No Red Blood: Clyde Fitch
and the Staging of the Neurasthenic

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Abstract

Neurasthenia, the disease of “nervousness,” was simultaneously a debilitating ailment and a badge of distinction for the emerging group of “mental workers” that began identifying themselves as experts—the Professional Managerial Class. From 1898 through 1909, American playwright Clyde Fitch presented a compelling series of “neurasthenics” that reflected and embodied the pressures of attaining business success that plagued not only the moneyed elite but also the rising professionals. In Fitch’s plays, the neurasthenics were lawyers or other professionals whose weakness or poor judgment caused the problems that drove the plots. Frequently, the problem entailed stock speculation, a modern variation on the earlier vice of gambling. Fitch’s nervous men helped pave the way for the PMC to recreate “neurasthenia” into one of the great unifying social constructs of the Broadway stage—neurosis. By the time Eugene O’Neill appeared on the scene, PMC critics and audiences were ready to embrace onstage neurosis and to celebrate the beginning of “serious” American drama.

American playwright Clyde Fitch enjoyed a tremendous popularity throughout his career, particularly from the late 1890s until his untimely death in 1909. Along with Fitch’s popularity, however, came a particular kind of personal and professional criticism regarding his supposed “femininity”—a reference to his anxious (and closeted) personal life, as well as an attack on his playwriting abilities. Nevertheless, during a time when the Professional Managerial Class, or PMC, was beginning to identify itself in the cities and in the world of American corporate capitalism, Fitch did a great deal of the heavy lifting in terms of bringing the PMC to Broadway. Fitch’s success, as well as the reservations and objections critics expressed, is tied closely to the phenomenon of neurasthenia. Neurasthenia itself was a condition that gained legitimacy as the emerging Professional Managerial Class strove to legitimize the strain of performing mental, rather than physical, labor. While he dressed too flamboyantly and lived too lavishly to fit comfortably within the emerging PMC, Fitch had one more significant trait, “nervousness,” that shared by both the moneyed elite and the PMC. In the
editorial notes accompanying his collected letters, friends Montrose Moses and Virginia Gerson write of “a shorthand quickness which suited his impulsive and nervous nature,” which is borne out by Fitch’s frequent use of italics and hurried abbreviations (Moses & Gerson, 1924, xiv). Fitch and his friends were all too aware of this neurasthenic quality that they shared, as evidenced by this 1904 letter to Fitch from Maude Adams: “We live so much among people of morbid tendencies, neurasthenics (I can’t spell it), and the like—that we begin to think they are real, and they are real of their kind but it isn’t a red blood kind.” Adams not only spelled the word correctly, but she put her finger on a key PMC problem. Nervousness and neurasthenia would prove significant in Fitch’s work, in future PMC self-identity, and in the future of “modern” American drama. Fitch’s place in the “PMC-ing” of Broadway consists of three elements, or perhaps, three overlapping stages: anti-model, posthumous super-model (the triumph of his final play, The City), and unconscious and largely unheralded pioneer in staging a distinctly PMC type—the neurasthenic.

The first stage, Fitch as anti-model, is the one with which his contemporaries were most familiar. While Fitch claimed that he did not, and did not care to, write for specific actresses⁴, he nevertheless created several winning roles for, among others, Effie Shannon, Ethel Barrymore, Maxine Elliott, Elsie deWolfe, and the unfortunate Clara Bloodgood, who would shoot herself in a theater in Baltimore before a performance of Fitch’s The Truth.⁵ Fitch occasionally wrote male-driven vehicles, most notably his first play, Beau Brummell, for Richard Mansfield, as well as Nat Goodwin’s successful historical piece, Nathan Hale. Until The City, however, critics primarily characterized Fitch and his plays as facile, artificial, superficial, and distinctly feminine.⁶

Fitch’s great subject through the bulk of his career was, in Edith Wharton’s words, “humorous exhibitions of human vacuity”—more specifically, the vacuity exhibited by a particular set of New York society. (Wharton 160-161, qtd. in Loney 22).⁷ For the most part, the Fitch hero (or more often, heroine) could rise above the deadly pettiness to attain a happy ending—a pattern not always to the liking of Fitch, but he would generally bow to either a producer’s demands (usually Charles Frohman’s) or his own sense of what an audience wanted. His output was large, regular (in terms of his plays being performed each season), and generally welcome. This was the Fitch—the “Hustling Histrionicus”—that the New York Sun playfully celebrated in verse: “. . . out of the glittering social grot./ Of the very Fitchiest, fetchingest lot, / Stirred in the scorching society pot, / Hot, / He plucks a wild, weird name and plot” (qtd. in Atkinson, 55-56).

