, can offer a glimpse of utopia, which she explains is “always a metaphor, always a wish, a desire, a no-place that performance can sometimes help us imagine, if not find” (171). The results of these moments are more effective as a feeling than as a plan for social action, even if they may build up, through accretion, into a desire to act towards positive change. However, “a ‘performative’ is not a metaphor; it’s a doing, and it’s in the performance-based performative that hope adheres, that communitas happens, that the not-yet-conscious is glimpsed and felt and strained toward” (171). Dolan’s idea about the power of live performance shared by a community can be applied to the at-home theatrical environment, and while it is difficult to conclusively capture a moment when family spectators and young performers glimpsed a utopia, it is possible to read moments of utopia written by playwrights into the playtexts, or moments reflected upon in letters and diaries which might well have been shared by performers and spectators for a fleeting but potent instant. Although I cannot be as specific about these ephemeral and long-ago performatives as Dolan insists analysis should be, I can judiciously imagine that there was power in at-home theatricals, and that power might have inspired girls, and possibly their families, to hope for different futures.

Throughout my research process, I encountered significant age and gender bounded categories that influenced how I could understand the world of Victorian middle class girls. While primary documents and nineteenth-century newspaper articles and fiction obviously influenced the way I position girls, scholarly studies also helped me to define Victorian middle class girlhood as a period of time between early childhood, until marriage shifted her dependence
to her husband, or until she started to work independently (although this life change might not necessarily end girlhood), or until she passed her mid-twenties and became an adult by virtue of her probable evasion of the marriage market. Carol Dyhouse (1981) emphasises the significant class differences in the use of the word “girl,” and a female person’s assumed sexual availability, ability to work, and potential for independent movement. Deborah Gorham (1982) discusses ways girls were constructed into the shifting Victorian feminine ideal. Sally Mitchell (1995), Kristine Moruzi (2012) and Valerie Sanders (2000, 2012) discuss fiction and periodicals for girls, and girls’ autobiographies examining how those sources both isolate different “types” of middle class Victorian girlhood identities, and how girls could be seen to adopt or chafe against expectations of their behaviour. I use all of these to consider how a range of girls and girlhood experiences might have influenced how girls may have imagined their probable futures and options.

Since Victorian girlhood comprises both childhood and adolescence, these terms also figure in my dissertation. Marah Gubar’s Artful Dodgers (2009) offers a very useful way to see the conflicted and ambivalent construction of childhood in Victorian literature, and also acknowledges ways children were invited to “own and renovate” (37) stories adults told, establishing a playful relationship which must have existed with published at-home theatrical scripts as well. Anne Varty (2008) also recognises tension in her description of the Victorian “janus-faced child” (234) who is both purely innocent and also precocious and sophisticated. Together with Gubar’s and Varty’s additional reflections on children’s theatre culture, performance, and literature, these observations help me to imagine how young Victorians might have viewed the stage, and how adult spectators might have viewed young thespians, particularly when they cross-dressed, performed sexually precocious or violent roles, sported “Oriental” costume, or performed in unconventional ways that conflicted with the Victorian feminine ideal.
In terms of teenaged years, Nancy Lesko’s *Act Your Age!* (2001/2012) offers an analysis of ways adolescence was constructed in the nineteenth century, and how white, middle-class, maleness became “normalised” while female behaviours and especially female deviance became pathologised and the subject of scrutiny by health, education, and political experts. Lesko’s scholarly work on “The Great Chain of Being” is particularly important for this study because it helps to explain why certain girlhood behaviours caused Victorian parents anxiety, but also, why theatricals could be an acceptable outlet for unusual, unexpected, or even shocking actions.

Also at issue for a study examining girls and children is the question of how children may “act agentically” in a world in which middle-class children are economically and socially dependent on their fathers, in which their movement is controlled, and their lives are structured and monitored by a variety of institutions and cultural discourses. David Oswell’s study *The Agency of Children* (2013) provides both a survey of various ideas about human agency and children, and often, a synthesis of disparate theories. He argues that agency should not be seen as a property—something that someone can “have”—but that it is relational and conditional, and that children, like other people, seize power through “highly entangled” relationships with people, things, and space (270). Under certain circumstances, and especially through “creative bricolage, through their makeshift mash-ups and their making do” (59), Oswell’s analysis of children and agency means that girls could recruit material and cultural resources, their peers, and their families, to make both permanent and temporary changes to their domestic space, their identity performances, and, perhaps, influence the way they and their immediate community thought about girls’ futures.
Research in Space, Time, and the Imagination

The research I conducted into girls’ lives and amateur theatricals in middle-class, nineteenth-century England is bordered and contained temporally and spatially. But rather than be constrained by the confines of a specific space or the rigid limitations of linear time, I sought theoretical frameworks that could enable me to acknowledge the particular, material and lived circumstances of the girls who are the subjects of my study, while at the same time, drawing on research from other times and places and on other girls’ voices to support, augment, trouble, and complicate assumptions I might make about the apparently static, fixed, and completed nature of these girls’ lives. The fact that all the girls in my study have passed away long ago does suggest a kind of closure, but while they were alive, their vibrant letters and diaries demonstrate that their lives were far from fixed, and that accurately predicting their life trajectories with absolute certainty would have been as impossible for them as it would be for girls today. I wanted to find theoretical lenses through which my subjects could be seen to expand, extend, and imagine their own sense of the possible, by refusing to cloister them in time and space. The theoretical positions I found most productive are from Doreen Massey’s *For Space* (2005), Rebecca Schneider’s *Performing Remains* (2011), and Paul Harris’ *The Work of the Imagination* (2000).

The foundational theoretical ideas in *For Space* include Massey’s argument that space should not be regarded as fixed or static because in fact, it is “always in process of being made” (9), and is made of multiple open-ended processual relations and interconnected trajectories that are constantly being made and remade (230). This open-ended, space-as-a-process concept means that the Victorian drawing-room, where most middle-class at-home theatricals were performed, is also in process. Constantly shifting, perpetually remade and re-conceived by the people who pass through it, controlled by mothers and older sisters, but perhaps dominated by patriarchal worldviews, these drawing-room spaces are especially potent sites of multiplicities
because they cannot be seen as merely domestic spaces: through the theatricals performed there, they temporarily become spaces of imaginary lives and worlds. Each spectator and performer brings with him or her ideas, assumptions, and memories regarding the domestic environment, ideas about professional theatre, and ideas about the world of the play, which collide into each other to alter the nature of the drawing-room, and which emphasise how mutable and porous these supposedly closed spaces could be. In his review of Massey’s book, Ben Anderson suggests that Massey’s ideas about multiplicities, open-ended trajectoriests, happenstance, and space-as-process (Massey 111) can be paraphrased as “space is the condition for the unexpected” (Anderson 231) making the drawing-room space a site of possibility, rather than fore drawn conclusions. Massey also asserts that the political importance of space exists because space “makes room for a genuine multiplicity of trajectories, and thus potentially of voices” (55). She suggests that adopting this fluid interpretation of space has political potential: if identities and relations are co-constitutive, the result is that space is open to difference and heterogeneity, and in fact, that there is “genuine openness about the future” (11). When space is not fixed, disenfranchised girls can fill it with their voices, they can expect to be heard, and they can even imagine a hopeful and unexpected future.

Connected to Massey’s open and processual vision of space are ideas relating to the imagination and imaginary space. David Oswell argues that the arena of children’s play space is “potential” space, neither “internal and psychic” nor “properly external and real” (196). In other words, the world of the play that was both imagined and in some ways tangibly constructed or seen by performers and at-home theatrical audience members, has a nebulous “potential” quality that marks it as neither fully fictional, nor completely “real.” That idea of potential space also appealed to Elsie Fogerty in the late nineteenth century, who describes the make-believe, imaginative plane, as a place where “life is re-created to our will, as opposed to the real plane
which dominates, cribs, cabins and confines our will” (in Norcia, “Performing” 15). In her case, the imaginative space could be an escape, but an escape that allowed performers to exercise will-power over it in a present, existing moment—to change and re-imagine it. If imaginative space can be positioned somewhere between real and not-real, between potential, and already-present, the potency of that kind of imaginary space has two valuable properties related to the critical potential offered by the co-constructed imaginary worlds of at-home theatricals. First, Paul Harris persuasively argues that “imaginary play” continues from childhood through adulthood, and that it is a tool humans use to learn about and explore “real world” possibilities. He argues humans judiciously apply what they learn in complex imaginary circumstances to their lives and to their understandings of the world in which they live. Second, Elizabeth Ellsworth argues that particular tangible spaces (such as a classroom or a drawing-room) can, under the right circumstances, become what she calls “transitional space.” These powerful “environments of interrelation” or “transitional spaces” could be viewed as a special subset of the Doreen Massey’s concept of processual space because these spaces “provide opportunities for us to both act in the world and to be acted upon by it – while at the same time offering us the flexible stability we need to risk allowing ourselves to be changed by the interaction” (32). Clearly, a drawing-room in which children and girls were about to present an at-home theatrical could be such a space: assuring flexible stability, inviting young people to take calculated risks in front of a largely sympathetic audience, in a space where young people must act to change their environment, act to take on a role, and re-act to one another. The question is, could the space allow young people, and especially girls to act in the world when the theatrical performance had ended? That, of course, depends on the drawing-room, the moment, and the extent of action a young person may want to take, but significantly, choosing to adopt a flexible, mutable, and productively re-imaginable quality of space has enabled me to define the drawing-room as a powerful and potential space.
Historical studies also insist upon confronting the limitations of linear time. Even in twenty-first century research, the ephemeral nature of performance events emphasises how challenging it is to grasp a completed moment. My own temporal distance and the impossibility of personal spectatorship or interviews with Victorian participants means reconstructing nineteenth-century theatrical performances, and doing that has involved reading nineteenth-century play texts and “how-to” manuals, newspaper articles, letters, diaries, memoirs, playbills, occasionally drawings or photographs, and contemporary fiction related to amateur theatricals. Rebecca Schneider writes that her book Performing Remains is about the “tangle of explicit theatricality and time” (6). Her primary concern is with theatrical re-enactments of historical events, and she acknowledges Richard Schechner’s discussions of rehearsal and re-performance, in which he defines performance as either “restored behaviour” or “twice-behaved behaviour” which indicates that any performance is subject to revision, reinvention, never happening or observed the same way twice. While Schechner’s work attests to the unique nature of each ephemeral performance, Schneider is curious about what re-performance might “drag” along with it, and in “the attempt to literally touch time through the residue of the gesture or the cross-temporality of the pose” (6).

Many of the documents I examine, such as playscripts published after they were tested with family, and diary entries or letters reflecting on a performance moment do contain traces of the ephemeral performance, and the letters and diaries in particular are a type of performance document themselves. However, they are not “re-enactments” in Schneider’s sense. Instead, where Schneider’s work becomes particularly useful for my study is the way in which her writing disrupts the inexorable flow of linear time, attempting instead to allow time to play “forward, and backward and sideways” (6). When thinking about live performance, she wonders about “a more porous approach to time and to art – time as full of holes or gaps and art as capable of falling or
crossing in and out of the spaces between live iterations” (6). If Rebecca Schneider is correct in imagining that certain lived and certain artistic moments can play back and forth to one another, then my research clearly benefits from asking how I can take advantage of the porousness of time, and the flexibility of performance-based arts, and find moments where twenty-first century girls might connect with and even speak to the performance experiences of nineteenth-century girls. This is not to say that twenty-first century girls can speak for Victorian middle class girls, or that the material conditions and lived experiences of girls participating in at-home theatricals are not relevant or important in contextualizing the traces of nineteenth-century lives and words. Yet Schneider’s attempts resist the sedimentation of time and argue in favour of working with time more playfully: she has encouraged me to use a wide variety of contemporary scholarship, recent ethnographic studies, and current thinking about girlhood, drama in education, and the imagination, to judiciously create cross-temporal dialogues between girls’ experiences across time and space.

Rebecca Schneider uses Adrienne Rich’s idea that for women, “re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes…is an act of survival” (6). Schneider observes that people need to look at history differently to discover that there is not only one way to interpret the past, and therefore, the way people understand the meaning of past events now can shift. She argues that for human ‘survival’ the past can be “passing on, staying alive, in order to pass on the past as past, not, indeed, as (only) present. Never (only) present” (7). Here the way that Schneider writes clearly emphasizes how the past can be with living with us, shaping who we are and how we understand our world, even as it is an ephemeral, distinct, and completed moment. North American girls today live with the residues of Victorian girls’ past lives; their lives touch one another because of the linear (but certainly not inevitable) historical trajectory of girlhood.

Schneider’s words demonstrate that it makes some sense for girls living with the Victorian legacy
of girlhood and nineteenth-century girls to be able to speak across time to one another. Her starting point is the twenty-first-century present, looking back into the past, and re-animating moments of history through present performance. Although my own personal starting point is clearly 2014, my research subjects performed at-home theatricals between 1849 and 1910, and unlike Schneider, I call upon twenty-first-century girls’ current lived experiences to animate, in a complementary way, girls’ lived experiences in the past. This somewhat inverse approach to Schneider’s ideas about the porosity of time is nevertheless supported by the way she leans on J. Austen and writes “to ask how to do things with mimesis might be to ask how to engage with historical process – with history – with the antecedent and subsequent real at/on any given stage of time” (18). Following Rebecca Schneider’s injunction to “undo the habit of linear time” (20), my research discusses theatrical performance, and uses both the antecedent and subsequent real, to illuminate the potential power of dramatic experiences in the lives of girls.

None of this playfully critical thinking about space and time would be possible without imagination: neither would theatrical performances, nor would the implications of post-show reflections. Imagination is complicated, and the work that I found the most useful for this study is Paul L. Harris’ *The Work of the Imagination* (2000). I augment his research with child psychology studies like Gerard Jones’ *Killing Monsters: Why Children Need Fantasy, Super Heroes, and Make-Believe Violence* (2002), with drama education scholarship that discusses the potential power of guided dramatic imaginary role-play (Gallagher 2001; Hatton 2013; Neelands 2009; Wilshire 1977) and with nineteenth-century assertions that mimesis is “natural” to children. These studies complement Harris’ argument that imaginative (or “pretend”) play, for both adults and children, is an excellent tool for understanding and for challenging assumptions about ways the world works, and ways people interact in and with it. Furthermore, he counters Jean Piaget’s belief that “pretend play” is a retreat from reality, instead, expanding on Eugen Bleuler and Lev Vygotsky’s
observations that “pretend play” is neither primitive nor gradually suppressed as people get older (5). Harris argues that in fact, “playing pretend” is a sophisticated skill that children learn and begin to practice sometime around the age of two. Young children start differentiating and combining as they play between “real” and “imaginary”, between possible and implausible or even fantasy play, between role playing based on familiar social conventions, and begin experimenting with these play conventions and challenging them in complex ways. In some ways, toddler play follows rules of real-world consequences (if pretend milk spills in a game, children often “clean up” the mess in a place where it might logically be), but they also experiment with the “impossible” (flying babies, for example) and with the improbable (the toddler is the Mommy and the adult playmate is the baby sister). Children track their decisions, respond appropriately to them, and are flexible enough to change them if they need to. Adults play and imagine in more complex ways, but Harris’ studies demonstrate that people regularly use imaginary play to productively engage with, experiment with, understand, and contest the world as they know it. Therefore, Victorian girls, performing in at-home theatricals, could be expected to have been fundamentally capable of using their role-play experiments as powerful thinking tools to help them understand and perhaps re-imagine their socio-cultural conditions, and their futures within their world.

**Research in Amateur Theatricals**

Although there is only limited scholarship on nineteenth-century amateur theatricals in England, existing research relates to my project in three significant ways. First, Mary Isbell has very productively discussed Jane Austen’s phrase “the aggregate” used by Fanny, the narrator of *Mansfield Park*, to describe how she felt about an at-home theatrical rehearsal. Isbell argues “the aggregate” is the “most pronounced” feature of amateur theatre, and influences how Isbell sees
the aesthetic of private theatricals. “The aggregate” is combination of a young thespian’s everyday performance of his or her “self,” and the character the actor portrays. Since in juvenile at-home theatricals the audience and performers knew each other, often quite well, it would be virtually impossible for an audience member to see the character and not the young performer’s daily self, and Isbell argues that part of the spectator’s pleasure comes from knowing the actor. If theatrical managers chose to do so, they could “exploit the aggregate” by “type-casting” to increase the believability of a particular character, or by casting against type (cross-dressing is the simplest example of this), for comic effect (Isbell 6). While Isbell argues that “one of the most important questions to ask of [private theatrical] recovered performance events is whether the managers of these productions were attempting to eliminate or exploit the aggregation of individual personalities with fictional characters” (25) my interest in the aggregate and the performance event is different: I am more concerned with the performer and spectator experiences than the manager’s intentions. Especially through chapters 2 - 5, I discuss ways the “aggregate” influenced what audience members saw, and how their vision might complicate what they previously believed was possible; and also what girls experienced – how they used “the aggregate” to challenge themselves, to experiment with unfamiliar ways of being, and how those opportunities might have expanded what they believed was possible for their present and future lives.

Second, three scholars, Ann Mazur, Pamela Cobrin, and Megan Norcia have all discussed amateur theatricals as a venue for exploring identity and developing agency, particularly for women. As I did my research and analysis, I realized that these scholars and I have independently arrived at similar conclusions regarding the potency of the private space, the high stakes of the familiar audience, and the incredible potential for role-play to open up imaginative possibilities for a young woman or girl. Cobrin discusses American suffrage parlour
plays, and Mazur discusses home theatricals before and after Ibsen, in each case troubling and sometimes re-imagining the borders of domestic space, while arguing that these plays encouraged women to explore the type of roles they might play in their homes and, possibly, in the public world. Meanwhile, Megan Norcia discusses Elsie Fogerty’s adaptation of Tennyson’s *The Princess* for girls’ schools, arguing that the stakes were high for girls who rehearsed the character roles of public scholars that they were already playing on a daily basis at school. These high stakes, and imaginary potentials of space are made all the more powerful through Doreen Massey’s politicized conceptions of space as a process. The space of the drawing room is in flux, and the theatrical worlds and roles entering the space, brought into the room in light of the aggregate, and viewed by spectators and other performers with their own life trajectories, all work together to expand the confines of domestic space, to challenge assumptions about it and the people in it, and to raise the possibility of change within and without that space, in the fictional theatrical world, while also expanding into the world occupied by real life.

Not surprisingly all of this scholarship on amateur performance relies on Judith Butler’s ideas about performativity: the aggregate is a performance of a character role, combined with what a spectator has come to recognize as a person’s “true identity” (although that, too, is arguably a performance); and experimenting with how it feels to perform controversial or otherwise unusual identities exposes an individual to an experience which they can use, if they choose, to augment or alter their daily performed identity. Butler’s assertion that even gender is a performance is strikingly obvious in some of the examples I explore, where Victorian girls convincingly performed male roles by altering their dress and/or their behaviour, and in so doing, had an opportunity to experience additional possibilities that accompanied male gender performance in the Victorian era: increased agency, political power, strength, and influence. Butler’s ideas about performativity significantly influenced Mary Jean Corbett’s 2004 analysis of
Elizabeth Robins’ descriptions of Victorian women’s daily performances and her ability to act theatrically; and compliment Valerie Sanders’ discussions of ways gender expectations were absorbed and manifested through nineteenth-century girls’ and women’s life writing. Along with Butler’s influential discussions of performativity, I refer to writers who discuss identity performance and twentieth- and twenty-first-century adolescent girls: Kathleen Gallagher (2001), Christine Hatton (2013), Osmud Rahman et. al (2012), and Dominique Rivière (2005). These scholars demonstrate ways drama activities could make girls aware of, and sometimes critical of, ways that they and their community perform gender on a daily basis, and ways that performances could expose girls to other ways of being.

Furthermore, these Victorian girls’ theatrical performances had high stakes for young thespians because they knew the audience and the audience knew them. When young performers took on roles, the audience saw their performances in light of “the aggregate.” Girls could perform roles very different from themselves, and perhaps shock or intrigue their audience, while girls who played characters similar to their own quotidian performance of girlhood, affirmed what audiences thought they knew about the actress. This way of watching means that girls influenced spectators, and themselves became performer spectators of their fellow actors, as they negotiated the possibilities in roles, risked disappointing audience members, and embraced liberating opportunities to behave in ways that were outside of or beyond daily behaviour expectations. In Anne Varty’s short discussion of home theatricals and childhood, she argues that the construction of child performance roles and child production responsibilities at home was very different than in professional environments because “the domestic audience was positioned as a part of the drama, with a full view of the processes of performance” (250).

My work combines and reconceives the ideas performativity, identity, and agency in light of girlhood, domestic space, and theatricals that are often set in the romantic past, the world of
fairy tale, or the exotic and distant “Orient.” Just as Cobrin (2006), Mazur (2012), and Norcia (2013) suggest was true for women’s amateur parlour theatricals, juvenile at-home theatricals created opportunities for girls to perform and speak ideas out loud that questioned the status quo. But girls acting in theatricals often performed these experimental roles in the guise of fairies, princesses, witches, and male characters, who they could never hope to become, but whose characteristics and actions might cause a girl to disentangle incongruities between her own desires and her lived experiences and opportunities, or to imagine possibilities well beyond the drawing-room walls.

**Interplay Between the At-Home Stage and Professional Theatre**

The amateur stage had a different aesthetic than the professional stage, but amateurs were influenced by the professional stage in numerous ways, some of which are strikingly relevant to my study. Katherine Newey points out that home theatricals indicate less about a Victorian “retreat into domesticity,” but rather indicate how much the “(private) home was imbricated in the (public) commercial world” (138). Just as Doreen Massey indicates that space is made of multiple trajectories that enter into and become a part of it, home drawing-room stages need to be understood in terms of participant familiarity with professional theatrical conventions (Newey 140); familiarity with details about productions and performers promoted through gossip columns and reviews in periodicals; as well as connections to an industry that rented sets and costumes; and with connections to society. Newey argues home theatricals are “a whole area of previously unrecognised women’s work, which has been labelled as ‘hobby’ or ‘accomplishment,’ but in the economy of the household and its improvement and entertainment, needs to be seen for what it is – work which keeps the private home connected to the public world” (143). As Newey makes clear, the drawing-room stages relied on connections to public space, and also
drew on community social connections, which expanded the boundaries of the home. While girls may have felt trapped and limited by the space, the home was not as cloistered as one might first imagine.

Juvenile at-home theatrical connections to the professional world were significant in three ways: through professional playwrights (almost always women), impressions of professional child actors, and through the real or imagined question of whether or not girls participating in at-home theatricals entertained ambitions regarding a career on the stage. There are numerous theatre historians whose work has enhanced my own, and the most important for me regarding playwrights have been Kerry Powell (1997), Tracy Davis and Ellen Donkin (1999), and Katherine Newey (2005). Kerry Powell explores the Victorian belief in the “impossibility of women playwrights” (77 - 94), which partly explains reasons why many talented women turned their attention to the home stage. Davis and Donkin argue that historians’ approaches to the Victorian theatre scene has tended to perpetuate Victorian notions about the possibility of women’s so-called “Genius” and the anti-theatrical prejudice that undervalued drama and certainly questioned the acceptability of women’s work in that field. Instead they assert that women worked throughout the theatre industry but with different privileges and proscriptions, some of which drove women towards the home market, and some of which changed the ways aspiring female theatre artists thought about potential careers. Surprisingly, they also argue that hardworking women playwrights do not show “growing rebellion (either individual or collective) leading to a feminist consciousness” (1). Nevertheless, Davis argues a woman playwright “became an active participant, a member of many communities, deliberating signalling the dialectic tensions between household and marketplace acting in concert with all other women of her kind,” (30) but she explains that it is a disservice to these women to consider them a unified counter-public, preferring to consider them minor voices set against dominant discourse.
Katherine Newey (2005) who tracks 500 female playwrights and their some 1200 theatrical titles, some of which were for the home market, disagrees with Davis and Donkin, suggesting that in fact, women playwrights manipulated the domestic ideology from within, which attempted to proscribe women’s participation in political debate (137). My research into juvenile theatricals certainly reveals ways that playwrights wrote in quietly subversive ways that simultaneously connected women to the professional theatre industry, and questioned the status quo and women’s and children’s places in it.

Children on the professional stage influenced the home theatre because they gave thespians an idea of what might be possible or desirable, and they also contributed to concerns about girls being drawn to stage careers. I found arguments about the performance of childhood and the complicated construction of child actors’ careers and, often, their relationship to their audiences, particularly valuable in Jim Davis (2006), Tracy Davis (1996), Richard Foulkes (2005), Marah Gubar (2008, 2009, 2011, 2012), Marlis Schweitzer (2014), and Anne Varty (2008). The numerous titles attest to scholarly interest in the professional stage child, but, more importantly, these writers discuss ways child performers negotiated the Victorian tensions in child performance regarding innocence and precociousness, virtuosity, gifts, hard labour, professional versus amateur theatrical performance, and also Victorian interests in gender performances. Meanwhile, Mary Jean Corbett’s discussion of Elizabeth Robins’ arguments regarding the daily performance of womanhood, and highly emotional performances on stage demonstrates that at least some Victorians were aware of the layers of artifice in their lives, and that performance styles were learned by everyone. Performances at-home were decidedly different than those on professional stages, but it is impossible to understand one without the other, and it was necessary for me to draw connections between the way women and children negotiated performance expectations and implications in their homes and in public.
Objects, Things, and Artifactual Literacies

In chapter one, when I discuss objects and things in Victorian at-home theatricals, the main scholarly voices upon whom I draw are Bill Brown (2001), Andrew Sofer (2003), Robin Bernstein (2011) and Kate Pahl and Jennifer Rowsell (2010). While my research disrupts the “habit” of linear time and the static nature of space, objects and things associated with nineteenth-century at-home theatricals root the research in the specific, material conditions of Victorian middle-class England. In an effort to understand the expected and actual conditions of theatricals, I look at the information I have about drawing-room (or other) at-home theatrical spaces, stage directions, set pieces, props, and costumes. I notice assumptions about some objects (everyone has a piano), and references to items that could be made, modified, purchased, or rented. The, as Ric Knowles puts it, “raw theatrical event” (3) exists through the material conditions of production and reception, and these material conditions point towards lively objects and things that can be seen as performers in their own right. Bill Brown writes “we look through objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture – above all, what they disclose about us), but we only catch a glimpse of things” (4). This, he argues is because a things are something more, they are imbued with a kind of agency. He explains that objects assert themselves as things when they start to go wrong, or when they are not quite apprehended (as in, “that thing about that poem”) (5). Robin Bernstein’s book Racial Innocence, in which she discusses “scriptive things,” and Andrew Sofer’s Stage Life of Props, in which he discusses “lively objects,” take the distinction between objects and things further, suggesting that objects can perform, can speak, and can even influence behaviours. Some of the prop objects referred to in published at-home theatrical plays are “scriptive things,” and some objects constructed for the play, especially those made by Victorian girls, could be called “lively objects” because they have a function for the play, but also tell the story of girls’ skills. References to these objects prompted me to learn more about the material
conditions of the Victorian world, and Kate Pahl and Jennifer Rowsell’s research into “artifactual literacies” suggests that Victorians were very capable of reading the narratives in these objects—for them, they were communicating, lively, *things*. In this chapter, then, I go beyond an examination of material objects that influence how I read the residues of a nineteenth-century performance, and examine some items as lively objects, scriptive things, and objects that could be read by spectators in their own time.

**Genre: Subversive Fairy Tales and Tales of the Orient**

For my second and third chapters, I specifically scrutinise the potential implications of, and opportunities enabled by, the content and genre of the at-home theatrical scripts written for children. The second chapter addresses the fairy tale genre, and takes Jack Zipes’ observations about the subversive and radical potential of what can also be viewed as the civilizing, traditional, and even morally conservative genre of fairy tales: “The fact is… that fairy tales can be both provocatively subversive and trivially traditional” (xiii); and “by the late nineteenth century, fairy tales were no longer “like the mirror, mirror on the wall reflecting the cosmetic bourgeois standards of beauty and virtue that appeared to be unadulterated and pure. The fairy tale and the mirror cracked into sharp-edged radical parts” (105). Nina Auerbach, U.C. Knopflmacher, Betsey Hearne, and Maria Tatar also discuss ways fairy tales were used as a critical space to discuss, among other issues, gender, class, industrialization, and childhood expectations. For the mid-Victorian era literary inheritances from the eighteenth century, Lissa Paul’s significant research which argues in favour of “rebranding the didactic as brilliant” encouraged me to carefully consider the potential of comparatively conservative texts, like Julia Corner’s, to provoke thought and conversation, while, as I mentioned, Marah Gubar’s discussion about the so-called golden age of children’s literature in *Artful Dodgers* reminds me that Victorian writers
encouraged children to engage with the texts they wrote, avoiding a perspective that positions child readers as passive (Gubar 34) but instead anticipating that children can “navigate through this arena of competing currents [of discourse] in diverse and unexpected ways” (33), creating possibilities for child performances and play well beyond the published texts and my ability to imagine them. Fairy tales offered spaces for adult writers to raise issues for children, girls, and their families to think about, but what young people actually did with those scripts, and how they may or may not have influenced their thought remains uncertain. Fairy tale scholarship confirms both the potential power of the fairy tale genre, and uncertainty about the outcomes for child consumers.

Besides fairy tales, another popular genre for juvenile at-home theatrical scripts were “Oriental” stories, often inspired by *The Arabian Nights*, and offering opportunities for “exotic” costumes, easy cross-gender casting because of the modest costumes, and controversial, “un-English” behaviours that could otherwise be seen as quite shocking. In her study of nineteenth-century children’s geography primers, Megan Norcia writes that women in England were both “imprisoned and enthroned” in the vast British Empire (*X Marks* 200), and notes that “historicizing the primer writers means acknowledging their economic and social realities as well as ways that their writing seemed to offer them a route to enfranchisement, even while this enfranchisement took place at the expense of non-European subjects” (*X Marks* 145). I adopted her approach to examining juvenile theatrical scripts because I believe that their similar missions were to amuse and instruct. Like geography primers, Oriental theatricals contributed to and reinforced stereotypical thinking about “Others” in distant places, even as playing Oriental characters could offer girls a chance to explore roles that they might otherwise consider to be deviant. Obviously, this fourth chapter interacts with Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978/1994), and feminist rethinking of his writing; as well as with Edward Ziter’s research concerning *The Orient*
on the Victorian Stage (2003). Victorian girls, as Said makes clear, had access to a wide variety of literature that reinforced ideas about Empire and Other, and the ability of English people to know about people in distant parts of the world, often in reductive and simplified ways. Ziter demonstrates that the Victorian stage functioned as a laboratory for exploring what it might be like to behave in Oriental ways, and at-home theatricals must have operated similarly, albeit less influentially. Feminist scholars like Inderpal Grewal (1996) and Bat-Ami Bar-On (1993) complicate both Said and Ziter’s work by arguing that binaries oversimplify a complex relationship between women in England and the colonised Empire. Bar-On points out that marginalised people (like Victorian girls) often marginalise others in similar ways to how they have been marginalised, and Grewal demonstrates that English women often aligned themselves with class and/or nation rather than gender in their real or imagined relations with women of the “Orient.” Bearing these complicated relationships in mind influences how I saw girls drawing personal power and being inspired to act agentically through their at-home performances of Oriental theatricals.

Research Intersections
My research discusses a niche space, time, and activity, and also a very specific group of participants, yet I believe the way my work intersects with the range of research disciplines discussed in here, productively extends several ideas and enhances certain kinds of knowledge about theatricals, performance, and girlhood. Methodologically (about which I write more in the subsequent section of the introduction), I believe that my research demonstrates that breaking the habit of linear time and notions of static space in historical research enable us to hear distant voices more clearly without necessarily losing the essential details regarding the material conditions of specific lived experiences. Unlike Doreen Massey, I apply her theories to interior
spaces, and augment them with “imaginary space.” I take inspiration from Rebecca Schneider’s call for time slippages forwards, backwards, and sideways, but her work addresses the past touching the present through re-enactment, while mine seeks to find ways for the present to touch the past through re-imagining.

As I will demonstrate, my research also corroborates scholars’ assertions that girls could, and probably did, use theatricals to explore a variety of identities and possible futures; and it augments their observations with the suggestion that the specific nature of amateur spectatorship influenced ways audiences could also be encouraged to imagine different identities and futures for the performers. By building on research concerning the lives of middle-class Victorian girls, women, and especially playwrights, I am also able to extend the implications of ideas about lively girl-made objects and their legibility, about the subversive potential of Victorian fairy tales and “Oriental” narratives, compounded by performance activities as a powerful thinking tool.

This brings me back to Jill Dolan and the idea of hope. As Victorian playwrights and Victorian girls hoped for expanded possibilities in their lives, the utopian moments they constructed in their theatricals were very specific to their own time, space, class, and community: those hopeful explorations might not be read as hopeful by either girls in the “Orient” or girls in the twenty-first century. Using the theorists and scholarly work mentioned here regarding Victorian girls’ lives, girls’ imaginations, and the possibilities of childhood agency, I extend Jill Dolan’s idea of “utopian performatives” into a probably undocumented “potential” something in the past, that might have been possible for a few performers and a few audience members to share (rather than everyone in the room), that may have been kindled in amateur performances, and that may have been suggested by playwrights, but never realised in practice. As I will demonstrate, although time can be bent and space is not static, and although girls’ performance experiences across time and space may share a great deal, what drama experiences have in
common is the potential to offer room to extend agency and explore dreams, even if what girls hope to do, and what they choose to dream is very different.

**Methodology**

As I began to consider a method and a methodology for this research project that would stretch my thinking, creatively and conscientiously make use of available material, and be appropriate for the scope of a dissertation, I looked to two particularly helpful sources of historiographic and methodological inspiration: Charlotte Canning and Thomas Postlewait’s edited collection *Representing the Past: Essays on Performance Historiography* (2010), and Kathleen Gallagher’s edited volume *The Methodological Dilemma* (2008). This following section of my introduction describes how and why I framed this study in the way that I did, and also, my thinking behind the way that I approached and made sense of the material I selected.

In their ruminations regarding historiography, in “Representing the Past: An Introduction in Five Themes,” Charlotte Channing and Thomas Postlewait assert “our consciousness of the past, of all human events, is shaped by our ideas of archive, time, space, identity, and narrative” (23, italics mine). They also note the significance of the idea of “change.”

Incorporating each of these six foundational blocks resulted in a hexagonal house of cards, functioning as an interpretation and representation of the past. I use the image of a house of cards advisedly: I am not concerned about the strength of the premises, the study’s value, or the conclusions I have drawn based on this work, but the image of a house of cards highlights, as I will explain in this chapter, the particular ethics of this kind of scholarly study and the creation of knowledge.
Archive

My dissertation study began with the tactile experience of opening numerous 100 to 150 year old juvenile at-home theatrical playscripts in the Osborne Collection of Early Children’s Literature at the Toronto Public Library. Anyone who has ever enjoyed an encounter with old written materials can bring to mind the evocative scent of old paper, some crumbling, occasional marginalia regarding a prop or an entrance, dedications indicating the book was a gift from a loving older relative, and be able to imagine the surprisingly brightly coloured pencil crayon underlining text that demonstrates engagement with the script decades after the volume was first published, but probably also before the book entered the strictly monitored archival collection. Barbara Hodgson writes that connecting with these so-called “echoes,” or interactions with the text, and similar echoes in lists of props, preserved playbills and costumes:

resembles eavesdropping on one side of a conversation, fragments of a larger narrative of performance process, intimations of a theatrical unconscious. What fascinates me about these documents? Speaking the minority language of rehearsals, these remains provoke me to address the question of how live performance persists in the archive, leaving traces endowed with agency that have a staying power in the promptbook, as well as in other documents, tracking how written words link to performers’ bodies, gestures, behaviors. (374)

The traces in the published scripts bear witness to the fact that long ago, an unknown person pored over the very book I held, and pondered decisions regarding an upcoming production or reading of the piece. One power of archival objects is that they seem to vibrate with stories and even secrets, and to dusty historians like myself, they coax the conduct of detective work.

The Osborne Collection includes theatricals for home performance, for toy-theatres, and for plays that seem to be “closet drama” for strictly didactic purposes. Some are published in collections, some bound individually, and some are part of a series in a periodical such as W.T. Stead’s Books for the Bairns or Aunt Judy’s Magazine. When I began to look at them, I knew almost
nothing about nineteenth-century home performances, but as I read the introductions, stage
directions, and scripts themselves, I realised that most of the publications were directed towards
children and “girls” (as explained, in the language of the time, any young, unmarried female
living at home), and that they could reveal a great deal about Victorian middle-class girlhood.
For that reason, I chose to limit my study to texts published in the second half of the nineteenth
century: I believe these texts participate in the burgeoning debate about changing perceptions of
and opportunities for middle-class women. By starting in the middle of the century, I could
examine fissures and critiques in the way gender was constructed in earlier texts, moving into
texts that openly engage with discussions regarding the “New Woman” or “New Girl” of the late
nineteenth century. The performance processes that probably resulted for girl thespians, and the
conversations I believe must have been engendered through the development of the performance
event neatly works towards addressing Margaret Werry’s question regarding “how performance
history might imagine a politics-to-come?” (222). I chose 20 initial publications from the Osborne
Collection that interested me because of the introductory notes, content, or theme of the script.
Eventually, I sought out additional scripts in periodicals, other plays based on particular stories,
and scripts written by the playwrights whose work I was already studying. In The Gymnasium of the
Imagination: A Collection of Children’s Plays in English, 1780 – 1860, Jonathan Levy asserts that when
he made selections for his volume there was no shortage of plays to choose from, and, in fact,
there were many excellent possibilities (1992). His collection includes examples from writers such
as Maria Edgeworth and Hannah More, whose popular late eighteenth-century scripts might
well have continued to grace Victorian households throughout the nineteenth century.
Nevertheless, since I am interested in ways girls used theatricals to explore identities, and ways
that playwrights used scripts to encourage girls to challenge the status quo, it made sense to limit
my script choices to the latter half of the century, as writers grew bolder about discussing issues regarding women’s and children’s rights.

My dissertation analyses dramatic literature, but I also examine the published plays as performance texts, and as a result, the archives I sought needed to touch the past theatrical event, not just the source text. In particular, I wanted to learn about how Victorian girls experienced and used theatricals in their own lives. The story of my archival explorations is found primarily in Chapters 4 and 5, but in terms of my approach to the whole project, it is relevant to know that I wanted to find traces of any of the playscripts I was studying as at-home theatrical events and I especially wanted to find the voices of girls who participated in them. As Margaret Werry enjoin, to be able to imagine a “politics-to-come” through our research, “we cannot do so on the basis of unexamined terms, categories, and habits of thought – our imagination necessarily needs to include Other voices and Other ways of knowing” (222). Perhaps nineteenth century middle-class white girls in England do not immediately seem to be Other, absorbed and trained in a sea of dominant discourses as they were. Yet in terms of the historical record, young people, and especially girls, are regularly ignored, even though it is clear that adolescent viewpoints and female perspectives often differ from the mainstream. Seeking girl voices was essential to the validity of this project, but junior and established nineteenth-century historians with an interest in amateur theatricals, such as David Coates, Melanie Dawson, Karen Halttunen, Mary Isbell, Ann Mazur, Kate Newey, and Marlis Schweitzer all cautioned me, in their publications or in person, that in spite of the popularity of home theatricals during the nineteenth century, finding letters or diaries that included comments about the entertainments from theatrical participants was far from guaranteed. To that end, I decided to focus my quest for girlhood commentary on the families of playwrights mentioned in this dissertation, who I suspected were more likely to mention theatrical activities than other girls who may or may not have participated in them, and
for whom the stakes were probably not as high. I sought archival traces of all of the playwrights mentioned in this dissertation, but ultimately, only found significant archival materials for Florence Bell’s daughters Gertrude and Molly, Julia Corner, Juliana Horatia Ewing (nee Gatty), Amy Levy, Louisa Powell MacDonald and her daughters, Clara (Chamberlain) Ryland, and Charlotte Mary Yonge. These, I supplement with a smattering of observations by other nineteenth-century women engaged in reflective life-writing who also gesture towards experiences with at-home theatricals.

**Space and Time**

b) **Conceptions of space and time, my own position in relation to the past, and the relative position of the girls whose lives I strived to understand, were a constant presence in my considerations of how to frame, conduct, and analyse my research. The issues were especially important to me in this study because they influenced my decision to use twenty-first-century girls to augment the voices of nineteenth-century girls. The concepts of space and time also lead me to explain why and how I felt Kathleen Gallagher’s book *The Methodological Dilemma* which is subtitled *Creative, Critical and Collaborative Approaches to Qualitative Research* was so important to a study in which all the research participants could be said to be Victorian girls who passed away long ago.

Canning and Postlewait explain that performance historians need to think carefully about their own positions regarding space and time. They point out “as we look backward to previous events, we perceive the past through a contemporary lens that necessarily refracts the distant events we seek to represent. We describe and transcribe them simultaneously. Past actions are reenacted in present discourse” (13, italics mine). Similarly, the position of a researcher, relative to the lives of her research participants, is paramount when she considers how to effectively and ethically design a contemporary qualitative research study. Recognising that my creative voice (and all the gendered, specifically located, socio-cultural perspectives and political agendas I carry with me) is
omnipresent in the way I constructed the finished product and analysis in this dissertation is only the final part of the story. No matter how much I attempt to understand the material conditions and common philosophical positions in the specific world of the girls I study, I “describe and transcribe” the historical events according to my own, particular and located point of view.

Being transparent about my viewpoint as a scholar is important to ethical qualitative research (and I believe historical studies as well), but in her chapter in Gallagher’s book, Patti Lather more deeply explores additional implications of being fully transparent about our own position as researchers in relation to research subjects. Lather advocates “getting lost,” in order to research across difference. She describes it as “a way to move out of commanding, controlling, mastery discourses and into a knowledge that recognises the inevitable blind spots of our knowing” (225). She uses Derrida to extend the idea saying “knowledge that interrupts or derails absolute knowledge is knowledge that loses itself…in order to expose itself to chance…in order to ‘learn by heart’, knowledge from the other, thanks to the other” (225). In my research getting lost does not in any way mean wilful ignorance, or a decision to avoid interpreting data, but it does mean opening my mind to what girls have to say, and the ways that they may have wanted to say it, and to acknowledging my own lack of mastery in terms of understanding girls’ lives. Canning and Postlewait argue that gifted historians are good at recognising that the eyewitnesses, historical agents and voices of the past have their own particular culturally located concepts of archive, time, space, identity, and narrative, that like us, “they think with (and that historians attempt to decode)” (14). But Lather complicates the idea of cracking codes by suggesting that we enter broken and uneven research spaces in order to “unlearn more in the field” (227) and that (in her interpretation of Gayatri Spivak), “our very ‘not-knowing’ becomes a productive space” to move from social to historical ground, in an effort to explore how that very space can be both a limit and a resource” (227). We learn by admitting that we do not know, and the ways we work
through time and space have the potential to open the researcher up to the possibilities of not-knowing.

In my calculated position of not-knowing and in my readiness to “unlearn” and “get lost,” I became fascinated by the two philosophical positions regarding time and space explained in the literature review part of this introduction, and further discussed in the main chapters, that offered potentially productive ways to grapple with the complicated position of a presently located researcher looking at documents attesting to living girls of the past. As mentioned, Doreen Massey’s book *For Space* (2005) and Rebecca Schneider’s book *Performing Remains* (2011), both advocate for views of time and space that are multiple, ever changing and dynamic instead of static or completed, and rather than linear or fixed, move side to side, and change depending on perspective. Schneider wants to avoid the “habit of linear time” (20) while Massey wants to acknowledge the “multiple trajectories” that make up space (230), and both argue that these definitions have potentially positive political implications for disenfranchised subjects who occupy particular spaces and times. When Margaret Werry describes adopting a Polynesian or “Oceanic” approach to performance research, she helpfully talks about this kind of fluid approach to time and space: “Taking an Oceanic approach… means understanding that time and thus history do not travel inevitably forward in regular momentum that leaves the past behind and propels us into the future, but rather, that the past appears before your face to lead you (spatially and temporally) into the future” (222). Both Patti Lather, who suggests researchers “live the present historically” (220, 221), and Jo-Anne Dillabough, who argues in favour of acknowledging the continuing presence of historical others in the study of contemporary lives and spaces (6), note that people – the researcher and the research subjects/participants – are a part of these dynamic notions of time and space. We are present in our interpretations of the past, and even if we wish to reinterpret it, the past is present in us, today.
If time and space can be productively imagined in this fluid way, I reasoned, they should be porous from the present to the past as well. I positioned myself to be open to learning from the girls in the archive, to imagining that, as Margaret Werry argues, performances themselves can be “a way of knowing but also a way of knowing how one might come to know” (226, italics original). At-home theatrical performances could teach me, and they could also be powerful thinking tools for Victorian girls. But Victorian girls did not, and often could not ask themselves the questions twenty-first century qualitative researchers might ask young drama students today. How could I “listen” to what nineteenth-century girls might say about the nature of their drama experiences, if they did not ask themselves those questions? I approached this dilemma in two ways: first, I was attentive to what nineteenth-century girls actually wrote about (for example, sick brothers, crushes, delicious meals, and also theatrical rehearsals). This I did with the awareness of Jo-Anne Dillabough’s cautionary words to qualitative researchers who would metaphorically “rescue” a girl and retrieve her voice, and in the process, suggest that the young woman was previously unable to speak or to initiate any meaningful “form of telling…for themselves, about their own social conditions” (194). Victorian girls did write about their lives; their written choices are compelling, and tell important stories about their lived experiences. But I augmented these with voices of young drama students from the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, whose ideas and observations resonate in some ways with the experiences of Victorian girls, and who were explicitly invited to reflect on issues that Victorians were not, even though Victorian girls may have felt, experienced, and imagined those experiences in similar ways. Seeking out resonant studies with young people from qualitative researchers, and to a lesser extent, with contemporary psychologists, sociologists, and even poets, does not mean asking these studies to speak for Victorian girls. After all, Patti Lather argues that phrases like “giving voice”, “dialogue”, and “empowerment” have all lost their innocence (227). Instead, I am suggesting a kind of
“speaking with” that imagines, carefully considering the specificities and limitations of nineteenth-century probable lived circumstances, judiciously making use of the work of twenty-first-century scholars, to productively disrupt space and time and illuminate possible if not definitively known experiences for girls. Methodologically, I believe that my research demonstrates that breaking the habit of linear time and notions of static space in historical research enable us to hear distant voices more clearly without necessarily losing the essential details regarding the material conditions of specific lived experiences.

**Identity**

When Charlotte Canning and Thomas Postlewait consider their fundamental historiographic ideas of archive, time, space, identity, and narrative, they call them “coordinates of the mind” and “categories of thought” (16). They argue human identity in particular, is “central to procedures of rational inquiry and understanding,” as are Descartes’s intrinsically connected “methods of doubt” (17). Canning and Postlewait claim that even the most novice historians bring doubt into their approach to documentary sources, especially when it comes to discussing the identity of the writer.

During this study, I have already indicated that I consider the identity of the researcher (me) to be central to the research process and final document of this study, but the identities of the playwrights and girls who participated in at-home theatricals in Victorian England are, of course, the primary concern. While I have described these girls in terms of conventional monikers (white, middle-class, English, primarily Christian, and “girls” in the Victorian sense of the word), the subjects of my research often had different ways of describing themselves, and they presented and performed their identities differently to various people at different times.
For this study, my approach to the identity of the people I describe certainly employs a dose of doubt—not only in Patti Lather’s terms of embracing a position of unknowing—but because I take the position that a person’s identity is multiple, unfixed, and performed. The multiple identities of Victorian girls and at-home theatrical playwrights are apparent through the various voices they adopt in letters, depending on who they are writing to, the many personas they adopt when writing juvenile newspapers, and, for the playwrights, their choice of the dramatic form enabled them to experiment with multiple voices and identities while distancing themselves from necessarily declaring any particular position as their own. Acknowledging that identity is not fixed, in the same way that neither space nor time are fixed, is utterly anachronistic to the majority of thought coming out of the Victorian era which suggested that in many ways a person’s identity was pre-determined and immutable, often based on so-called race, local geography, class, parentage and gender. Yet what we know about a person’s identity today suggests that identity is fluid, changeable in different circumstances, and often alters over time. In Kathleen Gallagher’s research with young people, she invites them to choose a pseudonym, and to apply any self-identifiers to themselves that they think are important in the moment, such as gender, ethnic background, immigration status, and sexual orientation. But she does not assume that as a researcher, she cannot also apply her awareness of the broader world of urban young people to help illuminate or clarify their insights about themselves. Gallagher’s research participants identify themselves, but, with access to a broad range of information, she also applies her ideas to identify youth and gain insight into the significance of youth experiences. She does not assume that she has no prior knowledge, but rather, like Lather, she approaches the research with a willingness to unlearn, to be surprised, to change her views, and to be taught by research participants. Her open-minded, yet thoughtfully critical, approach to contemporary youth self-appraisal is inspiring in its ethics. Gallagher’s research participants may or may not ever read the
scholarly analysis resulting from their willing contributions and participation, but she still uses
their words with careful respect: her ethics are orthogonal to any direct impact on the
participants. Viewed this way, the integrity of the research I conduct concerning the lives of
Victorian girls needs to be equally ethical and respectful. Girls who lived one hundred and fifty
years ago could not choose whether or not to participate in my project, nor could they read the
resulting analysis, but they deserve equally respectful and ethical treatment in the ways I discuss
their identities and their stories. I accept the way they describe themselves and the way they
frame their experiences, but at the same time, I am aware of, and able to apply information that
they did not know about themselves: discourse theory, psychology, contemporary ethnographic
research, performance studies, and many ideas about girlhood and adolescence had not yet been
developed, but are no less able to elucidate aspects of nineteenth-century girls and their lives.

Embracing the idea of performed identity is significant because this study is already
discussing the *performance* of at-home theatricals, and these performances as a vehicle for girls to
experiment with, try-on, and temporarily perform identities other than the one they performed in
daily life. As I explain earlier, Mary Isbell productively describes “the aggregate:” the nineteenth-
century audience was able to watch an amateur play and see the actor embody a character’s
identity at the same time as they saw the daily performance of her real identity, but Isbell muses
“perhaps I should put ‘reality’ in quotations here but for the purposes of this project, the concept
of the aggregate would be unnecessarily complicated by the concept of performative identity”
(271). Yet it is impossible to escape the fact that Victorian middle-class girls were trained to
perform a particular identity in daily life, which they performed in various ways with varying
degrees of success, and also, that by the end of the nineteenth century, girls could choose a
significant number of acceptable daily personas to adopt and perform. If they attended girls’
schools, they even had alternate performance venues – enabling them to choose one performance
for home, and one for school. And, as Valerie Sanders notes in her discussions of women’s reflections on their girlhood, the behaviours and performances that were acceptable and endearing, or at least tolerable for a child, had to be left behind when a girl entered society and adulthood. Sanders also remarks that many Victorian writers seemed aware of and frustrated by the injustice regarding expectations of their daily performance that made it necessary for girls to abandon their dreams and ambitions as they grew into older and more conventional adult behaviours. As a result, although I use Isbell’s concept of the aggregate to discuss many notable features of amateur performance aesthetics and experiences, I cannot abandon the idea of daily performed identities, even though it makes the approach to the documents and the resulting narrative more complicated and more difficult to pin down—or fix—which, given the nature of this methodology, is probably exactly as it should be.

Adopting an approach that establishes the identity of both researcher and research participant as significant to the development of knowledge, and accepting that these identities are mutable, brings me to Margaret Werry’s vision of “theory building as a dialogue between scholar and subject, [that] looks for points of resonance between their respective interests and investments” (226). By relating to the historical documents and their creators in a way that transparently acknowledges both my own political aims and cultural sensibilities (especially, in this case, those informed by twenty-first century feminist theory and a desire to find hope in theatre), and the explicit or latent desires of the writers, means that perhaps, I can discover connections and write about both. That Victorian girls would have been interested in the co-creation of knowledge about their own lives seems likely, based on Gallagher’s and Lortie’s qualitative research project, co-researched with young participants in the twenty-first century, which Gallagher and Lortie believe demonstrates that “youth are engaged in a process of theorizing or myth-debunking about their own lives” (406). I acknowledge that because of my
own perspectives I may be blind to some of the dreams of the girls and playwrights I discuss, but I am hopeful that my method has allowed me to be better attuned to many of them.

Patti Lather describes this co-creation of knowledge and politicized research approach, particularly when working with “others,” as being responsible to “the struggle for voice, the possibilities and limits of connecting across difference, and [generative to] the productivity of simultaneous tension and reparation in solidarity efforts” (228). Lather is not in any way imagining disenfranchised yet privileged middle-class Victorian girls when she makes this statement, yet I think that her comments about otherness, seeking solidarity and connecting across difference are relevant to my process. Lather’s suggestions also help to explain how a scholar might avoid falling prey to Jo-Anne Dillabough’s warnings about adopting a “politics of love” which, Dillabough argues, often causes well-meaning researchers to disconnect girls’ stories from their specific lived conditions, and reframe girls’ identities and their stories in terms of the researcher’s own conceptions of “girlhood, and legitimate forms of female citizenship” (195). As Gallagher notes, it is challenging to learn from, and even hear, the voices we do not want to hear (“The Art”, 72), and sometimes, it is difficult not to see what we are looking for, to the exclusion of something else. Within the context of qualitative research, Gallagher suggests shifting from the visual metaphors of seeing and observing “to metaphors expressing voice” such as listening and understanding (“The Art”, 72). This shift in metaphor is particularly powerful when seeking the traces of girlhood identity expressed in written form, and involves looking deeper than the sometimes difficult-to-read handwriting, and imagining girls’ voices performed in text form.

Notwithstanding Patti Lather’s assertion that “dialogue” has become a dirty word, I hope that this open-ended way of approaching documentary evidence and the unfixed interpretation of identities of the women and girls who created them allows for a kind of “dialogue” in which I am, in some sense, able to co-create knowledge with the Victorian subjects from so long ago.
Narrative

My favourite of Canning’s and Postlewait’s categories of historical thought is narrative: this is where the stories are, the decisions about voices to highlight and details to include. Very productively for the purposes of a study addressing girls and agency on the cusp of their futures, Canning and Postlewait write that as human beings, we narrate our lives, including not only our past actions but also our expectations and our predictive thoughts and plans. These narratives offer records of (that is, versions of) past accomplishments, present endeavours, and future undertakings (19).

Gallagher’s observation about the power of employing particular language, such as “metaphors expressing voice,” in the way research is framed and eventually shared directly relates to the idea of constructing a cohesive and thoughtful narrative from the source stories that research participants share about their experiences and their dreams, and that objects and ephemera allow us to construct. In this dissertation, the narratives I relate and create are partly a result of my discoveries in the archives, but even the gems I find are often directly connected to the questions I pose. Jacky Bratton (using Peter Burke), requests historians use “an approach which asks present-minded questions but refuses to give present-minded answers” (14). Questions about girlhood identities, possible futures, the value of participating in a dramatic process, performance, performativity, and hope are all very present-minded—as I mentioned, many of the questions may not even have occurred to middle-class Victorians. For that reason, the narrative I create and share in this dissertation is built from both nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century materials, and carefully and deliberately, finds ways to use those details to craft historically-minded answers.

Besides choosing to define girls and girlhood in Victorian terms, the narrative herein is constructed out of multiple nineteenth-century source types: dramatic texts which I analyse as
literary and performance documents; nineteenth century advice manuals and articles regarding how to “get-up” a play, how to choose costumes appropriately, or how to be a Victorian girl; nineteenth-century fiction about children and adults referring to private theatricals; book reviews and advertisements for play publications in nineteenth-century periodicals; playbills and programmes from at-home theatrical performances; and nineteenth-century letters, diaries, and memoirs. All these kinds of sources provide details that help imagine the process and experience of getting-up an at-home theatrical, and each one “speaks” in a voice that needs to be carefully scrutinised.

In one of her studies with high school students, Kathleen Gallagher and her research team developed what they called a “porous methodology.” She explains:

“porous methodology asks the researcher to position him/herself differently in relation to the context and the participants of the research, to reimagine the ‘gaze’ of research by changing the terms of communication, and to leave certain improvisational possibilities, conversational explorations and analytical practices open in the structuring of a ‘scientific method’ “(Methodological 5)

The “improvisational” possibilities that open up with archival and historical research are very different than those one can share with living students. But a ‘porous methodology’ is open to serendipity, inspiration, possibility, and chance. In my present-minded state, I mined the internet for archive sources and made contact with descendants of two playwrights which I discuss in more detail elsewhere; I cultivated supportive relationships with scholars in England, Australia, and the United States to get advice regarding fiction and archives, and, with the help of the University of Toronto Centre for Drama, Theatre, and Performance Studies, I put on an at-home theatrical version of Clara Ryland’s “Frog Prince” in one of the old houses on campus. But equally present-minded, were my decisions to apply and reconsider twentieth and twenty-first century qualitative research studies with young people concerning drama education and
“costume” practices, to help me imagine how Victorian girls might have answered similar questions if they had ever been asked to consider them. Placed alongside nineteenth-century fiction and diaries, these twenty-first century perspectives suggest possible ways of interpreting nineteenth-century sources and nineteenth-century lived experiences, without, I hope, imposing present-minded answers that pull Victorian girls out of their own, specifically located lives.

Sometimes approaching these Victorian girls as if they were participants in a contemporary qualitative research project gave me permission to get lost, to unknow, to admit my politics, and to try to discover ways for these girls to be co-collaborators in the story I write about them and their lives.

**Change and Choices**

Although they chose not to highlight “change” as one of their five categories of historical thought, Canning and Postlewait admit

> it cannot be denied that the processes of change are always operating in history: in the making of archives, in the temporal and spatial dynamics of historical events, in the developmental conditions of individuals, communities, and in the narrative constructions of history… (22)

I wish to discuss the idea of “change” as one of my cornerstones here because it is closely connected to hope. As I explain in my literature review, “hope” is one of the driving principles of this project. Victorian girls lived in a time in which we can see that opportunities for women were changing and expanding in significant ways: education opportunities, career options, legal support, travel, availability of information about women’s bodies, and the possibility of living independently and still having respect. Furthermore, by virtue of their young age, Victorian girls lived on the cusp of their future adulthood. Manon van de Water argues that it was not until the late twentieth century that changes in conceptions of childhood enabled the young to be seen as
“human beings” instead of “human becomings” (121). Viewed as dependent “human becomings” by their own contemporaries, girls may have craved respect, agency, power, and freedom to make choices, but this state also meant that their lives could be experienced as full of potential and possibility, poised to become adult, on the threshold of responsibility and womanhood, ready to become a person. Girls may have felt their probable options were limited, but in this space of becoming, girls’ lives could be energized with the chance of change, and depending on their circumstances, with the option to choose some of those changes.

Just as the girls I study in this dissertation were poised to make choices about their futures, fuelled by their imaginations and their experiences, as a researcher, I carry the burden and the promise of choice. Kathleen Gallagher writes “through our research and the choices we make, we imagine the world in ever more interesting and complex ways, and re-commit ourselves to our intellectual and political projects” (Methodological 1). My methodological and historiographic approach to this dissertation was intended to assist me in imagining the world in interesting and complex ways, where I could position myself, my politics, and my hopes for the futures of my now-dead subjects in ways that highlight the inherent possibilities of change. When I arrived at obstacles, especially the gaps I describe in Chapters 5 and 6, my decision to treat the gaps as more than absences, is a significant demonstration of ways that specific choices can alter the narrative I tell, the conclusions I draw, and the identities I discover. Gallagher suggests “obstacles urge us to face our assumptions, confront our investments, consider our ethical commitments and ask what is conventional about wisdom” (Methodological 2). In a study like this one, where I set out to unlearn as I learn, and to adopt a position which views identity, space, and time as mutable, and narrative as just one view of constructing the past, I hope that there is very little that is conventional. My hexagonal foundation for my house of cards provides a supportive base for me to share my discoveries and my analyses about nineteenth-century girls performing at-home
theatricals, and ways that those performance experiences allowed them to experiment with identities, play with possible futures, and imagine change for themselves. My methodological approach acknowledges that the narrative I share should not be seen as fixed or definitive, that the analysis welcomes questions and invites alternate interpretations. But the house of cards is here: it stands as a representative of the narrative I am able to construct today.

**Finding Possible Futures in Imaginative Theatrical Spaces of the Past**

For the majority of the participants, at-home theatricals were amusing, entertaining, and perhaps even educational experiences. But they could also be something more, and through this dissertation I demonstrate ways playwrights, through stage directions and advice, set up possibilities for girls regarding getting-up a play; and opportunities playwrights offered to try on alternate identities by scripting somewhat radical characters, dialogues, and politicized retellings of familiar (and occasionally original) stories. Through the writings of playwrights, participants, spectators, and through fictional accounts of at-home theatricals I also glimpse a picture of how the girl participants experienced at-home theatricals, and I use those accounts, augmented by similar discussions with twentieth- and twenty-first-century young people, to better imagine and understand how Victorian girls experienced at-home theatricals, and what those experiences might have meant to them. The scripted literature offers insights into what playwrights thought was possible, and their use of subversive material or stage directions inviting girls to be leaders and make choices illuminates the raw materials children and girls had to work with. Equally important are reflections written by Victorian girls, and by actual spectators because with these I can approach an understanding of how theatricals looked, felt and how girls experienced them. Adding the voices of young near contemporaries provides additional youthful words that augment, corroborate, or support what seems to be true in the nineteenth century. Ultimately,
this variety of sources lead me to conclude that with the help of girls’ imaginations, theatricals, at home, in a Victorian drawing room, which may have felt stifling, oppressive, and even cloistered to adventurous girls, could establish wide open potential spaces full of hope and imbued with potential futures.
Chapter Two: Stage Directions and Advice

*Victorian Middle-Class Girls, Agency, Identity, Space and Objects*

Scripts, stage directions, hints, and advice, regarding amateur at-home juvenile theatricals, performed by children and “girls” can be see as templates, raw materials, inspiring departure points which people used to carry out this popular pastime in Victorian England’s upper and middle-class homes. While some young people wrote plays to suit themselves, there were also numerous juvenile theatrical publications, both books and periodicals1, offering scripts and suggestions about how to “get-up” a play in a domestic space. Many playwrights used their “hints,” advice, stage directions, and scripts to invite children, and especially girls to imagine and reimagine their identities and possible futures. Similar encouragement can be found in fictional accounts about “getting-up” a play at home. These publications demonstrate how some at-home theatricals had the potential to open opportunities for girls to act agentically as they explored possible ways to make choices and take control of their environment, while others discouraged girls from challenging Victorian *status quo* expectations relating to women as angels of the house, who sacrifice themselves to their families. In this chapter, I am particularly interested in examining ways that stage directions and advice relating to the process of at-home theatrical production, and the objects referenced in scripts, related to costumes, sets, and props provide insight into the lives of Victorian middle-class girls, and also, how they give us a window into how young people might have chosen plays, the kinds of practical concerns that consumed young

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1 *Aunt Judy’s Magazine*, *Books for the Bairns*, *Chums*, *Girls’ Own Paper*, *Little Wide-Awake*, *St. Nicholas*, *Young Folks* and many more magazines especially for children included scripts for theatricals. Occasionally magazines for adult women, such as *Hearth and Home* or *Myra’s Journal of Fashion* also printed theatrical scripts especially for children to perform.
thespian’s plans and preparations, and ultimately, what their performances might have looked like when they were finally presented. The ways the plays looked, and, even more importantly, the process of creation, open a window onto ways theatricals offered opportunities for girls to take action, imagine, and dream.

To facilitate my examination of the relationship between juvenile at-home theatrical scripts and girlhood dreams, I begin by providing details regarding my primary sources, moving on to discuss the theoretical anchors of this chapter: agency, identity, space, and objects. Following those sections I describe some particularly relevant Victorian discourses related to morality, agency, idleness and work, girl identities, learning, and pleasure at home, which influenced the way playwrights set up their introductions, hints, and advice. The chapter will close with some case studies connecting the published scripts with issues concerning space, objects, and scriptive things, all of which serve to illuminate how theatricals were prepared and might have appeared as finished products; and ways at-home theatricals had the potential to bolster Victorian girls’ options concerning their own agency, identities, and possible futures.

**Sources**

For this chapter I chose to closely examine primary sources related to juvenile at-home theatricals that have extensive stage directions, or elaborate hints and advice. Printed in book form, Julia Corner’s *Little Plays for Little Actors* (1854), Florence Bell’s *Fairy Tale Plays and How to Act Them* (1896) and Keith Angus’ *Children’s Theatricals* (1879) offer quite extensive suggestions. In periodicals, I examine J.H. Ewing’s script “The Peace-Egg” (written 1884 but published 1896) and her “Hints for Private Theatricals, letters from Burnt-Cork to Rouge Pot” originally printed in *Aunt Judy’s Magazine* (1867c) and Marion Adams’ scripts in W.T. Stead’s *Books for the Bairns* (especially “Cinderella” (1900), and “Sleeping Beauty” (1901)). I also draw from fiction:
Charlotte Yonge’s fictionalised memoirs of her time with the Moberly family and the scripts she originally did with them (“The Mice at Play” and “The Strayed Falcon” in *Historical Dramas*) (1864); and a short story called “Christmas Holidays at Everton” published in *Aunt Judy’s Magazine* in 1871. The breadth of time this subset of publications considers 1854 to 1901 and the variety of formats and genres gives a fair picture of the type of literature Victorian girls encountered when they sought out advice, inspiration, and scripts. Apart from these, in this chapter I also refer to several other primary source scripts to supplement my observations (such as Annie Walker’s (1875) and Clara Ryland’s (1896), which are both discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, and Teresa Pulszky’s (1858), discussed in more detail in Chapter 5), and other contemporary sources, such as nineteenth-century advice manuals, and newspaper and magazine articles.

### Theoretical Anchors

#### Girls and Agency

Agency, including its limits and sources, is the first theoretical anchor in my quartet. The Victorian middle and upper-class concept of ‘girl’ in the Victorian era, as I explain in the introduction to this thesis, was socially constructed by gender and class, and indicated upon whom the person was dependent: she was a girl if she was dependent on father and family, and a woman if she was dependent on her husband. In some circumstances, an unmarried female person could work as a lady’s companion or governess, or she could remain independent through an inheritance, and when she reached an age when it seemed unlikely that she would marry, she was seen as a woman, but dependence was seen as both desirable and the norm. According to Carol Dyhouse, “behaviour of middle-class girls was likely to be defined as problematic when they sought to pursue goals outside marriage and family life” (*Girls Growing Up* 138). Rather than
acquiring education or developing skills that would help them to earn a living outside the home, most middle-class girls cultivated “feminine virtues” and accomplishments that would enhance their marriage prospects (*Girls Growing Up* 44). In a recent interview when Judith Butler was discussing gender performativity, she mused “it’s my view that gender is culturally formed, but it’s also a domain of agency or freedom” (*BigThink*). Although Butler is also concerned with “how such gender norms get established and policed and what is the best way is to disrupt them…” (*BigThink*), her perspective suggests that playing with gender performances had the potential to offer Victorian girls opportunities to experiment and challenge expectations. One way at-home theatricals could be powerful is that girls could use them to disrupt how others saw them and their gender, and also, when girls performed, they could “try out” the performance of certain kinds of disruptive behaviours, in a relatively non-confrontational way. A Victorian girl could use theatricals as a tool to negotiate or resist gender norming, if she had enough freedom or access to agency.

Yet how could a Victorian girl hope to act agentically if Carol Dyhouse argues that regardless of her class, a growing girl “tended to be seen as a problem when and where she showed signs of cherishing anything resembling autonomy” (*Girls Growing Up* 138)? “Resembling autonomy” is a significant phrase, since, according to feminist law scholar Kathryn Abrams, autonomy and agency are not synonymous. Abrams argues autonomy suggests an ability to make choices completely independently of other influences, such as gender socialization or the demands of family. Middle-class Victorian girls simply could not hope to do that. Abrams notes a “traditional” woman has been socialised in ‘feminine’ norms and devotes herself to caring for the family, thus entangling herself in social relations that regularly place demands on her that supersede her own needs. In fact, although women’s lives are shaped by unequal power relations, interconnected social obligations, social construction influences, and the media in particularly
significant ways, Abrams questions whether autonomy might be an impossible kind of independence for almost any human being, male or female. Abrams acknowledges Diana Meyers’ theoretical analysis that suggests there are different degrees of autonomy, but Abrams argues that even a modified theory of autonomy is inadequate when discussing women because it fails to account for complex “collective” attributions and diffused kinds of resistance that women often use to assert control in small but significant ways over their own lives. As an alternative, she argues the idea of agency takes into account the potentially collective character of women’s decision-making and the diffused nature of the way that women often assert influence. Rather than emphasise autonomy, she prefers to focus on two dimensions of “agency”: self-definition and self-direction (822). Indeed, if a Victorian girl was seen to be “cherishing anything resembling autonomy” she might incite panic, but operating agentically by redefining her own identity or by making actionable choices could be a more subtle form of interference in the domestic space, one that sometimes subversively resisted normative expectations for girls, and one that sometimes enabled her to gain power within the confining Victorian assumptions about middle class girls’ lives and futures.

Similarly concerned with the relationship of agency to self-definition and self-direction, David Oswell’s *The Agency of Children* (2013) offers insights into how dependent children, including nineteenth-century girls, may be able to (and might have been able to) influence their world and construct their own identities. Oswell explains that ideas about agency “allow us to think through children’s and young people’s capacities to make a difference (rather than being constituted as a difference)” while considering how they are “actively involved in emergent, innovative, experimental and substantive forms of solidarity and coexistence” (6). Even more contingent than Abrams’ assessment of agency, Oswell argues that agency “is always relational and never a property; it is always in-between and interstitial; and the capacity to do and to make a difference
is necessarily dispersed across an arrangement”\(^2\) of human and non-human relationships (270). He argues that children seize power through “highly entangled” relationships with people, things, and space, through mobilisation, networking, and experimentation. Oswell’s framework is relevant because home theatricals offered opportunities to engage with all of those elements. Understanding the “arrangement” that middle-class Victorian girls were likely a part of helps to explain how home theatricals could become extensions of girls’ agency, or could contribute to an environment that fostered agency. The capacity to use those highly entangled relationships with people, things, and institutions to seize power and make change is not fixed: even if under certain circumstances, some girls might accomplish very little, those same girls, or perhaps different girls, might be able to accomplish more under different circumstances.

Oswell contends that sometimes, like identity performances, “children’s agency is understood as being akin to a text or a performance in which different characters or actors are orchestrated through plot, voice, and staging” (36) but appealing as a performance model like that is in the context of studying theatricals, Oswell cautions that it “fails to account properly for the materiality of agency,” (36) and the way agency should be understood in all its human, non-human, social and technological, cultural, and natural relationships and distributions. Agency may be contingent, in-between, relational, and never a property, but that does not in any way negate the tangible materiality of the relationships required to make agency a possibility for girls. Although numerous factors could be considered when examining possibilities of child and girl agency as it relates to the performance of Victorian at-home theatricals, this chapter only takes some into account: human and social elements related to leadership; non-human and

\(^2\) Oswell explains that he uses the term “arrangement” to mean “assemblage” or *agencement* (270). The concept describes interconnected relationships between people, place, things, technology, institutions, etc.
technological elements related to props, costumes, and the nature of domestic space; and cultural discourses concerning morality, leisure and work, education, amusement, and gender.

One of Oswell’s most powerful suggestions involves examining ways that children recruit material and cultural resources, peers, and their own social competency in order to dynamically negotiate space and effect change in it (54). Taking that counsel, I examine the stage directions and advice offered regarding getting-up juvenile at-home theatricals, I consider the cultural discourses the texts evoke, the skills (both social and practical) playwrights assume young people would have had, the environment the playwrights imagined the children inhabited, and the objects at their disposal for manipulation. Throughout this chapter I lean on Oswell’s and Abrams’ analyses of agency to demonstrate how, even when girls were economically dependent on fathers, socially inferior to brothers, and confined to a narrow space in the world, they could nonetheless use theatricals to alter the way that people in their immediate community saw them and saw the space around them. Simultaneously girls chose, played with, considered, rejected, and embraced various conventional and character identities through at-home theatricals. As they built sets, props, and costumes to alter their space and themselves, they accessed a kind of agency, and nudged and shifted the way they, their current surrounding world, and their possible futures could be seen and imagined.

Girls and Identity
Identity is the second important theoretical construct used in this chapter. When girls imagine possible futures, insofar as they are a part of those possible futures they are also imagining current and future identities. In some ways girlhood is a liminal time because girls are posed both in a state of being, in the now, and simultaneously in a state of becoming adult. Education theorist and cultural historian Nancy Lesko argues that since the nineteenth century “in public spectacles,
scientific research, popular ideas of health and disease, and political rhetoric, adolescence – defined as “becoming” – became an embodiment of and a worry about “progress” (21). She argues that policy makers often think about young people in terms of what they are becoming, rather than what they are now. Nevertheless, both “now” and “future” are important in the context of this research because as girls prepared and performed at-home theatricals, they performed aspects of their current identity (perhaps middle-class, female, “good girl”) while simultaneously performing alternatives to their current identities, and possible (both probable and unexpected) future adult identities.

My understanding of “identity” is that it is, like gender, performed and performative; that it is always multiple; and it is always in process and never fixed. Like Judith Butler, who wonders who has the power to establish and police gender norms, education theorists McCarthy and Crichlow write “issues of identity and representation directly raise questions about who has the power to define whom, and when, and how” (in Gallagher and Rivière 321). In this chapter, I assume that through gender norming, identity options for Victorian middle-class girls were profoundly and systemically entrenched (but not fixed), and were regularly reiterated by fathers, mothers, education reformers and print media.

But, like identities, culture is not fixed either. Girls in Victorian middle-class England experienced what education theorist Dominique Rivière calls “living culture.” “It refers both to how a person’s daily cultural experiences influences her/his understandings of the social world, and to the dynamic, shifting, and ‘breathing’ nature of culture itself” (342). Victorian middle-class culture was in flux throughout the nineteenth century. The culture girls lived was not monolithic – it could be gently nudged or soundly kicked, and if they did so, girls could and did alter the boundaries of their lives. “Children make themselves and are made in space,” writes David Oswell (233). The cultural space of the Victorian home and family partially made girls what they
were, but girls also constructed their own identities, influenced their changing cultural environment, and contributed to the creation of their own cultural life.  

**Girls and Space**

While identity and agency are primarily concerned with the girls’ inner lives, their physical environment – space – is the third consideration that provides context for understanding at-home theatricals. Victorian middle- and upper-class girls inhabited domestic space for the majority of their daily lives. In most homes, the two rooms most relevant for children and girls who were interested in putting on a theatrical were the nursery and the drawing room. Nurseries were often sparsely furnished since company was not expected to visit them (Calvert 131), located out of the way in order to prevent children from disturbing their fathers, and they were also where children spent the majority of their time (Flanders 74). These features would have made them ideal rehearsal rooms and prop building spaces, and certainly the Gatty family (Juliana Horatia Ewing’s brothers and sisters) practiced their plays in the nursery. In contrast, the drawing room, where most playwrights who published juvenile theatricals imagined their scripts would, ideally, 

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3 Girl Studies scholar Catherine Driscoll refers to the influences of Victorian print material directed towards girls as a strong outside element in the construction of girl culture (15), but it is important that girls also influenced and constructed aspects of their own culture for themselves – evidence of their contributions are found in letters, diaries, memoirs, and fiction, some of which I discuss in chapters 4 and 5.

4 Nurseries were a relatively new concept in 1838, but only twenty-five years later, home designers considered them a necessary room in any middle-class home (Flanders 64).

5 In Charlotte Yonge’s *Historical Dramas* the adults occupy the drawing room while the young people are all relegated to a back parlour instead of a nursery, so certainly individual home layouts would have bearing on where girls might make theatrical arrangements. In Charles Dickens’ *Sketches By Boz* (1836) “Mrs. Joseph Porter” is a depiction of an amateur at-home production (to be performed by adults). In Mary Isbell’s dissertation, she explains the sketch suggests a home simply isn’t big enough to contain private theatrical preparations, and that it completely upset the lives of everyone living there. It is hard to imagine that young people would have had the power to take over a house in the same way as in “Mrs. Joseph Porter”: “The house, usually so clean and tidy, was, to use Mr. Gattleton’s expressive description “regularly turned out o’ windows;” the large dining-room, dismantled of its furniture and ornaments, presented a strange jumble of “properties.” The bedrooms were crowded with scenery, the kitchen was occupied by carpenters...every sofa in the house was more or less damaged by the perseverance and spirit with which Mr. Sempronious Gattleton, and Miss Lucina, rehearsed the smothering scene in “Othello” (in Isbell 38).
be performed, was “the center of the house, literally and spiritually. It was the status indicator, the mark of gentility, the room from where the woman governed her domain” (Flanders 168). Primarily a room for entertaining and engaging in the elaborate and intricate social duty of “paying calls” (Dyhouse 24), guests were more likely to visit the drawing room than other home spaces, and as a result, it was also the best-furnished room in the house. By the middle of the era, it seems probable that the space was crammed full of heavy furniture, comfortable chairs, curios, whatnots, china, photographs, natural science specimens, birdcages with accompanying birds, clocks, mirrors, books, and a piano. Flanders argues that achieving the correct balance in decorating was a social essential: “extravagance was immoral; thrift was moral; the greatest good was knowing one’s place and living up to it precisely” (Flanders 170). Although drawing rooms were full of furniture and objects, and in spite of the fact that drawing rooms were the mother’s domain, it makes sense that juvenile theatricals would be performed there, since theatricals were for the amusement of immediate family, as well as relatives and friends.

Although it was the mother’s space, girls did spend time in the drawing room. They practiced music there, and when the family entertained guests, girls might be expected to sing or play the piano. They also participated in the mother’s duties of “paying calls” and receiving guests. Furthermore, girls’ presence might be found in the decorating: much of the drawing room was draped in fabrics embroidered by mothers or daughters, and augmented by their paintings, handmade fabric flowers, or otherwise genteel examples of girls’ fancywork, representations of “accomplishments” and appropriate middle-class female labour. As popular novelist Dinah Mulcock Craik put it in her 1858 A Woman’s Thoughts About Women, “their whole energies are devoted to the massacre of old Time. They prick him to death with crochet and embroidery needles; strum him deaf with piano and harp playing…” (in Flanders 198). With the
space so full of objects, however, on an ordinary day, a girls’ handiwork probably often blended into the general impression of her mother’s territory, rather than standing out.

Through their domestic duties, middle-class girls with leisure on their hands knew the contents and possibilities of drawing-room spaces intimately: as mentioned, most playwrights were confident that as stage managers, girls could temporarily reshape drawing-room spaces. In taking command of the family’s most important public-facing space, they could re-imagine them in ways that, as Doreen Massey suggests, “makes room for a genuine multiplicity of trajectories, and thus potentially of voices” (55). Massey argues that altering the interpretation of space has political potential. When disenfranchised girls intentionally change the way people see daily environments (even temporarily within the context of a play), that action has political importance (Massey 55). David Oswell suggests spaces where children conduct imaginative play (what he calls “play” space), is imbued with power, calling it “potential” space. He argues it is neither “internal and psychic” nor “properly external and real” (Oswell 196). Although putting on a play is different from purely imaginative improvisational play, when children are acting, their imaginations are adding to Massey’s idea of the “multiplicity of trajectories.” There is power in what they can imagine, and power in how they influence the ways others might imagine with them.

Doreen Massey explains that no space is static because it is made of multiple open-ended processual relations and interconnected trajectories that are constantly being made and remade (230). What is significant about this observation in the context of a drawing-room theatrical is that Massey argues “space is the condition for the unexpected” and as such, the political impact of altering a drawing room space for a performance goes beyond a simple aesthetic analysis. When girls manipulated space and emphasised or altered certain trajectories connected to how Victorian families understood their home environment, they created openings to imagine the
unexpected, the unheard of and unfamiliar. Just as “existence in the spectators’ life” influenced the way audiences read amateur actor performances, existence in the spectators’ lives could influence the way the specific location of the drawing room is read and re-read.

The idea that re-arranging the drawing room could hold significant political potential is strengthened when one notices the importance of space and environment in the broader literature around Victorian girls and amateur theatre performance. When theatre historian Megan A. Norcia discusses Elsie Fogerty’s adaptation of Tennyson’s poem “The Princess” for performance as a play in girls’ schools and colleges, she points out the political significance of changing the way that girl performers and audience members might see the space around them. The plot is an apt one for that environment because the title character starts a school for women, and, cast in the light of a Greek tragic hero, must abandon it. Norcia cites Fogerty’s reverent comments concerning the “gift of supreme ‘make believe’” which allows “an imaginative plane where life is re-created to our will, as opposed to the real plane which dominates, cribs, cabins and confines our will” (in Norcia 15). Fogerty produced her adaptation numerous times in various schools between 1890 and 1901, and her writing demonstrates that she would have been convinced by Doreen Massey’s conception of the power of imaginary trajectories brought into, reshaping, and even stretching the bounds of real space. Norcia, in turn, interprets Fogerty’s assertions to mean that the stage “seems a necessary space in which to test out possibilities for women’s intellectual life” (Norcia 15).6

Like girls anticipating family audience members and negotiating role expectations at home, Norcia argues that stakes concerning performance for late Victorian college and

6 Norcia augments her interpretation of Fogerty’s words saying that the stage may also allow women “to perform or rehearse capitulation so that those possibilities do not become too transgressive to the patriarchal social order” (16).
schoolgirls were very high. Asserting that girls in educational settings still needed to perform the angel of the house role in public and private life, even as they pursued scholarly goals, Norcia believes that the particular subject of “the Princess” was especially effective in allowing female students to reconsider their own experiences of education, and in fact, their own experience of performing their gender in Victorian society, because the script created “a separate and subversive space [which students] explored through play and performance, improvising the possibilities for identity” (Norcia 20). To be able to reimagine, and possibly, redefine identity requires agency on the part of the person performing the alternate identity conception. David Oswell writes “we need to grasp that the things and people through which agency resonates are not all the same size or the same scale” (Oswell 60). Performing other identities, and reconceiving and changing the space of quotidian lives in middle-class homes through at-home theatricals may have opened up the possibility of reimagining spaces for fewer girls than a performance in a school might, but the proximity to home, family, and father, I would argue, makes the space just as potentially volatile and fertile.

Mary Isbell believes the style and aesthetics of private theatricals operate differently than those of the professional stage because “amateurs might bring something that the most talented professional could not: their existence in the spectators’ life” (Isbell 3). I concur completely, but the issue is not exclusively an aesthetic one. Elsie Fogerty’s “The Princess” is a particularly potent choice for Victorian girls at school, and obviously, not every juvenile theatrical script brings equally subversive narratives into the home, but every at-home theatrical requires the temporary reimagining, repurposing, and reconfiguring of domestic space, and each at-home performance space must be populated by props, sets, and costumes that were most often built by young people. These space-altering practices could direct audiences to simultaneously re-imagine the on-stage and at-home identities of the young performers.
Objects, Things, and Girls

The final theoretical underpinning I utilize concerns the significance of the objects and things that surrounded Victorian girls, and the role those objects had in the at-home theatrical.

Playwrights called on thespians to make use of a variety of objects they expected to festoon the home. All these prop directions indicate that even W.T. Stead, who sold his *Books for the Bairns* as cheaply as possible to foster literacy among all classes of English children, assumed a certain level of wealth, not to mention leisure, were necessary for at-home theatrical performances to be possible (or likely) to happen. In fact, descriptions of Victorian drawing rooms suggest that the extensive, often heavy or fragile, and status-indicating drawing-room décor would have been difficult to mask or eliminate completely from the space in the interest of creating a scene.

Because the room itself spoke for the status and taste of the mistress of the house, some girls were unlikely to be allowed to make drastic (albeit temporary) changes to the drawing-room décor, but if they had permission to get-up a play in that room, some degree of change would be part of the experience.

