

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: SOMEWHERE THERE'S MUSIC: NANCY
 HAMILTON, THE OLD GIRLS' NETWORK, AND
 THE AMERICAN MUSICAL THEATRE OF THE 1930S
 AND 1940S

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Nancy Hamilton, a Broadway lyricist, playwright, actress, screenwriter, and Academy Award-winning filmmaker, is an important unsung figure of the twentieth century musical theatre. Although she is now remembered chiefly as the lyricist of the song “How High the Moon” and, in the recent drive to recover gay and lesbian history, the life-long romantic partner of “first lady of the American stage,” Katharine Cornell, Hamilton was a successful lyricist of the intimate revue, a genre of musical theatre that flourished during the 1930s. Her intimate revues *One for the Money* (1939) and *Two for the Show* (1940) launched the careers of luminaries of stage and screen, including Alfred Drake, Gene Kelly, and Betty Hutton, and *Three to Make Ready* (1946), which featured Ray Bolger, ran for an impressive 323 performances.

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Hamilton maintained a constant presence as employer or employee on Broadway, and it appeared that she thrived by surrounding herself with an Old Girls' Network of women with whom she maintained overlapping professional and romantic relationships. This previously unchronicled Old Girls' Network, which included women such as Katharine Hepburn, Beatrice Lillie, and Mary Martin, countered the established Old Boys' Network of popular entertainment and launched the careers of many well-known women performers, producers, directors, composers, and lyricists. Yet, even with the support of this network, Hamilton could barely sustain her career after the 1940s. This dissertation considers the successes and failures of Hamilton's career and suggests that Hamilton offers a fascinating case study that allows the historian to map a larger network of women on Broadway. The dissertation further considers how the story of Nancy Hamilton and her circle offers historians an opportunity to expand their analysis of American musical theatre to explore how a woman could use the "bottom-most" aspects of her identity -- her gender and (at times) sexuality -- to create a subaltern network and establish a career on Broadway. It further encourages musical theatre scholars to re-think the ways in which they document and tell the history of women in the musical theatre.

**SOMEWHERE THERE'S MUSIC: NANCY HAMILTON, THE OLD GIRLS'S
NETWORK, AND THE AMERICAN MUSICAL THEATRE OF THE 1930S AND
1940S**

by

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2005

Dedication

for
Stacey

Finally

Acknowledgments

In one interview Nancy Hamilton stated, “All writing is plain hard work. It does not spring as the goddess Minerva did from the brain of Jupiter, instantly and fully clothed.”¹ The same is true of a dissertation. Fortunately I had a number of people who made the hard work a little easier. I am grateful for the excellent institutional support I received. In particular, I want to thank Mary Ellen Rogan and Mark Maniak of the New York Performing Arts Library, Nanci Young of the Smith College Archives, Kathleen Banks Nutter of the Sophia Smith Collection, Alex Rankin of the Boston University Special Collection, Leslie Fields of the Morgan Library, the staff at the Library of Congress’s Manuscript Division and Performing Arts Reading Rooms, and Judy Markowitz and Mary Scott of the Michelle Smith Performing Arts Library at the University of Maryland. I am also grateful for the financial support of Smith College -- the Margaret Storrs Grierson Travel Grant allowed me to travel to their archives -- and the American Society for Theatre Research -- the Thomas F. Marshall Travel Fellowship helped me travel to the 2003 ASTR conference, where I received valuable feedback on my research.

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¹ Wambly Bald, “Bachelor Girl Makes Good on Broadway,” *New York Post*, 12 April 1946, Nancy Hamilton, Clippings in the Theatre Collections, The Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Performing Arts Library, New York.

correspondence, I discovered so many dimensions to her aunt. I cannot thank her enough for her time and her generosity.

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Introduction: “The Words May Be Wrong”

How high the moon is the name of this song.
How high the moon, though the words may be wrong.
We’re singing it.
Because you requested it.
So we’re swinging it, just for you.
How high the moon?
Does it touch the stars?
How high the moon?
Does it reach up to Mars?
Though the words may be wrong to this song.
We’re asking how high high high high high is the moon.

Ella Fitzgerald riffing on Nancy Hamilton’s lyrics
for “How High the Moon”¹

In 2003, as I was writing this dissertation, actress Katharine Hepburn died at age ninety-six. As I listened to the non-stop stream of retrospectives and read obituary after obituary, I realized that every one emphasized Hepburn’s penchant for pants, with statements similar to the *New York Times*’s obituary:

Society was catching up to [Hepburn’s] willful, independent style. She had been wearing pants, then considered quite unladylike, since the 1930s. In her 1993 television autobiography, she recalled: “I realized long ago that skirts are hopeless. Anytime I hear a man say he prefers a woman in a skirt, I say: ‘Try one. Try a skirt.’ Although she based her choice on comfort, her trademark trousered look became so influential that the Council of Fashion Designers of America gave her a lifetime achievement award in 1986.”²

¹ Ella Fitzgerald, “How High the Moon,” *That Old Black Magic*, Hip 9003, n.d., compact disc.

² Caryn James, “Katharine Hepburn, Spirited Actress, Dies at 96,” *The New York Times*, 30 June 2003, sec. A, page 1.

Pants made Hepburn a gender renegade and, because of the media's tendency to label women who challenge gender conventions as "firsts," they consistently eulogized Hepburn as a sartorial groundbreaker.

History and the entertainment industry love "firsts." But Hepburn, dazzling as she was, belonged to a *group* of women in the 1930s who challenged gender norms. My subject, Nancy Hamilton, was one of these women. Indeed, when she made her debut on the New York stage in the 1930s, Nancy Hamilton -- a Broadway actress, lyricist, playwright, and an Academy Award winning filmmaker -- seemed to be a mirror image of Kate Hepburn. In 1932, right before Hepburn left her relative obscurity in New York for her phenomenal fame on the screen, Hamilton overrode the objections of her parents and entered the world of Broadway theatre. Hamilton quickly landed a job understudying Hepburn in the Broadway production of *The Warrior Husband*, and throughout the 1930s newspaper articles frequently remarked on the similarities between the two women.

The comparisons were not unfounded. Born just one year apart, Hepburn and Hamilton were both the second child and first daughter in their respective families. They both attended women's colleges (Bryn Mawr and Smith) where they both excelled in theatre, particularly in performing male leads. Both women cultivated public personas colored by their upper class upbringing, and they behaved with the casual *insouciance* of the well-heeled. They were also, in the veiled parlance of the conservative 1930s, "athletic," and, as they did with Hepburn, the media seemed bent on insinuating that Hamilton was a transgressive woman. Articles about both women were rife with thinly coded intimations about their sexuality. Irene Selznick, who had been married to Hollywood producer David Selznick, even speculated that Hepburn and Hamilton at one

time had been romantically involved.³ And, like Hepburn, Hamilton frequently sported pants.

Nevertheless, despite the similarities between the women, Hamilton's and Hepburn's careers did not follow the same trajectories – unlike Hepburn, Hamilton remains a relatively obscure figure in both musical theatre history and women's history. Hepburn achieved international fame, and the barrage of eulogies after her death attests to the fact that she was still revered, even after her final reclusive years away from the public eye. Conversely, after the press dubbed her an actress on the ascent in the 1930s, Hamilton's fame faded. In the 1940s Hamilton opted to work behind the scenes as a lyricist, where it was more difficult for a woman to achieve public recognition. After the 1940s she toiled with little success, and by the 1950s, although she received some attention for her Academy Award-winning documentary, *Helen Keller in her Story* (1955), Hamilton's promising early career on Broadway was largely forgotten. Now, when she is remembered at all, it is usually as the lyricist for the song standard "How High the Moon" and, in the recent drive to recover gay and lesbian history, as the longtime romantic partner of the "first lady of the stage," Katharine (Kit) Cornell.

Some *have* recognized Hamilton's contributions to the American musical theatre. In 1946, the Woman's City Club of New York invited Hamilton to a reception celebrating "Thirty of New York's Distinguished Women Citizens," and in 1966 Hamilton was the guest of honor at an exhibition on musicals from the 1930s at the

³ Irene Selznick told Hepburn's biographer, "[Director] Dorothy Azner, Nancy Hamilton – all those women. [Hepburn's long time friend] Laura Harding. Now it all makes sense. A double gater. I never believed that relationship with Spence was about sex." A. Scott Berg, *Kate Remembered* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2003), 266.

Museum of the City of New York.⁴ In 1997, the Songwriter's Hall of Fame inducted "How High the Moon" as the "Towering Song."⁵ And, although she died in relative obscurity, her obituary in 1985 (which, unlike Hepburn's, was not front-page news) eulogized Hamilton as "one of the first women to succeed as a lyricist on Broadway."⁶

However, these few remembrances are anomalous; most histories of musical theatre neglect Hamilton's contributions. Even books specifically concentrating on the revue, the form in which Hamilton excelled, include only fleeting references to her material. Hamilton's relatively small body of work compounds the problem of her historical erasure. She left behind only four professionally produced revues, two unproduced "book musicals," one play, two documentaries, some "ghost written" material (that is difficult to attribute) and scattered songs and sketches written for friends. Hamilton's career and lyrics have been eclipsed by the contributions of her more renowned contemporaries, such as Cole Porter, Lorenz Hart, Ira Gershwin, and Dorothy

⁴ Invitation from The Woman's City Club of New York, New York, to Nancy Hamilton, New York, 1946, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Performing Arts Library, New York; Telegram from the Museum of the City of New York, New York, to Nancy Hamilton, New York, 12 February 1967, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

⁵ According to the Songwriter's Hall of Fame website, "The 'Towering Song Award' honors outstanding songs by writers who may not have an extensive catalogue of hits and who have not been inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame." "Towering Song," Songwriters Hall of Fame, 2004; available from <http://www.songwritershalloffame.org/>; Internet; accessed 2 January 2004.

⁶ "Nancy Hamilton, Lyricist, 76, Dies," *New York Times*, 19 February 1985, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection. This statement is incorrect; there were several successful women lyricists who predated Hamilton. For more information on these women, see Korey Rothman Bradley, "Women Wordsmiths: Female Lyricists in the American Musical Theatre from 1866 to 1943," (M.A. Thesis, University of Maryland, 1999).

Fields, and the revisions of song interpreters who took ownership of her material, like Ella Fitzgerald and jazz saxophonist Charlie Parker.⁷ It seems that Ella Fitzgerald's inadvertent suggestion was eerily prophetic -- Hamilton's words *are* "all wrong."

So why a study on Nancy Hamilton? I discovered Hamilton while writing my master's thesis on women lyricists of the pre-*Oklahoma!* musical theatre. Initially I admired what I perceived as Hamilton's ability to make money as a professional lyricist. Some of the women I researched used songwriting to wile away the dull hours of a luxurious life, bankrolled by inheritances or wealthy husbands. But Hamilton was a working woman, at times supporting herself by writing for the theatre. Further, although she produced a comparatively small body of work, her revues enjoyed relative success throughout the 1930s and 1940s. *One for the Money* (1939) and *Two for the Show* (1940) each ran for more than one-hundred performances and launched the careers of luminaries of stage and screen, including Alfred Drake, Gene Kelly, Betty Hutton, and Eve Arden. *Three to Make Ready* (1946), which featured Ray Bolger, ran for an impressive 323 performances.

I found myself further fascinated by the anecdotes that surrounded Hamilton. She produced the first coed theatrical production at Smith by sneaking Amherst students on-stage.⁸ She claimed that she wrote her first revue to avoid a diet of popcorn.⁹ Hamilton audaciously refuted the critics who called her classist by insisting that she thought the

⁷ Parker based his trademark saxophone tune, "Ornithology," on the chord changes of "How High the Moon."

⁸ Unidentified Newspaper Clipping, Nancy Hamilton, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

⁹ Bald, "Bachelor Girl Makes Good on Broadway."

Stork Club was a maternity center.¹⁰ She reputedly gave “the very best parties in the old days”; she hosted a birthday party for Katharine Cornell’s husband, director Guthrie McClintic, during which McClintic’s gifts descended from the sky in a pink parachute.¹¹ She had a curmudgeonly side as well -- after exhausting herself whistling at the myna birds at the London Zoo, Hamilton grumbled, “Never did like birds anyway.”¹²

My research uncovered not only entertaining anecdotes and Hamilton’s witty personality, but also a body of articles on and interviews with Hamilton that were loaded with innuendo about Hamilton’s sexual orientation. One article reported on the “faint touch of severity in her get-up, her sleek, boyish haircut, dark tailored clothes, navy-blue beret”; another columnist noted that Hamilton shared “a cozy midtown apartment” with actress Brenda Forbes.¹³ After describing Hamilton’s “silver-glinted dark hair in boyish waves,” the *New Bedford Standard-Times* (Massachusetts) asserted that Hamilton “has become virtually a member of the household at Chip-Chop, the romantic Tisbury summer place of her friends Miss Katharine Cornell and Guthrie McClintic.”¹⁴ Then one day, at

¹⁰ Douglas Gilbert, “She Thought Her Revue Was Kidding Capital, Until the Critics Found it Capitalistic,” *New York World-Telegram*, Nancy Hamilton, Clippings in the Theatre Collections, The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

¹¹ Paul Monette, *Last Watch of the Night: Essays Too Personal and Otherwise* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994), 36; Tad Mosel and Gertrude Macy, *Leading Lady: The World and Theatre of Katharine Cornell*, with an introduction by Martha Graham (Boston: An Atlantic Monthly Press Book, 1978), 437.

¹² Brenda Forbes, *Five Minutes, Miss Forbes* (Chelsea, MI: Fairmile Press, 1994), 97.

¹³ Michael Mok, “Not Even a Cat May Quip at a Queen, But Our First Lady Smiles at Satire,” Nancy Hamilton, Clippings in the Theatre Collections, The Billy Rose Theatre Collection Performing; Bald, “Bachelor Girl Makes Good on Broadway.”

¹⁴ *New Bedford Standard-Times* (Massachusetts), n.d., Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

the New York Performing Arts Library, as I handed in my requests for the clippings files of Hamilton and Cornell, an elderly archivist whispered, “You know they were lovers.” Later Hamilton’s nieces confirmed the gossip I heard in the archives. All of these revelations changed the ways I understood the anecdotes surrounding Hamilton and the ways I unpacked the codes of sexuality across the historical divide.

But most critically, the rumors surrounding Hamilton helped me connect her to an underground network of women working in the commercial theatre. When I wrote my Master’s thesis I was struck by Hamilton’s frequent appearances in articles about the other women I researched -- she was the protégé of one (Elsie Janis), she ghost wrote for another (Ann Ronell), and she loaned her material for use in a fund-raiser to a third (Agnes Morgan). In the early twentieth century, David Belasco, the Theatrical Syndicate, and the Shubert Brothers concretized the “Old Boys’ Network,” a patriarchal model of theatrical production that became the blueprint for later twentieth-century theatre. But throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Hamilton maintained a constant presence as employer or employee, and it appeared that she thrived by surrounding herself with an Old Girls’s Network of women, with whom she maintained overlapping life-long professional and personal relationships.¹⁵

However, as I delved deeper into Hamilton’s biography, career, and lyrics, I did not discover, as I had hoped, that Hamilton was a prolific but forgotten genius. I instead

¹⁵ Some historians have described versions of this network as the “Sewing Circle.” According to writer Axel Madsen, the origins of the “sewing circle” can be traced to actress Alla Nazimova, who, after producing a film of *Salome* with an all-gay cast, used the term to describe a “sapphic set” of actresses and writers in her circle. Later the term came to refer to a “loose network of lesbians in the performing arts.” Axel Madsen, *The Sewing Circle: Hollywood's Greatest Secret, Female Stars Who Loved Other Women* (New York: A Birch Lane Press Book, 1995), 14.

learned that, despite her dogged efforts, Hamilton could barely sustain her career after the 1940s. Nor did I discover that her work was a bounty of overlooked merit. In comparison with luminaries of her era, like Porter, Hart, Gershwin, and Fields, Hamilton was substandard, both as a songwriter and as a theater professional. And despite her involvement in women's business networks, I did not find in Hamilton a crusading feminist who used her lyrics to advance women's causes. Indeed, Hamilton's friend Joe Whitmore remembered that although Hamilton admired strong women (including Eleanor Roosevelt) she disliked the label feminist, and she rejected a figure such as Gloria Steinem, whom she thought too aggressive in her politics.¹⁶

But I came to realize that Hamilton's professional failures and personal choices make her an especially compelling subject for study. And I found myself with a number of queries. Why, with influential friends like Katharine Cornell, Beatrice Lillie, Billie Burke, and Mary Martin, could Hamilton not sustain a moneymaking career on Broadway or in Hollywood? Why, in an environment that rewarded socially conscious theatre, did Hamilton choose to satirize the political and social mores of the left? Why, with an Academy Award for her documentary, *Helen Keller in Her Story*, did Hamilton never secure critical acclaim for her other work? And, ultimately, what can a woman's successes and failures reveal about the interworkings of the commercial musical theatre during the first half of the twentieth century?

Thus, in answer to the question "why a dissertation on Nancy Hamilton?" I suggest that Hamilton's fifty-year career offers a fascinating case study. The successes and failures of her career allow the historian to map a larger network of women

¹⁶ Joseph Whitmore, Interview by author, 20 July 2002, Martha's Vineyard, MA.

performers, producers, directors, composers, and lyricists on Broadway. Some of these women are famous, some are now forgotten, but all were laboring within an Old Girls's Network, which, unlike the parallel Old Boys's Network, these women forged at Thanksgiving dinners and beach parties. The women strengthened the network in living rooms and bedrooms, not boardrooms. The story of Nancy Hamilton and her circle offers historians an opportunity to expand their analysis of American musical theatre to explore how a woman could use the "bottom-most" aspects of her identity -- her gender and sexuality -- to create a subaltern network and establish a career on Broadway.

Research Methods

One immediate challenge I faced in my research was the lack of evidence surrounding Hamilton, who was both figuratively and, at times, literally, buried in a closet of historical erasure. As with most of the female lyricists of the pre-*Oklahoma!* era, histories of musical theatre largely exclude Hamilton. Although there are a smattering of references to her major works -- *New Faces of 1934* and the *One for the Money* series of revues -- in general histories of the musical theatre, there are no significant studies of Nancy Hamilton's life, career, or corpus. She is a footnote in the biographies and autobiographies of her associates, including Katharine Cornell, Guthrie McClintic, Brenda Forbes, Elsie Janis, Katharine Hepburn, Helen Keller, Beatrice Lillie, Leonard Sillman, and Noel Coward.

But Hamilton seemed to have some consciousness and concern for her own legacy. She divided her material into two collections. One, which she donated to her alma mater, Smith College's Sophia Smith Collection, is a collection of Hamilton's

papers related to the making of *Helen Keller in Her Story*. The other collection, which focuses specifically on her theatre work, is at the New York Performing Arts Library.

However, Hamilton also did much to confuse and cloud her own legacy by subordinating her own achievements. I interviewed the executor of Hamilton's will and learned that Hamilton donated a collection of her papers to the New York Performing Arts Library. But tracking down the physical material proved difficult because, since Hamilton's primary concern was for the legacy of Katharine Cornell, she catalogued her own papers (as well as the papers of their mutual business manager, Gertrude Macy) within the Cornell collection. But because the Cornell collection is not fully processed, it is not available to the public and there is no official indication in the library's catalogues that the facility houses Hamilton's papers. In what turned out to be an archival metaphor for Hamilton's career, her work was lost in Cornell's. When I finally did track down the Hamilton papers, I discovered they were unprocessed. My experience with the New York Performing Arts Library demonstrated how archives perpetuate historical erasure; history buries a figure deemed unimportant, making recovery efforts especially difficult.

But because the collection at the New York Performing Arts Library was unprocessed by archivists, when I secured access to the papers they yielded fascinating clues into how Hamilton organized her own legacy to emphasize her business interactions and her concern with preserving some of her unpublished material. What the collection omitted was access to Hamilton's private life. The contents of the two official collections of Hamilton's papers revealed how assiduously she attempted to hide her sexuality from posterity; between the two collections there was only one direct reference to Hamilton's sexuality (a journal entry in 1934 that complained that producer Leonard Sillman was

spreading rumors that she was a lesbian) and a part of a love poem to Cornell that Hamilton likely preserved by accident (it was a small scrap of papers stuck between two larger pieces of paper).¹⁷ As theatre historian Lesley Ferris observes, it is difficult to recover information “that for the most part has been deliberately obscured or erased from history,” and Hamilton’s case bore out the truth of this statement.¹⁸

Thus, I was especially fortunate to have the aid and enthusiasm of three of Hamilton’s nieces: Nancy Smart, Martha Hamilton, and Sally Hamilton, who shared their memories of their aunt in a series of interviews. A trip to Martha’s Vineyard to interview Sally Hamilton also yielded a treasure trove of evidence. Sally allowed me access to Hamilton’s diaries, journals, appointment books, scrapbooks, personal photo albums, and letters to and from her mother.¹⁹ Sally also helped me contact some of Hamilton’s surviving family members and friends. These materials and interviews offered me access to the private Hamilton. I discovered she could be witty, eccentric, and, at times, cuttily cruel. Like a window into a forbidden private world, I held in my hand pictures of Hamilton and Katharine Cornell dressed up like grand dames and photos Hamilton took of Cornell and McClintic in the nude. I saw Cornell and Hamilton on adjacent ladders, together building their house on Martha’s Vineyard, and I saw a less than dapper Noel Coward at one of Cornell’s birthday parties. I read the letter that

¹⁷ Diary of Nancy Hamilton, 5 October 1934, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

¹⁸ Lesley Ferris, “Kit and Guth: A Lavender Marriage on Broadway,” in *Passing Performances: Queer Readings of Leading Players in American Theater History*, with a preface by Jill Dolan, eds. Robert A. Schanke and Kim Marra (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1998), 198.

¹⁹ It seems that on her mother's death Hamilton's letters were returned to her as Sally has both sides of their correspondence.

Hamilton's mother sent her to tell her that her brother, Marshall, was missing in action in World War II. And I obtained a fuller picture of the woman than I could find in her archived public papers, which focused exclusively on her career.

Further, throughout my research I found myself fascinated by the intricate overlaps between the public and private lives that Hamilton strove to keep separate, and I grappled with how to reconcile the two spheres. Scholars of women's history, such as Adrienne Rich, Lillian Faderman, and Blanche Wiesen Cook, identify a range of relationships, including romantic encounters, friendships, and business arrangements, as lesbian relationships. In a now famous essay, Cook complicated the division between lesbian relationships, professional relationships, and female friendship, writing, "women who love women, who choose women to nurture and support and to create a living environment in which to work independently and creatively are lesbians."²⁰ Historian Lillian Faderman similarly notes that "lesbian," "describes a relationship in which two women's strongest emotions and affections are directed toward each other."²¹ Rich describes a lesbian continuum that encompasses a broad spectrum of relationships:

I mean the term lesbian continuum to include a range...of women identified experiences, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital experience with another woman. If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support...we begin to grasp the breadths of female history and psychology which have

²⁰ Blanche Wiesen Cook, "Women Alone Stir My Imagination': Lesbians and the Cultural Tradition," *Signs* 4 (1971): 739.

²¹ Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (London: The Women's Press, 1981), 17.

lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical, definitions of “lesbians.”²²

But others scholars have been troubled that Rich’s continuum elides the distinctions between homosocial and homosexual encounters, and the difference remains a subject of intense debate for theorists of women’s history. The issue of whether the sex act, natural inclinations, self-definition, participation in a subculture, or combinations of the above constitutes the term “lesbian” remains heavily contested ground.²³ As theorist Tamsin Wilton states, “Arriving at a working definition of ‘lesbian’ is fraught with difficulty and contradictions, there is no consensus about what defines a ‘lesbian.’”²⁴ Theorist Diana Fuss goes into more depth, “The lack of consensus and the continued disputes amongst feminists over the definition of ‘lesbian’ pivot centrally around the question of essentialism. Exactly who is a lesbian? Is there such a thing as a lesbian essence? Can

²² Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” in *Women: Sex and Sexuality*, ed. Catharine R. Stimpson and Ethel Spector Person (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 79-80.

²³ Discussion of the meanings of a lesbian identity and the related idea of queer theory could easily be its own dissertation. For a more thorough discussion of the controversy surrounding this idea see Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality,” Cook, “Women Alone,” Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth Century America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), Martha Vicinus, ed., *Lesbian Subjects: A Feminist Studies Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), Nicky Hallett, *Lesbian Lives: Identity and Auto/Biography in the Twentieth Century* (London: Pluto Press, 1999), Tamsin Wilton, *Lesbian Studies: Setting an Agenda* (New York: Routledge, 1995), Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), Donald E. Hall, *Queer Theories* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), Richard Norton, *The Myth of the Modern Homosexual* (Washington DC: Cassell, 1997), and Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking* (London: Routledge, 1989).

²⁴ Wilton, 29.

we speak of a ‘lesbian mind?’”²⁵ Defining Hamilton’s relationship with the women of her circle presents similar paradoxes and challenges to those the theorists outline.

And Hamilton complicates the story of her sexuality because she did not, in her papers, choose to self-identify as a lesbian. I found it important to be mindful of historian Leila Rupp’s inquiry, “We may privately believe that all the evidence suggests that a woman was a lesbian, but what do we do if she insisted, either explicitly or implicitly, that she was not?”²⁶ Historian Martha Vicinus laments the driving need of those studying lesbian history to “know for sure,” a conceptualization that she fears has privileged the self-identified woman.²⁷ As an alternate model, Vicinus, “argues for the possibilities of the ‘not said’ and the ‘not seen’ as conceptual tools for lesbian studies.”²⁸ Theatre historians Robert Schanke and Kim Marra similarly remind readers that:

Most people’s sexual desires -- straight or queer -- have not been conclusively documented with direct forms of proof.... To recover our subjects’ subaltern desires and their historical impact we have had to build circumstantial cases in which all evidence is relative and most is ersatz. The process is one of reading multiple signs.²⁹

²⁵ Fuss, 44.

²⁶ Leila J. Rupp, “‘Imagine My Surprise’: Women’s Relationships in Mid-Twentieth Century America,” in *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, eds. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr. (New York: Meridian, 1989), 395.

²⁷ Vicinus, ed., *Lesbian Subjects*, 2.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Kim Marra and Robert Schanke, “Introduction,” in *Passing Performances: Queer Readings of Leading Players in American Theater History*, with a preface by Jill Dolan, eds. Robert A. Schanke and Kim Marra (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1998), 7.

As an example of one of these multiple signs, Hamilton wrote, in a letter to her brother Marshall, which, because of his wartime duties with the Merchant Marines, the military censors would have expurgated:

Kit [Cornell] has just looked over my shoulder -- I am at Sneden's for the weekend and say this letter will never get to you because I have written it so widely and loosely on the page and the mail won't handle it. I thought for a minute of turning the pages upside down and finishing it between the lines, but I guess that wouldn't do either. So you just read between the lines dear and know that all that waste [sic] space is full of love and dear thoughts.³⁰

As Hamilton suggested to her brother, she allowed wide spaces for her family, the women of her circle, and the public to “read between the lines.” Literary theorist Patrice Petro reminds historians that uncovering women’s history, “necessarily entails a critical or transformed history and not a history predicated on the (illusory) fullness of empirical detail.”³¹ In order to understand Hamilton I, likewise, found myself constantly engaged in an act of reading between the lines.³²

³⁰ Nancy Hamilton, New York, to Marshall Hamilton, 7 November 1942, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton, Martha's Vineyard, MA. (16). Sneden's Landing was Cornell's home on the Hudson River, outside of New York City.

³¹ Patrice Petro, *Joyless Streets: Women and Melodramatic Representation in Weimar Germany* (NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 233.

³² For an interesting suggestion of ways to understand the papers of a woman see Estelle B. Freedman's essay on writing the biography of prison reformer Miriam Van Waters. Freedman writes that Waters's “case suggests the ways that some women could simultaneously internalize, resist, manipulate, and ignore the cultural constructions of sexuality in their times. Above all, her story reminds us to look beyond our sources, to read both silences and speech, and, at times, to accept the historical integrity of elusive personal identities.” See Estelle B. Freedman, “The Burning of Letters Continues”: Elusive Identities and the Historical Construction of Sexuality,” *Journal of Women's History* 9, No. 4 (Winter 1998): 181-200.

To understand fully both what was said and what was not said about Nancy Hamilton, I also found it critical to acknowledge the ways her career trajectory embedded itself in the development of American musical theatre, especially the transitional period between the intimate revues popular in the thirties and the book musicals of the forties. Musical theatre scholar Stacy Wolf argues that scholars have long neglected musical theatre:

Until recently, musical theatre occupied a space where few ideologically invested scholars (including feminists) would admit they like to traffic. Scholars have ignored or trashed musical theatre as popular culture, and most published scholarly texts tended to be positivist histories, formalist analyses, or thinly veiled tracts of adoration. In the past few years, though, work in cultural studies on Hollywood musicals has generated a considerable body of useful theory and criticism, reminding theatre scholars that ‘entertainment’ does much ideological work.³³

Theatre scholars such as Wolf, Andrea Most, Bruce McConachie, and, most recently, David Savran, are beginning to suggest ways to unlock the significant cultural work done by America’s most popular theatrical form.³⁴ As Most writes: “a close reading of the text, music, and performance strategies of a work of popular musical theatre can illuminate not only the complexities of the form itself, but also the multiple cultural and

³³ Stacy Wolf, “The Queer Pleasure of Mary Martin and Broadway: ‘The Sound of Music’ as a Lesbian Musical,” *Modern Drama* 39 (1996): 51-2.

³⁴ See, for example, Stacy Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002); Andrea Most, “‘You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught’: The Politics of Race in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *South Pacific*,” *Theatre Journal* 52, no. 3 (2000): 307-337; Andrea Most, *Making Americans : Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); Bruce McConachie, “The ‘Oriental’ Musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein and the U.S. War in Southeast Asia,” *Theatre Journal* 46 (1994): 385-98, and David Savran, *A Queer Sort of Materialism: Recontextualizing American Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003).

political forces at work in the moment of its creation.”³⁵ These scholars, however, have focused their efforts on musical comedies and the integrated musical, concentrating much of their analysis on the musicals of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein, II. This dissertation will draw on the foundation these scholars have provided in order to consider the ways Hamilton’s career interrelates with the cultural functioning of the intimate revue

Chapter Structure

Following the lead of the historians of the second wave of feminism, my dissertation strives to recover the work of a woman lost in the annals of theatre history. But Hamilton’s biography is especially interesting in what it reveals about systems of power on Broadway. Hamilton did not shove her way into the existing Old Boys’s Network like fellow female lyricist Dorothy Fields (daughter of vaudevillian Lew Fields) who, when asked “How to write a song?” replied, “I suppose a good method is to arrange to be born into a theatrical family.”³⁶ Instead, Hamilton used women-centered business connections to jockey for position in her private and professional life. I use Hamilton’s biography as a case study for how musical theatre scholars might re-think the ways in which they document and tell the history of women in the musical theatre and, consequently, the development of the musical theatre throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

Chapter One, “‘New Faces’: Introducing Nancy Hamilton,” explores the making of a musical theatre artist. I trace Hamilton’s privileged upbringing, her early interest in

³⁵ Most, “The Politics of Race in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific*,” 310.

³⁶ Henry Kane, *How to Write a Song* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1962), 158.

theatre, the ways she developed those skills in the rarefied atmosphere of Smith College, and her nascent career in New York. I set this against the tradition of women lyricists that flourished in the Jazz Age as the American musical transitioned away from the European operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan, Victor Herbert, and Sigmund Romberg.

Chapter Two, “‘Women Who Could So Amuse’: Nancy Hamilton and the Old Girls’ Network,” probes Hamilton’s entrance into the competitive world of the Great White Way. In this chapter, I trace Hamilton’s efforts to draw on a professional network that would advance her career. I argue that Hamilton insinuated herself into one of the least-studied and least visible networks in the early twentieth century theatre – an Old Girls’s Network that was founded on overlapping professional, personal, and romantic liaisons. I also consider how Hamilton’s association with this network produced the most significant and long-lasting relationship of her life -- her romantic partnership with Katharine Cornell.

Chapter Three, “‘Blah, Blah, Blah’: Nancy Hamilton as Broadway Lyricist,” investigates Hamilton’s techniques as a lyricist, setting her lyrics against the lyricists of the musical theatre pantheon. I also consider Hamilton as a political and social observer. In an era in which “Songs of Social Significance” were the norm, Hamilton penned lyrics that satirized the political positions of both left and the right. She took aim at the pretensions of the debutantes and socialites who waltzed through the Depression years in seeming oblivion, as well as the earnest agit-prop theatre of Clifford Odets, Marc Blitzstein, Harold Rome, and the International Ladies Garment Workers’s Union, which she derided as beyond the proper province of popular entertainment. I suggest that Hamilton’s Depression-era shows, especially *One for the Money*, pose an intriguing

challenge to the historian because, although Hamilton's ridicule of leftist lyricists offers a cogent critique of the failure of Depression-era theatre to compel audiences to direct social action, her refusal to tow the "party line" made her a lightning rod for critics enamored of shows like *The Cradle Will Rock* and *Pins and Needles*. I also look at how, after Rodger and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* made the book musical the dominant form of musical theatre, Hamilton attempted to adjust to new demands for form and content.

Chapter 4: "'When I am Old and Eighty': The End of Nancy Hamilton's Career," considers what happened to Hamilton after her musical theatre career fizzled. Looking at her choice of networks, her public and private personas, and trends in the business of musical theatre, this chapter offers insights into why Hamilton had difficulty finding success in the mid-century Golden Age of the musical. I consider how Hamilton's relationship with Cornell was, ultimately, the Achilles heel in Hamilton's attempts to sustain a career in the theatre, and I suggest how the limitations of Hamilton's network ultimately stifled her development as an artist.

As I embarked on the dissertation, I was constantly mindful of the warnings of Carolyn Heilbrun in *Writing a Woman's Life*:

Let any woman imagine for a moment a biography of herself based upon those records she has left, those memories fresh in the minds of surviving friends, those letters that chanced to be kept, those impressions made, perhaps, on the biographer who was casually met in the subject's later years. What secrets would, on the subject's death, be lost forever? How much would have vanished or been distorted or changed, even in our memories? We tell ourselves stories of our past, make fictions or stories of it, and these narrations become the past, the only part of our lives that is not submerged.³⁷

³⁷ Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1988), 51.

Heilbrun's words encourage the historian to remember that biography is always tenuous and contingent. But my hope in this dissertation is to correct some of the "words that are wrong," by liberating Nancy Hamilton from the closet of musical theatre history and encouraging new perspectives on America's premier popular theatrical form.

Chapter One: “New Faces”: Introducing Nancy Hamilton

You may know the Piermont Morgans of Tuxedo and New York
Although it's hard to get to know them quickly
You may know that whiskey's better if you do not drink the cork,
But nobody knows Nancy Hamilton of Sewickley.
“Untitled Draft,” Nancy Hamilton¹

Indeed, it seems no one does know Nancy Hamilton of Sewickley. But the images of Hamilton that circulated in newspapers and magazines of the 1930s and 1940s, as well as candid shots preserved in family scrapbooks, reveal a good deal about her. One of the most telling belongs to Hamilton's niece, Nancy Smart (see Figure 1). In the photograph Hamilton stares directly, almost defiantly, into the camera, capturing what her niece, Sally Hamilton, remembers as her way of fluttering her eyes, “the way women use a fan.”² Hamilton's flirtatious grin tempers the impertinence of her stare. The hat hides Hamilton's short haircut (which contemporary newspapers often described as masculine), and her stylization seems eccentric by the standard of the 1940s.³ The remains of an alcohol-drenched party surround her, memorializing the socializing and liquor that seemed constants for her; Katharine Cornell's biographer Tad Mosel called her “A prodigious maker of plans and planner of junkets, an indefatigable mixer,

¹ Nancy Hamilton, *Untitled Draft (Probably for New Faces of 1934)*, n.d., Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection. Hamilton frequently did not date her drafts. But by tracing the addresses on her writing paper and letterhead it is possible to approximate the dates when the drafts were written.

² Sally Hamilton, Interview by author, 4 June 2001, Cambridge, MA.

³ Although the picture does not have a date, (based on Hamilton's appearance) it was probably taken in the 1940s.



Figure 1. Nancy Hamilton (undated photograph).
From the Personal Collection of Nancy Smart, La Plata, MD.

collector, and maker of friends.”⁴ Hamilton also was, by all accounts, an inveterate drinker. Sally describes Hamilton as a “high functioning alcoholic,” and her capacity for alcohol consumption featured prominently in the recollections of those who knew her.⁵

Accounts of Hamilton’s continual parties and dissipated habits suggests that by the end of her career she had left her Protestant roots in Sewickley, Pennsylvania, a suburb of Pittsburgh, far behind. In this chapter I will consider Hamilton’s formative years in Sewickley, her time at Smith College, and her early career as an actress in New York, mapping her route out of suburban mainstream America into more perilous territory. And, as it is impossible to separate the biographical subject from her historical context, I will also explore how the shifting discourses surrounding gender, sexuality, and social class at the beginning of the twentieth century shaped the ways Hamilton stylized her private and public persona as she embarked on her theatrical career.

The Hamilton Family

Hamilton’s family played a significant role in the growth of Pittsburgh, a city dominated by the Carnegie and Mellon families throughout the nineteenth century. Samuel Hamilton, Nancy Hamilton’s paternal grandfather, who in 1885 built Pittsburgh’s first skyscraper, laid the foundation of Hamilton’s understanding of the marriage of art

⁴ Mosel, *Leading Lady*, 437.

⁵ Sally Hamilton, Interview by author, 19 June 2002, Martha's Vineyard, MA. As a personal drink Hamilton favored scotch and water, but Joe Whitmore, Hamilton’s friend and the executor of her estate, remembered fondly her Beach Plum Gin, a cordial that she poured into grape-shaped bottles and gave as gifts. Whitmore, Interview, 20 July 2002. Television personality Tom Snyder, Hamilton's Manhattan neighbor in the 1970s, recalled that Hamilton brought a thermos with cocktails on trips from Manhattan to her home on Martha's Vineyard, savoring what she described as “a swallow for the road.” Tom Snyder, Phone Interview by author, 22 September 2002, Beverly Hills, CA.

and capitalism. Called the “Pride of Pittsburgh,” the building housed Hamilton’s large piano business. A patron of the arts as well as a successful entrepreneur, Samuel sang to the accompaniment of his own pianos, oversaw the Pittsburgh Symphony, and founded Pittsburgh’s Junior Orchestra. Samuel, who had had youthful aspirations to the ministry, also supported religious organizations, singing in the choir of the United Presbyterian Church and serving as Choirmaster of Wesley Chapel M. E. Church.⁶ He even hosted Protestant evangelist Dwight L. Moody’s visit to Pittsburgh and led music for his revival tour.⁷ Music, it seems, was a family fixture; Samuel’s daughter, Frances, was a published composer of religious songs.⁸

In 1908, the same year that Samuel died, Nancy Hamilton was born in Sewickley, the second child of Charles Hamilton and Margaret Marshall Hamilton. Hamilton’s older brother was George Marshall (see Figure 2). Another daughter, Margaret, and a son,

⁶ George Swetman, “Ghosts in the Cornerstone,” *The Pittsburgh Press*, 18 September 1955, 8. In the mid-nineteenth century, as people with newly acquired wealth migrated to Sewickley, the older upper class attempted to establish separate institutions. For example, as the “new upper class” flooded the Sewickley Presbyterian Church, the more established upper class split to form the United Presbyterian Church. John N. Ingram, “Steel City Aristocrats,” in *City at the Point: Essays on the Social History of Pittsburgh*, ed. Samuel P. Hays (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989), 279. Samuel’s participation in the United Presbyterian Church indicates that the Hamilton family belonged to the old elite of Sewickley.

⁷ Swetman, 8.

⁸ Nancy Hamilton wrote that her aunt Frances’s finest work was a “new melody for 'My Country, 'Tis of Thee', which she feels should get itself untangled from 'God Save the Queen'.” Nancy Hamilton, Vineyard Haven, MA, to Fred C. Reinhardt, President Second Federal Saving and Loan Association, Pittsburgh, Personal Collection of Nancy Smart, La Plata, MD. In this letter Hamilton associated herself with her family’s musical roots, “And while we are on the Hamilton musical inheritance, I will mention that I am a writer of songs, rather the words for songs, best known of which is How High The Moon [sic].”



Figure 2. Margaret, Marshall, and Nancy Hamilton (1908).
From the Personal Collection of Nancy Smart, La Plata, MD.

Alexander, followed Hamilton's birth.⁹ The Hamilton family, which inherited Samuel's passion for music, engaged in amateur musical and theatrical entertainment. While at Princeton, Charles Hamilton had performed in the Triangle Club shows, and Margaret, an active participant in local theatricals, was, by all accounts, a talented actress.¹⁰ Charles invited opera performers to stay with the family when they toured through Pittsburgh and he encouraged his children to learn music by bringing home instruments from the family company.¹¹

As a child, Hamilton wrote and performed in her own shows (see Figure 3). According to her own recollections, she made her stage debut at age ten as the heroine in a "French Costume Play." She also played in a private theatrical production of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* and in Laurence Housman and Harley Granville-Barker's lyric fairy tale *Prunella, or Love in a Dutch Garden* at the Sewickley Country Club.¹² The Hamilton family's participation in amateur theatricals indicates a certain social status, which various newspaper articles confirm, describing Hamilton as a socialite and a member of the Pittsburgh elite. Her education followed the trajectory one might expect

⁹ George was known by his middle name, Marshall. Margaret went by Peggy and Alexander had the nickname Bud.

¹⁰ Francis, "Candid Closeups;" Sally Hamilton, Interview, 4 June 2001. The Princeton Triangle Club is a Princeton institution that was founded in the late nineteenth century and is still in operation. The organization specializes in musical comedy and male drag performances.

¹¹ Martha and Sally Hamilton, Interview by author, 4 June 2001, Cambridge, MA.

¹² Nancy Hamilton, Untitled Note, n.d., Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.



Figure 3. Nancy Hamilton (1912)
From the Personal Collection of Nancy Smart, La Plata, MD.

of a wealthy woman of the era. Hamilton attended a small preparatory school.¹³ And, in 1927, she spent a year at the Sorbonne in Paris before entering Smith College.¹⁴

Gender and Sexuality in the 1920s

Hamilton's time in Paris exposed her to a world significantly different from suburban Sewickley. In the 1920s, New York and Europe buzzed with the new language of the sexologists, especially that of Sigmund Freud. As playwright Susan Glaspell observed, "You could not go out and buy a bun without hearing of someone's complexes."¹⁵ France, in particular, experienced paradigmatic shifts in perceptions of gender and sexuality. During the same period that Hamilton attended the Sorbonne, a group of French women adopted a style known as *la garçonne* (after Victor Margueritte's infamous French novel, *La Garçonne*), which redefined images of women in Paris.¹⁶ The women who adopted this style sacrificed the long locks of the Edwardian era for a men's haircut that shocked bourgeois sensibility. As one Catholic critic railed, the women of *la garçonne*, who denounced life with men, "make themselves look ridiculous. Already we have the woman with the cigarette, the woman with the short skirt, and the woman with

¹³ Martha Leavitt, "From College to Stage Career," *New York Herald Tribune*, n.d., Nancy Hamilton, Clippings in the Theatre Collections, The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

¹⁴ The family's finances suffered from the stock market crash and family friends bankrolled some of Hamilton's tuition to Smith College (and, later her sister Margaret's tuition as well). Sally Hamilton, Interview, 4 June 2001.

¹⁵ Albert Parry, *Garrets and Pretenders: A History of Bohemianism in America* (New York: Dover, 1960), 278; quoted in Faderman, *Odd Girls*, 62.

¹⁶ In *La Garçonne* the protagonist leaves home to lead a promiscuous life in Paris.

the outrageously low-cut neckline and bare arms.... Now we have the woman without hair.”¹⁷

The era of *la garçonne* was also the heyday of the Paris salons of Natalie Barney and Gertrude Stein, which “promised not only escape from American and English Puritanism but also the possibility of artistic and sexual freedom beyond the boundaries of familial constraints and enforced domesticity.”¹⁸ The Paris salons and the expatriates who peopled them provided models of women-centered artistic communities, in which women gave each other creative and professional support. The salons also modeled possibilities for lesbian communities. Barney demonstrated the “free spirited play of upper-class homosexual women who saw their lesbianism as another mark of their select birth,” while Stein and her lover, Alice B. Toklas, created a marriage “considered by many to be typical of domesticated homosexuality.”¹⁹

Simultaneously in Great Britain, Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) became a scandalous best seller, creating significant shock waves on the continent and in the United States. In London, the mainstream press quickly condemned *The Well of Loneliness*; in an influential editorial in the *Sunday Express*, journalist Jane Douglas

¹⁷ Mary Louise Roberts, *Civilization Without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France, 1917-1927* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 46.

¹⁸ Shari Benstock, “Paris Lesbianism and the Politics of Reaction, 1900-1940,” in *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, eds. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr. (New York: Meridian, 1989), 321.

¹⁹ Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900-1940* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 175.

asserted the novel was “not fit to be sold by any bookseller or to be borrowed from any library.”²⁰ Douglas wrote of the book’s protagonist, Stephen Gordon:

I am well aware that sexual inversion and perversion are horrors which exist among us today. They flaunt themselves in public places with increasing effrontery and more insolently provocative bravado. The decadent apostles of the most hideous and most loathsome vices no longer conceal their degeneracy and their degradation.²¹

An obscenity trial in 1928 followed the censure of the press. Chief magistrate Sir Chartres Biron proclaimed:

That of course means a plea for existence in which the invert is to be recognized and tolerated, and not treated with condemnation, which they are at present, by all decent people. This being the tenor of this book, I have no hesitation whatever in saying that it is an obscene libel, that it would tend to corrupt those into whose hands it should fall, and that the publication of this book is an offence against public decency, an obscene libel, and I shall order it to be destroyed.²²

But despite public fears, *The Well of Loneliness* was a dubious statement of advocacy for lesbians; Hall’s self-loathing protagonist reinforced the sexologists’s position that the “invert” was a pathological figure.

When Hamilton returned to the United States in 1928 she returned to a country also in the thrall of shifting notions of women’s sexuality. When *The Well of Loneliness* was published in the United States in December of 1928, it became a best-seller, quickly

²⁰ Jane Douglas, “A Book That Must Be Suppressed,” *Sunday Express*, 19 August 1928, 38; quoted in Laura Doan and Jay Prosser, eds., *Palatable Poison: Critical Perspectives on The Well of Loneliness*, Gender and Culture, eds. Carolyn Heilbrun and Nancy K. Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 36.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Sir Chartres Biron, “Judgment,” 1928; quoted in Doan and Prosser, *Palatable Poison*, 48-9. *The Well of Loneliness* was not published in England until 1949.

selling more than fifty-thousand copies.²³ And the prevalence of both the novel and the rhetoric of the sexologists encouraged the public to understand lesbians as part of a community. According to Lillian Faderman:

It may be said that the sexologists changed the course of same-sex relationships not only because they cast suspicion on romantic friendships, but also because they helped to make possible the establishment of lesbian communities through their theories, which separated off the lesbian from the rest of womankind and presented new concepts to describe certain feelings and preferences that had before been within the spectrum of 'normal' female experiences.²⁴

As Faderman notes, although the public at large perceived lesbians as a pathologized community, this rhetoric also helped lesbians define themselves as a community, complete with their own signification system, and an active lesbian subculture flourished in New York in the 1920s. Lesbian communities flowered in Harlem and Greenwich Village, which became enclaves of lesbian-owned bars and social activities.²⁵ The late 1920s also was an era when "New York's chic lesbian theatrical circle" thrived.²⁶ In both New York and Hollywood, stars created a "sewing circle," a group of women, including Mercedes de Acosta, Alla Nazimova, Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, Eva Le Gallienne, Tallulah Bankhead, Hope Williams, Beatrice Lillie, and Katharine Cornell, whom

²³ Neil Miller, *Out of the Past: Gay and Lesbian History from 1869 to the Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 190.

²⁴ Faderman, *Odd Girls*, 35.

²⁵ Norton, *The Myth of the Modern Homosexual*, 181. Speaking of her years in Greenwich Village during the late teens, poet Edna St. Vincent Millay claimed, "It was bohemian chic for a woman to admit to a touch of lesbianism." Quoted in Miller, *Out of the Past*, 139.

²⁶ Diana McLellan, *The Girls: Sappho Goes to Hollywood* (New York: LA Weekly Books, 2000), xxiii.

Dietrich called “good-time Charlenes.”²⁷ Many of these women socialized, worked, and slept together and alternately promoted or damaged each other’s careers. The milieu that Hamilton observed in her early years away from the enclave of Sewickley were filled with complex and semi-secret communities of bed-hopping women.

The Women’s Colleges

But the increasing visibility of homosexuality in mainstream American culture also combined with the theories of the sexologists to arouse a “homosexual panic,” a term coined in the 1920s to describe the public’s concern for places, such as army camps, prisons, and schools, which placed people of the same sex in close proximity.²⁸ The “homosexual panic” further exacerbated concerns that had, for years, plagued the women’s colleges. Smith was founded in 1872 and, like its other six sisters, provided women, especially women of the upper and middle classes, with an education that permitted them to support themselves outside of the institution of marriage.²⁹ In addition to providing an alternative to co-educational institutions, in the early twentieth century, the women’s colleges were places where women solidified same-sex friendships and

²⁷ Madsen, *Sewing Circle*, 14. In many instances, sexual relationships with writer Mercedes de Acosta connected this network of women in the performing arts. In addition to several of the women listed above, De Acosta's reputed conquests also included Eleanor Roosevelt and Gertrude Stein.

²⁸ Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 137.

²⁹ Faderman, *Odd Girls*, 12. According to Faderman, between 1880 and 1900, a full fifty percent of the American women who graduated from college remained single. *Ibid.*, 14.

romantic attachments – frequently indistinguishable from each other.³⁰ In an article published in 1901, one student recalled how an older student might initiate a younger woman to college social life:

She sends her flowers, calls for her, fills her order of dance...and if the freshman has made the desired hit, there are dates for future meetings and jollifications and a good night over the balusters, as lingering and cordial as any the freshman has left behind.³¹

At the turn of the century, sexologist Havelock Ellis railed that lesbian relationships were on the rise, in part because of the women's colleges, which he called "unwholesome places that bred pathological attachments between women."³²

So by the 1920s, under increasing pressure to train students to be wives and mothers, many women's colleges shifted away from their earlier goals. Several women's

³⁰ The first co-educational institution, Oberlin College in Ohio was founded in 1833, four years before the opening of Mount Holyoke Seminary, the oldest of the Seven Sisters. Barbara Miller Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 20-1. By 1870, five years before the founding of Smith College, there were twenty-nine co-educational institutions in the United States. There were also fifty-nine institutions that only admitted men and twelve institutions that only admitted women. *Ibid.*, 44.

³¹ Quoted in Faderman, *Odd Girls*, 20. *The College Girl of America and the Institutions Which Make Her What She Is*, printed in 1905, provides a similar description. At the October reception for freshmen, "The new girl is escorted to this freshman festivity by an upper class partner, who, in addition to filling out her dancing-card and sending her flowers, sees that she meets the right person for each dance, entertains her during refreshments, and 'sees her home.'" In Mary Caroline Crawford, *The College Girl of America and the Institutions Which Make Her What She Is* (Boston: L.C. Page and Company, 1905), 14. At the turn of the century, "smashing" was also common: "When a Vassar girl takes a shine to another, she straight away enters upon a regular course of bouquet sendings, interspersed with tinted notes, mysterious packages of 'Ridley's Mixed Candies,' locks of hair perhaps, and many other tender tokens, until at least the object of her attention is captured, and the two become inseparable." Anne MacKay, ed., *Wolf Girls at Vassar: Lesbian and Gay Experiences, 1930-1990*, with a foreword by Lillian Faderman (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 5.

³² Andrea Weiss, *Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in Film* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 8.

colleges conducted studies to prove that their graduates were no less likely to marry than were women who did not attend college. And to allay rumors of rampant homosexuality, the women's colleges also undertook measures to prevent romantic attachments between students. In the 1920s Smith structured dormitories around small, cell-like rooms and large public spaces, explicitly to discourage the intimacy of unmonitored female friendships.³³

Despite the efforts of the administration, however, in many cases the communities of women faculty members at women's colleges and the learning environment they created modeled the pleasures of gynocentric communities for the students.³⁴ Hamilton's time at Smith, which coincided with the college's crackdown on lesbian relationships, may well have taught her how to conceal those relationships, just as it taught her the vital importance of a strong women's network.

Hamilton at Smith

Although Hamilton availed herself of Smith's social community, she spent less time on her studies. In addition to her conspicuous absence from honor rolls or academic societies during her tenure at Smith, her letters attest to her nonchalant attitude to

³³ Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Alma Mater: Design and Experience in the Women's Colleges from the Nineteenth Century Beginnings to the 1930s* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 314.

