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"A Dollar Book for a Dime!": The Vernacular of Cheapness and the Beadle Dime Handbooks

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**“A dollar book for a dime!”:
The Vernacular of Cheapness and the Beadle Dime Handbooks**

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**A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the College of William and Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts**

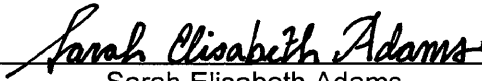
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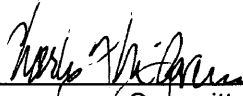
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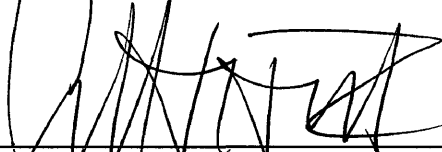


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ABSTRACT PAGE

Describing an object, service, or person as cheap confers meaning that can range from the assessment of monetary worth to indictments of immorality. The language of cheapness connects economic value with cultural legitimacy: while thrift has long been lauded as a virtue and consumers revel in a good bargain, extreme frugality and obvious markers of low price are typically disparaged or considered suspect. Cheapness's vernacular not only allows us to organize and value material possessions, it provides orientation within the systems of order that construct the social and material world around us. One site where we can see constructions of cheapness at play is in the series of inexpensive social manuals that New York's Beadle Company published between 1859 and 1880. For ten cents apiece, the Beadle Dime Handbooks offered an education in genteel sensibilities, behaviors, and practices to a readership presumed to aspire to the middling classes. But contradictions and ambiguities in tone and prescription, particularly in the realms of material culture and consumption, suggest that the series harbored ambivalence about nineteenth-century social mobility and market expansion. As the Beadle series demonstrates, the construction of cheapness and the vernacular within which we understand it reflect more than mere price point or insult. Cheap is a site where money, morals, and manners converge.

Table of Contents

Dedication	ii
Acknowledgments	iii
Introduction	1
The Language of Cheapness	3
Cheapness in Historical and Archival Context	11
Cheapness and Material Culture in the Beadle Dime Handbooks.....	26
Conclusion	41
Bibliography.....	44

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Sarah Glosson, Wendy Korwin, and Sarah Landres, who were good friends to me when good friends were what I needed.

“The most I can do for my friend is simply to be his friend.”
—*Henry David Thoreau*

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Introduction

The vernacular we use is one of the most revealing avenues into our cultural constructions. This paper evolved from my interest in one small piece of that vernacular, the word *cheap*. Cheapness is a fascinating construction because the deceptive simplicity of its primary definition—something that is cheap is low in price—caps a sea of anxieties about the relationships between monetary worth, moral value, and social legitimacy. A cheap commodity may be inexpensive or shoddy, a cheap person may be parsimonious or promiscuous, and understanding these distinctions demands fluency in both language and in the codes that comprise our cultural capital.

In looking for a site in which to consider cheapness and competing ideas about consumption and legitimacy, I was taken with a series of handbooks that the Beadle publishing house issued between 1859 and 1880. Best known in various incarnations for the hundreds of dime novel titles they published throughout the latter-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the Beadle company, in its earliest incarnations, briefly dedicated itself to a series of manuals offering social instruction in subjects ranging from dress to correspondence to public speaking to popular sports and games. Like the pulp novels for which they became famous, the Beadle Dime Handbooks cost just ten cents apiece, and their relatively flimsy physical construction was more in line with mass-market paperbacks than with hardcover volumes. These physical and aesthetic compromises did not perturb the publishers, who confidently advertised their product with the exultation “A dollar book for a dime!,” a line that simultaneously celebrates a bargain price while implying content of significantly

greater value. As such, the manuals were cheap commodities in and of themselves, and their presumed consumption by a largely working-class readership would have further compromised their legitimacy in a culture whose social ideals were informed by a dominating middle class.

By offering an education in middle-class ideology to aspirants from lower classes, the Beadle Handbooks articulated and fostered a host of anxieties about legitimacy, mobility, and access in the second half of the nineteenth century. In this essay I examine six manuals in the series: *Beadle's Dime-guide to dress-making and millinery* (1860), *Beadle's Dime Letter-Writer and Practical Guide to Composition* (1860), *Beadle's Dime guide to Curling and Skating* (1867), *Beadle's Dime Ball-Room Companion* (1868), *The Dime Debater and Chairman's Guide* (1869), and *The Dime Lover's Casket* (1870).¹ My interest lies in how these guides engaged relationships between economy, value, and middle-class authority to sell the genteel lifestyle to working-class readers, and in particular how the guides' notions of propriety correlated with specific types and degrees of expenditure. While the Handbooks rarely use the word *cheap*, their content engages concepts of cheapness, sometimes articulated in explicit language but more often implicit in the tensions that rise when material consumption becomes a cultural metonym for social legitimacy. In this inexpensive and accessible series and in the middle-class class respectability that its instructional content promised, the Beadle Dime Handbooks served as a site where vernacular, cultural, and financial understanding informed the construction of legitimacy in American identity.

¹ I chose these specific titles because they were available at my archive and because their physical condition was conducive to thorough perusal.

The Language of Cheapness

What associations does the word *cheap* bring to mind? A cheap meal? A cheap suit? A cheap trick? A woman who looks cheap? As these examples show, *cheap* is a complex term with a variety of definitions and a range of associated implications. Describing an object, service, or person as “cheap” confers meanings ranging from the valuation of monetary worth to indictments of amorality. The layered suppositions that fester beneath the relatively innocuous definition “inexpensive” are intriguing for the connections they draw between social legitimacy and economic value, and for the fluency they demand in the codes that dictate how we relate to the social and material world that surrounds us. This multifaceted conceptualization of cheapness is not a recent phenomenon in American language and social coding, but one that has long been evolving and informing our cultural experience. Exploring the term’s past and present employment reveals how a bit of common vernacular has served as an important convergence site for markets, morals, and value—for our possessions and our selves.

An examination of etymology and meaning is the logical starting point from which to explore cheapness. Both historically and in contemporary usage, *cheap*’s primary definition orients its subject within a system of financial value: whether due to the value of its materials, the degree of labor related to its production, or a combination, a thing that is cheap does not cost much money; cheap is the opposite of expensive. Accordingly, cheapness is always rooted in a structure that implies comparison. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd ed., 1989) dates the origins of this definition to its thirteenth-century derivation from the Teutonic noun *céap*, defined as

*barter, buying and selling, market, price, merchandise, stock, cattle.*² Quasi-adjectival meaning *that costs little (trouble, etc.), easily obtained; plentiful, abundant; of small value* can be dated to 1340 and to the c1375 phrase “good cheap,” meaning *That is a good bargain, that can be purchased on advantageous terms; low-priced,*³ but the term’s exclusive employment as an adjective, under the alternative spelling “chepe” did not appear until 1509. Indeed, the OED deems cheap “a comparatively recent shortening of ‘good cheap’, in its adjectival and adverbial uses.”⁴

The assignment of monetary value endows cheap with a veneer of stability: if by definition that which is cheap always costs less than that which is expensive, cheap could be considered nothing more than a verbal expression of the mathematics of relative value. Unfortunately, social application rarely preserves mathematic rationale, and the introduction of consumer participation forces *cheap*’s divergence from a monetary framework’s promised fixity. An item that is cheap to one consumer may be expensive to another with less money, and when affordability is relative to the consumer, *cheap* becomes subject to the person defining the term and reveals its central paradox. While the simplest definition promises certainty, in application the term is unstable and continually redefined by the people who employ it and the context in which it is used. *Cheap* is a sign of relative social value, and a potentially troubling sign at that.