Fitch, for his part, maintained his breakneck schedule of writing, rehearsing, and traveling. By his early 40s, he had shocked Broadway with his frank depiction of a seduction/near-rape in Sappho, and had started to show
audiences more social unpleasantness than “good taste” allowed. He had not, however, convinced critics or general audiences that he could write a “masculine” play. With The City, the story of the rise and moral corruption of a young, hustling politician, Fitch was able to create the play that at last earned him the “capital” of manhood. He did not live to enjoy it.

As a Fitch character, George Rand, Jr. was a relative anomaly—a young, striving male with “the New York bee in his bonnet” who held the center of the play and drove the plot (454). Whether or not Fitch realized this would be his final play, he nonetheless deliberately presented the audience with many distinctly “masculine” signifiers. As Rand, Jr. rises in politics, the local newspapers refer to him as “Teddy, Jr.” (512). Audiences of 1909 immediately knew that “Teddy” could only refer to Theodore Roosevelt, a proponent of vigorous exercise whose character was readily identifiable as manly. The public saw him, in Howard Zinn’s words, as “the great lover of nature and physical fitness, the war hero, the Boy Scout in the White House” (Zinn 351). Strength and masculinity, for Roosevelt, were integral in the fight for Anglo-Saxons to avoid “race suicide”—decadence and effeminacy left the superior races vulnerable to “inferior immigrant stock” (Lears 1981, 30). Fitch’s appropriation of the “T.R.” persona was a direct signifier of manliness, and this was lost on neither audiences nor critics.

Nor did Fitch stop there. He not only had the villain curse (earlier in the play, we also see the drug-addicted villain shooting up), but he included what apparently was the first time the Lord’s name was taken in vain on stage. “You’re a God damn liar!” character actor Tully Marshall uttered as the drug-addicted villain. The line was enough to draw astonished gasps from male and female theatergoers alike. Before the audience had a chance to fully recover from this blasphemy, the villain shoots Rand’s younger sister just as she is about to discover that she has married her half-brother. It could be said that Fitch would overpower the Broadway audience with brute strength, or die trying. As it happened, he did both—Fitch died at age 44, following an emergency appendectomy.

What is particularly significant about The City, aside from its considerable commercial success, is the rush of “manly” (and posthumous) cultural capital the play brought to the approval-hungry Fitch:

For “The City” was to be a challenge to those who had persisted in saying that Fitch was strictly a “feminine” dramatist. It was to be the proof that he could be strong and forceful, fearless and almost Greek in theme. “The audience roared its approval,” said one paper; cheers swept the house from orchestra to balcony. There were combined on that evening the power of the playwright, who was not there, and the power of the actors who at every moment seemed to feel his presence. Another paper declared, “It seems tame to say merely that the play was strong, for in its strongest scene it is tremendous. The play is strong as a
raging bull . . . a hungry tiger . . . This is a play to shudder at . . .‖ There is no exaggeration in saying that hysteria moved that vast audience. Women were removed fainting, and men shouted as the curtain went up and down in response to repeated calls. It was an unprecedented night in the theater. [Moses & Gerson 1924, 385-386]

Indeed, Fitch was “deeply conscious of the fundamental truths of life, and he was eager to put strength into his dialogue in order to offset the delicacy and feminine flashes which the public always considered Fitchean. ‘The City’ was his first, as it proved to be his last, effort in that direction.” (Moses 1925, 326).

