In the quarter century following the Civil War, “star courses” brought people famous for diverse pursuits before American audiences as lecturers, transforming what had been a largely educational institution into a major form of mainstream popular entertainment. No longer reliant on a rhetoric of uplift that had characterized the more sedate antebellum American lyceum movement exemplified by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Gilded-Age lecture series presented a wider range of individuals—writers, humorists, preachers, actors, scientists, and political activists—to an American public yearning to see and hear the famous and the infamous of all stripes in the flesh. Borrowing the word “star” from the theater, these national lecture tours helped to solidify an already evolving notion of celebrity through emerging public relations techniques and an expanding transportation network that transformed the lecture platform into a pre-electronic form of mass media, prefiguring much of the content of television and radio. Among the lecturers discussed are Mark Twain, the superstar cleric Henry Ward Beecher, cartoonist Thomas Nast, and African explorer Henry Morton Stanley, as well as the 19th wife of Brigham Young. Based on extensive archival research and newspaper accounts of the time, Star Course recaptures a lost chapter in American popular performance history.

“In the century before television brought stars into our living rooms, celebrities crisscrossed the nation, bringing entertainment and perspectives to towns large and small. Peter Cherches, through his careful research and engaging prose, brings the stars and impresarios of the nineteenth-century lecture circuit back from the dead and gives us a front-row seat. This is an important book.” – David I.Z. Mindich, author of Just the Facts: How “Objectivity” Came to Define American Journalism and chair of Temple University’s journalism department

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Star Course
TRANSDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

Volume 6

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Star Course

Nineteenth-Century Lecture Tours and the Consolidation of Modern Celebrity

Peter Cherches
To the memory of Brooks McNamara,
a pioneer in the study of American popular entertainment
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This book was literally 25 years in the making. I started researching nineteenth-century lectures in 1993, shortly after I had begun graduate work in the American Studies Program at New York University. I had gone to the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Massachusetts, to work on an unrelated topic when I decided to check out a hunch. I knew of Mark Twain’s lecture tours, and Oscar Wilde’s famous American tour of 1882, and I suspected these well-known examples were just the tip of a cultural iceberg. In the Society’s broadsides collection I discovered a wealth of material that provided a lens onto the widespread impact of what had become known as the “popular lecture system”—posters and handbills that employed the kind of ballyhoo associated with showmen like P.T. Barnum, as well as the invaluable publications of James Redpath’s Boston Lyceum Bureau, which told the story of a lecture system that was no longer the staid lyceum of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s time but rather a form of popular entertainment that brought those famous for a wide variety of pursuits before an adoring public, with the aid of emerging management and promotion techniques. I suspected the changes in the American lecture platform were emblematic of wider changes in the public’s relationship with the famous. I decided this would be an ideal topic for my doctoral dissertation, combining my interest in media and communication theory with American cultural history. This was the beginning of a journey that would take me to numerous libraries and archives, so I’d like to begin by thanking the many archivists and librarians I worked with, still the sine qua non of any historical research project.

At NYU I was fortunate to study in an interdisciplinary program that brought me in contact with many top scholars in diverse fields. My dissertation committee brought a range of perspectives to this work and unwaveringly supported my decision to write lucid prose unburdened by needless jargon and the fleeting academic hobby horses of the time. The perceptive media critic Jay Rosen provided invaluable direction for the theoretical framework of this study, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett kept me cognizant of wider cultural contexts, and the late Brooks McNamara, to whom this book is dedicated, was a nonpareil guide to the world of nineteenth-century American popular entertainment.

Finally, I’d like to thank series editors Jeremy Hunsinger and Jason Nolan for their enthusiasm for this project and their encouragement in finally bringing this book to light.
INTRODUCTION

The era of electronic mass media has brought Americans unprecedented access to the celebrity personality. Since the introduction of the TV talk show in the 1950s we have been privy to glimpses of celebrities’ true selves—or simulacra thereof—on a daily basis. Actors, sports figures, authors, politicians, you name it, are presented for our consumption “just as they are”—or just as they’d have us think they are. We take a relationship with celebrities, even if it is one-sided, for granted.

There were, nonetheless, pre-electronic media that served this function too, none more so, I’d argue, than the subject of this book, the organized system of lecture tours that was a primary mainstream cultural institution of the Gilded Age. The American popular-lecture system afforded audiences the opportunity to see and hear the panoply of celebrities of the time, a range similar to that to be found on today’s late-night TV programs. In the winter of 1873–1874, lecture-goers could witness talks and readings by such famous authors as Bret Harte, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Wilkie Collins. Humorists Josh Billings and Petroleum V. Nasby performed early versions of stand-up comedy. Several of the most famous thespians of the time gave dramatic readings in lecture series across the country. The renowned cartoonist Thomas Nast recounted his career while demonstrating the art of caricature. African explorers talked about faraway places, noted scientists explained recent discoveries, politicians addressed the political climate and celebrity preachers addressed the moral one. And, on top of everything else, a breakaway wife from the harem of Brigham Young decried the evils of polygamy. A major difference between then and now was that, in an age before the advent of electronic media, people had to leave the comfort of their homes in order to see celebrities, and they generally had to be content with seeing, on average, only about ten of those celebrities over the course of a year.

The American popular-lecture system of the second half of the nineteenth century was, in a way, a form of network broadcasting. Though we normally associate the term “broadcasting” with electronic media of the twentieth century, the rapidly developing transportation technologies of the nineteenth century made possible the distribution of live performance forms to a mass audience over a vast geographical area. By the 1850s, a popular speaker like the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher might deliver the same lecture to more than 50,000 people across the country each winter, in cities like Boston, New York, Baltimore and Chicago, as well as in numerous smaller cities and towns in between.

The network analogy can be taken further. Most towns and cities in the North and the Midwest had one or more annual lecture series, sponsored by community organizations or private entrepreneurs, that presented, on average, ten or twelve celebrity lecturers during a season that lasted roughly from November through April. Lectures in these series, or courses as they were generally called, were scheduled
in advance for the entire season and given at the same place and time on a weekly or biweekly basis. Though there was much independent lecture activity of varying levels of quality outside of these courses, the most successful and reputable lecturers tended to appear mainly in these established series. The regular lecture courses, by virtue of their track records as local cultural institutions, bestowed an imprimatur of worthiness upon their scheduled performers. Members of a community could choose to purchase a subscription for an entire course at a discount or pick and choose the events that interested them most. By the early 1870s, the programming for these local outlets was supplied by the handful of lecture bureaus that represented virtually all of the lecturers and entertainers who appeared in the hundreds of courses throughout the nation. The bureaus, at the dawn of modern advertising and management practice, quickly and effectively developed and refined techniques to market celebrities as cultural product.

Useful as the broadcast analogy is, it has its limitations. Most traditional theories of mass media have treated broadcasting as a mode of transmission. In the transmission (or transportation) model, media are seen, essentially, as little more than carriers of information. Though means of distribution are a central focus of this book, the ritual view of communication that media theorist James W. Carey has proposed can lead us to a more nuanced understanding of the cultural significance of the American popular-lecture system. The ritual model, which in American culture has been a minor counter-thread to the more commonly held transmission model, has its roots in religious thought and practice. “A ritual view of communication,” Carey writes, “is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs.” The archetype of a ritual communication form is “the sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality.” Within this model, “the original or highest manifestation of communication … [is not] the transmission of intelligent information but … the construction of an ordered, meaningful cultural world that can serve as a container for human action.”

Nineteenth-century lectures reflected and reinforced the cultural values of middle-class, Protestant America, values that were generally supported and reinforced by the dominant, mainstream media and cultural authorities of the time—newspapers as well as religious and civic leaders. Beginning in the late 1820s, lecture attendance was seen by audiences and promoted by the popular press as an important ritual of citizenship. Lecture audiences sought community as much as information. If the prevailing content of the lecture system changed over time, to the consternation of some cultural custodians, those changes represented significant transformations in American society in general.

