

## The Subject of Money: Late-Victorian Melodrama's Crisis of Masculinity

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Scholars describe nineteenth-century melodrama as a genre that makes visible the struggles of the powerless against the pressures of capitalism. Martha Vicinus, for example, suggests that in the sufferings of children, women, the elderly, and the poor, the purity of the melodramatic victim affirms domestic “human” values against the threat of a hostile world, and so contains the external hazard posed by market relations (130). In doing so, as David Grimstead argues in a discussion of melodrama in the American context, such plays remind viewers of a nostalgic past and provide “moral touchstones” for negotiating the inequities of capitalist society (28).<sup>1</sup> Such descriptions accurately characterize early- to mid-nineteenth-century melodramas, which often place socially powerless victims in opposition to villains with “class status, wealth, and privilege” (Booth 164). By the 1870s in Great Britain, however, the list of melodramatic victims had expanded to include exemplars of traditional male power. In these later dramas, the protagonist might be a squire rather than a laborer or a businessman betrayed by his partners. As with other melodramatic protagonists, the hero's vulnerability was both economic and physical. Yet, unlike young, poor, or female victims, whose moral status evokes nostalgia for a deferential social order in which weakness demanded

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ABSTRACT: This article focuses on the relationship between male suffering and economics in two late-Victorian melodramas, Henry Arthur Jones's *The Silver King* and Arthur Wing Pinero's *Sweet Lavender*. Both plays express contemporary anxieties about the stability of privileged male identity, offering narratives of masculine progress that affirm the superiority of moral, domestic values over economic ones while concomitantly making visible the imperative demands of the marketplace. This conflict between the domestic and economic spheres is expressed in the ailing bodies of the victimized male protagonists, whose physical incapacities suggest the limited ability of the male subject to manage the systemic contradictions that threaten the coherence of the domestic sphere. The suffering male body in late-Victorian melodrama thus emphasizes the problematic relationship between identity and money as well as the complicity of domesticity in the economic sphere to which it is nominally opposed.

protection, the privileged male's victimhood does not point back to a pre-capitalist "golden age." Instead, it indicates an emerging crisis in which middle-class male subjects are expected to participate in an increasingly aggressive and competitive capitalist economy, even as long-established standards of private, moral rectitude remain in force.

The emergence of a privileged male victim/hero represents a distinct shift in the conventions of nineteenth-century drama. Early Victorian stage comedies such as Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Money* (1840), Dion Boucicault's *London Assurance* (1841), or George Henry Lewes's *The Game of Speculation* (1851), acknowledged the problem of social identity being defined by money, only to subordinate it to demonstrations of the hero's merit, effectiveness, and respectability. Similarly, mid-century genteel melodramas such as *Still Waters Run Deep* (1855) and *Settling Day* (1865), both by Tom Taylor, pit the machinations of economically motivated villains against the paternal authority of middle-class heroes. After the 1870s, however, we see these affirmative representations of masculine authority replaced by anxious depictions of male victims' struggles within an impersonal and abstract economy that upsets traditional conceptions of patriarchal power. In some ways, such representations parallel those of fallible men that populate temperance dramas. But unlike the thematic problem posed by drink, which could be resolved by invoking self-regulation as a "cure" for moral laxity, concerns about the marketplace indicate the growing inability of the individual to govern himself within an increasingly abstract system. In the two plays I examine here—Henry Arthur Jones's *The Silver King* (1881) and Arthur Wing Pinero's *Sweet Lavender* (1886)—the economic and physical vulnerability of the victim/hero expresses contemporary anxieties about the connection between male identity and money.

These changes in the melodrama register a more general movement in economic discourse away from confirmations of individual, moral control over the marketplace. Between 1850 and 1870, for example, a new focus on professional expertise displaced the paternal, domestic ideal of bank management (Alborn 203). This and other changes within the marketplace were intended to stimulate the flow of capital by releasing individuals from personal responsibility.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, such legislation as the Partnership and Limited Liabilities Act (1855), the Joint Stock Companies Act (1856), and the Companies Act (1879) encouraged investment among the privileged while largely removing the necessity of preserving one's good name as a guarantee of responsible business

ethics. Among the middle classes, however, the freedoms associated with limited liability also raised concerns about an economic system divorced from the moral parameters of personal reputation. Particularly worrisome to moralists was the idea of a system that bracketed private moral character from public behavior in the marketplace.<sup>3</sup>

Earlier in the Victorian era, novels had begun to allocate blame for both masculine suffering and the fragility of the domestic sphere to the market's instability.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the later Victorian dramas that take up these themes might seem merely to rearticulate the subject matter of many successful novels. But genteel melodrama was able to frame anxieties in somewhat different terms. For in contrast to the novel, the immediacy of melodrama's theatrical event heightened the effects of economic conflict on the body. Indeed, while masculine suffering in the sensation novel masks conflicts central to male identity, as Ellen Bayuk Rosenman has argued (39), the visual element of theatrical melodrama made all the more vivid the problem of male bodies transformed by incompatible domestic and economic imperatives.