This record of audience response to The City, along with the testosterone-loaded metaphors of strength that the critics employed, bears some analysis. The Broadway audience, which included a number of nervous Professional Managerial men, seemed hungry (even starved) for manly displays from the stage heroes and powerful, shocking scenes that made wives and girlfriends faint. Here were no conventional matinee idols to attract “matinee girls” of all ages, nor were there last-minute rescues or intrusions that saved the characters from impropriety and bad taste. The City gave the audience an identifiable “nervous” hero, placed the hero in the depths of degradation heretofore unheard of on Broadway, and certainly unheard of from Fitch himself, and finally, allowed the hero to show the requisite strength to attain a moral (if not material) victory. One can practically hear the young George Rand Jr.’s of the audience, along with the middle-aged men who felt they had once been young George, shouting a rousing, manly cheer of “Bully for Fitch!” shortly before attending to their unconscious spouses and escorts.

While Fitch struggled with, and perhaps at last attained, his own playwriting “manhood,” critics at the time of his death gave him credit for doing almost as much for the American drama. 12 Although, as Moses admitted, by the 1920s Fitch’s plays would already fall out of favor13, the claim is not entirely inaccurate. Nevertheless, it was not so much Fitch’s final display of “masculinity” that paved the way for what the PMC would first acknowledge as “modern American drama,” but rather his display of the male neurasthenic, and the strong females who were arguably more PMC than the men.

The Moth and the Flame, from 1898, represents Fitch’s first major depiction of a fundamentally weak, excitable (i.e., nervous) male figure who, while in many ways well-intentioned, nevertheless causes the key crises that the plucky Fitchean heroine must solve and/or overcome.14 The heroine, Marion Wolton, has the earmarks of American fin-de-siecle modern womanhood—she’s been to college (and studied sociology), and works earnestly with settlement houses and the Y.M.C.A., or, as one of her less enlightened companions calls it, “that Christian thing-a-may-gig” (568). Marion’s natural bent toward “saving” the unfortunate leads her to make an ill-considered love-choice in the wastrel Fletcher, who, it turns out, has not acknowledged his child to a woman he has
not married. The unfortunate young woman, Jeanette, stops the wedding between Fletcher and Marion with the sort of dramatic confrontation Fitch and his audience reveled in: “No! You shall not write Bastard on the forehead of my child!” (576). The cowardly Fletcher reveals his true colors by striking Jeanette in the church, in front of God and everybody. In the rather calmer final act, Marion prevails upon Fletcher to marry Jeanette, and the man Marion should have been with all along, Douglas, appears to take on Marion’s debts, and presumably, Marion herself.

While the play had a respectable 10-week run in New York (cut short by the summer) and a happy touring future, the critical response proved rather ambivalent, particularly regarding the character of Fletcher. As Gerald Bordman comments: “One much voiced complaint . . . was that none of the characters truly enlisted sympathy. The most interesting figure was Fletcher, who seems genuinely willing to put his ugly past behind him and reverts to his baser self only when the woman whom he sees as his sole chance for salvation spurns him” (Bordman 1994, 424). This overview is confirmed by Edward A. Dithmar’s examination of the play about a week after the opening:

We are interested in their [the characters’] actions, but we do not feel heartily for them, nor do we ever even detest them. Perhaps we are all a little sorry for Fletcher when he loses his temper in the church, because that is such a “bad break” for a man of his kind. I think we feel sorry for him, too, when he starts for Europe and Asia just before the last curtain.15

What makes Fletcher so interesting as a character, and the critical response to him of equal interest, is that despite his “baser” actions, he is not (nor was he considered) a “villain.”16 The (limited) “pity” that is evoked in the wedding scene is not for the “meddlesome” (in Dithmar’s words) fallen mother, but for the “bad break” that Fletcher receives in the process. The existence of the double standard regarding men who make impulsive, unfortunate mistakes and “fallen” women is evident17, but there is something else at work as well. The identification of Dithmar and others with Fletcher as a young man attempting to put his past indiscretions behind him and assume a new life, only to be trapped by fate and circumstances, evidences considerable commonality with later, “deeper,” psychologically conflicted heroes of Eugene O’Neill—that is, of “mature” and “modern” American drama.

