

How Love Conquered a Convent: Catholicism and Gender Disorder on the 1830s Stage



In March 1838, theatergoers in St. Louis were coaxed out into the bitter March cold with the promise of a new comedy, *Pet of the Petticoats*. It was set in a French convent and starred local favorite Eliza Petrie in a breeches role as Paul. He is the “pet” of the convent boarders, who are attempting to reunite with soldier husbands. Paul helps to liberate the boarders and unite the lovers, meanwhile engaging in his own adventure and making “love a la *militaire*” to a touring opera star. Petrie’s performance as Paul, which played on the comedy and sexual allure of the actress-as-boy role, made for an “immense” night by the standards of the dismal season.

It also generated some negative publicity in the local paper from a *habitué* of the theater. This critic found *Pet* “abominably gross in language [and] implying

a slur upon one of the institutions of a numerous and highly respectable sect of Christians." St. Louis had a long-established and thriving Catholic community, a recently completed cathedral, as well as a small convent school. Another theatergoer wrote in defending the comedy. He noted its popularity with women theatergoers, a sign that it did not offend "the female ear." And to "put at rest the question of its moral tendency," he clarified that the "plot of the 'Pet' is *not* derived from the story of *Maria Monk*," the bestselling 1836 exposé of the sexual crimes committed in a Montreal convent. *This* was the moral offense and insult to Catholicism, rather than a light satire on convent life. *Pet* had nothing to do with the prurient anti-Catholic literature of dubious authenticity flying off American bookshelves. Or did it?

NATIONAL THEATRE!
 MR. W. M. FLEMING, MANAGER

PRICE OF ADMISSION.
 Dress Circle and Parquet 50 cts Family Circle 25 cts
 Gallery 15 cts Private Boxes \$5.00
 Doors open at 7 o'clock. The Theatre will commence promptly at 7 1/2.

ADIEU TO BOSTON!
Farewell Benefit
 AND POSITIVELY LAST APPEARANCE OF
 The Accomplished Comedienne and Vocalist,
MRS CHARLES HOWARD!
 WHO WILL APPEAR AS
PAUL - - IN THE - - PET OF THE PETTICOATS!
FORTUNIO,
 Which has been received with GREAT ENTHUSIASM.
 Mrs SMITH, Mrs FLEMING, Messrs JORDAN, HILD, CROCKER, CURTIS, MACGREGOR, STODDART and BYRNE, will appear.

WEDNESDAY EVENING, Sept. 28th, 1853.
 Will be performed the Comic Operetta Drama, in 3 acts, by John Balgoin, Bookstown, Eng. entitled

THE PET PETTICOATS!
 OF THE...

PAUL, nicknamed Paul the Pet..... Mrs CHARLES HOWARD
 Charles St Pierre..... Mr G. W. Woodard
 Colonel Malak..... F. G. Crocker
 Military Ensign..... Messrs Jordan
 the Countess..... H. C. Jordan
 Captain Chambliss..... Duffy
 Job the Courtier..... W. H. Curtis
 Title Lordship of the Golden Inn..... C. W. Gold
 Racing Butler..... Westcott
 Captain Achille..... Adams
 Lieutenant Vindex..... Adams
 Captain Fosse..... Adams
 Knight Collet..... Adams
 Lieutenant Cigar..... Adams

THE FAMOUS WOOD-UP, BY THE ORCHESTRA
 To be followed by the celebrated Cantata, arranged from the well-known Poem of Mark Twain, and set to Music by Richard Dimsell, Esq. entitled the

MANIAC!
 In which MRS CHARLES HOWARD IS UNRIVALLED.
 FAVORITE DANCE MISS TAYLOR

After which the celebrated Fairy Extravaganza, in 2 acts founded on the popular Nursery tale by the Countess D'Arno, Dramatized by J. E. Fitzche, Esq. entitled