In the plays considered here, visual depictions of the hero's suffering are crucial to melodramatic effect. In Jones's *The Silver King*, the hero's prematurely silver hair testifies to the external trials that have led to his inward reform, while the broken figure of the once-successful banker in Pinero's *Sweet Lavender* similarly confirms the connection between suffering and moral transformation. For contemporary critics of both plays, these visual changes to the male body offered evidence of the hero's moral status as a gentleman. Reviewing *The Silver King* in *The Theatre* in 1882, one anonymous writer notes the dramatic value of the change: "Sorrow has left its traces upon his face, his features are noble but marked with grief, his hair is white with trouble" (359). Similarly, Clement Scott describes the hero of *Sweet Lavender* as "an upright gentleman" whose "sad earnestness" testifies to his desire to make reparations to those he has wronged ("*Sweet Lavender*" 265). Such readings align the protagonist's physical state with his worthiness, suggesting a correlation between suffering and manifestations of "true" character. In doing so, however, reviewers were obliged to overlook troubling reminders of the male subject's ongoing implication in capitalist competition, even after their physical transformations. Though Scott's enthusiastic review of *The Silver King* praises its ending, in which the hero, "stainless and repentant, leads his sweet wife back to the home where she was born" (539), lingering

bodily reminders of his suffering suggest the impossibility of completely escaping the stain of worldly struggle. Indeed, while melodrama typically used the suffering body to affirm the potential of a universalized humanity to triumph over economic forces, both plays examined here offer endings in which the permanently marked bodies of male victims attest to the inescapable violence of the economic sphere.

Theatrical melodrama's visual focus on the material body made it particularly well-suited to address ideological anxieties about the increased participation of the privileged classes in the capitalist economy. The dramatic and narrative conventions of the genre emphasize the fixed connection between the body and moral identity, the superiority of human, embodied connections over economic exchange.<sup>5</sup> If melodrama's victims traditionally defeated the logic of capitalism by appealing to values grounded in the socially vulnerable body, however, the late-Victorian case of the privileged man was more equivocal. On one hand, physical suffering placed men within melodrama's symbolic moral order, offering reassurance that they too could ultimately overcome the alienating effects of the marketplace. Yet on the other hand, representations of suffering men upset the balance of a patriarchal order dependent upon masculine strength.<sup>6</sup> The presence of a privileged male victim on the stage suggested a disharmony among seemingly natural masculine traits and therefore unsettled both the oppositional logic of melodrama and its conventional association of the body with affirmations of fixed meaning. Far from containing anxieties related to capitalism, then, the suffering body of the privileged male victim drew attention both to the conflicted character of "proper" male subjectivity and to the larger systemic conflicts in which it was embedded.

In *The Silver King* and *Sweet Lavender*, the generic problem of the suffering male body was compounded by the conditions under which the plays were produced and by the audiences for whom they were intended. Unlike earlier melodramas, which were produced in East End and transpontine venues for largely working class audiences, melodrama after 1860 was increasingly patronized by affluent West End audiences. Effects of this patronage reshaped not only the drama, but also the theaters in which it was produced, as the custom of decorating the venues like sumptuous and costly drawing rooms became widespread, and expensive seating in the stalls and dress circle was expanded at the expense of the pit and gallery (Booth 163). The Princess's Theatre, where *The Silver King* was first staged, and Terry's

Theatre, which premiered *Sweet Lavender*, were no exception. Specializing in the production of sentimental melodrama and melodramatic comedy, both venues were lavishly remodeled from the ground up shortly before the premieres, becoming grand spaces intended to reinforce their patrons' assumptions of respectability and entitlement.<sup>7</sup>

As the middle classes became a focal point for theatrical marketing, managers began to stage plays that represented characters of that class. Thus, older melodramatic conventions were inserted into "drawing room" comedies of manners, and what came to be known as "genteel" melodrama eventually reshaped the domestic focus of lower class melodrama for new audiences. Although the translation of traditional melodrama into a subgenre amenable to an affluent audience has struck some critics as superficial (Booth suggests "the clothes were new, but not the wearers" [163]), deploying critiques of class and capitalism in plays and theaters intended for privileged viewers highlighted the contradiction of a moral identity sustained by wealth.

Both plays considered here are artifacts of this change, and both appeared in venues that reflected the problem of a moral world view that saw itself as insulated from economic forces but was, in fact, contained by and inseparable from them.<sup>8</sup> If this tension between economic and affective imperatives is reflected in the contrast between the exclusivity of the theatrical venues and the content of the dramas, it is particularly evident in Jones's and Pinero's representations of privileged masculinity. Indeed, while both plays offer narratives of masculine progress that affirm the superiority of human values over economic ones, they also suggest the limited ability of the male subject to manage the systemic contradictions of the marketplace that threaten the coherence of the domestic sphere—often, I will argue, by foregrounding the physical incapacities of their male victims. The problem of the suffering male body thus raises two interrelated concerns in these plays: the problematic relationship between identity and money, and the complicity of domesticity in the economic sphere to which it is nominally opposed.