The popular-lecture system that, in the years following the Civil War, presented such a diverse group of authors, actors, artists, explorers, preachers, politicians, humorists and renegade Mormons was an outgrowth of the much more austere American lyceum movement. The lyceums, the first of which were established in the 1820s, were primarily institutions of adult education that catered to a passion
for self-improvement that pervaded the early republic. The American lyceum was one of a number of “rational amusements”—providing, in Richard Altick’s words, “education sugarcoated with entertainment”—that were promoted on both sides of the Atlantic in the first half of the nineteenth century. The drive for “elevating,” “uplifting,” or “useful” forms of amusement was the legacy of enlightenment rationalism combined with the Puritan strain of early Victorianism that stressed utility, along with the obsession with industry that came of the industrial revolution. As the Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga observed, “Never had an age taken itself with more portentous seriousness.”

By the late 1840s the lyceum had mutated to a lecture system that was much more a form of popular entertainment—albeit an eminently respectable one—than a specifically educational institution. As programming on the American lecture platform evolved, it became apparent that the in-person appearance was the perfect vehicle in which to present a wide range of celebrities before their public. Rapid developments in print technology, photography, and transportation greatly increased the opportunities for individuals engaged in a variety of pursuits to become, quite quickly, well known by the American people. Lecture appearances afforded Americans personal contact with the stars of the moment. And those celebrities discovered that the widespread desire to see them could lead to an extremely lucrative second career. The lecture system became so celebrity-oriented that by the early 1870s numerous lecture series were dubbed “star courses.”

The more star-oriented popular-lecture system of the post-Civil War years offered audiences a ritual experience, but one that differed somewhat in character from the civic rituals of the early lyceum. As the sociologist Erving Goffman notes, in his analysis of the lecture as a form of communication, “To the degree that the speaker is a significant figure in some relevant form or other, to that degree this access has a ritual character … of affording supplicants preferential contact with an entity held to be of value.” Regarding contemporary lecture tours, and fully relevant to the post-Civil War circuit, Goffman adds that, “authority is not a prerequisite, or the thoughtful development of an academic topic, only association… It is thus that a very heterogeneous band of the famed and ill-famed serve to vivify what is or has recently been noteworthy, each celebrity touching audiences with what he or she has been touched by, each selling association.”

If the rituals of lecture attendance were once oriented toward the maintenance of a civic culture that upheld the values of the Republic, the ritual experience of the star lecture seems to have answered needs that were rather more personal.

The German social theorist Jurgen Habermas has described the nineteenth-century transformation of the European public from a “culture-debating” relationship among individuals to a “culture-consuming” aggregate. Habermas’ analysis is equally relevant to the American experience, and that transformation is especially evident over the history of the popular-lecture system. Habermas argues that, “When the laws of the market governing the sphere of commodity exchange and of social labor also pervaded the sphere reserved for private people as a public, rational-critical debate
INTRODUCTION

had a tendency to be replaced by consumption, and the web of public communication unraveled into acts of individuated reception, however uniform in mode.” However public certain gatherings in this later phase may have appeared, the satisfaction of individual needs in the company of others did not constitute a true public. The public sphere—once an intersection of private individuals who engaged in a form of critical discourse in such eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century institutions as salons, clubs, and reading societies, a whole that was different in character from the sum of its parts—had degenerated into an audience.

The history of the American popular-lecture system can be taken as one example of a shift from a civic public culture to a commercial one. In the American experience, this transformation can largely be attributed to a shift in emphasis from local to national cultural institutions. In the early days of the lyceum movement a limited transportation infrastructure mandated that lecturers mainly be local speakers who would, naturally, address the concerns of the local community. As developments in the system of railroads along with the evolution of increasingly sophisticated business practices and means of publicity turned lecturing into a national touring system, a local focus could not be sustained. Lecturers had to appeal to a national constituency. Practical instruction and issues of local import gave way to more generally marketable inspirational messages as well as a core group of celebrities of national renown who could attract audiences throughout the Northeast and Midwest, and occasionally the South. Celebrity was a common denominator.

By the 1870s, celebrity in America pretty much conformed to historian Daniel Boorstin’s oft-quoted definition of celebrity in the twentieth century, i.e. “a person who is known for his well-knownness.” The modern, largely national (and later global) commercial markets, from their very beginnings, helped to create the condition of celebrity as well as make it financially remunerative. Increasingly sophisticated and widely distributed media provided the publicity that promoted individuals from a wide range of pursuits as “stars” who could be packaged as lecturers, one of the most lucrative professions of the day. Celebrity had become commodified: What was ultimately consumed by lecture audiences was not, for the most part, a demonstration of the competence for which a celebrity’s recognition had been earned, but rather a display of personality or the projection of an image.

Certain significant precursors of our modern relationship with celebrity can be traced back to the eighteenth century, when a confluence of new social institutions and media hastened the solidification of what Habermas calls “the bourgeois public sphere.” This new public, primarily male and of the commercial classes, had begun to emerge in the seventeenth century, as a capitalist market economy based upon horizontal social relationships superseded the hierarchical feudal system in much of Europe. Newspapers appeared, supplying specific commercial intelligence such as commodity prices and transport schedules, as well as political news that could have a bearing on markets. Habermas notes that, “Certain categories of traditional ‘news’ items from the repertoire of the broadsheets were also perpetuated—the miracle cures and thunderstorms, the murders, pestilences, and burnings.” Concurrently,
INTRODUCTION

places of public assembly, most notably coffee houses, sprung up throughout England and the continent. By the first decade of the eighteenth century London alone had 3,000 coffee houses. The coffee houses embraced the full range of the middle class—shopkeepers as well as intellectuals.8 The news became the constant subject of discussion by the men who congregated at these meeting places.

Leo Braudy, in his ambitious history of fame, describes a significant shift in the public’s relationship with the famous that began to develop at this time. The eighteenth century saw the “advent of the fan.” According to Braudy, “The greater immediacy of eighteenth century publicity—the rapid diffusion of books and pamphlets, portraits and caricatures—plays a material role in introducing the famous to the fan, perhaps a more appropriate word here than audience, if only to distinguish a new quality of psychic connection between those who watch and those who, willingly or not perform on the public stage.”9 Jean-Jacques Rousseau experienced this new brand of fandom, and was bewildered that people who had never read a word of his writings would travel far and wide “in order to see and admire the illustrious man, the celebrated man, the most celebrated man, etc.”10

The proliferation of print media in the nineteenth century, especially the popular penny newspapers that were introduced in the 1830s and the commercially marketed carte de visite photographs that were consumed voraciously in the 1860s and ’70s brought tales and images of the famous to multitudes of Americans. Performance media, however, were perhaps most influential in fostering a star consciousness in the American populace. The stage and the lecture platform put fans in direct contact with their objects of veneration.

Throughout the nineteenth century the American theatre was the province of the star. The term “star” itself had become common theatrical parlance by the 1820s, designating the first rank of performers. These stars may have been bombastic (and their vehicles mediocre), but American audiences loved them. Actress and lecturer Olive Logan, in 1870, commented that, “With all their ardent love for theatrical amusements, I have no hesitation in saying that the Americans care much more for the actors than for the merits of the play itself.”11 That had been true for decades. A European-influenced, romantic conception of the hero as someone who transcends the limits that proscribe common mortals, combined with a particularly American cult of the rugged individualist—a combination no doubt responsible for the vitality of the Davy Crockett legend and other frontier myths—helped to foster the rise of the star system in the Jacksonian era.

Star performers were not noted for their range. In 1854, a writer for Putnam’s magazine commented that, “Shakespeare is only endured for the sake of the star actor who impersonates the one character suited to his physical powers.”12 Such limitations, however, did not seem to bother theatre patrons. Star performers like Edwin Forrest, Junius Brutus Booth and Charlotte Cushman toured the country, appearing before large and enthusiastic audiences, in their chosen vehicles with local stock companies. The local performers were often under-rehearsed and ill-prepared, but that mattered little to audiences who were preoccupied with the featured
attractions. As theatre historian David Grimsted notes, the star system “allowed towns as small as Mobile or Natchez to see every great player of the early-nineteenth century in his greatest roles.”