Cheap’s deliberate employment as a pejorative complicates the term’s implications by introducing the intent to destabilize economic *and* social worth. The

² "cheap, adj., adv., and n.2". OED Online. March 2012. Oxford University Press. 16 March 2011 <<http://www.oed.com.proxy.wm.edu>>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

phrase *cheap and nasty*: of low price and bad quality; inexpensive but with the disadvantage of being unsuitable to one's purposes appears in the OED alongside *cheap*'s primary adjectival definition, "that may be bought at small cost," and provides seven usages of "cheap and nasty" from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁵ A contemporary American source, *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (10th ed., 1998), outlines the pejorative definitions as follows: "a: Of inferior quality or worth: TAWDRY, SLEAZY. b: Contemptible because of lack of any fine, lofty, or redeemable qualities. c: STINGY."⁶ When restraint, refinement, and charity are the ideals that inform bourgeois constructions of respectability, the terms *tawdry*, *sleazy*, and *stingy* are not merely pejorative, they are subversive. By opposing genteel preferences openly and even brazenly, this formulation of *cheap* announces that prevalent social standards are mutable rather than iron-cast and endangers middle-class authority. *Cheap*'s pejorative use perceives and indicts inferior value in its referent, but simultaneously reveals anxiety in those who wield the term.

The cheap theater, a cheap boarding house, and cheap stuff are all inexpensive, but more importantly, they lack a specific social or moral value that would invest them with respectability. The inferences in such use are overwhelmingly negative: a "cheap shot" lacks any lofty or redeemable intent; a "cheap trick" is one that is not fair to its unwitting subject; the materials, fit, or general appearance of a "cheap suit" are of obviously inferior quality. Moreover, a person wearing a cheap suit invites scorn, even disgust, because his image does not match that which one

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ "Cheap." *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*. 10th Edition. 1995. Print.

expects, demands, or prefers from a person clad in business attire. A cheap suit broadcasts inferior material value, and its wearer's social value is demoted accordingly. The language of cheapness connects economic price with social legitimacy and invariably finds its referent lacking; finding its referent out of place, it transgresses by disrupting social and symbolic order.

By the nineteenth century, the meaning of cheapness had expanded to reflect the belief that a commodity's material and cultural value diminishes according to reduced financial worth. According to the OED, this *cheap* can indict those things "involving little trouble and hence of little worth," a sentiment that advertises the economic value of labor, or dismiss that which is "accounted of small value, made little of, lightly esteemed" with the implication that cheap stuff is nothing to hold in regard even if it is easy on the wallet. Directly addressing relationships between markets and accessibility, *cheap* can also refer to something "especially brought into contempt through being made too familiar,"⁷ a phenomenon that would have been novel in earlier artisan economies but which proliferated with industrialization's mass production, widespread distribution, and reduced prices. It takes experience and savvy to understand whether the accessibility inherent in cheapness merits disparagement or endorsement, and even a desirable quality like affordability can threaten alienation if *cheap* challenges the cultural worth of goods that are financially accessible.

When *cheap*'s referent is a person, the implications become even more complex. To label one *cheap* levies an insult by calling out his or her inappropriate relationship to social systems, typically financial or sexual relationships. The deviant

⁷ OED Online. 27 April 2012 <<http://www.oed.com.proxy.wm.edu/view>.

tenor often depends on the sex of the person being labeled. In all cases, cheap individuals lack, or perhaps cannot possess, qualities that would otherwise keep them in step with commonly held values, leaving such people to operate outside of a community whose shared values are always in flux; these shared values comprise what labor historian E.P. Thompson termed the “moral economy.” Rooted in the consensus that determined appropriate market practices and in the “consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations [and] of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community,”⁸ the moral economy that Thompson sees at play among the eighteenth-century English masses also informs the American socioeconomic class system. By publically compromising the legitimacy of prevailing economic and social values, *cheap* violates the moral economy.

A person who is deemed cheap in relation to financial systems does not participate in monetary practices at a level appropriate to his perceived means. Whether motivated by frugality or greed, a cheap person has resources that he refuses to spend or share. He does not use wealth appropriately; in *Webster’s* succinct summation, he is stingy. And while a cheap object may be endorsed for the sake of thrift, a cheap person enjoys no such superiority; his excessive parsimony implies a lack of charity that offends regardless of whether or not anyone suffers.

There is no small irony in this disgust with a person’s failure to spend liberally, as Americans historically have valued thrift as a social practice and a moral imperative. Benjamin Franklin made a livelihood out of platitudes such as “Be

⁸ E.P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century.” *Past and Present*. 50.1 (1971): 76-136.

industrious and frugal, and you shall be rich.”⁹ Nineteenth-century instructional literature, particularly that which educated on domestic matters, similarly lauded thrift as a noble pursuit. In 1835, Lydia Maria Child published *The American Frugal Housewife* for working- and lower-middle-class women who could not afford servants, dedicating the book to “those who are not ashamed of economy.”¹⁰ In later decades, Catherine Beecher’s 1841 *Treatise on Domestic Economy* would become “the mid-nineteenth century’s standard domestic textbook,”¹¹ which in turn informed *The American’s Woman’s Home*, an 1869 collaboration with sister Harriet Beecher Stowe that further lauded the “intelligent and benevolent lady [who] encourag[ed] habits of industry and economy.”¹² In metropolitan New York at the turn of the century, the Girls’ Friendly Society’s statement of purpose demanded “faithfulness to employers and thrift,” an oath that historian Kathy Peiss attributes to “middle-class concern with regulating working-class behavior.”¹³ As a virtue, thrift evidenced piety and industry, and its practice fostered domestic comfort and appreciation for the value of labor.

Cheap’s second personal pejorative in sex is highly marked. A cheap-looking woman is very different from a cheap-looking man. In describing a woman, *cheap*’s insinuation more likely challenges its referent’s morals than finances. A woman who *looks cheap* is one whose moral and sexual values presumably deviate from societal

⁹ Benjamin Franklin, “On an Early Marriage,” Letter to John Alleyn, Esq. *The Life and Miscellaneous Writings of Benjamin Franklin* (Edinburgh: William & Robert Chambers, 1839), 48.

¹⁰ Lydia Maria Child, *The American Frugal Housewife* (New York: Samuel S. & William Wood 1841), title page.

¹¹ Nicole Tonkovich, Introduction, *The American Woman’s Home*. 1869. By Catherine E. Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002), xviii.

¹² Beecher, *The American Woman’s Home*, 184.

¹³ Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 165.

standards. She is implied to be readily obtained; to use *Webster's* definitions, she is tawdry or sleazy. This insult relies on the association of sexual virtue with restraint and sexual deviance with accessibility: a cheap-looking woman lacks reserve and appears too available, perhaps even promiscuous. She does not literally have a financial value, but her worth is questionable specifically because she appears easily obtained; it is being too affordable, not being for sale in the first place, that is the issue. And while her presence is not priced, denigrating her appearance in these terms suggests the obvious comparison to prostitutes, whose bodies and time do have monetary worth. Though contemporary usage does allow *cheap* to refer to a woman's parsimony, there is no comparable inversion by which a man described as cheap is presumed to have slack sexual morals. In a heavily gendered society, *cheap* demonstrates how a vernacular does not merely describe sexual differences, but can evolve to personify them and cleave further division.

Cheap facilitates and frustrates economic and social relationships. In the financial realm, and despite the relativity of its construction, cheapness allows and expands consumption by opening the market to those of limited means. At the same time, cheap commodities are more apt to be culturally devalued because they are accessible to a broader community. Similar distaste and distrust for the accessible informs *cheap's* use as a pejorative against women, which employs economic vocabulary to condemn perceived sexual and social availability; cheap men, on the other hand garner disapproval because their availability for market participation is not ready enough. Ultimately, *cheap's* implications forge, and at times force, the construction of socioeconomic identity. In the next section, I will consider some of

the tensions that cheapness provoked and revealed in the financial, social, and moral vernacular of the nineteenth century, and in particular within the contained site of the Beadle Dime Handbook series.

