

“THEN IT’S A LIE, OF COURSE”:
LYING, SECRECY, AND DECEIT
WITHIN SELECTED WORKS OF HORATIO ALGER, JR.

by

Brandi Williamson Ettehadieh

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English

Middle Tennessee State University
December 2016

Dissertation Committee:
Dr. Alicia M. Renfro, Chair
Dr. Carl Ostrowski
Dr. David Lavery

To Lincoln, whose beautiful presence in the world became the extra motivation I needed to finish this six-and-a-half-year endeavor. This dissertation will make for a good lesson on perseverance someday.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For so long, the completion of this dissertation has seemed like something verging on a complete impossibility. After leaving Murfreesboro and academia, starting a career in an entirely different field, and growing our family, the process only became more challenging. With all of the obstacles, there is no question that this work could not have been completed without the help of many remarkable individuals.

No matter how many times I say “thank you” to my dissertation chair, Dr. Mischa Renfroe, it will never be enough. Her ongoing words of encouragement were critical when I needed a boost (and those times were many), and the guidance and knowledge she provided is unparalleled. She invested countless hours in this dissertation, and I could not have had a better advisor. This project truly could not have been done without her, and I am forever grateful. I also thank Drs. Ostrowski and Lavery for agreeing to serve as readers for this project—their knowledge and support have been both valuable and enlightening.

A huge thank you goes to two of the people I was lucky enough to meet as a result of my time working in MTSU’s College of Graduate Studies: Dr. Peter Cunningham and Amber Bollinger. The two of them have no idea how much the pep talks and “fires” they lit pushed me when I needed it, even when my progress was stalled. I also thank them for providing much-needed doses of humor along the way. The kindness that Dr. C. has shown me is remarkable, and is something I will never forget. He will also unquestionably continue to hold the title of “best boss ever.”

It goes without saying that I am immensely appreciative of the unwavering support that my husband, Ramin Ettehadieh, has given me. For years, he has constantly

let me bounce ideas off of him that are outside of his area of expertise, offered suggestions, and just listened when I needed an ear or started to unravel. He has heard more about this project than anyone, and is probably equally excited for its completion. His ongoing belief in my abilities is something that never goes unrecognized, and I could not ask for a better life partner.

Finally, I have to extend a very special thank you to my mother. She has been the biggest cheerleader for anything I have ever pursued, providing me with encouragement, words of wisdom, and some reality checks along the way. She manages to believe in me when I doubt myself, which is something that occurred often during my time in this program. And, everything seems to come full circle when I realize that she is a modern-day Horatio. There are countless cards, emails, texts, and notes from throughout the years that have always encouraged me and have made sure to mention that “with hard work and determination, you can achieve anything.”

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines scenes of deceit in selected Horatio Alger, Jr. texts and explores parallels to Alger's complicated biography. For decades, readers and scholars alike believed that Alger's biography mirrored the lives of his protagonists who exemplified the virtues of honesty and hard work. An initial assessment of Alger's novels suggests that he regularly repeated the same formulaic rags-to-riches plot; however, a closer look at his stories reveals that his protagonists often benefit from good luck and rely on deception as they play a variety of roles on the path to success and middle class respectability.

Alongside Gary Scharnhorst's enlightening Alger biography, *The Lost Life of Horatio Alger* (1985), the major texts examined in this study are *Ragged Dick: Or, Street Life in New York with the Boot-blacks* (1868), its sequel *Fame and Fortune: Or, The Progress of Richard Hunter* (1868), *Helen Ford* (1866), *Tattered Tom; Or, The Story of a Street Arab* (1871), *A Fancy of Hers* (1892), and *The Disagreeable Woman: A Social Mystery* (1895). A close analysis of these novels reveals multiple scenes of deceit—an area often neglected in studies of nineteenth-century American literature that tend to focus on adult con men and women. Also, an analysis of Alger's little-known novels with female protagonists foregrounds his complicated representation of gender and performance. This project argues that deception plays an integral, often ignored, role in Alger's formula for success and reveals much about the social context of America during the latter half of the nineteenth century.

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INTRODUCTION

"You may be deceived."

"If I am, I shall never put confidence in any boy again. But you haven't answered the charge, Mr. Gilbert."

"It isn't worth answering," said the book-keeper, scornfully.

"Still, I would be glad to have you give an answer one way or the other," persisted Mr. Rockwell.

"Then it's a lie, of course."

-Horatio Alger, *Fame and Fortune*

The dissertation title quote, taken from the excerpt above, appears in the final chapter of Horatio Alger, Jr.'s *Fame and Fortune: or, The Progress of Richard Hunter*, a follow-up text to *Ragged Dick*, Alger's most well-known novel. In this chapter, an established bookkeeper named Mr. Gilbert—who dislikes the title character because he is a “vagabond,”—utters the words “Then it’s a lie, of course” to the business owner when confronted with the accusation made by the young, and previously unreliable, Micky Maguire (270). Mr. Gilbert asserts his own honesty and offers support for his claim by suggesting that Maguire is untrustworthy solely attributable to his neglected appearance and the place he occupies within the social hierarchy. This scene is representative of many of the challenges that Alger presents within his novels—it provides a glimpse into the overarching themes of honesty and the importance of looks, as well as the social value ascribed to them.

Horatio Alger, Jr. has been described as the mouthpiece for the nation (circa 1900), the father of rags-to-riches stories that inspired Americans, and the key proponent

of the American Dream. Most people recognize him as the author of hundreds of motivational boys' stories, not as a man with a scandalous past—a past that would likely, if the truth were widely known, undermine his credibility as a children's, particularly a boys', author. Most people are also unaware that he was the subject of a fictitious biography that helped perpetuate the myth of success often associated with his fiction. Alger is, instead, remembered as an author of admirable stories, ones with good morals and honest heroes for children to emulate (at least during the latter half of the nineteenth century). Alger was unquestionably a household name in fin-de-siècle American literature, as well as in mainstream popular culture.

Alger's characters mirror his own public persona, and they are known for their moral images; however, just as Alger's life was more secretive than his readership realized, his characters are not as wholesome as they appear. In fact, the idea that Alger promoted, the self-made man, is, in itself, a form of deceit, at least based on the formula contained within his stories: the heroes are not self-made. While they are hard-working, they are usually the fortunate recipients of luck or a wealthy, sympathetic benefactor. For example, Dick (also known as Richard Hunter), Alger's most well-known hero, is not only hard-working, but he also benefits from good luck—he is always in the right place at the right time. In *Ragged Dick*, he saves a boy from drowning after falling off a ferry, and the boy's father is so grateful that he offers Dick a job at ten dollars per week, a considerable sum at this time. The father's act is the catalyst for Dick's upward social mobility. Although Dick works hard to attain "respectability" (a key word in many of Alger's novels—many protagonists aspire to achieve respectability which seems synonymous with upward social mobility for his male characters) and rise in society, it

can be assumed that without help from those with monetary means and social connections, Dick likely would not have attained the same success by the end of the *Ragged Dick Series*.

While Alger is known for his formulaic model characters and rags-to-riches success stories, an examination of his work proves that his protagonists are not as wholesome and morally conscious as readers assume. Lying, secrecy, and deceit often color his stories, and stock villains are not the only ones who are dishonest. The heroes and heroines—Alger did write stories with female protagonists—of his tales are also less than truthful; they keep secrets and deceive others as they trade their “rags” for “riches.” The deception presented within these stories, once unveiled, reveals an interesting, and often neglected area within nineteenth-century American literature.

This project will examine the role of deception within Alger’s work and explore parallels to his own life. Lying is not just a characteristic that is presented within one or two of Alger’s stories, but is a recurring issue that appears within his most widely-read novels. However, this issue remains neglected by all but a few Alger scholars and further adds to the mystery that has surrounded his life. Further, while Alger’s characters seem to be idealistically moral from a surface glance, the repetitive scenes of lying, secrecy, and deceit suggest another layer within his fiction. For Alger, deception is often related to gender and performance and reveals much about social and political context of America during the latter half of the nineteenth century. His texts imply that identities can be performed and may reflect cultural anxieties about gender and social class.

Background of the Study

The term “The American Dream” is credited as being coined by James Truslow Adams in 1931 when he published his book *The Epic of America*, although the concept of the American Dream was in existence in the nineteenth century. The notion of the self-made man, although not referred to as “The American Dream” was in existence well before the nineteenth century. The idea is often considered as old as America itself, and is most notably alluded to in Benjamin Franklin’s autobiography and *Poor Richard’s Almanack* (the latter published under Franklin’s pseudonym “Richard Saunders”). Adams’s definition of the American Dream focuses not on the pursuit of wealth and expensive possessions, but on the notion that no matter the birth or rank of a person in American society, everyone has the ability to achieve the “fullest stature of which they are innately capable” (415). Although Horatio Alger, Jr. did not create the idea of the American Dream, he certainly helped to further propel the concept into popular culture.

Understandably, the possibility for lower and middle-class individuals to achieve a more comfortable social position by way of their own efforts enthralled the nation. Because his novels tapped into the American thirst for success and led readers to believe that they, too, could achieve greatness with hard work, Horatio Alger became a household name. Alger’s novels inspired his readers during the second half of the nineteenth century, and into the first half of the twentieth century (though Alger died in 1899), by introducing tales that illustrate his characters’ rise from poverty (the classic rags-to-riches narrative), social mobility, and determination as a mechanism for success.

Despite the success of Alger and his formula during the late 1800s, he remains a neglected writer, especially when compared to his contemporaries, and most scholarship on Alger continues to focus on *Ragged Dick* and its sequels. This project will continue the conversation about Alger's life and works by examining texts from across his long career, including several with female protagonists, to explore an ignored aspect of his canon—the importance of deceit in his characters' paths to success.

Horatio Alger in Popular Culture

Despite being formulaic, Alger's approach to writing Cinderella-esque tales for boys fascinated nineteenth-century readers, not because of their ability to repeat the same concept in a new way, but because of their implications. Alger's tales inspired people of all age groups because of their protagonists' determination in otherwise defeating scenarios. Alger's heroes, against the odds, demonstrate the possibility of progress and extreme transformation for the hard-working individual. The Alger formula experienced resurgence in popularity after Alger's death, in the first few decades of the twentieth century, when Americans were feeling the effects of a mixed economy during the rise of capitalism and the subsequent Great Depression. In the afterword of Scharnhorst's *The Lost Life of Horatio Alger, Jr.*, he explains the changes in popularity in Alger's books sales:

A few months before his death, Alger estimated his total sales at about 800,000 volumes. His popularity soared only when his books were reissued in cheap editions after the turn of the century. By 1910, his novels were enjoying estimated annual sales of over one million—that is, more

were sold in a year than were sold in total during his life. Alger's books remained popular until about 1920, when sales plummeted. By 1926, the circle of his readers had so shrunk that the leading publisher of his books discontinued them. By 1932, less than twenty percent of seven thousand surveyed New York boys recognized Alger's name and only about fourteen percent admitted to having read even one of his books. He was described that year in the pages of one magazine as "forgotten" and two years later in the pages of another as "extinct." In 1947, a poll of twenty thousand New York children revealed that ninety-two percent of them had "never heard of Alger. Less than one percent had read any of his books.

(149)

As the above excerpt notes, Alger lost popularity after the early twentieth century, but managed to regain some of it during the 1980s when Scharnhorst was writing Alger's biography, but for an entirely different reason. By this point, Alger's name was synonymous with attaining the American Dream and pulling oneself up by the bootstraps, rather than the novels he wrote.

Interestingly, in 1982 the musical production *Shine!*, a tale modeled on Alger's tales *Ragged Dick* and *Silas Snobden's Office Boy*, was scheduled to make its Broadway debut. However, when 20th Century Fox, its producer, discarded its theatre division, the production was canceled. The following year, the show took stage at the Virginia Museum Theatre in Richmond, Virginia. In 2001, Kenneth Jones announced in *Playbill* online:

The once Broadway-bound *Shine!*, a rags to-riches musical comedy inspired by the Horatio Alger character Ragged Dick, will get a cast recording on the Original Cast Records label Oct. 16. The 21-track recording represents the company and songs heard for a piano-and-voice staged reading of the work in April 2001 in New York City for the National Music Theatre Network's "Broadway USA!" series. The cast later went into a studio to document the work, and orchestrations by Wade Tonken were added.

Not only was the play's script heralded as an interesting and worthy production, but the accompanying music was considered a feature worthy of having its own soundtrack.

Then, in 2010, Kenneth Jones announced in *Playbill* online that *Shine!* would finally experience its run on stage as part of the New York Musical Theatre Festival in October of that year. Jones writes:

The tuneful and traditional period musical comedy, inspired by rags-to-riches characters and stories by Horatio Alger, has been seen regionally and in Manhattan readings (and is published by Samuel French), but this is the first fully produced production in Manhattan. The script and score have been revised and refreshed for the 2010 NYMF by book writer Richard Seff, composer Roger Dean Anderson and lyricist Lee Goldsmith.

Shine! demonstrates that Alger still lives on within twenty-first century theatre, but, as noted earlier, Alger continues to be recognized for his image as a boys' writer and as the mouthpiece for an individual's ascent to a better life by means of hard work and determination. Alger's questionable past has never been acknowledged in popular

culture (outside of Gary Scharnhorst's publications and a few articles), and his frequent inclusion of deceitful characters has never been part of the public's perception of him or his work.

Another recent example of Alger in popular culture appears in the September 2014 *Slate* article, "The Self-Made Man: The Story of America's Most Pliable, Pernicious, Irrepressible Youth." As the title suggests, Swansburg examines the inaccuracies that exist with the term "self-made man." He begins the article by profiling a business opened by a self-made man, and readers engrained in the teachings of the American Dream would logically presume that the anecdote will end positively, as all self-made stories are supposed to, only it does not. The story is about Swansburg's father's failed business, "his biggest failure," which he recounts to emphasize the pervasiveness of the notion that hard work naturally leads to success. Swansburg then reveals:

My father never doubted that he could make something of himself if he put the time in—and he never doubted that any American could make something of himself if he put the time in. In this, he is typical. When the Pew Economic Mobility Project conducted a survey in 2009—hardly a high point in the history of American capitalism—39 percent of respondents said they believed it was "common" for people born into poverty to become rich, and 71 percent said that personal attributes like hard work and drive, not the circumstances of a person's birth, are the key determinants of success. Yet Pew's own research has demonstrated that it is exceedingly rare for Americans to go from rags to riches, and that more

modest movement from the bottom of the economic ladder isn't common either. In fact, economic mobility is greater in Canada, Denmark, and France than it is in the United States. ("The Self-Made Man")

Swansburg's concerns about the fallacies lurking beneath the notion of the self-made man prompt a deeper examination of the real-world possibilities for economic success; these statistics tell a much grimmer story. He asks about the utility of the rags-to-riches idea: "Is it a healthy myth that inspires us to aim high? Or is it more like a mass delusion keeping us from confronting the fact that poor Americans tend to remain poor Americans, regardless of how hard they work?" ("The Self-Made Man"). Swansburg goes so far as to point out the physical absurdity of the line, "pull yourself up by your bootstraps," because the famous line is actually an impossible feat. He even encourages readers to try to pull themselves up by the bootstraps, just to be certain—slyly hinting at the lie inherent in this popular adage.

Swansburg, motivated by the deceit contained in the phrase "self-made man," sets out to discover how the idea became entrenched in American culture. He acknowledges Benjamin Franklin as the original self-made man and then traces the evolution of the phrase. He chronicles the stories of six other individuals who had an impact on the term, placing Alger at number four and declaring that "even Horatio Alger, the man whose name became synonymous with the rags-to-riches narrative, turns out not to be who we think he is. The writer's story is far more sordid than anything you'll find in his cheery tales of aspiring bootblacks and newsboys, which themselves have been misremembered and misunderstood" ("The Self-Made Man"). Swansburg recognizes that most readers do not know the real Alger or his stories. As I will discuss in Chapter One, despite Gary

Scharnhorst's pioneering research in the 1980s to discover Alger's real story, most readers, especially outside of academia, still believe Herbert Mayes's fictional biographical depiction. Swansburg's article, published in 2014, demonstrates that Alger is still regarded as an upright figure in popular culture.

Swansburg also realizes that Alger himself has some connection to confidence games:

Horatio Alger wasn't a confidence man, exactly. But the man whose name would become synonymous with the rags-to-riches story did reinvent himself as a means to leave behind a sordid past. Of all the tales that have shaped the self-made myth, Alger's story is surely the strangest. Neither the man nor his fiction are what they seem to be. ("The Self-Made Man)

Although he alludes to Alger's confidence-man connections, Swansburg does not develop this idea. He never refers to Alger or his heroes as confidence men, a point that will be examined in Chapter Two. Swansburg does subtly suggest that Horatio Alger and his heroes both conned readers. He recognizes that although we are supposed to believe Alger's heroes are self-made men, they always require the assistance of luck despite their good virtues. He also references Scharnhorst's Alger biography, noting that Alger would "convince" boys to become his friend so that he could use their lives as inspirations for his novels. Swansburg postulates that any other motives may never be known. Alger stalked the docks and other locations where "the friendless urchins could be found," handing out money and candy in "crude attempt[s] at ingratiating" (Scharnhorst 77). Swansburg mentions Alger's tactic in an effort to paint a portrait of the real Alger, not the one that permeates popular culture. The way that Alger lured boys, however, points to

something else that Swansburg merely alludes to and does not explicitly state: Alger conned his subjects. He used candy and money, luxuries to street boys, to insert himself into their hangouts, their worlds, so that they would be forced to get to know and trust him. Then, he could use them for their stories and their characteristics.

Alger plays confidence games with his readers in multiple ways. As I will discuss in Chapter Two, his plots imply that most boys who participate in confidence games are exempt from punishment and may be reformed if they play their roles correctly. Also, Alger's work has helped teach readers for more than a century that all you need to become a self-made man is hard work and fortitude.

Scholarship on Deceit and Performance

Several scholars examine deceit in varying types of literature, although outside of brief scholarly journal articles and a biography, no one has done so with Horatio Alger's novels. Perhaps his formulaic plots and his characters' reputation as wholesome, virtuous, and hard working have deterred scholars from digging deeper. The following texts provide useful information for evaluating honesty, performances, confidence games, and gender throughout this dissertation. The most comprehensive Horatio Alger text, published in 2007, is the Norton Critical edition of *Ragged Dick*, edited by Hildegard Hoeller. Although *Ragged Dick* is not regarded as a canonical text, the Norton edition's back cover suggests that Alger's story is "canonical as a cultural text" instead. The Norton edition explores various aspects of Alger's most-read story, including maps, photographs, and documents, as well as notes specific New York City characteristics that served as Alger's influences when commenting on child labor, treatment of

immigrants, and urban poverty. The “Criticism” section includes subsections featuring contemporary scholarly research, parodies, and responses to the question about Alger accessibility: Should Alger be featured as a staple in our public libraries?

Although only two essays in the “Criticism” section consider the question of deceit within Alger’s work, and only do so briefly, the entire edition serves as a critical contribution to contemporary Alger studies. My project will build on the observations discussed within these essays. For example, Chapter Two looks to Glenn Hendler’s “Pandering in the Public Sphere: Masculinity and the Market in Horatio Alger” when evaluating how honesty, appearance, and performances are critical to an Alger hero’s social ascension. Hendler suggests that it does little good for a character to simply be smart or honest; instead, the benefit is derived from being able to convince others of these characteristics. In Hildegard Hoeller’s “Freaks and the American Dream: Horatio Alger, P.T. Barnum, and the Art of Humbug,” she explores the Alger-Barnum connection, arguing that Barnum character exhibitions are critical to understanding *Ragged Dick* (189). Hoeller’s essay hinges on her assertion that Dick is similar to the Barnum characters that amuse him because he, too, is a freak (190). Although I diverge with Hoeller’s claim of Alger modeling Dick after Barnum’s exhibition subjects, her exploration of Dick’s use of humor is particularly useful to my argument. Lastly, Mary Walsh’s “Selling the Self-Made Woman” is chiefly useful in Chapter Three, when considering Alger’s treatment of his female characters. Walsh’s essay suggests that Alger only crafted a life of dependency for his women, which is beneficial to my examination of whether or not female characters can achieve “respectability” and on what terms.

Outside of the Norton publication of *Ragged Dick*, several additional articles are influential in helping to shape this study. David Leverenz's "Tomboys, Bad Boys, and Horatio Alger: When Fatherhood Became a Problem," only covers Alger in the last three pages, but questions "why does nobody notice that this model of boyish honest is lying all the time?" (232). This question begs more exploration and categorization of the types of lying that Alger infuses in his novels. For example, how are malicious lies treated compared to humorous or white lies? Leverenz also hints at, but never really explores, the topic of performances in *Ragged Dick*—a topic I consider inseparable from the question of deceit, and which I expand upon in the second and third chapters.

Deceitful acts in Alger's stories, specifically with regard to confidence games, deserve close attention. Karen Halttunen's book, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* suggests that a shift occurs during the second half of the nineteenth century where confidence men are no longer viewed as villainous, and are alternatively emulated for their magnetic personalities (198). She positions Dick as a modern confidence man, but never expands using additional Alger stories. Confidence games and adult confidence men regularly make appearances in Alger's stories, which warrants an exploration of how boys participate in deceit. Are adults who participate in confidence games treated differently than children?

A staple in the study of confidence games in literature is *The Confidence Game in American Literature* by Warwick Wadlington, and this scholarship is useful in the following chapters when attempting to understand the role that male characters, who are involved in confidence games, play. Wadlington concentrates principally on the works of Herman Melville, Mark Twain, and Nathanael West, as he thought each felt the need to

establish confidence with their readers. He also focuses heavily on the trickster character, noting that he “presides over change and the accompanying social renegotiations of cooperation and belief—over change and exchange—we need only remember the history of approximately the last century and a half to begin to see why the idea of a confidence game is central to the world view and craft of Melville, Twain and West” (6). Although Melville, Twain, and West are not central to this dissertation, Wadlington’s consideration of conning characters serves as an underpinning when analyzing Alger’s trickster figures.

One book-length study that centers on Alger’s ideas, including the confidence man, is Carol Nackenoff’s *The Fictional Republic: Horatio Alger and American Political Discourse*. Nackenoff “offers a 'rereading' of Alger's plot, characters, foils, and meanings by relocating them in the historical, economic, and political context in which they were produced” (5). She also examines how his texts functioned in the Gilded Age and for whom his novels helped solve problems (5). Using a combination of literary theory, close reading, and cultural analysis, Nackenoff explores the works of Alger and a few of his contemporaries. She also observes that Alger, despite contributing to popular culture and producing mass literature, stood “at the margins of respectable literature,” and not just due to his formulaic stories, but also because the mediums in which his stories appeared were often story papers and cheap magazines specifically targeted toward working-class individuals (9). Nackenoff’s book is framed by attempting to determine why the Alger formula has continued to remain popular in America.

The Fictional Republic also emphasizes that Alger’s stories are ones of rites of passage, ones that occur right when adolescents are on the cusp of forming their habits

(33). Nackenoff writes that these rites of passage serve as a metaphor for the American Republic's own passage—one that transitions from a rural agricultural society to a more industrialized and urban-focused world. Youth were leaving home at a much younger age in search for prosperity (33). Many of Alger's heroes are forced to the city from small towns, an action that is often succeeded by the breakdown of individual families as well as communities. These adolescents lack experience and often struggle, sometimes developing what Alger considered bad habits in the city, such as gambling, drinking, and other forms of general decline. They also often encounter the confidence man, who tricks characters out of their possessions.

Nackenoff maintains that the confidence man is used to further illustrate that these characters are adolescents who are still in need of protection and guidance, and that there is danger in the Republic (40). Alger's characters had to learn that in order to succeed, they must become independent and self-reliant. Nackenoff uses the importance of this acquisition of new skills for survival as a parallel to show how Alger had to become self-reliant as an author. She implies that Alger's books were successful in the nineteenth century because of the positive outcome and success his characters achieved, which was especially uplifting during the time of American literary Realism and Naturalism—an often bleak time for the characters created by Alger's contemporaries.

The Fictional Republic comes to a close with Nackenoff noting, “the enduring appeal of [Alger's] formula is explained in part because the meaning of the foils and juxtapositions is *adaptable* to a variety of American political and cultural conflicts” (266). During a time when other nineteenth-century characters were consumed by what the Republic often had to offer and met with the difficulties of urban life away from

family, Alger's characters managed to succeed and find something positive after experiencing hardship. This, Nackenoff believes, is what can be credited for Alger's success during the nineteenth century and explains why his American Dream notions still remain popular today. Outside of Nackenoff's important contribution, there are no modern book-length studies about Horatio Alger's ideas and contributions to literature.

As this brief review of scholarship suggests, a gap exists in scholarship regarding Alger's use of lying. Only a few scholarly articles address the topic, and nearly all focus solely only on *Ragged Dick*, or never fully explore the topic. This project helps to fill this gap by attempting to answer several questions: Why do the antagonist's lies often appear more treacherous than those of the protagonist? Why do the protagonist's lies often go unnoticed? What do different types of deceit say about social hierarchy and the ability to progress? Does deceit work differently for male and female protagonists?

In attempting to answer these questions, this dissertation will also consider how lying functions as a marker of class. Deliberate, malicious lies are often associated with the lower classes in these novels, and Alger's good guys and girls never participate in this type of deceit, which likely marks them with the opportunity for upward social mobility. For instance, upper and middle class patrons make remarks about Dick's honest-looking face (associated with the middle and upper classes and something that cannot be changed) despite his dirtiness (something associated with lower classes that can easily be altered during his transformation).

Additionally, performance sometimes plays an important role in Alger's stories, particularly with regard to the title characters in *Ragged Dick* and *Tattered Tom*. My analysis will draw on Judith Butler's theory of performativity. As Butler describes in

Gender Trouble, gender is a performance, rather than an innate biological construct.

Butler writes, “If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity” (136). Similarly, in *Bodies that Matter*, she writes, “performativity is...not a singular ‘act,’ for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms” (12).

Whether as part of the social group or gender to which they are linked, some of the protagonists within the texts I will examine participate in some type of performance as part of their deceit, which demands the application of performance and gender theory. In addition to performativity, Butler proposes that individuals are placed in a discursive field through their use of language, which is ultimately transformed into an identity.

Alger’s characters are often evaluated by their language and performances or actions, both socially and with regard to gender.

While Butler and Waddlington do not specifically address Alger, their ideas and theories certainly apply to his work and suggest other layers of meaning for his rags-to-riches tales. As this project will reveal, scenes of deception appear throughout Alger’s canon in a variety of ways. Drawing on the work of the aforementioned authors and others, this project will investigate which characters participate in deception, why they do so, and how these scenes help us understand the texts in question and the culture in which they appeared.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter One, “The Dual Alger Myth: Secrecy in Alger’s Life and Legacy” covers the deceit that enveloped Horatio Alger as an author for more than half a century. Similar to his novels, Horatio Alger’s life story, published posthumously, became increasingly popular the early 1920s. Many people were interested in the story of Alger’s life, as it was commonly believed that he, like his characters, lived the rags-to-riches lifestyle. In *Homelessness in American Literature*, John Allen discusses the “Alger myth.” Allen writes that from 1928 and 1985, “most biographical information about Alger was inaccurate” and that even some of the diary entries attributed to Alger were fabricated to continue the myth that his life mirrored his characters’ (41-42). This idea was so pervasive that Alger became collectively known as the man who encouraged the American Dream, and readers, after his death, desired to know more about him, which spawned a resurgence in Alger literature because they were curious to know more about him. Due to the scandal involving boys, Alger’s life story remained shrouded in secrecy and myths. Because of the shame it brought him, Alger and his family acted quickly to have his misdeeds hidden from society, and Alger left few traces (he intended to leave none) about his personal life. He ordered friends, and particularly his sister, to burn any correspondence after his death, so that no details of his life, outside of his rags-to-riches tales, remained.