FORTUNIO!
 AND HIS
SEVEN GIFTED SERVANTS!
 Honorable Miss MYRTINA, (assuming the Name and Arms of Fortunio),..... Mrs CHARLES HOWARD
 The Fairy Fortunio, Patroness, Miss Adams
 Queen and Lady..... Mrs W. M. Fleming
 King of the Fairies..... Mr H. C. Jordan
 Emperor Merga..... W. H. Curtis
 Baron Smerald..... C. W. Gold
 Grand Chamberlain..... Duffy
 Roundabout..... Messrs Jordan
 Lightfoot..... Brockett
 Sirrumball..... Crocker
 Fire-ey..... Adams
 Topsy..... Adams
 Dublaine..... Byrnes
 Muckamuck..... Byrnes
 Prince Minkster..... Westcott

TO-MORROW EVENING,
MR. JOSH SILSBEE!
 THE GREAT BELLEVILLE OF YANKEE CHARACTER, will appear in two of his most celebrated parts. This gentleman's success in London was immense, his Engagements in different Theatres, extending to 300 Nights consecutively.
 TAKE NOTICE.—In compliance with the wish of a large number of the friends of the National Theatre, the Manager begs to announce that for the future the Price of Admission to the

GALLERY WILL BE 12 CENTS!
 "Times" Job Press.—J. H. & F. F. Farrell, Printers, 7 & 9 State St., Boston.

Figure 1: This 1853 playbill illustrates the continued popularity of *Pet of the Petticoats* in the 1850s. I have found evidence that it continued to be produced into the 1870s. National Theatre!: Mr. W.M. Fleming,—Manager. (Boston: "Times"

Job Press, 1853). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

This surprising exchange in the *Missouri Republican* sent me searching for traces of the play on American stages, where I discovered its enduring popularity for at least a half century following its 1835 debut in New York. I found no other evidence of controversy, in St. Louis or elsewhere, which surprised me given that the play first appeared in Boston the spring after the Ursuline Convent riot in Charlestown, Massachusetts. In America, *Pet* would have resonated with the bestselling convent captivity narratives *Six Month in a Convent, Or, the Narrative of Rebecca Theresa Reed* (1835) and *Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery of Montreal* (1836), which cast the convent as a danger to Protestant womanhood and domesticity, exciting prurient interest and controversy. What was the relationship, I wondered, between this “revolt of the convent” and the intensifying anti-Catholicism of the 1830s that scholars have found across Anglo-American print culture? *Pet* offers a tantalizing glimpse at the way comedy translated these themes as light fare.

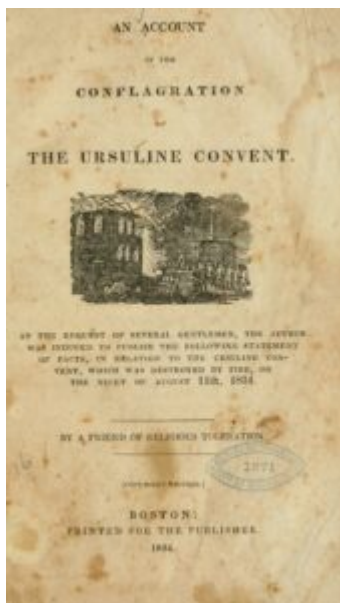


Figure 2: By a Friend of Religious Toleration, *An Account of the Conflagration of the Ursuline Convent* (Boston: [n.p.], 1834). Image, [Library of Congress](#).

Pet of the Petticoats extends the reach of Anglo-Atlantic anti-Catholicism to the stage, illustrating the ways its tropes and anxieties moved across genres and into sentimental stage comedy. The 1832 opera dispenses with villainous priests and nuns of the Gothic drama, instead using the convent setting to dramatize gender gone wrong when women are kept from men and boys are raised in a world of women. Paul’s case highlights the dangers of over-feminization for boys and men, exemplifying how ambivalence about aspects of Protestant culture was often worked out *through* anti-Catholic imagery, as Susan Griffin and Jenny Franchot have shown in their analyses of nineteenth-century literature. If much anti-Catholic literature of the period presented the priest and the convent as a dark mirror reflecting Anglo-Protestant anxieties, this farce mined those anxieties for comedic effect while offering audiences a reassuring moral

conclusion.