³⁴ See Patricia Ann Palmieri, *In Adamless Eden: The Community of Women Faculty at Wellesley* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) and Horowitz, *Alma Mater*.

schoolwork and her apparent contentment with the “gentleman’s C.”³⁵ As Hamilton wrote her parents before her graduation, “I finished my exams in a burst of glory on Saturday morning -- the glory, in case your hopes leapt suddenly to a Phi Beta Kappa key, I assure was purely an emotional glory bursting with the joy of being through with exams.”³⁶

Instead social activities and theatre consumed much of Hamilton’s life at Smith. In these activities Hamilton modeled herself on the transgressive “New Woman” that she may have observed and read about in Paris. Hamilton especially fit the definition of an emerging icon for New Women during this period – the Trickster:

That disorderly figure, libidinous, scatological, of indeterminate sex and changeable gender.... They demonstrate the contingency of order, the fragility of social customs.... The Trickster continually alters his/her body, creates and recreates a personality. A creative force at war with convention, beyond gender, the Trickster personifies unfettered human potential. She/he constitutes the ideal feminist hero of the New Women artists.³⁷

³⁵ *Smith College Yearbook*, 1928-1930, The Smith College Archives, Smith College, Northampton, MA. In her papers Hamilton saved only one example of her college work, a paper for English 37 entitled “Georgiana Cavendish, Fifth Duchess of Devonshire,” for which she received an A. Nancy Hamilton, “Georgiana Cavendish, Fifth Duchess of Devonshire,” Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection. Georgiana Cavendish was an author and trendsetter of Britain’s Regency period, perhaps best known for her infamous twenty-five year *ménage a trois* with her husband, Duke of Devonshire, and Lady Elizabeth Foster, the woman who likely bore three of the Duke’s children, including the heir to his title. Hamilton’s preservation of the paper perhaps indicates two trends that marked her later work -- anglophilia and an interest in women who flouted tradition.

³⁶ Nancy Hamilton, Northampton, to Charles and Margaret Hamilton, Sewickley, PA, n.d., Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

³⁷ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “Discourses of Sexuality and Subjectivity: The New Woman, 1870-1936,” in *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, eds. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr. (New York: Meridian, 1989), 277-8.

Throughout her time at Smith, Hamilton resisted the social customs, decorum, and gender conventions that marked “ladies” of good breeding. She wrote for an underground humor magazine called *The Campus Cats*, where she demonstrated her subversive wit. Indeed, she found among her colleagues there a fellow group of tricksters who, to initiate her, had, “pursued [her] down a lonely road at midnight, waylaid, bound, and gagged, and [by] a mysterious process of signs and countersigns made [her] to understand that she was henceforth to deliver humorous copy upon request.”³⁸ She also joined A.O.H., the Ancient Order of Hibernians, a semi-secret sorority founded at Smith College in 1890. Under the thinly veiled *nome de plume* “Boiled Hamilton,” she took part in the organization’s devotion to “the maintenance of devilish wit and the promotion of hellish spirit in college.”³⁹

Further, Hamilton openly defied college tradition in her work with the Smith Dramatic Association. During her first year she produced, directed, and performed in an “unofficial production” of Smith’s first musical, Gilbert and Sullivan’s *The Mikado*.⁴⁰ The Smith yearbook commended Hamilton, “for her careful and tireless directing” of *The Mikado*, and the Smith Dramatic Association saw the future earning potential of musical

³⁸ Hamilton recalled it was *The Campus Cats*’s “most flourishing year.” Louise Seaman, “Get Nancy Hamilton -- Slogan That Didn't Die in Smith College,” Nancy Hamilton, Clippings in the Theatre Collections, The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

³⁹ “Ancient Order of Hibernians,” Clubs, n.d., The Smith College Archives. Hamilton also served as Theatre Chairman for the Junior Promenade Committee. She was in the House of Representatives during the 1928-1929 school year, and she was class historian during her entire tenure at Smith. *Smith College Yearbook, 1928-1930*, The Smith College Archives.

⁴⁰ This production earned a seven hundred dollar profit and permitted the Dramatic Association to purchase a cyclorama. Clipping in *New Bedford Standard-Times*, MA, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

entertainment.⁴¹ The following year, after her election as president of the Dramatic Association, Hamilton directed and performed in the operetta *The Chocolate Solider*, prompting the Smith Yearbook to gush, “Nancy Hamilton, as Lieutenant Bumerli, more than adequately proved that the director should be allowed to act, as well as direct, if she is Nancy Hamilton.”⁴²

In the spring of 1930, during her final year at Smith, Hamilton collaborated with a classmate, composer Martha Caples, on an original revue called *And So On*. She wrote, directed, and performed in the show. A press release revealed that the revue emphasized parodies of contemporary theatre and dance, college life, and the debutante society of which many students were a part:

The production, made up of a series of songs, dances, and skits burlesquing the drama that is offered on Broadway, opened on the same scene with which it ended, a burlesque finale in which the spirited musical number ‘And So On’ is introduced. At the close of the finale two scrub women who came out to clean the theatre proceeded to give their diverting impressions of the performance. Following was a clever skit entitled “Under the Clock at the Biltmore”....The Sleep Walking scene from Macbeth as interpreted by five leading motion picture actresses of today added to the farcical element of the play....The second act opened with a rollicking number in which the La Gallantrina chorus made its appearance as debutantes of 1915 in peg top dresses. Their song, “The Stick to Mamma Blues” was interrupted by the appearance of Nancy Hamilton as Luella Little, a wall flower, who unable to catch a man, sought refuge by the punch bowl and finally renounced society in a song “The Old Society Racket” and was borne off by a group of stags resplendent in walrus mustaches.⁴³

Proving she could take a little ribbing herself, in *And So On* Hamilton even mocked the pretensions of the “smart set,” to which she aspired, in “People of Taste.”

⁴¹ “Dramatics,” *Smith College Yearbook*, 1929, The Smith College Archives, 225.

⁴² “Dramatics,” *Smith College Yearbook*, 1930, The Smith College Archives, 229.

⁴³ Press Release, Dramatics, 25 April 1930, The Smith College Archives.

We smoke through a holder
We turn a cold shoulder
On Flagstad's Isolde
Though critics remark her
We always guarantee
Simmons beds—for a fee-
We adore Dorothy Parker.⁴⁴

Hamilton herself performed send-ups of comedienne Beatrice Lillie (singing an angry vituperative against the joys of spring) and film stars Zasu Pitts and Greta Garbo (performing as Lady Macbeth).

Not only did *And So On* prove to the *Smith College Weekly* that, “college dramatic talent could leave the realms of Gilbert and Sullivan and ‘go Broadway’ successfully,” the circumstances of *And So On*'s production reportedly caused some school scandal.⁴⁵ Hamilton claimed that because of proscriptions against men on stage, administrators said that students from Amherst, the neighboring men's college, could only play in the orchestra. But according to Hamilton, after covert rehearsals half of the male orchestra members ended up on the stage and, “a new precedent was established in Northampton.”⁴⁶ However, the Smith College paper made no mention of this transgression and the Smith College archive provides ample evidence that men had performed at Smith before *And So On*.⁴⁷ Hamilton's story, which portrays her as daringly

⁴⁴ Nancy Hamilton and Martha Caples, “People of Taste,” 1931, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

⁴⁵ “Student Review [sic] is Most Successful,” *Smith College Weekly*, 30 April 1930, 6.

⁴⁶ Seaman, “Get Nancy Hamilton.” Hamilton relays a similar account of this event in Murray Boltinoff, “Theatrical Sideshow,” *New York American*, 22 April 1934, Scrapbook of Nancy Hamilton, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

⁴⁷ A Press Release from the Dramatic Association, dated Dec., 11, 1929, stated, “Under a new plan of cooperation with the ‘Amherst Masquers,’ Smith College is able to

subverting the established order, suggests her tendency, especially early in her career, to cast herself as a rule-breaking renegade and a Trickster.

In addition to writing and directing, during her time at Smith Hamilton distinguished herself as an actress, particularly in breeches roles. In Sewickley, Hamilton had played Rosalind in *As You Like It* and “The Gardener Boy” in *Prunella, or Love in a Dutch Garden*.⁴⁸ But Hamilton seems to have preferred male roles. When directing *The Mikado*, Hamilton cast herself as Nanki Poh, the son of the Japanese Mikado, and, in the following year, Hamilton again cast herself in a leading breeches role in *The Chocolate Soldier*.⁴⁹ Hamilton won acclaim for the authenticity of her depictions; in the review of *The Chocolate Soldier*, the *Smith College Weekly* lauded:

It is not often that a girl takes a man’s part so perfectly both in looks and movements. Even in the vocal parts the difference in tone quality was almost unnoticed since she dropped her voice to a low pitch, at times rather talking than singing.⁵⁰

Sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing linked lesbianism to an externally “mannish appearance” and “females wearing their hair short, or who dress in the fashions of

have Amherst men take male-parts.” Press Release, Dramatics, 1929, The Smith College Archives. Further, photos and programs from the plays *Extra Curriculum* and *Lilies of the Field*, both which predated *And So On*, indicate that there were men from Amherst on stage. (*Lilies of the Field* starred a young Burgess Meredith) See Dramatics, 1926-1930, The Smith College Archives.

⁴⁸ Nancy Hamilton, Untitled Note, n.d., Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton. For a discussion of Rosalind as a transvestite roll see Garber, *Vested Interests*, 32-40.

⁴⁹ “Dramatics,” *Smith College Yearbook*, 1929, 225; “Dramatics,” *Smith College Yearbook*, 1930, The Smith College Archives, 229.

⁵⁰ “D.A. Production Proves Excellent,” *Smith College Weekly*, 8 January 1930, 1.

men.”⁵¹ By targeting “opera singers and actresses who appear in male attire on the stage by preference,” Krafft-Ebing suggested that a woman able to confuse gender boundaries on stage would eventually do so in life. Indeed, in Hamilton’s case this prognostication proved prophetic as her Smith years were a “dress rehearsal” for the roles she assumed in both private and public once she left Smith.

The all-women environs of Smith also allowed Hamilton to rehearse the type of personal and professional relationships she continued to nurture in her life and career outside of college. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg writes of the women’s colleges:

[Higher education] took the New Woman outside of conventional structures and social arrangements.... College women were liminal figures locked together in a novel ritual and a novel place. Conscious of being scrutinized by a dubious world, they reached out to one another, forming the intense bond of shared identity that characterized the liminal experience.⁵²

In her study of the Seven Sisters, cultural historian Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz writes that college clubs were especially critical for helping women develop social and professional bonds: “Through college organizations, athletics, and dramatics they learned the masculine routes of power: how to cooperate, how to compete openly, how to lead.”⁵³

⁵¹ Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis with Especial Reference to the Antipathic Sexual Instinct* (Stuttgart, 1886), trans. F. J. Rebman (Brooklyn: Physicians and Surgeons Books Co., 1908), 355; quoted in Smith-Rosenberg, “Discourses of Sexuality and Subjectivity,” 269.

⁵² Smith-Rosenberg, “Discourses of Sexuality and Subjectivity,” 266.

⁵³ Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, xviii. Organizations like the Dramatic Association had long been social touchstones in the women's colleges. In 1905 Mary Crawford wrote a guide to the women's colleges that stated: “The senior play is the very biggest feature of a senior year, and the most noticeable of all Smith events to an outsider. The girls themselves say these theatricals are likewise of immense interest and importance, not only because of the careful training...but also because of the delightful comradeship that must result from week after week of the necessary rehearsals.” Crawford, *The College Girl of America*, 18.

Fostering these social and professional bonds, Hamilton continually relied on friends to assist her with the Smith Dramatic Association, which was one of the most popular organizations on campus during her time at Smith.⁵⁴ Further, Hamilton used her connections to bolster her recognition in the college. The *Smith College Yearbook*, of which Hamilton was also the editor, dubbed *The Chocolate Soldier*, the “most important of this year’s events.”⁵⁵

Clearly, Hamilton understood the necessity of developing professional connections. She wrote to her mother:

You may be entertained to know that either tonight or tomorrow A.O.H. is going to pledge Frances Rich, the youngest daughter of Irene Rich, the movie actress. We expect to have an annual [illegible] to Hollywood here-after, and should you be wanting a job out there I can probably get you one.⁵⁶

Although undoubtedly tongue-in-cheek, Hamilton’s promise of Hollywood connections presaged the ways she would use friendships forged at Smith and through other women’s networks to negotiate the world of commercial theatre.

⁵⁴ In one letter to her parents Hamilton wrote, “My days become fuller in [illegible] progression. As the era of the *Mikado* dawns, I grow busier and busier and more and more terrified. I am more overcome with a realization of my gigantic gaul [sic] in thinking that it was a beautifully simple undertaking which would work its own way to a natural conclusion. I was vaguely mistaken. But then I have a cavalcade of friends whom I have leaned on or browbeaten into service so that things ought to be a little easier.” Nancy Hamilton, Northampton, to Charles and Margaret Hamilton, Sewickley, PA, n.d., Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton. According to the yearbook, when students were asked “In what extra curricular activity have you been most interested?” they respond most frequently with dramatics and sports. “Senior Statistic,” *Smith College Yearbook*, 1930, The Smith College Archives.

⁵⁵ “Dramatics,” *Smith College Yearbook*, 1929, The Smith College Archives.

⁵⁶ Nancy Hamilton, Northampton, to Margaret Hamilton, Sewickley, PA, n.d., Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

In addition to establishing associations with women through organizations, Hamilton also developed close friendships with fellow students at Smith.⁵⁷ But at this time of rampant concern about “smashes,” as the press encouraged parents to monitor the behavior of their daughters in the women’s college and guard against “moral degenerates,” Hamilton’s effusions might have elicited parental suspicions.⁵⁸ Thus, while Hamilton seemed to be constructing a Trickster identity for herself at Smith, in her letters home she attempted to convince her parents of her commitment to normative sexuality and her society upbringing.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ In one of several examples, she gushed about a trip to Boston with her characteristic hyperbole: “it was too wonderful being with Ellen.” Nancy Hamilton, Northampton, to Charles and Margaret Hamilton, Sewickley, PA, n.d., Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton. In another letter, Hamilton worried when her friend Mary’s parents insisted that Mary return home: “This will mean that she misses three weeks of work and with exams coming in January won’t think it worth the struggle and will give up college entirely. This I consider simply dreadful and am using all my powers of persuasion to stay the verdict.” Nancy Hamilton, Northampton, to Margaret Hamilton, Sewickley, PA, n.d., Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton. Although it seems that Mary Loren Jeffrey did leave Smith (she is not listed in the yearbook after 1929) this relationship proved critical to Hamilton. Mary’s cousin was vaudevillian Elsie Janis, who helped Hamilton land her first job as a lyric writer on Broadway in *New Faces of 1934*. See Lee Alan Morrow, “Elsie Janis: ‘A Comfortable Goofiness,’” in *Passing Performances: Queer Readings of Leading Players in American Theater History*, with a preface by Jill Dolan, eds. Robert A. Schanke and Kim Marra (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1998), 172.

⁵⁸ Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 282.

⁵⁹ In one letter describing a proposition she received for a date, Hamilton wrote, “Never think that your daughter hasn’t an instantaneous attraction for the fellows.” Nancy Hamilton, Northampton, to Margaret Hamilton, Sewickley, PA, n.d., Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton. Hamilton makes other references to her parents’s expectations for her relationships; in a letter signed “your debutante daughter,” Hamilton wrote of coming home for Smith’s winter break, “I wish you would call up several attractive youths with desirable motors, who will put themselves at my disposal during the winter season. And lastly, I wish you would put a headline on the front page of the paper to the effect that I have been married and divorced. This is a sure way to success, and I know that is what you wish for me. A [illegible] life, full of chills and thrills.”

Hamilton the Debutante

Hamilton's letters home frequently mentioned her travels, the food which she ate, and the performances she attended, and in both content and style these letters display her efforts to style herself as a young sophisticate and a "lady."⁶⁰ Hamilton's letters from Smith reveal her in an interesting transitional period. Her year in Paris and her activities at Smith taught her the pleasure of subversive behavior and the power of strong women's networks, yet her letters also show the continuing influence of her upper class, conservative upbringing.

These letters and their focus on issues such as sartorial etiquette are not surprising; Hamilton's family belonged to Pittsburgh society and Hamilton came out as a debutante during her time at Smith. The *Pittsburgh* Press referred to her as a "society

Nancy Hamilton, Northampton, to Margaret Hamilton, Sewickley, PA, n.d., Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

⁶⁰ For example, her letters to her mother include debates about suitable evening clothes. Hamilton wrote, "I think a black velvet evening dress would be excellent, but send me an accurate account and drawing before proceeding, and don't get the blue chiffon until I get there as I'd like to help select it. Also can I wear that color of greenish blue with my coat but perhaps I had better not bring up questionable topics after the material is gotten [punctuation as in original]." Nancy Hamilton, Northampton, to Margaret Hamilton, Sewickley, PA, n.d., Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton. She followed that letter with another expressing concern with etiquette, "You mistake my meaning. I love the green velvet! I was only questioning its suitability with a blue coat, but if I am to have another coat it entirely changes the point of view, n'est ce pas and oui oui! How about a black coat or do you think brown would be better. I leave this entirely in your hands, but suggest the black as being suited to all colors, weathers, and lip-stick. Of course, if you think it verges too much on the merry widow, far be it from me to disagree [punctuation as in original]." Nancy Hamilton, Northampton, to Margaret Hamilton, Sewickley, PA, n.d., Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

girl” and in another article proclaimed, “her family is well up in society, too.”⁶¹ An article on Hamilton and her college friend Rosemary Casey (who later collaborated with Hamilton on *Return Engagement*) describes the women: “The fair-haired girls in the creative end of the theatrical business in New York seem to be a couple of Pittsburghers, a few years out of college, whose names are listed in the thin India paper of the *Social Register*,” and another article claimed that, “like Miss [Katharine] Hepburn, [Hamilton] comes from a social milieu, for the *Social Register* lists her among the leading families of Sewickley, Pa.”⁶²

According to sociologist Stephen Richard Higley, the *Social Register*, the “authoritative designator of the American upper class,” is an “address and telephone book for the American upper class.”⁶³ Higley notes:

Those that are listed in the *Social Register* are chosen primarily for the style of life (and, implicitly, the system of values) that they exhibit. The main purpose of the *Social Register* is to restrict social intercourse for the

⁶¹ “Pittsburgh Girl Scores in New York,” *Pittsburgh Press*, 19 March 1934, Scrapbook of Nancy Hamilton, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton; *Pittsburgh Press*, 7 April 1934, Scrapbook of Nancy Hamilton, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton. In 1934, another article called Hamilton one of “Ten Most Intelligent Women in Pittsburgh” and described her as a model of a lady: “This young Sewickley society girl is now ‘making good’ in a Broadway revue. She’s typical, we think, of the modern American girl -- she’s sensitively intelligent, she’s charming, and she radiates good health.” Nancy Jane, “Ten Most Intelligent Woman in Pittsburgh’s Mayfair Attractive Too,” *Pittsburgh Sun Isle*, 25 March 1934, Scrapbook of Nancy Hamilton, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

⁶² Evelyn Burke, “Social Registries In Thick of Gotham Theater Production,” Scrapbook of Nancy Hamilton, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton; “Hepburn Understudy Stars in New Show,” n.d, Scrapbook of Nancy Hamilton, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

⁶³ Stephen Richard Higley, “Privilege, Power, and Place: The Geography of the American Upper Class,” in *Race, Class, and Gender in a Diverse Society: A Text Reader*, ed. Diana Kendall (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1997), 78-9.

members by acting as a ready reference as to who is “in” and who is “out” of proper society.⁶⁴

In order to remain “in,” according to Higley, one has to display a “codified” range of “personal, ethnic, and religious characteristics,” that are “overwhelmingly white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant.”⁶⁵ Although in the liminal space of Smith Hamilton could act the Trickster, she clearly was aware of her obligations to the social world she inhabited, and she attempted to model her public persona accordingly.⁶⁶ Thus Hamilton offers an intriguing study in gradual transformation – through her time at Smith she founded new networks but at the same time, she retained the right to return to the networks of her family and her Pittsburgh past.

The Years After Smith

Lillian Faderman contends:

Once the young women left [a woman’s] college...they often felt adrift in a world that was not yet prepared to receive them. Sex solidarity became to them necessary armor against a hostile environment. They formed networks with one another, served as mentors for one another, and encouraged and applauded one another’s successes, knowing that they

⁶⁴ Stephen Richard Higley, *Privilege, Power, and Place: the Geography of the Upper Class* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995), 14.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 15; Higley, “Privilege, Power, and Place,” 79.

⁶⁶ Sewickley, the town where Hamilton grew up was, and continues to be, a bastion for society families. In the early twentieth century the Pittsburgh elite began to migrate to the suburbs, most notably to Sewickley and the neighboring Sewickley Heights. John N. Ingram, “Steel City Aristocrats,” in *City at the Point: Essays on the Social History of Pittsburgh*, ed. Samuel P. Hays (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989), 278. According to Stephen Higley, in a list of the forty zip codes with the largest number of households listed in the *Social Register* in 1988, Sewickley PA ranks 30. Higley, “Privilege, Power, and Place,” 81.

could not trust to males (who were still jealous of what they perceived as their own territory) to be thrilled about women's achievements.⁶⁷

Upon graduation from Smith in 1930 (see

Figure 4), Hamilton sold *And So On* to Junior League groups in Pittsburgh and Montclair, New Jersey, and used this opportunity to continue working with her college friends, whom she employed her as actors, producers, and stage managers in the Junior League productions.⁶⁸ The *Smith Alumnae Quarterly* reported, "Nancy Hamilton is presenting her revue, *And So On*, under the auspices of the Junior League in Kansas City the week of the Royal American Horse show in November. Alida Milliken, Marion Childs, and Margaret Adams '32 expect to be stage hands," and one year later the quarterly stated, "Nancy Hamilton and Pillow Rightor are show producers."⁶⁹ Hamilton was especially close with Jane Pillow Rightor and Alida Milliken; the three had lived together while at

⁶⁷ Faderman, *Odd Girls*, 21.

⁶⁸ Hamilton's choice to sell the show to the Junior League is also evidence of her continued networking within the society world. Women of society founded the Junior League in 1901 as a community service and society group. See Diana Kendall, *The Power of Good Deeds: Privileged Women and the Social Reproduction of the Upper Class* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 145.

⁶⁹ *Smith Alumnae Quarterly*, November 1930, The Smith College Archives; *Smith Alumnae Quarterly*, July 1931, The Smith College Archives.

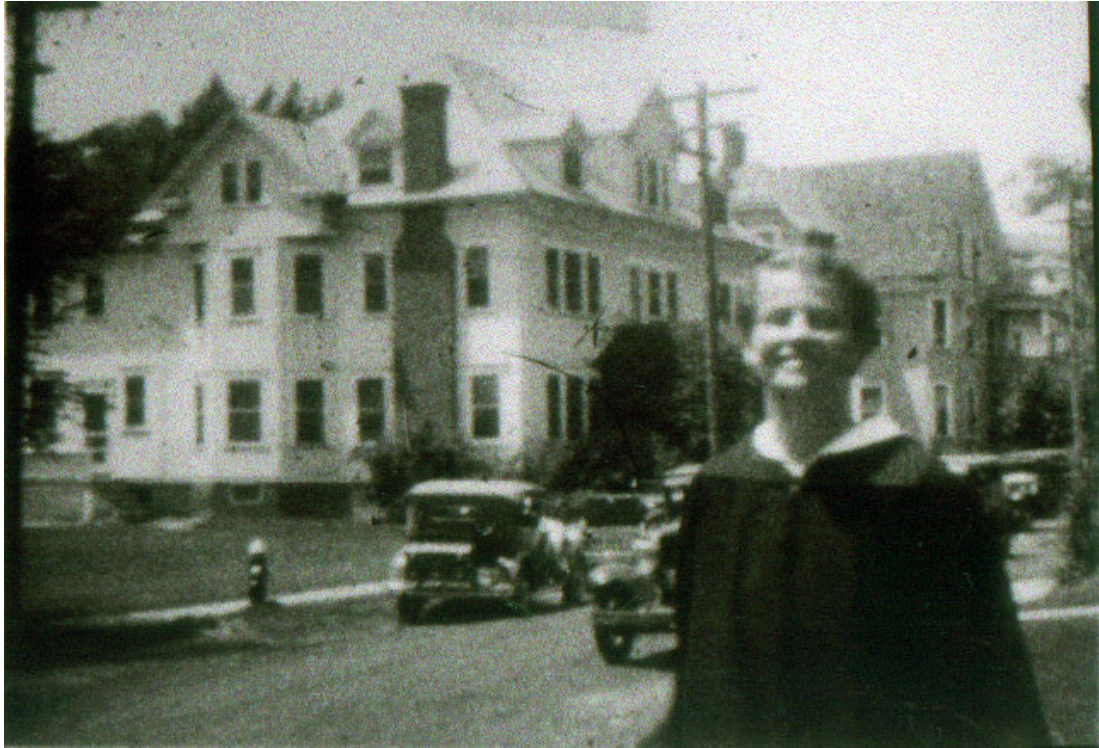


Figure 4. Nancy Hamilton, graduation from Smith College.
From the Smith College Archives, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

Smith and were together in A.O.H.⁷⁰ After graduation, Hamilton briefly lived with Milliken in Maine, and she later lived with Rightor in New York, continuing to mix her personal and professional lives.⁷¹ (see Figure 5)

New York

After leaving Smith, Hamilton also acted. Before she moved to New York she played Tyl-Tyl in an amateur production of Maurice Maeterlinck's *The Blue-Bird* in Sewickley and did stock work in Millbrook, Long Island.⁷² But Hamilton's decision to become a theatre *professional* flew in the face of her grooming for Pittsburgh society.⁷³ When she arrived in New York in 1930s, the theatre remained a dubious profession for ladies, and even though Hamilton's family participated in amateur theatricals, they resisted the taint of commercial theatre. Hamilton claimed that her acting stint in *The Blue-Bird* was, "the only activity in her entire theatrical career of which her family

⁷⁰ In the 1929-1930 school year Hamilton lived off campus in Northampton at 30 Belmont Avenue with Milliken and Rightor. *Catalogue of Smith College Fifty-Fifth Year: 1929-1930*, November 1929, The Smith College Archives, 244-48.

⁷¹ Nancy Hamilton, New York, to Mrs. Edward B Mayer, Jr., New York, n.d., The Smith College Archives. Hamilton provided this information in a letter to the New York Smith Alumni Association when they screened *Helen Keller in her Story*.

⁷² "Nancy Hamilton Writes Herself a New Revue," *One for the Money*, Nancy Hamilton, Clippings in the Theatre Collections, The Billy Rose Theatre Collection; Boltinoff, "Theatrical Sideshow."

⁷³ It was unusual for upper class graduates of women's colleges to make a career of the performing arts. Historian Barbara Miller Solomon writes that in the 1920s, "Some graduates looked to the performing arts for careers. Although most actresses still came from theatrical middle-class and poorer families, an occasional stage-struck collegian found her way from the college stage to legitimate theater." Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women*, 129.



Figure 5. Cartoon by Helen Hokinson.

Although Hokinson did not attend Smith, for a time she lived at the Smith Club in New York (which had been open to women who were not Smith alums) and her cartoons make frequent reference to the women's colleges and their graduates. In the 1940s Hamilton and Hokinson collaborated on *Our Best Girls*, a play based on Hokinson's characters from her cartoons for the *New Yorker*. Helen Hokinson, *When Were You Built?* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1948), n.p.

thoroughly approved.”⁷⁴

Although Hamilton had found it relatively easy to use family, school, and society connections to mount shows for the Junior League, she found selling her work and herself a tougher proposition in New York City. Perhaps because of the objections of her parents, Hamilton initially struggled to make her way in New York. After a period of working in the Klassy Kollege Kut Klothes department of Stern’s and “eating popcorn for nourishment,” she became a critic for RKO.⁷⁵ For \$27.50 a week she reported on the quality of shows and facilities in various vaudeville houses, “to see that the ushers were polite, that patrons were comfortable, and even report as to the general neatness of the ladies rest rooms.”⁷⁶ But RKO soon fired her for her unremittingly negative comments.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ “Nancy Hamilton Writes Herself a New Revue.” In one interview Hamilton recalled how her parents attempted to protect her from the degeneracy of the stage: “When I was riding my bicycle to Miss Dickinson's [prep] school I never dreamed I’d be writing for Katharine Cornell some day.... I remember that I wasn’t allowed to see her in those days because she always portrayed fallen women of some sort. So I didn’t catch up with her as an actress until *Barretts of Wimpole Street*.” Barbara Cloud, Unidentified Clipping, 1961, Nancy Hamilton Papers, The Sophia Smith Collection. Parental objections to theatre are a trope in the biographies of women theatre professionals. Producer Cheryl Crawford recalled the moment when she told her parents about her plans to enter theatre: “Bombs bursting in air! My father's eyes flashed, my mother's were full of tears. The response couldn't have been greater if I told them I was going to enter a brothel or a nunnery.” Cheryl Crawford, *One Naked Individual: My Fifty Years in the Theatre* (Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1977), 29. When vaudevillian Lew Fields told his daughter Dorothy, “Ladies don’t write lyrics.” Dorothy countered with, “I’m not a lady. I’m your daughter” (a parody of Fields’s famous vaudeville shtick), and added that she would write lyrics for the Westminster Kennel Club if given the chance. Deborah Grace Winer, *On the Sunny Side of the Street: The Life and Lyrics of Dorothy Fields*, with a preface by Betty Comden (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997), 27

⁷⁵ Bald, “Bachelor Girl Makes Good on Broadway.”

⁷⁶ Leavitt, “From College to Stage Career.”

⁷⁷ According to an article published in *Junior League Magazine*, “[The] RKO circuit had an opening for a spy. [Hamilton's] duties consisted in checking the audience

In 1932, not long after her failures with RKO, Hamilton made her Broadway debut, understudying a still relatively unknown Katharine Hepburn. The play was *The Warrior Husband*, a comedy by Julian Thompson about an army of Greek men who discover the land of the Amazons -- women who rule the land while their husbands tend the homes and purchase hats.⁷⁸ Hepburn recalled that the role was showy. Wearing “a metallic tunic with a spiraled cone over each breast,” (see Figure 6) she entered “bounding down stairs, three at a time, carrying a stag over her shoulders.”⁷⁹ Throughout the production, Hepburn was, in Hamilton’s words, “disgustingly healthy and never indulged in an accident.”⁸⁰ But when Hamilton got the understudy job it prompted her parents to voice their reservations about her new career path.⁸¹ They also expressed their

reaction, reporting on the ladies’s rooms, and timing the trailer. All day long and much of the night she went to movies from Brooklyn to the Bronx equipped with a small alarm clock. Unluckily, it went off in the middle of an act one evening, which RKO considered rather clumsy spy work. This incident, coupled with her exceedingly misleading reports on vaudeville acts (she gave low rating to acts that were positive wows, if she didn’t happen to care for them herself) brought about a severance between Miss Hamilton and the RKO circuit.” Eleanor Gilchrist, “Smith to Broadway: Ten Years’s Chronicle,” *Smith Alumnae Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (August 1940): 389-90, The Smith College Archives.

⁷⁸ The Ray Bolger vehicle *By Jupiter* (1942), with music by Richard Rodgers and lyrics by Lorenz Hart, was a musicalization of *The Warrior Husband*.

⁷⁹ Berg, *Kate Remembered*, 84.

⁸⁰ Press Release, Nancy Hamilton, Clippings in the Theatre Collections, The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

⁸¹ An article written by Hamilton's friend, Eleanor Gilchrist, in 1940, chronicled her family's continuing objections to her choice: “Miss Hamilton’s career in the theater has not been without conflict and frustration. Her family has always been rather sorry she gave up that nice job at Stern’s, and although resigned to her preference for the theater are nervous about it and prefer to be in Florida when she has an opening.” Gilchrist, “Smith to Broadway.”



Figure 6. Katharine Hepburn in *The Warrior Husband* (1934).
In Barbara Leaming, *Katharine Hepburn* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc. 1995), 125.

concerns about her life as a single woman in New York.⁸² But Hamilton's father eventually reconciled himself to his daughter's choice, and, in a letter in 1932 to him, Hamilton wrote:

Knowing how you feel about the stage as a vocation -- or even as a pastime...it will be a long time before I forget how well you have wished me along a path which you could have wished me to avoid. If it is any comfort to you, I can report that everyone concerned with this production has so far proved nothing but nice and thoroughly respectful, and Kate Hepburn, the heroine, is the kind of girl you would like to store away in a glass case on your mantel-piece. I have been taking fencing and wrestling lessons all week (at the company's expense), because, as understudy, I have to know how to do such things, and in off moments I have been attending the show from the front, and rehearsing. Today I was fitted for a costume for my part as a runner, and although I only have six lines to say, I may be adorned by a costume worth eighty-three dollars. It seems as if they ought to work up a few more lines to make the part worth the costume.⁸³

At the same time that she embarked on her career in the commercial theatre, Hamilton struggled to make herself known as a theatre aesthete. After arriving in New York, Hamilton wrote theatre reviews and poetic verses related to theatre and film, trying to emulate the caustic styles of Robert Benchley and Dorothy Parker.⁸⁴ Although she

⁸² Sally Hamilton, Interview, 4 June 2001.

⁸³ Nancy Hamilton, New York, to Charles Hamilton, Sewickley, PA, n.d., Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

⁸⁴ While she was at Smith, the touring productions that passed through Northampton had engaged Hamilton, who penned wry observations. One example of her reviewing style appeared in a letter to her mother, where she wrote about, "Attending a performance of *The Constant Wife* as rendered by Miss Ethel Barrymore, who -- to put it grossly -- was slightly 'under the influence' and most entertaining. The audience spent their time in laying bets as to whether or not she would make the door on her exits, and it resolved itself into something quite as exciting as a horse-race. Miss Barrymore indulged in a great many hilarious out-bursts, throwing back her head in girlish abandon, and spreading wide her arms in the generous gestures common to intoxicants. Her gait was uncertain, but with determined, if wavering steps, she charged from side to side of the stage, [illegible] propping herself against the larger pieces of furniture. In spite of all

was the paragon of wit at Smith, New York did not welcome the neophyte with open arms, and Hamilton had limited practice and training and, ultimately, limited success as a critic. *Vanity Fair* complained that her poems were too dated for publication, and *Stage Magazine* initially rejected her work on the grounds that her rhymed verses were “dated” and “not quite.”⁸⁵ But *Stage Magazine* encouraged Hamilton to continue her efforts and offered to reimburse her for the price of her ticket if they accepted her reviews.⁸⁶

In 1933, the periodical published a few of Hamilton’s writings, including “Design for Hollywood,” a rhyming essay pitching a MGM film version of Noel Coward’s *Design for Living*, starring, as did the play, Coward and the Lunts:

I have a play for three
Which my great Aunt would like to see
Converted to a talkie
It’s full of *pretty* and *awful* stunts,
But Noel Coward and the Lunts
I think you used the last two once --
Are *scandalously* funny.
It honestly is *pretty* gory,
(*Not* for kids in Montessori)
Still if we cleaned up the story,
You might make some money.⁸⁷

this, Miss Barrymore gave her brilliant performance, throwing herself into the part perhaps much more wholly than she would have had she been in full possession of her wits.” Nancy Hamilton, Northampton, to Margaret Hamilton, Sewickley, PA, n.d., Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

⁸⁵ Letter from *Vanity Fair*, New York, to Nancy Hamilton, New York, 6 May 1933, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection; Letter from *Stage Magazine*, New York, to Nancy Hamilton, New York, 28 October 1932, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

⁸⁶ Letter from *Stage Magazine*, New York, to Nancy Hamilton, New York, 28 October 1932, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

⁸⁷ Nancy Hamilton, “Design for Hollywood,” *The Stage*, April 1933, Scrapbook of Nancy Hamilton, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

Hamilton's "Ode to Intellectual Acting: Induced by too much contemplation of the classic woes of the late Lady *Lucrece*," also published in *Stage Magazine*, was a critique of Katharine Cornell's failed production of Thornton Wilder's translation of *Lucrece* (1932).⁸⁸ In November of 1933, *Redbook* published "Humble Plea," a short poem that asked the public to excuse youthful acts of petty larceny, including stealing towels and sneaking into movies.⁸⁹

Hamilton's first published piece was "A Dissertation on the Reflected Glory of Being Katharine Hepburn's Understudy." *Stage Magazine* paid Hamilton ten dollars for an essay on how she exploited the benefits of understudying Hepburn in *The Warrior Husband* the year before Hepburn won the 1933 Academy Award for Best Actress and became the toast of Hollywood and Broadway:

Really, the kindest thing Katharine Hepburn could have done for me, short of getting sick last spring (which she did *not* do), was to get famous this fall, which she rather definitely has done.... [When visiting casting agents] I would announce with lovely simplicity that I had been Katharine Hepburn's understudy last year. The change that would come over the whole personnel of an office at this announcement was nothing short of astounding.⁹⁰

Although Hamilton's writings demonstrate a wry wit, she found limited success as a writer of light verse and essays. She fared better as an actress. In 1935, Hamilton performed the role of Miss Bingley in Helen Jerome's adaptation of Jane Austen's *Pride*

⁸⁸ Nancy Hamilton, "Ode to Intellectual Acting," Scrapbook of Nancy Hamilton, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

⁸⁹ Nancy Hamilton, "Humble Plea," *Redbook*, November 1933, Scrapbook of Nancy Hamilton, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

⁹⁰ Nancy Hamilton, "A Dissertation on the Reflected Glory of Being Katharine Hepburn's Understudy," *The Stage*, January 1933, Scrapbook of Nancy Hamilton, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

and Prejudice, produced by the influential Max Gordon and designed by Jo Mielziner (see Figure 7).⁹¹ This role proved especially fortuitous for Hamilton, as it introduced her to Brenda Forbes, an English comedienne and character actress who was one of the stock actors in Katharine Cornell's company. By 1935, Forbes had shared the stage with Cornell in *Lucrece*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*, and *Flowers in the Forest*, the last three under the direction of Cornell's husband Guthrie McClintic. Forbes was also a part of Cornell's inner circle. In his memoirs, McClintic wrote that in the 1920s there was a company of five at his home -- his wife and him, actor Brian Aherne, Brenda Forbes, and Gertrude Macy, Katharine Cornell's business manager and personal assistant.⁹² During *Pride and Prejudice*, Hamilton and Forbes shared a dressing room, and Forbes remembered that their friendship began when Robert Sinclair, the director, asked Forbes to work with Hamilton on her accent: "Unless Nan could change her accent, he... would not be able to use her in the play... with great trepidation [I] asked her if she would accept a few hints from me. Little did I know that this was to be the start of a wonderful friendship that would last until the end of her life."⁹³ They became friends,

⁹¹ The spheres of influences between women performers in this era constantly overlapped. Hepburn's performance in the film version of *Little Women* (which Hamilton parodied in 1934) coincidentally, inspired Jerome's adaptation. Gilbert W. Gabriel, "Pride and Prejudice," Scrapbook of Nancy Hamilton, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton. According to one article, "This is the play once held by Arthur Hopkins who saw in it the flavor, wit and beauty which now come forth. It was his plan to cast Miss Katharine Hepburn as the spirited Elizabeth of the piece. She could not be induced to leave Hollywood and, reluctantly, he released the play. Mr. Gordon picked it up..." John Whitney, "Broadway Last Night," n.d., Scrapbook of Nancy Hamilton, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

⁹² Guthrie McClintic, *Me and Kit* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1955), 266.

⁹³ Forbes, *Five Minutes, Miss Forbes*, 96.



Figure 7. Nancy Hamilton, advertisement for *Pride and Prejudice*.
From the Personal Collection of the Author, College Park, MD.

roommates, and artistic associates; Forbes starred in all three of the revues Hamilton authored.⁹⁴

In spite of family difficulties (including the death of her father late in the decade and her brother's increasing mental instabilities), the thirties were a productive period for Hamilton.⁹⁵ Although the *Pride and Prejudice* received lukewarm reviews, Hamilton garnered some positive notice; one reviewer called her portrayal of the snobbish Miss Bingley an "incisive portrait," and John Mason Brown averred, "Nancy Hamilton is a finely haughty Miss Bingley."⁹⁶ One year after performing in *Pride and Prejudice*,

⁹⁴ Shortly after *Pride and Prejudice* closed, Hamilton and Forbes traveled to England together, the first of Hamilton's many trips to Great Britain. Ibid..

⁹⁵ Hamilton's younger brother, Bud, briefly lived with Hamilton in New York. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Hamilton's correspondence with her mother frequently addressed Bud's emotional state and his periodic breakdowns, which were, apparently, the cause of much family tension. At one point Hamilton enjoined her mother, "The best and most wonderful thing you can do is to finance Bud's recovery....and not think of what inroads it may make into your last will and treatments: what good will your money be to Bud if his life is wrecked.... You will tell me you haven't all the money I imagine you have, but I am not speaking of those mythical thousands, I am speaking of whatever money you have got that you are saving for us -- now is the time to use however much of it may be needed....You know, mother, I don't recommend anything that is going to put you in want or jeopardy, and it might possibly relieve Bud of want and jeopardy." Nancy Hamilton, Vineyard Haven, to Margaret Hamilton, Sewickley, PA, n.d., Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton. Eventually the family twice institutionalized Bud for nervous breakdowns and he received electroshock treatments. Sally Hamilton, Interview by author, 19 July 2002, Martha's Vineyard, MA. Although Bud seemed the most profoundly affected by a "nervous disposition," Bud's daughter, Sally Hamilton, suggests it is likely that others in the Hamilton family also suffered from a similar brand of depression. Ibid. Although the dangers of an armchair diagnosis are clear, periods of frenetic productivity followed by long periods of inactivity frequently marked Hamilton's work patterns. The patterns and tone of entries in her diaries she kept also suggest that, at times (especially during the winter), Hamilton's emotional state affected her work. Sally recalls that family friend, who also was a psychologist, thought that Hamilton might have been manic-depressive. Hamilton also, in Sally's opinion, was affected by the tendency toward alcoholism prevalent in the family. Ibid.

⁹⁶ Grenville Vernon, "The Play," Commonweal, n.d., Scrapbook of Nancy Hamilton, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton; John Mason Brown "Pride and

producer Max Gordon again cast Hamilton: at Philadelphia's Forrest Theatre she played the mannish outsider Nancy Blake in Clare Luce Booth's *The Women*.⁹⁷

As she embarked on her acting career, Hamilton's diaries and drafts indicate that her mind was teeming with ideas for a writing career. She wrote numerous scenarios, including one for a musical based on Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*.⁹⁸ In 1934, collaborating with Rosemary (Baby) Casey, James (Jimmy) Shute, and composer Fredrich (Fritz) Loewe (who later had great success collaborating with Alan J. Lerner), Hamilton wrote a musical comedy, *Return Engagement* (originally called *Love in Livery*), about a Hollywood actress who is tricked into hiring an impoverished French marquis as a butler.⁹⁹ She tried to sell the show to Broadway producers Richard Aldrich and Alfred De Liagre, Jr., but when that effort did not come to fruition she sold the script to Warner Brothers, who hired Herb and Joseph Fields to write the screenplay and changed the title to *Fools for Scandal* (1938). In the film, which starred Carole Lombard, material from Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart replaced Hamilton's songs.¹⁰⁰

Also in the early 1930s Hamilton wrote another full-length musical comedy, *The Water Gipsies*, which was a musicalization of A. P. Herbert's 1930 novel of the same

Prejudice Presented by Mr. Gordon," *New York Evening Post*, n.d., Scrapbook of Nancy Hamilton, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

⁹⁷ Program for *The Women*, Forrest Theatre, Philadelphia, 1936, Collection of the Author, College Park, MD. Hamilton replaced Jane Seymour, who originally created the role, out of town.

⁹⁸ Nancy Hamilton, Scenario for *Anna Karenina*, 31 August 1935, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

⁹⁹ Hamilton planned for Jo Mielziner, whom she befriended while acting in *Pride and Prejudice*, to design *Return Engagement*.

¹⁰⁰ Much of Rodgers's and Hart's material was also cut from the film.

name about a young English woman who finds love with a poet who drives a canal barge. Perhaps encouraged by actor Tommy Ladd's enthusiastic prognostication that, "it should make another *Showboat*," Hamilton spent much of the thirties trying to get *The Water Gipsies* produced on Broadway.¹⁰¹ However, *The Water Gipsies* remained unproduced, likely because Hamilton could not secure the rights from Herbert.¹⁰² Entries in Hamilton's diary also indicate that there were problems with the quality of the script. Noel Coward responded to her draft of *The Water Gipsies*, writing, "Yes! Yes! I've read part of the first act. Oh you wrote it, didn't you? Well you know, it's not very good, I'm afraid. Do you mind? It's a bit 'I know Miss Jenkins, oh hello, Miss Jenkins,' isn't it? Are the second and third acts any better? I do hope so."¹⁰³

But *The Water Gipsies* was significant for two reasons. First, it marked the beginning of Hamilton's career-long collaboration with composer Morgan (Budd) Lewis

¹⁰¹ Diary of Nancy Hamilton, 1934, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection. In one letter Hamilton offered seven thousand dollars for the film rights to *The Water Gipsies*, writing that with film rights in hand she would be able to get a stage production this season. Nancy Hamilton, New York, 21 July 1937, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

¹⁰² In 1954 A. P. Herbert, along with composer Vivian Ellis, opened his own musical adaptation of the novel at London's Prince's Theatre.

¹⁰³ Diary of Nancy Hamilton, 1934, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection. In her diary Hamilton also described criticism and rejections from producer Max Gordon (who must have succumbed to her entreaties and agreed to read the script): "Sure it's darling, but it won't make a cent of money."

(see Figure 8).¹⁰⁴ Lewis, who also published songs as William Morgan Lewis, was born in 1910 in Rockville, Connecticut, and, after graduating from the University of Michigan, began composing on Broadway, collaborating with lyricist Yip Harburg and directing dance routines for the Lunts.¹⁰⁵ Also, with *The Water Gypsies* Hamilton practiced tailoring her material to suit the talents of her friends and associates; she conceived her adaptation as a vehicle for Beatrice Lillie (see Figure 9). Hamilton drew Lillie's attention when she parodied the comedienne in *New Faces of 1934's* "I Hate Spring" (originally written for *And So On*), singing:

I hate the spring.
I hate open busses.
I hate fresh asparaguses.¹⁰⁶

Lillie adopted the urbane and sardonic song into her repertoire and employed Hamilton to ghostwrite material for her cabaret act and radio program throughout the 1930s.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ According to Hamilton's niece, Sally, Lewis was a lifelong alcoholic and was frequently emotionally out-of-control and difficult to work with. Sally Hamilton, Interview by author, 20 July 2002, Martha's Vineyard, MA. In a letter to her brother discussing Lewis's desire to enlist for World War II, Hamilton described some of Lewis's difficulties, "Bud Lewis is still in class 4-F, but has cut down on smoking, drinking, and late hours, and walks a hundred blocks a day trying to get his blood pressure down to fighting level." Nancy Hamilton, New York, to Marshall Hamilton, 7 November 1942.

¹⁰⁵ Lewis and Harburg wrote "Cause You Won't Play House," and in a later collaboration with Harold Arlen, which retained large portions of the original melody and lyrics of "Cause You Won't Play House," Harburg produced the hit song "Buds Won't Bud."

¹⁰⁶ Nancy Hamilton, "Draft of I Hate Spring," n.d., Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

¹⁰⁷ Lillie remembered working on the Borden Evaporated Milk radio program: "I shunned the waiting legions of radio script-writers... So three inspired beginners worked on the words by me -- Doc McGonigle, Peter Sharpe, and Nancy Hamilton, a pretty young actress from Pittsburgh whom I'd met when I went backstage to congratulate her on a burlesque she did of me. Beatrice Lillie, *Every Other Inch a Lady* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1972), 267.



Figure 8. Publicity photo of Nancy Hamilton and Morgan Lewis.
From the Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton, Martha's Vineyard, MA.



BEATRICE LILLIE

IN

"AN EVENING WITH BEATRICE LILLIE"

TWO WEEKS BEGINNING NOVEMBER 2, 1953

Figure 9. Beatrice Lillie (1953).
Program for "An Evening with Beatrice Lillie." From the Personal Collection of the
Author, College Park, MD.

According to one article, after meeting Lillie, Hamilton wrote “practically all of [her] radio scripts,” “flying to Toronto, Chicago, or wherever Miss Lillie was appearing, and flying back to *Pride and Prejudice* during the week.”¹⁰⁸ Later in the decade Hamilton adapted P. L. Traver’s book *Mary Poppins* as a vehicle for Beatrice Lillie. In return Lillie introduced Hamilton to her “smart set”:

Beatrice Lillie hates crowds but never is happy unless she has a large group of people around her. Her parties are famous and are the counterpart of the eighteenth century salon when all the bright lights of the day used to gather at the homes of the prettiest ladies. The cream of literary, artistic and theatrical America makes their headquarters at the Lillie apartment on fashionable East End Avenue.... Most of her entertaining is done after theatre, and she serves an elaborate buffet. Gathered at her festive board you are likely to find Alexander Woollcott... Charles MacArthur and Ben Hecht, Helen Hayes, Marc Connelly, Dwight Fiske, Howard Dietz and Arthur Schwartz, George Kaufman, Noel Coward when he is in the country, Fanny Brice, Hope Williams, Nancy Hamilton, and scores of others.¹⁰⁹

Despite her growing connections, Hamilton learned that producers were not interested in her musical comedies; the difficulties Hamilton had with *The Water Gypsies* and *Return Engagement* echoed the rejoinder directed toward Nancy Blake, the character Hamilton played in *The Women*, “I’d rather face a tiger any day than the sort of things the critics said about your last book.”¹¹⁰ But at the same time that she was working on *Return Engagement* and *The Water Gypsies*, Hamilton wrote material for the intimate revue *New Faces of 1934*, and she found a voice in that form.

¹⁰⁸ Francis, “Candid Closeups.”

¹⁰⁹ “Beatrice: A Vignette,” *Caravan*, n.d., Scrapbook of Nancy Hamilton, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

¹¹⁰ Clare Luce Boothe, “The Women,” in *Sixteen Famous American Plays*, eds. Bennett Cerf and Van H. Cartmell (Garden City, NY: Garden City Publishing Co., Inc., 1941), 606.

Hamilton and the Women Wordsmiths

Hamilton's shift reflects a trend in American musical theatre; in the Depression years intimate revues became the dominant form of musical entertainment. Intimate revues also elevated the role of the lyricist, and women wordsmiths such as Hamilton, June (Sillman) Carroll, Sylvia Fine (Kaye), Agnes Morgan, Ann Ronell, Viola Brothers Shore and, most famously, Dorothy Fields found employment writing for the revues.¹¹¹

The lyricists of the intimate revues were not the first women to write for musical theatre. During the period after World War I, women lyricists achieved particular success writing songs for both operettas and musical comedies, which were in the height of their popularity.¹¹² Musical theatre historian Gerald Bordman noted, "Operetta trafficked in a roseate, earnest romanticism" and "musical comedy professed to take a...cynical look at...contemporary foibles."¹¹³ Although different in tone and content, both operetta and musical comedy reflect the post World War I *zeitgeist*. The 1920 census was the first to find the majority of Americans living in urban areas, and musical comedies, such as *Very Good Eddie* and *No, No Nanette*, reflected the national obsession

¹¹¹ Although she is more commonly recognized as a composer, Ann Ronell wrote lyrics for the intimate revue *Count Me In* for which Hamilton served as script doctor.

¹¹² Of the top-ten longest running shows of the twenties, nine were operettas or musical comedies. The longest running musical comedies and operettas were: *The Student Prince* (608 performances), *Blossom Time* (592 performances), *Show Boat* (575 performances), *Sally* (570 performances), *Rose-Marie* (557 performances), *Good News!* (551 performances), *Sunny* (517 performances), *The Vagabond King* (511 performances), and *The New Moon* (509 performances). Ethan Mordden, *Make Believe: The Broadway Musical in the 1920s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 51.

¹¹³ Gerald Bordman, *American Musical Comedy: From Adonis to Dreamgirls* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 4.

with urban living.¹¹⁴ Changes in the operetta form also revealed a new American nationalistic verve. Staples of the late nineteenth-century American musical stage, operettas were generally translations of German or Austro-Hungarian works. “Then came World War I and a national prejudice against anything connected to the Central Powers; even sauerkraut became liberty cabbage.”¹¹⁵ While maintaining the exotic locales and Cinderella stories, American composers and lyricists Americanized the foreign operettas to suit the tastes of American audiences.¹¹⁶

At the same time that musical comedies and operettas thrived, the theatre was an increasingly welcoming profession for women. An article written in 1917 asserted, “In no other season has the feminine pen, applied to the difficult art of writing for the stage, been so prolific or successful.”¹¹⁷ And, as the author of a 1917 article published in *The Literary Digest* points out, “In song-writing, as in every other branch of business or profession, women are now pushing mere man very hard. They are said to be ‘putting

¹¹⁴ Mordden, *Make Believe*, 20.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹¹⁶ For example, a reviewer of *Maytime* wrote: “The musical success of last season in the German theatres was *Wie einst im Mai*. In view of the present international difference, this was thought to be unfitted in locale, and even in the nature of its music, to allied consumption. Rida Johnson Young took out the naturalization papers of the book, and though some violence is done to the probabilities and to local color, the hyphen has been, on the whole, very successfully eliminated.” “Maytime Scores at the Shubert,” *New York Times*, 17 August 1917, 7. Conversely, but equally revealing, another reviewer stated: “*Maytime*...is set down as the work of Rida Johnson Young and Sigmund Romberg. As a matter of fact, this is a bit of camouflage. The present unpopularity of Germans serves as an excuse for crediting our own countrymen with accomplishments not properly theirs. Thus does questionable honesty masquerade as patriotism?” Channing Pollack, “Squaring Washington Square,” *Green Book Magazine*, August 1918, 207.