Besides the pleasure of presenting the show, producing an at-home theatrical created an opportunity for girls’ skills and labour to become translated into “performing objects.” Through the objects’ performances, audiences could read a particular story about taste, femininity, and individuality. Girls who were supposed to be accomplished in sewing, decorating and making useful and beautiful objects could hardly hope for a better opportunity to display their work to their immediate community. Wealthier girls who were not busy darning socks or helping with their mother’s domestic duties may have filled their time augmenting fabric to drape various

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7 Most playwrights included several alternate arrangements to help young people imagine ways to adapt spaces to at-home theatrical needs (*Adams, Bell, Corner, etc.*)
objects in the drawing room, or making decorative objects for Christmas, bridal, or birthday gifts (Flanders 196). While these items did not command an extended gaze, an at-home theatrical created a different space because girl-made items were not lost in a deluge of objects, but rather, had central focus, on stage, for the duration of the scene. Audience members could not examine stitching at a close proximity, but they could still have a good impression of a girl’s work, style, and resourcefulness. Even if plays were performed with little expense, many playwrights stressed the value of taking and making costumes, scenery, and props seriously, setting up the play as a showcase for feminine skills.

Andrew Sofer paraphrases *Twelfth Night* saying “some objects are born lively, some achieve liveliness, and some have liveliness thrust upon ‘em” (23). One way that props can be “lively” or “active” (rather than passive) is by signifying something independent of the actor who handles them (24). The objects that girls found to grace their domestic stages were probably not particularly “lively” in that sense – for example, “a few broken trees, two or three handfuls of straw, some baskets, gardening tools” to represent a country village (Corner, “Dick Whittington” 11). But the props that the girls made could be “objects that are born lively” because they perform a parallel narrative that exists outside of the story of the play – the narrative about a girl’s taste, skills, hard work, and willingness to share labour with her family.

Playwrights’ advice regarding props and costumes offer insight into the material lives of girls in Victorian England because they reference actual objects, like eggs, pianos, and baskets, that could be presumed to be in middle- and upper-class homes, or could be expected to be available through locally known merchants. The “things” that girls make for the at-home stage, however, are invested with creativity, energy, and effort, and those items have an additional kind of “thing-ness” because through them, girls found opportunities to explore individual expression and personal agency. In Bill Brown’s “Thing Theory” (2001) he explains that “things” are more than
mere objects because they seem to have agency of their own: “that exceed[s] their mere materialization… their mere utilization as objects” (5). Instead, “things” are characterized by a “sensuous” or even “metaphysical presence” which “magically” changes objects (5). A knife is merely a knife until it cuts me (as opposed to me, cutting myself on the knife); in that moment, suddenly the knife becomes a thing.

Brown is interested in how “things” comprise the temporal “before and after” qualities of an object (6). Girls’ theatrical creations, or “things”, contain within them the “before” of the stage directions, the imagination, the research, and the labour. They also contain the “after” of the maker’s possible emotional response to the project, and of the traces of audience reception, because significantly, through these girl-made “things,” girls’ self-expression found an audience, and could be seen and perhaps heard. Even though girl-made “things” for theatricals may have been inspired by the script, they rapidly acquired meaning and even “sensuous” or “metaphysical presence” after the ideas on the page, because of the girls’ relationships to the objects they made, and because of the audience’s relationship to the girls. “After” the scripted references, while the items are built or modified, performed, and read is when they achieve what Sofer simply calls “liveliness.”

Education theory experts Kate Pahl and Jennifer Rowsell’s “artifactual literacies” research attests to the fact people can read the narratives embedded in a “lively object.” Pahl’s and Rowsell’s research focuses on family objects that represent and cue memories, stories, and connections to absent people or places, but it is clear that reading objects is a skill people have, yet rarely acknowledge. In a society like middle class Victorian England when ornamenting objects by hand, making clothes, decorating boxes and vases, and painting watercolour landscapes were seen as evidence of “accomplishments” desired by families for their middle- and upper-class daughters, it can be safely assumed that adult women and possibly adult men were
skilled at “reading” the objects to which girls had given their creative attention, for cleverness, care, style, patience, and other virtues. Each girl-made thing had the potential, by performing on stage, to become, as Brown put it, a “thing-in-motion” capable of narrating a specific story beyond the staged action, readable to people invested in Victorian middle-class culture. “Lively” girl-made elements of at-home theatricals performed both their obvious functions of assisting in creating the world of the play while they simultaneously told stories about the girls who made them.

**Victorian Discourses and At-Home Theatricals**

**Learning their Parts: Victorian Discourses of Morality and Individual Agency**

With explanations of these four theoretical anchors—agency, identity, space, and objects—in hand, which are simultaneously four ways of approaching Victorian middle-class girls’ experiences, I have now laid out some tools to consider the relationship influential Victorian discourses and at-home theatrical scripts: morality and individual agency; idleness and work; learning and identity; amusement and pleasure. The first to consider is Victorian society, morality, and the at-home theatrical. Professional theatre and participation in any kind of theatrical activity had a morally ambiguous position in the minds of the Victorian public, even though society pages in magazines, cartoons in *Punch*, and references to private theatricals in nineteenth-century essays and fiction indicate that Victorian English society was passionate about “amateur theatricals.” Positioning theatricals as a positive influence on the lives of young thespians, numerous playwrights explicitly addressed Victorian notions of morality, idleness and work, play and learning, and social obligations and pleasure. Prevailing ideas about these concepts directly influenced how girls could use theatricals to explore personal agency and their own identity, and how much real responsibility girls, as theatrical stage managers, could really
expect to have. In introductions and advice, playwrights responded to some Victorian parents’ concerns about theatricals and morality which included anxieties about supposedly debauched lifestyles of professional actors,\(^8\) the unsavoury nature of urban theatre environments, the dubious content of plays,\(^9\) and scandalous character behaviours,\(^10\) to concerns related to middle-class girls and idleness.\(^11\)

Middle-class parents experienced a great deal of external pressure to provide their children with a moral environment, since most experts agreed that if a child went awry, it was the parents’ (usually the mother’s) fault. Many Victorian advice manuals earnestly argued that the consequence of immorality would be hell (Marshall 22, 23, 35, 109, 113). Furthermore, even if parents were unconvinced by threats of hellfire if they erred, they might be concerned about censure from other respectable middle-class families. There was no consensus about the best methods of child rearing, but faced with mortal pressure to parent correctly, and possible disapproval from society, many playwrights felt they needed to assure families that performing theatricals in their drawing rooms could be a positive home influence. Even if parents never allowed girls to attend professional productions, girls’ families who permitted theatrical performances at home had to determine their family’s position on these pervasive discourses concerning morality and the theatre; girls, in turn, had to negotiate the family’s viewpoints when

\(^8\) Barish explains that inflammatory pamphlets with titles like *The Church and the Stage* were diminishing in intensity (317) but still exerted influence on a sizeable number of the middle class (Barish 343-349).

\(^9\) By 1850, people began to critique the “insubstantial” nature of English stage content, and equate that with “immorality.” Marvin Carlson argues that as a result, for many respectable middle-class Victorians, the very act of going to the theatre was suspect (Carlson 228).

\(^10\) Marah Gubar points out that the fare on the London stages included morally suspect behaviours such as children impersonating drunkenness, women singing in their underwear, or girls smoking cigars (Gubar 157).

\(^11\) Home theatricals with young adults also raised another spectre: parents worried that their children might fall in love, and, because theatrical performance might heighten their emotions and destroy their good judgment, behave in a passionately irrational way, and elope. Numerous fictional accounts of that concern exist (Isbell 144).
choosing, organising, and getting-up a play. Charlotte Yonge and Christabel Coleridge offered a nuanced exploration of various perspectives about theatre and particularly, amateur public performance, in their joint novel *Strolling Players* (1893). The novel follows a group of young aristocrats who frequently did at-home theatricals for pleasure. After their father lost all his money to a “bad banking situation,” and then passed away leaving them nothing, they decide to become semi-professional strolling players, primarily in private homes, to earn money. The remarkable piece articulates a wide range of viewpoints about the nature of acting and theatre, the role of the audience, the advisability of acting for young girls, the safety of the profession, the possible differences between classes, and girls’ duties to church and family. Some characters are quite scandalized by the idea of any kind of acting but Mrs Lambourne says “that sort of thing is all very well for girls, but I do think a woman should give it up when she is married” (115). The rector’s sister tells him, “it was of acting in general that she talked to me, and I could not condemn it altogether as mamma and Susan would,” while her brother explains he cannot imagine how theatre work could corrupt a basically good person (159). The multiple perspectives presented in *The Strolling Players* indicate that Victorian girls’ may have confronted any number of responses to the idea of home performances when trying to negotiate permission to do them. Some supportive families would have made room for deliberately chosen projects, and others might have been already enthusiastically organising their own.

One reason that some families would have approved of theatrical projects was contemporary enthusiasm for the significance of “play.” Julia Corner (1854) responded to the concerns about the potentially corrupting influences of theatre by writing that she is aware that

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12 In chapter 4 I discuss Grace MacDonald’s article for her family newspaper that describes an encounter with a girl who wasn’t originally allowed to perform in theatricals, but at this visit, was allowed to play charades on the condition that she did not get dressed up. This example demonstrates that not only were some parents more strict than others, but family rules could change.
some people object to “juvenile amusements that bear any affinity to theatricals,” but in her opinion, the argument is spurious: children do role playing and make up their own stories anyway. What is essential, in her view, is that “proper subjects be selected, and care taken that they convey some useful or moral lesson” and in that case “such performances would be calculated to good rather than harm” (Corner “Introduction”). Her attitude is in keeping with theorists of the day whom Anne Varty cites: Schiller, Walter Pater, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Ernest Dowson all argue that play is at the heart of acting, children are good at it, and there is nothing quite so wonderful as play (All Work, Varty 10-11). The very idea that play-acting could be “good” for children is central to the connections between amusement, educational activity, and morality. Julia Corner asserts that performing plays is good for children because it is fun, innocent, and prevents laziness (an immoral behaviour, of course). “Children want to be amused; and I believe that amusement is beneficial to them, provided it has no bad tendency” (Corner “Introduction”). W. T. Stead takes the promotion of at-home theatricals further by writing, “it is a good thing to act plays; it is much better to act them yourself than merely to go and see somebody else act them” (Stead in Adams “Sleeping Beauty,” preface). If playing could be framed as “good,” then when girls played at various unexpected, unusual, or even “naughty” identities, they were actually engaging in an activity (play) that parents could justify.

In fact, although the writers might have argued that their plays promoted innocence and/or morality rather than encouraging young people to succumb to vice, as I will discuss in more detail in the following chapters, they also gave girls opportunities to experiment with darker behaviours or to question status quo discourses concerning gender, parent-child relations, education, and marriage expectation. For the moment, two examples will suffice. In Charlotte
Yonge’s “The Mice At Play”¹³ she related a danger of a “squabble” among the young ladies for the pleasure of being a character named Joan. They all cry out, “oh let me be Joan…None of the others are any fun; but she is so nice and naughty.” Gertrude is cast as Joan, and “though a most quiet, well-behaved girl, put on the coquettish airs and graces of the Fair Maid of Kent so naturally, that her mamma professed to be quite frightened to see of what she was capable.” In the next play in the collection, “The Strayed Falcon,” Gertrude announces she would like to be “a naughty one” again, but this time, “the delightfully naughty” part goes to Aunt Alice. Meanwhile, although 11-year old Kitty’s character is well-behaved, off-stage she actually displays naughty behaviours, and for punishment, is not allowed to act in the second play. Yonge’s narratives offer occasions to consider performing fictional “naughtiness,” and real-life “naughtiness” and whether playing at and exploring “naughty” behaviours are connected to learning or displaying them.

Few of the plays I examined offered explicit “morals” at the endings but Ryland’s at-home version of *The Frog Prince* closes with:

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King. …If we insist once more upon the moral.
Belinda. If asked to give a promise, think well before you make it.
Aminda. But when your word is given, then never, never break it.
Prince. If any creature help you, beware how you forsake it.
Clorinda. And if papa gives good advice, just do like me and take it. (Ryland 98)
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The patriarchal discourse inscribed in “The Frog Prince” probably inspired confidence in some families, but note that Clorinda does not say “*when* papa gives advice, just do like me and take it”, she says “*if* papa gives good advice.” Even plays that appear to be “innocent” and written to promote “good” behaviour, and even playwrights who asserted that their plays should be

¹³ The book *Historical Dramas* has no pagination.
acceptable to Victorian families, could have raised provocative questions, as they invited girls to experiment with unfamiliar, unconventional, or even unacceptable ways of being and relating to others. Family expectations, the possibility of censure, and the need to please parents, all increased the stakes of putting on the theatrical, and at the same time, raised the complexity of exploring alternate behaviours, new identities and possible futures through the performance. But neither the careful framing of plays by playwrights and publishers, nor the high stakes for potential performers rendered these explorations unlikely. Rather, they indicate that potential for girls’ imaginations to be stimulated might be embedded in something as obvious as a naughty character or as small as rhymed doggerel in a play’s conclusion: a small crack in conventions, expectations, or status quo that could lead to a space for other dreams and possibilities where girls could develop their own opinions about what might be right or wrong, or how they would like to perform their own life if/when they could make decisions for themselves.

Moral Panic: Discourses Concerning Idle Girls

No one who has gone through the world with eyes open can have failed to have noticed that a great many girls lead useless lives.


There was also a certain amount of “moral panic” regarding girls and idleness in Victorian England, because as leisure hours increased, there was much less for middle-class women and girls to do. The second discourse playwrights needed to consider if they wanted to promote their scripts to the middle classes relates to idleness and its opposite: work. Sociologist Keith Tester argues that moral panics occur when events perceived to be precipitated by a particular social group point to the fragility of social interdependencies, because those events contest institutions and routine. The unpredictability of the challenge to the status quo is part of what causes panic. Tester writes, when the existing order is threatened, “moral panic reconfirms the moral goodness
of the existing order of things” (50). In her 1885 *What Girls Can Do*, Phillis Browne exemplifies moral panic regarding girls: she despaired that without useful work, girls grow narrow-minded and selfish, “gliding” into idle habits (3), and she considered “work” the prescription for this societal ailment. Browne’s table of contents does not mention theatricals as “work” but many of her listings could be applied to making scenery, costumes, and props for a play.

Katherine Newey argues that getting up home theatricals is “a whole area of previously unrecognized women’s work…[which] in the economy of the household and its improvement and entertainment, needs to be seen for what it is – work which keeps the private home connected to the public world” (Newey 143). Mary Isbell agrees that amateur theatrical management must be considered “work by our current standards” although “it certainly wasn’t perceived that way in the period” (109). But while Julia Corner acknowledged the concern of idleness, she specifically argued that getting up her plays could be an antidote, writing, “I also believe that a very important part of education consists in promoting innocent and agreeable occupation for leisure hours, in order to prevent any disposition to indolence, either of mind or body” (Corner “Introduction”). In fact, in the case of older girls managing juvenile theatricals, keeping “the private home connected to the public world” would probably be a relatively insignificant goal, compared to the more immediate need to ensure that children were busily engaged in wholesome and appropriately diverting activities. Although theatricals provided amusement for the family, they also dovetailed positively with other Victorian preoccupations: preparations for theatricals prevented laziness while being a productive use of time; they had educational value; they could provide moral instruction; and they encouraged congenial family interactions.

Girls who were allowed to engage in at-home theatricals would have had to be able to justify the expenditure of time and energy, because although Phillis Browne fretted that girls were
idle, many middle-class girls had extensive daily domestic duties. Charlotte Yonge’s description in *Historical Dramas of “Aunt Alice”* (who is only 18) illustrates that the labour of getting up a play could be perceived as a virtuous use of time, but was only one Alice’s many domestic occupations. Her flurry of daily tasks includes putting out the stores, writing notes for grandmother, tracking down letters or newspaper articles for grandfather, listening to the poor describe their troubles, sending the baby to sleep, consulting with a busy brother, “romping” with children and, in terms of the play, painting the scenery, “dragging the slow learners through their parts, or when the workers at costumes were in a puzzle, laying hold with her clever fingers, and getting through the difficulty as if there were fairy charm in her touch.” While much of Aunt Alice’s services to her family were invisible to the majority of the household, the painted set and costumes were not, which probably appealed to hard-working girls. Similarly, Alice’s 11-year-old niece Kitty had to justify her participation in the Christmas play. Not yet expected to do her own dress-making, she already did her own mending, and her assistance with adapting clothing into costumes demonstrated that she was developing valuable dressmaking skills. An advantage to Kitty was that some of her daily work could become visible, and along with that of the other clever-fingered girls, it could be admired. Provided Kitty did not neglect her daily chores and routine tasks, the family welcomed her participation in the at-home theatrical preparations.

**Discourses of Learning and Girls Exploring Identities: Juvenile Theatricals, Education and At-Home Leadership**

Not only did playwrights suggest theatricals were a productive, wholesome and even moral use of time, they promised that getting up theatricals could be an educational experience. Children and girls could expect to *learn* from the effort of “getting up” a play, and they might *teach* younger company members during the process. What was meant and interpreted as educational in the Victorian era is itself an issue that requires attention: in her discussions of the children’s book
industry in the long eighteenth century, children’s literature scholar Lissa Paul argues that too often literature that intends to teach young people is described as “merely” didactic. She proposes “rebranding didactic as brilliant” (97) but admits that it is difficult because the word rings discordant when set against words like fun, play and innocence which are tenaciously connected to notions of children’s literature. Yet, she stresses that the women who wrote for children in the eighteenth century were “engaged in all kinds of maternal teaching practices that were directed towards encouraging children to become thinking and knowing adults” (Paul 96). The at-home theatricals I discuss here were published a century after the works discussed in Paul’s book, but the significance of reframing the idea of “didactic” remains. Acknowledging that children sometimes resist efforts to teach them, Charlotte Yonge writes, in “The Mice at Play:”

“Oh! The time of King Edward III,” said Kate, “so there can’t be any smothering, Lucy.”
“What a horrid bore,” said Edward.
‘Oh! It’s all going to be improving and stuff,” said John. “Come along, Edward, and we’ll have some fun in the hall.”
“For shame, you idle boys,” cried Jane…
“Never mind, Jenny,” said Alice; “it’s no one’s loss but theirs”…

And indeed, the loss would be theirs, because although the plays provided practice in memory work, public speaking, decorum and poise, not to mention occasional history or moral lessons, they were generally packaged in a palatable and entertaining way. Girls and boys who performed the plays with vigour and commitment could practice important public social skills in a relatively tolerant and understanding environment, and they could work through many of those lessons under the protective guise of another character.

Playwrights may have emphasised different aspects of learning inherent in the experience of getting up a play, but most pointed towards certain valuable skills. Clara Ryland wrote “all children instinctively love acting, and such an occupation, I believe, not only gives them immense
pleasure, but is also very valuable as a *training*” (ix, italics mine). The “training” refers to social and public skills necessary for success in Victorian middle-class life. Beyond the pleasure of performing characters presented in the texts of private theatricals who might be unconventional, unexpected, or provocative, the theatrical itself created an opportunity to practice typical and desirable social relations and skills. For example, Annie Walker denied that her plays have any pretensions at teaching moral lessons, and simply began as “innocent” fun for two little boys and their friends (Coghill vi), but she emphasised the importance of “thoroughness in learning their parts and strict discipline at rehearsal” (Coghill vi). Julia Corner asserted young people’s “memories would be improved by the necessity of learning perfectly the parts” (viii). Florence Bell not only discussed the practice of appropriate basic acting technique, she also provided diagrams demonstrating typical deportment pitfalls and their gracious remedies in terms of gestures, sitting and standing properly. (“A kind of fin-like flapping of the hand and fore-arm is the ordinary stage gesture of the English boy and girl. On the whole, amateurs are probably safer in trying to gesticulate less rather than more…”) (xxv). Many of her suggestions point to the advantages of practicing decorum, clear speaking, and related social skills. For example,

as regards general deportment, however – standing, walking, sitting, moving – most of the maxims that apply to private life apply with still greater force to the stage, where, since the attention of the spectators is riveted on the performer, it is still more necessary to stand well, walk well, and sit well, than it is in daily life, where error in these respects may hope sometimes to pass unperceived. And especially with regard to the plays in the present volume is it necessary to insist upon this, since they are destined for performers at a time of life of which the most prominent characteristic, perhaps, is ungainliness (xx).

If girls embraced this kind of “training,” they were effectively rehearsing for future adulthood presiding over a gracious, middle-class, Victorian home, with all the responsibilities and expectations that might accompany that kind of life.
Perhaps the most significant conventional lessons in social and practical skills could be learned by the older girls, like Aunt Alice ("Mice at Play") or Aunt Fanny ("Christmas Holidays at Everton") who managed and trained the theatrical troupe. Theatricals created a real occasion for girls to embrace the identity of leader and manager. Playwrights, and writers generally, seemed to expect that older girls would take on at-home theatrical leadership responsibilities. Usually called "stage-managers," the role was often one of director, technical director, producer, publicist, and prompter all combined. Stage-management work would mirror, on a much smaller scale, the management of resources, space, their own future children, and events in a Victorian middle class home.

The task of stage-managing juvenile theatricals was not an exclusively female one, but notes and hints in published playscripts suggest that older girls were the most likely candidates for the job. Drawing-room theatricals were particularly common at Christmas holidays partly because boarding school students were home, and often extended families gathered under one roof. Returning boys may have been the eagerly anticipated arrivals, since fewer girls attended boarding schools until late in the era, but most often girls contrived and executed the children’s theatrical projects. In the prologue to her version of "Cinderella" Marion Adams writes, "it is taken for granted that the plays will never be "got up" except with the assistance of so kind and clever mother, or sister, or teacher, or friend to coach and prompt the 'little players,'" clearly assuming the helper would be female.14 In the fictional story "Christmas Holidays at Everton" (Aunt Judy’s Magazine 1871c) the young, unmarried Aunt Fanny writes the play, corrals the children, builds costumes, helps the children to invite guests, and performs the role of the

14 Routledge’s Magazine for Boys and Chums (a boys’ magazine) both published articles for boys regarding organizing home theatres. However, my research indicates that the default is usually assumed to be a female leader.
Duchess. Even in J.H. Ewing’s letters from Burnt Cork to Rouge Pot called “Hints for Private Theatricals,” although she uses the pronoun “he” to refer to the “stage-manager” the text gestures towards probable female leadership via a gender neutral pronoun: “he will have to bear in mind... that ‘boys will be boys’”, he must assign parts and work “without a thought to self” and must accept that if the play is a success, the credit will go to the actors, while he is “blowing-out the guttering footlights, or showing the youngest actor how to get the paint off his cheeks, without taking the skin off into the bargain.” Although it is entirely possible that boys could carry out theatrical leadership responsibilities while working with younger children, advice related to juvenile theatricals tends to emphasise selfless household management, caregiving skills, and tolerance for male antics, repeating the messages Victorian girls regularly heard regarding expectations for female conduct, and suggesting that the probable leaders for children’s theatrical projects were girls and women.

The management of at-home theatricals afforded girls with an extraordinary opportunity to semi-publicly present a project according to their own taste and ideas, while at the same time, performing the self-effacing, disappearing work women were expected to master as household managers, all the while tolerating company delinquencies by consoling herself with “the more reliable panacea of resolute good temper” (Ewing 89.) As Juliana Ewing (as Burnt Cork) writes in “Hints for Private Theatricals, I” the manager “will, however, have the satisfaction (and when one has a head to plan and a heart in one’s work, it is a satisfaction) of carrying through the thing in his own way” (89). As stage managers, girls could practice leadership and organisational skills while they imagined and even experimented with identities such as leader, teacher, and, most significantly, mistress of the house. Unlike some other identities girls might explore through
fictional characters, these roles were extensions of conventional successful futures for girls, and practicing them through an at-home theatrical offered a practical learning experience.

Amusement, Entertainment, and Pleasure At Home

Juliana Horatia Ewing, in her “Hints for Private Theatricals,” enjoins young people to bear in mind “that private theatricals are an amusement, not a business” (Ewing 88). The tone of advice for juvenile theatrical managers mimics the advice given to adult women planning to get up home theatricals with their friends, as opposed to the advice for men planning to do theatricals with their friends, students, or families. The former emphasises the congenial social occasion, and the importance of rendering one’s leadership invisible, while the latter emphasises a strong vision and authoritarian execution (Isbell 24, 111) indicating different ideas about how one should enjoy the fun of getting-up a play, and different—even gendered—ideas about the definition of pleasure.

Some playwrights assert that the major virtue of their scripts was that they would enable an appropriate and entertaining social occasion in the home, and like the idea of “didactic” which can be easily discounted, social occasions were an important but easily disregarded part of middle-class women’s labour, reinforcing positive connections with other families in the community, while ensuring harmony within the family, especially during chilly holidays when many people needed to be occupied indoors. Foregrounding the importance of pleasure, W.T. Stead writes that the theatricals in Books for the Bairns “will help you to make your people and yourselves merry at Christmas-time” (in Adams “Sleeping Beauty”, Introduction.) Theresa Pulszky wrote in her introduction, “As to the dramatic effect, I know from experience, that they

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15 Some of these other identities, inspired by fictional characters, are discussed in greater detail in chapter 2 and 3.
amuse the young performers as well as their audience; and therefore I trust they may be acceptable to mothers, as well as to children” (Pulszky preface, italics mine). Similarly, Annie Walker’s collection of plays included ignorant and naughty characters, all of whom she presented in amusing and entertaining rather than edifying ways. Florence Bell most emphatically framed at-home theatricals as social events when she explained why the area where the audience sits should not be too dark:

Personally I find this depressing at an amateur play, which is a social occasion as much as a dramatic one. I prefer that the auditoriums should be light enough, at any rate, to be able to read the programme comfortably, and to see what is going on in the room (Bell xv).16

Girls who organised and helped to “get-up” at-home theatricals contributed to the creation of a social occasion, which was an important, if undervalued, activity in the Victorian home. Even if, on balance, concerns about morality, time well-spent, and learning social skills were more important in juvenile theatricals than a social occasion, which, as Newey explains, connected private and public spaces, the imaginative and creative potential of theatricals because they were intended as entertainment for the participants and the audience should not be underestimated. Slightly daring, subversive, or even rebellious ideas could be tried out because the experiment was not perceived as “serious,” but as a kind of amusement.17 It seems likely that Victorian families would view theatricals through the lens of “social occasion” when the managers were girls (rather than men or boys), who were encouraged to set the event up as “an

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16 Bell adds that a darkened auditorium may be the new practice at the Bayreuth and Lyceum, but that does not “seem to bear upon it much” (xv). Even if lighting promoting the goals of naturalism were in vogue in London, Bell believed in this case, home theatricals needed to remain a social environment.

17 Discussing home theatricals to be performed by adults, Newey also writes “but ‘getting up’ a play, while presented in the scripts and ‘how-to’ guides as wholesome and educative, could offer possibilities of transgressing the conventions of feminine and masculine sociability” (141). Theatricals might have made behaviours that were otherwise inappropriate off-stage more acceptable during rehearsals as well.
amusement, not a business.” Even if it may have been risky to surprise or even shock certain guests, the audience was probably sympathetic to the children and their foibles, and ready to forgive a *faux pas*. The frame around at-home theatricals of “social occasion” and “fun” could enable girls to think about serious possibilities that existed outside of their daily lives. Similarly, the cloak of fun could allow serious challenges to other discourses that directly influenced how they imagined themselves, and how they could reconceive their interactions with their families, the public world, and their futures.

**At-Home Theatrical Case Studies, Theoretical Anchors, and Victorian Discourses**

**Girls and Example Theatricals: Defining, Inhabiting, and Reimagining the Domestic Space**

In spite of the buffer created by at-home theatricals being framed as an amusing, fun, social occasion, I believe the powerful nature of those imaginings could be multiplied when they directly confront (by occupying) what is typically a confining, private, quotidian space. Carried in the memories of performers and audience members, and potentially triggered after the performance by regularly being in the drawing room space for other reasons, traces of performances could continue to exist long after the theatrical took place.

Victorian juvenile theatrical playwrights agreed that an “ideal” space for performance in the home actually requires two rooms, one of which would be the drawing room. Julia Corner wrote:

> nothing could be better adapted to the purpose than two rooms opening into each other with folding doors the stage being that into which the doors open, as they would form places for the exit of different actors, who might retire behind the doors instead of all going off the stage at the same point. These would also answer the purpose of a curtain, some person being stationed behind each to open and close them between the scenes. The prompter might also stand behind one of the doors. (“Introduction”)
Similarly, in “Cinderella,” Marion Adams explained “two rooms with folding doors would answer admirably, because one room would serve as the stage and the other as the auditorium” (4). This solved lighting issues (because a chandelier about the stage can be lit, while the auditorium remains unlit), and entrances and exits, through the “other” door in those rooms. For Adams, a second best still required two rooms: a drawing room that opens onto a conservatory, where the conservatory becomes “behind the scenes.” Julia Corner conceded

> If, however, the play is to be acted in a single room, a curtain might be contrived to separate the stage from the part occupied by the audience; or rather two curtains to close in the middle, and draw to each side. They might be drawn on a string fastened by hooks from one side of the room to the other.

Florence Bell provided easy-to-follow diagrams of how to construct screens and curtains to provide the necessary space for entrances and exits in a drawing room. She also offered advice regarding how to build on-stage windows and simple stage doors, without the help of a carpenter, so that young people (even girls) could do the work themselves. Her collection of plays assumed the existence of a piano, explaining “the accompaniments here given are quite elementary, so that any child of about twelve who is learning the piano ought to be able to play them” (Bell xii). Corner repeatedly mentioned the piano in her scripts (“some young lady must play the bells on the piano and sing to them” (“Dick Whittington” 30), “a piano should be in the vicinity” (“Children in the Wood” 25). Other props and furniture that playwrights assumed would be available include chairs, stools, tables, kitchenware, and eating utensils such as cups, bowls, and spoons. These, too, indicated a certain level of family wealth because some cups, for example, could be redundant for the duration of the performance. The “ideal” space was clearly in an affluent middle-class home, but all the playwrights suggested confidence that girls could be resourceful, and “make-do” with any space they were allowed to use, and they also suggested that
regardless of how “ideal” the space was, that the girls were going to need (and want) to modify it in some way. The message was clearly that girls are capable of changing the way home space is occupied and seen by people in the house, even if the home was their mother’s domain. Temporary redecorating invited young thespians and their audiences to see and imagine domestic space differently than usual, and even expand its boundaries, making it, in imaginary terms, a much wider space in which to perform their lives. But the other significance of redecorating was much more practical and immediate: girls were effectively rehearsing for their (probable) futures as the mistresses of their own households after marriage. Rehearsing expectations and decorating in a way to imagine entirely different possibilities could seem contradictory, but since these activities exist as future trajectories in the domestic space, they can operate simultaneously, and with equal potential significance for the girls involved.

No matter how confident the playwrights were in young people’s ability to effectively modify space to suit their needs and sense of style, the fact is that “getting up” an at-home theatrical probably meant the thespians had to ask permission to use some family resources beyond the actual performance space for their project (such as pots and pans or old fabric), and the project might cost a little bit of money. Some playwrights acknowledged that children would have access to differing levels of financial resources, and might only have access to the furnishings “any modest home would afford” (Adams, “Cinderella”). Some playwrights, like Clara Ryland, offer helpful details about predictable specific expenditures. When she put up “Snow White and Rose Red” she made all the dresses at home, but the additional dress and

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18 In “Stage at Home,” Myra’s *Journal of Dress and Fashion*, 1887, the writer wrote for mothers rather than girls, and the tone is quite different. “The usual objections to children’s or indeed any private theatricals, are the elaborate and expensive preparations that are needed for them, the cost of the dresses, the difficulty of providing scenery, and the almost utter impossibility of carrying out, in anything like correct style, the directions for changes of scene, and the mechanical effects on which many plays depend” (658).
scenery costs were twenty shillings (17). Others, such as Marion Adams and Julia Corner, simply stated that their plays could be got up with little or no expense (but their stage directions assume using “found” items, and modifying or making use of materials expected to be available in the house). The issue of cost is a significant one for girls because, like the majority of their mothers, they were economically dependent on the father of the house (Dyhouse 7). Some middle-class children in the Victorian Era received pocket-money, but J.H. Ewing feels compelled to write a note to Parents and Guardians (in the voice of Burnt Cork to Rouge Pot): “I wish that a small annual outlay on little pleasures were oftener reckoned among legitimate expenses in middle-class British families” (Hints II 83). She goes on to explain that by “little pleasures” she means theatricals, adding that it might be legitimate for children to ask for a day’s work of the village carpenter, or “seven and sixpence worth of wood to carry out a project of their own devising”. Although she clearly believes “papa” should grant money for those expenses, she advises

the young people themselves would do wisely to set up a ‘theatrical-fund’ box, which will not open, and put in a fixed percentage of everybody’s pocket-money to accumulate for some genuine properties when the theatrical season begins (“Hints II”).

Since middle-class girls had very little money, if any, to call their own, their ability to carry out projects completely independently was somewhat compromised. But David Oswell suggests “children and young people, who so often are denied access to resources and to the means of accumulating resources find strength through their creative bricolage, through their makeshift mash-ups and their making do” (59). Even though adults control resources, space, and the means of production, children can engage in what he calls “tactical interstitial agency” which he says “has a more creative and experimental relation to the structures and resources to hand” (59). Even if girls could not act independently, but had to piece together a theatrical by asking
permission, making do, and even begging for money to rent a costume (for example), Oswell believes that their creative engagement with people and the material resources available to them should still be seen as agentic, because they were still effecting change according to their own desires.

Girls’ Theatricals Performing Individual Taste and Domestic Skills: “What Girls Can Do” and objects that are “really made”

In most collections I examined, playwrights argued that young people would enjoy “getting up a play” because, as Julia Corner explained, “their ingenuity would be exercised in adapting their resources to the arrangement of the scenes to be represented” (vii), or, as W.T. Stead put it, because the parts were “well rehearsed and the dresses all made ready” (“Ali Baba”, Adams 3). It is clear that the performance of at-home theatricals was more than acting: making props, costumes, and scenery to transform a drawing room into different world was an appealing part of the at-home theatrical project.

Girls’ skills were especially significant in the drawing room transformation process. In “Christmas Holidays at Everton” both boys and girls felt they contributed to mounting the production because Harry says, after the performance, “What on earth shall we do to-morrow? I expect we shall go on painting scenery and rehearsing our parts from sheer force of habit” (629), but it was young Aunt Fanny who coordinated the efforts, and other parts of the story suggest that boys were sent outside to skate while certain kinds of work took place. Gender roles

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19 The story refers to an activity that does not appear to be related to the putting on the play, but rather to preparing a Christmas Tree, decorated with festive items and gifts for poor children. The narrative allows the boys to go skating during the tree preparations, and suggests they might have been able to avoid some theatrical preparations as well in lieu of outdoor play: Fanny says, “In the meanwhile, I think we had better devote ourselves to preparing for the Christmas Tree...Fanny Arnott was a woman of her word, and having promised to dress the dolls, was not tempted to break her promise. Maud, who, it may be remembered, had come yesterday to the conclusion that the best part of skating was the coming in to tea after it, was equally conscientious, perhaps without a very severe struggle. However, as the boys could not dress dolls...there was no reason why they should not skate while their aunt and sisters remained indoors to work” (“Christmas Holidays” 489).
concerning domestic work related to getting-up a play were even more strictly followed in Charlotte Yonge’s *Historical Dramas*. Just prior to reading the first script out loud to the young thespians, (“The Mice At Play”) she wrote in her fictional frame,

> the ladies all settled themselves in their places, only some small feet wriggled a little in an ecstasy of expectation. As to the gentlemen, presently the door opened, letting in uncle Ernest, and behind him appearing somewhat as if they were afraid of looking foolish, John and Edward, who had probably found the hall cold, and the mammas in the drawing-room not anxious for their company.

Yonge mentions that the boys participated by building some sets, practicing sword fighting, and even creating a few prop weapons, but the majority of the work fell to the “girls” (who were very young or as old as 22). When the boys ran off to play or hunt and the little girls were upset, Yonge wrote,

> Jane and the aunts only laughed and said they did not want ‘the boys’ at all yet. They were deep in all the plans for costumes, and had strewn the floor with the wonderful contents of the chest of curiosities which grandmamma had inherited from her grandmother in the days of brocade, point lace, and silks that stood on end. (32)

As mentioned, Carol Dyhouse explains that from a very young age, girls in middle-class households were taught to serve men and boys (27). Girls’ domestic responsibilities depended on family wealth, but regardless of income, Victorians generally assumed it was natural for girls to work while boys had leisure (Dyhouse 11). 20 Here, girls were working while boys played, but they were also asserting control over their domain, making it a gendered space controlled by girls.

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20 Yonge’s anecdote about the little girls being upset with their absent brothers acknowledges the resentment some girls must have had regarding this system, and illustrates the way women were instrumental in perpetuating it. It is probable that some girls resented the expectations about their labour, even if they were supposed to be working for pleasure on an “at-home” theatrical. Girls may have expressed their anger in particular ways related to the production, but it is beyond the scope of this chapter to examine resistance as expressions of girls’ agency.
They did not “want” the boys or need them in any way because here was a time and place just for girls and girls’ skills.

While playwrights insisted that their suggestions for costumes, set, and props “are by no means arbitrary” (Corner “Introduction”), most writers specifically pointed out that young people may want to “improve upon” the ideas or “modify [them] as convenience may dictate” (Corner “Introduction”). Playwrights like Julia Corner, Marion Adams, and Florence Bell believed that children and girls should feel free to interpret the scripts in their own ways, and that the way they built the props, costumes, and scenery was a significant part of the performance – one which could be stamped with the girls’ own sense of style and ingenuity.

Marion Adams, Julia Corner, and Charlotte Yonge all expressed the ability to do clever costuming and set dressing on a small budget as a virtue and as an opportunity. In Marion Adams’ “Cinderella” she wrote “individual taste and the length of the purse will suggest various details in the furnishing of the Dressing Room… and the Ball Room…” (“Introduction”). She added that “the full details as to the dressing of the play must be left to the judgment and genius” of the stage managers. Julia Corner’s suggestions focussed on getting up a play with very little expense and in a tasteful manner, adding that a few yards of coloured cotton and some gold paper were all the young people really needed. Similarly, while she offered some specific costuming details, sometimes, as with the merchant’s daughters in “Beauty and the Beast” she said the girls may dress “according to fancy.” Assuring the young ladies of their “judgment and genius” and acknowledging “individual taste” suggests confidence in the young people’s skills and creative expression.

Acknowledging “individual taste” and suggesting that work can be done in a “tasteful manner” is significant because it honours both the possibility of a girls’ individuality while suggesting that personal expression will remain bounded by Victorian norms and expectations.
Victorian author Margaret Oliphant was aware of the great subversive potential of using “taste” to alter drawing-room spaces. Andrea Kaston Tange argues that Oliphant’s 1866 novel *Miss Marjoribanks*, relies almost entirely “on the heroine’s creation of a very specific physical place for herself – her drawing-room,” and in so doing raises complex questions about how the Victorian notion of a proper place for women could be defined and limited (Tange 163). Tange acknowledges that the portrayal capitalizes on “the centrality of the drawing-room in shaping cultural notions of feminine identity” and that Miss Marjoribanks occupies the drawing room as a physical and ideological space, while using it, “and all it represents to expand the boundaries of her cultural space” even suggesting that the heroine asserts “a woman’s power lies in the possibility for feminine taste to accomplish action” (Tange 163). Infused as drawing rooms were with pre-existing ideas about femininity, normalcy, family, and Victorian homelife, numerous juvenile theatrical playwrights anticipated the potential for girls to inflect the performance, and the drawing room performance space, with their particular *taste*, effectively opening up the space for occasions for individual taste to *act*.

Playwrights suggested the real fun exists in decorating in ways that altered the drawing room space completely: bringing the “outside” into the drawing room, or turning the drawing room into a party or palace. J.H. Ewing (as Burnt-Cork writing to Rouge Pot) wrote in her “Hints for Private Theatricals,” that the possibilities for scenery depended on the resources of the company, but she assured young people that plays could do without any scenery because “those who look and listen can also imagine” (Hints 1). Ewing advocated an empty stage with scene placards, rather than bad scenery, and in her adaptation of “The Peace-Egg” mumming play about St. George, her directions are in keeping with the traditions of mummery, and indicate “no scenery is required” (83). Ewing’s “Hints for Private Theatricals” and her own mumming play suggests a rather Spartan aesthetic on her part—but whether Ewing advocated little scenery
through all her own juvenile theatricals, or just for the mumming plays is unclear. Her suggestion is unusual, and it seems that playwrights expected young thespians to derive pleasure from the preparations and modifications to their space, in the form of props and sets.

Bringing the out of doors into the home, or turning the drawing-room into a palace indicates extreme differences in stage decorating, and illustrates the imaginative possibilities of drawing-room theatricals to challenge existing values, or to reinscribe the status quo. Since, for Victorians, drawing rooms as spaces represented comfort, luxury, civilization, order, and perhaps connection to empire, when drawing rooms became “palaces” they became extensions of the values already projected in the home – wealth, luxury, comfort, control and beauty. When the drawing room represented the out of doors, however, the drawing room had to succumb to uncivilized influences and wilderness. How the playwrights recommended bringing “wilderness” into the home actually offers clues as to those writers’ ease with child agency and with relaxing control to give space for them to operate.

Good taste and effort are the main ingredients for creating the impression of opulence, according to the playwrights. For elegant indoor settings, in three of Julia Corner’s she wrote a variation of: “decorating must be left to the taste of the managers, who should make it as brilliant as they possibly can” (42). She suggested creating flags, banners, streamers of coloured paper or ribbons, flowers, “gay looking fabric covers,” and lights. She offered “some of the small coloured wax candles could have a pretty effect” (23), but it was clearly up to the young people to figure out for themselves – an opportunity to make and express choices based on personal taste in a very visible way. While Annie Walker assured readers her suggestions were not costly (“various

21 “Oriental” or “Eastern” plays could create a tantalizing blend of wild and luxury, and are discussed in chapter 4 of this dissertation.
kinds of cotton stuff, tarletane, and gold and silver paper, are nearly all that is needed”) significantly she insisted they must be made “with some skill and a good deal of painstaking in their use” (Introduction). As previously explained, Victorians valued “painstaking,” because it suggests the opposite of morally suspicious idleness. When Marion Adams wrote that some children may be able to “elaborate the preparations, and by the exercise of their artistic and dramatic talents add greatly to the effect…” her suggestion that girls had artistic talents to share emphasizes the positive value of taking time and effort to make props, sets, and costumes well. Related to the idea that working on a home theatrical could be time and labour well spent, the idea that girls could, with effort, transform their world into something glittering, opulent, and magical, honoured their imaginations, and hopefully, inspired them to think as creatively as possible.

Bringing the “out of doors” inside was in utter contrast to the supposed pleasures of being inside a comfortable drawing room, in spite of the probable inclusion of natural specimens in the décor, which were intended for study and relate to Victorian attempts to understand, regulate, and control the natural world. Julia Corner, Clara Ryland, and Florence Bell suggest different ways of bringing forests into the drawing room, such as making hedges by employing chairs and benches, and decorating them with pine branches and berries made of wool. Corner’s designs recommend a blend of “real” wilderness with wilderness suggested by objects created or modified by the thespians. Her version of “Children of the Wood” is quite elaborate but, nevertheless, entirely doable by young people:

This next scene is in a dark wood. Chairs, hat-stands, clothes-horses, &c., covered with branches of evergreens to represent trees, should be prepared beforehand. These should be so placed, at irregular distances, as to make the stage have a pretty fair appearance of a wood. Some of the trees must have very small balls of red wool stuck on them here and there, to look like berries; also, darker coloured little balls for black-berries. Candles must be placed at intervals
among the branches that the spectators may have a clear view inside the wood. A few young firs, such as are commonly used for Christmas trees, would have a good effect…

Like Corner, Ryland’s forest scene in “Snow White and Rose Red” combines natural objects with constructed ones: a green cloth to cover the stage, two or three large potted shrubs, “and three or four poles, dressed with branches of evergreen, which make excellent forest trees…and can be put in corners, or leant up against a wall. Sprays of ivy should be trailed about, and a few flowers put in banks of moss around the trees, for the children to gather” (16). Bell’s forest in “Red Riding Hood” avoids any real wilderness items to be brought into the drawing room: it is made of paper and paint, but is equally straightforward to build. She advocated making a chestnut tree because “the chestnut tree is more easily made than any other tree” (92). Since the play was likely to take place in the winter, she suggested cutting leaves from brown paper, advising “it is a good plan to fold rather the paper several times and cut out a number of leaves at once, then fix them in groups with starch or thin glue, and paint them.” She also offered practical suggestions of how to make a tree trunk out of stout brown paper “known as ‘tip’”22 with a hidden packing case to sit on. Her sketch included a complete design for a painted backdrop, with tiny labels such as “oak,” “bracken” and “distant trees” to help the would-be stage manager plan accordingly. Since girls would be carrying out the designs themselves there are multiple opportunities for girls to reimagine the designs according to their particular taste.

Keith Angus’ description of the forest in “Babes in the Wood” is the most far removed from wilderness, and also, the least interested in young people’s ingenuity contributing to the imagination of a drawing room wilderness. In an effort to maintain order and control, Angus writes “brown imitation leaves should be procured.” Then, rather than scatter the leaves across

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22 Bell’s design even suggests where ‘tip’ can be purchased in London (Vacher & Sons, Parliament Street).
the stage, allowing for chance to operate, Angus describes a mechanism which will allow leaves to tumble one by one, to completely cover the “dead” actors. As I will demonstrate, the attitude that requires pretend versions of real things to be purchased, and then placed in a contraption, betrays a need for control and order that is pervasive throughout his publication. Regardless of how controlled or civilized the indoor wilderness became at the hands of Victorian children, the radical transformation of space demonstrates that their environment is not fixed. Considering agency in space, David Oswell writes “to act is to act in an environment which is not static, not a structure, but which is constituted through different and uneven securities and insecurities, permanence and impermanence, swiftness and sluggishness” (60). Bringing the outside into the home might suggest cracks in a house that seems solid, and could challenge what might otherwise appear normal and natural.

Since girls’ performing objects presented a story about the skill of the maker, and not merely her good taste, some playwrights argued the objects had to be really made. Opinions regarding how seriously to take the activity of creating props, costumes, and set pieces varied among households and between playwrights, possibly depending on the expected future of the girl-made object. 23 Annie Walker suggests

children’s theatrical dresses can always be made at home; but they ought to be really made, not merely pinned or tied on in separate scraps. In large families where acting is popular, every dress that has been once used should be put carefully aside; a capital wardrobe, capable of endless adaptation, will thus be gradually formed. (157)

23 Stories about Charles Dickens’ private theatricals abound. His children were involved in these semi-private affairs, and he demanded absolutely strict adherence to his plans. His son Charley wrote “I could always tell by the very look of my father’s shoulders at rehearsal, as he sat on the stage with his back to me, that he was ready for the smallest mistake and that if I didn’t wave that flag at exactly the right moment, or if the component parts of my storm were at all backward in attending to their business, there would promptly come that fatal cry of “stop!” which pulled everything up short and heralded a wiggling for somebody” (in Ishell 121).
To that end, the enthusiasm for “children’s fancy dress balls” among the upper middle class and middle classes meant that some quite elaborate costumes were available for rent or purchase that were “suitable” for young people. For those who preferred to make their own costumes (or could not afford to do otherwise), *Myra’s Journal of Dress and Fashion* provided sketches and descriptions of how to “carry out” fancy dress costumes for children over the age of six, and young girls under the ages of eighteen or nineteen (67). Similarly, an 1890 article in *Ladies’ Monthly Magazine* offered costume designs, acknowledging that they might be suitable for charades or amateur theatricals as well (5). In an 1887 issue of *Myra’s Journal*, the editors even included a script called “A Princess’s Frolic” for “schoolboys and girls to get up amongst themselves.” It included descriptions of the Louis XIII dress designs in introductory remarks called “The Stage at Home.” “The dresses are so simple that the elder girls may very well, with a little help cutting-out and arranging, make them for all the party out of old dresses and cast-off finery” (658). If Mrs Gaskell is typical in her assertion that by the age of three her daughter Marianne was making good progress in sewing, (38) then it easy to imagine how girls could be expected to, as Miss Walker put it, *really* make costumes. Well-made costumes could be valued and stored for future use and modification.

David Oswell’s observations about finding agency “through their makeshift mash-ups and their making do” (59) can be well illustrated by two fictional families who gathered materials, altered old dresses, and used their imaginations. In Charlotte Yonge’s “The Mice at Play” the girls were inspired by various medieval illustrations in books they owned, and found ways to adapt and re-tailor pieces of their own, and from their grandmother’s collections of old clothes. She describes, in great detail, the way the girls created medieval costumes by doing things like opening up two old dark green wool “merinos” and placing them over “white frocks,” harvesting a “moth-eaten swan’s down boa of grandmamma’s” for “fur” for borders on pockets and sleeves,
and building an enormous cone-shaped hat out of pasteboard, and covering it with a geranium
coloured scarf “which, by flowing down from the peak, just saved it from being an absolute fool’s
cap.” A suit of armour was the “grand work…consisting of shiny gray lining (33).” In “Christmas
Holidays at Everton” we read that the young aunt (who also wrote the play):

…in her trailing blue velvet gown and tiara of jewels, looked truly royal. (I hope
the reader will not betray my secret if I let out that those magnificently flashing
rubies, emeralds and sapphires…were the result of one hour’s work on the part
of her majesty herself, who had manufactured them the day before out of
gelatine paper, torn off of old crackers (624, 625).

Figuring out how (and when) to make do or make “magic” happen on stage is not unlike learning
to manage a household and deciding when to be extravagant, when to be frugal, and best of all,
how to create the illusion of lavishness on a budget.

Occasionally, the playwrights suggested that if the resources are available, hiring wigs,
buying particular props, or renting costumes might be a good idea. This was particularly true
when faced with the ever-complicated prospect of dealing with animals on stage. In her “Hints
on Dress and Scenery” Clara Ryland suggested a rather makeshift costume described as “black
bear’s mask with a border of black fur. Black jersey suit. Black stockings drawn over hands and
feet. Two little black hair door-mats slung on the back and front” (15). Kate Freilingrath-
Kroeker’s approach to an animal costume was similar: she wrote that the actor playing the wolf
in her script should not wear a mask because that “obstructs sound” but the wolf “should be
covered with white fur, and a white hairy rug, tied round the body, would answer the purpose
very well. A hood of the same fur, coming well over the face, but so as not to obstruct eyes and
mouth, would form a good covering for the head”(viii). Florence Bell, by contrast, provided
elaborate instructions and diagrams explaining how to make “an ogre’s head or beast’s head”
using thin sugar-cane (flexible cane), wire mesh, bits of paper, paste, and unravelled string “but
better, the crimped plaits of hair bought at the wig-makers” (xxxvi – xxxviii). But more often, playwrights suggested renting costumes for animals like “the Beast” in “Beauty and the Beast”, and illustrators seemed to think that the rented costume would likely be a bear. Nevertheless, Marion Adams wrote “some little folks will be sufficiently fortunate in their relations and friends as to be able to command costumes, wigs, &c.,” but others will have to “be content” with what they can do themselves. The wonderful possibilities of designing and constructing fanciful animal and Beast costumes might actually have eclipsed the pleasures of renting or even buying them, because of the opportunity to use one’s imagination in an unusual way.

Smaller on-stage animal props also seemed to be good candidates for very creative thinking or begging from papa’s purse. Playwrights often offered suggestions of how to make animals (rats out of some brown material stuffed with sawdust, a goose for the Golden Goose “from an old swan’s down tippet” stuffed with wool or bran, with beak and claws out of old kid gloves, or lizards made of paper for Corner’s “Cinderella” (14) – but Corner and other playwrights often suggest that buying toy animals in “any large town” would be preferable: mechanical mice, a soft toy bird, a toy cat, etc., again pointing to the resources family likely had available, and suggesting that the complexity of making costumes and objects like these might be beyond the skills of most middle-class girls. Even though the moment in the “Snow White and Rose Red” is brief, Ryland suggests purchasing, “a big Japanese frog (which can be bought from Liberty for sixpence) makes an excellent “catch” when [the dwarf] lands it at last, and falls backwards, entangled in his line and hook” (17). Seeming to answer a question she may have heard from her young friends, Julia Corner smilingly wrote in her version of Dick Whittington “the cat may be a real one, if there should happen to be one in the house quiet enough to perform the part with credit; if not, a toy cat should be procured” (20). Birdsong makers could be made or purchased: Ryland suggested using “lark calls” (these are easily made out of quills blown
in water) (16), while Julia Corner’s birdsong funeral dirge for “Children of the Woods” is to be accomplished by concealed children, “having sweet-toned whistles; or, if one of the elder boys could play a few high notes on a fife, to imitate the melancholy song of a bird, it would be better.” In order to cope with the birds in their plays, Charlotte Yonge’s fictional family used a taxidermied hawk they had in the house, toy birds brought to the country estate from London for the hawk to eat (40), and they used a live, pet parrot to represent a peacock. The ingenuity required to make animals for theatricals might have been more than some girls could manage, but the amazing variety of suggestions in these few publications suggests that even if they could not rent or buy the pieces they wanted to use, that girls could have been successful at creating “lively” objects through “makeshift mashups and making do.”

Kathryn Abrams reflects on how lively object creation in makeshift ways has the potential to contain “transformative agency” which she says can be “aimed at disrupting cultural productions, or small-scale social practices, that contribute to women’s oppression” (Abrams 838). Her twentieth-century examples include creative acts such as fan ‘zines, and could equally be applied to at-home theatricals. She writes these acts “may be understood as challenges to oppressive arrangements. This view is based on the premise that disrupting the uncontested primacy of a particular image or understanding may encourage observers to question their assumptions. In so doing, it may create credibility for competing images and understandings” (Abrams 838).

The same process can happen when girls modify the space around them. Rather than obliterating the drawing room where young people performed their theatricals, it continued to “speak” its own story about domestic comforts and limitations, while the modified drawing room as a set simultaneously critiques that space by presenting a world of possibilities and girls’ dreams. Bill Brown invokes Heidegger’s observation that people have the capacity to imagine that
“thinking and thingness are distinct” (16). If “thinking” can become a “thing” then the “thing” that the girls could do, or the “thing” that girls could make possible by creating articulate and readable object/things, and by modifying the spaces they inhabit, is a specific thought. Shakespeare’s Hamlet reflects, “there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.” Hence, girls’ ability to provoke thought in their audiences through their girl-made things and girl-modified space, might enable a critical thought to become (even though a thought it is not an object) a nearly tangible, visible “thing” and thus alter girls’ real-life imaginative possibilities.

**Scriptive Things and Daily Scripts for Girls**

Not all theatricals opened up possibilities, challenged societal norms, critiqued the Victorian worldview, and made space for girls to exercise agency, experiment with their own taste or explore unconventional identities. Some playwrights did the opposite, and one of those writers was Keith J. Angus, who wrote *Children’s Theatricals*. Angus is not the only male juvenile theatrical writer I have encountered (Alfred Gatty and Walter Powell both published theatrical scripts in *Aunt Judy’s Magazine*, for example) but the majority were women. Nevertheless, *Children’s Theatricals* betrays a very different attitude towards girls than the other plays that I have examined in this chapter, and his scripts retell traditional stories in ways that objectify actors, emphasize and re-inscribe the position of girls and women as possessions in Victorian English society, and, ultimately, direct girls to enact the status quo marriage script they were expected to play out in their off-stage lives.24

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24 Alfred Scott Gatty’s play “The Hunchback: A Burlesque in One Act, Adapted from the Arabian Nights, a bone-bouche for Christmas” printed in *Aunt Judy’s Magazine* has limited stage directions (probably, in part, because of the publication format). However, Gatty wrote “the nature of Eastern costume admits of all the above costumes, except those of John Brown and the Hunchback, being worn by ladies” (99). This suggests that only two of eight roles need to be performed by “real” boys, although only one character is actually female. (Marion Adams makes the same remark for her version of Bluebeard saying “it will be seen from the style of dress that the play might be given altogether by girls, and would probably be quite a success”). I will discuss these pieces more in Chapter 5, but it is worth noting that Gatty’s is not as prescriptive as Angus’ script. Walter Powell’s “Heir of Linne” was also published in *Aunt Judy’s Magazine*, and similarly has very few stage directions to work from. Like “The
Before offering a critical discussion of how Angus’ scripts differ from the others I discuss in this chapter, I would like to introduce two theoretical ideas that support my analysis. The first is Robyn Bernstein’s idea of “scriptive things.” Like Brown and Sofer, Bernstein believes that certain objects have a kind of “liveliness” and people even associate apparent agency with the object, rendering it a “thing.” Bernstein develops the idea that things participate in relationships by suggesting that certain “things” have an embedded script in them. These so-called “scriptive things” invite a particular kind of interaction and response, and although a person could reject the suggestion or refuse to act in the scripted way, the script still exists. A book has a very simple script: it invites the reader to turn through the pages reading left to right, from beginning to end. A magazine has a different script that does not suggest a linear movement. Some of the objects in Angus’ playscript are significant because they are “scriptive things” and when performed, the embedded scripts reinscribe standard and expected Victorian male / female relations.

As girls were socialized in Victorian middle class culture, they learned and eventually operated knowing (although not necessarily following) standard performative scripts. These daily scripts could guide how a girl should serve her father and behave towards him when he comes home from work, or how to react if a boy tries to kiss a girl. Some objects in Angus’s playscripts evoke certain nineteenth-century quotidian scripts, and by evoking scripts that were familiar, Angus’ playscripts could seem more “natural,” and therefore, the ideas in the scripts are more difficult to contest.

One way Angus’s scripts differ significantly from the others I examine in this chapter is the way he encourages girls to perform “to-be-looked-at-ness,” to borrow Laura Mulvey’s phrase. "Hunchback” it has more male characters, but no suggestion that girls can play them. The male Heir loses all his money to gambling even though his lover begs him not to gamble. She stands by him in “Angel in the House” style, and she is rewarded because eventually, he earns it all back in America. Angus is not alone in re-inscribing gender scripts through his theatricals, but his publication is valuable for discussion here because of the extensive stage directions.
regarding male gaze and the way performance can objectify women. Marah Gubar discusses Victorian men’s complicated, though not always sexual, fascination with children and desire for little girls, in what is often called “child-loving” or “the cult of the child.” Gubar argues that cultists revelled in children’s precociousness even as they extolled their innocent simplicity. Ideas glorifying children circulated widely in the press, and they influenced Angus and others like him. But he was also writing from within a discourse that assumed children were dependent male “possessions” and as such, they may be admired, petted, and enjoyed, essentially as objects. True cultists refused to see children as victims of their life circumstances, and instead celebrated children’s agency. However, positioning children as subjects is inconsistent with a view that children are possessions. In Julia Corner’s version of “Beauty and the Beast,” she wrote the merchant’s daughters “may dress according to fancy,” and “Beauty may carry a little basket, as anything in the hand assists the action when there are rather long speeches to make” (12). Corner considered the success of the production and the happiness and comfort of the young performer, quite rightly remarking that it is easier to avoid fidgeting when hands are occupied, the actor is comfortable, and feels beautiful in her clothes. Although the child is performing, she is clearly a performing person. Angus does not imagine young people performing for their own pleasure, but for his. He invents a prologue for his “Beauty and the Beast:”

The prologue is first to be spoken and a little girl capable of reciting well should be chosen for this. She should be dressed in barrister’s gown, bands, and wig. Advancing from right-hand of first entrance to near the footlights, she unrolls a sheet of paper and pretends to read from it. The lines, however, are to be learnt by heart, and no reference to the paper should in reality be made….Prologue goes off at whichever side there is the most room for her to remain. (13)

Angus’s barrister is present exclusively for the pleasure of seeing a little girl in male drag. He adds similarly gratuitous moments when fairies do simple dances and dumb shows, and kiss one
another in front of the audience (29). At the end of the play, the Fairy Moonbeam performs the epilogue, including:

And I confess, my language growing bolder –
(Coquettishly) We girls shall all need princes when we’re older. (62)

Angus’s fairy additions do allow more little girls to participate on stage, but the obvious emphasis on gaze renders them objects. The actors’ status as objects without any personal agency is amplified by the presence of blocking diagrams and detailed stage directions that tell performers where they must enter, stand, and exit. Returning to the little barrister, in contrast to Corner’s production notes, the Prologue’s comfort is not considered: first Angus argues that even though there is a scroll, the speech must be memorised, and second, after the child makes the speech she exits to the wings, where she will remain for the duration of the play. Having fulfilled her function, she is stowed like a prop to wait.

Angus’s ideas about props, costumes, and set actually discourage girls from actively contributing to the production. Although most collections recommend that the performance be supervised by a kind sister, aunt or friend, Angus writes

It is essential to arrange with some one, who has time to devote to attending rehearsals to act as stage manager, and it is of almost equal importance that the choice should devolve upon one with some practical stage knowledge. Erecting a theatre in a drawing-room presents many difficulties which can be overcome only by one possessing the power of successfully “cutting the coat according to the cloth.” (v)

Other writers emphasize the ease by which a stage can be erected in the home, and provide ideas that any young woman could easily follow to help her younger friends, and encourage her to employ her own taste and imagination, but Angus’s sets and costumes, by contrast, are surprisingly complex and prescriptive. For example, the Beast mask must include a jaw that can
be manipulated by a string and the Fairy Moonbeam’s old woman disguise should be removed by an off-stage hook in order to create the illusion of a magical transformation. In “Babes in the Wood,” unlike other methods of bringing the outdoors into the drawing room, Angus insists “a supply of large brown imitation leaves must be got, some of which must be strewn on the stage, and an occasional one let fall from above, as if blown down by the wind (italics mine).” Enough leaves have to be procured (and occasionally fall) to completely cover up the two children (125). In his version of “Bluebeard” when the sisters reveal the closet full of dead women, Angus described a complicated array of bloody masks tied in bunches to a screen behind which a “Man Working Eyes” stands because “some amusement can be got out of this scene by having the tongues and eyes of the masks to move” (79). The grotesque humour of the decapitated head puppets exemplifies Angus’s attitude towards girls in many ways: they cannot build or design sets or props, and like these puppets, they are to be animated by men, for the amusement of spectators.

Furthermore, Angus’ repeated the discourse that girls are male possessions seeking marriage, and even his props served to remind the audience of the marriage script middle-class girls were supposed to embrace. For example, in Angus’s rendition the Beast wins Beauty not with kindness, but by the provision of chocolate:

BEAUTY -- Your wife! Oh no -- and yet I am not sure --
BEAST -- Did not to me, that chocolate you lure?
BEAUTY -- I first must ask my father, he’s at home. (51, 52)

The Beast hands Beauty a “magic ring” to transport her to and from her father. Unlike other versions of the story, Beauty does not decide to marry the Beast herself. Instead, the chocolate courtship ritual reminds the audience that if she is a “good” girl, she will follow the rules of Victorian etiquette, first saying “no” and then asking her father if she can be given to the Beast. The chocolate becomes a semiotic “thing” on stage, suggesting simultaneously the offer of
security, wealth, and luxury in exchange for a girl’s own self, and also suggesting the expected and “sensible” script when girls were offered desired “things” of luxury. In Robyn Bernstein’s sense, a gift of chocolate is a “scriptive thing” implicitly “luring” Beauty to perform a particular relationship. Angus included chocolate in the stage directions knowing it was full of well-known scripted meanings.

One other scriptive thing in Angus’ collection deserves an observation because it so closely connects with Ruskin’s opinions in “Of Queen’s Gardens.” Ruskin argued girls were supposed to steer men to paths of righteousness, but otherwise, should use their intellect to support men and their interests. Angus evokes a similar “daily script” related to a gun in his “Little Red Riding Hood”. Red announces to the audience at the beginning (shyly) that she would like to lay her head on Robin’s redbreast. Young Robin appears with a gun slung over his shoulder, and he tells Red that his gun is loaded “and kills things til they are dead” (135). Many young Victorian boys enjoyed shooting as a pastime. In “The Mice at Play” the boys even go shooting while the girls make theatrical preparations. When a bird calls off stage, Robin says “hold quiet a minute till I shoot that thrush” whereupon a dead bird is thrown on stage. I do not doubt that many young girls disapproved of shooting, and that their disapproval was even encouraged because it seemed like natural and appropriate sensitivity. Red is very upset that the bird is dead and the young couple quarrel standing back to back. Robin is remorseful – not because he shot the bird but because “quarr’ling with her was never worth the fun / of shooting birds…/to gain her friendship back, my word I’d pledge to put this gun away, out of my sight, and ne’er to use it, save in cause of right” (136). Dyhouse explains that boys were allowed to get
into trouble and were to be endlessly forgiven, whereas girls had to remain completely sin-free.25 Suddenly as if she had just remembered that lesson, Red tells the audience she has forgiven Robin, and when he offers to swear to give up shooting, she interrupts and asks him not to. Later, when Red tries to escape the wolf by ineffectually screaming and running around her grandmother’s bedroom, Robin “rushes in and fires his gun. The wolf falls down dead” (155). Thus, Red is rewarded for her wisdom of forgiving Robin, accepting that he is right, and preventing him from swearing to give up shooting. The two young people hold hands and agree to get married when they are older, completing the expected script in their relationship.

Angus’ plays demonstrate that in at-home theatricals, girls might try on a new character, but also could re-enact the scripts they performed, or were expected to perform, in their daily lives. Similarly, objects like chocolates or guns might prompt certain scripted responses from girls in their actual lives, and these could be re-played on stage. In Angus’ productions, girls may not have made any objects for a performance, and if they did, they might have become invisible because of the technical prowess of adult male stagers, or because of the way the audience viewed the performance. Stage directions that replicated the ideal girl or woman on stage closed down possibilities for girls’ critical inquiry, reinscribing a sense that certain behaviours and relationships were not only normal, but also natural and right.

“It’s a girl thing”: A few thoughts by way of conclusion

In spite of Angus’s prescriptive stage directions and his tendency to re-inscribe Victorian patriarchal discourses, most other juvenile at-home theatricals I examined offered young people,

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25 Shanan Custer’s research on American private theatricals shows that most girl characters were an extension of conventional role expectations, such as mothers or wives (Custer 86-89). She also explores the mischievous boy character type, and points out that while he usually contritely apologizes, his antics are actually welcome, and he is generally assumed to be off for more tricks at the end of the play (Custer 83).
and especially girls, a forum to change the ways people saw them, an opportunity to explore their own creative taste and expression, and an occasion to showcase their frugality, skills, labour, and creative “genius” through the performing things they made. Because girls made choices about set, props, and costumes, and because they altered the space in which the theatricals were performed, they also explored personal agency.

But the story is also more complicated than a simple critique of Angus’ collection of scripts can tell. Even in narratives where a girl marries the Prince, following the idealized and expected script, girls often had the opportunity to express themselves, to perform differently than they did in daily life, and to collaborate creatively with other girls to achieve a collective goal. Theatricals may not have always offered possibilities for radical proto-feminist changes, especially closer to 1850 than to 1890, but they might have opened up space for incremental shifts and slight alterations in the ways girls thought about themselves, other girls, and their futures.

Similarly, even if the changes offered were radical, as we shall see in later chapters, the lives of Victorian girls were not likely to instantly undergo radical change. Rather, the process of getting-up theatricals at home might pique a girls’ imagination in such a way that space around her grew, the questions she thought about were more significant, and the possibilities for her future multiplied or seemed less fixed. Although juvenile theatricals were not limited to girls, the fact that girls developed most of the creative ideas for them, and did the majority of the work, perhaps preparing for “at-home theatricals” could be called “a girl thing” -- not disparagingly, but in celebration of all the potential that girls could explore and enact making choices based on "individual taste and the length of the purse."
Chapter Three: Subversive Fairy Tales
Pushing Boundaries, Re-Imagining Identity and Becoming an Agentic Girl

Literary fairy tales were a popular narrative source for Victorian at-home theatricals – both familiar stories, and “fantasy” tales that operate within the expectations of the genre. Archives are full of fairy tale scripts that encourage girls to examine identity alternatives and possible futures beyond the conventional expectations for Victorian middle-class girls, as well as those that intentionally or unthinkingly reinscribe Victorian views concerning gender, class, and moral behaviours. As fairy tale scholar Jack Zipes observes, “The fact is… that fairy tales can be both provocatively subversive and trivially traditional” (2012 xiii). If playwrights wanted to ask difficult questions, or to challenge the status quo, they could and did use the genre to comment on society, the way that professionally staged Pantomimes did, and in so doing, their scripts had the potential to provoke young thespians and their audiences to consider fairy tale characters and their stories differently, perhaps in light of their own lives.

Staging and performing fairy tale discourses embedded in and critiqued through at-home theatricals has powerful potential within the home, as I have already suggested. Like the late eighteenth-century theatricals analysed by Catherine Burroughs, juvenile theatricals were often rehearsed in the context of a holiday house party “in small spaces that rendered more permeable the customary barriers between spectator and actor” which she argues means

the private theatrical could offer its participants a deeply personal and imaginative experience, not only allowing for a great deal of playfulness and delight in the act of improvisation but also encouraging a serious self-consciousness about the performative features of social acting. (266)

In other words, inviting people who live in a space that doubles as a (possibly temporary) theatre to engage in character performances blurs the artificial lines between actor and spectator, and it
draws attention to performative aspects of quotidian life, with the mundane drawing room as a daily stage. As I will demonstrate, fairy tales could easily and seemingly innocently enter home spaces, while surreptitiously critiquing the roles children, girls, and women play, and while engaging in some of the sociocultural debates of the day.

Part of the strength of fairy tales comes from the power of story and a person’s desire to imaginatively engage with a fictional world. In *Private Theatricals*, Nina Auerbach argues that Victorian novels were “wishes rather than realism” that created a space “wherein readers could live the intensest [sic] life they were capable of” (43). Specifically considering girl readers, in *The New Girl: Girls’ Culture in England, 1880 – 1915*, Sally Mitchell writes, “I believe that reading – and its emotional and imaginary constructs, removed though they may be from readers’ material circumstances – had an effect on girls’ inner lives, their personal horizons and standards, their image of self and potential” (6). Mitchell acknowledges that her belief is virtually impossible to demonstrate, and furthermore, she does not claim that as a result of reading fiction, girls in the late nineteenth century “actually lived a dramatically altered life” (3), but she believes girls “welcomed the potential for change in their circumstances; their awareness of new possibilities shaped their inner lives” (4). Even if girls did not radically change the way they functioned in daily life, story, at the heart of any at-home theatrical, could inspire girls to imagine alternatives and possibilities beyond the conventional expectations for their lives.

If inner lives could be shaped by stories and reading novels, how much more could embodying and performing critical fairy tales influence girls, allowing them to experiment with giving voice and passion to ideas that would otherwise remain internal and private? In her article about antebellum American women performing “parlour” theatricals, Pamela Cobrin writes “the fact that actual Victorian women acted out these transformations of identity and manipulations of power, instead of the imaginary women of novels or the socially/morally
questionable professional actress, challenged existing limitations and boundaries of gender and social station” (398). The “real” quality to the performers was significant for performers and audience members alike. Tracy Davis pointedly queries:

why should we suppose that the custom of composing moral plays for school or home production… is any less significant as a historical phenomenon than Macready’s championing the plays of Lord Lytton…? Or that because productions in schools and drawing rooms are not reviewed in The Times they are of insignificant social or political consequence for the students and parents or friends and relations who gathered there to perform, watch, or even just listen to a reading? (28)

Indeed, even fairy tale plays for home production could be affecting for the performers and the audience, especially if the playwrights chose to write in intentionally provocative and subversive ways.

Although this chapter does not examine what nineteenth-century girls actually did with plays they performed, or how they used the experience or ideas in their own lives, or thought about them through their own writing, this chapter does examine what some juvenile theatrical writers, primarily women themselves, appear to have been intentionally doing for children and girls in nineteenth-century England. Cobrin suggests that “parlor drama’s subversive potential was not based on the agency or political intention of its participants; there is no indication that parlor drama participants set out to disrupt the public sphere through their indoor entertainments” (401). Indeed, while it is unlikely that Victorian girls who presented at-home theatricals “set out to disrupt” the social order of their community, I believe that, in fact, there was a great deal of personal agency involved in selecting and mounting an at-home theatrical.26 Furthermore, theatricals are inherently collaborative work: the actors interpret the characters

26 See Chapter 1.
and action however they choose, and they can even alter the script to suit themselves. Marah Gubar believes many Victorian fiction writers encouraged their young readers to “own and renovate the stories told for and about them by adults” (Artful Dodgers 37). The example she uses is Frances Hodgson Burnett’s A Little Princess in which Sara asserts “Stories belong to everybody…. Everything’s a story. You are a story – I am a story” (Burnett in Gubar, Artful Dodgers 37). Gubar believes children’s writers of dramatic literature and fictions, “entertain the possibility that children can resist and reconceive the scripts handed to them by adults, participating not only in the production of narrative, but in the drafting of their own life stories” (Artful Dodgers 38). In critical discussions about twenty-first-century drama in education experiences, certainly, Christine Hatton’s research with young people supports Gubar’s assertion. Hatton has observed that “subtle subterfuge within role can be a girl form of resistance, where they can play against the action from within it, thereby exerting relational power onto the fiction” (Hatton 160). Whether or not girls performed the pieces exactly as the playwrights imagined they would, girls could use the play production experience to influence how they imagined, constructed, and ultimately performed the story of their own lives. Nevertheless, since playwrights generated the fairy tale interpretations, embedded social critiques and core characterizations offered up for consideration in published at-home theatrical scripts, it is the playwrights and their scripts, rather than the young performers, who are the focus of this chapter.

Women playwrights wrote the majority of juvenile at-home theatricals, and the majority of the plays discussed in this chapter. They come from a range of backgrounds: there is a governess/lady’s companion (Miss Annie L. Walker), two upper-class society women (Lady...
Florence Bell, Clara Ryland), one who married a merchant, was the daughter of a poet, and a translator and poet in her own right (Kate Freiligrath-Kroeker), two who wrote educational texts as well as plays for children (Marion Adams and Julia Corner), and one who kept her identity anonymous. Some may have crossed paths in social functions, and others never would have met, but they all wanted to create excellent work for the “home market,” and regardless of their political opinions, their work demonstrates that they respected children and girls. Tracy C. Davis muses that nineteenth-century women playwrights could be considered voices of a minor literature, who function as “cultural guerillas” and for whom “everything is political” (26). She ties Victorian women’s writing to the idea of a minor literature by explaining that when nineteenth-century playwriting women penned plays, they used the language of the oppressor, a language “not their own”: “2,500 years of Aristotelean dramatic theatre as a possible corollary for women -- the minority is susceptible to accusations of unsuitability on the grounds of undereducation and the impropriety of literary aspiration” (Davis 26). Following this argument, the act of writing plays already positioned women playwrights as somewhat radical, even before considering their intended market or content. Katherine Newey calls the London theatre industry a “misogynist obstacle course” (1) for would-be women playwrights and also concurs with Davis that “Victorian gender ideology…theorized the public nature of the playwright’s task to be unfeminine” (1). Newey notes that women produced well over one thousand titles between 1800 and 1900, and they were writing and publishing plays in the eighteenth century as well, but in spite of women’s presence and work in the theatre industry, “indisputably, women’s plays were

whether it was professional is not clear to me. Walker married after she published her plays, so she is sometimes called Mrs. Coghill.

Male playwrights are not entirely absent from this chapter: I also discuss John Keith Angus’ plays for children, and mention Tom Hood’s “Harlequin Little Red Riding Hood,” and Peter the Friar’s “Bluebeard.” The latter is obviously a pseudonym, since the book was illustrated by Hubert the Monk, so the gender of the playwright is uncertain.
viewed and read differently by their contemporaries, and women faced gender-specific obstacles in the achievement of professional status as playwrights” (3). Women who opted to write plays for the niche home market and especially those who wrote for children, employed their playwriting skills more in keeping with Victorian gender expectations demanding women focus on home and family. Their work was probably perceived as less socially suspect, even if the act of writing plays was counter to assumptions about women’s behaviour and abilities.

Meanwhile, it may have seemed obvious for women to write fairy tales for children, but for a wide variety of socioeconomic reasons, men, rather than women dominated the nineteenth-century explosion of fairy tale writing and publishing. Their tales are “steeped in longing for unreachable lives” and “obsessive nostalgia for their own idealized childhoods inspired them to imagine dream countries in which no one had to grow up” (Auerbach and Knopflmacher 1). But as Nina Auerbach and U.C. Knopflmacher so aptly point out, while male authors envied children, most Victorian women writers envied adults – specifically adult men. In the eyes of the law, women were equal to children; as mothers, teachers, and governesses, the default focus of adult middle-class women’s routine lives was children. If women were “good,” they never grew up, trapped by the condition longed for by male writers (1). Literary women, therefore, often created characters who chafe against the artificial and real boundaries of childhood, who seek experience and autonomy, and whose journeys allow them to escape conventional childhood and sometimes, avoid the well-worn path leading to womanhood. When reimagining fairy tales for the stage, their work similarly pushed against the narrative confines, gender performance

29 It is also noteworthy that famous male playwrights who wrote for the professional stage contributed fairy tale plays to the home market. Clement W. Scott’s rather high profile Drawing-Room Theatricals and Parlour Pantomimes Collected by Clement Scott includes plays by W.S. Gilbert, Tom Hood, E.L. Blanchard, Alfred Thompson, and, of course, Clement Scott. Tom Hood contributed the only “juvenile pantomime” – a “Harlequin Little Red Riding Hood” (1870).
expectations, and “civilizing” discourses embedded in the genre and well-known versions of the source story.

According to Jack Zipes, the profound changes to European civilization that developed during 16th to 18th centuries are at the core of fairy tale discourse (10). He argues fairy tales are a “dynamic part of the historical civilizing process, with each symbolic act viewed as an intervention in socialization in the public sphere” (11). As I comment on specific fairy tales in this chapter, I will demonstrate how playwrights challenged those core discourses and associated images of ideal girlhood and womanhood to critique their contemporary civilization and create critical possibilities.

Fairy tales entered Victorian homes remarkably easily, considering the fact that eighteenth-century educators believed that children should be taught truths and banished fairy stories.30 Zipes quotes a typical nineteenth-century justification in the introduction to a collection of fairy tales:

> With no higher standard than the reading of Fairy Stories, children would ever, from these sources, learn how good and holy is virtue and benevolence — how bad and wicked is craft and cunning. Nay, moral lessons maybe learned from these sources not only by the little world of wondering, believing minds, but by many minds that have long since passed the age of wondering. (Robert Meek, 1876 *Grimms Goblins*, in Zipes xii)

The discourses embedded in fairy tales were initially touted as moral truths, but Zipes argues that by the late nineteenth century, fairy tales were no longer “like the mirror, mirror on the wall

30 Although fairy tales were largely accepted by the mid to late nineteenth century, Mrs. Chisholm’s *Little Plays for Little People* (1872) includes what I would call an “anti-fairy tale play” called “The Fairy.” A rich girl is taken for a fairy by a poor boy and she decides that she will let him think she is a fairy and do a good turn for him. Her falsehood causes quite a lot of trouble, but even before she realises that, her father says “how are you going to [give me some assistance] if from the very first you go about encouraging little boys to believe in fairies? You do not know the difficulty we have in getting rid of the superstitions about fairies and witches….you are quite old enough to know that you should not lend yourself to anything that is false” (91). The fact that the play was published suggests that there was still a market for this kind of writing.
reflecting the cosmetic bourgeois standards of beauty and virtue that appeared to be unadulterated and pure. The fairy tale and the mirror cracked into sharp-edged radical parts” (105). The radical parts Zipes refers to are certainly present in at-home fairy tale plays in the late nineteenth century, but the mirror did not shatter. It actually cracked rather slowly, and evidence of those early fissures is found in the mid-century fairy tale plays of apparently conservative, didactic writers like Julia Corner. Other late century tales, such as those by Clara Ryland, were radical in some ways but remained sociopolitically conservative in others.

Marah Gubar’s observations about children and discourse are fundamental to my approach to fairy tale theatricals because her analytical approach “avoids essentializing child readers as passive victims” (Artful Dodgers 34). She writes, “the Golden Age authors… acknowledge the tremendous power that adults and their texts have over young people, while still allowing for the possibility that children—immersed from birth in a sea of discourse—can nevertheless navigate through this arena of competing currents in diverse and unexpected ways” (Artful Dodgers 33). Gubar’s work inspires me to seek out ways that playwrights could be subversive in their written texts, while still aware that girls could, and probably did, reconfigure and rework those ideas in their performances and in their later reflections on their experiences.

This chapter is divided into four sections, drawing on familiar and original fairy tale narratives. The first examines ways fairy tale plays explored and challenged Victorian ideas about childhood and children; the second discusses plays that directly engage with Victorian ideas about gender and the performance of girlhood; the third exposes ways that fairy tale scripts might reinforce or radicalize narrative trajectories ending in marriage and other “happy”

31 The “Golden Age” of English children’s literature generally refers to child-centred (rather than explicitly didactic) work written between the mid-nineteenth century and the First World War.
domestic endings; and the final section focuses on staged fairy tale violence and performing
gender roles. Aspects of fairy tale plays that have an “Oriental” quality or are derived from the
One Thousand and One Nights of Scheherazade, I have primarily saved for the third chapter of
this dissertation. Each of these subsections suggest ways the fairy tales could open doors for girls
and offer them opportunities to grapple with agency, identity, and possible futures.

**Challenging Childhood and Children: Present Futures**

Fairy tale narratives often, although certainly not always, feature girl-child protagonists and
creating those child characters was both a challenge and an opportunity for Victorian at-home
theatrical playwrights, who wrote in a society in which attitudes towards children and childhood
was culturally ambivalent and obsessively uncertain. Although the Victorian Era has been called
the “golden age” of childhood, attitudes towards children in England were inconsistent, fraught
with tension, and differed greatly depending on the class of the child. Discussions about a
“golden age” of childhood and “cult of the child” focus on a generic “everychild” but unless the
writers specified differently, when playwrights imagined children in their at-home theatrical
scripts, they were unlikely to be thinking of the needy and impoverished lives of working class
children, but instead, the children they saw daily in their own society—middle- and upper-class
children—the same children for whom playwrights wrote at-home theatricals.

The term “cult of the child” was coined in 1889, but Victorians obsessed about the
correct role of children in society throughout the era. In 1846, for example, an anonymous article

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32 Throughout the nineteenth century laws were passed to improve the lives of children, but the children who needed them the
most were poor and working class. Ginger Frost writes, “Parliament passed factory acts in 1833, 1844, 1847, 1850, 1867, 1874,
and 1891. The government passed so many bills because each one was highly limited; rather than tackle juvenile work overall,
individual laws restricted child labor to certain ages in specific industries” (69). In theatres, Anne Varty demonstrates that laws
preventing child labour were consistently ignored until much later. Although there were Ragged Schools and Sunday Schools,
education for children aged five through thirteen was not compulsory and free until 1891. In 1835 England had already passed
the Cruelty to Animals Act, but similar legislation to protect children from violent parents, guardians or employers was not passed
until 1889. Not until 1891 did refusing to offer a sick child medical care become an offence.
called “Babyolatry” accused “child worshippers” of spoiling children: Marah Gubar writes “his main objection to the cult is that it immerses children in adult culture too soon, turning them into precocious performers” \(\text{Artful Dodgers 11}\). Gubar believes that nineteenth-century cultural productions, including playscripts, point to tensions between the “cult of the child” ideal that revelled in childhood innocence and “otherness” from adults, which clashed with a “vision of the child as a competent collaborator, capable of working and playing alongside adults” \(\text{Artful Dodgers}\ 9\). A desire to protect childhood and innocence was in opposition to many children’s obvious worldliness and competence. The Romantic idea of the innocent “naïf” and portrayals of children as otherworldly angels conflicted with attitudes about socially saturated, educated children, with agency and apparent levels of independence. There were also profoundly uncertain attitudes regarding childhood precociousness and children’s sexuality, leading children’s writers to represent “young people as complex, highly socialized individuals who (like adults) had to struggle with thorny issues of pressing contemporary relevance, including gender trouble, class division…and the question of how much agency one can have as an acculturated subject” \(\text{Artful Dodgers}\ 181\). When the playwrights discussed in this chapter created child characters for children to perform, the texts suggest they not only considered these complex social attitudes and expectations of children (both real and imaginary), but also, imagined how they believed children would construct their own identities, and how they would shape their worlds according to their desires, if they could.