Cheapness in Historical and Archival Context

Nineteenth-century social instructional manuals were premised on a committed belief in the authority of empirically correct values and behaviors. The knowledge contained in these manuals comprised a form of cultural capital whose compilation and distribution made it a material commodity as well as a tool for social advancement. This section will look at how social authority and print culture evolved in the nineteenth century; at the role of codes and boundaries in the construction of social mores and class systems; at the *Beadle Dime Handbooks* and how they addressed competing values of the middle and working classes; and at the implications of the series as a cheap commodity consumed by readers.

Ideology, industry, and economics were the major forces that informed the changing social order that emerged following the Revolutionary War. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, an elite mercantile class had personified gentility and enjoyed social privilege over those relegated to lower stations by birth and economy, but the ideology of the Jacksonian period enfranchised a broader populace to claim social legitimacy and seek higher rank in the class hierarchy. Social mobility was “the characterizing element of bourgeois society, setting it sharply apart from societies in which social rank is defined by history and legal status,”¹⁴ and to inhibit this element risked appearing to challenge revered cultural and political values. Developments in industrial technology further influenced the redistribution of social privilege through advancements in production, transportation, and communication. Industrialization granted more people greater access to more

¹⁴ Sven Beckert, “Propertied of a Different Kind: Bourgeoisie and Lower Middle Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States,” *The Middling Sorts: Explorations in the History of the American Middle Class*, Burton J. Bledstein and Robert D. Johnston, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2001), 287.

commodities, opening the market to participants newly able to consume at rates formerly limited to the wealthiest classes. With industrial capitalism established as the governing economic order, it was the population massed at the middle of the socioeconomic hierarchy, distanced from the influence of the indolent elite and the “producing classes”¹⁵ of primarily manual laborers, who came to constitute respectability and claim genteel authority. By 1830, membership in the bourgeoisie was less likely to be the result “of fortunate birth [than] of middle-class effort,”¹⁶ and the middling classes continued to grow and diversify accordingly.

Growing literacy rates were in part the result of the period’s egalitarian ideology. The unprecedented number of literate Americans, particularly in the Northeast and other densely populated urban areas, resulted in part from political and ideological endorsement of common education, as well as from increases in “average family wealth” that would have facilitated the ability to send children to school.¹⁷ The industrial revolution that dramatically increased the production, distribution, and affordability of printed material was another phenomenon that impacted literacy rates by giving readers new and greater access to print culture; publishing historian Carl F. Kaestle’s observation that “five times as many books were published in the twenty years after 1830 than in the previous sixty”¹⁸ reflects a print market that could not have sustained such propagation without consumers to support it. Though it is difficult to measure facility among those who identified as literate at mid-century, the

¹⁵ Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (New York: Verso, 1987), 57.

¹⁶ Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 95.

¹⁷ Carl F. Kaestle, *Literacy in the United States: Readers and Reading since 1880* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 24.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 54.

proliferation and diversity of books, magazines, and newspapers support the construction of a population that was increasingly able and eager to seek authority in the written word.

This abundance of both readers and reading materials contributed to a “vast new market for more specific instruction,”¹⁹ which included guides to home economy, hobbies, etiquette, and more. For the new legions of literate Americans who longed to understand and eventually inhabit middle-class sensibility and lifestyle, instructional literature was one tool that could assist in the endeavor. Book historian Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt estimates that there were nearly 200 “distinct editions” of etiquette books published in the United States before 1861, the majority of which were published after 1830, and that the genre’s popularity continued to flourish with another approximately 170 editions published between 1861 and 1890.²⁰ Gaging the popularity of individual titles, like measuring degrees of nineteenth-century literacy, is difficult in most cases due to incomplete and inconsistent publishing data. But in the same way that the explosion in reading materials indicates, in part, that there developed growing belief in the authority of print, the expanding market for instructional literature suggests that readers both relied on and trusted the genre as a legitimate source of education.

Brothers Erastus and Irwin Beadle entered the burgeoning print market determined to expand their New York typesetting foundry into a publishing house. They would prove to be extremely successful in this endeavor, producing over

¹⁹ John F. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990), 43.

²⁰ Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt, *The Book in America: A History of the Making and Selling of Books in the United States* (New York: Bowker, 1951), 197.

4,000,000 dime novels by 1865,²¹ but it was social instructional literature, not pulp fiction, which ushered them into the ten-cent trade. Having achieved modest success with two domestic magazines, *The Youth's Casket* (1851) and *The Home* (1855), the popularity of 1859's *Beadle Dime Songbook* inspired the debut later that year of the *Beadle Dime Handbooks*, a series of guides on a variety of social pastimes and practices. Demonstrating a "shrewd exploitation of the growing mass market for this kind of cheap volume,"²² the Beadles released six manuals in the first year of their *Handbooks'* publication, and published 25 titles in all before terminating the series in 1880.²³ One publisher among legions that sought to capitalize on the market for inexpensive social guides, the Beadle Company appears to have been innovative in its decision to publish this literature as a ten-cent series under a single imprint.²⁴ Though the absence of data about the *Dime Handbooks'* circulation and readership complicates the ability to accurately gauge their impact, evidence suggests that the guides enjoyed a degree of prestige despite their proletarian origins and the glutted market. Branding and the sheer number of titles would have distinguished the series and perhaps lent an air of legitimacy that one-off publications lacked. The series' longevity, which included multiple printings for more popular titles, also could have conferred authority in the suggestion of enduring utility.²⁵ The *Beadle Dime*

²¹ Denning, *Mechanic Accents*, 11.

²² John William Tebbel, *A History of Book Publishing in the United States* (New York: R.R. Bowker Co., 1972), 249.

²³ Albert Johannsen, *The House of Beadle & Adams and Its Dime and Nickel Novels: The Story of a Vanished Literature*. Northern Illinois University Libraries. University of Oklahoma Press, 1950. Web. 27 April 2012. <www.ulib.niu.edu/badndp/bibindex.html>

²⁴ Johannsen, *The House of Beadle & Adams*, 27 April 2012. <www.ulib.niu.edu/badndp/bibindex.html>

²⁵ Johannsen's history of the Beadle company estimates that the *Handbooks'* most popular titles ran to "tens of thousands," wearing down printing plates to the point of illegibility in later editions.

Handbooks were neither unique nor prestigious, but reflected a changing cultural landscape.

Social instructional literature promised greater comfort and respectability for those who seized the opportunity to climb the social ranks, but the class system's scalability also had the power to disturb because of its inherent instability: when everyone has the potential to rise, no station can be formally secured against interlopers from the lower classes. Even as class ascension became a more familiar phenomenon, the introduction of newly or incompletely educated aspirants to a rapidly expanding bourgeoisie threatened to dilute the authority and relative privilege of those who were longer established in the middling ranks.²⁶ Preserving a middle class that was defined by its separation from those who strived to join required that stewards of the status quo consciously monitor the boundaries and knowledge that constructed class identity. This effort was facilitated in part by the propagation of complex social rules for a "supposedly democratic but increasingly unequal society" that middle-class authorities could control, to an extent, by "espousing one set of values while nonverbally communicating another."²⁷

The social codes that define appropriate belief and behavior within a community also help to establish, maintain, and police social order and hierarchy, and the codes that prevailed in the nineteenth century can be seen as one means of negotiating class identity. In *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*, philosopher Michel Foucault identifies codes as a crucial force governing a

²⁶ Thomas J. Schlereth, *Victorian America: Transformations in Everyday Life, 1876-1915* (New York: Harper Collins, 1989), 29.

²⁷ C. Dallett Hemphill, *Bowing to Necessities: A History of Manners in America, 1620-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 9.

culture's "language, its schemas of perception, its exchanges, its techniques, its values, the hierarchy of its practices," establishing at once and for all people "the empirical orders with which he will be dealing and within which he will be at home."²⁸ In this formulation, codes teach adherents what to do and condition them to prefer the established order, but when even the safety of "home" is defined by such order, the individual who lacks fluency in those codes risks alienation from the comfort and privilege enjoyed by those who understand the rules. Because the knowledge and sensibilities that comprised dominant nineteenth-century social codes were drawn primarily from the middle classes, members of those classes had incentive to protect that knowledge from appropriation in order to preserve their own authority. Elizabeth White Nelson sees greater implications to this sort of stewardship because "[d]efining the terms of respectability, in terms of both personal and national virtue, helped give weight to these definitions and alleviate some of the fears of personal and national failure that could be brought on by a slackening of personal and public virtue."²⁹ There were high stakes governing the preservation of dominant social codes when their compromise threatened personal failure and social chaos.