¹¹⁷ Louis V. De Foe, *New York World*, 13 May 1917, in Clare Kummer, Clippings in the Theatre Collections, The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

over' the greater number of popular hits, many of them producing words, music, and orchestration."¹¹⁸ Thus, women playwrights and songwriters flourished in this period. Rida Johnson Young wrote the lyrics to *Maytime*, which, at 492 performances, was one of the most popular works of the World War I period. Anne Caldwell wrote lyrics to musical comedies that foreshadowed the integrated musical plays of Rodgers and Hammerstein. Dorothy Donnelly wrote the lyrics to two of the longest running musicals of the 1920s -- *Blossom Time* (516 performances) and *The Student Prince* (608 performances).¹¹⁹

Operetta and musical comedy, forms that were "mythological in feeling and, of course, intensely romantic," especially welcomed women songwriters.¹²⁰ Reviews of the period bespoke the traditionally "feminine" values invested in operetta and musicals. A

¹¹⁸ "Successful Women Songwriters," *The Literary Digest* 55, no. 15 (13 October 1917): 87.

¹¹⁹ Although these women found individual success, they did not work together to aid each other's career or enter the field with the aid of a woman's network. Young's began her professional career as a lyricist laboring as a "factory worker" at the Witmark Music Publishing Co., where she churned out song lyrics at a "bewildering rate." She remembered, "When someone singing in vaudeville made a hit, and an order came in for an encore verse, or two or three, or half a dozen, I sat down and wrote them." Helen Bennett, "Women Who Write," *American Magazine*, December 1920, 185. Until the death of her husband, James O'Dea, in 1914, Caldwell was half of a husband/wife writing team. Nora Bayes, likewise wrote songs with her second husband Jack Norworth, and performing their own material they were "the greatest man and woman singing act." Joe Laurie, Jr., *Vaudeville: From the Honky-Tonks to the Palace* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1953), 201-7. Donnelly, who grew up in a theatrical family, worked for three years with the Murray Hill stock company, run by her brother, Henry V, which allowed her to break into the profession as an lyricist.

¹²⁰ Lehman Engel, *The American Musical Theater* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1975), 12.

critic called *My Maryland*, “a piece of sentiment, not a rollicking playboy affair.”¹²¹ A review of *The Student Prince* called it a “simple romantic story.”¹²² Another critic characterized *Maytime* as a “romance of delicate charm and poetic romance.”¹²³ Perhaps the romantic lushness of operetta provided opportunities in which female lyric writers were not only acceptable, but preferable to their male counterparts.

Increasingly, however, the ascendant popularity of the “girlie revues” of the 1910s and 1920s competed with the operettas and musical comedy, and these new shows limited opportunities for women songwriters. The revue form originated in Paris in the late nineteenth century, but historians often attribute the American popularity of the revue to Florenz Ziegfeld and his much-ballyhooed “Glorification of the American Girl.”

According to theatre historians Amy Henderson and Dwight Blocker Bowers:

If Ziegfeld did not, as he later claimed, introduce the revue genre to Broadway, he was pivotal in establishing its popularity with audiences and enhancing its image in the theater community, turning the vagaries of the vaudeville stage into the stuff and substance of the legitimate theater.¹²⁴

Professional women lyricists found it difficult to cultivate careers as songwriters in thus genre. A description of how lyricist Gene Buck began to write songs for Ziegfeld suggests the kinds of negotiations male professionals made with the Great Ziegfeld to get jobs in the Follies:

¹²¹ “‘My Maryland’ Stirs with Martial Airs,” *New York Times*, 13 September 1927, 37.

¹²² “‘The Student Prince’ Brings Out Cheers,” *New York Times*, 3 December 1924, 25.

¹²³ “‘Maytime’ Scores at the Shubert,” *New York Times*, 17 August 1917, 7.

¹²⁴ Amy Henderson and Dwight Blocker Bowers, *Red Hot & Blue: A Smithsonian Salute to the American Musical* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 42.

Gene Buck came in and played two songs. I can't remember their names. And the next day he came in with this Lily Lorraine to sing the songs to Stern. So Stern said, "I'll see if I can introduce you to Ziegfeld." Well, one way or another he got Ziegfeld into his office, and he took a shine to this Lily Lorraine, and they went out together. Now, when she went out of there she was almost in rags. She came in the next day with a voluptuous fur coat and dressed to kill. She certainly made an awful monkey out of Ziegfeld there for years. She was a bad actress [and] a bad girl. That's how Buck got his start with Ziegfeld.¹²⁵

As the story suggests, Buck acted as a procurer for Ziegfeld in order to get the producer to notice his work. But women wishing to work with Ziegfeld in any capacity other than as performer often found doors closed to them because, in the Follies, "one of the most powerful proscriptions against women was that a pleasing physical appearance, exclusively defined, was the essential prerequisite for a successful career in the theatre."¹²⁶ As Ziegfeld once pontificated, "Grey eyes cannot be beautiful. They are too hard, too intellectual. They are the eyes of a typical college girl."¹²⁷ Because the veneration of objectified womanhood was a central tenet for Ziegfeld, and the "tired businessmen" who populated his audience, Ziegfeld did not valorize the work women did off the stage. More typical was the path of Nora Bayes, a performer who used songs that

¹²⁵ Cary Morgan, "Oral History," Transcript, p. 4, Popular Arts Project, Oral History Research Office, Columbia University, New York.

¹²⁶ Angela J. Latham, "The Right To Bare: Containing and Encoding American Women in Popular Entertainments of the 1920s," *Theatre Journal* 49 (1997): 459.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 462. Ziegfeld's comment highlights a central tension of the twenties, the emergence of educated women in the work force. As historian Linda Mizejewski argues, by the mid-teens, half of all female college graduates were professionally employed. Mizejewski hypothesizes that Ziegfeld's chorus girl emerges as a type of work that women could do which avoided "questions and authority and education and which further connects women to issues of appearance and decor." Linda Mizejewski, *Ziegfeld Girl: Image and Icon in Culture and Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999). 73-4.

she wrote, like “Shine on Harvest Moon,” to enhance her on-stage performance in the Ziegfeld Follies.

For those artists unable or unwilling to play the games necessary to get into Ziegfeld’s kingdom, the intimate revue offered an alternative to Ziegfeldian hegemony; women lyricists found they could, once again, contribute to musical theatre without donning a feather boa and headdress. The intimate revues were a form that was “not concocted for the tired businessman or the susceptible starry-eyed young but for the upper-middlebrows, whose sophistication presumably rose above follies and vanities and scandals.”¹²⁸ As musical theatre historian Stanley Green notes:

During [the thirties], audiences were seeing less and less of endless showgirls ascending and descending flights of stairs...mythical princes in mythical countries serenading mythical milkmaids...society life on Long Island and the pressing issue of whether Jerry or Teddy cares more for tennis than for Maisie or Nell...the Cinderella tale of the waif who hits the big town and eventually becomes Queen of the Follies...gold-digging manhunters fleecing wealthy bachelors, or vice versa. The collapse of the nation’s economy that had begun in October 1929 virtually dictated the need for fresher, more contemporary themes.¹²⁹

Unlike their Ziegfeldian predecessors, many of intimate revues were politically charged, promising, like the opening song of *Pins and Needles*, to “Sing a song of social significance.”¹³⁰

¹²⁸ Russell Lynes, *The Lively Audience: A Social History of the Visual and Performing Arts in America, 1890-1950*, New American Nation Series, eds. Henry Steele Commager and Richard B. Morris (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1985), 153.

¹²⁹ Stanley Green, *Ring Bells! Sing Songs! Broadway Musicals of the 1930s*, with an introduction by Brooks Atkinson (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1971), 13.

¹³⁰ Some reviewers balked at the revue form’s movement away from spectacle and chorines, refusing to attend *Pins and Needles* because they believed, “that the girls who came from the machines might be less pulchritudinous than those whom Ziegfeld

Because of the political and social commentary in the intimate revues, lyricists and writers often took precedence over composers, a departure from earlier forms of musical theatre entertainment, when, for example, a reviewer asserted that *The Student Prince*, “requires a minimum of dialogue and so clears the decks rapidly for the business of an operetta, which is music.”¹³¹ And while the women lyricists of operettas and musical comedies abided by romantic formulas and churned out cloying lyrics like “I love you ‘neath the moon,” both men and women lyricists found that the intimate revues afforded them opportunities to experiment with clever lyrics and topical themes, allowing them to gain notice *as* songwriters. In contrast to, for example, Dorothy Donnelly’s lyrics for operettas, which critics called an unfortunate distraction from Sigmund Romberg’s music, a press release called *One for the Money* “the snappy *Nancy Hamilton* musical [author’s emphasis].”¹³²

chose.” Gerald Bordman, *American Musical Revue: From The Passing Show to Sugar Babies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 110.

¹³¹ “‘The Student Prince’ Brings Out Cheers,” *New York Times*, 3 December 1924, 25. Similarly, when asked about her collaboration with Sigmund Romberg, Dorothy Fields complained, “I could never hear one of my lyrics because the orchestra was so loud. Nothing is more annoying to an audience than to strain to hear the words.” Rex Reed, “She Gives Broadway Something to Sing About,” *Sunday News* (Chicago), 29 April 1973, in Dorothy Fields, Clippings in the Theatre Collections, The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

¹³² Press Release, *One For The Money*, Clippings in the Theatre Collections, The Billy Rose Theatre Collection. Although Donnelly gained financial rewards for her body of work, widespread recognition eluded her. Contemporary reviews of *My Maryland* make no mention of Donnelly, instead referring to “Mr. Romberg and his lyricist.” *Variety* (New York), 28 September 1927, *My Maryland*, Clippings in the Theatre Collections, The Billy Rose Theatre Collection. Romberg received much of the credit for the operetta’s success, although his recollection of their collaboration reveals how integral Donnelly was to its creation: “We obtained the play *Barbara Frietchie*, on which it [My Maryland] is based, and read it several times. Then Miss Donnelly went to her country place on Long Island to write the scenario and arrange the music cues. These cues indicate the logical places in which to interpolate songs. Also, with each cue she

However, even through the intimate revue raised the profile of songwriters from that of professional hacks to that of craftspeople, for a woman, lyric writing was still a career fraught with challenges. Gender constraints conspired with the business of musical theater to discriminate against, and even exclude, women. In an interview, Dorothy Fields responded to a question about the dearth of women songwriters by enumerating the obstacles women songwriters historically faced:

There aren't more lady songwriters for the same reason that there aren't more lady doctors or lady accountants or lady lawyers; simply not enough women have the *time* for careers. The man, in our society, is the breadwinner; the woman has enough to do as the homemaker, the wife and mother. Yes, I do think song writing is a man's game. It requires push, energy, movement, mixing; and it *is* a field that is and has been dominated by men. No, I do *not* think men have more talent.¹³³

In another interview, Fields articulated the ways her family restricted her career:

It's always important to establish relationships that are pleasant, although a few composers hated me for wanting to start work at 8:30. But if you have a husband, a couple of kids, two houses, and work for the Girl Scouts, the blind and the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, you're too tired to work at night.¹³⁴

Composer and lyricist Ann Ronell, who began her theatre career in the 1930s, bluntly asserted that the field was difficult for women, "But it was not so easy to get a hearing. There were many other people, with tunes at their fingertips, most of them boys. Girls

wrote down a number of suggestions for the titles of songs. With some cues there were as many as twenty suggestions. I chose the ones I liked best and proceeded to compose the music. Usually, I wrote the opening phrase of the melody to fit the words of the title." Quoted in Richard Kislán, *The Musical: A Look at the American Musical Theater* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980; revised and expanded edition, New York: Applause, 1995), 104 (page citations are to the revised edition).

¹³³ Kane, *How to Write a Song*, 175-6.

¹³⁴ Sally Hammond, "Words for Music," *New York Post*, 1 April 1966, Dorothy Fields, Clippings in the Theatre Collections, The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

were few in this keenly competitive field and most of those in it at that time dropped out later.”¹³⁵

Although the intimate revue was a welcoming form to lyricists, to be successful Hamilton would have to be resourceful. The next chapter explores how Hamilton forged a career by aligning herself with an influential network of women theatre professionals, and it will consider the short and long term influence of the Old Girls’s Network on Hamilton’s career.

¹³⁵ *The Christian Science Monitor*, 3 January 1955, Ann Ronell, Clippings in the Theatre Collections, The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

Chapter Two: “Women Who Could So Amuse”: Nancy Hamilton and the Old Girls

Sarah Bernhardt was a floosy
So, I'm often told, was Duse
Mrs. Siddons' Tragic Muse
Was for lighter sport a ruse
Still this gossip can't abuse
Women who could so amuse.

“Maedchen in Uniform,” Nancy Hamilton¹

In a letter to actress Lillian Gish memorializing the death of her sister, Dorothy Gish, Nancy Hamilton wrote, “Reading of Dorothy’s death has sent memory whirling back over the glories you two have heaped upon me -- professionally and privately.”² As this letter implies, Hamilton and the women around her saw a close connection between professional and private munificence. This chapter explores how, cut off from the patriarchal Broadway world of casting, contracts, and production choices, these women navigated a professional sea by surrounding themselves with webs of influential women. Hamilton’s path from the margins to the center of this Old Girls’s Network was not a linear one, but her story offers a case study for how one woman joined the “women who could so amuse” to develop concatenated relationships of friendship, family, romance, and business.

¹ Nancy Hamilton, “Maedchen In Uniform,” n.d. (the early 1930s), Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection. *Maedchen In Uniform* is a German film about lesbian attractions between a student and teacher in a boarding school. After being briefly censored, it opened in the United States in 1932. For a further discussion of *Maedchen In Uniform* see Richard Dyer, *Now You See It: Studies on Lesbian and Gay Film* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 27-46.

² Nancy Hamilton, to Lillian Gish, 10 June 1968, Lillian Gish Papers, The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

The Old Boys's Network

To understand how some women developed networks of personal and professional relationships in commercial theatre, it is necessary to consider, first, the way working relationships traditionally had been established in the Broadway theatre. Following the precedent established at the turn of the century by the Theatrical Syndicate, an Old Boys's Network dominated Broadway. In this network, opportunities were predicated on associations with a powerful and exclusionary group of men. Tracing the careers and networks of composer Richard Rodgers and lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II aptly illustrates how this Old Boys's Network operated. Rodgers and Hammerstein, whose collaboration on *Oklahoma!* in 1943 made them the most important songwriting team in twentieth century musical theatre, met when Rodgers was fourteen, through Rodgers's older brother, who was in Hammerstein's fraternity at Columbia University.³ Rodgers and Lorenz Hart (Rodgers's collaborator before Hammerstein) met through a friend of Rodgers's brother, who was one of Hart's Columbia classmates.⁴ Rodgers, Hart and librettist Herb Fields (brother of Dorothy Fields) all worked together on the Columbia Varsity show.⁵ Even more so than Princeton's Triangle Show or Harvard's Hasty Pudding Club, the Columbia Varsity show gave young writers the chance to collaborate on an "almost professional production," in the heart of the Broadway theatre

³ Richard Rodgers, *Musical Stages: An Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1975), 21.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁵ Samuel Marx and Jan Clayton, *Rodgers and Hart: Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered: A Dual Biography* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1976) 45-7.

district; Rodgers thought this “an opportunity that could be of incalculable help in furthering my career.”⁶ The men of the Columbia Varsity Show were, as one biographer noted, the “nucleus of a youthful and energetic social group” that would enter, and later dominate, the profession.⁷

These men then used their influence to help the next generation of Broadway professionals by becoming their mentors and public advocates of their careers. An adolescent Stephen Sondheim was Hammerstein’s neighbor in Bucks’ County, Pennsylvania, and he benefited from Hammerstein’s tutelage and connections; his first job in the theatre was as “a glorified office boy” for rehearsals of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Allegro*.⁸ At Hammerstein’s home, Sondheim cavorted with Mary Rodgers, the daughter of Richard Rodgers, and in 1949 she introduced Sondheim to Hal Prince, the director and producer (and protégé of George Abbott) with whom Sondheim

⁶ Rodgers, *Musical Stages*, 35.

⁷ Winer, *The Life and Lyrics of Dorothy Fields*, 16.

⁸ Sondheim frequently relays how, as a teenager, he gave Hammerstein (whom he called a surrogate father) a musical he wrote for his high school and Hammerstein responded, “Well, it’s the worst thing I’ve ever read.... w I didn’t say it was untalented, I said it was terrible.” Hammerstein then took the afternoon to show Sondheim how to structure a musical and Sondheim says, “I’d say that in that afternoon I learned more about songwriting and the musical theater than most people learn in a lifetime.” Sondheim, under Hammerstein’s tutelage, undertook a course of study where, over the next several years, he wrote four different musicals. Until Hammerstein’s death he continued to offer Sondheim advice on his work and his career. Craig Zadan, *Sondheim and Company*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1989; updated, New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), 4-6.

enjoyed an extended collaboration.⁹ Today the young composer and lyricist Adam Guettel, (Mary Rodgers's son) receives Sondheim's enthusiastic public endorsement.

Many women who had active careers as composers or lyricists of musical theatre received their opportunities by way of an association with a powerful man. Dorothy Fields gained access to the Old Boys's Network when Richard Rodgers, at the suggestion of her brother, Herb Fields, auditioned songs for their vaudevillian father Lew Fields.

Dorothy Fields remembered:

When I was sixteen, one of my beaux was a boy named Dick Rodgers. Dick actually taught me to play the piano. Later on, my brother Herb, going to Columbia, had a friend Larry Hart. By then Dick and Larry had become acquainted at Columbia and had begun doing work together. The four of us spent a good deal of time in one another's company.¹⁰

Mary Rodgers's composing career was aided by her famous father and the encouragement of Oscar Hammerstein, II. Composer and lyricist Ann Ronell and composer Kay Swift had professional careers that were largely developed through their sexual liaisons with composer George Gershwin.¹¹ Betty Comden initially performed in Greenwich Village with Adolph Green, and they began to write their own material together soon thereafter. As the interrelations of these artists indicate, entrance to the Old

⁹ Meryle Secrest, *Stephen Sondheim: A Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 85.

¹⁰ Kane, *How to Write a Song*, 164.

¹¹ Gershwin met Ronell when she was in college. Gershwin helped Ronell get her first job in New York, as a rehearsal pianist for *Rosalie*. They may have been romantically involved for a number of years. Joan Peyser, *The Memory of All That: The Life of George Gershwin* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 147-8, 222. Between 1926 and 1936, Swift was Gershwin's lover and musical assistant. According to Gershwin historian Joan Peyser, "Kay received favors from George, too. It was shortly after their affair began that she started to carve out a music-theater career of her own." Peyser speculates that Gershwin got Swift a job as a rehearsal pianist for Rodgers and Hart's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. *Ibid.*, 76.

Boys's Network, for men and (occasionally) women, required a combination of connections, social privilege, and, often, ethnicity – for with the notable exception of Cole Porter, much of the Old Boys's Network was Jewish.

The Old Boys thrived on public displays of their connections. Like the Theatrical Syndicate at the turn of the century, “the boys” created a financial monopoly; as lyricists and composers gained more creative control over their work they hired their friends and associates to collaborate on projects with them, creating a small cabal of musical theatre creators. Moreover, the Old Boys's Network fostered an artistic monopoly, as protégés entered the profession with the benefit of the public imprimatur of their (male) mentor. Even today writers lay claim to the patriarchal lineage of their musical theatre progenitors.

Although the Old Girls's Network operated in a manner similar to the Old Boys's Network -- women formed connections in colleges and with a cohort group -- the women negotiated business connections in bedrooms and living rooms, not boardrooms. Many of the prominent members of the women's networks were lesbians, and they formed connections based on their romantic relationships. Because these relationships formed in the private sphere, the bulk of the professional interactions between the women, necessarily, also remained private. Even though women rarely held visible power in theatre – they did not dwell in the province of contracts and business negotiations -- women did receive quiet support and nurturance from other women theatre professionals. But because of the nature of their interactions, these women often deliberately obscured, rather than highlighted, their connections. The efforts the women undertook to keep the

network “sub rosa” cost them a visible system of support and the theatre a visible matriarchal lineage.

New Faces of 1934

Although the path to the invisible Old Girls’s Network was difficult to find, Hamilton found her way to it and used connections within the network to debut as a professional lyric writer on Broadway. Her break was in *New Faces of 1934*, which its producer, Leonard Sillman, described as “the first revue ever to aim for Broadway with a complete cast of unknowns, headed by a producer who hadn’t produced anything on Broadway.”¹² Along with Martha Caples, Hamilton’s composer collaborator from *And So On*, Hamilton contributed half the sketches and song lyrics to *New Faces of 1934*; many were songs from *And So On* that were recycled or rewritten for the new show. Hamilton also performed in the show.

Hamilton came to be involved in *New Faces of 1934* through Elsie Janis, a vaudeville and musical comedy actress known as “The Sweetheart of the AEF” for her performances overseas during World War I.¹³ Throughout her career, Janis earned a name as “an international celebrity, a war heroine, actress, dancer, mimic, author, composer, playwright, stage director, manager, and linguist.”¹⁴ Janis, who was a generation older than Hamilton, knew the importance of mentorship from strong

¹² Leonard Sillman, *Here Lies Leonard Sillman Straightened Out at Last* (New York: Citadel Press, 1959), 172. Sillman went on to produce six more editions of the *New Faces* revues on Broadway.

¹³ The AEF, or the American Expeditionary Force, refers to United States troupes sent to Europe during World War I.

¹⁴ “Little Bits From Janis’s Life,” *Vaudeville*, 12 September 1925, 23.

women's networks. Janis's mother, Jenny Cockrell Bierbower, determined early that her daughter would be a star; she divorced Janis's father when he disagreed with her plan that "Little Elsie" be a professional actress. She pawned her jewelry and sold household items to raise money to take Janis on the road.¹⁵ With mother and daughter on their own, Bierbower also involved Janis in circles that would help her career; Janis was a favorite of powerful theatrical agent Elisabeth (Bessie) Marbury and her romantic partner, Elsie De Wolfe. In the first decade of the twentieth century, they shielded Janis from the Gerry Society, which enforced the child-labor laws that threatened to stall Janis's blossoming career, by appearing as a character witness when Bierbower was brought to court on charges of child endangerment.¹⁶ Historian Lee Alan Morrow notes, "It is clear that [Janis and her mother] lived most of their lives in a gynocentric world of their own creation, and homosocial bonds were the chief determinants of their professional success in the male-dominated entertainment industry."¹⁷

In 1932, Janis came out of retirement to (in Sillman's words) "supervise" *New Faces of 1934*. She aided in all aspects of production -- she suggested members of the cast, developed ideas, raised funds and involved herself in most decisions regarding the

¹⁵ Morrow, "Elsie Janis," 152; Linda Martin and Kerry Segrave, *Women in Comedy* (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1986), 60. Janis called Bierbower "Mamma Svengali" and once commented, "My ambition is to keep just one step ahead of my mother's ambition for me." Morrow, "Elsie Janis," 155-8.

¹⁶ Ibid., 157. The Gerry Society was an organization, controlled by the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, which regulated child performers in New York. See Elbridge T. Gerry, "Children of the Stage," in *American Vaudeville As Seen by its Contemporaries*, ed. Charles W. Stein (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 24. For a first hand account of Janis's clashes with the Gerry Society see Elsie Janis, *So Far So Good!* New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1932) pp. 19-24, 27-8.

¹⁷ Morrow, "Elsie Janis," 152.

show.¹⁸ Janis also encouraged Sillman to employ several women, including his sister, June Carroll, lyricist Viola Brothers Shore, and lyricist Blanche Merrill, who had worked with Janis on *Puzzles of 1925*, a show with a book and direction by Janis.

It is also likely that Janis, whose cousin, Mary Loren Jeffrey, was Hamilton's roommate at Smith, championed Hamilton as a lyric writer.¹⁹ In his memoirs, Sillman claimed *he* discovered Hamilton when their paths crossed in a nightclub:

One night in Tony's, I was introduced to a girl wrapped up in a ridiculous rabbit coat.... 'Are you a performer?' I asked her.
"Well, in college I was, but nowadays I'm more what you'd call a writer."
"What's your name?"
"Nancy Hamilton."
"Would you like to be in a show I'm doing?"
"How do you know I can *do* anything?"
"I don't know," I said, "I just like your personality."

In Sillman's recollection, after this fortuitous meeting Hamilton became the sixth member of the ensemble cast.²⁰ But an anecdote from Hamilton's recollection offered a conflicting account:

Leonard Sillman, who had procured the co-operation of Charles Dillingham and Elsie Janis, telephoned [Hamilton] one morning and inquired of her present status in the theatre, mentioning he could use some sketches and a song or two. Miss Hamilton, that moment, severed her connections with RKO [the Vaudeville outfit, for which she was employed as a critic], and of the union was born *New Faces*.²¹

Another reporter wrote:

In looking around for songs, sketches, and ideas persons kept saying to Mr. Sillman "Get Nancy Hamilton." So Mr. Sillman telephoned her one

¹⁸ Sillman, *Here Lies Leonard Sillman*, 163-95.

¹⁹ Morrow, "Elsie Janis," 172.

²⁰ Sillman, *Here Lies Leonard Sillman*, 166.

²¹ Boltinoff, "Theatrical Sideshow."

day and said: "I'm putting on a revue in two days. "Have you any material for it or can you think of any." "I have and I can," replied Miss Hamilton.²²

Because of the conflicting accounts, the Smith connection, and Janis's role in *New Faces*, it seems most likely Janis was the "persons" who recommended Hamilton for the production.

Although billing for the show was under the aegis of Sillman and famed producer Charles Dillingham, Hamilton and Janis had a larger interest, financially and creatively, than that for which they were credited. An article in the *New York Herald Tribune* reported:

Returning to active producing after a long absence, C. B. Dillingham has taken over that intimate musical revue by Leonard Sillman and Nancy Hamilton that Peggy Fears originally intended to sponsor here. Active rehearsals on the entertainment started last week with Elsie Janis assisting in the direction, and it will be installed in the Fulton Theatre in mid-February. Miss Hamilton will head the cast in the piece. She had her apprenticeship in theatricals at Smith College where she organized a drama group of her own with considerable success. Miss Hamilton's supporting company will include Roger Stearns, Chuck Walters, Imogene Coca, and Hildegard Halliday.

In addition to initially receiving star billing, Hamilton helped raise funds for the production. According to Sillman, after producer Peggy Fears withdrew her commitment and Elsie Janis failed to raise money from her associates (including Irving Berlin, Will Rogers, Fred Stone, and Sam Harris), "Elsie, Blanche [Merrill], Nancy, Vi [Viola Brothers Shore] and I went among our friends. We bludgeoned them, one by one, into putting up small amounts -- \$100 here, \$50 there -- and we kept bludgeoning relentlessly, fanatically, until we had collected the missing \$6000."²³

²² Seaman, "Get Nancy Hamilton."

²³ Sillman, *Here Lies Leonard Sillman*, 183.

The rehearsal process for *New Faces of 1934* lasted over a year, as Sillman, Janis, and Hamilton struggled to find financial backing for the show; Sillman's promise to pay the bankrupt Dillingham a fixed sum for the use of his name on the show's promotional material especially encumbered the production. Through much of the rehearsal process the performers were unpaid.²⁴ Backstage tensions between Hamilton and Sillman swelled in a battle of egos, compounding the difficulties. Sillman remembered returning to the cast after a trip to producer Otto Kahn with a "great new title -- Leonard Sillman's *New Faces*. Nancy hated it."²⁵ He called Hamilton a "backstage intellectual...who figured me for a spoiled brat."²⁶ By the end of the rehearsal process, Hamilton's billing had been reduced – she was one member of the ensemble cast of theatrical newcomers (see Figure 10).

New Faces of 1934 finally opened in March after two years of rehearsal. As she had in *And So On*, Hamilton again mined contemporary theatrical material for satire. She wrote and performed "Katharine Hepburn Gets in the Mood for *Little Women*," an impression of Katharine Hepburn preparing to act as Jo in *Little Women*, which was Hepburn's fourth film role (see Figure 11). She also "wrote a memorable Walt Disney rip-apart, with the three little pigs doing their versions of *Ah Wilderness!*, *The Green Bay*

²⁴ Sillman remembered, "Jobs in that bleak winter of 1933 were conspicuous by their scarceness.... The [actors] were living mostly on charity -- and hope." In 1933, when more than one-fourth of all Americans were unemployed, the actors were also impoverished, many going without food or clothes. Sillman remembered that when film star Mary Pickford, known as "America's Sweetheart," attended a backer's audition, she gave everyone in the *New Faces* cast coupons to the Penny restaurant, owned by health and fitness guru Bernarr MacFadden's, where everything cost one cent. *Ibid.*, 170-9.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 175.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 202.



CHARLES DILLINGHAM

presents

an intimate musical revue

NEW FACES

conceived and directed by
LEONARD SILLMAN

production supervised by
ELSIE JANIS

"Here it is, a giggly, boisterous, good-natured young time, a large package of foolery and tunes put over with utmost pep.

—GILBERT GABRIEL, N. Y. American.

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MATINEES WEDNESDAY and SATURDAY

Over

Figure 10. Program for *New Faces of 1934*
Hamilton is the fifth from the left in the second row.
From the Personal Collection of the Author, College Park, MD.



Figure 11. Nancy Hamilton in “Katharine Hepburn in *Little Women*.”
From *New Faces of 1934*. From the Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton, Martha’s
Vineyard, MA.

Tree, and *Tobacco Road*, with the line, ‘I ain’t et anything, pappy, since we et mammy last week.’”²⁷ She wrote and performed a spoof of the famously reclusive Greta Garbo inquiring of a man who didn’t recognize her, “What! Not even in the dark glasses.” She also resurrected her performance of “I Hate Spring,” from *And So On*.

Reviewers were impressed with Hamilton’s writing. John Mason Brown noted, “Miss Hamilton’s writing has point and bite to it.”²⁸ Another review commended her, calling Hamilton, “satiric in the Noel Coward tradition.”²⁹ And although *New Faces of 1934* boasted an impressive cast of neophyte performers, including comedienne Imogene Coca and actor Henry Fonda, reviewers often pointed to Hamilton as the new face to watch. One reviewer asserted:

Prominent...both in the writing of certain numbers and in the acting, was a youngster named *Nancy Hamilton*. To me her work was delightful. I’d never heard anything about her before. Probably if I were as speakeasy-conscious as I used to be, or got around at all now to those resorts which have taken the place of the old ‘speaks’...I should have heard comment upon her promise.”³⁰

John Mason Brown also gushed, “If *New Faces* had done nothing else, it would have justified itself by giving Miss Hamilton her first real chance. Here is a talent that merits

²⁷ Lee Davis, *Scandals and Follies: The Rise and Fall of the Great Broadway Revue* (New York: Limelight Editions, 2000), 314.

²⁸ John Mason Brown, “Two on the Aisle,” *New York Post*, 7 May 1934, Scrapbook of Nancy Hamilton, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

²⁹ Robert Garland, “New Faces,” n.d., Scrapbook of Nancy Hamilton, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

³⁰ William Rose Benet, “The Phoenix Nest,” *The Saturday Review of Literature*, 5 May 1934, Scrapbook of Nancy Hamilton, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton

watching, not only as it is now being exhibited at the Fulton, but in the future.”³¹ As Hamilton moved out of obscurity, she took Broadway by surprise. The comments of the press about “Never having heard anything about her before,” indicates that they thought Hamilton was a genuine “new face,” who did not come with the *public* endorsement of a more established champion.

Hamilton’s was a young star on the ascent who, in the Depression era, could make a living from her stage work. Benefiting from stipulations in the National Recovery Act’s Legitimate Theatre Code, which President Franklin Roosevelt signed into law in 1933, Hamilton’s contract for *New Faces of 1934* guaranteed her forty dollars a week. The contract further stipulated that she would receive eighty-five dollars if the show grossed thirteen thousand dollars and 135 dollars if the show grossed more than fifteen thousand dollars, leading Sillman to complain, “Nancy Hamilton, who had written a substantial part of the show, was drawing down more than any of us because of her senior status and her royalties.”³² Hamilton may have been a new face, but she clearly had considerable business acumen.

Hamilton’s success in *New Faces* also made her a minor celebrity. After the revue’s opening, pictures of Hamilton out on the town appeared in New York newspapers and *Stage Magazine*. A bathing-suited Hamilton appeared in an ad for White Rock Soda that proclaimed, “Nancy Hamilton, actress and lyric writer, is apparently watching

³¹ Brown, “Two on the Aisle.”

³² Contract for *New Faces of 1934*, 1934, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection; Sillman, *Here Lies Leonard Sillman*, 202.

somebody dive. The White Rock is just waiting.”³³ And, she warranted a mention in Walter Winchell’s column – for many the zenith of stardom. The *Pittsburgh Sun Telegraph* reported, “A young Sewickley social registerite, Nancy Hamilton, ‘made’ Walter Winchell’s column yesterday. Said Walter, ‘Nancy Hamilton in *New Faces* was once Kate Hepburn’s understudy – and she now does a devastating and caustic echo of her.”³⁴

But the attention Hamilton started to receive also raised concerns about her reputation; her parents continued to insist that Hamilton behave, above all, as “a lady.” In April 1934, critic Brooks Atkinson wrote a feature piece describing the ways that the creators of *New Faces of 1934* procured financial backing for the flagging show:

The next afternoon Mr. Sillman and Nancy Hamilton decided they knew enough people in New York who would give them a thousand dollars a piece. Coercing a car and a chauffeur from one of their friends at 5 o’clock in the afternoon, they started out, sober and determined. They wracked their brains and combed their friends and acquaintances. No one failed to offer them a drink. Few proffered financial balm. At one house Mr. Sillman alone gave the whole show. By 3 o’clock the next morning they found themselves in Harlem, neatly intoxicated-and in possession of \$4,000 worth of pledges.³⁵

It seems Hamilton’s father complained about this article, because five days after the article appeared Atkinson wrote him a letter of apology:

I am sorry the article we had last Sunday gave you offense. It was intended to be light-hearted.... But I can assure you that we are not in the

³³ “Who’s Who...on the Alkaline Side,” n.d., Scrapbook of Nancy Hamilton, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

³⁴ Nancy Jane, “Gossipy Chat,” *Pittsburgh Sun Telegraph*, n.d. (probably 1934), Scrapbook of Nancy Hamilton, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

³⁵ Brooks Atkinson, “Behind New Faces,” *The New York Times*, April 1, 1934, Scrapbook of Nancy Hamilton, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

business of intentionally slandering anybody, least of all your daughter, who is a talented comedian.³⁶

Entering the Sewing Circle

Despite her parents's fears over her reputation, as she did at Smith, Hamilton set off on a transgressive path, ingratiating herself to a "sewing circle" of some of the most controversial women in Broadway and Hollywood –many of whom were lesbians. Although the Old Boys's Network had visible points of access as it foregrounded the connections of its members, the network Hamilton sought did not. Thus, Hamilton was treading a dangerous path, as she simultaneously needed to "signify" her intentions to the women in the network at the same time that she protected herself against the potential suspicion and public censure that would invariably come from being linked to these women.

Hamilton began her first tentative interactions with this circle on the level of fandom. Early in her career Hamilton took a particular interest in women and men whose homosexuality was the subject of gossip, rumor, and innuendo. In the 1930s, in a

³⁶ Brooks Atkinson, New York, to Charles Hamilton, Sewickley, April 6, 1934, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection. Perhaps in deference to her parents, during her early years in New York Hamilton allowed herself to be seen with men. Sillman recalled attending parties as Hamilton's date, "One night Nancy Hamilton, quivering with excitement, asked me to take her to a very important dinner party being given for Claire Luce and other *Time* and *Life* people. It was all by candlelight and all for soignée and terribly intellectual. I tried to keep up with the talk but the polysyllables were flying so thick and fast it all sounded like Greek to me." Sillman, *Here Lies Leonard Sillman*, 200. Hamilton's frequent date was a gay Cleveland gossip columnist, Winsor French. One clipping revealed, "Cleveland scribe Winsor French is doing the town with Nancy Hamilton of *Pride and Prejudice*." Ed Sullivan, Broadway, *New York Daily News*, 8 June 1936, Scrapbook of Nancy Hamilton, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton. Hamilton's niece, Sally, also remembers that Hamilton frequently attended events with a man named Nigel Fletcher. Sally Hamilton, Interview, 4 June 2001.

scrapbook primarily about her own career, Hamilton began collecting clippings of stars, including Katharine Hepburn, Greta Garbo, and, beginning in 1939, actress Mary Martin. A diary entry in 1937 reveals the stars who were of particular interest to Hamilton. She enumerated “Things I would Like to See,” a list of forty-eight ideas that included:

Greta Garbo in a screen version of *Tristan and Isolde*, *Hedda Gabler*, *The Way of the World*, *The Forsythe Saga*, and *The Portrait of a Lady*
Beatrice Lillie in a stage version of *The Water Gipsies*
Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne in *Much Ado About Nothing*
Katharine Cornell in *Anthony and Cleopatra* and the *Life of George Sand*
Noel Coward in *The Turn of the Screw* and *Much Ado About Nothing*³⁷

It is not unusual that these popular stars would intrigue a young lesbian like Hamilton. Film theorist E. Ann Kaplan describes spectatorship as an “urge toward identifying,” an especially potent urge in gay and lesbian culture,” and film theorist Andrea Weiss notes, in the 1930s “stars served as cultural models for a large spectrum of homosexuals across America.”³⁸

But Hamilton moved beyond mere spectatorship; she practiced signifying her transgressive sexuality by embodying the women she admired, including Hepburn, Beatrice Lillie, Marlene Dietrich, and Greta Garbo, in on-stage parodies. Further, as Hamilton moved from spectator to satirist, the shifting identifications became accretions to Hamilton’s public image -- audiences and critics came to see Hamilton as extensions of the women she imited. In 1934, the *Pittsburgh Bulletin Index* reported that Hamilton

³⁷ Diary of Nancy Hamilton, 5 February 1937, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

³⁸ E. Ann Kaplan, “Untitled Entry,” *Camera Obscura* 20/21: 198; Weiss, *Vampires and Violets*, 35.

understudied the “comparatively unknown Hepburn (whom she is said to resemble).”³⁹ Another review reported: “Miss Hamilton, who looks like a pleasant combination of Miss Hepburn and [actress] Hope Williams, has composed several of the songs and written some of the skits in the [*New Faces of 1934*], and they are said by those who ought to know, to be very clever.”⁴⁰ Another article on *New Faces of 1934* also emphasized the physical similarities between the Hamilton and Hepburn:

Hepburn is satirized by her former understudy, Nancy Hamilton, who also looks like La Hepburn. Among the back stagers the other evening was a dowager who barged into a dressing room and beamed at the young lady sitting there. “I think my deah,” said the visitor, “that you were mahvelous in your burlesque of the Hepburn woman. Simply mahvelous!” Thank you,” said the young lady, smiling just as sweetly, “I’ll tell Miss Hamilton you said so. I happen to be Miss Hepburn.”⁴¹

The comparisons between Hamilton and the women she satirized continued beyond *New Faces of 1934*. The following year a feature piece on Hamilton’s performance in *Pride and Prejudice* reported that “in profile [Hamilton] looked a bit like Miss [Beatrice] Lillie herself.”⁴² And a review of *One for the Money* in 1939 noted, “Miss Hamilton called Beatrice Lillie to mind both in the manner and the matter of her japeries, there are reasons for this. The readiest one is that Miss Hamilton has spent a

³⁹ *Pittsburgh Bulletin Index*, January 1934, Scrapbook of Nancy Hamilton, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

⁴⁰ Unidentified Clipping, Scrapbook of Nancy Hamilton, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

⁴¹ *Pittsburgh Press*, 7 April 1934, Scrapbook of Nancy Hamilton, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

⁴² Leavitt, “From College to Stage Career.”

good deal of her spare time supplying Lady Peel with sketches for her broadcasts. Naturally she knows her methods intimately.”⁴³

Although in her diary Hamilton complained that one critic, “reports that I have a Hepburn complex,” Hamilton herself encouraged these comparisons.⁴⁴ In the *Smith Alumnae Quarterly*, Hamilton recalled landing the role as understudy in *The Warrior Husband* by acting, like Hepburn, as a New England aristocrat:

Katharine Hepburn had just been cast as the lead in *The Warrior Husband*, and it occurred to Miss Hamilton that she was at least enough of an Amazon to understudy that part. Having learned that Harry Moses, the producer, had a weakness for high life, she borrowed a riding habit, rode downtown on the subway, and marched into his office saying in a manner that she hoped was at once Amazonian and stylish, “Sorry, hadn’t time to change. Just been exercising my horses on Long Island.” Mr. Moses was impressed. He told her to come back the next day. She returned in a borrowed squash costume, swinging her racket, Mr. Moses was convinced. She got the understudy part and a walk-on.⁴⁵

In “A Dissertation on the Reflected Glory of Being Katharine Hepburn’s Understudy,” published in 1933, Hamilton boasted that, when producers rebuffed her she would reveal her connection to Hepburn. “At the mystic moment when the telephone operator thought to put me to rout with the more or less final rebuff, ‘And anyway, you are not the type,’ I

⁴³ John Mason Brown, “In Praise of ‘One for the Money’ as a Revue,” *New York Post*, March 21, 1939, 14.

⁴⁴ Diary of Nancy Hamilton, 1934, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

⁴⁵ Gilchrist, “Smith to Broadway,” A similar version of this story also appears in Seaman, “Get Nancy Hamilton.”

would bring off my coup.... I would announce with lovely simplicity that I had been Katharine Hepburn's understudy last year."⁴⁶

Hamilton may have been stylizing herself in a way that would signal to the women of the sewing circle that she was one of their group. However, this public appearance left Hamilton open to the same accusations of lesbianism that chased these women. Although publically Hepburn was a "vocal opponent of homosexuality, linking it with other 'social ills' of society," her on and off screen performances of androgyny made her a favorite lesbian icon.⁴⁷ Likewise, according to historian Axel Madsen, Beatrice Lillie was noted for her "trademark close-cropped hair, fezlike cap, and long cigarette holder....Lillie was always on the edge of permissible."⁴⁸ Later in Hamilton's career her self stylization and her associations with members of lesbian culture would lead reporters to make more marked insinuations about her sexuality.

However, in 1934 Hamilton's connections to transgressive women and her involvement in *New Faces of 1934* allowed her access to larger circles of women on Broadway. The show opened with Hamilton's lyrics:

You'll find how full of charming maids and men this is.
We know you'll prove as charming
New names, tch, tch,
But they'll make Mae West and Gable talk.
Methuselah, Andromeda, Tallulah and Saint James

⁴⁶ Hamilton, "A Dissertation on the Reflected Glory of Being Katharine Hepburn's Understudy."

⁴⁷ See Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York: Quality Paperback Club, 1987), 116 and Madsen, *The Sewing Circle*, 139. So androgynous was Hepburn's appearance that when she first arrived at RKO, people thought she was director George Cukor's new boyfriend. *Ibid.*, 140.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 121.

Were all of them new names...⁴⁹

The inclusion of Mae West and Tallulah Bankhead was an homage to two transgressive performers who were open about their affiliations with gay culture. In fact, *New Faces* brought Hamilton within just a few degrees of separation of some of the most transgressive women in the theatre. Elsie Janis relied on a consistent appearance of androgyny, on and off the stage, to retain her sex-less “kid sister” image. But she also commonly dressed as a man in the style of British Music Hall and, according to her biographer Lee Alan Morrow, “attended parties at which same-sex desire was not masked. At one such party she arrived, dressed in men’s clothes, carrying a riding crop.”⁵⁰ Janis was a friend of Eva Le Gallienne, who played a French woman to Janis’s doughboy in *Elsie Janis and Her Gang* (see Figure 12). Le Gallienne’s sexuality was a matter of public knowledge after the press exposed her relationship with actress Josephine Hutchinson, reporting that Le Gallienne caused Hutchinson’s marital

⁴⁹ Sillman, *Here Lies Leonard Sillman*, 193.

⁵⁰ Morrow, “Elsie Janis,” 167. Janis married Gilbert Wilson, a man who was sixteen years her junior. But although Janis and Wilson never divorced, they lived separately for most of their marriage. (There are conflicting reports regarding their separation. Some reports say they were separated a year after marriage, some as many as fifteen years.) The suspicion that theirs was a “lavender” marriage heightened when Janis was in a severe car accident. While she recuperated in upstate New York, Wilson took an acting job in Manhattan and the media speculated on the sincerity of their commitment. Lee Alan Morrow posits that Janis and Wilson were “beards,” each masking the other’s homosexuality. *Ibid.*



Figure 12. Elsie Janis and Eva Le Gallienne in *Elsie Janis and Her Gang*.
Printed in Helen Sheehy, *Eva Le Gallienne: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf,
1996), 77.

separation by having “sex in the office.”⁵¹ Le Gallienne also had romantic relations with Beatrice Lillie, who was, “a veteran of affairs with all the usual suspects -- Eva Le Gallienne, Katharine Cornell, Tallulah Bankhead, Libby Holman, Hope Williams.”⁵² Bankhead had been involved with Lillie, as well as Katharine Cornell, Laurette Taylor, and Sybil Thorndyke.

Several women rumored to be part of Broadway’s lesbian circles were in the opening night audience of *New Faces of 1934*, including Bankhead, Hepburn, Libby Holman, and Elsa Maxwell.⁵³ Through her new associations Hamilton easily could have participated in this overlapping web of stars who shared beds and their professional connections; one article stated, “Nancy Hamilton, who is so well known for her writing,

⁵¹ Although many of the details were incorrect, “the press did all they could to expose Eva and Josie's intimate relationship, and Eva lived her life with lesbian notoriety.” See Schanke, *Shattered Applause*, 88 and Helen Sheehy, *Eva Le Gallienne: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996). According to Schanke, “Eva's fear was compounded because her lesbianism had become such public knowledge....At parties that [actress and writer May] Sarton attended during those years, she frequently heard people refer to Eva as 'that terrible lesbian woman'....As Eva's notoriety grew, she became the brunt of countless rumors and cruel jokes. One relayed the story of an avid fan who rushed to her dressing room one night with a bouquet of flowers, With great panache he flung himself at her feet: 'I must have you for my wife.' Le Gallienne supposedly replied, 'Oh, really! When shall I meet her?'" Schanke, *Shattered Applause*, 85.

⁵² McLellan, *The Girls*, 75.

⁵³ Hamilton’s frequent “beard” Windsor French was also attended the opening night production. Others in the audience were actresses Mary Pickford and Blanche Ring, producer Dwight Wiman, choreographer Ned Wayburn, and journalists Robert Benchley and William Randolph Hearst. “The Passing Show,” n.d., Scrapbook of Nancy Hamilton, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton and Howard Teichmann, *Fonda: My Life* (New York: New American Library, 1981), 86.

is another socialite to be connected with *New Faces*.... After the show, the cast and a great many of the audience will celebrate at the Algonquin Hotel.”⁵⁴

But despite the glamour of the Sewing Circle, associations with these transgressive women also had the potential to stall Hamilton’s career. By the late 1920s the stage was under the thrall of a conservatism that specifically targeted homosexuality, forcing playwrights to eliminate or “code” gay characters or face critical condemnation, censorship, or even prison. In February of 1927, the mayor of New York ordered police to arrest without warrant “anyone connected with a performance which...seemed to violate common decency.”⁵⁵ Under this injunction (designed largely to target “aberrant sexuality”), authorities imprisoned Mae West, star of *Sex* and the gay-themed *The Drag*, and closed the lesbian drama *The Captive*. Two months later New York passed the Wales Law, also known as the Wales Padlock Law. It prohibited plays “depicting or dealing with the subject of sex degeneracy, or sex perversion” and, in extreme cases, allowed officials to padlock any production that a jury determined had themes that “would tend to the corruption of youth or others.”⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Unidentified Clipping, Scrapbook of Nancy Hamilton, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

⁵⁵ Kaier Curtin, *We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians: The Emergence of Lesbians and Gay Men on the American Stage* (Boston: Alyson Publications, Inc., 1987), 57.

⁵⁶ John Katz, *Gay American History* (New York: Thomas Y. Cowell Company, 1976), 90; Curtin, *We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians*, 101. In this environment, gay men, as well as lesbians, concealed their sexuality. Noel Coward was terrified he would suffer the same fate as Oscar Wilde. In Terry Castle, *Noel Coward and Radclyffe Hall: Kindred Spirits* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 114. And although his homosexuality was wildly rumored, it was not until after Coward's death in 1975 that his long-time valet, Cole Lesley, wrote “He was a homosexual.” Cole Lesley, *Remembered Laughter* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), 89. Likewise, although most everyone in show business knew that he was gay, Cole Porter's sexual identity was not publicly

In the 1930s, homophobia and legal sanctions against homosexual images intensified.⁵⁷ On the West Coast, in 1934, the same year that *The Children's Hour* proved scandalous on Broadway, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, under the leadership of former postmaster general Will Hays, developed a system of self-censorship that prohibited any reference to homosexuality in film. And, when in October of 1934, Hamilton complained in her diary that Leonard Sillman was spreading rumors about her --“Leonard Sillman reports that I am putting in a revue of my own, directed by Serge Soudeikine and Elsie Janis backed by two wealthy friends of mine. To go into rehearsal in two days. There were four abortions in the cast of *New Faces* during the run of the show. Leonard Sillman reports that I am a Lesbian,” -- she had good reason to be disconcerted.⁵⁸

Brenda Forbes, Gertrude Macy, and *One for the Money*

Through *New Faces of 1934* Hamilton became more skilled at creating her own opportunities; as one reviewer noted in 1939, “every time she’s out of work, she writes a revue and then appears in it.”⁵⁹ In 1939, after her acting stints in *Pride and Prejudice* and

broadcast until 1971, seven years after his death. Mark Fearnow, “Let's Do it: The Layered Life of Cole Porter,” in *Staging Desire: Queer Readings of American Theater History*, eds. Robert A. Schanke and Kim Marra (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001), 158.

⁵⁷ Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, New York: Crown Publishers, 1991), 114.

⁵⁸ Diary of Nancy Hamilton, 5 October 1934, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

⁵⁹ Mok, “Not Even a Cat May Quip at a Queen.”

The Women, Hamilton brought *One for the Money* to Broadway. For this intimate revue, Hamilton wrote “every line and lyric” for the songs composed by Morgan Lewis, and she performed in six of the twenty-nine skits.⁶⁰

With *One for the Money* Hamilton again relied on her personal and professional associations with women to bolster her career, this time calling on actress Brenda Forbes (see Figure 13). Forbes and Hamilton had become acquainted when they shared a dressing room during *Pride and Prejudice*, and Forbes moved into Hamilton’s East End Avenue apartment before *One for the Money* opened. Although *One for the Money* was an ensemble show, Hamilton used it to advance Forbes’s acting career. Forbes remembered, “I could hear how the songs and sketches for the revue were coming along. Much of the material was tailor-made for me.”⁶¹ At one point Hamilton complained to a critic that Forbes was not getting the recognition her acting merited: “Poor Brenda Forbes, who is a fine comic, drew virtually no comment -- which was shameful.”⁶²

Together Forbes and Hamilton forged a social and professional circle among their

⁶⁰ Press Release, 1939, *One for the Money*, Clippings in the Theatre Collections, The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

⁶¹ Forbes, *Five Minutes, Miss Forbes*, 102.

⁶² Gilbert, “She Thought Her Revue Was Kidding Capital.”



Figure 13. Brenda Forbes and Nancy Hamilton (undated photograph)
From the Personal Collection of Nancy Smart, La Plata, MD.

colleagues on Broadway.⁶³ Initially Hamilton and Forbes socialized primarily with Hamilton's associates. According to Forbes:

After I met Nan, she and Dreek [actor Frederick Voight, later Forbes' husband] and I became a threesome. Soon we were joined by three others: the composer Morgan Lewis (known as Buddy), his friend Hawley Faber, and Eleanor Gilchrist, a Smith College friend of Nan's who was an editor at the *Reader's Digest*.⁶⁴

But by the end of the 1930s Forbes enfolded Hamilton into the social and professional circle of Katharine Cornell, a network within the Old Girls's Network. And as Hamilton moved into the inner sphere of this world, Cornell's network became inextricably tied to her personal and professional life.