Anti-Catholic literature, which crested in the 1830s and 1850s in relation to expanding Catholic communities, mobilized views of Catholicism to grapple with questions about Anglo-Protestant culture, particularly the status of women and the family. A turning point was the 1834 Charlestown riot, when a working-class mob attacked the Ursuline convent, founded in 1827, that was home to student boarders from elite Boston families. The fate of a disaffected nun, who had left and then returned, inspired the attack. Rebecca Reed's unpublished account of her years as a charity student also fueled suspicion of the convent and its role in the community. An estimated two-thousand spectators watched the rioters systematically destroy convent property. In the trial that followed, only one man was found guilty. The victims received no damages, and the convent was never rebuilt.



Figure 3: Ruins of the Ursuline Convent, at Charlestown, Massachusetts, unidentified artist, historical print, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

These events mobilized competing views of new Catholic institutions and communities, but the convent also became a target because it symbolized how America's democratic promise was being corrupted by elites, as Jenny Franchot has argued. The convent represented a danger to American purity in the guise of elite education, an anti-democratic force in America's competitive market society, and a threat to the patriarchal family. The fixation on the tyrannical masculine figure of the Mother Superior found in trial testimony and Reed's account policed the boundaries of female authority, which were at the time being reshaped by the Protestant cult of domestic femininity. The year after Reed's account appeared, ghostwriters published Maria Monk's more sensationalistic (and false) account of a Montreal nunnery where priests prostituted novitiates and illegitimate infants were buried in quicklime. This narrative engaged the politics of sexual virtue catalyzed by the moral reform movements of 1830s, asking how women might protect their virtue and secure class stability. *Pet of the Petticoats* spoke to these themes in the form of an English breeches comedy.

Pet exemplifies the transatlantic character of early U.S. theater (and print culture more broadly). It debuted in 1832 as a vehicle for London-based actress-manager Fanny Fitzwilliam adapted by John Baldwin Buckstone. Like many of Buckstone's comedies, *Pet* derived from a continental European source, a French vaudeville based on Jean-Baptiste-Louis Gresset's poem "Vert-Vert," about a bird who disrupts a convent with the blasphemy he learns from sailors. The bird learns reform, as does the boy protagonist at the center of the French original, in Buckstone's version an actress-boy role. In England as in America, the piece was popular, enjoyed for its "wit" and "excellent moral lesson," according to the London *Theatrical Observer*. *Pet* was initially marketed as "The Convent of St. Eloi, or the Pet of the Petticoats," though by the time it reached the United States in 1835, it was usually billed simply as "Pet of the Petticoats," which highlighted the problem of the protagonist's upbringing in a world of women.



Figure 4: Fanny Fitzwilliam painted by George Henry Harlow between 1807-1819, George Henry Harlow, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

In the absence of dramatic copyright law in the U.S., English plays were regularly imported, adapted, and produced by American theater companies. *Pet* first began appearing in U.S. theaters in 1835, usually selected by leading actresses for their benefit night, when performers could decide the repertoire and take a cut of the house. Benefit nights gave actresses an opportunity to try new roles and were often used to debut a new piece, like the English comic opera recently published in London. *Pet* was deemed the "sensation of the season" in Boston and New York in the spring of 1835, but it received little critical attention as it was not literary drama. This is unfortunate given the ways it surely resonated in the aftermath of the Ursuline riot and American convent captivity narratives, which might have been a factor in its selection.

MISS WATSON begs leave respectfully to inform her friends and the public, that her BENEFIT is fixed for Thursday, May 21, when will be presented the Operetta of THE PET OF THE PETTICOATS. Music by Mr. Watson. Paul, Miss Watson. After which *Bombastes Furioso*. Destifani, Miss Watson; and A Husband at first sight. Angelica, Miss Watson, with other entertainments. ml5 3:*

Figure 5: An announcement for a benefit performance of the operetta of "The Pet of the Petticoats." "Miss Watson," *Evening Post* (New York), May 19, 1835.