Herbert Mayes, in an attempt to write Alger’s biography years after his death, travelled to the author’s hometown. Mayes quickly realized that he could obtain no information from Alger’s tight-lipped family, so he created a fictitious biography and marketed it in jest, capitalizing on the lack of information about Alger’s life. The

problem, however, is that the wide readership perceived it as truth, and not wanting to own up to his fabrications, Mayes and his publisher kept up the lie—for decades. As a result, America believed that its beloved rags-to-riches author, who was responsible for perpetuating the idea of everyone’s ability to attain the American Dream, had lived the life that Mayes had created for him, and hardly any of it had its basis in truth. It took until the mid-1980s, when Gary Scharnhorst did his own Alger research, for the truth to be discovered, and for Mayes to own up to his deceitful composition. Interestingly enough, many still believe Mayes’ concocted biography; some supposed Alger scholars continue to reference the invented biography to support their own research.

Drawing on Scharnhorst’s pioneering research, this chapter will explore Alger’s authentic biographical past and will show the parallels that exist between his life and his stories. Alger’s actual biography proves that Alger, himself, kept secrets and went through great lengths to keep the truth hidden in order to attain his success, just as many of his heroic characters do. Interestingly enough, Alger’s life is not the only thing that is surrounded by lies. In addition to the distortion of Alger’s biography, the idea that his stories all contain heroes who begin as poor and end up prosperous is also an artificial construct perpetuated by those who published inaccurate biographies of Alger’s life. Because both Alger and his heroes are viewed as upstanding moral citizens, it is even more important to examine their connections.

The next chapter, “Acting the Part: Dishonesty and Performance in *Ragged Dick* and *Fame and Fortune*,” centers on Horatio Alger’s more popular novels and the deceit-based performances that appear within them. As a whole, scholars tend to focus on *Ragged Dick* and rarely on the other novels; however, only a few articles involving lying

have been written, such as those noted above by Glenn Hendler (who views Dick's lying entirely as a performance to aid him in earning money and attaining success), David Leverenz (who sees Dick as lying all the time and a poor choice for an admirable hero), and Hildegard Hoeller (who also feels that Dick lies as part of a performance to make the reader feel more comfortable with peering into the life of a street-dwelling child). This chapter will attempt to fill a gap in Alger scholarship, where Dick's lies will be examined for their greater purpose, rather than just noting that Alger's good boy isn't so good because he lies. I will explore how Dick lies often appear as a humorous effort to entertain, which also plays into Alger's objective of having us overlook Dick's lies (it is easier to overlook jokes than malicious deceit) so that he can easily be transported to a more respectable social space.

Ragged Dick garners most of the attention from scholars out of all of Horatio Alger's novels. The sequel, *Fame and Fortune*, likely ranks as the second-most referenced Alger text. Interestingly, lying often appears as part of an attempt at humor and entertainment or as a means to protect others in a society filled with other genuinely dishonest characters. In *Ragged Dick* and *Fame and Fortune*, Dick lies regularly, both as a boy of the streets and after his reformation, though it is almost always in jest or to right a wrong. He lies to entertain his patrons, and they are clearly aware of his comedic intent (for example, saying he wears Washington's jacket—because it is so large—and Napoleon's pants—because they are small enough to fit him and he's just a boy). Critics who do acknowledge the lying in these stories either view it as a humorous performance or intentional deceit from a boy who is represented as being honest. In both novels, he

narrator remarks that Dick is not a model boy, and he gives up bad habits to reform and rise socially.

In fact, Dick jokes so regularly that in *Fame and Fortune* one of the characters remarks, “So I heard you say at the table, but I thought you were joking” (29). Even when Dick is not joking, others assume he is because he is constantly adding humor to situations that would not otherwise be humorous. Perhaps Dick’s lies, presented in the form of a joke, help detract from the idea that it was a lie in the first place, making his transition to respectability smoother and more believable. Oftentimes, his lies predict the class identity he will assume by the end of the series.

Chapter Three, “Formula Breakers: Alger’s Little-Known Heroines” explores an aspect of Alger’s work that is rarely discussed: women. Alger has been touted as the writer of boys’ stories; however, he also composed novels with heroines instead of heroes. In fact, published two years before the well-known *Ragged Dick Series* was *Helen Ford*—a novel with a female protagonist. In “*Helen Ford*: Horatio Alger Jr.’s Book for Girls,” Bruce Lohof suggests that women were not “supposed to be aspiring tycoons, but Alger celebrated American morality rather than the American entrepreneur. For him, as his book for girls makes clear, American morality—whose essence was virtue, charity in particular—was unisexual” (104). Alger, in his desire to promote the ever-popular idea of the American Dream, shows that gender is not a marker for social mobility. He fosters the idea that girls, too, can aspire to their own version of the American Dream, by having female characters rise socially, usually by awarding them large sums of money that they can use for their betterment or attachment to a wealthy man. However, because Helen’s monetary gain at the end is the largest of all Alger’s

heroes, perhaps he is suggesting that females will have greater challenges in attaining the American Dream and therefore need the assistance of a large, unearned sum of money.

This idea also presents other questions that explore the inclusion of heroines versus heroes and the impact on the traditional Alger formula. Alger's female-centered novels speak to the cultural expectations for women—Helen, for example, can only find work as an actress or seamstress to earn money. The money Helen earns is certainly not enough to propel her vastly forward in society, which doesn't make for the same heart-warming story as Helen inheriting a large amount of money. While Alger's heroes can work to maintain their social status, it seems that his heroines are better off with a substantial inheritance, prompting a necessary investigation into the idea of “respectability” that so regularly motivates his heroes. Further, his female protagonists only participate in deceit when they have the best intentions in mind, never maliciously. For example, Helen lies to her father, keeping from him that she works in the theatre, so that she doesn't alarm and distress him.

Although *Helen Ford* is the most well-known of the Alger stories containing a heroine—and, the fact that he composed stories with female protagonists is relatively unknown, especially outside of Alger scholarship—it is important to note that there are a couple of others: *A Fancy of Hers*, *The Disagreeable Woman*, and *Tattered Tom* (where a girl is disguised as a boy). Because Alger's stories with female protagonists have gone comparatively ignored, it is crucial to examine how they factor into Alger's formula. In particular, when read in light of Judith Butler's ideas about performativity, *Tattered Tom* implies that gender is a performance and reveals cultural anxieties about changing gender roles in nineteenth-century America. *A Fancy of Hers* and *The Disagreeable Woman*

(both published almost twenty years after *Helen Ford*) provide glimpses of the emerging New Woman figure. This chapter will explore the novels containing female protagonists, examining how the formula differs from Alger's typical male-centered novels, and will also investigate the implications of deception for female characters.

Finally, the last chapter of the dissertation will reconsider the assertions made throughout this project and explore future directions. Generally speaking, Alger's protagonists experience a sense of otherness and often refuse to conform to the roles that society has ascribed to them. They often defy rules and prescriptions, and it is usually in an attempt toward upward-social mobility, that in turn conforms to cultural expectations about success. As a result, they tell lies, act deceitfully, and engage in performances. Like many of Alger's outwardly honest characters, he, too, was not exactly who he appeared to be, as Scharnhorst's work to clarify Alger's life reveals. Alger is also known for his good, honest characters who work hard to climb the rungs of the ladder toward success, but this, too, is a myth. His supposedly good heroes often lie, sometimes in jest and sometimes to protect others, to get what they want. But, at the end of Alger's novels, no "good guy" has done anything too terrible and ends up receiving a rewarding outcome. They live what is perceived as the American Dream, just as Alger did, which ultimately suggests that sometimes deceit is worth forgiving or overlooking if it presents a good outcome: Alger's protagonists succeed, and Alger, himself, gives us hundreds of rags-to-riches stories and his ideas continue to resonate in conversations about the possibility of the American Dream.

CHAPTER ONE

THE DUAL ALGER MYTH: SECRECY IN ALGER'S LIFE AND LEGACY

“That boy is an imposter.”

-Horatio Alger, Jr., *Adrift in New York: Tom and Florence Brave the World*

A Brief Biographical History of Horatio Alger, Jr.

Thanks to the pioneering research of Gary Scharnhorst and Jack Bales in *Horatio Alger, Jr: An Annotated Bibliography of Comment and Criticism* (1981) and in the follow-up *The Lost Life of Horatio Alger, Jr* (1985), Alger scholars can now rely on a brief but well-documented biography of the author. We now know that Alger was born January 13, 1832 in Revere, Massachusetts. His father, Horatio Alger, Sr., was a Unitarian minister who had five children with his wife, Olive Augusta Fenno; Horatio was the oldest. In 1845, when Alger was 13 years old, the family relocated to Marlborough, Massachusetts in an attempt to resolve their financial troubles—Horatio Alger, Sr. was offered a position in Marlborough that paid more money (*Lost Life* 12-13).

According to Scharnhorst and Bales, Alger began his post-secondary schooling in 1848 when he attended Harvard. Afterward, in 1853, he enrolled in Cambridge Divinity School and later graduated in 1860. During his time at Cambridge, he took several periods off from school that were dedicated to work: teaching, writing, and editing. Following his graduation, he spent ten months traveling and exploring Europe (*Lost Life* 43-54). Upon his return to the United States, the Civil War had started. Alger wanted to enlist in the Armed Forces, but his short stature (Alger was only 5 feet 2 inches) and poor eyesight (he had been nearsighted since childhood) would not allow it. In an effort to help the military, Alger decided to write patriotic stories instead (*Lost Life* 54-59).

Because his stories had not yet achieved success, Alger entered the ministry and became a preacher in Dover, Massachusetts in 1861, but he did not sacrifice his literary ambitions. He continued to write, publishing poems fairly regularly (which he had been doing since his late teens) and working on *Nothing to Do*, a book-length volume of poetry as well as some fiction (*Horatio Alger Society*). Both the serialized version of *Marie Bertrand: The Felon's Daughter* and his first juvenile novel, *Frank's Campaign; or What Boys Can Do on the Farm for the Camp* were published in 1864, while he was still relatively new in his vocation. Also during this year, Alger moved to Brewster, Massachusetts to become a minister at the Unitarian Church of Brewster. Although his stories were well-received and he was beginning to achieve literary success, he had already chosen to enter the ministry, so he continued with that profession.

As Scharnhorst's careful research reveals, the year 1866 proved to be the turning point in Alger's life and featured a move away from ministry to focus exclusively on literature, although it was not a choice he made without inducement. For one year, Alger had experienced success in the ministry, but, near the beginning of 1866, stories began to circulate in Brewster of his alleged misconduct with young boys. According to Scharnhorst and Bales in *The Lost Life of Horatio Alger*, "A young boy told his aunt that [Alger] had molested him. The rumor of his 'evil deeds' became 'more and more aggravating over the course of a few weeks.'" Thomas Crocker soon learned that his thirteen-year-old son and fifteen-year-old friend had also claimed molestation by the minister (66). The church where Alger was minister formed a committee to investigate the claims from the boys' parents. When questioned, Alger did not deny the allegations brought against him and left his position in the ministry, as well as the town of Brewster

before the church or the local authorities could bring charges against him (*Lost Life* 66). Church members sought resolution from the American Unitarian Association in Boston, but Alger's father was able to use his position in the ministry to intervene by directing a letter to the Association, noting that his son would resign and never seek another position in ministry, so long as the charges were dropped and the accusations suppressed (*Lost Life* 67). The Association agreed with Horatio Alger Sr.'s requests, and Alger never again entered the ministry. The allegations of Alger's molestations are considered the biggest secret of his life—a secret quietly kept from the public so that he could flourish as a boys' author.

Upon resigning from the ministry, Alger moved to New York City where he remained almost exclusively with the exception of some travel. The following year, in 1867, the success of his most famous novel, *Ragged Dick; or Street Life in New York with the Boot Blacks*, allowed him to be welcomed into The Newsboys' Lodging House, a social institution that became his second home (*Lost Life* 173). Alger became a successful writer for boys and his fiction sold well, but he also worked as a private tutor and wrote poetry, non-fiction, and adult novels in order to supplement his income. It was not until 1896 that Alger left New York City. After suffering ill health—he would endure two long years of asthma and bronchitis complications—and what was termed a “nervous breakdown,” he moved to South Natick, Massachusetts to live with his sister Olive Augusta Cheney (*Lost Life* 140-41). Alger died shortly thereafter, on July 18, 1899, at the age of 67.

Alger's work decreased in popularity in the years before his death; however, upon his death, he experienced resurgence when publishers began reprinting his novels at

cheap prices. The popularity of his novels declined in the Jazz Age, when his fame deteriorated and publishers responded by stopping the reprinting of his work. Up to this point, it is estimated that he sold nearly twenty million volumes (*Horatio Alger, Jr.* 104). However, as this chapter will illustrate, Herbert Mayes helped Alger regain some attention with his misleading biography of Alger in 1928. During his life, Alger managed to produce an astounding 537 novels and short stories, 94 poems, and 27 articles; however, many of his works were produced using pen names, and the accurate number of his publications may never be ascertained.

Since much scholarship on Alger has been devoted to his biography, this chapter will provide an overview of these biographies and examine the Alger myth as it relates to popular understandings of his fiction. However, as Scharnhorst and Bales reveal, Alger's actual biography demonstrates that he kept secrets, most notably hiding a questionable background (given his literary profession with an aim at juveniles situated at the core) and going to great lengths to veil the truth (that he was asked to leave the ministry due to allegations of sexual misconduct with boys) in order to attain his success. With their surface emphasis on hard work and other virtues, Alger's narratives also "keep" a kind of "secret"; they obscure role of secrecy and deceit as well as the importance of chance events on the road to success, and the protagonists perform a variety of roles as they aspire to respectability.

The First Alger Biography

At the turn of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, Horatio Alger, Jr. was still a somewhat popular author, despite his death in 1899. In 1927, twenty-seven-

year-old Herbert R. Mayes, in the beginning of his editing career, was commissioned to write Horatio Alger Jr.'s biography. After attempting research and talking to tight-lipped contemporaries and family members, Mayes did what he considered the next best thing: compose a parody based on the type of man readers expected Alger to have been.

Roughly a year later, the fictitious Alger biography, *Horatio Alger, Jr.: A Biography Without a Hero* (1928), was published by Macy-Masius. "All I had to do was come up with a fairy tale...the going was easy, particularly when I decided to write copiously from Alger's diary. If Alger kept a diary, I knew nothing about it" (vii), Mayes confesses in the preface to a reissue of his biography in 1978. As Mayes's comment suggests, Alger's stories themselves provided the basis of the fairy tale that other Alger scholars would duplicate for years to come. Thus, this approach became even more problematic when many Americans excitedly purchased the biography, which was not marketed as the parody that Mayes intended, and it was soon considered the authoritative Alger biography for decades—until the late 1970s.

Mayes creates an abundance of fictitious material for Alger's life, and what follows are some of the most representative quotes of the imaginative liberties he took. One of Mayes's first bold assertions is that Horatio Sr.

held one especial grievance against his wife. In doing things, he complained, she was always too late or too early. For such an important matter as bearing a first child he thought she might have altered her habits, but the poor woman ran true to form and never was fully pardoned for her tactlessness. She gave birth to the young Horatio on Friday the thirteenth of January in the year 1832. It was on Friday, the thirteenth of some month

in some forgotten year that her husband had accidentally gashed his cheek with a razor, and the scar that resulted was a perpetual reminder of the date's ill omen. . . .

Olive's labor and Alger's birth] had a devastating effect on the work Mr. Alger was struggling to complete. Fortunately for Olive Fenno—the woman's maiden name—she bore a boy. What consequences might have been had the issue of all the tumult had been a girl, no one may say. Mr. Alger was set on a boy; he had, in fact, lustily prayed for a boy. (13-14)

Mayes discloses seemingly private, yet completely fictional, material about Alger's parents' marriage, and creates a misogynistic approach to Horatio Sr.'s ideas about parenthood.

Mayes also professes to reveal an Alger secret—that it was collectively assumed that he “wrote for boys because the effort afforded him a comfortable compensation. That is not true. Alger wrote books for boys because he could not write books for men. The implication is not that the author of juvenile fiction is inferior, but that Alger was” (37-8). Not only did Mayes insult Alger by creating a fictitious biography of him, but he boldly claims to have unearthed a fabricated secret, which suggested that Alger desired to write different material but was creatively or intellectually incapable.

For over 45 years, Herbert Mayes continued to let readers believe that his Horatio Alger biography was an accurate representation based on research. A few subsequent Alger biographers questioned many of Mayes's claims, but they received little information or direction from him regarding his supposed sources. Prior to later biographers questioning the authenticity of Mayes's information and sources, literary

critic and historian Malcolm Cowley speculated in “The Alger Story” (a 1945 book review entry in *The New Republic*) that *A Biography without a Hero* was full of fabrications. He argues that “the one biography of Alger, by Herbert R. Mayes, is full of errors at the few points where it can be compared with dependable information from other sources” (319). He then discusses Mayes’s error in compiling the publishing order of Alger’s books, something that anyone could have easily determined by looking at copyright dates, and concludes that the biographer did little, if anything, to check the accuracy of his information. Most powerful, however, is when Cowley speculates about the validity of the Alger diary entries, writing, “Mayes said that much of his account was based on Alger’s private diary, a black, clothbound volume; but in view of his other errors you can’t help wondering whether he copied it correctly or whether it existed—for the diary has vanished since Mayes used it and nobody else remembers having seen it” (319). Though Cowley presents information that should have prompted later readers to question the authenticity of Mayes’s Alger biography, it hardly caused a stir.

In fact, it was not until 1974 that the truth regarding Mayes’s *Alger: A Biography without a Hero* was finally unveiled in *Newsboy*, a printed newsletter entirely dedicated to Horatio Alger and funded by the Horatio Alger Society. The entire January-February 1974 edition of *Newsboy* is devoted to covering Mayes’s admission of the Alger hoax. The issue is prefaced by a short introduction by Jack Bales, who served as guest editor for the publication, where he explains the context of Herbert Mayes’s communication with the publication’s editors regarding the fictitious Alger biography. Alger scholars will also recognize Bales’s name from other Alger scholarship: a new edition of Herbert Mayes’s *A Biography without a Hero*, 1978 (Bales wrote the “Afterword”), and *Horatio*

Alger, Jr.: An Annotated Bibliography of Comment and Criticism, 1981, the pioneering work coauthored with Gary Scharnhorst. Bales writes, on the cover of the January-February 1974 *Newsboy*, “Herbert R. Mayes has now permitted the Horatio Alger Society and Newsboy to publish by way of a series of letters between him and Doubleday editor Bill Henderson the history of this literary hoax.”

The letters included in this *Newsboy* edition represent the complete correspondence between Henderson, Mayes, Bales, and Ralph Gardner that took place between April 21, 1972 and June 4, 1973. The correspondence began as the result of an effort from Bill Henderson to see what information he could garner from Mayes regarding the truth to his Alger biography published in 1928. Henderson, who did not personally know Mayes, wrote to him, boldly asking him to do something he has never done before: admit to the falsities included in the biography. The content of his letter, dated April 21, 1972, is as follows:

On February 11, I wrote to you at your Park Avenue Address.

Unfortunately, that letter seems to have gone astray.

Recently I had the pleasure of reading your biography of Horatio Alger, which was published in 1928.

We are at present exploring the possibility of issuing a biography of Alger and I wonder if you would be kind enough to clear up a persistent question.

Was your 1928 biography of Alger fiction to a large extent? Was it indeed more a debunking document than a biography? There are persistent

rumors to this effect and I would appreciate your setting the matter straight.

Fiction or non-fiction, the book was very enjoyable. (*Newsboy* 4)

Shockingly, after years of denying that the Alger biography he had written contained false information, Mayes responded, through various letters to Henderson, revealing that he had, indeed, taken great liberties with the book—a secret that he had kept from the public for nearly 45 years. Mayes writes that his Alger biography was intended to be a debunking biography (a biography that Lytton Strachey declared in 1918 is meant to reveal truths, no matter in what light the subject is painted) instead of a traditional one, but he turned to fiction to fill in gaps (*Newsboy* 4).

The remainder of the *Newsboy* edition contains the correspondence between the two that reveals why Mayes wrote the fictitious biography and kept it a secret for many decades. The first couple of letters from Mayes to Henderson indicate that he was not ready to spill all of the details via mail, but instead preferred an in-person visit to discuss the matter. After scheduling conflicts continued to arise, pushing Mayes's trip from London (where he resided during the time of the mailings) to the United States back several months, he decided to give Henderson the details through a series of letters. In Mayes's first letter disclosing his deceit, he writes:

Not merely was my Alger biography partly fictional, it was practically all fictional. It was written sporadically – a portion in 1927, some portions probably in 1928. Because there had to be a few facts, I corresponded with a handful of people, interviewed a few, and made a visit to South Natick (I think I was there for all of two days). The project was undertaken with

malice aforethought – a take-off on the debunking biographies that were quite popular in the 20's, and a more miserable, maudlin piece of claptrap would be hard to imagine, though I surely could not have considered it so bad then as I did later. The story of the venture has been told by me to a few intimate friends over the years, but at no time did I ever put any of it in writing.

Unfortunately – how unfortunately! – the book when it appeared was accepted pretty much as gospel. Why it was not recognized for what it was supposed to be baffled the publisher (George Macy) and me, and Henry Pringle (who was involved with the biography of Alfred E. Smith for Macy), and the public relations man – Louis Popkin – whose idea it was originally. . . .

One of the first notices was written by Harry Hansen, who was on the Morning World. He not merely liked my Alger, he praised it rather highly, and I believe his concluding line was, “Don't miss it.” I believe as a matter of fact, most people did miss it; probably fewer than 1500 copies were bought. Lord knows I received no royalties, or any other payments. I was not acquainted with Hansen then. However, he and Macy were friends, which put Macy in a dilemma. How was one to announce that the book was a hoax without making Hansen look silly? As a publisher, and a fairly new one, Macy felt he was in no position to offend a critic. Hansen was one of numerous authorities who never expressed a doubt. Macy's

decision was to let the book ride, to try to dispose of the print order to get back his publication costs, and then forget about it.

Some years later, on various occasions, a few people write to make inquiries about the background of the book. I definitely recall some correspondence with Mr. Cowley who, among others, asked for verification of the existence of Alger's diary, which of course never existed. However, the original decision to perpetuate the myth was never changed. I think my response to inquirers was that the "diary" together with all other "research" material, had been turned over to the Newsboys Home in New York. I feel confident that, right up until the time of his death, George Macy shied away from discussion. (*Newsboy* 5-6)

The remainder of the letter includes Mayes noting that he is happy to go on record admitting the truth about his Alger biography, but his main concern is protecting Harry Hansen, who was still alive at the time. Mayes also makes sure to mention that all other biographies that had been written of Alger up to the time of the correspondence (July 3, 1972) contained many inaccuracies and included little to no research of their own (most citing his own as a source), with the exception of Frank Gruber, who "may very well have been the first person to do any honest digging . . . [but] he too indulged in some fantasy" (*Newsboy* 6). Mayes concludes the letter by telling Henderson that he sincerely desires for Alger to eventually receive justice by having the truth written, and he would be happy to help by allowing Doubleday to use what he has written in this series of letters, but "with the understanding that nothing is used while Harry Henson is still among us" (*Newsboy* 6).

Ultimately, by the end of the Mayes and Henderson correspondence, the two were able to confirm that Harry Henson did not care if the truth about the 1928 Alger biography was unveiled. The new biography that Henderson had initially hoped for, a reprint and somewhat of a rewrite by Frank Gruber, was never written (Gruber's original Alger biography will be discussed later in this chapter). However, Mayes was made an honorary member of the Horatio Alger Society, which is highlighted in the introduction of the January-February 1974 edition of *Newsboy*, and all of the correspondence to and from Mayes regarding the liberties he took with the Alger biography was published for the world to see. The *Newsboy* had a small readership, mainly limited to the Horatio Alger Society members, so the truth about Alger continued to go largely unknown until nearly 50 years later.

Perhaps after realizing what a stir his own revelations in *Newsboy* had created, Mayes, in 1978, decided to reissue a 50th anniversary edition of *Alger: A Biography without a Hero*, in which he, somewhat gleefully, admits to his perpetuation of the myth that for so long enveloped Horatio Alger, Jr. In the introduction, titled "After Half a Century," Mayes writes of the little research he did about Alger:

The more of the little I read and heard, the less likely it seemed that Alger was worth a biography, a quickly-reached baseless conclusion because of the insignificant time and attention I had given to investigating the details of Alger's life. No book about Alger had been written, it was my guess, because no writer and no publisher thought of Alger as anything but a facile hack who produced dozens of simple stories devoid of literary merit,

and a man who in no other aspect of his life had done anything or said anything to warrant anybody's interest. (iv-v)

After admitting to the falsities contained within the biography, and how he creatively arrived at them, Mayes continues to insult Alger but does so indirectly by referring to other writers and publishers who were familiar with Alger and his work. Because little was known of Alger's life due to his order for his sister to burn all his papers upon his death, Mayes was unable to find what he needed to write a biography (even if he had actually done more than his admitted scant research). In his initial written explanation about why he ended up writing a fictitious biography, Mayes writes:

Louis Popkin . . . conceived the idea for a book about Alger. He urged me to write or call on Macy, whom he knew. I don't recall my first contact with Macy—or rather, how it came about—, but I think it was through a letter. He liked the idea of an Alger biography, which we first discussed as a serious one. Popkin and I quickly came to the conclusion there wasn't enough information about Alger's life to make interesting reading. Popkin then suggested the take-off. Macy's initial reaction was negative; he wasn't confident I could do it, asked that I try a few chapters. I did. Macy was delighted. (*Newsboy*, January-February 1974, 8)

So, rather than admit the truth, or market the book as a parody, Mayes decided to ride out the success and attention that the pseudo-biography experienced by staying tight-lipped for nearly half a century. Instead of writing about the life of a man he considered a “facile hack,” he, instead, chose to invent a colorful story full of details that had Alger's life mirror that of his characters.

In addition to drawing traits from Alger's heroes, Mayes adds to the Alger character by explaining, falsely, that he was mocked as a youth, regularly called "Holy Horatio," had a stutter, frolicked and had multiple European affairs, was a carouser and womanizer, and lived for 30 years at the Newsboys' Lodging House (Mayes 19, 72-84, 101, 226). Mayes also gave very specific, false details of Alger's childhood. The following is one of the most vivid descriptions that Mayes adds to the book:

Until he was seven he had mute companions—only colored, wooden blocks—to play with. . . . Some children worked miracles with blocks. They raise bridges in an hour, and tunnels, even palaces and forts. Horatio specialized in towers. Over and over he built a tower of the same design, anticipating always a structure that would stand straight and proud, higher than his head, an impressive architecture. When the tower crumbled to the floor before its tall destiny was accomplished, the boy would gather the scattered segments and begin again, uncomplainingly. (17-18)

After reading the above passage, it becomes evident why Mayes's found it humorous when a reviewer declared that his Alger biography was "without imagination" (*Newsboy*, January-February 1974, 5). The entire biography was full of imagination and without facts.

Other Explorations of Alger's Biography

Despite its being filled with complete fabrications, Mayes's *Horatio Alger, Jr.: A Biography without a Hero* (1928) was regarded as the go-to, mostly unquestioned Alger source for decades. It was not until the early 1960s that another author attempted to offer

an updated edition of Alger's story. The 1960s seemed to indicate a surge of interest in Alger. When Alger enthusiast Frank Gruber decided to publish his own Alger biography, this prompted others to find inaccuracies in his and then publish their own attempt. As explained below, the other early Alger biographies were ultimately discarded for varying reasons and usually received little media or scholarly attention. Briefly examining the Alger biographies is critical to understanding how Alger himself became a mythic character in the 20th century; with the notable exception of Scharnhorst and Bales's work, most of these biographies perpetuate the rags-to-riches myth of Alger himself and indirectly contribute to surface readings of his fiction. In 1961, Frank Gruber published a comprehensive bibliography of Alger, but it only contained a short biography section that was overlooked by many later scholars because of its length. Next, John William Tebbel, a scholar who uses a Freudian approach to examine Alger's life, reproduces most of the inaccuracies contained in the Mayes biography. Ralph D. Gardner, a genuine Alger enthusiast, includes nearly as many inaccuracies as Mayes and Tebbel, though admittedly got creative with dialogue. A few years later, Edwin Palmer Hoyt rehashes the Gardner version.