Boundaries and hierarchy are constructions that help to guard against chaos and organize people, practice, and things in a recognizable order. Michel de Certeau, the cultural critic whose 1980 work *The Practice of Everyday Life* examines the relationships between ritual, ideologies, and social and cultural forms, considers boundaries a natural component of order and hierarchy. Employing spatial metaphors,

²⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Random House, 1970), xx.

²⁹ Elizabeth White Nelson, *Market Sentiments: Middle-Class Market Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (Washington: Smithsonian Books, 2004), 15.

Certeau identifies those things that do not comprise the knowledge grouping at hand as the *other*, which is oriented outside of established delineations. These delineations, however, do not reinforce the rigidity of space so much as they emphasize its curves and movements. Social delinquency, which Certeau defines as the violation of these boundaries, is perpetrated by those “not on the margins, but in the interstices of the codes it undoes and displaces.”³⁰ By forging an existence across rather than outside of established boundaries, the delinquent manipulates the established order according to his own orientation, creating an original identity from existing codes. And by borrowing from, traversing, and remodeling the social order, transgressors insinuate themselves as a natural and crucial part of that order, because by challenging existing codes they help to create new ones.

The Beadle Handbooks, priced to be accessible and constructed to carefully encourage a type of self-improvement that promised respectability, blurred boundaries by teaching people how to access and occupy new spaces.³¹ These might be artistic spaces, such as the “legitimate” theater; civic spaces, such as public meetings; intellectual spaces, such as lecture series; or recreational spaces, such as skating rinks. The significance of this occupation did not lie merely in the individual’s physical presence in a new venue, but in the act of participating in previously elusive practices. Physical and social boundary transgression was provocative in its indication of a liminality that, according to Karen Halttunen,

³⁰ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Transl. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 130.

³¹ This hypothetical construction also works with Certeau’s conceptualization of “making do,” according to which oppressed members of a system need not merely “make do with what they have,” but might operate within that system or manipulate the system itself in an effort to transcend their inferior positions. Such practice represents “the subtle, stubborn, resistant activity of groups, which, since they lack their own space, have to get along in a network of already established frameworks and representations.” (18)

“defied social classification” and fueled concern about displacement and placelessness within the social hierarchy.³² From the working-class perspective, the learned ability to access the arenas that defined respectability “allow[ed] one to capitalize acquired advantages ... [and] therefore to give oneself a certain independence with respect to the variability of circumstances.”³³ The result of increased boundary-crossing, however, is that the boundaries themselves become irrelevant, and the codes that dictate legitimacy become open to question both by those who established them and by those who appropriated them.

Social instructional literature is, ultimately, a guide to the codes that dictate conduct and sensibility. Defining codes as a set of laws and a set of symbols, historian of manners C. Dallett Hemphill observes that conduct works illustrate “not behavior, but a society’s dominant code of behavior,” and as such these works are “society’s code books” and can be used to navigate social systems.³⁴ While the Beadle Handbooks fit this description, their advertised identity as an inexpensive iteration of these codes complicates their interpretation. By compiling valuable information and disseminating it to readers of limited means, the manuals celebrated democratic values and industrial innovation: the codes that dictated respectability through belief and practice were not the exclusive purveyance of the culture or class that created them, but were available to anyone who was ambitious, literate, and in possession of a dime. But a closer reading of these manuals reveals the extent to which they assume and privilege certain middle-class conventions, and suggests ambivalence about the readers and daily reality of the lower classes. This is

³² Halttunen *Confidence Men and Painted Women* 32.

³³ de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 118.

³⁴ Hemphill, *Bowing to Necessities*, 5.

particularly evident in the guides' assumptions and expectations regarding readers' access to time, space, and community.

The Beadle manuals prominently feature activities that require the “conspicuous abstention from labor” that Thorstein Veblen would later identify as the “conventional mark of superior pecuniary achievement and the conventional index of reputability.”³⁵ The assumption that readers had spare time in which to acquire the skills and adopt the practices that the manuals champion is suggested by the topics covered by the catalog, roughly half of which offer instruction in games and hobbies that were primarily leisure occupations, such as cricket, yachting, summer and winter sports, and “Games, Forfeits and Conundrums for Parties and Home Amusement.” Others teach more practical skills, such as dressmaking, cooking, and letter writing, while still others seek to educate and prepare people for social rituals such as courtship and marriage. All of the guides presume to teach a more genteel way to practice recreational, practical, or ceremonial activities, and in doing so invite broader participation by redefining idle pastimes as educational labor.

In addition to their assumption that readers would have had adequate time to learn, practice, and participate in these social exercises, the guides presume access to venues that, like commodities, are coded with significance that exceeds their physical utility. An example of this environmental prescription appears in *Beadle's Dime Ball-Room Companion*, which is naturally concerned with the physical specifications of the “dancing apartment,” dictating the importance of good lighting and ventilation, a smooth floor, and space in which to serve refreshments.³⁶ Improved utility as a dance

³⁵ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Macmillan, 1899), 25.

³⁶ *Beadle's Dime Ball-Room Companion* (New York: Beadle and Company, 1868), 6-7.

space was not the only reason why lighting and ventilation mattered; the ballroom that met the guide's specifications comprised a space where "society is on its best behavior. Every thing there is regulated according to the strictest code of good-breeding, and ... any departure from this code becomes a grave offense."³⁷ The ballroom is both a site for and embodiment of the expression of privileged social and cultural codes. Consequently, the dance space that is not detailed according to prescription compromises and even flouts the values that define good breeding.

Beadle's Dime guide to Skating and Curling prescribes its venue according to a different set of values. Unlike the ballroom, which is a litmus test for the propriety that separates middle-class respectability from ersatz impression, the skating pond democratically unites people from all classes. The guide is particularly pleased with skating's community-building benefits, which it extolls alongside a lamentation about an increasingly alienated and hurried society in a section titled "The Morality of the Sport." Ice-skating is the prescribed remedy for this alienation.

At the skating-pond we meet with friends and acquaintances, not as we meet them in the street, where a passing bow or a minute's converse is all the intercourse we can have with them; nor as at the evening party, where the position of host and guests places them upon a footing wherein the amenities of life are as a matter of course brought into play ... nor as at the church or lecture-room, where one's attention is especially devoted to other matters ...³⁸

This litany indicts realities of the nineteenth-century urban life as well as some of the more snobbish constrictions that contemporary middle-class ideology propagated. City streets afforded neither the time nor ambience for meaningful social interaction; the protocol of parties and dances reinforced on a smaller scale the same codes that

³⁷ Ibid, 5.

³⁸ Henry Chadwick, *Beadle's Dime guide to Skating and Curling* (New York: Beadle and Company, 1867), 7.

disparaged class aspirants; religious and educational exercises were sites for contemplation, not conviviality. But the pond promised a shared experience (though not necessarily a shared ability) with other congregants on the ice.

Community is an important aspect of social instruction, as there would be no dominant social order without a congregation to share, observe, and enforce practice. Participation by two or more people is central to the Beadle sports guides that require teams of willing players, to the correspondence and courtship manuals that mediate communication between people, and to the instruction on etiquette that dictates all manner of rules that, in the words of Pierre Bourdieu, “by definition only exist for others.”³⁹ The Handbooks never explicitly prescribe engagement with a cohort of like-minded people, but social networks might have eased the anxiety that attends efforts in self-improvement by reassuring other aspirants they were not alone in their quest for advancement.