Playwrights creating child characters for the home market were also influenced by a very particular group of children: professional child performers. The collaborative nature of theatre and the still-developing labour laws meant that children regularly performed on stage for the delight of child and adult audience members, actively demonstrating an enticing blend of a child’s creative agency and adherence to adult rules and structures \(\text{Children, Varty Appendix B}\).
Girls played roles as wide ranging as dancing fairies with no lines to speak and Shylock, and child stars like Jean Davenport filled theatres with audience members of all ages. As Gubar puts it, child actors “modelled a form of nonautonomous agency in which being scripted by adults did not necessarily preclude them from functioning as intelligent, creative individuals” (Artful Dodgers 153).

Although middle-class children might attend dramas, melodramas, music hall variety shows, Shakespeare, “spectaculars” and a wide variety of performances that did not target children, by the 1850s, theatre managers began to consider the fact that many children went to pantomimes, and in 1876, one manager hit on the extremely lucrative idea to produce a Little Goody Two Shoes pantomime with an all-child cast, billed as a show for children, performed by children, and to be watched by children. All-child casts were not a new idea: Marah Gubar demonstrates that they were popular with adults and children in the United States and in the United Kingdom as early as the 1840s. However the content of Little Goody Two Shoes was different from the earlier all-child performances in that the fare was somewhat sanitized compared to what one might see in a racy and raucous evening pantomime, and it was so successful that it ran for 120 performances. Other theatres soon launched similar all-child productions. More middle-class and upper-class children than ever before saw children act in leading roles, some of them performing child characters, and some adult. Even though they were not trained, and whether or not they played adult or child roles, children who “got up” plays at home performed their roles in a climate of widespread awareness of professional theatrical performances where children exhibited jaw-dropping skills, and surprisingly mature

33 Children performing adult roles “may have functioned in much the same way as Marjorie Garber contends that gender transvestism does: that is to say, not to buttress a binary opposition like male-female (or in this case, adult-child) but rather to signal a “category crisis” “ (“Who Watched” Gubar). Gubar describes this phenomenon as “age transvestism.”
performances, that were complicated by the young actors’ own apparently innocent and naïve bodies. Blurring the lines between adulthood and childhood was part of the fun for audiences, and would have been part of the pleasure for at-home performers as well. Although the influence these “little performers” had on playwrights writing for the at-home market is difficult to conclusively prove, they should not be forgotten; in particular, professional child performances of child characters must have influenced how playwrights imagined children and how childhood could (and perhaps should) be performed at home.

Fairy tales with children and childhood as pivotal to the narrative structure that were particularly popular as source material for at-home theatrical scripts include “Snow White and Rose Red,” “Babes in the Wood” (Children in the Wood), and “Little Red Riding Hood.” Scripts by J. Keith Angus, Julia Corner, and Clara Ryland revel in the Victorian ideal of childhood innocence, while Florence Bell and Kate Freiligrath-Kroeker both create retellings of these well-known and popular tales that bring alternate, powerful versions of childhood into the home, offering children and girls opportunities to experiment with child identities that might spark imaginations regarding their present lives.

**Snow White and Rose Red: Childhood and Independence**

“Snow White and Rose Red” is an unusual and appealing source material for juvenile at-home theatricals because the story is much more positively female oriented than many fairy tales: the characters include a mother (rather than absent mother or stepmother), and the mother and sisters live harmoniously together, without a male guardian. With so many central female

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34 Kate Freiligrath-Kroeker wrote and published the first theatrical adaptations of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* and *Alice Through the Looking Glass*. Alice was an extremely influential character as a child and as a girl, but I decided not to address those scripts here because, in spite of the wonderful world Lewis Carroll creates, the scripts actually offer less agency to performers and stage managers than one might suppose simply because their main objective is to accurately recreate Carroll’s books on stage. The stage directions even suggest that costumes should be designed to look exactly like Mr. Tenniel’s illustrations.
characters, the tale could be especially attractive to families with girls who wanted to act. Clara Ryland (1896) and Kate Freiligrath-Kroeker (1881) both published significantly different at-home versions of the play, drawing attention to the uneven nature of the sociocultural changes to Victorian gender expectations. Ryland was an upper-class woman, with five daughters, while the well-connected and also married Freiligrath-Kroeker associated herself with the New Woman and radical Literary Women’s movement (Hughes).

The plays were explicitly written for children to perform. Ryland says she originally wrote her collection of plays for her own children (born between 1886 and 1892) since she found it “difficult to obtain any that were really suitable for such young performers” (ix). The piece is short and simple. She claimed the plays in her volume had been “tested year by year” and this particular script was for children between seven and nine years old to perform. Ryland’s “Snow-White and Rose-Red” only includes four characters: the two sisters, the Bear Prince, and the Dwarf. Freiligrath-Kroeker, on the other hand, in her 1879 preface to her collection of plays wrote, “I have only to express my earnest desire that my little volume may gain friends everywhere among children, for whom it was written” (Alice intro) but also explained that one of the plays in the collection was performed two years earlier at Hackney High School. In Kate Freiligrath-Kroeker’s second volume of plays for children she protests against comments that she heard regarding her first: that the plays are too long for the children to remember. “All,

35 Ryland was well connected politically. Her brother was the Rt. Hon. Joseph Chamberlain, but she may not always have shared her brother’s politics. In a letter (1 Dec 1885) to Beatrice (Potter) Webb, Ryland wrote “many thanks for your sympathy in my political interests” but I have not been able to determine what those were. Much later, December 10, 1909 Webb wrote her diary that she “thought she detected in [Ryland and Ryland’s sister] a growing feeling for the protection of property – a growing fear of encroachments on the wealth of the wealthy which I had not noticed before” (Webb). Webb herself wanted a career, followed politics, and supported the vote for women, so although it is interesting to note that Ryland had “political interests” and was not a completely sheltered upper-class socialite, what those interests might have been are not, at present, clear.

36 Beatrice Webb visited Clara and her three little girls who she described as “delightful children, the eldest is fast growing up into a pretty young women with a quiet shy disposition” (October 1886 in Mackenzie 59).
however, who have had any practical experience of children’s acting, will have been struck by the ease and rapidity with which a child as a rule learns by heart. A striking proof that the plays are not too long, is furnished by the fact that two of them were acted in one evening, many of the little performers in the first play also acting in the second” (Alice Thro’ Freiligrath-Kroeker v). Her “Bear Prince” is longer and more complex than Ryland’s “Snow White and Rose Red” and includes fairy tale characters from beyond the traditional plot (she adds Little Red Riding Hood, Hop o’ My Thumb, and a Princess). Regardless of the biological age of the playwrights’ anticipated performers, the two women clearly viewed them as children, and the plays were vehicles to express something about childhood, and, especially, girls’ childhoods.

Ryland’s play offers up a vision of happy innocence, in keeping with Victorian notions of “goodness,” and leaning towards the Victorians who embraced and fostered childhood naivety. Rose Red merrily sings:

What do we care for wind or weather,
Living so happily here together?
We sing at our work, we sing at our play,
So happy are we the live long day. (20)

The sisters keep the house neat, gather wood, go out to get vegetables, and also, collect basketsful of flowers. The characters are never naughty, selfish, unkind, or particularly spontaneous, although they have time for both work and pleasure. In Ryland’s tale, the girls live alone – she even eliminates the mother character, making their age a bit more ambiguous, and the result is Ryland constructs a fantasy world of complete independence from either male or female adult

37 It is interesting to note that in 1886, Beatrice Webb wrote of Clara Ryland, “I love that woman; although she is not in any way clever…” 15 Oct 1886, Diary TS. Perhaps her lack of “cleverness” accounts for an acceptance of some, more conservative, values. Other plays published for children in that decade offered more complex visions of childhood.
authority.\textsuperscript{38} When out of doors, the sisters exhibit kindness and forgiveness, helping the Dwarf two times even though he is rude to them. When the Bear stays with them, they share their food and fire, they play and dance with him, and Snow White secretly confides in the audience that “There’s not a man on earth, or prince, or peasant /Could as a comrade be one half so pleasant… I really wish he were a prince instead” (24). Her desire for the Bear as a husband, even before he reveals himself to be a Prince, is reminiscent of the Beauty and the Beast tales, and also, suggests that Ryland believed it was acceptable for a young girl to know her own mind and be interested in love, marriage, and even a specific individual. But, significantly it also means Ryland thought the fairy tale narrative ending in marriage, and therefore terminating childhood, was desirable. When the Prince asks Snow White to marry him, he invites her to share his throne, and let Rose Red be their little sister – without complicating the home staging by adding a younger brother and the double wedding found in the Grimms’ tale. The sisters do not have to separate, but Ryland’s fantasy world of two sisters with complete independence from authority must be traded for a chance at wealth and love. For Ryland, it seems, it is a good deal.

Freiligrath-Kroeker’s approach to the tale is very different, and offers young thespians a chance to explore different kinds of childhood / girlhood identities, and ultimately, invites them to imagine either choosing childhood over adulthood or perhaps, choosing to reject wealth and marriage in favour of control of self. Her first significant difference from Ryland is that she does not portray the two sisters as identical. Rosered calls Snowwhite a “capital housewife” (137): she gets the tea ready, mends the stockings, washes dishes, tidies up, and “does her lessons” like any good middle-class girl still educated at home. Rosered, meanwhile, rushes into the house

\textsuperscript{38} In the next section I will address how this girlhood freedom fantasy was promoted by writers like L.T. Meade who created a new genre of “girl” fiction, and contributed to the development of today’s liminal “girl” culture, poised between childhood dependence and adult responsibility.
famished and late because she was listening to Red Riding Hood tell stories and crows tell riddles, and when she does household tasks, she gets distracted and breaks a cup. Snowwhite laughs that her sister “talks nonsense” and Rosered responds definitively that she “never talks nonsense” (137). In spite of their different personalities and this minor disagreement, the sisters love each other dearly. When the Bear comes to stay with them, they both play wild rough games with him, beating him with their rolling pins, riding on him, and teasing him terribly. These antics echo an image from *The Illustrated London News* December 28, 1872, reprinted in Richard Foulkes *Lewis Carroll: Theatricals in a Quiet Life*, suggesting that this kind of rambunctious intergenerational play was actually quite common, and that occasionally little girls were permitted to master the adult men. The *Illustrated London News* writer argues that for children over the Christmas holidays, adults are “their sworn vassals” and he uses Susie as his example, who sees a print of “Una Taming the Lion” on the wall, and insists that Uncle Jack be the lion, while she will be Una. “You must go about properly on all fours… and ramp and roar like a real live lion while I hold you by the ear” (R. Foulkes 75). Certainly some adults revelled in the exuberant performance of childhood in which the child can master the adult, and girls playing either Snowwhite or Rosered could look forward to some raucous physical play, while the naughty but fun and good-hearted Rosered could be an especially appealing identity for a girl to try on even if she were concerned with being perceived more like Snowwhite in her daily life. Freiligrath-Kroeker demonstrates her respect for children by making it clear that Snowwhite, at least, can negotiate both the world of Victorian “young lady” expectations even as she has fun playing the child.

Freiligrath-Kroeker also offers young actors different ways of imagining their female fairy tale acquaintances. “Isn’t she brave,” Rosered says admiringly of Little Red Riding Hood
because she “isn’t a bit afraid” of going out alone in the woods after her ordeal (138). In contrast, when asked to identify the Princess who comes to tea, Snowwhite responds carelessly, “Oh I don’t know. She’s a Princess -- like any other Princess, I suppose. We don’t know anything about her” (172). The “brave” Little Red is more interesting and appealing than the rather unknowable Princess, who we later learn is also spoiled, unkind, and terribly class conscious. The four girl characters would not only give girls different kinds of people to perform, but, of course, the characters also suggest alternate ways to contemplate performing girlhood, including out of the ordinary attitudes regarding victims of violence and supposedly enviable princesses, with which to experiment.

Freiligrath-Kroeker’s attitude about whether or not Snowwhite and Rosered’s naivety is constructed by their mother or simply a fact of their very young biological age, is not entirely clear from the text, but it could have raised interesting issues for girls and women to think about, and perhaps discuss. When Rosered does not know what a “suitor” is, her mother sidesteps the question, but when the bear arrives at the door the mother says reassuringly, “Don’t be afraid girls. It’s only a polite and affable bear. He will not hurt you” (144). The bear’s response is enough to make any parent a bit protective: “Not I. But I’m very fond of children; especially of little girls; more especially if they are pretty” (144). Yet, the girls remain entirely unaware that there could be any sexual or romantic interest from the bear. When he reassumes his Prince shape and reveals his interest in marriage, they are horrified and disappointed. Both girls reject him in turn, with Rosered emphatically adding “I’m not your dearest Rosered,” and “I don’t care for you one bit” (205). He concludes that it is because “They are but children yet and that

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39 A veritable moral panic concerning white slavery existed in the Victorian Era, and was so severe that some middle-class girls and some fathers were quite terrified for girls to be out of the house on their own (Girls Growing Up, Dyhouse 26).
accounts for it!” (208). The Prince returns to his bear shape, which delights the girls, and he promises to stay with them as long as they wish. The mother in the play has the last word, emphasising their youth saying “bless you my children,” (216) as she hints in an aside to the audience that perhaps he may yet change into a Prince in the future. However, in fairyland where spells can be easily cast but only broken with difficulty, her words ring hollow after the girls say imperiously that he must remain a bear forever and a day. The mother’s hopes for a princely suitor raise questions about what young girls should be encouraged to desire, what kind of information about the “facts of life” they should be given. They also ask audiences and performers to consider if Snowwhite and Rosered were fully informed, would they have chosen childhood, fun, and power over the man/bear, or would they have chosen adulthood, marriage, and Victorian “obedience” to a husband. Because neither girl was obliged (either by the mother or the bear) to accept someone she considered to be a subpar potential husband, she still has an open future of possibilities that may or may not include marriage. But perhaps it is most important to note that it is because the girls were not required to abandon childhood, that, to a certain extent, they could still influence their own destinies. In Freiligrath-Kröcker’s retelling of the tale, childhood is a zone of protection from the expectations and strictures of adult womanhood.

One possible reason for the differences between the two texts may not be personal politics, but rather source material. Edgar Taylor published an English translation of the tale in 1824, Margaret Hunt published an English translation of the Brothers Grimm tale in 1884 and Andrew Lang published his in 1889, and Ryland probably became familiar with the tale through one of these translations. All these retellings emphasise filial love, love and friendship towards the strange beast, kindness and forgiveness towards the cruel dwarf, and end with romantic love and marriage, enabling the two sisters to demonstrate the four Ancient Greek varieties of love in one
Freiligrath-Kroeker’s scripted version of “The Bear Prince” however, was published before the 1884 English translations of the tale were widely available, and since she did German translations as work, she may have used either the Brothers Grimm 1837 edition (*Children and Household Tales*), or she might have been familiar with the Grimm inspiration: Caroline Stahl’s 1818/1821 story “The Ungrateful Dwarf.” Stahl’s story is interesting because Snow White and Rose Red are children, not young ladies, and marriage is never an issue in the piece; the Grimms added the double wedding to their version. Instead, the girls, who are very poor, meet the Dwarf several times in the forest, and save him from peril three times. In each case he leaves lugging a sack of gold, jewels, and pearls, but does not thank them. The fourth time he gets into trouble is when a bear bursts out of the forest. The dwarf tries to convince the bear to eat the girls, but the bear eats the dwarf instead, and the girls bring his bag of jewels home to their parents who buy land, castles, and beautiful clothes for the girls, and also use their new wealth to give the girls an education. Freiligrath-Kroeker’s script is closer to the Grimms’ tale than to Stahl’s, but her creation of a piece in which the girls are allowed to choose their own fate by rejecting marriage suggests that she may have been aware that another happy ending exists for the story. By permitting Snowwhite and Rosered to remain children, she may be contributing to the Victorian veneration of innocent and happy childhood, but she may also have been offering young actors character identities to explore where the future is still open rather than decided.

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40 This is my observation, rather than an explicit intention of the Brothers Grimm. The concepts include *eros* the romantic love between Snow-White and the Prince, *agape*, the spiritual and selfless love the sisters exhibit towards the dwarf, *philia*, affection between friends (the bear and the girls, or perhaps even between the sisters), and *storge*, love within a family, (the mother to her daughters, and the sisters to each other).

41 Jack Zipes thinks Stahl’s story may be an original literary fairy tale with no oral antecedent. The Brothers Grimm thought it had connections to a popular song in 1813, connecting the tale to an entirely lost oral history.
**Babes in the Wood: Refusing to Fear Death**

“Children in Victorian novels are illuminated presences because they die so often. Dying is what they do best; often, they are expected to die even when they don’t” writes Nina Auerbach in *Private Theatricals* (21). She argues that these dying children are “strangely seductive” and “bathe us in the reproachful, impersonal purity of our birthright” (24). Although Auerbach is being provocative when she writes that dying is what Victorian children do best, it is true that innocent children regularly die in nineteenth-century short stories and fiction for both adult and child readers, but sadly, real children also died, in some areas at alarming rates. Infant mortality decreased from approximately 150 / 1000 in 1850 to 100 / 1000 in 1900, but in some areas the infant mortality rates were well over 500 per 1000. Children died of smallpox, polio, consumption (tuberculosis), bronchitis, and a shocking number of unknown ailments (Williams and Galley). Death was all around Victorian families, even in the upper and middle classes, and belief that children were immediately welcomed into heaven helped many families cope, although diaries and letters indicate that parents felt their children’s deaths keenly.

“Babes in the Wood” or “Children in the Wood” is based on an English 16th century ballad, which in turn may be rooted in real events, and was popular material for home and professional theatricals. A brother and sister are lured into the woods and abandoned so that an uncle can receive their inheritance. It is considered a fairy tale rather than a folk tale because birds take pity on the children and cover them with leaves. Thomas Morton’s play “Children of the Wood” was first produced professionally in London in 1793, and Anne Varty observes that in this and subsequent professional productions, the child characters exhibit different states of

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42 Anne Varty offers *Pied Piper of Hamelin* (1842), Helen Burns’ death in *Jane Eyre* (1847), and most significantly, Little Willie’s death in *East Lynne* (1861) as potent and influential examples of literary child deaths (*Children* 127, 129). Little Willie began dying on stage in 1862 and many versions of the play were performed repeatedly through to 1874.
maturity depending on their immediate situation, and always perform according to strict gender stereotypes (“Baby” 226). By the Victorian era, “Babes in the Wood” variants were staple pantomime fare, coupled with “Robin Hood” or “Who Killed Cock Robin?” to enable a happy ending. Varty explains as the scripts changed, the actors were more likely to be adults, often a man in drag played the sister, and the performance encouraged comic alienation rather than pathos (“Baby” 227). Jonathan Levy’s list of over 500 published plays for children (1856 – 1919) includes only two “Babes in the Woods” variants (both published 1919), but the Nineteenth-Century Popular Stage lists a dozen different professional pantomime scripts, the earliest of which comes from 1856. The fairy tale would have been well-known in Victorian homes, and children who attended the Christmas pantomime might have seen staged productions of the tale.43 But the decision to write at-home versions for children to play out raises questions regarding how, or if, facing and embodying childhood death could offer agency and power to young thespians.

Julia Corner’s “Children in the Wood” (1856) seems to be drawn from the more sentimental early versions of the story, incorporating gender expectations in stereotypical ways. Corner’s child characters (Jane, age 7 and William, age 8) open the play discussing the past when they had parties, toys, and fun. They are kind to each other and miss their dead mother terribly (14). When the children are abandoned in the woods, Jane sobs uncontrollably and asks her brother what they should do. Her brother first promises to protect her (Corner says “manfully”), but seconds later says, “Alas! My pretty sister we must die! / So on the cold ground side by side

43 “Pantomime was widely accessible, and visits appear to have been an experience shared by the nation’s youth, excluding only the very poorest” (Children, Varty 139). Children whose parents disapproved of attending the theatre, even if they felt theatricals at home were morally acceptable, may not have had that privilege.
we’ll lie;/ Put your dear arms round Willie’s neck, and I / Will hold you close to me – Good-bye!” (23). Jane sleepily replies “Good bye” and they fall asleep. The Uncle lives richly for a while, but when the magistrate finds the children’s bodies, we learn that the Uncle is dead, previously haunted by the ghosts of the children, and having begged for their forgiveness.

Keith J. Angus’ “Babes in the Wood” (1878) incorporates some Cock Robin elements into his script, but maintains the tragic tone of the tale. He features Ruth and Philip, “scarcely in their teens,” where Ruth is frail and frightened, and Philip gallantly takes off his own coat to help keep her warm. Ruth collapses first and Philip lies down beside her to die. Ruth says things like “Philip, I wish so much we both were dead” (126) after they have been in the woods for two days, while Philip enjoins “keep a good heart” and “don’t despair” (126). Ruth nearly dies saying “Philip, good-night,” and although Philip begs, “For my sake, try to live,” she simply responds, “Tell uncle, if you see him, I – I – forgive.” When Philip realises she’s dead he lies down with her because without her “life’s charm is o’er.” The birds (Jenny Wren, Cock Robin, and Sparrow) have a dumb show wedding earlier in the play, and they follow the deaths of the children with a mimed funeral / burial.

Victorian middle-class families may have had several reasons for choosing to encourage or allow their children to put on “Babes in the Wood” as an accompaniment to their Christmas festivities. First, the tale had been popular as a ballad since the sixteenth-century, was staged in London in the late eighteenth century, and regularly circulated in chapbook form: the tale was clearly popular. Second, Tara Moore observes that starvation is a common theme for fiction in Victorian Christmas periodicals. She argues that some authors saw it as their work to draw attention to the need for improved social conditions and laws to help impoverished and emaciated English citizens, but points out that “the annual argument for Christmas benevolence is inextricably linked to the middle-class reader’s physical sense of satiation” (501). Both of these
ideas relate to potential interest in “Babes in the Woods.” As mentioned, throughout the nineteenth century the public debated the need for laws protecting children from their guardians’ violence\textsuperscript{44} and any family with children on their drawing room stage would certainly be grateful for those who were alive, even as they pitied (or mourned) those who were dead. The children in both Angus’s and Corner’s versions long for happier times when they were with their mothers and had a certain level of wealth, perhaps offering the “useful or moral lesson” to the young children that Corner hopes to impart, and emphasising the same impulse that drove the popularity of Christmas starvation fiction – inviting audiences and participants to feel pity (and perhaps support social justice action to prevent cruelty to children) even as they felt gratefully personally sated. Third, Auerbach’s suggestion that the dying child somehow draws attention to purity, and seems to bring readers into a state of grace is also a possible reason for the appeal.

The lyrics to a popular nineteenth century children’s hymn include:

\begin{verbatim}
Teach me to live, that I may dread
The grave as little as my bed.

Teach me to die, that so I may
Rise glorious at the judgement day.\textsuperscript{45}
\end{verbatim}

Children, who were regrettably at risk of dying throughout much of the Victorian era, sang this hymn about their own mortality, the importance of moral behaviour, and reminding them of the

\textsuperscript{44} The first English law protecting children from cruelty was passed in 1889, significantly after both these scripts were published.

\textsuperscript{45} The “Evening Hymn,” occasionally attributed to Bishop Thomas Ken, was reprinted throughout the nineteenth century in numerous collections of hymns especially for children. The lyrics varied slightly, including “Rise in Joy on Judgement Day” or “Rise Glorious on that Awful Day.” The hymn is found in hymnals for mission services, Sundays Schools, schools for the poor (like the Blue Coat Hospital, in Liverpool, England); and also hymnals that middle class families might have their homes. For example, A Collection of Hymns, Chiefly intended for those children and young persons who attend Sunday Schools, Selected by Edward Wentworth, London: 1818; First Truths, or Lessons and Hymns for Christian Children, London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1843; The Children’s Hosannah, containing upwards of one hundred and twenty hymns, Selected by a committee of Sunday School Teachers, London: Jarrold and Sons, 1865. Hymns and Rhymes for Children by the Daughter of a Clergyman, London: Ward, Locke, and Tyler, 1871; The Golden Hymn Book compiled by M. Catharine Albright. London, Edinburgh, Glasgow, New York: Henry Froude, 1903. It is also found in Thomas Hardy’s Jude the Obscure, where Hardy writes the hymn had been “endeared to him since earliest childhood” (Chapter 1, Part II).
existence of heaven. The Angus version of the tale, in which Ruth gasps out “I forgive,” particularly connects children and child performers with these Victorian preoccupations with death and heaven. Anne Varty extends Auerbach’s assertion by suggesting that a theatre was an ideal place to explore purity and transcendence. She calls theatrical child deaths “the pageantry of immortality” (*Children* 137) and asks, “Does it [the spectacle of the dying child] posit the stage as a place where immortality becomes visible, and where children, as ageless vessels of innocence, purity and trust are uniquely prized signifiers of the alpha and omega of life?” (*Children* 136).

Fourth, James Kincaid’s arguments, place a story like ‘Babes in the Wood’ firmly within the development of the Victorian Gothic, which spoke to troubling anxieties about the increasing divisions between children and adults. Arguing that Victorian attitudes towards children mixed desire with fear, he suggests that the increasing separateness of children within Victorian culture makes these anxieties possible:

> The key to the gothic and the cultural position of the child is isolation…. the child must be alone in order to be absolutely powerless. The modern child has no reason to being if it isn’t figured as something needing protection. The modern family comes into being around the separateness of the child….The family exists as such a tight fortress because we are told we have something to protect… -- the innocence of the child. (5)

The Uncle’s haunting by the two children he murdered suggests that Corner may have been evoking this genre of fiction as well. Finally, in contrast to Kincaid’s arguments, as I explained earlier, since Gubar demonstrates that children in the Victorian Era were not yet firmly “other” but comingled with adult society and conversation, the question of the appropriateness of the content of a story about child deaths may not even have occurred to Victorian families: the families who chose the plays may have thought “Babes in the Wood” was a good, dramatic story, with a clear moral (since the Uncle does get his comeuppance in the end, although not until the children have died) and thought little about what may have been disturbing content.
All of these potential reasons for why a family might want to stage “Babes in the Wood” point to the experiences, opinions, and intentions of adult family members, rather than the children and girls who performed and possibly chose the tale. How could playwrights imagine that performing vulnerable and highly gendered child victims whose future is cut short would appeal to Victorian girls? Nineteenth-century poet Edgar Allan Poe writes, evocatively, the urge for destruction is “the imp of the perverse.” He explains, “we peer into the abyss – we grow sick and dizzy. Our first impulse is to shrink from danger. Unaccountably, we remain” (Poe in Wilson 20). In the fifth chapter of this dissertation, I discuss Molly Bell’s diary, in which she describes creeping up under the eaves with a cousin, two candles, and a lantern, where they played all afternoon at killing each other. The creepy, dusty location lent itself well to exploring dark impulses, suggesting the girls were toying with Poe’s imp. The imp that prompts human fascination with disturbing tales may recognise the mystery of why girls may want to look, and may point to why readers seek out gothic and horror literature, but it does not explain how girls could have believed they would benefit from taking on the victim roles of dying children.

Philippe Ariès groundbreaking The Hour of Our Death offers some historical context into how Victorian families may have discussed and experienced deaths in their own immediate circles, and also, why playing out death might have had an appeal. Using diaries, letters, poetry and novels, Ariès argues that in the nineteenth century, people began to have a romantic view of death. He does case studies of two families plagued by consumption – the Brontës and the La Ferronays.

In both we find the same intolerance of the death of loved ones, the same sadness of a life deprived of affects, the same desire for and certainty of reunion with the deceased after death, and indeed, the same admiration for the phenomenon of death, for its intrinsic beauty.” (442)
The last phrase regarding death’s intrinsic beauty speaks to the appeal for Victorians of the dying children in the wood. Particularly notable, in terms of “Children in the Wood” is Ariès discussion of the death of Jane Eyre’s friend Helen Burns (434-436). After talking about God, in which Helen seems completely at peace with her death, and confident that she will go to heaven, the girls cuddle up together, tell each other good night, kiss each other, and fall asleep. When Jane wakes up, her friend is dead. The image of the peaceful, beautiful death of a friend is so similar to the young children lying down to die in each other’s arms in the woods, that it is easy to see why Ariès argues that the admiration of and longing for a calm, gentle death was increasingly pervasive in the nineteenth century, both in reality (as Emily Brontë’s poetry attests), and vicariously through literature, as the appeal of “Children in the Woods” demonstrates.

To further assist in speculating about the way darkness could appeal to young Victorian girls, in keeping with my methodology of adopting a more porous approach to time and space, I looked to some poets whose discussion about girlhood and adolescence in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries may be applied, retroactively, to understanding nineteenth-century England. When Arielle Greenberg and Becca Klaver discuss what they called “the poetics of female adolescence,” they refer to “the romance and glamour of unhappiness” (192). In their article, they try to untangle what makes Sylvia Plath an enduring figure for twenty-first-century teenage girls, and one of Greenberg’s conclusions is that Plath “takes personal pain and turns it into something grand, something important for the whole culture” (192). Greenberg also argues that teenage girls do not need art that empowers them, but “the act of testifying to the experience of girlhood may be all that is desired or required. Poems that bear witness, but do not necessarily offer solace or solution” (193). I do not wish to suggest that “Babes in the Wood” is akin to Sylvia Plath’s poetry, but rather, it may speak to the same needs Greenberg and Klaver discuss. During the tumultuous years of adolescence, finding a way to confront and give a voice to pain and fear
could have had significant value for Victorian children. Enacting a nightmare like “Babes in the Wood,” from which there is no escape but, in the Christian worldview, heaven, might have allowed some girls to indulge in the glamour of unhappiness, making it “something grand” and turning their sorrow and fear into art. Girls today experience deep, complex emotions, and it seems likely that Victorian era girls did too. Klever cautions against descending into “psychobabble” when discussing dilemmas of girlhood (195), but I would like to posit that Corner and Angus believed performing “Babes in the Wood” may have given young thespians an opportunity to explore upsetting emotions in a safe environment and to acknowledge deeply felt anxieties about significant questions regarding adult-child power dynamics, security, life, death, an afterlife, and of course, the future. After confronting the horror presented in “Babes in the Wood,” perhaps young Victorians could feel stronger and more confident about their own lives. Perhaps they could approach their parents with difficult questions about their own futures in the event of tragedy, and could have been reassured by the answers.

**Little Red Riding Hood: Dealing with Wolves**

“Little Red Riding Hood” (Charles Perrault), in spite of the unhappy ending, and “Little Red Cap” (Brothers Grimm), where everything turns out all right, were both popular in English folklore translations. Little Red is important for this study because the way she is framed allows for different performances of a girl’s childhood. Keith J. Angus and Florence Bell offer two radically different approaches to the tale, demonstrating that even in well-known stories, playwrights had a great deal of influence regarding the kind of girlhood that could be performed, punished, and possibly, redeemed.

The girls in both scripts are clearly intended to be appealing, albeit in completely different ways. Angus’s Red parallels “the angel of the house” and Ruskin’s ideal in “Of Queen’s
Gardens.” She is so thoughtful that she brings her elderly grandmother a birthday tea, so generous that she forgives Robin for shooting a bird without insisting on (or even allowing) an apology, and so chaste that she is shy and blushing, even though she longs for “Robin and his kiss” and to lay her head upon his chest. The reapers in the story think Red is so beautiful that they want to crown her their harvest queen, commenting that it is “queer” that she is so good that “there’s not a girl within a mile of here who grudges her good fortune” (148). When Little Red runs around her grandmother’s house screaming in melodramatic terror, Robin shoots the wolf and rescues the ineffectual Red. The two agree to marry when they are older and “school is done and lessons o’er,/ And we to useful life arise and soar…” (155). Her childhood is framed as a time of waiting for the future, not a time to live for the present, and clearly Angus thinks that “useful life” is found in marriage and adulthood, but not before. Little Red Riding Hood’s characterization simply asks young actors to perform the same expectations society has of girls, the only bonus appeal being that, as Harvest Queen and as a child already engaged to her sweetheart, this Little Red is very successful in her performance.

Angus’ perspective that a person’s life before adulthood is not “useful” but instead is a time of “becoming” is not surprising, given late nineteenth-century perspectives and preoccupations regarding adolescence. Nancy Lesko, who studies curriculum theory, history, and gender, demonstrates that Victorian scientific research in physical anthropology, psychology, biology, and medicine, popular ideas of health and disease, and political rhetoric all focused on adolescence as an embodiment and a worry about ‘progress’ (21) and contributed to the widely accepted notion that adolescence functions as a time of ‘becoming’ rather than ‘being.’ Lesko’s observations are particularly important in my chapter on “Oriental” theatre, but they are also significant here because her analysis indicates how inevitable and essential a productive adulthood, including marriage, was supported by a large number of middle-class Victorian
thinkers. Political rhetoric, in particular, made use of Darwinian notions of “The Great Chain of Being,” and created a normative hierarchy of humanity based on race and masculinity. Lesko explains that Darwin’s ideas were reworked into recapitulation theory in which “each individual child re-enacts the evolutionary climb from primitive to savage group and finally to civilized society [and that theory] offered an irresistible way to rank people from every social class, race, and gender” (32). She explains that “savage” (non-white) men and women were perceived to be identical, but gender differences were believed to be necessary for civilization (23). Since hierarchy is inherent in the theory, women (emotional and sentimental) occupied a lower place in the scheme than men (rational and autonomous) (35). The highest position in the scheme was the white male, and as a result, there were some parts of the climb that were simply impossible for non-white people and girls to achieve. But, climbing inexorably upwards towards the desirable goal of adulthood, was seen both as inevitable (as a result of biological aging), desirable (because that is the goal of life), and as something to be monitored, to ensure that aging was done properly, and that progress (for white, and especially white male society) could be assured. If a playwright’s story spoke against this discourse, it could have been perceived as very unusual, if not deviant. But Angus’ Little Red is all the things a “typical” little English girl should be, and as a child, she is waiting to fulfill her destiny as an English wife, when she can “to useful life arise and soar” (Angus 155).

Florence Bell’s “Little Red Riding Hood,” whose name is Jenny, is what Charlotte Yonge’s Barnscombe family in Historical Dramas might call “delightfully naughty.” Jenny is disobedient, rude, noisy, forgetful, and a bit lazy. She loves to chase butterflies and pick flowers, 

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46 The discourse also normalised “white males” and made them the assumed default of any discussion regarding adolescence or childhood, unless otherwise specified. Various sciences became fascinated by “others,” including girls, partly because they were perceived as deviant by default. The relevance of these issues will be explored further in Chapter 3.
and adores her mother, but rarely remembers (or chooses) to do as she is asked to do. She is even a bit spiteful, says unkind things about Polly (her classmate and neighbour’s daughter), and also pinches Polly’s arm until it is black and blue. Yet, somehow, the character is very likeable in contrast to the unseen “Polly,” who is polite, hardworking, never late, and unfailingly obedient. When Jenny’s mother confronts Jenny and tells her that she should not be rude to their neighbour, Jenny retorts, “She shouldn’t be rude to me then. It’s very rude to always be talking of good girls when she knows I don’t like them” (95). In fact, the Neighbour Slapps is an unpleasant busybody. She brags about her own daughter, and scolds Jenny to her mother and to her face. She even tells Jenny that she deserves to be eaten by a wolf. Jenny’s mother tolerates her Neighbour, but it is clear that she does not like her, and it’s also very clear that although she is not blind to her daughter’s faults, she loves her child too much to see her as she really is. Bell offers two endings to the play. In the first both Jenny’s never-seen grandmother and Jenny get eaten by the wolf who remarks, “Ah! That was nice and she deserved it too, for she was a naughty little girl and always forgot what her mother told her. Good wolves like eating naughty little girls” (106). The second ending, Bell explains, is “a concession to the popular prejudice in favour of a happy ending, especially in a play intended for young children” (106). When the Wolf cries out “all the better to eat you with,” Jenny screams and Neighbour Slapps comes in and beats the wolf to death with her umbrella. Unusual because her saviour is not a man, but a woman (and not a terribly likeable one either), only after the rescue does Jenny realize that her grandmother must have been eaten by the wolf. The play ends:

Jenny. Oh poor Granny! The wolf must have eaten her up before I got here.
Neighbour Slapps. Much you care, you naughty girl.
Jenny. Well, it’s better than if he’d eaten me.
Neighbour Slapps. I’m glad you think so. Now come home with me and I won’t lose sight of you til you’re safe within your mother’s door. I hope this will be a lesson to you. My Polly was never in danger of being eaten by a wolf.
Jenny. I wish she had been!

The unrepentant Jenny is fascinating because her encounter with the wolf has not changed her opinion of Neighbour Slapps and her daughter nor has it mellowed remorseless Jenny’s bravado. The Neighbour, meanwhile, is the hero of the play, and yet remains unappealing because of the way she brags about her own daughter. Both are strong and strong-minded characters, and Bell uses the well-known tale to invite girls to consider what it is to be a “good” girl or “bad” girl, a “good” or “bad” adult woman, and to consider which behaviours and attitudes are fundamental to becoming the people they want to be.

Even in the first ending, after Red is dead, when the Wolf tells the audience Jenny deserved to be eaten, neither the girl actors nor the audience could possibly accept the Wolf’s words at face value: does anyone deserve to be eaten? If the Wolf’s actions are taken as a metaphor for predatory males and the late nineteenth-century moral panic regarding white slavery, the question is even more interesting. Carol Dyhouse writes “at a time when women were undoubtedly getting stronger, and becoming more assertive politically, it suited a range of interest groups, for very diverse reasons, to represent girls as frightened, as oppressed, or as victims (Girl Trouble 41). In just 1885 the Criminal Law Amendment Act raised the age of consent from 13 to 16, largely in response to W.T. Stead’s exposé of girls lured into brothels called “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon,” and the moral panic continued throughout the 1880s to the First World War. In her second ending, since Bell’s Jenny remains saucy and brash in the face of danger, Jenny could be seen as fool-hardy, but she could also be resisting definition as a victim. The play is funny, the warning about “wolves” is serious, but the complex morality narrative renders the characterization of childhood (in the guises of naughty, fun Jenny and well-behaved, dull Polly) as ambivalent and uncertain as any Victorian vision of childhood.
Fairy Tales and Imagining New Identities: New Women and New Girls

Tensions concerning depictions of childhood in many ways characterised nineteenth-century children’s literature, but fairy tale plots regularly intersect with another sociocultural anxiety of the era: girls. Nineteenth-century English middle- and upper-class society were fascinated by, and anxious about, challenges to the strict gender roles Victorian society prescribed based on biological sex (Nelson ix). Just as some people were concerned about the changing nature of childhood, throughout the century, essayists wrote with passionate conviction about the nature of English girlhood and appropriate English girl behaviours. Catherine Driscoll explains “the spectacular modes of girl culture… raise concerns about girls today…[and] are in this sense always part of debates about citizenship and culture” (15, italics mine). Perceptions regarding the ways girls perform identities connect to concerns about control, stability, and possibility, so that girlhood comes to represent society’s hopes and anxieties for the future. The variety of girl “types” dominating the press, advertising and literature indicate numerous schools of thought about girls circulated in Victorian society. The common girl-types are useful to know about, because they help to demonstrate how some playwrights used fairy tale plays to directly engage with questions regarding girls’ identity, agency, potential independence, control of her own future, and power. As Mary Jane Corbett so aptly points out in her discussion of the American feminist actress Elizabeth Robins, in this post-modern era scholars generally agree with Judith Butler that all identities are performances, but any theatrical performance of a character had the potential to comment on or dilute the public identity that a Victorian woman like Elizabeth

47 Consuming Angels: Advertising and Victorian Women by Lori Anne Loeb (1994) examines advertising for adult women, and suggests that the images do not reflect an “angel of the house.” Instead advertisers incorporated images of strong women: Grecian goddesses, women warriors, queens, actresses, and adventurers. A comparable study is not available for girls’ magazines, but I suspect that advertisers followed the same impulse when trying to attract girls.
Robins constructed and considered to be her “real self.” Writers had to consider society’s behavioural expectations (and allowances) for nineteenth-century middle-class girls (who were also constructing “real selves”), if they wanted to create characters that were believable, even as they were critical or subversive, and playable by girls, even as they were stretching boundaries of normalcy. Before discussing some examples of fairy tale plays that expressly deal with behavioural expectations based on biological sex and performances of gender, I will outline the basic contemporary concepts regarding the nineteenth-century “English Girls”, “Girls of the Period,” the “New Woman” and the “New Girl.” These contemporary concepts guide my understanding of the playwrights' perspectives, and also help me understand what might have been at stake for girls when performing certain fairy tale characters, or what could have been subtly critical, within the well-known fairy tale genre.

Victorian writers who discussed the “English Girl” acknowledged the essential performative nature of this role, and imagined her to enact the unmarried version of the ideal wife described in John Ruskin’s “Of Queen’s Gardens.” In 1858, for example, an article appeared in *The Saturday Review* called “English Girls.” The writer extolls the virtues of girls who have a practiced drop of the eyelid and an “acted reserve,” who then surprise the reader (assumed to be male) with a clear, calm gaze “looking us right in the face, bespeaking a mind without concealment and without suspicion.” The English girls he likes delight him with the way they present their own opinions, providing they consider him to be an irreproachable source of inspiration. In fact, he says that English men go to war to fight for these appealing behaviours. But, the writer panics that the people (men) of England may soon lose these lovely, demure but

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48 When Ruskin wrote his essay, he dedicated it to his student and romantic interest, a ten-year old girl, who he describes in much the same terms as the essay.
forthright English girls if “Plucky Girls” are allowed to take over. Telling the reader he admires the frank curiosity and courage of English girl travellers, and even their practical decisions to wear clothing like “trousers,” he nevertheless complains about the obtrusive and defiant manner “in which the departures from the usages and decorums [sic] of the sex are put forward as if to startle, invite loose comments, or challenge opinions about her reputation.” The writer attaches a typical degree of moral panic to losing “unspoiled” girls even as he acknowledges the performance of girlhood, and notes the audience for whom they perform.

Writers who offered advice manuals, such as Phillis Browne’s “What Girls Can Do” (1884) or English Girls: Their Place and Power (Isabel Reaney 1879) offered numerous suggestions about how to perform the role of “English Girl.” They discuss household work, childcare, community support and ways that girls can be, as Reaney enthusiastically puts it, “mother’s right hand,” and the “darling of their father’s heart” (3). Reaney extolls “the English girl’s place in the home!” (6) (the exclamation mark is hers), and although she insists the girl should not work all the time because that would destroy her calm and “self-possession,” (v) Reaney insists there are numerous duties a girl must not decline, and in fact, “to live by rule is admirable” (vii). This obedient girl, full of youthful energy, whose work is to be sympathetic, to cheerfully do good whenever possible (83), and to always be ready to do “great” things, “will nevertheless feel that the power of her life exists in the due estimation and faithful performance of little things [sic] (77).

49 More details about this manual can be found in chapter 1.

50 Girls’ relationships to their fathers were actually significant for at-home theatricals as well. The drawing room space was seen as the mother’s but in a conventional family, permission to put on a theatrical would have needed to come from the father. In Jane Austen’s Mansfield Park the chaos that ensues as they prepare for the theatrical is partly because they are doing it surreptitiously, and the young people think it is likely that their absent father would disapprove. In contrast, at the end of Charlotte Yonge’s “The Mice at Play,” and perhaps in direct response to the Mansfield Park chaos, Kitty says to her father “it is only in fun we call you a cat; you aren’t our enemy, and we play all the better when you are there,” to which Yonge concludes, “And that is what all good children feel who trust in their kind parents, and whose parents trust them.” Whether or not a girl completely accepted patriarchal authority the way Yonge thought children should, a girl needed to negotiate the expectations of her behaviour and her relationship with her father in order to successfully “get-up” a theatrical.
Reaney’s advice regarding the performance of little things is connected to the theatrical way she describes the selfless performance of service throughout the book, using common girls’ names like Alice and Mary as characters, and painting images of how the girl would appear bouncing a toddler on her knee for a ride or reading to her father from the newspaper. Reaney’s advice places the English girl within a Christian context, explaining that the source of an English girl’s power “lies in the heart…with a heart filled with love to God, life becomes most sacred in its every detail” (12). Although she suggests that the performance may be spiritually motivated, there seems to be awareness, in both the Saturday Night article and in Reaney’s advice, that, desirable as English girlhood may be, it is performative, and no more natural than any of the other cultivated Victorian manners or decorum. Playwright Julia Corner, using the pseudonym Solomon Lovechild, wrote an edifying children’s collection of fictional character profiles, which demonstrates that little and older girls were expected to perform “English Girl” behaviours. The first piece in Sketches of Little Girls is “The Good-Natured Little Girl,” and she characterizes much of Mrs. Reaney’s advice in gentle, sweet, hard-working, and selfless ways. At the end of the sketch, Lovechild/Corner writes, “as it must be a great pleasure to be so universally beloved, it is worthwhile to imitate her example…” (14 italics mine). As Elizabeth Robins’ autobiography indicates, these “English Girl” performances were often equated with a person’s “real self,” albeit cultivated, which then might come into conflict with spectator perception of a character role on stage (Corbett 111).

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51 The sketches also include “The Thoughtless, The Vain, The Orderly, The Slovenly, The Forward, The Snappish, The Persevering, The Modest, and the Awkward Little Girl.” First published in 1838c, these “types” would be unlikely to find favour by the end of the Victorian era. Nevertheless, that Sketches of Little Girls was reprinted in at least four editions (up to 1860) attests to its popularity during the middle of the century, at least among adult buyers. Sketches of Little Boys followed the book for Little Girls, and also went through numerous editions.
An “English Girl,” however, is not to be confused with the scandalous “Girl of the Period.” Eliza Lynn Linton coined the phrase in 1868, but as the 1858 Saturday Night reference to “Plucky Girls” suggests, there was anxiety throughout the era about middle- and upper-class girls who did not conform to the restrictions Victorian society placed on them. Linton famously wrote:

The Girl of the Period, and the fair young English girl of the past, have nothing in common save ancestry and their mother tongue…. The Girl of the Period is a creature who dyes her hair and paints her face as the first articles of her personal religion – a creature whose sole idea of life is fun; whose sole aim is unbounded luxury; and whose dress is the chief object of such thought and intellect as she possesses.

This selfish, slang-talking, fast-moving, irreverent girl was the subject of society conversations everywhere. Phillis Browne insists she never saw one, but nevertheless suggests ways to avoid becoming “a girl of the period.” Cartoonists mocked both Linton and the “Girl of the Period,” and a magazine quickly adopted the title to add to its apparent notoriety. The fairy tale playwrights I selected generally avoided signs that would associate their characters with “Girls of the Period.” None of the girls use slang, none wear makeup, and although Cinderella (in the anonymous script) likes pretty clothes, only Dollabella is excessively interested in fashion. Yet some playwrights did want to offer young thespians an alternative to the “English Girl” – someone believable, but more appealing – someone who looked into the future courageously, boldly choosing to live it her way.

What kind of an alternative to the “English Girl” could playwrights paint for their fairy tale heroines? The final, essential catch phrase of the period, “New Woman,” was coined by Sarah Grand. Women who associated themselves with the “New Woman” movement shared

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52 Clement’s 1870 Drawing Room collection includes one script by “A.B. called “The Girls of the Period.” The piece is not a juvenile theatrical, but I mention it here to demonstrate how significant a reference it was.
the belief that the separate social spheres for the sexes was a construct of society and culture rather than biology, and they demanded that women be given the same educational and career opportunities and choices as men, so that they, too, could be economically self-sufficient (Nelson ix, x). However, these writers had a wide variety of opinions on social and political issues, debating the desirability of marriage, sexual freedom, and the importance of women’s suffrage. When Grand first used the phrase “New Woman,” it became a rallying cry, the focus of debates in letters to the editor by “Revolting Daughters,” and even the title of a humorous and very successful anti-women’s rights play. However, Grand did not actually coin the term until 1894, so many playwrights in this chapter could not affiliate themselves with that movement simply because it had not yet been defined. Kate Freiligrath-Kroeker and Amy Levy are the only writers in this chapter who attended literary meetings with other writers who later identified as “New Women,” (Hughes) yet Florence Bell’s play Alan’s Wife (with Elizabeth Robins) and Annie L. Walker’s novel Against her will arguably align those writers with the New Woman movement, and influence how we might read their fairy tale plays for children (McMullen). Meanwhile, Clara Ryland and the anonymous Cinderella writer were obviously influenced by the changing literary culture and new ideas about women’s gender performances. The New Woman movement did not start with Grand, she just gave it a name, and New Woman-styled rumblings and grumblings can be found as early as the 1830s in English writing. The New Woman ideal, as we will see, became important not only as a way to develop appealing but controversial characters, it also enabled playwrights to imagine happy futures for their fairy tale heroines that considered the possibility of social and economic independence, that did not rely on a Prince and that did not culminate in marriage, or if they did, the marriage could be on the girls’ own terms.

Although the writers may have been “New Women” themselves, if they were writing juvenile theatricals, they were writing for girls. Sally Mitchell identifies what she compellingly
calls the “New Girl” while Katherine Moruzi identifies five popular “types” of Victorian
girlhood, as identified by nineteenth-century girls’ periodicals. Both scholars agree that when
considering Victorian England’s upper and middle classes, girls were unmarried, between 8 and
18, or possibly into their twenties. Leaning heavily on formula fiction novelist L.T. Meade, who
began writing in the 1870s and popularized many story types that writers draw on today,
Mitchell identifies several appealing kinds of fictionalised girlhood identities: adventurer, tomboy,
industrious family breadwinner, school girl (who might have female friends or lovers), the Wild
girl (often Irish or American), and the athletic girl. Mitchel writes:

New images and models are implicit in Meade’s plots and dropped in without
comment, as a matter of course: athletic triumphs, girls whose money is put in
their own hands (without trustees), bicycles, unchaperoned friendships, girls
willing to pawn their clothes rather than write home for money, and adults (both
men and women) who are wrong and must be disobeyed. By focussing on other
things, Meade lets these be part of the automatic, unexamined, natural world.
(21)

Not only normalising previously unthinkable ideas, attitudes, and behaviours, Meade’s novels
sometimes contradict the advice given in manuals like Isabel Reaney’s: in one book, nurse
Priscilla does not go home to look after her young sisters when there is a crisis; the book explicitly
shows that it would be wrong – not right – for her to choose self-sacrifice and waste her talent”
(21). Girls could also read periodicals written especially for them during this period. Moruzi
suggests that Charlotte Yonge’s Monthly Packet attracted the “religious girl,” The Girl’s Own Paper
featured the “healthy, fit, beautiful girl,” L.T. Meade’s own Atalanta promoted the idea of “the
educated girl,” Girl’s Realm focussed on the “modern and heroic girl”, and finally Young Woman
focussed on “the marrying girl.” Of course, each of these categories is a mere simplification
(Yonge’s Monthly Packet could easily have attracted educated girls, especially in its early years, for
example). Although the fairy tale girls I refer to in this section do not have exact parallels with all
of these alternatives to “English Girls,” what is apparent from these different literary and fictionalised ways of behaving is that Victorian girls and playwrights writing for them had a lot of ambient material to direct them towards a variety of girlhoods not described in advice manuals. Girlhood increasingly indicated a “provisional free space” (Mitchell 3) and girls’ culture encouraged behaviours that were not yet acceptable in adult women, but nevertheless, made it possible to imagine an adult future that a girl could have a hand in writing herself.

**Fairy Tale Heroines and Their Sisters**

Since the “happy ending” of so many fairy tales is marriage, the female heroine characters are almost always single. Unlike the children in the first section, these fairy tale heroines are on the cusp of adulthood, nearly mature, and ready to begin a future away from their parents. Although multiple characterizations exist for the young women in “Beauty and the Beast” or “Cinderella,” it is really exciting when playwrights intentionally stretch the narrative requirements of the fairy tale, and find ways within the form to depict different girlhoods on stage, inviting girls to perform different girl types themselves. In this section I examine plays where the playwrights seem to put the performance of girlhood and/or young womanhood itself on trial: Florence Bell’s “Sleeping Beauty,” Clara Ryland’s “Frog Prince,” Annie L. Walker (Coghill)’s “The Lucky Page” and an Anonymous “Cinderella.” These tales use previously published fairy tales as their source material, but through their commentary, they become original “New Woman” or “New Girl” plays.

Florence Bell’s “Sleeping Beauty” (1899) offers a barbed critique of the “English Girl” and specifically, the “accomplishments” that she was supposed to attain. On the very first page the Queen tells her husband, “You must think before you speak, then, and not be a stupid king”
(303) thus setting the tone for the play. When enumerating the fairies’ gifts to their daughter, the King and Queen have an exchange that includes:

Mistress of the Ink Bottle (reading): From the Fairy of the Lake, marvellous beauty.
King. Ah, that is essential for a woman!
Queen. Not at all. It is an advantage perhaps, but that is all.
Mistress. From the Fairy of the Mountains, excessive wit.
King. She shouldn’t have too much of that
Queen. One can’t have too much of it….
Mistress. From the Fairy of the Forest, the gift of painting better than any artist that ever lived.
King. How truly charming that will be! She shall paint my portrait in oils.
Queen. No, she shall not. That would be an absurd waste of time… (305)

Although the fairies give the princess the typical virtues and “accomplishments” admired in mid-century Victorian girls, the Queen, who apparently runs the kingdom for her husband, suggests her daughter will not really need painting, dancing, and singing – instead, she is in favour of intelligence. She despairs (somewhat caustically), “oblige me by thinking for a little without speaking, instead of speaking without thinking, as you generally do….The worst fortune of all is to have a chattering father, and I am afraid all the fairies in the world cannot preserve our child from that” (305). When we meet the princess later she is friendly but arrogant because she is so easily able to do the “accomplished” things expected of her, and she is also rather bored because applying herself to them seems pointless, and she can’t think of anything useful to do.

After the Princess sleeps for 100 years, the Prince wakes her with a kiss and the Princess declares kissing “a charming custom” (329). The King asks if the world has changed very much in one hundred years, and it has. Bell introduces a kind of utopian, female-dominated vision of the future. The Prince explains that there is “peace everywhere these days: people no longer go to war…everyone is polite” (380). When the King asks, rather petulantly, what kings do if they cannot go to war, the Prince explains that, in fact, there aren’t any Kingdoms anymore at all –
just Queendoms. The Princess asks what Princes do if they cannot be Kings, and he answers affably that they marry beautiful princesses and become their husbands. Surprisingly, Bell undercuts her own female dominated paradise with the arrival of one of the original fairies. She promises to whisk the Prince and Princess away to fairyland, where there are still Kingdoms, and where they can be King and Queen together. Nevertheless, the critique of “accomplishments,” which many girls still performed and practiced, might have had particular resonance in a drawing-room performance. Her criticism of girls who are bored because they cannot think of anything productive to do with their time is also worth noting. Furthermore, Bell’s “Sleeping Beauty” invites girls, however fleetingly, to imagine a world where women run the governments and choose peace over war. Instead of a modest, accomplished, and subservient girl, Bell’s scripted alternative evokes a girl who works to become useful, and aspires to influence and perhaps run peaceful governments.

Other playwrights opted to critique “English Girls” by creating a trio of sisters representing different performances of girlhood. Clara Ryland’s “Frog Prince,” Annie L. Walker’s “The Lucky Page,” and the anonymous “Cinderella” all feature sister characters who enable the playwrights to specifically offer girls a chance to perform different girlhood types, even though not all of the fairy tale sources feature sisters. Although versions of the Frog King story have existed in the British Isles since the 16th century, Ryland’s version of “The Frog Prince” is obviously drawn from Grimms’ Household Tales. In the Grimm’s version, however, the Princess with the golden ball is simply “the youngest princess” and her other siblings do not figure in the story. So when Ryland creates Aminda, Belinda, and Clorinda, she brings more girls on stage, but also, she can use them to explore several ideas about girlhood. “The Lucky Page,” which

53 Household Tales also featured “Snow White and Rose Red” which, as mentioned, Ryland transformed into a fairy tale play.
Walker says was inspired by a Brothers Grimm Tale, features the Princesses Sophia, Serena and Dolores, each expressing different attitudes and ways of approaching life. Finally, the anonymous “Cinderella” considers different ways of performing girlhood through Cinderella and her sisters. Bonnie Cullen outlines a history of Cinderella’s published presence in England, commenting that while Cinderella was always the most desirable of her sisters, Cinderella’s sisters were not always “ugly,” or even entirely unappealing. Therefore, for Victorian girls, Cinderella’s sisters were not automatically hideous characters, and that would have made it easier for playwrights to consider “Cinderella” an appealing site for revision.

In Galia Ofek’s “New Women and Cinderella” she explains how many New Women fairy tale revisions satirize the culture of consumption and beautification and conventional conceptualizations of femininity. As New Woman writers combatted the pervasive homogenizing cultural construction of girls through their stories, the New Woman view of sisterhood and the importance of friendship were equally essential. Ofek argues that New Women writers offered alternative happy endings in terms of “self-reliance, friendship, cultural production and labour.” In a few of the fairy tale scripts I discuss, playwrights use sisters to emphasise the possibility of women working together and supporting one another, but in many, playwrights present sisters with individual and substantially different interests, goals, and, as a result, identities.

All three plays include a central character who could be equated with the “English Girl.” In Ryland’s “Frog Prince” Clorinda is a lovely dreamer, reminiscent of the Romantic innocent child of nature, who would rather read poetry, gather daffodils and listen to the cuckoo than accomplish tasks at home. Her father calls her his “sunbeam” and although she is reluctant, she

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54 So far, after combing the Grimm’s tales, I have not found the source for this script.
obeys him when he insists she keep her promises to the frog. In “The Lucky Page,” Princess Serena most closely resembles the English Girl, acting as the eternal optimist, graciously enjoying whatever life offers, behaving kindly, and also responding to her duty. And in the anonymous Cinderella, it is Cinderella herself who is the “English Girl,” hardworking and absorbed in domestic tasks. In this version there is no mother in the story, and the father despair of the problems caused by all three of his daughters. When he introduces Cinderella he says, “It’s true Cinder’s far too much to do. / She’s always workin’ on, and never through” (3) although it becomes clear that Cinderella does a lot of the work by choice, not because her sisters demand it. Perhaps Mrs. Reaney would be concerned that this Cinderella works so hard that she does not allow for the calm, self-possessed attitude Mrs. Reaney admires, but overall, this Cinderella seems like a “good girl” in the conventional Victorian sense.

At the end of each play, these English Girls must get married, and their responses offer some insight into how the playwrights viewed marriage, and also, how the playwrights raised questions about a married future for the girls performing the characters at home. When Ryland’s frog turns into a Prince, the King says “I’ll give her to you gladly” offering Clorinda no say in the matter. However, as a good English Girl should, she responds positively to the idea of marriage and to the responsibility of making her husband happy, saying, “And I shall live no more in idle dreams / But try to make real life / As full and glad to another as it seems / To me, your promised wife” (97). Clara Ryland and Beatrice Webb were friends, and if Webb was correct in her assessment that Ryland was very happy in her own married life (Webb in Mackenzie 59), it makes sense that one of Ryland’s three sister characters should be looking forward to being a wife.

Annie Walker’s Princess Serena does not fair quite so well, and the details in the play are interesting. When Serena’s wise older sister Sophia refuses to marry the page who assists in their
rescue, she tells Serena that it is her duty to marry him. Serena’s response “I – don’t – know. I don’t – mind – much” (71) is completely out of character for Serena, the eternal optimist, for whom life always seems to be pleasant and positive. Walker worked as a governess when her own father was in debtor’s prison, a teacher when she lived in Canada with her parents and sisters, and she was a secretary and companion to her cousin Mrs. Oliphant when she returned to England. She may have worked as a kind of governess for the Spottiswoode family for whom she first wrote these plays, although she lived with Mrs. Oliphant when she probably knew them. Nevertheless, Walker herself only married when she was in her late 40s, and her novel A Canadian Heroine suggests that she did not believe that marriage was necessarily a positive thing for a young woman. Serena’s reluctantly dutiful decision could not have gone unnoticed by young thespians who would have to ask themselves if they would mind much or not.

Although two of the playwrights use the “English Girls” to quietly subvert girls’ attitudes towards fairy tale marriages, some of the other sister characters offer more intentional criticism of

55 Another reluctant bride can be found at the end of Marion Adams “Bluebeard” (1904). I explore Bluebeard stories in the next chapter, but this is an interesting parallel. In Adams’ re-telling, Bluebeard is a victim of a spell. When it is broken, his previous wives are released, and the Fairy suggests that one of them may choose Bluebeard as a husband. They comment, “We don’t think much of matrimony,” “To trust your kindness we’re afraid” and the eighth wife declares, “I mean to be a nice old maid” (50). The Fairy tells Fatima, “you’ll have to take him,” and Fatima responds, “doubtfully”: “Well, If it were really just the spell/Which made him act so strangely (hesitatingly), I/Will try to love him by and bye” (52). The tainted “happy” ending is interesting because Fatima dutifully seems to view the spell on Bluebeard as an extension of “in sickness and in health” and it is clear that since she was the most recent person to marry Bluebeard, she views remaining with her husband as her duty. (Divorce for any reason other than adultery, including insanity or cruelty, was not possible in England until 1937. Women could divorce their husbands if they could prove both adultery and cruelty by 1857. Men only had to prove adultery).

56 Walker dedicates the play collection “to Hugh and Cyril Spottiswoode, for whom they were originally written.” My survey of the Spottiswoode family has not revealed any information about their at-home theatricals, but one of the brothers, at least, performed in several amateur theatricals when he was studying at Oxford. The boys would have been 11 and 14 when Plays for Children (1875) was published. Mrs. Oliphant, who hired Walker as a lady’s companion and personal secretary, writes in her autobiography that her family engaged in amateur theatricals such as an “innocent Barbe Bleu”, and she mentions theatricals in letters in 1867 and 1877. It is possible that the Spottiswoode family became acquainted with Miss Walker through those social events, since it seems unlikely (though not impossible) that Walker worked for the Spottiswoode family while working for Mrs. Oliphant.

57 In the 1851 census, at the age of 16, Walker stated that her profession was a “governess”. The following year her father took the family to Canada where he was the chief engineer designing a railroad. There she ran a private school for girls with her older sisters until both of them passed away. Her parents also died and Walker returned to Canada, unmarried and 30. She contacted her second cousin, the prolific novelist Mrs. Oliphant, and lived with her, working as a secretary and companion until her rather late in life marriage to Harry Coghill (Covick).
conventional English girlhood expectations. Dolores in “The Lucky Page” is a pessimist, and may humorously bring to mind the kind of girl who, like Masha in Chekhov’s “The Seagull” is “in mourning for [her] life,” while Dollabella in the Anonymous Cinderella is, among the plays I am discussing, the closest fairy tale sister representative of “The Girl of the Period.” Unable to accomplish anything and fascinated by fashion, she expects to marry rich and use feminine charms to rule her husband. However, Dolores and Dollabella are not as subversively critical as the other four sisters who refuse marriage in favour of other options. Aminda, in the “Frog Prince,” is a domestic homemaker powerhouse and turns away from her father when he reassures her that her turn to marry will come. “I shall display a worthier ambition/ And teach domestic arts,/That all may know, a woman’s noblest mission / Is making pies and tarts” (97). Of course, the rhyme is trite and equating making pies and tarts with a noble mission would provoke a laugh in the audience, but Aminda chooses to reject marriage in favour of doing what she loves to do and becoming an educator. Her sister, Belinda, also turns away from the father saying:

I in some learned University  
Shall draw admiring throngs,  
To hear my lectures upon Man’s perversity,  
And Woman’s rights and wrongs. (97)

Earlier in the play Aminda and Belinda have a hilarious exchange where the sisters discuss Clorinda’s failings. While Belinda talks about the excitement of book learning, Aminda extolls the virtues of effective homemaking. Part of the conversation is worth quoting here:

Belinda. Arithmetic and algebra she hates! 
Aminda. Sewing she thinks a bore! 
Belinda. She’s always sadly casual about dates! 
Aminda. She cannot scrub a floor 
Belinda. Political economy she shirks! 
Aminda. She always tears her frocks!
Bleinda. She yawns at Dr. Dryasdust’s best works!
Aminda. She will not mend her socks! (84, 85)

The banter continues, concluding with “she does not want a vote!” The rhymed rant in some ways seems to mock the girls who speak the words – after all, who could get a thrill from “Dr. Dryasdust”? But even if the girl who gets to marry the Frog Prince does not want the vote, the fact that Ryland has Belinda despair that Clorinda should want the vote, and that both girls would rather be useful and productive than directionless dreamers offers thespians to imagine an economically independent future. Beatrice Webb wrote to her father after an 1886 visit with Ryland saying “[Clara] is very happy in her married life, but is indignant with the physical ills of matrimony and is coming round to the conclusion that women are not all made for marriage!” (Mackenzie 59). This curious statement may relate to the challenges of pregnancy and giving birth since Webb alludes to these issues euphemistically in her diary, but it may simply be that Ryland observed that the challenges of marriage and motherhood might mean that particular kind of adulthood was not desirable for everyone. Girls may legitimately want different things from their futures.

Even more concerned about politics and education than Belinda is Princess Sophia, the eldest daughter in “The Lucky Page.” The King does not find his Sophia’s intelligence and wit appealing:

Oh, girls! girls! girls! What troublesome things they are! First of all there’s whooping-cough, and chickenpox, and measles, and all sorts of things; and then there’s governesses, and masters, and they can’t learn this, and they won’t learn that; and then, worst of all, if they happen to be princesses, there are people wanting to marry them….Would anybody want to marry a girl like Sophia who knows Latin, and Greek, and Hebrew, and numismatics, and palaeontology, and polarization (counting them off on his fingers), and all kinds of things, if she were not heiress to a kingdom? (43)
Early in the play Gulpho, the page, sighs that he knows of no one as reasonable or as wise as Princess Sophia, and he seems quite smitten with her throughout the play, but even he is intimidated by Sophia and does not want to marry her when her father suggests it. Expecting to rule the Kingdom after her father, she tells Gulpho the page, “I never mean to marry. I am convinced that I can do more good to myself and our people if I remain single” (71). Luckily for Sophia, Walker frames the decision to remain single as the princess’s own choice, and one that she believes will do her good as well as her people, but the content of the play also troubles the qualities Sophia cultivates and demands that actors and audience members alike ask themselves how they view Sophia’s education and intelligence, and whether they would choose those attributes in a companion, or perhaps cultivate them in themselves.

The other educated girl among my selection of plays is Bluette in the Anonymous Cinderella. Her name may be a reference to the “Bluestockings” which aligns her with the vote-seeking intelligencia. Like Sophia’s father, Bluette’s father admires her but is concerned about her: “Bluette’s…awful clever--/I don’t know as I seed her ekal ever/She’ll cook a case; but yet, as I’m a sinner/ I don’t believe that she can cook a dinner” (3). When Bluette’s father suggests that she could help Cinderella to get supper ready, Bluette retorts “how like a man!” because he is thinking of his stomach all the time, whereas she wants intellectual food to nourish the minds of young girls in schools (4). In fact, Bluette has several political projects: she also seeks the vote for women, and she is a vocal pacifist. Her activism leads her to attend the Prince’s ball, not to dance, but to meet the King and demand that he negotiate for peace. When the King meets Bluette he is so taken with her that he asks her to be his Queen, and in fact, asks if she would rule the kingdom in whatever way she saw fit. Bluette, after making an impassioned and articulate plea for peace replies “Oh no, I ne’er shall wed,/I’ve vowed to lead a virgin life instead/To give my time to the pursuit of knowledge,/And, for that end, to form a Ladies’
Although her intellect leads the King to exclaim, “I adore you,” he agrees to her terms and promises Bluette an endowment for the college. Bluette is the most appealing character in all of these New Woman fairy tale scripts because not only does Bluette get to choose her own, independent future, but she gets to do it even though she is attractive to a powerful man. Once Bluette convinces the king to negotiate peace, and once he promises her a college endowment, she acknowledges how lucky she is to have achieved so much, and concedes that she could be kinder, gentler, and less strident in the future, and still be a persuasive activist. In the final scene, Bluette agrees to dance and allow herself to have some fun, ensuring that playing Bluette is actually the most enjoyable of any of the characters to play. Although the script was published prior to the creation of the phrase “New Woman,” the Anonymous playwright clearly would have supported many facets of the New Woman arguments, and at the same time, created in Bluette, a “New Girl” character who was educated, a political activist, and able to choose her own future.

Bluette’s story is especially powerful to imagine embodied by nineteenth-century girls since it brings to mind Jill Dolan, and her notion of the “utopian performative.” It may be impossible to prove that Victorian girls’ performance experiences could create occasions for debate, incite thought, plant seeds of question, and produce an environment where hope for an independently shaped future is imaginable and where faith in change (whether incremental or radical) were possible, but late twentieth- and early twenty-first century performance studies theorists argue that performance creates the conditions for alternatives to become realities. When discussing her book *Utopia in Performance*, she argues:

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58 This Anonymous *Cinderella: a parlour pantomime* was published in 1878. Ladies Colleges were not yet common in England, but Girton opened in 1869, Newnham in 1871, Royal Holloway in 1878, and Westfield College in 1882. The dream of running a college would seem distant, but it was not impossible – certainly more likely for most girls than marrying a Prince.
Belief in different kinds and structures of reality is imperative to rethinking and revising, through the powerful affective tools of performance, who we are to each other and, most importantly, who we might be. I believe we can resignify ‘faith’ to progressive political ends, and that through the power of performance, we can re-envision our social imaginary so that we might eventually live it as more humane, more loving, and more just. (164)

In a theatrical event, Dolan believes there are moments she called “utopian performatives.” She explains, “a utopian performative is a mode of thinking and seeing that relies on the magic of performance practice, on a belief in social justice and a better future, on the impact and import of a wish, and on love for human commonality despite the vagaries of difference” (171). Not all scripts contain utopian performatives, and an entire performance is not necessarily utopian, but for a fleeting moment, such as Dolan describes, some performances can bring people together to “share experiences of meaning-making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting intimations of a better world” (164). When Bluette rejects the King’s offer to get married, for example, and the moment is framed as positive, the playwright not only criticizes the world as it is (as it was at that time), but offers an alternative imagination of what the world could be. Similarly, Florence Bell offers a utopian performative when her “Sleeping Beauty” awakes to find herself in a world without war where women govern. Focused on audience experience, Dolan claims that because a “utopian performative” is “most effective as a feeling” and suggests demanding that a performance demonstrate effectiveness “can only collapse the fragile, beautiful potential of what we can hold in our hearts for just a moment” (170). Arguing that “utopia is always a metaphor, always a wish, a desire, a no-place that performance can sometimes help us imagine, if not find” (171) she insists that a ‘performative’ is not a metaphor, “it’s a doing, and it’s in the performance-based performative that hope adheres, that communitas happens, that the not-yet-conscious is glimpsed and felt and strained toward” (171). The power of doing an at-home theatrical and sharing it with an audience of family and friends, could create a moment of
hopeful and alternative thought because it dares to imagine what might make a more ideal world.

As for sisterhood and friendship, the girls in these fairy tales do not generally support each other nor become each other’s saviours in the way that Ofek suggests New Woman writers anticipated. The Anonymous Cinderella sisters are happy for one another, but not particularly helpful, and the “Frog Prince” sisters Aminda and Belinda follow more traditional fairy tale depictions of spiteful sisters, and are negatively disposed towards Clorinda, because she seems to be their father’s favourite. But Princess Sophia and her sisters cooperate together to free themselves from the Enchanters (although they recruit the Page’s help). Of course, Snow White and Rose Red not only look after each other, but they are loyal to one another even if one gets married, and the unappealing but undeniably helpful Neighbour Slapps is the heroine of Florence Bell’s “Little Red Riding Hood.” The connection in these fairy tale theatricals to the New Woman plan for women to work together and care for one another without male assistance is rather thin, but not impossible to imagine. Rather than a community of “New Woman” style girls with whom girls could share their alternative imagined futures, these plays encourage girls to think about their individual identities, their own choices, and the increasingly wide range of possibilities open to them.

Significantly, these at-home theatricals encouraged girls to enact potential changes to their individual identity performances in a place where “real life” happens: In Gender and Sexuality, discussing the gender politics of today’s world, Judith Butler writes “fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home” (Butler in Dolan 164). Although Butler is not describing at-home theatricals in the Victorian era, Butler seems to suggest, by extension, that by performing the “otherwise” for all to see and bringing the
“elsewhere” into the drawing room, girls’ performances could influence their audience’s and their own ideas about the girlhood they live, and they girlhood they would choose.

**Narratives of Marriage and Alternative “Happy” Endings: Imminent Futures**

How did playwrights writing fairy tale juvenile theatricals with girls in mind give their plays satisfying, if subversive, endings? In outlining some ways that fairy tale plays created subversive character roles for girls to play as children and as girls on the cusp of an adult future, I have already discussed instances where the typical plot of fairy tales offers a site for playwrights to offer critical commentary on marriage or to provoke thoughtful questions regarding what makes a desirable future for an individual Victorian girl. Snow White and Rose Red, (as children), reject the notion of marriage altogether in Kate Freiligrath-Kroeker’s play, and Serena submits to the duty of marriage in Annie L. Coghill’s play in such a way that actors and audience members alike must ask themselves why marriage might not always seem like a good choice. When Sophia, Aminda, Belinda, and Bluette all reject marriage in favour of independence, they implicitly demand why marriage and career are incompatible for women, but not for men, in Victorian society. These moments that I have already highlighted would have been worthy subjects of discussion among girls in the drawing room, but other significant “marriage” and “future” issues that playwrights draw attention to in the context of a fairy tale play, and are also worth noting.

Numerous fairy tale plays ending in marriage drew attention to the fact that, in the Victorian Era, marriage was still very much an economic transaction, complicated by social conventions, and constrained by laws regarding women’s bodies, their property, and their children. Sally Mitchell’s detailed discussion of Victorian rites of passage in *Daily Life in Victorian England* refers to two important social concepts for middle- and upper-class girls: coming out and engagement. Mitchell argues that “coming out” meant that a girl was “eligible for romance” and
was an “entrance into adulthood” (155). The occasion of “coming out,” which, depending on family circumstances, could be marked by a change in dress (such as wearing hair up instead of down), or a family party with a dance, but it did not constitute an arrival into true adulthood; it merely meant that girls began to circulate in more public adult culture. During this period of extended Victorian middle-class girlhood, “coming out” might indicate a readiness for adulthood, but middle-class girls did not achieve that status until they got married. In fact, Frances Power Cobbe argued that they never did, since the same legal status was afforded “Criminals, Idiots, Women, and Minors” (1869). Sometimes, after a girl had been unmarried for long enough to be regarded as a spinster (which really depended on the family and the young woman herself), she could be an unmarried adult lady. Socially, the marriage rite was a sure entrance into adulthood, but to become an adult that way, girls had to accept the economic and legal nature of the marriage transaction.

Engagement was a significant rite of passage because marriage was serious business socially and legally: women’s social status may have changed and even improved with marriage, but once married, she had “no independent legal existence” (Mitchell 103). She had no right to spend her own income on her own needs, no right to stand independently in a court of law, and no right to the custody of her own children, even if her husband died before they were grown, unless he wrote a will and named her as their legal guardian. Marriage, therefore, had significant implications for a girls’ life that went far beyond romance and less strict chaperoning. In order for a middle-class girl to get married, the conventional path was to get engaged. Mitchell explains that a father’s involvement was different than one might imagine: when men had the financial means to support a wife they proposed marriage in person or by letter. If the girl accepted the proposal, then the man spoke to her father “whose duty it was to inquire into the suitor’s prospects and establish how long it would be before the marriage took place” (156). If the father
accepted his prospective son-in-law at that time, then the couple could begin preparations, which included drawing up legal agreements together, such as marriage settlements, which were essential to protect girls who were about to lose their status as independent legal beings (157). This suggests that the father’s interest, at least formally, had more to do with economics and legalities, rather than the suitor as a person. If the girl (or her suitor) were under 21 years old, they needed to have a father or guardian’s permission to marry (103) but many girls were older when they married,\(^{59}\) and did not technically require their father’s permission. Yet while the young women could accept or reject a proposal, without her father’s blessing, she could neither access her assets nor could she count on being accepted in her family’s social circle in her life as a married woman. Furthermore, older girls would still have needed their father’s help to negotiate the economics and legalities of marriage. Playwrights sometimes addressed the powerful social conventions and economic and legal issues of marriage in the light-hearted form of a fairy tale play.\(^{60}\)

That fairy tale plays became a space to interrogate, or at least raise these issues, is not really surprising: in legal historian Phillip Mallett’s discussion of women and marriage in Victorian society he highlights how very topical issues of marriage and women’s independence were. Mallett also observes, “one of the remarkable features of the social history of Victorian England is the extent to which marriage was still seen, at the end of the period, as the ideal way

\(^{59}\) The average age of first marriage was 25 for women and 27 or 28 for men. It was slightly lower for the working classes, and both men and women of the middle classes were often over 30 at their first marriage. The marriage age grew later throughout the century, and 1/3 of women from the “professional classes” remained single (Daily Life Mitchell 142).

\(^{60}\) For example, In the Anonymous Cinderella, Lord Snuffy approaches Golddust, Dollabella’s father, and outlines his assets, and demands to know if Golddust is satisfied. Golddust replies, “I’ll need to be / for Dolly is as far as I can see” and his acquiescence enables Dollabella to have real choice and personal agency regarding the creation of her own future. Some versions of “Beauty and the Beast” also complicate the process of engagement. Angus mimics Victorian conventions regarding youth by having the Beast propose to Beauty, and, after she demures “I don’t know,” he points out the riches he offers her: sweets, candy, and chocolates. She agrees to ask her father if they may wed. In contrast, in Julia Corner’s version the Beast asks Beauty to marry him on three occasions, and the third time she says yes because she loves him, not because he is wealthy. The exchange not only demonstrates that the love is real, it gives Beauty the right to refuse, and a right to choose.
of life – the goal of a man’s labours, and the summit of a woman’s expectations” (171). Mallett points to work written in the middle of the nineteenth century by intellectual powerhouses like Florence Nightingale (‘Cassandra’ 1852), Barbara Leigh Smith (Women and Work 1856), Frances Power Cobbe (1860s) and John Stuart Mill (The Subjection of Women 1869), who all argued in favour of women’s right to economic independence. By the middle of the century, debates often focussed on tensions among social conventions, realistic economic opportunities, and legal status. Cobbe argued that single life should be a viable and socially acceptable option for women while Mill argued in favour of a kind of individualist liberal feminism that did not question the institution of marriage. Cobbe and Mill were both concerned that unmarried women had more legal rights than married women throughout the century (Mitchell 103) but “ladies” risked being socially stigmatised if they worked as anything other than a governess, lady’s companion, or perhaps a teacher in order to support herself. Even by 1904, Marion Adams’ version of “Bluebeard,” asserts acceptable employment options for the sisters are few. The sisters’ father has run out of money and they must go out and earn their living. The girls ask each other, “Shall we be type-writers, or clerks, / or take in lodgers?” (3), and read want ads for a mother’s helper and an elderly lady’s companion, and even an ad for a “gentleman” wishing to “correspond with a lady….View matrimony” (7).

Feminists and concerned citizens throughout the Victorian Era entered debates regarding women’s rights and women’s social and economic independence and references to some of these debates slipped into the drawing room via fairy tale plays. Economic independence was important, but it concerned both employment and property: The Married Women’s Property Acts of 1870 and 1882 gave women the right to own property individually after they were married, thus affording women of means a certain amount of independence within marriage. Feminist activists also demanded changes in child custody laws, and improvements in the level of
education for girls. Mallett argues that most feminists took a moderate, gradualist approach to making changes to Victorian society, but that opponents responded vigorously, calling upon science to prove that “any movement towards sexual equality would be attended by dangerous consequences” (172). Women who tackled the legally supported double standards regarding sexual morality, engaged in radical debates that split the Victorian feminist movements (176). Considering the deeply divisive discussions regarding marriage and the related issues, the often light-handed treatment of the topics, in the context of fairy tales makes sense – it is as if the playwrights simply wanted to open a window a crack, to invite young thespians and their audiences to peek through and think about the ideas they saw on the other side.

One issue that playwrights raise in the lead-up to the “happy” ending of marriage at the end of the play is the idea of negotiating marriage “consent.” Adopting polite society conventions, in Julia Corner’s 1861 “Sleeping Beauty,” her heroine, called Fair Star, is orphaned through her one hundred years of sleep, and after the Prince asks if she will marry him, she turns to her guardians, the fairy godmothers, and says, “I willingly bestow my hand; on this brave prince, if such be your command” (43). Compare this to Florence Bell’s 1899 “Sleeping Beauty” in which the King and Queen quibble over who has the right to grant permission for the marriage between their daughter and the prince:

Benvolia. And now, you must marry the prince whom you see before you….
King. I joyfully give my consent to the union.
Queen. Nobody asked you for it. I joyfully give mine. (381)

Bell’s witty repartee was published fully fifty years into debates regarding women’s control of their own bodies and property, but it is interesting for several reasons. First, when the Queen tells the King that no one asked him for consent, it raises the question of why, indeed, it should be fathers who give consent to marriages. But then when the Queen says “I joyfully give mine,” it
asks girls in the drawing room to consider, why anyone at all should have to give permission to young people to marry. Especially since the Married Women’s Property Act had already been passed, there were fewer and fewer legal reasons why girls needed their parents’ support to get married. But the passage is also interesting because, even though the Prince and Princess are quite smitten with each other in a love-at-first-sight way, neither asks the other for a hand in marriage: the fairy Benvolia simply tells them they “must” marry, setting marriage up not only as a desirable happy ending, but also, it continues to be presented as a duty to fulfill – something else worth discussing in the drawing room, after a young lady has slept for one hundred years and has not had an opportunity to meet any other young men. Finally, this particular exchange is poignant because Florence Bell’s own stepdaughter, Gertrude (with whom she had a very good relationship), went to Persia in 1893 and became engaged to foreign service British legation secretary Henry Cadogan. In Gertrude’s parents’ opinion, Cadogan did not earn enough money to support their daughter, and furthermore, he was a gambler, so they did not approve the marriage. This example demonstrates how much social power parents had, even when their daughter was out of the country and over the age of 21, not to mention highly educated, intelligent and adventurous. Debbie Foulkes relates that Gertrude Bell was heartbroken but she obeyed her parents, and returned home from Persia to England without marrying Cadogan. Sadly, one year later, Cadogan caught pneumonia and died. When Florence Bell had the King and Queen scrambling to give their daughter permission to marry, she may have had her daughter Gertrude in mind.

Gertrude may also have been on Florence Bell’s mind when she wrote “Bluebeard.” Bell’s version of the tale, which has the potential to render the sisters hopelessly helpless in the face of Bluebeard’s fury, actually opens up small spaces within the fairy tale narrative, where the sisters
try to change their fate. Bell, again, also draws attention to the complicated issue of economics when considering marriage. When Fatima learns that her father and brothers have invited Bluebeard to their home to seek a wife she says “oh, how terrible it is that our father and brothers should be so ready to sell us to the first bidder” (343). Like many women concerned about the unbalanced demographics in England that meant that there were far more young women than men, Anne replies, “My dear girl, that’s just it! He is the first bidder who has ever presented himself, and, as far as I can see, he is likely to be the last” (343). Using the language of sale and bidder, Bell is referencing famous and widely read 1888 articles by Mona Caird. Caird described the “twin-system of marriage and prostitution,” (Caird in Mallett 180) and many others followed. For example, Nat Arling wrote, in 1898 in *The Westminster Review*, “What is the Role of the New Woman?” (Arling in Mallett 180) “She wishes to make marriage no longer an auction of sale to the highest bidder…” (180). Far from being stale, the “Marriage Question” was frequently discussed in the press even in the late 1890s, but bringing it to the drawing room where girls perform the roles is a bold choice, challenging them to evaluate the implications of this contemporary concern so relevant to their immediate futures.