The American theatre offered more diverse opportunities for celebrity exposure than one might at first expect. On occasion, the star system could encompass the audience as well as the stage. Grimsted writes, “George Washington attending the theater drew better than any of the plays written about him, and more Americans turned out to see a Napoleonic general watching a poor play than came to see the best of actors in good dramas. A manager in Nashville complained that none of his expensive stars drew so large a house as did a visit by Martin Van Buren, whom he would have liked to engage ‘on his own terms, for the season.’”

The stage career of the boxer John L. Sullivan exemplifies the protean nature of celebrity that had become commonplace by the end of the nineteenth century. Sullivan was America’s first major sports celebrity. He was heavyweight champion in the 1880s, a time when spectator sports, boxing in particular, were becoming enormously popular in the United States. Sullivan was the subject of countless newspaper stories—in one eighteen-month period, the New York World featured eighteen front-page stories about him. Visual images of Sullivan were ubiquitous. According to one biography, “The flood of likenesses rapidly saturated the masculine world, no saloon being complete without at least a head of the champion on display.”

Photos and newspaper articles are engines as well as emblems of fame or notoriety. By the late nineteenth century, media of publicity could often provide individuals with an entrée into areas where specific competence or hard-earned authority had traditionally been a prerequisite. Concurrent with and subsequent to his boxing career, John L. Sullivan had a successful run as a stage actor—or, more precisely, a stage personality.

Much had changed in the half century between Martin Van Buren’s appearance in the audience in Nashville and John L. Sullivan’s on the Broadway stage. The theatre had become a rather plastic vehicle in which to present not only dedicated theatre people, but also celebrities with no prior stage experience, in starring roles. The popular-lecture system, which presented an unprecedented range of famous individuals as star performers, may well have been in large part responsible for changing the rules of the legitimate theatre.

For Daniel Boorstin, the state of modern fame was most poignantly articulated by a 1959 publication titled Celebrity Register: “The Celebrity Register’s alphabetical order shows Mortimer Adler followed by Polly Adler, the Dalai Lama listed beside TV comedienne Dagmar, Dwight Eisenhower preceding Anita Ekberg, ex-President Herbert Hoover following ex-torch singer Libby Holman, Pope John XXIII coming after Mr. John the hat designer, and Bertrand Russell followed by Jane Russell. They are all celebrities. The well-knownness which they have in common overshadows everything else.” Boorstin was appalled, and would, no doubt, have been equally appalled by the roster of a typical lecture course of the 1870s, a celebrity register of its time.
INTRODUCTION

Whether we critique a widespread public preoccupation with celebrity or are simply intrigued by it, a study of its history and mechanisms can give us a firmer, more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon. This book, which traces the history of the American popular-lecture system and considers its role in the formation of our modern conceptions of celebrity, represents one look at those mechanisms.

NOTES

1 James W. Carey, Communication as Culture (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), pp. 18–19.
4 The term “entertainment,” granted, is a thorny one. Though we tend to use the word assuming we know what entertainment is, at best we think we know what it isn’t. In the early and mid-nineteenth century, the term “entertainment,” often modified by the adjective “mere,” was one of approbation, and its consumers were considered guilty of frivolous behavior. Entertainment was seen as an unacceptable substitute for more useful pursuits.
8 Habermas, pp. 21, 33.
10 Rousseau, Confessions, quoted in Braudy, p. 381.
14 Grimsted, p. 61.
17 Boorstin, p. 58.
CHAPTER 1

LYCEUMS AND LAY SERMONS

“The lyceum is the American theatre,” proclaimed an article in the March 1857 issue of *Putnam’s* magazine on the subject of “Lectures and Lecturers.” Behind this seemingly simple declaration lie a number of fundamental truths about the public lecture system of the 1850s as well as the state of mid-nineteenth-century popular entertainment in general. First, there’s the claim that the lyceum was theatre. It is clear that, for this observer at least, the characteristic lecture of the time was, above all, a form of entertainment or amusement. Education, though once fundamental to and still somewhat a component of the medium, was no longer its primary raison d’être. The qualifier “American” adds another dimension. The popular lecture of the mid-nineteenth century was indeed a characteristically American medium, planted and nurtured in American cultural soil. For many Americans the lecture was the American theatre in the absence of other options. In small towns and villages, resident theatrical companies did not exist, though itinerant performers or troupes might pass through on occasion with stage plays, minstrel shows or circuses. For much of the fall and winter, however, these constituencies could count on weekly or biweekly performances by visiting lecturers, many of them among the best-known personalities in the land. For many city dwellers, as well as for the townspeople, the stage, if not always out of sight or out of mind, was simply out of the question. The popular lecture was a homegrown performance medium that was unobjectionable to middle-class Protestant sensibilities.

There were a number of factors that made theatregoing an unacceptable amusement option for multitudes of Protestant Americans in the antebellum era. Though some of the objections might have been religious in nature, it’s important to remember that for much of America’s early history there was a symbiosis between the doctrinal and the cultural. Much of the anti-theatrical sentiment of the early and mid-nineteenth century was the legacy of tenacious Puritan values and beliefs. The original Puritan objections to the theatre, dating back to late-sixteenth-century England, were based largely on the premise that role-playing was contrary to the purposes of God and nature. The theatre was an institution, furthermore, that challenged the Puritan ethic of hard work and thrift by encouraging idleness and the pursuit of pleasure. Even before the popular lecture became an alternative to theatre, the subterfuge of advertising plays as “moral lectures” had been used to circumvent the anti-theatrical prejudice. As one platform veteran noted, “Otway’s ‘Venice Preserved’ was announced as a moral lecture in five parts, ‘in which the dreadful effects of conspiracy will be exemplified’; and ‘Romeo and Juliet,’ and ‘Hamlet,’ etc. were masked under the same catching and hypocritical phraseology.”
The physical and social atmosphere of the urban playhouses themselves was wholly distasteful to the sensibilities of many. Antebellum American theatres were far from genteel environments. Architecturally, they provided four distinct levels of seating, each serving a different class of spectator. In the uppermost tier of seats, the gallery, or what we would now call the balcony, sat a group composed mainly of the working and servant classes. Commonly referred to as the “gallery gods,” these were the most boisterous members of the audience. Below the gallery was the notorious third tier of boxes. This tier was for the most part inhabited by prostitutes, who solicited business in the theatres. Men would normally visit these women to arrange for after-theatre assignations, but it was not unheard of for the entire drama to be played in the seats. Just below were the first two tiers of boxes. These boxes contained the most expensive seats in the house and were generally inhabited by the wealthier patrons with a taste for nightlife. These people attended the theatre as much to be seen as to see, and would box-hop to chat, loudly and theatrically, with each other. In the pit, at ground level, the audience was almost exclusively male and of the “middling” classes—artisans, merchants, and mechanics, for instance, as well as occasional poorer workers out on a splurge. This was the portion of the audience most likely to pay respectful attention to the stage, though they too were capable of unrestrained displays of enthusiasm or contempt. Many pious or modest Protestant Americans, especially women, felt that there was no place for them in such an environment.4

Unlike the morally suspect theatre, the lecture hall was an environment that was comforting to Victorian sensibilities. Audience members needn’t fear a commingling with a distasteful element in this generally homogeneous gathering. They could rest assured that an evening’s fare would be inoffensive and hope that it would be instructive and uplifting. The minister and lecturer Theodore Parker noted that the popular lecture was “an original American contrivance,” combining “the best things of the Church, and of the College, with some of the fun of the theatre.”5

The lecture system that Putnam’s described as the American theatre grew out of, or more precisely mutated from, the American lyceum movement, which was born in the late 1820s and flourished for about fifteen years.6 The original lyceum was an institution whose aims and programs were specifically instructional. The popular-lecture system of the 1850s, though promoted and supported as an agent of moral uplift, was not primarily an institution of continuing education.