Nor is Marion Wolton without further interest as a character. Her work with settlement houses, for example, puts her in the midst of the contemporaneous urban reform movement. Marion’s undergraduate sociology degree further aligns her with the PMC “experts” who spearheaded many of the Progressive reforms of the era.18 Fitch’s Marion, drawn to the unfortunate “like the moth to a flame,” could be considered something of a PMC hero(ine). Nevertheless, if PMC hero(ine) she is, Marion’s methods and mindset are
frequently called into question. When, as noted earlier, Marion’s friends chat about her Progressive leanings (and the “Christian thing-a-may-gig”), the joke seems equally upon Marion as it is upon her less well-read (and less socially conscious) friends. Further, Marion’s (motherly?) impulse to reach out to fallen characters almost leads her to a disastrous marriage. For Fitch, as for many playwrights of the period, issues of social consciousness touched upon in his plays would inevitably give way to individual responsibility, as would be the case with *The City*. Nevertheless, Fitch was acknowledging the presence of a PMC kind of expertise and social consciousness, even as he gave his version of such consciousness feminine embodiments.

Fitch was by no means finished with the neurasthenics. *The Climbers*, produced in New York in early 1901, provided the Broadway theatergoers with another “nervous” type, once again supplying the obstacle to the heroine’s happiness.¹⁹ Fitch gives a detailed description of the neurasthenic Sterling, the heroine’s husband: he “is handsome and distinguished. His hair is grayer than his years may account for and his manner betrays a nervous system overtaxed and barely under control. At the moment that he enters he is evidently laboring under some especial, and only half-concealed, nervous strain” (Fitch 1915, v. 2, 512).²⁰ Fitch contrasts the fatally flawed husband with a more ideal male: Edward Warden, Blanche’s best friend and soul mate. “He is good-looking, practical, a reasoning being, and self-controlled,” Fitch writes. “He is a thorough American, with the fresh and strong ideals of his race, and with the feeling of romance alive in the bottom of his heart” (Fitch v. 2, 522-523). Once again, however, it is the less “practical, reasoning, and self-controlled” male who commands more interest. Warden, a lawyer (fitting with a Professional Managerial Class position), and like a number of Fitch characters, an unsuccessful Wall Street speculator, pays for this lack of control by taking his own life—the price of nervousness run amok.

“Nervousness” would beset many of Fitch’s male characters throughout his career. In *Her Own Way*, first presented in 1903, Fitch again presented a weak man whose rash actions precipitate a crisis, who openly displays his nerves: “his voice and body almost vibrating with nerve,” (Fitch v. 3, 473) the stage directions read. In contrast, the man worthy of the heroine has “No finicking about him, no nerves. Just a sane, healthy, fine fellow” (Fitch v. 3, 488-89). That he is also a bit of a dull fellow once again reflects Fitch’s greater interest in, and facility for creating, not only a fairly complex heroine, but also a fairly complex neurasthenic man.²¹ Nevertheless, the condition of nervousness in Fitch’s supporting male characters is not insignificant. Many of Fitch’s nervous men were professionals, agitated due to business deals gone wrong. Sterling, for example, is a lawyer, trying unsuccessfully to emulate the “killings” of the stock market. Steven Carley, in *Her Own Way*, is another misguided speculator, although (with the heroine’s help), he is able to give up his penchant
for bad investments and become a respectable business manager, one who will only buy or sell on the word of his client. In turn, Geoffrey, in Fitch’s Clara Bloodgood vehicle The Girl With the Green Eyes, is described as “a young, good-looking man, but with a weak face”—his weakness manifests itself in a shameful, drunken marriage. And finally, Fitch’s most “manly” hero, George Rand, Jr., of The City, could be said to his ultimate man of nervousness—he and his family are all too nervous to stay in Middleburg. Rand, Jr.’s nervous energy is of such magnitude that only “The City” can contain it.

Fitch’s depictions of nervousness were very much in line with the culture of the era. As Tom Lutz writes in his anecdotal study of nervousness and neurasthenia, there were “numerous texts . . . which link nervousness and success, nervousness and social mobility, as well as nervousness and divorce or any other disruption of the gender system” (Lutz 3). There was, in fact, a certain amount of cultural capital to be gained by suffering from the “disease” of nervousness: “Nervousness . . . was therefore a mark of distinction, of class, of status, of refinement. Neurasthenia struck brain-workers but no other kind of laborer” (6). Just whose disease neurasthenia was is a matter for debate; while the moneyed elite feared modernity (and thus became nervous), neurasthenia was also linked with more progressive responses to cultural change. The question arises: could not gentlemen (and women) also be nervous? And the answer is that they certainly could, and they often were. The quality of nervousness tended to unite, rather than separate, the moneyed elite from the cultured elite, or the gentlemen from the PMC. It would soon fall to the PMC “experts,” with a healthy assist from Freud, to “spin” neurasthenia into something more universal—namely, neurosis.