⁶³ If the historian can, as Andrea Weiss suggests, "locate gay history in rumor, innuendo, fleeting gestures, and coded language," it seems difficult to believe that Forbes and Hamilton did not have a romantic relationship. Andrea Weiss, "A Queer Feeling When I Look at You': Hollywood Stars and Lesbian Spectatorship in the 1930s," in *Multiple Voices in Feminist Film Criticism*, eds. Diane Carson, Linda Dittmar, and Janice R. Welsch (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 330. Newspaper reports in the 1930s and 1940s hinted at it; one columnist noted that Hamilton shared "a cozy midtown apartment" with Forbes, and newspapers reported on items such as the Thanksgiving dinner for twelve hosted by Hamilton and Forbes: "Brenda and she staged a Thanksgiving dinner for 12. We were a little worried about the magnitude of the job (they were entertaining current producers et. al.) but Bea Lillie sent a case of champagne, and everybody said the cooking was delicious." Bald, "Bachelor Girl Makes Good on Broadway;" Francis, "Candid Close-Ups." Further, although Forbes twice married, she reported that her friends responded to both unions with ambivalence. Forbes married actor Frederick Voight shortly before he left to serve in World War II. She recalled, "I can't say Nan was happy when she heard the news, but she agreed to help with the ceremony -- after all, we did share an apartment. Many of my friends had doubts about the marriage, but they sportingly said nothing at the time." Forbes, *Five Minutes, Miss Forbes*, 114. In 1945, Voight returned to New York, but, according to Forbes, the "physical side of our marriage was over." The married couple lived in separate apartments, Forbes continuing to live with Hamilton. Eventually Voight committed suicide. After the police discovered Voight dead, they found Forbes's name in his diary and called her. Forbes, however, had a matinee performance and called on Gertrude Macy to go to the morgue and identify Voight's body. *Ibid.*, 151.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 97. Hamilton employed Voight in the tryouts for *One for the Money*.

The first business boon Hamilton enjoyed from Cornell's network came about when Gertrude Macy, Cornell's business manager and personal assistant, produced *One for the Money* with Guthrie McClintic's business manager, Stanley Gilkey. Macy was a physics major from Bryn Mawr who met Cornell in 1926 on a transatlantic crossing.⁶⁵ Cornell described Macy's role: "She runs the whole shooting match, as far as I am concerned....May goodness and Macy follow me all the days of my life."⁶⁶

Macy was also at the center of Cornell's personal circle. During her early years working for Cornell, Macy lived on the top floor of Cornell's and McClintic's town home on Beekman Place in Manhattan. Writer Paul Monette recalled his friends of an older generation saying, "'Oh yes, Miss Macy -- she was Cornell's lover for years. And Guthrie [McClintic] had all the boys.' It seemed like a secret that nobody kept."⁶⁷

One for the Money was Macy's first producing venture independent of Cornell. A press release for *One for the Money* described Macy's association with the show as serendipitous: "Miss Macy went to Suffern N. Y. on vacation and there, in a 'straw hat' theatre, saw a performance of *One for the Money* which the brilliant young Nancy Hamilton had written and produced there for a summer tryout."⁶⁸ More likely, however,

⁶⁵ Mosel, *Leading Lady*, 211-12.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 221. Hamilton lauded Macy as "beyond doubt the most capable person of either gender that has ever managed a troupe of actors." Nancy Hamilton, Italy, to Margaret Hamilton, New York, 27 August 1944, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton. Actress Margalo Gillmore had a colorful description of Macy, "a combination of the lion of Trafalgar Square and the one in front of the New York Public Library." Margalo Gillmore and Patricia Collinge, *The B.O.W.S* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1945), 11.

⁶⁷ Paul Monette, *Last Watch of the Night*, 34

⁶⁸ Press Release, *One for the Money*, Clippings in the Theatre Collections, The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

Forbes brought Macy to the show; in her memoirs Forbes wrote, “My good friend Gert Macy came to see [*One for the Money*] and promptly decided to produce it for Broadway, with Stanley Gilkey “⁶⁹ Hamilton likewise asserted that Macy did not simply happen on the production; her involvement was more deliberate. Hamilton wrote that Macy decided to stop merely being Cornell’s manager and try something on her own. So Macy pooled resources with Stanley Gilkey and they went to the County Theatre in Suffern, New York to see the show.⁷⁰

In any case, Macy’s association with *One for the Money* proved a benefit to Hamilton. The Macys were well connected; in 1942 Macy’s sister, Louise, would marry Harry Hopkins, an advisor to President Roosevelt and one of the chief architects of the New Deal. And in the Depression, when producing a show was tricky, Gertrude Macy’s connections provided much needed capital. Hamilton and Forbes hosted friends and business associations for Thanksgiving of 1938, including Hamilton’s brother Bud, Morgan Lewis, Dreck Voight, Eleanor Gilchrist, and Gertrude Macy. But Hamilton wrote to her mother, that Macy’s friend Millie Kellaber was:

The most welcome guest of all tomorrow, having introduced me yesterday to a woman who on hearing the songs and sketches from the revue [*One for the Money*] has just put up twenty-five hundred of the ten thousand necessary to go ahead. We also think we have enticed at least two more people into doing the same and everybody is very bucked.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Forbes, *Five Minutes, Miss Forbes*, 102.

⁷⁰ Nancy Hamilton “*Two For the Show: Our Illegitimate Problem Child*,” n.d., *Two for the Show*, Clippings in the Theatre Collections, The Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Performing Arts Library, New York.

⁷¹ Nancy Hamilton, New York, to Margaret Hamilton, Sewickley, PA, n.d., Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

And, as she did with Forbes, Hamilton developed her long relationship with Macy into a mixture of business and (an often contentious) friendship. At the same time that she produced Hamilton's shows, Macy moved next door to Forbes and Hamilton.⁷² Hamilton's diaries indicate that through the 1950s Hamilton and Macy dined or had cocktails together almost daily. Even after Cornell's death in 1974, they were neighbors on Martha's Vineyard, living close enough that Hamilton could use binoculars to spy on Macy.⁷³

One for the Money opened in February of 1939 in Broadway's Booth Theatre. The revue had an ensemble cast of sixteen, including, in addition to Hamilton and Forbes, rising stars Alfred Drake and Gene Kelly. It featured burlesques of modern life, politics, culture, and high brow society, including "The Three Kings," a send-up of Orson Welles discussing ways to rewrite Shakespeare (replace the unfamiliar Kings Richard and Henrys with the more familiar Prince Michael, Alfonso, Edward VIII, and King Victor). In this sketch the notoriously egomaniacal auteur proclaimed, "At the age of two I knew Shakespeare backwards. At the age of four I knew Shakespeare frontward. At the age of six I knew Shakespeare personally."⁷⁴ Hamilton also wrote "The Story of the Opera," a sketch in which an opera fanatic (performed by Hamilton, dressed as a frenzied fan, replete with a brass brassiere and Viking horns) described the joys of Kirsten Flagstad, the Norwegian opera soprano, performing Wagner. Hamilton also took aim at Eleanor Roosevelt's popular newspaper column "My Day" in a routine that mocked the frenetic

⁷² Forbes, *Five Minutes, Miss Forbes*, 113.

⁷³ Monette, *Last Watch of the Night*, 35-40.

⁷⁴ Nancy Hamilton, "The Three Kings," Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

life the First Lady described in her daily syndicated column.⁷⁵ The song opened with Hamilton costumed as Eleanor Roosevelt dressed as a Native American. In each verse of the song, Hamilton took off a layer of clothes to reveal another outfit underneath, singing about dancing a war dance, throwing out the first pitch at a baseball game, and the everyday tasks of a First Lady. In the “Yoo Hoo Blues,” Hamilton performed, in blackface, “a Tin Pan Alley Topsy lamenting because her Dixie existence is so happy that she has lost the orthodox blues.”⁷⁶ In *One for the Money*, Hamilton also directly attacked more politically motivated revues like Irving Berlin’s and Moss Hart’s *As Thousands Cheer* (1933) and Harold Rome’s *Pins and Needles* (1937), the run of which coincided with *One for the Money*.⁷⁷

In the leftist *zeitgeist* of Depression-era America, liberal critics saw *One for the Money* as a reactionary celebration of society life. Forbes remembered, “Most of the critics were unimpressed. Some called us ‘Park Avenue pets,’ suggesting that we were rich and unfeeling sophisticates. (Actually, that opening night Nan and I came home to no lights -- and no way of cooking dinner -- as we were in arrears with our bill.)”⁷⁸ During a decade when intimate revues were rife with political critique, one critic correctly prognosticated:

⁷⁵ Historian David Emblidge notes that by 1938, “Mrs. Roosevelt’s column appeared in 75 papers and had 4 million readers.” David Emblidge, ed., *My Day: The Best of Eleanor Roosevelt’s Acclaimed Newspaper Columns, 1936-1962*, with an introduction by Blanche Wiesen Cook (New York: Da Capo Press, 2001), 28.

⁷⁶ Lloyd Lewis, “Parlor Variety,” *The Chicago Daily News*, *One for the Money*, Clippings in the Theatre Collections, The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

⁷⁷ Chapter 3 addresses the nature of Hamilton’s attacks on the leftist shows and critical response to *One for the Money* in depth.

⁷⁸ Forbes, *Five Minutes*, *Miss Forbes*, 103.

[It is] possible that Miss Hamilton's gently ironic jabs at social foibles might not go over well with audiences educated by "Pin and Needles" and the forthcoming "Sing Out the News" to laugh at the grim humor of current world issues.⁷⁹

After about ten weeks on Broadway, the show traveled to Chicago, where it ran for two months.⁸⁰ Hamilton wrote to her mother:

There is a very good chance that the "One for the Money" company will sail for England a week from Saturday on some well-appointed cattle boat! Business has not improved this week -- the contrary in fact -- but Gert and Stanley, not to mention me, feel that we might still sell our wares at another market place, so with luck and a fair wind, we will go.⁸¹

One for the Money did not, however, make the transfer to England. Instead, after the show closed, Hamilton traveled with Forbes and Forbes's mother to a vacation in Laguna Beach, California. There she began work on the next revue in the series, *Two for the Show*.

The Mannish Woman

One for the Money had returned Hamilton to the spotlight she first enjoyed during *New Faces of 1934*. This time images of her out on the town appeared on the society pages of more elitist periodicals like *Town and Country*, and Hamilton and the cast of *One for the Money* did print advertisements for Gladstone Fabrics (which made the show curtain for *One for the Money*) and performed a fashion show featuring the head dresses

⁷⁹ "Strawhat Review [sic]," Unidentified Newspaper Clipping, *One for the Money*, Clippings in the Theatre Collections, The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

⁸⁰ Forbes, *Five Minutes, Miss Forbes*, 104.

⁸¹ Nancy Hamilton, New York, to Margaret Hamilton, Sewickley, PA, n.d., Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

by Lilly Dache (which also appeared in the show) at the Ritz Carlton Hotel.⁸² But away from the spotlight Hamilton continued to stylize herself after women like Katharine Hepburn and Beatrice Lillie. She sported short hair, pants and, in Forbes's words, "boyish good looks."⁸³

But this stylization placed the sexuality of the unmarried Hamilton under scrutiny. In the late nineteenth century, Richard Von Krafft-Ebing had asserted that women with a "strong preference for male garments, women who cropped [their] hair short, who hated dolls and needle work, liked cigars, and wanted to marry women were...easy to spot and diagnose."⁸⁴ Krafft-Ebing's work continued to hold sway through the 1930s when an issue of *Current Psychology and Psychoanalysis* published in 1936 linked a woman's features and sartorial choices with her sexual proclivities in order to describe the "mannish woman":

"Lady Lovers," as they are termed on Broadway, are plentiful. Girls, many in their teens, with the "wives," rove both the dark streets and alleys and the well-lighted avenues arm-in-arm. Often it is difficult to tell whether the creatures are boys or not. Clothed in mannish togs, flat-chested, hair slicked tightly back and closely cropped, seen in a restaurant or bar room, one often ponders before hazarding a guess to "its" sex. Faces then, often hard, voices low as a man's, their features have masculine characteristics, although few shave. Make-up is not used in an obvious fashion as it is by most women.⁸⁵

⁸² *Town and Country*, Spring 1939, n.p., Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection; Advertisement for Gladstone Fabrics, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection; Press Release, n.d., Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

⁸³ Forbes, *Five Minutes, Miss Forbes*, 96.

⁸⁴ Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis with Especial Reference to the Antipathic Sexual Instinct* (Stuttgart, 1886), trans. F. J. Rebman (Brooklyn: Physicians and Surgeons Books Co., 1908), 355.

⁸⁵ "Degenerate of Greenwich Village," *Current Psychology and Psychoanalysis* (December 1936) quoted in Miller, *Out of the Past*, 147.

Much of the newspaper discourse surrounding Hamilton circulated around these codes of the “mannish woman.” In a decade when the public gaped at Greta Garbo’s “white flannel trousers and silk shirts, cream polo-neck jumpers and berets, complete with short, boyish haircuts,” and outraged headlines screamed, “GARBO IN PANTS!” and “Miss [Marlene] Dietrich Defends Use of Pants,” one article on Hamilton reported on the “faint touch of severity in her get-up, her sleek, boyish haircut, dark tailored clothes, navy-blue beret.”⁸⁶ Wambly Bald’s tellingly titled “Bachelor Girl Makes Good on Broadway” described Hamilton as a “Big-boned woman who stands five feet seven inches with her shoes off. Her weight is 145 pounds, neatly distributed beneath her dark tailored suit. And she has short, crisp hair.”⁸⁷ Further, at a time when articles on women playwrights and lyricists commonly emphasized feminine fripperies and the domestic sphere, articles on Hamilton reveled in her more masculine activities.⁸⁸ Bald reported that Hamilton “has a habit of sipping beer while at the typewriter,” and goes on to write, “she also likes to

⁸⁶ Norton, *The Myth of the Modern Homosexual*, 207; Faderman, *Odd Girls*, 125-6; Mok, “Not Even a Cat May Quip at a Queen.”

⁸⁷ Bald, “Bachelor Girl Makes Good on Broadway.”

⁸⁸ In one typical example, an article on lyricist Dorothy Fields (one of Hamilton's contemporaries) emphasized that, “Her non-professional activities include much charitable work; frequent attendance at the opera, concerts, art shows, and keeping in touch with her children....the 60-year-old songwriter is just a fair cook, but phenomenal with needle and thread.” Bob Lardine, “Never at a Loss for Words,” *New York Sunday News*, 22 May 1966, 4. Articles on Dorothy Fields also frequently mentioned her habit of breaking up her morning and afternoon writing sessions with televised soap operas and her extensive collection of teapots.

work in the garden, rolling up her sleeves for some real physical effort, such as digging in the earth or whitewashing the fenceShe hates shopping.⁸⁹

It may be that Hamilton was continuing to “perform” Lillie, Hepburn, Garbo and the other women she tried to emulate early in her career. Or she may have been signifying in a way that would gain her access into their circles. In a period when, as theorist Marjorie Garber points out, Krafft-Ebing “made dress analogous to gender,” lesbians themselves capitalized on these pathologized descriptions in order to create identifiable codes.⁹⁰ Although in the 1920s the lithe, athletic woman’s body was the ideal, in the 1930s pants “became a costume and a symbol that allowed women who defined themselves as lesbians to identify each other.”⁹¹ Hamilton adopted a series of “identifiable codes” and in a picture accompanying an article published in *Collier’s* in 1940, she not only sports pants, but she seems to flaunt them (see Figure 14).

However, Hamilton was living at the wrong historical moment to model herself on Hepburn and her ilk. According to film theorist Richard Dyer, these women had “strong upper-class, intellectual, or . . . exotic associations which made them exceptions to the rule, the aristocrats of their sex.”⁹² Film theorist Caroline Sheldon asserts that they

⁸⁹ Bald, “Bachelor Girl Makes Good on Broadway.”

⁹⁰ Garber, *Vested Interests*, 135; Jane Gaines, “Costume and Narrative: How Dress Tells the Woman’s Story,” in *Fabrications: Costume and the Female Body*, ed. by Jane Gaines and Charlotte Herzoh (New York: Routledge, 1990), 185.

⁹¹ Faderman, *Odd Girls*, 125-6.

⁹² Richard Dyer, *Stars* New Edition (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 58.



Figure 14. Nancy Hamilton (late 1930s).
The photo, originally published in Collier's, also appeared in Eleanor Gilchrist, "Nancy Hamilton" Smith Alumnae Quarterly, August 1940, originally published in Junior League Magazine. The Smith College Archives, Northampton, MA.

were “women who define[d] themselves in their own terms...playing parts in which they are comparatively independent of domestic expectations of men.”⁹³ But as the image of the “New Woman” ebbed, the American public saw these women as more threatening than liberating. In 1938, Hepburn, Dietrich, Garbo, and Joan Crawford were condemned as “box office poison,” and replaced in popularity by the pre-adolescent Shirley Temple and the Technicolor splendors of *The Wizard of Oz* and *Gone with the Wind*. Considering the fate of these women, it seems more than a coincidence that 1939 marked the end of Hamilton’s initially promising career as an actress; *One for the Money* was the last time she performed on-stage.

Two for the Show

In 1940, as they did with *One for the Money*, Gertrude Macy and Stanley Gilkey produced *Two for the Show*. Brenda Forbes led the ensemble cast, which again featured Alfred Drake as well as Betty Hutton and the directing talents of up-and-comer Joshua Logan.⁹⁴ Hamilton wrote all of the sketches but did not perform.

Perhaps sensitive to the criticism that beset *One for the Money*, in *Two for the Show* Hamilton privileged dance numbers and entertainment parodies over pointed commentaries on politics and manners. *Two for the Show* included “Destry Has Ridden Again,” a take-off on Marlene Dietrich’s film Western comeback, and “To a Skylark,” in

⁹³ Caroline Sheldon, “Lesbians and Film: Some Thoughts,” quoted in Richard Dyer, *Stars New Edition* (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 58.

⁹⁴ Carol Channing auditioned to understudy in *Two for the Show*. She recalls, “They were welcoming to me, but they already had an understudy.” Carol Channing, *Just Lucky I Guess: A Memoir of Sorts* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), 45.

which a member of the Pelham Bay Women's Club visits an actress who resembles Gertrude Lawrence. The revue also included a character named Mr. Carp in a malapropism-laden lecture on cooking called "Culinary Cunning in the Kitchen, or How to Titillate the Jaded Palate." *Two for the Show* produced Hamilton's most significant contribution to the American songbook, "How High the Moon." In the show it was "presented against the background of a London Blackout. It began with an air-raid warden blowing an all-clear in Belgrave Square, couples came out of doors to enjoy the brief respite, a couple in evening clothes waltzed, two costermongers, in pearly costumes danced a variation of the Lambeth Walk."⁹⁵

For the most part, critics viewed this writing effort more favorably than *One for the Money*. Burns Mantle wrote, "It is, in its general make-up much like the first number. Better in spots, I thought, especially the dancing spots."⁹⁶ A mixed review carped that *Two for the Show*, was "not so self-consciously smart as [Hamilton's] previous escapade and, particularly toward the end, rather funnier. Miss Nancy Hamilton's sketches are still rather wan, but the people make up for them, or pretty nearly."⁹⁷ But more reviewers expressed sentiments similar to those in the *New York Post*:

The spirit is still fresh and charming, but they have set about eliminating as far as possible a certain faintly amateurish, afternoon-at-a-woman's-

⁹⁵ Nancy Hamilton and Morgan Lewis, *Three to One: An Intimate Revue* (New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1952), 61.

⁹⁶ Burns Mantle, "Two for the Show: Lively Revue Designed for the Carriage Trade," *New York Daily News*, 9 February 1940.

⁹⁷ Richard Lockridge, "Two for the Show, an Intimate Revue, Opens at Booth Theatre," *New York Sun*, 9 February 1940.

club quality in last season's show that kept it from being quite the top notch Broadway entertainment it was obviously intended to be.⁹⁸

With *Two for the Show*, Hamilton began the process of professionalization as a lyricist in earnest. She joined ASCAP, the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers, an organization designed to distribute royalties for public performances of works under its protection. Because of the popularity of "How High the Moon," which became a standard in the repertoires of guitarist Les Paul and his wife Mary Ford, and Ella Fitzgerald, Hamilton quickly moved up the ASCAP ranks.⁹⁹ Based largely on the popularity of "How High the Moon," Hamilton found her words were in greater demand. In 1946, Chappell's publishers produced an anthology of Hamilton's and Lewis's songs.¹⁰⁰ Brenda Forbes remembered that after appearing in *Two for the Show* she got a job performing at a popular East Side supper club called the Le Ruban Bleu. "I was the singing comedienne, with most of my material supplied by Nan Hamilton. And I

⁹⁸ Wilella Waldorf, "'Two for the Show' Revue at the Booth Theatre," *New York Post*, 9 February 1940, *Two for the Show*, Clippings in the Theatre Collections, The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

⁹⁹ Rather than pay directly for rights to an individual piece (as with dramatic rights) institutions pay ASCAP a flat fee to use ASCAP registered material and ASCAP monitors the institutions to determine how frequently individual songs are played. According to the ASCAP website, "The monies collected from these establishments goes into a 'general' licensing fund and is paid out to members on the basis of feature performances on radio and all surveyed performances on television." For more information on ASCAP see "The ASCAP Payment System," ASCAP, 2003; available from <http://www.ascap.com/about/payment/>; Internet; accessed 25 February 2003. By 1949 Hamilton was a Class 1 lyricist and by 1952 "How High the Moon" had an impressive 17359 ASCAP credits, ensuring that Hamilton received the maximum allotment of ASCAP royalties.

¹⁰⁰ Contract with Chappell Publishers, 17 January 1946, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

paid her for it -- Bea Lillie never did.”¹⁰¹ In addition to Lillie and Forbes, Hamilton claimed to have written nightclub material for Elsa Maxwell, Fred Astaire, Al Jolson, Kitty Carlisle Hart, Kaye Ballard, Ray Bolger, Lois Long, and Gene Kelly.¹⁰²

Like many Broadway composers and lyricists, as Hamilton developed greater name recognition as a writer she found opportunities in Hollywood, including a brief turn as a scenario writer for MGM. During this period she collaborated on the film adaptation of Cole Porter’s musical *DuBarry was a Lady*. She did not, however, enjoy Hollywood; she complained in a letter to Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne that she had been “called to do a sudden stint in, I regret to admit, *DuBarry was a Lady*. It is sudden, uncalled for, lucrative and I believe brief, but here I am for the next four weeks anyway.”¹⁰³

Hamilton’s friend Joe Whitmore recalls that Hamilton would regale friends with the story of the time she walked into the office of movie mogul Samuel Goldwyn and accused him of being only interested in popular trash -- then she quit her Hollywood job.¹⁰⁴

Hamilton’s increasingly derisive attitude toward popular entertainment is, likewise, evident in her letters to her brother Marshall; she complained of her work as a script doctor for the Shuberts, writing, “Much of small importance has transpired since I last saw you. In the first place I sold my soul to the Shuberts for a mess of [illegible] and contracted to doctor an evil-smelling musical of theirs called ‘Count Me In’ [1942] which

¹⁰¹ Forbes, *Five Minutes, Miss Forbes*, 120.

¹⁰² Clipping in *Pittsburgh Bulletin Index*, January 1934; Eleanor Gilchrist, “Smith to Broadway.”

¹⁰³ Nancy Hamilton, Hollywood, to Lynn Fontanne and Alfred Lunt, n.d., Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection

¹⁰⁴ Whitmore, Interview, 20 July 2002.

laid them in the aisles in Boston for four weeks and laid itself in the grave in New York.”¹⁰⁵ Hamilton’s statements are prescient of two directions her career ultimately took – she showed an increasing disdain for the popular vein in which she chose to write and she was increasingly under the thrall of Katharine Cornell, whose unwillingness to appear in film was an extension of her antipathy to entertainment beyond the realm of “serious theatre.”¹⁰⁶

Enter Katherine Cornell

During the forties Hamilton solidified her position in Katharine Cornell’s world, moving from the margins of the group to its innermost sanctum. Cornell was born in Berlin, fifteen years before Hamilton, on February 16, 1893. She grew up in Buffalo, New York. After performing in several school plays, she joined the Washington Square Players in 1916 and then the stock company of famed female producer Jessie Bonstelle. She made her Broadway debut in 1921 and became a theatrical star, often performing as the “fallen” woman (see Figure 15). In the same year she married director Guthrie McClintic, who directed her in several of her productions, presenting to the public a compelling image of a union between a star and her impresario and masking the

¹⁰⁵ Nancy Hamilton, New York, to Marshall Hamilton, 7 November 1942. *Count Me In* was a war satire with lyrics and music by Ann Ronell.

¹⁰⁶ According to essayist Paul Monette, “To [Cornell’s] generation, Hollywood was the opposite of legitimate theatre.” Monette, *Last Watch of the Night*, 33.



Figure 15. Publicity Photograph of Katharine Cornell.
From the Personal Collection of the Author, College Park, MD.

homosexuality of both.¹⁰⁷ In 1930, in order to perform in Rudolf Besier's *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*, a play turned down by 28 other New York managements, Cornell started her own production company.¹⁰⁸ The play was a triumph, running for 370 performances, and Cornell's performance as the invalid Elizabeth Barrett Browning became one of the staples of her repertoire. The role also purified her on-stage image.¹⁰⁹ Although Cornell's performing career declined significantly in the 1940s, the "First Lady of the American Stage" continued to appear onstage until 1961, when she retired after McClintic's death from cancer.

Cornell's biography, co-authored by Gertrude Macy, does not label Cornell a lesbian; it only demurs that she "found rapport and spiritual affinity more important than physical gratification...Her closest relationships, more often with women as the years

¹⁰⁷ Lesley Ferris writes, "Kit and Guth, as they were known to their friends, had a lavender marriage: a marriage of convenience and companionship while both maintained various same-sex relationships." Ferris, "Kit and Guth," 198. According to Lee Alan Morrow, the marriage was not lavender from the beginning: "Guthrie strayed first with his relationships with a variety of young men and Katharine -- out of a sense of loneliness and loss -- began to rely more frequently on her female friends. With Guthrie's death, she could have a fully committed relationship with Hamilton." *Ibid.*, 201. Descriptions in Cornell's biography, however, indicate that she showed a proclivity toward relationships with women before her marriage to McClintic. Rumor matches her with some of the most prominent lesbians of the era, including Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo, Tallulah Bankhead, Beatrice Lillie, and Mercedes de Acosta. "Reading between the lines" in Cornell's biography also reveals that Cornell had a number of lesbian relationships before her marriage, including Jessie Bonstelle, and actress Ann Guglar. See Mosel, *Leading Lady*.

¹⁰⁸ Korey Rothman and Brett Crawford, "Power, Money, and Influence on Broadway: Documenting Across the Gender Divide," Plenary Address, American Society for Theatre Research, November 2003.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

went by, might aptly be called ‘passionate friendships.’”¹¹⁰ But the biography describes Cornell by the codes of the “mannish woman,” discussing her childhood tomboyishness and her proclivities for men’s clothing. It also describes an incident in which administrators forced a young female student to leave the all-girl Oakmere School after she developed a crush on Cornell that was “so strong she would have done anything in the world.”¹¹¹

Historian Ann Douglas writes that Cornell’s lesbian orientation was “well known” in theatrical circles.¹¹² But unlike her contemporary Eva Le Gallienne, Cornell chose to conceal her relationships with women from the public, shielding herself, in part, with her forty-year marriage to McClintic. Like Lynn Fontanne, who married the gay Alfred Lunt, Cornell’s marriage helped curb suspicions of her homosexuality and to protect her public image. Robert Schanke relates that after reading Brooks Atkinson’s eulogy for Cornell, which lauded her “integrity and taste of a lady,” a jealous Eva Le Gallienne was furious: “Was it a sign of integrity and taste for lesbians such as Kit and Lynn to disguise their sexuality in preposterous marriages? Why should they be praised for their charade?”¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Mosel, *Leading Lady*, 386. For a further discussion of the ways this biography treats the sexuality of Cornell and McClintic, see Ferris, “Kit and Guth,” 197-220.

¹¹¹ Mosel, *Leading Lady*, 18-57.

¹¹² Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995), 330.

¹¹³ Schanke, *Shattered Applause*, 238.

It is not clear when Hamilton and Cornell began their romantic relationship. A draft of a love poem written by Hamilton suggests that her first contact with Cornell was as a fan:

When I would say one single thing to you
No words come
When in my heart a thousand songs I sing to you
I am struck dumb
And yet in the years before I knew you
And “certes” you had never heard of me
I chattered away in verse and lay
About Kit Cornell, or Cornell K-
One after another hopeful bouquet
I tossed your way hoping to be...¹¹⁴

Lee Alan Morrow estimates that Hamilton and Cornell became lovers around the time of *New Faces of 1934*.¹¹⁵ There is, however, little evidence in Hamilton’s papers to suggest they knew each other in 1934; although Sillman mentioned that Guthrie McClintic was at the opening night party for *New Faces of 1934*, neither Sillman nor any of the press report that Cornell was in attendance.¹¹⁶ Relying on the Tad Mosel biography of Cornell, Lesley Ferris writes that the success of *One for the Money* “brought Nancy Hamilton into the circle of Cornell’s friends.”¹¹⁷ If that is the case, as seems most likely, producing *One for the Money* proved both fortuitous and devastating for Gertrude Macy. Although it gave Macy an opportunity to produce apart from Cornell, according to gossip, Hamilton

¹¹⁴ “Untitled manuscript,” Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection. The poem, seemingly written on two pages, ends at this point. The poem was on a small scrap of paper that was stuck to two larger sheets of papers in a folder labeled “verses for friends.” Based on the absence of anything else like it in Hamilton’s papers, Hamilton probably preserved the poem by accident.

¹¹⁵ Morrow, “Elsie Janis,” 167.

¹¹⁶ Sillman, *Here Lies Leonard Sillman*, 196.

¹¹⁷ Ferris, “Kit and Guth,” 203.

replaced Macy in Cornell's romantic affections.¹¹⁸ According to Joe Whitmore, although they frequently associated, Macy saw Hamilton as her chief rival for Cornell's affections.¹¹⁹ More to the point, essayist Paul Monette described Hamilton as, "the second great love of Kit's life -- the one who came after Gert."¹²⁰

By the 1940s, Hamilton had replaced Macy and she and Cornell were involved in both a romantic and professional relationship, a union they enjoyed until Cornell's death in 1974. Hamilton's friend Tom Snyder described Hamilton as Cornell's life-long "lover, secretary, friend."¹²¹ During the 1940s and 1950s, Hamilton shuttled between Cornell's homes in Manhattan, Sneden's Landing (north of Manhattan), and "Chip Chop," an estate on Martha's Vineyard near Vineyard Haven (see Figure 16).¹²² The *New Bedford* (Massachusetts) *Standard-Times* asserted that Hamilton, with her "silver-glinted dark hair in boyish waves...has become virtually a member of the household at Chip-Chop, the romantic Tisbury summer place of her friends Miss Katharine Cornell and Guthrie McClintic."¹²³

¹¹⁸ Although she discusses Macy's role as Cornell's business manager and biographer, Ferris fails to identify the passionate relationship that Cornell and Macy shared. Ferris, missing the jealousy that colored Macy and Hamilton's relationship, writes, "Though there is meager information on Hamilton [in the Cornell biography Macy co-wrote], Macy clearly has great respect and regard for her." *Ibid.*, 202-4.

¹¹⁹ Whitmore, Interview, 20 July 2002.

¹²⁰ Monette, *Last Watch of the Night*, 39.

¹²¹ Snyder, Phone Interview, 22 September 2002.

¹²² Chip Chop was named because of its placement between two headlands, East and West Chop.

¹²³ *New Bedford Standard-Times* (Massachusetts), n.d., Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

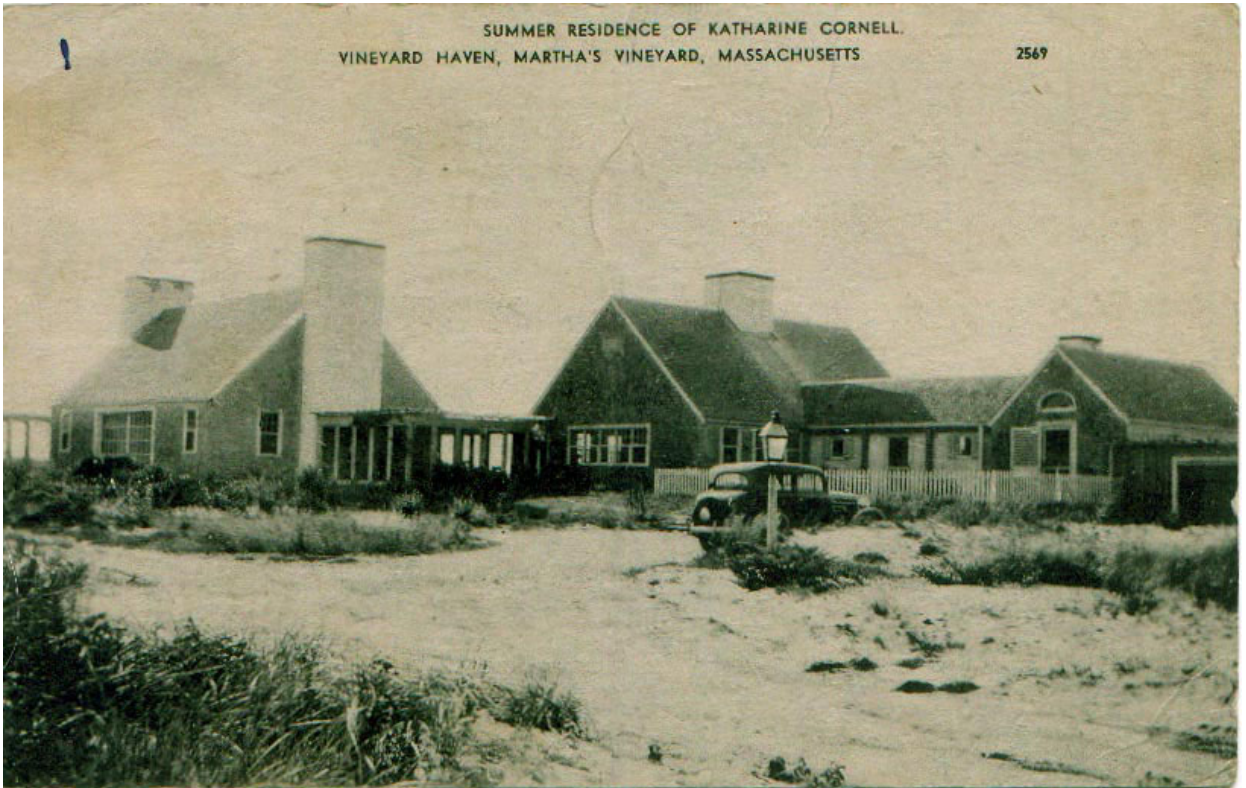


Figure 16. Postcard of Chip Chop
From the Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton, Martha's Vineyard, MA.

Martha's Vineyard was a retreat for Hamilton, Cornell, and McClintic, and there they surrounded themselves with both intimates and professional contacts. In the 1950s, Brenda Forbes and her husband, Merrill Shepard, rented from Cornell a home on Martha's Vineyard.¹²⁴ Macy also frequently visited the island, and later in her life owned a home on the island close to Hamilton's and Cornell's home.

Chip Chop was an artistic enclave over which Cornell presided as grand doyenne, and it became a crossroads for gay and lesbian social life, comparable to Cheryl Crawford's home on Fire Island or Noel Coward's Swiss chalet, *Les Avants*.¹²⁵ Thus, much of Hamilton's networking occurred at Chip-Chop. There Cornell introduced Hamilton to the denizens of gay and lesbian circles, including John Gielgud, the Lunts, Noel Coward, and Helen Keller. They also entertained several other luminaries in the performing arts, including Helen Hayes, Vivien Leigh, Martha Graham, and Kirsten Flagstad, and they hosted visits from figures such as Eleanor Roosevelt and Gerald Ford.

At times these visits bore professional fruit for Hamilton. During Eleanor Roosevelt's visits to Chip Chop, Hamilton and Roosevelt formed an acquaintanceship that transcended Hamilton's Republican leanings, and Roosevelt became a major financial backer and advocate for the Helen Keller documentary that Hamilton wrote and

¹²⁴ The home, owned by Cornell, was known as "The Swindle" because the owner before Cornell had won the house in a shady card game. Forbes, *Five Minutes, Miss Forbes*, 193.

¹²⁵ See Jay Plum, "Cheryl Crawford: One Not So Naked Individual," in *Passing Performances: Queer Readings of Leading Plays in American Theater History*, eds. Robert A. Schanke and Kim Marra (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1998), 257, Esther Newton, *Cherry Grove, Fire Island: Sixty Years in America's First Gay and Lesbian Town* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), and Castle, *Noel Coward and Radclyffe Hall*.

directed.¹²⁶ Noel Coward, whom Hamilton had long admired, had particular significance for her. According to Terry Castle, a biographer of Noel Coward and Radclyffe Hall, the “sapphophilic” Coward “had scores of women friends and actively supported the careers of many; more important, almost all of his closest professional associates were either lesbian or bisexual,” making him a satellite to the women’s networks in the performing arts.¹²⁷ As early as 1934, Hamilton had turned to the more established Coward for professional advice; she sent Coward a manuscript of *The Water Gipsies*, which he criticized harshly.¹²⁸ But through Cornell, Hamilton began to have a more personal relationship with Coward. In a letter to her mother, dated August 1947, Hamilton gushed over Coward:

¹²⁶ Hamilton first met Eleanor Roosevelt in the 1930s. She told her mother, “I guess I told you I have been asked to be guest of honor at a luncheon where Mrs. Roosevelt is to make an award of some kind. I can’t think I would enjoy making a speech very much, so if that is what they want, I’ll never dare go, but I have told them I would be happy to go and eat my lunch in public silence.” Nancy Hamilton, New York, to Margaret Hamilton, Sewickley, PA, n.d., Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton, Martha’s Vineyard, MA. (12) The meeting between Hamilton and Roosevelt was, however, an ignominious one. Hamilton followed with another letter to her mother: “My luncheon with Mrs. Roosevelt was preambled by an introduction to her which was a little hard for either of us to deal with, so I am not her best friend quite yet. It just so happened that I am probably the only living American who has been introduced to her back first or rump on or however she chooses to term it. I was leaning over talking to Laurette Taylor, while the host was formally introducing me, with the result that Mrs. Roosevelt found herself holding out her hand to my hind end, and the whole room was in a dither. When I finally did turn around, quite as horrified as the rest of the room, Mrs. R. had the misfortune to try and put me at my ease by saying, ‘well, why should you want to speak to me when Miss Taylor is the guest of honor.’ This did not lend itself to ready repartee, and after worrying through a few minutes of hapless small-talk, she excused herself to make a phone call. So that was my meeting with Eleanor.” Nancy Hamilton, New York, to Margaret Hamilton, Sewickley, PA, n.d., Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton,

¹²⁷ Castle, *Noel Coward and Radclyffe Hall*, 56; *Ibid.*, 24.

¹²⁸ Diary of Nancy Hamilton, 1934, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

He couldn't have been nicer, more charming, or gayer or sweeter -- really a thoroughly attractive human being, and full of humanity as well -- which for no reason at all -- surprised me. After all, he couldn't have done what he has, and got where he's got if he didn't have a special talent for meeting and charming people. In that way he is like Kit.¹²⁹

And in 1954 Coward joined the Lunts and Mary Martin and her husband Richard Halliday for Thanksgiving at Hamilton's home.¹³⁰ Initially Coward seemed poised to help Hamilton's career. In another letter Hamilton boasted to her mother that Coward wanted to include one of her songs in his show: "Isn't it exciting about Noel Coward and the revue? I scarcely dare believe it is true and won't believe it is true till it happens."¹³¹ Hamilton's hesitation was wise; there is no evidence that the interpolation occurred. But throughout her career Hamilton continued to turn to Coward for advice. In a diary entry on March 29, 1955, Coward wrote:

I saw a film of Helen Keller's life, shown privately for me by Nancy Hamilton who wrote and constructed it. Aside from two or three moments when its nobility spilled over and became unintentionally funny, it was immensely moving.¹³²

¹²⁹ Nancy Hamilton, to Margaret Hamilton, 17 August 1947, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

¹³⁰ Graham Payn and Sheridan Morley, *The Noel Coward Diaries* (London: Phoenix Press, 1982), 245.

¹³¹ Nancy Hamilton,, to Margaret Hamilton, n.d., Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

¹³² Payn and Morley, *The Noel Coward Diaries*, 233.

Additionally, Sally Hamilton remembers that after Cornell's death her aunt went to meet Coward to discuss her songs; apparently, Coward complained that the lyrics were too chatty.¹³³

Even if Coward did not enthusiastically advance Hamilton's career, he did lend her his friendships and associations. Both Cornell and Hamilton appear in the guest registry at Goldenhurst, Noel Coward's country house in Kent, known as "a Mecca for gay and lesbian bohemians" and Hamilton sent her mother letters from Coward's Swiss estate, *Les Avanst*.¹³⁴ At Firefly, Coward's retreat in Jamaica, Hamilton and Cornell posed nude with McClintic, Coward, and Coward's lover, Graham Payn (see Figure 17). In the words of Castle, "One could hardly wish for a more exquisite, if risible, emblem of gay and lesbian solidarity."¹³⁵

World War II

Through Cornell, Hamilton forged a broad circle of important associations. But during the World War II period her personal and professional life coalesced around a small core of women in the network. World War II had a substantial effect on Hamilton,

¹³³ Sally Hamilton, Interview, 4 June 2001. This criticism may have been an extension of Coward's personal opinions about Hamilton. In 1955 he wrote in his diary, "The New Year festivities were very fun and most enjoyable.... Altogether...it was a hilarious evening. Kit, Nancy, Binkie, Coley, Graham and me. They are very sweet but Nancy talks far too much." Payn and Morley, *The Noel Coward Diaries*, 589. Impresario Binkie Beaumont was Coward's friend, Coley Lesley was his valet, and Graham Payn was Coward's long-time romantic partner.

¹³⁴ Castle, *Noel Coward and Radclyffe Hall*, 22.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

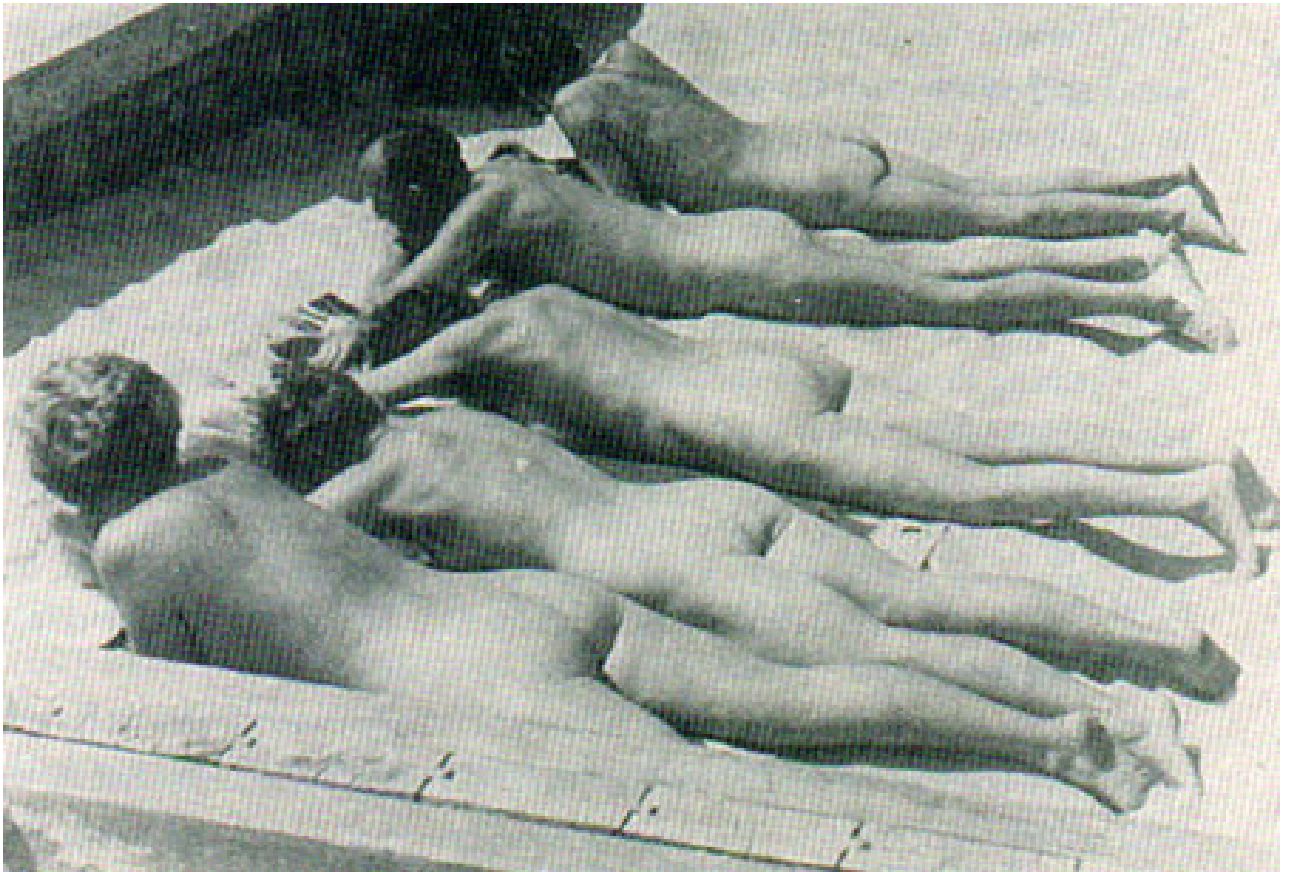


Figure 17. Nancy Hamilton, Katharine Cornell, Guthrie McClintic, Noel Coward, and Graham Payn (circa 1950).
Printed in Terry Castle, *Noel Coward and Radclyffe Hall: Kindred Spirits* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 37.

personally as well as professionally. Hamilton first heard word of Germany's invasion of Poland when vacationing with Brenda Forbes in Laguna. She wrote her mother:

It seems fairly incongruous to be sitting in a flower-decked sun-kissed patio in Southern California – as safe as houses – and listen to the outpourings of the angry radio from overseas this morning. I was up most of last night, having turned the radio on in my room just as the announcement came through of Germany's bombardment of Poland. I heard Hitler's address and all the subsequent analyses and comment, and was wakened this morning to hear Chamberlain's address to the House of Commons. The whole thing is so dreadful and Hitler so apparently senseless that it doesn't seem to leave room for rational thinking any more. I can't help feeling that America will have to get into it and, unfortunately, the sooner the better to my way of thinking. And where that will leave the lot of us, God only knows.¹³⁶

Hamilton's sense of foreboding would be a very personal one. Her older brother, Marshall, was deployed to an undisclosed location as a third mate with the Merchant Marines. In March of 1943 the family received a telegram informing them that Marshall's boat, the Puerto Rican, was lost at sea.¹³⁷ The Hamilton family, especially Marshall's younger brother Bud, was devastated by the loss.¹³⁸

Hamilton had responded to Marshall's involvement in the war with pride. She wrote Marshall, "You are the talk of East 51st Street. I may say everyone is full of admiration and excitement and well wishes when your name comes up which it does

¹³⁶ Nancy Hamilton, Laguna, to Margaret Hamilton, Sewickley, PA, September 1939, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

¹³⁷ Hamilton, who was traveling with Brenda Forbes, received the news by letter. Margaret Hamilton wrote her daughter, "Hope you have arrived comfortably and have had some sleep so you can hear bravely what I am about to tell you. Marshall is missing in action. A wire came from the war department five hours ago." Margaret Hamilton, Sewickley, PA, to Nancy Hamilton. n.d., Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

¹³⁸ Sally Hamilton, Interview, 19 July 2002.

almost constantly.”¹³⁹ Galvanized by her brother’s service and the country’s patriotic fervor, Hamilton began to help the war effort. She contributed in small personal ways – she volunteered as an air raid warden and, like much of America, she planted a victory garden on Cornell’s property on Martha’s Vineyard.¹⁴⁰ Hamilton also “sent some books and all my years collections of ‘Time’ to the Merchant Marines Library,” and she encouraged Cornell and Macy to do the same.¹⁴¹

For a few years Hamilton also made the war effort the center of her professional life. In 1942 she helped write and stage the *Katharine Cornell Jamboree*, a theatrical fund-raiser for war bonds performed on Martha’s Vineyard. The show featured, among others, Cornell, Forbes, Hamilton, and Gregory Peck (see Figure 18).¹⁴² In 1943, Hamilton became the voice behind Billie Burke, writing much of the material for her World War II radio program, “The Billie Burke Show,” also known as “Fashion in

¹³⁹ Nancy Hamilton, New York, to Marshall Hamilton, 7 November 1942. This letter was returned to Hamilton and the envelope was marked “returned because refused,” indicating that it arrived after Marshall's death.

¹⁴⁰ Hamilton wrote Marshall, “I am now an air raid warden – it was the only thing I could volunteer for and still have time to keep myself abreast of the bank accounts.” Nancy Hamilton, New York, to Marshall Hamilton, 7 November 1942; Mosel, *Leading Lady*, 515.

¹⁴¹ Hamilton continued in her letter to Marshall, “A dear little man who looked like the Quaint Companion came around in a truck and picked them up....Kit has sent a lot of novels to the Woods Hole commander of Merchant Marines and Gert is making a search of her magazines and books too for the same purpose.” Ibid.

¹⁴² Henry Bettle Hough, “Remember Actress Katharine Cornell and Her Gifts to the Vineyard.” *Vineyard Gazette*, June 14, 1974, n.p.



Figure 18. In costume for the *Katharine Cornell Jamboree* on Martha's Vineyard. From left to right: Brenda Forbes, Nancy Hamilton, Unidentified, Guthrie McClintic, Unidentified, Gregory Peck, and Katharine Cornell. From the Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton, Martha's Vineyard, MA.

Rations.”¹⁴³ And in 1944 Hamilton accompanied Cornell, McClintic, Forbes, Macy, as well as regular Cornell collaborators Margalo Gillmore and Brian Aherne, on a U.S.O tour of *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*.¹⁴⁴ Hamilton served as an understudy, production assistant, and, although Gillmore lamented she “can’t sew a stitch,” as wardrobe mistress.¹⁴⁵ She also wrote and arranged musical material for a revue that traveled to military hospitals, culling songs and sketches from *One for the Money* and *Two for the Show* to perform for the wounded soldiers.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ Billie Burke was the widow of Follies impresario Florenz Ziegfeld. She is perhaps best remembered as Glinda the Good Witch in the 1939 film the *Wizard of Oz*. She wrote in her memoirs, “I had, as you may remember, my own morning show for quite a while, and I adored that show as much as I admired the girl who wrote it: Nancy Hamilton, who has since given the theatre many fine things.” Billie Burke, *With a Feather on My Nose*, with Cameron Shipp (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1949), 257.

¹⁴⁴ For more information about the tour see Mosel, *Leading Lady*, 456-67, Brian Aherne, *A Proper Job: The Autobiography of an Actor’s Actor* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1969) 317-28, and Gillmore and Collinge, *The B.O.W.S.*, 56.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.* The backstage work was new for Hamilton. But the troupe of sixteen people and Flush, the performing dog, who accompanied *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* was large by U.S.O. standards. Hamilton had to learn skills in order to justify traveling with the tour. Hamilton wrote her mother, “I have handmaided everyone in the company – and can now curl hair, repair costumes, launder and press, and find things in the dark.” Nancy Hamilton, Italy, to Margaret Hamilton, New York, 27 August 1944, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

¹⁴⁶ Hamilton told her mother, “This afternoon we all went to a hospital and performed for three hours singing and talking in all the wards – I did ‘I Hate the Spring’ which I wouldn’t have thought that they would really get – but they loved it, and I do ‘My Day’...and we all – including Kit do the opening [to *One for the Money*]. This afternoon we did it as a closing in the main corridor, which has a five-floor stairwell, and patients in pajamas and bathrobes streamed into the hall, packed the stairs of all five flights, and hung over the banisters. And we sang it up the stairwell. It was like a production number in an M.G.M extravaganza.” Nancy Hamilton, Italy, to Margaret Hamilton, Sewickley, PA, 5 September 1944, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

The tour left for Naples on August 11, moved to stations in Italy and France, and returned to the United States on January 31, 1945. One Army Major insisted that the group's primary duty was to "make every man who leaves the theater after seeing *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* better able to turn a knife in the guts of a German."¹⁴⁷ While it is uncertain if the tour roused martial urges, the soldiers greeted it with great enthusiasm. At one performance, Macy overheard one soldier saying to another, "Didn't I tell you this'd be better than a whorehouse," a statement that Cornell took as her "most cherished compliment."¹⁴⁸

As she traveled through Europe, Hamilton was moved by the devastation she witnessed. In almost all of her letters to her mother she expressed sentiments like the one she wrote upon arriving in Italy:

What beauty and what picturesqueness. All these beautiful old houses with their magnificent old doors and grill work and courtyards – and poor filthy babies and...woebegone hags all tumbled together in squalor in the midst of it. The countryside is so lovely – the hills and the fields with the trees all strung with grapevines like lace. And the poor miserable people ride through it in carts and donkey carriages. It makes you almost ashamed to have eaten three meals a day.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ Gillmore and Collinge, *The B.O.W.S.*, 34.