### I. Relative Merit: Money and Masculinity in *The Silver King*

Jones's *The Silver King* charts its hero's movement from dissipated squire to proper middle-class man, a transformation effected as he learns to subordinate economic values to domestic ones. Yet it is also a play in which the progress of its hero, William Denver, is dependent upon

his victimization. In the opening scene, Denver has gambled away his family fortune, condemning his wife and children to penury. The first act ends when Denver, after passing out in a drunken rage, wakes with the mistaken belief that he has killed a man; in fact, he has been framed by the villainous Captain Herbert Skinner (or, “the Spider”), a criminal mastermind masquerading as a gentleman. Pursued by the police, Denver flees to America where he strikes it rich in the silver mines of Nevada. When he returns to England as John Franklin, the Silver King, he is a transformed man: now wealthy, he engages in benevolent activities, helps to reform others, and restores his impoverished family to their ancestral home. In doing so, Denver also proves his own innocence and brings the real villain to justice. He is thus able to resume his proper place as a father with a renewed sense of duty, affirming the role of the Victorian man as protector and provider. If Denver’s triumph over the villain offers proof of the fixed moral values he now sustains, however, the play’s conventionally melodramatic resolution unsettles this notion with residual, embodied reminders of the conflicts—between competition and benevolence, ambition and detachment—that Denver must internalize to become a proper middle-class man.

At the level of plot, *The Silver King* emphasizes Denver’s abdication of paternal responsibility during his decline, and his subsequent moral reform idealizes a view of masculinity defined by the middle-class values of hard work, self-regulation, and advancement by merit. This idealization carries with it a firm regard for the individual’s ability to conquer disappointment through the exercise of inner strength of will, a sentiment Jones invokes directly by prefacing the play with a two-stanza quote from the first section of Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*:

I held it truth with him who sings  
 To one clear harp in diverse tones,  
 That men may rise on stepping stones  
 Of their dead selves to higher things.  
 But who shall so forecast the years  
 And find in loss a gain to match?  
 Or reach a hand thro’ time to catch  
 The far-off interest of tears? (37)

Jones himself emphasized the first stanza in discussions of the play’s design, identifying Denver’s struggle with man’s capacity to conquer

his lower nature (Jackson 5). Yet the second stanza questions the extent to which the problem of intersecting economic and domestic spheres can be satisfactorily mediated by the individual. The “one clear harp” suggestive of higher aims in the first stanza is thus offset by the qualifying “but” in the second, which employs the economic language of “loss,” “gain,” and “interest” to convey the emotional costs of individual progress. The epigraph as a whole, therefore, invokes the ideal of masculine self-control and strength, only to suggest the compromised position of a self caught between the competing languages of merit, sentiment, and the marketplace.

The problem of measuring or assessing individual merit was embedded in the larger cultural project of reifying an ideal of Victorian manhood at once moral and economic. Conventionally, idealized views of fatherhood helped manage the contradictory demands of privileged masculinity by vesting economic and domestic forms of authority in a single individual who ensured that moral values predominated. This compression of money and merit in the father helped to obscure the complex interconnection between domesticity and economics by placing money as a by-product of self-discipline and proper conduct. In practical terms, however, money sustained domesticity rather than vice versa, and economic success was generally achieved by engaging in a range of competitive or aggressive behaviors incompatible with personal merit, at least as it was sentimentally defined. Insofar as he was aware of this conflict, the privileged Victorian man, H. L. Malchow suggests, was a divided figure who negotiated the competing demands of economics and domesticity by adopting discrete or “layered” identities (8). Such divisions performed the cultural work of supporting the father’s claims to authority while preserving the stability of the public/private divide. Perhaps most centrally, John Tosh observes, establishing a home was an important stage “in winning social recognition as an adult, fully masculine person,” in that it naturalized connections between material and immaterial markers of merit (3). Once having gained this power, however, the middle-class man was implicitly charged with sustaining the fiction of a moralized domestic sphere by internalizing the systemic contradictions necessitated by establishing and maintaining a home.

In *The Silver King*, Jones appeals to a traditionally melodramatic formulation of the father as a figure able to harmonize or manage the conflicting demands of economic success and domestic

morality on a subjective level. Rather than placing the father as an authoritative hero, however, Jones situates him as a victim who must demonstrate his merit by overcoming the limitations of his nature. In the first act, Denver's domestic failings are identified both with heredity and with his inherited class position. As Jaikes, the family's faithful servant, explains of Denver: "he's a bit wild, but there ain't no harm in him. Bless you, it's the blood: he's got too much nature in him, that's what it is. His father was just like him when he was a young man" (40). Such inherited moral flaws indicate the problem of an identity defined by birth, or nature, rather than individual action and self-regulation. Indeed, Denver's resemblance to his father and grandfather leads not only to dissipation, but also to ineffectiveness as a breadwinner because assumptions about privilege constrain him from working. To rectify this failure of character, Denver must become a self-made middle-class man, able to provide for his family and to secure them against the threat of economically motivated villains.