At any rate, nervousness was inevitably making its mark on Broadway bodies and their audiences, and the strain of neurasthenia would keep physical and psychological experts busy for the next generation. What Fitch had done was to place characters on stage that straddled the gap between the cultures of character and personality. With the vestiges of 19th century notions of honor, morals, manners, and integrity, Fitch continued to insist on character. Nevertheless, Fitch was also keenly aware of more modern notions of personality, described by adjectives such as “stunning,” “attractive,” and “magnetic”—his characters are frequently striving to “be Somebody.” What Fitch accomplished, finally, was to place on stage a modern psychological Professional Managerial habitus that anticipated O’Neill.
Notes

1 Fitch’s sexuality has been mostly a “hinty” subject until fairly recently. There were “whispers” of Fitch having “a hint of lavender” about him during his lifetime (Andrews 48-57), and there existed what might be called a preponderance of circumstantial evidence, i.e., his lifelong bachelorhood, his flamboyant dress, his affinity for acting out the female characters of his plays, etc. Kim Marra, in her article “Clyde Fitch’s Too Wilde Love,” cites letters exchanged between Oscar Wilde and Fitch as reasonable proof of Fitch’s (secretly) gay orientation (in Staging Desire: Queer Readings of American Theater History).

2 While a strong case could be made for Ibsen introducing neurasthenic PMC men to the modern drama (especially in A Doll’s House, or A Doll House), it is my contention that Fitch, as a successful American playwright operating firmly in the Broadway mainstream of the early 20th century, did the most to introduce the American city-dwelling neurasthenic to the Broadway audience.

3 Adams and Fitch shared Charles Frohman as their principal producer. Frohman and Adams, in particular, would achieve great success inventing and complicating the male body, with Adams playing such roles as Peter Pan, Joan of Arc and the rambunctious rooster Chantecler. See especially Kim Marra, Strange Duets: Impresarios and Actresses in the American Theatre, 1865-1914, pp. 106-141. Marra’s analysis is an informative “queer” approach to the issues of male bodies and masculinity.

4 See Clyde Fitch and His Letters, p. 311.

5 Ibid., pp. 353-54.

6 One critical exception to pigeon-holing Fitch was William Dean Howells. In an exchange during January 1904, Howells received Fitch’s letter with: “May I say that I do not know how it [your letter] could be manlier?” (Letters, pp. 257-258, author’s emphasis)

7 Fitch would collaborate with Wharton on a dramatization of Wharton’s The House of Mirth, which opened on Broadway in 1906. While the play only enjoyed a brief run, Wharton and Fitch remained friends. See Glenn Loney’s introduction to Fitch and Wharton’s The House of Mirth: The Play of the Novel.

8 See Bordman, 1994, p. 457, and Atkinson, p. 6. As Atkinson reports, “...the police closed Sapho after the first performance, although they permitted it to reopen later by popular demand. In New Haven, the police had been more constructive. They closed Sapho until Mr. Revelle could learn how to carry Miss Nethersole [i.e., the lead actor and actress] upstairs ‘in a chaste and orderly manner’ in which the implication of sin would be totally eliminated.”

9 All references to The City are taken from Plays by Clyde Fitch in Four Volumes, vol. 4, with introduction by Montrose J. Moses and Virginia Gerson, Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1915. The play was first performed December 22, 1909.