¹⁴⁸ Gillmore and Collinge, *The B.O.W.S.*, 111. The actors experienced several challenges as they performed in makeshift venues. During one performance, "Brian [Aherne] swallowed a fly at his entrance – got it up his nose, coughed it down and removed it daintily between his thumb and forefinger and there wasn't a peep in the house. And in the second act he made his dashing entrance with his trousers completely undone – and didn't get Kit's frantic signals till midway through the scene." Nancy Hamilton, Italy, to Margaret Hamilton, Sewickley, PA, 5 September 1944. Before another performance Hamilton had the misfortune of carrying a costume bonnet at the same time she carried the company dog, Flush. "Flush had not been taken walking for a few hours and mistook the bonnet for a bush. The hat looks as if it had been swept up like driftwood from the sea." Nancy Hamilton, Italy, to Margaret Hamilton, Sewickley, PA, 23 September 1944, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

¹⁴⁹ Nancy Hamilton, Italy, to Margaret Hamilton, New York, 27 August 1944, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton. In another letter Hamilton told her mother, "The

She took great satisfaction in doing the shows in hospitals, and she wrote:

You have no conception of what it is like to come into a ward where thirty men are in bed with their arms and legs suspended in midair – their heads in bloody bandages – their torsos in casts – some of them with an arm or a leg or even both legs off – group around an organ and give a show. Six months ago I would have said I couldn't do it. But you find yourself looking them square in the eye – smiling and doing it – and if you forget every word you ever know, if you never knew any to start with, they would laugh and cheer and love it. In some of the wards, patients who could walk, had come in from other rooms and doubled up in beds so that more could see us, and in one ward they sang "Happy Welcome to You" as we came in. It didn't make me cry then. But it makes me cry now as I write it. It was a wonderful Thanksgiving.¹⁵⁰

children are pitifully hungry. About twelve almost mobbed Brenda on the way to the theatre to get half a dozen Life Savers. And today when Margalo gave two children doughnuts they burst into tears." Nancy Hamilton, Italy, to Margaret Hamilton, Sewickley, PA, 5 September 1944. However, despite her guilt, Hamilton consistently complained about the food she was receiving. In one letter she wrote, "We face more spam than you could shake a stick at," and in another she entreated her mother to send, "good dehydrated soup, bouillon cubes, chipped beef in jars, Hormel chicken, or tuna fish...anything that you can send us except SPAM will be joyfully received." Nancy Hamilton, Italy, to Margaret Hamilton, Sewickley, PA, 11 September 1944, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton; Nancy Hamilton, Italy, to Margaret Hamilton, Sewickley, PA, 23 September 1944. Hamilton further complained about, "e-rations, which though nourishing – can become very tiresome and unappetizing. We have all had diarrhea in varying degrees of discomfort." Ibid. She revealed that this problem was, "affectionately referred to as the G. I. Trots," and sadly related that Cornell was beleaguered by an "awful griping case of G.I.'s" after partaking of a rancid Thanksgiving dinner at a hospital. Nancy Hamilton, Italy, to Margaret Hamilton, Sewickley, PA, 29 September 1944, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton; Nancy Hamilton, France, to Margaret Hamilton, Sewickley, PA, 25 November 1944, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton. So many members of the troupe fell ill from dysentery that McClintic jokingly feared the play he would have to rename the play *The Barrett of Wimpole Street*. Gillmore and Collinge, *The B.O.W.S*, 87.

¹⁵⁰ Nancy Hamilton, France, to Margaret Hamilton, Sewickley, PA, 25 November 1944. Hamilton told her mother, "We gave three shows in a hospital...the other day – that is we sang in three wards – for almost three hours. That is always a moving and inspiring experience. Many of the cases were incurable and many terribly upsetting to see but that have infinite courage and gaiety." Nancy Hamilton, Italy, to Margaret Hamilton, Sewickley, PA, 29 September 1944.

According to Forbes and Gillmore, in Marseilles Hamilton brought three thousand tiny bisque *santons*, painted figures of animals, villagers, saints, and angels, and gave one to each of the hospitalized soldiers they visited on Christmas.¹⁵¹

Through Cornell, Hamilton gained access to an international lesbian circle. According to Cornell's biography, when poet Gertrude Stein and her lover Alice B. Toklas wanted to see *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* on its U.S.O. tour, "Nancy and Gert suppl[ied them] with GI raincoats and...caps. Poet and companion sit in box.... No one the wiser."¹⁵² When Stein gave Hamilton a manuscript of her new play, *In the Savoy*, which included the line "Bah aristocrats make me wisk anything makes me wick everything," Hamilton thought she discovered the secret to Stein's Modernist style: "Alice B. Toklas can't type."¹⁵³ Natalia Danesi Murray, a free-lance writer (the lover of Janet Flanner, author of *The New Yorker's* "Letter from Paris" column) visited the troupe to convince her old friend Cornell to perform for Roman civilians.¹⁵⁴ Before they

¹⁵¹ Forbes, *Five Minutes, Miss Forbes*, 141; Gillmore and Collinge, *The B.O.W.S.*, 128.

¹⁵² Mosel, *Leading Lady*, 461. Forbes further described meeting the hostesses of the famous Paris salon: "Nan, Kit and I visited the legendary Gertrude Stein and her companion, Alice B. Toklas. Kit had received a note from Miss Stein at the theatre inviting her to come to tea and bring a friend or two....[Stein] greeted us warmly and in no time we were engrossed in a lively conversation as to how they survived during the German occupation. It appears the Germans had great respect for Miss Stein and left them alone, looking the other way when one or the other of them would wangle a bit of real butter on the black market. Our hosts asked if they could see the play. Only soldiers were allowed to be the audience, however, so we would have to disguise the two women. Miss Stein was lent Kit's GI raincoat and cap while Miss Toklas was to wear mine. When they turned up backstage after the performance we were disappointed we didn't have a camera to record that historic moment." Forbes, *Five Minutes, Miss Forbes*, 143. See also Gillmore and Collinge, *The B.O.W.S.*, 151.

¹⁵³ Gillmore and Collinge, *The B.O.W.S.*, 168.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 94.

shipped back to America, Clemence Dane, an important lesbian playwright and a close friend of Cornell and Noel Coward, surprised the troupe with a party in London.¹⁵⁵

But more important than the new friends that Hamilton made was the way the U.S.O. tour solidified Cornell and Hamilton's small circle of intimates. In a letter to her mother, Hamilton described preparing to ship off to Europe:

I am now in a barracks (somewhere along the East Coast of the United States I am instructed to say) in a row of thirty beds – 8 of which are occupied by Kit and Margalo and Brenda and Gert and [three other women in the acting company] and me – (Gert has just stumbled along by my bed and handed me a glass of water and Kit who is trying to sleep in the next bed is muttering that taps is sounding and everyone should be asleep – and the rest giggle like girls at camp – which of course, we are, The Barracks of Wimpole Street as Margalo said).¹⁵⁶

The women in Hamilton's circle shared much during the tour.¹⁵⁷ Hamilton described the opening performance as the climax of “all of our professional lives.”¹⁵⁸ According to Hamilton's niece, Sally, one of Hamilton's favorite pictures – the one she asked to be creamated with -- shows a jeep with Cornell, Macy, Forbes, and Gillmore (see Figure

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 170.

¹⁵⁶ Nancy Hamilton, to Margaret Hamilton, Greenwich, CT, 6 August 1944, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton. The undisclosed location Hamilton writes of was Camp Patrick Henry in Virginia. Mosel, *Leading Lady*, 458.

¹⁵⁷ Although she frequently associated with Cornell, Forbes, Macy, and Hamilton, Gillmore often was the “odd woman out.” In her letters Hamilton frequently mocked her. For example, she wrote to her mother (with the warning “don't repeat”) during the U.S.O. tour that, “Personalities have begun to develop and crystallize as they are wont to do in a group as constantly together as us...If someone else is given something, Margalo cannot rest easy until she has gotten one too, no matter whether she wants it or not. The other night the heard the hospital here gave Kit some medicine for her cold and Margalo the minute she heard of it swooped on him and demanded a bottle too. If it weren't so embarrassing it would be funny.” Nancy Hamilton, Italy, to Margaret Hamilton, Sewickley, PA, 23 September 1944.

¹⁵⁸ Nancy Hamilton, Italy, to Margaret Hamilton, New York, 27 August 1944.

19). This was the core of Cornell's network and the women who engaged in a life-long commitment to support each other's careers and lives.

Three to Make Ready

Arriving home from the U.S.O. tour Hamilton returned to her own work, crafting the lyrics and sketches for the most successful of her revues, *Three to Make Ready*, which opened at the Adelphi Theatre in March of 1946. Like *Two for the Show*, *Three to Make Ready* prominently featured dance numbers. The presence of Ray Bolger, who had starred as the scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz*, helped bolster the ticket sales. Also, Brenda Forbes was in the cast, and Hamilton tailor-made material for her.

Although the war may have affected Hamilton's world view and strengthened her core personal and professional network, she did not tackle these weighty issues in her writing. *Three to Make Ready* pushes even further *Two for the Show's* apolitical stance. In addition to several Bolger dance turns, *Three to Make Ready* had sketches like "Cold Water Flat," in which Bolger was beleaguered by a flood of plumbing problems caused by an antique commode. In another Forbes performed as a woebegone ballerina who sang a song about wanting to be remembered, not realizing she was the model for Degas's famous paintings. The sprawling centerpiece of *Three to Make Ready* was "Wisconsin or Kenosha Canoe," a parody of the musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein, combining *Oklahoma!* and *Carousel* with Theodore Dreiser's best-selling crime novel,



Figure 19. On U.S.O. tour in Italy (1944). Katharine Cornell is at the wheel. Clockwise from her are Gertrude Macy, Margalo Gilmore, Brenda Forbes, and Nancy Hamilton. Printed in Tad Mosel with Gertrude Macy, *Leading Lady: The World and Theatre of Katharine Cornell*, with a foreword by Martha Graham (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1978), 459. Hamilton asked to be cremated with this picture.

An American Tragedy (1925).¹⁵⁹ *Three to Make Ready* ran for 327 performances. When audience attendance in New York declined, Gilkey and Barbara Payne (Macy no longer produced for Hamilton) moved the production to Chicago and then to Boston, where it closed.¹⁶⁰

Three to Make Ready also produced a new collaborator for Hamilton. Although Josh Logan and John Murray Anderson, skilled directors of musical theatre, staged Hamilton's first two revues, Margaret Webster, a British director best known for her work with Shakespeare, staged some of the songs and sketches for *Three to Make Ready*. For the revue she left the familiar territory of Shakespeare to embark on her first musical effort. At the time she directed the revue, Webster was such a musical theatre neophyte that terms like "pay off," "routine," and "laying an egg" fascinated her.¹⁶¹ Reviewers were quick to note Webster's involvement, one mocking: "Sketches were directed by a celebrity from the other world of dray-mah, Margaret Webster."¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ The Kenosha Canoe is a thousand-year-old dugout canoe found in the Kenosha region of Wisconsin. *An American Tragedy*, based on a real incident, is the story of Clyde Griffiths, a social climber who kills his pregnant young girlfriend in order to pursue a wealthy girl of whom he became enamored.

¹⁶⁰ Forbes, *Five Minutes, Miss Forbes*, 155-7.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 149. In her papers Webster said little about her decision to direct the musical -- she only complained about the difficulty she had with mercurial dancer Ray Bolger. Margaret Webster, New York, to Webster Family, 12 February 1946, Margaret Webster Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

¹⁶² Elliot Norton, "New Revue Opening at Shubert," *Boston Post* 8 February 1946, n.p.

Life After *Three to Make Ready*

Three to Make Ready marked Hamilton's last theatrical success, and although she continued writing for the stage during the next three decades she failed to get most of her other projects off the ground, and she did not have another Broadway production.¹⁶³ One of her projects, started in the mid-1940s, was the play (with no music) *Our Best Girl*, written in collaboration with *New Yorker* cartoonist Helen Hokinson.¹⁶⁴ Based on the "ample dowagers" in Hokinson's book, *My Best Girls* (1941), the play gave life to the strong-minded society women originally featured in Hokinson's *New Yorker* drawings, women Hokinson described as "those denizens of women's clubs, beauty parlors, art galleries, summer resorts, and Lane Bryant."¹⁶⁵ *Our Best Girl* is the story of Mr. and Mrs. Newscomb, who buy the Connecticut house of Mr. Potter, a wealthy collector of antiques.¹⁶⁶ The upper crust citizens of the town find Mrs. Newscomb vulgar and reject

¹⁶³ Because the reasons for Hamilton's later career failures only become clear after considering the arc of her total career, chapter 4 will offer some theories as to why Hamilton's Broadway success ended.

¹⁶⁴ Hokinson approached Hamilton about this collaboration. In 1946 she wrote Hamilton, "Ever since seeing 'Three to Make Ready' I have wanted to write and tell you how much I enjoyed it. It is entertainment after my own heart, and I am so pleased that you are interested in the idea of a play about what I call 'My Best Girls.'" Helen Hokinson, Nod Hill, CT, to Nancy Hamilton, 3 August 1946, Helen Hokinson Papers, Literary and Historical Manuscripts, The Morgan Library, New York.

¹⁶⁵ Helen Hokinson, *The Ladies, God Bless 'em*, with a memoir by James Reid Parker and an appreciation by John Mason Brown (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1950), 5.

¹⁶⁶ The play is set in, "The living room of Mr. Potter's house in Stanfield Connecticut -- as Early American as money could achieve....The furniture has been chosen for age and authenticity rather than for comfort -- Windsor writing armchairs, stiff ladder back chairs, a colonial wooden day bed, the kind of things you wouldn't want unless you were an avid collector. And, in especially built shelves on either side of the fireplace is the main wonder and glory of the room -- Mr. Potter's incomparable

her until she offers to sell Potter's antiques for a fundraiser so that the wealthy can buy a plot of land to prevent the construction of an unsightly television tower.¹⁶⁷ In typical comedic fashion, after a series of mishaps and mistaken identities all turns out well for the major characters in the end. Hokinson's friend and collaborator James Reid Parker remembered:

For several years before Helen died she had been fascinated by the notion that if a competent dramatist would write a play about the kind of women she drew, she would lend her name to it and it would be a big Broadway hit and then be sold to the movies for a large sum.... Liking Miss Nancy Hamilton's clever revue sketches, Helen invited this talented and theater-wise young woman to collaborate with her. Together they wrote a play which did not find favor with the managers to whom it was submitted.¹⁶⁸

Hamilton had correctly suspected *Our Best Girl* had limited commercial appeal, and in a letter in 1946 she wrote: "I am getting on well with the Hokinson play. Have finished one scene and galloping on with the next. I suppose no one will like it but Hokey and me (?I?- me?) but we are enjoying ourselves."¹⁶⁹ Hamilton and Hokinson's collaboration

collection of milk glass." Nancy Hamilton and Helen Hokinson, *Our Best Girl*, Unpublished Drama (D UNPUBLISHED 20155), The Manuscript Collection, The Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

¹⁶⁷ Some elements of the play came from Hokinson's observation of the women in Wilton, Connecticut, where she had a home and spent much of her time. In one letter to Hamilton, Hokinson wrote, "There was a garden club meeting held at my house in Wilton a short time ago and I listened to it from an upstairs bedroom, jotting down notes on the entire meeting. Garden club talk is very funny, even the most intelligent." One act takes place at a garden club, and it seems likely that Hokinson's eavesdropping inspired the scene. Helen Hokinson, New York, to Nancy Hamilton, Vineyard Haven, 6 November 1946, Helen Hokinson Papers.

¹⁶⁸ Hokinson, *The Ladies, God Bless 'em*, 15.

¹⁶⁹ Nancy Hamilton, to Margaret Hamilton, Sewickley, PA, 1946, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton. Because Hamilton did not consistently date her letters and material it often is unclear when she began and finished projects. The author dated this letter based on Hamilton's mention of just having seen Ingrid Bergman in *Joan of*

ended in 1949, when Hokinson died in a plane crash. Hamilton could never get a production for *Our Best Girl* despite her efforts through the 1970s.¹⁷⁰

Another disappointment for Hamilton was her failure to see through to production her musicalization of P. T. Travers's novel *Mary Poppins*. Hamilton and Morgan Lewis started writing the musical comedy in 1939 as a vehicle for Beatrice Lillie.¹⁷¹ In November of 1942, Hamilton wrote her brother, "I have finished my rewrite of *Mary Poppins*, which all consider very good and we are slowly collecting the necessary financing."¹⁷² But plans somehow stalled. According to one newspaper clipping, for a brief time Guthrie McClintic owned the literary rights to *Mary Poppins* and had opened discussions with designers. But either he lost those rights or they could not find the backing.¹⁷³ Although Hamilton tried for thirty years to have a full production mounted

Lorraine in New York, a production that takes place in 1946. Nancy Hamilton submitted *Our Best Girl* for copyright protection in 1951.

¹⁷⁰ According to Sally Hamilton, Hokinson's death instilled a life-long fear of flying in Hamilton. Sally Hamilton, Interview, 4 June 2001.

¹⁷¹ Hamilton wrote her mother from Laguna, "I have been trying to write 'Mary P'.... I have written three scenes this week...but I am still not finished with the first act. I guess I told you that Bea is showing interest in it, not that Guthrie McClintic wants to direct it.... I am trying to get as much of 'Mary P.' done as possible so that if there is immediate interest from Bea, I could go east with the bulk of it for Christmas production." Nancy Hamilton, Laguna, to Margaret Hamilton, Sewickley, PA, September 1939, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

¹⁷² Nancy Hamilton, New York, to Marshall Hamilton, 7 November 1942.

¹⁷³ A clipping announced that "The Nancy Hamilton dramatization of the 'Mary Poppins's books is not for this season, although from the fact that Guthrie McClintic has been seeing scenic designers for the same, it could be gathered that the show likely will be along with the Fall. He owns the rights until October. The production would be a pretty big one – say, \$50,000 worth." Unidentified Newspaper Clipping, Nancy Hamilton, Clippings in the Theatre Collections. Hamilton completed *Mary Poppins* by the 1940s because in a will in 1944 Hamilton wrote, "To Katharine Cornell McClintic I leave the disposition of my dramatization of *Mary Poppins*. By which I mean that she

(including a promising lead in 1967, when the General Manager of the Goodspeed Opera House wrote to Hamilton “to see what further can be done towards making ‘More Mary Poppins’ a reality for the 1968 summer season”) the musical remained unproduced.¹⁷⁴

At the same time she was working on *Our Best Girl* and *Mary Poppins*, Hamilton and Lewis were also writing *Maggie Here* (initially called *Two Can Dream*), an original musical comedy. Set in upstate New York, the story circulates around a sickly girl, Canary, her widowed father, Peter, and an Englishwoman, Maggie. Canary, who is enchanted by British royalty, awaits a visit to New York from the English princess Margaret Rose. But Canary is too ill to leave her bed, so when Peter meets the British Maggie in a restaurant he invites her home to trick Canary into thinking the Princess has visited the house. Maggie and Peter are attracted to each other, but when the radio announces that Princess Margaret is missing, Peter has mounting suspicions that Maggie is, in fact, Princess Margaret. In dream sequences Peter imagines his marriage to the princess, and becomes fearful of the consequences of a union with British royalty. At the end of Act I Peter tells Maggie that he cannot love her unconditionally. In Act II Peter fantasizes

shall judge when and how and by whom it should be produced, if at all. To Gertrude Macy I leave the disposition of my revue material, produced and unproduced. In case of the prior decease of Kit, I leave the disposition of *Mary Poppins* to Gert Macy.” Nancy Hamilton, Will, New York, 4 August 1944, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton. In a 1949 revision of her will, Hamilton added: “I give and bequeath to my friend Katharine Cornell all rights and royalties that may accrue from my dramatization of *Mary Poppins* in absolute ownership, I know that to whatever use she may wish to apply this currently indefinite bequest, whether personal or professional, it will benefit the theatre which she so jubilantly serves.” Nancy Hamilton, Will, New York, 27 May 1949, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

¹⁷⁴ Goodspeed Opera House, to Nancy Hamilton, 1967, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Performing Arts Library, New York.

about sharing a life in America with Princess Margaret. Peter determines that his love for Maggie exceeds his concerns over the difficulties of a marriage to a princess. He tells Maggie he loves her whether she is royalty or a regular English woman. After Peter expresses this revelation to Maggie she begins to tell him (and the audience) the truth of her identity. But Peter asserts that it is irrelevant. The play ends with Maggie, Peter, and Canary establishing themselves as a family in New York, while the lost Princess Margaret remains lost.¹⁷⁵

Maggie Here marked Hamilton's attempt to shift from the unintegrated songs of the intimate revues to songs embedded in the plot, in the style of the integrated musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein. *Oklahoma!* (1943) had marked a change in the themes and forms of musical comedy and made the intimate revue an increasingly obsolete form. But unlike other popular integrated musicals, Hamilton's book musicals drew heavily on Noel Coward-esque dialogue and anglophilic characters and settings. The excuse intoned by producers who rejected *Maggie Here* was that the show was too British. Cheryl Crawford's complaint in 1957 (seven years after Hamilton wrote the show) echoed the responses of others: "Yes, the book is still fun but honestly it seems much too British to me for popular consumption."¹⁷⁶

Throughout the 1940s Hamilton struggled to get backing for her material. But even though she had earlier put her career on hold to support Cornell's, Cornell's production company did not finance any of Hamilton's theatre work. Cornell helped

¹⁷⁵ Nancy Hamilton and Morgan Lewis, *Maggie Here*, 1950, 5-7, Unpublished Drama (D UNPUBLISHED 25972), The Manuscript Collection, The Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

¹⁷⁶ Cheryl Crawford, New York, to Nancy Hamilton, New York, 9 May 1957, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

Hamilton purchase homes on Martha's Vineyard and in New York, but she seems to have made a conscious effort to divorce herself from Hamilton's creative work. One press release pointedly reported that Gertrude Macy and Stanley Gilkey produced Hamilton's revues, "with neither Miss Cornell nor Mr. McClintic interested financially, or otherwise."¹⁷⁷ Perhaps fearing the attention it would focus on the nature of their relationship, Cornell kept any professional connection to Hamilton invisible.¹⁷⁸

Helen Keller in Her Story

Although Cornell did not bankroll Hamilton's theatre work, she did provide financial backing for two documentaries that Hamilton oversaw, *Helen Keller in Her Story* and *This is Our Island*, a documentary about Martha's Vineyard. *Helen Keller in Her Story* came about through Cornell's association with Helen Keller. In the 1940s Keller and her companion and personal secretary, Polly Thompson, frequently visited Chip-Chop. Cornell, an animal lover, met Keller through her former lover, Anne Guglar, who worked with seeing eye dogs.

According to a press release for *Helen Keller in her Story*, Hamilton "first met Miss Keller and Miss Thompson at Katharine Cornell's home in Martha's Vineyard in 1940."¹⁷⁹ Keller's biographer describes the first time Hamilton and Keller met:

¹⁷⁷ "Nancy Hamilton's Achievement," Press Release, *One for the Money*, Clippings in the Theatre Collections, The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

¹⁷⁸ "Unidentified Clipping," *Boston America*, 8 February 1939, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

¹⁷⁹ Al Margolies and Co., "Press Release for *Helen Keller in Her Story*," n.d., Nancy Hamilton Papers, The Sophia Smith Collection.

Kit [Cornell] invited [Keller] to Martha's Vineyard, where her lovely cluster of houses sat right on the beach. Helen may have been keyed up and tense at going to the theater with Kit; the latter was equally tense at having Helen as her house guest. When Helen and Polly arrived, she insisted that Nancy Hamilton, her manager and close friend, stay with her because she was somewhat intimidated by the prospect of being alone with Helen. Nancy herself was somewhat intimidated; and when Kit took herself off to show Polly the house, leaving Nancy alone with Helen, she sat silent and abashed. But only for a moment. In her bluff, outgoing way Nancy was equal to any situation, and soon the two were trying to communicate. Kit returned and a swim was proposed. Nancy said she swam in the nude. Helen replied that since she could not have the pleasure of seeing, she would wear a bathing suit. That was the way the friendship between Katharine Cornell and her entourage, and Helen and hers, began, and although Helen was sixty, it sank deep roots and enriched her final years.¹⁸⁰

By 1942 Hamilton and Keller had a social relationship; Hamilton wrote to her brother Marshall, "Helen Keller came for dinner the other night and when I told her about you [a reference to his service in World War II] she clapped her hands and sent you her blessing."¹⁸¹

Hamilton also introduced Keller and Thompson into her circle. Forbes described hosting Keller and "her staunch companion" Thompson in 1945, "at a dinner party Nan gave on the patio of our apartment. Helen was full of joy and was drinking her favorite cocktail, an old-fashioned."¹⁸² Hamilton was an opera fan who cultivated friendship with opera stars and, according to Nella Braddy Henney, Keller's friend, biographer, and neighbor, "It was Nancy who brought into her living room to sing for Helen two great

¹⁸⁰ Joseph P. Lash, *Helen and Teacher: The Story of Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan Macy*, Radcliffe Biography Series (New York: Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, 1980), 665-6.

¹⁸¹ Nancy Hamilton, New York, to Marshall Hamilton, 7 November 1942.

¹⁸² Forbes, *Five Minutes, Miss Forbes*, 153.

prima donnas, Gladys Swarthout and Kirsten Flagstad (not on the same day).”¹⁸³ At one tea hosted by Cornell and Hamilton, Keller and Thompson socialized with their mutual acquaintance Eleanor Roosevelt (see Figure 20).¹⁸⁴

By 1952, Keller considered Cornell and Hamilton among her closest friends; Keller told Hamilton that she and Thompson could count their friends on their fingers and, “Nancy was surprised to find herself included -- saddened a bit too, for it brought poignant realization of how very lonely the girls are.”¹⁸⁵ Both Cornell and Hamilton learned the manual alphabet, and Cornell was the only person whom Thompson allowed to tend to Keller alone.¹⁸⁶ And because of their relations with Keller, blindness became a crusading cause for Hamilton and Cornell.¹⁸⁷ Keller, in turn, lent her story and her

¹⁸³ Nella Braddy Henney, *With Helen Keller* (Eaton, HN: Keith Henney, 1974), 14-5. Hamilton remembered the concerts in a letter to Henney, “I still say the Flagstad concert in my apartment was the most breath-taking, not only because of the beauty, perfection and dedication of her performance for Helen alone, but because it involved the strangeness and hazard of Helen’s hand on Kirsten’s throat, and we saw what that did to Swarthout! Lennie [Bernstein] started out wanting something for himself, and it was only when he was half-through the Chopin that he unconsciously began to give rather than receive.... You can see I’m inclined to be Leery [sic] of Lennie, he is so facile and such a complete egocentric, but God knows he is a great teacher, to the benefit of millions and millions of us.” Nancy Hamilton, Vineyard Haven, to Nella Braddy Henney, 30 June 1961, Nancy Hamilton Papers, The Sophia Smith Collection.

¹⁸⁴ According to Keller's biography, “Helen took time off to visit Kit at Martha's Vineyard. Mrs. Roosevelt was visiting friends, and Kit Cornell invited everyone for tea. Helen eagerly explored Eleanor Roosevelt's face with her fingers and read her lips: ‘I wish we might all have been together longer,’ Helen wrote her ‘dearest of Katharines’s afterward.” Lash, *Helen and Teacher*, 747.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 727.

¹⁸⁶ Dorothy Herrmann, *Helen Keller: A Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 303.

¹⁸⁷ In 1958 Hamilton added to her will, “I direct that, if possible, my eyes shall be given to the eye bank.” Nancy Hamilton, Will, New York, 27 May 1958, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.



Figure 20. Eleanor Roosevelt, Helen Keller, and Katharine Cornell at Chip-Chop (circa 1954).

Printed in Joseph P. Lash, *Helen and Teacher: The Story of Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan Macy*, Radcliffe Biography Series (New York: Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, 1980), 662.

official imprimatur to *Helen Keller in Her Story*, an Academy Award-winning documentary that became Hamilton's pet project after her theatre career stalled (see Figure 21). Hamilton called on her circle of associates to help with the project. Cornell narrated and (more importantly) financed the film. Morgan Lewis composed the score. A number of people in Hamilton's professional and personal circle made guest appearances in the documentary, including Guthrie McClintic, Gladys Swarthout, Martha Graham, and Gertrude Macy's brother-in-law Harry Hopkins.

The film was, ostensibly, an homage to Keller and a fundraiser for the American Foundation for the Blind. But Hamilton also viewed the project as an important career gambit, and she insisted that she get billing as the primary creative force. In an angry exchange with Richard Wood, a cinematographer and creative consultant for the film, Hamilton asserted her position in the project: "This film, as you know, was put into my hands to bring forth.... The fact that there could be but one head was inevitable."¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁸ Nancy Hamilton, New York, to Richard Carver Wood, 11 May 1954, Nancy Hamilton Papers, The Sophia Smith Collection. This comment was in response to a letter Wood sent complaining of his billing on the documentary: "For the rest of picture what I do claim is this: that it is the creative product primarily of your work and mine and in which if any division is made you should be credited primarily with all the research and visual content. Notice that I say 'primarily.' You know very well that you began with a limited knowledge of the Brownie camera and that while you of course contributed ideas that the pictures we now have on film are my work and not yours.... For better or worse, I consider my work and my integrity as indelibly stamped upon the film as is yours. Nothing I have said means that I wish or intend to compete with you for top honors. I know that you have carried on long after I had to bow out, that you are still contributing an infinite amount of work toward the success of the film and that the limelight properly belongs to you. I do hold however that there is plenty of room for me to receive recognition in the press that is somewhere in relation to what I have contributed to the film. I am not going to be content to be know [sic] as 'one of forty producers's' nor only as the technical director, a term which was phony from its conception in your mind.... It is the eleventh hour regarding press releases and I trust before it is too late you will if necessary readjust your own attitude You should know though that I get so damn



Figure 21. Nancy Hamilton, Katharine Cornell, Helen Keller, and Polly Thompson, with the film canister for *Helen Keller in Her Story*.
In Dorothy Herrmann, *Helen Keller: A Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 311.

After opening in a special engagement at New York's Guild Theatre, on a double bill with Walt Disney's Technicolor *Stormy the Thoroughbred*, the documentary failed to find a commercial market. Hamilton's agent wrote her, "Unfortunately the picture is dying at the Guild. They claim it's a record low. As you know, another picture will replace it on the 15th of July."¹⁸⁹ He then suggested they "explore the non-theatrical distribution field."¹⁹⁰ Determined to see the film through to a wide-spread commercial release, Hamilton solicited every major distributor, but, she received only rejections.¹⁹¹

furious with you when I see evidences of misrepresentation by omissions as well as what is said that I do not know how long I can continue to hold faith in you, nor how long I can hold my strained patience in check.... If you want to answer this in words rather than deeds I should prefer you write. Our one conversation on the subject was an emotional experience I do not wish to repeat, nor do I want to descend into the dismal arguments of petty details." Richard Carver Wood, New York, to Nancy Hamilton, 9 May 1954, Nancy Hamilton Papers, The Sophia Smith Collection. The relationship between Hamilton and Wood had been deteriorating throughout the process of filming the documentary. In a letter in which Wood complained about the amount of money Hamilton was paying him, he wrote, "And don't ever let me hear you talk about how you are the impractical one and Gertrude Macy the business woman. Though I don't know her well I venture you have outmacyed Macy a hundred to one. Never in the history of picture making has so much been accomplished for so little." Richard Carver Wood, New York, to Nancy Hamilton, 5 March 1953, Nancy Hamilton Papers, The Sophia Smith Collection.

¹⁸⁹ William Fitelson, New York, to Nancy Hamilton, Vineyard Haven, 8 July 1954, Nancy Hamilton Papers, The Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Hamilton even tried to find international distribution for the film by soliciting Johanna Hirth, Cornell's former lover, in Germany. Hirth wrote Hamilton, "Kit tells me that you are planning to show it at the local movie house for the benefit of a local blind or deaf charity, which is wonderful, and which could perhaps be instrumental in interesting a German commercial distributor or church group in giving the picture national distribution in Germany -- something we have been hoping for very much for the film, as then it would benefit our cause, which is the Helen Keller Deaf-Blind Fund of the World.... I have been teasing Kit for months now to go on a trip with me to Bavaria. This winter I had her nearly won over, and then along came this TV, but we will do it

Hamilton's and Cornell's friends and business associates rallied around the film. There was a major showing on Martha's Vineyard as a benefit for the Martha's Vineyard Hospital, with a guest list that consisted of a number of Hamilton's personal and professional contacts, including Brenda Forbes and her husband Merrill Shepard, Gertrude Macy, Margalo Gilmore, Eleanor Roosevelt, Billie Burke, Noel Coward, Margaret Webster, Lillian and Dorothy Gish, Mary Martin and her husband Richard Halliday, Tallulah Bankhead, Henry Fonda, Richard and Dorothy Rodgers, Joshua and Nedda Logan, Ann Guglar, Tallulah Bankhead, Judith Anderson, and Cyril Ritchard.¹⁹²

By keeping the documentary in the public eye Hamilton also kept it eligible for the Academy Award, and in 1955, with only one other film competing in the documentary category, *Helen Keller in Her Story* won the Oscar. The Academy Award did not, however, enhance the film's potential for commercial distribution. So Hamilton called on her associates, this time for endorsements; a sheet of advertising that accompanied the film included quotes from familiar names, including Eleanor Roosevelt, Josh Logan, Lillian Gish, Billie Burke, Noel Coward, and Mary Martin and Richard Halliday.¹⁹³ In an advertisement in the *Boston Herald*, for a small, non-commercial

eventually. I think you had better begin to apply pressure from your side of the water. It really seems idiotic that in all these years I have never encountered you." Johanna Hirth, Germany, to Nancy Hamilton, 3 April 1957, Nancy Hamilton Papers, The Sophia Smith Collection.

¹⁹² "Opening Night Sponsors for *Helen Keller in Her Story*," n.d., Nancy Hamilton Papers, The Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College. Judith Anderson starred with Cornell in a production of Chekov's *Three Sisters*, directed by McClintic. Cyril Ritchard became friendly with Hamilton when he sang one of her songs, "The Old Gavotte," in the West Coast production of the musical of *Peter Pan*, which also starred Mary Martin.

¹⁹³ "What Some Have Said About the Unconquered," n.d., Nancy Hamilton Papers, The Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA. According to

showing of the film, Mary Martin proclaimed, “Never have I left the theatre with such a feeling of happy excitement,” and Eleanor Roosevelt gave the film additional press in her “My Day” column, writing, “At an hour when the theatre people were through with their shows, I went at Katharine Cornell’s invitation to see the movie of Helen Keller’s life, which Miss Cornell narrated. It is a most moving and dramatic picture.”¹⁹⁴

Thus armed, Hamilton tried to interest non-commercial distributors. She even solicited Ford and the General Motors Company and asked them to sponsor the film for showings at schools and libraries, a type of sponsorship these companies commonly undertook. But both rejected the film. The only distributor who would handle the documentary was Louis De Rochemont Associates, which specialized in educational films for schools, churches, and libraries. In 1956, the film finally had a featured spot -- in the Junior Scholastic Catalog.

The same problem that beset most of Hamilton’s work after *Three to Make Ready* plagued *Helen Keller in her Story*. Hamilton clearly committed herself to the cause and her work, but she had neither the training nor the skills to make a commercially viable documentary. After a test showing of the film, Hamilton’s agent wrote, “All admire the picture, and most of them are inspired and moved by it. But they are unanimous in their

theatre historian Jay Plum, networks often manifest themselves through celebrity endorsement. Plum argues that the list of women who endorsed producer Cheryl Crawford's autobiography, including Mary Martin, “points to the subcultural knowledge circulated through a complex network of social and professional relationships among lesbians, gays, and bisexual men and women in the American theater with which they all were familiar.” Plum, “Cheryl Crawford: One Not So Naked Individual,” 240.

¹⁹⁴ Advertisement for *Helen Keller in Her Story*, *Boston Herald*, 4 May 1956, Nancy Hamilton Papers, The Sophia Smith Collection; Eleanor Roosevelt, “My Day,” Syndicated Press Release, 19 March 1954, Nancy Hamilton Papers, The Sophia Smith Collection.

opinion that ‘it is not commercial.’”¹⁹⁵ The top executives at United Artists Studios “felt that the picture will not be a commercial success, but are interested in its purposefulness.”¹⁹⁶ And in a “Memorandum: My Reaction to the Helen Keller Picture,” the president of Loews Incorporated summarized the criticism that greeted the film:

I do not feel that we can book this picture as a second feature attraction. It might be booked as a short subject by cutting it materially, but that would not be within our province. In talking with our managers, assistant managers and other help where the picture played, there was a definite apathy toward the picture by the younger people and the males. The people who liked it were mainly older women, more the discriminating type of patrons. During the showing of the film, many people got up and either walked out or walked around the theatre. It is the kind of a subject that appeals to the most discriminating patron and, unfortunately, this is only a small percentage of our total attendance, who come mainly to lose themselves in entertainment, and this is not entertainment for them.¹⁹⁷

The next chapter will consider how Hamilton’s musical theatre work suffered the same problems as the documentary, as she increasingly expressed an ambivalent attitude to writing for a popular audience. The chapter explores Hamilton’s work as a lyricist and her how career-long tendency to appeal to a coterie audience cost her a widespread popular audience, a successful career, and a legacy.

¹⁹⁵ William Fitelson, New York, to Nancy Hamilton, Martha's Vineyard, 24 August 1954, Nancy Hamilton Papers, The Sophia Smith Collection.

¹⁹⁶ William Fitelson, New York, to Nancy Hamilton, Cincinnati, 30 December 1954, Nancy Hamilton Papers, The Sophia Smith Collection.

¹⁹⁷ President of Loews Incorporated, New York, to Mrs. David Levy, New York, 15 November 1954, Nancy Hamilton Papers, The Sophia Smith Collection.

Chapter Three: “Blah, Blah, Blah”: Nancy Hamilton as Broadway Lyricist

Somewhere there’s music --
How faint the tune!
Somewhere there’s heaven --
How high the moon!
There is no moon above
When love is far away too, --
Till it comes true
That you love me as I love you --

Nancy Hamilton¹

I’ve written you a song,
A beautiful routine.
(I hope you like it.)
My technique can’t be wrong:
I learned it from the screen.
(I hope you like it.)
I studied all the rhymes that all the lovers sing;
Then just for you I wrote this little thing:

Blah, blah, blah, blah, moon,
Blah, blah, blah, above;
Blah, blah, blah, blah, croon,
Blah, blah, blah, love.
Tra la la la tra la la la, merry month of May;
Tra la la la tra la la la, ‘neath the clouds of gray.
Blah, blah, blah, your hair,
Blah, blah, blah, your eyes,
Blah, blah, blah, blah, care,
Blah, blah, blah, blah, skies.
Tra la la la, tra la la la la cottage for two --
Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, darling, with you!

Ira Gershwin²

As Ira Gershwin’s parody suggests, lyrics of early Tin Pan Alley tunes often were “a compendium of the worst sins in songwriting. It was a period when artiness prevailed

¹ Hamilton and Lewis, *Three to One*, 61-2.

² Robert Kimball, ed., *The Complete Lyrics of Ira Gershwin* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998), 173.

and good sense didn't matter so long as words rhymed.”³ By the 1930s many American songwriters had grown frustrated with the moon/June rhyme formulas that peppered the lyrics of popular music and musical theatre (often one and the same). But Nancy Hamilton's most famous song, “How High the Moon,” written in 1940, with its “tune/moon” and “too/true/you” rhymes, seems a veritable case study for Gershwin's parody. Some of Hamilton's songs did achieve brief success, and, according to Hamilton's niece, Sally, “How High the Moon” paid Hamilton's liquor bills for her entire life.⁴ But even though Hamilton wrote four intimate revues and two unproduced “book musicals,” she did not secure the same popularity or legacy of some of her contemporaries, and she certainly has not achieved the same lasting celebrity of the famous lyricists of the decade like Cole Porter, Lorenz Hart, Dorothy Fields, and Ira Gershwin. As Hamilton was not a trailblazing innovator, she found her career as a lyricist predicated on her ability to adjust to shifting trends, and the places where Hamilton went wrong highlight what a lyricist had to do to succeed. By looking at Hamilton's responses to shifts in the nature of song lyrics, show content, and the musical theatre form, this chapter will use Hamilton to explore the changing demands on musical theatre writers during the transitional period of the 1930s and 1940s.

Lyric Writing in the 1930s and the Intimate Revues

After a period of relative stasis, the 1930s and 1940s saw broad fluctuations in songwriting trends. During the era of Tin Pan Alley, standardization was the key to

³ Stephen Citron, *Songwriting: A Complete Guide to the Craft* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1985), 52-3.

⁴ Sally Hamilton, Interview, 4 June 2001.

commercial success, and lyricists forced rhymes into a rigid thirty-two-bar, AABA formula.⁵ In the AABA structure, the song typically moves from two eight-measure statements of a theme or problem (the first two As) to an eight bar musical and thematic transition (the B) that leads to an eight-bar resolution of the problem stated in the first A (the final A). The AABA structure created in the listener, “a feeling of satisfaction by rounding out the whole with a return to the original theme material.”⁶

This structure imposed constraints on both the content and the form of the standard song; songwriters traded ingenuity and flexibility for commercial security. But in the 1930s, larger cultural trends brought about a change in the nature of lyrics. Novelist John Updike recalls that the decade of the 1930s was the “heyday of light verse: there were book reviews in verse, and sports stories; there were droll ballades and

⁵ In his essay “On Popular Music,” Theodor W. Adorno critiques Tin Pan Alley and the related musical theatre, suggesting that the music industry was geared to mass marketing, and therefore, standardization, which prevented songs from achieving any real innovation. Adorno argues that listeners are passified recipients of commodified popular music because “The composition hears for the listener. This is how popular music divests the listener of his spontaneity and promotes conditioned reflexes. Not only does it not require his effort to follow its concrete stream, it actually gives him models under which anything concrete still remaining may be subsumed. The schematic buildup dictates that way in which he must listen while, at the same time, it makes any effort at listening unnecessary. Popular music is ‘predigested’ in a way strongly resembling the fad of digests of printed material.” In Theodor W. Adorno, “On Popular Music,” in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, 2d ed., ed. John Storey (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 201.

⁶ Musical Theatre historian Lehman Engle explains, “The main A theme, exploited as it is three times, impresses itself more on the memory. The B section -- called a release -- is in actuality a relief. It provides a necessary contrast from the three A’s, normally departs from the main theme in key, mode, and mood, and often displays rhythmic and melodic variance.” Lehman Engel, *The American Musical Theater*, revised ed., with an introduction by Brooks Atkinson (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1975), 9.

rondeaux and triolets.”⁷ The witticisms of satirists Ogden Nash, Dorothy Parker, Robert Benchley, and H. L. Mencken filled newspapers, and forces as diverse as the European avant garde, *vers de société* and jazz shaped songs.⁸ In response to these influences, lyricists sought novel ways to construct their lyrics and lyric-writing came to be a finely tuned skill developed by songwriters who were often educated in Ivy League colleges and groomed for the intelligentsia. Under the leadership of writers such as Porter, Hart, Fields, and Gershwin, lyricists came into their own as “writers.” According to Engel, “By 1930 American lyricists had succeeded in bypassing their own shabby heritage and had begun creating something important and new in the theatre and in the language.”⁹

As the lyricists of popular songs and musical theatre kept pace with the new demand for witty lyrics, the intimate revues that sprouted in the 1920s and matured in the 1930s were the perfect place for songwriters to hone their verbal skills.¹⁰ The intimate revue was an offshoot of a form already well established in American musical theatre. Revues, from a French word for a theatrical occasion, flourished in Europe, especially Paris, in the late nineteenth century. American theatre adopted the revue format--a variety of songs, sketches, and dances loosely connected by a theme -- with the

⁷ Robert Kimball, ed., *The Complete Lyrics of Cole Porter*, with an introduction by John Updike (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), xiv; quoted in Henderson and Bowers, *Red Hot & Blue*, 115.

⁸ Philip Furia, *The Poets of Tin Pan Alley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 3-18.

⁹ Lehman Engel, *Words with Music: The Broadway Musical Libretto* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1972), 101.

¹⁰ Stanley Green, “The Musical in the Twentieth Century: Variety and Revue Formats,” in *Musical Theatre in America: Papers and Proceedings of the Conference on the Musical Theatre in America*, ed. Glenn Loney, Contributions in Drama and Theatre Studies, Joseph Donohue (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984), 145.

production in 1894 of *The Passing Show*. By the 1910s and 1920s, thanks to impresario Florenz Ziegfeld, revue became synonymous with lavish spectacle and female pulchritude, as producers created annuals like *George White's Scandals*, *Earl Carroll's Vanities*, and *The Music Box Revue* that followed the Ziegfeld formula. In spite of featured songs by Sigmund Romberg, Irving Berlin, and Ira Gershwin, the girlie revues were primarily sexualized displays of the female form.¹¹ Musical theatre historian Ethan Mordden argues that Ziegfeld's chorus included the "loveliest creatures ever seen on Broadway, but the composers, lyricists, and sketch writers Ziegfeld hired were hacking out second rate material."¹² The tired businessmen who dominated Ziegfeld's audiences focused on the follies lorelei, and Ziegfeld's primary objective was not the glorification of the American songwriter.

Inevitably the novelty and appeal of the girlie revues waned; as one critic sneered, "If we went about the world nude, theatre managers would reap fortunes by displaying girls completely garbed from head to toe."¹³ Further, the costs of production became prohibitively expensive for Depression-era budgets. According to Lehman Engel:

The public had wearied of ever-increasing lavishness, and the growing cost of this lavishness made the future for producers an impossibility. The formula of girls and scenery and costumes had become passé and no longer interested the public. The old revue passed totally out of existence.

¹¹ As one reviewer noted, Ziegfeld, "in the course of any year, sees and appraises the beauty of the most beautiful girls of America, for the same reasons that Mr. Heinz views and chooses America's most nearly perfect pickles." In James Whittaker, "Extra! A Ziegfeld Follies Girl Need Not Be a Raving Beauty," *Chicago Tribune*, 26 March 1922, sec. 8, p. 1; quoted in Latham, "The Right To Bare," 460.

¹² Ethan Mordden, *Better Foot Forward: The History of American Musical Theatre* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1976), 40.

¹³ Alan Dale, "Gold Tickets An' All, Alan Dale Sees It Through," *American* (New York), 25 August 1926, n. p.

Two factors clearly motivated the style of the new revue.... One of these was the need imposed by the new kind of audience to deal with literate ideas, which would give a show with some intelligent audience identifiable and sustained interest.... The second factor -- at least as important as the first -- was money. These were Depression years, and even established giants in the area had failed and closed up shop.¹⁴

Ziegfeld died in 1932 and what remained of the spectacular girlie revue form faded as well.¹⁵

Another form of the revue, almost the antithesis of Ziegfeld's extravaganzas, reached its peak during the Great Depression. These intimate (or "smart," "topical," or "material-oriented") revues required a new kind of lyrics, as the emphasis shifted from spectacle and the women of the chorus to the skills of the performer and the material. As Lehman Engel writes:

These were the Depression years.... Since the established revue producers had begun noticeably to feel the financial punch and were experiencing increasing difficulty in raising money, the most viable productions were those on a small and simple scale, and the material itself for such productions had to be cast in new and revolutionary forms.¹⁶

¹⁴ Engel, *The American Musical Theater*, revised ed., 24.

¹⁵ Musical theatre historian Gerald Bordman claims, "In a way the death of Florenz Ziegfeld at the very beginning of the season... was the most significant milestone of the theatrical year.... None would ever possess Ziegfeld's expensive tastes or elegant panache. His death ended an era." Gerald Bordman, *American Musical Theatre: A Chronicle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 477. Undoubtedly a number of other factors contributed to the declining popularity of the spectacle-driven girlie revues. The popularity of "the talkies," encouraged by the production of *The Jazz Singer* in 1927, made film the new popular medium in the United States. And much of the Broadway "old guard" left New York for more lucrative salaries in Hollywood. *Ibid.*, 121-3. Historian Lee Davis forwards an interesting hypothesis that Prohibition encouraged a generation of American intelligentsia to migrate to Europe and that musical theater tastes changed in the thirties because of the "new level of sophistication that these travelers escaping Prohibition and embracing European cultural values, brought home with them." Davis, *Scandals and Follies*, 271.

¹⁶ Engel, *The American Musical Theater*, revised ed., 24-5.

Hamilton herself spoke of the ways that the intimate revues differed from their lavish predecessors: “Simplicity is the other essential element in an intimate revue. If you want a big, spectacular musical, you would obviously not be choosing this one, so the more you rely on the material and the actors, the better for the whole.”¹⁷ Because of this emphasis on material, songwriters increasingly found that they could approach lyric writing as a craft. Gerald Bordman notes, “The best theatrical craftsmen had studied the lessons taught by the more avant-garde revues of the 1920s and had consolidated their art to such a degree that the new decade would soon come to be looked on as a halcyon time for the more thoughtful, melodic revue.”¹⁸

The Greats

The 1930s were also the halcyon days for a group of songwriters who were able to create innovation within the constraints of the AABA song. Cole Porter’s famous catalog of copulation, “Let’s Do It,” from *Paris* (1928), provides an instructive example of how a lyricist could operate within the standard song formula but still create innovation and a sense of anticipation in the listener, paralleling the light verse of poets like Ogden Nash:

The chimpanzees, in the zoos, do it,
Some courageous kangaroos do it,
Let’s do it, let’s fall in love.
I’m sure giraffes, on the sly, do it,

¹⁷ Hamilton and Lewis, *Three to One*, 5.

¹⁸ Bordman, *American Musical Revue*, 87.

Heavy hippopotami do it,
Let's do it, let's fall in love.
Old sloths who hang down from twigs do it,
Though the effort is great,
Sweet guinea pigs do it,
Buy a couple and wait.¹⁹

Although Porter structured “Let’s Do It” around simple masculine end rhymes (for example, the repetition of “it” and “great/wait”) and internal rhymes (“zoo” careens into the phrase “courageous kangaroos”), he used convention to his advantage. According to musical theatre historian Thomas Hischak, Porter taught the audience to listen for lyrics, “knowing that there would be a pay off for their attention.”²⁰ In the song’s B sections (in this selection starting with “Old Sloths”), the rhyme simultaneously completes the lyrical line and also operates as the punch line to the joke.

Porter, who was both a lyricist and a composer, chose lyrics and music that melded form and content. In “I Get a Kick Out of You” from *Anything Goes* (1934), Porter used five internal rhymes in an eight bar phrase:

I get no kick in a plane.
*F*lying too *high* with some *guy* in the *sky*
Is my *idea* of nothing to do,
Yet *I* get a kick out of you [author’s italics].²¹

In addition to lyrics that describe flying, the internal rhymes create a musical phrase that soars as the music and lyrics support each other.

Lyricists who did not write music also developed new lyrical structures to accommodate the music of the composers with whom they collaborated. Lorenz Hart

¹⁹ Kimball, ed., *The Complete Lyrics of Cole Porter*, 72-3.

²⁰ Thomas S. Hischak, *Word Crazy: Broadway Lyricists from Cohan to Sondheim* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1991), 61.

²¹ Kimball, ed., *The Complete Lyrics of Cole Porter*, 118.

broke apart phrases and words in order to maximize rhyme alternatives for Richard Rodgers's music. "Mountain Greenery" from the revue *The Garrick Gaieties* (1926) included the lyrics:

While you *love* your *lover*, let
Blue skies be your *cover*let—
When it rains we'll laugh at the weather.
.....
Beans can get no *keener* re-
Ception in the *beanery*.
Bless our Mountain *Greenery* home [author's italics and underlines]!²²

In "Manhattan," from an earlier edition of *The Garrick Gaieties* (1925), Hart used similar techniques of breaking apart words and phrases to create rhymes:

Summer journeys to *Niag'ra*
And to other places *aggra-*
vate all our cares.
We'll save our fares!
I've a cozy little *flat in*
What is known as old *Manhattan* [author's italics and underlines].²³

Hart also created new pronunciations of words in order to accentuate a rhyme scheme or, in his coinage of new phrases, such as "hobohemia" for "The Lady is a Tramp" from *Babes in Arms* (1937), to articulate new ideas.

As I hitched and hiked and gifted, too,
From Main to Albuquerque
Alas, I missed the Beaux Arts Ball,
And what is twice as sad,
I was never at a party
Where they honored *Noel Ca'ad*.
But social circles spin too fast for me
My *Hobohemia* is the place to be [author's italics].²⁴

²² Dorothy Hart and Robert Kimball, eds., *The Complete Lyrics of Lorenz Hart*, with an appreciation by Alan Jay Lerner (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 71.