The issue of equality in marriage and a partnership between companions that J.S. Mill and other Victorian writers emphasise is only occasionally considered in the fairy tale plays, primarily because the narratives do not extend beyond the engagement. However, the

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61 I will discuss Bluebeard more in the section on Oriental tales. The final moment when Bluebeard waves his sword or scimitar around the room trying to kill one or both of the sisters is a moment which several playwrights tried to use to increase the visibility of female agency. In “Bluebeard,” rescue is essential, but do the women simply wait and pray for help, as Perrault stipulates? Or do they try to take action to hasten their rescuers and stall Bluebeard so that help can arrive? In Bell’s version, Anne begs her sister not to lose hope, and Fatima, resourcefully, asks Bluebeard for time to make a kind of will for her possessions. Anne and Fatima draw the conversation out as long as possible, probably referring to objects that don’t exist, in order to stall Bluebeard. When the brothers rush in, Anne calls “Kill him first pray, dear brothers, I’ll explain afterwards,” and of course, they do (362, 363).

62 Caird published “Marriage” and “Ideal Marriage” in the 1888 *Westminster Review* but she also published *The Morality of Marriage and Other Essays on the Status and Destiny of Women* in 1897, just one year after Florence Bell published her *Fairy Tale Plays and How to Act Them*. 
Anonymous Cinderella includes a subversive comment on behalf of Cinderella regarding her marriage to the Prince. Although Cinderella seems very happy with the match, the Fairy sings at the end “Poor dear Cinderella / You will have to try and rule / Your husband too, like Dollabella. / Don’t you fear, though, ‘t will be done -- / He will do whatever you wish/ – Don’t let him to danger run, / at the same time don’t be shrewish” (39). Reminding Cinderella that her life will be better if she rules her husband, rather than simply follow the vow “obey,” the playwright points out to girls that subservience does not have to be the default in marriage, and in fact, may not even be the right choice.

The more obvious tale for critical discussions about obedience and subservience within marriage is in versions of “Bluebeard.” The story demands that Bluebeard’s new young wife be completely obedient. Although some plays also emphasise the significance of “curiosity” as woman’s particular vice, the play hinges on whether or not the wife will agree to obey her husband. J. Keith Angus’ Bluebeard draws attention to this point when he discovers the secret door has been unlocked. The sister, Anne says “You said you’d love and cherish – “ and Bluebeard replies, “True – yet stay, / Did not her vow include the word “obey”?” (95). Many versions, such as Peter the Friar’s “Bluebeard” (1856) or Marion Adams’s (1904) do not examine Bluebeard’s life with his wife. In several versions, the wife remains obedient but the sister, mother, or even a governess unlocks the forbidden room. However, Bluebeard’s married life is a site to comment on the husband and wife relationship in marriage. J. Keith Angus presents an unhappy marriage between Belinda and Bluebeard, which is both violent and petty. Belinda opens the play by telling her sister “My sister, never marry – you don’t know / The careless thought on wives, husbands bestow” (69).” Although we learn that Bluebeard eats the food off Belinda’s plate, flirts with her sister, gives her hardly any pocket money for when he travels away from home, and that he threatened to throw Belinda down a well, her real despair comes from
mundane comments that seem as petty as they were probably common in the Victorian era. She complains that “on washing-days they will not eat cold mutton,/ Then hear them swear when their shirts lack a button!” and “says I shan’t have six buttons to my glove, / Hints two are plenty – and calls that love” (69). Angus raises very real issues with his script, such as the fact that a wife like Belinda must ask her own husband for money, and that Bluebeard is “always in a rage” (70), however he undercuts these concerns by equating them with being allowed to wear scent or permitting the fashionable number of buttons on a glove. Girls who performed Angus’ theatrical might have found Bluebeard to be provocative regarding married relationships, but his mocking commentary may have diffused any wife’s real concerns.

However, in an anonymous version of “The Blue Beard” which the George MacDonald Family performed in the garden in 1872, the commentary regarding husband-wife relations are much more intentional and explicit. Blue Beard is very abusive, and Fatima’s father is comedically domineering towards her mother. Blue Beard tells Fatima that she must say “I love you” to him, and if she does not, he will hurt her. Then he hurts her anyway. They also have this exchange:

Blue Beard. Beware of rebellion, my dear angel. My wife must set an example of obedience. Is not that as it should be?
Fatima. I shall not forget your commands. Your ideas of the relationship of husbands and wives and their duties to each other are so at variance with mine, it will take me some time to understand them.
B. It is not your understanding, but your memory, that appears to be at fault.
(60)

Fatima’s father and mother have a less physically violent, but certainly emotionally abusive relationship:

Mother. Well, papa, I think with you that Fatima ought really to consider us and consent to listen to what Baron Blue Beard has to say. He’s very rich dear.
In this particular version of the tale, the sisters are betrayed and deceived by a money-hungry past governess named Madame Teecher Ronga. Although she is clearly the villain in the tale, the playwright suggests that she has problems with her marriage as well. The governess returns to Nabob’s home because she says, she found that after going home to her husband, she did not want to stay with him anymore. Nabob cruelly mocks, “absence did not make his heart grow fonder, eh, Madame?” (15). The anonymous playwright never reveals the circumstances between Madame and her husband, but she or he is clearly making a statement about the challenges for women in marriage. Of course, Blue Beard is defeated in the end, and Fatima escapes to a different, and one hopes, more loving husband. They seem to have a positive relationship, but there are hints of patriarchal entitlement in his speech as well. Early in the play he makes Fatima promise to “submit to her father,” (12) even though he acknowledges that Nabob can be cruel.

This anonymous piece was not published as a juvenile theatrical, but since the MacDonald children did perform in it, I have included it as an extreme example of the way that Bluebeard fairy tale plays could have contributed to debates in family homes about the “marriage question,” and about violence against women.

Marriage vows demanded that women promise to obey, and the law offered women little protection against a husband’s violence, as Matilda Blake pointed out in *The Lady and the Law* (1892). Blake furiously argued that men, who were the so-called protectors of women, “daily beat, torture and violently assault them…while the male judges, appointed by a Government
chosen by an exclusively male electorate, punish the offenders in a most inadequate manner, holding a woman’s life a lesser value than a purse containing a few shillings” (Blake in Edwards 248). Although Frances Power Cobbe criticised domestic violence among the working classes, even she minimized the significance of middle-class male violence against women to little more than “the occasional blow or two and not of the dangerous kind” (Cobbe in Edwards 249). Some women must have known that their friends suffered violent husbands, but even if they were, like Cobbe, essentially blind to the possibility of middle-class physical abuse, Bluebeard narratives open up questions about emotional abuse, and also about the positive possibility of partnerships suggested by feminist writers, where married men and women might cooperate equally (Mallett 171) instead of supporting a relationship in which the wife was subservient to her husband in every way.

The structure of fairy tale narratives, so often ending with marriage, was an excellent vehicle to promote discussions about possible futures for girls. Nineteenth-century playwrights could not, of course, govern how girls would respond to the elements in the plays they wrote any more than theatre practitioners can insist upon a particular response today. As twentieth-century Swedish director and playwright Suzanne Osten explained to me in an interview, when children have a theatrical experience, it is difficult to predict how they will use it. She explains that in her productions, children may love an actor, a character, or a song, but the artists cannot predict what the children will do with it: “we have given up the control” (Osten in Fitzsimmons Frey 2015). In the same way, Victorian playwrights who wanted to direct girls to consider issues regarding marriage and marriage alternatives could not be sure how girls would react to the script elements, but, if the girls were to perform them, then at least they had to speak the words, and in hearing them and saying them, perhaps they would think about their implications, and ask themselves questions about their own lives.
Although I cannot confirm how Victorian girls interacted with subversive questions about marriage and the playwrights’ proposed alternative “happy endings,” an absence in the archive does not mean an absence of thinking any more than it means thought was necessarily silenced. In this case, I am not going to use fiction, but a study conducted within my living memory, in the city of Toronto, in a world that would have been bold science fiction to Victorian girls, but in a world where girls also engaged in dramatic role play.

I can imagine that girls could personalize, engage with, and question the ideas presented in fairy tales but I have no nineteenth-century evidence to indicate whether or not I am correct. Again, making use of the ideas regarding porous time and space outlined in my introduction, it makes sense to look for insights in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries for girls’ drama education experiences. Certainly Kathleen Gallagher’s ethnographic drama education research with grade ten girls in the late twentieth century, suggests that those girls’ drama experiences, in some ways, could have been shared by middle-class girls in the nineteenth century. On the surface, the projects seem rather different: Gallagher’s classroom-based research used improvisation, process based theatre, and forum theatre research techniques, and invited girls (both in and out of character) to reflect on characters, narrative, and sociocultural conditions influencing the fictional world they co-created. In one instance, Gallagher’s students started their dramatic explorations with Jane Mobley’s retelling of the Earthwoman myth, which Gallagher describes as “rooted in the fantastical world of native folklore” (Lives 77). Earthwoman leaves earth to marry a Skyhusband, and gives birth to a son, the Moon. Homesick and bored she longs to go home, even though she loves her husband and son. Like the fairy tales reimagined in this chapter, Earthwoman’s mythical context separated Gallagher’s students from the “reality” of the situation depicted in the play, and, in a Brechtian sense, defamiliarized those situations sufficiently so that sociocultural influences on girls’ lives could be exposed and reconsidered.
Gallagher sensitively guided the creation and reflection process, provoking girls to challenge the inherent, patriarchal assumptions in the myth, but allowing them to write their own satisfying endings to the tale (the students’ answers included keeping the Earthwoman with her sky family, allowing Earthwoman to go home, and sending the Moon to her upon her death). She invited young people to engage with the story to reconsider issues in their own lives related to feelings of belonging and exclusion, and personal anxieties concerning interracial or intercultural marriage. One student even connected the play’s narrative about Earthwoman and the Moon to her own struggles when her mother abandoned her to be with an abusive boyfriend.

While I cannot imagine that the process of getting-up a juvenile Victorian at-home theatrical directly parallels Kathleen Gallagher’s process of folk tale re-creation, facilitated engagement, and classroom discussion, there are two significant ways that these drama experiences can be connected across time and space. First, Gallagher argues, “I have learned that inviting the aesthetic into the classroom can give external form to the often subjugated inner lives of students” (Lives 22). The “aesthetic” in the case of at-home theatricals is the re-interpretations of familiar fairy tales, or in the case of original tales, fairy tale tropes. The questions playwrights pose may be most effective when they resist closure and invite girls (and audience members) to draw their own conclusions. For example, the bickering King and Queen in Bell’s “Sleeping Beauty” ask why girls need permission to marry; the decision to have careers instead of marriage made by Clorinda’s two sisters in Ryland’s Frog Prince asks whether or not a career future is as desirable as marriage; and the fairy godmother’s advice regarding ruling her husband in the Anonymous Cinderella asks whether the obedient marriage relationship is necessary, possible, or desirable. The “inner lives” of girls activated through the process of playmaking mean girls may have answered those questions in ways that supported the Victorian cultural conventions concerning marriage, or they might have answered them in riskier ways suggesting female
independence and increased equality between men and women. Conversations derived from these historically distant Victorian theatrical moments are not inevitable, but Gallagher explains that through drama experiences, students can gain “poetic access to truths they value and are of some significance” (24). Victorian girls may have found that enacting fairy tale roles helped them to distill their beliefs concerning issues about marriage, economic security, and their future. Gallagher’s students found that role playing characters with points of view differing from their own helped them to understand and sympathize with those characters, and sometimes even reassess their own viewpoints in light of their experience of embodying and giving voice to another’s ideas (57). Perhaps a Victorian girl would laugh at Aminda’s obsessive passion for domestic work, but committing to playing Aminda might make her an ally who must, at least, seriously consider her perspective. As Gallagher noted with her students, they made extensions from their dramatic explorations into their lives in the “real world they experience beyond their created world” (49).

Secondly, Gallagher’s reflections on the complicated work of drama educators can be tentatively connected to the playwright’s efforts to create a thought provoking play for young people. Among other things, Gallagher explains that the teacher must sense when to participate in dramatic exploration and when to draw back to help young people ask questions (118). Neither the role of drama educator nor improvised process drama existed in the Victorian middle-class home. Although sometimes there would have been thoughtful, helpful older girl leaders, and although children engaged in imaginative play and some improvised their own

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63 The young Aunt Fanny in “Christmas at Everton” (who writes, directs, and produces their at-home theatrical) develops a very special relationship with the young daughter Maude. “To Maude her companionship had been much more than to any of the others; it seemed quite the thing she had been dimly conscious of wanting. Near enough to her own age to be able to understand and enter into her own feelings, thoughts, and tastes, and yet old enough to have had a much wider experience of the world, Fanny had done Maude the great service of enlarging her world” (630, 631). Maude explains to Aunt Fanny that she does not want her to leave after the play has been staged because “you have made me think quite differently about life, and wish for quite
dramas, the work I am examining was completely scripted by (usually absent) playwrights. In these cases the playwright adopted the role of facilitator, educator, and provocateur, and her published scripts encouraged girls to ask difficult questions of themselves, their lives, and their choices regarding their futures. By re-casting the playwrights in the role of facilitator, it is possible to see that they not only hoped girls would have a satisfying aesthetic experience, but that they hoped girls would use the ideas and questions in the play to fuel ideas and questions of their own.

**Fairy Tale Violence: Addressing and Performing Against Gender Expectations**

Fairy tales, with their extreme worlds of magic, villainy, and heroism, are sites of heroic violence and sympathetic victims. Victorians enthusiastically paid for on-stage sensation and spectacle, and they had a penchant for so-called true “bad” news. Some at-home fairy tale plays could feed these appetites (fairy tale plays may not have been true, but the news was often bad!), and also a third: through performances, good girls had an outlet to engage in “play” violence.

Crime news in the Victorian era is significant when considering at-home plays and the girls who performed in them because how girls and their families perceived criminality influences the way I imagine they related fairy tale violence to contemporary issues. The increasing availability of cheap newspapers meant that publishers could feed the voyeuristic desire for “bad” news. Eric G. Wilson, an English scholar with an interest in psychology, argues that “macabre voyeurism is pervasive, and has been for centuries….our addiction to the grim is perhaps our common ground” (14). Judith Flanders believes Victorian fascination with stories about death and true crime stem from the fact that Victorians were surrounded by slow deaths related to different things than I did before you came…(632). In Victorian fiction, at least, it is clear that some older girls were capable of adopting the role played by an effective drama educator.
poverty and malnutrition, or, in the case of the middle classes, also disease and exposure to unhealthy environments (lead paint, filthy city streets, etc.) There was no way to hold any individual responsible in those cases and there was no place to direct anger. In the case of Victorian violent crime, there was clearly a victim and a villain with a despicable intention, satisfying a desire for justice in a world of senseless or inexplicable death, and creating a feeling of safety and security in the knowledge “that murder was possible, just not here” (Flanders 1, 2).

Judith Rowbotham and Kim Stevenson argue instead that Victorians craved newspaper reports because they wanted information about crime to help them to understand the disorders that afflicted society and to exchange ideas about strategies that might deal with the problem (271). They suggest that although the public persona of the Victorian age was that it was an age of “moral certainties,” in fact, it was actually rather different, “certainly in its own perception of itself at times of crisis” (268). In fact, Rowbotham and Stevenson assert that Victorians lacked confidence about their responses to crime and murder, especially when the perpetrators were women or children.

Rowbotham and Stevenson point out “the media of an age is complicit in the discourse it produces for popular consumption, but does not bear the sole responsibility for the ideas and ideologies it purveys” (270). Indeed, the Victorian public may have craved crime news primarily to understand how dangerous and derelict their urban society had become, or they may have had a sordid fascination with other people’s suffering, but significantly, there is no doubt that the media reports reflected stereotypes and opinions already existing among the populace. The print media presented news stories within the context of pre-existing discourses, such as those involving age, gender, class, and ethnicity. Printing commentary related to those ideas could have fuelled moral panics, but anxieties concerning gender, for example, were already present.
The news regularly reported on real life child criminals and victims, and as a result, people inhabiting drawing rooms had impressions of crime and crime life, even though it was almost certainly far from their own experiences. Mary Carpenter, who was among the Ragged School activists of the 1850s, equated “ignorance, destitution, and the circumstances in which [children] are growing up” as likely precursors to a life of crime (Carpenter in Abbott 26). Even though the contemporary impression was that juvenile criminality in the nineteenth century was dramatically elevated, it was not (Abbott 24) but regular media reports brought crime news into sharp focus for many families. Stereotypes of young criminals, which Carpenter tried, largely unsuccessfully, to diffuse with more measured insights, gave delinquents a kind of dramatic appeal (Abbott 28). Those impressions of criminals may have been far from the truth, but were, nevertheless, the images entering middle-class homes. Victorian girls would have known, for example, that boys committed more violent and more petty crimes than girls, but some young female domestic servants stole from their masters while others carefully planned pickpocketing. Abbott explains “as girls were less frequent perpetrators and [were] expected, according to Victorian stereotypes, to be purer creatures, their sentencing often seems to have been more severe in relation to their crime when compared to a boy committing the same offense” (35). Girls who were “bad” were worse than deviant boys, in the public imagination. There was also a general impression that petty or opportunistic crime led inexorably to organised or violent crime. A few shocking cases included boys committing violent crimes against other children, but in the broad vision of deviant children, there seems to have been more outcry against gangs of thieves who disturbed the public on a daily basis, than against those who committed murder. Nineteenth-century penny dreadfuls (inexpensive sensational literature aimed at the increasingly literate working class boys), were often linked to children’s criminal activity, but working-class rather than middle-class children were the target market for these inexpensive stories (Sutter
Since the stereotypes regarding girls and class were so strong, it seems likely that middle-class girls were completely free of criminal suspicion, and while girls had probably had ideas about criminals, Victorians did not worry that participation in theatricals might encourage real-life crime or violence. Charlotte Yonge’s “Strayed Falcon,” for example, includes two young female thieves, and Florence Bell’s Morgianna in “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves” is a clever killer, but as Judith Flanders argues regarding the nineteenth-century professional stage, “audiences – the most respectable audiences – had long proved their love of gore. Even for those who found theater morally dubious, violence was not the problem. The problem was the artifice theatre required” (Flanders 384). Generally speaking, if “artifice” were not a concern for the family, staged violence or crime would be acceptable. Middle-class girls probably had vivid, albeit stereotypical, pictures in their minds about criminals, criminality and violence, but class expectations firmly separated them from imagined real-life descent into that particular world of vice.

Rather than seeking to understand the way print media interacted with crime and the public, Judith Flanders is more intrigued by the sensational industry that developed around violent crime, the desire for salacious details, and even personal connection with murders and violence. Flanders’ description of visits to Madame Tussaud’s waxworks to see the likenesses of murderers, including a man accused of murdering and dismembering a child named Fanny Adams, were billed as “Christmas Treats” for children (Flanders 383), demonstrating that children were not expected to be shielded from the grisly world of blood and gore. In one shocking murder, a man was bludgeoned to death with a blunt object. The accused became a kind of folk anti-hero. For at least five years following the murder, an elderly lady offered tours of

64 I will discuss this piece in detail in chapter 4, examining at-home theatricals and the “Orient.”
the buildings where the criminal was said to have made his plans and *The Times* sold models of the buildings. Newspapers, who reported wildly different murder details, printed souvenir broadsheets about the verdict, and if people could not afford those, they could break off pieces of the nearby hedge to take home. Plays proclaimed his guilt before his trial, and one theatre purchased “the actual” horse and cart involved in the murder and paraded them on stage to enhance the verisimilitude of their performance (and the public appeal). Revelling in death and also detection, Flanders calls the Victorian era, “a century of murderous entertainment, of melodrama, of puppet shows, of penny-dreadfuls and more” (466). Like Rowbothom and Stevenson, Flanders agrees that fear and fascination were exacerbated by a lack of solution to crime, but notes that, since most people in Britain never actually had to worry about murder (murder in the nineteenth century was “vanishingly rare”), people could indulge in their love of blood “safely and securely, without any fear of an ugly reality bursting in” (466). She adds that to this end, “oceans of blood could cheerfully be poured across the stage, across the page…murder was, finally, a fine art” (466). For Victorian families, *real* violence was entertainment, and therefore, staged violence could be even more fun.

Although violence and the grotesque have an allure for adults, playing with theatrical violence may be especially appealing to children because it allows them to embody what adult civilizing influences try so hard to repress. Maria Tatar explains that sadistic moral tales, like fairy tales embrace what distinguishes children from adults, “exuberance, energy, mobility, irrepressibility, irreverence, curiosity, audacity” (Tatar in Wilson 34). Writing in 2002, psychologist Gerrard Jones explains that for children, “storytelling that is both visual and verbal leads them to…experience their thoughts and feelings more completely…. The process gives young people a sense of authorship, of authority over their own emotions and the world’s influences. It also reveals the way that children use fantasies, stories, and media images in
building their sense of self” (9). Speaking of twenty-first century North America, Jones explains, “we’ve tried to reduce our children’s relationships with their fantasies of combat and destruction to vast generalizations that we would never dream of applying to their fantasies about love and family and discovery and adventure” (19). However, in the Victorian era, those socioculturally constructed and enforced barriers concerning disturbing content and children were still developing. Marah Gubar describes how a review of a play called Little Un-Fairy at the end of the nineteenth century declared the piece “too sad and cynical” and objected to “the fact that the play dwelt extensively and honestly on Sara’s struggles with poverty and abuse, subjects that ‘should surely passed over quickly in a play intended for laughter-loving children’” (Artful Dodgers 198). Gubar argues that at the turn of the century commentatrors began to suggest that children had their own theatre preferences that were different from adults, and that they would prefer, for example, “raucous fun to sappy sentimentality” (Artful Dodgers 199). What these observations demonstrate is a change in attitudes – prior to the end of the century, there was comparatively little anxiety or even attention paid to the appropriateness of the content in plays children watched, and certainly, middle-class parents did not generally worry that what their children saw on stage would scar them.65 Throughout the nineteenth century, at home, most children were also free to perform the plays that interested them, and perhaps made them feel like they could be powerful in a violent world.

Violent at-home theatricals may have been even more valuable for girls than for boys because of the strict gender roles based on biological sex that Victorians upheld. Karin Calvert

65 Reading Penny Dreadfuls and highwaymen series stories, and attending “vulgar” penny gaffs and music halls were viewed by some as behaviours that could easily lead to juvenile delinquency. However, these were working-class pursuits and middle-class children were much more likely to read their violence in history books or even novels, or to see them in melodramas or Shakespeare. Punch launched a campaign suggesting that attending the Madame Tussaud's Chamber of Horrors was inappropriate for middle-class entertainment (Flanders 154), but the fact that Punch even decided to protest it means that many parents thought it was just fine for their children.
demonstrates that in the nineteenth-century United States there was more gender cross-over for toys than one might imagine – boys were given dolls, for example. But boys were still encouraged to play outdoor, rough and tumble games more than girls, and they were given toys to support that kind of play. Boys received toy (and later real) rifles, swords, hobby-horses, and other playthings that encouraged active play. Girls were given fragile dolls to dress in clothes they made themselves, and sometimes fragile tea sets which encouraged quiet, domestic-focused play. For inside play, boys might be given toy soldiers, with which they could play out some of their more violent fantasies.

In historian Robin Bernstein’s book *Racial Innocence*, she cites numerous examples where nineteenth-century girls' doll play was shockingly violent, and included whipping and even hanging. Girls caught playing this way were chagrined but the activity still happened. However common that kind of play was among girls in England, it is clear that boys were more frequently *openly* invited to engage in physical, violent games. Exploring violence, either as a victim or as a perpetrator, in an at-home theatrical environment, not only could allow girls to grapple with human powerlessness in the face of an inexplicably violent world, but it could also give girls a chance to play with the possibilities of power and control for themselves, in a way that was usually only encouraged among boys.66

An ocean of blood rarely filled a drawing room theatre, but there are three common fairy tales featuring girls that are violent and bloody at their very cores.67 Bluebeard, Little Red

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66 Although this chapter primarily discusses scripts rather than performances, it is notable that girls often performed characters that were designed for boys, such as dragon slaying princes.

67 Juliana Ewing’s “Peace Egg” Christmas Mumming Tale may be considered a fairy tale since it features a sword fight with a dragon, and several fights with a giant in which people are wounded. The characters are almost all male (except for Dame Dolly and Princess Sabra) and while girls may well have taken on the male roles, I am looking at the intentions playwrights placed in the text. Similarly, Julia Corner’s “Sleeping Beauty” features a dragon that must be slain, but the dragon killer is a prince.
Riding Hood, and Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves all include scenes of murder. The first suggests victims of domestic violence, the second suggests a victim of a child predator, and the third features a young woman as a brave, but murderous heroine. When Charlotte Yonge’s fictional Barnescombe family set about planning their first Christmas theatricals Edward says that he hopes the play will be “Blue Beard” and then he “proceeded to get up a private rehearsal by insisting on hooking up little Lucy Lester and his sister Mary by their plaits of hair, to which they objected so decidedly, that Kate, with all Gertrude’s help, had a hard matter to cause the peace to be kept” (“Mice at Play”). When Fanny announces the location of her play as the Tower of London, Edward enthuses “Oh! Then we shall smother the Princes; that’s fun” and Lucy objects, “I won’t be smothered.” These exchanges suggest that Bluebeard was a favourite drawing room theatrical, and that boys craved violent plays. However, in the sequel story, “The Strayed Falcon,” when Kate begged Fanny to write another play, Fanny rather demurred at Kate’s best subjects. She decidedly objected to Christie of the Cleek, who caught little children for his dinner in the famine, though Kitty offered herself and Mary for the victims, provided Uncle Ernest would come, in the last moment, to rescue them with the brown bill.

Instead, the play Fanny wrote involved an off-stage battle narrated through commentary by the on-stage actors.

Janet. How goes on the fight, Mysie?
Mysie. Will you not look from the window?
Janet. No, tell me; I cannot watch blows. How goes it?

Although Janet cannot bear to look, Mysie and her brother enthusiastically report on the action. Even Charlotte Yonge, who had a very clear sense of appropriate gender performances, acknowledged that girls sometimes craved a little violence and excitement in their fiction. The violence made possible in at-home theatrical performances could be all the more potent because
girls were allowed to feel powerful. Equally applicable to probable desires of the past, but speaking of twentieth-century children, Gerard Jones argues that children use violence in controlled fictional environments because it makes them feel strong. “They need to feel powerful in the face of a scary, uncontrollable world. Superheroes, video game warriors, rappers, and movie gunmen are symbols of strength. By pretending to be them, young people are being strong” (Jones 11).

“Bluebeard” is violent in several ways. I have already discussed ways some “Bluebeard” scripts may critique domestic violence, but the story also includes the gothic and graphic room of horrors and a battle at the end when Bluebeard is killed (or the spell is broken, in the case of Adams’ version). In 1846, Punch coined the name “Chamber of Horrors” for Madame Tussaud’s separate room featuring criminals and artefacts of the French Revolution (Flanders 172), and it is entirely possible that many middle class children were aware of the “Chamber of Horrors” and may have even visited it. Since professional theatres enthusiastically presented complicated spectacles of all kinds, featuring various types of lighting and new technology and “sensation scenes” (Flanders 88) young people may have hankered for an opportunity to test their creative genius and attempt to produce similarly jaw-dropping effects in their own drawing rooms. The theatrical approaches to the scene in Bluebeard’s grisly room vary. Peter the Friar’s “Blue Beard” entirely avoids staging the scene where the chamber is revealed – instead the sisters talk about how their mother keeps fainting (19). It seems likely that the anonymous script the MacDonals performed calls for a reveal of “bloody heads,” although the actors could just play at horror while

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68 Florence Bell and J. Keith Angus are particularly interested in producing stunning effects in a home theatre. Bell encourages false floors for Rumpelstiltskin to stomp through while Angus describes rigging to make leaves fall in the forest to cover the “Babes in the Wood.” Bell cautions young thespians about the dangers of stage weapons, but in no way discourages their use. See Chapter 1 for more details on how stage directions suggest a wide variety of at-home possibilities, and encourage girls to act agentically as they design their own worlds.
seeing something the audience cannot. Both of these emphasise a more pathetic, melodramatic approach to violence, and could give girls permission to explore feelings of horror and fear in a safe environment, reminiscent of Aristotle’s *catharsis*.

Acting passionately could be as important as spectacle. When successful Victorian actress and women’s suffrage activist Elizabeth Robins discusses the challenges of not being her “real self” on stage Mary Anne Corbett argues that Robins viewed her “real self” as her “internalized performance of ladylike behaviours” (111) which Robins had to repudiate on stage. Robins wrote that one of the greatest challenges of being a well-bred actress is “the difficulty of the modern woman of education doing powerful emotional or tragic acting. *That requires capacity for abandon* – of letting yourself go, which comes to be impossible to the well-bred” (Robins in Corbett 111).

For girls expected to exhibit self-control in all aspects of their lives, indulging in big, highly performative emotional displays could have been both challenging and liberating, not to mention fun.

However other playwrights offer girls an opportunity to own horror by provoking laughter: J. Keith Angus’ version of “Bluebeard” involves mask / head puppets in which the eyes move and tongues loll, and in Marion Adams’ play, Bluebeard’s wife and her sister reveal a closet in which the heads of girls are disclosed, hanging by their hair (with a sheet stretched in front covering their bodies.) The “heads” sing “Bluebeard’s Wives” to the tune of “Three Blind Mice.” The first verse is sung:

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Bluebeard’s Wives!
We’re Bluebeard’s Wives!
We’re Bluebeard’s Wives, hung up in a row,
His axe chopped off our heads at a blow;
If our name and rank you want to know,
We’re Bluebeard’s wives. *(They all sob together.)* (31)
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In fact, diffusing something as disturbing as violence against women with humour might offer girls a different kind of power. When she was considering an early twenty-first century audience of girl readers, poet Arielle Greenberg says that she would like to create poetry:

that acknowledges the Gothic and wallowing tendencies of white teens while admitting the ridiculousness of all that, examining those self destructive feelings without trying to cheer or erase them out of existence. Poems that imagine teenage girl readers to be sophisticated and self-aware, and to have a sense of humor[sic] about themselves. (197)

Greenberg’s views on the way poetry might be able to respectfully invite girls to laugh at themselves could be imagined in the intentions of Victorian playwrights writing for amateur juvenile performers. Productions of “Bluebeard” were unlikely to be as nuanced as good poetry, but by using black humour, nineteenth-century playwrights could actually engage with a sophisticated side of young women, while potentially acknowledging the complexity and depth of emotions girls experience.

Productions of “Little Red Riding Hood” in which the grandmother and Red are killed by the wolf could also swing towards pathos or uncomfortable laughter. I have already described some ways that playwrights approach the violence in “Little Red Riding Hood,” but the way playwrights describe staging these moments is interesting to note as well. In the case of the grandmother in J. Keith Angus “Little Red Riding Hood,” he writes, “The wolf rushes at the Grandmamma in the bed, and a struggle ensues – appropriate music being played – during which the Grandmamma slips off bed and down behind, being thus hid from the audience and supposed to have been swallowed.” Angus recommends leaving a duplicate nightdress and spectacles behind the bed for the wolf to take out and put on as he says, “A little tough, but still I got her down, / And saved my hotel dinner – half-a-crown” (153). Angus’s Wolf is cruel but amusing, and if a pianist pounded out a melodramatic tune, it is hard to imagine the
scene being anything other than ridiculously funny. In contrast, in Florence Bell’s “Little Red Riding Hood” during the ending where the wolf eats Jenny, her stage directions have the curtain go down as the wolf says “All the better to eat you with my child.” After “a minute’s pause” when the curtain goes up again, the wolf is sitting in the middle of the room with “Jenny’s cloak lying on the ground R, her frock L, and her two shoes in front” (106). The self-satisfied wolf declares, “Ah, that was nice…Good wolves like eating naughty little girls” (106). Although the Wolf’s performance in that moment might provoke laughter, the careful placement of the shoes and carelessly flung frock and cloak can be read as monuments to Jenny’s short life, blending horror and humour in the final moment of the play.

Both “Bluebeard” and “Little Red Riding Hood” opened up spaces for girls to think about the society convention of girls as victims, and may have encouraged them to confront their own daily gender performances that supported the idea of girls as weak, frail, and in need of male protection. The Morgiana character in “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves” is the opposite: she is clever, strong, and ready to take action. In Florence Bell’s version, she solves the plot, saves the family she works for by killing the robbers with boiling oil, and murders the robber baron in full view of the audience. In Chapter 3 I will discuss this play in the context of “Oriental” at-home theatricals, but I could not ignore Bell’s “Ali Baba” for a section on violence.

Morgiana remains calm and resourceful at the sight of blood, taking on a leadership role even though she is a slave in Ali Baba’s family. When she discovers Ali Baba’s brother Cassim’s body in the robber cave, she asks Ali Baba “I suppose you are quite sure it is a misfortune?  

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69 As with all of Angus’s scripts, lack of respect for women is an undercurrent in the grandmother’s death. The grandmother’s death is not Angus’s invention, since the Brothers Grimm tale indicates that the wolf eats her, but the fact that he presents women as helpless victims, and that he frames the grandmother’s death as a source of humour, gives the piece an uneasy edge.
...Misfortune for him, certainly. But as far as you’re considered, isn’t it better that you should have all this to yourself” (29). Later, when she dances with the robber, Bell writes this exchange:

Ali Baba. Really Morgiana. Do take care how you dance! Look what you’ve done; you’ve killed our guest!
Morgiana. Yes, I stabbed him to the heart.
Amina. It seems so inhospitable. (44)

When she explains to Ali Baba and his wife about the robbers she confidently declares “There is no need for anyone here to be murdered – I have been beforehand with the robbers. They are murdered themselves. I have killed them all, every one!” (45). Morgiana’s heroism in the face of danger, not to mention her cleverness and passionate dancing, would place Morgiana completely outside of the normal expectations for middle-class girls. Like a broadsheet dramatic criminal, like a hero in a penny dreadful, and similar to the adventurous girls in the novels of L.T. Meade, more than any other fairy tale character, Bell’s Morgiana allows girls to imagine identities for themselves that include agency, strength and power, outside the bounds of social conventions.

For Victorian middle-class girls, educated, single, and independent characters like Bluette and Sophia might be easier to imagine as icons for a possible imagined future. Morgiana is different: she is like one of Gerard Jones’ superheroes: an exotic, impossible figure that allows girls to play at being strong. Particularly in terms of how Bell creates Morgiana to play against Victorian ideal gender expectations as outlined by the likes of Mrs. Isabel Reaney and Phillis Brown, Morgiana’s subversive actions still retain power. As Jack Zipes points out,

Fairy tales interrogate the lack of correlation between real world practices and ethical idealistic options....they compel us to consider what is lacking in our lives that prevent us from fulfilling our dreams and utopian longings....if the protagonists succeed in finding love, wealth, and contentment in fairy-tale melodramas, what is preventing us in reality from having the same success?” (xiii)
Girls could pretend to be violent, clever, and strong, determine whether or not they enjoyed that experience, and then, if they liked it, ask themselves what changes would be necessary for them to feel that way in daily life.

**Seizing the Tale: Opportunities For Agency and Alternate Identities**

The inherently subversive nature of fairy tales made them ideal candidates for challenging Victorian understandings of appropriate behaviours and attitudes for middle-class girls. Playwrights writing juvenile theatricals for the home market brought serious political questions into the drawing room by way of characters like fairies, princes, and princesses. Using their scripts, playwrights participated in debates concerning appropriate childhoods and proper adult relations to children; performing girlhood and all the related, troubled nuances; marriage, education and economic independence for women; and criminality and violence. Through subtle wit, by insidiously raising questions, and with blatant daring, playwrights reinterpreted well-known texts to address situations that mattered to them and that they imagined young people cared about. They also created characters they hoped young people would want to explore, characters who, as Nina Auerbach and U.C. Knoepflmacher describe, “may live in a fairy tale, but [breathe] feminist air…challenging the conservative ideologies of gender that often seem embedded in the very form of fairy tales” (17). Since theatricals, unlike novels, required girls to embody the characters and perform their actions in front of an audience, playwright preoccupations could potentially make a significant impact on the actors and on the audience, and could make use of the potential of shared experiences to create the environment of faith, hope and radical possibility Jill Dolan calls “utopian performatives.” The significance of the role of the audience, in co-creating the world of the play, and thus making it an incredibly powerful
vehicle for change, is eloquently explained by British novelist and twentieth century cultural commentator Philip Pullman, and worth quoting here, at length:

The experience of being in the audience when a play or an opera is being performed is not simply passive. It’s not like watching TV; it’s not even like going to the cinema. Everyone in that big space is alive, and everyone is focused on one central activity. And everyone contributes. The actors and singers and musicians contribute their performance; the audience contribute their attention, their silence, their laughter, their respect. And they contribute their imagination, too. The theatre can’t do what cinema does, and make everything seem to happen literally.... But the limitations leave room for the audience to fill in the gaps. We pretend these things are real, so the story can happen. The very limitations of theatre allow the audience to share in the acting. In fact, they require the audience to pretend. It won’t work if they don’t. But the result of this imaginative joining-in is that the story becomes much more real, in a strange way. It belongs to everyone, instead of only to the performers under the lights. The audience in the dark are makers too.

Lest we imagine that the experience of a nineteenth-century at-home theatricals would be different from the experiences Pullman believes audiences have today, we have only to look at Charlotte Yonge’s description of the performance of “The Strayed Falcon” in the Barnsecombe family. Kitty did not get to perform in the play because of poor behaviour, but Yonge explains that even though Kitty knew the script and even the staging very well:

the whole scene seemed much more real to her than last year, when she had been taken up with her own part, her dressing, and acting. It was more to her as if time were really gone back three hundred years; and well as she knew every word, she could be surprised and frightened, and delighted at all the right times, and was quite able to forget the real people in the characters they had taken.

Kitty, like Pullman’s audience, could help to make the magic happen with her imagination. If her imagination was contributing to making a subversive or rebellious fairy tale moment possible, then in the sense Pullman describes, her imagination was making it real and if that reality could be accepted on stage, then perhaps, it could be dreamed of off stage.
What is, perhaps most significant about these fairy tale at-home theatricals is that the characters may be extraordinary—there are princesses, fairies, magicians, dwarves, and even dragons—and the stories themselves are full of bravery, villainy, and magic, but the young people playing the characters were generally ordinary middle-class children in an ordinary middle-class home: they were not professional child-actors dazzling audiences with their much discussed artless artistry, nor were they activists campaigning for child welfare, the “marriage question,” or the vote for women. Mary Isbell argues that the difference between a professional performance and an amateur performance is significant when it comes to understanding the potential reception of acting and casting choices (and I would argue, potential sociocultural impact on the community of performers and spectators):

A spectator of a professional performance will see in an actor’s performance the combination of the character he depicts in that particular performance and all of the previous heroic, tragic, and comic roles that the spectator has observed. But to a spectator of an amateur production, I contend, the aggregate is in most cases a combination of the character performed and all of the traits the spectator has come to recognize as the performer’s personal identity. The former is a blend of performance with performance, while the latter is a blend of performance with reality. (5)

When Charlotte Yonge’s character Gertrude, “though a most quiet, well-behaved girl, put on the coquettish airs and graces of the Fair Maid of Kent so naturally, that her mamma professed to be quite frightened to see of what she was capable” (“The Mice at Play”), the “mamma’s” response is an effect of what Isbell calls the “aggregate.” The role was well-played, but so unlike the behaviour her mother normally expected from her daughter, that her perception of what might be possible in “real” life actually shifted.70

70 Gertrude’s mother’s response is one type of reaction connected to the anti-theatrical prejudice described by Jonas Barish. Anti-theatrical prejudice could take several forms including concern about the implications of performance on performers (and what performing theatrical roles might say about the morality of actors), and concern about the potential negative impact of passionate performance on spectators, especially women. Nora Nachumi effectively connects some of those antithetrical attitudes to the way
When seemingly ordinary people do extraordinary things, the perception of what is possible shifts: what is possible to perform in a play may even become what is desirable to perform in life. There are two important parts to this claim. The first relates to the ordinary people doing extraordinary things, and the second, to possibility and performance. When Wendy Parkins analysed the British suffragette movement, she was particularly interested in the idea of embodiment. She first explains, “subjectivity and agency arise out of the specific experience of embodiment located and engaged in specific material and historical situations….we cannot think of agency without the body” (Parkins 62). Then, as she describes the political actions of young British women, she asserts, “suffragettes did not simply act to become citizens or act like citizens, they acted citizenship” (63). The suffragette performance was not intended to be a fiction the way that at-home theatricals were, but Parkins' observations about embodiment are powerful: the girl who played the role of Bluette, for example, only acted like a radical peace activist, but the embodiment of the role, made visible only through the physical performance of the young thespian, could make the action of radical peace activism a believable possibility in the minds of the performers and the audience, enhanced by Mary Isbell’s concept of “the aggregate” in amateur performance.

Furthering this idea of the power of embodiment is Christine Hatton’s twenty-first century drama in education study conducted with 14 and 15 year old school girls. Primarily process drama, like Gallagher’s “Earthwoman” project, Hatton used Rita’s story in Shaun Tan’s *The Red Tree* to specifically consider agency, problematize girls’ own knowledge about girlhood.

Jane Austen constructs the narrative about theatricals in *Mansfield Park* as compared to the way she responded to theatricals in her own life. Also engaging with the antitheatrical conversation, at the end of “The Mice at Play” when the characters assess the value of the finished production, Fanny quickly comments that the children don’t need plays to teach them “habits of unselfishness, while they have Alice to set them the example, and show them its beauty.” Meanwhile, dovetailing with ambient questions about the particular vulnerability of girls to bad theatrical influences, Fanny’s brother comments “I do not think the little girls have been either affected or occupied with themselves, otherwise they would never have been able to play their parts so well.”
and discuss alternate ways to perform “girl” (158). Hatton describes tensions for her students that Victorian girls probably also negotiated when they were performing “self” and “other:” many girls must have felt the differences in their characters’ behaviours compared to their own daily behaviours, and the particular tension that caused in a room full of peers (and in the case of Victorian girls, family). When Hatton’s students reflected on the process of examining Rita’s character and life circumstances in their exploration of how to perform “girl,” some students reflected on the opportunity of “rehearsing” future actions, and others on the way that enacting Rita’s problems gave them courage and new knowledge (165). As I have mentioned, unlike a Victorian at-home theatrical, Gallagher’s and Hattton’s projects were intentionally facilitated to encourage young people to think, reflect and feel empathetically. Nevertheless, if Hatton’s students could draw courage from enacting Rita, perhaps a character like Princess Sophia could inspire young Victorian thespians. Hatton argues that the imaginative possibilities of drama education can be empowering, and can “assist students in developing self/other knowledge which has relevance in their everyday lives” (165). A performance of courage by an otherwise unremarkable girl can lead the girl performer to believe that perhaps she, too, can do great things. In “Christmas Holidays at Everton,” young aunt Fanny has a late night conversation with her niece Maude, after their at-home theatrical is finished, and Fanny must return home. Maude tells her aunt that she is tired of trifles, and that, after everything that has happened this week, “don’t think me very conceited, but I think I could do great things, if I had the chance” (632). Drama experiences might crack open the possibilities of greatness for young girls.

The second part of the claim that needs justification is the idea that “what is possible might become what is desirable.” Bruce Wilshire’s 1977 philosophical inquiry “Role-Playing and Identity: the limits of the theatrical metaphor” wrestles with the idea of “possible” on stage, and argues that through theatre “we explore the possibilities of action in two senses of possibility:
things that might happen, and what would make them possible if they did” (206). Performance exposes, or at the very least, suggests, potential future consequences. Hatton’s students used drama to rethink girlhood and later, imagining Rita as a mother to her own daughter, “a caring, wise woman who had braved her experiences with courage” (164). Once Victorian girls had thought through the consequences of, for example, challenges to expected and conventional gender behaviours such as the ones presented by Bluette, they could imagine, and perhaps make real, possibilities in their own lives. By encouraging Victorian girls to act out the unexpected, and to embody difference, Victorian fairy tale scripts prompted girls to imagine unexpected or unusual identities for themselves, and to envision living out a future which they designed, and in which they had power to influence the world in which they lived.

Whether or not girls chose to take up the playwrights’ challenges is almost impossible to determine. Challenges may have been embraced unevenly, as some girls preferred the safe predictability of known Victorian strictures over the unknown attitudes of a more open society. But it is clear that cracks in the “mirror, mirror on the wall” spread slowly and unevenly. Julia Corner (1854, 1861) had great respect for her potential stage managers and their ability to significantly reimagine their drawing rooms as performance space, but the content of her scripts echoed popular versions of the fairy tales and reinscribed the courtly discourses regarding gender relations Zipes describes. Uneven social change is demonstrated by the fact that the Anonymous “Cinderella” writer (1878) and Kate Freiligrath-Kroeker (1880) both seem more concerned about the treatment of women than Clara Ryland, who published her plays later (1896). Different concerns about girlhood and the future are evident in the Anonymous Cinderella, Clara Ryland’s plays, and Annie L. Walker’s plays, which all offer up educated and intelligent female characters, while at the end of the century, Marion Adams and Florence Bell ignore girls’ education as an issue in favour of other ways of creating interesting girl characters. The ways
female Victorian playwrights responded to and negotiated limits differed from woman to woman: for example, Charlotte Yonge believed strongly in women’s education, but also in the moral correctness of male authority; Florence Bell believed strongly in women’s rights in marriage such as the right to divorce her husband and protection from abuse, but she was against the vote for women. Although some had seemingly contradictory views about women’ rights and social position, that does not negate the potential power of their more critical and progressive viewpoints.

Just as Auerbach and Knoepflmacher assert that Victorian women’s fairy tale translations, adaptations and refashionings could, and often did, subversively “activate the traditional materials they appropriate” (13) playwrights used fairy tales to encourage girls to examine society and determine how they want to operate within it, or how it needs to be changed. How much protection and how much freedom should children have? How should girls function in the face of fears of white slavery? What is an ideal marriage relationship? What can be done about domestic violence? How can respectable ladies have economic independence? Can girls refuse to be defined as victims? Can good girls commit crimes? Of course, these are just a handful of the questions that fairy tale plays discussed in this chapter could prompt in spite of the widespread belief that fairy tales offered improving, moral instruction.

In inviting girls to consider how to play with the fairy tales, and how to respond to the questions those scripts provoked, playwrights were offering girls a chance to make choices and take action that would instigate changes in their own lives and the lives of people they knew; playwrights invited girls to reimagine and redefine identities for themselves in light of the characters they encountered in the scripts; and they encouraged girls to take risks and boldly perform unconventional actions in front of an audience. The playwrights did not tell girls that they were powerful, but instead, created powerful characters with strong voices and effective
actions that could inspire girls to think beyond the limiting world of Victorian gender expectations, not necessarily adopting every proto-feminist concern, but positioned according to their own interests and preoccupations. Playwrights did not offer simple solutions, nor did they create scripts that suggest the future for girls is either fixed or without hope. Instead, they used the extreme nature of fairy tales to challenge girls to imagine and enact their own utopias and possible happy endings.
Chapter Four: Performing the Edge and the Other

Unexpected Possibilities, Girls and “Oriental” Fairy Tales

“There are no innocent readings – only guilty ones.” – Louis Althusser

“...a close investigation...gives us clues...about women’s relationship to an empire in which they were both imprisoned and enthroned.” – Megan A. Norcia

In Florence Bell’s 1898 “at-home theatrical” version of “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves,” Morgiana, the slave girl, is beautiful, brave, and brilliant. Rapidly discovering the plot when the forty thieves enter the house in large earthenware jars, she takes action without alerting the robbers – and saves the whole family. After pouring boiling oil into the jars she stabs the Robber Chief while she sensually dances for him. Then she declares, “There is no need for anyone here to be murdered – I have been beforehand with the robbers. They are murdered themselves. I have killed them all, every one!” As mentioned in the previous chapter, Morgiana’s heroism and passionate behaviour challenged the boundaries of conventional role models for English girls, yet she and “exotic” characters like her were popular on drawing room stages. Like the “Oriental” girls they portrayed, girls and women were “inferior” subjects in the British Empire.

In this chapter I acknowledge the duality of girls’ participation in “Oriental” theatricals simultaneously contributing to the oppression of non-English peoples even as Victorian girls

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71 As I explain in more detail in chapter 2, by the end of the nineteenth century, when Florence Bell published her collection, *Fairy Tale Plays and How to Act Them*, role models for English girls were regularly challenged through fiction, especially by writers like L.T. Meade, and by essayists known as “the Revolting Daughters.” However, books like *Sketches of Little Girls* by Julia Corner (featuring such characters as “The Good Natured Little Girl” and “The Forward Little Girl”), and Phyllis Brown’s *What Girls Can Do: A Book for Mothers and Daughters* still circulated widely, that behaviours that were radically different from “the English girl” (modest, selfless, marriage-bound and domestically-inclined) continued to shock some middle-class families.

72 It may be more accurate to suggest that “Oriental” people were those who were perceived as “non-English.” Linda Hunt Beckman points out that journalists sometimes described Amy Levy as “Oriental” because she was a darker complexioned Jewish woman, and even Levy referred to Jewish “orientalism” in her writings about Jewish treatment of women (Hunt 252). Yet Levy herself was swept up in *japonisme*. In one issue of her juvenile newspapers *The Kettledrum* (March 1880), there is a drawing that uses one of Levy’s pennames (discussed in Chapter 5) of five figures, probably all female, in kimonos. Two are dancing and three play...
could use the transgressive possibilities embedded in “Oriental” plays to expand conceptions of their own possible futures and identities.

For thespian girls “Oriental” plays brought numerous imaginative possibilities within reach. First, girls had more acting subject roles available to them because they could be easily cast as male characters. The notes for Alfred Gatty’s “The Hunchback” (1 December 1869) and Marion Adams’ “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves” 1909c specifically suggest that male characters could be successfully performed by girls because of the costumes. Gatty writes, “the nature of Eastern costume admits all of the above costumes, except those of John Brown and the Hunchback, being worn by ladies” (99). Male characters in these plays include a doctor, a judge, a male tailor, a robber chief, robbers, a sultan, a vizier and Ali Baba himself. Second, through “Oriental” characters, they could defy home behavioural expectations and experiment with actively participating in a male-dominated violent world. Unlike popular geography primers that described the “real” East while consistently repeating messages that girls could not be explorers and that it was normal to deny nineteenth-century girls experience of the wide world (Norcia), the artifice of theatricals meant imagined differences between Oriental and English realities could be dynamically explored and even embodied at home. As a result, through Oriental theatricals, girls had the potential to imagine having as much power and agency as most middle-class boys.73

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73 Megan Norcia’s study X Marks the Spot (2010) demonstrates that boys were depicted as having and encouraged to embrace far more agency than girls in primers and other educational discourse. Similarly, as explained in more detail in my first chapter, Carol Dyhouse demonstrates that from the moment they were old enough to walk, Victorian girls were taught to put their needs and desires behind those of their brothers. Boys had the freedom to play outside further afield than girls, to get dirty, and to get into trouble and still be forgiven. Once they went away to school, boys may have suffered for many reasons, but they acted somewhat independently, controlled a small portion of their own money, and made choices without consulting their parents on a daily basis (Girls Growing Up in Victorian England 1981).
In this chapter I will offer an overview of significant at-home theatrical scripts featuring characters who were not just “other” in terms of history, but were perceived to be “other” racially and culturally. Then I will outline how Victorians imagined, understood and learned about the idea of “Oriental” in the nineteenth century, and how that kind of knowledge, and its implications within the British imperial project, could have contributed to girlhood explorations of agency and identity, while simultaneously contributing to the oppressive discourse of “othering.” I will discuss the nineteenth-century passion for “fancy dress balls” and the way those events might influence how we can understand the performance of “Oriental” theatricals, even among girls who had not yet “come out” into society. I will argue that an at-home “Oriental” theatre could operate as a resistant “counterprivate” space in which to explore alternative femininities, even if its effects were only incremental because participants initially lacked consciousness or awareness about the potential consequences of their actions. Finally, I will return to specific playscripts and discuss a few powerful possibilities embedded in embodying boy characters, playing at adventure, discovery, or governance, playing at violence and agency, and playing the sensual.

“Others” in At-Home Playscripts

Although not all of the writers so far examined in this dissertation wrote “Oriental” plays featuring “Other” characters, costumes, or references, most did. Orientalised versions of “Bluebeard” and “Beauty and the Beast” were common, while plays drawn from the Arabian Nights, such as “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves,” “The Hunchback,” and “The Sleeper

74 Following an inspiring conversation with Jacqueline Taucar and Belarie Zatzman at the “Researching Performance for / by / with Young People” Seminar at CATR 2014 regarding “counterpublics” (Nancy Foster; Michael Warner) and “countermemorials,” I decided to develop Taucar’s comment that perhaps subversive at-home theatricals could create “counterprivates.”
Awakened” were popular sources for stories, and seemed to inspire some original work as well.\textsuperscript{75} In spite of late nineteenth-century Japonisme (sometimes also called Japonaiserie) taking England by storm,\textsuperscript{76} I have only two juvenile theatrical publications set in Japan, and although England had regular contact with India throughout the nineteenth-century, only one at-home theatrical in my collection features Indian settings.\textsuperscript{77} There are, no doubt, scripts I have missed, but after looking online and in the British Library, it seems likely that the Arabic world functioned most commonly as the imaginary Orient in at-home theatricals. At-home theatricals also included a few relatively common “other” characters. Teresa Pulszky includes a “Jew” in her collection, and Marion Adams, Florence Bell, Kate Freiligrath-Kroeker, Amy Whinyates all suggest using either minstrel characters or black slaves. However, these characters are inherently male, clownish, and older. In Bell’s orientalised “Beauty and the Beast,” for example, when explaining her cast of characters, she writes: “Molinko – if played by a little child (girl or boy of three or four) to have a little cotton shirt, pink or blue, coloured trousers down to knee; or, if preferred, he can be a negro servant, older, and dressed as in illustration” (110). These characters are often insolent and tricky, but childish, unable to seize any real power for themselves, and for that reason, I am not taking time to discuss them in this chapter about Orientalised characters and worlds as a way of exploring agency and expanding horizons for a girls’ identity.

However, before I discuss “Oriental” at-home plays in more detail, it is worth examining another “other” character type that may have functioned in similar ways to the “Oriental”

\textsuperscript{75} “Sinbad the Sailor” was popular for toy theatres, but I have not found an at-home theatrical script for the story.

\textsuperscript{76} The Mikado is the most famous British theatrical example of Japonisme.

\textsuperscript{77} Edward Ziter suggests that although India was of much greater economic value to Great Britain than nations of the Arab World, “it arguably did not exercise the same hold on the British imagination as the Middle East” which had been a source of inspiration for England since the Crusades. (10)
characters for Victorian girl imaginations: the gypsy. Like people in the distant Orient, gypsies were supposed to be darker complexioned, and have wilder lives, but gypsies were a locally present other. Deborah Epstein Nord claims that in nineteenth-century literature, gypsies were a “constant, ubiquitous marker of otherness, of non-Englishness,” hovering “on the outskirts of the English world, unassimilable, a domestic and visible but socially peripheral character” (189). Nord argues that the gypsy world was seen as wild, passionate, brooding and impulsive in contrast to the “hedge-clipped” world of England, offering an imaginary “‘escape’ from English conventionality at the borders of English society itself” (190). Nord also suggests that gypsies were not merely culturally different, but that they offered writers like Charlotte Brontë, Emily Brontë, and George Eliot an imaginary glimpse of unconventional femininity, and allowed those writers to set characters apart as heroic females, marked as different by birth, and enabling the writers to reinvent femininity through them. Gypsies as present outsiders had influenced English folklore in stories of mistaken identity, changeling children, and kidnappings, but they also offered an imaginary and just-barely visible way of performing female identity.

Two playwrights in my collection incorporate the “gypsy” idea into their writing: Charlotte Yonge, and to a lesser extent, Marion Adams. Yonge’s 1861 play “The Strayed Falcon” takes place in Scotland where the female gypsy characters read palms, interpret dreams, seem to hear voices, commit theft, kidnap a boy, and the unseen gypsy men fight a fierce battle. The Stranger (who is really King James) says to the gypsies “I heard tell there was a clever

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78 Today writers tend to use the spelling “gypsy” while nineteenth-century writers generally favoured “gipsy.” I have used “gypsy” when it is my voice, but “gipsy” when I am quoting, or using a character name that uses that spelling. The more correct term today is often considered to be Roma, but I am using “gypsy” as an imaginary, rather than accurate, construct.

79 In a letter Yonge writes that she was inspired by a story about King James and the Bridge of Crammond. Her character, Kate’s source is more specific: Sir Walter Scott’s 1828 Tales of a Grandfather (Chapter 27, Volume II). Even though Scott was her primary source, Yonge took imaginative liberties with the story, adding numerous female characters and plot twists related to the gypsies.
fortune-teller in these parts, but sure you are too young and bonnie…. Those black sparklers of yours should see further than an old woman’s blear, dim eyes, perhaps.” Later, he calls Annaple, the eldest gypsy girl, a “bonnie young damsel” and a “cunning woman.” Annaple does seem to be different from the Scottish girls in the play, and the English girls in Yonge’s story frame. She “steals softly” into the room, and claims that she can tell that she can make money from the Scottish lass Lily “by the sit of her snood” and boldly tells Lily “the bonniest luck comes where there is no judging.” She lures Lily into having her fortune told so that Annaple’s two younger sisters can stealthily carry off the hawk and any objects of value they can find. Yet Yonge constructs the story so that Lily’s fortune (regarding “one who will come over the bridge”) has an element of truth to it, and Annaple’s prediction for The Stranger / King James is also full of truth. The little sister Mysie declares “my little brother Alan stolen away by the cruel gipsies” even though Alan runs on his own towards the gypsy tent to retrieve the hawk. The gypsies do, in fact, tie Alan up and threaten to beat him, but they are beautiful, wild, and clever nevertheless.

In the story about getting up the play that follows, Yonge describes how the children contrive a “gipsies’ tent,” and she tests the appeal of the gypsy outsider by having Katherine say “I don’t like to be a gipsy, and steal,” while Kate retorts, “Stealing is very good fun…I should like it myself.”

Marion Adams also incorporates the gypsy trope into her version of *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, although as a “disguise” for Gina (Morgiana). In Adams’ story, Gina is Ali Baba’s servant and friend, primarily a fretful confidante, tearfully begging that he be cautious at every juncture in the tale. The Princess Roseleaf is the unmarried Ali Baba’s love interest, and in order to facilitate their relationship, a Fairy insists that Gina, who is already costumed as an Oriental servant, re-costume herself so that she is now doubly disguised as a gypsy. “To-morrow Gina, you must go to court…/There, in a fortune-teller’s quaint disguise, /Tell the Princess’s fortune.
(Laughing) If you’re wise / You’ll make her future husband just like Ali” (41). Gina eagerly agrees to the plan, promising to tell the Princess that Ali is “handsome, noble, true” and that she will “read it in her hand, as gipsies do” (42). The next day Gina offers to tell the Princess’s fortune, and predicts that she will marry Ali Baba. When asked if she is a gypsy she counters “Don’t I look like one?” (45) and later insists that she can read Ali Baba’s name in Princess Roseleaf’s palm because she knows “gipsy lore” (47). Gina tells the Princess and her friends “Three winsome maidens here, among the flowers, / Should have a golden fortune, that they should! / You shall each have a husband if you’re good” (45). Yet Gina, the gypsy and the servant, remains outside the reconfigured narrative’s “happy” if predictable, ending. Her last words in the play beg the Princess and her friends to remember the fortunes, but forget her name. In the final scene, Ali Baba declares Gina is his “chum” (52) but while Ali Baba becomes rich and gets married to the girl he loves, and the robbers are forgiven and must start new careers, Gina is essentially forgotten. Nevertheless, the role would enable a young thespian to toy with two possibilities of “other” women at once: an “Oriental” servant, and a gypsy fortune-teller. I will go into much more detail about the potential power of “Oriental” characters for white middle-class Victorian girls in this chapter, but I also wanted to acknowledge that the gypsy, as a present “other” who may even have been perceived as “Oriental” sometimes, could also offer girls’ kindling for their imaginations.

Gypsies were the present others in the nineteenth-century English literary landscape – but European fairy tales could also be familiar presences that were defamiliarised and distanced from the local landscape. Interestingly, European fairy tales like “Bluebeard” and “Beauty and the

80 Perhaps just barely opening up the possibility for a different “happy ending,” in her song “A Little Gipsy Girl” Gina sings about her skill in reading stars, cards, and palms. She adds “A spinster’s life you may prefer, /So calm and so sedate, /But if she finds B O B, /Why Bob will be your fate” (48).
Beast” often were re-told for the at-home stage, and were commonly, but inconsistently, Orientalised. In her extensive study Bluebeard: A Reader’s Guide to the English Tradition, Cassie E. Hermansson suggests that Bluebeard began to be characterized as a “beturnbaned Turkish tyrant” in the late 18th century, possibly because a translation of Perrault’s tale used the word “scimitar” instead of “cutlass” to translate “coutelas” (51). Blue Beard or Female Curiosity! (1798), may have been the first theatrical production that firmly orientalised Bluebeard by naming his wife Fatima, and by setting the production in Turkey. Throughout the nineteenth century the story was reproduced in chapbook form,81 and widely disseminated among all English classes. Hermansson argues that the orientalising may have endured in chapbooks and the public consciousness, because the Turkish despot was already a staple stock character in England, and publications also often refer to the public’s familiarity with Othello (52). Maria Tatar doubts that there was any particular strategy to orientalising Bluebeard, but argues that the orientalising was useful because as the tale was aligned with the East, it also distanced the tale’s horrors from England (32). The association with the imaginary East was so pervasive that Maria Tatar notes that in his introduction to The Blue Fairy Book (1889) Andrew Lang insists “Monsieur de la Barbe Bleu was not a Turk!...One of the Ladies’ brothers was a Dragoon, the other a Mosquetaire, of M. d’Artagnan’s company perhaps...They were all French folk and Christians; had he been a Turk, Blue Beard need not have wedded to but one wife at a time” (Lang in Tatar 36, 37).

Regardless of why, oriental Bluebeards occupy most of the at-home theatrical versions of the tale

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81 In the nineteenth century, “chapbooks” were cheap pamphlets, containing political and religious tracts, as well as folk tales, fairy tales, and children’s literature. They were cheaply produced, widely available to the increasingly literate public, and in the nineteenth century, began to include images.
as well. J. Keith Angus and Florence Bell avoid “Oriental” references in their scripts,\textsuperscript{82} and the MacDonald Family Script (1872)\textsuperscript{83} is semi-Italian (Fatima’s love interest is called Lorenzo) and semi-Indian (Fatima and Anne’s father is “the Nabob,” and although the young men must kill dragons, Lorenzo is supposedly killed by a tiger). The references to Bluebeard at-home theatricals in Charlotte Yonge’s “Mice at Play” and Margaret Oliphant’s Autobiography (where she calls their production an “innocent version [of] Barbe Bleue”) (119) are ambiguous, however Peter the Friar’s Bluebeard: or Fatal Curiosity, semi-Burlesqued (1855) and Marion Adams “Bluebeard” (1904) are both decidedly Oriental in costumes and illustrations, demonstrating that the idea that the story could or perhaps should be Oriental entered homes considering putting on a theatrical during the entire second half of the nineteenth century.

Like “Bluebeard,” versions of “Beauty and the Beast” were inconsistently, but frequently orientalised for the home stage as well. Betsey Hearne’s Beauty and the Beast: Visions and Revisions of an Old Tale (1989) argues that texts and illustrations often feature an Eastern setting and Moorish costume because of nineteenth-century interest in Persian art and philosophy. “The projection of the East as mysterious, exotic, and romantic makes it a more appropriate backdrop for magical tales than industrializing England” (56). As early as 1811, Charles Lamb is attributed as the writer of a poem called Beauty and the Beast: or a Rough Outside with a Gentle Heart, a Poetical Version of an Ancient Tale. In this version, the merchant was not specifically Eastern, but when the Beast is transformed, he declares “Prince Orasmyn is my name / In Persia not unknown to fame” (67),

\textsuperscript{82} Bell does so very consciously, arguing for a domestic version of the story. “The scene of the play is laid, contrary to the usual tradition, in the fourteenth century, in Western Europe, where a counterpart to the Oriental Bluebeard is believed (by the author) to have resided in feudal times.

\textsuperscript{83} The script in the Beinecke is entirely anonymous, and no suggestions about authorship are made in the collection. However, since she wrote many other plays the family performed (exceptions include Macbeth, Twelfth Night and Twenty Minutes Under an Umbrella and Domestic Economy), it is conceivable that the piece is by Louise Powell MacDonald.
indicating a link between the story and the East throughout the century. Among the writers I looked at closely, Louisa Powell Macdonald’s “Beauty and the Beast” features characters like Georgiana and Sophia, and is entirely Western European, while J. Keith Angus (1879) published a version which is only nominally Oriental because the Merchant is called “Pasha,” and because as he goes on his journey to recover his lost ships, Pasha declares

Have I been dreaming? Let me see, I tried
To go one way, but always was defied.
The very blue-bells seem’d to whisper “East;” (40)

Otherwise, the piece is very English, and includes luxuries such as currant buns and roasted chestnuts. Similarly, Julia Corner offers a slightly orientalised “Beauty and the Beast,” in which the father is named Zimri, and the Beast is Azor, and the girls are Anna, Lolo and Beauty. Zimri should wear “A long flowing dress of some dark colour, fastened round the waist with a wide red or yellow sash or scarf. A turban or a cap of black cloth or velvet” but the daughters “may dress according to fancy; only keeping in mind that Beauty should be plainer and neater in her attire than her sisters” (10). The illustrations accompanying the text resemble an imaginary East, but there is nothing else Oriental in the story. In contrast, Florence Bell’s is enthusiastically “Oriental.” Characters include Abou Cassim (Merchant father, who is to wear “Large Turban, full trousers down to ankle, loose shirt with sash round waist, cloak”), and daughters Fatima, Zuleika, and Ayesha, who are to wear “variations of the following Oriental costume: long, full muslin trousers quite down to ankle, a skirt above them hanging either to the knees or lower, an embroidered belt or sash, full shirt with flowing sleeves either of muslin or embroidered silk, brightly coloured embroidered sleeveless jacket above it; head-dress.” Bell foregrounds the East in her dialogue as well, making the East comic in the process:

Ayesha. I was just coming.
Abou Cassim. Just coming – what’s the good of that? I’m just going! You’ll make me miss my camel! I said he was to be at the door at three o’clock, and it is now – [he looks first in one direction, then in another] I never can remember where the sun ought to be in the afternoon. I wish people used watches in Turkey. (112)

In Bell’s version, Beauty’s sisters also itemize a list of distinctly Eastern desires when their father goes away:

Z. Oh, but I assure you, father, they are things we really want.
A. That we couldn’t possibly do without
Z. An embroidered sash –
A. A pair of golden slippers
Z. A silk veil –
A. A new turban –
Z. Some diamond earrings –
A. A new-fashioned skirt –
Z. Some spangled muslin
A. A tame monkey – (114)

When their father is gone, the girls try to think of something to do, and agree to dance, creating an opportunity to perform an “Oriental” and sensual dance.84 When Beauty arrives at the Beast’s home, unlike the currant buns and chestnuts of Angus’ version, Beauty dines on Turkish delight and lemonade.

84 What the “sensual” dance might have looked like is not clear, although there is a range of possibilities. Edward Ziter notes that in the early and middle of the century, Oriental performances on stage were quite tame compared to performances which “bordered on pornographic” later (75), yet how they were perceived is also important, and it is difficult to know if those early performances were perceived as titillating or not. Mari Yoshihara argues that in the early twentieth century some American women seized upon Oriental performance as a way to seize transgressive power for themselves. In 1908, the press perceived Maude Allan’s barefoot performances of a Vision of Salome as respectable, rather than transgressive, and explained they were not precisely “Oriental,” but emphasizing the arms, her choreography was very different from Western dance such as ballet (Koritz). The girls who did at-home theatricals were probably trained in basic ballroom “Society” dancing (Buckland), so what they did would have been based on any “Oriental” performances they had seen, pictures of dancing women from their books, and their imaginations. My best hypothesis is that, like Maude Allan, the girls would have tried to perform something they believed to be Oriental, and depending on their age and inclinations, they might have performed in a way they felt was sensual, but probably would not scandalize their families. Possibly similar to what girls might have tried to present, when discussing 1890s Russian ballets called Raymonda and The Pharaoh’s Daughter, Seeta Chaganti suggests that Egyptology and the medieval were linked in the nineteenth-century mind (152), and that both could be evoked through angled and twisting arm and torso movements that evoked folk dance (158). In any case, Bell created a space in the script for girls to dance which is entirely unnecessary for the plot, simply because girls often like to dance, and audiences often like to watch.
As I will demonstrate, these “orientalised” Western fairy tales offered very specific opportunities to girls getting up plays in their drawing rooms and other home spaces. Similar opportunities are embedded in the tales derived from the *Arabian Nights*. In his 1954 study *English Children’s Books: 1600 – 1900*, Percy Muir suggested that Ali Baba was the most popular, “with ‘Alladin’ and ‘Sinbad’ some distance behind, and the rest nowhere” (40), but, in fact, while Ali Baba may have been the most popular (and I do have three at-home theatrical versions of Ali Baba: Adams, 1904; Bell, 1895; Whinyates 1909), there are numerous other plays inspired by *Arabian Nights*. Teresa Pulszky’s “The Sleeper Awakened” (1854) tells about a Caliph who tests a man by allowing him to believe that he is Caliph for a day. Alfred Scott Gatty published a version of “The Hunchback” in *Aunt Judy’s Magazine*, 1869, and Mrs. A.L. Chisholm’s 1872 *Little Plays for Little People* includes a significantly different version of “The Hunchback” for home performance. S.H. Gatty published a rather unsatisfying piece called “The Barmecide: A Muddle” he says is based on the Barber’s Brothers in the *Arabian Nights* (1871). The home versions of Aladdin and Sinbad tend to be restricted to toy theatres (perhaps because a giant genie in a bottle and sea monsters were daunting for the home stage).

But other playwrights draw inspiration from enthusiasm for the Arabic world. Set in Alexandria, Miss Walker attributes her “Tailor Prince” to the Brothers Grimm, and the tale makes use of deserts, an oasis, and particularly Egyptian fashions. In “A few words as to Costume”, Walker notes that for “The Tailor Prince” “they must, of course, be Oriental,” while “The Lucky Page” would suit Louis XIV dresses. Yet even in “The Lucky Page” some of the Enchanters’ spells are drawn from Arabic Proverbs. For example, “La yakulu elhadid ila

85 Amy Whinyates and Marion Adams wrote versions of Aladdin for home theatre. I was not able to read Whinyates’ version in the British Library, and the library’s copy of Adams’ play only includes the score. Both scripts are from after 1900.

86 I have not yet found the associated source fairy tale.
elhadid!” and “La yanfaa hadar min kadar!” Walker comments in a footnote, are proverbs meaning “Steel is cut only by means of steel,” and “No caution avails against fate” (53). Other spells include snatches of Greek or Latin, but the only ones with translations offered are the Arabic ones, suggesting, again, a fascination with the blending between the reality of the Arab world, and the imagined magic potential there.

Plays set in Japan, for the home market, seem to be much fewer in number, and may have served a rather different function for Victorian girls seeking to expand their horizons and explore new identities. On the professional stage, Yoko Chiba explains, theatre rooted in Japonisme appealed to the Victorian extravagant tastes, and “their intent was to create and project the image of a far-away country, a “never-never-land” of porcelain and geisha, and to locate it in a Western context” (6). The stage Japanese woman became a professional stage stock character “with all her flowery paraphernalia. Often embodied by a geisha committing suicide…” (8). The most well-known, albeit American, example is Madame Butterfly (1898) in which Cho-Cho-San is portrayed as a submissive victim, feminized, sexualized, objectified and infantilized. She lives with an American officer when he is posted in Japan. When his wife comes to take Cho-Cho-San’s half-American child to the United States, the officer’s wife says, “How very charming – how lovely – you are, dear! Will you kiss me, you pretty – plaything!” (italics original, John Luther Long in Yoshihara 4). Reduced to a “plaything” by another woman, like other female characters contributing to the stereotype, Cho-Cho-San commits suicide after her son is gone. The stereotype was adored within the context of melodrama. According to Peter Brooks (in his influential The Melodramatic Imagination), melodrama’s “aesthetics of astonishment,” rhetoric, and hard-to-believe plot relationships are a way of articulating the “moral occult” that

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87 Japan fascinated England, but the political and economic stakes of the Japanese-American relationship were much higher.
underlies the real world, using a fantasy to tell the truth about the way the world is under the surface. Victorian girls would have been likely to see melodrama as quite “real” or “truthful” in a certain way. In discussing a particular selection of urban melodramas, for example, Katherine Newey asserts the recognizable reality of those plays, explaining

I would argue that these melodramas are examples of popular culture acting upon the world, using melodramatic structures and conventions to mediate between the linguistic and material worlds of theater professionals and their audiences, and reconciling aesthetic conventions with lived experience. It is the aesthetic product, the codes and conventions of melodrama itself, which is modified, to reflect the material experience of its producers and consumers (260)… in the form of melodramatic sensation drama, we can see a type of “realistic” reflection, a melodramatic verisimilitude, which keeps referring to the lived concrete experience of the audience. (261)

Melodrama can be fun to play, and, as Newey remarks, it is not completely far-fetched fantasy because it continually refers to the concrete lived experiences. However the conventional narratives and predictable character arcs are containing rather than liberating, and do not give much potential inspiration to hopeful, future-looking girls.

For Victorians, Japanese culture was not only spectacle, it was, like the objectified Cho-Cho-San, a consumable thing. In his article “Being Modern: the Circulation of Oriental Objects,” Thomas Kim argues that consumer culture in late nineteenth-century United States, and the performative aspects of objects from the Far East, coupled with a heightened by Oriental discourses on beauty and aesthetics, demonstrate that in the nineteenth century “the Orient comes to be almost exclusively associated with things” (380). Significantly for girls, the rise of consumer culture meant that, according to Mari Yoshihara’s study Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism:

the encounter with things Asian as spectacle and objects of consumption was an index of the expansion of women’s/girls’ imaginary, if not physical, sphere. It suggested liberating potential for white, middle-class women whose rights and
opportunities were limited by their gender yet whose racial, class, and national identities made the world come to them in the form of commodities. (17)

Yoshihara suggests that consumption of material culture related to Asian products could actually be a source and expression of power for women.

Furthermore, Thomas Kim adds that the aestheticization of the Orient enabled the West to safely exercise authority over the other, especially since the Orient’s ancient beauty appeared fragile (392). Kim explains how taste professionals emphasised a supposedly untouched, timeless beauty to Oriental objects suggested by Japan’s entirely closed doors until 1854. Kim’s remarks about the significance of Japanese fragility connects to already well-established Romantic and Victorian beliefs about beauty, and especially feminine beauty, which, Inderpal Grewal argues, owe much to Edmund Burke’s influential 1764 text *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. Grewal says Burke’s universal aesthetic not only feminized and racialized beauty (equating beauty with whiteness), it also stressed softness, order and submission, arguing that while people *admire* “great” objects, they only *love* what submits to them (29). Grewal argues that in the English imagination, Asian women could only be portrayed as “sensual” but not as “beautiful,” (45) but based on the fancy dress research I discuss later in this chapter, I believe that objectified Japanese women often *were* regarded as beautiful, but also as non-agents, and perhaps as victims of oppression, requiring rescue and care. Although Kim argues that his analysis resists suggestions that the Oriental aesthetic was merely exotic and anti-modern, suggesting instead that it was a part of changing modern consumer culture, the fact remains that the Orient was perceived as pristine, untouched, cloistered, and almost frozen in time, inhabited

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European women’s travel writing (see Grewal and Foster; also Boxwell) clearly indicates fascination with non-white women, but often that is tempered with disgust with ways non-European women clothe and expose themselves. There is no room for “beauty” in those descriptions, although the landscape is often perceived as “beautiful.”
more by objects than by people, and in fact, as a result, if Japanese people were thought of at all, they were often objectified.\textsuperscript{89} As a result, even though Gilbert and Sullivan’s D’Oyly Cart production of *The Mikado* took England by storm in 1885, Japan may not have proved to be an inspiring setting for playwrights looking to write exciting plays for young people simply because the fantasy/imaginary world of Japan was perceived as narrow and static rather than progressive.\textsuperscript{90}

The two publications that I found that are set in Japan are Amy Whinyates’ *Princess O Ione San* (1909) and Rosina F *Three Japanese Plays for Children*. Whinyates’ play, like her other work, is written in a heightened melodramatic style, and adheres strictly to conventional gender performances. The Princess must agree to sacrifice herself to the Dragon and his master the deadly centipede in order to save her people. As the daughter of a brave samurai, she proudly agrees to this, but her attendants (“Mousmees”, the French word for Japanese maids) ask if there isn’t an alternative. A brave knight arrives, and eventually slays the centipede, restoring order.

\textsuperscript{89} In an 1893 *Atlantic Monthly* article describing a Japanese woman’s dance, Lafcadio Hearn writes a beautiful but objectifying description of the dancer that could have been appealing to contemplate, but probably would not inspire mimicry by girls who craved action, passion, and agency: “Her every movement is a poem . . . . Her face remains impassive as a beautiful mask, placid and sweet as the face of a dreaming Kwannon; and her white feet are pure of line as the feet of a marble nymph. Altogether, with her snowy raiment and white flesh and passionless face, she seems rather a beautiful living statue than a Japanese maiden” (Hearn in Kim 44, 793). No doubt some girls enjoyed the objectifying gaze, just as some preferred action and adventure, some liked both, and some would rather have neither. However, for playwrights seeking to construct scripts where girls explored agency, the living statue quality of Hearn’s dancer might only have provided a kind of backhanded inspiration, concerning distant girls who could be framed, like English girls, as trapped.

\textsuperscript{90} Agreeing with Thomas Kim, Mari Yoshihara explains that American Japanesque (or Japanese-inspired) design was touted as “the antithesis of the art of the modern, industrial, civilized West” (28). However, she also discusses ways that white women created Orientalist performances in *The Mikado* and *Madame Butterfly*, and she ties both of these to the rise of the New Woman. “The performance of Asian femininity thus provided an effective tool for white women’s empowerment and pleasure as New Women. While not all white women who performed in these productions may have identified as New Women...both their roles as Asian heroines and their identities as professional performers appealed especially to the female audience, who saw them as liberating themselves from fixed categories while producing new, constructed identities for women” (78). Although Yoshihara’s argument contradicts my suggestions for why there may have been so few Japanese “at-home” theatricals, her performance examples are drawn from the first two decades of the twentieth century. Furthermore, Yoshihara links “white women’s performances of alternative femininity — often in the form of subservient, tragic heroines of the East” with “representational power over real Asian women and men” and “solidifying[ing] their identities as modern American women” (79). While white American women may have found playing these alternative identities liberating, it remains true that the identities were subservient and objectified — and perhaps writers for girls and children were reluctant to encourage those character attributes.
The Mousmees are very foolish characters, dancing, playing pranks like stealing the Chinese character’s umbrella, and singing songs such as:

No milk no sugar, no spoon.
We offer you tea on our bended knee,
ere we dance by the light of the Moon.
Tea tea tea, Japanese tea.
Clear and bitter as should be.” (15)

Including advice on how to “toddle,” employing a few Japanese words, such as “sayonara,” although the play is set in a Japanese “never-never-land,” the script only offers young girls a chance to dress up as someone else, but does not invite them to try to behave differently or imagine themselves challenging conventional girlhood identity expectations.

Rosina Filippi’s *Three Japanese Plays for Children* (1897) includes three scripts: “The Mirror,” “The Flower Children” and “The Light of a Hundred Years.” Anne Varty argues that Filippi used “the arcadian construction of childhood as a foundation in order to appraise it critically,” (247) and points out that each play includes a supernatural element that supports the wishes or needs of children against the interests or desires of their parents. In “The Flower Children,” the flower children rebel against their parents, sobbing, “we wish to go, but you detain us, we wish to live our lives, but you chain us to your own” and are last seen skipping away happily from their father who has finally let them leave. Perhaps because the flowers are alive, and not mere objects, and perhaps because the piece is so obviously about fin-de-siècle changing values regarding childhood, the Japonisme of the piece does not create a static world, but one full of possibilities and independent futures for girls to embrace.

**How was “Oriental” understood in the nineteenth century?**

Nineteenth-century thinking racialized and stereotyped “Others” in complicated ways that could be freeing to an English girl’s imagination, while simultaneously exempting girls from the risk of
“descending” into those behaviours. Nancy Lesko demonstrates that, as the idea of the “Great Chain of Being”91 gained traction in England, “race” and “racial hierarchies” became a fundamental part of the way Victorians understood human behaviour (Lesko 2001). Lesko explains that the discourse soon encompassed biological age and gender as well, presented in the form of a diagram in which different animals, human biological ages, genders, and races were placed on a series of steps, inexorably moving upwards (but, of course, some species, genders or races were limited in how far they could climb) (Lesko 2001). In recapitulation theory, the steps also made visual connections between historical periods. For example, a child was equated with the tribal period, while a boy was associated with medieval period, suggesting that history is constantly improving and achieving, but also, remarkably focussed on male bodies – women were only a part of the discourse because they were understood to be inferior, with a cranial capacity closer to a gorilla’s than an adult civilized male. Like historical periods, theorists also placed racialised peoples on the steps, ranking racialised groups according to cranial capacity (“Mongolian” rated an average of 85, while “Teutonic” an average of 92) (Lesko 21), and equating racialised peoples with children (27). The “Science” behind these beliefs, widely held in England and the United States through 1900, meant that an Oriental character was, in essence, completely different from the English thespian playing the role. Edward Ziter explains that for the nineteenth-century English person, “race was both external marker and internal proclivities” and the discourse maintained “Orientals” were passionate, sensual, and indolent. Similarly, gypsy women’s unconventional and uninhibited femininity was “located in blood and bone” (Nord 190). People from what we might call the Arabic world are not clearly marked on the

91 Nancy Lesko’s chapter “Up and Down the Great Chain of Being: Progress and Degeneration in Children, Race and Nation” explains the system of racial hierarchy popularised in the nineteenth century, explained the apparent “morality” of empire, and the way it expanded to include “recapitulation theory” which normalized white males, and equated biological age categories with historical periods such as “primitive” or “medieval.”
diagrams Lesko references, but were nevertheless held to be racially Other. The idea that a person’s behavioural destiny was inscribed in the body meant that girls could experiment with transgressive identities / behaviours, but since parents believed their daughters were inherently *English*, they would not (and perhaps even *could* not) adopt those “Oriental” behavioural attributes in quotidian life.