Education and reform were foremost on the mind of Josiah Holbrook, the man almost singlehandedly responsible for the popularization of the lyceum idea in the U.S. Holbrook published his manifesto, a blueprint for the lyceum system (though he did not yet use the term “lyceum”), in the October 1826 issue of the American Journal of Education. In the article Holbrook proposed the establishment of “associations for mutual instruction in the sciences, and in useful knowledge generally.” Such associations would aid in “raising the moral and intellectual taste” of young Americans, many of whom have been steered by “that monster, intemperance” into “places and practices which lead to dissipation and ruin.”7
Holbrook’s target constituency was the class of young workingmen whom he considered sorely in need of moral as well as practical instruction. Among the numerous social ills that troubled reformers of the Jacksonian era, excessive drinking was certainly one of the most troubling. Drunkenness, public and private, was pervasive. The period from 1790–1830 saw the highest per capita consumption of alcohol in American history. Josiah Holbrook hoped to make the lyceum a ubiquitous institution, but, in the late 1820s, “taverns were surely the most widely accessible local institution of all.”¹⁸ Young men, of course, were subject to more than one kind of intemperance, even if that term generally suggests drunkenness. In addition to the taverns, gambling dens and brothels were more than ample.

Though public schools had been founded in a number of localities, it would take some time before the common schools, which would attempt to provide universal and uniform primary education, would be established, largely through the efforts of educational reformers like Horace Mann and Henry Barnard. Before the 1840s, schooling was haphazard at best. Opportunities varied greatly by class as well as by region. Secondary education was severely limited, and the handful of American colleges served a very small, elite minority. What the colleges offered was a far cry from what we would now consider higher education. As Thomas Wentworth Higginson remembered in 1867, “Our so-called universities were once but high-schools, and it was no uncommon thing for boys to graduate with honor at seventeen… Honors thus obtained were the honors of school-boys, and showed a boyish standard of attainment; they gave no guaranty of real merit; they implied nothing which it was not a disgrace to our culture to call scholarship.”³⁹

The lyceum, Holbrook hoped, would fill an educational void by providing adults with a form of practical, continuing education that was otherwise unavailable. Holbrook’s proposals were embraced by proponents of public education, and, as Carl Bode suggests, the lyceum system created “a general atmosphere” favorable to the spread of public schools.¹⁰

The lyceum’s promise as a power for moral reform was central to Holbrook’s vision. It is this aspect of the early lyceum that would, in fact, have a much more lasting impact on the popular-lecture system than would practical education. The lyceum idea, along with other reform activities of the nineteenth century, was in large part the product of a pervasive cultural ethos that stressed the importance of virtue, both public and private. The idea of virtue was an essential component of a republican ideology embraced by most nineteenth-century Americans and was central to a Puritan ethic that pervaded American political and social thought.¹¹

The republican rhetoric of the American Revolution had stressed that virtue was a necessary precondition for the establishment of a true republic. Public virtue, for the republicans of the revolutionary era, meant the willingness to forsake private interests for the good of the community. The idea of the republic remained a constant source of pride for nineteenth-century Americans, and cultural institutions that were considered sustaining of the republic—lyceums and museums in particular—were the most highly valued.¹² For the eighteenth-century republicans, the examples of
classical Greece and Rome had been both inspiring and cautionary. Along with pride in the republic, subsequent generations experienced the anxiety that without the proper stewardship America could suffer her own decline and fall. In this climate, the lecture halls and museums were public spaces in which rituals of citizenship could be enacted.13

In a leaflet published in November of 1826 that expanded upon his original article, Josiah Holbrook suggested that lyceums (he had, by this time, adopted the term) would help to promote an educated electorate. This “good political tendency” of the lyceum complemented its “good moral tendency.”14 The very title of Holbrook’s leaflet bespoken its debt to the strains of republicanism and the Puritan ethic: American Lyceum of Science and the Arts, Composed of Associations for Mutual Instruction and Designed for the General Diffusion of Useful and Practical Knowledge. Instruction would, in theory, at least, be mutual (as opposed to authoritarian or hierarchical), and the knowledge imparted would be useful and practical (neither frivolous nor purely theoretical).

Thomas Greene, a founder of the lyceum in New Bedford, Massachusetts, saw the institution as a site where the constitution of community could be enacted. Greene believed that each member had some form of expertise to share with the others. The instruction given, he felt, should lead to a better understanding of the New Bedford community itself. Ultimately, the greatest benefits of the lyceum would be moral and fraternal, rather than purely intellectual. At his address to the members, in December of 1828, Greene optimistically suggested that, “From all the divisions, ranks and classes of society, we are to meet … to instruct and to be instructed. While we mingle together in these pursuits … we shall remove many of the prejudices which ignorance or partial acquaintance with each other fostered.”15

In an 1829 leaflet outlining some of the advantages of the lyceum, Holbrook himself saw the elevation of discourse as a primary function of the movement. “An immediate and uniform effect of a lyceum,” he wrote, “… is the introduction of good topics of conversation into the daily intercourse of families, neighbors and friends… Subjects of science, or other topics of useful knowledge, take the place of frivolous conversation, or petty scandal, frequently indulged, and uniformly deplored, in our country villages.”16 Holbrook and many of the early proponents of the lyceum saw the system as, ideally, an engine for the sustenance of a public sphere in Habermas’ sense of an intersection of private individuals engaged in rational-critical debate.

Local lyceums proliferated quickly, and by the early 1830s the lyceum had clearly become a formidable American institution. In 1835 more than three thousand American towns had their own lyceum.17 While the lecture courses originally offered instruction primarily in the practical sciences, aimed at young workingmen, the range of lectures soon expanded. Popular demand, particularly from housewives desirous of education of a more general or liberal nature, not to mention the chance for a socially acceptable diversion from the drudgery of the home, led to the addition of lectures on history, literature and travel. The lyceum quickly became a middle-class, family institution.18
Most lecturers in the early lyceum courses were local amateurs who lectured gratis or for token fees. Recompense rarely exceeded ten dollars in the first years of the lyceum. Lecturers tended to be prominent citizens—clergymen, attorneys and businessmen, for example. These lecturers performed a civic duty by volunteering to educate their neighbors. Though many may not have been particularly inspired speakers, they did, like the great orators of antiquity, practice citizenship through oral communication.

In New England, local lyceums were established in hundreds of communities of all sizes. The movement extended throughout the Northeast as well as the Midwestern (or just Western, as they were then known) states. The lyceum became a particularly cherished institution in Ohio, which was peopled by many transplanted New Englanders. The South, on the other hand, was not fertile soil for the spread of the lyceum. The population densities of a plantation-based society would have rendered the establishment of lyceums impractical outside of the urban centers that were relatively few and far between. And Southerners, at any rate, were not especially hospitable to Northeastern cultural influences.

The tenor of lyceum offerings changed considerably in a rather short period of time and by the early 1840s the lecture course was for all intents and purposes the only component of the original lyceums that had survived. The transformation from the lyceum to a popular-lecture system was in some ways gradual, in others startlingly rapid.

At first, most lyceum lectures had been delivered by local citizens. Practical science lectures were likely to be pedestrian attempts to impart information that could be of use in the work life of the community’s male population. Literary and historical lectures might be given by the better-read men of the community willing to share their erudition. It is natural that certain local lecturers would be more adept and popular than others, and word of their talents spread to neighboring communities. These men, Ralph Waldo Emerson among them, responded to popular demand and began to travel to nearby towns to deliver their lectures. As the American transportation infrastructure progressed, larger distances were covered. Itinerant lecturers were, at first, paid small, though respectable, fees, perhaps ten or fifteen dollars, plus expenses.