²³ *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 230.

The late 1920s and the 1930s was an era of innovations in song content as well as form. As listeners increasingly demanded lyrics “intricate enough to merit the same attention we give to poetry,” lyricists searched for new ways to say “I love you,” popular song’s most popular theme.²⁵ With cynicism and satire the order of the day, double entendres with an edge marked the lyrics of Gershwin, Hart, Fields, and Porter. Although these songwriters, most notoriously Porter and Hart, frequently wallowed in lachrymose love songs, just as often their lyrics relied on word play to develop subtext. When, in one often censored portion of “Let’s Do It,” Porter wrote, “Moths in your rug, do it/what’s the use of moth balls?” he became one of the first of many songwriters to “combine love and sex in a lyric.”²⁶ Likewise, Hart’s lyrics for *The Boys from Syracuse* (1938) included the innuendo laden “Sing for Your Supper”:

Hawks and crows do lots of things,
 But the canary only sings.
 She is a courtesan on wings --
 So I’ve heard.

 Sing for your supper,
 And you’ll get breakfast.
 Songbirds always eat
 If their song is sweet to hear.

 I heard from a wise canary
 Trilling makes a fellow willing.
 So, little swallow, swallow now.²⁷

²⁵ Furia, *The Poets of Tin Pan Alley*, 6.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 163.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 255.

Fields followed Porter's and Hart's lead, giving voice to carnality in the racy "I Won't Dance" from the film *Roberta* (1935):

When you dance you're charming and you're gentle
'Specially when you do the "Continental"
But this feeling isn't purely mental;
For heaven rest us,
I'm not asbestos.²⁸

In "A Fine Romance" from the film *Swing Time* (1936), a sexually frustrated woman laments:

A fine romance! With no kisses!
A fine romance, my friend, this is!
We should be like a couple of hot tomatoes,
But you're as cold as yesterday's mashed potatoes.
A fine romance! You won't nestle,
A fine romance! You won't wrestle!
I might as well play bridge with my old-maid Aunts.²⁹

The woman singer then makes a more direct allusion to her partner's frigidity, complaining, "I've never mussed the crease in your blue serge pants."³⁰

Nancy Hamilton the Lyricist

Like her contemporaries, Hamilton attempted to reconcile the wit, innuendo, and erudition expected in songs for the "smart set" with the conventions of Tin Pan Alley. Reviewers frequently commented on the ingenuity of Hamilton's lyrics within the intimate revues. After *New Faces of 1934*, songwriter Irving Berlin reportedly went

²⁸ Deborah Grace Winer, *On the Sunny Side of the Street: The Life and Lyrics of Dorothy Fields*, with a preface by Betty Comden (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997), 87.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 101.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

backstage to congratulate Hamilton on her material, saying, “If I had written that song I would die happy.”³¹ After seeing *One for the Money*, composer Jimmy McHugh (who wrote songs with Dorothy Fields) wrote to Hamilton, “not only are your lyrics and songs wonderful, but with all this you seem to have retained that charming simplicity.”³²

But even though Hamilton’s rhyme structure and references periodically surpass much of the lyrical pap prevalent in popular songs, she pales in comparison to some of the better-remembered wordsmiths of the 1930s. Her most successful song, “How High the Moon” from *Two for the Show*, provides instructive insights into the fundamentals many mediocre lyric writers employed in the first half of the twentieth century, as well as the techniques Hamilton favored:

Somewhere there’s music --
How faint the tune!
Somewhere there’s heaven --
How high the moon!
There is no moon above
When love is far away too, --
Till it comes true
That you love me as I love you --

Somewhere there’s music --
It’s where you are!
Somewhere there’s heaven --
How near -- how far?
The darkest night would shine
If you would come to me soon --
Until you will, how still my heart,
How high the moon!³³

³¹ Seaman, “Get Nancy Hamilton.”

³² Jimmy McHugh, New York, to Nancy Hamilton, New York, 12 April 1939, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

³³ Hamilton and Lewis, *Three to One*, 61-2. According to Joe Whitmore, Hamilton changed the lyrics to “How High the Moon” to make the song more commercially viable. Whitmore, Interview, 20 July 2002. A draft of the song in her papers includes another set of lyrics, that punctuates the song’s theme of unrequited love:

In “How High the Moon,” Hamilton relied primarily on masculine rhymes (also called ultimate rhymes) common in standard songs, which featured a rhymed pair with an accent on the last syllable of the line (in the case of “How High the Moon” the masculine rhymes are “tune/moon,” “too/true/you,” etc.).³⁴ Hamilton also used internal rhyme (also called interior or inner rhymes), the “extra ping that chimes in midline” (“above/love” or “will/till”).³⁵ With the line “somewhere there’s music,” Hamilton employed a more sophisticated variety of internal rhyme, called contiguous rhyme, which is the touching of two matched sounds within the line.³⁶ She also used alliteration, linking neighboring words like “how” and “high.”

In “Rhapsody,” from *One for the Money*, Hamilton used a similar set of lyrical techniques:

And when I try to touch your hand
You're faraway too
What can I do
To make you want me close to you
Somewhere there's starshine
How [illegible] the light
Somewhere there's moonglow
How dark the night
Is love a long way off or will you come to me soon
Until you will how still my heart
How high the moon

Nancy Hamilton, “Draft of How High the Moon,” n.d., Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

³⁴ Citron, *Songwriting*, 134. According to Citron, this type of rhyme was called masculine because the masculine form of a noun in Latin poetry was pronounced in one syllable and the feminine form was pronounced in two syllables.

³⁵ Sheila Davis, *The Craft of Lyric Writing* (Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 1985), 193.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 192.

You are the rhapsody, you are the theme.
You are the music I heard in a dream.
Each time I hear it, my spirit soars;
Life has no faults, my heart starts waltzing!
Music was still until you touched the string;
You are the spell that gave melody wings.
Now ev'ry sound in my pounding heart sings this rhapsody of you.³⁷

The rhyme patterns of “Rhapsody” are more intricate than “How High the Moon.” In this song, Hamilton also employs a trailing rhyme, “a device in which a one-syllable rhyme agent is paired with either the first syllable of a two-syllable word or the first of two words, making a perfect rhyme plus a trailing syllable” (“faults/waltz-ing” and “spell/mel-ody”).³⁸ But in this song Hamilton again relies primarily on masculine end rhymes (“theme/dream”) and internal rhymes (“still/until” or “sound/pound”).

Hamilton’s emphasis on simple masculine end rhymes limited her lyric choices, and, thereby, the way she could develop content. According to one songwriting manual, the perfect rhyme limits lyricists’s options to between 50 and seventy words.³⁹ A typical example of the ways Hamilton’s lyric structure affects content appears in “A Drop of A Hat” from *One for the Money*:

At the shake of a stick,
I’d announce about us
From the top of a bus
I would even do that!
I’m so in love with you!
By reputation I was a mild man --
Now I’m like the wild man from Borneo
At the drop of a hat,
I would kiss you like mad,

³⁷ Nancy Hamilton and Morgan Lewis, *Rhapsody* (New York: Chappell and Co. Inc., 1952), 2-4.

³⁸ Davis, *The Craft of Lyric Writing*, 191.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 194.

Right in front of your dad, --
No, he couldn't stop that
I'm so in love with you.⁴⁰

“Kiss and We'll Both Go Home,” also from *One for the Money*, includes the following lyrics:

Man: Come back here, I won't hurt you.
I am a man of virtue.
Girl: Please let me pass you silly ass.
Man: But what are you afraid of?
You know I'm harmless as a blade of grass.
Girl: I have my doubts, alas.⁴¹

In both cases, rhymes like “us/bus” or “pass/ass/grass/alas” seem forced and, at turns, make the song lyrics feel predictable and the song content feel undeveloped. Further, Hamilton's songs tend toward phrases that end at the rhyme, which Lehman Engel identifies as a problem: “one monotonous and needless miscalculation that many, especially new, lyricists make is to imply a stop at the end of every line.”⁴²

Perhaps Hamilton's process caused her to fall into some of the rhyming patterns that mark her songs. A draft of a song written on the occasion of Helen Keller's eighty-eighth birthday provides insight into Hamilton's methods of composition. The song contains the lyrics:

A very cute
And quite astute, fright, to boot
Little Rooty Toot
In her Birthday Suit

⁴⁰ Hamilton and Lewis, *Three to One*, 22-3.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁴² Lehman Engel, *The Making of a Musical* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1977), 45.

Appeared in Eighteen Eighty.⁴³

Hamilton apparently struggled to complete the line following “appeared in eighteen eighty,” because a long alphabetical list of single words and phrases that rhyme with eighty appear in the side margin of the draft. Seemingly unable to find a suitable rhyme for eighty, Hamilton wrote an alternative line: above “appeared in eighteen eighty” she wrote “Was born in Alabamy.”⁴⁴

Hamilton’s tendency to complete her lines with masculine end rhymes, and her inability or unwillingness to find clever solutions to rhyming problems, limited her as a songwriter. As critic Stephen Citron asserts, “Songs that stick doggedly to the same kind of rhyme can turn out to be insufferably dull.”⁴⁵ Oscar Hammerstein wrote, “A rhyme should be unassertive, never standing out too noticeably. It should, on the other hand, not be a rhyme heard in a hundred other popular songs of the time, so familiar that the listener can anticipate it before it is sung,” as in the much maligned moon/June pair.⁴⁶ Hamilton’s rhymes were predictable and at times even jarring, as she remained beholden to the thirty-two-bar song form and its associated rhyme structure. Because lyrical techniques unify the content of the song by using phonetic completion to reinforce conceptual completion, Hamilton’s songs seem to lack the sophistication of some of her more noted counterparts on the levels of both form and content.

⁴³ Nancy Hamilton, “Draft of ‘For Helen Keller on her Eighty-Eighth Birthday,’” 1968, Nancy Hamilton Papers, The Sophia Smith Collection.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Stephen Citron, *The Musical From the Inside Out* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1991), 64.

⁴⁶ Oscar Hammerstein, II, *Lyrics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1949), 21.

Despite her apparent limitations as a rhymestress, however, Hamilton was writing for listeners who were educated and well read. She frequently displayed erudition in her songs and often relied on literary, artistic, or historical references. Its incongruous ending aside, “Kiss Me and We’ll Both Go Home” includes lyrics that anticipated a degree of learning from the listener:

We’ve talked about music
Debussy and Liszt
The “Ring” and “The Pines of Rome,”
There’s not a sonata that we have missed,
Kiss me and we’ll both go home.
We’ve talked about reading
McCauley and Lamb,
The Bible and Ethan Frome
You can’t eat the muffins without the jam,
Kiss me and we’ll both go home.⁴⁷

One for the Money’s “Ordinary Family” includes a reference to Sir Walter Scott’s gallant:

I’m looking for my Lochinvar almost as hard as Mother --
I do not plan to treat him as a sister would a brother.⁴⁸

And the “Christmas Tree Bauble” from *Two for the Show*, in which a grumpy Christmas tree angel complains about the artificiality of the holiday, featured the line:

The “Rape of Lucrece” was a token of peace
As compared to the Rape of December⁴⁹

But Hamilton does not, for the most part, fold these references into the rhyme scheme, where they would be the featured part of the song aurally. And Hamilton’s lyrics do not

⁴⁷ Hamilton and Lewis, *Three to One*, 114.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

stand up to repeated listening. With the exception of “How High the Moon,” none have become American song standards.

Nancy Hamilton and the Intimate Revues

Hamilton was not at the forefront of trends in lyric writing techniques, during the 1930s. Further, she failed to adjust to changes in content for musical theatre, and she suffered the hazards of being a satirist on the wrong side of the political fence. Although by 1938, the year *One for the Money* opened, the worst of the Depression was behind America, approximately thirty-seven percent of the population of New York was still on federal assistance.⁵⁰ The Depression had caused seismic shifts in America’s relationship to their government and political ideology. Despite the vociferous Conservative reaction to Franklin Roosevelt’s “New Deal” policy, in 1932 Roosevelt defeated Hoover handily, and in the 1936 election Democrats swept almost all city and state elections, gaining Roosevelt the largest presidential plurality in history.⁵¹ A monograph published in 1934 shows how the Depression and Roosevelt’s “New Deal” policies brought about a change in social attitudes:

The trend from individualism to institutionalism may signify something more than a change of front in the pursuit of economic gain -- or even of ‘prosperity.’ It may be also the expression of a quest for a more satisfying way of life.... The kind of life which fulfills itself in the business, the service club, and the family has narrow cultural horizons, a narrowness portrayed in the recent literature of protest. Moreover, the exploitative character of the individualistic order has been brought home to the consciousness of the average citizen by the revelations of banking scandals and colossal graft. At the present stage the desire for a new

⁵⁰ James R. McGovern, *And a Time for Hope: Americans in the Great Depression* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000), 263.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 268.

orientation of life, for a more co-operative order with large social aims, has found numerous expressions.⁵²

In a cultural context that railed against individualism, intelligentsia and literati who were socially committed and often allied with the radical left, replaced the witty *ennui* of the Algonquin roundtable and the society wags. According to William E. Leuchtenburg in *The Perils of Prosperity, 1914-1932*, “Even that insouciant exemplar of the apolitical 1920s, F. Scott Fitzgerald, who by the summer of 1932 was reading Karl Marx, wrote, ‘To bring on the revolution, it may be necessary to work inside the community party.’”⁵³ Historian Alan Brinkley notes:

A great many of America’s leading writers and intellectuals were forming some kind of relationship to the Communist Party in these years.... There were some important writers who did not become politicized in the 1930s.... But the list is not a long one. Most important intellectuals succumbed in one way or another to the allure, the romance of the left.... Intellectuals gave the Party much of its public rationale and, in the process, illustrated how the Great Depression had transformed their view of the world.⁵⁴

With the intelligentsia at the forefront, theatre took a decidedly leftist swing during the Depression; critic Brooks Atkinson asserted: “If there is any trend in today’s theaters it is the vigorous advance of the drama of the Left.”⁵⁵ As theatre of the thirties was

⁵² R. M. MacIver, “Social Philosophy,” in *Social Change and the New Deal*, ed. William F. Ogburn (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1934), 111. The articles in this monograph were reprinted from the *American Journal of Sociology*.

⁵³ William E. Leuchtenburg, *The Perils of Prosperity, 1914-1932*, 2d ed. The Chicago History of American Civilization, ed. Daniel Boorstin (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 258.

⁵⁴ Alan Brinkley, *Culture and Politics in the Great Depression*, Charles Edmondson Historical Lectures, no. 20 (Waco, TX: Markham Press Fund, 1998), 25.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Herbert Kline, “1984’ Flashbacks to Half a Century Ago,” in *New Theatre and Film: 1934-1937*, edited by Herbert Kline (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1985), 8.

“increasingly dominated by artists of a pronounced liberal bent,” writers’ willingness to dabble in leftist content, both in their shows and their personal lives, often determined success. Commitment to the left was not only politically fashionable, it was, ironically, profitable.⁵⁶

Consequently, the 1930s saw a proliferation of theatrical entertainments that seemed earnestly committed to the theatre’s ability to effect positive social change, including, among others, the Living Newspaper, the plays of Clifford Odets and Elmer Rice, and agit-prop musicals like *Sing for your Supper* and *The Cradle Will Rock*. The musical comedies of Rodgers and Hart eschewed topics of “young, rich playboys and debutantes in love” to concentrate instead on “themes of social significance,” and when lyricists “began to criticize everything around them, audiences stayed and listened.”⁵⁷

The intimate revue *Pins and Needles* featured the song, “Sing me a Song of Social Significance”:

Sing me of wars and sing me of breadlines,
Tell me of front page news.
Sing me of strikes and last minute headlines,
Dress your observations with syncopation!
Sing me a song of social significance,
There’s nothing else that will do -- ⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Bordman, *American Musical Revue*, 110.

⁵⁷ Most, *Making Americans*, 73; Julian Mates, *America’s Musical Stage: Two Hundred Years of Musical Theatre*, Contributions in Drama and Theatre Studies, Number 18 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 186.

⁵⁸ Harold Rome, *Pins and Needles* (New York: Florence Music/Chappell and Co., n. d.), 5-6. *Pins and Needles* marketed itself as the product of union pride; the published music from the show printed the garment trade and local number of each cast member. See John Bush Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theatre*, with a foreword by Sheldon Harnick (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2003), 117.

This anthem to the melding of social commentary and popular entertainment encapsulates much of the motivations of theatre entertainments during the decade. Stanley Green writes of the increasing responsibility musical theatre assumed in the 1930s:

The musical theatre – the most opulent, escapist, extravagant, and unabashedly commercial form of the theatre – could not hide from what was going on. Of course, it could still provide relief from reality. It could still offer evenings of mirth and song and glamour. But it showed a growing awareness of its own unique ability to make telling comments on such issues of the day as the folly of war, municipal corruption, political campaigns, the workings of the federal government, the rising labor movement, the dangers of both the far right and the far left, and the struggle between democracy and totalitarianism. It discovered that a song lyric, a tune, a wisecrack, a bit of comic business, a dance routine could say things with even more effectiveness than many a serious minded drama simply because the appeal was to a far wider spectrum of the theatergoing public.⁵⁹

Even the revue *Hellzapoppin'* (1938), a rambunctious evening in which vaudevillians Ole Olsen and Chic Johnson shared the stage with midgets and trained pigeons, opened with a mock newsreel that depicted Hitler orating with a Yiddish accent.⁶⁰

At the helm of this trend toward a theatre of social activism was the Federal Theatre Project. During the Depression the Federal Theatre Project launched a total of fifty-one musicals, twenty-nine of which were newly created with the help of the agency.⁶¹ Initially Hamilton attempted to capitalize on these resources; in 1937, along

⁵⁹ Green, *Broadway Musicals of the 1930s*, 12.

⁶⁰ Abe Laufe, *Broadway's Greatest Musicals*, revised ed. (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1977), 374.

⁶¹ Carol G. Baxter "The Federal Theatre Project's Musical Productions," in *Musical Theatre in America: Papers and Proceedings of the Conference on the Musical Theatre in America*, ed. Glenn Loney, Contributions in Drama and Theatre Studies, ed. Joseph Donohue (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984), 382.

with many other songwriters, Hamilton auditioned her songs for the Federal Theatre Project revue, *Sing for Your Supper*.⁶² A draft in her papers includes the lines:

Sing for your supper
Don't you strain for the high notes
Get the plain apple-pie notes,
If you want to eat sing.⁶³

Hamilton also told one reporter that she originally sent "My Day," a send up of Eleanor Roosevelt's newspaper columns, to Washington for authorization for inclusion in *Sing for Your Supper*.⁶⁴

But, ultimately, Hamilton's words did not appear in *Sing for Your Supper*, and she instead pointed her satire at the earnestness of the leftist theater. In the 1930s, Hamilton drafted *Workers Unite* with critic Robert Benchley and Louise Macy. According to the recollections of Hamilton's friend Nancy Nitchie, the inspiration for the show was a picture of a coal miner (see Figure 22 and Figure 23). Nitchie recalled that the show included the song "Coal Trust":

I'll never see the sun again
I'll never have much fun again
I'm doomed to lie in coal dust
Coal dust while I'm young
I'll never get a tan again

⁶² After discovering that the people inside the Federal Theatre Project had limited experience writing for revues, composer Ned Lehac and director George Kondolf solicited song ideas and sketches for *Sing for Your Supper*, and many songwriters auditioned to get songs into the show. See Ned Lehac, "The Story of Sing for Your Supper: The Broadway Revue Produced by the Federal Theatre Project," in *Musical Theatre in America: Papers and Proceedings of the Conference on the Musical Theatre in America*, ed. Glenn Loney, Contributions in Drama and Theatre Studies, ed. Joseph Donohue (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984), 193.

⁶³ Nancy Hamilton, "Draft of 'Sing for Your Supper,'" Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

⁶⁴ In Mok, "Not Even a Cat May Quip at a Queen."



Figure 22. The postcard that inspired *Workers Unite*.
From the Personal Collection of Nancy Nitchie, Martha's Vineyard, MA.

Workers Ignite!
 (A protest in Three Acts)

CAST

Michael - Dan Knoblock
 Foreman of Mine - Bob Lindsay
 Jeffrey - Burgess Meredith
 A Mute - Tom Wana maker
 Chloe (Mine Owner's Daughter) -
 Whitney Bourne
 Bernie (at piano) - Buddy Lewis
 Samuel (a painter) - Jimmy Shoot
 Clementine (a poetess) -
 Nancy Hamilton
 Maurice (Jewish fanatic) -
 Bob Benchley
 Sadie (a Nymphomaniac) -
 Louie Macy
 Off stage - Mine Owner
 Malicious Militia

SCENE

Act I - The Black Pit
 Act II - Greenwich Village Flat
 Act III - Same as Act I

Figure 23. The back of the postcard with the breakdown of characters and scenes. From the Personal Collection of Nancy Nitchie, Martha's Vineyard, MA.

Or blister like a man again
I'm doomed to lie in coal dust
Coal dust while I'm young. ⁶⁵

Listed on the back of the picture (which was in Nitchie's possession) is the dramatis personae of *Workers Unite*, which included Clementine, the poetess (Nancy Hamilton); Sadie, the nymphomaniac (Louise Macy); and Maurice, the Jewish Fanatic (Robert Benchley).⁶⁶ If the show was a parody -- and based on Hamilton's inclinations and politics it likely was -- the choice of this familiar cast of characters shows her willingness to take aim at the reigning darlings of theatre, the Greenwich Village liberals who wrote material like *The Cradle Will Rock*, a Federal Theatre Project sponsored musical set in "Steeltown, U.S.A." whose hero was a union organizer.

Hamilton continued to mock the agit-prop tone of theatre well into the 1930s.⁶⁷ At the same time that *Pins and Needles* sang of breadlines and labor strikes, *One for the Money* made these "songs of social significance" a subject for parody.⁶⁸ In the opening number, "An Ordinary Family," the patriarch of the family intoned:

⁶⁵ "Sketch of *Workers Unite*," Personal Collection of Nancy Nitchie, Martha's Vineyard, MA.

⁶⁶ The list of characters is in neither Hamilton nor Nitchie's handwriting. Ibid.

⁶⁷ In some way the cries of the agit-prop theatre were, in fact, without teeth. As one historian notes, "not a single agitprop production undertook to advocate what any genuine revolutionary would be expected to espouse: that is, the overthrow of the government and the rule of the proletariat." Jordan Y. Miller, and Winifred L. Frazer, *American Drama between the Wars: A Critical History* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 118.

⁶⁸ Hamilton's idol, Noel Coward, expressed a similar distaste for theatre with an overt political agenda. He wrote, "My advice, in essence, is simple and can be considered in three words: Consider the Public.... To batter it with propaganda, bewilder it with political ideologies, bore it with class prejudice, and, above all, irritate it with willful technical inefficiency is a policy that can only end in dismal frustration and certain

I'm the ordinary master
I'm fond of poker, fish and yachts,
The same as Vincent Astor.⁶⁹

Then, in what seemed a direct salvo against *Pins and Needles* and shows of its ilk, the rest of the family joined in:

We've made ourselves a very solemn promise,
To stay away from propaganda dramas.
We've nothing very shattering to say;
We haven't any message to convey;
Our show has only money for its aim.
And wishing you the same.
Here's one for the money,
Wonderful money
How tenderly, old friend, do we speak of you.⁷⁰

failure.” Jacqui Russell, comp., *File on Coward*. (Writers Files, ed. Simon Trussler. New York: Methuen, 1987), 91.

⁶⁹ Hamilton and Lewis, *Three to One*, 12.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 14. Hamilton was not the only lyricist make *Pins and Needles* the object of satire. In a show at the famous straw hat theater Camp Tamiment, in 1938, lyricist Sylvia Fine Kaye wrote a satire of the state of Broadway where union politics seemed a prerequisite for stage success:

When we were very, very young
Our leanings were dramatic
We starred in every high school show
And comments were ecstatic
We went to college to perfect our art
But found that was no way to get a start
If you hail from Yale, you could go stale
As an agent's office lurker
But they're certain to discover you
If you're a garment worker.

Quoted in Martha Schmoyer LoMonaco, *Every Week, A Broadway Revue: The Tamiment Playhouse, 1921-1960*, Contributions in Drama and Theatre Studies, no. 45 (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1992), 46. LoMonaco notes that the summer camp of the International Ladies Garment Workers's Union was adjacent to Camp Tamiment and some of the Tamiment performers resented how the success of *Pins and Needles* allowed non-professional performers to earn their Equity union cards easily.

Hamilton's revues of the 1930s not only eschewed the social activism of musicals, they mocked the fervent leftist sentiments that were appearing across the Great White Way. In a sketch entitled "The First to Go," a wealthy couple prepares to attend the wedding of their cook:

Michael: I still think it is unfortunate that with all the cooks in the world to choose from, we had to choose a cook who has decided to marry Red Poliokoffski.

Sylvia: Red Pollokorffski, dear.

Michael: Pollokoffski - Pollokorffski -- but the Red is correct, isn't it?

Sylvia: Yes, darling, the "red" is correct.

Michael: It is also correct that Bertha is marrying this Red Pollokorffshi in a mass demonstration in Union Square, and that you and I have been invited to be present.

Sylvia: But of course, darling, and Bertha's saving seats for us in the grandstand.

Michael: Do we wear a red carnation, or do we just carry a hammer and a sickle?

Sylvia: Oh, mercy, no! Nothing like that. Bertha said just to slip into something inconspicuous and we won't be noticed.

Michael: That's just the point. I'm getting rather tired of going unnoticed, by the likes of Bertha's fiancée I mean. I think we ought to take a stand.

Sylvia: But you are not going to wear a top hat to Union Square?

Michael: Why not?

Sylvia: It's so uncommunist.

Michael: I don't know. Clifford Odets wears one.

Sylvia: He only wears it to spit in. You'd be shot from under it.

Michael: I hope so. Would you care to join me under an old top hat?

Sylvia: Class suicide, dear? Don't you think we're rather too nice to die, dear? I mean quite yet?

As Michael and Sylvia finish dressing, Michael proposes a toast:

Michael: To the poor rich!

(They drink. As they do so a shadow of the guillotine falls across the back of the stage)

Sylvia: Oh, that reminds me,

Michael: What?

Sylvia: My knitting!

(She picks up some knitting and they start out the door as the first notes of the “Marseilles” sound off the stage).⁷¹

The reviewer from the *Daily Worker* took umbrage; in a review titled “*One for the Money* is Vapid Upper Class Musical,” he described this sketch as “a vintage shaft at the communists.”⁷²

In “My Day,” also from *One for the Money*, Hamilton wrote and performed a spoof of Eleanor Roosevelt’s popular syndicated column that had thrilled women readers by making “the nation’s most exalted household seem like anybody else’s.”⁷³ In this send-up of the banalities of the column, Hamilton, dressed as Roosevelt, sang:

Well, my breakfast was an apple,
And then some find [sic] scrapple,
And buttered toast and muffins, plus
Some marmalade de-lic-i-ous
And there I was ready for my day.

Oh what a day to use the East Room,
Perhaps the West,
The North Room, the South Room,
Whichever is the best room for
My Day.⁷⁴

Ostensibly the parody seems toothless; in fact one reviewer called the sketch “free of anything offensive” to the first family.⁷⁵ But parodies of the Roosevelts were tricky

⁷¹ Nancy Hamilton and Morgan Lewis, “The First to Go,” Typescript for *One for the Money*, Burnside Collection, The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

⁷² John Cambridge, “‘One for the Money’ is Vapid Upper Class Musical,” *Daily Worker*, 8 February 1939, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

⁷³ Emblidge, ed., *My Day*, 28.

⁷⁴ Nancy Hamilton and Morgan Lewis, “My Day,” Typescript for *One for the Money*.

during the Depression, and although shows like *I'd Rather Be Right* made jokes at the expense of the Roosevelts, they always portrayed them with good-humored sympathy.⁷⁶ Set against the tone of Hamilton's revue there clearly was a space for reading the routine as an attack, and some spectators did. One fan wrote to compliment Hamilton on her performance, "Eleanor is one of my pet peeves too, and do you lay her open to the bone."⁷⁷ A reviewer, critiquing both the piece's politics and Hamilton's acting, complained that "My Day," was the "sharpest, and also the unfairest, sketch in the show.... Miss Hamilton...plays the part of Mrs. Roosevelt with a venom that would be more effective if it had greater relationship to the truth."⁷⁸

In the political climate of the late 1930s Hamilton's choice of subjects for satire might seem foolish or even dangerous. But she was an equal opportunity offender, also targeting the well-heeled world from which she hailed. In "People of Taste" from Hamilton's college revue *And So On*, she mocks the pretensions of the smart set, the very group to which she aspired when she arrived in New York:

We deplore the vulgar and the cheap.
 Gardenias are preferable to daisies
 We much prefer a Saks appeal to Macy's.
 We're useless, but beautiful and not straitlaced -
 We're bored, We're smart, We're people of taste.

.....

⁷⁵ Kelcey Allen, "One for the Money," *Women's Wear Daily*, 6 February 1939, 18.

⁷⁶ For a discussion of the ways Depression era musicals depicted Franklin D. Roosevelt see Jones, *A Social History of the American Musical Theatre*, 112-6.

⁷⁷ Wyman Fitz, New York, to Nancy Hamilton, New York, 11 March 1939, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

⁷⁸ Charles Angoff, "Drama," *The North American Review* 247, no. 2 (Summer 1939): 365.

People of taste
With time to waste
In-ordinate haste
Is showy
We read the New Yorker
And think it a corker
For smartness without
Being blowey.⁷⁹

Likewise, in “I Hate Spring,” which originally appeared in *And So On*, and which Hamilton later revived for *New Faces of 1934*, Hamilton mocked the *ennui* of the urban dwelling curmudgeons:

I hate cats.
I hate rabbits.
I love people who have habits.
I hate fancy cheeses.
I love diseases.
I hate the spring.
I hate anything pretty.
I love Radio City.
But more than anything,
I hate the spring.⁸⁰

Hamilton also took aim at the culture of debutantes and the Junior League, in which she also participated. The setting for “The Old Society Racket” from *And So On* was, “A formal ball in 1915. A settee backstage on which are seated as the curtain rises, two society matrons, the chaperones of the evening. There is a table on which is a punch

⁷⁹ Nancy Hamilton and Martha Caples, “People of Taste,” 1931.

⁸⁰ Transcribed from Katharine Hepburn, “I Hate Spring,” *Ben Bagley's Contemporary Broadway Revisited*, Painted Smiles Records PSCD-131, 1991, compact disc. New York was a common topic for popular song. Perhaps the most famous was, “Manhattan,” Lorenz Hart’s cityscape in songs from the Garrick *Gaieties* of 1926. The ubiquitous veneration of the urban environment in the United States continued throughout the Depression and, according to social historian James McGovern, newspaper stories and photographs, song lyrics, and film perpetuated American fascination with cities. See McGovern, *Americans in the Great Depression*, 249.

bowl, and placed around at decent intervals, are potted plants... The debutants are dressed in peg-top evening dresses of nigger pink and nigger yellow, with silver ribbons holding their cootie garage headdresses in place.”⁸¹

Chorus: -- For we doz what mamma doz,
And it's what does mamma choose
We've got the stick to mamma blues
And we love them
From the time when we are small
Our fiancés at the ball
Our mamma choose them all.⁸²

In another sketch in *One for the Money*, “Search Me,” a matron at the customs office inspects Elsie and Kitty, two “society smugglers” returning from Paris:

Matron: (Taking off Kitty's dress) And did we get the little dress in Paris, too?
Elsie: Now, Matron, anyone can see she ran it up at home. She's just getting the last bit of wear out of it. She's had it for years --
Matron: (Examining the label) Schapiarelli
Elsie: Well, really, Kitty, if you're fool enough to leave the label in....
Why, I take over a stack of old Bloomingdale's labels every time I go. Everybody does.⁸³

Although a press release for *One for the Money* trumpeted: “Sketches and lyrics were written under the influence of the fads, fancies, and philosophies of the times and, as the world and local opinions changed, Miss Hamilton's skits and jingles changed with them,” unlike the other intimate revues the show did not take a pronounced stand on

⁸¹ Nancy Hamilton and Martha Caples, “Old Society Racket,” 1931, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection. Hamilton's had a tendency toward racist language and sentiments in both her private life and her stage routines, which is discussed later in this chapter.

⁸² Nancy Hamilton and Martha Caples, “Old Society Racket,” 1931, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

⁸³ Hamilton and Lewis, *Three to One*, 93.

contemporary issues.⁸⁴ When, in 1939, the Daughters of the American Revolution used Jim Crow laws to prevent opera contralto Marian Anderson from singing at Constitution Hall, the entertainment community (as well as Eleanor Roosevelt) rallied around Anderson. In response to the incident, *Pins and Needles* added a song that transformed “Three Little Maids” from *The Mikado* to:

Three little D.A.R.’s are we,
Reactionary as we can be,
Full to the brim with bigotry...⁸⁵

However, at the same time, *One for the Money* continued to feature the “Yoo Hoo Blues.” A press release for *One for the Money* boasted, “Nancy Hamilton takes off complete black face make-up and reappears in swank evening gown and perfect coiffure within four minutes” while singing:

Yoo hoo, blues
I got news for you-oo
You see me skippin’ round
Pickin’ the cotton?
Well, I’s e so plumb happy,
I’s e most forgotten you-oo.
.....
Oh, listen here, blues
Where you hid-in’ honey?
Days is so fair
And skies so sunny
Don’t leave me sittin’ here
Loaded with money.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Press Release, Nancy Hamilton, Clippings in the Theatre Collections, The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

⁸⁵ Quoted in Jones, *A Social History of the American Musical Theatre*, 119.

⁸⁶ Press Release, *One for the Money*, Clippings in the Theatre Collections, The Billy Rose Theatre Collection; Nancy Hamilton and Morgan Lewis, *The Yoo Hoo Blues* (New York: Chappell and Co. Inc., 1952), 43-7. Although examples of blackface minstrelsy remained on Broadway through the 1940s, racial issues were treated with increasing sensitivity. One example of the growing consciousness of racial issues are the

Not all reviewers found humor in blackface performance in the 1930s. The review for the *Daily Worker* complained that the song “had a good tune and satirical words, but [was] sung by Nancy Hamilton in an offensively anti-Negro make up.”⁸⁷

Whether mocking the theatre of the left, the foibles of the wealthy, or issues of race, Hamilton and *One for the Money* offended. And the revue raised further critical ire by reveling in conspicuous consumption. So fashionable was the set conceived by director John Murray Anderson that its “white decor made this show a *House Beautiful* spread.”⁸⁸ Musical theatre historian Robert Baral further described the show:

“Everything was meant to be *precieux*: sofas by William Pahlmann, hats by Lily Dache, quilted red satin curtains by Gladstone, Austrian fringe drop curtains by York, borders by Velden, flower arrangements by Contance Spry, and Miss Hamilton’s jewels by Flato.”⁸⁹

While these lavish sets may have flourished in the screwball comedies of 1930s

lyric changes Oscar Hammerstein II made in the 1946 stage revival to *Show Boat* (1927), including the elimination of the “African” chorus at the beginning of Act 2. But Hamilton’s insensitivity to issues of race continued in the 1950s. In 1956 a London revue, *Pay the Piper*, used five of Hamilton’s songs, including the “Yoo Hoo Blues.” When the director complained that the song was not getting an audience response because it did not have a strong “tag” at the end, Hamilton asked, “Does a slice of watermelon indicate a poor but happy kid to the British mind as it does to us over here, because if so, there should be a quick twist...drawing from behind her back or from under the chair cushion an oversized slice of watermelon...holding it with both hands—just under her chin—singing the last “Yoo Hoo” on a smiling jubilant note.” Nancy Hamilton, New York, to Laurie Lister (director of *Pay the Piper*), Aberdeen, Scotland, 11 November 1954, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

⁸⁷ John Cambridge, “‘One for the Money’ is Vapid Upper Class Musical,” *Daily Worker*, 8 February 1939, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

⁸⁸ Robert Baral, *Revue: A Nostalgic Reprise of the Great Broadway Period*, with an introduction by Abel Green (New York: Fleet Publishing Company, 1962), 206.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

Hollywood, escaping into the lap of luxury played better in Peoria than on Broadway.

Baral stressed the contrast between *One for the Money* and the grittier revues, describing *One for the Money*'s opening set as, "A handsome all-white living room...with the principals in still life posed around the fireplace (not the fireside)." ⁹⁰

One for the Money and the Critics

Because the subjects of Hamilton's satire were so widespread, and her revue differed so much from other Broadway fare, critics seemed unable to position Hamilton and *One for the Money* within the cultural climate. But they knew that the revue was not towing the "party line" of the Depression era musical theatre, and, in Hamilton's words, "*One for the Money* was panned with unanimous vigor." ⁹¹ One reviewer went so far as to complain, "Miss Hamilton's smug exhibitionist conceits are a little sickening." ⁹²

The nature of the critical quibbling was more about content than quality; musical theatre historian Cecil Smith is probably correct in his hypothesis that *One for the Money* would have received a better reception in the post-Depression years. ⁹³ But as *Pins and Needles*'s "strong pro-union and proletarian stance was increasingly acceptable to many people pinched by the Depression," critics panned *One for the Money* specifically

⁹⁰ Ibid., 205.

⁹¹ Eleanor Gilchrist, "Smith to Broadway."

⁹² Quoted in Gilbert, "She Thought Her Revue Was Kidding Capital."

⁹³ Cecil Smith, *Musical Comedy in America* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1950), 291.

because it was *not* the pro-labor revue.⁹⁴ According to journalist Douglas Gilbert, “Most of [the critics] panned it. Called it ‘rightist,’ of no social significance, ‘parlor entertainment’ and ‘cafe society’s *Pins and Needles*.”⁹⁵ Assessing the revue’s failure, Gerald Bordman writes that *One for the Money* “looked steadfastly in a political direction opposite to that of *Pins and Needles* and *Sing out the News*.... It was, in effect, the right’s genteel reply to the more raucous left. At one point the show sang, ‘We think that right is right and wrong is left.’”⁹⁶ Even positive and neutral reviews measured the show against *Pins and Needles*. Hamilton’s friend Robert Benchley described the show’s “general mood of slightly Junior League sentiment and hilarity, [which was] a definite addition to the season’s class entertainment, a ‘Pin and Needles’ in reverse, and what is known as ‘good fun.’”⁹⁷ Another reviewer noted, “In spirit *One for the Money* offers Cafe Society what *Pins and Needles* offered workers and *Sing Out the News* offered New Dealers.”⁹⁸ Another proclaimed, “What *Pins and Needles* is to the proletariat, *One for the Money* is to Park avenue, Café society, the Junior league, El Morocco and the Stork Club. ...All we wonder is how the average Broadwayite and transient playgoer will take to its amiable snobbery.”⁹⁹

⁹⁴ Jones, *A Social History of the American Musical Theatre*, 118.

⁹⁵ Gilbert, “She Thought Her Revue Was Kidding Capital.”

⁹⁶ Bordman, *American Musical Revue*, 113.

⁹⁷ Robert Benchley, Unidentified Newspaper Clipping, *One for the Money*, Clippings in the Theatre Collections, The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

⁹⁸ Unidentified Clipping, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

⁹⁹ “Ritz Skits,” *Sun*, (Durham, NC), 11 February 1939, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

In fact, after *One for the Money* opened, critics almost universally made proclamations like the following: “Café society has a new spokeslady in Nancy Hamilton, the current darling of the El Morocco-Stork Club-Twenty-One circle.”¹⁰⁰ Café Society was the name for a series of clubs that were “one-third haut monde, one-third demimonde, and one-third pure exhibitionists.”¹⁰¹ The Stork Club, which opened in 1929, was the epicenter of the Café Society world. The preferred clientele of these exclusive nightspots were “young and good looking, famous, influential, successful, rich, well born, and preferably WASP.”¹⁰² But during the Depression the cost of these locales made them inaccessible for most New Yorkers.¹⁰³ In a climate when President Franklin D. Roosevelt advocated in his 1936 inaugural speech, “The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough to those who have too little,” the public viewed denizens of Café Society with a mixture of fascination with and resentment toward their frivolous, gilded life.¹⁰⁴

Thus, it is neither surprising nor inaccurate to say that critics damned *One for the Money* and Hamilton as classist by aligning the show and its writer with Café Society.

¹⁰⁰ George Ross, “Show is Park Avenue’s Reply to its Critics,” *Aurora, IL Beacon-News*, 19 February 1939, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

¹⁰¹ Quoted in “New York City - Cafe Society Or Up From The Speakeasies,” available from <http://www.oldandsold.com/articles06/new-york-city-75.shtml>, Internet; accessed 9 October 2004. This article was originally published in 1959.

¹⁰² Ralph Blumenthal, *Stork Club: America's Most Famous Nightspot and the Lost World of Café Society* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2000), 159.

¹⁰³ McGovern, *Americans in the Great Depression*, 250.

¹⁰⁴ *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt* (New York: MacMillan, 1938-1950), vol. 6, p. 5.

Everything about Hamilton's early days in New York indicates that she was worshiping at the Stork Club's "shrine of sophistication."¹⁰⁵ Famous denizens of the Stork Club included a number of Hamilton's professional associates and friends, including Tallulah Bankhead, Robert Benchley, Ray Bolger, Betty Hutton, Beatrice Lillie, and Mary Martin.¹⁰⁶ In fact, an early official press release for *One for the Money* trumpeted it as "a revue that became the rage of New York cafe society and which the sophisticates of the metropolis pronounced 'smart' to the last degree."¹⁰⁷

However, it is surprising how quickly Hamilton chose to change her public identity in response to the criticism. As critics derided the show as classist, Hamilton attempted to divorce her public persona from the world of Café Society. One interviewer reported, "The 'café society' allusion pretty near got her down. Miss Hamilton has been maybe thrice to a nightspot since she graduated from Smith. She thinks the Stork Club is a maternity center and Brenda Duff Frazier just a rhyme for a limerick. Besides, she reads and writes."¹⁰⁸ The article goes on to say that the Café Society reference "mystified everybody connected with the enterprise. Miss Hamilton is merely a Pittsburgh Junior Leaguer who doesn't go to cafes."¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ Blumenthal, *Stork Club*, 3.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ "Nancy Hamilton's Achievement," Press Release, *One for the Money*.

¹⁰⁸ Gilbert, "She Thought Her Revue Was Kidding Capital." Brenda Duff Frazier was a society heiress, most famous for being famous; to describe her columnist Walter Winchell coined the term "celebutante."

¹⁰⁹ "One for Miss Hamilton," *The New Yorker*, 8 April 1939, Nancy Hamilton, Clippings in the Theatre Collections, The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

Faced with the salvos of critics, Hamilton continually waffled in the way she chose to present herself and her work to the public. Not only did she reposition her relationship to New York society, she also, at turns, defended her work as a rightist response to the current Broadway fare or cried that *One for the Money* was a misunderstood night of meaningless fun. In one interview Hamilton said, “My whole intention was to poke fun at ourselves. Yet even if it was capitalist, is it unfair to kid the leftists and only fair to kid the right wing?”¹¹⁰ In another article she insisted that *One for the Money* was not political theatre, arguing that the show was written “for no reason at all, [and] simply because it didn’t mean anything at all, it was decided to call the revue *One for the Money*.”¹¹¹ *The New Yorker* reported, “As to the rumor that Miss Hamilton, when reproached for composing non-significant songs, replied ‘I seen my ditty and I done it,’ that, unfortunately, is true.”¹¹² Even Hamilton’s friends and associates came to Hamilton’s defense. Beatrice Lillie, “expressed indignation over the way *One for the Money* was treated by the critics. ‘They’re communistic,’ she said.”¹¹³ Clare Boothe Luce, author of *The Women*, proclaimed, “Since the advent of *Pins and Needles*...the critical fraternity expected every intimate revue to be angled at least slightly to the left. When it discovered that Miss Hamilton employed no singing or dancing garment workers

¹¹⁰ Gilbert, “She Thought Her Revue Was Kidding Capital.”

¹¹¹ Nancy Hamilton, “Our Illegitimate Problem Child.” Perhaps the source of Hamilton's title was an original show performed at Smith in May of 1935 (without Hamilton's involvement) also called *One for the Money*. Hamilton's younger sister Peggy would have been at Smith during 1935. Dramatics, 1935, The Smith College Archives.

¹¹² “One for Miss Hamilton,” *The New Yorker*, 8 April 1939.

¹¹³ Unidentified Clipping, *Telegraph*, 11 February 1939, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

the boys expressed considerable disappointment.”¹¹⁴ Hamilton finally defended herself by addressing the commercial nature of Broadway theatre: “Well, we’ve only proceeded on the basis that most people like money and most like to be entertained. If that is a capitalist idea, I’m afraid we are stuck with it.”¹¹⁵

Musical theater historian John Bush Jones notes:

The milieu of the Depression was more than just the impetus for satire to emerge as a dominant mode of the period’s musicals; the conditions of the times also fed the stance of most musical satires. Capitalism’s seeming collapse inspired an increase in left-leaning sentiments, a tendency that led to a spirit of social inquiry, commentary, and criticism in many musicals of the Depression years. It also accounts for the fact that the point of view of all the satirical musicals ranged from liberal to far left.¹¹⁶

One for the Money suggests that, although rare, there were exceptions to the liberal musicals -- not all satires of the 1930s reveled in purely leftist sentiments. But in the 1930s, social inquiry, not social status, was the mode of the day.¹¹⁷ Hamilton’s career suffered because of her refusal or failure to abide by this trend. Her choice to write in the parlance of café society or, in the words of Stanley Green, revues “tailored for the

¹¹⁴ Robert Pollak, “Our Critic Does Justice to Nancy,” *Chicago Times*, 11 June 1939, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

¹¹⁵ Gilbert, “She Thought Her Revue Was Kidding Capital.”

¹¹⁶ Jones, *A Social History of the American Musical Theatre*, 90.

¹¹⁷ Bordman, *American Musical Revue*, 5. Nancy Hamilton should have been prepared for the objections to *One for the Money*. Months before *One for the Money* opened, Leonard Sillman and Elsa Maxwell, both Hamilton’s associates, produced *Who’s Who* (an extension of Sillman’s *New Faces* series). The show featured a slate of sketches remarkably similar to those in *One for the Money*, including a satire of Eleanor Roosevelt, a blackface number called “Dusky Debutantes,” and a parody of Clifford Odets describing a revolt in which the upper classes overthrew labor organizations. After opening to vitriolic reviews, the show quickly closed. See Davis, *Scandals and Follies*, 330-1.

International Ladies Garment *Wearers*,” alienated her from Broadway critics and, ultimately, from audiences.¹¹⁸

Two for the Show and Three to Make Ready

Two for the Show (1940) and *Three to Make Ready* (1946) differ from *One for the Money*, indicating that even if Hamilton was noncommittal about her reasons for writing *One for the Money*, she learned what she had to do to placate the critics. In her later revues, Hamilton made politics a non-issue.¹¹⁹ Instead she relied on humor grounded in visual gags, malapropism, novelty songs, and star power. In the 1930s, Roosevelt’s “Good Neighbor Policy” helped make music inspired by Latin America a fad.¹²⁰ *Two for the Show* featured “Calypso Joe,” a number written in the vein of other popular, exoticized tunes:

He sing in de rain,
He sing in de hurricane
De more day he sing

¹¹⁸ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 333. *One for the Money* traveled to Chicago after closing on Broadway and found critics and audiences more receptive. Cecil Smith commented in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, that the revue is “manna from heaven” and “Hamilton is up to date without lapsing into laborious political satire of either leftist or rightist persuasion.” Cecil Smith, “New Revue Has Wit and Fresh Young Players,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 6 June 1939, *One for the Money*, Clippings in the Theatre Collections, The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

¹¹⁹ See chapter 2 for a more detailed descriptions of the acts in these two shows.

¹²⁰ Musical theatre historian John Bush Jones hypothesizes that the Good Neighbor Policy, “made its mark on Broadway musicals.... Anglos across the nation caught ‘Latin’ fever for the culture, food, dress, and music of the Caribbean and Central and South America; Spanish language classes in and out of the military filled to capacity. But mostly the exotic rhythms and fancy footwork of Latin American dances captured the nation as never before.... In nightclubs, dance halls and theaters the Latin American craze threatened to sweep everything before it.” Jones, *A Social History of the American Musical Theatre*, 133.

De more it blow
Dat's Calypso Joe!
He sing about sin,
He sing about where you been --
He talk like a walkin' radio --
Dat's Calypso Joe!¹²¹

In *Three to Make Ready*, which starred dancer Ray Bolger, Hamilton capitalized on his star power by referencing it in the sketches; in “A Lovely Lazy Kind of Day,” Bolger appeared as a scarecrow, a reference to his turn in *The Wizard of Oz*. Hamilton also took advantage of Bolger’s physical agility and traded parodies of social class for parodies of dance fads. One reviewer called Bolger a “dance satirist.”¹²²

Hamilton’s efforts to avoid political or social controversy in her later two shows appeared to work. Relying on contemporary reviews, Gerald Bordman asserts that *Two for the Show* “affected the same debonair stance as the first edition, although it moderated its former anti-left militancy,” and (possibly paraphrasing Bordman) musical theatre historian Lee Davis describes *Two for the Show* as “more debonair than anti-Democratic.”¹²³ Musical theatre historian Cecil Smith recalls it as “closer [than *One for the Money*] to the Broadway pulse.”¹²⁴

However, critics of *Three to Make Ready* complained about the show’s reliance on Bolger, consistently making comments similar to the headline in the *Chicago News*,

¹²¹ Hamilton and Lewis, *Three to One*, 77.

¹²² Edwin H. Shloss, Unidentified Review, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

¹²³ Bordman, *American Musical Theatre: A Chronicle*, 514; Davis, *Scandals and Follies*, 341.

¹²⁴ Smith, *Musical Comedy in America*, 291.

“Nimble Feet Skip Around Feeble Wit.”¹²⁵ As the *Chicago Sun* reviewer wrote, “*Three to Make Ready* is a revue and a good one and Mr. Bolger is very much in it. In fact, it has been stated that had he not been the show might have been on the anemic side.”¹²⁶ Another complained, “Subtract Ray Bolger from *Three to Make Ready* at the Blackstone and what you have is no great shakes.”¹²⁷

Hamilton’s lukewarm reviews may indicate that her material shifted from incendiary to bland. But in light of the critical thrashing *One for the Money* received, *Two for the Show*’s “House with a Little Red Barn” seemed like a post-Depression apology:

We want a house with a little red barn,
On a little green hill,
Near a little white church
And a little windmill
.....
We’ll leave the Great White Way
And Saks, Fifth A.
Behind us --
A lucky pair we’ll be
When R.F.D.
Is where the Stork Club can find us.¹²⁸

¹²⁵ Sydney J. Harris, “Nimble Feet Skip Around Feeble Wit,” *Chicago News*, 10 February 1947, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

¹²⁶ Henry T. Murdock, “Bolger’s Versatile Toes Score in Elaborate Revue,” *Chicago Sun*, 10 February 1947, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

¹²⁷ Robert Pollak, “Bolger Puts Zip into a Weak Revue,” *Chicago Times*, 10 February 1947, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

¹²⁸ Hamilton and Lewis, *Three to One*, 104-5.

Here Hamilton revoked her prior veneration of the world of expensive shopping and cafes, and audiences seemed to respond. *Three to Make Ready* ran a respectable 323 performances.

The Book Musicals

As was mentioned in Chapter 2, Hamilton's most noteworthy sketch in *Three to Make Ready* was "Wisconsin, or Kenosha Canoe," a parody that combined *Oklahoma!* and *Carousel* with Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925), a novel (based on a real incident) about Clyde Griffiths, a social climber who killed his pregnant young girlfriend in order to pursue a wealthy woman with whom he was enamored. "Wisconsin, or Kenosha Canoe" opens with the entrance of Griffiths, who greets the family of the impoverished June, who he just murdered:

Oh what a beautiful mourning!
Oh what a beautiful black!
I've got a beautiful feelin'
I'll never have ter go back!¹²⁹

As this sketch continues, Hamilton mocks the folksy regionalisms that pepper *Oklahoma!* and *Carousel*. She also riffs on the names of the characters; her version features Ido Wanny and her boyfriend Mr. Snow White.¹³⁰ Hamilton and Lewis freely quote

¹²⁹ Hamilton and Lewis, *Three to One*, 64. Although the transformation of Hammerstein's lyric, "Oh, what a beautiful morning" reads well, because it is a homonym Hamilton's use of "mourning" likely would not have registered with a theatre audience.