Girls learned about the “Orient” from a wide variety of sources in the Victorian era, and those sources offer insights into how girls might have imagined, understood, and performed their characters in at-home theatricals. The sources from which they learned are inherently problematic, as Edward Said famously asserts when he suggests “all academic knowledge about India and Egypt is somehow tinged and impressed with, violated by, the gross political fact [of imperial interests and Orientalism]” (11) and that particular knowledge “*is*, rather than expresses, a certain *will or intention* to understand, in some cases control, manipulate, even incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world” (Said 12). The imaginative power of “Oriental” at-home theatricals is also problematic: the type of “border crossing” or hybridity cannot be seen as embodying a celebratory transnationalism, as Inderpal Grewal points out, since each theatrical encounter often contains notions of essentialism or authenticity (3). That essentialism, desire for authenticity, appeal of the “manifestly different (or alternative and novel)” does not imply that these Orientalist encounters could not be valuable to white Victorian girls or writers who employed those tropes in their subversive and / or provocative theatricals. Said writes, “quite the contrary: my whole point is to say that we can better understand the persistence and durability of saturating hegemonic systems like culture when we realize that their internal constraints upon writers and thinkers were *productive*” (14). Just as Said argues that every person writing about the Orient needs (and needed) to consider the literary Oriental precedent (including literature, travel books, and fantasies) (20), Victorian girls created and represented
their Oriental characters in response and relation to their probably saturated “understanding” of the Orient. Therefore, *how* girls acquired their “knowledge” about the “other” and “other places” is part of why the performances could be so potent for the imagination, and also why it is reasonable to assume girls held a common orientalist perspective, which ultimately obliterated the human beings in the “Orient” even as it gave strength to white Victorian girls.

**Geography Text Books, Travel Diaries, Explorers’ Tales and Professional Entertainments**

In at-home playtexts like an Orientalised “Bluebeard” or “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves,” the “Orient” functions as a fantasy world, only marginally different from fairyland. Yet the *realness* of the East, as evidenced by “real” accounts by explorers and missionaries recounted in children’s geography primers, could make embodying Eastern action-oriented, emotional and sensual characters more powerful. Megan Norcia’s study of geography primers *X Marks the Spot* (2010) points out that the prodigious expansion of the imperial project in the nineteenth century resulted in an increased demand for knowledge about the Empire and the world. Geography primers, most often written by women who were unable to travel, explore, or participate in scientific discoveries themselves, give voice to the highly complex dynamic for England’s women who were both “imprisoned and enthroned” (200) in the Empire, persuasively articulating beliefs about empire, nation, and colonization that conventional society believed children should learn. Including maps, information about social customs, religion, dress, food, landscape, climate, and history, playwright Julia Corner wrote geography texts for such exotic locales as China and Turkey, Charlotte Yonge wrote *Little Lucy’s Wonderful Globe* (1878), and Kate Freiligrath-Krocker was invited to write a text about her father’s homeland, Germany. In Emily Taylor’s 1856 *Glances at the Ball we Live On*, her introduction explains to her readers:
To take you over this wide world we live in, really and truly, by land or by water, is a thing I could not do. I have visited but a little part of it myself, nor do I expect to see much more; but yet how much pleasure have I felt in reading of the wonders of that stranger world! And then there comes the pleasure of telling others – you among the rest – what one has read – of sending the story round and round. (in Norcia, 111)

The popularity of geography as a subject, particularly as travel accounts from intrepid explorers of the Nile, the Amazon, and Antarctica reached England, meant that young girls were probably quite well-read on the subject of distant lands and peoples.

Well-read they may have been, but primer writers repeatedly tamed girls’ imaginations, reinforcing narratives suggesting girls should stay home while boys could be explorers – but at the same time, “these texts contain disruptive moments in which their writers seem to express their dissatisfaction with an empire that did not offer them full participation as acting subjects” (4). Without exception, the primers participated in the ideas enshrined in notions of the “Great Chain of Being,” and the “Family of Man” emphasizing that the British were the most “morally fit” to rule other people. Although the system of beliefs espoused by primers infantilized non-European people, primer writers also suggested “Asian, African, and American peoples had souls and minds that were capable of improvement as a result of exposure to European cultural ideas, manners, and religion” (41). One early text was Barbara Holland’s Panorama of Europe: a New Game of Geography, first published in 1813, and there were eight editions by 1840. Part of the “game” was to learn physical, cultural, and commercial features of their assigned country, and then to perform it, in costume (44). As is evident in the later section on Fancy Dress balls, the idea that a

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92 Inderpal Grewal points out that between 1833 when Tennyson wrote “The Lady of Shallot” which she describes as a narrative of “compulsive domesticity” and 1871 when George Eliot wrote Middlemarch, opportunities for women to travel had increased a great deal (24). Nevertheless, the message in the geography primers still suggested that women should stay close to home even if men went away. Furthermore, those fortunate female travellers were primarily privileged women, and few were explorer/adventurers in the same way that men could be.
country could be performed through (and reduced to) a few critical signifiers was widespread through the nurseries of Victorian England. Megan Norcia quotes Tony Watkins who argues

> The stories we tell our children, the narratives we give them to make sense of cultural experience, constitute a kind of mapping, maps of meaning that enable our children to make sense of the world. They contribute to children’s sense of identity, and identity that is simultaneously personal and social: narratives, we might say, shape the way children find a ‘home’ in the world. (64)

Norcia asserts that geography primer writers spent less time locating particular nations and more time positioning them in relation to England, resulting in the stories children were told always orienting them back towards home. But what if the girls who read the primers were looking for another home, or at least, did not like aspects of home life that prevented a woman from easily acting independently in the world? The taming aspect of primers could have influenced the way girls performed “Oriental” theatricals, but the truth is that theatricals gave girls permission to do (and temporarily be) someone else, in a way that primers never did.

Perhaps some girls would have been drawn to geography primers and journals written by women travellers that celebrated women’s power and agency rather than tamed it. Barbara Hofland also wrote a text about Africa, and included lots of detail about female sovereignty, such as African warrior queens, and female Pharoahs like Cleopatra, and the vicious, wicked, and sensual Zingha, Queen of Matomba.93 “The most extraordinary and singular custom of the Egyptians was that of giving preference to women; since even the accordance of common consideration for them as the weaker sex, seems unknown to all the nations around them” (Hofland in Norcia 113). Similarly inspiring, E.S. Brooks wrote Historic Girls: Stories of Girls Who

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93 Hofland unseats the traditional view of Zingha as the killer of her own son to take the throne, instead emphasizing that the Portuguese council were “struck by the acuteness of her understanding, the vivacity of her wit, and the dignity of her deportment” and arguing that her enemies clearly intended to vilify her, since the idea that she could kill her own son was clearly too monstrous to be believed (Norcia 115).
Influenced the History of Their Times (1887), and among the European girls, Brooks includes “Zenobia of Palmyra: The Girl of the Syrian Desert,” “Woo of Hwang-Ho: The Girl of the Yellow River” and even “Ma-ta-oka of Pow-ha-tan: The Girl of the Virginia Forests.” His stories are introduced by the assertion “In these progressive days, when so much energy and discussion are devoted to what is termed equality and the rights of woman, it is well to remember that there have been in the distant past women and girls even, who by their actions and endeavors proved themselves the equals of the men of their time in valor, shrewdness, and ability” (iii). Including details about geography and historical circumstances, these stories of brave and bright young girls could contribute to the image girls had of the East, and the way they could imagine themselves enacting the stories of believable “Oriental” women.

Travel writing also provided girls ample information about other lands. Giving girls a particular understanding of “real life” girls in the Orient were descriptions that “confirmed” exoticism and sometimes alluded to promiscuous sexuality, such as Edward Lane’s An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians 1836, and his annotated editions of the Arabian Nights, which framed the stories as ethnographically valuable and appropriate for a wide range of English readers, including children (Schacker 79). Suggesting that the Arabian Nights were a source of information, bolstered by footnotes of sociological, ethnographic, philological, literary,

94 Surprisingly, in his re-telling of the Zenobia story, Brooks admiringly describes how Zenobia, highly educated as a scholar, horsewoman and hunter, was a “passionate hunter” who “pursued with ardor the wild beasts of the desert” and “thought nothing of fatigue or peril” (14). In the same paragraph, however, Brooks seems to disparage contemporary young women asking, “what girl of to-day, whom even the pretty little jumping-mouse of Syria would scare out of her wits, could be tempted to witness such a scene?” (14)

95 Jennifer Schacker notes that English people had looked to the Arabian Nights for information for a long time: even the title page of a 1713 version is subtitled Arabian Nights contacting a better account of the Customs, Manners, and Religion of the Eastern Nations, viz. Tartars, Persians, and Indians, than is to be met with any author hitherto published (83). A wealth of versions of stories from the Arabian Nights were available as illustrated chapbooks as well. These, along with the images in other books and toy theatres would have also influenced the ways girls imagined the East.
and folkloristic details, meant that Arab world realities and imagined Oriental girlhoods co-
mingled easily with ideas about magic, or, as Jennifer Schacker puts it, “otherness and
otherworldliness” (80). Schacker argues that realistic details in annotated versions like Lane’s,
rather than standing in opposition to fantasy, “becomes a sign of it” and reinforces the otherness
of the Arab World, easily leaping backwards into otherworldliness – a marvellous place for which
there could be no British analogy (115). There were also widely available chapbooks, toy books,
and toy theatres that included images of the East (inspired by or illustrating some of the more
popular Tales). No doubt the tension between the perceived reality of the East, and its supposedly
inherently fantastical quality also had implications for the ways girls imagined the plausibility of
the Eastern characters they portrayed – and their potential to be translated and transferred into
English society.

Edward Lane claimed his authority to speak about Egypt because of his own travels,
experiences, cultural immersion, and efforts to learn the language, and there were a few women
writers who could also speak about the Orient from experience. In her discussion of nineteenth-
century women’s travel writing in the east, Shirley Foster argues that, influenced as they were by
imperialist ideas about race and class, and agreeing that it “is undeniable that social and cultural
conditioning are powerful factors in determining female representations of the foreign other”
(16). She nevertheless notes that the work of female travel writers at least partly unseated the
dynamics of colonial discourse, and those travelling women “were also able to offer a counter-
hegemonic viewpoint” (7). According to Shirley Foster, Edward Said’s theories regarding
Orientalism are dependent on two assumptions: “first, that the sense of self against which the
Other is positioned embodies the age’s cultural hegemony, thus representing the dominant voice;
and second, that the ‘self’ exists as a trope of positive function and value against which an
alternative ‘not self’ can be measured” (Foster 6). Said suggests that the Orient has inherently
female quality, which is desired and feared by Western men. Foster goes on to explain that feminist critics point out that these theories construct the Orientalist as essentially male and part of an oppositional system of dominance (7). Foster argues that female travel writers’ gender position meant they “were free from pervasive Orientalist tropes (the Orient as female object of male desire)” and travelling women also had access to experiences men did not: they could visit a harem, and discuss those homosocial, although cross-cultural, encounters. In subtle opposition to Foster, Reina Lewis argues instead “women did play a part in the textual production that constituted Orientalism” but that “gender, as a differentiating term, was integral to the structure of [Orientalist] discourse and individual experience of it” (18). Indeed, women supported and upheld oriental and imperial discourses, but they sometimes approached their writing differently (and Lewis is particularly interested in women’s painting) because of their gendered subject experiences. Lewis observes that women’s Oriental paintings, for example, often destabilized male harem fantasies. Girls performing female “Oriental” characters were not representing characters with a pen, but with their own bodies, nor were they creating representations based on personal experience, but based on their interpretation of what they “knew.” If girls read about some of these women’s experiences in harems, or saw their visual representations, depending on how much those particular women allowed gender to fracture and complicate how they represented the East, they might have had a differently nuanced view of harem girls, for example. When girls acted out the narrative what spectators saw could actually be differentiated from the content of the tale. Even if Victorian girls were constructing their embodied interpretations based on what they learned from sources like primers and the Arabian Nights, it makes some sense that their female subject position might change how they performed “Oriental” girls, even if, as I will demonstrate later in this chapter, their more complex performances may not have influenced how they were seen.
Perhaps the most interesting potential way through which Victorian girls would have learned how to perform “the East” was through the entertainment industry itself. Throughout the nineteenth century, unknown territories were brought before the eager public in traveling shows, magic lantern shows, exhibitions, museums, botanical gardens, and panoramas, making it possible to know the East in increasingly spectacular detail (Ziter 10). Edward Ziter argues that theatre (melodrama, pantomime, ballet, and opera), the new notions of “realism” on the stage emphasizing historical and aesthetic accuracy in order to achieve “authenticity,” together with the new disciplines of ethnology, anthropology, biblical archaeology, and geography, “both reflected and helped constitute the modern British colonial imaginary” (3) and the theatre was “a principal space for the creation and dissemination of the modern geographic imagination…. at a time when new racial theories were coming to the fore” (165). Ziter points out that

British audiences marvelled at depictions of desert storms and harem dances as well as Nile steamers and colonial armies….The features of this theatrical East attained a remarkable currency throughout British culture as a wide population became versed in an emerging pictorial vocabulary that organized and interpreted the regions east of Europe. I argue that the entertainment industry, as a primary site for the dissemination of visual information, was central in the creation of Europe’s image of the East as well as in popularizing and shaping the new vocabularies employed in defining and managing Eastern bodies. (3)

The significance of “defining and managing” Eastern bodies is particularly important to girls performing in at-home theatricals, because the way that bodies were defined on stage (and as we will see, for the purposes of fancy dress balls) guided how girls moved, spoke, and portrayed characters like an Eastern “Beauty” from “Beauty and the Beast,” the Hunchback’s cousin in Mrs. Chisholm’s version of the story, or, of course, Morgiana, in the Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves. The fact that girls could (and many did) see moving visual performances of “Oriental” girls on stage meant that in all likelihood, at-home performances of “Oriental” girls probably bore
significant similarities in spite of the performers’ own distance from her character’s life. For the many girls who attended the Great Exhibition of 1851, they had the opportunity to see displays of actual Eastern peoples – and many pleasure gardens and panorama halls responded to the popularity of the exhibits by continuing presenting some of their own after the Great Exhibition, (Ziter 102) increasing the likelihood that urban girls, at least, could have attended one.

Enamoured as they were with “authentic” and spectacular performances, productions with actor Edmund Kean, in particular, perpetuated details that reinforced a gender coding of the East. His productions suggested

the East was lascivious, ideal, wasteful, closed to outsiders, and subject to tyrannous rulers. Whereas Byron used harem imagery in a critique of European power structures, the theatre often used such imagery to implicitly or explicitly laud British expansionism. In the process, the East was transformed from a threatening male power to a space of female segregation. The East was a harem daring abduction. (Ziter 65)

Harem scenes were common, and girls portraying slaves and concubines on stage were the norm.96 Nevertheless, believing that the East was a real referent, containing real people meant exploring a character like Morgiana was more significant than performing the fairy Malvolia in Bell’s “Sleeping Beauty.” Even though both are powerful (and beautiful), Morgiana is more subversive because her fairy tale exists in a “real” world. If imaginary real girls behaved like Morgiana in the East, girls might ask themselves why they live differently in England.

96 Edward Ziter discusses a Drury Lane production of Freedom in which he observes “throughout the play the Egyptians presented such profoundly different values from the British as to suggest not simply cultural differences but an essential otherness.” One character, Araf, tries to buy the British Loring’s daughter. Loring is incensed. “We English, when we speak of our children, do not class them with our cattle. We rear our girls to be the ornaments of our hearth, not as objects of barter and exchange” (170). But I can imagine this statement backfiring for a young, frustrated Victorian girl. Who wants to be an ornament? In general, Arabic people are also depicted as having “hot blood” running through their veins, and in the same play, a passionately murderous woman asserts, “an Arab woman’s love is the full measure of her life” (171). In spite of the truth of Ziter’s observation that Arab people may have been portrayed with “essential otherness” it is easy to believe that the “reality” of this Otherness could be appealing to Victorian girls.
“Ephemeral Freedom while Retaining Integrity”: Fancy Dress Balls and Etiquette Manuals

Mid- to late-nineteenth century Victorian English periodicals and etiquette manuals offered plentiful advice regarding “fancy dress” balls (costume parties without masks) for adults and “juveniles,” and often noted that their advice could easily be applied to charades and private theatricals. Many also offered specifications for “Oriental” dress of various kinds. Leading the nation, in 1840s London, Queen Victoria began to host fancy dress balls, and by the late nineteenth century, so did Covent Gardens, and juvenile fancy dress balls became ubiquitous. Particularly consistently interested in discussing fancy dress fashions are Myra’s Journal and Hearth and Home, and many articles took an interest in what seemed to be perceived as exotic national dress. In an April 1 1889 Myra’s Journal article regarding children’s fancy dress, a person can read about how to construct national costumes such as Russian, Modern Greek, and German peasant, while there are more fanciful costumes like flowers and a “bicycle costume” in which a girl sports a head lamp and has a bike wheel fixed to her dress. In 1896 there are descriptions and drawings of Medieval costumes, eighteenth-century riding costumes, not to mention Spanish Gipsy (with tambourine), Spanish Dancer, and Turkish Dancer. In 1898 The Birmingham Pictorial and Dart includes an “Eastern Girl” among its suggestions for children’s fancy dress balls, in the same year Hearth and Home added Cleopatra, and “Indian Dress” to their suggestions, and in 1899 Hearth and Home also provides designs for a Dancing Girl wearing harem pants. Like Myra’s, Hearth and Home suggests whimsical costumes, such as “Rain,” and “Billiard Table,” but by 1892, they invite

97 Obsessed as they were with etiquette and correctness, articles about fancy dress balls appeared almost as soon as Queen Victoria introduced them to English society. One early article simply called “Paris and London Fashions” in The Lady’s Newspaper, February 1, 1853, describes “appropriate” fancy dress ball gowns.
readers to consider “Japanese” noting that a Japanese costume “has rare charms, one of them being, perhaps, that it is so easy to procure.” The popularity of “Fancy Dress Balls” also meant society pages reported on particular costume successes. For example, in January 1892 *Hearth and Home* included a positive comment about a woman representing a Remington typewriter, and a sketch of Mrs. Kingsley Scott, dressed in a kimono; and in 1897 when Lord Provost and Mrs. Richmond hosted a juvenile fancy dress ball in Glasgow, the admiring columnist reported, “Mrs. James Muir Simpson wore an exquisite French confection of coral-pink satin, draped with net, and made to represent the dress of an Egyptian Lady….Among the girls there were a coquettish little Poudré, in white satin…a daring young damsel as Rhodesia wearing a raider’s hat and having a cartridge belt slung across the shoulders…a demure little Geisha, and many as roses, buttercups, poppies, etc.”

Oriental costume advice could be found in periodicals like *Myra’s* and *Hearth and Home* but other periodicals and fancy dress ball advice and etiquette books also offered words of wisdom. Mrs. Aria’s chapters on Oriental Dress detail the differences between the Empress of China, the lesser wives, and the hairstyles of Peking girls. She describes traditional Japanese (rather than industrial Tokyo) dress, including how if kimono overdresses became inconvenient to walk in, they could be tucked into the sash, revealing the “gaily coloured” layer beneath (158). Dress advice for a “Japanese girl” is also found in an 1890 *Ladies Monthly Magazine*, while an 1892 *Hearth and Home* notes that a wide variety of styles of kimonos can easily be purchased at “Liberty’s.” From Japan, “the land of chrysanthemums,” Mrs. Aria moves swiftly to Egypt and writes “in point of fact no more dissimilar types could be imagined than those of old Japan and ancient Egypt. Woman’s dress characteristic of the latter country was marked by a shamelessness of display and a unique brilliancy of colour, the effect of the scanty garments in vivid tones accentuating rather than concealing the natural lines and curves of the figure” (158). She
describes skin tight fabrics and bare breasted Egyptian Queens, wondering if the women of Egypt never grew old (162) before moving on to India and the Mogul empire where she notes curled toed slippers, and brilliantly hued loose flowing trousers, splendid saris for after marriage, and jewellery. With Persian women she emphasises veils, and indoor dress of embroidered skirts. She notes that Persian servants “expose the centre of the body to view” (170), she comments on the fez and turbans, Turkish modern dress, and Arabic desert dress. But while there is enough information here to recreate any “Oriental” national costume according to the way Mrs. Aria understood it, she also has a section on Fancy Dress. “The notion is full of fascination which may be best realised not by the borrowing of clothes, but by making them, planning them, inventing them, and above all, wearing them with grace” (185). The stakes of Fancy Dress are high, she believes: a woman costumed as “Money, in gold or yellow satin, jingling with golden coins, may be assured that she will be run after, and she who represents Cleopatra, or some other Oriental queen, blazing with jewels, will not be allowed to sit in a corner” (185). She comments that even veiling as a Turkish woman with a yashmuk can be intriguing, for always the unknown allures! (186)

If girls avoided the more whimsical costumes like “Money,” “Rain,” and a “Remington Typewriter,” fancy dress balls offered compelling opportunities for girls and young women to imagine themselves as people other than the person they performed in daily life. In fact, there are some remarkable similarities between Victorian fancy dress balls and the Asian cosplay subculture of the 2000s – and although there are also notable differences, the similarities are

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90 Ardern Holt's advice is highly detailed for “Oriental” costumes (although does not try to be particularly accurate). He writes “For an Egyptian costume, the hair is flat in front, with ringlets at the back. The Turkish women plait their hair in innumerable tresses, entwining them with coins and jewels; and round flat curls appear on the side of the head. At fancy balls two long plaits are generally adopted in this character, but it would be more correct to add to the number” (5).
worth discussing because cosplay culture and its participants can offer some insights into how young Victorian girls might have used the experience of dressing up and performing other identities to an audience, and also, what kinds of constraints they had to abide by. The value in looking at cosplay culture in conjunction with fancy dress is simply that the experiences are in some ways analogous, and there are recent ethnographic studies in which young cosplayers answered questions I would have liked to have asked Victorians about the meanings of their costume experiences. “Cosplay,” a conjunction of costume and play, originated in Japan, but is popular throughout Asia and North America. Although cosplay is often performed at parties, conventions, and special events, unlike Victorian fancy dress parties, cosplay performers focus on making flat, two-dimensional art, such as anime and manga, into a “living”, three-dimensional performance, while replicating exact postures, gestures, colours, and character costume details. In Rahman et al’s study of cosplay culture in Hong Kong, they observe that “authentic” performance and attention to detail, to the point of wearing coloured contact lenses, is highly valued among members of the subculture. Chelsea, a Hong Kong cosplayer explains:

It’s not difficult to tell who is a real cosplayer and who is not. The most obvious indicator is that their costumes do not match the original character in terms of style and color. I saw a cosplayer even wearing sneakers with an ancient outfit. Some of them are not neat and tidy. In my opinion, they should clean and iron their clothes before they cosplay the character. In addition, some cosplayers just sit there or walk back and forth across the venue without role-playing or performing like their chosen character. They only enjoy being there. To me, authentic cosplayers should at least wear the right clothes...be neat and tidy...and engage and immerse themselves completely in the performance. (326)

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99 In North America, science fiction fans like “Trekkies” and Star Wars “fanboys” have dressed up for conventions for decades. Some people call these activities cosplay, and other restrict cosplay to its Asian two-dimensional origins (Joel Gu explains cosplay origins in his 2011 article “Queer simulation: The practice, performance and pleasure of cosplay”). A search of the internet demonstrates that “Asian-style” cosplay is also popular in North America.
Similarly, the significance of taking fancy dress activity seriously exists in *Myra’s Journal* in February 1887, where we can read: “In copying any of these costumes the smallest detail should be carefully attended to; the lorgnette of the élégante, for instance, and the walking stick carried by the child in Directoire costume, must be those of the period. A good fancy costume is often spoilt by want of attention to these minor points.” Earlier, in 1875, *Myra’s Journal of Dress and Fashion* reported that Mssrs Unwin and Albert, who keep wigs for fancy balls and masks for charades were “about to open a department of costumes for charades and fancy dress balls. We are informed that the dresses will be chosen with due regard for beauty, correctness, and economy” (italics mine). Even around the turn of the century, an American women’s etiquette manual by Annie Randal White (circa 1900) also stresses good taste and accuracy, noting: “There are so many historical personages known to us, as well as gypsies, fortune-tellers, flower girls, farmers, milkmaids, and clowns that it is no difficult matter to design a costume….by the exercise of taste and accuracy, some beautiful effects can be obtained” (210 italics mine). Cynthia Cooper notes “Theatre had long taught the public that if a costume appeared tasteful and attractive, it could be assumed to be accurate” (Cooper 24) and some historical details could co-mingle with current fashion. Even though acceptable portrayal of an “Eastern Girl” or “Spanish Gipsy” cannot have been as strict as contemporary cosplay enthusiasts attempting to recreate a known anime character like “Sailor Moon” or one of Miyazaki’s “Spirited Away” characters like Chihiro Ogino, emphasis on accuracy and correctness of costumes connect these two cultural dress-up practices.

Furthermore, Rahman’s research on Hong Kong’s cosplay found that performers emphasised the importance of adopting a character who shares an appropriate physicality, body type, and personality. Joel Gn’s study concerning queer cosplay and “cross-play” suggests performers focus on an affective response to the particular character they choose to perform. He
argues “the cosplay performance can be theorized as an expression of mediated fantasies, due to a visible form of identification between the subject and the image” (588). The contrast between an affective response to a character combined with a desire to play out a particular fantasy could actually be in conflict with a potential performer’s own biological sex: girls often choose to play *bisho ōnen* and boys often opt to play girl heroes for whom they have an affective attachment (although Gn is quick to point out that gender is often ambiguous in cosplay performance, and has little to do with a cosplayer’s quotidian gender performance). Victorian advice also established that the wrong fancy dress choice could be dire, but the right choice could enhance a person’s charms, and provided, as Cynthia Cooper put it in her discussion of the Victorian passion for fancy dress, “a reprieve from limitation on their identities,” while balancing on a fine line between “ephemeral freedom and retaining integrity” (37). Indeed, in many cases, Victorian costume balls only offered an illusion of choice. Myra’s writes “In choosing fancy dresses for children, the complexion, figure, and even disposition of the wearer should be taken into consideration….The choice of pretty costumes is so large and varied that it is an easy task to find one to suit any child, whether she be fair or dark, short or tall, lively or a “sober-sides” without doing violence to her natural appearance or character.” For example, a dark haired girl must never consider dressing as a Scandinavian peasant (Cooper 30), while Dorothy Lane writes, “The

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100 Rahman et al interviewed one young male cosplayer, Keung, who explained, in keeping with Joel Gn’s analysis, “I don’t mind if people misjudge me as gay or abnormal, I know what I’m doing. I only dress like a girl in cosplay events, and my friends understand that I’m cosplaying... By wearing this outfit, I feel like I am the character—sweet and lovely. It gives me a chance to fulfill my dream” (334).

101 Ardern Holt writes “It behoves those who really desire to look well to study what is individually becoming to themselves, and then to bring to bear some little care in the carrying out of the dresses they select, if they wish their costumes to be really a success. There are few occasions when a woman has a better opportunity of showing her charms to advantage than at a Fancy Ball. (6) Mrs. Aria also notes “In deciding upon a costume for a fancy-dress ball, the first thought of the reveller should be to secure the becoming and the suitable, and to be successful the choice should be mainly influenced by his or her personality. I quite realise the problem to be a difficult one, since happily we have not the gift given to us to see ourselves as others see us, else should we never meet a podgy Mephistopheles bulging out of his clothes, nor an attenuated Juno, nor a dusky Desdemona, nor a buxom Puck” (188).
Egyptian Priestess is an extremely imposing dress and would prove most attractive if worn by a handsome dark girl” (*Hearth and Home* 1896). If a ball guest chose badly, she risked being ridiculed by journalists, and, perhaps, other guests. Charlotte Yonge’s play “The Strayed Falcon” acknowledges the apparently “natural” connection between a person’s own physical appearance and the character they undertake. When casting the gipsy roles, she writes, “some new cousins, named Tyndall…were reported to be so dark as to be ready-made gipsies,” and Yonge tells us that Sophy’s “black eyes and hair would come in capital under the red cloak that was to be borrowed from the old woman at the lodge.” Any representation at a ball was expected to bear some kind of connection to the portrayer: “The key factor in attaining the ideal combination of a becoming fancy dress costume and an appropriate fantasy character was a judicious selection requiring an honest assessment of one’s figure and true self-knowledge – neither a matter to be taken lightly” (Cooper 29). Girls who performed in at-home theatricals needed to consider the implications of this information: audiences may believe a character a girl performed well was likely to resonate with her natural character, not just her physicality. Like cosplayers, ball guests needed to find ways to recreate preconceived ideas about characters in ways that enhanced their quotidian selves, while giving them an opportunity to play out someone who appealed to them on a deeper, affective level.

There are three other ways that cosplay and Victorian fancy dress aficionados are similar: costumes can be erotic, spectators are significant, and costume is used to explore fantasy identities. Each of these issues has particular resonance for Victorian girls playing “Oriental”

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102 Ardern Holt’s very popular *Fancy Balls (etc)* divides costumes for women into “Brunes,” “Fair,” and “Elderly.” Although Brunes could present Africa, Arab Lady, Asia, Gipsies of various kinds, the Bride of Abydos, Brigand’s Wife, Carmen, Cleopatra, Egyptian, Esmeralda, Luti, the Indian Girl, and Zingari, together with Italian, Spanish, and Oriental dresses, (1, 2), he believed these costumes were inappropriate for fair women. If his opinion held sway for at-home theatricals, many young girls could not have “appropriately” depicted Oriental characters, unless they were allowed wigs, or perhaps, figured out ingenious veils.
characters in at-home theatricals. Although parents of cosplay participants are often concerned about erotic undertones of their daughter’s costume choices, such as costumes in the “Lolita” genre, the very particular spaces that sanction cosplay activities offer some protection for young participants: except in very unusual circumstances, women would not don a Lolita costume on an ordinary street for fear of harassment. Even in Japan where cosplay sometimes influences street fashion, there are only certain neighbourhoods where cosplay on the street is seen as acceptable. Although some British periodicals remarked that Fancy Dress should be seen as “undress,” in fact a little exposure emphasizing normally concealed parts of the body, and playing with erotic allure was part of the fun of fancy dress. Cooper notes that women might have shortened skirts revealing legs and ankles, tight boots emphasizing the curve of the leg, décolletage, or might even be uncorseted, wearing loose flowing clothing (32). In a 2013 discussion about turn of the century Orientalist French fashion designer Paul Poiret as a creator of virtual reality through his sumptuous event The Thousand and Second Night, Minh-ha points out that in the nineteenth century, with or without a corset, “loose clothing indexed an uncorseted body and thus the unrefined character of a morally suspect woman” adding that corsets were accepted as hallmarks of virtue while “an uncorseted woman reeked of licence” (6).

In the fancy dress social space, some boundaries of the permissible could be turned upside down. Spectators were and are important for people engaged in fancy dress and cosplay. In Hearth and Home when describing the merits of a Japanese costume, “E.A.” writes, “In any case, Japanese women have always had their admirers, and admirers are – are they not? – the be-all and end-all of the social existence which recognises the joys of fancy dress balls” (1892). Advice manuals are replete with suggestions about how to be noticed in a positive way. For example, as mentioned, Mrs. Aria notes “she who represents Cleopatra or some other Oriental Queen will not be allowed to sit in the corner.” Similarly, Rahman writes that cosplayers “want to be
recognized, photographed, and admired. Through photo shoots, they can also capture and record pleasurable, memorable, and meaningful moments for self-enjoyment” and in a striking similarity to Victorian culture, remarks, “They can be described as tableaux vivants or “living pictures”” (332). Photography, especially still photography, is very important to cosplayers, perhaps re-evoking the two-dimensional origins of their inspiration, but also, to create community, and to affirm and demonstrate their admiration of fellow cosplayers. In the late nineteenth century, wealthy Victorians also had photographs of themselves taken in fancy dress, extending the possibilities of spectatorship beyond the ephemerality of the fancy dress ball.

But it is the motivations behind engaging in Victorian fancy dress and contemporary cosplay that may offer the most insight into what the activity could have meant to Victorian girls. Cynthia Cooper argues that Victorian fancy dress was popular because “In a society preoccupied with correct behaviour, convention, and conformity, dressing up provided an outlet through which one could project oneself to a different time and place” (Cooper 21). In strikingly similar language, Rahman et al write, “it is evident that cosplaying provides performers with a momentary escape from the stresses and monotony of ordinary life; and allows them to enter into a whimsical dream of fantasy or childhood” (321) also noting, “cosplay enables enthusiasts to imitate the personas of their adored characters and to create an imaginative self in reality. Indeed, it is a fun and playful act of fancy, a fluidity of identification, and self-objectification of a kind that many people are unlikely to attain in everyday life” (321). Cosplay is a form of identity-transformation from, among other things, an “ordinary person” to a “super hero” or a “game player” to a “performer” (333). Victorian girls performing Geishas, gipsies, Turkish dancing girls, or Cleopatra were also transformed from ordinary person to a kind of super hero, and, while not a “game player,” from someone who reads about characters and far off adventures, to someone who performs and embodies them.
Although the identity of a cosplay character is often very specific and well-known from anime and manga, the same is essentially true for an “Oriental” character in the Victorian era, whose personality and character were "well known" because of widely held race theory beliefs.

For that reason, I would like to quote two cosplayers interviewed for the Rahman et al study.

Joyce: Every time I put on a cosplay costume, I immediately feel like I’m transformed into a new person. It’s kind of an experience of changing my identity.

Po Yin: Being a cosplayer, I can transform myself into many different characters – a heroine, a cute little girl, or even a beautiful boy (bishōnen). I’m no longer a passive reader or video game player. I’m a producer and performer. (333)

Rahman et al argue that in order “to feel ‘alive’ in a mundane society” cosplayers search for comfortable spaces to express themselves, and “role-play their beloved characters in order to fulfill the role/dream that is missing in real life” (333-334). Like Victorian girls opting to perform an unexpected or slightly erotic character in the culturally appropriate venue of a fancy dress ball, or the relative privacy of a theatrical performed in her own drawing room among family and friends, cosplayers seek out sanctioned arenas to experiment with identity performance. Like Cooper pointing to the Victorian craving for a magical escape of fixed time and place, Rahman et al argue that “this changing identity of performativity is a magic wand or time machine which can offer excitement, contentment, escapism, and empowerment” (334) and “imaginative and alternative identities can create meanings for the performers” (333).

Rahman’s study also rather pessimistically suggests that cosplay “allows enthusiasts to momentarily change their identity in order to create an exciting, extraordinary and contented self rather than attempting a real-life transformation” (334). While I have no doubt that fancy dress performance also sated the desires of many Victorian girls, I cannot help but believe that it must also have whet their appetites for something different, bolder, and grander. As mentioned in Chapter Two, when Maude, the young thespian in the 1869 *Aunt Judy’s Magazine* story
“Christmas Holidays at Everton” despairs, “I am so tired of trifles!... Don’t think me very
conceited, but I think I could do great things, if I had the chance” (631). Her exclamation comes
late at night, after performing their at-home theatrical. I believe that performance activities can
be powerful thinking tools. As mentioned, when Jill Dolan describes the impact of “utopian
performatives,” she explains they can produce “feelings” that may gradually encourage change
(Dolan 2006). No doubt cosplayers and girls who engaged in fancy dress balls and at-home
theatricals would not have necessarily felt their performances necessitated change in their lives, but
eventually, they might.

“Oriental” Performances in the Drawing Room, Gaze, Spectators and
the Imperial Project

How might the “knowledge” of Oriental life, and the rules of “fancy dress” have translated into
girls’ performances on the drawing room stage? Sometimes girls were encouraged to play doubly
transgressive roles, as male Oriental characters. Playwrights like A.S. Gatty and Marion Adams
argue that the features of imagined Oriental dress meant that girls could take on male roles, and,
as Marion Adams put it in her introduction to “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves,” “the
production would be a success.” As a result, girls could retain their real-life modesty, but take on
wildly unconventional characters, such as sword-wielding sultans, embattled merchants, robber
chiefs, and the like. Marjorie Garber suggests orientalised cross-dressing could be “‘the escape
hatch’ of polymorphous sexuality and multiple identity,” (321) opening access to entirely different
forms of identity exploration and expression. In Recollections of a Spinster, there are two 1851 letters
to Mary from her cousin BA concerning the performance of “King Charming.” The children
had to get Miss Jolly’s permission to do the play (presumably she was their governess), and she
agreed providing the only gentlemen in the audience were fathers. There could be a number of
reasons to control male spectatorship: putting girls on display could be a bit like “coming out”
and provoke a different kind of gaze among other men, performing could be viewed as immodest, or this could be this family’s particular approach to dealing with anti-theatrical prejudice – just as Grace MacDonald’s acquaintance was permitted to do charades as long as she didn’t wear a costume, even a hat. BA explains that Lionel and Ellen will help but won’t act, and then she outlines the various performers and their parts, including “Alice [is] the bad fairy because we don’t like her” (22). She tells her cousin “I have two parts, the good fairy and the Lord Chamberlain because he sings a song and wears a turban and baggy trousers and I wear a beard and a mustache [sic]” (22). In her second letter, BA tells Mary “I wish you could have seen the play. A lot of people came and they said it was lovely” (22). Besides describing the pie “and blackbirds jumped up on springs when the crust was taken off” she says that when she performed as the Fairy Asuzena, she was so frightened she forgot the words. Then she declares:

But I did not mind when I was the Turk in a turban and a beard and mustachos and black eyebrows. Everyone laughed so when I sang the song;
   Come down the back stairs, come down with me
   Come ““““““‘, of the door I’ve the key,
   ““““““‘, and let nobody see,
   And come as if you were not coming to me.
   I thought Lily would have a fit she laughed so (22).

Whether BA loved her part in the performance because she could hide behind a beard, or because she could stride about the stage confidently as someone completely other than who she was in daily life is not obvious – probably it was a combination of both of those, and the appreciative laughter. But the fact remains that if it was easy to imagine girls performing in male “Oriental” dress, suddenly they could be the Merchant in “Beauty and the Beast,” the Doctor in “the Hunchback,” the Caliph in “The Sleeper Awakened,” or the Robber Chieftain in “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves.”
Playing Oriental men, striding about the stage and influencing their world could enable experimenting with one kind of identity performance, but the powerful and dangerously sensual geisha girl, harem girl, or gypsy presents an entirely different set of challenges. Much depends on which family friends and acquaintances a particular family invited to have in their audience: only fathers? nearby cousins? close neighbours? servants? the clergyman? As Mrs. White writes in her chapter “Misses and Unmarried Women,” “There is no gainsaying the fact that women from the moment they enter society until they depart from this “vale of tears” are hemmed in and restrained, and if we may use the word, watched” (117). If the girls performing juvenile theatricals had not yet entered society, they were still “watched” but by a more exclusive range of spectators, which clearly changes the significance of the spectator-performer relationship, especially when performing some of those more sensual Oriental roles.

The Oriental fantasy female was largely created by Anglo-male discourse. Edward Ziter remarks that “Harem scenes became common as female display and became a more insistent objective of British theatre and here, as well, depictions of Eastern sexuality were informed by Britain’s own sense of imperial power” (75). Ziter explains that early Victorian productions were tame compared to the Edwardian ballets, tableaux vivants, and chorus girl burlesques that used pink fleshings in costumes that “resulted in orientalist productions that bordered on pornographic” (75). He adds, “then as now, the theatrical harem translated as the display (rather than the segregation) of women.” Ziter believes that the pleasure of the theatrical harem, for male spectators, was an opportunity to imagine white European women as compliant, sensual Eastern women. In each case, “playing the exotic was a sexually evocative act” (155). Particularly significant for the way that girls performing in Oriental dress were watched was the issue of corsets. In spite of the dress reform movement, the pre-Raphaelites, and followers of the “aesthetic dress” movement, Mary Blanchard explains that the “Victorian female body
functioned as a model/object for the discerning and omnipotent gaze…the male body…

contemplated the female form, one bounded by tight corseting and domestic confinement” (21). If the body were not corseted, it could be associated with a burlesque dancer, a prostitute – or the Orient. The issue was not only with the male gaze: Shirley Foster notes that some women who visited harems often professed shock at loose robes and lack of corsets. Being costumed without a corset immediately suggested licence – but it also suggested a kind of freedom, in opposition to domestic confinement. Even if Victorian girls did not attend professional productions featuring dancing harems, this exotic and sensual (if not actually sexualised) understanding of girls in the Orient would have been a part of the circulating ambient imagery of the East that contributed to their impressions of the character, as it would for any male members of their audience.

Increasing the argument for controlling who gets to be a part of the at-home theatrical audience, it also makes some sense that regardless of the nature of a girls’ performance in the drawing room, spectators (especially male spectators) would view her presentation of a female Oriental character filtered through their ideas about indolent, sensual Oriental women, and, their experience of the blend of that performance with their idea of a girl’s daily reality: what Mary Isbell theorizes as “the aggregate” (as previously outlined in the introduction and second chapter). Regardless of the complexity of a girl’s performance, and her sense of kinship as a woman with a dominated Oriental character, or of how she felt about her experience of interpreting an Oriental character, her performance would still be seen through eyes that, by and large, embraced dominant imperial and Oriental discourses.

Since, Victorians also held uncertain and conflicted views regarding childhood precociousness and sexuality, the perspective of individual families may, indeed, have influenced the performance experiences possible for girls. Some Victorians believed protecting childhood innocence was necessary, while others thought children’s innate innocence protected the child (if
not the spectator) from sexually charged thoughts, and still others believed young girls were sexually available.\textsuperscript{103} If, in some families, sensuality was not controlled or repressed until late girlhood, or if adults were socioculturally permitted to imagine adult sexual fantasies through children’s bodies,\textsuperscript{104} then a girl’s experience of performing a character like Morgiana, who revels in feminine sensuality, could lose some of its potency because it differed little from the way the girl was permitted to relate to her community in her daily life. However, as Rana Kabbani explains, visions of the Orient through the \textit{Arabian Nights} came “to express for the age, the erotic longings that would have otherwise remained suppressed” (Kabbani in Schacker 81). Depending on the intentions of the production’s sponsor/stage manager, who may have been anyone from a young adult male, an older girl, or an ambitious eleven year old, those erotic longings, layered with ideas of “irrationality, indolence, and the imagination itself” could have added an additional layer of sensuality to the performance even in cases where spectators believed that a girls’ childhood innocence protected her from any erotic thoughts of her own. If the costumes were awkwardly draped sheets and fabric, and the performances were accompanied by enthusiastic shrieks and loud whispers of “not yet!” and “\textit{now go},” no doubt the effect would be more parodic than erotic or even sensual. Yet Beatrice Chamberlain comments to her brother Neville that their little cousin Pearl, dancing the role of a fairy and who professed to be shy, “cast the most languishing glances” at the audience from behind the “(imaginary) footlights” (25 December 1896). In 1896 Beatrice found the notion of a sensual relationship between audience and

\textsuperscript{103} In 1885 the age of consent for girls was raised from 13 to 16.

\textsuperscript{104} All-child companies performing plays that would normally feature adult actors (such as \textit{Romeo and Juliet}, \textit{Macbeth} or \textit{HMS Pinafore}) were extremely popular with adult and child audience members. Victorians seemed to take great pleasure in a child’s precocious performance of the adult world. Similarly, Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll’s) sensual, and even erotically charged photographs of young girls, taken with their parents’ approval, suggest an ambivalent attitude towards child \textit{theatrical} performances of adult material, even if parents maintained control over what they perceived as their children’s \textit{real} actions and decisions.
performer appealing and appropriate (although such glances would not have been acceptable off the stage) – and the character wasn’t even Oriental! The power dynamics inherent in a potentially erotically charged relationship between audience and young thespian cannot be ignored when considering girlhood agency and identity. Like the possibilities in Jill Dolan’s “utopian performatives,” in a repressive sociocultural environment like the Victorian middle-class domestic space, “letting go” in Elizabeth Robins’ sense, and subversively experimenting with sensuality and other ways of being, has an empowering quality, and may have offered girls a space to imagine (other) possibilities for their lives in spite of (or even because of) adult voyeurism.

Playwrights seemed to be aware of this complex performance dialectic as well: in Florence Bell’s orientalised “Beauty and the Beast,” in Teresa Pulszky’s “The Sleeper Awakened,” and in Mrs. Chisholm’s “The Hunchback,” not to mention Florence Bell’s and Amy Whinyates’ versions of “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves,” opportunities are especially constructed so that girls can dance on stage. In fact, in “The Sleeper Awakened,” dancing is almost the only function of the beautiful but essentially ornamental slave girls. Yet dancing in an “Oriental” style could be a powerful act, especially in an era when even dancing bodies were strictly controlled. Just as actress Elizabeth Robins claimed that powerfully emotional acting “requires capacity for abandon – of letting yourself go, which comes to be impossible to the well-bred” (Robins in Corbett 111), “Orientalised” dancing may have also been challenging and liberating. Through dance, playwrights offered girls a chance to embody characters according to their fantasies, allowing girls to explore their own sensuality under the guise of a character, but dance also could enable girls to interrupt the script, and as Marah Gubar suggests, “own and renovate the stories told for and about them by adults” (Artful Dodgers 37). Since “Oriental” dancing was not prescribed in the plays (even though Florence Bell offered suggestions for other dances), dancing was a way that girls could really put their own mark on the performance. Victorian girls may have been aware
that their performances could be all of these -- an opportunity to explore the idea of themselves as sensual beings, and an opportunity to be original in their performance, even as they were aware that they could be inviting a particular kind of gaze.

Another hint about how Orientalised drawing room performances could have been received is offered by William Makepeace Thackeray, in his novel *Vanity Fair*, in a chapter entitled “In which a charade is acted in a way that may or may not puzzle the reader.” The charades are organised by an Eastern traveller dandy, who clearly provides the majority of the props. The first scene takes place in Turkey, and a slave-merchant brings in a veiled female slave. When her veil is removed, Thackeray says “a thrill of applause bursts through the house.”

It is Mrs. Winkworth (she was a Miss Absolom) with the beautiful eyes and hair. She is in a gorgeous oriental costume; the black braided locks are twined with innumerable jewels; her dress is covered over with gold piastres. The odious Mahometan expresses himself charmed by her beauty. She falls down on her knees and entreats him to restore her to the mountains where she was born, and where her Circassian lover is still deploring the absence of his Zuleikah. No entreaties will move the obdurate Hassan. He laughs at the notion of the Circassian bridegroom. Zuleikah covers her face with her hands and drops down in an attitude of the most beautiful despair.

When the charade scene ends Mrs. Rawdon Crawley (Becky Sharp) “comes forward and compliments Mrs. Winkworth on the admirable taste and beauty of her costume.” Mrs. Crawley behaves as she should, complimenting “taste” and “beauty” of the costume. Mrs. Winkworth was well-chosen for the role because of her beautiful eyes and black hair and because she is clearly perceived as “gorgeous in oriental costume.” Her performance, as a slave, is predictable, and anticipates the idea of harem abduction, alluded to by Edward Ziter.

The scene that Mrs. Rawdon Crawley performs is not “Oriental” but in an Ancient Greek tent, yet here, too, are suggestions of what it may have been like to perform “the other” on a private stage. Colonel Crawley, as Agamemnon, lies sleeping in his chamber at Argos:
Aegisthus steals in pale and on tiptoe. What is that ghastly face looking out balefully after him from behind the arras? He raises his dagger to strike the sleeper, who turns in his bed, and opens his broad chest as if for the blow. He cannot strike the noble slumbering chieftain. Clytemnestra glides swiftly into the room like an apparition—her arms are bare and white—her tawny hair floats down her shoulders—her face is deadly pale—and her eyes are lighted up with a smile so ghastly that people quake as they look at her. A tremor ran through the room. "Good God!" somebody said, "it's Mrs. Rawdon Crawley." Scornfully she snatches the dagger out of Aegisthus's hand and advances to the bed. You see it shining over her head in the glimmer of the lamp, and—and the lamp goes out, with a groan, and all is dark.

Thackeray points out Mrs Crawley’s sexually loaded loose hair, and her bare, white arms. He explains “the darkness and the scene frightened people. Rebecca performed her part so well, and with such ghastly truth, that the spectators were all dumb” but when lights blazed on again, Thackeray claims “everybody” began to shout applause, although it is quickly clear that Mrs. Crawley’s admirers are men, not women, and that there was some anxiety about the fact that her victim was her real-life husband. Her patron shouts “Brava! Brava!” and says between his teeth "By—, she’d do it too." After she is presented to his Royal Highness he declares, “Mrs. Rawdon Crawley was quite killing in the part.” Clearly, Mrs. Crawley’s performance is permitted to be somewhat risqué, and yet, the sense that her character should somehow relate her real personality was a cause for concern. She is feted for the rest of the evening by the male guests who find her performance tantalizingly evocative and attractive, but she has no friends among the women.

While fiction, Thackeray’s depiction of “others” in charade draws attention to the importance of considering how spectators might have watched young Victorian girls performing in their own homes. Like Mrs. Crawley, girls would have been permitted to perform riskier behaviours, but (depending on the invited spectators and the particular intentions, sophistication and success with their dancing and costumes) may have been subjected to a gaze that both
imagined and observed the performer as a sexual object, and which employed the ideas of Mary Isbell’s “aggregate,” ensuring that her performance was read through the way the actress was known to behave in her daily life, and that her performance might also influence how she could be imagined in the future.

The Other and the Imperial Project

While the imaginary reality of “the East” is a significant factor in my analysis, the Victorian habits of racialising and exotification, linked to belief in the moral correctness of Empire, means at-home theatricals enhanced power and agency for English middle-class girls at the expense of people in the East. In 1998, Bat-Ani Bar On observes that socially marginalized groups (which could easily include Victorian female playwrights and Victorian middle class girls), often align themselves with those in power, and similarly marginalise others in ways they, themselves, have been marginalised. Through gypsies, harem girls, geisha girls, and other imaginary “real” people living elsewhere, girls could use what they supposedly “knew” about Oriental people to experiment with behaviours typically forbidden by English society, imagining alternative, powerful identities and futures for themselves, even as their performances augmented cultural interactions that negatively influenced the way English people thought about people of the East, and the way Eastern people could be heard. Bat-Ani Bar On’s comment resonates with Inderpal Grewal’s work on imperialism and the nineteenth-century English woman (particularly through a lens interested in travel culture, and constructions of home and harem). Grewal remarks that binaries (such as dominant and dominated, colonizer and colonized) are not useful because they ignore the complex differences related to class, gender, and sexuality. She notes “I reject a methodology of “opposition,” that would equate “women” and the “colonized” noting that even when English-women positioned themselves in comparison to their Indian “sisters,” the
comparison was hegemonic, albeit different than one offered by men (13). Particularly relevant for my project, she notes that it is not productive to see women (from either country) as victims, but instead, they should be viewed as “complex agents interpellated by various discourses” (13). The messy, complex relationship between the people of the East and English girls who were simultaneously “imprisoned and enthroned” (Norcia 200) in the British Empire, overshadows every reading of these scripts – as Louis Althusser puts it, “there are no innocent readings – only guilty ones.” In spite of contentious ideas regarding childhood and girl behaviours, middle-class girls clearly could use “Oriental” theatricals to defy expectations of girl behaviour, but their subversive journey towards increased power and possibility came at the expense of the Others the girls purported to represent.

In her study of geography primers, Megan Norcia asks “was there a route to agency / authority / autonomy for nineteenth-century women that did not go through the patriarchal imperial master narrative, which expropriates agency and freedom from others to shore up its domain and power?” (145). Daryl Chin argues that hidden in the contemporary postmodern agenda is “a rebuke, an insult, a devaluation. Instead of recognizing the status of “the other” as an equal, there is the undermining of “the other” by a declared indifference to distinction, while attempting to maintain the same balance of power. In fact, the very designation of “the other” is one such manoeuvre” (165). Victorian girls had no such indifference, no such illusions of equality. All around them was “evidence” of England’s moral superiority, and of Oriental peoples’ inherent, racially driven, differences. In the letter from BA to Mary, her exuberance about performing “the Turk” shows no consciousness of her participation in oppression and the Imperial project, nor does it suggest any consciousness of her own possible and gradual emancipation through the activity of performing a male role: the pleasure is wrapped up in the
unexpected aggregate of her transgressive, even carnivalesque performance, that made people laugh.

In fact, it is through Mikhail Bakhtin’s ideas regarding the carnivalised body that it may be possible to reimagine the socio-political implications of Oriental at-home theatricals, ever-acknowledging their silencing and oppressive side effects to non-English, racialised girls. First, Bakhtin describes two kinds of bodies: the classical body, and the grotesque body. The classical body is “entirely finished, completed, strictly limited” (320) and adopting an impenetrable façade, and acquiring meaning as a “closed individuality that does not merge with other bodies and the world” (320). Perhaps one could argue that an adult Victorian woman’s body is, at least symbolically, a “classical” body – corseted, untouchable, and “entirely finished.” But no growing girl is “entirely finished” and any girl experimenting with gender, and with imagining herself another race is offering her body up to a kind of merger with other bodies, and opening her individual self to the possibility of change. The grotesque body, on the other hand, “is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body. Moreover, the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world” (317). I do not believe Bakhtin had “youthful bodies” in mind when he imagined the grotesque, and yet, girls are in the act of becoming, and continually constructing themselves. It is even possible to say that the voracious appetite of youth could swallow the world, even as the world swallows youth, typically absorbing it into dominant discourses and ideologies. Second, Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque refers to inversions, transpositions, and temporary reversals. It can provide “conceptual space where marginalized voices can theorize about the possibilities of resistance where established assumptions about gender…may be renounced, rescinded, and reversed, albeit temporarily” (Brown et al). In dressing up and in behaving “otherwise,” girls could resist dominant culture and gender constructions of their identities and bodies.
Although written after World War One, Virginia Woolf’s 1927 homage to Vita Sackville-West in *Orlando* is worth considering here. D.A. Boxwell argues that the novel indicates that for Woolf, Turkey was significant, because it offered the “possibility of assuming, rather than merely being, another racial and ethnic identity in another realm of ‘becoming’” (311). From her own experiences in Persia, Vita Sackville-West believed that the Orient’s carnivalesque possibilities offered a “boundless space” of abundant possibilities for Western women’s empowerment through masquerade, cross-dressing, and gender destabilization, offering white women’s bodies opportunities to transgress their own limits, and denaturalize the conventional. Boxwell explains that the best example of Sackville-West’s point of view can be read in her “camped up” descriptions of Turkey, and the cross-dressing Madame Dieulafoys, in a sketch she wrote for *British Vogue* in June 1926 (314). But Woolf and Sackville-West clearly also saw Western women’s privileged status in comparison to Persian women’s were part of why these possibilities existed, especially since the Persian women Sackville-West saw she described as fully veiled spectators, not participants, who spoke with “charming twittering, as from a lot of birds or children” (Sackville-West in Boxwell 316), emphasising again how empowerment often comes at the expense of the subaltern other (Boxwell 316). But, acknowledging that the Orient of at-home theatricals is based on long-entrenched fantasies about the East as well as filtered impressions of nineteenth-century realities, in the Bakhtinian sense, thespian girls needed to “merge” with imaginary “others” to temporarily construct and perform an embodied character, even if contemporary race theory suggested they would not and in fact could not “become” the other.

Megan Norcia answers her own question about a route to agency / authority / autonomy that does not oppress other people saying “historicizing the primer writers means acknowledging their economic and social realities as well as the ways that their writing seemed to offer them a route to enfranchisement, even while this enfranchisement took place at the expense of non-
European subjects” (145). Delap writes “following the insightful work of historians of gender and empire, feminist constructions of selfhood, authority and agency have been widely recognised as dependent upon imperial hierarchies and exclusions” (390). The experience of girls in their orientalising at-home theatricals is always potentially both empowering and oppressive, both complicit with the imperial project, and critical of marginalisation.

**Imagining and Performing Alternative Femininities: Publics, Counterpublics, and Counter-Privates**

One of the peculiarities of the Victorian at-home theatrical is the somewhat complicated relationship between playwrights, performers, and spectators, and the permeability between the Victorian public and private spheres. Fully unpacking the layers of probable relationships is not possible here, but it is relevant that although published playwrights performed the plays they wrote privately, in their own homes, prior to publication (as many of them assure readers in their introductions), when they publish their plays, they are writing for a “public.” Their introductions indicate that they are writing for children and/or their mothers, but their “publics” are the people who choose to read the play. Michael Warner helpfully explains these publics are of a particular self-selecting group of people, who must not all be known to one another, and some of whom must be strangers to the writer. A public is limited in what it can do – it can “scrutinize, ask, reject, opine, decide, judge, and so on” but as soon as a public takes action, it becomes a particular group, and no longer a more general public. Warner goes on to explain that there are dominant publics and counterpublics. “Dominant publics are by definition those that can take their discourse pragmatics and their lifeworlds for granted, misrecognizing the indefinite scope of their expansive address as universality or normalcy. Counterpublics are spaces of circulation in which it is hoped that the poesis of scene making will be transformative, not replicative merely” (88). It is difficult to say that playwrights, such as Florence Bell and Annie Walker, with their
“New Woman” outlooks, were writing for a counterpublic, but their efforts, and the efforts of playwrights like them may have helped to create a “counterpublic” that may have tied into movements like the “Revolting Daughters.” Warner argues against Nancy Fraser’s coining of the term “subaltern publics,” suggesting that a counterpublic should be more than a group of subaltern people with a reform program. “A counterpublic maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status.” Increasingly, through the Victorian era, women and girls became not only aware of their subordinate status, but began to chafe against the confining social structures that prevented them from being equal members of “the public” or fully participating citizens.

But once the girl readers, imagined by the playwrights, but not known to them, decided to take up a script and perform it “at-home” the performance was not to be “public” but “private.” Guests were invited and selected, and although it cannot be said that the girls truly “knew” some men in the audience whose lives were largely conducted separately from their own, it is probable that the men “knew” the girls (or at least, knew as much as they thought they wanted to know). Certainly, they were acquainted with one another. I would like to suggest that in some cases, the shared experience of theatre performance and spectatorship, potentially offering opportunities for girls to conduct themselves and present themselves in ways that were unfamiliar to themselves and their spectators, and creating space for girls to rethink their identities, as they reconstructed their drawing-room (or other private) space, may have constructed a kind of “counterprivate,” sharing similarities with a “counterpublic” except that the self-selecting group of people making an address (the performance) and the audience of people receiving the address, were all known to each other.

In Chris Eaket’s paper “Running Amok in Utopia: Newmindspace, Flashmobs, and Secondary Orality,” he argues that for spectators, and especially for participants, the collective
“fun” experience of certain flash mobs (such as mass public pillow fights, soap bubble blowing events, and light sabre battles) could allow participants to experience quotidian public space differently, to find community with strangers, to feel differently about their city and to see it in unexpected ways, and to consider what they would need to do to change the way they related to people and their immediate environment so that had those kind of positive feelings more often.

He suggests that in these moments of public fun people can glimpse a kind of utopia, and after the event, may be able to reevaluate and possibly make constructive changes to their daily lives based on their experience. Because participants are mostly strangers, choosing to participate in an event that disrupts the status quo, one might be able to address them as “a counterpublic.”

A Victorian private theatrical, and especially an Oriental one, could change the ways participants, and perhaps spectators, saw each other, saw the space in which the piece was performed, and even considered the way the performance event could alter ideas about what could be desirable in their own lives. The foreign costumes and set decorating, and the way performers moved and behaved could disrupt and fracture views of the home and the people in that space. A large number of families, all independently doing at-home theatricals, could be imagined as creating and participating in “counterprivates” which reconfigured conventional private space, and where girls could defy Victorian girlhood expectations in ways that gradually might spill out into the public sphere, and into “non-theatrical” life. Girls experimenting with alternative femininities in private were tacitly and anonymously connected to the playwright’s “counterpublic” of other girls and women who might be exploring alternate identity performances as well, using the playwright’s public address (the playscript) to “scrutinize, ask, reject, opine, decide, judge, and so on” (Warner). Like flashmobbers reimagining urban spaces as a fleetingly utopic community space, Victorian girl thespians and others who participated in supporting or witnessing their performance could connect to their defamiliarized home space,
and re-imagine how they could live in it. “Oriental” plays could be especially powerful motivators for critically re-thinking space and the way people behave in it because they allow an imaginary “reality” to occupy the home and be embodied by the actors. As mentioned, the fact that behaviours may be perceived as unconventional or even transgressive and that there may be opportunities for girls to perform male roles, all the more increases the potential power of these spaces of potentially raised consciousness and resistance that could be conceived as “counterprivates.”

**Oriental Scripts Challenging Quotidian Life**

In order to discuss the particular potency of Oriental at-home theatricals for challenging girls’ quotidian identities, and offering alternative ways for their audiences to see girls they think they know, in this section I offer extended examples of a few moments from several different “Oriental” plays. Because of cross-dressing potential, girls could play at having adventures, making discoveries, acting in government, and being explorers, not to mention taking on the girl-character roles which allow for participating in violent acts, having ideas and the agency to act on them, playing with erotic sensuality, and subverting contemporary gender power dynamics.

The opening scene of “The Hunchback,” one of the tales of the *Arabian Nights*, is portrayed entirely differently by Mrs. Chisholm and A.H. Gatty, and demonstrates how interpretations of the story could have guided girls to ask different questions about people who were far away and unlike themselves. In Gatty’s 1869 version, the play opens when the Hunchback is already dead. The Tailor begins “why did I ask to dinner / That little wretch? No doubt he was a sinner -- / Else in his throat the fish-bone had not stuck, / And brought us to this crisis of ill-luck” (100). The Tailor’s wife offers suggestions on how to revive him, but ultimately, they begin the process of dropping the dead body at various places where each person assumes
he has accidentally killed the King’s favourite, the Hunchback. When they are all brought before the Caliph, the Hunchback spits out the fish-bone, and everyone is offered a reprieve. The play is a farce with ample opportunity for physical humour, but, apart from Gatty’s suggestion that most of the male roles could be taken by girls, the play offers very little in the opportunity for critical discussions regarding gender, the Orient, or even “others” like the Hunchback.

In contrast, Mrs. Chisholm’s 1871 play opens with the Tailor and his wife, Fatima, gently teasing one another. When his wife spots the Hunchback outside (who is her cousin) she begs her husband to bring him upstairs for supper. We learn that the Hunchback sang songs at the Tailor and Fatima’s wedding but that he had not been able to visit them because the Caliph rarely lets him out of his sight. When the Hunchback says “I hope you are not affronted with me,” Fatima asks her husband to hold her frying pan for a moment, and seizes the Hunchback by both hands, saying, “Now dance, dance; and I will dance too! Oh joy, joy, this is really a happy day! Here is Mustapha, the Caliph’s favourite, come to sup with his poor relations” (7) and they dance around the room together. When the cousins stop to have supper, Fatima exuberantly says “eat! eat! here is a fine bit of fish for you!” (8) and crams it in his mouth, whereupon he chokes and falls over. The difference here is significant because, of course, by now the audience likes all three characters, and they can see Mustafa’s “death” was an accident (although also Fatima’s fault). But more importantly, the thespians have an opportunity to play real affection for “the Hunchback” who is Other because of his physical deformity, they can imagine what the happy dancing between Fatima and her cousin might be like – and might even contradict imagined “Oriental” dancing – and young actors could see Eastern people could be embodied as human characters, rather than mere farcical agents of story. Also, before the Hunchback chokes, he confides that the Caliph is unhappy because he is looking for a new sensation. At the end of the play each of the characters tries to take the blame for the Hunchback’s death in order to save
another. For example, the Caliph demands “and you, woman, you deny that your husband killed Mustafa?” and she replies “I do; it was I who killed him.” But the Tailor interjects, “With kindness, my Lord, as she is doing to me by inches; but let her go, let me suffer in her stead” (27). When the Hunchback is miraculously able to breathe again, the Caliph says, “I think I have experienced a new sensation, for here I have found some persons ready to sacrifice themselves for one another, a thing I had heard of before, but had never really seen” (29). Instead of using the Orient as a source of ridiculousness, or even predictable sensual languor, the inherently funny story allows the Orient to be a site of friendship, compassion, and noble behaviour. Although girls would not be stretched to challenge Victorian conventional identity performances here, they would be invited to perform Oriental characters counter to expectations.

Annie Walker’s (Mrs. Harry Coghill’s) re-telling of “The Tailor Prince,” establishes a female character who is wise, sensible, powerful, haughty, and also motherly: the Queen. Threatening to have her ladies in waiting whipped if they do not sing, and simultaneously interested in admiring fine cloths and fabrics, the Queen is a complex character to play. When the false prince and the true prince both arrive at the palace to claim their destiny as heir to the throne, the Queen recognises her real son at once, but her husband is not satisfied that her instinct could be correct. She devises a plan to determine who is the true Prince and who is (she suspects) the Tailor.

Queen: I have an idea.
King. Have you? What is it?
Queen: Send both these young men away.
King. Away, my dear! But one of them must be our son; I can’t send both away.
Queen. Oh, pshaw! I only mean send them out of hearing. (141)

Once the young men have been sent out of the room, the Queen tells the King her plan:
Queen. Let both these young men be shut up separately. Give to each of them a piece of handsome silk, with needles and thread, and everything necessary, and say to each of them that I, the Queen, desire particularly to have a robe made by the hands of my son. Two days hence let them both be bought [sic] here to present their work to me in your presence.

King. And what then?

Queen. Then we shall know whose fingers have been trained to hold the needle, and whose to hold the sword.

King. Ha! Not a bad idea, though a woman’s.

Queen (contemptuously). Did you ever know any one but a woman who had an idea at all?

Presented as the generator of good ideas, the clever Queen’s test works – but once again, the King refuses to accept the result. She finally suggests that he should consult the Spirit of the Wood, who invents a test with caskets. Walker’s presentation of two ways of women’s knowing being discounted – through motherly instinct, and through a cleverly constructed test – no doubt would have generated some conversation among young girls who could see that the story could have ended long ago if the dull-witted King was not allowed to have the final power of decision.

Not always likeable, the Queen behaves like a monarch who will never be allowed to rule.

Edward Ziter explains “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves” was an incredibly popular pantomime on Victorian stages, and it was also featured in storybooks, toy books, and toy theatres. Unlike Mrs. Chisholm’s “The Hunchback,” performing the play would have positioned girls well beyond of their usual behavioural expectations: either performing dynamic male roles like Ali Baba and the Robber Chief, or performing Morgiana, who is not only a sensual dancer, but the clever heroine who discovers the robbers’ plot, saves the family from certain death, and gives all the villains a violent end. Some scripts offered more scope for embracing agency than others, and I have chosen three versions from the long nineteenth century as examples.

In Amy Whinyates’ version, Morgiana is a reluctant heroine. Unlike little Maude in “Christmas Holidays at Everton” who longs to do “great things,” Whinyates’ Morgiana never dreamed of greatness – she has greatness thrust upon her. When Morgiana discovers the robbers
who have sneaked into the house in jars supposedly containing oil, she rushes to the front of the stage, wringing her hands

Wahi-ahi! Wahi-ahi! We’re lost – undone….
But something must be done.
I’ll heat some oil and pour it on every one.
Morgiana rushes out, returns with tin of oil and pours it hastily into the jars. Throws herself half-fainting on the chair. (35)

The picture of the conventional Victorian melodrama heroine, she gasps

I feel quite faint, but I must not rest here:
The Robber Captain lives – there’s much to fear
Here come the guests! That villain too.
Well well! I know what I must do. (35)

A timid young thespian might have felt inspired by Morgiana’s brave willingness to act in spite of fear, all the while rendering her violence comparatively benign since the stage directions suggest she should act as if she were apologising to her audience as if to say, “I would never do this if I didn’t have to.”

Quite differently, in Florence Bell’s “Ali Baba,” (also described in the previous chapter), Morgiana is actually proud of her violent actions in the final scene. The only really intelligent person on stage, she is quick thinking and quick to act. She offers to dance for the robber chief, and seizes a convenient moment to lunge at him.

Ali Baba: Really, Morgiana. Do take care how you dance! Look what you’ve done; you’ve killed our guest!
Morgiana. Yes, I have stabbed him to the heart.
Amina. It seems so inhospitable. (44)

When Morgiana explains to Ali Baba and his wife that the robbers are also dead she confidently declares “There is no need for anyone here to be murdered – I have been beforehand with the robbers. They are murdered themselves. I have killed them all, every one!” (45). As a reward, in
this version of the tale, Morgiana is granted freedom from slavery, and “five asses laden with
gold” (45). The play closes with a toast to Morgiana’s health, ensuring that the focus of the story
is really on her, rather than her former master.

Marah Gubar demonstrates that by the end of the Victorian Era and into the long
nineteenth century, some playwrights and theatre critics began questioning whether young
people liked to see cruelty or sorrow on stage, and whether they wanted to play really nasty roles,
or violent characters themselves (198). In keeping with that change in attitude, Marion Adams
revised classic tales. For example, in her Orientalised version of “Bluebeard,” the Baron was
enchanted – when the enchantment was broken, he was shocked and remorseful. Similarly,
Marion Adams avoids violence, in “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves.” Morgiana never murders
the Robber Chief, nor does she get to boil the thieves in oil. Instead, she has to find a clever,
gentle way to save the day:

Thieves. Spare us! Spare us!
Gina. Prayers are of no avail!
The thieves were scalded in the fairy tale.
Assad. We know they were. But that’s another story.
Gina, be kind, and win greater glory.
Do go one better than the Arabian Nights;
They knew no mercy in the older days.
Now, even forty thieves should have their rights
And not be butchered in such horrid ways. (31)

When Morgiana (or Gina, in this version) asks the robbers if they were planning to kill the whole
family, they admit that they were. But, because she is kind, she doses each of the robbers with
Winslow’s sleeping syrup (since they can do no harm while they sleep). Perhaps not as much fun
to play as a scene with boiling oil, the story still positions Morgiana a heroine rather than a
helpless bystander, but as mentioned earlier in this chapter, when she later disguises herself as a
gypsy, she asks to be forgotten – and at the end of the play, Adams ensures that she is.
Just as Bertolt Brecht set his plays in distant countries or times to help his audience think about the economic and political situation he critiqued, playwrights could make use of the distance between Oriental characters and young thespians to throw certain socio-political possibilities into relief. Performing a complex character like Morgiana – whether reluctantly, enthusiastically, or in an alternatively clever way – could enable Victorian girls to imagine themselves as strong women who do not merely deal in trifles, but could influence their own lives and the lives of others.

**Performing the Edge and the Other**

Oriental at-home theatricals offered Victorian girls many similar opportunities for re-imagining their identities, re-constructing their own futures, and being newly seen and imagined by their own community, as other at-home theatricals did. However, the imaginary hyperreality of the “Orient” meant “Oriental” plays could offer girls something additional. Dressed as someone completely other than who they are, girls could wrestle with violence, laugh at strictures on their behaviour, explore their own sensuality, and most importantly, have a chance to stride confidently and passionately inhabit a wider world than they might ever see outside their imaginations. Dressed as a man, they could brandish a sword and lead others into battle; dressed as a gypsy, they could operate outside the confines of “English life” and imagine a future with more control; dressed as an “Oriental” woman, they could dance, command governments, and commit murder. And while their fathers and uncles “knew” that their daughters could never behave violently in “real life,” since it was against their racial profile, the girls could have the thrill of trying it out, imagining it was real, and perhaps, asking themselves “why not”?

The idea that a person’s behavioural destiny was inscribed in the body meant that when girls experimented with transgressive identities, since parents believed their daughters were
inherently English, the girls would not (and perhaps even could not) adopt “Oriental” deviant behaviours in quotidian life. These beliefs about the significance of a person’s physical characteristics found their way into the apparent rules of fancy dress costuming, making it more difficult for fair girls to convincingly experiment with the “Orient” than dark haired girls, and pointing out that shy, quiet girls should not attempt to be convincing as an imperious Egyptian queen.

Performing a powerful, imaginary character, whether male or female, could inspire girls to think differently about how it felt to embody a passionately agentic role, and in consequence, they could think differently about what they wanted out of their own future lives. Like cosplayers who explain that dressing up can give them a sense of a new identity, Victorian girls could perform as a radically different Oriental woman or man, and experience what it might mean to be someone different. The private spaces throughout England, where these critical discoveries were being explored could be described as multiple “counterprivates,” which together, could be part of the forward-thinking playwrights’ “counterpublic,” collectively but separately thinking about social change.

The examples I offered from the plays I examined demonstrate that the possibilities in all the “Oriental” plays are not the same, nor are they all equally potent. Some offer roles that replicate English values, some offer a combination of conventional gender performances, and

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105 Transgressive behaviour could be found in European women as well, and Joan of Arc was a popular character for Fancy Dress Balls (although I have no juvenile plays where she is featured). In *Bow Bells* we are advised that a “slight, lively, fair woman” would look “ridiculous as Joan of Arc” (1894) suggesting very strong ideas about physical appearance and personal character. In *Women of History* by Eminent Writers (1881), the entry on Joan of Arc (by de Quincey) betrays some anxiety about Joan of Arc’s particular kind of heroism, beginning “What is to be thought of her?” (81). Near his conclusion, De Quincey writes, “Woman, sister, there are some things which you do not execute as well as your brother, man; no, nor ever will; but I acknowledge that you can do one thing as well as the best of us men… you can die grandly, and as goddesses would die, were goddesses mortal” (84). Perhaps Joan of Arc’s ultimate execution made her a “safer” heroine. Regardless of how Victorians viewed European girls of history, middle-class English Victorians seemed to feel very confident about their security of their position: newspaper reports indicate that they did not worry about negative influences of “Penny Dreadfuls” on middle-class boys – only on working-class ones. As mentioned in Chapter 3, stereotypes regarding girls and class were so strong that it seems likely that middle-class girls were completely free of suspicion of “descending” into a life of crime as well.
something shocking or subversive, and only a few are completely different from an English girl. But, as Jill Dolan argues with regard to “utopian performatives,” the effects of performance experiences are cumulative: when girls performed in ways that were unexpected or on the margins of conventional, those performances could still contain subversive gestures. Some plays might encourage a previous unconsidered affinity with women of the Orient, but most contributed to the Imperial project which insisted on English superiority, and “Oriental” difference, inferiority, and essential otherness, ultimately meaning that English girls (likely unwittingly) contributed to the oppression of others as they used the imaginary “reality” of the Orient to critique and change their own lives.
Chapter Five: Listening to Mid-Victorian Girls' Voices and Making Gaps Speak
Diaries, Letters, Memoirs and Playbills

Imaginative reconstructions of the past, tightly wedded to historical knowledge...can bridge the gap in our evidence and allow us the marrow of human feeling. --Tiya Miles 60

When, in the summer of 2014, and the autumn of 2013, I began to seek out the voices of girls who participated in mid- to late-Victorian at-home theatricals, I discovered both more and less than I expected in diaries, letters, and personal writing by those who wrote theatricals featured in this dissertation, and by girls and young women who participated or observed the original family performances. While some of the moments families and/or girls chose to record are rich with details that help me to position how girls experienced at-home theatricals, why they mattered to them, how they might have influenced their thinking about their own identities, and their own possible futures, there were, nevertheless, gaps. Chapters 4 and 5 are very much stories about what I discovered, and about those gaps.

Of the girls and women who wrote, participated in, and witnessed juvenile at-home theatrical performances put on by their families that were later destined for publication, some did, indeed, make references to them in diaries, letters, and other personal writing attesting to the importance they held in their lives at that moment, or upon reflection. Yet, not everyone who participated wrote about the activity, which is particularly interesting if those same girls and women wrote about other family happenings. Some playwrights and daughters of playwrights made terse notes regarding the rehearsals and/or performances in their diaries, but they went on

106 In chapter 5, one of the New Woman playwrights I discuss is Amy Levy, and her work is not featured elsewhere in this dissertation. I intended to discuss her “Unhappy Princess” in chapter 2, but the text and characters were more relevant to my discussion on archives and supplementary sources, so her work is only found there.
at great length about dances, picnics, or skating. Similarly, some girls or young women wrote extensively about aspects of their theatrics that I would not have expected to receive much attention (such as arguments about casting), while they wrote comparatively little about the performance itself. Significantly, some playwrights or theatrical organisers who are remembered by family, in print, for being great proponents of at-home theatrical activities, left little or no trace about their own thoughts on the matter.

I do not believe that it is reasonable to treat the gaps as mere absences in the social record or shortcomings in the present research – as evidence that I simply looked in the wrong places, or that these “unfound” stories mean theatrics were uninteresting to writers to begin with, benignly neglected by them, and therefore, unavailable to me. Rather, I think that it is essential to try to understand the meaning of the gaps: why do they exist? Why were some moments remarkable to some girls, and others not? Are there reasons why particular types of reflection are rare in the material I examined?

Jo-Anne Dillabough cautions researchers who would “rescue women” by retrieving the lost girl, or the lost girl’s voice, against presenting young women as “unable to ‘speak’, or initiating a ‘form of telling’ in any meaningful sense, for themselves, about their own social conditions” (194). Evidently, the young women whose various writings I read were quite capable of communication. Dillabough argues that even based in what she describes as a “politics of love,” researcher rescue efforts often wrench girls’ stories from a specific narrative dimension based in the material conditions of space and time, creating closure through a re-representation, that is often framed through a researcher gaze of what she calls “middle-class modality of girlhood, and legitimate forms of female citizenship” (195). I take Dillabough’s concern seriously, and do not wish to “speak for” Victorian girls, or to wrest their stories from their own, particular lived experiences, yet I believe that there are ways to acknowledge the specificity of their time
and place while also acknowledging what Rebecca Schneider calls the sometimes unproductive “habit of linear time” (20) and what Doreen Massey describes as the open-ended processual relations and interconnected trajectories that make up the not-static quality of space (230).

In order to imaginatively speculate about the gaps in the archives I visited, and reconstruct what I might have heard Victorian middle-class girls say if I could have involved them in an ethnographic qualitative research study, I use four kinds of supplementary and illuminating sources of information: other Victorian women’s life writing, particularly as analysed by Valerie Sanders; research concerning twentieth- and twenty-first century adolescent girls; nineteenth-century fiction; and facts about the trajectory of the young women’s lives after they created their written traces. In Chapters 4 and 5 I use all 4 kinds of supplementary sources, but using fiction is especially important in Chapter 4, and using twenty and twenty-first century drama education research is more important in Chapter 5. In both cases, I hope the supplementary material I chose goes beyond mere facts and helps get to the “marrow of human feeling” Miles mentions in the opening epigraph.

Since Valerie Sanders makes significant observations about Victorian women’s life writing, autobiography, the construction of self, and women’s self-censorship, her analysis of other girls’ and women’s life writing suggest ways to approach the material I examined, and to illuminate gaps regarding what girls said and what was left unheard. Sanders points out that one significant reason for lack of self-reflection in writing can be found in Jane Welsh Carlyle’s exclamation in 1843, that ‘decency forbids’ her to write an autobiography ‘without reservation or false colouring’ (Sanders Private 1). Particularly useful are Sanders’ Records of Girlhood I and II in which she collects and discusses not only the meanings of the content choices, but the significance of ways Victorian girls and women reconstructed their lives through autobiography. Only one of
the writers I discuss, Charlotte Yonge, is featured in these collections, yet Sanders’ observations can be judiciously applied to other girls and women.

Second, keeping in mind Sanders’ assertions about self-censorship, I use research about twentieth- and twenty-first century adolescents to illuminate what Victorian girls might have written about themselves, had they given themselves permission, or had they allowed themselves to be so (in their worldview) self-indulgent. Researchers like Kathleen Gallagher, Christine Hatton and Jonothan Neelands all wrestle with ideas of learning, memory, representation, reflection, and identity politics among adolescents taking drama classes in schools, and while these contemporary girls cannot speak for Victorian middle-class girls, their observations can help us understand what might have been said, what girls might have thought, and what girls may have reflected many years later. Although Catherine Driscoll argues that American twenty-first-century girls share a legacy with Victorian girls, and believes many discourses regarding gender and sexuality were developed in the nineteenth-century and still influence us today (Driscoll), the majority of the connections between girls of the past and girls of my present are not causal. There are a few cases where I can see deep structural similarities between the worlds of Victorian girls and Canadian girls today (stories related by one participant in Kathleen Gallagher’s research about pervasive patriarchal discourses in a Catholic school come to mind), but for the most part, they are merely analogous. The girls are young people on the threshold of adulthood, taking on drama projects, and their experiences resonate with one another because the situation is similar – not because it is the same. These studies should not “wrest” nineteenth-century girls out of their own lived experiences, nor should they speak for girls living a century or more earlier than the participants in these studies. But similarly, it seems visionless to ignore research that asks questions I would have liked to ask Victorian girls about their experiences, but which, for a variety of reasons, they did not and even could not ask themselves. The insights girls and young
women reveal about themselves in twenty-first century research can shed light on aspects of
girlhood that can judiciously be placed alongside Victorian writing and reflections, and may
furthermore suggest reasons for certain preoccupations, and also, for some of the gaps.

Third, girls and young women in the Victorian era were captured by several writers in
fiction, and these stories, while certainly not “fact”, can also help to fill the gaps that exist where
girls did not write about themselves. Furthermore, I critically use some of the fiction they did
write. In chapter 4, these stories were written by the very writers into whose lives I was digging,
and offer insights and suggest ways of interpreting the social record.

Finally, facts regarding the actual theatrical performances, and the girls’ known futures
(known to us with the benefit of hindsight, although, unless writing memoir, still unknown to
Victorian girl writers), compared with their own young reflections and those of their families help
to make sense of what it is possible to imagine, even if it is not possible to conclusively know.

Slightly skewing Rebecca Schneider’s original intentions with her idea of the copy, the
clone, and re-enactment (6) each of the girls’ or witnesses’ descriptions in letters, memoirs, or
diaries of an at-home theatrical event is a kind of “re-enactment” or copy of the production.
Moreover, the published versions of the scripts offer glimpses into an imaginary and idealised
version of the actual performance that most probably preceded the publication – another
inadequate (or better than adequate improvement?) copy or record of the moment. These
records do not always provide critical commentary or suggest participants’ emotional
engagement with the event, but they open up spaces that help to guide inquiry into the labour of
preparation, the ephemeral moment of performance, and the possibility of reflection into its
significance.

These next two chapters, chapters 4 and 5, are structured in a series of narratives. In each
sub-section, I will share a story about my research regarding a particular family who participated
in at-home theatricals, and in which one female family member wrote them, and I will relate some insights about theatricals and girlhood I gained from the archival and historical record. I discuss the key playwrights for each family in, more or less, chronological order, based on either the publication or performances of their plays: Julia Corner, Charlotte Mary Yonge, Juliana Horatia Ewing (née Gatty), and Louisa Powell MacDonald in chapter 4, and in chapter 5, the writers of the “New Woman” era, Amy Levy, Clara Ryland (née Chamberlain), and Florence Bell. I examine letters, diaries, photographs, playbills, and memoirs, and through these, the voices of writers and young performers speak about theatrical pleasures and struggles, as well as interests and concerns that (for them) superseded the theatrical project. In each subsection I also highlight some particularly significant gaps, and through informed speculation, and in an attempt to imaginatively furnish those gaps by incorporating other Victorian girl observations, twenty-first century drama education research, and fiction, I construct potential meaning from those gaps so that they are not mere absences or representations of “unfound” material, but rather, silences that voice something profound about Victorian girlhood, drama, identity, agency, and, in fact, girlhood in general.

**Julia Corner: The Corner and Heppel Families and the Authoress**

Julia Corner¹⁰⁷ lived from 1798 – 1875, never marrying, but instead, living by her pen. She started publishing in the 1830s and her works include a biography of Hannah More, etiquette manuals framed as edifying stories (published under the pseudonym Samuel Lovechild), several novels, short stories, a “play grammar,” stories written in words of one syllable for early readers, scriptural texts, thick children’s history and geography textbooks for places as near as England

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¹⁰⁷ In the majority of publications written about Julia Corner during her lifetime, she is known as “Miss Corner.” However, here I will use Julia Corner or Corner unless quoting.
and as far away as China, and contributions to two series of plays. Intended for very young
performers, Corner’s *Little Plays for Little Actors [People]*, published with Dean & Son in 1854,
was so successful that Dean & Son launched a series called *Home Acting for Young Performers*
in 1861 to which she contributed several scripts, and which featured content clearly intended
to appeal to older children and teenagers. Amazingly prolific and productive as a writer
(although I have not found a complete bibliography of her work), she has well over 75
publications to her name, and many of her histories and her collections of plays continued to be
recommended by critics and advertised by her publishers over twenty years after her death,
throughout the British Empire. In this section, the gaps around the few details available
regarding her family’s productions of her plays are primarily supplemented by applying Valerie
Sanders’ ideas about nineteenth-century women’s life-writing to the facts about the Corner
family theatricals.