Many of the original lyceums that had been established according to Holbrook’s plan had disbanded by the 1840s. They were replaced in many localities by organizations whose sole purpose was to sponsor lectures by visiting speakers, or by lecture committees affiliated with new or preexisting Young Men’s Unions, Mercantile Library Associations, and similar organizations. A taste for lecture attendance had been instilled in the public, and this aspect of the lyceum would remain popular, in some form or other, for at least the next half century.

The presenting organizations of what we might call the second period of popular lecturing were, like the lyceums, quasi-civil institutions. Acting in the public interest, they engaged speakers who, by reputation or prior local demonstration, were certain to give a performance that would be compatible with the prevailing
values of the community. Any speaker could appear outside the established lecture courses by hiring a hall and promoting his or her own performance, but the lecture committees of the young men’s unions and library associations acted as editorial boards. These committees invited speakers from the ranks of the tried and true (or the highly recommended).

Established lecturers and hopeful newcomers commonly sent out descriptive circulars, replete with reviews and/or testimonials (often quite hyperbolic), to the committees. Each summer or early autumn the lecture committees would write to the speakers they hoped to book for the upcoming season, suggesting possible dates and fees. Before the mid-1860s almost all bookings were made via direct correspondence between lecture committees and the lecturers themselves. It was an extremely inefficient system. Occasionally lecture managers in neighboring towns and cities would coordinate their schedules to create a practical itinerary for a speaker, but such efforts were intermittent and haphazard. Nonetheless, most courses and lecturers managed to get their season’s schedules secured by October. Occasionally, additional events might be added at the last minute, or substitutions made due to logistical problems or transportation delays.

A course of lectures consisted of anywhere from six to twenty events (eight to twelve being the norm), normally weekly or biweekly, at the same time and place, and generally commencing in November. In the larger cities the lecture season might last from early October through late April. Admission to a single lecture generally cost 25¢ in the early years, rising eventually to 50¢, with reserved seats sometimes available at a premium. Higher ticket prices might also be charged for lecturers like Henry Ward Beecher or John B. Gough, whose fees were especially high. Course subscriptions were available at a discount, perhaps two dollars for a series of ten or twelve events. Subscribers were often given preferential seating. Subscriptions were important to lecture committees as a hedge against expenses, but single-ticket sales tended to be the determinant of profit or loss. It was generally agreed that the more prominent names, though charging higher fees, guaranteed a large house, and were better financial risks than the considerably cheaper relative unknowns. A single performance by John B. Gough could very well keep a series from falling into the red.

A typical course might consist of a travel lecture or two, some historical or biographical presentations, perhaps a popular science lecture, and a liberal dose of the general, essay-like strings of homilies and horse sense that were especially popular with lecture attendees. The term “course,” though perhaps retaining the educational connotations of the lyceum, may simply have referred to a regularly scheduled series of events, and was universally used to describe an organization’s lecture season. By the 1860s, according to J.G. Holland, the term “lecture” could broadly describe “any characteristic utterance of any man who speaks” in a lecture course. Controversial and political topics were, however, generally shunned until the climate of the 1860s invited changes in content. A course, Holland claimed, “might be more properly called a bundle, the bundle depending for its size on the managerial purse.”
A list of lectures given before the Salem Lyceum, one of the few early lyceums to survive beyond the 1840s, attests to the rapid transformation of the American lecture system. In the first course, given in 1830, nearly all of the lectures had titles like “Steam Engine,” “Optics,” “Geology,” and “Nervous System.” Of fifteen lectures, only four depart from this pattern: lectures on “Advantages of Knowledge” (appropriately, the opening lecture), “Authenticity of Ancient Manuscripts,” “Public Education,” and “Workingmen’s Party.” Only one lecturer that season was not a resident of Salem. In the third season, 1831–1832, 26 lectures were given. One third of the lecturers were non-Salemites. Among the topics that season were “History of Printing,” “Popular Superstitions,” “Character of Byron,” and “Present State of Greece.” Scientific lectures were already in the minority. In the fifteenth course, 1843–1844, of 21 lectures, only two were delivered by locals. A number of well-known individuals were represented, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Charles Francis Adams, Orestes A. Brownson and Wendell Phillips. Topics included “The New England Man” (Emerson), “Milton” (Adams), and “The Lost Arts” (Phillips). Only four scientific lectures were given that season. The twenty-fifth course, in the 1853–1854 season, opened with a concert by the Mendelssohn Quintette Club. The speakers represented a veritable Who’s Who of the American platform. Emerson spoke on “American Character.” Bayard Taylor, the most popular travel lecturer of his day, talked about “The Arabs.” Other lecturers included Thomas Starr King, George William Curtis, and Henry Ward Beecher. Wendell Phillips closed the course with his ever-popular “The Lost Arts.” There was nary a Salemite in the bunch.

By the mid-forties, the lecture system had become undeniably professionalized. Most lecturing was now done by men who spent between four and six months of the year as touring speakers. Yet while lecturing remained popular in many localities, quite a number of towns were left without regular series for some time after the demise of their lyceums. By the end of the decade a number of commentators were observing that the popularity of the lecture was in almost universal decline. This may have been due in part to the fact that organizations did not yet exist in the smaller towns to replace the defunct lyceums. In addition, it may have taken some time for what one might call the post-instructional lecture to become as widely embraced, by the local cultural arbiters if not the public at large, as the original lyceum. Furthermore, the supply of itinerant lecturers with national reputations was, at first, limited. Transportation logistics limited the area that a lecturer could cover comfortably, though the rapid expansion of the American railroads would eliminate that particular problem in a few short years. As the Cleveland Herald noted in November of 1852, “Three years since, at this season of the year, Cleveland was isolated. Cincinnati was four days distant; Pittsburgh was reached by two days journey through the mud; and New York was a far off city, cut off from us by four days staging and twenty-six hours of railroading over a flat rail variegated with sundry snake heads. Today we can breakfast in Cleveland and sup in Cincinnati, the same day finds us lodged at Leland’s Metropolitan in New York.”
CHAPTER 1

The 1840s, then, might best be seen as a transitional decade in which emergent forms were tested in selected markets, and during which a growing number of men entered the field of professional lecturing. New developments solidified over time and a stable of talent formed to supply a system that would expand considerably, in geography as well as magnitude. That expansion was not very long in coming.

By the early 1850s, and for a quarter century thereafter, organized public lecturing was one of the most popular forms of entertainment for middle-class America and one of media most influential in reinforcing the cultural values that historians now generally refer to as “Victorian.”

The term “Victorian” has, in recent years, become the label that cultural historians have preferred to apply to the mainstream, middle-class culture of nineteenth-century America. Standing for a value system that paralleled that of Queen Victoria’s England, the term, paradoxically, is perhaps more applicable to America than to the mother country. The values of middle-class Protestantism more easily attained hegemony in the United States than in England, where aristocratic cultural patterns remained strongly influential. Victorian values were very much the legacy of Puritanism—hard work, control of the passions, and the primacy of the family as a morality-shaping institution. The Victorian outlook was highly optimistic, and, rather than subscribing to an orthodox Calvinist belief in essential human depravity, American Victorians had an almost boundless faith in the possibility of self-improvement. It’s important to remember, however, that Victorian culture represented an ideal that was neither embraced by all Americans, nor always lived up to by those who did embrace it. Yet, as the ostensible value system of middle-class, Protestant America, Victorian ideals were consistently expressed and promoted by the influential media of the time, lectures as well as print forms. The term “Victorian” itself is best thought of as a useful, if problematic, historical construct. As one scholar of nineteenth-century thought has cautioned, “If we think that there once actually existed ‘Victorian culture’ we shall forever be hopelessly confused; if we recognize that ‘Victorian culture’ refers to a model and a construct and an operational fiction, we can use the term ‘Victorian’ with hope, though never with impunity.”