Frank Gruber, a mystery and western writer of over 50 novels, was an avid collector of Horatio Alger, Jr.'s novels. According to his biographical information on The Thrilling Detective website, he was considered "one of the most prolific writers of pulp fiction, writing more than 300 stories for over 40 pulp magazines, as well as over sixty novels, and over 200 screenplays and television scripts." Gruber sometimes used the pseudonyms Stephen Acre, Charles K. Boston & John K. Vedder (*The Thrilling Detective*). In 1961, he published a bibliography, which included a short biographical

section about Alger, entitled *Horatio Alger, Jr.: A Biography and Bibliography*. In his biography, Gruber writes that Mayes's Alger biography contained many inaccuracies, which prompted him to want to correct the errors that had been, for decades, believed by many. He writes that the Mayes biography was "studded with such a vast number of factual errors and flights of imagination that I am compelled to discard virtually everything in the book with one single exception, the date of his birth. Even the date of his death is wrong" (13). As much as Gruber considered himself an Alger enthusiast, he did little to help set the record straight on the facts of the author's life. He did, however, conduct more research than Mayes. In fact, in the *Newsboy* January-February 1974 edition that contains Mayes's correspondence with the editors, he writes, "Frank Gruber may very well have been the first person to do any honest digging. Gruber, who was a writer of mystery novels, came to visit me several times—a pleasant man--, and we kept up some sort of correspondence" (*Newsboy*, January-February 1974, 6).

Despite Gruber's efforts to update Alger's biography, his Alger publication only included a few pages about Alger's life, and this likely lessened its potential to become a prominent biographical source for Alger scholars. Gruber empathizes with Mayes's dilemma, however, as evident when in a 1961 comment he remarked, "I must say that if I had to write a full-length biography of Horatio Alger, Jr., I would myself be compelled to invent even more romantic and glamorous incidents than did Mayes to fill out the pages" (Gruber 13). Similarly, in the 1965 *American Quarterly* essay "Who Was Horatio? The Alger Myth and American Scholarship," John Seeyle, captures Gruber's evaluation of Alger's life: "for the truth of the matter, according to Gruber, is that Horatio Alger Jr. was a very dull man who wrote books which boys found exciting. He was a man to whom

practically nothing ever happened” (751). Seeyle would likely be surprised to discover the truth.

John William Tebbel, formerly the chairman of the Journalism Department at New York University and Director of the New York University Graduate Institute of Book Publishing, boasts titles which allow him to be considered a “scholar with credentials” (Seeyle 752). His Alger biography, *From Rags to Riches: Horatio Alger, Jr. and the American Dream*, was published in 1963, and Seeyle writes that it was his status as a revered scholar that allowed him to escape reference to the Gruber biography (752). Instead, Tebbel writes of Mayes that “it is a tribute to the research he did at twenty-eight to note that it can hardly be improved upon nearly four decades later” (v). He also asserts, in the preface to his Alger biography, “the primary sources of Alger material are meager, indeed, but Mr. Mayes appears to have examined all of them, and no new original material has turned up in the intervening decades. . . . Mr. Mayes also had access to the memories of Alger’s family and friends alive at the time, and now dead. Mr. Mayes’s research was definitive and I have drawn upon it freely” (v). As far as Tebbel’s approach goes, the title of his biography is revealing: Alger, like his characters, paves his way from mediocrity to success. Building upon Mayes’s biography, he continues the idea that Horatio Sr. cared little for his wife or newborn son—only that “Olive would not dare to give him a girl” (23). He elaborates even further, mentioning quotes from a nonexistent letter written by the senior Alger to an old friend:

The boy has arrived as I expected. . . . It was a *strenuous ordeal* and I am earnestly trying to accommodate myself to the new order of things.

Needless to say my work has *suffered* enormously and some months will

elapse before all is normal again. His name will be Horatio, after me, not as a concession to any vanity of mine but rather as a reminder to him that I shall expect him to continue the religious endeavors I have begun but in a *larger, broader* manner. (23)

Again, in the same manner as Mayes, Tebbel regenerates the myths surrounding Alger's birth, as well as a negative relationship between his parents.

Despite his lack of research, Tebbel reinforces the claims in Mayes's fictitious biography by referring to it as authoritative. He also goes so far as to thank people who helped him with research that never occurred when he professed his indebtedness to "the staff members of the New York Public Library and The New York Historical Society . . . and to the critics and other literary figures who have so generously discussed with [him] the place of Horatio Alger, Jr., in the stream of American literature" in the preface of his Alger biography (vi). Because Tebbel was a scholar, it seems he thought readers would automatically view his work as scholarly and credible, leaving it open to less questioning and criticism. His description of Herbert Mayes as an authoritative Alger biographer who examined all primary Alger sources helped to entrench Mayes's biography as a legitimate academic source.

In 1964, Ralph Gardner's *Horatio Alger, or, The American Hero Era* was published. As an enthusiastic Alger collector, he embarked upon his own biography for Horatio Alger, and like his predecessors, he is quite creative with the biography. Gardner even writes in the preface that "some situations were dramatized and dialogue created, but always within the framework of existing facts" (12-13). Gardner also fails to make reference, via footnotes or citations, to any secondary sources. In what seems like a

proactive attempt to shield himself from any forthcoming criticism, Gardner notes in early pages of the book that “critics finding this treatment of the subject to be highly sympathetic are reminded that it is done by an unabashedly enthusiastic admirer of the author” (13). In other words, Gardner expects that readers should forgive any errors and embellishments and consider him exempt from criticism because he was a huge Alger fan. Gardner creates the Alger that fans are ready to believe: an author who is just like his heroes, and poor, helpless boys just like those by which Dick is surrounded. He writes that Alger and Nathan D. Urner—a *Tribune* reporter and one of Alger’s best friends—were exploring one day when they encounter Fillipo, a typical Algeresque hero. Fillipo informs the boys that his “best friend, a sickly boy, died after a beating received for not bringing in enough money at the end of the day” (210). Just like the poor boys who live in Alger’s New York City streets, and who sometimes work for tyrannical bosses and regularly experience the struggles that city life brings, so did the characters in life that Gardner created for Alger.

Because of the liberties Gardner took with dialogue and embellishments, his Alger account was never regarded as accurate or authoritative. The Horatio Alger Society does, however, emphasize that Gardner’s book is still valuable for its bibliography of many Alger books and for identifying several Alger first editions. Both the Horatio Alger Society and Northern Illinois University library (which houses a rare books and special collections department, with more than 50,000 dime novels, and the nation’s preeminent collections related to Horatio Alger, Jr.) sites remind readers that Gardner “single-handedly” resurrected interest in Alger stories in the 1960s. Northern Illinois University’s “Bibliography of Horatio Alger, Jr. Related Materials in Print” notes that Gardner’s

“volume uses artificially constructed dialogue to tell the story of Alger’s life. While not always contextually accurate, it is valuable for the appended bibliography of Alger’s books. Gardner single-handedly resurrected interest in Alger the writer and Alger as a collectible author during the 1960s.” Ultimately, at the time of its release, reviewers discredited Gardner’s biography as speculative, calling it a “whitewash” and noting its inferiority to John Tebbel’s scholarly Freudian account of Alger’s life.

Though Gardner was a self-proclaimed lover of all things Alger, and was included in the Mayes and Henderson correspondence where Mayes claimed he wanted to set the record straight regarding Alger’s true biography (by reintroducing an updated version of Gardner’s biography, nonetheless), he, like Mayes, indulges in own contributions to the myths that surround Horatio Alger, Jr.

Edwin Palmer Hoyt’s *Horatio’s Boys: The Life and Works of Horatio Alger, Jr.*, is a 1974 attempt at another Alger biography. Like so many of the Alger biographers who came before him, Hoyt failed to obtain the information most important to producing a biography—facts. According to the *Horatio Alger Society*, Hoyt’s biography relies heavily on Ralph D. Gardner’s version and is described as a “sensationalist biography” (March 3, 2015). During a time when the general public was still relying on Mayes’s tale as truth, Hoyt’s Alger biography received little attention, and even now, it rarely surfaces when researching Horatio Alger, Jr., with the exception of a sometimes-minor blurb about how he, too, contributed to what was an ever-growing collection of myths about the author.

Although the *Newsboy* publications received little attention outside of those subscribing to it because they were studying Alger or were collectors of his work, the

newspaper worked hard to assist in revealing myths associated with Alger and setting the record straight. One such instance appeared in the October 1978 *Newsboy* edition, when Medford Evans—in a reprint of his article “The Story of Horatio Alger”—claims that “Edwin P. Hoyt’s *Horatio’s Boys: The Life and Works of Horatio Alger, Jr.* would probably have produced legal difficulties if it had been published in Alger’s lifetime. (Mayes, Tebbel, and *Britannica* would even more surely found themselves in court)” (7). Referring to the incorrect information that seemed to continually appear when several authors offered retellings of Alger’s life, Evans points out that Hoyt’s biography, though lesser known than those of Mayes and Tebbel, would have caused him a great deal of trouble had it been published while Alger still lived.

Redeeming Alger after Nearly Half a Century

In 1981, Gary Scharnhorst and Jack Bales (the man who once was a college student working as an editor during the summers for *Newsboy* and who was involved in the correspondence between Mayes, Gardner, and Henderson regarding Mayes’s revelations of his hoax biography) set out to prove the truth about Alger. The two worked together to write *Horatio Alger, Jr.: An Annotated Bibliography of Comment and Criticism*, which has an introduction written by none other than Herbert Mayes himself. Mayes begins his introduction by mentioning three books, *Ben Barton’s Battle*, *Toward the Top*, and *Plan and Prosper*, supposedly written by Alger, that “many an Alger votary has sought, in vain, to find” but do not exist because he invented the titles within his Alger biography (vii). He also goes on to explain that he created quite the problem for Alger enthusiasts and scholars in search of the truth about the author’s life, and he

thought it strange that he was the one asked to write the introduction for a fully-researched bibliography about him. He writes, “Nevertheless, I have undertaken the brief assignment with enthusiasm. In a way it may be considered fitting that I should have an opportunity to express my unstinting respect and admiration for what must have been a labor of love, a task of gigantic proportions” (vii). He concludes his page-and-a-half long introduction by emphasizing that it would “be a misfortune if their book is not made available in every public and private library” (viii). In the “Preface” that follows, Scharnhorst and Bales spend only a sentence mentioning that the Mayes biography was a “debunking biography [that] had been a fancifully embellished fabrication, a hoax foisted upon those many readers who believed its sources authentic and its record reliable” (ix). They do, however, give a brief overview of those who have studied Alger, and note that their bibliography is not “definitive,” but that they have “compiled the first comprehensive bibliography of comment about Alger’s life and work” (xi). The rest of the book is a thorough look at all of the texts written about Alger, his letters, and manuscripts to which they could obtain access.

Four years later, in 1985, the pair collaborated again to expand upon what they had written in the annotated bibliography to form a complete Alger biography—the first comprehensive and reliably researched Alger biography ever written—*The Lost Life of Horatio Alger, Jr.* It is still, to date, the only full-length and exacting Alger biography—no one has since attempted another biography about Alger, as there is likely little, if any, additional biographical information left to gather. Alger was “an intensely private man who shunned publicity throughout his life, fearing his reputation would be tarnished if an intimate secret, an unsavory incident in his early adulthood, was publicly exposed. . . .

Upon his death, in 1899, his sister Augusta, in accordance with [Alger's] instructions, destroyed all of his private papers" (*The Lost Life* ix). None of the letters he had received and none of the diaries he had written were kept. Other family members soon followed Augusta's lead, and Anna Alger Richardson, Alger's niece, informed a researcher that she would resent her attempting to research Alger in his hometown (*The Lost Life* ix). During his short stint in the ministry, Alger was forced to resign after a number of young boys complained to their fathers, who then complained to church and local officials about Alger regarding sexual misbehavior and advances (66). Despite one clergyman's desire to press charges against Alger for his conduct, a higher church official decided to save Alger's reputation by dismissing the incident and sealing records about it, as long as he never attempted to hold another position in ministry (66-67).

The culminating effort of Scharnhorst and Bales was an undeniably thorough biography of Horatio Alger, Jr., though only 148 pages because of the little information they could garner from the letters and writings that did remain from Alger's pen. The biography is followed by an "Afterword" which, though including biographical information, follows the lead of former Alger biographers by making speculations about what Alger might have done or might have thought about certain events and revelations. Scharnhorst and Bales' work remains the only comprehensive and accurate portrayal of Alger's life that has ever been compiled, and it is to them that all Alger scholars and enthusiasts should be grateful because without their scholarship, we could not today study Alger.

Alger's Own Biographical Explorations

While Horatio Alger, Jr. has been the subject of his fair share of inaccurate posthumous biographies, he, too, added to the collection of somewhat inaccurate biographies of others. Although the context is different because the figures he profiles are well-known, he still contributes to creating an inaccurate portrait of them, engaging in the type of myth-making that will later color accounts of his own life.

Abraham Lincoln: The Backwoods Boy; or How a Young Rail-Splitter Became President, originally published in 1883, is the most well-known biographies by Alger. Later, in the same year but by a different press, the book was republished as *The Backwoods Boy: Or, the Boyhood and Manhood of Abraham Lincoln*. This volume appeared as part of Alger's series *The Boyhood and Manhood Series of Illustrious Americans*. The book details Lincoln's struggles and rise to fame, which makes for a good Alger story since he writes about the aspects of Lincoln's life that parallel the successes and hardships of other Alger characters. The language is also similar to that used within Alger's entirely fictitious novels. Encouraging the reader to see that the protagonist will endure and triumph during struggles, Alger writes, "Abe is not to be pitied for the hardships of his lot. That is the way strong men are made" (33). The narrator also interjects in the narrative by remarking that the hero is to be trusted: "If I were a capitalist, I would be willing to lend money to such a young man without security" (65). Alger also makes sure to emphasize Lincoln's honesty, just as he does for his fictitious heroes, when he discusses his nickname: "'Honest Old Abe' was well deserved ... [because] a man who begins by strict honesty in his youth is not likely to change as he grows older, and mercantile honesty is some guarantee of political honesty"

(66). And, of course, the descriptions are often infused with an Algeresque quality, a task which only took him 14 days to complete and for which he was “quite handsomely paid” (“Horatio Alger to Mr. Elderkin”). As these brief examples suggest, Lincoln’s biography sounds much like that of Ragged Dick and other fictional protagonists.

When writing the Lincoln biography, Alger consulted several biographies considered standard at the time: Francis B. Carpenter’s *Six Months at the White House, with Abraham Lincoln* (1866), Henry J. Raymond’s *History of the Administration of President Lincoln* (1864), David V.G. Bartlett’s *The Life and Public Services of Hon. Abraham Lincoln* (1860), Josiah G. Holland’s *The Life of Abraham Lincoln* (1866), and Ward H. Lhamon’s *The Life of Abraham Lincoln* (1872). Alger did not question any of the information contained within the aforementioned biographies. He also quoted several portions of Lincoln’s addresses (*The Backwoods Boy: Or, the Boyhood and Manhood of Abraham Lincoln* 72-73; 80-81; 124-25; 186-87; 202-07; 274-75). Of course, in true Alger fashion, he interjects his own thoughts into the narration, especially about important events. In 1953, Jordan Fiore discusses Alger’s biography of Lincoln in one of the only articles that covers the subject, “Horatio Alger, Jr., as a Lincoln Biographer.” He writes that the Lincoln biography “had value as a portrait for young people in the 1880’s, when Horatio Alger, Jr. was perhaps more real to American boys than was Abraham Lincoln” (253). There is little else to extract from Fiore’s coverage of the biography as he relies heavily on the inaccurate Herbert Mayes’s Alger biography as his main point of reference.

The Lincoln biography was Alger’s third, fictionalized biography within the series. He also published *From Canal Boy to President: The Boyhood and Manhood of*

James A. Garfield (1881), where in true Alger fashion, he tells the tale of a boy who struggled and eventually became successful. Alger writes how, at an early age, James Garfield was eager to pursue a life at sea, but was thwarted by his mother who persuades him to travel to Cleveland and obtain employment. After many trials and tribulations, he rises above his struggles and becomes president. *From Farm Boy to Senator: History of the Boyhood and Manhood of Daniel Webster (1882)* is the fictionalized biography of Webster that details his life from his youth as a farm boy to the culmination of his political career as a respected member of the Senate. Alger narrates Webster's climb to greatness, how he encountered conflict, and how he met many helpful individuals along the way. Alger also published two volumes of a biography about Edwin Forrest, co-written with his cousin William Alger: *Life of Edwin Forrest: Early Life of the Famous Actor* (volume 1) and *Life of Edwin Forrest: Decisive Biography of the Famous Actor* (volume 2) in 1877. Both volumes of the Edwin Forrest biography are considered by The Horatio Alger Society to be a "serious biography" of the actor, not a fictionalized version as his others had been. These volumes provide a comprehensive look at the life of a pioneer in the world of American theatre. In Scharnhorst's Alger biography, he, too, acknowledges the validity of the biography with the amount of research that Alger and William conducted in order to write it (*Lost Life* 107).

Despite the facts that serve as a frame for the biographies Alger penned, he, like the authors of the biographies that were published about him, indulged in creative dialogue and made-up "facts" in order to capture the attention of readers. When John R. Anderson suggested that Alger write the Garfield biography upon the president's death in 1881, he had in mind that it should be written for a boy audience—the market to which

Alger was already writing (*Lost Life* 121). So Alger employed the same tropes he used in his other works of fiction: a young boy who endured many hardships becomes a respectable and honored man. His biographical work (as well as the biographies of Alger) also positions biographers as mythmakers, as they choose which facts to include and decide on how to assemble them. Alger as a biographer, like his own biographers, ultimately decides on the story he wants to tell for, ultimately influencing the way readers view the subject.

Mythologizing Horatio Alger, Jr.

Although many biographies (some accurate, some completely fictitious) have been written about Alger, it is still the Herbert Mayes hoax biography that often resonates in accounts of Alger, especially outside of academia. In fact, during my research for this dissertation, I regularly came across Alger articles, internet postings, and book reviews that either referenced Mayes's Alger biography or included the information from his text as fact. Rarely will a person recognize the subject of my dissertation, especially outside of academia (more specifically, outside of those who study nineteenth-century American literature), with anything other than, "Oh, the American Dream guy?" That is who Alger has become—the American Dream guy. In one of the few book-length studies of Alger's fiction, Carol Nackenoff describes this idea:

Alger heroes are part of our language of discourse about social mobility and economic opportunity, about determination, self-reliance, and success. They are symbols for individual initiative, permeability of economic and social hierarchies, opportunities and honest dealings. "Horatio Alger" is

shorthand for someone who has risen through the ranks—the self-made man, against the odds. (3-4)

As Nackenoff suggests, Alger has become synonymous with pulling oneself up by the bootstraps and overcoming economic obstacles, and not the caricature that Herbert Mayes successfully, yet deceitfully created.

When Herbert Mayes's Alger biography took hold and created the image we continue to have of the author, a dual Alger myth began to take shape. The first myth is fairly obvious based on the discussion within this chapter: the myth about who Alger is believed to be, perpetuated by the Mayes biography, contrasts with who he really was. Most people do not realize that the man who penned hundreds of books for boys was asked to leave the ministry due to improper behavior with boys. The second Alger myth is slightly less straightforward, and is what the following chapters set out to explore: on the surface, Alger's texts seem to emphasize the idea that anyone can become successful. However, a closer reading reveals moments of deceit as well as blind luck that play a role in Alger's protagonists' success. Alger's own biographical work plays into both of these myths: he creates stories about real people that are not entirely fact based, which we can contrast with who we historically know that person to be, and he uses the same story line from his fiction—the idea that anyone, especially those with humble beginnings, can rise to honor and respectability through hard work.

When we, as readers and products of American culture, think of Alger, we might be inspired by “the American Dream guy” who wrote stories that tell us that we can do anything we want to with hard work and determination. When critics and scholars write about the work of Horatio Alger, Jr., the latter myth—the rags-to-riches plot—is often the

implicit focus, but without observing the myth. Scholars regularly examine the way the characters succeed, after experiencing struggle, but little has been said, outside of a few articles, about the role of Alger's not-so-wholesome characters and themes of deceit.

Several scholars acknowledge that Alger is a mythmaker. In *The Dream of Success: A Study of the Modern American Imagination*—a book about the works of Dreiser, London, Norris, and other contemporaries as the American ideal of success—Kenneth S. Lynn writes, “sublimating a lifetime which Alger himself judged to be ignominiously unheroic, he created the ‘Alger hero,’ and thereby became one of the great mythmakers of the modern world” (4). The Alger hero, according to Lynn, is a myth in popular culture because of all of the inspiration it gave people, and allowed them to erroneously believe that they could become anyone they wanted as long as they worked hard for it. Similarly, Gary Scharnhorst points out that the Alger myth evolves with each new generation; originally a “champion of Uplift” in the mid nineteenth century, he “was ultimately transformed from an economic mythmaker, a reputation he acquired during the prosperous 1920s, into a patriotic defender of the social and political status quo and erstwhile proponent of *laissez-faire* capitalism” (“Demythologizing Alger” 192). Extending these observations, I suggest that Alger is a great mythmaker because he has the ability to make readers look past his sometimes-flawed protagonists to focus on their positive qualities. Hidden are the dark, less endearing qualities, just as Alger managed to do in his own life.

In *The Lost Life of Horatio Alger, Jr.*, Scharnhorst and Bales write, “Alger himself hardly could have imagined that he would be long remembered, much less celebrated as an American mythologizer a half-century after his death” (156). This

statement, despite its speculations about what Alger might have thought, aptly highlights the amount of myth (including lies, deceit, and other forms of mythmaking) that surrounds Alger's life, his characters, and his stories. Alger, in one way or another, is associated with deceit—either the myth about his biography or the myth about ease of attaining the American dream.

The next chapter will center on Alger's more popular novels, *Ragged Dick; or Street Life in New York with the Boot Blacks* and *Fame and Fortune; or the Progress of Richard Hunter*, examining how deception functions within them. As several scholars note in passing, Dick (or Richard, as he is referred to in the follow-up novel) often lies and participates in acts of deceit. I will examine these moments in the context of Alger's overarching agenda in the novels, with a particular focus on the transition to respectability—a term that is regularly repeated and emphasized in many of his novels. As I will suggest, Dick's lies are often packaged as jokes to make connections with upper class patrons, and his acts of deceit are often part of a scheme to reveal a crime committed by an unscrupulous character. Both afford *Ragged Dick* opportunities to perform the identity that Richard Hunter will eventually reflect.

CHAPTER TWO

ACTING THE PART: DISHONESTY AND PERFORMANCE IN *RAGGED DICK* AND *FAME AND FORTUNE*

“He isn’t exactly the sort of guide I would have picked out for you. Still he looks honest. He has an open face, and I think can be depended upon.”

-Horatio Alger, Jr., *Ragged Dick; or, Street Life in New York with the Boot Blacks*

Honesty and Intentions

In the relatively concise *Ragged Dick; or, Street Life in New York with the Boot-blacks*, arguably Horatio Alger, Jr.’s most well-known novel, some form of the word “honest” appears in the text 17 times. In fact, from the introductory chapter of *Ragged Dick*, the narrator emphasizes that Dick is an honest boy: “He was above doing anything mean or dishonorable. He would not steal, or cheat, or impose upon younger boys, but was frank and straightforward, manly and self-reliant. His nature was a noble one, and had saved him from all mean faults” (6). This quote and others like it establish Dick’s honest nature at the beginning of the novel, and readers typically assume that Alger’s heroes are hard-working do-gooders. As a result, Alger’s novels often receive a surface evaluation, and readers and critics frequently assume several basic elements: Alger wrote stories mainly for boys, typically featuring a poor youth protagonist who works hard and transitions from rags to riches. His stories are formulaic: the setting, character names, and occupations change, but the plot and outcome rarely deviate from the formula. Although these components arguably describe the shell of an Alger novel, there is much more to examine in these seemingly rudimentary stories. The importance of honesty is deeply

embedded into these novels, functioning as an indicator of a character's potential and limitations, yet it regularly goes unnoticed.

This chapter will examine scenes of deceit in Alger's most well-known novel, *Ragged Dick*, and its sequel, *Fame and Fortune*, to better understand how honesty and performances help Ragged Dick (or Richard Hunter, as he is later known), to succeed. As I will discuss, few scholars have examined the topic, and those who have done so seem mostly concerned with readers admiring a "lying" protagonist, often simply concluding that Alger's "good" boy cannot really be good because he lies. Drawing on recent scholarship on confidence games and performance, this chapter will provide an in-depth look at several scenes of deceit in order to get at the core of Alger's emphasis on honesty within *Ragged Dick* and its sequel. First, I will provide an overview of the *Ragged Dick* series and a review of relevant Alger scholarship. Then, I will examine key scenes to show that although Dick lies, his lies are presented differently than those of other characters. Alger encourages readers to make a distinction between Dick and other characters who lie with malicious intent. When Dick lies, he typically does so as a part of a performance to entertain and make connections with his patrons or to right a wrong, usually involving a crime or mistaken identity. Alger also emphasizes Dick's appearance—his honest face often helps him establish these relationships. However, Dick's performances also suggest that appearances, and the Alger formula itself, can be deceiving.

First published in 1867 as a twelve-part serial in *The Student and Schoolmate* (a monthly children's magazine), *Ragged Dick* is Alger's most popular story. After the success of the serialization, *Ragged Dick* was published in book form by A.K. Loring in

1868. Using the same formula employed in the novel, Alger eventually composed over one hundred novels in the second half of the nineteenth century. Although I only explore *Ragged Dick* and its successor, *Fame and Fortune*, in this chapter, I must mention that there were other novels that followed in the *Ragged Dick* series: *Mark the Matchboy; or, Richard Hunter's Ward* (1869), *Rough and Ready; or, Life among the New York Newsboys* (1869), *Ben the Luggage Boy; or, Among the Wharves* (1870), and *Rufus and Rose; or the Fortunes of Rough and Ready* (1870). I focus on the first two novels from the series because they are the only stories that chronicle the life of Ragged Dick. Dick is mentioned in *Mark the Matchboy*, but the novel itself simply continues the series with a different protagonist. At the end of *Fame and Fortune*, Alger fully concludes the future of Dick and other main characters; however, at the beginning of the next novel, *Mark the Matchboy*, Alger reverts back to a much earlier time in Dick's life, more or less ignoring the conclusion that he had previously drawn, and instead inserts his hero back into late boyhood to continue a small portion of the previous plot. Prior to publishing the third installment in the *Ragged Dick* series, Alger published two other books, *Struggling Upward; or Luke Larkin's Luck* (1868) and *Luck and Pluck; or John Oakley's Inheritance* (1869), the latter of which started an entirely new series, *The Luck and Pluck* series.

Ragged Dick begins by introducing Dick, a fourteen-year-old homeless boy who sleeps on the streets. He earns his living as a boot black, and formerly as a match boy and a newsboy. We learn that he is different and stands out from other street boys because he uses humor to engage his patrons, is motivated, and has good looks and an "honest-looking" face buried beneath his dirtiness. Readers also discover that like most street

boys, Dick can never get ahead or begin to change his position in life because he has vices: smoking, gambling, and going to Barnum's.

The narrator reveals that although Dick is the main character, he is "no model boy" (*Ragged Dick* 6), which is emblematic of Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*. Franklin's renowned description of the 13 virtues seems to be at work within many of Alger's stories, particularly with Dick's reformation. Like Franklin, who suggests that "it would be well not to distract [his] attention by attempting the whole at once," but instead focus on one area of improvement at a time (137), Alger has Dick reform his vices and weaknesses one by one (e.g., dirtiness, ragged clothing, visiting Barnum's, slang speech). Correspondingly, because Alger presents Dick as "no model boy," he further indicates his lack of perfection as ideal, a notion that Franklin notably proposed when he wrote that he

found the difficulty of obtaining good and breaking bad habits in other points of vice and virtue, have given up the struggle, and concluded that "a speckled ax was best"; for something, that pretended to be reason, was every now and then suggesting to me that such extream [sic] nicety as I exacted of myself might be a kind of foppery in morals, which, if it were known, would make me ridiculous; that a perfect character might be attended with the inconvenience of being envied and hated; and that a benevolent man should allow a few faults in himself, to keep his friends in countenance.(145)

Through Franklin's satirical suggestion that it is preferable to keep some flaws so as to not be made the object of envy, he emphasizes the benefit of continuous effort toward goodness rather than the pursuit of perfection, just as Alger does with Dick.