10 Theatre historians tend to cite the line “You’re a God damn liar!”, which the villain Hannock says in Act II (580), as the ultimate shocker. Nevertheless, in Fitch’s script, Hannock also uses the epithet earlier in Act I when he threatens to reveal Rand, Sr. as “a God damn whited sepulchre” (479). The second “God damn” comes at a much stronger moment in the play, as the hero has just revealed that Hannock has married his half-sister. It is not inconceivable that the first “God damn” was cut before the
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11 Fitch had tried to introduce some “manly” cursing before, notably in the 1899 Nat Goodwin-Maxine Elliott vehicle, *The Cowboy and the Lady*. The dude-cowboy hero played by Goodwin introduces a “swear jar” at his ranch, and those who swore were obliged to sacrifice a quarter. The Goodwin character, after a couple of stray “damned,” contributes the first fifty cents. At the time, he was criticized by *The New York Dramatic Mirror* for exercising poor taste: “By actual count there are nineteen violent outbreaks of cursing in the first act alone . . . This sort of thing is not amusing . . . “ (“Knickerbocker—The Cowboy and the Lady,” *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 6 January 1900, p. 16).

12 William Lyon Phelps, writing in 1921: “when he began to write, American drama scarcely existed; when he died it was reality . . . He did more for American drama than any other man in our history” (qtd. in Andrews, 48-57); also, “Walter Prichard Eaton said that modern American playwriting began with Clyde Fitch” (Ibid.)

13 See Moses, *The American Dramatist*, 314, as well as a contemporaneous review of Fitch’s *Letters* from the *Times*: “Yet will he [Fitch] live by his plays? When one thinks of the best of them, ‘The Truth,’ ‘The Girl With the Green Eyes,’ and ‘The City,’ the dust of time seems to be slowly settling upon them” (“Letters’ of Clyde Fitch and ‘The Truth at Last’ About Charles Hawtrey,” *New York Times*, Book Review, 2 November 1924, p. BR7). Once “modern American drama” had made its (PMC-endorsed) entrance onto the world stage, a recurring theme of criticism was to put as much distance between the present and the past as possible; thus were plays less than 20 years old often dismissed as “old” and “antiquated.”

14 References to *The Moth and the Flame* are taken from Representative Plays by American Dramatists, ed. Montrose Moses (New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1921).


16 By striking the mother of his child in church (and onstage), Fletcher went beyond nearly all of the era’s stage villainy in terms of vile actions. Indeed, at the end of the 1950s, directors were still reluctant to stage the striking of a woman (e.g., Inge’s *The Dark At the Top of the Stairs*, wherein the audience hears the husband violently slap his wife offstage).

17 That the “double standard” was accepted by Broadway audiences and “experts” (including the PMC) was also borne out by the later responses toward Rachel Crothers’ *A Man’s World* (1910) and Augustus Thomas’ “answer” play, *As a Man Thinks* (1911). While critics respected Crothers’ skill and thoughtfulness in presenting the injustice of the double standard from the “feminist” perspective, it was Thomas’ play, with the pro-status quo message that “upon the golden basis of woman’s virtue rests the welfare of the world,” that found wider acceptance (see Quinn, Arthur Hobson. *A History of the American Drama: From the Civil War to the Present Day*, vol. 2. New York: F.S. Crofts & Co., Publishers, 1945; also Bordman 1994, p. 669, 687-88). There is no evidence, however, that Fitch himself believed in the double standard; to the contrary, as a writer who wrote and directed with great empathy toward and identification with his heroines, Fitch would most likely not have adopted such a standard as his own.

18 Women such as Jane Addams (Hull House, Chicago) and Lillian Wald (Henry Street Settlement, New York), would have been well known to Fitch and his
audience. The budding professional field of social work began with these attempts to understand and alleviate the problems of new immigrants.

19 The Climbers found its way to Broadway without the help of Fitch’s usual producer Charles Frohman. Frohman objected not only to the last-act suicide of the repentant but weak husband (which allowed the dutiful, heartbroken wife and the loyal best friend to get together), but also to the spectacle of the opening family catfight on the heels of a funeral (Andrews 48-57). See also Letters, p. 174.

20 Fletcher, in The Moth and the Flame, is described on his entrance only as wearing “dark sailor clothes” (544). In all probability, this is because Fitch did not publish Moth himself—Montrose Moses published the play especially for his collection.

21 “Anti-hero” would not be an inapt description, except that these characters acted as catalysts, rather than leads.


24 See Susman, 273-274, and 277.

References Cited