¹³⁰ These characters are spoofs on the names of Ado Annie from *Oklahoma!* and *Carousel*'s Enoch Snow; in their respective shows both are half of the comic second couple. In Hamilton's satire Wanny combines the two shows, singing, "Cain't Say Snow." In light of recent research into the theme of ethnic otherness in Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals, it is interesting that Hamilton transforms *Oklahoma!*'s Jud into Yellow Belly, "a very sinister looking Indian." *Ibid.*, 69. Ironically Gordon MacRae performed as Snow White, years before performing as Curley in the screen production of

Rodgers's and Hammerstein's music and lyrics. In a parody of "Surrey with the Fringe on Top," Griffiths, in a flashback, rhapsodizes about his plans to kill June. He tells her she will return in splendor from the dance they are attending:

Eyes will melt and hearts will soften,
Folks will use their handkerchiefs often
When they see you out in your coffin
With the fringe on top!¹³¹

"Wisconsin, or Kenosha Canoe" also satirized the formula of Rodgers and Hammerstein's musicals. When Clyde learns that he impregnated June, he sings, in a parody of *Carousel's* "Soliloquy":

I've got ter do a soliloquy
Cause that's the only way
Anyone can say
Jist what is happernin' to me.
.....
By gum, what kind of man am I!
A gut-bustin', but-gustin', bat-gasted, gat-basted, pot-bellied, rot bellied,
man am I.¹³²

Oklahoma! Alfred Drake, who was in *One for the Money* and *Two for the Show*, was the original Curley in the stage production of *Oklahoma!*

¹³¹ Ibid., 72-3.

¹³² Ibid., 70. In *Carousel's* "Soliloquy," protagonist Billy Bigelow fantasizes about what his unborn son, Bill, might be like. He sings:

My boy, Bill --
He'll be tall
And as tough
As a tree,
Will Bill!
Like a tree he'll grow,
With his head held high
And his feet planted firm on the ground,
And you won't see no-
body dare to try
To boss or toss him around!
No fat-bottomed, flabby-faced, pot-bellied, baggy-eyed bastard'll boss
him around.

Hammerstein, *Lyrics*, 98-9.

The sketch ends in a send-up of end of the finale of *Oklahoma!* -- except in Hamilton's version, the characters want to leave the state:

Wis-
Consin when we're bouncein' through the good old U.S.A.
Miss that eight month freeze
The smell of cheese
When the breeze comes wheezin' down the bay.¹³³

One reviewer wrote that the piece is "scintillatingly witty and immensely funny, and, like all good satire, gaily but sharply inoffensive. Morgan Lewis's burlesque of the "Oklahoma!" score (sometimes almost strait-faced) adds to the triumph."¹³⁴ But "Wisconsin, or Kenosha Canoe," takes aim at both the form and the content of the

¹³³ Hamilton and Lewis, *Three to One*, 75. It seems that Rodgers's and Hammerstein's associates took the parody in good fun. After seeing *Three to Make Ready* in its Boston tryout, Theresa Helburn, the director of the Theatre Guild, which produced *Oklahoma!*, wrote to Hamilton: "I want to tell you how much I enjoyed 'Three to Make Ready' when I saw it in Boston.... I suppose I enjoyed the 'Carousel'-'Oklahoma!' number more than anyone in the audience." Theresa Helburn, New York, to Nancy Hamilton, New York, 23 February 1946, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection. But the sketch did spark controversy for its effrontery of Wisconsin. Hamilton originally called the number "We're Leaving Wisconsin, the Rattlesnake State," which prompted Virgil L. Dickinsen, the Chairman of the Wisconsin Conservation Commission, to write, "Wisconsin is most definitely not a rattlesnake habitat.... A recent news story on this highly controversial material states that you decided against the use of Wisconsin, the Badger State, because the two syllable word did not fit with the notes of the music. Therefore, I am suggesting that you use one of the four following more complimentary and accurate titles for your song: Wisconsin, the Holiday State, Wisconsin, the Relaxing State, Wisconsin, the Muskellunge State, Wisconsin, the Vacation State." Virgil L. Dickinsen, Wisconsin, to Nancy Hamilton, New York, 18 March 1946, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection. Wisconsin governor Walter S. Goodland also wrote to Hamilton, complaining that New Yorkers seem to think, "Indians wander up and down the streets of Madison." Hamilton retorted, "We mention cheese in the song. Maybe they'll forgive me when they know about that advertising plug." Unidentified Clipping, 24 March 1946, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

¹³⁴ Edwin H. Shloss, Unidentified Review, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

popular musicals of the 1940s. It begins with a tongue-in-cheek exposition, bespeaking the ubiquity of the Rodgers and Hammerstein style of musical theatre. An announcer (performed by radio personality Arthur Godfrey) introduced the sketch to the audience:

Ladies and gentlemen, we now approach the most important problem on our agenda: a problem which concerns not only the American theatre-going public, but the entire theatre-going public of the world. Where can musical comedy go next? After Rodgers and Hammerstein -- what? They've done just about everything they could for musical comedy. That is to say they've taken out the comedy. The question is now should they take out the music? Our answer to that is -- frankly -- no. We feel that a tragi-comedy can be just as musical -- that is, a musical tragedy can be just as comical -- Well, what we mean is look at them! *Oklahoma* [sic], *Carousel*, *South Pacific*, *The King and I* -- all tearjerkers, all very sad stories. But you laughed, didn't you! You had fun! To tell you the truth we think Rodgers and Hammerstein should go further. We think they should go the whole hog -- take a story that's *really* got some guts, that's *really* terrible. Like -- say -- *The American Tragedy*. What a musical comedy *that* would make. There isn't a laugh *in* it....Tragic, but that's musical comedy these days, you know.¹³⁵

Hamilton's mockery of the serious themes Rodgers and Hammerstein addressed may reveal more than a twinge of bitterness, as she parodied a form she couldn't master herself. In the 1940s, Rodgers and Hammerstein were at the vanguard of the "book musical" (also known as the "musical play," or the "integrated musical"), the form that came to dominate musical theatre. Unlike the revue, in this form all elements of the musical, including the libretto, lyrics, music, and dances, work toward the advancement of an integrated plot. Although many critics and historians of musical theatre argue that integration began long before *Oklahoma!* (most notably with *Show Boat* in 1927, which also had lyrics and libretto by Oscar Hammerstein II), and some protest that integration was not the evolutionary pinnacle of the musical theatre form, most agree that the advent

¹³⁵ Hamilton and Lewis, *Three to One*, 63-4. *South Pacific* and *The King and I* post-date *Three to Make Ready's* production in 1946; Hamilton likely added these references when she compiled the sketch into *Three to One* in 1952.

of *Oklahoma!* in 1943 created a sea change in the types of musicals popular on Broadway. As composer Richard Rodgers recalled, “Everyone suddenly became integration-conscious, as if the idea of welding together song, story and dance had never been thought of before.”¹³⁶ Lyricist Alan Jay Lerner further notes, “For what *Oklahoma!* had done was to unify and give form to the threads that had been growing disparately in the music theater and in doing so, provide a marker for the next mile into the future.”¹³⁷

The ascendancy of the book musical coincided with the declining popularity of the intimate revue; Stanley Green writes, “Impressed by the enormous success of *Oklahoma!*, creators of musical shows became primarily concerned with telling a story through well-integrated songs and dances.”¹³⁸ This shift in the dominant form of the musical had an adverse effect on Hamilton’s career. Reviews indicate that *Three to Make Ready* sold primarily on the star power of Ray Bolger and Arthur Godfrey, and *Four to Go*, the proposed fourth revue in the series, never materialized. Despite persistent efforts to sell her revues and material from her revues (including a compilation of her three revues, *Three to One*, which she put together in 1952), Hamilton received consistent rejection. After *Three to Make Ready*, none of Hamilton’s shows had a major production until her old friend, Charlie Forsythe, directed an Off-Broadway production of *Three to One* in 1972.

Hamilton did attempt to respond to shifting trends in musical theatre tastes. As was noted in Chapter 2, she wrote two integrated musicals, *Mary Poppins* and *Maggie*

¹³⁶ Richard Rodgers, *Musical Stages* (New York: Random House, 1976), 229.

¹³⁷ Quoted in Joseph P. Swain, *The Broadway Musical: A Critical and Musical Survey*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2002), 85.

¹³⁸ Green, “The Musical in the Twentieth Century,” 145.

Here. Although Hamilton tried to follow the Rogers and Hammerstein formula -- Hamilton called *Maggie Here* a “bookshow” when she asked her agents at the William Morris Agency to try to sell the rights to the show -- the conventions of the revue continued to bind her.¹³⁹ One of the markers of an integrated musical is the presence of an “I want” or “I am” song, which establishes the identity and desires of the protagonist(s) – such as “Wouldn’t it be Lovely” from *My Fair Lady* or “Cockeyed Optimist” from *South Pacific*. These desires determine the structure of the musical as the protagonist overcomes obstacles to achieve the wants he or she expressed. In *Maggie Here*, Maggie’s first song is a standard “I am” song that establishes Maggie’s character and her attraction to Peter, the male protagonist:

Maggie: (Spoken) I expect you think I’m an idiot, don’t you. But I can’t help it!

Maggie: (Sung) When you live in your own digs
Cows is cows, pigs is pigs
When you’re traveling things is diff --
So you’ll please forgive me if --

I stare at your hair as if a hair were rare --
I’m a stranger in town -
If I leer at your ear
Just as if an ear were queer -
I’m a stranger in town.

At home I wouldn’t notice
Your pocket handkerchief,
But in this land of Lotus,
It’s so new and so if
I gaze in a daze

¹³⁹ Nancy Hamilton, New York, William Morris Agency, New York, 15 June 1956, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection. For a plot summary of *Maggie Here*, see chapter 2. Hamilton originally titled *Maggie Here Two Can Dream the Same Dream*. During this time period Hamilton also wrote an unproduced comedy with cartoonist Helen Hokinson, *Our Best Girl*. Because this chapter concentrates on Hamilton’s work in musical theatre it will not focus on that play.

At your Clark-be-Gabled ways,
Please don't give me that frown -
I'm a stranger in town.

Peter (over music): Do I seem as old as all that?

Maggie: I beg your pardon?

Peter: Well, didn't you mention Clark Gable?

Maggie: I wasn't referring to age -- but it's thoughtful of you to take it that way!

.....

Maggie: (Sung) When I'm home I'm just like you
Nothing's strange, nothing's new
But as fades the Dover Cliff
Things seem so transformed if

I gape at your shape
Half-prepared to see an ape,
I'm a stranger in town.

.....

I look overawed
Just as if you were a god --
When you're just Mr. Brown,
I'm a stranger in town.¹⁴⁰

In addition to providing a sense of character and some exposition, this song also uses a technique, popularized by the "Bench Scene" in *Carousel*, of interweaving the dialogue throughout the song.

But Hamilton had neither experience nor training in the integrated form, nor did she have the guidance of more experienced songwriting mentors, so the quality of her songs was inconsistent. The opening number of her other book musical, *Mary Poppins*, "A Child Without a Nurse," should establish the needs of the children, Jane and Michael Banks. But it reveals little:

¹⁴⁰ Hamilton and Lewis, *Maggie Here*, 5-7.

Michael and Jane: Good, morning, Admiral Boom, we haven't any nurse!
Admiral Boom: Well, blast my gizzard! Batten down the hatch!
Up with anchor! Shoot 'er in reverse!
What did you children say! [sic]
Michael and Jane: We haven't any nurse

All: They haven't any nurse — they haven't any nurse
Like an ice cream cone without the cone
Like a penny without a purse
Like a town without a jail
Or a mop without a pail
Is a child without a nurse
.....
Like a circus ring, without a clown
Like a poet without a verse
Like for better without for worse
Is a child without a nurse.¹⁴¹

“A Child Without a Nurse” establishes almost no specific details about place or the needs of the characters who sing it, other than their strong conviction that children need nurses. In contrast, “The Perfect Nanny” from the Walt Disney’s film musical of *Mary Poppins* (1964), which holds the same position in the musical’s structure, includes the lyrics:

If you want this choice position
Have a cheery disposition
.....
If you won't scold and dominate us
We will never give you cause to hate us
We won't hide your spectacles
So you can't see
Put toads in your bed
Or pepper in your tea
Hurry nanny

This song reveals something about the current desires of the characters as well as their past behaviors. But unlike integrated “I want” songs, the songs in Hamilton’s musicals

¹⁴¹ In Nancy Hamilton and Morgan Lewis, “A Child Without a Nurse,” Manuscript of *Mary Poppins*, n. d., Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

are too often more akin to revue-style production numbers — entertaining but divorced from character specificity and not organic to the story as a whole.

Like Rodgers and Hammerstein, Hamilton uses an older figure, largely outside of the story, to provide humor and homespun wisdom. In *Maggie Here*, Fanny, an African-American servant, operates both as comic relief and as a “mammy” figure, reminiscent of Queenie in *Show Boat*. But her similarities to Queenie make Fanny derivative; her solo song seems like a quotation of “Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man “ from *Show Boat*:

Fanny: A man kin be by himself too long,
A man can sit on the shelf too long,
.....
Ain’t no bird in the sky
Lets a lady-bird fly by --
Ain’t no fish in the swim
But what needs women-fish followin’ him --
A man kin live in a cell too long
Kin be a beau with no belle too long.

Peter: Let’s remember the amoebae.

Fanny: He cain’t get no Queen of Sheba --
Living’ in a cell too long.¹⁴²

Further, even in this small selection, Fanny’s dialect is awkward. The song’s mention of “beau” and “belle” serves the rhymes, but they are unlikely references for a character of Fanny’s position and class.

Similarly, in the moment in Hamilton’s version of *Mary Poppins* when Bert, the chimney sweep, professes his love to Mary Poppins, Hamilton wrote the lyrics:

Bert: Oh, you’re a wonderful person!
You’re the reason why everyone that you meet
Seems to dance in the street
You’re so-such a wonderful person!

¹⁴² Hamilton and Lewis, *Maggie Here*, 22-3.

And as long as you're anywhere,
There life's complete
No other wonderful person
Ever made me believe my dreams could come true
Dreams just don't — but they do
Each time I'm with wonderful you!

In addition to using some of the same lyrical banalities that Hamilton showed in her earlier work, this song also gives little sense of the specificities of Bert's character or his class. Hamilton's inability to sustain the veracity of a character's voice throughout the show seems to be a consistent problem, and that is, possibly, the product of a lyricist accustomed to writing short and unconnected songs and sketches for the revue.

Further, although Hamilton tended to imitate successful Broadway book musicals -- to the point of seeming derivative -- at times she reverted to the form of the intimate revue. When *Maggie Here* moves from the romantic musical comedy plot to the dream sequences, in which Peter imagines international reaction to an American's marriage to Maggie in the event that she is the British Princess, the stage directions read: "Enter people dressed in costumes of Spain, France, Italy, Bavaria, Greece, South Pole, etc."¹⁴³ As each country sings a song about their relationship to Britain, the plot of the love story fades into the background, and the musical, instead, becomes a fantasia on international relations with Britain and the United States:

Nations: O, Brave Heart, across the water!
You who wish to understand us
If you wed their Ruler's daughter,
Will we be as Marshall planned us!

Peter: I don't pretend
To comprehend
The lofty plan of Marshall!
But come what may,

¹⁴³ Ibid.

The U.S.A.
Will ever be impartial!
No British oaf shall eat your loaf,
No British maid your marmalade
No British peer shall drink your beer --
Here or in Calcutta --
So friends, be calm!
My dairy farm,
Will even send you butter!¹⁴⁴

The reference to the Marshall Plan, a program initiated in the 1940s in an effort to allow the United States to provide aid to recovery efforts in Europe, was a nod to current events. As another reference to current events, the musical centered around America's fascination with the actual Princess Margaret Rose, a woman of society who many considered the most beautiful and eligible woman of her time.

However, although topicality was the rule in the intimate revues, it was incongruent with the historized settings of many integrated musicals. Readers had mixed responses to the topicality of *Maggie Here*. Producer John C. Wilson, whom Hamilton asked to read the script, commented favorably on the musical's reliance on current events:

I read the first act with great interest and excitement and I really think you have got an extraordinarily interesting topic situation there for a musical. It is indeed topical with a capital T, but handled with great good taste and great charm.¹⁴⁵

Most potential investors, however, saw the topicality and the subject matter as a detriment. Producer Herman Shumlin's explanation for rejecting the show was a frequently repeated refrain:

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 39-40.

¹⁴⁵ John C. Wilson, New York, to Nancy Hamilton, Vineyard Haven, 7 July 1950, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

I have returned [your manuscript] with considerable regret because apart from one serious objection that I have to it, I don't believe I have ever read a more delightfully written libretto and I feel the same about the lyrics. For some reason, speaking of my serious regret, I find it too difficult to accept the story of the English Princess. It is not that I am anti-British for I like the English very much, but I am unable to accept the reality behind the royal characters.¹⁴⁶

Dorothy Hammerstein, who read the play on her husband's behalf, wrote to Hamilton:

I am an Australian and Australians of my particular vintage are generally children of parents born in England during Victorian times and so we have ingrained in us a very strong love and respect for the Royal family and for England...so that I have no sense of humor at all on this matter...I do feel that because of a great deal of misunderstanding existing at this time between England and America I do hate anything that might make matters worse...I think much of your play is darling—the songs are lovely and after that I run against my particular prejudices.¹⁴⁷

Even Hamilton recognized that the topicality of *Maggie Here* created problems;

she explained to a potential producer the urgency of a quick production:

Needless to say, I have been aware from the moment I embarked on it, that the very topicality and timeliness of the subject are hazards.... There is also the hazard that Margaret Rose might get herself engaged before the show even gets to Broadway, a contingency which I am trying to cover in the script, and I think successfully.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ Herman Shumlin, New York, to Nancy Hamilton, Vineyard Haven 18 August 1950, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

¹⁴⁷ Dorothy Hammerstein, Boston, to Nancy Hamilton, 15 March 1951, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

¹⁴⁸ Nancy Hamilton, New York, to Kenneth MacKenna, Culver City, 16 April 1950, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection. MacKenna is a film producer. Originally Stanley Gilkey advised Hamilton to solicit film producers to fund a Broadway production with the promise that they would have the rights to the material when it was adapted for the screen. In another letter to MacKenna Hamilton suggests that the film of *Maggie Here* might be a vehicle for Elizabeth Taylor. Nancy Hamilton, New York, to Kenneth MacKenna, Culver City, n.d., Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

Hamilton's fears that the musical would become quickly dated were reasonable. In 1954, more than a decade after writing the show, she still pitched it. She explained to Margo Jones, a potential director, that the death of George VI, Margaret Rose's father, and the popularity of the film *Roman Holiday* (1953), which had a plot similar to *Maggie Here*, forced her to shelve the script for four years.¹⁴⁹ Ultimately the controversy that surrounded Princess Margaret Rose's romance with a divorced man in the late 1950s and her subsequent marriage to another man made the book for *Maggie Here* permanently obsolete.

Because Hamilton unified *Maggie Here* around a topical idea (the marriage of Margaret Rose to an American) rather than plot, the musical at times it appears more like a precursor to the concept musical than an intimate revue or a book musical.¹⁵⁰ Whether Hamilton's book musicals were too experimental or too antiquated, no one was willing to take a chance on them despite Hamilton's dogged efforts to see these shows through to production. As the writers of the integrated musicals reigned supreme on Broadway, Hamilton and her musicals became a relic of the by-gone era of the "immature" musical.

¹⁴⁹ Nancy Hamilton, New York, to Margo Jones, Dallas, 1 February 1954, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

¹⁵⁰ The concept musical is a musical in which the songs, dances, and libretto all explore a theme, such as war protesters (*Hair*), marriage (*Company*), or Broadway gypsy performers (*A Chorus Line*). Although historians of musical theatre generally identify the concept musical as a product of the late 1960s, some scholars identify *Love Life*, a collaboration between Kurt Weill and Alan Jay Lerner in 1948, as the first concept musical. Instead of a linear plot, *Love Life* is a series of related scenes, and the songs are comments on the characters and situations in the style of Weill's German collaborations with Bertolt Brecht.

“The Freshness of Amateur Skylarking?”

Although she was not prolific, Hamilton possessed obvious songwriting skill, and she paid attention to some trends in songwriting. Thus it may seem puzzling that, after her promising debut, she had difficulty finding lasting successes as a lyricist. In some ways, the nature of the intimate revues stifled her and limited her potential for an enduring legacy. For these revues Hamilton relied on novelty songs (like “Calypso Joe”) and topical numbers (like “My Day”), both of which have short shelf lives.¹⁵¹

But many of the successful songwriters of the 1930s transcended the constraints of the intimate revue and parlayed their revue material into some of the most enduring standards in the American songbook. So another explanation for Hamilton’s limited success as a songwriter may be connected to her professional circles. When asked what she would advise nascent songwriters, Dorothy Fields replied:

A song writer, a beginning song writer, should have friends, if possible, who are similarly interested; should move about, if possible, in the milieu of work that he has chosen for himself; should, as any other artist, become immersed in the stuff, the gossamer stuff, that is the root and earth and base and flower of his career. He should move in music. He should think in lyrics. And he should find friends who move and think similarly.¹⁵²

In addition to indicating that songwriters must create networks with other songwriters (an activity in which both Hamilton and Fields engaged), Fields’s statement hints at the importance of finding the right cultural environment (an activity in which Hamilton

¹⁵¹ Hamilton gave directors permission to update the topical references, suggesting in the foreword to *Three to One*, “there are places in some of the sketches, and also in the songs, where topical or local references would undoubtedly add to their appeal, so if a local rhymester or quipster can supply them, let him or her go to it.” Hamilton and Lewis, *Three to One*, 3.

¹⁵² Kane, *How to Write a Song*, 164.

faltered). Fields, Hart, Gershwin, Irving Berlin, Yip Harburg, Frederick Lowe, Alan Jay Lerner, and most other songwriters of that set were, not insignificantly, Jewish. All lived in New York City, which in 1939 was twenty-six percent Jewish.¹⁵³ Even Cole Porter, a Midwesterner whom musical theatre historian Gerald Mast identified as the “one *goy* in American popular and theatre music,” submerged himself in the New York life and used Eastern European tonalities in his songs.¹⁵⁴

But even though New York Judaism infused the sounds and ethos of American popular song (not to mention the ethos of much of the audience), Hamilton did not participate in this milieu. Based on her lyrical style and business network, Hamilton was familiar with the New York songwriters. But she looked across the Atlantic for inspiration, especially to the songs of Noel Coward. In one letter Hamilton remembered that she began writing revues, “having been exposed at an excitable age to a *Charlot*’s review [sic] by Noel Coward.”¹⁵⁵ A persistent anglophilia marked her career. All of Hamilton’s full-length musicals are English in source material; *The Water Gipsies* and *Mary Poppins* were based on texts by English writers and *Maggie Here* involved English royalty. Hamilton’s anglophilia continued (and perhaps even intensified) in the 1950s.

¹⁵³ McGovern, *Americans in the Great Depression*, 262.

¹⁵⁴ Gerald Mast, *Can’t Help Singin’: The American Musical on Stage and Screen* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 1987), 185. Several critics contended, along with Richard Rodgers, that, “It is surely one of the ironies of the musical theatre that despite the abundance of Jewish composers, the one who has written the most enduring ‘Jewish’ music should be an Episcopalian millionaire who was born on a farm in Peru, Indiana.” Rodgers, *Musical Stages*, 88.

¹⁵⁵ Nancy Hamilton, to Peggy Martin, Division of Performing Arts, Smithsonian Institute, Washington DC, n.d., Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

In 1956, she inquired about obtaining the rights to a number of British texts for musicalization.¹⁵⁶

For his part Coward advised budding songwriters, “Music or lyrics, try not to be derivative.... Throw it away if you feel it’s not completely original, completely yours -- no matter how pretty, and no matter how much you feel you *may* get away with it.”¹⁵⁷

But Coward seemed to be the very person Hamilton was imitating. A draft of the song “Great Britain Needs a Cook!” for the unproduced musical *Return Engagement* (1934) shows Hamilton at her best, not emulating the New York colloquialisms of Fields, Gershwin, and Hart, but employing Noel Coward-esque turns of phrases:

Great Britain Needs a Cook!
Their gastronomic fashions
Tend to steak and kidney rations
And they cook it all by memory not by book.
They never heard of Fanny Farmer
If they had it would alarm her
When she saw how English boiled beef can look!
Oh, the harmony of nations they may stifle
If they will persist in serving slip and trifle.
Let their farthest flung dominion
Take a foreigner’s opinion
To preserve the peace Great Britain needs a cook.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ These books included Leonard Merrick's *Conrad in Quest of His Youth* and *Quaint Companions*, Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, and *Pride and Prejudice*, and Anthony Trollope's *Kept in the Dark* and *The Parliamentary Series*. Nancy Hamilton, New York, William Morris Agency, New York, 1956, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

¹⁵⁷ Kane, *How to Write a Song*, 64.

¹⁵⁸ Nancy Hamilton, “Draft of Great Britain Needs a Cook,” n.d., Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection. Although the music for “Great Britain Needs a Cook!” does not survive, it was written by Fritz Lowe, who later teamed with Alan J. Lerner.

Reviewers and historians took note of Coward's influence on Hamilton's work. Gerald Bordman notes that *One for the Money* "was aimed at the knowing, well-heeled crowds that supported Coward," and another critic made a sneering comparison between the two songwriters: "Indeed, in holding the lorgnette up to Nature [Hamilton] makes Noel Coward, at times, seem like a proletarian writer."¹⁵⁹ A reviewer of *Three to Make Ready* complained that Hamilton was a pale imitation of Coward: "There are times when Nancy Hamilton writing for Brenda Forbes confuses herself erroneously with Noel Coward in collaboration with Beatrice Lillie."¹⁶⁰

But by the 1930s and 1940s, American musical theatre had outgrown its British antecedents. After the isolationism that followed World War I, songwriting turned away from European sources, influenced more by jazz than the rapid-fire patter of Gilbert and Sullivan and lush Viennese waltzes. Additionally, in the 1930s writers such as John Steinbeck, John Dos Passos and William Carlos Williams popularized American documentary style and a heightened naturalism in writing, akin to the colloquialisms that appear in the lyrics of Fields and Hart. Although he continued to write, by the mid-1940s Noel Coward's greatest successes were behind him. In 1954, Gertrude Macy, fearing Hamilton's similarity to Coward, encouraged her to be grateful that five of her songs were to appear in the London revue *Pay the Piper* and not request more money than the producers were offering, writing, "I am afraid you may never get it done over there if you

¹⁵⁹ Bordman, *American Musical Theatre: A Chronicle*, 514; Unidentified Clipping, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

¹⁶⁰ Unidentified Clipping, *Chicago Tribune*, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

hold out.... Incidentally, it is sad to see and feel the new generation's reactions to Noel Coward's new material. He is suddenly very 'has been'."¹⁶¹

Bordman's reference to *One for the Money's* appeal to "knowing, well-heeled crowds" also may explain some of Hamilton's difficulty obtaining widespread success. Several critics remarked that her work had limited audience appeal. Brooks Atkinson alluded to this problem with *One for the Money*: "Their revue was not merely intimate. Long stretches of it are virtually a private joke. In her collection of topics Miss Hamilton writes for her personal friends rather than the general public."¹⁶² Another reviewer complained, "Miss Hamilton has a load of friends and they are backing her to the last lorgnette and mink coat.... Designed as an intimate revue, [*One for the Money's*] humor is entirely too much of the private or parlor joke category."¹⁶³ For *Two for the Show*, reviewer Richard Watts likewise noted that, "the comedy of the show has a way of being rather specialized fare."¹⁶⁴

However, even though Hamilton apparently targeted a small, coterie audience, she did not engage in the same type of layered innuendo that could make her songs subcultural anthems. Historians have made much of the layered references to gay culture

¹⁶¹ Gertrude Macy, New York, to Nancy Hamilton, Vineyard Haven, 7 July 1954, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

¹⁶² Brooks Atkinson, "One for the Money' an intimate Revue With Sketches and Lyrics by Nancy Hamilton," *One for the Money*, Clippings in the Theatre Collections, The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

¹⁶³ "Where to go," Unidentified Review, 16 February 1939, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

¹⁶⁴ Richard Watts Jr. "New Revue," *New York Herald Tribune*, 9 February 1940, *Two for the Show*, Clippings in the Theatre Collections, The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

in the songs of Noel Coward, Cole Porter and, to a lesser extent, Lorenz Hart -- all gay songwriters.¹⁶⁵ As historian George Chauncey notes:

Numerous artists of the 1920s and 1930s, some of them widely known to be gay within the gay world if not beyond it, produced work that fairly bristled with gay meanings. “Noel Coward was the Mount Everest of double entendre,” recalled one gay fan of gay playwrights, and Cole Porter’s songs were mainstays in gay culture.¹⁶⁶

For example, “I Went to a Marvelous Party,” by Noel Coward, sang of a world that historian George Chauncey described as a “homosexual high life.”¹⁶⁷

Tho’ the Riviera
Seems really much queerer
Than Rome at its height.
Yesterday night
.....
I went to a marvelous party
Elsie made an entrance with May
You’d never have guessed from her fisherman’s vest
That her bust had been whittled away.
Poor Lulu got fried on Chianti
And talked about *esprit de corps*.
Maurice made a couple of passes at Gus,
And Freddie, who hates any kind of fuss,
Did half the Big Apple and twisted his truss;
I couldn’t have liked it more.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁵ See, for example, Joseph Morella and George Mazzei, *Genius and Lust: The Creativity and Sexuality of Cole Porter and Noel Coward* (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, Inc., 1995). The androgynous pronouns common in popular song further enabled coded lyrics; musical theatre historian Philip Furia describes the popularity of, “a genderless ‘I’ cooing to an equally indeterminate ‘you’ -- that could be performed by either male or female vocalists.” Furia, *The Poets of Tin Pan Alley*, 154. Although androgyny helped a song’s flexibility for performance, and therefore its commercial viability, it also created possibilities for a text that bespoke a range of desire.

¹⁶⁶ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 288.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁶⁸ Noel Coward, “I Went to a Wonderful Party,” in *Short Stories, Short Plays and Songs by Noel Coward*, ed. Gilbert Millstein (New York: Dell Publishing Company, Inc., 1955), 316-18. Coward remembered when Beatrice Lillie adopted this song for her

Not only did the songs of these lyricists, like “I Went to a Marvelous Party,” drip with double entendre and subtext, by the 1930s there was a well-developed gay and lesbian argot that these songwriters often appropriated.¹⁶⁹ Unlike many of her better known counterparts, Hamilton’s lyrics rarely evince subtextual layers. Although Hamilton was most comfortable writing for audiences who were in on the joke, that coterie was not a broad subculture. She wrote for a rather small and limited group of her close associates.

Several critics noted that the limited range of Hamilton’s appeal made her shows seem amateur. A less than flattering review proclaimed, “The carriage trade took *One for the Money* to its chinchilla bosom, giggling at its upper-class gags and looking upon it as a blue book, rather than a Broadway show, designed for and played by the citizens of cafe society, much in the manner of a junior league tableau.”¹⁷⁰ Not all saw this as a problem.

Brooks Atkinson wrote that *Two for the Show* “should not discourage well-bred theatergoers from sampling an intimate revue that retains some of the freshness of

cabaret concerts, singing it “wearing slacks, a fisherman's shirt, several ropes of pearls, a large sun-hat and dark glasses.” *Ibid.*, 316. And she helped make the song a “camp classic in the gay world.” Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 288. The camp popularity of the song is not surprising in light of its origins. Coward remembered writing “I Went to a Marvelous Party”: “During the summer of 1937 or 1938, I forget which, Elsa Maxwell had a party in the south of France. It was a 'Beach' party and she invited Grace Moore, Beatrice Lillie and me.” Coward, “I Went to a Wonderful Party,” 316. Maxwell, a lesbian herself, was widely considered the consummate hostess of the gay world.

¹⁶⁹ According to Lillian Faderman, words in the 1930s that could be coded references to lesbians or lesbian activities included “in the life,” “lady lovers,” “queer bird,” “lavender,” “spook,” and “trapeze artists” (a reference to oral sex). Words such as “jockey,” “daddy,” “poppa,” “husband,” and “top sergeant” referred to “butch” women. “Mamma” and “wife” were references to “femmes.” Parties with lesbian guests were called “Mickey Mouse Parties.” See Faderman, *Odd Girls*, 105-7.

¹⁷⁰ Dorothy Kilgallen, “The Voice of Broadway,” *Journal American*, 2 March 1939, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

amateur skylarking” and Richard Watts declared that the *Two for the Show* “is pretty much the same sort of entertainment [as *One for the Money*], fast, informal, intermittently merry and given to the hopeful manners of the promising amateurs.”¹⁷¹ But Hamilton’s tendency to write amateurish entertainment for a small, connected audience harkens back to her success with *And So On* at Smith. In both the feel of her shows and her relationship to her audience, Hamilton remained in the insulated and limited province of the college revue.

Perhaps Hamilton would have been a better Dorothy Parker than Cole Porter, as her poetry reveals a sophistication that does not appear in her song lyrics. In a draft for “Madcap Rose, The Belle of Forty Fifth Street” Hamilton wrote:

She plies her trade with Rabelaisian fervor.
West Forty-Fifth trembles at her yelling.
No insult rudely hurled will swerve her.
No curse or threat of jail unnerve her.
A mere casual observer
Cannot avoid the frenzy of her selling.¹⁷²

In this piece Hamilton employs a quadruple internal rhyme (“fervor/swerve her/unnerve her/observer), and uses arresting combinations of words until the poem resolves in the yelling/selling rhyme. In her poem “The Stockie,” Hamilton devises clever rhymes out of summer retreats to write a light verse about summer stock in wealthy New England communities:

¹⁷¹ Brooks Atkinson, “‘Two for the Show’ Comes as the Successor to Last Year’s ‘One for the Money,’” *New York Times*, 9 February 1940; Richard Watts, Jr., “New Revue,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 9 February 1940.

¹⁷² Nancy Hamilton, “Draft of Madcap Rose, The Belle of Forty Fifth Street,” n.d., Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

In Red Bank and White Plains and Madison, Conn.,
The drama will prosper, the show will go on.
In Surrey, Mt. Kisco, Skowhegan and Dennis,
They've given up golfing and swimming and tennis
In Sharon and Newport and Capes May and Cod,
The sportsman is now thought decidedly odd.
In Milbrook,-what matter?
It's all the same chatter;
These summering people just love the theater.¹⁷³

Because Hamilton wrote better poetry than lyrics, it may be that Morgan Lewis, her composer and collaborator, caused some of her songwriting limitations. Many manuals on songwriting articulate the same sentiments as Sheila Davis's manual: "it was the music that usually led an inventive wordsmith to the heights of imaginative wordplay."¹⁷⁴ Although Hamilton had at least an elementary understanding of music (she is listed as the composer of "A Horse Called Margaret" for *Mary Poppins*) nothing in her papers indicates that she worked extensively with music. Further, Hamilton's letters and diaries reveal that, for the most part, she tended to write apart from Lewis (often Hamilton was on Martha's Vineyard while Lewis was in New York). They did not work closely in shaping lyrics to music.¹⁷⁵ The distance of Hamilton's collaboration, combined with her limited skill as a musician, may have exacerbated her difficulty in shaping lyrics to Lewis's musical phrases. When Hamilton did compose, the quality of her lyrics improved -- they were clever and layered. Hamilton added a verse to "A Horse Called

¹⁷³ Nancy Hamilton, "Draft of The Stockies," n.d., Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

¹⁷⁴ Davis, *The Craft of Lyric Writing*, 193.

¹⁷⁵ In his manual on songwriter, Stephen Citron advises, "Collaborators meet often, usually daily, to discuss new ideas and the direction their work is taking. Some prefer a short meeting to listen to what the other has produced, after which each will retreat to work in private; other prefer to work side by side, on call as it were, so a lyricist can read the composer an especially apt line and the composer can get the lyricist's opinion of a melodic snatch hot off the keyboard." In Citron, *Songwriting*, 22.

Margaret” from the unproduced *Mary Poppins*, on which she inscribed, “written particularly for Kate Hepburn - June 9, 1979 (Belmont Stakes Day),” for which she wrote both lyrics and music:

Odds were against her, but you don't know Marg'ret --
Marg'ret was the gamest horse.
She had everything it takes!
When she couldn't get the breaks
She transvesticized herself and won the Belmont Stakes!
Eyebrows were everywhere, but not so Marg'ret's
Didn't know the word “remorse”
Simply murmured “What on earth”
When at the wire she gave birth.
Marg'ret was a cool, cool horse
And she never told her son
That his Ma and Pa were one --
Marg'ret was a lovely horse.¹⁷⁶

“I Want To Make Good on Broadway”

Despite some stand-out lyrics, looking across Hamilton's career and corpus shows that her training in the satire and parody of the intimate revue made speaking in the voice of others her strength. The cleverness of the “Wisconsin, or Kenosha Canoe” sketch shows off Hamilton's ability to riff on already established work and to emulate the tone of other lyrics. But Hamilton never found her own voice. Nor did she develop a signature style; unlike Porter or Fields, there are no markers of a “Hamilton song.” Thus, although she could comment on the works of others, she never could create the sort of niche for herself that she would need to secure a legacy.

But, ultimately, it is difficult to evaluate Hamilton's contributions as a lyricist fully because she left a relatively small body of work. Much of what Hamilton did write

¹⁷⁶ Draft of “A Horse Called Margaret,” 9 June 1979, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

is lost or cannot be attributed to her. She ghostwrote for performers, including Beatrice Lillie and Billie Burke, and some of her material was subsumed under their names. Other times writers, directors, and producers stole her work.¹⁷⁷ Further, she may not have received credit for some of her most skillful lyrics. The newspaper column “Billy Benedick’s Social Comment,” reported that Elsa Maxwell’s glittering revue at Versailles night club featured the Cole Porter number “I Want to Make Good on Broadway”:

I want to make good on Broadway
For in an odd way I feel Gilbert Miller might present me,
If Helen Hayes did not resent me.
I got to give more than mere society appeal.
I want to make good on Broadway
Just as technically sexy as can be.
The social register has dropped me.
But I swear they could not stop me.¹⁷⁸

These lyrics, full of contemporary references and clever turns of phrases, would have shown Hamilton’s writing best had the words been recognized as hers. But Hamilton had to be satisfied with a small retraction printed in Walter Winchell’s column: “Everybody, it appears, credited Cole Porter with fathering the excellent lyrics used at Versailles by E. Maxwell...They were auth’d by a gal tagged Nancy Hamilton.”¹⁷⁹

Ironically, the uncredited verses may have been Hamilton’s truest. She did risk the censure of the social register to “make good” on Broadway. Yet, ultimately, Hamilton’s lyric writing career did not match the promise of her debuting years in New

¹⁷⁷ For example, Hamilton complained that Leonard Sillman stole her material in some of the later editions of the *New Faces* revue. Nancy Hamilton, *Martha's Vineyard*, to Margaret Hamilton, n. d., Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

¹⁷⁸ “La Maxwell 'Wows' Elite With Cole Porter Song,” n.d. Scrapbook of Nancy Hamilton, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

¹⁷⁹ Walter Winchell, “Walter Winchell On Broadway,” *New York Daily Mirror*, n.d. Scrapbook of Nancy Hamilton, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

York. Even “How High the Moon,” the pinnacle of Hamilton’s career and her one contribution to the American songbook, endured, primarily, because of its music. Gerald Bordman points out, the song’s “intriguing passage from G major through ten other major and minor chord changes before it returned to G made the song the delight of a generation of professional jazz artists.”¹⁸⁰ Hamilton herself called it the “*Musician’s* National Anthem [author’s emphasis].”¹⁸¹ Hamilton’s work on the lyrics is obliterated in Charlie Parker’s instrumental riffs in “Ornithology” and Ella Fitzgerald’s scats. Without the training she needed or mentors to guide her, the fate of “How High the Moon” epitomizes Hamilton’s fate as a lyricist -- her words and her position in the history of the American musical have fallen away.

¹⁸⁰ Bordman, *American Musical Theatre: A Chronicle*, 519.

¹⁸¹ Nancy Hamilton and Morgan Lewis, “Format for The Edsel Show -- An Intimate Revue,” Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection. This was a treatment for a television variety show sponsored by Edsel.

Chapter 4: “When I am Old and Eighty”: The End of Nancy Hamilton’s Career

When I am old and eighty
And my breath is just a wheeze
I hope I have a stomach
That flows vaguely to my knees.
I hope to have three double chins
And in each chin real pearls
I hope my chest is so unusual
It horrifies young girls

.....
I’ll dress in old chinchillas
And I’ll always clutch a cane
With which to hit the servants
When they whisper I’m insane

.....
I’ll die in a four-poster
With descendants all around
And my relatives won’t hate me
Till they’ve got me underground.

“When I am Old and Eighty: Nancy Hamilton
Talking to Herself at Eighteen,” Nancy Hamilton¹

Nancy Hamilton’s career as a lyricist for musical theatre essentially ended after *Three to Make Ready* in 1946. Thus, this chapter will briefly discuss Hamilton’s work until her death in 1985 and explore the reasons her career as a musical theatre lyricist fizzled. Hamilton did work on material for the theatre in the 1950s and there were plans for a fourth revue, entitled *Four to Go*, for which she had written some material, but Hamilton never again saw her name in the lights of the Great White Way. In the mid 1950s, apparently frustrated with Broadway, Hamilton put aside her earlier contempt of Hollywood and turned her attention to film and television. She fired her literary agent,

¹ Nancy Hamilton, Draft for “When I am Old and Eighty: Nancy Hamilton Talking to Herself at Eighteen,” n.d. (approx 1926), Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

Monica McCall, and placed the rights to the three revues and *Mary Poppins* in the hand of the William Morris Agency, “in the hope of turning a television or film penny.”² She became especially interested in writing for the variety shows that continued the intimate revue format on the small screen, writing material for women in her network. In 1950, Hamilton received a contract for one-hundred dollars to provide material for a Brenda Forbes appearance on *Showtime...USA*, a musical variety show that often presented songs and scenes from Broadway musicals.³ Hamilton asked writer and producer Max Liebman if he had interest in collaborating on a television special for Imogene Coca, and in 1955 she began work on *Here We Go*, a TV spectacular for Mary Martin, a leading lady of Hollywood and Broadway who had already found fame as Nellie Forbush in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *South Pacific*.⁴ Nevertheless, like Hamilton’s other writing

² Nancy Hamilton, to Monica McCall, New York, 9 June 1956, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

³ Contract for *Showtime...USA*, 21 November 1950, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection. In 1953 Hamilton received a letter asking if she would be interested in working as a staff writer for thirty-six episodes of an upcoming variety television show. They also wanted to air “The Story of the Opera” from *One for the Money*, and they wanted Hamilton to star in the show, but it appears Hamilton did not take the job. Monica McCall, New York, to Nancy Hamilton, 1953, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

⁴ Nancy Hamilton, New York, to Joseph Moon, 1954, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Performing Arts Library, New York. Initially Hamilton suggested that the television special star Martin and feature original material by Hamilton. Eventually Hamilton decided to use primarily sketches and songs from her previous stage revues. In a letter to Mary Martin and her husband Richard Halliday, Hamilton suggested thirteen songs and sketches for the special, including “Ordinary Family,” “How High the Moon,” and “The Story of the Opera.” Nancy Hamilton, New York, to Mary Martin and Richard Halliday, n.d., Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection. The 1950s marked the beginning of a long-term friendship between Martin and Hamilton, and in 1973 Martin bought a house on Martha’s Vineyard. Martin also faced rumors that she was a lesbian, predicated, in part, on her circle of woman-centered associations. For a discussion of Martin’s marriage to Richard Halliday, a relationship that director Elia

projects in the 1950s, the special did not materialize.⁵ Although Hamilton and Morgan Lewis (likely on Martin's invitation) contributed "The Old Gavotte" for Cyril Ritchard (as Captain Hook) to sing in the Martin vehicle, *Peter Pan*, they were not invited to collaborate more fully on the musical.⁶

But after the 1940s Hamilton dwelt in an increasingly insular world, and she narrowed her focus to a small group of friends who worked to create mutually beneficial opportunities. In the 1960s, Brenda Forbes worked on a stage adaptation of Daphne Fielding's *The Duchess of Jermyn Street*, *The Life and Good Times of Rosa Lewis of the Cavendish Hotel*. Against the advice of Monica McCall, who was now Forbes's agent, Forbes insisted, "I am sending a script to Nan. Should we all decide to make it a musical, I want to give Nan the first crack at it."⁷ Hamilton, in turn, encouraged producers to employ her friends, many of whom were struggling to find work. Hamilton also

Kazan compared to the lavender marriage of Cornell and McClintic, see Stacy Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria*, 14.

⁵ In the 1950s Martin did star with Noel Coward in a television spectacular sponsored by the Ford Motor Company. They opted for material from songwriters better known than Hamilton, including Gershwin, Porter, Kern, Rodgers and Hammerstein, and Coward himself. Stephen Citron, *Noel and Cole: The Sophisticates* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 234.

⁶ Mark "Moose" Charlap (composer) and Carolyn Leigh (lyricist) wrote the bulk of the score for *Peter Pan* with additional songs from Hamilton and Lewis, Jule Styne, Betty Comden and Adolph Green. There was, in fact, much debate over whether "The Old Gavotte" would remain in the *Peter Pan* score. In the end Hamilton and Lewis only received 1.5 cents on each album of *Peter Pan* sold. Floria Lasky, New York, to Nancy Hamilton, Vineyard Haven, 12 August 1954, Nancy Hamilton Papers, The Sophia Smith Collection. But Ritchard sang "The Old Gavotte" in high camp style and it became one of his signature songs. He stayed friendly with Hamilton throughout her life.

⁷ Brenda Forbes, Chicago, to Monica McCall, 29 October 1963, Monica McCall Papers, The Special Collections at Boston University, Boston.

attempted to interest television networks in her two documentaries, *Helen Keller in her Story* and *This is Our Island*, which was about Martha's Vineyard.

As her career as a lyricist evaporated, Hamilton turned to other projects. In the 1960s, Hamilton concentrated her attention on her long-time friend, Norwegian opera soprano Kirsten Flagstad. Hamilton gave a reading of Flagstad's translations of Norwegian and German *lieder* at the Morgan Library, where Hamilton also donated letters and personal effects related to Flagstad and bequeathed funds in the name of the opera star. And in 1964 Hamilton began work on a book about Kirsten Flagstad for Alfred A. Knopf.⁸ Hamilton also invested a great deal of time in protecting the image and legacy of Helen Keller. In the late 1950s, Hamilton and Cornell fought with the director of the American Foundation for the Blind, James Adams, a rift that one of Keller's biographers describes as "the pullings and haulings between the Cornell group on one side and [Keller's] trustees on the other."⁹ Hamilton (with the help of Keller's biographer and friend, Nella Braddy Henney) took it upon herself to protect Keller's legacy and prevent the revisionist history she feared the American Foundation for the Blind would create. The two women conspired to conceal some more volatile

⁸ Sally Hamilton, Interview, 4 June 2001. Although the records of the Library of Congress indicate that a book by Flagstad, with a foreword by Hamilton, was submitted for copyright protection, there is no indication that this book was ever published commercially.

⁹ Lash, *Helen and Teacher*, 755-9. The rift began when James Adams hired a surgeon to operate on a bone tumor in Keller's foot. Cornell and Hamilton questioned the qualifications of the surgeon and feared Adams only hired him because he was a donor to the American Foundation for the Blind. The feud was exacerbated when Cornell nominated David Levy, her neighbor on Martha's Vineyard and a major donor for the documentary, as one of Keller's trustees, and Adams rejected that recommendation. *Ibid.*, 757.

information about Keller in a collection of letters Hamilton donated to the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College.¹⁰

In what became another failed project, Hamilton announced she would write a book that celebrated the relationship between Keller and her companion Polly Thompson.¹¹ Like so many of her other projects, Hamilton did not complete this book,

¹⁰ Henney wrote to Hamilton asking for advice about archiving Keller's material and her own: "When I was talking to Mr. Noyes one day last week it came out that Helen has made a new will since Polly [Thompson]'s death, leaving her books and other writings to the Foundation. I think this will mean also that Helen's papers will not go to the Library of Congress, as planned, but to the American Foundation for the Blind and that in turn means I think that no scholar of the future will ever be able to study unexpurgated records. My papers will go to the Library of Congress, but they are so full of indiscretions that they will have to bear a legend 'Not to be opened until – 'I think we should all get together on this and maybe gather up photostats of revealing letters that the owners want to keep. No hurry on this score, but a bland inhuman picture of Helen ought not to stand.'" Nella Braddy Henney, Garden City, NJ, to Nancy Hamilton, 3 May 1960, Nancy Hamilton Papers, The Sophia Smith Collection. This letter is also reprinted, without documentation, in Lash, *Helen and Teacher*, 768. Henney also insisted Hamilton get credit for authoring the documentary on Keller as a means of protecting Keller's reputation: "As for credits on the film I think no possible doubt should be left as to its source. I should not like anyone to be able to say 'I wonder who has got hold of her now' or to start speculating as to whether there is a gimmick in it or, if it were anonymous, to say, 'I done it.' [Keller] is surrounded by people who want to use her or exploit her. Some of them are very suspicious of others and some of them are slimy." Nella Braddy Henney, Snowville, NH, to Nancy Hamilton, 11 August 1953, Nancy Hamilton Papers, The Sophia Smith Collection.

¹¹ In the mid-1950s Polly Thompson, Keller's personal assistant, became obsessively protective of Keller, to the extent that their friends described her as "bordering on madness." Herrmann, *Helen Keller: A Life*, 312. Concerned over Thompson and the impact her mania was having on Keller, Henney wrote Hamilton, "The other day I had a letter from Nelson Neff.... He spent an evening at Arcan Ridge and...the main burden of his letter was that the time has come to pay a special tribute to Polly.... He spoke of Polly's always being in the shadow of Teacher or Helen. He is dead right. In her lowest moments of depression I think Polly feels that nearly everybody gets more credit that she does." Nella Braddy Henney, Snowville, NH, to Nancy Hamilton, 5 October 1954, Nancy Hamilton Papers, The Sophia Smith Collection. In response to this letter Hamilton sought a commission from Doubleday publishers to write a book about Keller and Thompson. Doubleday also published Henney's book *Anne Sullivan Macy*, the book that provided the basis for the play *The Miracle Worker*.

claiming her other projects delayed her work on the Keller book.¹² In 1965, she returned her five-hundred dollar advance and canceled her contract. She suggested that Doubleday should instead publish “The Miracle Worker” in paperback: “Every grade school teacher and pupil would thank him for it.”¹³

Hamilton’s friend Joe Whitmore remembers wishing Hamilton “would slow down and finish one of these things.”¹⁴ According to Whitmore, Hamilton lost her “finishing drive” and he guesses that living in Cornell’s house forced Hamilton’s life away from the creative and toward the social.¹⁵ As Whitmore notes, Hamilton’s relationship with Cornell, their social life together, and her efforts to preserve Cornell’s legacy consumed the lion’s share of Hamilton’s time and professional energy after the 1940s. In 1958, Hamilton traveled to Israel with McClintic, Cornell, Macy, and Forbes for a production of Christopher Fry’s *The Firstborn* in celebration of Israel’s tenth anniversary, and between 1958 and 1960, Hamilton toured with Cornell and Brian Aherne as the “chef and assistant manager” for the 1959-1960 tour of *Dear Liar*, a play Jerome Kilty adapted

¹² In 1955 Hamilton also began research for *The Lost Flight*, a book on Sir John Alcock and Sir Arthur Whitten Brown, the British aviators who, in 1919, made the first non-stop flight across the Atlantic (eight years before Charles Lindberg's solo flight). In 1962 Hamilton told her editor that she could not begin the book on Keller and Thompson because she was “still moons away from completing my book on Arthur Whitten Brown.” Nancy Hamilton, to Ken McCormick, Doubleday Publishers, New York, 27 April 1962, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

¹³ Nancy Hamilton, to Elin McCormick, New York, 3 May 1965, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection. For years Cornell and Hamilton had held the option for Anne Sullivan Macy: *The Story Behind Helen Keller*, the biography Henney wrote in 1933. But in 1959, after Cornell determined she was too old for the part of Sullivan, William Gibson turned it into the popular stage play, *The Miracle Worker*, and Hamilton and Cornell became informal advocates for the show.

¹⁴ Whitmore, Interview, 20 July 2002.

¹⁵ Ibid.

from the letters of Mrs. Patrick Campbell and George Bernard Shaw.¹⁶ When *Dear Liar* opened for two weeks on Broadway, it marked Cornell's last public performance before McClintic's death in 1961 and Cornell's subsequent retirement from the stage.

Cornell's retirement also produced a de facto retirement for Hamilton, who claimed that between 1961 and 1970 her career "came to a standstill."¹⁷ During that time Hamilton focused on her life with Cornell; as Cornell's biographer notes, "Nancy Hamilton continued to be a joy and strength for the rest of Kit's life."¹⁸ Hamilton had remodeled "The Barn," a house on the site of Cornell's World War II victory garden on Martha's Vineyard, and after McClintic's death, Hamilton had an abandoned lighthouse moved to the property. She renovated it to serve as bedrooms for her and Cornell (see Figure 24).¹⁹ As Cornell's health worsened, Hamilton added quarters for a live-in nurse.²⁰ Together they also refurbished Cornell's house in the exclusive Turtle Bay neighborhood of Manhattan, just a few blocks away from Katharine Hepburn's home.²¹

¹⁶ Hamilton and Cornell followed this trip with a European tour that included visits to Venice, the Teatro Olimpico, the Swiss Alps, France, Brussels for the World's Fair, Bruges, and London. Forbes, *Five Minutes, Miss Forbes*, 198.