Similarly, Alger also seems to rely heavily upon Franklin's suggestion to display these endeavors publicly for the purpose of inspiring others. Within his *Autobiography*, Franklin writes that he originally intended the contents to be used for the benefit of his son; but, upon the encouragement of two friends, Abel James and Benjamin Vaughan—who decided that his message was important for the public masses—Franklin decided to have the *Autobiography* published (131). The importance of presenting examples of morality was viewed as a necessity, an idea that Alger undoubtedly adhered to when he composed his stories with the aim to inspire young boys to pursue respectability.

Just like Franklin suggests, Dick displays an attempt at a moral reformation and displays that effort publicly—the opposite approach of Alger's villainous characters. Throughout the novel, Dick is contrasted with other street boys who are lazy, manipulative, or thieving and who have none of the qualities or characteristics attributed to the title character. Dick later, by way of good fortune, meets Frank and his uncle, Mr. Whitney, who provide him with his first opportunity for friendship with someone outside his social class, support, moral guidance (Frank encourages Dick to spend his money more wisely and give up his bad habits), and the beginning of his advancement (a new suit and a \$5 tip).¹ Dick becomes inspired, and vows to turn his life around. Dick soon encounters Henry Fosdick, who eventually shares a room with him in exchange for tutoring (heeding the advice of Frank and Mr. Whitney, who emphasized the need of an education to better oneself). After a short time of tutoring, saving, and sleeping in a room instead of on the streets, Dick decides he is able to search for a better position, which he is unable to obtain because they tend to be better suited for “gentleman's sons.” But, in

¹ \$5 in 1867 is the equivalent of \$80 in 2014 (using an inflation calculator).

the typical Alger manner, Dick encounters a bout of luck, saves a man's son, and is rewarded with a new position as a clerk, at a salary of \$10 per week (the average salary of similar positions in the novel are approximately \$4-6 per week). The raise and better position allow Dick to arrange better living quarters, save more money, and continue on his journey toward "respectability," inspiring him to adopt the more formal version of his name, Richard Hunter, "a young gentleman on the way to fame and fortune" (216), to match his upward mobility.

Published in the same year as *Ragged Dick*, *Fame and Fortune* continues right where *Ragged Dick* left off. The narrator even prepares readers at the end of *Ragged Dick* to expect to learn more about the protagonist and other major characters in the sequel. The subtitle of the sequel, *The Progress of Richard Hunter*, is also indicative of Alger's intent to finish the story of the novel's hero. After their combined incomes increase, both Dick and Fosdick decide that it is only appropriate to relocate to a more respectable apartment. Fosdick tutors Dick to help him quickly acquire equivalent knowledge Dick's upward mobility is further propelled when his boss invites him to his home for dinner and then presents him with one-thousand dollars and a gold watch and chain. The watch, as we learn, is more a signifier of social status than the cash, as all respectable men have watches, and respectability can even be determined by the fanciness of the watch. Another lucky break is presented to Dick when Mr. Murdock offers to let him join him in a real estate venture, buying coveted lots that the city will certainly want to purchase later, for a very high return, during the expansion of Central Park.

Micky Maguire returns to the sequel when Gilbert solicits his expertise in trickery to tarnish Dick's now-respectable reputation. All of these characters are willing to lie and

scheme to cause Dick's fall from respectability because they are envious of his newfound circumstances and situation in society. Micky successfully frames Dick for theft so that he will lose his job. The scheme temporarily works as Dick is hauled off to jail. As he awaits trial, Mr. Murdock comes to Dick's defense, helps him become exonerated, and fittingly suspects that Gilbert is behind the trick. Upon Dick's release, he harbors no hard feelings for Micky, noting that he had little choice in life because of his upbringing: he grew up with an abusive father, and rather than endure the continued mistreatment, he opted for a life in the streets where he was only further exposed to unscrupulous role models and a life of trickery. As the novel nears a conclusion, Dick is able to impress the wealthy Ida Greyson at her birthday party by showing her how educated he has become—displaying his French-language knowledge and dance skills. He is accepted by all present as a respectable gentleman, the status he so desperately seeks throughout both novels. Gilbert removes himself from the bookkeeping position (due to frustration from being interrogated for his scheme), and Dick receives the position. Dick convinces Rockwell to give Micky Maguire a chance, and he transitions into the hero's former job (indicating that Micky has turned a new leaf and is following in Dick's footsteps toward becoming respectable). We learn in the last few pages that Micky is very successful and becomes a porter due to his abilities. Dick eventually becomes a partner to Rockwell, and he proposes marriage to Ida Greyson—a fully-concluded happily ever after for the hero and the other characters who manage to appear good by the novel's end.

As this plot summary suggests, Alger focuses on his hero's courageous actions and suggests that hard work leads to a successful future. Despite the obstacles that Dick faces, he always succeeds by the story's end—this notion, Alger proposes, is due entirely

to his work ethic and courage. What is less obvious beneath the surface is a character who is sometimes deceitful and whose ascent is often catalyzed by luck or a chance acquaintance. This veiled approach suggests that Alger's own formula is deceptive because it emphasizes hard work and masks the role that luck, deception, and appearance regularly play. Alger also creates a character in Dick whose personality is enveloped by his performances, which can make his motives somewhat difficult to understand, both by characters in the story and critics.

Scholarly Contributions for *Ragged Dick*

In comparison to many of his contemporaries, Horatio Alger, Jr. remains neglected by scholars. Most scholarship on Alger appears in *Newsboy*, the journal for the Horatio Alger Society. As Chapter One demonstrated, his biography has received some attention although many of these publications (with the notable exception of Gary Scharnhorst's work) are inaccurate or rely on incorrect biographies as sources. Of his fiction, *Ragged Dick* is unquestionably the most studied Alger text, although scholarship about the novel is scarce. Most scholars approach Alger and his work from a few general perspectives: his influence on later writers, his depiction of American capitalism, his version of the American success story, and his representation of masculinity. As I will discuss below, important articles by Glenn Hendler, David Leverenz, Hildegard Hoeller, and W. T. Lhamon, Jr. touch on the role of deceit and suggest provocative connections between lying and performance, and I will build on their work to explore these connections.

In other contexts, most scholars mention Alger in passing as a rags-to-riches advocate, and a few articles trace the influence of the Alger formula on later writers such as Theodore Dreiser, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and others. For example, appearing in the Autumn 1982 issue of *American Literary Realism, 1870-1910*, Paul A. Orlov's essay "Plot as Parody: Dreiser's Attack on the Alger Theme in *An American Tragedy*" suggests that the title of Theodore Dreiser novel is a "bitterly ironic inversion of a Horatio Alger story" (239). Orlov explores Alger's reverse influence on Dreiser within this novel because it parodies the success-myth stories that Alger so regularly composed. Conversely, Alex Pitofsky's essay "Dreiser's *The Financier* and the Horatio Alger Myth," published in the Fall 1998 edition of *Twentieth Century Literature*, explains that Dreiser was inspired by Alger. *The Financier*, published in 1912, roughly 13 years before *An American Tragedy*, features a hero who strives for material success by employing Alger's luck and pluck formula. Pitofsky asserts that the likeness is evident and that Dreiser went as far as to give his hero an Alger-inspired middle name, "Algernon." Although critics have previously raised the idea that *The Financier* parallels Alger's formula, Pitofsky argues that this concept has not been explored in detail until his essay (276). Gary Scharnhorst's essay "Scribbling Upward: Fitzgerald's Debt of Honor to Horatio Alger, Jr.," featured in the 1978 issue of *Fitzgerald-Hemingway Annual*, discusses F. Scott's Fitzgerald's connection to Horatio Alger, both as a youth and an adult. Fitzgerald read Alger's stories as a child, and his early story "A Debt of Honor" uses the title of one Alger novel, and the hero from another (161). As Fitzgerald matured, his writing often satirized Alger's Myth of Success, which can be seen in *This Side of Paradise* where he gives "a satiric twist to [Alger's] absurd convention[s]" (162). The

story's hero doesn't capitalize on his Algeresque opportunities, and Fitzgerald makes sure to mention in the opening pages that he "did not read" Alger's *Do and Dare* (163).

Fitzgerald sometimes gave his stories satirical Alger titles, such as the play *The Vegetable or from President to Postman* which mirrors several titles such as *From Canal Boy to President* and *From Farm Boy to Senator*, and critic Richard Lehan has remarked that "*Gatsby* is like 'an inverted Horatio Alger novel,' but *Gatsby* can be more accurately described as a sequel to an ironic fable" (165). Despite Fitzgerald's growing disaffection of Alger's novels, Scharnhorst's article demonstrates that they still proved useful to the author.

Before turning to an examination of deceit in *Ragged Dick* and *Fame and Fortune*, it is important to consider key points from the limited existing scholarship on the series. In a basic database search, Horatio Alger's name is usually related to the same umbrella of topics, most commonly American capitalism, American success stories, and gender studies. In "American Profits: Moral Capitalism in Horatio Alger, Jr.'s *Ragged Dick*," John R. Ernest suggests that Alger presents capitalism as a moral system for Americans, in which he conceives his own rules for governing behavior (58-9). Ernest ends his article by noting that Alger created a myth about culture and society (64) when he wrote his most famous novel, but he does not expand on this idea. Similarly, in "Endless Frontiers and Emancipation from History: Horatio Alger's Reconstruction of Place and Time in *Ragged Dick*," Aaron Shaheen discusses Alger's depiction of capitalism, but specifically with regard to time and space. He touts *Dick* as the "postbellum 'American Adam,'" and suggests that the novel's greatest achievement is "its ability to deny the very real possibility of urban economic stagnancy in both temporal

and spatial terms” (21-22). Shaheen spends much of his essay emphasizing that Alger created juxtaposition between the American East and West, and uses the motif of the American Frontier to “channel space and time” (37). Shaheen believes that Alger pushed readers toward an understanding of capitalism and noticing the differences between the Frontier and the urban East.

Another regularly occurring topic in Alger studies is how the author contributed to the America idea of success. Joseph Gustaitis’s short essay, “Horatio Alger: Creator of the American Success Story” most clearly embodies this notion as he claims that Alger’s formula can be equated with “Social Darwinism” (36). Gustaitis writes that the association of Alger’s name with success is “due to twentieth-century intellectuals, both conservative and liberal, who, in casting about for a symbol of *laissez-faire*, latched upon Alger” (37). Because of his formulaic stories and the biography Herbert Mayes created for Alger, it seems he was easily identifiable as someone who promoted the idea of achievable attainment of success with hard work, making it ideal for his name to become synonymous with the rags-to-riches pursuit.

Another popular topic in Alger studies centers on how gender (specifically masculinity and heteronormativity) functions in *Ragged Dick*. In “The Construction of ‘Respectability’: Horatio Alger, Jr.’s *Ragged Dick* and Alger’s Reputation,” Nancy Koppleman compares Dick’s actions to those of Alger himself, proposing that the Bowery regularly featured in *Ragged Dick* was Alger’s favorite hangout for “homosexual encounters and public sexuality,” and suggesting that Dick and his companions frequent this spot for the same purpose (130). Similarly, Koppleman suggests that Alger chose his vocation and preferred venues that best served his “homosexual activity in New York” so

that he could structure his life around his homosexual tendencies (130). Koppleman's essay, like others that focus on this topic, discusses how particular scenes in *Ragged Dick* reveal the hero's homosexuality, as well as his clear mirroring of the author himself.

In "'The Gentle Boy from the Dangerous Classes': Pederasty, Domesticity, and Capitalism in Horatio Alger," Michael Moon takes on the topic of how Alger's "domestic fiction" functions as "a particular brand of male homoerotic romance" in order to support capitalism (88-89). He discusses the various and tempting "male pleasures" that are available to Alger's heroes, ranging from social respectability, accumulation of a small fortune, and philanthropy toward other young boys in need while in pursuit of the American Dream (89). Moon observes that Alger regularly gives "handsome faces and comely bodies" to his boys who aspire to rise, despite their "shabby coverings," which is ultimately emblematic of the hero's first seduction with a transformation to respectability (94). By introducing his impoverished heroes to men and boys of gentility, Alger uses homoeroticism to inspire these boys to seek respectability. Moon concludes that encapsulated in America's "long-cherished myth" of capitalism is what Alger uses tales like *Ragged Dick* to illustrate: male homoerotic tendencies are often repressed, but can be found in examining tales where "white males who control wealth and power have their eye out for that exceptional, 'deserving,' 'attractive' underclass youth who defies his statistical fate to become . . . yet another 'gentle boy from the dangerous classes'" (107). Although Moon's essay discusses how male relationships function within Alger's most recognizable stories, female protagonists are neglected, as they are in nearly all Alger scholarship. I will examine the roles of Alger's female protagonists in Chapter Three.

Glenn Hendler's "Pandering in the Public Sphere: Masculinity and the Market in Horatio Alger" focuses primarily on masculinity and hints at the importance of performativity. Hendler aims to define the roles men and boys played in the economy and the cultural public during the nineteenth century (416). Hendler remarks, "Alger's stories were reformulations of the traditional association of masculinity with the public sphere, ways of interpellating boys as virtuous, 'manly' individuals destined to play a role in an especially homosocial version of that sphere" (416). Masculinity is central to the nineteenth-century American social realm, a place where the key to stability and success is manliness, and Alger's world functions in the same manner. Alger's good boys must strive to model their lives after the businessmen they aspire to become, dressed in suits, foregoing slang and using proper language, keeping a neat and professional appearance, and, of course, producing a worthy income—a concept that I later develop and suggest is a continual form of deceit, the performance. Hendler draws upon Jürgen Habermas's *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* to argue that reading "both psychologically and materially positions the private subject to participate in public discourse. The same is true in Horatio Alger's public sphere. Alger typically foregrounds his protagonist's illiterate status early in his stories" (419). For example, initially Dick says "'readin' makes his 'head ache'" (*Ragged Dick* 28) and as Dick begins to rise socially, namely visible through his property acquisitions (e.g., a bank account, a gold watch, new clothes), his success is directly mirrored by his increased ability to read.

I suggest, however, that the most important idea to take away regarding reading is that it is closely connected to a character's outward conversion. It does not matter that Dick learns to read and has honed a new and necessary skill, but it is more important that

he can convince the public sphere of his literacy. As Hendler explains, “the prerequisite of virtuous publicity is simply that the boy’s interiority and surface appearance are identical” (419). I build on this notion in the “Performances” section of this chapter, suggesting that whether or not the boy is literate, honest, and educated matters little; he must be able to perform as one who automatically embodies those characteristics. There are several instances where Dick meets a businessman in the public sphere who suggests that he probably should not trust someone he doesn’t know, but because Dick has an honest face or he likes his looks, he feels compelled to trust him. This particular theme is one of many where Dick must adhere to bourgeois ideological constraints in order to be eligible to rise socially—it is not important that Dick is an honest boy, but crucial to his success that he can easily convince others of his honesty. To use Hendler’s terms, Alger “pandered” to the public sphere by having his heroes and his readers aspire to adhering to visual social constructs, such as appearing gentlemanly in order to be perceived as gentlemanly. Although Alger lectures boys on the importance of adopting good and honest qualities, he instead accentuates the outward display of these characteristics, rather than the true inner transformation. Alger’s message suggests that the way in which a character functions in public is one of the most important requirements for upward mobility, and is less concerned with the private self that is not on public display in the social world.

Hendler’s essay hints at, but never fully explores, the performative aspect of Dick’s character: that his honesty is part of a performance. This issue raises an important question: if honesty is simply a matter of performance, then is it honesty in the true sense of the word? Hendler also mentions in passing that Dick participates in confidence

games. He does not provide a detailed exploration of the topic, but notes that “the Alger hero’s ability to ‘look good’ is a potentially dangerous quality because it risks making his performance of virtue look like a confidence game” (420). Hendler’s essay presents several interesting points, most notably that Dick cannot just “be” the part. I build upon this observation later in the chapter by suggesting that being inherently honest or smart gets Dick nowhere. He must act the part: he must show his honesty, bravery, wit, and grit to others, so that his patrons and other middle and upper-class members of society can readily assess his character. In this sense, Hendler suggests the importance of performance and hints at questions about the implications of performing honesty, but never explores how this functions in Alger’s stories.

Another important, yet concise, study on Dick Hunter is David Leverenz’s “Tomboys, Bad Boys, and Horatio Alger: When Fatherhood Became a Problem.” Only the last three-and-a-half pages of a seventeen-page article discuss Alger’s work, but Leverenz takes careful consideration of Alger studies that have preceded his own. He specifically reviews noteworthy Alger texts, including Marcus Klein’s *Easterns, Westerns, and Private Eyes: American Matters, 1870-1900*, Glenn Hendler’s, “Pandering in the Public Sphere,” and Carol Nackenoff’s *The Fictional Republic: Horatio Alger and American Political Discourse*. Leverenz ultimately expresses his frustration with aforementioned scholars because none of them seem to have a problem with the fact that Alger’s hero lies regularly—a point which he feels should be emphasized. He notes that Dick regularly fakes “upscale connections” and that his “linguistic bravado constitutes much of his appeal,” and Leverenz ultimately concludes that Dick is a “good bad boy” (232)—a term with undefined parameters.

It is important to note that Leverenz observes the “theatricality” in Dick’s performances, although he never really explains what constitutes a performance or how performances might work. Leverenz assesses the use of Dick’s “drolling” and namedropping, and determines that it “enables his upward mobility by pleasing his listeners. Why? Perhaps Dick’s extravagant name dropping admiringly yet mockingly mirrors his audience’s uneasy negotiations between character and theatricality, sincerity and fraud” (233). Leverenz does not expand on these ideas, nor does he definitively outline the characteristics of a “good bad boy.” Leverenz implies that Dick’s lies are problematic because of the role he serves as the series’ hero. He does not explain why a protagonist should not be permitted to lie even in jest or to right a wrong, as Dick often does. This article indirectly raises an important question: Does Alger imply that certain types of lies are acceptable? Alger certainly categorizes and assesses lies by their severity, evinced through the punishment that they receive throughout his novels. Malicious lies result in the liar being caught and punished, whereas more innocent lies—those told as jokes to break tension in an uncomfortable situation and those told to shield others from painful or harsh realities—are overlooked. Dick’s lies fall into the innocent lies category, and he never receives reprimanding for them. The same is true for other characters, such as Helen Ford, where she lies to shield her father from realizations that would only upset him. Villains, on the other hand, tell malicious lies and are almost always punished, usually by being sent to the tombs, banished from the city, or confronted by a policeman. The section below, on confidence men and boys, further explores the notion of lying, but specifically considers age as a mechanism of separation and degree of punishment.

The most comprehensive collection on Alger studies is the 2008 Norton Critical Edition of *Ragged Dick*, which is edited by Hildegard Hoeller and also features her 2006 essay about Alger's substantial connections to P. T. Barnum, titled "Freaks and the American Dream: Horatio Alger, P.T. Barnum, and the Art of Humbug." In her article, she asserts that "the similarities between Alger's fictional practices and P. T. Barnum's exhibition strategies are central in understanding both the nature and the success of Alger's most famous and quintessential rags-to-riches story" (189). She immediately recognizes the connection that Alger's most beloved hero has to Barnum's—a habit Dick must forgo in order to become successful. Dick has to abandon theatre going, Barnum's, and other vices in order to make any social strides. Hoeller argues that Alger creates his own fictional Barnum character through his hero because of his poverty, homelessness, and the general curiosity he evokes in his patrons. Hoeller also asserts that Dick is "like Tom Thumb, a charming miniature man" (190), and her argument strongly proclaims that Dick's attributes are freakish in nature, just like those of a Barnum character.

However, Hoeller's argument loses some credibility after a closer examination of *Ragged Dick*. Dick is not a small, Tom Thumb-sized boy as Hoeller suggests, and there are several indications in the novel that substantiate this impression. When we are introduced to Johnny Nolan in chapter two of *Ragged Dick*, the narrator remarks that he is about the same size as Dick (7), and later that Johnny Nolan is "large of his age" (109). Ida Greyson also clues the reader in on Dick's size when she enquires about his age. Dick tells her that he is fourteen, which leaves Ida surprised, responding, "You're a big boy of your age" (72). In another instance, Micky Maguire throws rocks at Dick, who immediately stands up to the bully. Fostick is in awe of the encounter, and is worried that

his friend could have easily been harmed by confronting Micky; however, Dick reassures Fosdick that there was no cause for concern because Micky would “rather get hold of small boys,” and advises Fosdick, who is small, to let him know if he is ever bothered by the bully (*Ragged Dick* 76). Never is Dick described as a small boy, a notion on which Hoeller’s argument hinges. Perhaps Hoeller bases her claim on the multiple mentions of Dick’s too-large coat, but it is clear that he wears whatever clothing he can obtain—likely the coat of a large, adult man, a garment that would appear enormous on most boys. This same coat, and Dick’s other clothing articles, specifically their “ragged” condition, are what prompt Hoeller to see Dick as “freakish,” because there is nothing else unordinary about the novel’s hero (aside from his regularly-emphasized determination and grit that others do not have).

Conversely, Dick’s ragged condition is nothing extraordinary or “freakish” among a city full of often-homeless street boys who could not afford clothing that was not tattered or in desperate need of repair or replacement. In Charles Loring Brace’s *The Dangerous Classes of New York and Twenty Years’ Work among Them*, he regularly describes the appearance of nineteenth-century New York City street children as unclean and disheveled, relating how they appeared “ragged, fronzy, with tangled hair and dirty face[s, and who have] slept for years in boxes and privies” (272). Brace’s observation suggests that Hoeller’s equating Dick to a Barnum freak may be an overstatement, as he would have blended perfectly with other street boys in New York City at the time. Hoeller also does not observe that Dick’s ambiguous size also makes him seem both like and unlike an adult confidence man—a concept that I explore near the end of this chapter—rather than a Barnum side show character.

Another connection that Hoeller makes between Dick and Barnum is his linguistic bravado. She refers to David Leverenz's study, addressed above, when he asks, "Why does nobody notice that this model of boyish honesty is lying all the time?" (Leverenz 232; Hoeller 192). She agrees that critics have not sufficiently discussed the topic, and asserts that the "quality" is one of his assets, but, of course, a particularly Barnumesque feature because his lies tend toward joking—an effort to entertain his patrons and friends (192). One particularly important idea that Hoeller notices, though is minimally discussed, is that "the customer pays for Dick's performance. . . . Dick turns himself into an exhibit, a humbug performance, for which the customer pays" (193). While Hoeller uses this observation of Dick's performances to make her Barnum connection, she, like most other Alger critics, is quick to label him as deceitful without further examining his motives or questioning how this fits into the Alger paradigm.

W.T. Lhamon, Jr.'s essay, "Horatio Alger and American Modernism: The One-Dimensional Social Formula" appears last, though dated earliest, in this otherwise chronologically-ordered section, because the author arrives at interesting points that I will expand upon in this study. Lhamon's primary aim is to illuminate the one-dimensional culture that Alger created in his novels. For Lhamon, the notion of a one-dimensional culture begins with Herbert Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man* (1964), when he discusses his fears of "drastic unification" in society (13).

Contributing to what Lhamon finds problematic about Alger's one-dimensional culture is a skewed presentation of urban society, where the middle class functions in an entirely wholesome light, which mostly arises as a result of Alger's dislike of extreme

wealth. The upper class threatened Alger's middle-class constructions, and an upper-class hero would make his work unappealing to those for whom he wrote:

No Alger hero ever aspires to or achieves the upper class, for the upper class is divorced from 'fighting upward' . . . [which is rooted in the] unconscious sense that the real danger to an aspiring middle class was the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of an upper class. He had to dramatize such a class as ineffective and had to dismiss its constituents if his formula was to work, if Ragged Dicks were to make it. The novels too repeatedly display the author's animosity toward the very wealthy and too often show the poor boy vanquishing them for any reader to doubt either that Alger had a great anger toward an over-moned class or that he saw them as invincible. (18)

When looking at the text itself, we can see that Lhamon's ideas regarding the distinction between classes unfold. This is made evident in the treatment of upper class boys who regularly expect special treatment because they are gentlemen's sons. Roswell Crawford in *Ragged Dick* illustrates this point, and the reader is positioned to dislike his character from the outset—he is smug and a braggart, and publicly humiliates Fosdick in front of other boys applying for a job, simply because he is not the son of a gentleman. To create this "one dimensional culture," as Lhamon terms it, Alger uses his novels to show that the only way one can respectably have money is to earn it honestly, and that those who derive wealth otherwise are not to be emulated. Because Alger's readers were predominantly middle-class white boys, Alger appealed to them by having the heroes act out the endings they desired. Alger's novels, despite being formulaic, were successful

because of the wholesomeness they depicted and because the audience could identify with the heroes he created.

While Lhamon is quick to highlight Alger's influence, he also notices Alger's moments of deceit without labeling them as such. He recognizes that Alger's novels were meant to serve as guidebooks establishing urban realities, but instead ended up becoming a "departure from reality" (16). Even Alger's publishers took this idea one step further by helping to establish him as someone to be believed, with stories that should register in readers' minds as equally believable, with phrases such as, "'books that are good and wholesome, with enough 'ginger' in them to suit the tastes of the younger generation . . . healthy and elevating' (from the last page included in the Hurst & Co. reprints)" (22). Not only were Alger and his stories regarded as wholesome, but his publishers were telling readers this was how they were supposed to feel about them, further perpetuating the Alger myths discussed in the previous chapter.

Like many readers, Lhamon glosses over the hero's somewhat deceitful practices, but he does observe those of the villains who are nearly always adult men, noting an interesting distinction that is made between boys and men in Alger's novels. Lhamon is quick to recognize that once the heroes in Alger's novels transform into respectable men, we no longer see the boy villains employing their deceitful habits. Men, on the other hand, are treated differently:

Boys will be boys; some boys will be men; but no boys will be visibly poor men. When poor men do appear, it is as thieves or confidencemen [sic], whom the hero always catches and ships to Blackwell's Island, or the Tombs, or sends scurrying westward. When, toward the end of a novel,

occasional representatives of the *honest* poor remain, Alger heroes always lend them a helping hand. Good Samaritanism, therefore, takes care of anything left over from the scourges. Poor men who fail to succeed in the system disappear. . . . As symbolic action, this rise of one man with concomitant social cleansing action is serious. An ultimate world without threatening villains, without evil adults, without poor people, without problems: this is how the literary contribution to the one-dimensional society is made. (17-18; emphasis added)

While Lhamon is interested in the one-dimensional culture that Alger created, which in itself is a form of dishonesty, he does not discuss how Alger's narratives mask the traces of dishonesty by the time they reach their conclusion.

Rather than attributing Alger's successful formulaic method to deceit, Lhamon concludes:

Alger's impact is ominous: in the way he grants potency and even existence only to those fully in accord with bourgeois values, while scourging alternative modes of being; in the way he assures solid consensus by closing society, while righteously insisting it is open; and in the personal cost to the few who succeed. . . . Most ominous of all is that this patter sold so many books, presumably because it satisfied such great needs, and thus, at least in part, indicated that the reading audience participated in Alger's anxieties. His heroes acted out the resolutions his audience wanted. They were like the boys who bought the books, only a little more so. (21)

Lhamon rightfully considers Alger's method concerning, not just for false hope it often gave to young readers, but because of the impact it had on society as a whole during the second half of the nineteenth century, into the early twentieth, and on to the time in which he wrote the article (1970s). The notion that we can all rise with hard work and perseverance still permeates American culture today, nearly a century and a half after the publication of *Ragged Dick*. Luck is infrequently mentioned as being a key component. And while Lhamon chalks this up as an "ominous" impact, I choose to suggest, instead, that his method is just another layer of deceit that surrounds the lives of Alger and his heroes.

Luck and Social Ascension

Alger constantly emphasizes the need for honesty, hard work, and determination in order to achieve respectability; however, he never openly says, "you also need luck on your side." In fact, no Alger hero rises from his previously undesirable circumstances without the assistance of luck, but this concept is overshadowed by the protagonist's hard work. In *Ragged Dick*, Dick, for example, luckily meets Frank and Mr. Whitney, who impress upon him the importance of ridding yourself of vices and of getting an education. They also give him a nice suit. Without this advice, Dick may have never realized what he needed to begin his path to respectability. But, more importantly, the suit with which they gift him is an outward marker of class, which allows him to be taken more seriously and apply for a better position. Without meeting Frank and his uncle, Dick likely would have continued his old ways. They explained to him the importance of giving up his bad habits so he could save money and find a room to rent, and this room also afforded him

the opportunity to clean himself properly before stepping out into society each day, something he was previously unable to do. And, in Alger's novels, a clean face serves a very important role in becoming successful, and is also another social marker. Mr. Whitney also gave Dick a parting gift of five dollars, which allowed him to pay his first week's rent.