Nineteenth-century critical reviews of Julia Corner’s works tend to admire pleasurable
writing combined with learning, and praise their accuracy and reliability, as well as the industry,
and tact necessary to write an amusing and informative way (such as *The Age*, 1840). Corner

108 Initially the series was published by Dean & Munday who became Dean & Son. Some printings call the series “Little Plays for Little Actors” while others call it “Little Plays for Little People.” The librarians at the Osborne Collection of Early Children’s Literature inform me that this kind of inconsistency is not uncommon in nineteenth-century publishing.

109 In fact, there is a discrepancy here with the publication record. Groombridge is initially credited with publishing the “Plays for Home Acting and Young Performers” series. Advertisements for the scripts in the 1880s include plays from the Dean & Son original series (such as Dick Whittington) and the Groombridge series (such as the Miller’s Maid) suggesting that there may have been a merger, or perhaps Dean bought the rights to these particular plays and combined them. The series mentioned in *Young Folks*, 1882, for example, is called “Little Plays for Little Actors and Home Performance.”

110 “Sleeping Beauty,” “The Miller’s Maid,” “The King and the Troubadour.”

111 *The British Mother’s Magazine* is an exception: in 1850, their review of several of Corner’s histories questions Corner’s efforts to offer unbiased analysis, and not to favour one religion over the other. The Magazine is quite concerned that if Corner is not Roman Catholic, she might as well be, for in her recounting of the histories it seems she believes “the Protestants quite as bad as the Catholics, and the Catholics quite as good as the Protestants.” *The Lady’s Newspaper* also questioned Corner’s use of the device of a white lie in her *Brothers Basset*, arguing that they did not perceive a white lie as “innocent.” Although a few reviews of her novels are guardedly positive, the general impression is that they are not great writing.
was probably best known for her histories, and Dean & Son made use of an Athenaeum review in their advertising copy, including the assessment that Corner’s histories “are really of great worth, and might be read with advantage by multitudes of parents as well as children; the language is so simple that children MUST comprehend it, but withal so free from childish insipidity, that an adult may read with pleasure” (Lady’s Newspaper 1861). Similarly, Le Follet praises her pedagogical method and the age appropriate use of language (1849), while The Ladies’ Cabinet of Fashion asserts “Miss Corner is so intimate with historical facts, and so well known to the youthful public, that her name is a promise of pleasant reading.” In fact, in a survey of literary women of the nineteenth century (and what had begun to be possible), Julia Corner is singled out as an example of an “industrious” woman because of the numerous histories she wrote (Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine).

Meanwhile, her plays also seemed to meet contemporary critical approval because they “please and instruct” (The Morning Post 1854). In their ad copy, Dean & Son quote The Times as declaring, “we predict that Miss Corner’s plays will form the chief delight of any young folks capable of getting up a charade” (January 1854) and in 1856 Dean & Son claimed “these little books never fail to promote amusement and instil moral good in those engaged” (Lady’s Newspaper 1856). In a review of her first play for children, “Beauty and the Beast,” the writer says Corner “has shown the subject capable of a very charming moral, and situations which the small actors and audience will find very interesting indeed” (Ladies’ Cabinet 1854), while “Dick Whittington and His Cat” is praised for smart rhymes, being easy to commit to memory, and the critic argues it will be an amusing addition to any child’s library (Bell’s Life in London and Sporting Chronicle 1854). The glowing review of her Little Plays in the London Morning Post in 1853 credits her with the idea of turning fairy tales into scripts for home performance, claims the rhymes are so pleasant that the old prose may suffer in comparison, notes the props and costume suggestions with approval,
and enthusiastically writes that “Miss Corner is ever devising some new method of instruction and amusement for the young” and that they will be entertaining recreation for the holidays. The review concludes “If anyone desires to ingratiate himself with the young people, let him take Miss Corner’s plays in his hand, and we will answer for the cordiality of his reception. They must be the favourite gift books of the season.” The Newcastle Courant (1855) received a copy of “Mother Goose” to review and suggests the book has a good moral for little ones and children of a larger growth, and recommends “Papas and Mammas who love their children (as all papas and mamas surely do) to procure a copy and send it to the nursery for their verdict” which the writer confidently declares will be positive.

These verdicts by contemporaneous taste-makers, and especially the last two, draw attention to the fact that the reviewers in these newspapers and magazines are all adults. However, it seems probable that children did enjoy putting on Julia Corner’s plays: Aunt Judy’s Magazine esteemed the plays in the “Little Plays for Little Actors” series so highly, the editor said they were the best plays she knew of for “little children [emphasis in original].” Her observation is hardly surprising since, as I mention in a subsequent subsection, the Gatty children enjoyed performing Miss Corner’s plays in their home when they were young. Aunt Judy’s Magazine also includes, in the correspondence section, contributors offering to swap copies of other playscripts in exchange for any of Corner’s plays – so they must have enjoyed a good reputation among potential performers.

Julia Corner was such a well known name in the mid- to late-nineteenth century that reviews of her work appeared in magazines aimed at ladies, gentlemen, boys, and girls, and she could be confidently referenced in other reviews, such as a review of poetry in John Bull (1877) and mentioned in a satirical Punch article called “The Prince of Wales and the Press.” The Ladies’ Treasury survey of possible suitable employments for women suggests a variety of literary careers,
and claims that Corner’s writing for children on historical and other subjects brought her both “wealth and fame” (1864) – or at least that was the public impression. Susan Mumm’s research into the Royal Literary Fund to which authors who wrote works of a moral nature and uplifting tone might apply for financial aid, (59) indicates that Julia Corner applied for assistance at the age of 75, declaring with pride “I have every reason to believe (and it affords me great satisfaction so to do) that my books have been and still are, of some use in the world” (Corner June 1873 RLF) and “as long as I was able to write I was sure of maintenance” (Corner in Mumm 73). Her application indicates how important writing was to her, both as a viable means of support, and also, in terms of her identity. Yet at the end of her life she was in need of funds to deal with medical care and the costs of, as she put it, “advanced age”, in spite of her savings and the continuing circulation and popularity of her earlier work. She may have been a famous and financially successful writer, but age has its costs.

While investigating this archive, I considered Julia Corner’s motivation to become a professional at-home playwright, and in particular, the source of her idea to publish plays for children. Clearly, being a writer of some reputation was an important part of her identity, but I also wanted to understand what getting-up plays might have meant to her, and what she hoped they might mean to potential young thespians. Besides the fact that they could be a lucrative source of income, there are at least three reasons why Corner might have taken an interest in writing and publishing plays for the young. First, one of Corner’s early works was a biography of Hannah More (1838) suggesting that she admired Mrs. More, who is famous for her

112 Two of her relatives contributed letters to support her application (Louisa Heppel and A. Bittelston), and it is possible that A. Bittelston was the young actor who played Florinet in the 1860 family revival of “Puss in Boots.” Evidence of two family members writing letters on her behalf indicates that her family did not abandon her, but rather, they were taking advantage of a source of support, perhaps at their Aunt’s request, in an effort to help her retain independence. On June 13 1873, Julia Corner gratefully acknowledged receipt of the sum of sixty pounds offered to her by the Royal Literary Fund.
philanthropy, religious writing, and, in fact, for her plays for young ladies to perform at school. Whether or not Corner ever performed any of the plays is unknown, but if a pious and well-reputed woman like Mrs. More could publish plays for young people, it could have seemed reasonable to Corner to write at-home plays for younger children.

Second, like many middle class Victorians, Corner’s family loved to put on theatricals in their own home, and Julia Corner performed in them. The Heppel Family and Corner Family were close cousins and friends – they intermarried and socialized together, and today, much of the record of Corner’s life resides in a large trunk in the Heppel Family personal archive, marked “AEH” for Alice Emmeline Heppel, who performed The King in a juvenile production of “Puss in Boots.” In the trunk there is a playbill for a January 24th, 1837 performance of *The Rivals.* Julia Corner was already almost 40, and based on the elaborate program, it seems likely that this was not the family’s first-ever production. The playbill claims the piece is being put on at the “Theatre Loyal,” and Julia Corner is listed as performing the role of Miss Lydia Languish. The trunk also houses the unpublished family memoirs, in which the writer claims to remember family performances of Corner’s “Little Plays for Little Actors,” which I will relate in a little more detail momentarily.

Finally, Corner herself declares that her inspiration for writing and publishing fairy tale plays was Christmas Holiday charades, possibly at Christmas 1852, the year before her *Little Plays for Little Actors* were published:

113 Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s plays were popular amateur material, and the archival records I explored also include references to performances of “The Liar” and “The Critic.” A Private Theatrical version of “The Rivals” is featured in the first chapters of Wilkie Collins’ *No Name* (1862).

114 Lydia is the romantic lead, a teenaged heiress, in search of the kind of love affair one finds in novels.
It happened, during the last Christmas holidays, that I was present on several occasions when a party of young people, from about eight to twelve years of age, contrived to amuse themselves, as well as the elder portion of the company, very agreeably, for the greater part of an evening, by acting charades. The clever and spirited manner in which they represented a variety of characters confirmed me in an idea I had previously entertained, of arranging some of the most popular and favourite stories of our childhood for similar performances. It struck me, that, in personating our old friends Whittington, Mr. Fitzwarren, and the cross Cook, or Cinderella, her proud Sisters, and her fairy Godmother – the younger branches of many a family, especially in the country, might during the winter season, find an innocent and lively recreation. (Preface, vii, viii)

Although she claims the family charades inspired this publication, she notes that it “confirmed in me an idea I had previously entertained,” perhaps as a result of the two previous inspirations I speculated. As mentioned in chapter 1, Corner goes on in her introduction to emphasise the benefits young people could gain from doing theatricals (“their memories would be improved by the necessity of learning perfectly the parts assigned them; and their ingenuity would be exercised in adapting their resources to the arrangement of the scenes to be represented”) (viii), and to assuage any anti-theatrical objections potential buyers may have, she insists the plays are moral, that children love to engage their imaginations and act out roles anyway; that her plays guide the subject matter of their mimicry, and that amusement can be beneficial to children. Near the conclusion of her introduction she also remarks, “I am convinced, from experience as well as reflection, that such performances would be calculated to do good rather than harm” (viii). Perhaps the timeline of her reconstructed remembrances is a bit truncated, and the charades were performed a few winters previously, followed by a few winters in which the Corner and Heppel families tested her plays. Certainly most of the later playwrights for the at-home market in the nineteenth century claim that their plays were tested with family prior to publication, and Charlotte Yonge, about whom I will write more, also notes that doing performances would give her an opportunity to improve her writing. If Corner is convinced from “experience” that such
performances do good, although she might be referencing the other plays her family put on together, she is probably referring to performances of her own plays for children.

Julia Corner’s published plays indicating confidence in young people may betray a certain hemmed in frustration about theatricals in her own life, and offer an impression about what it might have been like to be a woman in a more traditionally oriented mid-Victorian family, and be involved in, and possibly even manage, juvenile theatricals. In the Heppel Family archive, a collection of school work books, filled with copied and recopied versions of the family memoirs (the newer copies being more in keeping with today’s handwriting styles, and therefore, easier to read), includes some observations about the family performances of Julia Corner’s dramatised versions of fairy tales. The “present writer” (whose identity is lost to time, and recopying) claims that he or she recalls the family performances of the plays. The writer says, “on most occasions the stage was “managed”, the scenery painted, the company was drilled, by George R. Corner, the younger, who added to the gaity [sic] of the plays by his witty play-bills. Some of these are still in existence.”

At first, I wondered why her cousin directed her plays, rather than Julia herself. George Richard Corner clearly adored the theatre and seems to have been a witty, memorable and even theatrical personality. In Shanghai, where he went to work in the 1860s, he was one of the founders of the Amateur Dramatic Club, and his 1898 obituary indicates he was dearly missed for all his work. The writer claims he was a “main-stay” of the club, “having designed the stage and painted a large portion of the scenery,” and continuing his interest in the “Lyceum” as Secretary of the Recreation Fund Trustees “almost to the last.” Certainly the program for “Puss and Boots,” (re)mounted by the family “Theatre Loyal” in 1860 includes comments especially for this performance written to amuse the family that were not in the published version, such as pun additions to the cast list (“First and Second Haymaker: both Countrymen, but not Rakes”); the
crew list (“Peruquier: Miss E. Heppel a first rate hand at wigging people”); the details (the performance is free but “No half price. No money returned”) and the scenery descriptions (scene III takes place at the very “Path by the River” “immortalised” by contemporary singer Miss Rebecca Isaacs). George Corner is, indeed, credited as the stage manager, he may have been among the Messrs Corner who built the sets, and if the memoirist is correct, he probably wrote the program. His presence in the family production is absolutely unmistakable.

As for the supporting women, in 1860 the Misses Corner made the costumes, and Miss Julia Corner is credited as the playwright. It is possible that she received acknowledgement during the King’s epilogue, written by Maria Louisa Corner (recorded by the memoirist but not included in the “Puss in Boots” programme) and performed by Alice Emmeline Heppel, as the King. The memoirist claims the last two lines were “And now farewell! Your kind approval grant / Indulgence to our faults is all we want.” But s/he notes that some suggest the last line “should run – ‘And don’t forget the authoress, my aunt’ but it is believed that the epilogue was spoken in its original form.” The memoirist argues the first version to be correct, but the fact that she or he acknowledged discrepancy demonstrates that memory can be uncertain, that there were competing viewpoints, and also that Julia Corner’s presence in the performances was contested.

Further, if on “most occasions” the stage manager was George Heppel, who was the stage manager the other times? The most likely candidate is Julia Corner who knew, therefore, “from experience,” that it was very possible for young women and children to get up a play on their own, and it would have been consistent behaviour to quietly step aside when a male figure wanted to take control. Evidence from Julia Corner’s published scripts indicates that she believes that young people and even girls were absolutely capable of launching a production on their own, and that it would, very likely, be a success. Following her own advice in Sketches of Little Girls
and *Girls in Their Teens* she may have considered her own self-effacement a virtue, and tried hard to serve the male members of her family, and as a result, perhaps, in her own family, she was eclipsed by a male personality.

The memoirist’s thin reflection “Some other performances of these “Little Plays for Little People” [sic] remain in the recollection of the present writer,” almost raises more questions than it answers, widening a gap in my understanding that might be bridged if I knew more about that person’s identity. The comment suggests that the play performances were both memorable and seen as notable. But since the “present writer” is unknown, as is the time of writing of the original memoir document, I cannot speculate in what capacity the writer remembers the performances: as an actor? as a set builder or costume designer? as a child or adult audience member? Each of these types of participation and witnessing lend themselves to different kinds of experiences of a theatrical event. If the writer was female and a performer, however, the social conventions of the nineteenth century make it unsurprising that she would not record details about her own participation. Valerie Sanders observes:

> repeatedly in writing by Victorian women, the intimate is marginalized, pushed to the very edge of their text, or restricted to incidental or fragmented expression in works purporting to be something else. As if they felt their own experiences were an unpardonable intrusion, they held them back from all but occasional expression, using themselves more as case-histories than as unique examples of personality and achievement. *(Private 15)*

It may be that the gesture to memory of a particular experience that made the writer visible to her whole family was all she felt comfortable recording, especially when she was supposed to be writing about Miss Julia Corner, rather than herself.

The original writer may have been male, based on a story the memoirist recounts about one of Corner’s nephews going to a new school, and being asked if he were related to Miss Julia Corner who writes the histories:
A relative of this lady well remembers that on going to a new school, he was asked by a ‘big boy’ if he were of the family of “that beast that wrote the histories.” On owning the soft impeachment, he received [such is schoolboy humour] “a punch for the History of Rome and another for the history of Greece.” What the result would have been if this ‘young barbarian’ had extended his studies to the whole circle of Miss Julia’s writings it is painful to contemplate. Possibly the smaller boy might not have survived to tell the tale. In that case, these pages would have been written, if at all, by other hands.

Does this mean the writer is male, and the victim of schoolyard bullying? At first I thought so. And yet, the writer could equally be any younger family member, descended from the poor victim of the bully at school. Since the task of writing memoirs of this ilk seems more female, simply because of the preoccupation with family matters and relationships rather than great deeds (Peterson 17), this does seem like the most likely, if not definitive, direction towards authorship. If the writer is female, it also helps to explain why the writer modestly masks her own identity and participation in the home theatricals.

Since Julia Corner’s personal letters have been lost, and the recorded reflections on performing in the Corner/Heppel family theatricals are scanty, they open wide gaps of factual questions as well as questions concerning the significance of what is possible to know. Because the name of the memoirist and the identity of the person who directed the other “little plays” are unknown, and since it is not possible to say, conclusively, what how the Heppel and Corner children experienced performing the “little plays,” nor are Julia Corner’s reflections on the performances available, exploring this archive reveals details about at-home theatricals even as it opens gaps. As mentioned, for this family archive, the gaps are partly illuminated by Valerie Sanders’ suggestion that Victorian women thought it was unseemly to spend too much time thinking about themselves. But another way to light up the gaps is to look at ways that Corner wrote the plays to offer girls moments of agency and resistance.
Sometimes it is easy to discount the socio-political perspectives of women like Julia Corner and (as I will describe in the next section), Charlotte Mary Yonge – quiet, encouraging, and respectful of children and girls – because they wrote on the cusp of radical times, when their ideas about women’s power and potential seem to pale in comparison with the either subversive notions or vocally pro-women views of their near-contemporaries. When Corner published *Little Plays for Little Actors* in 1854 her *Sketches of Little Girls* strongly suggests that she did not have aspirations to disrupt the patriarchal status quo, but the plays she wrote for girls and boys to perform at home invited young people to take action: to be leaders and managers, to modify their space, and to take up fictional roles and behave in thought-provoking ways that were outside Victorian expectations. As explained in more detail in Chapter One, Corner’s publications indicate that she not only believed in the value of good education for girls, she had a great deal of respect for girls’ intelligence, ingenuity, creativity and probable domestic skills. Her stage directions and advice offer insight into how Corner tried to establish conditions through her at-home theatricals in which girls could imagine leadership identities for themselves, possibilities those playwrights dreamed were attainable for girls, and how they believed *theatricals* could alter how home audiences imagined domestic space and the lives of girls in it.

Besides encouraging young people to take leadership roles in “getting-up” the play, the way that Julia Corner constructed the characters also invited girls to challenge expectations of their own daily behaviour, and to push back slightly against the status quo. Since Alice Emmeline Corner played the King in the Theatre Loyal 1860 production, we know that in her family, through her theatricals, girls could take on male roles, and stride across a room, imagining being leaders and people with far more power and agency than they could expect to have in their quotidian lives. Corner also wrote in small moments of female resistance to normative behaviour expectations in all her plays. Although she is describing the way nineteenth-century women
approached autobiographical writing, Valerie Sanders explains that with the benefit of hindsight, many Victorian women “recognized the beginnings of their absorption into a repressive code, and used their childhood reminiscences to highlight the split between their emotional and intellectual needs and the meagre provision made for them by society” (71). Sanders argues that for these women, the split remained throughout their adult lives, and as adult writers, they were often forced to compromise (72). But they compromised less in their fiction, where many channelled their own life ambitions, perhaps, as Sanders suggests, because fiction offers more freedom, and more “anarchic potential of female passion” (16). Little Plays for Little Actors are far from anarchic, but Corner challenges the self-effacement she advocates in Sketches of Little Girls. In “Puss in Boots,” the Queen and Princess do not always defer to men in their lives, but trust their own observations about life instead. For example, when the King announces he is going to go hunting rabbits, the Second Lord says:

I fear, your majesty, we sha’n’t find one;  
For all the wisest men are of the opinion,  
That there are no rabbits in your whole dominion.  
Queen. The wisest men are very foolish then  
For I have seen them run across the glen. (12)

At the end of the play, the King tells the Princess that she should marry Florinet, who is now Prince of Ogrelan. The Queen considers her daughter’s feelings more, and asks her what she says to the idea. The daughter replies, “It is my duty to obey/ his majesty’s commands, be what they may.” But in an aside, the First Lord whispers to the Lady in Waiting, “But if she did not like them, I’ll be bound/ She would not be quite so obedient found” (31). By having the Queen ask for daughter’s opinion on the matter, and by the Lord pointing out that the Princess might have resisted if she did not like the plan, Corner is both writing a character that is polite, good, and submissive in the conventional and “correct” sense, but allows for the possibility of a thin fissure
of personal agency, and a more independent woman’s identity. Perhaps Corner did not choose to push back in her own family, or to draw attention to herself in ways that she did not consider to be “correct”, but in her theatricals for home performance she wrote in opportunities for her nieces and for other girls to do what she may have craved.

The ephemera relating to Julia Corner’s life and her theatricals provide a small window on what theatricals might reveal about, and might have meant to, mid-nineteenth-century girls, and they also expose details that help to imagine what at-home theatricals might have looked like. The memoirist and the playbill offer evidence of how a middle-class family good-humouredly mirrored and even parodied some aspects of professional theatrical productions while demonstrating awareness at their own deficiencies. As will become more significant as I unpack the other archives I discuss, the theatricals place emphasis on pleasure in the moment for the participants and audience. In her own family it appears that even behind the (probably imaginary) footlights, generally speaking girls and boys followed gendered behaviour expectations: in spite of the openness she scripted, boys did carpentry, while girls made costumes; and girls practiced self-effacement and stepped aside when men wanted to lead. It is clear that her identity as an independent writer was important to her, but whether she also wanted to be a leader/stage manager is not. Julia Corner, as the playwright, may or may not have had special recognition during their family performances, which raises unanswerable questions about whether she craved or eschewed the attention. We do know that in Corner’s family productions, girls had the opportunity to play boys, and Corner’s scripts push gently at status quo gender behaviour expectations, but they do not push very hard. In the mid-century, theatricals offered girls in Corner’s own family (and beyond) a chance to do something a little bit outside of their normal lives in a respectable way. At the same time, her scripts gave scope for girls to imagine potential for agency, disruption, and change.
The major gaps in my research remain a lack of commentary from Corner herself, and the uncertain memoirist’s identity, which influences how accurately I can read that document. Yet the empty spaces could evoke Corner’s own longing and frustration, a desire to be a leader in her own right, rather than someone who created leadership scaffolds in the form of juvenile theatrical scripts.

Charlotte Mary Yonge: Seeking Reflections in Fiction

Charlotte Mary Yonge\textsuperscript{115} (1823 - 1901) was even more prolific than Julia Corner (her publications number over 250), spending more than 40 years editing a journal for girls (\textit{The Monthly Packet}) and influencing numerous professional writers. Even so, her three \textit{Historical Dramas}\textsuperscript{116} received comparatively little critical attention in the popular press, either when they were published as part of the Groombridge “Magnet Stories,” or when they were re-published in their own volume. The plays were made available after she had achieved significant success with her 1853 novel \textit{The Heir of Redclyffe}, one of the most popular novels of the Victorian era (Hayter 1). In fact, most of the Groombridge advertising material for the \textit{Historical Dramas} capitalizes on her past success and does not list Charlotte Mary Yonge as the author, but states “by the author of \textit{The Heir of Redclyffe},”\textsuperscript{117} The printed commentary I have found is sparse: \textit{The Ladies’ Cabinet of Fashion} recommends “Mice at Play” as a history that appeals to young and adult readers alike (330), but I have not found other reviews outside of magazines targeting young readers. The

\textsuperscript{115} Like Julia Corner, Charlotte Mary Yonge was usually referred to as “Miss Yonge” in print. In 1996, Alethea Hayter writes, “Miss Yonge [as she has always been called by her readers and critics until recently; to call her ‘Charlotte’, still less ‘Yonge’, will always seem ludicrous to anyone habitually reading books by or about her]...” (1). Nevertheless, in the interest of consistency, I will refer to her as Charlotte Yonge or Yonge in this chapter.

\textsuperscript{116} \textit{Historical Dramas} is not paginated, which influences my citations.

\textsuperscript{117} It is possible that at this stage in her career Charlotte Yonge may have wished to remain anonymous: many women writers did. Early in her career, she donated all her profits to charity in an effort to diffuse to her material success. However, in letters, and publicly in \textit{The Monthly Packet}, she openly acknowledged her authorship both of \textit{The Heir of Redclyffe} and \textit{The Historical Dramas}. 
plays are also applauded in *Aunt Judy’s Magazine*, both as recommendations in their correspondence (XCII), and in a “Talk Upon Books” review saying, “‘Historical Dramas’ by the author of ‘The Heir of Redcliffe [sic]’ … needs no recommendation from *Aunt Judy*. The plays contain a little of everyday life interests mixed up with historical facts, so that a great deal worth remembering is conveyed with the amusement. They appear best calculated for children from nine to thirteen or fourteen” (XXXIII, January 1 1869). Much later, *Monthly Packet* readers contacted Yonge to see where they could get copies of the plays, but they had gone out of print and Yonge’s efforts to recover copyright or to get the plays republished by a new publisher failed. Although the letters indicate that there was clearly some interest in the work, and that the scripts responded to a demand for non-fairy tale plays especially for young people, considering her stature as a writer I am surprised that that plays did not receive more attention. Regardless of their apparent lack of commercial success or popularity, the plays offer insights into the at-home theatrical experience for girls and children because some details about Yonge’s original at-home performances of these plays exist, and because performing them inspired her

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118 In a letter to Mr. Craik of Macmillian publishers, June 23, 1886, she writes:

*If you are looking up my old books there are some I should like to resuscitate, if you can find out what became of Groombridge’s books (I believe he failed). He had a series of Magnet stories, for which I wrote four[;] three little plays - the Mice At Play, the Strayed Falcon and the Apple of Discord - and a story The Sea Spleenwort, each making a little book, for the plays (historical) are embedded in a story. I think I had £5 for the copyright of each, but they have never been reprinted and I should think could easily be bought back if they can be traced.*

*Yours truly*

CMYonge  [Jordan et. al. Letters of Charlotte Mary Yonge]

*The Osborne Collection of Early Books, vol 1*, lists Groombridge as an active publisher between 1806 and 1865 (475), suggesting that Yonge may be correct.
fictional reflections, which are the primary type of source used in this section to furnish gaps in personal remembrances.\textsuperscript{119}

Far more details about Charlotte Mary Yonge and her personal life are available to the public today than those for Julia Corner, and those help contextualise Yonge’s views on and experiences of girlhood, and how theatricals were significant to her as a writer, and what she hoped her scripts and productions might be for her friends. Yonge wrote a brief memoir of her childhood, her friend Christabel Coleridge (Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s granddaughter) wrote and published Yonge’s biography and some of her letters, and the Charlotte Mary Yonge society have published hundreds of her letters online. Furthermore, although she was an only child for many years, and then only had one brother, her family were close to three families with many children: the Yonges of Puslinch (10 children about her age), the Coleridge Family of Devon, and the Moberly family, with 15 slightly younger children, who she met when she was 16. Not only were they, generally speaking, a great and happy influence on her otherwise solitary life, she used her experiences with them to help her to write popular (and extensive) fiction about family life. In George Moberly’s memoirs \textit{Dulce Domum} (collected by his daughter C.A.E. Moberly), for example, she writes, “we used to recognise personal traits in Miss Yonge’s books” (117), and she

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{119} In this chapter the most significant fictional reflections are the fictional frames around the \textit{Historical Dramas} she published. However, Yonge wrote about theatricals in \textit{Pillars of the House} (1875), \textit{Strolling Players} (1893), \textit{Henrietta’s Wish} (1853), and to a lesser extent, \textit{Two Sides of the Shield} (1885) and \textit{The Long Vacation} (1895). She also wrote a piece about Christmas Mummers in 1858. In an advice column for women, Yonge wrote: “It does not seem to me that, in right measure, theatres and operas need be shunned by those in whose way they come naturally.” [She admits some people are over-stimulated by them]. "But in most the enjoyment is a safe one, and a delightful study of the real beauty and purpose of isolated passages already learnt. The other consideration which strongly moves many against these spectacles is the harm they do to professionals and to the lower grade of persons they attract. This, besides the actual disgust of the sight, is an absolute reason against the ballet; but the other grades of actors and singers in the well-regulated theatres are often beyond all reproach, and take delight in the exposition of the beauty of their parts. Of course it would be doubtful whether a profession involving so much display and stimulating of sentiments is always a safe one; but it seems to me that where gifts are bestowed in such a manner as they were upon the Kemble family, it is a token of their being intended to serve for the good of man." (\textit{Womankind}. 123.)
\end{flushright}
offers some specific examples. While not autobiographical, the characters are widely recognised as modelled after members of those families (Hayter), so when she discusses details about performing at-home theatricals, it is not a stretch to conclude that those are based on a realistic view of experience.

Yonge’s fiction is significant here because it positions the stories and scripts in *Historical Dramas* in relation to her views on girlhood, the families who performed her scripts initially, and the work she published elsewhere. In her introduction to her father’s memoirs, C.A.E. Moberly declares that Yonge:

> Not only through her own prolific writings, but through the numbers of story-writers who have followed in her wake, she largely influenced the mothers of the next generation. The strenuous, intelligent, inquiring girls presented by her books were almost a new departure. The single heroines of Miss Austen's and Miss Ferrier's novels, the Emmas and Elizabeths, Annes and Marys, sensible, bright, and clever, did not stand alone in Miss Yonge's books, but had sisters and friends as charming as themselves; and the fathers of the next generation were also strongly interested and influenced by them. (*Dulce* 4)

Yonge valued both community acceptance and strong, intelligent women and girls. Her plots grate against my twenty-first century sensibilities since her female characters’ happy endings often teach them how to be less individual and join the community embrace. Yet in spite of her conservative, and patriarchal conclusions, her characters offer significant insights into how she saw girlhood and the possibilities of at-home theatricals for girls.

Valerie Sanders re-printed parts of Yonge’s childhood memoirs, along with Sanders’ own editorial commentary in *Records of Girlhood*. Noting that many promising Victorian female

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120 The examples in the text are from “Scenes and Characters”, "Abbey Church”, “The Clever Woman of the Family”, and “Hopes and Fears.”
autobiographers end their reminiscences at the beginning of their teen years, Sanders observes that nineteenth-century adolescent women are strikingly passive, arguing that “at an age where a century later teenagers would be making decisive choices about their future, Victorian girls were emotionally adrift, bridging the gap between childhood and marriage by helping out in Sunday schools or with younger brothers and sisters, continuing their education at home, or paying calls” (19). While childhood could be full of intense moments of pain, joy, and new experiences, adult life for women like Charlotte Yonge, who lived at home with her parents until their deaths, brought few changes that seemed worth recording, and perhaps, as a result, Yonge never wrote memoirs beyond her childhood. However, the reminiscences of early life she did record help to paint a picture of an imaginative, emotional, and eager child, who craved the company of other children.

Yonge describes her child self as wild and loud: “I was the noisiest of all, being very excitable, shrill-voiced, and with a great capacity of screaming” (209) and such an enthusiastic participant in so many games that some were actually forbidden when she was visiting. Not only did she and her friends try to play games like hockey in the hall, but during those “riotous” days (as she called them) they indulged themselves in exuberant imaginative play:

That too was the year when we took to ‘playing the fool’, namely, dancing wildly about the hall in any fantastic garb we could manage to lay hold of. My uncle to his horror, caught me skating about the stone hall in a pair of wooden pattens with tall iron rings.

121 Frances Power Cobbe writes in her memoirs that like Yonge, her childhood was “strangely solitary” (42). Yet at Christmas, her cousins came to visit and the indoor behaviour was quite raucous. In this passage she first reflects on early childhood, and then, on later youth which included theatricals for entertainment. Remembering 1833 she writes, “Often a party of twenty or more sat down every day for three or four weeks together in the dining-room, and we younger ones naturally spent the short days and long evenings in boyish and girlish sports and play. Certain very noisy and romping games Blindman's buff, Prisoner's Bass, Giant, and Puss in the Corner and Hunt the Hare as we played them through the halls below stairs, and the long corridors and rooms above, still appear to me as among the most delightful things in a world which was then all delight. As we grew a little older and my dear, clever brother Tom came home from Oxford and Germany, charades and plays and masquerading and dancing came into fashion. In short ours was, for the time, like other large country-houses, full of happy young people, with the high spirits common in those old days” (41, 42).
‘Charlotte,’ he said, ‘how can you be so foolish?’
‘But Uncle Yonge, I am a fool’ I squeaked out, as if he had been paying a great compliment. (209)

Valerie Sanders observes that anecdotes like these, positioning the writer as naïve, ill-behaved, or a little wild, are actually quite common in nineteenth-century women’s writing about childhood, although comparatively rare in men’s (who, more often than not, ignore childhood experiences as they try to make sense of their lives). She argues that unlike the numerous subjects that were taboo for women to write about, childhood memories could be made entertaining, could have educational potential, and could invite a reader’s interest in “apparently trivial incidents,” while “quirkiness of character can be made endearing and acceptable in children – a source of amusing anecdotes – whereas in adult women it becomes an embarrassment, something to be concealed, rather than written about” (Records v. 1 5). Sanders believes that women, like Yonge, who wanted to contemplate and celebrate their individuality were more likely to be able to do so without censure if they wrote about their precocious or mischievous childhoods, and the experience of being “young, frustrated, and powerless” with which many readers could identify (5). When Yonge candidly writes about her affection for her cousin Anne, and the way it was both undermined and misunderstood, she is demonstrating her profound emotional life in contrast to her eccentricities, both of which other Victorian women could be expected to relate to:

the great love of our lives was getting to be conscious. Anne and I were always together. We wanted to walk about with our arms round each other’s waists, but our mothers held this to be silly, and we were told we could be just as fond of

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122 The Moberly family remembers Charlotte Yonge as similarly loud and imaginative. C.A.E. Moberly writes, Charlotte Yonge, then a girl of twelve with a very shrill voice, came with them. This was about the time when, according to Yonge’s own account, she was in the habit of relieving the weariness of a formal call by imagining it to be another period of history, and that every one was discussing (for instance) the prospect of invasion by the Spanish Armada! (Dulce 60).
Apart from warm friendships with her cousins and neighbours, Yonge’s lonely childhood focused on her 16 dolls, her ad hoc, sometimes cruelly supervised, but extensive studies,\textsuperscript{123} and her intense religious education. When given the opportunity to be with others, her solitary life made her a great observer of character and family relationships, while her own experiences with feeling odd and misunderstood lead her to create some sympathetic female characters who chafed against social expectations, enabling her to develop a wide spectrum of believable girl characters.

Although Yonge did not mention theatricals in her autobiography, she does mention preparing for plays in a few of her letters. Not only is it clear that they were a significant source of pride and pleasure, they give insights into how her theatricals were originally conceived and produced. In an October 1849 letter to her Aunt Mary Anne Dyson she wrote

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My idle work now is writing a play for the Moberly’s Christmas sport, about that time when Edward III and Philippa found their children left all by themselves in the Tower. As they say great novelists cannot succeed in the drama, I suppose I shall make a fine mess of it, but it will do for them at any rate to make fun of. (Jordan et al)
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By this time, Yonge had not yet written her incredibly successful \textit{The Heir of Redclyffe} (1853), but as she published her first novel in 1844, she must have seen herself primarily as a novelist.\textsuperscript{124}

\textsuperscript{123} In their edited volume of her letters, Mitchell, Jordan and Schinske write that Yonge’s “unusual intellectual abilities” were recognized by family and friends and “it is impossible to conclude that Charlotte Yonge was anything other than extremely well-educated.” Unlike her brother who went to Eton and Oxford, Yonge was educated at home, learning Latin and mathematics from her father, French and Spanish from an émigré, botany, conchology and astronomy (perhaps on her own) and later learnt Italian, German, Greek, and Hebrew, with help from Keble and the Heathcote and Moberly libraries. Her mother taught her drawing, and she read very widely, especially in history (10).

\textsuperscript{124} Like Corner, who claimed to be inspired to write plays for children when she saw them perform charades, in a footnote Yonge wrote in the Moberly memoirs, she claimed to be inspired to write plays by seeing children visiting with the Moberly family perform a “private joke.” “The children announced that they were just going to act Miss Edgeworth’s play of ‘The Knapsack’…. Presently George, in the character, called out in a grand manner, ‘Now I will show you the remains of the once magnificent Swedish regiment,’ and in hopped three little girls in red cloaks. We all burst out laughing, and Dr. Moberly exclaimed, ‘They have indeed degenerated in quality as well as in quantity.’ This set me thinking of writing a play” (Dulce 96).
A month or two after writing to Mary Anne Dyson, Yonge wrote to her friend Alice Arbuthnot Moberly regarding the play she mentioned to Dyson: “St. Bathelmy’s Fair” which she later published with Groombridge as “The Mice at Play” first as a Magnet Story, and then as one of the tales in *Historical Dramas* (1860). The letter to Alice is worth quoting in its entirety here:

> My dear Alice! I am glad you think ‘St. Barthelemy’s Fair’ practicable. I shall very much enjoy doing what I can in the preparations, and I will try and grow as fat and dignified as I can in honour of her Majesty, Queen Philippa. I was almost afraid that there were too many characters, though I could not see how to manage with less. We can furnish a real sword and spinning-wheel. My notion of the King is in a long blue cloak, which we have here, and a fur tippet. The object of this letter is to ask you and Miss Cowing [the Moberly Governess] and as many of the schoolroom party as the carriage will carry, to come in the afternoon and look at the illuminated illustrations in Froissart and talk it over and see what can be done. You cannot think how I shall enjoy the fun of the rehearsals, and it will give me such a good opportunity for correcting any part of the play that may not have the right effect. (Jordan et al)

The letter points to many details about the way Yonge created the theatrical, and experienced it with her younger friends. She took a role in acting, she found “old fashioned” props, she considered costumes, she encouraged her young friends to make backdrops, and she planned to use the rehearsals to help improve the text. Considering the plays Yonge wrote for them to act at Christmas, C.A.E. Moberly remembers that “learning the parts and rehearsing took weeks beforehand, and Miss Yonge liked to act herself sometimes” (96). At the time, Yonge clearly did not expect to publish “St. Barthelmy’s Fair” for a general audience: she was writing for the pleasure of her friends.

“St. Barthelmy’s Fair” was obviously a success because the next November or December, Yonge wrote to Alice again about another play she was writing for her young Moberly friends –

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125 MS location unknown. This fragment printed in C.A.E. Moberly, *Dulce Domum: George Moberly, his Family and Friends* (London: Murray 1911), 97. [November or December 1849?]
this one, called “Pigeon Pie” remained unpublished (although later she wrote a novel called *Pigeon Pie*) – but her letter to Alice reveals her anxieties about working with uncooperative boys:

My dear Alice, Would George mind being the Colonel? He is never on the stage with Edmund, and a cloak and blue scarf would turn him into a Roundhead. I do not see what else is to be done, for altering the part now would spoil the dinner scene. (Jordan et al)

In fact, George did refuse to play a Roundhead, and the Moberly memoirs claim Mrs. Yonge [Charlotte’s mother] took the part herself ([Dulce 96]). Mrs. Yonge also built a dummy actor to play the part of a soldier (Charlotte named him Zedekias Dunderhead) and he was used as “extra” in other Moberly plays as well. Yonge also remarks on the fun of learning lines, laughing at herself when she declaims script lines that are so obviously untrue in real life, and bringing to mind the “aggregate” concept that Mary Isbell uses from Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*:

I am glad you are not more perfect in your parts. I say mine every evening when I am going to bed, but I cannot leave off laughing in the wrong places, especially when I have to congratulate Edmund on his alteration since I saw him six years ago. (Jordan et al)

The last letter I have regarding Moberly Theatricals to Alice was written the following year (1851), about the second play in *Historical Dramas*, “The Bridge of Cramond,” later published as “The Strayed Falcon” (1862):

My dear Alice, Herewith is the 'Bridge of Cramond' finished. I hope George will not think too much sentiment falls to his share; and that we shall soon fall in with that important actor, the hawk. You and your two gipsies (Emily and

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126 Roundheads, or Parliamentarians, fought against the King in the English civil war. George was quite difficult to work with in getting up the theatricals, but when working at Winchester College in September, 1866, he describes “two wild nights of theatricals in Commoner Hall; pretty and successful” ([188 Dulce]). Clearly the experiences at-home did not prevent him from enjoying them with “his boys” later.

127 I have wondered if there is an error here and Mrs. Yonge should read “Miss Yonge.” I consulted with Ellen Jordan, editor of *Letters of Charlotte Mary Yonge*, and she thinks “Mrs.” Yonge is plausible.
Annie)\textsuperscript{128} will make courtiers, and Zedekias will help; indeed six, besides the other actors, is nearly as much as the stage will hold. Pray be grateful to me for bringing in a rat and the old lark. As to the Scotch, I believe it is shocking; but if you can get it corrected it will be a good thing. My boast of no scratches was futile; I had to make them afterwards. (Jordan et al)

This letter, again, reveals how difficult it is to include George in the theatrical project, and how Yonge was deeply involved in casting, staging, and collecting props and costumes. Her remark “As to the Scotch, I believe it is shocking” is interesting because she obviously never got the language corrected to her satisfaction. In the published drama and story, she uses the fictional Lester family to criticise the Scottish words in the printed script and it has to be rewritten entirely within the context of the story, but the rewritten version does not get published, leaving it to readers to imagine the improvements.

C.A.E. Moberly also describes performing “Cinderella” (whether a script of Yonge’s or someone else’s is not clear). Remembering costuming and humorous staging, she writes:

Mary made a lovely Cinderella, and was small enough to be pushed into one of the cupboards of the carved oak sideboard when the prince came to try on the shoe. She was dressed in my mother’s dark green silk, and under it a dress of white net with all her most glittering ornaments sewn on to it, which was displayed when the fairy (Dora) touched her with her wand tipped with a silver star.” (96)

This reminiscence is actually one of the very few that focuses on the final performance, rather than the work of “getting up a play.” The more typical emphasis on preparation concurs with drama education practice that emphasizes \textit{process} rather than \textit{product}. Yonge’s discussions about memorising lines, her agonies about costumes, and her comment that she is looking forward to the fun of rehearsals indicate a great deal of pleasure in getting ready. Except in this example of

\textsuperscript{128} Emily was 7 and Annie was 5, if Annie was Charlotte Anne Elizabeth (CAE Moberly). Alice was already 16 for this performance.
“Cinderella,” the performance appears to be unimportant, or at least, less significant, although it is entirely possible that the performance did not get re-lived through letters and diaries because everyone who mattered to the final performance attended, and that all the debriefing, and re-living, could happen face to face.

When Charlotte Yonge finally did publish the some of the plays she wrote for the Moberly family, she was obviously emotionally conflicted about the printed text and the original “lived” inspiration. A letter to Alice, to whom she sent a copy of “The Mice at Play” hints that some of the original actors had passed away, and so, the memory is a bittersweet one:

My dear Alice, I was thinking of sending 'The Mice at Play' to Maggie, but somehow I felt that the note must be to one who could remember the old days, when the three bright faces it brings to mind were with us. If you had been people who shrank from such recollections instead of cherishing them, I would of course never have disinterred this old affair, but I know you will like the recurrence to those merry old days and bright remembrances...." (Dulce 175)

Apart from this letter, the only place where Yonge seems to reflect in print on her at-home theatricals is in the guise of the fictional Barnescombe family, who performed the plays in their own Christmas festivities. The fiction often reflects concerns mentioned in her letters, but expands on those observations in a way that gives a rather complete (if not strictly accurate) picture of theatrical preparations and performances, and how the young people were involved. In the “Mice at Play”, after Aunt Fanny reads the children her script, there is squabbling and

129 She may have written about them to her absent friend and cousin, Mary Coleridge, but apparently, all those letters were destroyed (Coleridge 200). Theatricals were also important in some of her other fiction. Henrietta’s Wish, and The Christmas Mummers were both written near the time that Yonge and the Moberly Family were mounting their own theatricals, but the theatricals they did are not specifically referenced. The positive benefits of theatricals are emphasized in Chapter XIV of Pillars of the House in which the children convince the old folks that they should do theatricals, which turns out to be enormous fun for everyone. Yonge includes a few details about getting up the play, the performance, and the dance afterwards. When the strict elders try to refuse the activity, one of the smiling older people, Felix, says “You can't keep children's heads a blank… and Edgar's good taste ought to be trusted in his own home, for his own sisters….Besides, I believe we do live a duller life than can be really good for any one. It can't be right to shut up all these young things all their holidays without any pleasure.”
discussion regarding each role, ingeniously creative costume and prop suggestions, a simple stage
design, despair because “those boys! They were a sore trial of patience” and because “John…
absolutely disliked the whole affair,” deep admiration because Aunt Alice (who must be so named
to recognize Alice Moberly) merrily works incredibly hard to help with the play in addition to her
usual chores, and frustration because Jane Lester would not allow her own real baby to be used
in the play. All of these relate to play preparation, and have parallels in Yonge’s own letters,
demonstrating that the fiction was closely related to Yonge’s lived experiences.

Perhaps attesting to her own anxieties, Yonge writes that on the day of the performance,
the playwright, Fanny, was terribly shy and worried that the boys would not know their parts,
and that the whole piece would be a failure. The audience, who applauded loudly, was made up
only people they knew: aunts, uncles, the clergyman’s family, and some of the servants. One of
the actresses, playing Cecily, turned out to be very good, and the others on stage improved
because of her bright speeches and arch nods. When her uncle in the audience remarked that she
was a flirt, she made threatening gestures at him, before returning her attention to an excellently
funny scene where the actress on stage with her was just as amusing as she was. The other
flirtatious female character came on later, and her mother claimed she was shocked to see what
her daughter was capable of doing.130 The little girl who got to play the boy prince looked so
pleased with herself that Yonge wrote the audience might worry that she would shout joyously,
“Look at me now that I’m a boy!” The other children threw themselves into their parts “so

130 I discuss Yonge’s “delightfully naughty” characters elsewhere in this dissertation. However, it is interesting to note here that in
Dominique Riviére’s study with twenty-first century Toronto girls, several high school students in her focus groups claimed that
girls were comfortable playing emotional roles and/or roles with “attitude.” When describing her preferred drama activities, one
girl named Hilary commented “oh, the best is ‘bad’. Because, you don’t wanna stick to the ‘good’ side, you wanna also become
‘bad’. (Mya: Yeah, that’s just fun. I like it when we’re doing stuff like that.) That’s just natural” (Riviére 348).
entirely that they seemed to themselves to really be young Plantagenets” and later the girls screamed lustily in a way they simply couldn’t during rehearsals. However, one little girl had hoped to faint from shock, but hadn’t been able to figure out how to do that conveniently, so just stood on stage and watched. When Jane entered as the Queen, she was sweet and gentle, but “emphasized the mother” more than royalty. Edmund looked regal, (but was awfully hot in his costume), and Edward became wonderfully courtly as the Black Prince. But John clearly hated every moment and was glad when it was over, gasping, “it’s done!...what a comfort,” while the little girls cried, “It’s done, I’m so sorry”, and one actress particularly wished she could keep on being a princess.

In these fictionalised observations, Yonge points out the significance of the audience-performer interactions, the way that a sense of moment and “stage” brought out the best in many of the actors, and how some were able to allow themselves to be swept up into the fantasy world they created, while some had to accept practicalities (like gravity) that prevented them from being as passionate as they felt they wanted to be. For thespians who could allow themselves to really “be” those characters in those moments, it attests to the power of make-believe performance, and also, the kind of re-enactment that Rebecca Schneider describes, where the participants feel as if they are evoking a kind of reality or truth in the moment of performance.

That moment of blurring between the moment of performance and the past being evoked is also significant when considering the potential importance of performing other identities. Yonge highlights the issue of the “aggregate” (the idea that Mary Isbell adapts from Jane Austen, described in detail elsewhere in this dissertation) particularly for the little girl who plays a boy, for the mother who played the Queen mother, and for the young, demure girls, who played flirtatious coquettes. For both the little girl playing the prince, the girl playing the princess, and one of the girls playing a coquette, she gestures towards the pleasure of adopting an assumed
identity, and even the desire to be or become different that could be kindled during performance experiences. That some actors could “seem to themselves to really be young Plantagenets” means that Yonge believed that in the moment of performance, an amateur actor could experience another identity, and therefore, the identities she creates for young people to perform take on an additional significance: she consciously offered alternatives to daily life.

Becoming absorbed in the invented dramatic world also exists in similar ways in late twentieth-century classrooms. One of Kathleen Gallagher’s students told her “A Day in the Life of Mary Morgan scared me. I felt like it was actually happening. Performing scenes helps to realize exactly what was happening and how each character felt” (49). Even if the moment was fictionalized history, it could offer the performer what seem to be “real” insights. Yonge’s fictional reflection of the Moberly theatricals in the guise of the Barnescombe family is not an exact mirror of their actual theatrical performances (she herself played Queen Philippa and unlike Jane, was never a mother), but the possible truth behind those moments in the fictional frame can fill the gaps in Yonge’s letter record, giving a sense of what mattered and what transpired in a home theatrical.

Although her letters do not mention her productions at all after they had occurred, her fictionalized reflections through the narrative frame of the Barnescombe performances and post-show experiences do. Probably concluding the theatrical event the same way the Moberly family did, the fictional Barnescombe adults suggested tea and a country dance in costume after the performance, and during the post-show fête, the dialogue gives a good sense of how Charlotte Yonge evaluated play production experiences. Fanny’s eldest brother says, rather pompously, but quite sensibly,

Well, Fanny, you have given us a pretty evening’s amusement, as well as a great deal of pleasure to the children; and I don’t think that it will have been without
use either - not so much in the scraps of historical knowledge, as in the habits of
good-temper and mutual forbearance which such sports entail.

Fanny’s brother goes on to say that he did not think the little girls had been badly affected, in the
sense of becoming vain or self-centred, because otherwise they would not have performed so well.
Indeed, the generous and selfless collaborative skills Fanny’s brother highlights are precisely what
drama educators argue are among the most valuable aspects of drama education. Jonathan
Neelands, for example extols drama as “a living practice” which makes possible a variety of
“kinds of knowing and learning which come from the direct participatory engagement with
drama as an experiential learning process” (180), and he notes that “children and young people
are changed by that which is important rather than the form of the drama work itself” (181). The
social and even democratic learning advantages to drama education Neelands observes are based
in the ensemble work of “process drama,” which Mia Perry and Theresa Rogers succinctly
differentiate from theatre in education because when the focus is drama, “process is valued over
performance, and the notion of representation itself is rarely addressed directly” (48). But in her
*Historical Dramas*, Yonge demonstrates that even when the work is theatrical and script-based,
some similar significant gains to young participants reside in the process of working together as a
community, towards a particular goal. Even though it is end product-oriented, for Yonge,
process is the most memorable part of the project.

In the post-show conversation with her brother, Fanny observes that Alice, who worked
so hard to help everyone be successful, but did not go on stage herself was the “heroine of the
play” while John Lester was the hero because “he has been so good-natured, and tried so hard to
be good-tempered in doing what was disagreeable to him.” Alice’s stage management and
creative support really is significant, and in this moment of her fiction, Yonge acknowledges Alice
and other girls like her as unsung powerhouses without whom little could be done in Victorian
middle-class homes. However, even though John was sulky and difficult, in Victorian culture boys are to be forgiven, especially if they bear up and do their duty, and so what Fanny says makes some sense: the play itself and the story it told did not matter as much as the drama the family experienced in building it.

The second drama, “The Strayed Falcon,” foregrounds the “family drama” even more, but focusing on overly enthusiastic Kitty in the narrative frame, who sounds a bit like Yonge’s reflections on her child self, which demonstrates a different perspective on girlhood and what theatricals might mean for girls. Unlike Alice, the admirable and selfless leader highlighted in the first play; like many of Charlotte Yonge’s likeable heroines, Kitty is impulsive and passionate, and her narrative journey teaches her to overcome some of her traits that make her too individual and selfish and less community-oriented, which is decidedly off-putting to my modern ear. As they prepare for the play, Kitty is bossy about who will get which part, pushy about making costumes and painting the set, neglectful of her own household duties, impatient with other family cares and demands, and finally rash because she retorts to her grandmother that a real fire needs to be built in the middle of the room for the gypsy tent. Although her brother and male cousins are building the fire and carrying it around the room in a shovel, she is the one who is punished because she is the one who is rude to her grandmother, (which is deemed the greatest fault) and her father forbids her from participating in the play.

I have no reason to believe that this incident was inspired by the Moberly experience with ‘The Bridge of Cramond,’ but not only does it highlight significant potential sources of conflict inherent in getting up a theatrical, such as casting, the extensive labour of preparation, and the

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131 Shanan Custer argues that Victorian boy characters were not only expected to be forgiven, but they were also expected to reoffend. If the offense was mischievous or slightly problematic, she argues that, in American at-home theatricals at least, characters and audiences looked forward to boys’ naughty antics.
possible tensions caused by differences between dreams and pedestrian realities, it informs the emphasis of Yonge’s post-show reflection. At first, Kitty’s cousins want to cancel the play if she cannot participate, and her brother, who was carrying the fire about the room in the first place, is especially adamant that the play should not go on. But Kitty insists they should go ahead but that she would not like to act anymore because it would feel like she was still being naughty. When the play is presented, Yonge relates the performance through Kitty’s eyes: “the whole scene seemed much more real to her than last year, when she had been taken up with her own part, her dressing, and acting. It was more to her as if time were really gone back three hundred years; and well as she knew every word, she could be surprised and frightened, and delighted at all the right times, and was quite able to forget the real people and the characters they had taken.”

Here, it is as if Yonge is arguing that it is entirely possible to embrace the fiction of the play experience, and ignore “the aggregate,” even in an at-home performance of a story that a person knows very well. That she believed audience members had the capacity to be absorbed into the performances lends credence to the notion that Victorian at-home audiences had the potential to support “utopian performative” moments by sharing the communal experience with the young performers, thus, adding weight and significance to any explorations girls might have made related to identity, agency, power, and imaginary futures.

The final play in the volume places emphasis on the fictional frame prior to the playwriting, and the post-production reflection is extremely short. Since there is no mention of this particular play in any of the extant letters or memoirs, I wonder if Yonge and the Moberly Family never actually performed it. The “Apple of Discord” draws heavily on the “Dulce Domum” night at Winchester College, where George Moberly attended and was eventually eventually

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132. Jill Dolan’s “utopian performatives” are described in the introduction.
headmaster. Charlotte Yonge evidently attended the festivities one year because in the Dulce Domum memoir she writes the note:

There is no forgetting the wandering in the twilight or moonlight; the meeting old friends; the keeping with some seldom-seen friend as it grew darker and darker; the enthusiastic cheers in Chamber Court; the singing louder and hoarser each time; the hats waved; the losing all one's companions, and their all turning up again in the drawing-room, full of fun and anecdote. (Dulce 132)

Her story frame describes the Domum night, and the ball for put on for the boys’ sisters in almost the same way that George Moberly describes the event in his own memoirs. Fanny, the fictional playwright, writes a play inspired by the night at Winchester College simply because the Barnescombes wanted to have a play based in Winchester. Fanny decided to write about the winter when Queen Anne of Denmark and her attendants were shut in on a kind of house arrest in Winchester, and the Queen insisted they play numerous childhood games while jealousies flared between the ladies. Yonge creates a play within a play so that the characters also perform as the Greek Goddesses of the “Apple of Discord” and as a result she offers a little detail about the way the actors contrived their costumes to be easily transformed, and why roles were assigned in a particular way.

But rather unsatisfactorily Yonge concludes, “in spite of its name, no Barnescombe play had ever gone off so well, or given so little vexation, to any one. And the chief reason was that Edward and Kate had learned by past experience to control themselves, and not be too eager.” In fact, Yonge’s reflection here is not unlike the numerous diary entries I read, to which I refer in subsequent sections, in which an at-home theatrical is declared a “success” and nothing more.

“The Apple of Discord” raises two important questions: Is the lack of detail about the theatrical because she used so many pages on describing the events of Domum, which she did experience, while there are few pages about the play, which perhaps, never happened? And, is it possible
that, in fact, a “success” in a middle-class at-home theatrical could be defined by the absence of discord among the performers and the audience? Both explanations are plausible, and as I explored the various family archives, I began to be able to speculate about the way participants and spectators use the word “success” in terms of an at-home theatrical. The idea that “success” could go beyond the aesthetic quality of a performance is one that I will come back to in subsequent sections of this chapter.

The Yonge archive also sheds light on one additional issue regarding at-home theatricals. Considering the depth of these three reflections, especially the first, it is notable that for her co-written book with Christabel Coleridge *Strolling Players*, Yonge wrote, in a letter to her publisher, that Coleridge had agreed to accept one hundred pounds between them for the copyright, because “Really by far the best and most original part is hers. The idea was mine, but I did not know enough about theatrics to carry it out” (January 25 1892). *Strolling Players* deals with touring semi-professional performers, which, of course, the Moberly family never were, suggesting that Yonge acknowledged that her experience represented a particular performance niche, and might not be extrapolated to other environments, or to older performers. It also highlights the significance of the home space as a performance environment when the audience is all known to the performers, compared to a more open environment where the performance may be in a stately home, there may be invited guests, but the performers would not know all the spectators. This difference is particularly significant given the experiences of the MacDonald family, examined later this chapter. Yet for the purposes of understanding what the Yonge archive and associated fiction can reveal about at-home theatricals, Yonge’s comment that she “did not know enough about theatrics to carry it out” shows that while performances at-home may be related to professional aesthetics, Yonge viewed the project as fundamentally different: a special, family focussed, home entertainment, which often functioned entirely as girl territory.
Charlotte Yonge’s theatricals, the archive of her letters, and her own fiction together provide some insight into girlhood, at-home theatricals, and what gaps in the archive might mean. They also point towards a need for further inquiry, which propels me into the next family archive to both unlearn, in Patti Lather’s sense (287), and to look for clues, in Charlotte Canning and Thomas Postlewait’s sense (14). Yonge’s writing gives a glimpse of visions of girlhood and what theatricals could mean to different girls. Some girls craved excitement and could live large, effusive lives on stage, when their own lives smacked of routine lessons and chores. Others got to exercise leadership skills, and even be recognised for it. Yonge’s fiction shows how some girls revelled in the opportunity to explore otherwise forbidden identities (like thief or flirt), while some girls shrank from them, but her writing also demonstrates that the emphasis for the performers would have been on exploration and pleasure, rather than honing performance skills.

Furthermore, Yonge demonstrates the power that the patriarchy had in the lives of mid-century Victorian girls, who required the approval of fathers and brothers, and where boys’ bad behaviour could be forgiven or even celebrated, while girls were punished. Like Julia Corner’s family, girls may have written, performed, and in Yonge’s case, managed, but their girlhood was subject to patriarchal surveillance. In Yonge’s fictions the men are benevolent, but it is still possible to see how that might have been stifling to young girls.

The multiple sources I used together give a rich sense of how theatricals were put together, how very involved the older girls could be, and even what they might have looked like from the point of view of playwrights, performers, and spectators. And finally, the gaps that exist in the Yonge archive – post-show reflections in letter form, and reflections reduced to a single line about success do not demonstrate that Yonge neglected to think deeply about theatrical experiences. Rather, they demonstrate how very important process is in these kinds of projects, instead of the end product. And, as I will demonstrate, the experiences and gaps in other the next
two archives combined with these gaps start to reveal something significant about the Victorian meaning of success, and ways that girls reflected on their own performances and their own lived experiences.

**Gatty Family Theatricals and The Older Girl**

Juliana Horatia Ewing (née Gatty) (1841 - 1885) was the eldest in a clergyman’s family of three sisters and four brothers, and those who recorded their memories of her describe Ewing as a wonderful storyteller, a great proponent of private theatricals, and as having a great spark of genius that, throughout her short life, constantly threatened to overwhelm her frail body.

I visited the archives in Sheffield where the majority of the Gatty family papers are kept, and between Ewing’s very limited and often terse reflections on theatricals, the memoirs, and obituaries for Ewing, I further developed my ideas about at-home theatricals and the Victorian home, even as the archival record suggested gaps that need to be explained. This archive particularly potently encourages consideration of ways theatricals challenged issues concerning leadership and gender (complicating some of the ideas from the Corner archive), and ways that nineteenth-century families might have defined at-home theatrical “success,” (augmenting what I started to understand from the Yonge archive). The gaps in her diaries and sister’s memoirs are supplemented with observations from Ewing’s own factual and fictional account of performing theatricals.

Although she published numerous well-loved stories and books for children, including “Amelia and the Dwarves” which Nina Auerbach and U.C. Knopflmacher describe as pushing the boundaries of what childhood and girlhood could mean, and although she and her family were eager amateur performers, directly related to theatrical activity, Juliana Horatia Ewing only published one fictional story concerning theatricals called “The Peace Egg” (1871c), one article
(in three parts) called “Hints for Private Theatricals,” and one juvenile script, “A Christmas Mumming Play” (1884), and a script of the mummery the children perform in “The Peace Egg” in response to demand from *Aunt Judy’s Magazine* readers who wanted to be able to do their own mummery like the children in the story. The script is a carefully researched compilation of five different mumming plays, and Ewing claims only 30 original lines in the whole piece. The publication was also based on personal experience: as she and her siblings grew up, they watched a wide variety of theatre as well as versions of mummery, and also performed their own. Nevertheless, Ewing saw herself as a storyteller, not a dramatist.

In the Sheffield Archive, I hoped to read about Ewing’s Christmas mummery with her brothers and sisters, or about their other theatrical experiments. Her sister Horatia recalls “All my earliest recollections of Julie (as I must call her) picture her as at once the projector and manager of all our nursery doings. Even if she tyrannised over us by always arranging things according to her own fancy….” (Gatty 6). Yet the tyranny of the older sister neither discouraged the others from taking their own creative risks of their own nor did it result in her investing a great deal of energy writing or writing about theatricals. In fact, in terms of dramatic writing, her siblings and cousins were much more prolific than she was. Reginald, Alfred, and Stephen composed plays of their own for children to perform, some of which were published in

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133 “In refining and welding the piece together, I have introduced thirty lines of my own, in various places. The rest is genuine. JHE” (Introduction to “The Christmas Mumming Play” 60).

134 Horatia K.F. Gatty (later Horatia K.F. Gatty Eden) wrote “In Memoriam” for her sister’s child fans and published it in *Aunt Judy’s Magazine* in 1885. Later, she republished it as the introduction to *Juliana Horatia Ewing and her Books* (1887 and 1889). I accessed an online copy of the 1889 version, and use it for Horatia’s memoirs because it is paginated, while the copy I have from *Aunt Judy's Magazine* is not.
Aunt Judy’s Magazine. Ewing may have been remembered as the original leader and theatrical generator in her family, but those experiences must have inspired some of the younger Gattys to create their own work.

Like many middle-class families, such as the Brontës, who produced their own family versions of popular magazines, the Gatty family created “Anon” and later, “The Gunpowder Plot,” written and edited by Ewing and her brothers and sisters (Ewing, Sheffield Archives). To my disappointment, in these magazines, theatrical references are very few. I could not find any references to family theatrical happenings (although in March of 1860 they refer to a concert by Reginald and a circus show by some of the other children). In the February 1867 “Gunpowder Plot” Horatia added a new scene to Hamlet and one of the siblings wrote out some Valentine’s Day Tableaux. Occasionally Ewing used the family magazine format to dramatize apparently real-life but farcical family occurrences (she called them “Home Scenes”), such as a time when her brother Regie tried to sneak into her room late at night, or another scene in which he burst into the room (again, after midnight) to discuss his concern that his mother thought he wasn’t doing any work around the house. Although she included stage directions, these were more akin to amusing anecdotes than plays. The actual family performances do not seem to have been viewed as subjects worthy of their newspapers.

Prior to her marriage to Alexander Ewing in 1867, in her diary Ewing frequently notes rehearsals and charades, and occasionally, theatrical performances, but the detail regarding theatrical activity is unsatisfying, considering the fact that in Horatia’s “In Memoriam” she says

135 One of Reginald’s plays is mentioned in Ewing’s diaries, but he does not seem to have included any in Aunt Judy’s Magazine. Alfred’s published plays include “Rumpelstiltskin,” “Robert Goodfornothing,” “The Christmas Dinner,” and “The Hunchback,” while Stephen published “Princess Bluestocking” or, The Rival Brothers” and “The Barmecide.” Later Alfred published operettas for adult amateurs and two operettas for children, “The Goose Girl” and “The Three Bears,” both published by Boosey and Co. Ewing’s mother, Margaret Gatty, also an accomplished writer (for children and of botany), also contributed an Extravaganza to Aunt Judy’s called “The Twin Harlequins.” Several plays in the magazine are “freely adapted” versions of well-known stories and, as the playwrights are not identified, it could certainly be an editor or family member.
Ewing exercised “a great influence over our theatricals” (10). For example, June 23, 1855, Ewing notes in her diary “settled about the charades with the girls,” and in September of the same year she writes “Fattie & I acted charades in the evening to amuse the others.” These typically brief notes reveal nothing of the content of the charades and only hint at the preparation (“settled about the charades”). Yet in describing an afternoon with the Aveling family the same year, she remarks on playing ball outside, drinking ginger beer, and coming inside when it got dark, at which time:

Mrs Aveling played polkas & vales & we danced. Worked. Mrs. A sung & played. Then Regie took the piano, Fattie the harp & they & the rest shrieked & howled in every variety of key, something they told us was God Save the Queen. They shouted as loud as ever they could & we clapped & applauded when it was finished. Then we got 2 bottles of scent & bathed each other’s faces, & had some cake & wine. Then we played at Hunt the Slipper & Old Maid & about 10 o’clock the carriage came for us. Enjoyed it very much (August 7 1855)

What a rich description of a day! Shortly thereafter, she offers similar detail regarding dances, including with whom she danced the quadrille and a polka, and who took her in to dinner, concluding, “We came away at one. I enjoyed it extremely” (January 3 1856). Although she was in a verbose mood that holiday season, when it came to the children’s theatrical, the note is brief again. On January 7 she writes “Mr. Norton came last night as usual. He called today for his umbrella. Discussed Butler’s sermons & the obedience proper to wives, with Mother.” As a young girl of fifteen, no doubt “obedience proper to wives” would be a significant conversation to overhear, but the detail about the umbrella seems surprisingly important to Ewing compared to

136 Ewing uses numerous pet names for people I assume were her siblings: Fattie, Brownie, and Dot appear regularly. I have not been able to determine, conclusively, who any of these people are.

137 Like many strong Victorian women, Mrs. Gatty had complicated views regarding the patriarchy, embracing some ideas about women’s equality to men, while rejecting others. In 1861 she went to hear Frances Cobbe speak, and confessed that she disliked hearing women speak in public and teaching men what to do, and wrote, “I was interested by what was said and liked the lady who spoke. But to hear a woman hold forth in public, except when she is acting and so not supposed to be herself, is like listening to bells run backwards” (Maxwell 138).
her short comment in the same entry: “In the evening the children had a play of Regie’s composing. We attended.” She never says what the play was about, if there was music, whether she was impressed, or proud, or even if there were costumes.

Yet the 1885 obituary by her sister Horatia in *Aunt Judy’s Magazine* suggests that Ewing adored theatricals. Horatia writes, “her powers of imitation were strong; indeed, my mother’s story of “Joachim the Mimic” was written, when Julie was very young, rather to check this habit which had early developed in her” (10). Horatia claims that Ewing always “took what may be called the “walking gentleman’s part” in the plays, starting with Julia Corner’s series (“Julie was usually a Prince”), and later they performed farces (10). As far as I can tell, Ewing only mentions cross-dressing in her diaries in reference to a fancy dress nursery ball she and her mother put on for the children when she was 17: Her mother played the piano and Ewing wrote, “In the evening I dressed as a Sailor boy (!) & the children in various costumes & we had a Dance in the Nursery. Mother playing” (Ewing, January 14, 1859, Sheffield).

While downplaying her own participation, Ewing’s diaries reference farces such as “Box & Cox” (1856), “Love in a Mist” (1861), and also mentions “20 Minutes with a Tiger” (1860). Ewing’s diary entry for a performance of that play in February of 1860 is:

138 Although almost all the letters and diary entries I found concerning Victorian cross-dressing for women and girls suggest that girls often welcomed the opportunity to play against their gender, Charlotte Brontë uses her character Lucy Snowe in *Villette* to suggest an alternate reaction to the “opportunity” to play a man. Against her will, Snowe is required to perform as a substitute in the school theatrical. She says “to be dressed like a man did not please….I had consented to take a man’s name and part; as to his dress – halte là” (208). M. Paul retorts “something must announce you as of the nobler sex.” She insists that she will contrive her own costume in a sort of incomplete male-female attire hybrid. In spite of her resistance to male attire, when another teacher sneers at her costume, she embraces her acting role and says, “if she were not a lady and I a gentleman, I should feel disposed to call her out” (209). As in this moment, she appears to reject truly male costume during her performance, but embrace male behaviours.

139 In 1856 the Avelings and Mr Norton performed “Box & Cox.” For about two weeks in February Ewing alludes to rehearsals perhaps of her brothers’ attempt at “Box & Cox.” Her entry does not even make it clear if she was involved. No performance is mentioned in her diary, and the next theatrical activity in the diary is March 25 when she declares “In the evening drove to Mrs A-S & having picked her up went to the Chambers to tea. All the C. girls Mrs N ourselves & the A-S played at charades. Very nice evening.” “Box and Cox” must have been a popular farce for at-home performances. Although they do not perform it, it is also suggested as a possibility in Charlotte Yonge’s *Pillars of the House.*
In the afternoon at Mrs Guests’. Mrs Greville Chester came. Dined at six after which we acted “20 minutes with a Tiger.” It went off well.

In 1861, when Ewing was somewhat sick, her brothers acted it for a visitor named Aubrey. Her assessment of that performance, in which she did not participate, was “a general rumpus.” “It went off well” and “A general rumpus” do evoke different levels of at-home theatrical success. Yet “it went off well” seems like an understatement compared to Horatia’s comments about the play in her “In Memoriam.” Horatia writes that her sister’s “most successful character was that of the commercial traveller, Charley Beeswing, in “Twenty Minutes with a Tiger.”” Horatia explains that Ewing liked “character” parts like Beeswing best, and continued to perform those kinds of roles at military theatricals after she and her husband were married. If Horatia is correct that her sister loved theatricals so much, and that she was especially good at roles like Beeswing, why does Ewing devote so many lines to describing the events of an afternoon at the Aveling’s, but write only “it went off well” about a performance of a particularly memorable role?

Ewing is similarly terse when reflecting on the role of supporting older girl / stage manager rather than actor. December 30, 1862, her entire entry is:

worked. After breakfast read a little German with Liz. Practiced the children for “The Dwarf.” I wrote the Playbill. Out with the children up to Kemble [not clear]. P.M. Georgina and I ask a drive with [?] and the two ponies. Worked. The Dwarf came off. Lizzie and I being “Hand” with great “éclat.” Read.

January 1, just days later, she “prepared for the theatricals this evening” but also had time for a long walk with Birdie, gathering leaves that flew in the wind, and to read “Sir Charles” before she “worked with E. at the theatricals.” Then there was dinner, and then “The performance went off well. A charade. Birdie acted capitally. Eddie was Blue Beard.” Her assessment is so brief that I wonder if tact prevented her from putting more detail in writing for her diary’s
imaginary audience (was Eddie quite a poor performer compared to Birdie?), or, did she only made notes in her diary that she hoped would jog her own memory of the event?

Consulting Juliana Horatia Ewing’s fiction regarding theatricals in hopes of trying to understand more about her ideas concerning being the older girl leader for what she called “nursery” theatricals, or even getting a sense of what she felt was important, is not as straightforward as it is with Charlotte Yonge’s fiction. While Horatia claims that the two dogs in the story “The Peace Egg” are very like two favourite family dogs, and an incident of being chased away by a neighbour’s housekeeper was inspired by real events, the fictional family is quite different from theirs and the mob of children were not lead by a generous older sister.

Although the Gatty family and Charlotte Yonge’s friends seem to have been lead by older girls, that certainly was not the only way theatre entered the house. Valerie Sanders includes historical novelist Anna Eliza Bray’s autobiography in her *Records of Girlhood*, and Bray describes how she and her brother (who was six and a half years her senior) engaged in elaborate dramatic play imagining and creating a King’s parliamentary administration where they took on numerous roles each, but she always played a “bustling civilian” while he was a “high-minded nobleman” (37). Later, when they had the opportunity to hear some Shakespeare performed by one of their father’s tenants, her brother decided that they should perform Hamlet and the Ghost (she played the ghost).

Next followed the quarrel of Brutus and Cassius, and then, what was really to suited to my age, that scene where Prince Arthur so eloquently suppli
cates Hubert to spare his sight; a scene of such exquisite and natural pathos, that it is not difficult to be understood even by children. Shall I add (what is the truth) that, young as I was, I touched the hearts of my hearers in reciting the part of

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140 In Horatia Gatty’s “In Memoriam” she writes, “I recollect how proud we were on one occasion, when our disguises were so complete, that a neighbouring farmer’s wife, at whose door we went to act, drove us as ignominiously away, as the Housekeeper did the children in the story.”
Prince Arthur? I am not surprised at it, for the words I had to recite touched my own. (42)

Eventually they began to do whole plays and her brother continued to spearhead the theatricals at their home, writing prologues and epilogues, adapting Molière’s comedies to perform after the tragedy. They never performed “juvenile” theatricals, but Bray’s story about her energetic and theatrically minded brother is otherwise similar to the story that could have been told by Ewing’s younger siblings about their sister. Since girls were more often placed in charge of nursery activities, they were the more likely leaders of children’s activities, but they were not the only champions of at-home theatricals.

In “The Peace Egg” short story by Ewing, the eldest character is a rather bossy and impulsive slightly older brother. Ewing writes:

Robin bought a copy of “The Peace Egg.” He was resolved to have a nursery performance, and to act the part of St. George himself. The others were willing for what he wished, but there were difficulties. (28)

That the others were “willing for what he wished” is the first important comment because Robin is described so differently from Horatia’s memories of the affable, generous, and selfless Julie. Ewing writes that the strong-willed Robin commanded “an irregular force of volunteers in the nursery, and never was colonel more despotic….when his affections finally settled upon the Highlanders of “The Black Watch,” no female power could compel him…” (14). Although he seemed concerned with masculine honour (he abhorred lies, and tried very hard to keep his promises), he disdained the opinions of women, and the emotions of his sister. At one point he is furious because his sister won’t promise to give him her beloved old doll for a funeral and burial when she received a new one for Christmas. “You want both; that’s it. Dora, you’re the meanest girl I ever knew!” And although his younger brother sympathised with sobbing Dora, “Robin’s
word was law to him.” The leadership that boys could use to impel their brothers and sisters to do as they wished would be extremely unlikely in a successful Victorian female nursery leader, and while Ewing may have enjoyed indulging in the bravado possible for male characters when she cross-dressed, there is no suggestion that she adopted the selfish and headstrong qualities that were expected, if not quite acceptable, in boys. Ewing may have “tyrannised” over her brothers and sisters by arranging everything the way she wanted it to be, yet Horatia writes, “we did not rebel, we relied so habitually and entirely on her to originate every fresh plan and idea” (Gatty 7).

“The Peace Egg” story suggests that even when they organised something the younger children wanted to do, the kind of leadership style that was open to boys simply could not have been imagined by girls in the same situation. Mary Isbell suggests that advice manuals written by and for male stage-managers (usually of home theatricals performed by adults) advocated “a patriarchal authoritarian style” while advice for women described a “feminized style, which placed the social event before the performance event…” (24). She points out two different (albeit American) manuals that particularly clearly indicate “the man should exercise absolute power over his company, while the woman should be able to rely on the decorum of her guests to keep the corps dramatique in line” (111). Interestingly, in Ewing’s own “Hints for Private Theatricals,” in which she recommends that for “nursery” productions, the stage manager be an older sister, she does say that her word should be law “or there will be no end to it”, but notes “the stage-manager will have his own way, but he will have nothing else.” She notes that the stage manager must make sure everyone is happy, create an environment in which there is “pleasure out of toil,” and if the production is a success, she will not be able to take credit for it, but if it is poor, she will

141 At the University of Toronto Centre for Drama, Theatre, and Performance Studies, in October 2014, I “stage-managed” a group of students in the performance of an at-home style theatrical version of Clara Ryland’s “The Frog Prince.” My experiment with adopting the feminized management style proved to be one of the most discussion-worthy aspects of the production in post-show discussions with the cast and creative team.
need to take the blame. She will also have to do clean-up and other unpleasant tasks after the performance when the actors are being congratulated. This approach, which suggests that children need more definitive leadership than adult women, is nevertheless gendered and self-effacing, and may partly explain why Ewing’s remarks about her own work as stage manager were so limited.

Although one might think that the difficulties the fictional Robin encountered in his “Christmas mummery” related to his bossy, heavy-handed, and belligerent management style, they actually had to do with casting, coarse language in the text, a few characters that might not be appropriate to a nursery (various devils), and the unwieldy length of the script. Ewing describes her approach to these same difficulties in her introduction to the script, which also serves as a history of early English theatre and the St. George mumming tradition. She writes:

As it stands, this old Christmas Mumming Play…is not fit for domestic performance; and though probably there are a few nurseries in those parts of England where “mumming” and the sword-dance still linger, in which children do play some version of St. George’s exploits, a little of the dialogue goes a long way…. In fact, the mummery is the chief matter – which is what makes the play so attractive to children, and, it may be added, so suitable for their performance. In its rudeness, its simplicity, its fancy dressing, the rapid action of the plot, and last, but not least, its bludginess…is adapted for nursery amusement.

She continues in some detail to outline the concerns that, in her short story, Robin’s mother also had about the suitability of the play, and then explains how her compilation has addressed them, while maintaining the “bludginess” of the original. She explains why she includes mute parts for the very youngest performers (Sabra should be “the youngest and prettiest maid who can toddle

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142 In light of what is known about her short life, Ewing rather poignantly remarks in the introduction “I have been again urged to [write a nursery version of the script] this Christmas, and though I have not been able to give so much time or research to it as I should have liked, I have thought it better to do it without further delay, even if somewhat imperfectly” (48). Ewing did versions of the performance with her brothers and sisters, but she clearly did not see their home versions as adequate for publication, hence the need for more research. Ewing knew she was very ill in 1884 passed away only a year after the publication of this script.
through her part”) (56), she suggests convenient ways for two character roles to be double cast, and she points out that she has removed everything that could possibly offend, even phrases that are “no less vulgar because they are old” (60), except the line “‘Take him and give him to the flies.’ It betrays an experience of Asiatic battlefields so terribly real that I was unwilling to abolish the unconscious witness to the influence of Pilgrims and Crusaders on the Peace Egg” (57). But it seems she has removed the other offensive lines for the benefit of mothers like Robin’s, not like her own. She admits that she removed the character of Lord Beelzebub, but only very reluctantly pulled “Little Devil Doubt.” In fact, she was so unwilling that she actually includes lines for the character in her introduction that could be reinserted if someone wanted to do so! From her editing explanations, it seems likely that the Gatty version of the Peace Egg was more vulgar than either the printed version or the version that Robin did with his siblings, and probably included at least one devil. It also seems probable that when coaching the children through their parts that the Gatty Family focussed on the “bludginess” (that is, the performance of swordplay and physical bravado), rather than the text.

Although it gives insight into differences between appropriate male and female leadership styles, the fictional story “The Peace Egg” barely illuminates what Ewing believed makes a good or “successful” amateur juvenile performance. In her introduction to the script, Ewing writes that mummery almost has to be seen to be mimicked, suggesting that the physical performance aesthetic was important, but the short story narrator simply notes that Robin and his siblings’ performance was “most successful” (31) for his parents, and “went off quite as creditably as before” for their elderly neighbour (38). But what did success look like? When Robin watched the local Yorkshire children practicing their performance he asked them “don’t you enjoy it?” and their St. George admitted, in what might be read as an understatement, “We like it well enough.” For the narrative structure of the story, it was enough that the child characters were
satisfied with their play and Ewing did not describe the nature of their performance’s success. In fact, the only disappointment seems to have been that Robin and his siblings had intended to give a performance in the kitchen, presumably for the servants, but the servants were too busy cleaning the hall. Although the question of what made an at-home theatrical successful in the eyes of Victorians is not clear from the Ewing and Gatty experience, she suggests that for children, simply getting to perform it before an audience is significant, and feeling as though it went well is important too. So while Ewing’s brief but typical comments may seem unsatisfying to me (that “The Peace Egg” was “most successful”, or, in her own family’s case of “Twenty Minutes with a Tiger”, “it went off well”) perhaps for her it indicated a sense of closure without indulging in a vanity-tainted analysis of one’s personal performance or a discussion of ways the audience reacted to specific moments in the play. Perhaps, as Sanders suggests, a kind of hesitance to look too closely at oneself is part of why the reflections of amateur theatrical activities are often so brief, even in fiction.

The traces of Ewing’s theatricals—and her reticence to record details in diaries, or offer full descriptions in fiction—gesture towards hidden girlhood and especially “private” theatricals. Since her mother initially tried to discourage Ewing’s mimicry, but ultimately tolerated a host of theatrical activities in the house, it is possible to imagine the fine balance girls managed in the middle of the century between possibly adventurous character performances, and the daily performance of girlhood. Horatia argues that Ewing performed both very well, and it was probably easier to applaud her performance of a farcical salesman when she performed the role of “big sister” so well each day. As a leader, she could guide her brothers and sisters through a theatrical, according to her fancy, providing she continued to employ the leadership style appropriate to her gender, and like Yonge’s characters, keep up with her regular household duties. Furthermore, it seems that reluctance to review the Gatty Family theatricals in their own
newspapers or in her diary has a great deal to do with “success” in a very private affair. Just performing for others was the primary indication of success to the children, but they did not try to unpack why (or in what ways or even if) a performance “worked.” The theatri
cals were viewed and experienced through lenses like amusement, exploration, and pleasure, all of which could be shared with a community, and offered personal, possibly reflective space for girls. As long as the theatri
cals were private, success was about the process, the experience, and the opportunity to share that with others, simultaneously sharing the work, the ingenuity, and the experiments with identity that made the theatri
cals so different from ordinary life.

Louisa Powell MacDonald and her Daughters: Less than Private Theatricals

Seeking traces of evidence regarding the MacDonald Family at-home theatri
cals, their writer, stage manager, and sometimes actress Louisa Powell MacDonald (1822 – 1902) and the star actress, her daughter, Lil
ia Scott MacDonald (1852 – 1891) brought me to archives at Yale (the Beinecke Collection) and King’s College in London, England, as well as to online searches for traces of the family in Italy. Of all the families whose work I discuss, the MacDonald family theatri
cals trouble the ideas of “private” and “amateur” the most. They and others always saw their performances as amateur, but Louisa decided to start charging money for some of them in order to raise enough funds to bring her family to Italy for its more healthful climate. Louisa believed fundraising through theatri
cals was a God-given duty to support her family’s health needs, but some people, even some of her children, regarded selling tickets as morally suspect both because the quality was not up to professional standards, and because charging money for

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143 George MacDonald’s family included 11 children, four of whom died of tuberculosis, and two adopted (or semi-adopted children), whose mother had tuberculosis. George MacDonald wrote successful fiction and poetry for young readers, lectured on Shakespeare’s tragedies, and was devoutly Christian, although he failed as a minister because of his unconventional interpretation of the Bible.
performances just seemed *wrong*. I include the MacDonald family archive in this chapter for three important reasons. First, even though I did not find any of Louisa’s commentary about her theatricals, reflections by her daughters Lilia and Grace, by other family members, and by audience member witnesses, offer a glimpse of what dramatic performance could mean to young people. Second, a discrepancy in the documentary evidence opens the door on a mystery, but simultaneously suggests what Lilia, and perhaps other girls like her, might have believed about the inherent value of amateur, private theatricals. Finally, the blurred lines between amateur and professional, private and public performances help to illuminate how certain words like “success” could mean different things to Victorian thespians depending on the context. In this section, girlhood letters, memoirs, and performance records are supplemented by fiction written by Lilia Scott MacDonald when she was a girl. As the archives I explored begin to clarify the idea of “success,” some ways girls could use theatricals to imagine possibilities for themselves beyond the drawing room walls, and ways that theatricals might provide insight into their present lived circumstances, also start to become evident.