Pet is representative of comic opera and breeches drama in this period, mobilizing essentialist gender roles in a plot celebrating sentimental domestic ideals. The setting is a vaguely foreign, vaguely historical past. Though adapted from a French original, in the American context it spoke directly to concerns of Anglo-American Protestant culture with legitimate family structure, courtship, and sexual virtue. In this play as in broader anti-Catholic literature, the convent represents a threat to the institution of marriage and raises questions about legitimate female authority. Its borders have been separated from their husbands and must live behind high walls and locked gates under control of the Mother Superior. The "under governess," Sister Vinaigre, whose name evokes the dried-up spinster deprived of marital sexuality, "does nothing but watch and torment the poor young girls from morning till night." All is not as it seems: Vinaigre is carrying on a clandestine romance with the dancing instructor, Monsieur Zephyr.

By casting the protagonist, Paul, as a breeches role, the piece highlights the convent as a site of gendered disorder: wives kept from husbands, and a boy raised as a girl and infantilized by the convent borders. Paul's mother has sent him to the convent to be "educated in innocence, and brought up as pure and as virtuous as a girl" because "his father was a sad rake." The result, the convent gardener jokes, is that "he don't know whether he is a boy or girl." Paul evokes the androgyne prominent in anti-Catholic imagery but also in Protestant writing concerned with the proper way to raise sons. Alas for his mother's intentions, he tries to emulate the arts of seduction, producing a comedy of gendered errors where the actress likewise tries but ultimately fails at manhood. Actress Charlotte Watson was praised for her chaste performance as Paul, an indication that she conveyed innocence rather than knowingness, enhancing Paul's feminine youth.



Figure 6: While no image of an actress as Paul survives, this portrait suggests the qualities Charlotte Watson brought to similar breeches roles. George Endicott, lithographer, *Miss Watson. As Celio in the Opera of Native Land* (New York: Firth & Hall, [1835]). *Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.*

The allure and humor of actress-as-boy roles like Paul relied on the association of youth and immaturity with femininity. Though *Pet* is unusual in following Paul through a coming-of-age tale and hints at his burgeoning manhood, the character fails in his approximation of adult masculinity. For the audience at least, Paul's essential femininity is never in doubt. (Some dramatic actresses did take on adult male leads like Hamlet, Romeo, and Ion to critical acclaim, roles otherwise intended for actors.) While breeches acting had a clear heterosexist allure, resting on fixed notions of gender difference and infantilization of women, these roles gave actresses new realms of expression and stage business, like combat. And while male theatergoers were avid fans of actresses who played roles like Paul, the excitement of watching a young woman wear the breeches and, in the case of Paul, satirize male libertinage also entertained women in the audience. Roles like Paul were innocuous, if somewhat racy fun, because their morals reinforced contemporary gendered order. *Pet* reassured viewers of the natural desire for domesticity even as it titillated audiences with a ribald celebration of male libertinage.

Paul's failed attempt at sexual conquest shows the consequences of his innocence, a product of over-feminization. Paul arrives at an inn, where he discovers the soldiers entertained by opera star Madame Bravura. Paul has no context for the world of adult sexual vice and cannot even explain his attraction to Bravura. He overhears the soldiers discussing the arts of seduction and decides to win Bravura by attempting "love *a la militaire*." He follows the advice of Chevalier St. Pierre: "the cooler she may appear, the warmth of your fervor should increase; if she repulses you, charge again—hem her in—take her round the wait—kiss her—she'll scream—never heed that—but call for a delicate dinner and a dozen of Champagne" and "the victory is yours."

When Paul tries to caress and kiss Bravura, she is “repulsed.” The scene made light of seduction techniques practiced by male libertines yet gave its actresses a rare opportunity to satirize male sexual aggression. (In one of the French versions, Paul’s love interest Mimi finds and intercepts him in successful pursuit of the opera singer. He becomes the caged parrot rather than an innocent cupid reuniting lovers.)



Paul. If I'm not doing right, tell me, for I'm leaning with
intention on this fair hand I swear —
Ah, I thought — When do I see — I'm sure I should! Get
up, sit, get up, or I'll tell your notes.
Act 6.