This chance meeting with Frank and Mr. Whitney begins the journey for Dick's social ascension. Throughout the story, Dick is lucky enough to meet authoritative characters who naturally believe him either because of his honest-looking face or because he mimics those of the middle class in appearance after he obtained his suit. The first instance of how his looks allow him to be treated differently is after Frank and Mr. Whitney provide Dick with a new suit and instruct him to clean himself up, noting that "clean clothes and a dirty skin don't go well together" (*Ragged Dick* 14). The only missing item to solidify his outward transformation is a new cap, which he and Frank set out to purchase. The man at the entrance to a nice clothing store on Chatham street encourages the two to come into his store—a courtesy that would not have previously been extended to Dick with his former clothes and unclean appearance. His treatment after the transformation illustrates how others view cleanliness and clothing: because he looks and plays the part of a well-to-do young man, and appears to have money, he is treated as though he does. Before, if he would have tried to enter such a store, he would have been treated as a vagrant who must naturally be seeking a handout.

Later, another instance of outward appearance affecting treatment presents itself when Dick and Frank take a car. The boys are seated next to a "middle-aged woman, or lady, as she probably called herself, whose sharp visage and thin lips did not seem to

promise a very pleasant disposition” (40). The woman does not want the boys sitting next to her, claims there is not enough room, and continues to harass the boys for the remainder of the trip because she “had a bad temper” (41). She soon yells for the conductor, exclaiming that her purse has been stolen and accuses the boys of crowding into the car just to rob her. The “passengers rather sided with the boys. Appearances go a great ways” and the boys did not look like thieves, according to the narrator. A passenger echoes this notion when he says that they “do not look as they would steal” (43). The woman refuses to accept the other passengers’ notions of what makes one honest, and demands the conductor search the boys. Neither boy has the wallet, and after the conductor encourages her to look through her own pockets again, she discovers her purse. The passengers reflect the ideals of cleanliness and neat appearance that the narrator projects throughout the novel, and suggests to readers that the woman does not share this sentiment because she is “disagreeable” and “bad temper[ed]” (41).

These chance meetings present many opportunities for Dick’s social ascension: he receives new clothes, learns the importance of cleanliness, discovers the connection between a clean and honest face, and meets wealthy characters who help to pave the way for his ultimate success. Near the end of the novel, another instance of luck provides Dick with the chance for his big break when Mr. Rockwell’s son falls overboard while they are on a ferry, and the father yells, “Ten thousand dollars to anyone who will save him” (*Ragged Dick* 110). Dick, of course, selflessly risks his own life to rescue him, which results in great praise from the father and a job offer as a clerk in his counting room at ten dollars per week—a substantial sum, and an amount much higher than the position typically offers (the larger monetary reward comes later, in *Fame and Fortune*). The

reader knows, by this point, that this position means Dick has finally achieved the beginnings of respectability. These lucky encounters are what make Dick's success possible, but are touted as being achieved through his strength of character, not his luck. Without the luck, Dick would not have been successful, at least certainly not within the same time frame as he is in the novel. For Alger, suppressing the idea of luck is important because if he did not, as Lhamon notes,

the formula would lose credibility. But the obvious fact in each novel is that good fortune falls on the hero while mischance rains on villains. Therefore, in direct proportion to the number of incredibly lucky accidents in the novels, Alger obfuscates their necessity by repeatedly and rhetorically underscoring the overwhelming reliability of manly pluck, grit and prudential virtue. In short, Alger was skirting a central problem in his formula. It is luck that makes the man, but not obviously, because the formula and authorial rhetoric hide the luck. (19)

This notion of luck as the driver is purposely shaded in favor of showcasing Dick's honesty and resolve, a resolutely deceitful tactic on Alger's behalf. While Alger himself may have believed in the notion of social ascension as the result of diligence and hard work, he markets his stories as "rags-to-riches" tales, which inherently suggests that the protagonists pull themselves up by the bootstraps and de-emphasizes the reliance on a chance encounter or lucky benefactor. Nearly all of Alger's tales rely on luck. Doves of middle-class boys, Alger readers, learned to believe that they, too, can achieve their dreams with only hard work and good intentions—luck is not emphasized. This idea also permeated society at the time, seemingly endlessly endorsing Alger's message that we

can all transition from less-than-desirable circumstances to greatness with just a little effort and honest intentions.

Although Alger de-emphasizes the role of luck as critical to his heroes' success, it is conceivable that he relied upon the notion of Providence, or the idea that individuals are simply destined to receive rewarding outcomes and lucky breaks as a result of their continued virtue. In *The American Myth of Success: From Horatio Alger to Norman Vincent Peale*, Richard Weiss makes the connection of Providence to the nineteenth century's popular self-help stories when he writes:

The “rags-to-riches” tradition in the nineteenth century centered around the ethical maxims of industry, frugality, and prudence—in short, around the behavioral patterns enjoined by the Protestant ethic. Men living by these rules were likely to be successful; men living in violation of them were certain to fail. But the Puritan legacy to the self-help tradition extended further. . . .

Reason dictated that God would reciprocate if man fulfilled his terms of the covenant. In this way, man acquired some role in determining the outcome of his life. As Perry Miller wrote: “With the notion of a covenant to assist them, theologians could give reasons for what physicists could but lamely assert, that in a universe governed by God's providence and sustained by His concurrence, the will of man remains free.” (5-6)

When Dick attempts his reformation—from a stereotypical boot black who frequents Barnum's and smokes, among other vices—it can be assumed that he is adhering to these ideas. By having Dick give up bad practices in favor of more satisfactory ones and

rewarding him for doing so, Alger implies that Dick has a hand in his own destiny.

Further, Weiss elaborates that during the Jacksonian era,

“rags-to-riches” writers explicitly linked virtue with success and sin with failure. They rarely stated the premises on which this view rested, namely, that justice must reign in a universe governed by mortal law and that in such a universe man’s freedom to sin or not to sin gave him power to govern his own destiny. The belief that all men could achieve material success by living according to certain ethical rules of conduct was a kind of secular transmutation of the covenant theory. (6)

Alger’s stories unquestionably promote the “rules of conduct” as a requirement to becoming prosperous. Furthermore, sin and vices are equated with failure, as manifested through the punishments that villains receive.

As noted earlier in this chapter, Alger was likely influenced by Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography* and adheres to many of its prescriptions. Weiss also suggests that nineteenth-century rags-to-riches writers relied on Franklin’s instruction and believed in the idea of Providence when he writes, “the habit of telling people how to live properly did not die with the Puritans. It reappears in the writings of Benjamin Franklin, in the “rags-to-riches” literature of the nineteenth century, and in the inspirational writings of the twentieth” (4-5). Further, Franklin’s *Autobiography* confirms his own belief in the notion of Providence and its influence of the governance of individual outcomes. He elaborates:

I was never was without some religious principles. I never doubted, for instance, the existence of the Deity; that he made the world, and govern'd

it by his Providence; that the most acceptable service of God was the doing good to man; that our souls are immortal; and that all crime will be punished, and virtue rewarded, either here or hereafter. These I esteem'd the essentials of every religion. (131)

Franklin's understanding of the influence of Providence is undoubtedly similar to the reasoning that Alger relied upon when composing his characters.

For example, Alger's heroes are able to masquerade as wholesome and ideal, an option that is not afforded to characters, such as confidence men, whose deceit has been revealed by the end of a given novel. The virtue of the good is rewarded; the "sin" and deviant ways of the villainous are punished. Similarly, Providence seems to play a role in the inherent characteristics a character receives, particularly when it comes to outward appearances. Alger's heroes always have handsome and honest-looking faces, whereas villains are continually given dark features and looks considered to be untrustworthy, indicative of their inability to reform. Only the mischievous youth are awarded an opportunity of transformation toward respectability—men, specifically, are not given this opportunity to work toward honesty and rectification. Reformation is only offered to Alger's boys who are willing to change or to perform the attributes of change, not to the hardened confidence man, who is, to Alger, past redeeming himself.

Confidence Men and Confidence Boys

As the discussion above suggests, most Alger scholars reference confidence men and confidence games only in passing. In this section, I draw on Karen Halttunen's observations about confidence men in American literature and in Horatio Alger's work to

suggest that Alger provides a slightly different version of the character type. Her book *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* creates a picture of class structure and upward mobility in mid-nineteenth and early-twentieth century America, based predominantly on conduct manuals and fashion magazines published during those years. In the section “The Confidence Man in Corporate America,” Halttunen opens by noting a shift that took place during the end of high Victorianism, which changed attitudes about social mobility around the mid-1800s. During this time, “middle-class Americans were coming to accept the idea of a social system filled with liminal men in pursuit of the main change [and with it] came a new view of that archetypal man-on-the-make, the confidence man” (198). Toward the end of the century, this emerging new vision of the confidence man was no longer alarming readers about the dangers of “placelessness in a society of self-made men,” but was instead “becoming a kind of model for ambitious young Americans to emulate” (198)—a complete shift in confidence man literature. This new confidence man, one who no longer evoked fear and disdain, but instead provided a model to emulate, had transformed completely by the early twentieth century. Halttunen suggests that the idea peaked in 1936 with Dale Carnegie’s ever-popular *How to Win Friends and Influence People*—an instructional guide intended to instill confidence in its readers and encourage them to take on a more assertive demeanor, despite their natural inclinations—and had already taken hold in 1868 when “the most popular spokesmen for success of his generation, Horatio Alger, Jr. published his first successful novel, *Ragged Dick*” (198). She claims that Alger created the new confidence man, a model figure instead of a threat.

Halttunen recounts a few instances where Dick plays confidence games and suggests that he embodies the characteristics of the newly formed American success ideology: “aggressiveness, charm, and the arts of the confidence man” (201-202). This new ideology was present in the increasingly popular success guides that appeared after 1865, which emphasized the importance of aggressiveness, charm, and “personal magnetism” (which was “one of the salient characteristics of the confidence man”) for success (203-204). Because these new characteristics were so closely related to those of the confidence man, a changing market emerged, and the former trickster confidence man slowly lost appeal, leading to his eventual departure. The confidence man, despite his former popularity in literature, began to disappear from “advice literature . . . [because of] the growing acceptance of the idea that the young American on the make had to become a kind of confidence man himself in order to succeed” (Halttunen 205). The fear once associated with the earlier versions of confidence men was replaced by praise for the new confidence man’s characteristics, embodied by characters like Ragged Dick.

While Halttunen does recognize that confidence games function differently within Alger’s novels, she misses a key point that is critical to solidify this theory: age is a determining factor in the type of confidence man a character can become—boys can embody Halttunen’s definition of the new confidence man, one who is still respected and receives a good outcome, while adults cannot in Alger’s fictional world. I, instead, propose that only the creation of a new category can fully encompass the way in which many of Alger’s young boys behave with relation to honesty and confidence games: the confidence boy. Confidence boys differ greatly from Alger’s adult cons who are never regarded favorably. Alger’s confidence boy is able to masquerade more effectively than

confidence men. His lies can take the form of jokes, his tricks are viewed as juvenile rather than offensive or damning, and his lack of guiding principles is expected. After all, he has influence over his position in society as a vagabond because he had no family to instill values, or to provide shelter, guidance, and support (both morally and financially). The same rules do not apply to Alger's confidence men because they are categorized as men, adults. Their jokes or tricks are no longer humorous, their performances always considered malicious, and recipients are never willing to forgive their choices or position in society because of absent or inept parents. Age allows confidence boys the ability to reform, whereas Alger's confidence men have crossed over into territory from which they cannot turn back. If they engage in dishonesty and deceitful practices as adults, they are labeled confidence men, viewed as a threat, and are regularly punished.

Alger's conning adults are always represented as villains, swindlers, and cheats—those who should not be praised or imitated. Alger emphasizes the differing results for confidence men versus confidence boys by showing us that boys who play tricks on others, like Dick, can still be heralded as heroes once they reform (i.e., Micky Maguire in the last few chapters of *Fame and Fortune*). On the other hand, adults who trick others get caught in their own games, sent to jail where they are punished for their crimes, or are never heard from again. For example, when Travis, Dick's neighbor in the boarding house, steals his bankbook, he is arrested. Dick begs the arresting officer to not take him to jail, and he responds, "You needn't pity him too much. . . . I know him now. He's been to the Island before" (*Ragged Dick 100*), referring to Blackwell Island prison—New York's notorious prison of the late 1800s known for strict and poor treatment. Travis's theft and con games land him in prison, where adult con men are supposed to end up in

the Alger archetype. Young boys, confidence boys, who participate in deceit, are instead given the opportunity to transform, but specifically those who have experienced unfortunate circumstances. This opportunity is never provided for adult cons. Dick, for example, is given a chance to improve his life because of his plight—his mother died when he was a young child and his father went off to sea—never to be heard from again—,which left Dick fending for himself. Similarly, Micky “never had a fair chance [because] his father was a drunkard, and used to beat him and his mother, till Micky ran away from home, and set up for himself. He’s never had any good example set him” (*Fame and Fortune* 238). Because these confidence boy characters have experienced misfortune, which caused them to take care of themselves, we are encouraged to pity them, forgive their conning tendencies and misdeeds, and find it acceptable that they are permitted to rise and become respectable.

However, we must also give consideration to whether or not these characters actually transform. As noted earlier when discussing Hendler’s essay, Alger certainly seems more concerned with having his boys perform a virtue rather than give weight or devote exploration to truly embodying an inward transformation. Alger’s boys who strive toward the bourgeois ideal, like Micky and especially Dick, continue to perform as society demands in order to secure and retain their social positions. Travis, for example, seems to care less about fitting in the public sphere, displayed through his repetitious theft and malicious conning, and he never makes the transformation from con boy to con man. Perhaps if Alger had written a backstory for Travis that evoked empathy from readers, he may have been presented with more opportunity for transformation and

willingness to adhere to society's demands, or would at least seem to be more concerned with performing the part of a trustworthy boy who shows potential prior to adulthood.

Through his characters, Alger is suggesting that boys only participate in confidence games when they are young. They have two options as they merge into adulthood: leave the confidence games behind and strive toward a life of respectability—another type of performance—or continue their confidence games and become confidence men who never fare well in an Alger story. Even if the adult confidence man—who is often, as Warwick Wadlington claims in *The Confidence Man in American Literature*, “the self-maker extraordinary, the player deity who masters roles and illusions”—manages to “recast himself in a series of forms” (103), he always ends up experiencing a negative outcome as a result of his conning performance, whereas Alger's young confidence boys alter their confidence games in favor of respectability. Respectability offers the boys with an outcome that Alger regularly emphasizes to his readers as the ideal. The aim of most Alger novels is to encourage his readers to strive toward hard work, honesty, and advancement—the middle class ideal, and his characters transition from performing as confidence boys to performing as “respectable” middle class men.

Performing the Part

Several of the previously discussed scholars allude to Dick's performances by briefly mentioning that he assumes a certain persona in order to be successful. A small number of scholars have categorized Dick as a con man—a label that is undeniably tied to performance: pretending to be a certain type of person, whether good or bad, to gain

someone's trust or form a bond is an unquestionable performance. And, as noted above, Hildegard Hoeller's aim is to show the similarities between Dick and Barnum's characters—people who perform to entertain—further demonstrating that Dick regularly entertains others in an attempt to form a bond. In order to more fully explore this topic within *Ragged Dick* and *Fame and Fortune*, we must consider the importance of performance. When one is performing a part, despite the intentions (i.e., in Dick's case, to create a bond with his patrons, to seem likeable, and to shield himself from embarrassment created by the differing social class of patron and boot black), that person assumes another identity—becomes a character he creates—and is no longer an authentic representation of himself.

In his quest for respectability, Dick performs the part he seeks in order to satisfy his need to belong, calling to mind Judith Butler's notion of the authentic self. The idea of the authentic self is most notably explored in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler's publication that seeks to emphasize the problem that occurs when we associate specific actions to a particular gender. Butler's work, drawing on French poststructuralist ideas, encourages readers to rethink gendered ideas and to thoroughly re-evaluate norms before arriving at exacting conclusions. Dick, and many other Alger boys, only see the big picture (i.e., respectability), and continue to perform a role, abandoning what might be considered an authentic self in favor of something considered more ideal. Butler discusses the construction of "real" and "authentic" compared to the ideal as a process that "seeks to understand the discursive production of the plausibility that binary relation and to suggest that certain cultural configurations . . . take the place of 'the real' and consolidate and augment their hegemony through that

felicitous self-naturalization” (43). According to Butler, this ideal is something better than what the supposed authentic self is capable of producing. Dick performs as a “respectable” young man would in order to achieve respectability and to earn his place in the middle class social sphere. If he would have continued to joke, gamble, visit Barnum’s—things that he declares he enjoys—he could not attain this status. He abandons certain characteristics in order to become the type of young man who occupies a desirable role in society. He must choose one over the other, and he opts for a continual performance that adheres to Alger’s tenants of respectability, rather than a continual performance as the joking boot black. Abandoning these more “original” characteristics, according to Butler, is not a rejection of an authentic self. Both selves—Dick the boot black and the character into which he morphs as the story unfolds—only develop as part of what Butler suggests is a “process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot be rightfully said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification” (*Gender Trouble* 43). Dick’s transition into a respectable young man is achieved through a continued performance, a practice “sustained and regulated by various social means” (*Gender Trouble* 43). The repetitive nature of Dick’s performances is what allows both of these selves to be successfully believed.

A useful study of performance in everyday life is Erving Goffman’s *The Presentation of Self in Everyday*, a book selected in 1998 by the International Sociological Association as one of the top 10 books of the twentieth century. Goffman’s study is the first to examine the ways in which performance is integrated into face-to-face interactions. His primary assertion is that humans are constantly trying to shape or control their environmental setting, appearance, and demeanor while interacting with other, and,

at the same time, the other person is simultaneously attempting to gather and formulate information. His approach is often referred to as the dramaturgical analysis because of the comparison that exists between performing on stage and in one's daily life:

When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess, that the task he performs will have the consequences that are implicitly claimed for it, and that, in general, matters are what they appear to be. (17)

Goffman's description of a person's performance can easily be applied to Dick's actions during his quest for respectability.

Dick learns that in order to be perceived as a respectable person, he must mimic the habits and qualities of those who seem respectable. In *Ragged Dick*, Mr. Whitney, a respectable gentleman, teaches Dick that "clean clothes and a dirty skin don't go very well together" (15). Employing Goffman's theory, we realize that even Micky Maguire, a fellow boot black and a ruffian, realizes that cleanliness differentiates the social standing among individuals when he indicates on more than one occasion that having a clean face is a "piece of presumption, and an assumption of superiority" (*Ragged Dick* 105). He also believes that a street boy who has a clean face or clean clothes must certainly be "puttin' on airs" (*Ragged Dick* 57; *Fame and Fortune* 145) or "tryin' to be a swell" (*Ragged Dick* 105; *Fame and Fortune* 140). Because other boot blacks are familiar with Dick's appearance prior to the beginning of his transformation, he has a harder time convincing them of his intentions, and they think he is playing a part,

mimicking those of a higher, more respectable social standing. However, what the boot blacks initially fail to realize, and what outsiders do see, is Dick's continuous dedication to performing like a person of a higher social standing: he dresses the part, keeps his face clean, and later begins to reform his linguistic habits to conform—not for a temporary act of transformation, or “puttin’ on airs” by pretending to be something he is not, but to practice becoming the type of person he desires to be.

This description does not apply as much to Dick's constant joking—characterized by some scholars, most notably David Leverenz, as a form of malicious lying—which serves as a form of entertainment during an otherwise uncomfortable or embarrassing moment. Goffman does, however, address fear of embarrassment as an inherent part of performance. Embarrassment is unintended and “would be avoided were the individual to know in advance the consequences of his activity” (Goffman 133). Embarrassment or uncomfortable situations and Dick's joking are inseparable. Dick uses humor and jokes with the businessmen who utilize his boot-blackening services as a means to break the tension in an otherwise uncomfortable situation. Because Dick aspires to be like the respectable businessmen for whom he shines shoes, he is often embarrassed of his position and uses jokes and humor to compensate or add relief to the situation. Often times, patrons will comment on his tattered clothes, which Dick responds to with a joke rather than truthfully commenting on his impoverished quality of life.

Most often, when Dick is questioned about his appearance, it is usually related to the poor condition of his clothing. In the opening chapter, Dick asks a potential customer if he would like his shoes shined. The man asks the price, which Dick informs him is ten cents. The man, shocked, suggests the price is expensive, and Dick explains that it is not

entirely profit and that he has purchases to make to sustain his little business, such as blacking and brushes. The man responds, “And you have a large rent too,” as he eyes the large hole in Dick’s coat (*Ragged Dick* 3). Embarrassed when the man points out the tattered condition of his clothes, he jokes to relieve the discomfort: “I have to pay such a big rent for my manshun up on Fifth Avenoo, that I can’t afford to take less than ten cents a shine. I’ll give you a bully shine, sir” (4). He continues to respond with joking when the same inquisitive and unsympathetic patron asks about the state of clothes:

“This coat once belonged to General Washington,” said Dick, comically. “He wore it all through the Revolution, and it got torn some, ‘cause he fit so hard. When he died he told his wider to give it to some smart young feller that hadn’t got none of his own; so she gave it to me. But if you’d like it, sir, to remember General Washington by, I’ll let you have it reasonable.”

“Thank you, but I wouldn’t want to deprive you of it. And did your pants come from General Washington, too?”

“No, they was a gift from Lewis Napoleon. Lewis had outgrown ‘em and sent ‘em to me, —he’s bigger than me, and that’s why they don’t fit.”

(*Ragged Dick* 4-5)

The previous scene also includes another of Dick’s regularly-used jokes about his living in a Fifth Avenue mansion. He often uses this joke to shield himself from the embarrassment that will result if he mentions his homelessness, and the extravagant assertion is meant, and undoubtedly perceived, as a joke. The text suggests that Dick’s patron would not feel sympathetic to Dick’s plight, so rather than subjecting himself to

additional discomfort by offering up the truth when asked, he opts for a more lighthearted approach.

Another scene where Dick is embarrassed because of his position in society is when he meets Mr. Greyson's family, particularly the daughter, Ida Greyson. Wanting to learn more about this boy who seems different from most boys she has met—revealed when she makes a remark about his “strange” speech (72)—she begins asking him a series of questions about what he does and what his life is like. Dick is able to avoid painting the entire picture of impoverished life by only answering parts of her questions that do not distinguish his position from that of respectable boys. For example, Ida mentions that she, although several years younger than Dick, has just begun studying French and asks if he knows the language. He responds with a joke to both avoid admitting the entire truth and to relieve tension from the awkward situation: “Not enough to hurt me,” which Ida finds humorous (72-73). Joking is regularly part of Dick's act to guard against potentially embarrassing moments. Again, just as with performances, Dick creates a persona. Similarly, his joking often points to where he will end up by the end of the series. These performances help pave the way for what he feels is, and Alger promotes as, the social ideal. Dick seeks financial stability and being treated with respect. His joking through performances for his patrons allows him to embody the characteristics of the “respectable” ideal through the use of repetition that Butler emphasizes, before being presented with better opportunities. Alger is allowing Dick to practice playing a part, which is critical for his eventual transformation.

A shift occurs in *Fame and Fortune* because Dick is rarely embarrassed and no longer needs to provide a joke as part of his performance to avoid uncomfortable

circumstances. One memorable instance where Dick becomes embarrassed and uses a joke to counter is during his incarceration after being framed for robbery. After being held in the local jail for a short while, awaiting his trial, Fosdick visits him: “‘How are you, Fosdick?’ hailed Dick from his cell. ‘I’m holdin’ a little levee down here. Did you receive my card of invitation?’” Then, when Fosdick relates that he was worried about Dick and had been longing to see him, Dick, relieved, exclaims, “‘Then you aint [sic] ashamed of me, even if I am in the station-house?’” (*Fame and Fortune* 187). He addresses Fosdick with a joke, assuming his friend would be ashamed and he would feel embarrassed as a result. This scene is the outcome of Dick being framed, not a situation that he created on his own. In *Ragged Dick*, Dick is ashamed of his clothes, dirty skin, and speech, but since he has left those things behind and has begun his transformation, he mentions multiple times in *Fame and Fortune* that he is not embarrassed or ashamed of his former occupation because it was—echoing Mr. Whitney in *Ragged Dick*—“honest” work.

But there are several moments when Dick’s words and actions indicate otherwise. For example, when Mrs. Browning, the landlady for the new apartment that Dick and Fosdick are seeking to rent, asks for references, Dick refrains from joking about his occupation, like he did when he was ashamed of his boot-blackening position: “‘I am going to Rockwell & Cooper’s, on Pearl Street, next Monday,’ said Dick with a sense of importance. He felt that this was very different from saying ‘I black boots in Chatham Square’” (*Fame and Fortune* 14). Because Dick feels as though he has now acquired a respectable position, he can answer Mrs. Browning’s question with joke-free confidence—he is no longer embarrassed.

This shift illustrates a new type of performance that occurs in *Fame and Fortune*, one much different than the jokes that appear in *Ragged Dick* to avoid embarrassment. As a result of new acquisitions (better social standing, well-regarded occupation, and improved appearance), Dick performs as Richard Hunter in *Fame and Fortune*—the successful, respectable businessman who wears good clothes, keeps his face clean, is educated, chooses his words carefully because they are a marker of social standing, and abandons his former vernacular. For example, when Dick and Fosdick agree to leave their former residence in favor of a new room in what they consider a more respectable boarding house, the landlady mentions that she will prepare their rooms and, in the meantime, the boys can bring their trunks when they please (*Fame and Fortune* 15). The narrator mentions that not having a trunk was an embarrassment to the boys (16), prompting the following conversation to take place between them:

“We’ll have to get trunks, or perhaps carpet-bags would do.”

“No,” said Dick, decisively, “it ain’t ‘spectable to be without a trunk, and we’re going to be ‘spectable now.”

“Respectable, Dick.”

“All right, —respectable, then. Let’s go and buy each a trunk.” (17)

Although Dick is still learning to speak as a “respectable” boy would, he quickly sees the connection between being without a trunk and not being considered respectable. Fosdick, who does not share the same obsession with respectability as his friend, does see the need for a container to carry their belongings and suggests a carpet bag. Dick, however, will consider only a trunk so that he may visually perform the part of a respectable boy—a carpet bag will not be sufficient. With their newly purchased trunks, the boys are now

able to show up at the boarding house as the landlady expects; Dick will not have to explain why he does not own a trunk, which would certainly bring about questions as to whether he is the “honest-looking” boy he performs.

Also during his official arrival at the boarding house, Dick recognizes one of his fellow boarders, Mr. Clifton, as a young man whose boots he blacked only the week prior. Clifton mentions that Dick looks familiar, but cannot recall where he has met him. The following scene develops as a result of his recognition:

“It’s strange I can’t think where,” said the young man, who had not the least idea that the well-dressed boy before him was the boot-black who had brushed his boots near the Park railings the Monday previous. Dick did not think proper to enlighten him. He was not ashamed of his past occupation; but it was past, and he wanted to be valued for what he might become, not for what he had been.

“Are you in business, Mr. Hunter?” inquired Mr. Clifton.

It sounded strange to our hero to be called Mr. Hunter; but he rather liked it. He felt that it sounded respectable. (19)

Not only does Dick avoid mentioning to Clifton how the two had previously met, but also the narrator explains that Dick would rather only be known as the boy he was now performing—Richard Hunter. This scene also further illuminates Dick’s longing to be viewed as a respectable boy, when Clifton refers to him as “Mr. Hunter.” He finds the title strange, never having been called that before, but he much prefers it to his nickname because it radiates respectability, and, in turn, better helps him play the part.