Louisa Powell MacDonald, who wrote the *Chamber Dramas* discussed in this dissertation, was a controversial personality among friends and family, and although her husband is sometimes credited with her creative work,\(^\text{144}\) it cannot be denied that she was the driving force behind the family entertainments they originally did for their own pleasure and for small invited audiences.\(^\text{145}\) Greville MacDonald’s memoirs claim that his mother, Louisa Powell MacDonald, was “charming, original, perfectly proportioned”, she had “a twinkle in her eye” (102), and

\(^\text{144}\) Even at the King’s College archive collection, Louisa Powell MacDonald’s dramatised version of “The Pilgrim’s Progress” was incorrectly attributed to her husband.

\(^\text{145}\) Muriel Hutton asserts that prior to marriage, Louisa and her sisters performed theatricals together, so they were a part of her life for a long time.
possessed “artistry in entertaining” (313). She was enterprising, found a way to get licence to perform The Pilgrim’s Progress, even though it was based on religious material and therefore subject to censorship,\footnote{How exactly Louisa managed to get a licence is not clear, although it is likely that her husband’s work in ministry, and approval of the project, probably helped. In the family memoirs, Greville MacDonald writes, “In the first place the Lord Chamberlain refused to license a religious play; yet, being above the law, my mother always found means for circumventing it!” (502).} generous in that she allowed two children and their consumptive mother to stay with them for several years, and had a hospitable spirit, in that, when in Italy, she opened her parties in the family home to Italian peasants and British expats alike. She was deeply religious and spiritual, along her husband’s more unconventional lines, and a letter to a friend in 1876 indicates that she had strong views on raising children: she believed children innocent rather than inherently sinful; she argued that parents should not teach girls manners, because “her own father and mother’s guidance and consideration for other people’s feelings will surely come out in her bearing and behaviour” and she indicated that parenting manuals focus far too much on what parents should not do (Louisa, King’s 1/2/6). At least one outsider, Rose LaTouche (John Ruskin’s sweetheart), adored her and wrote letters to her as Cuckoo Fledgling to her Mother Brown Bird (LaTouche, King’s). But Louisa was not universally admired or admirable. Her son Ronald’s 1932 letter to his brother Greville mentions his mother’s “fits of temper” and the way she “slang[ed]” Lilia (Ronald, King’s). When Bernard Grenfell visited Italy, he believed the MacDonalds were not well-liked in Bordighera, and wrote “in fact the women were particularly disliked because the girls take after their mother, who is the exact opposite of her husband” (English 247). Although Grenfell’s letter does not explain what he means, it is apparent that Louisa was a complicated woman to know, and perhaps, more powerful than many women of her generation, even if she remained in her husband’s shadow.
Louisa Powell MacDonald did not publish anywhere close to all the dramatic work she wrote for her family to perform. Her *Chamber Dramas* (including “Cinderella,” “Beauty and the Beast,” “Snowdrop,” and “The Tetterbys”) were published by Alexander Strahan in 1870,\(^{147}\) and her *Dramatic Illustrations of Passages from the Second Part of The Pilgrim’s Progress by John Bunyan* was published posthumously in 1925 by Oxford University Press, but other pieces remain unpublished. Greville MacDonald remembers an at-home performance of “The Three Bears” which he watched, while one of his older sisters played Goldilocks, and the other, the little bear; there is a mention in the children’s 1873 juvenile newspaper called “The Reculver Record”\(^{148}\) of their mother’s play “Too Many Cooks Spoil the Broth”\(^{404}\) (Beinecke); there is an 1878 playbill for her “Which is Which?” (January 1, 1878, San Bartolomeo, Genoa)\(^{7}\) (King’s), featuring nine of the MacDonald children as actors; and in a 1932 letter to his brother Greville, Louisa’s son Ronald fondly remembers a playscript for puppets that his mother wrote, performed by his brother Maurice. She even attempted adaptations of stories by Emile Zola (Salmon 7). Louisa regularly organized charades and entertainments in Italy, including *tableaux vivants* representing the Christmas story. There is also an unattributed text of *The Blue Beard* in the MacDonald collection at the Beinecke Library in Yale, and, given that her family performed it in their garden, it is plausible that Louisa wrote that adaptation as well. Like Juliana Horatia Ewing, Louisa Powell MacDonald’s focus seems to have been on the performance and entertainment event, rather than the written text.

\(^{147}\) According to *The Osborn Collection of Early Children’s Books* “lack of financial prowess and excessive generosity to authors brought about the failure of his business about 1880” (497). Strahan also published the magazine *Good Words for the Young* to which George MacDonald contributed his serialized story “At the Back of the North Wind”, and which he edited for a time.

\(^{148}\) “The Reculver Record” and “The Hasting’s Report” were juvenile newspapers, about which I write more in this section of my dissertation.
One of Louisa’s daughters, Grace, kept a diary in 1870 (born in 1854, she was 16 that year), and a few entries suggest that family performances were both commonplace, and exciting for the MacDonald children (III/15/408 Beinecke). Her entries demonstrate that the children were involved in dealing with costumes, make-up, getting things ready, and of course, performance. On February 24, regarding a play that may have been at Octavia Hill’s, her diary entry includes details about her responsibilities, but also her youthful preoccupations that are outside the creation of theatre, such as concerns about good looks and the attention of boys:

We were all very busy all day getting the things redy(sic). I packed everybody’s dresses. Nettie Irene C and J and I went by train we had a very little room to dress in I forgot to bring Grevilles wiskers(sic) so H.S. lent him his. Net was extreamly(sic) useful & so was H he does manage so nicely. It all went off very well. I think Mary of course looked very pretty as Cinderella. H told her she looked very handsom(sic) & said to us behind the seen(sic) how awfully pretty she looked. I wish I were not so envious. He walked to the station with us and talked to M all the time his comforter got packed up with the other things so he is coming to fetch it sometime I daresay he will come on Sunday I know he dislikes me so I shall not trouble him with speaking to him when he comes. All acting is over now so it will hum drum now for a long time. (III/15/408)

However, less than a month later, on March 16, she notes that already “Miss Hill and mamma have arranged for the acting (for Miss H’s tenants) to be on Thursday week or Thursday fon [fortnight]” so the MacDonald children did not have to experience “hum drum” for a very long time.

Lilia Scott MacDonald was probably the most gifted performer in the family,\(^\text{149}\) and her letters and diary entries reveal that she was passionately enthusiastic about theatre. When she writes about the family theatrical activities, she clearly loves every minute, from the preparation to the actual performance. In one undated letter, probably to her sister Mary, she writes that at

\(^{149}\) Some articles also assert that Maurice was a very talented performer, but the majority mention Lilia.
the house from which she is writing “there is a lovely stage being put up with” and then she fills one quarter of a page with the word “GAS-LIGHTS” (King’s). Reading the letter, I could imagine Lilia’s excitement as she wrote to her sister, especially combined with the probability that she would act on that stage. Regarding the scripts her mother wrote for them, Sunday, August 13 in 1865, Lilia enthuses in her diary:

Mama wrote Part of the First Scene of Snowdrop & read it to me I am delighted beyond pleasure- it is charming! My name is to be Isabella, Mama says it is the best name for a proud haughty woman that she can think of. I am not introduced yet tho! 150 (Beinecke)

In two letters from Italy to her best friend Jane Cobden (December 1881 and January 1882, King’s), at least half of the text is devoted to the family theatrical activities. She eagerly describes the stage the family set up that they used to play Domestic Economy and Twelfth Night, the way that she and her sister Irene are indistinguishable to audience members (presumably as Viola and Sebastian), the costumes they hired for one character, and the Christmas tableaux her mother organized. In fact, whether she was performing for pleasure or performing as a fundraiser, Lilia loved the stage. In her letters she enthusiastically tells friends about their performances, eagerly giving credit to her parents, if they were involved.

When her brother, Maurice, passed away in 1879 she wrote to Jane to justify their continued performance of The Pilgrim’s Progress, explaining that she felt it did the whole family a great deal of good:

You will wonder, perhaps, as we did at first, how we can go through it so soon after parting with our Maurice— . . . but we thought we ought to try and are

150 There are photographs in the Beinecke of Lilia at the age of 15 dressed imperiously as the evil queen, Isabella, in “Snowdrop” (a “Snow White” story). In Louisa’s version, Isabella kills herself at the end of the play!
quite glad we did so, it has all come back to us with such force and truthfulness and fresh light as has made the rehearsing of it quite a help on along the difficult path of the real daily pilgrimage (Johnson 8).

Lilia found performance to be a source of fun and pleasure, but also spiritually uplifting in times when her own life was particularly difficult. Kathleen Gallagher alludes to a similar connection between challenging quotidian life experiences and powerful staged moments in her Lives of Girls. In particular, Gallagher’s story about a student named Madeline who profoundly connected with drama activities based on the story of Earthwoman and her son the Moon resonates here. Madeline, whose mother abandoned her to be with a boyfriend in another province, drew strength from the drama activities they did together, finding a way to reimagine an ending to the story of Earthwoman and the Sky People, and through that rethinking, construct a possible new narrative she could believe she and her mother could live out. Critically, in the young student’s revisionning of the story, Earthwoman tells the Moon that she will always love him. Acting out that message of a mother’s love for her child gave the student strength and helped her to make some difficult decisions about her own life (Gallagher, Lives 81). Using drama to increase her spiritual strength was similarly healing and powerful for Lilia. Although Lilia occupied herself with many aspects of the performance preparation, it seems likely that the role-play was most meaningful for her.151

Like the Gatty family, during Christmas 1873, when she was a “girl” of nearly twenty-two, Lilí Scott MacDonald and her younger siblings and cousins produced a home “newspaper” called “The Hastings Gazette,” including mock advertisements, editorials, wittily recounted

151 The type of acting the family did most of the time was often described as “natural.” Edward Eggleston, in St. Nicholas article (an American children’s periodical) wrote that when Christiana (played by Lilí) said good-bye to her children, “the simple, human feeling, expressed by strong, restrained, and “natural” acting, brought tears to all eyes, and I heard many sobs” and George MacDonald “has no need to feign” and “simply acts himself.” That their style was perceived as “natural” rather than heightened, melodramatic, or stylized in any way, may also have contributed to the performers’ connection to the apparent “truthfulness” of the metaphors they performed.
family happenings, and some fiction (Beinecke 402). Although comparatively few issues of the “Hastings Gazette” remain, theatricals are frequent content. In 1873, Grace recorded a delightful “report” of a tea she attended where the young people played charades. She notes “Tea progressed as most teas do I suppose & though everybody seemed to find plenty to laugh at in the smallest jokes I am not aware that anyone said anything worth recording.” Instead she narrates extensive details about the charades proposed after tea. They “consulted & arranged” them in a fire lit bedroom; they were organized by a Miss G, “whom we had met at former though larger parties in this town at which she had neither acted no allowed her brother Guss (aged 15) to do so.” Miss G seemed “quite into everything & planned the charade very well” but she was limited in her acting options because “she could not do the Mama (as was first proposed) as she would have to put something on her head & she was only allowed to act if she did not dress up.” Yet the word they planned to play was “mistletoe,” and the end of “this scene was chiefly a jumble of kisses; Captain Smith kissing every one all round in rather a wild & wholesale manner.” Miss G’s brother Guss played Captain Smith, so perhaps that made it acceptable. Grace played Captain Smith’s lover, Dora, so she was certainly the recipient of many kisses. In any case, the audience called for a second charade, but poor Grace found herself alone with the responsibility of leading the charade. She writes:

after the necessary amount of talk, we left the room, but when I got into the impromptu green room I found that the other actors had deserted us and left me with only two other girls & two boys of twelve who of course were not of much

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152 The issues of “Hastings Report” are unpublished, but are in the “George MacDonald Collection” at the Beinecke Library at Yale. In several articles, just like in the Gatty Family magazines, the MacDonald children cast themselves as Royalty. As a result, in an 1870 description of home theatricals, one of the children writes “Several Theatrical Entertainments have been given at Reculver Palace Hastings within the last few weeks, all of them characterised by the spirit and energy which we always see with so much justification in these charming evenings with the Royal Family. The play to which we officially wish to call attention is that of the Jaorot (?) “Too many cooks spoil the broth” charmingly written by Mrs George MacDonald. The Queen herself condescended to take a part in it which naturally gratified the Princes & Princesses not a little. The performance was a highly successful one & shall entice (?) it more in detail in a future occasion.”
assistance. One of the girls was flabby & simpering & soft as a girl could be perhaps in consequence of having passed a Cambridge examination & the other though she did her best in trying to think of words & how to act them succeeded no better than myself so after spending what seemed long time in trying without success to think of something that would do & not receiving much help from the hymn books which were the only books on the table & having received one or two deputies from the fast-becoming-impatient audience – we made up our minds to give it up & return to the drawing room, which we accordingly did feeling very small indeed. (Beinecke 402)

Grace’s wonderful article is fascinating because it outlines a theatrical failure instead of a success, because it betrays her own preoccupation with personalities and skills of co-actors, and admits to feeling “very small indeed” when they were unable to please the audience. Her attitude towards the two “boys of twelve” and their predictable inability to get her out of the jam are unkind, but also in keeping with the expectation that most juvenile at-home theatricals were expected to be organised by women/girls, while her caustic comment about the “flabby & simpering & soft” girl who passed a Cambridge examination not only indicates conservative views of women’s education, but suggests Grace is not so different from teenagers involved in drama productions in the twenty-first century – a point I will return to later.

In order to better understand what theatricals might have meant to Lilía, I approached one of her “Hastings Gazette” short stories as historical evidence,¹⁵³ even though it is obviously invented. Lilía’s brother Greville’s family memoir entitled George MacDonald and His Wife is the standard account of Lilía’s life and her relationship to the theatre: Lilía never performed professionally, and she rejected a marriage proposal because her suitor demanded she give up performing on an amateur stage. In some ways, Lilía’s unusual fiction directly contradicts and confronts Greville’s constructed portrayal of her life, and may offer an alternative reading of her

¹⁵³ The tradition of using contemporary fiction to help historians understand the nuances of the period is well-established – in my own field of private theatricals, scholars regularly refer to Jane Austen’s Mansfield Park, for example.
own history, concerning how Lilia related to theatre and performance, how she defined her own identity, and her ambitions for autonomy beyond her family’s influence.

Just as important as gaps, for the MacDonald family, doubt is a significant guide to my approach to the archival data. Seika Boye recently published an article in *alt.theatre* called “Portia is that you? – Contextualizing Doubt in Archival Research.” She writes, “like the project to re-contextualize an archive, what I gleaned from this puzzle…is the need to find frameworks for contextualizing our doubt.” Lilia’s story, although fiction, made me doubt the way her brother framed her life decisions, and placing that doubt in context is essential for discerning what the fiction might reveal. Victorian memoirs, Valerie Sanders suggests, cannot be taken as reliable history (3), and are often theorized to exist somewhere between literature and history, revealing just enough, masking more, and choosing details to promote a particular perspective or ideology. Greville’s account positions Lilia as more-than-perfect by conventional Victorian standards of girlhood. He writes, “she mothered not only all the family…but guests and servants also” (384). She let her brothers and sisters eat her share when the family was short of food; she nursed sick friends; and she helped her mother with her work. He admires her sense of duty, her intelligence, not to mention her “genius for acting” and notes that she had many admirers, “but for her, there was just one” (516). Greville obviously adored his sister, but his efforts to characterize his sister as a conventional, if brilliant, Victorian girl might mask the true motivations for decisions she made regarding her identity and her future.

Lilia’s story in “The Hastings Gazette” (402 Beinecke) was part of a game called “Conglomerations” in which participants are given seven random words to build into a short

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154 Typical for a memoir that carefully chooses what to conceal and reveal in order to construct a particular family image, Greville never identifies the name of Lilia’s suitor. In the 1880 letter he quotes to her friend, Lilia calls him her “young man.”
story. Because one of the words was “Greenroom,” all the stories in “The Hastings Report” are about actors and actresses, but Lilia’s is quite different. Often admired as an amateur actress, Lilia wrote her story as a letter, in the guise of an uncle to his nephew, advising against a professional theatre career, in favour of the better theatre that can be produced at home for audiences of all classes. Lilia begins:

let an old Uncle say a few words in season to his young relative whose present wild notion he fears he had encouraged by foolish praise, & an old man’s tales of the days when he was young and acting was yet believed an art. But it is no longer so. (18)

What follows is an amusing collection of advice. For example, she must include the words “Smile” and “Eyeglass” and she writes:

To become the apple of an admiring public’s eye he must Smile carefully on his first entrance, raise his Eyeglass, look round the house while his repeating his part & think more of the measure of success his last photograph has gained him than of the person he represents. In fact, he must never forget he is himself and not the person whose representation he undertakes. (Beinecke 18)

Her witty critique of professional theatre comments on acting style, performance technique, fickle audiences, greenroom behaviour, staging plays calculated to make money, overuse of expensive stage machinery on the professional stage, and finally, concludes that the nephew should raise the theatrical bar “by letting those who can still appreciate a good bit of acting see a good play at your own house carefully got up by intelligent ladies and gentlemen” and “let all the classes come to these in the hope that taste for them may filter…. [and] there may come an opening for Intelligence and Truth & even the establishment of a National Theatre.” Through Uncle

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155 In 1868, Greville Macdonald claims that actors Samuel Phelps and J. Forbes-Robertson both saw her perform, and were impressed (385). Charles Dodgson/Lewis Carroll remarked on her talent in “Cinderella,” he enjoyed her 1873 performance of “Blue Beard” enough to ask permission to invite a friend to see the next production (Beinecke), and in 1875 (two years after this) she played Lady Macbeth very successfully. She and her family toured The Pilgrim’s Progress, she played Corneille’s Polyeuctus in 1882, and the “Hastings Report” describes rehearsals for a Christmas Play.
Sandy’s voice, Lilia suggests that the wrongs of the professional stage can be (and are) avoided in private theatricals. For example, Uncle Sandy suggests that since thespians have no public persona to maintain, they can humbly abandon themselves to portraying a character. Uncle Sandy argues that private theatricals they are likely to produce “good” theatre, using better scripts, with fewer stage effects, and a focus on truly committed performances and they are more likely to do good because they are better for the performers and for the community in which they are performed.

When Lilia wrote this fictional letter, she and her family had already performed some of her mother’s plays for friends and audiences of poor people (as an act of charity), but she had not yet performed in her most challenging roles, nor had she yet faced the ultimatum between marriage, or continuing to perform in public. If Greville correctly asserts that Lilia aspired to a professional acting career at one time, by Christmas 1873 it seems likely that Lilia already had different ideas about theatre and the stage. What Greville describes as “sacrifices” – an apparent decision to be a dutiful daughter, combined with a refusal to give up theatre altogether, and thus abandon hope of a family of her own – might have had less to do with pleasing others, and more to do with living her life in a way that was true to herself and her convictions.

Greville claims Lilia’s parents forbade her from seeking a career on the professional stage, but he does not say when. In 1873 Lilia’s parents visited the American actress Miss Charlotte Cushman and Greville MacDonald suggests her shocking stories about the seedy nature of professional theatre life corroborated the advice given to Lilia by Mrs Arthur Lewis (nee Kate Terry, married and retired from the stage in 1867). Lilia’s writing may merely reflect her

\[156\] “Miss Cushman, the great American tragedienne, had told my parents such terrible things of the stage, and repeated them even more dismally when we met her again in the States in 1873, that they could not consent to their daughter becoming an actress. Mrs. Lewis too had her share in this final decision that robbed the world of a genius – though she must have known of this
parents’ account of Miss Cushman’s advice regarding the stage, but it is possible that the fictional letter is evidence that Lilia considered the opinions of Miss Cushman, Mrs. Lewis, and her own parents, carefully thought about her experiences as an amateur actress, and solidified her own ideas about performance that Christmas. By taking on the persona of an older man through the letter, she gives her writing authority and weight in her patriarchal society. Even though the fiction was written as a part of a game, and I cannot confirm that she believed the words she wrote, using a male voice suggests that she thought Uncle Sandy’s advice should be taken seriously.

Near the beginning of the fictional letter from Uncle to Nephew, Lilia acknowledges that going on the stage is a “serious step” that entails “loss of position, friends & privacy for a fleeting phantom of popularity” (17) and that may be the final proof needed that Lilia could not, in 1873, have seriously wanted to work professionally as an actor. Although Greville muses that Lilia’s young man was short-sighted because he had no profession and Lilia could have earned money working as an actor, that seems to be the brother’s concern rather than Lilia’s.

If Lilia believed the words she wrote for Uncle Sandy, then her decisions regarding the amateur stage and her “young man” may have been based in heartfelt convictions about the theatre, herself and her identity, rather than merely the expressions of a dutiful daughter, trapped by the expectations of her parents and the optics of a life on stage. I would like to think that even if Lilia felt bereft when she rejected her suitor because he requested she leave the stage forever, that she did so because she felt she was being true to her artistic ambitions and ideas that existed outside the demands of family. When she chose the amateur stage over the professional one, I

girl that hell itself could not have smirched her whiteness” (G. MacDonald 385). Although Greville claims his sister was a “great friend” of Kate Terry’s (Mrs Lewis), Charles Dodgson introduced the two young women, and as of 1870, they had not yet met.
imagine it was not merely her response to duty, as Greville suggests, but because she believed the nature of professional theatre was flawed, while the possibilities of amateur and private theatre could be expected to do good in the world.\textsuperscript{157}

Greville quotes her letter to her friend Miss Jane Cobden, “It feels very strange – as if I had never been without him all my life before. I shall get used to it in time – it couldn’t be helped…(Nov 1880)” (516, 517). While the phrase “it couldn’t be helped” is ambiguous, if Lilia meant that she could not imagine a life without an opportunity to participate in her idea of really good theatre, and that acting was important to how she defined herself, that is significant indeed. Using Lilia’s fiction to doubt the possibilities Greville offers means complicating his interpretations of her life with something that is neither one, nor the other, but something else besides. If Lilia’s opinions about amateur performance and her own talents did not change in the seven years between 1873 and 1880 when she chose the amateur stage over marriage, she was probably not interested in fame or money, nor did she believe amateur theatre was “settling” – she believed in being true to herself as an individual – something very few Victorian women dared to do.

Lilia’s interest in defining “good” theatre in her “Hastings Gazette” story draws attention back to the third point I want to discuss related to the MacDonald Family archive, that of “success” in the Victorian amateur theatre. As mentioned, the MacDonald family seems to have participated in three different kinds of private theatricals. First, they performed at home, for their own pleasure, and the pleasure of their friends (who were sometimes high profile people such as Charles Dodgson/ Lewis Carroll and John Ruskin, and sometimes were invited local

\textsuperscript{157} In Greville’s memoirs \textit{George MacDonald and His Wife}, he writes in his somewhat melodramatic style, “Of Lilia Scott MacDonald’s many admirers and lovers, for her there was but one. She lost him because, to repudiate her art even for his sake had been like sitting with Peter by the fire in the midst of the hall: as much a denying of her faith as if she had gone on the stage against her parents’ decision. Her genius and her duty reigned together on one throne” (516).
Second, they performed *Pilgrim’s Progress*, and the religious nature of this particular script, and the fact that some people asserted that it was a revival of Medieval Miracle plays gave this work a particular tenor. And finally, they performed fundraisers for their own benefit.

Performing for their own pleasure, when Grace writes that Cinderella “went off very well,” she is using the same kind of post-show language that Ewing and Yonge used about their family theatricals. Similarly, in Italy, in 1881 Lilia wrote to her friend Jane Cobden “we had some Christmas tableaux. They pleased” and in January 1882, she wrote with casual good humour “We have had a capital stage up in the drawing room, & played *Domestic Economy* with great success. Our kind friends in front laughed and laughed till it was all up with us Summleys who had to laugh too.” But, notwithstanding the letter to an American friend in which she claims that audiences “love” *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Lilia asserts that there is something a little different about a *Pilgrim’s Progress* performance compared to fairy tales, charades and farces. In January of 1880 in a letter to Jane Cobden she wrote, “we had a much better audience than hoped for this afternoon…. People were wise enough to think this different from a secular affair” (Johnson 2).

Rachel Johnson argues that the spiritual nature of the production changed the way that audiences received the work: reviews of individuals varied from euphoric to the disparaging” (Johnson 2), and most reviewers who complained that the acting was not up to the task of performing such a difficult piece agreed that the performance was still effective. Working with friends and their friends’ connections, Johnson cites letters from Grace, Lilia, and Irene in which the girls explain the way that well-connected friends took tickets and distributed them, or that

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158 The “Private” invited audiences often included poor people. In England they performed for their servants and for peasants working the land nearby; they performed as a part of Octavia Hill’s housing schemes for the poor (Salmon 6); and in Italy they invited local peasants to their productions. (In 1881, writing to Jane Cobden, Lilia writes that for their tableaux: “We had all the English one day — and about a hundred of the Italians the next — the people about — any one that happened. There are hardly any native gentlefolk in the winter here.”) The family viewed these performances as acts of charity, but apart from Lilia’s letter to Uncle Sandy to his nephew, where she suggests that performing to all classes will “do good,” I have found no other commentary about this particular class of audience.
they were invited to perform in various gracious homes and theatres hosted by local gentlefolk.

“Many places are asking for us,” (Johnson 3) writes Lilia to Jane Cobden in a way that suggests that having a full schedule of engagements had become as significant a measure of success as feeling as though they were doing “good” through their performances. However, a very different tone comes from the family fundraisers of Shakespeare that had no religious or spiritual undertones at all. Lilia’s January 14 1882 letter to Jane Cobden specifically points out that even with Shakespeare, they relied on friends to promote their productions in other cities, but reaching many people with a special production and as broad an audience as possible was no longer the primary concern:

last winter’s rehearsals have really come to something & to something quite satisfactory, considered financially – the manager of the Cannes theatre was quite pathetic over the difference of our receipts & his & went about telling all our corps dramatique that he got the best French artists & no one came, but behold! How Shackspere[sic] drew! London Managers? Tell a different tale, eh? We were much amused. But the affair was well worked at Cannes & human nature exhibited itself most startlingly during the process. You would have been diverted with the doings of some society leaders in Cannes – Miss Crewe was very kind in puffing things for us.

In this production, the piece was “something quite satisfactory, considered financially” and the usual “it went off well” did not even find its way into her letter. As is evident, at times the MacDonald family performed the three different kinds of theatre within the same year, and it is interesting to note that Lilja’s idea of a successful production changed depending on the goals, and while her own fiction suggests that she thought that private theatricals (and private “success”) were best, having one type of success in one did not influence her willingness to appreciate and enjoy a different kind of success in another.
Fiction, Gaps and Listening to Girls

I began this chapter by explaining that my exploration of these four mid-nineteenth-century archives would offer insights and expose possible meanings for the gaps in the archival record regarding girls and at-home theatricals. The archival, historical, and even fictional record related to Julia Corner, Charlotte Mary Yonge, Juliana Horatia Ewing, and the MacDonald women, present glimpses of girlhood, insights into the ways girls may have related to theatricals, and, of course, details regarding the look and feel of theatricals themselves. In previous chapters I was able to examine idealised performances by reconstructing performances from stage directions, and I was able to consider major ideas that playwrights embedded in their texts, but through the research materials in this chapter, I had the opportunity to look closely at how mid-Victorian girls engaged with the process of getting-up a play and contemplate whether ideas in them influenced their thinking and the way they envisioned their own possible futures.

The first significant observation is that mid-Victorian girls rarely reflected on their own theatrical performances, beyond a terse comment like “it was a success.” When post-show reflection does exist in the diaries and letters of girls, it falls (broadly) into two categories: the very brief “it was a success” or the memories of observers who were outside the production. After carefully reading the diaries, letters and memoirs in these archives, it seems that for children’s productions, as long as the performance happened and that there was an audience to watch it, that it could be called a “success.” If the atmosphere among the performers and audience was congenial, that contributed to the production’s success.

Julia Corner left no trace of her own theatrical performances and possible stage management, except for a potentially loaded comment in her introductions to her Little Plays for Little Actors that she knew from experience that theatricals could be good for children. Her memoirist also avoided writing about his (or more likely, her) own role in the performances.
Reviews of Corner’s work show that she was a successful writer in her own time, and Corner’s application to the Royal Literary Fund reveals how her reputation and her independence through writing were significant in terms of how she defined her own identity. But as for theatricals in her own home, it is not clear whether or not she managed them, or whether or not she cared about the opportunity to lead, or even if she craved credit for theatrical management. The way Julia Corner herself experienced at-home theatrical success is completely shrouded in mystery, even though the record demonstrates that her own and other families enjoyed getting-up her plays.

Like Corner, Charlotte Yonge did not leave behind personal reflections regarding her at-home theatricals, although her fiction suggests that for her, a “success” meant that the production happened harmoniously, without family conflict. Juliana Horatia Ewing’s diaries also tersely mentioned success, which seemed to confirm that if a performance happened before an audience, that was nearly always a success. Ewing did not acknowledge her own performances in her diaries, and even in her “Hints” she notes that managers should not expect to take any credit for a job well done. Failures on the amateur, at-home stage almost never exist in post-show print reflections, except rarely when a performance does not come off at all, such as the incomplete charade Grace MacDonald describes, or the fictional “Peace Egg” performance for the servants that cannot take place in Ewing’s story.

Lilia MacDonald complicates at-home theatrical successes by placing them in relief against the “success” of a public affair. As long as the MacDonald performances were viewed as a spiritual, community event, things went very well. If an affair began to be perceived as “public” or a commercial venture, it could be subject to critical commentary and censure. Not only did tickets sold and shows requested suddenly matter, but the simple statement “it was a success” no longer applied—or at least it was no longer adequate. The standards of success were entirely
different in these different spaces. Lilia also demonstrates that she, like Julia Corner and Juliana Horatia Ewing, did not claim any credit for the success of their productions, although her name was frequently mentioned in reviews of their public performances. In the mid-century, at-home success seemed to mean a performance took place before an audience, and it was one that preferably enhanced a sense of community and took place without family conflict, while accolades for individuals were downplayed, or at the very least, girls were expected to deflect personal success.

The second observation is that, although they avoid discussing the outcome, some girls and women in these archives discuss the process of mounting a play: a few of Charlotte Yonge’s letters remain and she wrote about preparation in fiction, focussing on the pleasure in working and the resourcefulness required to find and cobble together props, costume and sets; Juliana Horatia Ewing noted rehearsals in her diaries. Julia Corner emphasises the pleasure of preparation and even encourages young people to take on leadership through her stage directions. The documents in all four archives attest to the idea that in a drama production, even when it is script-based rather than improvised process drama, process and preparation are far more important for most participants than product. The attention to preparation also shows how exciting the work of manipulating and shaping the domestic space to encompass the possibilities in their imagination could be. Although skill was, of course, essential in the modification of the drawing room, the focus on process and imagination also means that those production elements did not garner post-production analysis by girls in their reflective writing either—even if spectators may have observed them and discussed them with the girls afterwards in person.

Third, these four archival resources suggest a particular reading on the way gender performances took place in at-home theatricals. Corner and her memoirist allude to self-effacing girls and women. Yonge describes dynamic girls with essential skills who craved independence,
and were often eccentric or liked to imagine naughtiness but were nevertheless fully ensconced in patriarchal discourse. Ewing’s archive points towards gendered differences in leadership styles. In Corner’s, Yonge’s and Ewing’s archives we can see that girls had the opportunity to revel in male character roles, and Lilía Scott MacDonald borrows male authority by adopting a male voice in her fiction. In the mid-century, some writers challenged gender boundaries in their scripts, and girls could be encouraged to manage theatricals, but male authority still overshadowed their work, while the appeal of temporarily adopting male power is unmistakable.

Diaries and letters only sometimes appear to reliably indicate whether or not theatrical activity was particularly meaningful for a participant. Charlotte Yonge’s letters to Alice bubble with enthusiasm; Lilía Scott MacDonald’s letters clearly demonstrate that she loved to act; but while Juliana Horatia Ewing’s friends and relations remember that she loved to perform, her absent personal reflections make her reasons impossible to conclusively discern. Fiction is especially valuable for filling the gaps because writers include elements they see as essential, which gives those details extra weight, even if they did not appear in various forms of life writing. The fiction discussed in this chapter provides ample evidence of how at-home theatrical productions might have looked, but even more importantly for this analysis, characters’ emotional responses, opinions, and ideas that are represented in fiction give realistic (if not “real”) clues as to how girls might have experienced at-home theatricals. Lilía’s story expresses how powerful she felt amateur theatricals could be, while Yonge’s stories show how performing in at-home theatricals gave girls opportunities to experiment, imagine, and think about ways of performing identity, leadership and ways of being a girl. In spite of the male protagonist, Ewing’s story emphasises how children could do something significant completely independently of adults. Clearly these performance experiences did not appeal to all girls, but for those who enjoyed them, they could become a powerful thinking tool. Victorian girls lived in a rapidly changing world which was restrictive in
terms of gender and social behavioural expectations, but was quickly, yet unevenly, opening up to previously inconceivable futures for girls, and a theatrical could functions as an arena or a springboard for discussions and thought.

I also opened the chapter explaining that I hoped to determine what gaps in the archival record mean. Why do they exist? How can the voids speak? In spite of the richness of the material I found, the absences were meaningful as well. I asked why some moments were remarkable to some girls, and others not, and whether there are reasons why particular types of reflection are rare in the material I examined. Fictions offers clues as to what the girls I was looking at might have thought, felt, or written, even though I cannot conclusively know what they thought about the ideas in the scripts, how they felt about their performances, or the play production after it was all over. But why did the gaps exist in the first place?

Since almost none of Julia Corner’s personal papers remain, the lack of her reflections is much more difficult to think about productively, however the other women did leave behind life writing of various kinds. Charlotte Yonge did not write about her theatricals with the Moberly family after they took place, nor did Juliana Horatia Ewing write more than a brief phrase about her theatricals in her diary, although they both reflected on and evaluated theatricals in fictionalised form. Louisa Powell MacDonald left no trace of her thoughts about her own theatricals, and although Lilia Scott MacDonald enthusiastically wrote about them to her friends, she almost exclusively described the production as a whole rather than any element of her own participation in the event.

There may be two significant reasons for this. First, because of the nature of at-home theatricals, almost everyone who really mattered in the lives of the young performers and playwrights attended the performances, and therefore, post-production debriefing could happen face to face, rather than in letters. However, this does not explain the absence of reflections in
diaries, memoirs and juvenile newspapers/magazines where writers choose to record details about picnics, dances, and other social occasions. The most likely reason for these gaps is put forward by Valerie Sanders who suggests that girls and women were encouraged to be self-effacing and community minded, and discouraged from individualised reflection, and, as a result, would not tend to allow themselves to dwell on their own participation in a theatrical presentation which already had put them prominently on display. Certainly Victorian girls were watched and monitored throughout their young lives, but at a garden party, their performance was improvised, and at a ball the gaze was diffused among other dancers. Only when they performed an entertainment did they draw the gaze of everyone in the room, and only when they performed a character role did they (potentially) perform attributes that were not necessarily ones they chose or aspired to in their daily lives. The high stakes of the performance context coupled with the seemingly attention-seeking behaviour may have discouraged girls and women from further re-living (and re-enacting, as Rebecca Schneider might put it) the performance on paper. Yet the example of Juliana Horatia Ewing, whose sister claimed theatricals were significant for Ewing, shows that theatricals could be important for mid-Victorian girls and their identities even when they did not put that idea in writing. In fact the written absence might actually indicate that many girls were especially proud of their participation – and therefore, unwilling to write about it. As I explore in the next chapter, with the help of twentieth and twenty-first century girls taking drama education, asking present-minded questions may help reveal girls’ thoughts that implicitly exist in archival gaps.

159 Constance Milman’s published reflections and advice are an interesting exception to the rule. She describes how to organize private fundraiser performances based on her own experiences and her experiences working with children. She shares anecdotes about what worked for her (including silly minstrel numbers, special effects for tableaux, home made instruments, and ways of encouraging – and sometimes bribing – children to perform). Most significantly, she discusses “being funny,” an attribute otherwise not acknowledged in the advice manuals for children that I looked at.
Chapter Six: At-Home Theatricals, New Women and New Girls in the late Nineteenth Century

Listening to the Archives in a Whirlwind of Social Change

It can be argued that for any time-based art encounter its most interesting aspect is its double, the second, the clone, the uncanny, the againness of (re)enactment… I am curious to ask here about a more porous approach to time and to art – time as full of holes or gaps…. Rather than a unidirectional art march toward an empiric future of preservation, time plays forward and backward and sideways across the imagined community of an otherwise spatialized national plot. This book explores the warp and draw of one time in another time – the theatricality of time – or what Gertrude Stein, thinking about Hamlet, referred to as the nervousness of “syncopated time.” – Rebecca Schneider, 6

The influences of the New Woman and New Girl movements were far from globally accepted, nor were all aspects of their sociopolitical agendas adopted by all radical or slightly radical women. Furthermore, change did not happen overnight: playwrights featured in Chapter 4 demonstrate proto-feminist leanings in some of their writing, even as they continued to support patriarchal status quo behavioural expectations and identities for women and girls. Yet playwrights the playwrights featured in this chapter—Amy Levy (1880), Clara Ryland (1896), and Florence Bell (1896) and their families—lived in turbulent times that were profoundly influenced by new ideas regarding women in society, and that allowed them to position themselves as New Women, if they so chose, and also allowed them to write more overtly about their chosen New Woman issues. Girls who performed the roles in their plays were swept up in those burgeoning social changes, contributing to the creation of a cultural shift in identity that Sally Mitchell calls the “new girl” (1995).

As in the previous chapter, I examine diaries, letters, memoirs, and playbills, and make special note of the gaps in girls’ writing about at-home theatricals, but in this chapter, I am especially interested in time’s againness, syncopation, and non-linear movement, as Rebecca Schneider describes it. As the nineteenth century and the Victorian era drew to a close, connecting back to the middle of the century helps to paint a picture of the relationship between
girlhood, theatricals, agency and identity, but so do leaps forward into late twentieth and twenty-first century drama classrooms. The archival evidence and the gaps that yawn where I wish evidence could be make it possible to hear snatches of Victorian girl voices, helping me to understand the relationship between girlhood and theatricals and the ways these late Victorian girls, swept up in a whirl of social change, experienced both. As in Chapter 4, I augment the nineteenth-century archives with Sanders’ ideas about life-writing, ideas explored in Victorian fiction, and, as mentioned, complementary twentieth and twenty-first century drama education studies.

Amy Levy and “The Unhappy Princess”

Considering Amy Levy (1861 – 1889), her family’s at-home theatricals, and what they may reveal about Levy and girlhood is interesting because the Levy family were typical and atypical members of the Victorian middle class in significant ways, which I will outline below. But what is particularly striking about Levy’s “girlhood” letters (I include letters into her early 20s), is her clever but girlish voice, which not only helps to illuminate some issues related to theatricals, but also ties her experience of youth and theatre to the experiences of young people engaged in drama education living in the twenty-first century. Where there are gaps in Levy’s reflections on her experiences, her voice seems to connect her to girls separated from her by spatial and temporal distance, and it is possible to apply their reflections to illuminate a Victorian life.

Amy Levy was born in 1861, and wrote “The Unhappy Princess,” her only published play in 1880,160 which her family performed twice in 1880 and once in 1883. Linda Hunt Beckman, 

160 Levy wrote at least two other unpublished plays. In one of her now fragmented juvenile journals (1873 Popular Club Journal when she was 12, her sister 14, and her brothers 10 and 8) there is the final scene from a melodrama called “Queen Eleanor & Fair Rosamund.” After Rosamund kills herself, Linda Hunt Beckman reports that Eleanor says “exultingly” “Now lie there thou frail piece of clay; & be a witness that Eleanor of Aquitaine has now revenged her wrongs; & she alone now reigns the mistress of
Amy Levy: Her Life and Letters, 2000), argues that Levy’s Anglo-Jewish family were like most members of their Jewish community: fully integrated into middle-class Victorian society, yet perceived as being somewhat racially other. The Levy family participated in the at-home theatricals, the children wrote juvenile newspapers for family entertainment, they hired a non-Jewish governess, and Levy’s mother adhered to conventional Victorian views on propriety in social relations between the sexes. It is not even clear that they regularly attended synagogue. But they were also atypical: not only were they Jewish, but they were a particularly literary family, the father was very interested in what could be called “progressive” political ideas, and Beckham suggests that the family must have been “unusually tolerant” because of the way Levy irreverently joked about morality in her “Confessions Book” by taking on the personas of Maryanne Salvation and Satan (23). She also attended A Doll’s House very close to opening night, but certainly after the play was deemed outrageous. Amy Levy was an original member of the influential Literary Ladies Club, founded in 1889, which Linda Hughes argues can be directly associated with rise of the New Woman movement (Hughes 233). Hughes quotes from a British Weekly article that mentions that Mona Caird presided over the first meeting, and that Levy was certainly “the most interesting personage” who attended” (239). While her two brothers may not have been highly educated, unlike in many Anglo-Jewish families, both the Levy daughters received an excellent education (not at a finishing school, but at Brighton High

her husband’s heart” (20). At Newnham College Levy wrote a comic verse play called “Reading” which Beckman says “shows that she was aware of the unwelcoming attitude of men at Cambridge” (39).

161 Confession Books were popular albums that were, Levy’s cover says, a place “to Record Opinions, Thoughts, Feelings, Ideas, Peculiarities, Impressions, Characters of Friends &c.”…” (Beckman 15). Her friends and family members answered questions such as “If you were not yourself, who would you be?” (her father wrote Mr. Darwin), “What characters in history do you most dislike?” (Amy Levy answered “the intolerant ones) and “Who is your favourite poet” (Levy answered on behalf of Satan “Mrs Aphra Benn [sic]” (Beckman 15, 16, 24).

162 Kate Freiligrath-Krocker, whose fairy tale plays I discuss in chapter 2, wrote a poem in memory of Amy Levy and presented it at the Literary Ladies Club after she died.
School, established by feminists; her parents also let her be practically a pioneering student at Newnham College, a college for women at Cambridge College. Levy herself was different from conventional girls because she was interested in suffrage and proto-feminism at a very young age,\textsuperscript{163} she was deeply committed to her career, she had same-sex desires that went beyond normalised Victorian school-girl crushes, and unfortunately, she was different because she suffered from depression throughout her life,\textsuperscript{164} and ultimately, committed suicide at the age of 27.

Home theatrical performances, and Levy’s performative writing for home, are a thought provoking way to examine Amy Levy’s life because through writing plays and performing in them, Levy could engage in embodied role play. Embodied role play seems significant since Levy appears to have struggled with identity conflicts that may have exacerbated her depression (Beckman 7), and because she had a penchant for adopting personae in her writing, a habit that Beckman calls “striking” (23) but may be more indicative of her similarity and connection to twenty-first century girls who take on a variety of roles in their drama classes. Her writing and role-playing gave her (and through her theatricals, others) opportunities to speak through alternate voices, often choosing a male point of view,\textsuperscript{165} and to destabilise the fixed identities into which Victorian society tried to mould girls. Naomi Hetherington and Nadia Valman argue that

\textsuperscript{163} Beckman found a childhood drawing of “a woman standing on a soap box dressed in a bloomer costume, her sign reading “Women’s Suffrage! Man is a Cruel Oppressor!” (18); at thirteen Levy reviewed Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s epic poem for \textit{Kind Words}; the same year a feminist journal called \textit{The Pelican} published Levy’s “The Ballad of Ida Grey”(18); at age 17, Levy wrote a letter called “Jewish Women and ‘Women’s Rights’” to the \textit{Jewish Chronicle} regarding the importance of paid professional work (17). Yet Beckman argues that although Levy was interested in social reform, and had friends who were leftists, aesthetics, socialists and social activists, her own preoccupation was living her life as a New Woman, which Beckman believes Levy understood to mean “a woman who, instead of centering her attention on home and family, strived for an autonomous, achievement-oriented existence” (6). Levy’s overwhelming commitment was not to politics but to her art and to her career as a woman of letters (5).

\textsuperscript{164} Beckman identifies 1876 as the first year when Levy mentions “the blues” (219).

\textsuperscript{165} In her controversial novel \textit{Reuben Sachs}, she looks at things from Reuben’s and Leo’s point of view, but also shifts to Judith’s (in third person). In “Sokratics in the Strand,” she has two male narrators, and in “Minor Poet” the voice is male (Beckman).
Levy achieved iconic status as a symbol of cultural marginality, poignantly reading her suicide as “the tragic outcome of identity conflict, either between her Jewishness and her feminism and/or lesbianism or as the result of her dissident position in a predominantly male, heterosexual, and Christian culture.” Yet they caution that focus on “identity conflict” encourages a monochromatic and unnecessarily consistent interpretation of her life and work (3). Nevertheless, since articulating one’s identity is, arguably, a defining feature of girlhood, it is useful to consider Levy’s probable identity conflicts as a factor in locating Levy’s contribution to understanding the relationship between at-home theatrical performance and Victorian middle-class girlhood. A direct autobiographical reading of any of Levy’s experiments with various personas is reductive, but considering those readings and performances as powerful explorations is an instructive way to think about the potential power of at-home theatricals for girls.

Linda Hunt Beckman is currently working on an edited volume of some of Levy’s lesser-known writing, including her play, “The Unhappy Princess.” Beckman describes Princess Morosa as “a seemingly fortunate young woman who is prone to melancholia” and argues that the Princess “shows that Levy could laugh even at this aspect of herself, and, though its plot is hardly original, the drama reveals its author’s quirky, delightful sense of humour” (14). The play is not autobiographical – the publication credits “The Double Story” by George MacDonald for inspiration (12) – but Levy’s treatment of the characters is self-referential, poignant, and another example of how women in Victorian England often channelled complicated emotions into fiction, rather than writing about them as non-fiction. Levy does note her despair in letters to

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166 The princess in “The Double Story” is sullen, spoiled, and prone to violent temper tantrums. The princess in “The Unhappy Princess” is inexplicably sad and spoiled. Each princess improves when a Wise Woman steals her away and she has to work.
her mother and sister, but more often she references feelings of sadness and teetering on the edge of suicide in her fiction and poetry.\textsuperscript{167}

In the first moments of “The Unhappy Princess”, the Queen confesses that she is sad because her beautiful daughter Morosa, who is only fifteen, “Who should be glad and blithe and gay/sits in a corner all the day,/And sulks and frowns and sighs and mopes;” (3), and her governess (named Girtonia to wittily reference Girton College, another school for women) rues the day that she came to the palace to teach the girl because she “\textit{will not learn}. I’m sure I try/To skip the subjects which are dry…/She only opens wides [sic] her eyes,/ And sits and sighs and sighs and sighs!” (3). Nothing seems to shake her daughter from malaise: she did not even enjoy the Christmas pantomime they attended together. The Queen reports that even doctors can find no reason for her complaint.

Princess Morosa also admits that she does not understand why she is so sad:

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{c}
Ah, me! I know no more than they  
Why I am sad; perhaps some day  
I’ll smile again. An no, ah no!  
My heart proclaims ‘twill not be so.  
Alack, alack, how sad am I!  
I’ve got to live, yet want to die! (5)
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

Princess Morosa sighs to the Wise Woman of the fairy tale, who will eventually cure her, that she wishes she’d “ne’er again draw breath!” and that for her “the world is empty, drear, and dark”

\textsuperscript{167} A year after the 1880 performance of “The Unhappy Princess,” Levy wrote to her mother from Dresden (November 10, 1881), “I don’t like being twenty at all; I think my arrival in the world was rather an unfortunate occurrence for everyone concerned” (Beckman 233). December 4, 1881, she merrily wrote to her sister “Sunday evening…we played games, tableaux, charades, etc. of a rich variety…” but four days later, she writes, “Madge & I sit like two aged crones & talk bout the past – by mutual consent avoiding any reference to the future. Really if this confounded neuralgia don’t stop I shall have to hie to a chemist – no, not a chemist – the river; for the German chemist is alas! not permitted to retail the death-fraught drug to the chance customer. Write soon to the profoundly miserable. AL” (237, Beckman). Her poetry also suggests that suicide is often in her mind. Beckman reprints Levy’s “To Death” (210) as the most poignant example of this theme in her writing: If within my heart there’s mould,/If the flames of Poesy/And the flames of Love grow cold,/Slay my body utterly. Swiftly, pause not nor delay;/Let not my life’s field be spread/With the ash of feelings dead,/Let thy singer soar away.”
At the end of the play, after she is accomplished at various labours, she is too busy to sigh, and after she has fallen in love with Felix, a young prince (whose name, of course, means happiness), the Wise Woman changes the Princess’s name: she is not Morosa, but my Rose. The Queen accepts the blame for spoiling the princess, but the solution -- work tirelessly, find love, and fall in love with happiness -- predict the approach Levy attempted for ten years to cure her own depression. Although she sought love, she never found anyone who loved her. Linda Beckman explains that her most probable relationship was with Dorothy Blomfield, but that was certainly over by the time she returned from travelling in Florence in early 1889. Perhaps a more unlikely love affair, Levy was also rejected by Vernon Lee (Violet Paget). The year she took her own life, Linda Beckman reports that Levy’s calendar was a whirlwind of work and social activity; but on the eve of her death, in response to Olive Schreiner’s attempts to interest her in life by taking her on a seaside holiday, and sharing Edward Carpenter’s “Have Faith” with her, Levy wrote, “might have helped me once; it’s too late now; philosophy cannot help me.” Ultimately, Princess Morosa succeeded in embracing life where Amy Levy could not.

Regardless of how Levy’s final decision intersects with her art and her life, Levy’s lived experience of writing and performing theatricals is relevant to this study of girlhood, identity and performance. In Kathleen Gallagher’s ethnographic study Drama Education in the Lives of Girls: Imagining Possibilities (2000), the questions she asked the girls who participated in her study included 1) Do you see yourself as different in this class compared with your other classes?; and 2) Do you think there are characteristics or aspects of yourself and your life experiences that you brought into the dramas we worked on together?” (19). She employed the idea of the “resisting listener” who, as Gallagher describes it, “must listen for and against conventions of relationship within a society and culture rooted, psychologically, in the experiences of men” (19). Her process inspires me because it would have been fascinating to ask Amy Levy (and other Victorian girls)
similar questions: 1) Did you see yourself as different when you worked on and performed theatricals?; 2) Did you think you brought characteristics or aspects of yourself and your life experiences to the theatricals? I would be especially interested if girls felt they brought hidden or repressed parts of themselves to performance. But since I cannot ask Levy these questions directly (and even if I could, Valerie Sanders’ research suggests that our conversation would lack candour), in the next paragraphs, I am going to draw attention to some intriguing connections, parallels, and significant voices that assist in interpreting Levy’s possible experiences, even in a time before Europeans had developed a study of psychology as we know it today.  

One way late twentieth-century students are similar to Amy Levy and her contemporaries is their use of a passionate, youthful language, that they employ partly to distance themselves from adult contemporaries while aligning themselves with young peers. Victorian slang is different from the language used by twentieth- and twenty-first-century students, but it evokes the same kinds of intensely emotional responses to the world they inhabit. It is possible to connect Amy Levy to high school girls today through their passionate, sometimes playful, and irreverent use of language. Slang is specific to the particular time and location, but the use of slang crosses physical and temporal boundaries. The work of analysing the way Levy used language in letters to her sister is the subject of different study, but I want to note a few significant examples. Levy uses chatty slang in her letters such as “the teaching is really crack [at Newnham]” and “I get so grimly fagged” from the workload (Beckman 228). But she also uses words that refer to people’s

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168 Victorians were struggling with empiricism, the soul, science, and physiological understandings of neuroses, but everyday acceptance of the idea of a subconscious or inner world had not been popularized. Carolyn Steedman argues that during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, childhood came to represent a physicalisation of human interior life (as projected by adults, of course) and the performance of childhood represented “questions” about interiority (76) but at the time of Levy’s depression ideas about interior life were radical and the subject of debate.
performances of identities that are not the same as words used by girls today, but resonate with them, tying girls in different worlds together based on desire to define and label their social landscape through their own youthful language. For example, Levy regularly uses the word “rich” in a way that is not complimentary at all to the subject of the adjective (Beckman, appendix); and Dominique Rivière hears similar labelling conversations from twenty-first century drama students in an urban setting outside of Toronto, with whom she discussed the performance of gender and femininity in the school environment. One student, Victoria declared “If you act a certain way, people…put you into different categories. Like, they’ll call you…bad things that start with an “s” and end with a “t” (347). Evidently, Victoria’s phrase is rude, but it also demonstrates a desire among young people to carve out identity descriptions that are often sexualised, relate to performance, and like Levy’s use of the word “rich,” simultaneously define and momentarily control ephemeral social structures that are generally controlled by a broader discourse. Sometimes Levy’s imagery is irreverent and youthful, but perhaps not a part of typical language among girls: she calls her schoolmates’ crushes their “divinities” noting “mine looked lovely. She grows more passion-inspiring daily” (222 Beckman), at Newnham, she describes Miss H. Gladstone as the “cock” of the college (230 Beckman), and there she calls teacher crushes G.P.s (Grand Passions) (228). Sometimes, Levy’s language draws attention to the “theatrical” nature of identity performances in the daily world. The exclamation “tragical!” or “tragedy queen” also appears in her letters and stories (Beckman 225; “Euphemia,” unpublished fragment). Similarly, in Kathleen Gallagher’s research regarding twenty-first century urban youth and drama education, one of the Toronto teacher’s class rules, based on discussions with students, was “Focus on the drama, not the ‘drama’” (Why Theatre Matters 125). The words young people to label, define identities, and express their intense emotional lives are different, but the
performative emotional intensity behind them is similar, connecting the girls across space and time.

Gallagher’s students engaged in a wide-range of drama projects, mostly through improvised creations rather than previously scripted work, but there are still many potential parallels to Victorian experiences. One of Gallagher’s grade 10 students, Ruby, reflected:

Playing a day in the life of Mary Morgan (like all drama presentations) required quite a bit of imagination and interpretation of who I feel a certain character is. In a sense, it requires finding a certain quality of a particular character within yourself and improvising on that. (49)

The idea of “finding a certain quality of a particular character within yourself” is significant for many acting methods, but factors less significantly in the still-dominant melodramatic theatre practices of the late Victorian era, in which certain gestures and types body language were seen to truthfully convey and externalise inner emotions. But the externalised gestural code does not diminish the impression of the “reality” of this style of performance for Victorian audiences.

Furthermore, since Elizabeth Robins argued that the “abandon” required for emotional performances “came to be impossible” for the well-bred Victorian lady (Corbett), we do know that the personal restraint expected in the performance of daily life could be challenging for an actress to overcome. Abandoning oneself to a character is, no doubt, part of why acting was so appealing to some Victorian girls, but was complicated by notions that, in fact, a performance

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169 Kathleen Gallagher also remarks on the way young people are socialized to perform certain roles in specific circumstances. In Why Theatre Matters she discusses interviewing young people who “let their guard down” and told interviewers they were “revealing their ‘true’ selves, as opposed to those selves they performed daily and effortlessly for their fellow peers, teachers, and us, presumably abandoning in these stolen moments the kind of performative norming they are accustomed to. While my postmodern sensibilities continue to make me uneasy with notions of a ‘core’ or ‘true’ self, I knew what they meant” (119). While I am not convinced that the performance of Victorian expectations for girls was always “effortless”, I think it seems likely that young women in our era and in the nineteenth century share a struggle or at least feeling of friction with quotidian performance expectations, and those expectations of daily social performance necessarily influence what is appealing, and what is challenging, about dramatic role-playing. Gallagher argues against embracing a narrative of social masks and authentic self-hood, and instead argues that for twenty-first century students “what they enjoy about drama is the play between so-called fiction and reality, the play between an intentional performance and a social one” (123). The argument could easily be extended to Victorian girls, experimenting with unexpected behaviours, and aware of the nature of the “aggregate” in their performances.
could taint the public’s impression of a woman or girl’s personal character, emphasising the Jane Austen (via Mary Isbell) notion of the aggregate that audiences see when the performer is someone they know. If these factors – externalising an emotional inner world through melodramatic style, abandoning the daily self to the character, awareness of the “taint” that a particular role could have on her personal character -- were at play when a girl learned and performed her role, then it makes sense that girls would be at least somewhat aware that as they played, they both drew on aspects of their own emotional life, even as they might temporarily absorb the traits and opinions someone quite different from themselves. The significance for Amy Levy’s 1880 performance of “The Unhappy Princess” is interesting: the playbill indicates that while she wrote the character of Princess Morosa in a way that echoed her own inexplicable sorrow, she chose not to play that part herself. Instead, Miss Irene Cohen (possibly a cousin or friend) had the opportunity to interpret and imagine depression, while Amy Levy took on the part of the generous, sensible, and self-composed Wise Woman. In Why Theatre Matters, Gallagher writes that in drama spaces “broader and more intransigent social relations can be reproduced, disrupted, or temporarily suspended” (119). Like Ruby, unless Irene chose to mock malaise in her performance, she (and the girls who might perform the role in future post-publication performances) could imagine that trait as her own and perform it, possibly leading her to a sympathetic understanding of depression.

In a study with American drama high school students of colour, Jonathan Neelands and Bethany Nelson shared this student reflection on working, ensemble style, on Hamlet:

Monica: Instead of just being in a classroom…we get to act out the words and feel them…
Abel:…we actually lived it, we became part of it and that just helps overall.
Kristie: I just liked that we got to act it out, like, ourselves, and interpret it…and I like the fact that we got into a deeper level of it. (23)
The students who participated in Neelands’ and Nelson’s study engaged in a wide variety of physicalized supplementary activities, including an imaginary tour of Hamlet’s castle, where one student with eyes closed was led by another who acted as guide. Students were explicitly encouraged to discover the “traces” of Hamlet in their own lived experiences (25). Certainly Levy’s theatrical was not supported by activities like these, yet it is striking that Monica points out that the significance for her was not being in a classroom, but “we get to act out the words and feel them” while Abel said “we actually lived it.” Even Kristie, who does not describe herself as quite as absorbed in the experience says she got to “interpret it” herself. Although they used a well-established script, the very act of putting serious emotional stakes into the body had the potential to change the way Monica, Abel, and Kristie felt, understood, and possibly related to Hamlet. Another student, Lily, explained, “Complicated characters will only reach you if you are trying to reach them” (27), underscoring the fact that acting does not immediately guarantee that young people will experience something that might change the way they think about themselves and others. But if Victorian young people were able to get beyond the anxiety of learning their lines, and were engaged in performing a character (as the children in Charlotte Yonge’s narratives are) then they are trying to reach that character. Like Neelands and Nelson’s students, better than reading a novel quietly in the house, perhaps Victorian thespians who played Princess Morosa could come to a more profound connection to her situation as well.

Similarly to Elizabeth Robins’ discussion of emotional acting, another of Kathleen Gallagher’s students reflected less on how she found aspects of herself to perform, and more about abandoning herself to a completely different character. Siobhan, when discussing role-playing said that she was able to separate her own beliefs from the beliefs of her character, but in taking on the character:
I began to understand how a person could feel differently. His beliefs became my beliefs when I was in role….I also found that when performing the role of a character you become that character. It is as if you are no longer yourself and yet you are; but you are completely taken over by this alternate identity. (53)

Amy Levy does not talk about being “taken over” by alternate identities, but Linda Hunt Beckman is struck by the number of different voices Levy employed in her juvenile magazines “Harum Scarum” and “Kettledrum.” Probably disguising her handwriting, and certainly employing various pseudonyms, through the magazine Amy was able to present numerous points of view on certain issues, and even offer various critiques of a piece which she, herself, wrote.170 For example, she wrote a story called “Euphemia” in one issue, and in a following issue includes two different comments about the tale, one facetiously over-praising it, and one with qualified praise (Beckman 22). Later, when she published short stories, Gail Cunningham observes that Levy perfected her penchant for adopting multiple narrative voices, and those stories allowed her space to imagine various identities, and “relations between narrator (or narrators), reader, and author, and between the fictive and the real…” (71) which may have been particularly significant for a young woman whose personal interests and beliefs chafed against the community in which she lived.

Amy Levy’s family was liberal minded by Victorian standards, but her two communities were the patriarchal Victorian Christian middle-class norm and the comparatively conservative Anglo-Jewish community. Levy’s at-home theatrical performance experiences may be partially illuminated by two comments made by participants in Kathleen Gallagher’s Drama Education and

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170 The Gatty and MacDonald families often adopted the Royal characters in their publications, referring to various family members as Princess so-and-so, but the characters are transparent and easy to connect with the original writer. Lilia Scott MacDonald employs different, humorously critical voices when she writes classified advertisements, editorial apologies, and takes on a male voice in her “conglomerations” story. The practice of creating various personas in order to construct a legionary writing staff was not original to Amy Levy, but the fact that Levy continued to use the practice as a more mature writer suggests that it was a technique she particularly enjoyed.
the Lives of Girls study. Amy Levy, like Juliana Horatia Ewing (née Gatty), Alice Emmeline Corner, and other Victorian girls, seemed to like taking on male roles when she performed at home. Playbills from a double-bill family performance of Act IV of The Merchant of Venice and “an entirely NEW COMEDY written expressively for this Theatre entitled Medicus” (which Beckman speculates Levy wrote) indicate that Amy Levy played Shylock in Merchant and Leonard Larkins in Medicus. Her sister Katie played Portia and Posy Pipps, but her brother William also cross-dressed in the latter as Aunt Matilda Madcap, and Emma Isaacs played Salerio in the former. Given the comedy context of Medicus, it is likely that William played Aunt Matilda for comic effect, but Shylock and Salerio were not played by girls for laughs – and in fact, there were other boys to play the parts if they had wanted them. Gallagher’s grade ten student Fenny commented, “you take all of your surroundings and you use that to make the character. Yeah, I think that the character you play is always a part of you, like even though you could be playing something totally opposite” (88). According to dominant Victorian ideas about gender, the Levy’s and their friends/cousins were playing their “total opposite” when they played cross-gender. To do it, they must have adopted Fenny’s approach of careful observation of how social relations functioned, but they also had a chance to find a way that the character was a part of them, even though it was very different. Girls could, in fact, explore their masculine side, and feel how male dress, action, and agency were, perhaps, a part of them.

Tensions between constraining and often strict dominant cultural values, their translation into social expectations, and the at-home stage are also important for Victorian girls who

\[171\] Beckman is very interested in the significance of an Anglo-Jewish family performing an iconic Jewish character through which many stereotypes were maintained, on the at-home stage. However, it is important to note that performing Shylock in the drawing room was not completely unheard of. In Charlotte Yonge’s Henrietta’s Wish a girl tries on her uncle’s barrister wig, he sees her, and declares she must play Portia, and that becomes the subject of their charade version of The Merchant of Venice. He offers to play “growling” Shylock.
engaged in theatricals. Beckman notes that performing theatricals was a quintessentially Victorian bourgeois activity, but the decision to perform part of *Merchant of Venice* “reveals a preoccupation with things Jewish and an interest in the way Jews were perceived by the dominant culture” (14). As other writers demonstrate, theatricals were a space to stretch the boundaries of home life, to critically engage in issues of the day, and for girls to perform differently than their daily lives, thus opening the way for conversations and questions about the norm. Girls performing male roles brought questions of gender performance into the drawing room, and when Levy performed Shylock, she brought questions about Anglo-Jewish-Christian relations into the drawing room. Katie’s performance of the judge (Portia disguised as a man), and the inevitable marriages in “The Unhappy Princess,” *The Merchant of Venice*, and probably, Medicus, also draw attention to the patriarchal social expectations for happiness. In light of the family’s relatively liberal viewpoints, all of these would have been open topics for discussion.

One of Kathleen Gallagher’s older students, Clara a grade 13 student, who both did videography for the study, and reflected on her own grade 10 self, specifically remarks on the way that theatrical activity in the school where Gallagher conducted her research could engage girls in discussions about identity and patriarchy. Clara argued that because the school was a Catholic school, it was “extremely oppressive” and “it is the pressure of the religion itself, that would like to ‘mould’ every female student into the ‘ideal patriarchal woman’” (*Lives* 103). Clara referred to the powerful influence of the Catholic school, but Levy and her young female friends and relatives were similarly contained by the vast majority of their society. Clara also observed that Gallagher’s particular approach to drama enabled students to wrestle with questions they may not even be aware of until the program was over like “1) What is a woman composed of? 2) What am I composed of?” (*Lives* 102). Clara explained that in retrospect, the drama program made it possible for her to see “beyond and above the institution” and “allowed me to see parts
of myself that I never knew existed. I was faced with developing myself as a woman” (Lives 103).

Clara credits Gallagher’s pedagogy with creating the space for self-reflection and growth, but it is possible that, especially within a liberal thinking Victorian family, that performing theatricals at-home, in a way that re-imagined, critiqued, or simply held up a mirror to patriarchal society, might have afforded nineteenth-century girls an opportunity to imagine or even “see parts of [themselves they] never knew existed.” Amy Levy’s experiences in theatricals, and her own script “The Unhappy Princess” suggest that the raw materials to encourage reflection and discussion were present in the home; whether or not girls consistently took up the challenge to use theatricals to think about their lives is still uncertain.

**Clara Chamberlain Ryland: Hack Poet and the Annual Christmas Play**

On December 2, 1910, Clara Ryland (1851 – 1915) wrote a letter to her niece Beatrice in rather difficult-to-read penmanship, that was almost all about theatricals: her daughter Sybil’s at school and the one she was launching at home. She includes:

> Of course with my usual madness I have reached head long into another Dramatic performance here for the holiday amusement of my girls & Cecily’s 2 elder ones. They do so love it & I meant it to be very simple & fun (?) for the family & “no trouble at all,” but it has grown as usual. It is fatal to have a hack poet on the premises who can’t resist (?) adding a bit here & a bit there as a fresh idea strikes her till it develops into quite a long & elaborate performance. (Cadbury)

In 1910, Clara Ryland was not presenting her own play, but it’s clear that as she planned the costumes, and imagined the scenes, she made modifications to suit her space and especially her cast and audience, as I suspect many other families did. Ryland coordinated and participated in many facets of theatrical activities, and in this subsection, I explore as many aspects of theatricals as possible, primarily through the eyes (and pens) of spectators.
“Drama is exploration and performance; it is about the performer, the spectator, and the spectator within the performer” writes Kathleen Gallagher, drawing attention to the multiple dimensions of drama (Lives of Girls 24). Mia Perry and Theresa Rogers have also conducted studies with girls that sought connections between the two processes of creation and spectatorship and which “invited connections between what and how we perform and what and how we watch” (49). Gallagher’s study and Perry’s and Rogers’ study both focus on devised, process drama as opposed to the form of script-based theatre performed by the Ryland family, performed in a space “supported by entrances and exits, props, sets, lights, costumes, curtains and characters” (50). They argue “this is a space that delineates the relationships between the performer and the performed, between the performed and the spectator, between reality and the fiction portrayed” (50). These assertions regarding the construction of theatrical space and the differences in spectator/performer experiences are probably accurate. Yet there are several letters from spectators describing the Ryland performances, and these, in conjunction with information about the participants’ adult lives, enable me to speculate about performer and witness experiences, using the Ryland family theatricals to think about what and how Victorians watched, and to consider possibilities for the performer, and the spectator within the performer. I have not been able to find any of the performers’ diaries or letters,172 but comments by observers offer insights suggesting that even though a devised drama experience may more explicitly and intentionally demand that young people “look to themselves, to their own bodies/minds/selves” (Perry and Rogers 50), in the nineteenth century the very act of performing differently than in daily life, and being watched and scrutinised by influential daily life observers, may have created

172 On Canadian Thanksgiving weekend 2014 I heard from Sybil Mary Ryland Thompson’s grandson Chris Thompson who may have some of her papers. However, even if those papers do exist, including her reflections will have to be the subject of another study.
similar kinds of productive spaces of rupture and instability for performers, and perhaps spectators as well. Using commentary by Victorian witnesses to the Ryland theatricals, and reflections by twenty-first century youth about performance experience, I hope to fill in some of gaps that opened up during my Chamberlain-Ryland family research concerning the significance of the theatrical performances for the young participants.

Clara Ryland was born Clara Chamberlain, and her brother was Joseph Chamberlain, an influential and radical politician, first working as Mayor of Birmingham, and later as a Member of Parliament and even Leader of the Opposition. When I visited the Chamberlain collection in Birmingham at the Cadbury Research Library, it was clear that theatricals permeated many aspects of family life. Joseph Chamberlain loved amateur theatricals. The collection includes an amateur poster for Chamberlain’s original farce “Who’s Who? A tale of Slasher and Crasher” (1856); an 1854 playbill for two farces in which he performed; an 1872 amateur playbill for “The Liar” in which he performed; and there are handwritten, undated playbills for theatricals and charades. Joseph must have encouraged his own children’s theatrical efforts as well. His son Austen wrote an original theatrical version of Bluebeard (undated, unpublished) in which Fatima and Anne are saved by their mother, Bluebeard is terrified of his mother-in-law, and she insists he must repent for his bad deeds while she will take over his estate and his affairs. Similarly, Joseph Chamberlain’s daughter Hilda and her sister Ida describe in enthusiastic detail the process of choosing, rehearsing, and mounting theatricals in a school where they teach, and even remark on their reception. Clara’s name does not appear on any of her brother’s playbills, but he was 15 years her senior. In 1854 she was only 3 years old; she was 11 when his daughter Beatrice was born. Joseph and Clara had five other siblings who survived; given Joseph and Clara’s love of theatricals, it seems likely that they performed them as children
as well (although since they were separated so much in age, perhaps not on the same stages), but I have not found a record of those performances.

Clara Ryland herself is an interesting proto-feminist in that she embraced some of, but not all of, the New Woman ideas. For example, in a letter from Ethel to her brother Neville (April 3, 1896), she describes a visit from her Aunts Clara and Lina who “had evidently come up with the idea of impressing us the necessity of learning to bicycle. They knew Hilda was learning but thought we were all set against it.” However, Ethel laughingly remarks that her sister Mary had already learnt, and that she [Ethel] was planning her first lesson the following day. “All the arguments they were preparing to bring to bear on us were quite thrown away as we were already persuaded.” Furthermore, Ryland’s “Frog Prince” script suggests that she believes young women should seriously consider alternatives to marriage, and that she believed in educating girls; she certainly sent at least one of her daughters to college. Yet, while the Belinda character in the play expresses dismay that her younger sister does not want to vote, it seems probable that the women in this politically influential family were generally speaking against the vote for women\footnote{In spite of her personal convictions, the fact that Clara Ryland includes Belinda’s comment in “The Frog Prince” suggests fissures in her opinions. While she seems to have accepted patriarchal viewpoints regarding women and political thought (likely believing that she could influence her husband without needing the vote), like Julia Corner writing plays forty plays earlier, when Ryland wrote in moments of resistant transitional feminism into her fairy tale scripts she points to the possibility of change and, probably, to encouragement for girls and their families to debate and discuss the issue.}; in January, 1911, Hilda wrote with satisfaction to her sister Beatrice that she met Clara Ryland’s daughter, Sybil, at a luncheon and found out she was an anti-suffragette: “I always said she was a sensible child & I am thankful that college has not upset her!” Ryland’s husband, Frederick Ryland, wrote a series of articles for The Girls’ Own Paper called “Politics for Girls” (1895 and 1896), the same years that Clara Ryland was penning her plays for children. Part IV, “Female Suffrage,” offers an explanation of what he sees as the major debates
concerning women and the vote. Although near the end of the second column he asserts, “the truth is, that even the intelligence of a highly intelligent woman is not political,” (520) he begins his article by explaining that the object of giving franchise to a class of persons is to secure that the interests of that class shall not be overlooked….It is, perhaps, an open question whether the class of women as such has any special interests not adequately provided for; but the general drift of thoughtful opinion seems to be in the direction that it has. (519)

He continues by referring to the outrage of unfairness raised by the fact that Mrs. B has an equal education to Mr. A, but that not only may she not vote, but her gardener probably can. Although he remarks that he thinks it would be possible for husband and wife to live together happily and have differing political opinions, he points out that married women would have no vote, that independent rich and educated women would be vastly outnumbered, and the greatest influx of voters would probably be from Factory Girls (leaving political power “chiefly in the hands of young, ill-educated, giddy; and often ill-conducted girls, living in lodging”) and at times of special issues such as war, women could be expected to turn up and “overwhelm the male voters” (519). He then argues that it would not be good for the State for a large number of voters with inferior political knowledge “who habitually take little interest in political matters and do not get political training from incessant discussion, [to] be able to rush in and form a momentary and irresponsible majority.” Frederick Ryland’s arguments could be easily countered based on class bias or on male voter apathy, but what is interesting is that he concludes his article, “One thing is certain, that if women want the franchise they will have to ask for it…. probably there are many more men who wish women to have a vote than there are women who wish to gain it” (520). It is
likely that in his own home, full of political conversations as it was, Frederick Ryland did not hear the rumblings of discontent regarding franchise, even if there were other women’s issues that captured the imagination of his wife and daughters. The end of the nineteenth century was a politically volatile time for women, and women who supported change did not necessarily agree with every socio-political cause. Ryland’s plays offered girl thespians an opportunity to perform roles celebrating women’s education, alternatives to marriage, and promoting women’s suffrage, even if she had not definitively embraced the all aspects of the New Woman movement herself.

Although she calls herself a “hack poet,” Clara Ryland wrote and published at least four scripts for children’s performance. One 1896 volume, published by J. M. Dent, includes “Snow White and Rose Red,” “Prince Riquet and the Princess Radiant,” and “The Frog Prince” and a privately printed but still available for purchase publication, is Ryland’s 1907 version of “The Yellow Dwarf.” These fairy tale plays were all originally performed at home, by the Ryland children. In spite of their widely read publisher, the first volume was neither advertised nor reviewed in hardly any of the publications where I have found other reviews. Only “Women’s Doings” on December 3, 1896, in *Hearth and Home* mentions the publication, (incorrectly spelling her name):

> Mrs. Clare Ryland has written a collection of charming plays for children, which will shortly be published under the title of “Snow White and Rose Red.”

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174 The Rylands were well-connected politically. Beatrice Webb née Potter was a frequent visitor, and if Clara Ryland’s letters and those of her nieces are any indication, the entire family took an interest in political issues, and, not surprisingly, elections.

175 My correspondence with Ryland family descendants indicates Clara wrote and published at least two other short plays (“A New Judgment of Paris” and “Two Strings to One Bow”) (1910) but I have not seen them yet.

176 *The New Zealand Graphic and Ladies’ Journal*, August 7, 1897, does mention a play in their answers to correspondents, that could well be from Ryland’s collection: the post-publication timing is correct and if one includes the prologue, then the cast size is right, and this suggests that since Ryland was so socially and politically well-connected, her plays may have circulated by word of mouth. The printed letter replies to Minnie’s inquiry, “You will find nothing better to amuse your children with than letting them act plays. There is a very good little play – arranged for children – called “The Frog Prince” but it requires a good many little actors – I think ten, or twelve.”
These plays were written by Mrs. Ryland, whose name is well known in Birmingham for her “Own Children,” and they have proved so successful that she has been prevailed upon to issue them in book form.

In fact, Ryland’s family performance of the final play in the collection had not even happened yet at this announcement (it was to take place that Christmas), but clearly, plans for publication were already well under way.

The beautifully illustrated little collection may not have been reviewed or advertised, but it obviously circulated (at least among the Ryland social circles) and was appreciated by audiences who were not strictly family. On Thursday, April 22, 1897 Hearth and Home reported that students at Hampstead Conservatoire, Swiss College performed Ryland’s “Frog Prince.” Although the performance review does not credit the playwright, the piece included a Fairy Prologue and the Princess is unusually named Clorinda, so I am sure it is the same script.

December 7, 1900, The Birmingham Pictorial and Dart reported on a performance of Mrs. Fred Ryland’s “Snow White and Rose Red,” by a cast of children under the edge of 10 as a benefit for the Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Aid Society, and claims that it was the first time that the play was performed in public. The review mentions clear enunciation, that the children seemed “quite at home in their parts,” that the bear engaged in amusing “grunts and grumbles and little by-play,” the girls had attractive costumes, and the children gracefully performed pretty dances. Rose Red “looked very sweet, and astonished the audience by her clear enunciation, as her voice could be heard distinctly in every corner of the room; she also threw much pathos into her acting, and seemed thoroughly at home in her part.” A December 20th review in Hearth and Home, which includes photographs of the young performers, contains similar details, asserting that the girls were “born actresses,” and that the Bear Prince’s proposal to Snow White “brought forth great applause from the audience.”
As mentioned, I was not able to find commentary by Clara Ryland’s daughters and their cousins about the experience of performing Christmas Theatricals, nor is there much remaining of Ryland’s own reflections on the work, yet detailed descriptions of some of the original family performances remain from the point of view of spectators. Ryland’s nephew Neville was sent to the Bahamas managing a plantation for several years. During that time his sisters wrote to him about all the details of family life that he was missing, and that included the Ryland family theatricals.

In her 1910 letter, Clara Ryland asserts that her daughters “do so love” the annual Christmas Theatrical put on by her family, and it is clear that she loves doing it as well. In that letter she enthuses about the three different plays in the programme, one of which she hopes will be amusing but “it all seems deadly serious to me now” (Cadbury). She chose the last as a costume piece, describes how she has been borrowing costumes from many contacts, and mentions that her daughter Sybil will wear a “full dress Georgian suit” which Hugh wore, so, clearly she will play a male character. Typically, the rehearsal time seems much too short:

…if we had only more time we really I think could make a very pretty show of the entertainment at all events. Unfortunately our first rehearsal only begins to day! With 7 different “Acts” & 8 performers & it has to be all ready & performed tomorrow week with Xmas & all its claims coming in between….

Ryland loves the costumes, the staging, the rewriting, and the rehearsing. It is clearly a highlight of the Christmas season for her, regardless of all the competing “claims coming in between.”

What is particularly fascinating about the letters Ryland’s nieces sent her nephew Neville is the way they describe the young people’s performances – and these help to creatively imagine how the young people might have experienced the performances themselves. On December 27, 1895, Ethel wrote to Neville:
...In the afternoon the whole family adjourned to Baskerville\textsuperscript{177} to see the play written by Aunt Clara & acted by the five Ryland children\textsuperscript{178}, with two Sonnenschein boys and Dorothy Chamberlain. It was a great success. Dorothy is a regular actress & the others had also much improved. Mabel had a little dance which she performed with much creditability. A large number of the family were there. By the way, Gerald has grown tall, parts his hair down the middle and I think is trying to grow a mustache.

The piece they performed was probably “Prince Riquet and the Princess Radiant” since Ryland published it the following year, and it features 2 male characters and 6 female.

Mentioning the dance Mabel performed affirms that dances were a notable addition to theatricals, and also suggests that even as dancing was becoming less important as either a girlhood “accomplishment” or an indication of successful entrance into fashionable society, to dance well was still admirable.\textsuperscript{179} Amazingly, neither Ethel nor Beatrice, whose letters to Neville were preserved, bother to include the name of the play, or anything about the roles the children perform, perhaps because the characters are very much in the realm of conventional fairy tale Princes and Princesses. It is not even clear why Gerald, with his mustache and hair parted in the middle, gets a particular mention – perhaps he was involved technically, or perhaps he was a fellow witness in the audience.

Like her sister, Beatrice wrote to Neville on December 27\textsuperscript{th} and declares “I think at all events I shall skip the Ryland Christmas play. As every soul went, you must have had two or three descriptions.” Yet Beatrice must have enjoyed it, because she could not resist writing:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{177} The Ryland Family home.
\textsuperscript{178} All girls.
\textsuperscript{179} Theresa Jill Buckland’s \textit{Society Dancing: Fashionable Bodies in England, 1870 – 1920} explores the way fashionable bodies (especially women’s) were molded through dance styles into objects of wealth and grace. She asserts that the 1870s were the last decade of the undisputed pre-eminence of high society culture in England. She suggests that as the political, economic, and social power of the aristocracy declined, so did their social rituals, including dancing. By the end of the First World War, other influences in fashion and music were significant, and society “followed rather than lead....With Society’s slow decline went the significance of dancing in socio-political circles in Britain” (7). Yet, as she indicates, the decline was slow, and in the 1890s, Mabel’s dance performance was still worthy of remark.
\end{quote}
It was very pretty. Aunt Clara is really a most talented authoress & stage manager & the children take to it like ducks to the water. I think Freda will be like Bertha very capable of training & that Uncle Herbert’s Dorothy may be an actress. Mabel acts with great spirit, knows her part & enjoys it, but I think she probably won’t care for it when she has outgrown children’s acting, or my impression is that she has rather general brightness & cleverness than special dramatic gifts…

That Beatrice differentiates between “children’s acting” and acting done by adults, which she seems to think Dorothy may enjoy, and that she notes “general brightness and cleverness” as opposed to “special dramatic gifts” suggests that she and her family took amateur theatricals both seriously and lightly. It seems that she thinks that they could be just for pleasure – but that they might possibly lead to something like a career, and that a career in the theatre would not be a terrible thing.

The following year, 1896, Beatrice wrote to Neville on December 17, informing him that his younger sister Hilda and probably his niece Mabel would be dancing a menuet [sic] for a few, select friends, and that the next week “there is already Aunt Clara’s children’s play for Thursday afternoon, & Christmas itself on Sunday.” On Christmas Day, 1896, Beatrice found time to write again to her brother to describe the family happenings. She begins “Here I am writing to you at my window with a great yellow sun looking me full in the face before it drops behind the L____ (illegible) Hills.” Her description of the Ryland family play suggests that it had to be delayed until Saturday, but that the piece went very well. The play was “The Frog Prince” and proved to be a family favourite. Below, Beatrice declares it is Ryland’s best play yet, and in 1921, Neville’s sisters Ida and Hilda decided to use the script for a Women’s Institute Children’s Play (Ida, Cadbury). A large portion of Beatrice’s lively letter is worth quoting in its entirety, but I will break it up in

\[180\text{Probably Arthur Chamberlain’s daughter, Bertha Chamberlain, born 1875 (already aged 26, so probably not a performer, but suggesting that theatricals were part of family celebrations prior to the Ryland Family Christmas Theatricals), and therefore a first cousin of the Ryland children. Freda must be Clara Winifred Ryland, born 1887, age 9.}\]
order to discuss aspects that I think develop understanding of the participants’ experience, at
least from the point of view of a spectator:

We all went to the performance of the “Baskerville Midgets” yesterday by
invitation. I really think the Frog Prince is the best of Aunt Clara’s plays partly
because, as some of the children grew older, she could make the principal parts
longer & a little more complicated.

In her letter to Neville, Beatrice’s introduction to the “Frog Prince” starts by acknowledging
Clara Ryland’s role in the success of the production. The previous year she wrote “Aunt Clara is
really a most talented authoress & stage manager,” and in this case, she remarks on how Ryland’s
plays have changed to suit the needs and skills of the young actors. As a creator sensitive to the
children with whom she works, it seems probable that Aunt Clara’s projects were, indeed, a
pleasure for the children, or at least most of the young participants, and that she managed them
with skill and sensitivity:

Mabel\textsuperscript{181} was excellent as a learned elder sister & entered into the part with
great gusto. Freda did the heroine very well & Jamie Sonnenschein had a well
deserved ovation for the Frog Prince’s sentimental song, which, performed in an
excellent frog costume, with appropriate gestures, was really killing.