The public lecture platform of the 1850s and '60s was a performance counterpart to the new monthly magazines such as *Putnam’s*, *The Atlantic*, and *Harper’s*, that emerged in the same period. The range of lecture topics echoed (or was echoed by) the content of these magazines. The lecture system and the monthlies were bulwarks of Victorian values.

Many of the most popular lecturers happened to be men who edited or frequently contributed to the new journals. The magazines, not surprisingly, regularly published articles in praise of the popular-lecture system. Men like Thomas Wentworth Higginson, George William Curtis, Oliver Wendell Holmes and J.G. Holland wrote for magazines, lectured, and wrote for magazines about lecturing.

The lecturers and the magazine writers were, for the most part, educated, articulate members of a new American cultural elite that had emerged in the wake of a decline of the traditional wealth-based gentry. The values they represented
were in many ways the same as those that had fueled the original lyceums—virtue, moderation, propriety, and avoidance of trivial pursuits. In the several decades following the founding of the lyceums, a number of developments had provided opportunities for the once private scholar to earn his living as a public intellectual. Technological advances made printing faster and cheaper, while the U.S. postal system and other distribution networks for printed matter expanded considerably, encouraging a proliferation of periodicals at affordable prices. Lecture fees rose, and by the early 1850s $50 was a common evening’s take for a lecturer, while $25 was a minimum rate. The few most sought-after lecturers could command even higher fees. Beecher regularly charged $200, while Gough often, out of charity, settled for $100 in the smaller towns. To put these fees in perspective, the average daily wage for nonfarm employees across the nation in 1860 was a little over one dollar, while a skilled laborer in New York could earn about $2.50 for a 10-hour day. The going rate inspired one lecturer to claim that he lectured for “F.A.M.E.—$50 and my expenses.” An eloquent man could now feed his family quite well and exercise his civic duty at the same time. In Donald M. Scott’s words, these men had found “a satisfactory vocational outlet for their intellectual proclivities.”

Some of professional lecturers of the 1850s and ’60s had emerged from the lyceum system, Emerson being an obvious example. A number of men had cut their public-speaking teeth in front of more parochial reform organizations. Two of the most successful lecturers of the period were Wendell Phillips and John B. Gough. Phillips earned his first fame at abolition rallies, while Gough earned his at temperance meetings. A good percentage of public lecturers came from the ranks of the clergy, and lecturing was commonly referred to as “lay preaching.” The period’s most famous ordained preacher was Henry Ward Beecher. Beecher commanded the highest fees of any lecturer of the day. Noted scholars like Louis Agassiz of Harvard and Benjamin Silliman of Yale took time out from their college duties to present popular science lectures to the general public. Instructional lectures certainly had not disappeared entirely.

The popular lecture of the mid-nineteenth century was a species of what one might call middlebrow culture. Avoiding, for the most part, the sensationalism associated with lowbrow popular entertainments, the lecturers addressed topics such as literature, ethics and politics in a manner suited to a broad, popular audience. The appeal to a common denominator did not allow for much depth. As Thomas Wentworth Higginson summed it up, “there is no room for the subtile [sic] and evanescent, nor yet for the profound; but on the other hand you know that your broadest common-sense, your heartiest sympathy, your manliest courage, will be sure of appreciation.” The lecture system, Higginson suggested, “saves the philosopher from becoming a pedant, the student from being an intellectual voluptuary, and it places each in broad, healthy contact with his fellow-men.”

The most common type of lecture could be defined broadly as popular philosophy. George William Curtis opined that, “An American popular lecture is a brisk sermon upon the times. Whatever its nominal topic may be, the substance
of the discourse is always cognate to this people and this age."

Thousands of Americans heard “brisk sermons” with titles like “The Conduct of Life” (Emerson), “Modern Chivalry” (E.H. Chapin), “Loafing and Laboring” (Thomas Starr King), “The Ministry of the Beautiful” (Henry Ward Beecher), “The National Heart” (J.G. Holland), and “Clear Grit” (Robert Collyer). Print media, especially the popular press, had become so widely available as to obviate the platform or pulpit’s need to provide basic information. The lecture platform now took on a more ritual function, as J.G. Holland described it in 1865:

For facts alone the modern American public does not go hungry. American life is crowded with facts, to which the newspaper gives daily record and diffusion. Ideas, motives, thoughts, these are always in demand. Men wish for nothing more than to know how to classify their facts, what to do with them, how to govern them, and how far to be governed by them; and the man who takes the facts with which the popular life has come into contact and association, and draws from them their nutritive and motive power, and points out their relations to individual and universal good, and organizes around them the popular thought, and uses them to give direction to the popular life, and does all this with masterful skill, is the man whose houses are never large enough to contain those who throng to hear him. This is the popular lecturer par excellence.

Holland’s description of the ideal lecture is strikingly consistent with James W. Carey’s ritual model of communication, discussed earlier. The ritual or resonant nature of the popular lecture had also been described in the pages of Harper’s a number of years before Holland’s article appeared in The Atlantic. People have been informed and instructed by other means, a Harper’s editor granted, but, he asked, “What, now, can be a more signal benefit … than the opportunity, afforded by lectures, of reviewing their former acquirements and recovering their grasp of them? … The old furniture … is handsomely dressed; a good, glossy varnish is applied, stains and scratches disappear, and you can see your face again in the polished walnut and mahogany … The people should have their indistinct conceptions and anticipations made audible in [the lecturer’s] utterance, and their own heart throbs should come back to them in his inspiring eloquence.”

The media theorist Tony Schwartz has written of a resonance principle in communication. Similar in many ways to Carey’s ritual model, it derives its metaphors from acoustics and electronics rather than religion. Like Carey, Schwartz finds a sender/receiver model of communication inadequate. For Schwartz, “The vital question … is: What are the characteristics of the process whereby we organize, store, and act upon the patterned information that is constantly flowing into our brain? Further, given these processes, how do we tune communication to achieve the desired effect for someone creating a message?” Communication, in other words, is hardly a simple inscription of a specific “message” upon a tabula rasa. “Resonance,” Schwartz writes, “takes place when the stimuli put into our communication evoke
meaning in a listener or viewer… The listener’s or viewer’s brain is an indispensable component of the total communication system. His life experiences, as well as his expectations of the stimuli he is receiving, interact with the communicator’s output in determining the meaning of the communication.”

Though descriptive of a more modern communication environment, one in which people perpetually bathe in information supplied by electronic and other forms of media, Schwartz’s insights are, in fact, quite useful in understanding the dynamics of the nineteenth-century lecture hall. The popular lecture was one component of what had become, by the mid-nineteenth century, a rich media environment in which a multiplicity of verbal and print forms thrived and complemented each other. Nineteenth-century Americans were voracious readers, talkers and listeners.

Alexis de Tocqueville, in the 1830s, observed with wonder how taken all Americans were with oral performance. He noted that, “even the women frequently attend public meetings and listen to political harangues as a recreation from their household labors. Debating clubs are, to a certain extent, a substitute for theatrical entertainments: an American cannot converse, but he can discuss, and his talk falls into a dissertation. He speaks to you as he was addressing a meeting; and if he should chance to become warm in the discussion he will say ‘Gentlemen’ to the person with whom he is conversing.”

Oratory, Tocqueville noted, had been consumed by many Americans as a substitute for theatrical entertainment. It was also, arguably, a national literature, which Tocqueville felt America lacked. Well before the emergence of writers like Irving and Cooper, the speeches of the great Congressional triumvirate of Webster, Clay and Calhoun were apt to be discussed and criticized on literary grounds, and newspaper accounts of speeches devoted as much space to discussions of style and delivery as to synopses of subject matter. The passion of many nineteenth-century responses to oratory can be hard to fathom from today’s perspective. George Ticknor exclaimed, upon hearing Daniel Webster, “I was never so excited by public speaking before in my life. Three or four times I thought my temples would burst forth with the gush of blood.”