Micky Maguire also demonstrates how characters who feel embarrassed by their lower social standing employ a method for shielding themselves from humiliation—Dick uses humor and Micky uses bullying. Both boys utilize these maneuvers to divert attention away from their unfortunate circumstances, and specifically those that negate respectability. In *Ragged Dick*, Micky Maguire serves as the stereotypical bully, regularly picking on Dick; however, upon a closer examination of these scenes, we discover that Micky often bullies Dick when he feels inferior. After attending church and dinner with Mr. Greyson, Dick, dressed in his best clothes, encounters Micky, who throws a rock at him. The narrator explains that Micky “hated Dick more than ever, because he thought [Dick] was ‘putting on airs’” (*Ragged Dick* 76). Earlier in the novel, Micky and his friend see Dick in his new clothes, and again the bully is frustrated that Dick is “putting on airs”:

“My eyes!” he exclaimed in astonishment; “Jim, just look at Ragged Dick. He’s come into a fortun’, and turned gentleman. See his new clothes.”

So he has,” said Jim. “Where’d he get ‘em I wonder?”

“Hooked ‘em p’r’aps. Let’s go and stir him up a little. We don’t want no gentleman on our beat. So he’s puttin’ on airs,—is he? I’ll give him a lesson.”

“What’s that for?” demanded Dick turning round to see who had stuck him.

“You’re getting’ mighty fine!” said Micky Maguire, surveying Dick’s new clothes with a scornful air.

So saying the two boys walked up to [Dick], who had not observed them, his back being turned, and Micky Maguire gave him a smart slap on the shoulder. (*Ragged Dick* 58)

When Micky realizes Dick is doing better for himself while he is struggling, he becomes frustrated and bullies Dick out of embarrassment of his own status and appearance. His comments about “putting on airs” seem to indicate that he thinks Dick is performing as someone other than himself, pretending to be someone he is not in order to rise socially.

However, Micky is also given a chance to improve his life, just as Dick has done, but not until the second half of *Fame and Fortune* when Mr. Rockwell takes pity on him and offers him a new suit to begin his transformation. Micky is also given Dick’s former job when he advances, an indication that he is working toward respectability. But, in order to do so, he must give up his bullying ways, which he does as he befriends Dick. Because Micky no longer has to feel embarrassed by his clothes and position as a boot black, he gives up harassing Dick and accusing him of “putting on airs.” And, just as Dick adopted the more “respectable” name of Richard near the end of *Ragged Dick*, which signified his transformation, Micky, too, is encouraged to use the more formal “Michael” by Mr. Rockwell (*Fame and Fortune* 271-5). Both boys perform the part of those who are respectable: they drop their bad habits—those that would liken them to confidence men as they merge into adulthood (for Dick, it is to give up slang speech for a more formal speech; for Micky it is to give up bullying)—change their names and their appearances. It is not enough to want to be respectable by obtaining a proper occupation; both boys must constantly perform their newly-adopted roles of respectability by speaking, dressing, and acting like those in more valued positions. Aside from joking to

shield himself from embarrassment, which seems to diminish as he acquires respectability, Dick never entirely gives up his joking—it seems to be inseparable from his character, although he no longer needs to joke to shield himself from social inequities once he has attained respectability. Micky’s transformation also suggests that it is not necessary to just become the part, but the character must also regularly perform it. Before he was given the opportunity to transform, Micky, unlike Dick, does not possess innate goodness. He has no conscience when it comes to bullying and stealing from others. In order to become good and continue on his upward path toward respectability, Micky must regularly perform as a respectable young man would, honestly and without bullying others.

Dick’s performances in both *Ragged Dick* and *Fame and Fortune* are also emblematic of Judith Butler’s description of performativity. In *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex,”* she explains that “performativity is thus not a singular ‘act,’ for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms” (12). Dick performs as those from a higher economic class expect from a young vagabond while he is working as a boot black: as he performs the boot-blackening service for which they have hired him, he always uses lies or jokes to ease the inherent tension, to break the cultural barriers. By telling these lies in the form of a joke, Dick tries to evade some of the embarrassment he feels because of his occupation and tattered appearance, as noted above. But, by telling these lies, despite his intentions, he is further adding to the assumption that plagues many of his patrons—that all street children lie. Dick’s interactions are often a form of performativity as he regularly reiterates the same act. One of his most commonly employed lies is to state that he has no money because it is all tied up investments.

During a scene where Dick has finished completing a shoe-shining service, the customer asks him if he has change for a quarter. He responds:

“Not a cent,” said Dick. “All my money’s invested in the Erie Railroad.”

“That’s unfortunate.”

“Shall I get the money changed, sir?”

“I can’t wait; I’ve got to meet an appointment immediately. I’ll hand you twenty-five cents, and you can leave the change at my office any time during the day.”

“All right, sir. Where is it?”

“No. 125 Fulton Street. Shall you remember?”

“Yes, sir. What name?”

“Greyson,—office on second floor.”

“All right, sir; I’ll bring it.”

“I wonder whether the little scamp will prove himself honest,” said Mr. Greyson to himself, as he walked away. “If he does, I’ll give him my custom regularly. If he don’t, as is most likely, I shan’t mind the loss of fifteen cents.” (*Ragged Dick* 8)

Of course, Mr. Greyson’s thoughts indicate that he does not view Dick or any boot black as honest when he declares that he will not likely be repaid, and his tone indicates he has experienced this scheme on more than one occasion. In fact, his thoughts seem to imply that if Dick does bring his change to him, he will regard him above all other boot blacks by giving him business regularly. Dick also immediately offers up a lie to Mr. Greyson

about having his money tied up in shares, but the businessman does not seem to even acknowledge Dick's utterance as such since it is unlikely that a boot black is able to acquire them with his meager earnings that only afford him a dirty and tattered appearance. If Mr. Greyson had not recognized Dick's lie about the Erie shares as a joke, he would not have trusted him with the task of returning his change in the first place. Just as Greyson illustrates, Dick's patrons regularly perceive his lies as jokes, indicating that joking is part of his regular performance as a boot black.

These recurrent jokes, too, are presented as lies; however, as the character responses indicate, Dick does not lie maliciously, but rather jokingly. Butler reaffirms the need to have this consistent repetition of behavior, when she emphasizes:

At the risk of repeating myself, I would suggest that performativity cannot be understood outside a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed *by* a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. This iterability implies that "performance" is not a singular "act" or event, but a ritualized production. (*Bodies that Matter* 95)

These performances also work to establish a bond between Dick and other characters, to rid him of unwanted pity and the embarrassment that he would likely feel as a result, and to eliminate the emotional distance that separates him from those of a different social class. They also function to detract from the deceit that is often present in Dick's performances. The most regularly occurring jokes in *Ragged Dick* are those that pertain to his clothing and how he acquired them, or to his notable acquaintances. At one point,

after having told jokes about his distinguished friends so regularly, he even jokes with himself in the same manner:

“Well, Dick,” said our hero, apostrophizing himself, as he left the office; “You’re gettin’ up in the world. You’ve got money invested, and are goin’ to attend church, by partic’lar invitation, of Fifth Avenue. I shouldn’t wonder much if you should find card, when you get home, from the Mayor, requestin’ the honor of your company to dinner along with other distinguished guests.” (71)

His aside to himself indicates that not only does he perform this joke regularly to others, but he also iterates it when alone.

There are also multiple other indicators of Dick engaging in performance, most notably through his “costume.” The narrator describes Dick in the introduction of *Ragged Dick*:

Dick’s appearance as he stood beside the box was rather peculiar. His pants were torn in several places, and had apparently belonged in the first instance to a boy two times larger than himself. He wore a vest, all of the buttons which were gone except two, out of which peeped a shirt which looked as if it had been worn a month. To complete his *costume*, he wore a coat too long for him, dating back, if one might judge from its general appearance, to a remote antiquity. (3-4; emphasis added)

From the very onset of Dick’s introduction to his readers, we are told that he appears in “costume,” in order to become the ragged boy whom we are supposed to pity. Later, when Dick begins his initial transformation and appears in a suit, the narrator tells us,

“Dick’s change of *costume* was liable to lead to one result of which he had not thought. His brother boot-blacks might think he had grown aristocratic,” (*Ragged Dick* 56-57; emphasis added) confirming that a change in “costume” equals a change in the perception of his role by observers. Also, to further solidify that he performs his position in society, one indicated by his clothing, Dick has to don his old costume in order to retrieve a letter from the post office that is addressed to “Ragged Dick.” He realizes that he cannot ask for the letter while wearing a suit—the post master will not believe that he embodies the name of the character he portrays. When Fosdick suggests that Dick wear his old, tattered clothing, he ends the idea by telling him, “They won’t have any doubt of your being Ragged Dick then” (103). Fosdick’s comment solidifies the idea that Dick’s role is only becomes believable through his costumes. If he wears the costume of Richard Hunter, no one suspects him of being a boot black. When he wears his tattered costume, he can easily assume the role of “Ragged Dick.” He cannot successfully perform the role of either in the opposite costume.

Masculinity is an important part of Dick’s performances. Masculine performance, according to Butler, “is the parodic replication and resignification” of gender constructed actions (“Imitation and Gender Insubordination” 23). Dick constantly performs acts that will help him rise economically in society—an act expected of all young men who wish to achieve the respectability he so desires. The conclusion of Dick’s journey, at the end of *Fame and Fortune*, echoes what is expected of young men who wish to perform as respectable, adult men: “So Dick has achieved Fame and Fortune,—the fame of an honorable and enterprising man of business, and a fortune which promises to be very large” (279). Dick has spent the better part of two novels adhering to the code of

masculinity that Alger has set forth—becoming respected by other men, becoming a businessman, and obtaining a large fortune. Without these things, Dick would have become like all of the other boys who did not perform the type of masculinity required to attain respectability: they remain boot blacks into adulthood, and often end up leading lives full of deceit, confidence games, and perpetual poverty—a different kind of masculinity.

This section on performances cannot be sufficiently concluded without considering the performances of confidence characters. The previous section about confidence men describes both good and bad confidence men and how Alger, as well as how some of his heroes (confidence boys) and villains (confidence men), played confidence games, but it did not elaborate on the performative nature of their actions. Alger, throughout his life and posthumously, has been regarded as a wholesome character who inspired the masses in America. However, Alger himself performed a role by keeping his past a secret, and, by promoting his stories as appropriate for children, his publishers, and later Herbert Mayes, reinforced this wholesome image. In order to maintain this untarnished persona, Alger had to embody it constantly, continually playing the part for readers and the public (even his regularly-interjecting narrative voice in his novels continues this idea). Alger offered readers and the public a continual performance; the iterable nature of this self-presentation is undeniably an act of performativity.

The same can be said of the confidence men (adult villains) and confidence boys (e.g., Ragged Dick): they, too, put on regular performances in order to convince others. In order to be believed and be successful in their confidence games, they must continually perform the same part. Confidence boys must highlight their innate good looks (a clean,

attractive face, in Alger's novels, is almost always associated with honesty), appear to want to help others (Dick does this by always being the first to right a wrong or save someone who cannot help him or herself; the immoral confidence men almost always pretend to want to help others as part of their scheme, e.g., the lost-wallet trick or offering up "evidence" that suggests some other "villain" stole money from an unsuspecting bystander), and lead with their charm (Dick regularly jokes as part of his charm). In order for a confidence man to be good at his art, he must routinely perform the part by creating, what Butler termed in *Bodies that Matter*, "a ritualized production." The performance, however, differs for confidence men and confidence boys. Confidence boys are able to integrate some of the characteristics (deceit, performing a part, using charm, among others) of confidence men by using the veneer of respectability. The performance of confidence boys allows them to embark on a path toward respectability, or the bourgeois ideal, which is promoted and praised. Adult men are not afforded this opportunity. Their confidence games are presented as deceitful and manipulative, counterproductive to society, and are punished in Alger's novels. Confidence boys often transition into respectable men, not confidence men, in Alger's world.

The Long Con

Just as the idea of the American Dream has inspired the masses to work hard to achieve greatness through hard work, Alger, too, through his rags-to-riches plot, used his hero Ragged Dick to encourage middle-class boys to "struggle upward." In both *Ragged Dick* and *Fame and Fortune*, Dick encounters multiple unfortunate circumstances and setbacks, but he still comes out on top. Through his formula, readers learn to believe that

all they need, like the hero of these novels, is a hard-working attitude; however, upon a closer examination, we can realize that Dick is ultimately successful due to his lucky breaks, good looks, honest-looking face, and wealthy “bystanders” who are willing to help him attain a better position. If Alger had openly emphasized these latter items as part of his formula, it is likely that he would not have achieved the same success because most readers would not have identified with his hero. And, if Alger’s past had surfaced, revealing the issues with young boys that caused his dismissal from the church—an incredibly well-kept secret—he, undeniably, would not have been regarded as the wholesome author for boys, as he came to be known. For more than a century, until Scharnhorst’s biographical excavations, Alger successfully pulled off “the long con.”

The next chapter focuses on the role of deception in Horatio Alger’s relatively unknown works—those with female protagonists. This chapter will examine the ways in which female characters participate in scenes of deceit; like his male characters, Alger’s female protagonists lie, perform roles, and engage in various acts of deception; however, a comparison reveals some differences for women. Through a close reading of *Helen Ford* (Alger’s somewhat anomalous early novel), *Tattered Tom*, and other Alger stories featuring women, the next chapter will explore the implications of several interesting distinctions. Most notably, Alger’s formula changes to incorporate elements of domestic fiction. Stories with female protagonists often have a traditional Alger plot at the center but conclude with the protagonists abandoning former occupations for a life of domesticity.

CHAPTER THREE

FORMULA BREAKERS: ALGER'S LITTLE-KNOWN HEROINES

“I beg to assure my readers that she is not one of the conventional kind.”

-Horatio Alger, Jr., *Tattered Tom: Or, the Story of a Street Arab*

Three years after Horatio Alger, Jr. published the well-known novel *Ragged Dick*, *Tattered Tom: Or the Story of a Street Arab* made its debut in 1871. The title does not incite a second glance: it suggests a typical, formulaic Alger story with an archetypal Alger title. Despite mostly following the Alger rags-to-riches formula, the novel does deviate in terms of the central character's gender and the requisite roles ascribed as a result. Tom, the story's central character, is a girl who masquerades as a boy. The other children accept her as a boy—or at least her ability to perform as a boy—when she outfits herself in boys' clothing and assumes masculine mannerisms in order to survive in a society that is already mostly unaccepting of street children. Before Alger presented his tale of a crossdressing heroine, he published *Helen Ford* in 1866, a novel with a female protagonist at its center and intended for adult readers (although the novel is sometimes categorized as a “book for girls” rather than a novel for adults). These are not the only Alger novels with heroines. *A Fancy of Hers* was published in 1892 and shares the story of Mabel Frost Fairfax. Three years later Alger's final novel, *The Disagreeable Woman*, was published using the pseudonym Julian Starr. *The Disagreeable Woman*, however, is slightly different in its presentation of the heroine. While the *Disagreeable Woman* is the story's central character, she does not function as the protagonist because Alger presents her tale through the eyes of Dr. Fenwick. These texts suggest the complexities and contradictions in Alger's representations of female characters as well as cultural

understandings of gender which shifted significantly between 1866 when *Helen Ford* was published and 1895 when *The Disagreeable Woman* appeared. This chapter will situate these texts in their historical context and explore Alger's women in light of Judith Butler's ideas about performativity.

Overwhelmingly, in hundreds of novels Alger penned, most focused on and were written for boys. Few readers are even aware that Alger produced novels with central female characters. Why are these stories about women not more popular or recognizable? Low sales figures suggest that these novels were not as popular with Alger's audience.² These low sales figures may be related to the contradictory way the Alger formula works for female characters. Consistent with contemporary ideas about gender, Alger's female protagonists are not given the same opportunity to struggle and then be rewarded with an employment opportunity that allows them to thrive economically and socially in the same manner as Alger's boy protagonists. Though they often work and enjoy various activities like the boys do. Alger's heroines always conform to nineteenth-century expectations about gender roles and abandon any occupation they may have previously enjoyed once they inherit money or become married. Also, these novels may not be as recognizable as *Ragged Dick* and other boy stories simply because of the hundreds of Alger novels, only a few focus on female protagonists and at least two were not published under Alger's name.

In "Demythologizing Alger," Gary Scharnhorst outlines Alger's popularity throughout the late 1860s and through the first couple of decades after his death, noting that the Gilded Age resurgence of Alger's popularity can be attributed to how his books

² Northern Illinois University's "Rare Book Collections" website that features information about Horatio Alger, as well as copies of several works and letters, indicates that although *Helen Ford* was well received by reviewers, both sales and his earnings were disappointing.

were being published and marketed. According to Scharnhorst, by the 1920s, Alger's work was best appreciated when his heroes functioned as symbols of economic triumph, and his books were republished only when they could adhere to this expectation. The novels that concluded with Alger's male heroes attaining only moderate success were "rarely reprinted, and some publishers abridged others by deleting as many as seven of the original chapters, often those in which the hero performs virtuous deeds for which he is later rewarded" (21-22). Alger's stories are known for their formulaic construction; however, novels with girls and women at their center deviate. Alger's female characters do not have access to the highly-prized respectability grounded in material wealth. Instead, they conform to a gendered model of respectability because they learn to embody traditional gender roles and rely on others for their newly-found fortunes or happiness (i.e., finding a husband). These stories adhere to a different formula, one that, from a surface glance, easily deceives readers, critics, and scholars by leading them to believe that they differ little from Alger's male heroes aside from gender. One example, in the limited scholarship that exists for Alger's novels with heroines, appears in Bruce Lohof's "*Helen Ford: Horatio Alger, Jr.'s Book for Girls*," when he suggests that Helen Ford is simply a copy of Ragged Dick and the typical Alger formula, except the gender, is unchanged (101). As I will discuss below, Lohof's reading is surprising since Helen Ford is a protagonist envisioned for adult readers, and the novel itself reads more like domestic fiction than a rags-to riches tale. Also, Tattered Tom behaves much like Ragged Dick for most of her novel, but her version of respectability looks quite different than his.

Although Scharnhorst does not analyze the reasons for the lack of popularity for Alger's novels with heroines, these novels easily fit his argument. Alger's heroines

typically do not achieve great wealth, and it is particularly critical to note that the female characters do not achieve success on their own: they either inherit money from a previously-unknown family member or marry in order to have a happy ending. This type of ending likely was not as popular in the early twentieth century in the era of the New Woman and the flapper figure. Though Alger's male protagonists often inherit money and thrive due to lucky breaks, the Alger formula positions male heroes to become successful by working hard and rising socially and financially. Alger's heroines who do work, however, give up their occupations and an independent identity. Alger creates female protagonists who are initially strong and seemingly on the same path toward respectability and the identity it establishes for male characters, but he does not sustain this idea and his female protagonists conform to society's gender expectations of domesticity. His novels about women suggest the complicated and sometimes conflicted understandings of gender in nineteenth century American culture.

Like Chapter Two, this chapter will examine scenes of deceit in several Alger novels, but will specifically explore those with women at the center. Through this examination, I suggest that honesty, lies, and performances function differently with relation to gender in Alger's tales. The three key novels that serve as examples—*Helen Ford*, *Tattered Tom*, and *A Fancy of Hers*—demonstrate how Alger alters his formula for women, even though the few scholars who have studied these novels tend to suggest that the Alger's stories with female protagonists are replicas of his more popular boys' stories. *The Disagreeable Woman* also proves notable to further emphasize this point, but cannot be characterized as a novel with a female protagonist since the story centers on the male Dr. Fenwick and his point of view. The woman, however, is central to the story, as

the title suggests, and is worthy of examination. This chapter will provide an in-depth look at several scenes in order to demonstrate that although women and girls often begin on the same kind of path to success as Alger's male protagonists, the moments of deceit and performances focus on their work and sense of obligations to others. For women, work, which serves as a driving force for most of each novel, is replaced with a shift toward seeking domestic prescriptions, such as marriage and conformity. Because their motivations are different, Alger's girls act dishonestly for different reasons than his male characters. While Ragged Dick typically deceives others as part of performing a desired identity—the type of person he aspires to become—female characters often lie out of a sense of duty or desire to protect others, as well as their own identities. Alger's women seem to be lying or performing to maintain an identity rather than to develop a new one.

The Alger formula implies that his young heroines achieve respectability just as his males heroes do: by pluck and a little luck (or, a lot of luck, although Alger would rather have us believe it is the former); however, his heroines, regardless of their ages, are successful when they achieve a different type of respectability and become what society defines as a proper lady: one who forgoes an occupation for domestic life with a husband or who relies on an inheritance with the future expectation of marriage. Mary Walsh briefly discusses Alger's female protagonists and notes that

To Alger, there appeared to be no attractive alternatives for women other than a life of secure dependency. Women in his books usually fall into four categories: wealthy women who are either mean-spirited or who have had their only child abducted; widowed mothers who can only be saved by a hardworking son; poorer women who take in boarders or sell apples; and

younger women who either work in sweatshops, or who must wait for a young man to restore their fortune. (203)

While Walsh is correct that Alger emphasizes “secure dependency” for women, she does not consider how ideas about work inform Alger’s version of respectability or how deception works as a part of performing an identity. All of Alger’s female protagonists’ dishonesty centers on their work, and this deception is also central to their performances. Tom performs as male in order to make a living and to be able to better compete for jobs often only afforded to boys. When pressured, she shifts to performing as female in order to secure a job that requires domestication. Helen’s performance is more direct: she becomes an actress, an occupation which she hides from her father; and Mabel deceives the townspeople in her performance as a working-class teacher, rather than a woman of genteel society, in order to be taken seriously.

Although she does not address Alger texts directly, Nina Baym, in “Melodramas of Best Manhood: How American Fiction Excludes Women Authors,” emphasizes the nineteenth-century problem with marginalizing women’s importance in literature. Her essay focuses on “theories controlling our reading of American literature [that] have led to the exclusion of women authors from the canon” (123). She also discusses generalized views of women authors from the nineteenth century as held by authors, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, who famously expressed his frustrations to his publisher by referring to the “damn’d mob of scribbling women’ whose writings—he fondly imagined—were diverting the public from his own” (124). However, most important to my research, is Baym’s assertion that women’s tales were regarded as melodramas and were questioned for their ability to portray truth and important topics. Baym points out

that male writers of the day, as well as later scholars, assume that both stories written by and “stories about women could not contain the essence of American culture,” and that “American experience is inherently male” (130). Critic Leslie Fiedler, in his popular book *Love and Death in the American Novel*, reflects these ideas when he suggests that nineteenth-century women authors were creators of the “flagrantly bad best-seller” while “our best fictionists from Charles Brockden Brown to Edgar Allan Poe to Hawthorne and Melville have felt it necessary to struggle for their integrity and livelihoods” (93). Alger embodies Baym’s claims as he tended to write tales both for boys and about boys, and although he does very rarely include female protagonists, they do not carry the story in the same way as his male heroes. Alger’s women ultimately rely on the secondary male characters to help pave their way—either with an inheritance, the opportunity for love and marriage, or a lucky break.

Baym also notes that the male character’s important purpose in life is that of “self-discovery and self-assertion” (133). This idea materializes over and over again in Alger’s tales featuring male protagonists and is further made evident in the majority of his novel titles with phrases such as “struggling upward,” “strive and succeed,” “what boys can do,” “bound to rise,” and “brave boy’s trials,” among many others. The “self-discovery and self-assertion” that Baym recognizes as critical to the male-hero’s ascent is not presented to Alger’s women. In his stories, the path to a male model of respectability includes numerous male mentors, invaluable learning experiences and more formal education, and opportunities to learn how to behave like an admirable nineteenth-century man. Alger’s women are not likewise presented with these experiences. Instead, they follow the male path but receive a different reward. As I discuss below, Tattered Tom, for

example, transitions from a street child into a character who dresses more feminine and better fits society's expectations of a young woman. She is not given the opportunity to continue paving her own way with newly-learned skills as Alger's boys are, but receives a happy ending when she learns to behave like a girl is expected. Her educational process is not a long and continuous one, as it is with Dick, but merely mentioned in passing near the end of the novel:

Having no further occasion to remain in New York, Mrs. Lindsay took the train for Philadelphia the next day, where Tom, whom we must now call Jane Lindsay, found herself in an elegant home, surrounded by all that wealth could supply. Her mother lost no time in supplying her with teachers, that the defects of her education might be remedied. These were great, as we know, but Jane—I had nearly said Tom—was quick, and her ambition was excited, so that the progress which she made was indeed remarkable. At the end of the year she was far advanced as most girls of her age. (*Tattered Tom* 273-4)

In contrast to Dick Hunter's education, which spans two novels and takes many forms, Tom's education is not a process, but is simply a means to her becoming a woman fit for society and likely the wife to a respectable man in the near future. Her experiences before joining Mrs. Lindsay are elided as "defects to be remedied" on the path to domesticity.

In her evaluation of Louisa May Alcott's famous tomboy in the essay "The Story of Jo: Literary Tomboys, Little Women, and the Sexual-Textual Politics of Narrative Desire," Karin Quimby echoes Baym's ideas when she writes that when literature demands the "tomboy exchange her overalls for a dress to signal her availability for

heterosexual romance [it] is a clear attempt to ‘order’ her ‘precarious’ gender development into an acceptable heterosexual narrative framework” (2). Adhering to Quimby’s assertions, we see that Tom is not allowed the same independent ending as boys like Dick, but she is prepped for a more acceptable role, one in which she is prepared to serve men as a proper lady—a more domestic-focused outcome where she learns to wear dresses and take care of a home. Neither Baym nor Quimby address Alger texts directly, but their observations are easily applicable. There is a lack of scholarship related to Alger’s novels about women, often making research difficult. When scholars do mention Alger’s women, they do so only in passing and often in the context of Alger’s complicated biography. For example, biographer John Tebbel notes that *Helen Ford* “embodies the essential elements of the Alger formula and also indirectly casts light on Horatio’s particularly tangled personality” (168). Tebbel’s reading amounts to a plot summary of the novel with a few comments on Alger’s evolving writing style, and he does not discuss *Tattered Tom*, arguably the most interesting novel with a female protagonist, at all. Scharnhorst and Bales note, in only one sentence, that *Tattered Tom*’s ambiguous gender may “betray [Alger’s] own sexual insecurity” (92). The two then discuss the publication history and a few reviews of *Helen Ford* without examining either novel. Though they provide useful insights about Alger’s life, these biographical readings provide a limited view of Alger’s understanding of gender and sexuality, and may indirectly contribute to the continued neglect of Alger’s novels about women.

In one of very few article-length analyses of *Helen Ford*, Bruce Lohof’s “*Helen Ford: Horatio Alger, Jr.’s Book for Girls*” declares that Helen Ford does not even need to introduce herself because “gender notwithstanding, even the most callow of Horatio’s

fans recognize an Alger protagonist when they meet one” (97). He spends most of his essay explaining how Alger’s female protagonist is exactly like her male counterparts, even proclaiming that “so similar to the Alger boy is Helen that she may as well be he in drag” (101). He carefully explains his rationale for declaring Helen a copy of Alger’s more popular male heroes, even including an illustrative chart that diagrams typical Alger schemes and story motifs.

A few other scholars discuss Alger’s female characters in the context of broader arguments. Glenn Hendler, in “Pandering in the Public Sphere: Masculinity and the Market in Horatio Alger,” includes a very brief examination of the roles of Tom, Mabel, and Helen, only noting that they begin in the public sphere, as do Alger’s boys, but they end up “reinscribed in a feminine privacy, whereas the telos of the male protagonist’s performance of virtue is publicity” (423). Michael Moon repeats Hendler’s claim when he mentions Tom’s unique gender role in “‘The Gentle Boy from the Dangerous Classes’: Pederasty, Domesticity, and Capitalism in Horatio Alger.” Moon writes that “Tom is drawn upward into genteel femininity” (96) when she transitions into Jenny the girl. Claudia Nelson also notices the importance of Tom’s transformation into Jenny in “Drying the Orphan’s Tear: Changing Representations of the Dependent Child in America, 1870-1930.” Nelson includes a short section on *Tattered Tom*, but only to support her argument about the importance of clothing to orphans’ outward appearance, which affected their acceptance by adult benefactors. Nelson notes that Tom is unique because of her “ambiguous appearance,” and is only “rewarded with a loving home” when she changes her clothing in order to morph into the socially acceptable daughter of

Jane Lindsay (63). These scholars recognize how the endings shift to domestic rewards, but they do not explore the tension between the ending and the rest of the narrative.