Promoting community serves as a savvy way to police behavior through the suggestion that those who incorrectly followed instruction risk ostracism from the majority. The threat of alienation due to uncouth manner is explicit throughout the Handbooks. According to *The Dime Lover's Casket*, a man who acts overly familiar with new acquaintances risks being considered “a ‘vulgar fellow’—that is, one unused to good society; and will hardly be a welcome guest thereafter,”⁴⁰ a violation that does not merely offend social convention, but potentially jeopardizes one’s acceptance in society. Threat of exclusion is not the only way that the guides shape

³⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Transl. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 95.

⁴⁰ Lambouillet Rossi *The Dime Lover's Casket* (New York: Beadle and Company, 1870), 16. A “casket,” according to the OED, is a small box for treasures.

notions of community; by endorsing and disseminating standardized iterations of belief and practice and carefully differentiating between correct and incorrect participation, the manuals assert order and encourage participation in communities whose stability is defined by a united adherence to these rules.

Despite their endorsement of membership in a larger community, the Handbooks typically privilege family relationships as those that are most important. Evidence of this appears in *The Dime Lover's Casket*, which discourages young couples from “[t]he growing habit” of residing in boarding houses for the first years of marriage because it is “at best [a] restricted, dependent life: it dwarfs the tastes, hurts the temper, encourages indifference to home comforts, and, in may—alas, too many!—cases, produces a love for idleness and society.”⁴¹ This warning suggests that the desire to socialize can easily become a dependence that undermines the strength and sanctity of the family unit. People who resist establishing families and bolstering community through marriage are not merely suspect, they are antithetical to propriety, for “cynicism of man or woman against marriage” indicates “moral obliquity. Trust not to the *purity* of such a person!”⁴²

While the *Casket* encourages proximity to family, *Beadle's Dime Letter-Writer* presumes in its opening pages that readers are geographically separated from loved ones. “What a satisfaction it is to be able to *converse* with the friend at a distance! To send messages of love, of friendship, of interest, of business, of inquiry, is a miracle, if we would but realize the fact—the sending of ideas, and thoughts, and sympathies, by letter! It is a miracle that the guide believes all may, and all should,

⁴¹ Ibid, 50.

⁴² Ibid, 68.

learn to perform.”⁴³ The reality that written correspondence was the only way to converse with distant family and friends is spun as a celebration of the ability to do so. For many, correspondence was not a chore, but the only connection to one’s native community, rendering the letter “a great social privilege as well as a great necessity. It brings together the divided members of the household, and, for the while, gives home a place in the hearts.”⁴⁴ This stance illustrates the period’s limited channels for maintaining ties to one’s roots, and the comfort that using those channels had the power to afford, however temporarily.

Finally, it is necessary to consider the Beadle Handbooks’ commodity value: they are first and foremost material texts that advertise the order and value of other material artifacts, and as commodities, they have economic and cultural value in their own right. These manuals were not shoddily constructed. Their bindings are stitched, not pasted, and the medium-weight paper pages are sturdier than one might expect from volumes that are not far removed from pamphlets. At the same time, the paper-stock covers and string bindings that would have helped to keep down costs emphasize the series’ disposability—this is a collection that would not have carried the same weight, literally or figuratively, as leather- or cloth-bound books. But while the manuals’ physical properties may have diminished their appearance of legitimacy, the very act of compiling, printing, binding, and distributing the tenets within invests the series with a degree of authority that would have been absent from word-of-mouth exchange of the same information. Giving material form to information suggests permanence even when the materials used are insubstantial.

⁴³ Louis Legrand, *Beadle’s Dime Letter-Writer and Practical Guide to Composition* (New York: Irwin P. Beadle & Co., 1860), 7.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

Like any texts, dime manuals can be presumed to have fostered producer–consumer relationships outside of the marketplace. Certeau again provides a useful framework in which to consider this, arguing that producer–consumer relationships in reading are “overprinted by a relationship of forces between teachers and pupils, or between producers and consumers whose instrument it becomes.”⁴⁵ He locates the practice of reading at the intersection of class relationships and textual interpretation, a site where both authors and texts are privileged as elite but readers are understood to be inferior because they are not producers.⁴⁶ In dime manuals, the reader is both pupil and consumer, but hardly devoid of agency. Despite the guides’ authoritative tone, readers might have readily interpreted and followed the instruction according to their own circumstances, and if so could be seen to have exercised an interpretive freedom that would have reflected material culture specialist Katherine Grier’s observation that, “[g]iven the absence of formal training in most places, becoming a local professional tastemaker seems to have been a process of apprenticeship and self-education.”⁴⁷

Other examples of nineteenth-century consumer agency, particularly those based in the confident manipulation of available resources, appear throughout historian Nan Enstad’s research on working-class women and fashion at the turn of the century, and lend credence to the idea that denizens from the lower classes were not helpless to construct bourgeois convention to their own liking. Enstad argues that

⁴⁵ de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 171.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 172. Claiming that its “inventiveness is outside of cultural orthodoxy,” Certeau dismisses the notion that readers act as producers when they construct and derive their own meanings from a given text.

⁴⁷ Katherine C. Grier, “The ‘blending and confusion’ of expensiveness and beauty: bourgeois interiors,” Sven Beckert and Julia B. Rosenbaum, eds. *The American Bourgeoise: distinction and identity in the nineteenth century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 92.

the women who appropriated middle-class styles altered and exaggerated details in order to assert their own aesthetic autonomy, despite the fact that deviation from faithful mimicry prompted middle-class purveyors to disparage working-class tastes as inferior.⁴⁸ One can imagine that Beadle readers who failed to adhere to the prescribed advice properly—which is to say, exactly—may have garnered similar contempt from some corners, but that does not prove that they failed to take such action. The deliberate revision of convention seen in Enstad’s fashions and imagined in dime-guide readers’ engagement with text suggests that these consumers might have enjoyed a degree of creative authority that would have marked them as producers in their own right.

Whether there exists the potential for similar agency within the Beadle Handbooks is a question addressed in the next section, which considers how the series’ content engages with material culture. Certeau’s recognition that goods were often imposed by a “dominant economic order”⁴⁹ is manifest in the guides’ material prescriptions, which evoke prevailing middle-class tastes more often than practical budget restrictions, and invest specific types of acquisition with social respectability. Under dime-manual auspices, consumption becomes an exercise in correct thought and deed.

⁴⁸ Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Leisure, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia Press, 1999), 20.

⁴⁹ de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, xii-xiii.

Cheapness and Material Culture in the Beadle Dime Handbooks

The Beadle Dime Handbooks inhabited and championed a burgeoning material world whose navigation was predicated on the recognition, acquisition, and employment of a variety of commodities. The manuals' material prescriptions educated readers in the financial and cultural values attached to specific types of consumption and exchange, and that instruction, in turn, reveals prevailing notions about social order and class mobility in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Additionally, because the *guide to dress-making* is the only volume in my sample that offers instruction in the creation—and not merely the acquisition—of the goods it champions, there arise related, and at times competing, roles of labor and professionalism. These guides alternately endorse and discourage consumption, and are similarly ambivalent about the cultural values they ascribe to commodities and peg to price: the pursuit of costly artifacts could demonstrate foolish indulgence or laudable taste, while cheaper iterations might appeal to the poor, the pious, or the aesthetically ignorant. Complex and contradictory, the Beadle Handbooks struggle to resolve conflict between virtuous consumption and the signification of social class.

Because of its direct engagement with the most fundamental of material displays, the clothing we wear, *Beadle's Dime guide to dress-making and millinery* naturally emerges as a manual that is primarily concerned with material goods and their use. Clothing is historically mandatory, traditionally ornamental, and socially invested with a range of values that reflect economics, aesthetics, and morality. The economic implications of one's wardrobe are significant: clothing both demands and represents a financial investment that might be manipulated but can rarely be

foregone altogether, and every garment we wear bears the investment of money, time, and labor somewhere in its provenance. In the aesthetic realm, trendiness and decoration define clothing that is fashionable rather than merely utilitarian, and demonstrates fashion's power to communicate aesthetic aspirations and economic realities. If a dress's financial and aesthetic value is understood according to the quality of its materials and its ornamentation, age, and appropriateness to the situation, this evaluation inevitably accompanies a host of interpretations related to the wearer's income, temperament, and moral sympathies.