A symbiosis of oral and literary forms is especially evidenced by the popularity of elocution and oral interpretation in the nineteenth century. Oral interpretation was required study in most schoolrooms, and itinerant elocutionists toured the country giving performances and private lessons. Some of the greatest actors of the day gave dramatic readings from poetry, prose and drama for audiences who would never think of attending a stage play.

The communication theorist Walter J. Ong suggests that the popularity of elocution reflected nineteenth-century Americans’ “yearning for the old orality.” The spoken word allowed for a communal experience as contrasted with the private experience of reading. “Writing and print isolate,” writes Ong. “There is no collective noun or concept for readers corresponding to ‘audience.’” In the face of the isolating bias of an increasingly print-based culture, and retaining a memory of the communal
orientation of a culture grounded in orality, Americans popularized a hybrid form that utilized literary texts in ritualized interpersonal situations.\textsuperscript{47}

The mid-nineteenth-century lecture audience was a congregation of readers and talkers, as well as auditors. James Parton, describing an audience awaiting one of Greeley’s lectures, wrote that, “Every third man is reading a newspaper… Men are going about offering books for sale—perhaps Uncle Tom, perhaps a treatise on Water Cure, and perhaps Horace Greeley’s Hints toward Reforms… A good many free and independent citizens keep their hats on, and some ‘speak right out in meeting’ as they converse with their neighbors.”\textsuperscript{48}

The lecture itself was literary insofar as it was composed in writing, but its intended mode of presentation was oral. Though newspapers commonly printed summaries or (often corrupt) transcripts of lectures as newsworthy items, and many lectures were published subsequent to their original performance in books or pamphlets, their primary life was on the platform. Indeed, the most successful lectures do not necessarily read well in print because their authors were so well aware of the exigencies of oral presentation. Emerson transformed a number of his lectures into essays (that is, as opposed to those published as lectures), but in doing so he modified them for their printed incarnations.\textsuperscript{49} Some lecturers, Emerson and Mark Twain among them, were troubled by much of the newspaper coverage of their platform appearances. Among their complaints were that reviews often misrepresented the lecturer’s words, and that the wholesale reprinting of a lecturer’s intellectual property could hamper its future marketability (though there does not appear to have been much evidence that this was indeed the case).

When the lyceum movement began in the 1820s, printed matter was relatively scarce and the majority of Americans received most of their information through oral forms of communication. By the 1850s a proliferation of print media, as well as the development of new technologies such as photography and telegraphy, had rendered the informational burden of oratorical forms essentially obsolete.\textsuperscript{50} The new balance among media forms that had developed in two short decades significantly altered the nature of lecture content. The ritual function of reinforcing a value system promoted by a cultural elite, which had always been a component of the lyceum lecture, became more prominent through the popularity of the “lay sermon” type of lecture.

Another, in some ways contradictory, capability of the form was also seized upon at this time. The Putnam’s writer who called the lecture “the American theatre” made another equally significant observation. The lecture, he wrote, “secures to the insatiable Yankee the chance, for an hour long, of seeing any notability about whom he was curious.”\textsuperscript{51} The lecture platform, it became apparent, was the natural medium by which to present famous individuals before audiences eager for celebrity contact. While perhaps exaggerating the universal availability of celebrities to the platform, this writer’s claim nonetheless addressed what was quite likely the most prominent reason for many Americans’ attendance at lectures. Though it would not be until the end of the next decade that lecture series were formally dubbed “star courses,” many courses of the fifties could quite well have been so called. Now any famous lecturer
who by name alone, regardless of his ostensible subject, could fill a lecture hall was commonly accorded the title of star.

At first, popular lecturers were likely to be men with literary or oratorical leanings. Though some were already known for pursuits outside of lecturing, their stardom was essentially a product of their platform popularity. By the mid-fifties, however, quite a few individuals who had already achieved a level of name recognition through a wide variety of endeavors jumped on what had become a notoriously lucrative bandwagon. According to George William Curtis, “If a man had done any thing, from inventing a mermaid to writing a history, he was instantly bagged by the lecture committees and carried through the country. There was a natural and simple curiosity to see the man of whom much had been said; and the shortest and easiest way was to ask them to lecture.”

The lecture platform had proved itself a pliable medium. Though some lecturers were gifted speakers, the medium had never been subject to the expectations of oratorical virtuosity associated with deliberative and ceremonial speaking. The lecture platform was the only organized performance medium in which famous individuals who were not associated with the traditional performing arts could appear before the public for fee. All lecturers did speak on an advertised topic, and the expectation that a formal lecture would be an evening’s fare was rarely breached. But audiences who attended lectures by P.T. Barnum and Horace Greeley were presumably less interested in the ostensible message of the discourse than in the opportunity to see a celebrity in the flesh—to experience, in Goffman’s words, “preferential contact.” One might say that persona, more so than language, was the essential content of the star lecture.

J.G. Holland, though a constant critic of trends he considered unworthy of the lecture platform, understood the appeal of celebrity. “The popular desire,” he wrote, “is strong to come in contact with those who do remarkable things. They cannot be chased in the street; they can be seen only to a limited extent in the drawing room; but it is easy to pay twenty-five cents to hear them lecture, with the privilege of looking at them for an hour and criticizing them for a week.” Curiosity, however, was much more easily satiated than sustained. Beyond showing up at the appointed time and place, the star lecturer did have to deliver something memorable, be it a stimulating discourse or a less tangible, but perhaps equally pleasing, presentation of an engaging persona. “A man whose name is on the popular tongue,” Holland wrote, “will always draw one audience… After getting a place upon the platform, it is for him to prove his power to hold it.”

Successful star lecturers of the 1850s, in addition to those already mentioned, included politicians and statesmen such as Carl Schurz and Charles Sumner; Richard Henry Dana, author of the best-selling Two Years Before the Mast; the New England poet/wit John Godfrey Saxe; the arctic explorer Dr. Isaac I. Hayes; and William Makepeace Thackeray (who made two American tours).

Among the most popular platform events of the 1850s were the travel lectures of Bayard Taylor. Taylor, who often appeared on stage in exotic Arab or Russian garb, was a matinee idol of sorts. He wrote of his successes to a friend: “Crammed houses;
women carried out fainting; young ladies stretching their necks on all sides and crying in breathless whispers, ‘There he is! that’s him’ etc.” Recognition of that sort was bittersweet at best for a man who wanted to be remembered for his poetry.

Itinerant lecturers endured hard traveling and grueling schedules, but they were handsomely compensated. The most famous, naturally, commanded the highest fees. The biographer James Parton felt that the lecture system provided a means for great men to earn the sums they were truly due:

> Reputation, it has been discovered, will draw… That airy nothing is, through the instrumentality of the new institution, convertible into solid cash… Bayard Taylor roams over a great part of the habitable and uninhabitable globe. He writes letters to the Tribune, very long, very fatiguing to write on a journey, and not salable at a high price. He comes home and sighs, perchance, that there are no more lands to visit. “Lecture!” suggests the Tribune, and he lectures. He carries two or three manuscripts in his carpet bag, equal to half a dozen of his Tribune letters in bulk. He ranges the country, far and wide, and brings back money enough to carry him ten times round the world. It was his reputation that did the business. He earned that money by years of adventure and endurance in strange and exceedingly hot countries; he gathered up his earnings in three months—earnings which, but for the invention of lecturing, he would never have touched a dollar of… I praise [lecturing] because it enables the man of letters to get partial payment from the public for the incalculable services which he renders the public.55

The formidable fees commanded by platform stars like Taylor and Henry Ward Beecher led many critics to complain that greedy lecturers were gouging a public that deserved culture at a fair price. Parton expressed the other side of a debate about fame and compensation that continues to this day in regard to the astronomical sums earned by sports and entertainment stars. He was, however, hardly a disinterested observer, being a lecturer himself.