In *The Fictional Republic: Horatio Alger and American Political Discourse*, Carol Nackenoff, though not examining *Helen Ford*, touches on the outcome Alger's female characters could have when she references Theodore Dreiser's Caroline Meeber:

When a girl leaves her home at eighteen, she does one of two things. Either she falls into saving hands and becomes better, or she rapidly assumes the cosmopolitan standard of virtue and becomes worse . . . Half the undoing of the unsophisticated and natural mind is accomplished by forces wholly superhuman. A blare of sound, a roar of life, a vast array of human hives, appeal to the astonished senses in equivocal terms. Without a counsellor at hand to whisper cautious interpretations, what falsehoods may not these things breathe into the unguarded ear! (*Sister Carrie* 2)

According to Nackenoff, because late nineteenth-century females were less geographically mobile than their male counterparts, their opportunities were significantly more limited, and there were drastically fewer financially-rewarding jobs for women. Boys and young men, although impoverished and working strenuous jobs, were often able to influence the amount of money they earned in a day. Women, on the other hand, were often confined to sewing jobs, or working in slop-shops—illustrated by both Helen Ford and her friend Martha—where they are unable to impact their wages; no amount of additional hard work can earn them more money. This is one of many problems with Lohof's characterization of Helen as undifferentiated from Alger's male heroes. As Nackenoff suggests, nineteenth-century working women were confined to a limited range

of jobs, typically a variant of sewing (e.g., millinery work) or working as a servant.

Unlike Ragged Dick and other male protagonists, Helen simply does not have the opportunity to become a clerk or office boy (common occupations on the path to middle-class respectability for boys).

Although male characters, like Dick, struggle to make a living, female characters during this era had substantially less opportunity. Women in the nineteenth century were viewed as dependents, and, as Christine Stansell emphasizes in *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860*, women were categorized the same as “servants, children, apprentices, slaves and the poor—all inferiors whose lack of reason and virtue necessitated for the common good that they live under the care and supervision of wise citizens” (19). Because of their assumed dependent status, there were fewer opportunities for women to find employment, and the limited options to which they did have access were not often ideal. In 1818, the committee formed to identify and eliminate the specific causes of poverty in New York City, The New York Society for the Prevention of Pauperism, wrote that “women have fewer resources than men; they are less able to seek for employment; they are more exposed to a sudden reverse of circumstances” (*Report of a Committee on the Subject of Pauperism* 14). Stansell expands on this idea, remarking that for women, “paid work was sparse and unstable. Laboring women were confined within a patriarchal economy predicated on the direct dependence of men” (18). The struggles of working women, however, were not as prevalent as those for poor, working men, as men’s work tended to take place more frequently in the public sphere that Glenn Hendler references.

In *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880*, Mary Ryan addresses the nineteenth-century views of women with public occupations. She reports that journalists at the time often warned that the “public space was densely populated with wily street people who made their livelihood off gullible men” (70). Women whose occupations took place in the public sphere were viewed as particularly dangerous, and their roles were often equated with prostitution. Ryan writes:

the dangerous as well as the endangered urbanite was often portrayed as a woman, who in turn preyed on both sexes. Dangerous women assumed their most threatening guise as prostitutes. The greatest moral risk that women encountered on the public streets was presented by these members of their own sex who converted public space into an erotic marketplace.

(71)

To add to the heightened awareness and fear that was being cultivated, journalists of the late 1800s were warning the masses about the dangers of inhabiting the same public spaces as these women, such as those in ice cream parlors and dry goods stores (Ryan 71). Women working in the public sphere were regularly touted as precarious and manipulative, and should be avoided entirely. Because women were discouraged from working in the public sphere, they suffered with fewer options for employment. Likewise, they were forced to bear the burdens of poverty much more quietly in the private sphere—with their sad economic situations and deteriorating health—hidden from society rather than on display for the public to acknowledge. I elaborate on the private plight of working women in the following section, when I establish the private suffering of women like *Helen Ford's* Martha Gray, which is juxtaposed with public display of

poverty experienced by boys with public occupations, such as bootblacks like Dick. The following sections discuss the ways in which Alger's female protagonists function differently than his male heroes. Despite the implication that a similar formula is at work within all of his stories, a closer look reveals that the roles of men and women in Alger's novels are not consistent. Women earn their livings differently, perform differently, deceive differently, and experience drastically different outcomes than Alger's boys who transition into "respectable" men.

Before Dick Hunter Came Helen Ford

After being disgraced within the church community of Brewster, Massachusetts, Alger moved to New York City in April 1866, only to discover that he was unable to find employment offering a comparable salary to what he had previously been earning. Due to the scandal, he interrupted work on *Helen Ford*, his novel for girls, and Loring postponed its appearance until the fall. As promised, in early October 1866, Loring issued *Helen Ford* so that it would be available for the holiday season. The novel was well received, but sales were unsatisfactory (*Lost Life* 70-73). The reviews were mostly positive. Scharnhorst reports: "The *New York Evening Post*, in one of the first notices of the story, declared that 'some of the passages are lively.' The *Boston Transcript* found the narrative 'interesting, and the spirit of the writer thoroughly kindly and benevolent'" (*Lost Life* 73). Although the book's release quickly followed the closure of the Brewster scandal, the *Christian Inquirer* praised *Helen Ford* for its "good thoughts, pure feeling, and well-developed Christian lessons," and the *Christian Register* gave a similar review, noting that the story "contained beautiful lessons of self-sacrifice and trust," and declaring Alger

a writer with “talent of a peculiar and high order” (*Lost Life* 74). The scandal did not affect the publication or reception of *Helen Ford* because high-ranking officials within the Unitarian circle, who knew Alger, Jr. and his father well, were willing to cover up the details as a favor to their friends so long as Alger, Jr. vowed to never re-enter the ministry (*Lost Life* 74). *Helen Ford* appeared nearly two years before Alger’s most heralded novel, *Ragged Dick*, and its lackluster sales figures did not predict the success of the latter work. The novel also did not come close to reaching the popularity of his previously-published books for boys, such as *Frank’s Campaign*, *Paul Prescott’s Charge*, and *Charlie Codman’s Cruise*—all novels from the *Campaign Series* (Northern Illinois University “Horatio Alger, Jr. Biography”).

Why was Alger’s first book for girls not met with more popularity, especially since it largely conformed to conventional gender roles? Why did Alger go back to writing books for boys immediately after his first publication for girls? As discussed above, few scholars acknowledge Alger’s books featuring female protagonists, and those who do make mention of them typically include basic publishing information (dates and plots) and do not elaborate on these texts. Within those few instances, scholars merely discuss the ways in which *Helen Ford* (and *Tattered Tom*) is a mirror image of Alger’s repetitious plots for boys’ books. Although *Helen Ford*, like Alger’s boys’ novels, features a rags-to-riches storyline and a do-good protagonist—who struggles but eventually catches a big break despite thieving villains—the main character is a girl, which changes the protagonist’s role and outcome and suggests some of tensions in nineteenth-century understandings of gender roles and expectations.

Alger suggests that both boys and girls have equal opportunity at the ever-coveted respectability, which requires the character to continue paving his own way toward sustained success, but the picture he paints indicates otherwise. Though they experience many of the same hardships as Alger's boys, Alger's girls, instead, are afforded a different model of respectability when they adhere to social prescriptions for women. A careful examination of *Helen Ford* suggests important differences in Alger's formula. When girls work, they often do so out of necessity rather than as a means to develop an independent identity, and they are often restricted to marginal or socially questionable jobs, such as sewing, acting, operating a boarding house, or selling apples.

Helen Ford opens at Mother Morton's boarding home, which houses "mechanics, working-men, clerks on small salaries, seamstresses, and specimens of decayed gentility" (3). It is situated on one of Manhattan's bleaker streets. Responsible for herself and her inept father, Helen enquires about renting a room, and as she moves in, the reader encounters two other female characters: Mademoiselle Fanchette, a milliner who considers herself fashionable and of a higher social standing than she currently occupies, and Martha Gray, "a pale seamstress" who befriends the heroine (5). Helen's father, the widower Robert Ford, is also introduced, and readers soon discover that he is unemployed, distracted, and seemingly unhealthy because of his constant preoccupation with finishing the creation of a flying machine that will allow him to have Helen "dressed in silks, and ride in a carriage of her own" (6). From the opening of the novel, Alger positions Helen as the dutiful daughter, taking responsibility for herself and her father. Unlike his oftentimes orphaned male characters, Helen must work to support someone

else. Like Martha Gray, she finds work as a seamstress, but soon realizes that she does not earn enough money and turns to acting as a more lucrative alternative.

Alger also sets up a parallel plot focusing on the Rand family and a substantial inheritance. In typical Alger fashion, the villain lies and deceives. Shortly after introducing Helen and her situation, the narrator describes two men, one old and one young, as they pass through the park where Helen and her father are walking. The older man, Mr. Rand, sees Robert Ford and declares, "He must be Robert, my long-lost son" (20). Mr. Rand's nephew, Lewis, is shocked by the discovery, but assures his uncle that the man he saw "does not in the least resemble [his] cousin" (20). Mr. Rand agrees, chalking his assertion up to wishful thinking. It quickly becomes evident that Lewis has deceived his uncle about Robert's identity; however, due to inherit his uncle's money if father and son never meet again and reconcile, Lewis spends the majority of the novel trying to keep them apart to keep his inheritance. Otherwise, Lewis feels he will "never be paid for the years in which [he] danced attendance upon [his] uncle," determines he "must succeed by whatever means," and assures himself that his uncle "cannot last much longer" (19-21). Because his uncle and cousin are now in such close proximity, Lewis takes extra steps to inherit Mr. Rand's fortune by hiring scrivener Jacob Wynne to forge a will naming Lewis as the sole heir. Wynne's wife, Margaret, overhears this scheme, but keeps their secret until she can later use it to incriminate her husband, who has been unfaithful and treated her poorly throughout their marriage. Lewis also employs Mr. Sharp, an attorney, to further assure that his cousin and uncle never have an encounter. The scheme that Lewis plans sets the stage for much of the underlying deceit and secrecy

on which the novel hinges, and because he is so intertwined in all of the deception that occurs, readers are quickly able to identify him as the novel's chief villain.

Meanwhile, Helen soon meets fellow boarder Herbert Coleman, an impoverished yet rising artist whom she has come to regard as a brother. She also realizes that her meager seamstress salary and family's diminishing savings will not pay the bills for much longer, so she turns to the theatre for employment. Despite a rather nervous audition, Helen impresses the theatre manager with her voice, and he sends her on stage that evening to replace the lead actress who has fallen ill. Like Alger's male protagonists, Helen benefits from a lucky break, and success soon follows. Her salary as an actress is much better than that of a seamstress, and by the end of her short-lived career on stage, she is making double her original earnings. By placing her in a career on the stage, Alger suggests to readers that Helen is a performer. Like *Ragged Dick*, Helen plays a character in order to earn her living. At this point in her story, Helen relies on her own efforts—the effectiveness of her own performance—to secure her wages, just as Dick does when he is a boot black.

Lewis Rand's scheme to inherit begins to unravel when the lawyer Mr. Sharp wants more involvement than Rand has afforded him, and taking a more active role, Mr. Sharp pays a visit to Helen and her father in order to inquire about his invention. He offers Robert Ford a two-hundred dollar loan in order to help him to keep tinkering on his flying machine, a sum Mr. Sharp knows will be spent quickly. Because Sharp knows Robert Ford is entirely lost in working on and dreaming about his invention, he later comes to collect his loan and suggests that he originally loaned three-hundred instead of two-hundred dollars—yet another scheme in this tale that relies on deceit and where a

villain takes advantage of the protagonist and her father. Sharp also decides to reveal Lewis Rand's intention to prevent Ford from inheriting his father's fortune, but not altruistically—he realizes Ford will likely compensate him for his “good deed.” With the help of Margaret Wynne, Mr. Sharp exposes Lewis Rand's deceitful arrangement, Robert Ford reunites and reconciles with his father moments before his death, and the true will is revealed, naming Robert Ford as his father's heir. Robert Ford, Helen, and her friend Martha Grey move into one of three houses gifted to the rightful heir in Mr. Rand's will. Mr. Ford also receives “a quarter of a million in bank and railway shares” (280), which equates to roughly \$4.7 million dollars in 2015.³ After returning from studying art in Italy, Herbert Coleman returns to marry Helen Ford. Lewis Rand learns his lesson while living in Paris.

Despite interesting differences, most scholars view Alger's female protagonists as slightly modified versions of his men and do not explore the ways in which women characters function differently, particularly when it comes to the importance of work and identity. However, the significant differences that separate working men and women in *Helen Ford* are overt and should not be ignored. Martha Grey is emblematic of lower class women in the 19th century who must work in order to survive. Sewing, a task generally associated with women, is suggested as a logical and common method of earning wages, and the only means of employment for which Martha seems qualified. Over the course of the novel, Helen works—first as a seamstress like Martha, and then as an actress—to support her father; her beauty is what allows her to transition into acting, an opportunity not provided to pale and plain-looking girls like Martha. Also, unlike Alger's male protagonists, Helen does not work to forge an identity grounded in a

³ Using the WestEgg inflation calculator.

middle-class male version of respectability. In *The Fictional Republic: Horatio Alger and American Political Discourse*, Carol Nackenoff describes the narrow job choices available to poor women in the nineteenth century, highlighting sewing as the most available choice despite its entrapment and poor compensation. She emphasizes that “the narrow choice allowed to women, who are compelled to labor for their livelihood, leads to an unhealthy and disastrous competition in this department of toil, and enables employers to establish a disgracefully low scale of prices” (85). Nackenoff mentions Martha Grey in her only reference to Alger’s female employment in her entire book when she writes that “Martha, sewed constantly, only to find her wages decreased by 20 percent because shops gave out less work and more people seemed to desire it” (85).

Although Nackenoff does not further explore Martha’s role in *Helen Ford*, I argue that her character is important to examine because she is most representative of struggling female seamstresses of this era. In this sense, Alger provides a realistic depiction of working women and the issues they faced. On the novel’s opening page, Martha is introduced to readers as the “pale seamstress” (*Helen Ford* 3)—hinting at her sickliness by emphasizing her lack of color—and shortly thereafter the narrator mentions that she was “stricken down by a fever, induced by over-work” (5). When Martha falls ill, Mother Morton, the landlady for the home in which Martha and Helen reside, not only overlooks Martha’s inability to pay rent in a timely matter, but helps care for her and discharges her rent for the time she was unable to pay (5). Prior to this event, Alger writes that Mother Morton does not tolerate late rent and promptly evicts those who cannot pay; however, she makes a special exception to her otherwise unbending rule for the sickly Martha, because she recognizes her hard work, sees her struggle, and identifies

her inability to rise from her impoverished circumstances despite her continuous work and efforts.

Mother Morton intuits that Martha's sickness is the result of being overworked and underpaid. Alger accentuates Martha's "never-ceasing work" (157), and suggests that her paleness comes from working too hard (158). At the novel's onset, the seamstress earns less than \$4 per week and works from morning until night, and, after a short period of time,

hard work and an absence of nourishing food were beginning to tell on the delicate frame of Martha Grey. An expert needle-woman, she commanded, in good times, an abundant supply of work. But times had changed. The shops gave out less work, while the number who desired it seemed rather to have increased rather than diminished. The natural result followed, —a reduction in the compensation, already disgracefully low. Many could not obtain a chance to work at any price. Martha was allowed her usual supply, but at prices twenty per cent [sic] lower than she had before received. . . . Her health, never very firm, had shown some indications of failure. She was troubled with occasional dizziness and frequent nervous headaches, which rendered her enforced slavery to the needle a torture, but one from which she could not deliver herself. (255)

Her only remedy to the twenty-percent salary cut was to eat even less food in order to conserve money, which leads to more extreme sickness. When Helen discovers an unconscious Martha on the floor, she knows the only remedy for recovery is rest. Resting is not an option for Martha because she knows she has to continue the very task that

made her ill, sewing, in order to live (256). Along with Helen's urging and assurance that she will help her physically and financially, rest and adequate food prove to be the luxuries that allow Martha to recuperate, and Helen's newfound riches eventually provide both of them with the option to forgo strenuous labor that was previously necessary for their survival. Unlike Ragged Dick and other male protagonists, Martha works hard only to be rewarded with illness rather than financial success, and her experience may provide a cautionary tale for Helen.

Like Martha, Helen has humble beginnings sewing for the "slop-shops" in an effort to support the rapidly declining small sum of money that her father has managed to save. Her absentminded father finally takes note of her work when he comments that Helen is constantly sewing, particularly when he notices that she is sewing a man's vest. In *The Needle's Eye: Women and Work in the Age of Revolution*, Marla R. Miller details the distinction between the different types of seamstresses in the nineteenth century, observing that "women's clothing production . . . , which continued to demand a custom fit to the body of the wearer, remained more akin to crafts like blacksmithing" (194). The production of women's clothing was a respected art form, while the creation of men's clothing, though still manufactured by women, was considered a lowly occupation that required less detail and precision and was, therefore, mass produced by poor women who were desperate for work, despite the scanty pay. Miller notes, "instruction manuals, supported by a booming publishing industry, transmitted craft knowledge from author to reader. And men's shirts and other garments became the work of anonymous makers first with the appearance of large and thriving slop shops and later with the advent of vast outwork networks" (194). These historical working conditions precisely describe those

that Martha Grey experienced: an anonymous seamstress works endlessly and unhealthily to create men's garments. Alger's mention of Helen's work in the slop shop indicates that if not for a lucky break, pleasing singing voice, good looks, and her father's last-minute inheritance, she, like many poor and unmarried females with no family to care for them, would have certainly wound up like Martha, sewing herself into sickness.

Aside from the taxing demands of the job, the work of a seamstress is particularly isolating, which the narrator emphasizes when revealing that Martha works from morning until night with a bird as her only companion (*Helen Ford* 63). Because seamstresses receive their work and take it home, they have little contact with outsiders. But more important than the loneliness and lack of solidarity and comradery that results from working in isolation, independent and anonymous seamstress work did not allow outsiders to see the harsh conditions of this job relegated to poor women. Martha Grey's plight, although indicative of that of many poor women of this era, seems confined entirely to her character in *Helen Ford* and suggests a possible outcome for Helen if she does not find another option. Other than Helen's brief foray into sewing, Martha is alone in her struggles (Martha's cousin leads a more prosperous and certainly less stressful life; Madame Fanchette does not have to work to survive; Helen will eventually have her father and Herbert Coleman as financial supporters; Mother Morton is a widow who owns a boarding home, presumably purchased from savings her former husband left). In contrast, Alger stresses the plight of poor boys in his novels but without as many negative and realistic details. We see the main characters as boot blacks, newsboys, or engaging in a similarly impoverished trades, and Alger highlights the multitudes of boys who work these laborious and poorly-compensating jobs to make sure that readers understand the

widespread epidemic plaguing young boys of this time; however, contrasted with the young women in his novels, Alger's boys always manage to get enough to eat and regularly go to Barnum's prior to their reformation. Martha's physical decline, as a result of her scanty sewing wages, is not a punishment for engaging in vices as it is when boys experience hardship.

Additionally, as some scholars observe, the plight of laboring young boys is markedly more visible to outsiders. These boys work on the streets, making their occupations and impoverished circumstances overtly apparent to passersby. Their working arrangements are public and especially observable, allowing the generous benefactor the perfect encounter to intervene and begin paving the path toward improvement in the lives of these young Alger boys. Male characters also have more influence over their workload and compensation. Dick, for example, proves time and again that once he gives up his vices, he can afford housing and decent food. The harder he works, the more he earns. Although Dick is a poor, young boy forced to make his own way, he has control over his income. He will not starve or face homelessness if he works hard; the same proves true for most of Alger's boy heroes. Through a lucky encounter and intervention, Alger's hero is always able to quickly rise from his humble situation.

Men (and boys) also had more job options available to them during this era. In Alger's novels, readers regularly encounter newspaper sales boys, bootblacks, carpet bag carriers, and errand boys—jobs for which females were ineligible, regardless of their capability and need. Except for Helen's bout of luck with a job on the stage because of her voice and looks, Alger's poor women are often employed as seamstresses and seldom have access to other jobs. Tattered Tom's role in a predominantly male job has many

implications (discussed later in this chapter), and she fairs better when she masquerades as a male in order to better profit as a street sweep. Similarly, male characters are not presented as becoming weak and sickly from being overworked in their trades. Dick and his peers, for example, are often seen indulging in pleasures after the working day is finished. Martha Grey, on the other hand, is always working, becoming visibly weaker and poorer despite her increased efforts.

Not only do Alger's women have distinctly different roles when it comes to employment and ability to earn a living wage, but they use deceit differently than do Alger's male characters. Chapter Two establishes the ways that Alger's male heroes use deceit differently than villains: boys who lie for humorous effect can still transform into respectable men, at which time they must forgo all forms of dishonesty. Also, male characters who lie to intentionally deceive are not afforded an opportunity to reform, cannot achieve respectability, and become con men who are often banished to the Tombs. Chapter Two also explains how Alger obscures his heroes' deceitful practices and downplays the role that luck plays in their ultimate success. Although Alger's females often lie for different reasons, their acts of deception are most often presented as innocent and harmless or part of a performance that proves to be temporary.

Helen Ford never lies, as Dick does, in an effort to infuse humor into an otherwise uncomfortable or serious situation, but instead employs deceit in an effort to guard those she cares about from circumstances she regards as potentially hurtful. Most of Helen's deceit is directed at her father, but only as a mechanism to hide their looming economic fate so that he may continue his passionate, albeit fruitless work on a flying machine. In

the following scene, Helen's father, Robert, discovers her sewing a man's vest and asks why:

“Only this, papa, that being quite tired of sitting idle, and having done all my own sewing, I thought I might as well fill up the time, and earn some money at the same time by working for other people. Is that satisfactory?” she concluded, playfully.

“Surely this was not necessary,” said Mr. Ford with pain. “Are we then so poor?”

“Do not be troubled, papa,” said Helen, cheerfully. “We could get along very well without it; but I wanted something to do, and it gives me some pocket-money for myself. You know that I am getting extravagant.”

“Is that all?” said her father, in a tone of relief, the shadow passing his face. “I am glad of it. (18)

Helen tells multiple lies in order to shield her father from the truth that would—as the “tone of relief” and “shadow passing his face” indicate, when she assures him that they are not in need of additional money—undoubtedly incite anxiety. The truth is that Helen and her father are dangerously low in their supply of money after paying living expenses and rent for their humble apartment. Realizing that their savings are nearly depleted, Helen quickly takes up work in the slop-shops in order to help supplement their expenses; here, Alger reverses conventional gender roles even as he provides an acceptable justification for Helen's unconventional behavior. Even when confronted, Helen hides the truth from her father to protect him from reality, and to allow him to continue focusing all of his efforts on his forthcoming invention. Readers are led to believe that this is a naïve

endeavor on both Helen and her father's behalf, as it is often implied that the flying machine will never reach completion or success.

Again, in chapter ten, Helen continues to hide how poverty stricken they are becoming and chooses to bear the burden of earning the money they need to survive.

Helen and her father

lived very frugally, but there was the rent, and two persons cannot live on air. So the little hoard diminished, and five dollars were now all that remained to Helen. . . . From her father Helen could hope for no present assistance. He was always at work, but his labor, however well it might be compensated in the future, brought in no money now. . . . Helen grew uneasy at the thought that they might be turned penniless into the street.

(62)

In contrast to his treatment of *Ragged Dick's* finances (his savings grow when he forgoes Barnum's and gets a roommate, for instance), Alger foregrounds Helen's dwindling funds and her fears about their plight. Soon after Helen realizes the need to quickly acquire money, she seeks advice from Martha Gray:

“My father and I are very poor. We have been for some time, but I got a little money by sewing, and that helped along. Now, you know, business is dull, and I can get no more work to do. The little money we have left will not last a fortnight, though I am *very* economical. So you see, Martha, it is quite necessary that I should find some way of earning more money at once.”

“Does your father know how near you are to destitution?” inquired the seamstress.

“No,” was the child’s reply; “and I hope he will not find out. I cannot bear to trouble him with that, when he has so much to think of.” (64)

Helen’s purpose of consulting Martha in the previous scene is to determine if she genuinely feels her singing is good enough to earn a position in the theatre. Helen sees this as her only alternative to earn a living wage because she cannot earn any additional money from sewing. Aside from discussing her potential with Martha, Helen bears poverty quietly. This is the opposite of Dick, whose social and financial predicaments are openly on display and are the center of his performance. Dick publicly jokes about his poverty, while Helen suffers privately, even lying to keep her secret concealed from her father so she does not worry him.

Like Alger’s male characters, Helen does benefit from a lucky break. The importance of luck begins to emerge when Martha Grey notices Helen’s lovely singing voice. The compliment inspires Helen to pursue a career as an actress. Like Ragged Dick, Helen is attractive and able to take on a new role when necessary. She makes her way to a local theatre, and, as luck would have it, she lands the job immediately because the play’s lead actress has fallen ill with no replacements in the company. Excited to be earning a better income than the slop-shops provide, Helen accepts the job without hesitation, later wondering how she can go to the theatre regularly for work without her father discovering. Helen begins by asking her father if she may go to the theatre, implying that she intends to watch a show, rather than disclosing her new employment (77). After several shows at the theatre, Helen contemplates the situation. While staring

out the window one morning, she considers “whether it would be possible to make known to her father her engagement at the theatre, without, at the same time, revealing the motive which had led her to seek it. She was assured that her father would feel deeply pained if he knew the real state of the case, and she dreaded that he might object to her keeping her engagement” (93). Her father interrupts her thoughts, and provides the perfect segue into revealing the truth, but she refrains, and instead the two go for a walk. On this walk, a bystander notices Helen from her performance the night before, from her likeness to a convenient bill posted with the evening’s entertainment at the theatre. Helen is forced to reveal the truth to her father about her recent employment; however, at his questioning regarding whether her employment had to do with their needing money, she is once again evasive and instead underscores her desire to sing, claiming that there was no other reason for her employment with the theatre (96). Helen’s lies to her father are never to maliciously deceive, but are instead intended to protect him from the hurtful truth. Helen seems to be fulfilling her duty as a daughter by shielding her father from the truth, and her justification opens the possibility that she actually enjoys performing and playing an unconventional role as a singer.

With some typical Alger luck, Helen becomes an actress in order to earn enough money to feed and provide shelter for herself and her father—though they constantly perform in other ways, Alger’s male heroes do not work as actors and instead acquire positions on the path to middle-class respectability. Helen’s acting serves as a type of role-playing, where she plays a part much different from her own character. When taking the stage, Helen casts off her poverty and performs as a happy young woman when she sings her tunes and wears clothing different than her own. Then, she returns home each

evening to her meager living arrangements and to a life filled with worry: thinking of her financial situation, hoping her father will not discover the seriousness of their lack of finances, and considering her friend Martha's own plight with poverty and sickness. Helen becomes someone very different, someone without worries and struggles when she takes the stage, and in this sense, she is also performing the role she will later undertake as a financially secure young woman. She is also presented as one to be idolized, made evident when her name appears on fliers promoting the play throughout New York City, and a group of boys excitedly recognize her when she passes them, exclaiming, "That's she! . . . I saw her last night!" (93). This type of public identity and performance is different than Dick's acting when he performs his role as a bootblack to earn his wages—he presents his customers with a humorous show and does not pretend to be someone entirely unlike himself. Dick is the same joking character around his friends that he is to his patrons at his job.

A clear parallel in Helen's story and many of Alger's heroes' stories is that she is the recipient of even more luck, which provides her family with a large sum of money through an inheritance. The similarities end here because gender roles come into play. Alger's heroes tend to catch their lucky break when offered a handsomely rewarding career or upon receiving an inheritance themselves. Although Helen's life improves drastically because of a newly acquired inheritance, it is not given to her. She receives the inheritance and new life indirectly by means of her father and the will of his estranged father. A male character, and an inept one at that, receives and controls the inheritance, not Helen. Though she has been managing the family finances for the entire story, she must rely on her father to control the inheritance, and she opts to give up acting as a

means to pave her way in the world. Once her father receives the inheritance, she immediately resigns her position on the stage, telling her manager, “If it wouldn’t inconvenience you too much to release me . . . I like to be with papa in the evening. He is lonely without me” (288). Helen’s statement suggests that she gives up a career she loves in order to keep her father company.