Digitized by Google

THE PET
OR
THE PETTICOATS:
AN OPERA,
IN THREE ACTS.
BY
JOHN BALDWIN BUCKSTONE
PERFORMED AT
THE THEATRE ROYAL, DRURY LANE.
The Music by JOHN BARRETT.
LONDON:
WILLIAM STRANGE, PATERNOSTER BOW.
1834.

Digitized by Google

Figure 7a and 7b: John Baldwin Buckstone, *The Pet of the Petticoats; An Opera, in Three Acts* (London: William Strange, 1834), 2-3, collected in John Baldwin Buckstone, *Popular Dramas by John Baldwin Buckstone as Performed at the Metropolitan Theatres* (London: William Strange, 1835), digital image, [Google Books](#).

Pet pokes fun at efforts to discipline urban sexual culture. Soldiers separated from their wives by the convent’s “squadron of governesses”—note the

masculinization—were expected to pursue illicit romance. The play assured audiences that while male libertinage could not be prevented, neither was it a threat to domesticity. The play concludes with a tidy moral: Paul offers to help the soldiers liberate their wives but only if they agree to “no more assignations with ladies.” The bonds of marriage to a virtuous woman will properly channel male sexual desire. Paul asks for forgiveness from the Mother Superior by affirming the natural order disrupted by the convent: “I have but restored husbands to their wives, and wives to their husbands; and those who have been once united in Hymen’s bonds, we are instructed never to put asunder.” The play also resolves the problem of Paul’s “feminine education.” He promises himself to the boarder Mimi but asks her to wait for him while he joins the army. With Paul destined to a proper masculine education prior to marriage, all sing “the conqueror love smiles on us now.”

The convent as a site of mystery, seduction, and illicit authority are present in *Pet* but rendered ineffectual rather than sinister, like the bumbling gardener or the repressed Sister Vinaigre. For audiences steeped in the dark salaciousness of convent captivity literature, *Pet* represented a lighter fantasy of revolt against elite conspiracies that threatened men’s legitimate access to American women. With actress-as-boy Paul at the center, the play also spoke to anxieties about over-feminization in middle-class Protestant culture. Paul is a failed boy in a world of cloistered girls and a failed seducer among worldly men. His character both celebrates youthful innocence and satirizes the feminization of American culture, but the revolt of the convent promises to restore him to his proper role.

marital domesticity “conquers all.”

Further Reading

After first learning about *Pet of the Petticoats* in Elizabeth Reitz Mullenix, *Wearing the Breeches: Gender on the Antebellum Stage* (New York: St. Martin's, 2000), I rediscovered the play through the discussion in the *Missouri Republican* in March 1838 while I was researching theater culture in St. Louis, Missouri.

Unfortunately, many of the pieces appearing on American stages from the 1810s to the 1850s, especially short comic afterpieces, never found their way to print. John Baldwin Buckstone's *The Pet of the Petticoats* was unusual in this regard, first published in London in 1834 because of its popularity and then anthologized in *Popular dramas by John Baldwin Buckstone as performed at the Metropolitan theatres*, vol. 1 (London: William Strange, 1835), available through the [Internet Archive](#).

Understanding the play in relation to contemporary anti-Catholicism led me to the following key works: Susan Griffin, *Anti-Catholicism and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Marie Anne Pagliarini, “The Pure American Woman and the Wicket Catholic Priest: An Analysis of Anti-Catholic Literature in Antebellum America,” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 9, no. 1 (Winter, 1999); Timothy Verhoeven, *Transatlantic Anti-Catholicism: France and the United States in the nineteenth century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

Thank you to Kara French for encouraging me to write about this play for the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic Annual Meeting.

This article originally appeared in September, 2022.

Sara E. Lampert is an Associate Professor of History at the University of South Dakota and coordinator of the Women, Gender & Sexuality Studies program. She is the author of *Starring Women: Celebrity, Patriarchy, and American Theater, 1790-1850* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020). Learn more at Saraelampert.com and follow @slampie2.