Despite its orientation in a realm predicated on display, the *guide to dress-making* is only minimally concerned with style. Absent is any middle-class anxiety about the moral character ascribed to a woman whose garment is too revealing or ostentatious; impracticality, not immodesty, defines fashion's "vulgar absurdities," and utility and durability are privileged over fashion appeal. "Sensible women" directs the guide, are obligated "to rebel against such preposterous commands, and only follow Fashion so long as she and Reason do not walk in precisely opposite paths."⁵⁰ Middle-class austerity in dress preserved a desirable distance from the upper classes as well as the lower, according to historian Stuart Blumin, who cites the period's "continuing belief that middling sorts should dress more plainly than better sorts, and defiance by those who would dress above their station."⁵¹ Fleeting trends, particularly those that are physically constrictive or impractical in addition to having temporary aesthetic appeal, are especially offensive to the *guide to dress-making*,

⁵⁰ Marion M. Pullan, *Beadle's Dime guide to dress-making and millinery* (New York: Irwin P. Beadle & Co., 1860), 24.

⁵¹ Stuart Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: social experience in the American city, 1760-1900* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 56.

which bristles at the prospect of overly tight corsets or gowns whose gratuitous trains drag in the mud; these garments are problematic because their greater likeliness to go unworn or be easily ruined marks them as *wasteful*. In this treatise, practicality and careful consumption, not indulgence and slavery to fashion, signify gentility in dress.

This restraint is unsurprising in an era when middle-class women's obligation to embrace and exemplify sentimental virtue demanded austerity of dress, and elaborate decoration constituted an "act of hypocrisy" that threatened transgressors with social retribution.⁵² Given such strident regulation, maintaining simplicity in style was undoubtedly the safer choice for women who wished to be thought respectable. Antithetical to this was the sin of wastefulness, which indicated total deviation from middle-class sensibilities. Whether rooted in the indiscriminate selection of materials or haphazard needlework, there was nothing luxurious about waste; it was a cardinal offense that compromised an individual's finances, sullied her appearance, and raised questions about her comprehension of and respect for social codes. Economy, rather than aesthetics, ultimately emerges as the guiding force in the *guide to dress-making's* consideration of material consumption.

Because the purchase of fabrics and notions in excessive quantity or inferior quality squanders a shopper's basic financial outlay, the Beadle guide offers detailed instruction in the procurement of materials. Here, the correlation between price and quality is a particularly tricky relationship to navigate, for while the guide disparages the notion that expensive goods are superior, it consistently dismisses most cheap goods as poor investments that are not worth low prices. The market may have born out this belief, which is undeniably practical in its anticipation of long-term saving,

⁵² Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, 63-64.

but the feasibility of spending more for quality would have eluded those for whom even middle-quality goods were simply too expensive. The manual's pragmatism does not seem to recognize that for some, thrift was a mandate for survival rather than a moral virtue.

The *guide to dress-making's* lengthy discourse on that most expensive of fabrics, silk, illustrates the complexities that informed its purchase.⁵³ Opening with the reminder that, "In proportion to the costliness of a purchase is the importance of exercising judgment and knowledge in making it,"⁵⁴ the section on silk selection reiterates that education is the greatest weapon against the potential missteps that can be traced to financial irresponsibility. The comprehensive silks glossary that follows provides detailed descriptions of the fabric's physical properties, quality and inferiority, and of shifting relationships between aesthetics, utility and price. But this section also departs from the manual's standard counsel to avoid cheap goods, in its concession that purchasing lesser-quality silk at a lower price might be prudent if the completed garment will last the season and can be repurposed for trimmings and linings.⁵⁵ This observation diverges from the *Dime guide to dress-making's* prevailing belief in the correlation between quality, price, and value. And for those Handbook readers whose immediate economic concerns would have precluded the ability to invest in superior quality, casual endorsement of a cheap product lends a degree of legitimacy to constrained consumption.

⁵³ The manual prizes silk for two qualities in particular: its perpetual fashion, and the ease with which it takes dye; both qualities are conducive to repurposing or reusing the fabric. (63)

⁵⁴ Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, 62.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 64.

If the competent and careful purchase of materials was a basic step that women could take to consume wisely, education in and appreciation for skillful construction technique was equally important in reducing wastefulness. Historian Susan Strasser identifies this period as one in which “many if not most middle-class women in the North went to dressmakers or hired seamstresses.”⁵⁶ Regardless of the likelihood that some Beadle readers could afford to enlist the services of professional hands, the *Dime guide to dress-making* takes great pains to condemn incompetent professional seamstresses who purvey mangled fabrics or goods that are unattractive or unwearable. The problems created by women who have “recklessly spoiled and wasted the materials”⁵⁷ are grave enough for the manual to consider in a national context, musing that “[this] is especially the case in America, where not one woman in a hundred, in the [dressmaking] business, has had any sort of education for it and where consequently, there are more ill-fitting dresses than in any other country whatever; while the prices charged for making (and spoiling) gowns are at least twice the average price for the first houses in Paris and London.”⁵⁸ The accusation that shoddily-made American fashions cost twice as much as more esteemed European iterations adds financial insult to nationalist injury, and presumably would be of particular concern to working-class dime-manual readers who had to be conscientious about every dollar they spent.⁵⁹ The unskilled and unambitious dressmaker’s culpability lies not merely in her mediocrity, but in the havoc her sloppiness wreaks

⁵⁶ Susan Strasser, *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1999), 40.

⁵⁷ Pullan, *guide to dress-making*, 11.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵⁹ French fashion authority is cited throughout the *dress-making guide*, from approving references to “the latest fashions, found in good French magazines” (98) to the acceptance of “popular prejudices in favor of Paris-made goods.” Despite this, France’s sartorial achievements are attributed to “superior excellence both of material and workmanship” rather than an innate Gallic taste.

materially, fiscally, and morally: she wastes commodities, offers poor returns on financial investment, and most egregiously, she squanders the opportunity to develop real skills or improve herself. In line with the most damning definition of *cheap*, she is “contemptible because of lack of any fine, lofty, or redeemable qualities.”

While the manual’s suspicions about professionally made clothing are at times openly hostile, that contempt is directed only at unskilled practitioners and not at dress-making as a profession. To the contrary, it enthuses, “We do not object to good, or even high prices, for any well-performed labor, and are but too happy to see women well-remunerated for theirs.”⁶⁰ This declaration privileges quality workmanship (and the ability to pay for it) while endorsing female professionalism (in fashion’s realm, at least). Disapproval of those women who employ the services of a seamstress is similarly oriented in concern about cost–value relationships, and not in gender politics: there is nothing distressing about a woman’s willing abstention from sewing her own clothes,⁶¹ but the opportunity for criticism arises when she invests in a professionally-made wardrobe whose inferior quality belies its costlier heritage. In that case, the consumer merits disapproval both because she has betrayed her own ignorance about sartorial propriety, and because she has put on display her own wasted expenditure. She has paid a lot to look cheap.

The endorsement of practical consumption is evident elsewhere in the *Beadle Handbooks*, but never as stridently or consistently. Consequently, there are instances where the manuals seem to endorse ambition over solvency in the pursuit of self-improvement. This confusion of values is most prevalent in *The Dime Lover’s Casket*,

⁶⁰ Ibid, 7

⁶¹ Indeed, the guide’s introduction directly addresses and disputes the notion that “dress-making is supposed to come by nature” to women. (7)

which claims to be “a Treatise on and guide to friendship, love, courtship, and marriage,”⁶² but whose preoccupation with goods and acquisition is incongruous in a tome ostensibly dedicated to social and romantic relationships. The *Casket* brims with conflicting advice on appropriate consumption, and the gospel of austerity and simple living that it prominently features is interspersed with the cheerful promotion of lavish acquisition. The guide privileges strict budgets as an exercise in and manifestation of proper decorum, while casually outlining the social pitfalls that threaten those who don’t consume according to its liberal dictation. Where the *Dime guide to dress-making’s* practical content might have been useful to those from any socioeconomic class who wished to better understand garment construction, the *Lover’s Casket* promotes a squarely middle-class lifestyle that surely eluded many readers.