¹⁷ Nancy Hamilton, Chronology of Career, n.d., Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

¹⁸ Mosel, *Leading Lady*, 514.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 515.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 515.

²¹ For a description of the Turtle Bay neighborhood see Berg, *Kate Remembered*, 21.



Figure 24. Nancy Hamilton working on renovations to The Barn.
From the Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton, Martha's Vineyard, MA.

They furnished it for entertaining with crystal, antiques, game tables, and a Mason & Hamlin piano.²² However, Cornell's health rapidly deteriorated and her care proved time-consuming for Hamilton. Further, during the 1960s and 1970s, Hamilton also faced her own health struggles. In 1972, three years after having a mastectomy of her right breast, Hamilton wrote to a doctor complaining of being "conscious" of her left breast. Yet time after time, in issues of her own career and, even, her own health, Hamilton continually prioritized Cornell.²³

In June of 1974, Cornell died at The Barn on Martha's Vineyard; Hamilton was by her side, reading aloud from books by Hamilton's favorite author, Anthony Trollope.²⁴ Condolences poured in from Hamilton's friends and important theatre professionals, including John Gielgud, Lillian Gish, Mary Martin, Tony Randall, Josh Logan, and Cyril Ritchard. Most all echoed the sentiments of actor Brian Aherne, who asked, "What will you do I wonder? Your life will be greatly changed, but you are a noble and courageous woman and time will comfort you."²⁵ Composer Leonard Bernstein also acknowledged

²² Snyder, Phone Interview, 22 September 2002.

²³ For example, in 1972, when Hamilton rented a house in Naples, Florida for herself and Cornell, she asked about the availability of a "recording machine" in the local library for her to work on her writing, but her primary concern was obtaining an oxygen tank for Cornell. Nancy Hamilton, to Mr. Fitkin, Naples, 12 January 1972, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection. And in the letter to her doctor complaining about her breast Hamilton wrote, "'Now that [Cornell] is comfortably settled and starting to benefit by the Florida Sunshine -- well at least, Florida, I must have a doctor [crossed out] examination as soon as possible.'" Nancy Hamilton, Naples, to Dr. Frank Butler, 12 February 1972, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

²⁴ Mosel, *Leading Lady*, 437.

²⁵ Brian Aherne, to Nancy Hamilton, Martha's Vineyard, 12 June 1974, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

Hamilton's unerring devotion to Cornell, writing, "You must know that I feel deeply for you, dear funny Nancy. And we all appreciate all you have done in health and in illness to ease and support your darling Kit."²⁶

On June 9 1974, the *New York Times* reported that Cornell's estate was valued at between five-hundred thousand and one million dollars and that "Under the terms of the will, made last April 9, the bulk of Miss Cornell's estate was left to her secretary, Nancy Hamilton, who lived with Miss Cornell at her townhouse at 328 East 51 Street."²⁷ Joe Whitmore remembers that after Cornell died Hamilton devoted both her time and the money to memorializing Cornell's "greater glory."²⁸ She provided funding for the dedication of the Katharine Cornell- Guthrie McClintic Reading Room at the New York Performing Arts Library.²⁹ There remains today a Nancy Hamilton Fund devoted to financing renovations to the Katharine Cornell Theatre on Martha's Vineyard.³⁰

²⁶ Leonard Bernstein, to Nancy Hamilton, Martha's Vineyard, 9 June 1974, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

²⁷ The *New York Times*, 9 July 1974, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection. After reading of Cornell's will, Jimmy Shute, who collaborated with Hamilton on *Return Engagement* in 1934 wrote, "I am so happy that your future is assured. I hadn't exactly feared that you were going to have to beg your way into an old ladies' home, but I had feared that you might have to live in less comfort than you have known. That is a mode of living that would not have become you and I am so glad that I shall see you, as before, surrounded by creature comforts and some few of the world's luxuries." Jimmy Shute, to Nancy Hamilton, Martha's Vineyard, 10 July 1974, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

²⁸ Whitmore, Interview, 20 July 2002.

²⁹ Ironically, although the reading room at the Lincoln Center library is named after Cornell, her papers, which Hamilton also placed in that repository (and under which Hamilton and Macy's papers are housed), are currently unprocessed and unavailable to the public.

³⁰ According to her obituary, Hamilton, "was the driving force behind the Katharine Cornell Theatre in the Tisbury Town Hall [on Martha's Vineyard]. She

Two years before Cornell's death, Hamilton's career had taken a brief upswing, when her old friend Charlie Forsythe (after much prodding from Hamilton) directed and produced *Three to One*, a compilation of Hamilton's revue material, with the off-Broadway Equity Library Theatre company. The production received good reviews and prompted the *New York Times* critic to wonder, "Where on earth has this gifted lady been hiding lo these many years? She has a way with a rhyme, as with 'superfine' and a 'glint of sunlight streaming through a vine' that suggests two Dorothys, the Misses Fields and Parker."³¹

Nancy Hamilton died at age seventy-six on February 18, 1985 a few hours after hearing of the death of her younger sister, Peggy. Her obituary identified the cause of death as a long illness, but her niece Sally (who was with her when she died) hypothesizes that Hamilton died from an undiagnosed case of Lyme disease.³² Sally also asserts that the alcohol and drugs Hamilton used to control the pain of rheumatoid arthritis exacerbated her illness.³³

After she died, Hamilton's surviving family cremated her with her favorite picture from the U.S.O. tour of *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* (see Figure 19). A tombstone stands for her in the Hamilton family plot on Martha's Vineyard. Although her death

worked closely with the late William Katzenbach of Chilmark, architect-designer for the restoration, and commissioned the murals by Stanley Murphy on behalf of Miss Cornell." "Nancy Hamilton, lyricist and film producer," *Martha's Vineyard Times*, 21 February 1985, 1. The theatre with Katharine Cornell's name remains a centerpiece of the town of Vineyard Haven.

³¹ Howard Thompson, "The Program," *New York Times*, 17 January 1972, 24.

³² Sally hypothesizes that Hamilton contracted Lyme disease during a visit to Katharine Hepburn's home near Lyme, Connecticut

³³ Sally Hamilton, Interview, 20 July 2002.

came thirty years after she received the Academy Award and almost forty after her Broadway success, producer John Murray Anderson eulogized her as the “wittiest and ablest revue writer in America.”³⁴ In 1997, “How High the Moon” was inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame as a “Towering Song.”

Why does nobody know Nancy Hamilton of Sewickley?

Looking at Hamilton’s career trajectory it is clear that, although she initially ingratiated herself successfully into active networks of women on Broadway, these opportunities dried up after the 1940s. However, even though the post World War II era was notoriously repressive toward independent, career women, many women lyricists, including Carolyn Leigh, Betty Comden, and Dorothy Fields, came into their own and forged active careers and professional networks in the American musical theatre during this era. So, what happened to Hamilton’s career? Why, despite the period of recognition she enjoyed, is she only a footnote in histories of the musical? Why did her networks, initially so promising, fail to advance her career or sustain her legacy?

First, Hamilton endangered her legacy by writing for the revue; its reliance on topicality made it a fleeting form. Because her songs did not transcend their historical moment, Hamilton’s lyrics, dealing with Roosevelt’s newspaper columns and the Marshall Plan, quickly became irrelevant or incomprehensible.³⁵ Thus, her songs could

³⁴ Quoted in Bordman, *American Musical Revue*, 97.

³⁵ In contrast, Cole Porter’s biographer points out, “Although early in his career Porter sprinkled his lyrics with names of celebrities...which would have little meaning to audiences on the brink of the twenty-first century, his later work avoided this topicality in favor of the elemental.... Cole’s work stands up through repeated hearings.” Stephen Citron, *Noel and Cole*, 263.

not become standards. Even when she tried to adapt to popular trends, like the integrated musical, Hamilton, who never lost the habit of writing “topical” revues, found producers unwilling to risk their money on a piece that would date quickly and have little potential for future productions. Yet the transient nature of the material Hamilton wrote does not fully explain her failure. Many other lyricists, including Hart, Gershwin, Harburg, and Fields, wrote songs for the revue that were flexible enough become enduring entries in the American songbook. This problem forces the historian to look elsewhere to explain Hamilton’s ultimate failure in writing for the musical theatre.

Perhaps Hamilton’s career suffered because she did not choose the networks best positioned to help her both advance professionally and develop her writing abilities. After leaving Smith College, Hamilton involved herself with women like Janis, Lillie, Burke, and Cornell, who were a generation older than she. Although these women initially mentored Hamilton and helped her get work, as their own popularity declined, they instead relied on *Hamilton* to make opportunities for *them*. This seems to be what occurred with Elsie Janis, who was forty-five at the time of her involvement in *New Faces of 1934*. Her once powerful career and connections were fading. Although Janis got Hamilton her first big songwriting break, instead of continuing to open doors for Hamilton, after *New Faces of 1934* Janis asked Hamilton to help her own flagging career. In a letter written in September of 1934, Janis wrote to Hamilton to inquire about her script for *The Water Gipsies*:

What is your Musical Comedy about? Are you going to play in it yourself? I have been thinking of returning to the stage. Mother must want me to now because I woke one morning with the feeling that I should do so and was not sick at the thought.... If your musical would be any

good for me you might send me an outline Best love to you from the big bad blonde and your best audience.³⁶

Billie Burke also solicited material from Hamilton under the guise of providing Hamilton writing opportunities. In 1954, Burke appealed to Hamilton to allow her to star in *Four to Go*. Burke also asked Hamilton to write a treatment for a children's show for her and to write material for a 1957 edition of the Ziegfeld Follies.³⁷ And, in 1956, she requested the lead role in *Our Best Girl*:

You would think loving you as much and as deeply as I do I wouldn't bother you when I know you are deep in work that is awfully important yet quixotically [sic] enough it is because I love you I want you in my life again -- heavens I better hurry on with this -- its beginning to sound very strange!!! I've been searching in this little thing I laughingly call my mind how to get some work to do and the fascinating idea you once told me very scantily (there I go again!!) about the little old lady who arrived in her old Rolls Royce to occupy her little house and ...began taking the whole neighborhood into her heart...would give me a working story that old men, old women, and millions of [illegible] wouldn't miss seeing on TV for anything the world!!!³⁸

Throughout her career Hamilton tried to use her work to provide job opportunities for these women.³⁹ But in an industry that values youth, especially in its women performers,

³⁶ Elsie Janis, Beverly Hills, to Nancy Hamilton, 11 September 1934, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection. After her mother's death Janis believed she could speak to her mother from beyond the grave and contacted her frequently for advice on her career.

³⁷ Although Hamilton was uncredited, Beatrice Lillie headlined the show and the credits list Lillie as the author of some of the material. Because Hamilton so frequently ghostwrote for Lillie and for Burke, it is possible that some of that material is Hamilton's work.

³⁸ Billie Burke, to Nancy Hamilton, 3 November 1956, Nancy Hamilton Papers, The Sophia Smith Collection.

³⁹ For example, in 1975 Hamilton wrote a letter to Thomas Wolff, Esq. of the ABC television network, attempting to sell *Our Best Girl* as a television series: "My [illegible] is still as clear as the driven snow. I say nothing for the moment about the accompanying play except that it is already as long as a TV serial and there are quite a

the older generation of actresses found their once powerful connections had withered and Hamilton did not have the clout to help their careers -- or her own.

Further, although Hamilton understood the value of women's networks, she could never make significant inroads into more powerful women's networks on Broadway, most notably that of successful lesbian producer Cheryl Crawford, who was known for promoting the careers of other women theatre professionals. Ostensibly Hamilton should have had a strong affinity with Crawford. Like Hamilton, Crawford attended Smith College (fourteen years before Hamilton), where she also specialized in breeches roles. Crawford also was president of the Smith Dramatic Association and, like Hamilton, got into trouble during her presidential tenure -- a faculty committee supervised Crawford's presidency for fear that she would produce "something outlandish and dangerous to young ladies' morals."⁴⁰

Initially Hamilton did try to appeal to Crawford for work. One article noted that early in her career Hamilton:

Braved the professional theatre offices. Cheryl Crawford of the Guild Theatre, a sympathizer of college girls who wanted to paint their faces with grease paint instead of Elizabeth Arden's advised her to sit at home and await the clarion. When opportunity did knock, Miss Hamilton heard it a week too late, inasmuch as her friendly neighbor had erroneously

few Hokinson women such as Vivian Vance, Helen Hayes, Lucille Ball (!!!), Lillian Gish, Mildred Natwick, Peggy Cass, Brenda Forbes hanging around on the chance of a clean as the driven snow script. It doesn't even boast an 'Oh, Fudge!' Also, it would lend itself easily to musical numbers, of which as you can imagine, I have trunkfuls. I also have some beautiful drawings by Hokinson of the various characters and am in at least partial control of my creative facilities. What more can either of us say." Nancy Hamilton, to Thomas Wolff, Esq., New York, May 1975, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

⁴⁰ Crawford, *One Naked Individual*, 17.

taken her postcard of notification. *The Good Earth* was offered without her presence in the cast.⁴¹

Hamilton later sent Crawford at least two scripts (*Mary Poppins* and *Maggie Here*), but the powerful producer rejected both and offered only cursory guidance for the struggling songwriter.

Perhaps Hamilton and Crawford did not forge a connection because, despite their similar origins, Hamilton and Crawford chose decidedly different career paths. In 1945, after leaving the Group Theatre, Crawford joined with lesbians Eva Le Gallienne and Margaret Webster to open the American Repertory Theatre, a classical repertory company, created, in part, to respond to the dearth of good roles available to actresses. Known for being founded and managed by three women whose lesbian orientations were widely rumored -- Webster and Le Gallienne had a ten year romance -- the mission of the American Repertory Theatre was, in part, a feminist one; theatre historian Helen Krich Chinoy asserts that it gave actresses an opportunity to work in an environment that did not treat them as commodities.⁴²

But none of the powerful women of the American Repertory Theatre took Hamilton under their wings.⁴³ As committed feminists they may have ignored Hamilton

⁴¹ Boltinoff, "Theatrical Sideshow."

⁴² Schanke, *Shattered Applause*, 173; Helen Krich Chinoy, "Art Versus Business," in *Women in American Theatre*, eds. Helen Krich Chinoy and Linda Walsh Jenkins (New York: Crown Publishing, Inc., 1981; Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 1987), 5.

⁴³ Hamilton's life and career intersected with all three women. In addition to her intersections with Crawford, Eva Le Gallienne received an honorary degree from Smith the same year that Hamilton graduated, and Hamilton and Webster worked together when Webster directed some of the sketches for *Three to Make Ready*. Further, Hamilton's

because she refused to define herself openly as an advocate of women. Although she benefited from and participated in women's networks to champion the careers of her female friends, she was not a revolutionary. She felt it possible for women to change *within* the system.⁴⁴ In one letter written in 1974, Hamilton rejected the feminist movement of Gloria Steinem, insisting that she "deplored" the appellation "Ms."⁴⁵

Hamilton also refused to advocate for gay rights. Writing in the post-Stonewall era, essayist Paul Monette seemed surprised that, "Clamorous though the closet was, the world Gert [Macy] and her friends [including Hamilton] inhabited still had walls, so that they didn't even think to reach out to the pained anonymous legions of queers with nobody to look up to."⁴⁶

Hamilton's self-stylization may have further limited her access to Crawford's more prolific networks of women. When Hamilton left Smith, she modeled her public persona on figures like Hepburn, Garbo, and Dietrich, assuming, like these women, a set of identities -- wealthy, unapproachable, intellectual, and androgynous. Initially this worked for her, as producers, reporters, and some women of the Broadway Sewing Circle seemed intrigued by Hamilton's performance of intellectual androgyne. Hamilton further emulated Hepburn by cloaking herself in WASP privilege. She frequented (and performed amateur theatricals at) the Colony Club in New York, an institution

associates, Cornell and Mary Martin, were among the American Repertory Theatre's initial sponsors.

⁴⁴ Whitmore, Interview, 20 July 2002.

⁴⁵ Ibid.; Draft 2 of Letter, Nancy Hamilton, Martha's Vineyard, to Edna Linderman, Buffalo, 1974, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

⁴⁶ Monette, *Last Watch of the Night*, 52.

established in 1907 as America's first social club for women; the Colony Club required that any new members belong to a family listed in the Social Register.⁴⁷ Beatrice Lillie, noting how Hamilton created a persona for herself based on the intersection of intellect and class, claims she hired Hamilton to write for her because she wanted the material for her new radio show to "favor caviar rather than sauerkraut."⁴⁸ However, unlike the more radical women and Katharine Hepburn, Hamilton's privileged persona matched her private politics. She remained a lifelong Republican.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Kendall, *The Power of Good Deeds*, 145. According to Kim Marra, the Colony Club (decorated by Elsie de Wolfe, the lesbian partner of theatrical agent Elisabeth Marbury) hosted a "network of female friends [and] provided an invaluable support system for the pursuit of mutual personal, social, political, and business interests." Kim Marra, "A Lesbian Marriage of Cultural Consequences," in *Passing Performances: Queer Readings of Leading Players in American Theater History*, with a preface by Jill Dolan, eds. Robert A. Schanke and Kim Marra (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1998), 118.

⁴⁸ Lillie, *Every Other Inch a Lady*, 267.

⁴⁹ The Hamilton family was critical of the politics of Roosevelt. For example, Hamilton wrote to her brother Marshall: "You know about the coffee and sugar rations and the tea and oil and Dewey election (how that would have pleased father) and the 25,000 ceiling on incomes (how that would have infuriated him)." Nancy Hamilton, New York, to Marshall Hamilton, 7 November 1942. This letter refers to the New York gubernatorial election of Republican Thomas Dewey and the comment about income ceilings is a criticism of Roosevelt's "A Call for Sacrifice" speech on April 28, 1942: "Are you a businessman, or do you own stock in a business corporation? Well, your profits are going to be cut down to a reasonably low level by taxation. Your income will be subject to higher taxes. Indeed in these days, when every available dollar should go to the war effort, I do not think that any American citizen should have a net income in excess of \$25,000 per year after payment of taxes." See "Franklin D. Roosevelt," in *Modern History Sourcebook*, available from <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1942roosevelt-sacrifice.html>; Internet; accessed August 20, 2003. In the 1960s Hamilton was still a Republican. She wrote to her friend (and early collaborator) Rosemary Casey, "you are a fine brave, patriotic spirit to be pitching into the campaign. I feel like a sloth just pasting a Nixon-Lodge sticker on my old Cadillac...I pray that your eyes are blazing not only with republican fire, but with brought good health." Nancy Hamilton, Martha's Vineyard, to Rosemary Casey, Pittsburgh, 2 October 1960, Nancy Hamilton Papers, The Sophia Smith Collection.

Although Hamilton's conservative and classist posture may have worked in the decadent 1920s and with the denizens of the Algonquin roundtable, it alienated the Broadway set of the 1930s and 1940s. Not only were the women of Crawford's circle pro-woman, they also were vocal advocates of the political left. Although Crawford claimed politics were "incidental" to her, she was part of a network of active radicals in the Group Theatre and signed an advertisement protesting the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and sent a telegram with her good wishes to the Hollywood Ten.⁵⁰ Margaret Webster appeared before the HUAC, and her name appeared in Red Channels, a list compiled by the FBI to identify communist sympathizers in the entertainment industry.⁵¹ In an era when theatre professionals often wore these kinds of accusations like a red badge of pride, Hamilton and Cornell were swept into the scare. When newspapers made insinuations about Helen Keller's socialist associations, Cornell confessed that Keller's "redness troubles" concerned her, and both Hamilton and Cornell articulated a desire to limit Keller's access to radicals with leftist sympathies.⁵² Because Hamilton did not share the feminist mission or the politics of Crawford's circle, she could not find a place in this influential network.

Even more detrimental to Hamilton's networking than her conservative political bent was her tendency toward anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitic sentiment festered in both her

⁵⁰ Crawford, *One Naked Individual*, 256. Crawford's HUAC hearing was postponed and she never did testify.

⁵¹ Milly S. Barranger, "Webster Without Tears," in *Passing Performances: Queer Readings of Leading Players in American Theater History*, with a preface by Jill Dolan, eds. Robert A. Schanke and Kim Marra (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1998), 233.

⁵² Lash, *Helen and Teacher*, 287.

academic environment and her family. During the time Hamilton attended Smith, the Jewish population of the school was more than ten percent, a situation administrators of the women's colleges dubbed the "Jewish problem" as they devised strategies to control the large influx of qualified Jewish students.⁵³ In addition to the rampant anti-Semitic sentiment in her institutional environment, Hamilton's family also harbored some anti-Jewish feelings. While at Smith, Hamilton wrote her mother about a Jewish boy who asked her for a date:

Georgia [illegible], that cute little Jew-boy, a brother of Mima's, whom I but met at her weekend party asked me up to the Harvard -- Penn game at Cambridge November 10th. I could hardly resist the temptation to shake hands with the tribe in Boston, and to go to the Beacon Street synagogue, but I thought of you back there at home trusting me in a distant town and I realized that I could not encourage Jerusalem, so I refused. But it was quite a conquest.⁵⁴

In 1933, Hamilton drafted a song called "The Great Thumbing of the Noses: A Suggestion," detailing the ascendancy of Hitler's extermination policy and the budding formation of a Jewish homeland.

In Germany, or so I've heard
A very silly thing occurred --
Although I'm told there is an old, old precedent behind it.
It seems if you can trust the news,
They got to persecuting the Jews.
If this is real, I can't but feel the Jews themselves must mind it.

They don't of course object to jibes
Directed at the Lost Jew Tribes
For any bloke can take a joke if sweet and kindly spoken --
But when you're wakened up at two

⁵³ For a further discussion of the "Jewish Problem" and the women's colleges see Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Woman*, 143-4 and Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 256-9.

⁵⁴ Nancy Hamilton, Northampton, to Margaret Hamilton, Sewickley, PA, n.d., Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

And notified that you're a Jew
So get your pants and make for France it hardly seems like jokin!

However Jews are patient folk
And chuckled at this little joke --
"Just" said the Yids, "a bunch of kids. They don't mean nothing by it!"

.....
With all this talk you would surmise
That Hebrew people would arise --
With gentile bribes collect their tribes and go and form a new land
For every one who sneered at kikes
Must love what Hitler so dislikes
And [illegible] boys and other goys would help them form a Jew-land.

.....
However, it is very bright
If Hebrews do not choose to fight,
If they increase keeping peace
Should "we" perforce be jealous?
And if the Jews have found a way
To make a persecution pay
We should decide to swallow pride
And get the Jews to tell us.⁵⁵

Although likely a satirical statement on Hitler's policies, anything perceived as "anti-Semitic demagoguery" was hardly a humorous topic for the American Jewish community.⁵⁶ One year later Hamilton complained in her diary about three powerful Broadway producers in anti-Semitic terms, writing: "Dwight Wiman -- a moderately bright Jew passes for a brilliant Christian, Max Gordon -- A smart Jew passes for an artistic wizard. Jed Harris-A presumptuous Yid passes for a misunderstood genius."⁵⁷

Hamilton's prejudice, both privately expressed and implicitly embedded in her work, made other networks of the commercial musical theatre unavailable to her. With

⁵⁵ Nancy Hamilton, Draft of "The Great Thumbing of the Noses," 1933, Personal Collection of Sally Hamilton.

⁵⁶ See Most, *Making Americans*, 69.

⁵⁷ Diary of Nancy Hamilton, 1934, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

the notable exception of Cole Porter, a powerful network of Jews had dominated Broadway musical theatre.⁵⁸ During the Depression, at the same time that Hamilton was laying the foundation for her professional circles, the solidarity of Jewish professionals especially intensified as “[Jews] developed close business and professional linkages with fellow Jews.”⁵⁹ Stacy Wolf notes, “As in the early days of the movie industry, Jewish men, many of whom were first-generation Americans, dominated the mid-century production of the musical.”⁶⁰ Hamilton’s anti-Semitism may have limited her willingness to join the Jewish club or it may be that Judaism was a requisite for these networks. But in either case, Hamilton’s WASP upbringing and public persona made the road to developing a career more difficult for her. In an era when, according to Andrea Most, Judaism, leftist politics, and the commercial theatre were so intertwined that detractors implied that “the New York (often a code word for Jewish) theatre was receiving its directions from Moscow,” Hamilton found that the melding of her anti-Semitism and her rightist politics kept her outside of Broadway’s power circles.⁶¹

Consequently, Hamilton’s work suffered for the lack of an experienced professional mentor who could help her develop her career and, more importantly, her skills as a lyricist. As I noted in Chapter 2, a period of apprenticeship was not

⁵⁸ A short list of Jewish songwriters in the musical includes Jerome Kern, Irving Berlin, George and Ira Gershwin, Burton Lane, Lorenz Hart, Richard Rodgers, Dorothy Fields, Betty Comden, Adolph Green, Carolyn Leigh, Leonard Bernstein, Jerome Robbins, and Stephen Sondheim. See Kenneth Aaron, *The Jews on Tin Pan Alley: The Jewish Contribution to American Popular Music: 1830-1940* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1982).

⁵⁹ McGovern, *Americans in the Great Depression*, 276.

⁶⁰ Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria*, 17.

⁶¹ Most, “The Politics of Race in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *South Pacific*,” 310.

uncommon in the American musical theatre; those musical theatre professionals who were not scions of show business (like Oscar Hammerstein II) were encouraged by more seasoned professionals. Hamilton worked with several powerful figures, such as producer Max Gordon, designer Jo Mielziner, and director Josh Logan, and she appealed to all of them for advice on her writing, but none of them gave her more than a superficial response to her work and none worked with her as a protégé.⁶² When Hamilton sent a draft of *Maggie Here* to Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein soliciting their criticism, she was given the brush-off by a secretary who wrote, “You caught the boys at an impossible time. Dick Rodgers is the only one of the two who has read it. He might make some sense on it if you were to catch him on the phone. I’m sorry we have been so slow and unhelpful.”⁶³ Hammerstein did not read the script at all.⁶⁴

⁶² Hamilton claimed that Gordon hired her to act in *Pride and Prejudice* to mollify her after refusing to look at her new musical, *The Water Gypsies*. Leavitt, “From College to Stage Career.” Through *Pride and Prejudice*, Hamilton became friendly with designer Jo Mielziner, who later gained fame as the set designer for productions including *Death of a Salesman*, *Carousel*, *South Pacific*, and *Gypsy*. In a letter in 1937 asking for the rights to the novel of *The Water Gypsies*, Hamilton stated that she consulted Mielziner, who went over the script a “couple of years ago, and made an estimate of the cost of production.” Nancy Hamilton, New York, 21 July 1937, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection. Hamilton met Logan through Morgan Lewis and they developed a connection when he staged *Two for the Show* ten years before his run-away success with *Annie Get Your Gun*. Joshua Logan, *Josh: My Up and Down, In and Out Life* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1976), 118. In the 1950s Logan earned prestige and connections in musical theatre circles, directing works by Richard Rodgers, Oscar Hammerstein II, Irving Berlin, and Dorothy Fields. But although Hamilton had an extended social relationship with both Mielziner and Logan, neither helped her become part of their powerful communities of musical theatre professionals.

⁶³ John Fearnley, The Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein Organization, New York, to Nancy Hamilton, New York, 12 September 1950, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

Hamilton also appealed to Crawford and Theresa Helburn for advice on how to market *Maggie Here*.⁶⁵ Crawford offered to advise Hamilton, writing:

As you may imagine, I am bushed after six steady months of *Paint your Wagon*. I cant [sic] face another musical this year, but I may have a sort of advisory capacity on one that I instigated. I don't think it's fair to authors to listen to a work I can't undertake now, but if there is any other reason you might wish me to hear it, for like advice, I'll be available after next week.⁶⁶

But rather than giving her the tools to fix this and her future work, Crawford rejected the musical wholesale because of its British themes and, when Hamilton submitted the script again six years after her original appeal, Crawford simply recommended that Hamilton send it to British producer Toby Rowland.⁶⁷ Helburn gave Hamilton even less assistance; a secretary wrote, "Miss Helburn asked me to tell you that she thought MAGGIE HERE was very charming but not exactly the sort of thing the Guild wanted to do this year."⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Instead his wife, Dorothy, wrote to Hamilton to offer her criticism. Dorothy Hammerstein, Boston, to Nancy Hamilton, 15 March 1951, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

⁶⁵ Crawford, for example, produced the revival of *Porgy and Bess*, as well as *One Touch of Venus*, *Brigadoon*, *Love Life*, *Regina*, and *Paint Your Wagon*. Under Helburn's direction, the Theatre Guild produced *Carousel*, *Allegro*, and a revival of *Oklahoma!*.

⁶⁶ Cheryl Crawford, New York, to Nancy Hamilton, New York, 15 November 1951, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

⁶⁷ Crawford wrote, "Yes, the book is still fun but honestly it seems much too British to me for popular consumption. It might interest my friend Toby Rowland in London and if you're interested I'll be glad to put you in touch." Cheryl Crawford, New York, to Nancy Hamilton, 9 May 1957, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection York.

⁶⁸ Eunice R. Scott, Secretary to Theresa Helburn, New York, to Nancy Hamilton, Vineyard Haven, 10 August 1950, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

In a vituperative letter to Helburn, quoted here in its entirety, Hamilton voiced frustration at her lack of ability to find someone to offer her guidance for her writing:

I am sending this to your Westport address in the hope that it will reach you personally instead of your secretary as I am about to give you a thoughtful criticism which, when I submitted my script to you, is what I hoped for and expected from you. I did not necessarily expect that you would love it or buy it or produce it, but I did expect that you would consider it, and if you did not like it well enough to produce that you would tell me why not. That would have been really helpful. I have been a professional writer for the last sixteen years with sufficient success to have been able to turn down many highly remunerative offers from Hollywood and the radio, though, as you may know, I did one writing stint for MGM and four seasons of radio writing, two for Beatrice Lillie and two for Billie Burke. But I prefer writing for the theater and would rather struggle on to that end than make money from hackwork, as would many other writers I am sure, if they were given proper consideration and criticism from reputable producers. Who else can we turn to for this kind of help and advice? Once, at the request of Katharine Cornell you were kind enough to listen to the scores of *MARY POPPINS* and *THREE TO MAKE READY*, and during the out-of-town tryouts of *THREE TO MAKE READY* you very graciously wrote to me and asked that I submit something to you. It never occurred to me when I called you early in July and asked if you would like to read *MAGGIE HERE* that it would take six weeks to hear a word from you, in spite of two urgent wires from me, or that when I did hear, the message would be the usual from a secretary saying only 'it is very charming but'. Apart from myself, I believe this kind of impersonal dismissal of a script, is not only discouraging and angering to a reputable writer, but also harmful to the theater, which, we are told, is crying out for writers. I realize how many scripts pour into your office, and how pressed for time you are, and want you to know it, in the hope that this honest outburst from me may benefit other playwrights. Producers exist only because there are playwrights, and playwrights would cease to exist if producers were no longer interested in them. Thus ends this tantrum and I am glad, for I have high respect for the Guild, and I would like to believe this letter will bear fruit, and a mutual respect will be recaptured.⁶⁹

Under the guise of defending fledgling playwrights, Hamilton expressed her anger and confusion. Her outrage at Helburn's lack of personal attention and her reference to

⁶⁹ Nancy Hamilton, Vineyard Haven, to Theresa Helburn, Westport, CT, 15 August 1950, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

Cornell's request, which Helburn ignored, suggests that Hamilton had realized that her connection to Cornell was not opening doors for her in the mid-century musical theatre.

In fact, Cornell was, simultaneously, both the greatest asset and the greatest detriment to Hamilton's career. Cornell's name did open some doors for Hamilton and their association placed Hamilton within, if not a wide professional circle, at least a social circle of some of the most important figures of the first half of the twentieth century – people with whom Hamilton likely could not have cavorted on her own. Cornell's world also developed into a tight social/professional network, the core of which was Cornell, Hamilton, Macy, Forbes, and actress Margalo Gillmore. These women helped Hamilton achieve the limited success she enjoyed. Additionally, Cornell's wealth freed Hamilton from the need to write solely for financial gain – Hamilton could explore professional avenues that interested her without worrying about how she would support herself.

However, Cornell's wealth and willingness to bankroll Hamilton personally (if not professionally) also may have encouraged Hamilton's dilettantism. The financial stability Cornell provided allowed Hamilton to leave projects incomplete. Although Hamilton did have financial downturns that required her to borrow money from her mother, she did not pursue theatre to make a living. But in return for personal financial support, Cornell demanded Hamilton's time, which drove Hamilton further away from her work. Considering the decline in Hamilton's level of productivity and output after her relationship with Cornell began, it seems likely that Cornell freed Hamilton to approach theatre as an avocation, rather than as a vocation.

Further, Hamilton was constrained by the very network that was at the core of her professional and personal life. In spite of the vast number of Cornell's associates, Forbes

wrote, “[Cornell’s] private life was unglamorous and ungrand. She had very few intimates but the friends she had were showered with generosity and caring.”⁷⁰ Although guests constantly thronged to Chip-Chop, Cornell let few into her inner sanctum. As Hamilton solidified her place in Cornell’s world, Cornell’s network closed in on her. In Hamilton’s diaries from the 1950s, almost every entry mentions drinks or dinner with some combination of Cornell, Macy, Forbes, and (occasionally) Gilmore. Forbes and Macy both bought houses on Martha’s Vineyard near Hamilton and Cornell. This circle limited Hamilton from making vital professional connections outside of Cornell’s world.

Even more importantly, Hamilton frequently put her own career on hold to assist Cornell, working on productions with Cornell or as her personal secretary. In order to write the *Katharine Cornell Jamboree* and travel with Cornell on the U.S.O. tour, Hamilton postponed writing her own revue material. In the summer of 1955, Gertrude Macy tried to encourage Hamilton to again concentrate on her own material: “I am delighted to learn that at last you are settling down to a little hard work on your own behalf. The world is waiting for another revue from your hand and I, personally, am expecting this to be the Pearl in the series” (emphasis in original).⁷¹ But a few months after Macy’s letter Hamilton attempted to justify her inactivity to her agent by corresponding about the responsibilities she assumed during one of Cornell’s illnesses:

Kit is coming along well, but taking her time and I -- apart from all else -- have in the last week with the help for five days of a secretary answered over five hundred letters and telegrams. The secretary has now departed

⁷⁰ Forbes, *Five Minutes, Miss Forbes*, 218.

⁷¹ Gertrude Macy, New York, to Nancy Hamilton 5 July 1955, Nancy Hamilton Papers, The Sophia Smith Collection.

and I am on my own with another fifty to answer, so no more of this [promoting the Keller documentary] for now.⁷²

Throughout her career Hamilton, was continually too occupied with Cornell to concentrate fully on her own work.

Hamilton also frequently diminished her own abilities in order to accentuate the star in the relationship. In a letter referencing Cornell's rehearsals for the narration of the Keller documentary, Hamilton insisted that Cornell have final approval over *her* dialogue:

And no matter how polished...a script, it cannot be the final thing until Kit has had at least one go at it for us all to see what words best suit her, and what passages are sufficiently enhanced by her voice to keep them in and what passages not even she can save.⁷³

In another example, Hamilton responded to a letter from Rosemary Casey, one of her collaborators on the 1934 *Return Engagement*, who asked her to introduce the Keller documentary to a woman's charity in Pittsburgh, writing, "I don't think anyone is going to want to hear from me with Kit sitting in the same hall."⁷⁴ Even after Casey responded, "You know how much publicity we could get from a personal appearance of Kit's, but as you have never done anything in Pittsburgh, I doubt if you can imagine how much publicity we could get from a native who had had three revues on Broadway," Hamilton's speech at the event began, "My name is Nancy Hamilton and by a happy set of circumstances I find myself today a sort of preamble to your afternoon with Katharine

⁷² Nancy Hamilton, Boston, to Al Butterfield and Thomas Wolf, New York, 15 October, 1955, Nancy Hamilton Papers, The Sophia Smith Collection.

⁷³ Nancy Hamilton, Pasadena, to Nella Braddy Henney, 27 February 1953, Nancy Hamilton Papers, The Sophia Smith Collection.

⁷⁴ Nancy Hamilton, Martha's Vineyard, to Rosemary Casey, Pittsburgh, 11 June 1960, Nancy Hamilton Papers, The Sophia Smith Collection.

Cornell.”⁷⁵ And, as she did with Lillie and Burke, Hamilton allowed Cornell’s name to appear on work that she wrote. Cornell is listed as the author of the introduction to *The Open Door*, a selection of excerpts of Helen Keller’s writing published in 1957, but early drafts are on Hamilton’s letterhead and in her hand.⁷⁶

So intertwined were Cornell’s and Hamilton’s social and professional lives that Hamilton seemed to have difficulty defining herself apart from Cornell. An undated note to actress Lillian Gish, on stationery engraved with “KC” (for Katharine Cornell) included a sketched-in “NH.” And the card’s inscription expresses the union of the two women:

Dearest Lillian

What more can we say!

Love,

Kit and Nancy⁷⁷

In many ways this note is a metaphor for their relationship. Although always linked for their friends, Hamilton did not really exist officially. Even with friends Hamilton was an appendage, sketched in next to Cornell’s star. Perhaps the ultimate tyranny of Hamilton’s closet was that, even after Cornell’s death, Hamilton had not found an identity for herself. After Cornell’s obituary in the *New York Times* stated that Cornell

⁷⁵ Rosemary Casey, Pittsburgh, to Nancy Hamilton, Martha's Vineyard, 2 October 1960, Nancy Hamilton Papers, The Sophia Smith Collection; Nancy Hamilton, “Draft of Speech for the St. Lucy Auxiliary to the Greater Pittsburgh Guild for the Blind,” n.d., Nancy Hamilton Papers, The Sophia Smith Collection.

⁷⁶ Multiple Drafts of “The Introduction to *The Open Door*,” Nancy Hamilton Papers, The Sophia Smith Collection.

⁷⁷ Katharine Cornell and Nancy Hamilton, to Lillian Gish, n.d., Lillian Gish Papers, The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

left her estate to “her secretary, Nancy Hamilton,” Hamilton received a letter from a curator of the State University of New York’s art museum. The letter addressed Hamilton as Cornell’s former secretary and requested the loan of a watercolor Cornell owned.⁷⁸ In the first response Hamilton drafted, she replied, ““I would have been happy to be Miss Cornell’s valet- (secretary that is) - except that I could only type out, extremely badly, my own plays and musicals and film scripts.””⁷⁹ Hamilton then drafted a second letter, and she shifted away from bitterness at the lack of acknowledgment she received for her own career as she attempted to clarify her relationship with Cornell:

It is unfortunate that the United Press report of Katharine Cornell’s will gives a distorted picture of our relationship. I was not her secretary. I was her friend who with other friends enjoyed answering letters for her when she wasn’t feeling well or had too much to do, and though I indeed inherited the “bulk” of her estates that “bulk” was mainly the house we shared, that I am struggling to keep and maintain as it was when she was alive.⁸⁰

In the second letter Hamilton comes close to asking for public acknowledgment of her position in Cornell’s life, but she still hedges when it comes to full disclosure. Both these drafts (neither of which resemble the final draft) show Hamilton struggling to find the words to define appropriately for the public the nature of her relationship with Cornell and the nature of her life and career apart from and with Cornell.

⁷⁸ “Obituary of Katharine Cornell,” *The New York Times*, 9 July 1974, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

⁷⁹ Draft 1 of Letter, Nancy Hamilton, Martha's Vineyard, to Edna Linderman, Buffalo, 1974, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection. Hamilton hand-wrote these drafts and a number of words were scratched out with words written over them, indicating how she struggled to write these letters.

⁸⁰ Draft 2 of Letter, Nancy Hamilton, Martha's Vineyard, to Edna Linderman, Buffalo, 1974, Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

Hamilton struggled to define her career –a secretary, a songwriter, an actress, a filmmaker, Cornell’s close friend – because she never found a niche or developed a consistent stance that could guide her work. When she first arrived in New York she fancied herself a theatre aesthete, and she publicly denigrated commercial theatre. She also derided Hollywood screenwriting as hack work. But at the same time she seemed to have little use for the more experimental strains of New York theatre. In the early 1930s, Hamilton wrote the poem “Willowy Hilary Wilberforce or A Stage Struck Boy,” which satirized the pretenses of the non-commercial theatre:

Willowy Hilary Wilberforce was mad about the stage
.....
And he loved to go down to the Provincetown, and sit in an old red blazer.
Or toddle around to Fourteenth Street to bask in aesthetic glory.
And shake his hair in the cloistered air of the Civic Repertory
His parents were fairly liberal, but they did begin to droop
When they saw their boy, their expected joy, take an interest in the Group
.....
And it seemed so bad to Hilary’s dad that they finally called the doctor
.....
No cure prevails for that which ails your Hilary, as I see it.
Save one recourse, Mrs. Wilberforce, but I do not guarantee it
Make him go seven times to every show of Elmer Rice’s
And make him pay at every play that’s selling at cut-rate prices;
Send him to “Strike Me Pink” the day of Miss Cornell’s arrival,
And make him sit in the front row pitt [sic], at each Shakespeare revival.⁸¹

Hamilton was not a writer for the masses, yet neither was she an innovator. With the notable exception of the work of her friends, she seemed to harbor resentment toward most facets of both the commercial and noncommercial stage. In an undated poem, Hamilton took aim at the matinee crowd who peopled the audience of popular theatre.

⁸¹ Nancy Hamilton, “Willowy Hilary Wilberforce or A Stage Struck Boy,” n.d., Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection. Although there is no date, the address on the letterhead indicates this was written around 1934.

I heard two ladies at a play
A comedy considered witty
It was a Wednesday matinee
And they had come from Garden City.
Their frocks were rather Arts and Crafts
And they had lunched, I heard, at Shrafts
Although we did not speak or bow
Or comment even on the weather
.....
So much I heard of strange and true
Almost reconciled me to
The fact, unseemly to recall
I did not hear the play at all.⁸²

As a writer of the musical, Hamilton's attitude toward the Garden City set was, in essence, biting the hand that fed her. But her obstinate refusal to adapt to popular trends to appease a mass audience, or to break new theatrical ground, made her career difficult for audiences and critics to understand.

In several areas, Hamilton failed to take strong positions, instead presenting the public a series of ambivalent statements. She refused to champion populist theatre but she distained "high art." She denigrated pap entertainment but lacked a guiding mission for her own work. She was not a member of Crawford's club or the leftist ralliers of the Greenwich Village set, but she provided no alternative to their vision of what the world and theatre should be. She refused to take a political stand; after the wags railed against *One for the Money*, she waffled between saying she was in support of the right and claiming to be apolitical. She both claimed and denied she was a child delivered by the Stork Club. She emulated the members of the Algonquin Round Table, but could not put their acerbic voices into her song lyrics. As the first lady to the First Lady of American

⁸² Nancy Hamilton, "Untitled Poem," n.d., Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

theatre, Hamilton was a star who hid behind the scenes when Cornell required it. She vacillated in the image she chose to present for the media and the public. With the notable exception of the photo from *Colliers* mentioned in chapter 2, Hamilton posed for publicity shots couifed and wearing a dress, photos that were accompanied and contradicted by newspaper descriptions of Hamilton’s boyishness. When newspapers hounded Hamilton about the prospect of marriage, she hedged, admitting to no “heart interests” and stated, “I have always preferred my own freedom. I am the individual versus the state of matrimony.”⁸³ But in another article Hamilton advised college girls, “to find a man, raise a family and become a good cook.”⁸⁴

Hamilton may well have been continuing to act the slippery trickster, a role she rehearsed at Smith. But, for a public that needed to define its stars in terms of categories, Hamilton never found her role. She was not a fledgling starlet, a femme fatale, a Broadway grand dame, an ingénue, an Amazon, a matron, or a glamour girl. Even figures like Garbo and Hepburn, who broke away from some of these categories, created public images so strong they blazed the trail to create new categories. Hamilton, conversely, harbored so many contradictions that the public could neither understand nor embrace her – thus she became invisible. Hamilton was, at times, a trickster, a liar, a contradiction, a ventriloquist, a cipher, but, as no one knew for what she stood, she could be an icon for nothing. Ultimately, Nancy Hamilton of Sewickley was an enigma that the public and history never really could know.

⁸³ Francis, “Candid Close-Ups”; Bald, “Bachelor Girl Makes Good on Broadway.”

⁸⁴ Boltinoff, “Theatrical Sideshow.”

Epilogue: Choices

I could have gone to St. Moritz

.....

Or trod the beach at Biarritz
With such a nice young man.

I could have tossed my life aside
And give his pleasant way
All legalized and sanctified
By law, by church, by lay.

Instead of “can” I answered “can’t”
And so my chance was gone
I kicked myself in either pant
And went serenely on.

“Lines to a Simple Choice,” Nancy Hamilton¹

At the end of my dissertation I return to the same question with which I started – why write about Nancy Hamilton? The issue of choice is a resonant one, as it is choice that links Hamilton and me. Like all figures, Nancy Hamilton made a series of choices that affected her career trajectory. She also made choices that affected how the public, the media, her friends, her colleague, and, perhaps most critically, history would perceive her. Unlike the title to Hamilton’s poem, none of those choices was simple.

As the historian, I also had to make difficult choices as I struggled to make meaning from Hamilton’s choices. What story would I choose to tell? At my prospectus defense my committee asked me what this study would be -- a compensatory biography, a queer history, or a history of the musical theater. In the case of Hamilton, I could not separate these three types of history – all strands of her story inform each other in such a way that Hamilton emerges as the sum of her choices. Nancy Hamilton was a Broadway

¹ Nancy Hamilton, Draft of “Lines to a Simple Choice”, n.d. (circa the early 1930s), Nancy Hamilton Papers (unprocessed), The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

lyricist, an actress, a playwright, a filmmaker, an author, a lesbian, a conservative, a Smith graduate, a debutante, a patriot, a friend, a lover, a secretary. Her story is about this fascinating convergence of identities in conversation in a historical moment.

However, because Hamilton's choices often seem in conflict, she poses a number of challenges to historians. In and of itself, neither Hamilton's reluctance to champion feminism nor her conservative politics is especially unusual. Natalie Barney and her Paris salons created a mythos of the "rich and indulged" lesbian expatriate, and, in the landmark *Lesbian Images*, Jane Rule wrote, "Gertrude Stein could not align herself with the cause of women...or support the women's movement. 'Not that she at all minds the cause of women or any other cause but it does not happen to be her business.'² Radclyffe Hall also favored conservative politics, and like her character, Stephen Gordon, cloaked herself in the fashions and lifestyle of the landed gentry.³ But Stein and Hall shrouded themselves in the privilege of stratified class systems and both used their writing to advocate their political causes. Conversely, Hamilton, as a lesbian, who was nurtured in the all-girls environs of Smith and who made a living writing rightist material during Broadway's most leftist era, is a case study of the lesbian who rails against expectations. Thus, Hamilton challenges the historian to ask about the space queer history gives to figures who did not publicly commit to a queer identity or whose politics went against that identity. How can the historian choose to understand the contradiction within a woman who maintained a transgressive lifestyle and a conservative political belief system? What role does a person who was not a crusader play in the history of a

² Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank: Paris*, 174; Jane Rule, *Lesbian Images* (Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1975), 72.

³ Castle, *Noel Coward and Radclyffe Hall*, 67.

marginalized group? Theorist Tamsin Wilton asserts, “at times sub-cultural groups or behaviors [are] marginalized within an already existing marginality.”⁴ What is the danger when the historian marginalizes, buries, or simply cannot identify a member of an othered subculture who does not conform to the group?

Further, although Hamilton did not choose to construct her image around a queer identity, recent efforts to recuperate queer history must not ignore her story, because she is a “degree of separation” in a large system of women with overlapping networks of business, friendship, and romance. Although several recent studies document the covert romantic and professional lives of the greatest women stars of the first half of the twentieth century, the histories of women of lesser stature than Garbo, Dietrich, Le Gallienne, and Cornell remain unexplored. But women who were not stars also played important roles in the “sewing circle.” As historians unearth more strands of this web of women, its level of complexity becomes clearer. Six degrees of separation closes into two and one degree, and the stories of women like Hamilton become a sort of “secret decoder ring” to uncovering the lives and careers of an active Old Girls’s Network on Broadway. Bringing even small components of this subaltern world to light may encourage other historians to make connections with their own research that would allow for a fuller picture of the ways women worked in the commercial theatre of the mid-twentieth century.

Hamilton also emerges as a case study for how to evaluate the career of a musical theatre failure. How can a failed musical speak volumes about a political or cultural climate that refused to acknowledge it? What do historians lose when the failed

⁴ Wilton, *Lesbian Studies*, 62.

musicals, as they often are, are hidden from the public and history? What can a person's inability to adapt to a form or find a voice say about some of the generic patterns of the musical?

Additionally, Hamilton informs the ways historians can choose to consider the careers of other women lyricists not yet inducted into the musical theatre pantheon. When historians do remember women lyricists, those women are often considered anomalies in a profession dominated by men. Thus, these women tend to be heralded as individuals -- every woman was a "first." Nancy Hamilton's obituary called her one of the first women to win success on Broadway. Lyricist Betty Comden said of Dorothy Fields, "She was the woman songwriter.... She did it all as the lone female amid the old-boy club of legends that gave us the American songbook."⁵ Newspapers called Ann Ronell "the nation's leading female songwriter."⁶ None of these women lyricists arrived like Athena from the head of Zeus, but because the networks which have connected the women remains invisible, history has been reluctant to link women lyricists and their *collective* contributions to the early twentieth century American musical theatre. Although not as successful as someone like Dorothy Fields, Hamilton is an invisible piece of a large and complex puzzle. Making women like Hamilton visible helps bring to light the ways historians can choose to understand the skill women lyricists used to negotiate a patriarchal and, often misogynistic, world.

⁵ "Nancy Hamilton, Lyricist, 76, Dies," *New York Times*, 19 February 1985; Winer, *The Life and Lyrics of Dorothy Fields*, xi.

⁶ Unidentified newspaper clipping, Ann Ronell, Clippings in the Theatre Collections, The Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

Hamilton's upper-class leanings and Republican politics may have cast her as an other within the otherness of the women's lesbian circles on Broadway. Her lack of success with genre and content shifts in the musical has relegated her to a footnote in musical theatre histories. But as current scholarly trends endeavor to resurrect both queer history and musical theatre scholarship, which, for different reasons, have both been relegated to the margins of their fields, it is worthwhile to consider those who have been doubly marginalized in these discussions and to discover what they can offer to the discourse as a whole.

Hamilton did not make simple choices, and it may be that her choices cost her a career and, even (or especially) in this day of recuperative history, her legacy. But there is value in liberating her from her historical closet. Although some of "her words may be wrong," somewhere there's Hamilton's music. It is well worth remembering.

Appendix A: Career Chronology

1908	Born in Sewickley, PA
1927-1928	Attended the Sorbonne in Paris
1928-1930	Attended Smith College
1930	Wrote lyrics for, performed in, and directed <i>And So On</i> at Smith College
1930-1931	Performed <i>And So On</i> for Junior League groups
1932	Understudied for Katharine Hepburn in <i>The Warrior Husband</i>
1933-1934	Wrote lyrics for and performed in <i>New Faces of 1934</i>
1934	Wrote lyrics and book for <i>Return Engagement</i> , which in 1938 was adapted into the film <i>Fools for Scandal</i>
1934	Began to ghostwrite material for Beatrice Lillie
1934	Began her collaboration with composer Morgan Lewis
1934	Wrote the lyrics and book for a musical adaptation of <i>The Water Gipsies</i> (unproduced musical comedy)
1935	Performed in <i>Pride and Prejudice</i>
1936	Performed in <i>The Women</i>
1937	Wrote lyrics for and performed in <i>One for the Money</i>
1940	Wrote lyrics for <i>Two for the Show</i>
1940s	“How High the Moon” becomes a hit song
1942	Worked on screenplay for Cole Porter’s <i>DuBarry Was a Lady</i>
1943	Ghostwrote Billie Burke’s radio shows
1944-1945	Traveled with Cornell’s company on a USO tour
1946	Wrote lyrics for <i>Three to Make Ready</i>

- mid 1940s Wrote *Our Best Girl* with Helen Hokinson (unproduced play)
- mid 1940s Wrote lyrics for an adaptation of *Mary Poppins* (unproduced book musical)
- mid 1940s Wrote lyrics for *Maggie Here* (unproduced musical book musical)
- 1952 Compiled her revue material into *Three to One*
- 1952 Began work on *Helen Keller in her Story*
- 1955 Won Academy Award for documentary *Helen Keller in Her Story*
- 1972 *Three to One* produced by the off-Broadway Equity Library Theatre Company
- 1974 Katharine Cornell died
- 1985 Nancy Hamilton died

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