In disgrace because of his supposed crime and his inability to provide for his family, Denver escapes from England dressed as a sailor, a disguise that demotes him in the social register even as it offers him the prospect of rising again by his own efforts. Denver's reprobate self is also metaphorically dead by the end of the second act, when he is reported to have perished in a horrific train wreck. His escape to America thus places him on the road to personal reform in a country that admits no pretensions of birth. When he returns to England in the third act, Denver is a radically changed man. By his own account, his success in America is the result of hard work and suffering that has transformed him by conferring both money and merit. As he explains to Jaikes, "When I left England I went to the Silver Mines of Nevada—I had to struggle hard at first and could only send you a few dollars—I was almost starving myself, but one morning I struck a rich vein of silver; today I'm richer than I can count" (75). The coincidence of hard work, self-regulation, and providence here frames success in moral terms that affirm a Weberian blending of economics and spirituality in the doctrine of work. At the same time, however, the speculative nature of mining suggests a continuity between Denver's successful acquisition of a fortune and his disastrous involvement with gambling in the first act. This conjunction of providence and possible moral impropriety indicates the underlying difficulty of seeing the economic sphere in moral terms. Such connections haunt the play's affirmation of



Denver's reform, subtly questioning the exercise of merit that underpins his moral transformation: "His whole life is spent in doing good," his secretary notes. "He's as noble and generous as he is rich" (78). Denver's wealth becomes a marker of his inner worthiness, as the means by which he has acquired his fortune is subordinated to his subsequent philanthropic behavior. Distanced geographically and temporally from the domestic sphere in England, Denver's activities as a miner may therefore be represented as a matter of personal privation and endurance, rather than of competition or aggression.

If Denver seems to harmonize the imperatives of economic and moral behaviors associated with proper masculinity, however, the untold story of his experience in America haunts his return to the domestic sphere. This story of his transformation from victim to hero is not expressed verbally, but rather in the bodily effects of his exertion. When he first appears on stage after returning from America, the stage directions describe him as "changed very much, his hair is almost white and his face worn, his manner grave and subdued" (71). Physically altered by the strain of mining, the prematurely gray and aged Denver is unrecognizable to his daughter, who cannot connect his current appearance with a picture of her father:

CISSY: (*after looking at it for a moment or two*) Oh, no, mamma! The Silver King's hair is nearly white.

NELLY: But the face, Cissy, the face?

CISSY: (*looking again*) No, my father's face is quite young and happy, and the Silver King's face is so sad and old. No, the Silver King isn't a bit like that. (86)

Though this exchange emphasizes the literal effects of physical exertion and aging that result from privation, Denver's transformation also expresses the symbolic connection between his physical appearance and the fortune that defines his new identity. In the "silver" hair, we find reminders of the silver mine necessary to sustain the immaterial system of merit that allows him to inhabit the public role of philanthropist and the private role of father. His family's inability to recognize Denver—the replacement of the "young and happy" father by the "sad and old" Silver King—effectively dramatizes the difficulties men face in managing conflicting but intimately connected social imperatives.

The range of competing symbolic values that money carried for Victorians further complicated these difficulties. On the one hand,

Christopher Herbert points out, money constituted social identity by defining class status and public reputation, and so functioned almost as an object of “displaced spirituality” (189). On the other, it possessed a corrupting influence that undermined fixed moral value (189). Conventionally, theatrical melodramas superficially resolved this incongruity by restoring money to the moral control of the individual capable of defeating the villainous representative of unstable market-place fluctuation (Gledhill 21). Yet the application of melodrama’s Manichean logic could not eradicate anxieties stemming from money’s potential to define social position; thus, in the physical suffering of the victim/hero of later Victorian melodrama we find reminders of the extent to which domestic values are produced and sustained by an amoral economic sphere.

Denver’s “silver” hair becomes a visible sign of the effects of this economic competition, the physical cost of operating outside the moral laws of the domestic sphere. In the play, Nevada’s violence and lawlessness are the natural results of expansion into new territory, and Denver’s prematurely aged body reminds the audience that men survive by aggression, both in the wilderness and in business. Historically, the experience of mining was physically demanding, competitive, and individualistic—a combination that encouraged open conflict (Mitchell Marks 223). Not surprisingly, Denver’s mining period exists outside the realm of law and social expectation: in Nevada he is “free from the past, safe from the law” (Jones 84). His success in America thus aligns him directly with lawlessness and unrestrained aggression, supposedly natural masculine qualities that also recall the conflict between competition and moral restraint central to privileged masculinity. Denver’s silver hair offers a reminder of those aspects of masculinity that cannot be admitted into the domestic sphere but are nonetheless necessary to sustain it.

Moreover, because America produces and sustains Denver’s claims to civilized domesticity, it functions in the play as a reminder that apparently fixed values may seem natural but are in fact imposed by society. This point is made indirectly by the villain Skinner, who defends his own actions by suggesting that competition is itself natural: “all living creatures prey upon one another,” he tells his wife. “The duck gobbles up the worm, the man gobbles up the duck and then the worm gobbles up the man again. It’s the great law of nature” (63). In England, the villain’s materialism and capitalist philosophy are defeated by Denver’s exertions: he is brought to justice for murder and exposed as a social fraud.

Yet Denver's physical transformation suggests an underlying connection between villain and victim that unsettles the oppositional logic anchoring the play's celebration of morality. Not only is Denver's power to save his family identical to Skinner's power to torment them (both have an economic basis), but both victim and villain must assume false identities in order to function as privileged members of English society. The conflict written on Denver's body thus serves as a point of convergence between villain and victim, a reminder of the relativistic economic world that surrounds and determines the domestic sanctuary.