Most contradictory is the *Casket’s* advice on gift giving, and the result is a muddled understanding of the social and emotional values inherent in exchange at the site where, according to Marcel Mauss, “obligation and liberty intermingle.”⁶³ The observation that society “has resolved that no lady shall receive valuable presents from a gentleman who does not stand in the relation of her lover”⁶⁴ equates intimacy with expenditure and implies that romantic relationships constitute a kind of market in their own right. But in the next sentence, the *Casket* challenges this resolution, suggesting that “if a gentleman sees proper to send a lady friend a diamond ring, furs, or a camel-hair coat” it is fine to do so. This advice is surprising for the casual

⁶² Rossi, *Dime Lover’s Casket*, front cover.

⁶³ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: the form and reason for exchange in archaic societies* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), 65.

⁶⁴ Rossi, *Dime Lover’s Casket*, 17.

manner in which it proposes the subversion of a social tenet. If there was an understood prohibition against the casual exchange of expensive gifts between men and women, then violating that code presumably bore repercussions, but the guide chooses not to address potential consequences for those who flouted the rules. Moreover, the extravagance of the suggested offerings would have been out-of-step with the means of readers whose finances restricted them to dime guides for such instruction. To propose that diamonds and furs were conceivable gifts for any object of one's affection, let alone a casual one, ignores financial and social realities.

While it happily endorses generous gift giving within couples not seriously attached, the occasion to bestow gifts in celebration of marriage troubles the *Casket*, which was not alone in its suspicion of the relatively new practice that had trickled down from the upper classes around mid-century and generated "social fear" in those uncertain about what to give, or unable to give at all.⁶⁵ "Many a person" engaged to be married, the guide explains, has his or her sights set on "expected pieces of china, silver, jewelry," and it is the expectation of and anticipated value attached to such gifts that is offensive. On the other hand, a "right-minded person," who privileges emotional rather than financial value, appreciates gifts that are "modest mementos or souvenirs of affection" and in doing so bears out Elizabeth White Nelson's construction of nineteenth-century sentimentalism that "allowed an elevation of the material world to a moral plane."⁶⁶ Self-righteous tone does not diminish the legitimacy of the *Casket's* argument that matrimony's evolution into a mandate for

⁶⁵ Vicki Howard, *Brides, Inc.: American Weddings and the Business of Tradition* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 18.

⁶⁶ Nelson, *Market Sentiments*, 7.

costly gift-giving turns a cultural celebration into a financial transaction, and consequently cheapens the ritual by assigning it monetary value.

This thoughtful proposal to reject financial obligations associated with gift exchange is abandoned almost immediately, in a subsequent paragraph that cautions that “nothing is in worse taste” than giving costly presents to people of limited means. The instruction not only ignores the *Casket*’s previously articulated preference for sentiment over spending, it promotes a socioeconomic hierarchy that dictates expenditure. There is a world of contradiction here: costly gifts have become standard among people of certain means, but “right-minded people” prefer simpler tokens. Furthermore, while one *need* not buy expensive gifts for anyone, one *should* not buy expensive gifts for people unaccustomed to material extravagance, advice that directly engages socioeconomic discrepancies in the broader population.⁶⁷ The social or cultural reasoning behind this advice goes unaddressed, but whether rooted in concern for the attention a costly accessory may draw to its recipient’s simpler station or in the fear that such an item could not be appreciated by those unaccustomed to such consumption, the implication is that an investment along these lines would be wasted. Unconsidered is the possibility that a working-class newlywed couple might appreciate or even treasure a generous gift.⁶⁸

Material goods and their exchange are not the only site where the *Lover’s Casket* identifies and interprets economic values; the parties in a relationship are

⁶⁷ This population would have included those *Casket* readers who could not have afforded to gift marrying friends with silver and jewelry any more readily than they would expect to receive it on their own wedding days.

⁶⁸ The dangerous pursuit of upper-class luxuries also surfaces in a section addressing the benefits of platonic friendship, which cheerfully warns readers that, “The luxury and dissipation which prevail in genteel life, as it corrupts the heart in many respects, so it renders it incapable of warm, sincere, and steady friendship.” (13)

worth something, and sections devoted to the analysis of “Unworthy objects of love by woman” and “Unworthy objects of man’s love” attempt to determine that worth according to gender. In the first section, a parable about a millionaire’s daughter who married her father’s coachman serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of socioeconomic class mingling. The *Casket* hastens to assure readers that “it was not that one was rich and the other poor” that compromised this match, but their “utterly irreconcilable” differences in “habits, tastes and acquirements.”⁶⁹ The reasonable assumption that new access to the necessary funds and instruction might have allowed the coachman to appropriate these tastes and acquirements is dismissed with the admonition that “the process should be commenced in youth” if it holds any possibility of success. It is a grim pronouncement to include in a guide that aims to educate readers so that they may climb the social ladder. Hidden in this account of the follies of class mixing lurks a message that neither financial nor cultural capital will likely improve one’s standing.

With a woman is deemed unworthy of a man’s love, economics take a back seat to anxieties about moral and social character. The unworthy woman is an “artful coquette,” whose pursuit of men is perceived to be deliberate or aggressive, but who will abandon this drive and prove to be “lazy in mind and body ... jealous and envious” once she has landed a mate. Not necessarily from the lower classes but marked as cheap by her availability, such a woman is dangerous because a union with her is sure to bear repercussions like “misery, poverty, drunkenness and divorce.”⁷⁰ Poverty stands out against the other predicted outcomes because it is a less natural—

⁶⁹ Rossi, *Dime Lover’s Casket*, 23.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 24.

or at least, less expected—consequence of an unhappy marriage, and the absence of elaboration leaves the reader to imagine the ways in which an unworthy woman could sabotage her husband’s solvency when class incompatibility destabilizes economic equilibrium. What remains clear is that those who do not exercise prudence in their monetary and social relationships risk financial ruin.

Marriage between suitable people does not offer protection from the misery that the *Casket* attributes to select material desires. A seven-stanza poem warning newlyweds about the dangers of competitive consumption instead advises them to “Get a little tenement / just big enough for two,” “In furniture be moderate,” and concludes with the admonition “Don’t try to ape the rich.”⁷¹ Ultimately, a young couple’s contentment is most threatened by the “burning desire” to “do as others do—to live as others live—to dress as others dress—to go where others go,” so that “[t]heir lives are made wretched by *extraneous* things—by too great consideration for immaterial matters.”⁷² Given the *Casket*’s abundant and detailed guidance that virtually commands aping the rich and stalking commodities, this prim call for economy seems almost facetious, though it is presumably issued in earnest.

Other Handbooks endorse the honesty of humble acquisition while privileging the perceived gentility of consumption that is both costlier and specialized. One example appears in *Beadle’s Dime Letter-Writer*, which invites readers to use ruled or unruled paper according to their own custom and comfort, but casually adds that unruled paper “is always best and most genteel.” The socially conscientious fan of ruled paper inspired to switch to “most genteel” unruled might think twice when the

⁷¹ Ibid, 65-57.

⁷² Ibid, 65.

author warns that the latter “can not be used except by those accustomed to it.”⁷³ In a few short sentences, readers have been told that they can use whichever paper they like, but that one is preferable to the other, but that the preferred product is inaccessible to new users. This warning to those looking to develop their command of genteel accessories could easily refer to the difficulty that inexperienced writers may have maintaining neat penmanship without lines for guidance, and “can not” is best understood as “should not [because of the ease with which the appearance of the letter can be compromised].” But according to the *Letter-Writer*’s own definition, correspondence written on ruled paper is not the best, nor the most genteel, and will tacitly betray that the writer is not the most genteel, either.