In 1895 Beatrice remarked that the children “take to it like ducks to water” and here, she
notes that Mabel performed with “great gusto.” Again, in Beatrice’s eyes, the children appeared
to be enthusiastic participants, and although I cannot be sure that too, was not a performance, to
the audience, the young people seem to have been happily engaged on stage. No doubt the

\textsuperscript{181} Mabel was born 1886, so she was 10 for the performance in 1896, and she played the “learned sister”; Sybil was born in 1890,
so she must have been 6. Sybil probably performed as a fairy in the Christmas prologue, and then came out on stage again for
the closing menuet [sic] dance. Dorothy is Uncle Herbert’s daughter, born 1887, so 9 years old. Pearl may have been another
cousin; there is a Pearl listed in the Chamberlain family tree, but no birthdate is recorded. Edward Nettlefold was one of Joseph
Chamberlain’s and Clara Ryland’s first cousins. I am not sure how Cousin Edith fits into the family tree. The Sonnenschein
family were friends. The Wiggins appear regularly in the family correspondence, and may have been friends. I cannot identify the
Gitterin (sp?) family.
enthusiastic spectators, who Yonge and Ewing point out are a consistently an essential part of the performance, supported the thespian efforts with their ovation for Jamie’s rendition of the Frog Prince’s sentimental song. She notes that it was “really killing” which suggests to me that the audience responded with delighted laughter, further encouraging Jamie’s performance, and demonstrating (as I discuss below) different ways of watching boys’ and girls’ performances:

The fairies were very quaint & Pearl’s first appearance upon any stage was carried off in a manner to afford high gratification to both her parents. She looked very pretty & although off the stage she professed to be extremely shy & silent, she cast the most languishing glances at the audience from behind the (imaginary) footlights & danced & joined in the chorus with all desirable aplomb.

In the above section, there are several observations worth making. In contrast to the “excellent” Frog costume, it seems that the “fairies were very quaint” and Pearl looked “very pretty.” As they would be in Aunt Clara’s 1910 Christmas performance, costumes are important here as well. Jamie’s Frog costume, gestures, and singing are “killing” but the girls are praised for being quaint and pretty, \(^{182}\) and I imagine that attractive appearances were especially important for girls at these affairs.

This section also indicates that not only do spectators take pleasure in the performance, but that adults cared about it enough that a child’s performance could be a source of pride for parents. Beatrice’s description of “shy & silent” Pearl, dancing with “aplomb” and casting “the most languishing glances at the audience” reminds me of the characters in Charlotte Yonge’s stories who had a chance to play the “naughty” characters or the “coquettes.” As it did for

\(^{182}\) Constance Milman (1891) is the only writer I came across who discusses the idea that girls might be funny on stage — in fact, she seems to expect it, and seems to believe that it is a goal. Other writers emphasise the importance of girls being graceful, attractive, and articulate, and sometimes praise a girls’ ability to perform traditionally female characteristics (like the coquette). Sometimes Milman performed for fundraisers, and she describes crammed houses with encores, and the next night, only twenty people are in the audience. “How dreary it was to sing, recite, and “be funny” to empty benches! My spirits sank lower and lower until I almost cried” (92).
Yonge’s friends in the 1850s, acting allowed a girl to behave differently than she usually felt she did, taking courage from the guise of performing another character, and having an opportunity to see how that felt. In 2008, in Mia Perry and Theresa Rogers’ study with urban Vancouver girls, one grade nine student, Cassie, declared in a focus group “acting, to me is… an actor is developing a character and he throws away, he or she, throws away who they are and then becomes that character” (50). Like Cassie, Pearl could temporarily throw her everyday self away and try something new.

Finally, it is helpful to know something about the extent to which the little play was staged. Although there was, no doubt, effort to construct a set, the Ryland family did not bother with “footlights.” Lilia Scott MacDonald’s amazed enthusiasm about the “GAS-LIGHTS” (Lilia, Undated, King’s) that were being installed on stage, and the absence of footlights in the Ryland home suggest that lighting was not always set up to mimic the professional stage, either by choice, or by necessity. The real focus seems to have been on the performers.

Poor little Hilda Wiggin had a feverish chill & had to give up her part, which she in turn had taken in place of Edward Nettlefold’s daughter when they had German measles in the house. You may imagine the consternation at Baskerville, but a little girl, named Dorothy Gitterins (sp?) learned the part in a day & a half, & did it without being once prompted – very nicely too…. Hilda Wiggin was fortunately sufficiently recovered (?) to be present & to take the smaller of her two parts – a fairy; so that I think she will not have been so disappointed and if she had had to give it up altogether.

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183 The Lyttleton Family, who were also politically connected, and therefore, probably ran in similar circles to the Chamberlains, constructed a set so significant that the sister who volunteered to perform the piano could neither see the production, nor could she be seen herself. Lucy Lyttleton, age 13, (later Lady Frederick Cavendish) wrote in her diary on January 7, 1857, just before the performance, that they constructed a “splendid dark red curtain, which draws not vulgarly aside, but right up” (Cavendish 46). Elsewhere she describes building “a Magician’s Cave and Fisherman’s Cottage in the gallery and this involved much spangling of paper, ‘pasting, hanging…fetching, carrying…pinning, nailing…gilding, silvering…scientific piling of rocks and shells’ (Fletcher 7). The set piece in their home was so extensive that Meriel, the pianist, was “buried alive behind the Fairies’ Grotto” where she could not share in the applause (Fletcher 7).
As is true today, there is never enough time for rehearsals, actors will often rise to the expectations of the production, and quotidian life can get in the way of the hoped-for ideal. In Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*, Miss Lucy Snowe is locked in the attic to learn a role in a day, demonstrating that the pressure to learn lines at the last minute was not an uncommon (or at least, unimaginable) source of panic. The “consternation” at Baskerville regarding how to solve the last minute casting difficulties must have been a challenge for many of the children as well as Clara Ryland. Among the children, the disappointment of Edward Nettlefold’s daughter and Hilda Wiggin may have been intense, especially if they were not too sick to feel that they were missing out on something fun, but we are left with only Beatrice’s guess about how the children might have felt about issues.

…I wish I could give you an idea of the intense gravity & conscientiousness with which Sybil took her part in a menuet [sic] & frowned down an attempt of Cousin Edith’s to make her laugh.

This is the final comment Beatrice makes to her brother regarding the Ryland family play. Was Cousin Edith on stage, or was she a spectator? Could she have been like the uncle in Charlotte Yonge’s narrative who made remarks to Cecily about being a flirt, and was rewarded with threatening gestures? Or was she a fellow actor who imagined it would be fun to trip up young Sybil? Sybil was popular with her older cousins. An 1894 letter from Hilda to her brother Neville, just two years prior to the theatrical, describes the characters of each of the Ryland girls, noting that “Sybil is more fascinating than ever, and talks a great deal more, though not at all plainly.” Sybil’s air of “intense gravity & conscientiousness” must have amused her cousin, but suggest an inner drama taking place for six-year old Sybil that may have surprised Beatrice: potent moments of real-life drama often cut across the significance of the theatrical drama, as I will demonstrate further in the final section about the Bell Family.
For Beatrice, Ethel, and the other members of the audience, was it possible for them to go beyond their critical assessment of the Ryland children’s performances, and their experience of seeing Mary Isbell’s idea of Jane Austen’s “aggregate” – that is, the blend of seeing whose daily behaviour is well-known to the audience who is playing a character that is, or is not, quite different from the daily self they perform? What kind of identity bending could they imagine through performance? In a study on youth spectatorship and transformative encounters, Bundy, Ewing, and Flemming write that providing the audience is emotionally engaged in the performance, “live theatre can make the familiar strange, and the strange familiar, so that the audience member can examine and reflect on the taken for granted” (146). There are several examples in the Victorian at-home theatricals and related fiction that I have discussed that suggest that seeing the aggregate can be such a moment – and even here, shy Pearl’s languishing glances suggest a similar experience for Victorian audiences: relatives could be surprised at how young people could behave. I imagine that the same surprise would be possible for fellow performers, and even the actors themselves – bringing to mind the idea of Gallagher’s spectator within which the performer sees him or herself in a different way. But did the spectators allow themselves to be absorbed in the matter of the performance in a way that could make “re-cognition” (Bundy, Ewing, and Flemming) possible? They argue, using Bently “[art] does not tell you anything you didn’t know…it tells you something you know and makes you realize” (146). Regardless, neither Beatrice’s nor Ethel’s letters suggest that their spectator experiences offered anything like a transformative learning experience, in which there were “significant shifts in their understandings of themselves and the worlds in which they live” (Ewing in Bundy, Ewing and Flemming 147).

Yet, I am not convinced that such moments could not be precipitated by at-home theatricals – rather I think that the place of the emotional journey cannot be separated from the
aggregate for more than, perhaps, an instant. Ewing describes transformative learning as shifts in consciousness that alter understandings of the self, relationships, power relations, body awareness, identity, and belonging (147). In a *Vanity Fair* excerpt I also discuss in chapter 3, William Makepeace Thackeray suggests such a moment influences the spectators of the charade in which Becky Sharp both triumphs and fails. In the charade, Becky plays Clytemnestra, while her husband, Rawdon Crawley, plays Agamemnon. At first, the audience does not recognise Becky, “her face is deadly pale – and her eyes are lighted up with a smile so ghastly that people quake as they look at her.” As “a tremor ran through the room” someone calls out that it is Mrs. Rawdon Crawley. She advances towards Agamemnon, snatches the dagger from Aegisthus, and “with a groan” the lights go out. Thackeray writes, “the darkness and the scene frightened people. Rebecca performed her part so well, and with such ghastly truth, that the spectators were all dumb…” When the lights come back on, the audience reaction is mixed. There is loud applause, the women are jealous of Becky’s attention, and both Lord Steyne and His Royal Highness seem to suddenly think that Becky might, actually, be willing to kill someone – perhaps even her husband. Thackeray writes, “‘Heigh ha? Run him through the body. Marry somebody else, hay?’ was the apposite remark made by His Royal Highness.” The spectators in this instant were emotionally affected by the performance, but the way they interpreted their emotional response was through the lens of the aggregate of Becky Sharp and Clytemnestra. Similarly, when Charlotte Yonge’s Kitty allowed herself to be swept up in the performance of “The Bridge of Cramond” she could enjoy the play in the moment, but no doubt her reflections afterwards would relate to her thespian relatives. Beatrice and Ethel could not separate themselves from the performers that they knew so well, but seeing Mabel perform the intellectual princess had the
potential to, for example, make them see the ambitious scholar in Mabel that they already knew was there, but had not previously acknowledged. They may not have remarked on this because it was something they already knew, and yet, that does not change the significance of the relationship between the performance, the spectators, and the unexpected ideas explored therein.

Although I do not have an example of the transformational significance of the spectatorship experience from Clara Ryland’s own plays and the audience perspective, there is an important letter that Ryland wrote in 1910 about attending her daughter Sybil’s school performance that I think lends credence to my assertion. Ryland and her daughter Mabel (Sybil’s oldest sister) together went to go see the show which was well received and the College Authorities declared it to be the best “2nd Years’ Play that has been given.” Ryland writes that after the production, Sybil and her friends gave the audience a tea:

she was the hero a small part in which was only required to look a particularly nice & modest & gentlemanly young man & this she did so successfully in that becoming Jane Austen style of dress, that I felt very proud of my son when I saw him offering his Arm to Miss Pearsson (sp?) the Head to take her to supper! As for me I fell quite pathetically sorry for myself to think as I walked about with him what a very nice son I might have had if only Fate had been kinder to me!

Although the performance of Sybil the young gentleman that Ryland referred to was actually outside of the scripted portion of the play, her daughter’s costume and behaviour, in the Victorian world of strict gender performances, struck Ryland deeply enough that she actually put to paper how much she, the mother of five healthy daughters, had wished for a son. It is impossible to know how Sybil felt about her performance (although she apparently performed the

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184 Hilda’s 1894 letter to her brother describing the Ryland cousins includes “Mabel has grown immensely, has learnt to read at last, & is beginning to develop the Chamberlain way of seizing a book & plunging at once into it remaining absorbed and totally oblivious of the outside world.” It is possible that choosing Mabel to perform the “learned sister” was an amusing bit of typecasting, or perhaps, it suggested her mother was aware of yearnings for education on Mabel’s part. Unlike the learned Princess Belinda, however, Mabel chose to get married in 1919.
role with good taste, and according to the expectations one would have of any gentleman, proving that she was capable of male behaviour, even if she were a girl), nor is it possible to know if Sybil was aware of the effect her performance of a gentleman had on her spectator mother. Yet it is clear that for Ryland, this was a moment of art telling her something she already knew but suddenly realised. For Sybil, it could have been a moment when the familiar was made strange (familiar male behaviour was made strange because she adopted it), and the tea room could have become a transitional space, which, in Ellsworth’s words, “provides opportunities for us to both act in the world and to be acted upon by it – while at the same time offering us the flexible stability we need to risk allowing ourselves to be changed by that interaction” (Ellsworth 32). Sybil’s reaction to the pleasures of performing a male hero role are still a gap that cannot be filled, but it is possible to imagine how the space could have been transitional for her, just as her performance of a boy heightened Clara Ryland’s awareness of something deeply felt that she already knew, but may not have previously acknowledged.

I have only been able to delve into the Ryland family theatricals through the observations of spectators. In Clara Ryland’s nieces’ words, I see a thoughtful, hard-working, and sensitive stage-manager, enthusiastic child participants, prepared and barely prepared thespians, disappointed convalescents, clowns and coquettes, and seriously dedicated children. There are still gaps. How much the experience of participating in theatricals lasted beyond Christmas entertainment for either the participants or the spectators is a gap I cannot fill at this time, but it seems plausible that, based on Mary Isbell’s analysis of the aggregate, some nineteenth-century fiction, and research done with twenty and twenty-first century drama students, that spectators and participant-spectators might be able to have a transformative experience, they might be able to get to know themselves differently through performing another character, and of course, they might simply have fun in the moment, with the possibility of reflection and rethinking in
hindsight. Transformative experiences certainly influence identity construction, but so, too, could the content of Ryland’s plays. A chance to think about the vote and to perform alternative futures to marriage and see how that felt, could propel girls towards being a fin-de-siècle New Girl.

Florence Bell and Molly Bell Trevelyan: Passionate Teenager, Resistant Daughter

Lady Florence Eveleen Eleanore Olliffe Bell (1851 – 1930), also known as Mrs. Hugh Bell, is the final playwright I discuss in this chapter. Like the Louisa Powell MacDonald family, Bell’s career as an artist brought her into amateur and professional venues, but in a very different way: the at-home theatricals she did with her own children were purely private, amateur affairs; however, she also had a rather distinguished career as a professional playwright, getting positive reviews for her professionally staged comediettas, and parodies of Ibsen. Furthermore, she acquired New Woman status when she collaborated with the famous and sometimes controversial actress Elizabeth Robins on such plays as Alan’s Wife, and attempted to write a play with actress/manager Madge Kendal. Because Bell was a wealthy society woman, her name also regularly appears in contemporary newspapers reporting on social events, often with descriptions of what she wore, and with whom she was chatting.

Bell published a wide variety of work: many of her plays for professionals, and some of her dialogues found their way onto amateur stages, and she also published numerous collections of plays for children, several of which were intended to support the study of French. She wrote etiquette and conversation advice, essays on education and working class women’s issues, and edited two volumes of letters written by her step-daughter Gertrude Bell (1868 - 1926), a traveller, explorer, archaeologist, stateswoman, and perhaps spy in the area she called Persia.

Florence Bell’s 1896 Fairy Tale Plays and How to Act Them, her only work I refer to regularly in this
dissertation, includes extensive advice on getting up a play, some “New Woman” characters, and, as The Girls’ Own Paper response to a letter from a reader puts it, the plays are “full of delicate humour, funny without being vulgar, and by no means childish or uninteresting” (December 26 1896). Although, like Clara Ryland, Bell did not promote women’s suffrage (an argument that threatened to destroy her friendship with Elizabeth Robins), her artistic career positioned her among the “New Women” writers. February 15, 1893 a “People, Places and Things” article in Hearth and Home cites Florence Bell as an example of an admirable, successful, and independent woman writer:

A contemporary recently called her “Hugh Bell,” and talked about her as if she were a man; and the authoress of “Time is Money,” when she first began to write, had some idea of adopting a masculine pseudonym. However, she resolved to dare and do as a woman, and I should think she can hardly have regretted it. There are people who declare that there still exists a foolish prejudice against a woman’s work, especially if it is for the stage, and that manager fight shy of plays bearing a woman’s signature. This seems very absurd. Within recent years women have made great successes in stage work…. To condemn a play in the MS. merely because it is written by a woman is a preposterous proceeding…

In spite of her somewhat star-studded professional career, Florence Bell’s private theatricals were just that: amateur affairs for an exclusive circle of acquaintances.

I was not able to read any of Bell’s own letters or diaries, but a visit to the archives at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, to the uncatalogued Trevelyan collection, has letters and diaries from Mary Katherine (Molly) Trevelyan, née Bell (1882 – 1966), and a few letters from her older sister Elsa.185 Online, the University has also published Gertrude Bell’s diaries and letters. The daughters, New Girls in many ways, give insights, in their own words, about what

185 By all accounts, Gertrude had an excellent relationship with her step-mother who joined the family when Gertrude was 8, and they wrote to each other regularly throughout their lives. Gertrude also enjoyed spending time with all her brothers and sisters. She had one brother (Maurice) and besides Molly, she had two other half-siblings: Hugh was the eldest, then Elsa, and youngest was Molly.
was important to them about theatre and what was not. In this section, the question of the identity of Molly's imagined audience for her diary looms large – many surprising details are included and others are curiously left out. At the age of 16, on December 17, 1897, after recording a detailed assessment of the skills and appearances of all her family members, including herself, she writes, “I think it would be advisable if this diary were not left about!!” (Diary, Newcastle, CPT Ex 145) and there are hints that she even expected her stepmother to read her diary – or at least, imagined that she might do so. Molly’s teenaged words resonate with twenty-first century girls so I have drawn links between her drama and social experiences and those of girls today. Since I have the advantage of hindsight, and knowing the trajectory of her life, I can see how her attitudes as a young person (and what I view as occasional disengagement or resistance to her mother’s theatrical projects) may have been re-evaluated when she had children of her own. Combined with evidence from recent drama education studies, Gertrude’s and Molly’s youthful writing offer perspectives on girlhood and theatricals that, I believe, help to narrow the gaps in ways that other letters, diaries, memoirs, and self-writing I looked at could not.

Gertrude and Molly both started to keep diaries when they were young. In 1877, after her father had been married for about a year, and when Gertrude was only 9, she refers to a play Florence Bell is rehearsing with the family. On December 6 her entire entry is “Morning stopped at home. Afternoon stopped at home and saw many [sic] make Papas dress for mother goose. Evening mammy read to us. Lessons went on very well” (Bell, Newcastle). On December 12 she notes “Evening we practiced our dancing and play,” and she mentions play rehearsals on the 13th, 15th, and 23rd. On the 26th she declares, “Evening we acted our play with great success,” and the 30th, the family had already shifted to acting charades. The theatricals for that Christmas were not over yet – on the 31st Gertrude reports that they were going to stay up (after the
fireworks!) and “see a rehearsal of the play,” and on the 1st of January 1878, she announced that she was going to “stay up to the acting and after to dance.” Perhaps, after such a busy season of late nights, it is not surprising that there is no entry at all for January 2, but there was still no rest for Gertrude: On the January 5th she writes “we are going to learn a charade we rehearsed it,” on the 7th she “stopped at home, rehearsed and swung. Afternoon stopped at home and learnt our play.” Four days from announcing the charade, on the 9th of January, Gertrude writes “Afternoon stopped at home and read children came at four to see the bran pie. Evening had tea at harf parst [sic] four and afterwards the bran pie and then the acting which went of [sic] very well then supper….” She noted the charade in a letter to her mother on the 11th “My dear Mammy We are having such fun here on wednesday we had a bran pie and we acted a charade wich[sic] went off very well…” which demonstrates that her mother did not supervise all the family theatrical activities, which is what I had previously imagined. Who was Gertrude making her diary notes for? Did she expect anyone, such as her mother, to read them? In her January 11 letter to her mother she asserts “I keep my diary still” which may mean that keeping a diary was an expectation in the same way that Gertrude’s lessons were. “The play” seems to be an event for young Gertrude, but the content of the play, and the nature of her participation, with the exception of her father’s Mother Goose costume, seems quite irrelevant.

For several months, Gertrude does not mention performing theatricals, although besides her constant lessons, she does refer to a diorama / magic lantern show (January 10), a visit to a menagerie (January 30), playing cards and gobang, hoops, dancing, pasting in a scrapbook (sadly lost), visiting a beach where she sailed boats and made castles, playing dress-up in April (we dressed up and made ourselfs[sic] goasts[?]) and in March, she and her brother Maurice were “acting our shakspere [sic].” When December rolled around again, she skated enthusiastically, and on the 22nd her only note is that “Morning acated[sic].” On the 30th she saw “them
rehearse”, on the 31st, she rehearsed. She does not refer to that theatrical again, but on March 25, 1879, after her new baby brother was born (but still unnamed), she writes to Florence Bell “We are getting up a play in my little theatre which I am writting [sic] when you come home we shall act it.”

Gertrude enthusiastically attended the theatre, professional and occasionally amateur, throughout her adult life, wherever she travelled: London, Berlin, Tokyo, Tehran and Bagdad. She also took an interest in her mother’s work, asking after her writing, the performances, insisting that she wished to have a ticket, or bemoaning the fact that she was too far away to attend. In one particularly effusive letter (10 July 10 1921), Florence Bell must have sent a script of “The Heart of Yorkshire” to Bagdad, because Gertrude’s letter offers commentary: “Must tell you how charming I think the play. It’s full of poetry and grace – acted in its own setting it ought to have a tremendous effect. The sentiment of it is so delicious…. I do think it’s so good” (G. Bell, Newcastle).

Gertrude’s letters and diaries make it clear that theatre and theatricals permeated many aspects of the lives of the Bell family: they were personally connected to theatre professionals, they enjoyed watching professional productions, and they regularly engaged in amateur theatricals as well. Yet, Gertrude’s attitude towards her own involvement in theatricals is absent in her diaries, and almost non-existent in her letters. Her half-sister Molly, however, writes in much more detail about her involvement in theatricals, and because she is so specific about some details, the gaps in her record become all the more interesting.

The Trevelyan collection has all of Molly’s extant diaries from age 10 (1892) through her adulthood, and for the purposes of this dissertation research, I read Molly’s girlhood diaries (that
is, those until she was married in 1904), as well as letters between her and her sister Elsa, and letters to her mother. Her very first diary entry, on January 1, 1892, predictably mentions a theatrical rehearsal – but it is the only childhood theatrical she ever makes note of. The entire passage is:

Went to feed Echo at 9.45. Stayed out till 11.20, the went out with Mrs Ritchie, took Echo, Hugo had a chill & Mommy had a very bad face ache. Went again to feed Echo at 3.20. Stayed out till 3.30 with Billy (sp?) Learnt a play (by Mommy) called Henny Penny. Hugo didn’t get up all day. After tea, we danced – then played the Hankerchief [sic] game til 7.10. Dinner at 7.45. Hugo asleep now. 9.27. Fine.

Molly mentions going to the opera on January 3, and tracks her brother’s health in her diary (it turns out he probably has “scarlatina” (scarlet fever)), but she does not refer to rehearsals or the performance of “Henny Penny” again. I wondered if the play was abandoned because of the children’s health, or if the absence had another meaning. The rest of the year, Molly prefers to focus on visits to her brother (who must be away at school), visits with Gertrude who travels to Tehran, practicing violin and piano, a language she, Hugo, and Elsa create for themselves (called Jumbonic, March 3), playing tennis, riding, gardening, and details about animals (including ones that have to be drowned for various reasons).

One of Bell’s plays “Nicholson’s Niece” did not receive favourable reviews in the press (reviewers often suggest they expected more from Florence Bell), and 10-year old Molly’s diary entry (1892) regarding what was probably a bit of a family drama is:

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186 The most delightful of these letters are miniatures, bringing to mind the miniature juvenilia created by the Brontë family. Often written by fictional identities with names such as Cat and Turbot, the letters suggest a coded imaginative play and inside family jokes that probably reference real events as often as they invent them.

Tuesday May 31
Nicholson’s Niece is not a success. Boohoooboohoo!!! Swimming bath at 7.0AM.

Otherwise, the year draws to a close with Molly “putting in a penny” for fireworks for Guy Fawkes, celebrating that her brother Hugo is back from Eton, and further celebrating with the single line “Joy!” that Tommy (whoever that may be) has left. Was there less family theatrical activity when Molly was 10 than when Gertrude was 9, or did Molly prefer to write about other activities? Without comparing calendars or diaries of other family members, it is impossible to say, yet it seems likely that the intense theatrical schedule would not have changed.

The next diary in the Trevelyankan collection is from 1896, the year that Molly was 14, and went away to “Queen’s College” in London (starting her school year in February). Her diaries over the course of the year describe, sometimes in extraordinary detail, the professional London productions she attends, the at-home theatricals in which she participates, the amateur theatricals she watches, and the school productions in which she is involved. She also refers to several instances of “imaginative play” in which she re-enacts scenes from plays with her friends. Rather than attending to these events in Molly’s life chronologically, I group them together below according to subject.

One of the defining features of her semester in London was seeing *The Prisoner of Zenda*. Alexander Hope and Edward Rose adapted Hope’s popular novel into a stage play and it was performed in New York and London to great acclaim. Molly’s entry about the play is fascinating because of what interests her immediately following the performance, and because it made such a

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188 It is also the year that Florence Bell published *Fairy Tale Plays and How to Act Them* so one might have thought that all the plays in her volume had been previously tested by her own children. With the gap in the diary, that is certainly possible, but in the Christmas Season of 1897/98 Molly Bell is involved in a theatrical of “The Tinder-Box” which is included in her mother’s collection.
lasting impression on her. She was very pleased to find that although she did not get to sit with her mother and Gertrude who were in the press circle, their tickets were close by, and so “it was like sitting together” – unlike many young people today, at least in this situation, Molly preferred the idea of her mother’s company to independence from her (10 March 1896). During the course of the performance (and perhaps beforehand) she develops quite a crush on “very good looking” Mr George Alexander, who plays a triple role (Prince Rudolph, Rudolph V and Rassendyll.) She writes, “At the beginning I knew quite well I should love him at the end & of course I did, do still, for that matter” (10 March 1896). She observes the way he kisses the leading lady, Evelyn Millard, “He always kisses her properly, not stage kisses, you see his lips meet hers each time,” and she notes the theatre gossip that she is going to marry Alexander Hope (she doesn’t). Molly loves the way Mr. Alexander quietly says “Damn”: “He says it just as a young Englishman would.” She also exclaims “I never saw anything so extraordinary as in the drunken scene.” She describes the costumes and performances in some detail, but what particularly amazes her is that after “passing out” on stage, the actor sneakily gets off stage, does a quick change into another costume, and then returns as another character. “The change is very cleverly done (Of course, M Alexander plays Prince Rudolph & Rassendyll) but one never saw when he changed & the other man came in Pr. R’s place.” Molly’s observations of staging matters demonstrate that she is a sophisticated play-goer, while her fascination with kisses, good looks, and slightly naughty language gesture towards her adolescence and the subjects that concern her at that time.

Two weeks later, “The Prisoner of Zenda” entered her imaginative play. She writes that she and her sister Elsa “played at being Rudolph & Flavia in “The Prisoner of Zenda.” I was Rudolf & E was Flavia. We did it because we saw that the second part of the P of Z is coming out in the Idler” (25 March 1896). Without a drama education facilitator to encourage her, she and
her sister took on these passionate identities purely for their own pleasure. This is not the only time that Molly engaged in dramatic imaginative play. Later in 1897, Sybil (her cousin, I believe) came to visit at the house. She writes:

We went about outside a bit & then climbed into the little passage that is in the eaves. It is like this [draws triangle and writes 'low roof']. It was very dirty and cobwebby, but awfully exciting. We took a candle & two lanterns. Then we played at killing each other. She left at 5. (15 December 1897)

Finally, in June, she records one other notable “dramatic” instance of imaginative play that year, related to her school’s performance of “The Critic”, which I will describe in more detail later in this section. She and her friend Dorothy Kendal (the actor-manager Madge Kendal’s daughter) acted out parts of the play, for pleasure, at the swimming pool.

…Dorothy & I acted The Critic in the Water. When she got to “Forgive my friend, if the conjecture’s rash” she took me up in her arms & walked me across the bath! She was an angel & I never enjoyed a swim so much. (9 June 1896)

At the age of 14, Molly seems to be very much a girl, ready to engage in imaginative play, like a child, but also ready to imagine a life with passion and romance. I have no way of knowing how busy the bath was when she and Dorothy performed their scene, and whether or not there an unintended audience for their antics. Obviously when she and Sybil played at “killing each other” in the passage under the eaves there were no spectators, and it is not clear whether or not Rudolph and Flavia were performed in a private space. Nevertheless, what is key is that these performances were more akin to spontaneous imaginative play than they were to a theatrical performance.

Bleuler and Lev Vygotsky, arguing that “it is a mistake to think of pretence as a primitive or primary mode of thinking…. [and] pretence is not a psychological function that is gradually suppressed in the course of development” (5). Harris’ argument is that imaginative or “pretend” play serves a positive function for adults (most frequently seen in the way adults get absorbed in fiction and film), and that “the consideration of alternative to reality may be linked with a move towards objectivity rather than way from it (7). Although Harris’ study focuses on preschool children, he observes ways that children’s play allows them to consider alternative possibilities “in a consequential and orderly fashion”, and they can use play to explore their assessments of reality (7). Perhaps most interestingly when considering Victorian girlhood, Harris argues that imaginative play allows children to “entertain counterfactual alternatives” which can subsequently help children learn to make casual and moral judgements about specific outcomes. The result is that the imaginative thinking made possible in the pretend play Molly engaged in, and to a certain extent, the pretending involved in creating characters in theatricals, actually enlarges a child’s scope of objectivity. Observing very young children, Harris demonstrates that imaginative play enables children to learn about possibilities (and I suspect limitations) in the real world. That Molly’s imaginative play blends theatricals with purely imaginary play attests to the connections to these two types of play exploration, and suggests that even if she was not aware of the significance of her play at the time, the process of playing out different characters and actions was actually a way to develop a more clear and critical understanding of the world around her.

In the years between 1896 and 1900, Molly also participated in, or watched, several different at-home theatricals, many of which her mother wrote, some of which had already been published in the *Fairy Tale Plays and How to Act Them* (1896) and others which became parts of

189 Bleuler called this “autistic thinking” but it does not relate to autism as we understand it today.
futures volumes, or had been staged professionally as comediettas. That Molly makes notes about the productions indicates that she thought they were worth remembering, yet the anecdotal detail that surrounds the references to the plays is often more colourful and dynamic than her observations about the plays. March 24 1897 she and her sister Elsa attended a party at the Grosvenor’s with an extensive programme including “Tommy Trout & the Owl” (adapted from Juliana Horatia Ewing’s ‘The Brownies’), scenes from Henry V, and “Le Bureau Télégraphique” by Mrs Bell. These were performed by the Grosvenor children, the Lytteltons,190 and Miss Sylvia Stanley, who may have been a cousin because she appears regularly in Molly’s correspondence. Molly carefully recorded all the casting and the scenes, described a conversation with the Principle’s [sic] Wife who claimed she had seen Elsa and Molly on the stage, but “poor Elsa” had to endure a conversation with her without knowing “a bit who she was,” and Molly described her cousin’s performance: “Sylvia was very good & looked so pretty. Her hat fell off in the middle, but she carried it off very well & put it on again” (24 March 1896). Why did she note the hat miss-hap, when so many other details are ignored? I supposed it may be because if she had been the performer, Molly may have been mortified, and she was impressed with Syvlia’s apparent calm. Molly concludes the evening reflection with “After the theatricals we played games very dull…” giving a sense that although she does not offer an assessment of either “Tommy Trout & the Owl” or “Henry V” that these performances offered more pleasure than the comparatively dull games that followed.

Near Christmas of 1897 the Bell family began to prepare “The Tinder-Box,” one of Florence Bell’s plays from the Fairy Tales and How to Act Them collection, and “the Clementi boys”

190 The Lytteltons were Lady Lucy Cavendish’s nieces, Lucy and Hilda. These are not to be confused with the passage quoted from Lady Lucy’s own diary earlier in this chapter, as that moment took place forty years earlier.
joined them ("Eustace barks beautifully. Hubert speaks well" (24 December 1897)). Molly played the Princess, and Elsa played the Queen, and the plan was to perform the play four days later, with rehearsals every day (sometimes in the "schoolroom" in their family home) including Christmas Day and Christmas Eve. The weather was unseasonably warm that December, and so although they cannot skate, Molly plays golf, itemizes the gifts she receives, and describes the guests. At one point on Christmas day she found her step-brother Maurice and his friends Hugh and Willie Whitehall had come for tea. Molly’s mother had to change her shirt “so I poured out their tea. I felt very grown up, sitting all alone with them and making conversation! Hugh is very goodlooking…” (25 December 1897). Just two days later she notes that Gertrude and Elsa began discussing “when I should be out” and Gertrude asks who she likes dancing with best. By December 28th her diary re-focuses on the theatrical:

Dec 28,
Gertrude and Maurice taken to the station [to go to Japan].
...we had tea at 4.30 & the Clementi boys came at 5.30. We rehearsed & dined at 7.15. At 8.30 we had the dress rehearsal. All the maids & Father came. I had my hair up, and looked very nice.

Having her hair up is particularly significant because once a girl is “out” she no longer wears her hair loose. Although Molly does not mention the significance of that action here, the year before (July 29 1896) in her diary she notes when Elsa made the transition “Elsa put up her hair! For good. She looks very funny with it up…” and the remark about her own up-do in costume here is an indication both of how growing up is on Molly’s mind, but also, of how performing in a theatrical was an opportunity to try on behaviours, attitudes, and even grown-up performances, to see how they feel.

On December 29, “The Tinder-Box” theatrical process was nearly over, but before they could put the play to rest, they needed to perform it for the “Mother’s Tea” which was, as far as I
can tell, a two-day community social event which the Bell family may have arranged for the families of the people who worked for them. Molly notes that she and Elsa got up at 8.45 and missed breakfast at 8.15 that day. In the morning “we buttered & cut scones for the Clarence (sp?) tea this afternoon.” Then they went to town where she, her mother, and the other actresses (but not the boys) arranged the Cooperative Hall “till 2.15 when we hung about & I had my hair put up and done. At 3, the people began to come.” The guests were all “our Middlesbro’ work people,” and she seemed to know many by name. Molly and her family poured out the tea, but some of the guests helped. “At 4 we began to act. It all went off well & was a great success.” Molly notes nothing further about the play that day, but on the way to the train station she was invited to a dance. “I was awfully pleased & on the way home I asked Mother if I might, & she said yes, if it freezes they will skate after the dance & if not there will be a meet. I hope it won’t freeze.” The next day was the second performance of the “Tinder Box” and Molly wrote “We went quickly thro’ the Tinder Box after breakfast and buttered tea cakes after”… noted that friends came to help out with the production, and commented that the venue was “the drill hall, a much better hall, with splendid dressing rooms. It went v. well” (30 December 1897). The majority of the entry is focused on the upcoming social occasions, friends coming to tea, and a chance she had to play with a friend or cousin on two pianos. A few days later she learns that the Clementi family are going to perform “The Tinder Box” again for an entertainment of their own.191 Molly attends a rehearsal on January 5 and declares “they are quite good” but the vast

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191 Constance Millman’s memoirs of her “Evenings Out” with children include “The fatigues and small worries are forgotten, only the bright faces and hearty applause are remembered, and if other folk can be stirred up to similar exertions we shall feel indeed that our efforts were not thrown away” (123). She also claims imitation is the highest flattery. Perhaps discovering that the Clementi Family decided to do a “Tinder-Box” of their own was another indication that the Bell theatrical was a success.
majority of her diary is devoted to the dance,\textsuperscript{192} who she dances with, a young man (Will Pearce) she would like to marry Gertrude, playing piano duets, and a funeral for her dead kitten, for which her mother played dead marches on the penny whistle. On January 8 Alice Clementi came over and they did not talk about the theatrical, but they did “talk gossip about our partners [at the dance].”\textsuperscript{193} I note these completely unrelated events here because I would like to put the theatricals in the context of Molly’s life and her impressions of it. While they occupy a fair amount of her time, she is not nearly as excited about them as Clara Ryland was about her theatricals, and it seems likely that Molly had very little choice about whether or not to participate in the productions.

The following years (1898, 1899 and 1900), Molly’s diary suggests some resistance to her mother’s annual theatricals. In 1899 she notes the rehearsals on December 23, 24\textsuperscript{th} and 27\textsuperscript{th} (when they had rehearsals at 12 and 6 and a dress rehearsal at 8.30) but does not say what they are rehearsing. The dress rehearsal was for friends and all the maids again. “It went off all right with only one or two little hitches…” she notes slightly gloomily. December 28 she begins “Beastly weather, rainy. Hilda came to lunch & to rehearse the music afterwards.” She notes that the room for the performance was very full, the tea was 3 – 3.45, and that her father spoke “very nice.” The last perfunctory sentences are “Play 4.15 – 4.45. Successful. Then G[ertrude]’s lecture. Home at 8. One day of it over” (28 December 1898). The next day she buttered scones, the weather was horrid, wet, and cold, and writes “Just the same as yesterday except for a much

\textsuperscript{192} Molly devotes about seven pages of her diary to this dance. She describes each dance in detail and with whom she danced, she records her dialogue with Will (the young man she hopes is Gertrude’s suitor, although she seems to flirt with him quite a bit herself, and notes how she amuses him), and she includes her dance card for the evening. This is clearly the event of the season for Molly Bell, not the obligatory theatrical.

\textsuperscript{193} Molly remarks that they planned to do two more theatricals for very young children on Tuesday night (“Little Petsy & Cat & Dog,” both published in \textit{Nursery Comedies}). She does not mention these again, but it seems likely that Molly experienced the same intense theatrical schedule as Gertrude did when she was younger.
better audience” (29 December 1898). On Friday December 30 she begins her entry “Hooray no more teas for a long time.” In December 1899 she only notes that the plays they will perform are “The Joint Household” and “Red Riding Hood” (both by Florence Bell; the first is not a juvenile script) and she mentions learning the play on December 23, preferring to take the time to write “when we went to bed Lisa told me interesting stories about a woman who had been in love with her (Lisa’s) husband.” In January of 1900 she does not mention the rehearsals at all, but does say “Cut & buttered scones & bread & arranged flowers before lunch…Successful. House at 5” and the next day she says “arranged flowers but w. Mother at 4.” Perhaps Molly did not perform that year. She seems much more involved in the choir practices she has, and the maids’ dancing classes that she is leading at the end of the day.

What happened with this fizzling of interest? Did Molly “grow out” of her mother’s theatricals? Did she come to resent having to be involved, without choice? It’s clear from her diary that she preferred playing music to acting, even though she loved to attend the theatre. In Gallagher’s book Why Theatre Matters, her observations and conversations with urban youth in Toronto, New York, Lucknow, and Taipei lead her to the conclusion that “engagement is not an easily observable event, but a complex interior experience” (230 2014). Exactly why Molly appears to be distancing herself from family theatricals at this time in her life is probably as complex as it is uncertain. Although Molly seems to want to avoid theatrical participation in the future, it is worth noting that Florence Bell’s 1922 collection of playlets called The Cat and Fiddle Book is dedicated to her 10 grandchildren, eight of whom she claims, “created the roles:”

To My Ten Grandchildren
Eight of whom
PAULINE, GEORGE, KITTY, MARY, BRIDGET, VALENTINE, MARJORIE, AND FLORENCE have "created" many of the parts in these playlets, and two of whom, BILL and GEOFFREY, are still among the audience
Five of the children listed are Molly’s own; the others are Elsa’s. Elsa (Mrs Richmond) wrote the additional two plays, but it is clear that Molly’s family continued to participate and perform in theatricals after she had a home of her own.

As teenagers, Molly and her sister also did theatricals when they attended school in London, and later, in France. School is in many ways a completely different environment for working on a theatrical production, although Megan Norcia’s research on Elsie Fogerty’s version of Tennyson’s *The Princess* demonstrates that many of the issues around performing alternative identities might be similar. Nevertheless, working on a theatrical as a school assignment, with peers instead of relatives, for a good many strangers (even if parents and siblings attend) is a different kind of performance space. Yet, when Molly’s elocution teacher decided they would put on Sheridan’s “The Critic,” the high stakes that were connected with the project are too interesting to ignore. Details in Molly’s extensive discussion about the theatrical preparations is almost completely consumed with conversations about social relationships connected to the project, rather than details about the project itself, offering evidence regarding what young girls like Molly might have considered significant in their lived experiences, while leaving vast gaps regarding basic facts about the production.

Molly lived in London in a house associated with the school while she attended her classes. Many of the other girls lived there as well, and as a result, many female behaviours commonly associated with adolescence were unchecked by adult influences, magnified, and became Molly’s central focus regarding “The Critic.” In Laura Hensley Choate’s 2008 guide for counsellors *Girls’ and Women’s Wellness: Contemporary Counselling Issues and Interventions*, she discusses the significance of friendship for teenaged girls, and also describes some of the common power struggles associated with girlhood. She observes:
Girls value their friendships with other girls highly but often resort to hurtful and even cruel behaviors within their peer circles. During the past decade, a large body of research on relationship aggression (RA) has centred on this aspect of girls’ friendships. RA is the act of hurting others through manipulating or harming their relationships. (63)

Choate explains that, biologically speaking, girls have a higher capacity than boys to suppress negative feelings, and this may be why girls tend to experience social censure for outward expression of those emotions, even though, like boys, they continue to have those feelings, and so express them in delayed, covert, and manipulative ways (64). Although Choate’s research focuses on contemporary American culture, and, she claims, has particular relevance for white, heterosexual, middle-class girls who are socialised to embrace traditional gender roles (66), it seems likely that those “traditions” were relevant for Molly. For example, Choate argues that girls (unlike boys) expect a great deal of their friendships: “more kindness, loyalty, empathy, high levels of intimacy and self-disclosure [which] can lead to high-quality friendships, but increase girls’ vulnerability to relationship problems” (64). In Molly’s first year living away from home, although she lived with her sister, her intimate friendships were of profound concern to her. On March 20, 1897, several days before their elocution teacher announced that they were going to do a performance of “The Critic,” but after they had been reading it in class, Molly and her friends decided to act out parts of it together. After doing bits of the play for pleasure for a while, and even decided how they would cast it if they could, Molly reports:

Then we said we must go home, so we began to kiss then all round. Dorothy played at being Dorothea Thorpe, & curtseyed to us while she shook hands. I was kissing Lily with my arms round her neck & I said “I don’t know why I’ve taken to kissing you such a lot, Lily. I suppose I am fonder of you.” So she looked off & smiled & kissed me again. Then, after some more affection, we finally went away in a four wheeler.
These affectionate crushes were common among schoolgirls, as was the kissing, but it is easy to see that Molly has publicly singled out Lily as a “best” friend. Molly notes conversations she has with Lily in which she is trying to determine if Lily likes her as much as Molly likes Lily, and she has similar conversations about Lily with her sister Elsa and her friend Dorothy Kendal, all recorded in angst-filled detail. Molly never seems quite satisfied that her friendship with Lily is absolutely solid, yet when Lily betrays her because of “The Critic” she is furious, devastated, vengeful, and, strangely desperate to re-establish her friendship. Indeed, Choate argues that traditional gender role prescriptions teach girls to constantly please others and to limit their expression of anger, creating a situation in which girls lack the skills to directly address conflict, and resulting in what she calls “the tyranny of kind and nice” (66). Lily and Molly’s friendship is destroyed, patched up, destroyed, and abandoned during the rehearsal and performance process. Possibly because of Molly’s deep concern about Lily and, at times, her friendship in jeopardy, her diary entries provide far more reflective thinking about Lily’s involvement in “The Critic” than her own.

When Mr. Breden, the elocution teacher, announced that his class would do “The Critic” he asked the girls which parts they would like. Molly recorded her friends’ and sister’s answers in her diary (March 24), and her own as “I should like Mr. Puff, but I don’t know if I can do it.” Crossed out, she wrote (significantly, as we shall see) “I debated whether I should ask for the Governor, but in the end, I decided to stick with Puff.” When her classmate “Miss Robinson” asked for the part of Tilburnia, Molly was furious on Lily’s behalf, because “everyone” knew that

194 In Why Theatre Matters Gallagher records a conversation she had with Cherry, an older high school student, who probably would have described Molly’s behaviour as “chatty.” Explaining why it is important to avoid distractions and focus on school, Cherry says “everybody’s going to bring you down. Everybody’s going to say, ‘you can’t do it.’” But you just have to prove them wrong. And if somebody – girls have this thing, ... a lot of people are like ‘I’m not going to go to school because this person’s chatty or that person’s chatty’ you know? You have to take that other door because we’re older now so you can’t focus on those kinds of things anymore right?” (126). Cherry’s comment suggests that if she were older, Molly would have engaged with “The Critic” differently. Certainly Molly’s diaries are more “chatty” this year than her subsequent girlhood diaries.
Lily wanted that role, and she wrote “(Lily was not there.) By Jove! The cheek of that girl! Good heavens! We were cross!” Molly proceeded to start to “learn the part” of Puff, yet Mr. Breden only asked about role preferences for the sake of information because he did not adhere to his students’ requests. On April 23, Molly recorded that her hopes were “shattered”:

M Breden. “Miss Vignoles, would you care to take the part of M. Puff, when we set the Critic?
Lily (after a long pause, during which Dorothy & Elsa & I whispered “No, don’t take it!”) “Yes sir, I should like it very much.”
I was never so surprised & angry in my life! L. knew that I wanted Puff; she had always said she wanted Tilburnia. Then why the deuce should she have said “I want Puff?” I was raging w. Lily. I had the greatest difficulty not to cry with rage & disappointment! Then we went quietly (outwardly) thro’ the next scene.

Molly had performed numerous theatricals at home as an amateur actress, but as it was her first year at the school, she was considered to be inexperienced. Lily may have chosen to say “yes” because she wanted the part, because she wanted in some way to hurt, Molly, or, even because Mr. Breden had asked. Even though Molly performs a kind of outward and restrained calm, at no time does it occur to Molly to consider Lily’s motives. In her entry she describes the rest of the class, the other casting choices, and then:

at 3 ‘clock after the lesson, they all went away except Lily, Dorothy, Elsa, & I & Mr Br. We were standing in the stage, swearing at L & then M Br. Came up in saying “now what is the matter? Tell me what it is.” So I very bravely said, “Well, sir, you haven’t cast the parts at all as we wanted them.”
M Br. “Why, how did you want them?”
Me. “I wanted to be Puff & Miss Vignoles wanted to be Tilburnia.
M. Br. “But you see Miss Vignoles has been in the class a very long time & I think she wld do Mr Puff very well indeed.
Me. “Very well sir.
Mr Br. I will find you a part, & tell you next lesson (Exit).

After recording this choice bit of dialogue, Molly records, in detail, the incredible “relational aggression” that she and her friends use to wield power over Lily.
Then we fell on Lily & began to scold her awfully. We told her she was a selfish beast. She knew I wanted the part & if she had wanted it, why the blank [sic] didn’t she say so before.” She said “Oh I forgot you wanted it.” By Jove!” I was in a rage. But we all laughed, all the time. I was awfully cross with her. Then I said, “I don’t care if you do like me. I don’t like you. I used to, but now I think you are a beast. a beast.

Lily. I never said I liked you.

The conversation degenerated into insults about Lily’s appearance and other spurious issues. Of course, it is impossible to be sure what was really said between the girls, but what is clear is that their interpersonal drama completely overshadowed the dramatic performance for which they were rehearsing. Mr. Breden offered Molly the part of the Governer, which she “accepted with joy!” – and I can’t help but wonder if she crossed out the earlier lines in her diary where she confessed that she had considered asking for that role after she had been granted it. Yet once the play had been cast and rehearsals began, the focus did not shift to the performance. Molly notes her disappointment that the play would be performed without costumes (“Isn’t that a shame?!?...“Damn damn!” That is the last thing Dorothy & I said to each other. Oh! How naughty!!! I ached in the afternoon.”), and she and Dorothy discuss whether or not Dorothy would like to be a professional actress, but Molly’s work on the play is invisible. Instead, she records, word for word, an apology letter she received from Lily, her response to that letter, attending rehearsals, and deciding that Lily was “abominably bad” as Mr. Puff. She writes that she believed Dorothy told Molly that she should tell Lily how bad she was, and so (recording every line of the conversation like a play) she does so. The astonishing fact is that Molly seems to

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195 Dorothy & I talked about acting The Critic. I said what fun it would be, & I asked her if she liked acting. “Yes, I love it” she said – “Would you like to go on the stage?” “Yes.” (with great enthusiasm). I wonder if she will & if Mrs Kendal will let her. …

196 Lily was abominably bad as M. Puff! When we finished the Critic about 2.45 I thought D[orothy] said to me, “Tell her she is very bad” & I said “yes” & said to Lily as she came down, “Lily, you’re very bad.” “I know I am” she answered. Then we read some Shakespeare. “Are you cross with me, Lily?” Lily. “Not at all” but she was scarlet for the rest of the time. Then we went to drawing. At 4 we went up to L’s room, & Dorothy said “She’s furious with you. What did you say to her.” Me. “What you told me to – you’re very bad”. D What I told you to? I never told you that….”
have been concerned about her friendship, asking several times whether or not Lily was cross with her. For example in May at a party she says, “Lily did you mind my telling you about Puff?” Lily answered “not a bit!” But later she asks again, “Lily, are you cross with me?” and, not surprisingly, she learns that she is. Molly apologises in person and with letters, and Lily replies that she “only forgives her in a sort of a way.” The drama continues, as Molly tries to make amends to Lily by clapping enthusiastically during classroom rehearsals, and noting that she “must talk to Lily.” On Thursday, June 18, she writes that “Lily was much better as Puff in Elocution” but she does not make any comments about her own efforts.

On June 26th, 1896, they had the first of two performances. Molly was delighted that her parents and brother came, and writes a great deal when each guest arrived, and about her conversation with Dorothy about her good-looking brother Maurice. Dorothy, apparently, told Molly, “I’ve quite lost my heart to him.” Yet regarding “The Critic” itself, she writes, “Public opinion pronounced Lily very bad & Dorothy v good. There is audience performance tomorrow & Mrs Kendal is coming.” The next day, Saturday the 27th, is equally unsatisfying when seeking details about Molly’s performance as the Governor, or any other details about the play. All we read is: “Dorothy forgot her lines once, but not enough to matter. They said Lily was better today. Home to tea.” In spite of all the detail about preparation for the performance, there is a yawning gap regarding Molly’s own experience, skills, and success. With the end of “The Critic,” Molly’s drama with Lily ended as well. Molly went home for the holidays, and does not record any details about Lily, their friendship, or their animosity again, although she maintains a connection with Dorothy. Furthermore, the following school year when she goes to boarding school in France and does theatricals there, her diary entries do not include a similar level of gossip or detail regarding relationships, and she is typically perfunctory when she notes “learning
the play” and rehearsals. She continues to enthusiastically describe performances she attends, and she also makes frequent comments about playing the piano.

Reading Molly’s diary entries concerning “The Critic” raises questions about the gaps around girls’ reflections on theatricals that many of the other sections in this chapter did, and, simultaneously, it is humbling. Valerie Sanders’ assertions that Victorian girls’ autobiographies do not offer full, truthful disclosure because of the way that girls were raised to be self-effacing young women seems to fit with the absence of reflection on Molly’s own performance experience, yet Molly’s decision to record her own cruel and unkind behaviour towards Lily, not to mention her unflattering assessments of her once-friend, suggest that an impulse towards self-effacement was not at work here, unless it only was a factor when a person was tempted to write positive and self-complimentary things. It is true that in the year she did “The Critic,” Molly occasionally tries for a kind of false modesty in her diary. In March 1896 she records that the Stanley family thinks she is pretty, which she undercuts with “So much for their taste.” When she writes up family profiles on December 17, 1897, she declares “Elsa plays the fiddle well & I the piano decently. I love it. So does she.” Yet later when she and Elsa sit their music exams, Molly passes and Elsa does not. In her self-profile on December 17 she also writes, “I am pretty, nice complexion blue eyes curly hair all that sort of thing. I bite my nails like a trooper…. Otherwise I shd have nice hands. However I am stopping. Mother Elsa & I have enormous feet, I have the biggest worse luck! I am much too fat.” These comments support an argument that Molly may have been aiming for “balanced” observations, rather than self-effacement, but in that case, why did she ignore her own participation in the theatrical?

Molly’s treatment of theatricals in her diaries reminds me that there can be a great many claims on time and emotional energy in the lives of young people. Ultimately, at Queen’s College, Molly was probably more interested in her relationship with her friends than she was in
her performance of “the Governor.” When she performed her mother’s theatricals at Christmas, she was fed up with the chore of tea and buttering scones, and may have been frustrated that the power dynamic between mother and daughter meant that she could not refuse to participate. When she did a theatrical at the age of 10 she was probably more worried about her brother’s health than she was about the performance. All these other concerns for Molly do not necessarily mean that performing theatricals had no significance for her, nor do they mean that the words of resistance, the alternative behaviours, or the creative responsibilities playwrights embedded in their scripts were never effective for, or embraced by, anyone. Rather, I believe the gaps may mean two things for Molly: either she, like many young people, was not conscious of the significance of the experience at the time; or, in fact, her preoccupation with other issues and her preference for other activities such as piano playing may not have allowed her to deeply engage with the theatrical experience the way that girls like Lilía Scott MacDonald did. But that does not mean that other girls could not, nor does it mean that as an adult, Molly did not reconsider the value of at-home performance experiences because, as mentioned, her own seven children performed in them. Although as an older teenager Molly seemed to be resistant to her mother’s teas, and she ignored the substance of “The Critic,” she must have remembered theatrical experiences fondly enough to encourage her own children to do them.

Neither Molly nor Gertrude’s own adult professional interests were theatrical, yet I wonder if performing theatricals had any kind of impact on their adult lives anyway. Kathleen Gallagher recently wrote an article in which she revisited memories of a drama education study she did with students nineteen years ago. For the article, she interviewed two previous participants with whom she has kept in touch, who did not choose to have careers in the arts, and therefore “how, if at all, drama is playing out in their current lives would be less obvious and would require a delving into lessons learned and their real world implications.” Rather than
interview these women, she chose to correspond with them by email, much more closely mirroring the way nineteenth-century sources I read (letters and possibly diaries) were constructed. The type of process drama activity that Gallagher and her students engaged in was collaborative, imaginative, and often improvisational, unlike the Victorian scripted theatricals that were certainly collaborative, but have much clearer limits regarding responsibilities and potential for innovation. Gallagher writes:

“The value of revisiting previous lives decades later, it seems to me, is not just in having hindsight or an interesting retrospective gaze, or finding things that may have been overlooked at the time, but in discovering how those presences and absences shed light on who we are, what we know, and what we value in the present.” (“Literacy of Lives,” Gallagher 168).

If I could have asked Gertrude and Molly about their participation in theatricals as young people, or, as Gallagher did, their ideas about them in retrospect, I would certainly have done that, but without the possibility of time travel, I suggest considering Gallagher’s older students’ observations. Danielle emphasised the significance of “listening to the story” and “knowing her audience” as beneficial to her working in the compliance department of a large firm. Sylvia meanwhile, became a physician, and discussed improvisation, listening, and the way that examining different characters impacted her work because she realises that there are different truths from different perspectives. Both women observed that their drama skills supported collaboration towards a common outcome and both also, at Gallagher's prompting, wrote letters to their younger selves, based on what they know about life now. These letters were particularly fascinating to think about in light of Gertrude and Molly’s futures. At the age of nine, Gertrude could not have imagined that she would be an influential player in the establishment of the Iranian state, or that in spite of several attempts at love, she would never marry. Molly might
have imagined marriage and motherhood, but she could not have predicted the specifics of her adulthood either.

As an historian, I look to Molly and Gertrude’s young lives to see what they reveal about theatricals and about girlhood. Molly and Gertrude’s girlhoods were privileged and they had quite a bit of freedom compared to girls in the middle of the Victorian era – Molly attended boarding school, Gertrude went to college, Gertrude travelled extensively and had a career in Persia. Both were athletic and independent in some ways – but in others, still very much reliant on their father for support. Contemplating the ways the sisters represented their lives, and the “presences and absences” of theatricals in their letters and diaries, sheds light on who they were then, what they knew, and what they valued in that present moment. The trajectory of their lives demonstrates that their ideas and values, like ours, can change, and like Gallagher’s students, past experience may resonate with a future present in unexpected ways. It is impossible to conclude that, as “New Girls” who may become “New Women,” Gertrude’s and Molly’s experiences performing in theatricals determined the women they became, the choices they made, and the futures they embraced. But life is often full of incremental changes, and small events that, through accretion, can influence how people think and behave. The plays Florence Bell wrote certainly offered girls opportunities to explore, and they encouraged girls to think. Her plays may not seem so radical now, but in their own time, they were part of a controversial conversation about womanhood and girlhood, and by inviting girls to play the roles in the script, Bell’s theatricals drew girls into a discussion that directly related to their young lives and immediate futures.
Listening to Girls Across Time and Space

Whatever the differences in their political opinions, those women who wrote and worked near the end of the nineteenth century, and who were later identified as New Women, all subscribed to the idea that gender differences in Victorian society were culturally and socially constructed, and they demanded that women be given the same opportunities and choices as men (Hughes ix). Amy Levy, Clara Ryland, and Florence Bell all wrote in an environment steeped in that debate, and each, in her own way, contributed playscripts that invited girls to engage with the very issues that had the potential to limit or expand the horizons of their lives. Women who wrote earlier in the century often pushed the boundaries of gender behavioural expectations as well, but by the end of the Victorian era, the movement towards change had gathered momentum. A character who, for example, wanted to run her own college was easy for performers to imagine because she regularly appeared in the periodical press. Advocating the vote for women on stage was not laughable—even if suffrage had not been achieved. New Women and their ideas were a significant part of social discourse.

But New Women and the young girls growing up near the end of the nineteenth century still inherited many Victorian gender expectations. She may have travelled and attended boarding school, but Molly still worried about when she should “put her hair up” and “come out” into society. Molly may have allowed herself the physical closeness associated with girlhood crushes that was forbidden to Charlotte Yonge, but she was as interested in her dance card as Juliana Horatia Ewing was. The end of the nineteenth century was full of social changes, and for girls growing up in those changes—when they were changing so much themselves—the time must have been exciting and full of possibility, but sometimes also daunting as girls looked into the unknown of their futures.
Theatricals provided a possible space for girls to consider those possibilities. Defining and redefining themselves, embracing the future or being paralysed by the unknown, girls near the end of the nineteenth century share quite a bit with girls near the turn of the twentieth century, one hundred years later. In the epigraph with which I began this chapter, Rebecca Schneider asks about “a more porous approach to time and to art – time as full of holes or gaps and art as capable of falling or crossing in and out of the spaces between live iterations” (6). In earlier chapters I quoted Doreen Massey who calls for a similar reconception of space – one that acknowledges that no space is static because it is made of multiple open-ended processual relations and interconnected trajectories that are constantly being made and remade (230), and one that “makes room for a genuine multiplicity of trajectories, and thus potentially of voices” (55). Bearing in mind Schneider’s and Massey’s ideas about fluidity through space and time, I connected the voices of late nineteenth-century middle-class English girls and at-home playwrights with twentieth and twenty-first century scholarship with girls in as far distant places as Australia, Canada, and the United States. Far from suggesting that there is some kind of universality to the lived experiences of girls in these spaces and times, I looked for resonance, contradiction, question and possibility in their drama-related experiences.

The archives related to the girls and women I discuss in this chapter reveal a preoccupation with role-playing, and by extension, identity exploration; with witnessing and spectatorship; and with ways that New Woman preoccupations found their way to the stage. In terms of role-playing, it is notable that even at the end of the Victorian era, gender performance expectations were candidates for disruptive performances. Amy Levy, Sybil Ryland, and Molly Bell all performed male roles on stage, exploring ways those characters could resonate with their own identities, and experimenting with the kind of power men commanded by virtue of their birth. Concurrently, Clara Ryland’s nieces’ letters indicate that on stage gender performance
expectations were still very much at work: girls were supposed to be pretty, while boys could be funny, for example. Girls who wanted to experiment with roles could navigate the omnipresent expectations for appropriate girls’ behaviour, but those expectations were still very much present, even if, as the New Girl became a sociocultural fixture, they were changing and relaxing. Molly Bell’s diary entries about imaginative play attest to the possible power and appeal of dramatic play, and contribute to why I believe that the voices of twenty-first century girls conducting their own explorations of dramatic role-play can resonate with Victorian girls, in spite of the cultural distance of time and space. Role-playing could give girls opportunities to embody roles they aspired to, or were even just curious about. For girls like Amy Levy, for whom role play was a temporary escape from her own depressed self, (and in the case of her own script, a chance to share what inexplicable malaise might feel like), embodying other identities could be especially powerful, but taking on different characters could be thinking tools for any Victorian girl.

Research with drama education students in my own time suggests that Victorian girls may have embraced opportunities to use theatricals as tools to think differently about their lives. Unlike drama education students today, nineteenth-century girls were not guided to consider the issues playwrights embedded in their plays, nor were they encouraged to unpack ideas that the act of performance raises. However, mid-Victorian girls may have had discussions with their fellow thespians, or their reflections could have been private, and perhaps only possible through accretion. Late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century girls discuss ways drama allows them to draw on something inside themselves to create a character, in a way, allowing them to “become” that character, which could also mean role-playing allows girls to understand something different about themselves. Twenty-first-century girls also talk about social restrictions on their lives, including still-existing patriarchal structures and community monitored gender behaviour expectations, and ways drama activities could help to expose those restrictions, and enable them
to ask questions about and even challenge them. Victorian girls who participated in at-home theatricals had the opportunity to consider these issues too, and their experiences may have influenced the way they thought about their own lives, and their futures.

Witnessing and spectatorship are also very important in this chapter—not only for the spectators in the audience, but also for what Kathleen Gallagher calls “the spectator within” who must see herself differently through her dramatic activities. As in Chapter 4, writing about spectatorship emphasises the significance of “the aggregate”, and the way that girls could surprise those who knew them by performing outside of their normal behaviours, perhaps in ways that were naughty, or coquettish, or even “male.” In these archives, I learned that while spectators might take an interest in performer skills, the performers themselves, like Molly and Amy, did not write about their own performances at all, choosing to focus on other activities, or on the performances of their fellow thespians. This observation is interesting in light of Valerie Sanders’ ideas about Victorian girls choosing not to indulge in too much self-scrutiny because it does seem that they occasionally allowed themselves to critically examine others. Witnessing a particular performance could influence what a spectator imagined was possible for a particular performer, but these archives also confirm that art can make clear what a spectator already knows. In other words, at-home theatrical performances had the potential to present a performance as if they were refracting light, clarifying, focussing and confirming a particular idea about girlhood or identity that the audience (or even the spectators within) might have already believed.

The New Woman preoccupations that appear in the archives explored in this chapter are significant because they show how something as innocuous as an at-home theatrical could enable girls to participate in the political conversations that raged outside their drawing rooms, and were otherwise largely closed to them. Amy Levy’s Morosa solves part of her malaise by working. Levy aligned herself with the New Woman movement by defining herself as a working woman of
letters, and although Morosa works the way that fairy tale characters often work, doing unpaid traditional women’s activities, the fact that she must work, rather than simply be an accomplished and merely ornamental girl, is an important political statement. Ryland entertained ideas about career, education, and women’s suffrage in her plays, even though her own opinions on those matters were somewhat ambivalent. While Bell’s daughters did not discuss Bell’s characters in their diaries, Bell’s strong women humorously contributed to New Women conversations. Although girls may not have directly commented on specific fairy tale play or “Oriental” play performance experiences, or on the thinking opportunities that playwrights constructed for young people through their scripts, the girls’ diaries, letters, and memoirs discussed in this chapter make it possible to imagine the potential influence these theatricals could have on the imaginations of Victorian girls. Whether or not girls discussed the ideas in the plays remains unclear after examining the archives, but it is absolutely certain that proto-feminist disruptions were present in the texts, surreptitiously entering Victorian homes and ready to influence girls, their conversations, and their thinking.

These archives also demonstrate with striking clarity, how girls’ lives are complex, busy, and multi-faceted, and that it just as easy to overemphasise the potential importance of theatricals in the lives of girls as it is to blindly ignore them. Scarletina, inexplicable depression, social conflicts, and romantic love all occupy the writing attentions of the young girls featured in these archives. Just as Grace MacDonald, in chapter 4, despaired that a boy seemed to like Mary better than he liked her (and as a result she wouldn’t speak to him), and Molly focussed on her faltering friendship with Lily, the immediate social concerns that occupy the lives of young girls could take up significant time and attention. As the students in Gallagher’s study demonstrated, the pull of immediate life made it difficult to, “focus on the drama and not the drama.” As I reflected on these immediate girlhood concerns, I considered how Molly Bell’s children
participated in theatricals, even though she seemed to reject them as she got older. While the social demands on girls' lives are important to them in the moment, just as Lily disappears from Molly's diary entries after she leaves school, many of these concerns might also fade in significance, leaving space for other, more powerful issues, to become important upon reflection. If Gertrude's brother had died of scarlet fever, of course that would have lasted, but other kinds of ephemeral, petty concerns that seem so significant at the time, could have made way for reconsidering the value of theatricals, and rethinking identity, future, and the importance of taking action and making choices for oneself.

In the previous chapter, I explored the idea of "success," and that continued to be relevant in chapter 5, offering a different lens to consider some of the issues I have already discussed in this conclusion. Some girls and women acknowledged the process of preparing to put on an at-home theatrical. Gertrude Bell noted rehearsals in her diaries; one letter about the flurry of preparation remains for Clara Ryland; and Molly Bell exhaustively comments on the social and friendship issues related to getting up a play. Process remains the keystone for at-home theatrical success, but in chapter 5 we can see an extension of the idea about "success" explored in Chapter 4. Levy's play "The Unhappy Princess" established a place for someone to perform the "successful" girlhood that eluded Levy because of her own depression, while she performed the Wise Woman, totally competent and confident character herself. Girls could role-play different kinds of "successful" identities in the guise of New Women-type characters, or not. Even if they did not describe these characters using the word "successful," we can see how significant performing that interpretation of success, in public, before an audience, could be. Ryland's spectators hint at the "success" created in an amusing evening's entertainment, and the pleasure at seeing children perform in unexpected and "successful" ways. Those letters also openly admire Clara, the playwright, for her successful writing and management in a way that she, doubtless,
could never have put into writing about herself. As for the whirl of social pressure surrounding Molly Bell’s school performance, it completely overshadowed her ability or interest in reflecting on her own performance of “The Critic” – the process was simply too full of conflict to really be a success for her, corroborating the importance of a harmonious process emphasised in Charlotte Yonge’s fiction, and also in some of the drama education research I discuss. Similarly, the pressure, perhaps from her mother, for her “mother’s tea theatricals” may have made her resistant to reflecting on those as well, although she usually declared that they went off well. It seems that “success” in at-home theatrics is strongly associated with process, but character roles invite exploring a different kind of success, and spectators may have a different idea about success—and also may allow themselves to evaluate the performance event in more critical or descriptive ways than the participants.

For girls’ lives, and girls considering their futures, the emphasis on process, and the particular, “amateur, private theatrical” idea of success that seems to pervade their writing also draws attention to another significant idea: at-home theatrics were primarily about the experience, rather than the craft. Although young people and their spectators may have appreciated a well-performed play (in chapter 4, for example, Lilia notes of her mother’s tableaux “they pleased”), the real issue was not, in fact, how “good” it was, but, especially for the performers, was in the act of doing it. I wonder if the significance of doing, like Jill Dolan’s “utopian performatives,” which she insists are not a metaphor but a “doing,” are part of why the ephemeral act of performance was rarely re-enacted on paper in these girls’ diaries, but just as thinking is an essential part of the moment contained in a utopian performative, it is possible to imagine that theatrics could still function as powerful thinking tools for girls? Even Molly, who wrote so prolifically about others, was relatively closed about herself on paper. I can imagine that the unwritten diary reflections, and undiscovered stories in letters are open spaces in which girls
pondered their theatrical experiences, and reconsidered their own lived experiences in light of their performances.

If the very process of “doing” theatricals is where the significance in these archives can be found, the records suggest two more important possibilities for New Women and New Girls. First, they emphasise the significance of the theatricals themselves—what they looked like, what the subjects were, what kinds of preparations were made, and whether or not they actually happened. The actual existence of these theatrical performances in the socially turbulent fin-de-siècle demonstrates that through theatricals, the participants, and the spectators, were drawn into conversations about social change and social relations referenced in these performances. At-home theatricals are an under acknowledged part of the way debates entered homes and circulated through discourse. Second, they point out that, even if they were only mentioned in diaries and letters in marginal ways, theatricals shaped girls' experiences and thinking, just as books, periodicals, and professional theatre must have done. No matter how preoccupied girls were with other aspects of their busy and rapidly changing young lives, doing at-home theatricals meant that those actions were a part of girls’ consciousness, their memories, and their lived experiences. We cannot see how girls reflected on them if they did not do so on paper, but the very fact that they happened means that it is likely that some girls did. Clearly these performance experiences did not appeal to all girls, but they could become a powerful thinking tool for those who enjoyed them. Simply because they did them, performing in at-home theatricals gave girls opportunities to experiment, imagine, and think about ways of performing identity and ways of being a girl in an era when “New” could be appealing, daunting, intriguing, dull, energizing, and even hopeful.
Chapter Seven: A Denouement: Ideas So Far Regarding Girlhood and At-Home Theatricals, Study Limitations, and Ideas for Next Steps

Of young girls, an old writer has said, that the world gives them no place;...that theirs is an intermediary state. In a way the old author was right and in a way, he was mistaken. Girlhood, that curious and colourless period of a woman’s life, would not be unhappy if mothers had the wisdom and the patience to arrange the lives of their daughters in a way that would bring absorption or unconsciousness during the period of “nobodyism.” The very word girlhood has a charm that is prophetic in its possibilities. The poet and the artist find a fascination in the budding life that lingers for a season on the hither side of womanhood. – Bow Bells, 1888

Theatre and performance offer a place to scrutinize public meanings, but also to embody and, even if through fantasy, enact the affective possibilities of ‘doings’ that gesture towards a transformed world. – Jill Dolan 165

Few girls I know – “girls” in the middle class Victorian sense of the word – would describe their lives as “colourless,” as the Bow Bells writer in the epigraph put it. However, many are frustrated by their lack of power during their “intermediary,” young, pre-adult life, and perhaps they even feel that the adult world sees them and treats them as “nobodies” until they can more fully control their destinies and make choices that influence their space and the lives of others around them. For English, middle-class girls between 1850 and about 1900, who shared the feeling of hedged-in, socially enforced impotence, at-home theatricals offered a discrete environment in which girls could actually affect change, by managing and constructing an amusement that altered their domestic space, and where they could explore change and possibilities through their imaginations. The Bow Bells writer declares that girlhood is “prophetic in its possibilities,” and indeed, that is what makes activities like theatricals so implicitly powerful for girls: both the experimental practice work related to activities like household management and the embodied fantasy “doings” (as Jill Dolan puts it) related to the characters and dialogues girls could enact have the potential to influence girls’ present lives and choices, and even more importantly, their choices regarding their futures. For mid- to late- Victorian girls who were surrounded by debates
regarding girls’ and children’s identities, appropriate gender behaviours, women’s education, employment, and suffrage, their specific historical time and location could increase the significance of any conversation about a girl’s choices, identity, or future. On the “hither side of womanhood” nineteenth-century girls could use theatre experiences as tools to discover, explore, and “gesture towards a transformed world.”

In the preceding pages I have discussed ways that participation in at-home theatricals could be sources of hope and power for Victorian girls. In chapter one I looked at ways that playwrights wrote scripts, stage directions, and advice regarding getting-up a play to foster girls’ agency, and encourage girls to make visible choices that altered their space, showcased their domestic and management skills, and revealed their taste. In particular, I explained how lively objects that girls created for their productions could tell stories about girls’ labour. Furthermore, the drawing-room theatrical could be so much more than an amusing entertainment for the family because, as my work relying on Doreen Massey’s ideas about space as a process indicates, bringing the fictional trajectories into the private home space could change the way that spectators and participants saw the space itself, and more importantly for the young thespians, the way they saw the girls who inhabited that space on a daily basis. My exploration of scriptive things and ways some playwrights reinscribed Victorian patriarchal discourses demonstrates that not all at-home theatricals would have exposed a girl to the idea that her identity could be multiple and that her future was not fixed, but even when the scripts did not contain radical proto-feminist ideas, girls still took action and made choices in ways that might, incrementally, encourage them to dream beyond the status quo. The primary examples in chapter one concern action: while the examples also have implications for the ways girls thought, the focus is the creative and practical work of getting-up a play.
In chapters two and three I discuss at-home theatrical content. Chapter two addresses fairy tale plays and, specifically, how playwrights could use the fairy tale genre to bring subversive ideas into the home space. Related to Victorian expectations regarding girlhood and gender behaviours, childhood, women’s economic independence, marriage as a happy ending, and even domestic violence, the ideas embedded in at-home fairy tale scripts participated in contemporary political debates, and encouraged girls to discuss and embody the controversies in front of an audience, making the discussion somewhat public, but in the comparative safety of a domestic environment. Although the Victorian middle-classes tended to view fairy tales as on a spectrum from innocuous to morally improving, the genre could easily also be used to criticise sociocultural norms, just as it could present girls with alternate possible ways of being, and unexpected happy endings. In chapter three, I address “Oriental” plays, which are often fairy tales, but since girls were performing the characters of “others” they offered significantly different possibilities for girls, and also raise a host of other concerns related to the imperial project and various race theories popular in the nineteenth century. In this chapter, I demonstrate the even greater significance of performing someone who acts like a fairy tale character, but inhabits a “real” (albeit fictionalised) world. Characters in “Oriental” plays could be sensual, passionate, and violent, and do things middle-class English girls could only dream of doing. The fact that they were “real” meant that Victorian girls could consider why girls in the East could do those things if they could not. Because of the robe-like costumes, the “Oriental” genre also meant girls could easily perform male characters without inviting the controversy of wearing Western male clothing, opening up a wide range of behaviour options and characters for girls to explore and embody. The idea of the “aggregate” became important for girls who performed male characters or characters that were different than the self they portrayed in daily life, because spectators (and the spectator within) would be confronted with behaviour traits that were unexpected, but
suddenly might seem possible, or even desirable. Subversive and slightly radical content and performances were ways playwrights could bring controversial issues into middle class homes, where girls would encounter them, possibly discuss them, and certainly engage with them as performers.

Chapters four and five address the life writing and some archival ephemera of Victorian girls and female playwrights who wrote at-home theatricals, opening up understanding of how girls planned and experienced at-home theatricals, as opposed to what playwrights suggested they should do, and what scripts presented for them to think about. In chapter four, I discuss archives created in the middle of the nineteenth century, and consider why girls seemed reluctant to reflect on their own participation in theatricals, what theatrical “success” meant when they mentioned it in their diaries and letters, how gendered leadership expectations were, and for participants, how much more important creation process probably was than the product. In chapter 5, I focus on archives created in the late nineteenth-century, when New Woman ideas were increasingly influential. These archives compliment the idea that process was more important for thespians than product, they complicate ideas about success, particularly in light of theatrical spectatorship, and they demonstrate that gendered performance expectations still existed at the fin-de-siècle even if some girls’ behaviours were less subject to strict patriarchal discourses. They also point out the way that other activities and family concerns competed for girls’ attention. While Lilia Scott MacDonald and Clara Ryland absolutely adored theatricals, other thespians appear to have been willing participants, but were more preoccupied with other aspects of their social lives. Thus cautioned against overstating the implications of performing in at-home theatricals, the fact remains that, as Jill Dolan puts it, theatricals are a “doing” and the very act of doing a theatrical activity requires both embodiment and witnesses which increase the stakes and alter the significance of the literary text beyond something a person reads and thinks.
about into something that a person does, perhaps not only possible on stage, but in quotidian life as well.

My analysis, which encompasses three ways of contemplating source material related juvenile at-home theatricals—the action and activity of getting-up a play, the provocative meanings derived from content, characters, and dialogue in a play, and the planning and reflection that attest to the lived experiences of presenting an at-home theatrical, demonstrates that at-home theatricals could both be an important activity within the scope of middle-class entertainments, and they could be a profound source of inspiration for girls. Theatricals could build and showcase girls’ skills, they could be politically relevant and occasionally radical, and they could be a source of learning and amusement, as Victorians would put it. But for girls who were living a transitional time in their lives by virtue of their biological age and sociocultural position in their communities, and who were living in a society where opportunities for women were being challenged in almost all aspects of cultural life, performing in theatricals could stretch ways girls imagined their own identities and futures. Diaries and letters do not always corroborate this assertion, but Valerie Sanders argues that girls and women were trained to avoid what they saw as overly indulgent, and therefore selfish, contemplation of the self, even in what might be considered private writing. By augmenting personal reflections with nineteenth-century fiction, and with interviews with late twentieth and twenty-first century girls studying drama, the hopeful and powerful nature of participating in drama activities emerges. When girls in any century embody the change they imagine, even in a fantasy situation, the idea can become credible. Change seems possible. But when there are witnesses to that performance, the vision of something different is shared and acquires weight as it permeates the consciousness of more than one person, remaining in the memories of a community of theatrical participants and spectators, shifting (if not transforming) the collective view of a what a particular space might be, and who
and what a specific individual might be, and might become. A better understanding of how juvenile at-home theatricals were planned and performed in Victorian middle-class homes is crucial to the relevance of this study in terms of theatre history. However, the central and vital concern that this research exposes pertains to the way girls, across time and across place, could use drama experiences as powerful thinking tools to help them thinking about their lived experiences, their current lives and identities, and the futures they want to have.

**Was it a “Success”? Identifying Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

The material in the five chapters of this work has barely begun to uncover links between Victorian girlhood and at-home theatricals, and to that end, I would like to highlight some areas I see as exciting areas for future research—ones that I was not able to pursue myself for this dissertation, but which I, or others, could productively approach in the near future. Of course, there are some very obvious absences in this study. Several of the playwrights about whom I wrote, such as Clara Ryland, Florence Bell, and Charlotte Yonge, are connected to other archival material I was not able to access due to time constraints, or because I was not aware of it until this project was nearly done. Florence Bell’s letters, besides being scattered throughout England in archives related to individuals to whom she wrote, are housed in a collection near York, England; another collection is at Fales Library, New York University, as part of the Robins Collection. Charlotte Yonge was very close to Christabel Coleridge, and her letters are in the

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197 Kathleen Gallagher’s *Why Theatre Matters: Urban Youth, Engagement, and a Pedagogy of the Real* (2014) five year, multi-site ethnographic study of twenty-first century urban youth (Toronto, Lucknow, Taipei, Boston) indicates, among other things, that in spite of the significant differences in the material conditions of young people inhabiting different geographical spaces, theatre experiences matter. Young people’s storytelling, as Gallagher explains, is often consensus-resisting, suggesting multiple truths and perspectives (16). Gallagher’s study also notes what she calls the instability of youth engagement (163)—the unpredictable and complex reasons why students might choose to really engage with a drama activity, or why they might not. As in the Victorian era, sometimes girls participated and engaged, sometimes they did not, and sometimes, it was very difficult to be sure whether or not there was engagement. But it was evident that some young people, sometimes, did engage, in meaningful and productive ways, in all the geographic sites.
British Library, and others may be uncatalogued in a new sixty-box collection in Devon. As this dissertation was in its final edits, my efforts to reach Clara Ryland’s descendants suddenly bore fruit: Clara Ryland’s daughter Sybil married into the Thompson Family who are connected to Riley Castle in England. I contacted the Riley Castle managers, who put me in touch with Sybil’s grandson, Chris Thompson. Besides clarifying some of names in the Cadbury archive letters that I had trouble identifying, he and his cousins enthusiastically contacted me with family photographs, and told me about numerous plays, poems, and letters that they have in their private collections that would be fascinating to read. Other playwrights like Annie Coghill and Kate Freiligrath-Kroeker may have personal papers in archives, but I have not been able to find them. Similarly, there are hundreds of published at-home scripts in books and periodicals that could be valuable to analyse, and whose playwrights and their families might be worth trying to learn more about. Versions of other famous tales, like Robin Hood could be examined, as could the wide variety of “other” character types I didn’t have space to consider, such as blackface or Jewish characters. As for girlhood and childhood writings, examining more juvenilia and especially more juvenile newspapers that may include scripts or stories about plays children wrote to perform themselves might give a different idea about children’s concerns and interests, in contrast to the plays adults wrote that they imagined children would enjoy. Perhaps there may be more candid “newspaper” reports of theatrical failures, like Grace MacDonald’s description of her failed charade, or even unexpected and unperformable scripts, like Juliana Horatia Ewing’s “Home Scenes.” Another fertile area for exploration is women’s colleges, universities, and schools. Drexell College of Medicine, in the United States, is one of the early colleges to accept women, and after contacting their archivist, it seems that in the nineteenth century, girls may have participated in “Med Show” type variety and minstrel shows that could offer a different perspective on girls and amateur dramatic activities. Similarly, children in colonial outposts
(sometimes in schools and sometimes at home) participated in theatricals in the same way that they would have in England. Gertrude Bell mentions watching cadets perform a theatrical while she was in Persia, and it is possible that both local and ex-patriot boys were the performers.

Projects relating child participation in theatricals to the Empire could be fascinating additions to the research I have begun. Pursuing another angle, some of the archives and newspapers I examined included children wearing theatrical costumes, either for their performances, or perhaps, just for the fun of being photographed in fancy dress. A concentrated examination of children and young people in theatrical dress may contribute to conversations about depictions of children in Victorian visual culture at the same time as the study could reveal more details about at-home theatrical costume. I am particularly interested in ways dance and music are incorporated into at-home theatricals, and how scripts invited children to perform them. As a genre, juvenile, at-home, and girls’ and boys’ school theatricals are all understudied, and further examination of them, from the perspectives of cultural studies, education studies, and performance studies could suggest what playwrights felt children should learn, how they should perform gender, what kind of adulthoods they should aspire to, and depending on what kind of child-written responses are available, how children engaged with or resisted those experiences. In Kathleen Gallagher’s four-site study of drama in urban education, she writes, “Hope is at the centre of the practices we witnessed, but not a naïve hope that unwittingly reinforces the status quo. It’s a hope that by working together actions could change material lives” (Why 224). Hope is so often at the forefront of work done for and with children, but while I believe that some Victorian playwrights and some Victorian girls engaged with theatricals in ways that meant “working together actions could change material lives” I do not think that goal was everyone’s.

More diverse research and more complex questions could position theatricals within Victorian discourses regarding children, girlhood, identity, and dreams about the future.
While the research I did accomplish could be augmented, it stands alone and is valuable in its own right. In my first chapter I quoted Judith Butler who writes, “fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home” (Global 208). In the case of Victorian girls performing at-home theatricals, their imaginations could literally bring the elsewhere home—bringing the imagination of themselves “and others otherwise” right into the drawing-room. In so-doing, they were responding to offers made by playwrights, and interpretations they made on their own that allowed them to navigate the discourses around them, and choose how to adapt them to suit themselves. Ultimately, the ephemeral nature of performance means that I can only guess at what theatricals felt like to participants on stage and in the audience, how girls modified them, and how much control or agency they had in the moment.

I will return here to one of my starting ideas: hope. I believe that I have demonstrated that girls could, and probably did use some theatrical scripts as vehicles to explore identity, imagine alternate futures, and perhaps engender social change. The change does not have to be radical, and it did not have to make an impact on every participant for this to be true for some girls. Theatricals could be fun, and, in a way, could be considered a “success” because they happened and because there was an audience. If you’re reading this, that is true for this dissertation (it happened because I wrote it, and there is an audience because you read it), but I believe the points my research makes are more penetrating, even though I am aware that there is so much more to be learned. In a concrete way, because juvenile at-home theatricals were embodied and because there were witnesses, they could also be a real source of inspiration and of hope. At-home theatricals could support girls who wanted to imagine alternate identities for
themselves and atypical futures, propelling them into an adulthood in which they had agency and choice in quotidian life as well as on stage.
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