In *The Silver King*, these unsettling similarities are obscured by appeals to the binary logic of melodrama, which refocuses attention on questions of their absolute moral difference. Denver's ability to save his family from the villain by providing for them economically is thus set aside to emphasize a commitment to justice that distinguishes his true moral character. As he contemplates fleeing England with his family, Denver has a nightmare in which he experiences the mental anguish of guilt. Describing a "murderer's sleep," he suggests:

It's the waking time of conscience! It's the whipping post she ties him to while she lashes and stings his poor helpless guilty soul! Sleep! It's a bed of spikes and harrows! It's a precipice over which he falls sheer upon the jags and forks of memory! (84)

When he is wakened from this nightmare, Denver recognizes that "though I should fly to the uttermost ends of the earth . . . there is no hiding place for me, no rest, no hope, no shelter, no escape" (85). This conventionally melodramatic proclamation, expressed as a string of negations, aligns his crisis with the quest for moral certainty central to the genre. Indeed, it exemplifies what Peter Brooks has described as melodramatic "excess," through which the "polar concepts of darkness and light, salvation and damnation" are reintroduced into the post-sacred world to confer meaning (*Melodramatic* ix). By contrast, the villain is unmoved by the plight of Denver's starving wife and children—he sees death as a "nuisance"—and unrepentant when caught (67). His incapacity for moral feeling distinguishes him from characters who otherwise share a disquieting awareness of the economic and physical forces domesticity requires. To resolve the problem that Denver poses as a compromised male subject, the play thus translates the internal conflict between economic and moral concerns into the external opposition between two characters polarized as good and evil.

If the opposition between victim and villain affirms the moral assumptions of the genre and clarifies the confusions occasioned by economic competition, however, it cannot dispel the challenges to privileged domesticity raised by Denver's persona as the Silver King. Rather, the play's ending offers a final reminder of the economic values that surround and threaten domestic security. "Come," Denver enjoins his family in the closing tableau, "let us kneel and give thanks on our own hearth in the dear old home where I wooed you, and won you in the happy, happy days of long ago. Come Jaikes—Cissy, Ned, Nell—come in—Home at last!" (102). The domestic world and its values seem validated as the family takes refuge in its ancestral home, yet Denver's silver hair offers a lingering reminder of the fragile character of idealized domesticity. Though restored to his old name, it is the economic power of the Silver King, rather than Denver's inherited position as squire, that sustains the play's domestic resolution. This ending consequently carries with it a reminder of Denver's ideologically divided identity, subject to the demands of both morality and economics. Ultimately, the play suggests that Denver's position as squire can only be sustained artificially through a larger system of capitalist exchange that upsets the deferential logic it seems to affirm.

Denver's residual association with silver reminds viewers of the systemic difficulties occasioned by conflicts central to male subjectivity. In contemporary economic discourse, silver did not share the relatively stable value of gold; its fluctuating status thus makes it an appropriate symbol of an identity defined by money. As numerous Victorian commentators point out, silver was a highly unstable commodity by the 1870s—the result of European demonetization of silver currency, British trade in the rupee, and mining activities in the New World.<sup>9</sup> Both in the decade leading up to the first production of *The Silver King* and in the decade that followed, trade in silver gave rise to a series of manias and crises in the global economy. What analysts characterized as the "dangerously fluctuating" character of silver suggested not only its instability as a commodity, but also the relativistic character of an economic system increasingly abstracted from individual or national control (Moore 292). Discussions of bimetal standards—that is, the simultaneous circulation of gold and silver as currency—in England and America emphasized both the impossibility of determining a fixed relationship between silver and gold, and the amoral character of economic relations such relativism enabled.<sup>10</sup> "If [measures of value] can be changed without the consent of

both parties to a contract,” one anonymous commentator noted, “they pass into a category of implements of crime, and rank with the burglar’s ‘jimmy,’ ‘wedge,’ and false keys” (“Demonetization” 378). In *The Silver King*, the difficulty of relating silver and gold on the market suggests the dissonance between the fixed moral values central to domestic melodrama and the relativism of its surrounding economic context. Moreover, such instabilities continue to mark Denver’s social identity to the end of the play. His character is secured by the value of silver, but it is also haunted by the knowledge that the values associated with the private sphere will always be subordinate to, and reliant on, those characterizing the economic domain.

## II. *Sweet Lavender’s* Domestic Economy: Masculinity and the Victorian Family

If *The Silver King* evinces an uncomfortable awareness that domesticity is sustained by the economic activities and self-division of the male subject, *Sweet Lavender* suggests the difficulty of managing the economic/domestic division under the conditions of expanding capitalism. The plot recalls one of the most significant economic crises of the later Victorian period: the failure of the City of Glasgow Bank in 1878.<sup>11</sup> The result of mismanagement by the bank’s directors, who incurred bad debts to family and friends for millions of pounds and then doctored the account books to cover their actions, the bank’s failure had a cataclysmic effect on depositors, shareholders, and the stability of the British banking system as a whole. The collapse of the City of Glasgow Bank, one of the largest banks in Great Britain at the time, immediately bankrupted one third of its shareholders—approximately 600 investors—and inspired widespread fear about the instability of financial institutions (Robb 73-74).<sup>12</sup> *Sweet Lavender* recasts this economic debacle in individual and local terms, charting the reform of a successful banker, Geoffrey Wedderburn, who is bankrupted by his partners’ dishonesty and left to assume public responsibility for the failure. Focusing on the economic downfall and subsequent reform of its victim/hero, Pinero’s play emphasizes the need for moral—explicitly paternal—authority in both the private and public spheres. Unlike earlier melodramas, however, *Sweet Lavender* does not displace the conflict of the male subject onto the opposition between villain and victim. Wedderburn’s partners remain off-stage