Those Handbooks whose subjects demand minimal consumer investment engage with materialism in different ways. Participation in debate clubs and civic meetings, according to *The Dime Debater and Chairman’s Guide*, requires no accessories other than the guide itself, which claims to fill the need for “a popular [emphasis theirs] Hand-Book of the Rules of Order”⁷⁴ as opposed to the “Chairman’s Guides accessible to the public [that] are almost without exception prepared with references to use by Congressmen and Legislatures.” If encyclopedic tomes like *Robert’s Rules of Order* were authoritative in their density and complexity, they were no more—and potentially less—valuable than the inexpensive and concise *Dime Debater*, which could be more readily obtained and understood by a populace whose interest in public speaking was more likely rooted in personal development than professional necessity. In her research on public speaking at the turn of the eighteenth

⁷³ Legrand, *Dime Letter-Writer*, 22.

⁷⁴ *The Dime Debater and Chairman’s Guide*, (New York: Beadle and Company, 1869), opening page.

century, historian Carolyn Eastman supports the assumption that debate-society members were intent on self-improvement, not legislative careers; she identifies membership in these societies as a marker that “announced one’s lack of position more often than the reverse, since these groups promised to further a young man’s entry into public life by cultivating his speech, conduct, and relationships.”⁷⁵

Though the *Dime Debater* seems to recognize a working-class readership, it passes no judgments regarding finances, education, or social position. To the contrary, the guide’s devotion to the benefits of debate promotes a degree of reverse snobbery that privileges untutored readers and the *Debater*’s accessibility. The publisher’s note concludes with the proclamation that “All persons who would understand and perfect themselves ... will find in this volume what very few more pretentious works can offer,”⁷⁶ and the term “pretentious” suggests a tension not between the professional legislator and the hobbyist public speaker, but between the inexpensive populism of the *Dime Debater* and the misplaced superiority that the manual perceives in denser procedural guides. Carolyn Eastman’s early-Republic debaters pursued “practice in self-presentation as well as friendships with men who similarly sought to establish themselves in a competitive market environment,”⁷⁷ and two generations later, the *Dime Debater* continued to endorse and facilitate market participation through the accessibility of its instruction and price.

Like the *Dime Debater*, *Beadle’s Dime guide to Curling and Skating* is more concerned with its subject’s democratic and improving qualities than with complex

⁷⁵ Carolyn Eastman, *A Nation of Speechifiers: Making an American Republic after the Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 115.

⁷⁶ *Dime Debater*, 1.^s

⁷⁷ Eastman, *A Nation of Speechifiers*, 116.

prescriptions for consumption. But as the *Debater's* accessorizing requires, at minimum, procurement of a procedural handbook, so must even novice skaters invest in the purchase or rental of a pair of skates. Having boasted at length about ice-skating's inherent democracy, when the *guide to Curling and Skating* discusses equipment requirements it is forced to acknowledge material limits on egalitarianism. The observation that ice sports unite practitioners "on a footing of equality – except so far as skates are concerned," reads as a humorous aside in an otherwise earnest rhapsody, but its joke openly and aptly acknowledges the power of material goods to classify and sort consumers along socioeconomic hierarchy. With adequate instruction, any able-bodied and reasonably coordinated person should be able to pick up the fundamentals of ice-skating, and by the *guide to Curling and Skating's* 1867 publication, access to that instruction had expanded to include classes of people who historically would have lacked the time and money to invest in the practice and equipment of recreational sports. But while the population of practitioners increased and diversified, skates themselves still telegraphed a range of information about their owner's finances that could be presumed to correlate with their social class. Ice skates that are unfashionable or in poor condition due to age, inferior construction, or both, indicate owners who are unable to afford newer or superior gear. There may exist a "footing of equality" at the rink, but so long as material signifiers telegraph the cheapness of one's accessories, analyses about class and belonging attend participation.

Where some of the Beadle Dime Handbooks steadfastly endorse practical consumption, others in the series are less consistent in their advice. Though the

manuals in this sample never encourage indiscriminate spending, they selectively ignore the financial limitations under which many readers would have labored, and their instruction becomes even more convoluted when material prescriptions contradict commentary on appropriate consumption. Alternately sensitive to budget and preoccupied with acquisition, enthusiastic about thrift and suspicious of restraint, the guides struggled to provide consistent advice to readers of limited means. This site where economic and social values converge in learned acquisition and practice reveals the same tensions that construct the vernacular of cheapness: the desire to correlate price with quality, the perceived relationship between expenditure and morality, and above all, the access and insecurity that affordability fosters.

Conclusion

Relationships between the vernacular employment of *cheap* and the Beadle Dime Handbooks may seem tenuous beyond the series' ten-cent price tag, but my goal in this project has not been to force corollaries between disparate twin subjects; rather, I was and continue to be intrigued by their shared social and economic engagement and encapsulation of cultural history. The Beadle handbooks *are* cheap, and their content is comprised from complex codes and vernacular that cheapness also evokes and embodies. Both *cheap* and the Handbooks address the instability of value, the consequences of affordability and access, and the exchange between respectability and materiality. The fluency that *cheap* demands, socially and linguistically, is mirrored in the mastery of social codes that nineteenth-century convention required from those who sought class ascension. All of these concepts ultimately inform the construction of legitimacy as a virtue that is threatened by instability and imitation.

Inexpensive pricing is the most literal way that the Beadle Dime Handbooks engage *cheap*, and that relationship is no less significant for being obvious. The manuals both reflect and represent the nineteenth century's economic dynamism and industrial innovation, because the proliferation of inexpensive reading material was a direct result of the technological advances that facilitated production and distribution, opening the market to new consumers. The flourishing ten-cent trade also evinced the cultural shifts that informed and were informed by market changes, communicating the participation of an increasingly literate population that sought reading materials but could not afford to spend significantly on them. Through its affordability, cheap

nineteenth-century literature is able to serve as a record of the same major economic and social movements that produced it. At the same time, it demonstrates the popularity of cheap goods despite the compromised values they are frequently perceived to bear. *Cheap* may not impress aesthetically, but its utility functions in a variety of ways.

The Beadle Handbooks' determined valuation of virtually all goods and practices, beside instruction that is frequently inconsistent and ambivalent, construct a site that fosters many of the same complexities and contradictions seen in *cheap*. Most prevalent is the extent to which consumption and material culture are parsed as an initiation to respectability through things. Despite the exceptions in my sample, most notably those found in *Beadle's Dime guide to dress-making's* pragmatic sartorial advice, the prescribed expenditure for acquisition, gift exchange, frivolities and necessities all challenge readers to meet specific economic and social standards and threaten alienation for those who cannot. Even some arguments for reserved consumption imply that certain forms of market abstention are more legitimate than others. Such arguments are most frequently premised on the virtues of thrift rather than the realities of limited income, and assume that frugality is a practice born of piety, not forced by circumstance. By failing to address financial limitations, the manuals dismiss, and consequently devalue, those for whom austerity is not a choice. Enforcing hierarchy was one way for the dominant social order to preserve and enforce the illusion of stability in a system whose traversable borders promised and threatened exchange.

While the Beadle Dime Handbooks provide a dynamic site in which to explore the constructions and implications of cheapness, the series is just one facet of the expansive material and historical context in which *cheap* is prevalent. This prevalence illustrates the extent to which we have come to rely on the term to classify and orient people and possessions; cheap is everywhere, informing our construction of monetary, material, and social identity and influencing how we understand those identities in a broader cultural framework. *Cheap* matters because it identifies legitimacy and value as the central and related concepts on which we have built our economic market and social calculus. Though the content and employment of our vernacular changes over time, cheapness reliably signifies how we relate to and orient ourselves within an unstable world.

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