By the late 1850s, lecture courses, especially those in cities, were dominated by a small coterie of speakers with national reputations. The 1859–1860 course of the Franklin Lyceum in Providence, Rhode Island, featured a characteristic mix of popular philosophy, travel, popular history and big names:

- Bayard Taylor—“Moscow.”
- T. Starr King—“Existence and Life.”
- Wendell Phillips—“Street Life in Europe.”
- John G. Saxe—Poem—“Love.”
- George William Curtis—“Modern Infidelity.”
- Mrs. Sara J. Lippincott—“True Heroism.”
- Henry Ward Beecher—“Heads and Hearts.”
- Nathaniel P. Banks—“The Influences of Personal Character upon the Destiny of Empires.”56
A list of lecturers and topics from the same course only two seasons later testifies to an important change in direction, one that would characterize the lecture system throughout most of the 1860s:

SIXTEENTH COURSE—1860–1861.

Edward Everett—“The Nature, Origin, Progress, and Tendency of the Civil War in which we are engaged.”
George William Curtis—“National Honor.”
Edwin H. Chapin, D.D.—“The Power of the People.”
Wendell Phillips—“The War, or the Times.”
Rev. John Lord—“Great Rebellions.”
John B. Gough—“Here and There in Britain.”
Henry Ward Beecher—“The Beautiful.”
Mrs. George Vandenhoff—Readings. 57

George William Curtis observed in 1862 that, “The Lyceum this year has but one subject, as the newspapers and common conversation have. The lectures treat of the rebellion in a multitude of aspects; and there is no doubt that they will be of the utmost service in giving a more precise form to the faith of many honest, patriotic hearts.” 58

The national crisis of the Civil War forced a political coming of age upon the lecture system. The war was a subject that preoccupied the public; the lecture system could no longer skirt partisan issues. Still, as Curtis understood, it was a ritual, rather than expository, function that the platform served. The newspapers provided copious reports from the battlefield and the White House. The lecturers helped their public to live with that information. The titles of the lectures alone suggest that the “multitude of aspects” to which Curtis referred may have included historical, religious, moral, and nationalistic perspectives on the war. Newspaper reports told people what was happening; the lecturers helped them to grapple with what it meant.

A number of orators who had previously spoken primarily before political or reform organizations now appeared in the organized courses. One of the most prominent was Anna Dickinson, a young woman whose impassioned oratory was legendary. The popular lecture had characteristically been delivered at a simmer. Dickinson came with the fire of the partisan rally and brought things to a boil.

Though lecture audiences from at least the 1830s onward had included both sexes, women rarely spoke in public during the first half of the nineteenth century. The American public sphere was dominated by an Anglo-Saxon patriarchy that often resorted to the precedent of the Pauline injunction against women speaking in church in order to keep women silently in their place—the domestic or woman’s sphere. Women were welcome to be edified, but not to do the edifying. But with the rise of a number of reform movements, and women’s instrumental roles as leaders in those movements, it was perhaps inevitable that some women would emerge as public speakers. By the time of the Civil War significantly fewer obstacles stood in the
way of women who chose public speaking careers, though male critics and pundits tended to prefer those who behaved in a “ladylike” manner.59

Women had begun to appear in lecture courses even before the outbreak of the war. A few literary figures like Sara J. Lippincott (who published under the pseudonym Grace Greenwood) lectured in the late fifties. At about the same time actresses began to appear on the platform to perform dramatic readings, a new feature of many courses. But the popularity of political orators like Anna Dickinson and Mary Livermore during the war years helped to open the field to numerous prominent, politically oriented female speakers such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony.

One male lecturer who was much sought after during the war was Frederick Douglass. But Douglass was very much an exception; few African-Americans became popular lecturers.60

The Civil War may have encouraged new types of speakers to enter the field, but it naturally had certain deleterious effects. Due to economic factors, transportation problems, and the fact that many of the lecture committeemen and potential audience members were otherwise engaged, many courses were suspended, and lecturers were left scrambling for the remaining spots. George William Curtis wrote to Bayard Taylor in 1861 that he had, that year, “not more than half of the usual invitations.”

“Politics, long excluded by common consent, now threaten to exclude everything else,” Thomas Wentworth Higginson wrote in 1868.62 There was a grain of truth in this comment, but it was hardly the whole truth. To some degree all of the types of lecture that had been presented in previous decades could still be found. In addition, a number of new offerings were common in the 1860s. Now nearly all courses featured concerts and dramatic readings as well as lectures. Comic lectures became a prominent feature of the courses after Charles Farrar Browne, the creator of Artemus Ward, began to lecture in the early 1860s. By the end of the decade, lecture courses featured concerts, readings, a healthy dose of lay sermon, political oratory, early forms of stand-up comedy, and ample opportunities for a wide variety of celebrities to be seen and heard by the public. All of these elements would be exploited and marketed in a much more systematic fashion by lecture bureaus and “star courses” in the next decade.

NOTES

Though the term “lyceum” still had some currency by the 1850s, it was used less frequently than in previous decades. Commentators commonly used terms like “popular-lecture system,” or “system of public lectures” to distinguish the form from the original lyceum movement. By the late-sixties, however, the terms were used interchangeably.


Bode, p. 113.


Early American museums, such as Charles Wilson Peale’s institution in Philadelphia, were promoted and supported with much the same rhetoric of citizenship as the lyceums. See David R. Brigham, *Public Culture in the Early Republic: Peale’s Museum and its Audience* (Washington: Smithsonian, 1995); on rituals of citizenship in European as well as American museums, see Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

However, lest these rituals of citizenship as played out in the lecture hall and museum be idealized as evidence of such institutions’ inherently democratic nature, or employed as an unqualified defense of “civic” over “commercial” culture, a caveat is in order. As the cultural theorist Tony Bennett has suggested, such institutions can be seen as implements of social control. Bennett argues that nineteenth-century museums and expositions were employed as means to garner a consensus for the status quo. In Bennett’s words, “To identify with power, to see it as, if not directly theirs, then indirectly so, a force regulated and channelled by society’s ruling groups but for the good of all: this was the rhetoric of power embodied in the exhibitionary complex—a power made manifest not in its ability to inflict pain but by its ability to organize and co-ordinate an order of things and to produce a place for the people in relation to that order.” Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 67.

The humorist Charles Farrar Browne (“Artemus Ward”) satirized the ubiquitous “Recommendations” in the printed program for his lecture “The Mormons.” One of these read, in part, “My wife was dangerously unwell for over sixteen years… But in a fortunate moment she commenced reading one of your lectures. She got better at once… If you should require any more recommendations, you can get any number of them in this place, at two shillings each, the price I charge for this one… I am,
CHAPTER 1


The explorer Isaac I. Hayes, in 1856, had inquired of Bayard Taylor as to the prospects of securing some last minute bookings. Taylor replied that, “In nearly all the large towns … the societies will readily arrange lectures for you, outside of the course, making the remuneration depend on the attendance.” The Unpublished Letters of Bayard Taylor in the Huntington Library, ed. Jan Richie Schultz (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1937), p. 46.

For example, the officers of the Salem, MA, Young Men’s Union voted, on February 18, 1874, to invite Gough for a special lecture because the regular season just ended had been unprofitable. Young Men’s Union, Salem, MA, Papers, Essex Institute Library, Salem, MA. Hereinafter cited as YMU.


Emerson is perhaps an exception, but there is reason to believe that people flocked to see him in spite of, or even because of, the fact that he was “difficult.” “A Western agent is said to have justified Emerson’s continued popularity, not on the ground that people understand him, but that ‘they think such men ought to be encouraged.’” Thomas Wentworth Higginson, “The American Lecture System,” MacMillan’s Magazine 18 (May 1868), p. 55. See also Cayton, passim.
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50 On the cultural ramifications of the telegraph, see Thomas Standage, *The Victorian Internet* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).
51 “Lectures and Lecturers,” p. 317.
54 Hansen-Taylor and Scudder, p. 271.
55 Parton, p. 293.
61 Quoted in Mead, p. 124.