and are not brought to justice. Instead, the victim must learn to apply the lessons of domesticity to his business life by repudiating the misguided economic philosophy that leads to his downfall. As he does, he affirms the superiority of fixed moral values associated with domesticity, supplanting the proprietary relations of class-conscious society with human connections that disavow money as an index of character or prestige. Even as it celebrates the value of sentimental attachments, however, *Sweet Lavender's* focus on a male victim suggests the way in which ideological conflict is manifest in male subjects as physical symptom. In doing so, it lays bare the complicit relationship between economic and domestic spheres.

Traditional assumptions about male authority changed significantly in the last decades of the nineteenth century. The domestic power of the father was challenged by legal developments such as the Married Women's Property Act, altering the financial dynamic of the home and subjecting male behavior to increased scrutiny on moral grounds (Tosh 178). As the conflict between public and private forms of identity became more intense, the strain on male subjects forced to internalize conflict between the competing demands of economic and domestic spheres became more visible. After mid-century, for example, as Karen Chase and Michael Levenson observe, the rise of conspicuous consumption upset the idea that the domestic sphere might be kept free from the taint of commercialism (78). This effect became more pronounced as changes in the marketplace redefined the nature of economic exchange in the years after 1870. Perhaps most crucially, the extension of limited liability significantly altered the earning strategies of the privileged classes, who fully embraced a culture of investment by the late Victorian period.<sup>13</sup> Once connected with notions of work that sanitized competitiveness by conceiving of it as moral control, income was now determined largely by practices of investing that required no labor.

The ability to amass a fortune without working for it unsettled the distinction between domesticity and economics. Not only could women as well as men invest, contemporary commentators noted, but reminders of incorporation were evident in the most private, domestic activities:

No sooner do we rise from our bed (furnished by Somebody, Limited) than we use a limited soapmaker's soap. Very likely our garments bear a limited address. When we have donned them and go down to breakfast we find on our table some prospec-

tuses arrived by the first post; our bread and jam bear the limited brand, and very likely our tea and butter would bear it if they could. (Van Oss 731)

The linked economic forces of consumption and investment steadily infiltrating the domestic sphere placed demands on the limited means of providers. As one later Victorian critic of limited liability noted, those “who prove the greatest fools financially” are professional men “whose children have formed exaggerated ideas of their means, and whose wives will insist on setting up their carriages” (Shand 295).

*Sweet Lavender* examines the problem of compromised masculine authority in a culture of investment by invoking the nostalgic ideal that the father must manage his business as he does his home. But Wedderburn, the play’s protagonist, is initially guilty of abdicating responsibility for both. At the bank, he has lapsed from active manager to passive, absentee investor, and when the play begins, he is traveling on the continent “buying things” (33). “They don’t want me at the bank,” he explains, “—I’m only a name there nowadays” (112). Wedderburn is similarly negligent in his position as adoptive father to Clement, a young barrister. Able to supply Clement with the trappings of material prosperity, Wedderburn neglects his moral duty to guide his child and misuses his paternal authority by upsetting his son’s planned marriage with Lavender, the daughter of a laundress. Despite the fact that Lavender is in all ways a refined, well-spoken, and modest young lady who is devoted to his son, Wedderburn snobbishly opposes the match.

To underscore the injustice of his position, Pinero aligns Wedderburn’s irresponsible business practices with the example of improper masculinity he sets for Clement when he suggests that they “cut away North and be lazy and happy” (112). Wedderburn also advises Clement to apply business logic in personal relationships. Explaining that “hard, old-fashioned common-sense” informed his own decision to end a relationship with a woman “in humble life,” he notes that class differences “would have soured her and made me cross, and it would have been a damned wretched marriage” (113-14). The play thus interweaves examples of improper governance in the economic and domestic spheres to make a point about Wedderburn’s failure to assume the responsibilities associated with masculinity. The play further connects Wedderburn’s failure both to his passive position as an absentee manager and to his unquestioning application of economic valuations to human relationships, as dictated by society.

The effects of Wedderburn's shortcomings as a father and a businessman converge when his bank fails, leaving him bankrupt and dishonored. After reading about the crisis in the newspaper, Wedderburn bemoans the loss of his good name, the totem of his social identity: "The villains! Dishonour! Dishonour!" (117). His melodramatic response takes on a second level of meaning, however, when the woman he had wronged in his youth reappears, close on the heels of his financial ruin. She is Ruth Rolt, Lavender's mother, and her appearance delivers a crippling physical blow to Wedderburn. Recognizing her, he "puts his hand to his eyes and staggers, and Clement, re-entering at that moment, catches him as he drops into the armchair fainting" (118). The significance of Ruth's appearance and Wedderburn's physical collapse becomes clear when she nurses him through his subsequent incapacitating illness: her ready forgiveness teaches him to value human ties over economic imperatives. Recognizing the negative effects of his choices, he acknowledges the suffering he has caused both to her and to himself. "I have stared the world in the face as if I were an honest man, and bragged of my shrewdness, and hard common sense," he admits, yet "I have been playing a loud tune to drown my conscience. I—I have suffered" (168). His guilty confession here admits the hypocrisy of his position as an honorable man, even as it raises the more complex problem of masculine effectiveness—for honesty cannot always go hand in hand with "shrewdness" or "common sense."

The difficulty of harmonizing honesty and shrewdness becomes evident when Ruth informs Wedderburn of the outcome of their relationship: an illegitimate child. Learning that Lavender is his daughter connects Wedderburn's public dishonor to Ruth's private shame, implicating the purity of domestic relations in the amoral "shrewdness" of the economic sphere. Wedderburn thus responds to Ruth's admission by recasting the economic fact of his bankruptcy as a metaphor for his failed domestic life: "I am utterly bankrupt," he suggests, "I have lost strength, fortune, comfort—all that makes age endurable. But what I've lost now is little compared to what I flung away eighteen years ago—the love of a faithful woman" (171). His association of economic bankruptcy with domestic failure demonstrates Barbara Weiss's claim that in Victorian literature, bankruptcy was "an elemental life force that was capable of sweeping away the gilded surface of life to expose the reality—or the void—beneath" (87). Wedderburn's affirmation of the real values of family over the false



values of society is further complicated by the problems of honesty and honor. Wedderburn resolves to restore Lavender to her proper place as his daughter by uniting her with his adopted son. "You will be my boy's wife," he tells her, "so you must try to forgive my old unkindness to your mother, and learn to call me father" (175). In doing so, he attempts to set right his relation to his daughter, yet he also undermines the power the play seems to accord truth and love by keeping the secret of Lavender's paternity. It is significant, in this respect, that the account he gives of his previous relationship with Ruth omits her faithfulness to him, both during their relationship and over the succeeding years: "This lady did me the honour to believe in me, to love me," he suggests, "until, very wisely, she perceived that I was not worth her devotion—and we parted" (174). Wedderburn's affirmation of sentiment and honor has the curious effect of replacing truth with falsity. Additionally, it tacitly acknowledges that identity is not a matter of intrinsic goodness but rather a socially determined construct. He thus unsettles the play's extensive claims for Lavender's character as an innocent, essentially moral woman by indirectly acknowledging the unsentimental basis of social position as a matter of extrinsic value that eludes the power of sentiment to reclaim or forgive.

If Wedderburn's acceptance of Lavender marks the triumph of sentiment over social snobbery in the text, then, it also unsettles the moral claims of domesticity. Indeed, Lavender can only be restored to her proper place as Wedderburn's daughter by an act that parallels the decision of the City of Glasgow Bank directors to falsify their records to conceal bad debts to family members. In attempting to recast the problems of business in domestic terms, Pinero ends by introducing the relativistic possibilities that morally questionable practices may be inseparable from acts of sentiment, and that sentiment may be used to mask morally questionable practices. By preserving Ruth's secret, Wedderburn behaves with proper masculine feeling and chivalry. Yet he also indirectly preserves his daughter's value in respectable society by covering up her illicit parentage.

The problem of Lavender's parentage is expressed, perhaps most centrally, in Wedderburn's compromised masculinity. After he has learned a moral lesson about the value of human connections, melodramatic convention dictates his return to a position of proper masculine authority in business and in the home. In Wedderburn's case, however, reminders of his dishonesty and its unresolved effects

are expressed in the weakened body that betokens his compromised position as a male subject. Superficially, Wedderburn's physical transformation is similar to Denver's: when he appears after his illness he looks "much older than before, his hair being gray and his voice and manner feeble" (162). Unlike Denver, however, Wedderburn remains a dependent, diminished figure able to move about on stage only when he is supported between his niece and Lavender (163). This image of incapacitated masculinity visually suggests the need for domesticity to support or heal men compromised by economic activities that, in turn, sustain the fiction of separate domestic and economic spheres. The play thus ends by making domesticity the problematic—even hypocritical—refuge of the failed provider. Wedderburn's compromised health is thus a visible sign of the social conflicts that sentiment can cloak over but not correct.

In the final scene of the play, the mutually constitutive relationship between the economic and domestic spheres embodied by the weakened Wedderburn becomes unequivocal. Having vowed to return to Barnchester and face the people ruined by the bank failure, Wedderburn is saved by an act of forgiveness that parallels Ruth's ministrations. Dick Phenyl, Clement's dissipated friend and fellow barrister, forgives Wedderburn's bank its loss of his inheritance, a large fortune. Dick's solicitor appears with news that the Barnchester Bank's "principal creditors, animated by the example of one of their number, have resolved to put Wedderburn's Bank upon its legs again—with every prospect of restoring confidence . . . and discharging its old responsibilities" (177). This image of a bank set "upon its legs again" by a sentimental intervention calls to mind Wedderburn himself. Indeed, the central figure propped up in both cases *is* Wedderburn, restored to nominal authority in his bank and in his home by sentimental acts divorced from moral considerations of right and wrong. For both Dick's and Ruth's acts of forgiveness are offered not to alleviate, but to help cover over Wedderburn's transgressions. The emergence of Dick at the end of *Sweet Lavender* as a noteworthy character is significant, for he becomes a parallel to Wedderburn. Both men lead lives of irresponsibility, and both make attempts at moral regeneration—Wedderburn through his acceptance of Lavender, and Dick through his forgiveness of the bank's debt. While these reformations are similarly motivated by sentiment (Wedderburn's by his recognition of domestic guilt, Dick's by his friendship with Clement), however, neither attempt is

conclusive, making it impossible to accept moral, domestic sentiment itself as the drama's resolving element. Wedderburn's permanent physical weakness undercuts his masculine authority, and Dick ultimately returns to a life of dissipation. Brushing aside his "slight moral repairs," Dick seems content knowing that "the seams of my coat are prematurely white, my character radically out at the elbow" (179). His premature whiteness of character again placing him alongside Wedderburn, Dick's failure of masculinity seriously troubles our assumptions of Wedderburn's rehabilitation and with that, our belief in the conventional separation of domestic and economic forms of identity. Rather than ending with a traditional scene of justice and punishment, then, the play retreats into an uncomfortable marriage of domesticity and economics that ultimately rests on a lie.

### III. Conclusion

If *The Silver King* raises the problem of a masculine identity divided between economic and moral imperatives, *Sweet Lavender* is concerned both with the complicity of domesticity and economics and the difficulties that both raise for the masculine subject. In both melodramas, in fact, the body of the male victim reminds us that the performance of proper masculinity is inseparable from an economic system heavily implicated in both male authority and the domestic sphere. Yet the plays also indicate the limits of melodrama as a vehicle for addressing anxieties about identity under the conditions of expanding capitalism. In the increased resemblance between villain and victim in *The Silver King* and in the absence of traditional villainy in *Sweet Lavender*, we find evidence of the proprietary nature of selfhood that upsets both the binary organization of the genre and the binary organization of difference central to Victorian notions of gender. The difficulty of managing the overlap between domesticity and economics appears as the collapse of traditional distinctions between villain and victim—an erosion of binary logic that connects generic changes to extratextual shifts. In the "bankers, lawyers, bailiffs, stewards and squires who distrain for rent," Frank Rahill suggests, we find "a decline in the primitive integrity of evil" (209). Rahill's concern with "integrity" of melodramatic character aside, his observation about the rise of economically motivated, increasingly middle-class villains intimates a crisis in masculinity informed by divisions between moral and

economic concerns. By the 1880s, I would add, a further symptom of the erosion between these spheres appears in the rise of male victims who can no longer manage ideological conflicts within the traditional resolutions offered by the genre.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Grimstead reasserts this position later in his essay (90) as does Gledhill (21). Melodramatic powerlessness could also be used to consolidate or critique power relations from the perspective of the victim; see Steinbach 1-5; Leaver 54-56.

<sup>2</sup>For discussions of responsibility and limited liability in the novel see Feltes; Robbins; and Miller. Gagnier offers a broad context for understanding the shift away from moral models in economic discourse; see especially 19-60.

<sup>3</sup>For Victorian critiques of limited liability on these grounds see Shand; Van Oss; and Emden.

<sup>4</sup>Literature on economics in the Victorian novel is extensive. See, for example, Weiss's overview, 1-22; Rosenman on sensation fiction; Miller on *Cranford*; and Smith on *A Christmas Carol*.

<sup>5</sup>For a useful discussion of the semiotic function of the body in melodrama, see Brooks, "Melodrama" 18-19. My own analysis differs from Brooks's on two counts: first, I read the body in ideological rather than psychoanalytic terms; second, Brooks focuses on the body as an expression of female victimhood. I am indebted to Hadley's formulation of the "proprietary" subject here and throughout; see especially 224.

<sup>6</sup>For discussions of the ways strength and health informed conceptions of the privileged male subject, see Rosenman 30; Adams 51.

<sup>7</sup>See descriptions of The Princess's Theatre and Terry's Theatre in Mander and Mitcheson 334-57, and 506-17.

<sup>8</sup>Both plays enjoyed long runs and made considerable fortunes for Jones and Pinero. On the success of *The Silver King* see Doris Jones 39; for *Sweet Lavender* see Rowell 113.

<sup>9</sup>For contemporary examples of such arguments see Balfour; Moore; and Newcomb. For a useful overview of issues related to the bimetallic controversy, see also the exchange between Green and Howe in the *English Historical Review*.

<sup>10</sup>In the later 1870s, arguments about bimetallism erupted in the *Nation* ("The Executive Barrier Against the Silver Mania," "Demonetization of Silver," and "Subsistence of the Silver Craze"), as well as in other venues. See Giffen; Ellis.

<sup>11</sup>Though Pinero does not refer directly to the failure of the City of Glasgow Bank, the play's references to Wedderburn's bank failure would have resonated with contemporary audiences for whom the event was still fresh in public memory.

<sup>12</sup>Both Ziegler and Collins provide useful overviews of the broad economic effects of the City of Glasgow Bank failure.

<sup>13</sup>By the late Victorian period, Robb notes, middle- and upper-class Britons

had become “a nation of shareholders” with total joint-stock assets worth hundreds of millions of pounds (3).

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