Alger’s male heroes, whether by the result of an inheritance or a rewarding new career, use their newly acquired money to ensure a life of the highly-sought “respectability.” This money allows them to live a middle class life and continue working for an even more improved situation. They pull themselves up by the bootstraps when times are tough, experience a lucky break, and continue working to make their lives adhere to the “American Dream.” In keeping with nineteenth-century expectations about gender roles, Helen’s life after the inheritance is much different than Alger’s male heroes: she immediately ceases working and presumably marries Herbert Coleman. Respectability, in the sense that Alger uses the term, is not an option for heroines, and marriage and inheritances represents the “respectable” outcome for women.

Tattered Tom and the Gender Masquerade

If ever an Alger novel with a heroine is referenced, it is nearly always *Tattered Tom: Or the Story of a Street Arab*. Tom story begins as seemingly similar to *Ragged Dick*, although this section explores how Tom’s performance complicates the Alger formula and the idea of respectability with regard to gender. So that there is no initial shock associated with Tom’s gender for readers, Alger identifies the character as a female from the story’s preface. He writes:

Some surprise may be felt at the discovery that Tom is a girl; but I beg to assure my readers that she is not one of the conventional kind. Though not without her good points, she will be found to differ very widely in tastes and manners from the usual young ladies of twelve usually to be met in society. I venture to hope that she will become a favorite in spite of her numerous faults, and that no less interest will be felt in her fortunes than in those of the heroes of earlier volumes. (vii-viii)

Initially dressed in a boy's hat, jacket, and sporting a boy's haircut, Tom seems to confuse those she encounters regarding her gender; however, Alger later cloaks her in a dress so that she may never entirely conform to the gender with which she more comfortably identifies. Like many other street boys in Alger's tales and nineteenth-century New York City, Tom earns her meager living as a street sweeper. Most of her earnings are not kept for long because she is required to turn them over at the end of each day to the woman she calls "Granny." Granny, despite her efforts to appear to care for Tom to onlookers, uses Tom solely as a source of scanty income. Readers soon discover that Granny is not actually Tom's biological grandmother, which allows the typical Alger villain-versus-hero plot to slowly unfold.

Granny is a violent alcoholic who often beats Tom when she becomes disappointed. When Tom eventually escapes Granny, she experiences a number of hardships, as Alger's protagonists often do, before a chance meeting with someone willing to help her on a path toward a better life. When she offers to carry luggage for Captain Barnes, he takes an instant liking to her, declaring, "if you were a boy, I'd give you a position on my ship" (74). Despite her repeated attempts to convince him she is

capable of performing the work even though she is not biologically a boy, Barnes does not give in. Barnes refuses to accept Tom as a boy, whereas the street children treat her as the gender she performs, never questioning her, perhaps because they have not yet been influenced by nineteenth-century gender concepts. Instead, Captain Barnes offers to take her to his sister's boarding house, so that she can have a nice place to eat, sleep, work, all while learning the skills necessary to become what Barnes considers a proper girl. Barnes's sister, Mrs. Merton, immediately decides that to take her in, she will need to have her cleaned, give her a dress, and give her a traditional girl's name. Tom is then called Jenny. As Tom's refinement progresses, her relationship with Mrs. Merton's older daughter, Mary, deteriorates.

Tom slowly becomes accustomed to her new life at the Merton's home while another plot is unfolding. Readers discover that Granny kidnapped Tom when she left her employment at Tom's parents', the Lindsay's, home in Philadelphia. She fled to New York, as instructed by Mrs. Lindsay's brother-in-law upon his brother's death. She was also given a lump sum of money as encouragement. Tom has, at this point, lived in New York with Granny for the last six years. She was too young to recall her kidnapping, but as time passes, she soon intuits that Granny is not her real grandmother. After a streak of bad luck, influenced by Mary Merton, Tom ends up back on the streets and is once again captured by Granny. Granny tries to leave the city with her, but Tom manages to escape and runs into her biological mother as she ventures back to the city. The two quickly and conveniently discover their relation. Tom is then transformed into a "lady" by her mother, and lives a fairy-tale-like happily ever after. After her transformation, Captain Barnes returns, sees Tom's progress, and is proud of her. The story's villains are

punished or never heard from again. Tattered Tom's story, like *Helen Ford*, does not appear so different from Alger's stories with male heroes, but there is certainly much lurking beneath the surface that requires an examination.

Although his work focuses on the observations and plight of non-fictional New York City street children of the nineteenth century, Charles Loring Brace's *The Dangerous Classes of New York and Twenty Years' Work Among Them* proves useful in understanding how street children were viewed, particularly girls. In his introduction to "street girls," Charles Loring Brace—minister, early social work pioneer, and founder of the New York Children's Aid Society—first defines what it means to be a boy of the streets in order to contrast the differences in assimilation with regard to gender:

With a boy, "Arab of the streets," one always has the consolation that, despite his ragged clothes and bed in a box or hay barge, he often has a rather good time of it, and enjoys many of the delicious pleasures of a child's roving life, and that a fortunate turn of events may at any time make an honest, industrious fellow of him. At heart we cannot say that he is much corrupted; his sins belong to his ignorance and his condition, and are often easily corrected by a radical change of circumstances. [He will eventually] eradicate these evil habits . . . [and] make an honest, hardworking Western pioneer. (114)

Although street life provides plenty of hardships and acquiring of vices for young boys, just like in Alger's stories, the real street boys of New York City make the most of their situations, and with some luck or, as Brace describes, "a fortunate turn of events," most will eventually dispose of bad habits and become honest and successful.

Girls, on the other hand, are doomed from the onset of street life. According to Brace, “A girl street-rover is to my mind the most painful in all the unfortunate crowd of a large city. . . . She feels homelessness and friendlessness more; she has more of the feminine dependence on affection; the street-trades, too, are harder for her” (114-15). And, Brace also suggests that street life for girls is not just more difficult than for boys, but in his observations, girls typically seem to end up spiraling downward into prostitution:

She develops body and mind earlier than the boy, and the habits of vagabondism stamped on her in childhood are more difficult to wear off.

Then the strange and mysterious subject of sexual vice comes in. It has often seemed to me one of the most dark arrangements of this singular world that a female child of the poor should be permitted to start on its immoral career with almost every influence about it degrading, its inherited tendencies overwhelming toward indulgence of passion, its examples all of crime or lust, its lower nature awake long before its higher, and then that it should be allowed to soil and degrade its soul before the maturity of reason, and beyond all human possibility of cleansing!

For there is no reality in the sentimental assertion that the sexual sins of the lad are as degrading as those of the girl. The instinct of the female is more toward the preservation of purity, and therefore her fall is deeper—an instinct grounded in the desire of preserving a stock, or even the necessity of perpetuating our race. (114-16)

Brace continues by concluding that the ultimate demise of the street girl of Alger's time is a moral one, one that hinges on adhering to social constructs and, ultimately, chasteness. Brace, in his othering of a gender, further isolates the girls by emphasizing the distinctions between sexes, elaborating that young, near-poverty or poverty-stricken girls often turn to prostitution, a job that becomes increasingly more difficult to leave or to be rehabilitated once started. Like Alger, Brace had a fondness for offering charity specifically to the boys of New York City's streets. He did, however, create a girls' lodging-house, but he worried that an especially charming female would reveal herself to be a "professional street walker" (306), scattering disease and rebellion among the others. Brace's work suggests that he wanted to teach the ways of respectability to street girls, just as he did with boys, but determined that a woman's innate tendency toward prostitution undermined his otherwise idealistic ideas, leaving him, like Alger, to fully believe only in the reformation of boys. Brace seems to think that non-fictional girls cannot attain respectability (apparently according to either model), whereas boys, with some luck, have a great chance. Girls tend to only spiral downward to prostitution without the reward of marriage.

While Brace and Alger hold very similar viewpoints, Alger's representation of gender may be more complex. Though Alger's females do not attain the ever-sought respectability that both men and boys so heavily prized, they are able to achieve middle-class respectability through marriage even though they act in unconventional ways. This chapter's examination of Alger's novels with central female characters explores this complexity. *Tattered Tom* differs in presentation because the story begins with a girl masquerading as a boy, a plot device that raises many questions about gender and

performance. The lines are blurred when assessing where she fits in and how gender influences her outcome. Tattered Tom is Alger's only girl who makes her life on the streets, but just like Alger's other female characters, she ultimately requires being saved through the assistance of a man or a chance inheritance. While her story resembles Alger's stories with boy heroes, she can never achieve the Alger prize, respectability, otherwise known as paving one's own way. This version of respectability is elusive for Alger's girls, and, paired with Brace's assertions, is indicative of the sentiments regarding gender in the nineteenth century.

In "Women, Children, and the Uses of the Streets: Class and Gender Conflict in New York City, 1850-1860," Christine Stansell outlines the gender distinctions between impoverished men and women of the 1800s, as well as within the fiction of the time:

Women were less visible in the society's literature, their work less well-advertised, since it was separate from Brace's most innovative programs. The women of the Children's Aid Society were not paid agents like the men, but volunteers who staffed the girls' programs: a Lodging-House and several industrial schools. The work of the women reformers was, moreover, less novel than that of the men. Rather than encouraging girls to break away from their families, the ladies sought the opposite: to create among the urban laboring classes a domestic life of their own. They aimed to mold future wives and mothers of a reformed working class: women who would be imbued with a belief in the importance of domesticity and capable of patterning their homes and family lives on middle-class standards. (329)

Boys were taught to reform and were shaped for a life of respectability, just as Alger did with his male heroes, and girls were trained to become dependent on men and to aspire to be domesticated wives and mothers. Lower-class women and girls had much more difficulty attaining work that provided enough to pay for their board and meals. In turning to the streets for their living, poor girls discovered that, as David Nasaw explains in *Children of the City: At Work and at Play*, "the conditions that made street trading so attractive for the boys made it off limits for the girls" (110). Many cities even passed laws "protecting" girls from street trading, which was deemed too aggressive for them (101). Servant work also became more difficult to obtain. As Stansell notes, "Until the 1840s, girls of the laboring classes had easily found work as servants, but in that decade, older female immigrants, whom employers preferred for their superior strength, crowded them out of those positions" (315). The young girls who were forced to earn their own livings rarely, if ever, had the option of working a more respectable job, such as a servant within a middle or upper-class home as they previously did. Although not all of these girls were destined for a life of prostitution, as Brace implies, it was especially tempting because "one encounter with a gentleman, easy to come by in the hotel and business district, could bring the equivalent of a month's wages in domestic service, a week's wages seamstressing, or several weeks' earnings huckstering" (Stansell 317). Alger neglects the real and troublesome topic of prostitution entirely in order to present his story in a more wholesome and positive light.

Alger, through his representation of girls, particularly with Tom, also neglects the matter of Tom's gender masquerading—why does he have her identify as a male, only to reform her by the story's end? Although he never explicitly defines his methodology,

Alger's purpose of creating a cross-dressing girl highlights the gender problems among the City's poor and desolate: He wants to create a character similar to his other heroes, but complicates the formula by altering the protagonist's gender. Alger realized that in order to create a character that experiences the same humble beginnings as his male heroes, he could not accomplish this with a girl who adheres to society's ideals (shown through Helen Ford, and, as later discussed, Mabel Parker and the Disagreeable Woman). The result was to create a female character that can pass as a boy in order to experience the same types of dilemmas as his male characters. Tom's ability to pass permits her to remain in occupations more visible to New York City's inhabitants. Being able to pass brings more advantages to those of marginalized genders as well as races. Appearing white and male better equips individuals with a chance for survival and self-reliance. Passing also hints at another level of the story: Alger wrote that it was difficult to distinguish whether Tattered Tom was a boy or a girl. Here, the deception works as part of a performance geared toward identity.

In order to pass as a boy, Tom has to embody certain characteristics; she has to perform as stereotypically male. Even her name, Tom, presumably a shortened version of "tomboy," suggests masculinity. Alger often indicates a fascination with appearance, evinced in many of his tales, but interest becomes particularly apparent with Tom. She appears dirty, like Alger's impoverished boys, and enjoys fighting. Her limitations are highlighted only when she is recognized as a girl. For example, other characters suggest that "girls can't fight" (52), and Captain Barnes will not consider hiring her as his luggage carrier or as an employee on his ship strictly because of her gender, as there was "popular sentiment in favor of employing boys" (71). Similarly, after Barnes attempts to

reform Tom into what he, and society, views as a proper girl, she can no longer secure the same jobs as before because of her feminine dress (190). Paving her own way was much simpler when she performed as a boy. Alger utilizes clothing as a symbolic manifestation of the body by allowing it to either represent the person wearing it through self-expression (i.e., when Tom transforms into a girl, it is suggested that she is an acceptable representation of her gender) or disguise the wearer through self-concealment (as Tom does when dressed in boys' clothes).

In what is often considered her most influential publication, Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* explores various concepts that can be used to evaluate Tom's struggle with a gendered identity. Butler's aim is to suggest that society, and even varying modes of feminism, have created a binary view of gender relations that tend to force individuals to choose a gendered self. Butler submits that society has not allowed individuals a choice where gender is concerned, and she proposes, instead, that "those historical and anthropological positions that understand gender as a relation among socially constituted subjects in specifiable contexts" are inaccurate (10). For Butler, gender is fluid and ever evolving, taking on different meanings at different stages throughout a person's life. Rather than remaining static, gender is instead, as Butler suggests, a continual performance: "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (25). It matters more how an individual performs at certain times rather than who the individual happens to be with regard to biologically-assigned gender. Embodying Butler's ideas, Tom initially identifies interiorly as more masculine than feminine because she is forced to in order to

survive. Personifying masculinity allows her to have more work on the streets without turning to prostitution, which Brace would suggest is her likely outcome. Clothing, for Alger, is gendered and emblematic of social constructs. Clothing and appearances also serve as the mechanism for Tom to sometimes deceive others, and often herself, regarding gender.

Tom, once discovered and transformed by her biological mother, is eventually rid of all masculine appearance and behaviors. Her mother attempts to refine her former boyish ways through dress and education. Rather than suggesting that gender is a willful performance of a theatrical basis, Butler suggests that it is an enforced stylized cultural performance perpetuated in a vicious cycle by society which ritualizes the repetitions of such sustained performances. As such, this gives gender the illusion of being real which then in turn feeds into culture and society, which then feeds back into the perpetuating cycle. Butler writes, “If the category of ‘sex’ is established through repeated *acts*, then conversely, the social action of bodies within the cultural field can withdraw the very power of reality that they themselves invested in the category (*Gender Trouble* 141). The cultural gender performance is manifested when Tom’s mother comes along and forces her to dress like a proper society girl. In fact, Tom’s mother, upon finding her, orders dinner for the two of them to her room, “not wishing to introduce her to fellow-boarders until she had supplied her with a more suitable wardrobe” (*Tattered Tom* 272). The new clothes Tom’s mother has her wear establish a “strong resemblance” between the two, and her clothing and lifestyle are expected to influence her actions, and soon “soften and refine her manners, and make her more like girls her own age” (*Tattered Tom* 273). Tom

instantaneously conforms to the new gender identity being forced upon her. She immediately refines her rough edges and seeks an education.

Alger closes the novel by assuring readers that the change from masculine to feminine was something repressed but coveted by Tom all along: “The time had been when she did not want to look like a young lady,—when she would have preferred to be a boy. But her tastes had changed considerably since then. Something of the instinct of her sex had sprung up in her, as she was brought to a closer knowledge of more refined ways of life. She was no longer a young Arab in her feelings, as before. Three months had wrought a great change in Tom” (200). Alger does not allow Tom to remain tattered and masculine by the book’s conclusion. She is transformed into the ideal representation of femininity, with her status and ascension further confirmed by her dress. Judith Butler’s view of gender and cross-dressing suggests that “the parodic repetition of ‘the original’ ... reveals the original to be nothing other than a parody of the idea of the natural and the original” (*Gender Trouble* 41). Even though Tom is taught how to behave like a socially-accepted girl, Butler would view this as a parody because she is discarding behavior that seems natural to her, for actions deemed more accepted by society. The continuous nature of repeating gender norms, as Tom performs when she attempts to transform into a “proper” young woman, lends itself to parody as Butler suggests. Her gender transformation, and the expectations that accompany it, are shaped by the larger culture and merely end up imitating the social definitions of gender norms. Alger wants readers to believe that Tom mirrors her male counterparts from his other tales, but the deceit lies in her story’s ending. Her upward mobility is rooted in domestic life, and not in finding a

good job that allows her to climb the rungs of ladder toward success like his male heroes always do.

A Fancy of Hers and the Social Masquerade

The title of this Alger story suggests that it is different than most of his other tales. Not only does the title imply the story will differ from his traditional plot, but this fictional tale completely foregoes adhering to the Alger rags-to-riches motif. In Ralph D. Gardener's publication *Horatio Alger's A Fancy of Hers and The Disagreeable Woman: Two Lost Novels for Adults by the Man Loved for his Rags-to-Riches Tales for Juveniles*, he writes that Alger first attempted to have the novel published in 1877, when he was Loring's top money maker. Loring was concerned that the publication of *A Fancy of Hers* would affect the sales of the already-advertised and forthcoming *Wait and Hope* novel—a more traditional rags-to-riches tale for boys—so he suggested a smaller anonymous publication instead. The story was published as *The New Schoolma'am; Or, A Summer in North Sparta*. The story went unnoticed and was quickly forgotten. Alger continued to revisit and revise the story, and later convinced Frank A. Munsey to publish it in 1889, in *Munsey's Magazine* (*Two Lost Novels* 17). Gardner makes no mention of the story's reception after its second publication, but considering the lack of scholarship and documentation existing about the novel, it is safe to assume that it received little, if any, attention.

Shifting from the traditional New York City backdrop that an Alger story typically utilizes, readers are transported to rural life in Granville, New Hampshire. Generally, when Alger's readers encounter rural or country characters, they are presented

as naïve and ignorant tourists to the big city. Alger hints at the same assumption about country folk when he sends his protagonist to Granville by creating a town full of people who are easily deceived by someone from New York City. Alger's presentation suggests that it does not matter where the country people happen to be—in the city or their hometown—they are always easily misled by city inhabitants. The story also quickly unveils a secret: Mabel Frost, as she introduces herself to Granville residents, is actually Mable Frost Fairfax and is the picture of youth, beauty, and refinement. She conceals her identity in order to become a school teacher in the small town as part of an experiment. Mabel hopes her scheme will provide a life free from the pressures that a society woman in the city encounters. Similar to the way Dick uses deception to add to his performance, Mabel uses it to help shape her identity for the citizens of Granville. As long as she hides the truth, her employment as a poor school teacher seems plausible to onlookers, which is further emphasized when she realizes she must hide her last name in order to avoid being found out.

The Granville locals immediately suspect she is a city girl from “York State” (24), attributable to her nice clothing and her “too many trunks” (25), both of which can only suggest vanity (27). Mabel soon meets the chairman of the School Committee, Squire Benjamin Hadley, who, although friendly, is portrayed as unintelligent and only receives his position as a result of small-town politics. Without effort, Mabel passes the school teacher qualification test given by Squire Hadley and is offered a position teaching children at the only local school. Regularly described as being pretty and having natural refinement, Mabel quickly becomes the talk of the town, particularly among the women who seem to dislike the outsider from the onset. The town's women spend much of their

time speculating how she affords her clothing and how she can pay to initially board at the only hotel, rather than a boarding house, when the rate must be equal to her salary.

Shortly after beginning her new role as teacher, Mabel is able to win over her students, even the most mischievous, with her kind ways and attractiveness. When the time comes to choose a boarding house, she selects the home of one of her female students because she wants to financially assist the family. Instead of paying the typical \$3 per week boarding rate, she pays \$10. The story continues with more gossip, as well as the introduction of a few additional main characters: Randolph Chester, a bachelor from New York spending his summer in Granville; Clementina Raymond, the school-aged girl who, along with her parents, plays the part of a girl from a wealthy family in order to secure a husband; and, Allan Thorpe, an artist whom Mabel has previously met at New York's gatherings for socialites. Chester pursues Mabel throughout most of the story, hoping she will accept his forthcoming marriage proposal. He unquestionably believes she would be delighted to marry a man of his financial means and does not consider whether or not she is actually interested in him. Despite her visibly demonstrated lack of interest, Chester continues to believe she will certainly accept a proposal from him until Thorpe arrives.

Thorpe quickly recognizes Mabel, and identifies her using her given name; however, she corrects him, and explains that she is conducting an experiment in this small town and took on a pseudonym of sorts in an effort to go undetected. The narrator reveals that Thorpe was immediately interested in pursuing Mabel when he met her in the city, but because he was not wealthy and she was, he refrained. Now, he assumes she must have lost her fortune in order to be working in Granville, so he seizes the

opportunity to get to know her now that they are considered more socially equal. When he discovers that Mabel might be interested in Thorpe, Chester pursues Clementina in an effort to make her jealous. The plan backfires, and Chester hastily marries Clementina with little consideration. Predictably, after their marriage, Chester becomes even more displeased when he discovers the Raymonds are far from wealthy. It is implied that the two live a life of misery as a result of their schemes. Equally as anticipated, Thorpe proposes to Mabel, even though he assumes her poor, the two marry, and she reveals her significant affluence. When Thorpe asks about why she invented a scheme to become a teacher, she responds, “Because I wished to be of some service to my kind; because I was tired of the hollow frivolity of the fashionable world. I don’t regret my experiment. I never expected to be so richly rewarded” (103). The novel concludes with the pair taking a two-year European honeymoon.

In most ways, aside from the protagonist having a happily-ever-after ending, the traditional Alger plot is inverted: Mabel begins as the story as an upper (or upper middle) class and self-sufficient person and transitions into a life of assumed poorness throughout the story. What remains consistent with other Alger stories featuring heroines is she transforms into a “model” woman by the novel’s end, one whose happy ending can only result by being paired with a man. Similar to Helen Ford, Mabel works a meager, but respectable job, one she unquestionably enjoys. For example, when questioned about one of Grandville’s busybodies about why she chooses her profession despite poor wages, she replies that she enjoys teaching because she feels “repaid for [her] labor by watching the progress of the scholars” (92). Also, when Randolph Chester asks her if she likes teaching, she replies saying she “find[s] it pleasant” (114). When he suggests that she is

throwing her talents away, she responds, “I don’t think so. . . . I find many of my scholars pretty intelligent, and it is a real pleasure to guide them” (111). Differing from other Alger texts with female protagonists, Mabel seems to embody some characteristics of the New Woman, an idea that began emerging in the late 1800s, with the term attributable to Sarah Grand (from her article “The New Aspect of the Woman Question,” published in the *North American Review* in March 1894). Mabel works when she does not have to, rather than out of necessity as Helen and Tom do. However, she does not entirely conform to this idea. When Helen realizes her future can be affected by change, she gives up what she seems to love—teaching—as soon as she is presented with a more socially acceptable alternative--domesticity. In Helen’s case, it is the financial inheritance, and then a marriage. Although the stories vary greatly, Tattered Tom’s outcome is quite similar: she gives up an identity in which she feels comfortable and happy in favor of one society suggests is more acceptable. Tom gives up her masculine name and identity to please Barnes while working for his sister, and fully commits to the idea (again thinking how happy it would make him) when her mother finds her and oversees her transformation into a “proper” lady. All three of the women, unhesitatingly, stop working when they are presented with a more socially acceptable alternative.

Likewise, all of these women employ various types of deceit to achieve their outcomes. For Mabel, she chooses a small, unpretentious town within the country that contains stereotypical and easily-deceived residents in order to conduct her experiment of living a life free from the expectations of upper-class society. She tries to masquerade as a relatively poor young woman (her teacher’s salary is \$7 per week and outsiders assume it is all the money to which she has access), but Granville’s residents immediately take

note of her elaborate dress compared to other and former school teachers. Prior to her departure, Mabel hires her usual dressmaker to create six dresses that she thinks will help her better blend in Granville. Although her plan does not go as she had hoped, the location-specific dresses are created to help Mabel assimilate, as well as to prevent surprise and chatter (32).

Choosing to board at the hotel for her initial weeks in the small town also adds to the local gossip since the fee is equal to her salary. Mabel quickly realizes that she must acquire cheaper boarding to persuade the locals of her newly-assumed character, and lodges with one of the underprivileged families in town to avoid suspicion and to help provide them with an additional source of money. When offering to board with the Kent family at a rate of \$10 per week (\$7 more than the typical weekly rate), Mrs. Kent is concerned and suggests that Mabel's salary must be much less. Mabel calms her fears by offering up a secret that she depends on Mrs. Kent not making public (47). Mabel reveals, "I am quite able to live without touching a penny of my salary" (47). In addition to her requiring Mrs. Kent to aid in her deceit, she tells her that she must never let anyone know how much she pays her, emphasizing that "it will imperil [her] secret if [she] does" (47). Mabel's confiding in Mrs. Kent with private information works similarly to the way confessing does in *Helen Ford*, where she only discloses her occupation to her friend Martha Gray. Mabel's fears and adamancy about keeping her secret all hinge on how locals would perceive her if she were found out. It would not be unacceptable for Mabel to continue teaching if the Granville residents knew she was a "society belle" (71). It is expected that the "staid,"—as Allan Thorpe refers to her before he rephrases his original assertion, "no, not staid, but hard working country school mistress" (71)—is employed,

and in a position that produces only poverty-inflicting wages. It would be shocking, and unheard of, if the society belle were to work as a school teacher.

The story includes many references to Mabel presumably working only out of perceived necessity even though she actually enjoys the job and deceives others in order to do it. Mabel's unwanted suitor, Randolph Chester, assumes that she has no choice but to remain employed as a teacher. Marriage is suggested on more than one occasion as the key to saving Mabel from the supposed drudgery of being a working woman. Chester suspects Mabel has "seen better days, though at present reduced to school teaching" (80) when he observes her uncharacteristic clothing and learns of her having lived in the city. When offering a proposal of marriage to Mabel, Chester's biggest selling point is that he can "release [her] from the slavery of the schoolroom and provide for [her] a life of ease," which he presumes is what she, as a working woman, desires (98). Even Thorpe, the novel's hero, suggests that one of the few benefits marrying him can offer is that it can at least "relieve [her] from teaching at once," despite not being wealthy. Her response, while it does not reveal her employment as a choice, does indicate that she enjoys her chosen employment when she emphasizes, "But suppose I do not consider it a burden. Suppose I like it" (102). It is unfathomable to all of the characters, who are not privy to her secret, that she does not teach out of financial necessity, and that she could simply choose to do so out of enjoyment. Mabel, conversely, suggests on multiple occasions that she enjoys her occupation, even professing that even though teaching began as an experiment, she "never expected to be so richly rewarded" (103).

A great deal of secrecy also surrounds Mabel's teaching. Her social experiment can only be carried out in a location where she is unknown. An aristocratic girl like

Mabel could never work openly in the city. When talking to her seamstress, Mary, about wanting to try working in order to “feel, for the first time in [her] life that [she is] of use to somebody,” she knows that she has to do so in a town where she can masquerade as someone else—a working-class woman. Mabel soliloquizes:

“Well, I have taken the decisive step,” she said to herself. “It may be a mad freak, but I must not draw back now. Instead of going to Newport or Europe, I have deliberately agreed to teach the grammar school in this out-of-the way country place. I am wholly unknown here, and it is hardly likely that any of my friends will find me out. For the first time in my life I shall make myself useful—perhaps. Or will my experiment end in failure? That is a question which time alone can solve.” (24)

This quote suggests that she cannot make herself “useful” through employment because she comes from upper-class society. Her friends whom she references would not approve.

Later in the novel, Clementina’s statements about fashionable ladies, and the snide commentary from the townspeople about her dress and occupation, also underscore the need for Mabel’s secrecy. For example, when Clementina discovers that Mabel works as a school teacher, she attempts to highlight the division between herself and the supposed working-class girl when she insincerely suggests that at least she is useful in teaching others. Clementina also asserts herself as a “fashionable girl” when she stresses, “fashionable girls are useless” except for philanthropic giving (79). Similarly, the middle-class locals, like Mrs. Slocum, regularly criticize and gossip about Mabel and assume she “might be proud” because she is “fond of dress” (26). Mrs. Slocum tells the other locals, “She put up at the hotel. I was there jest [sic] now, and saw her two trunks.

Rather high toned for a school teacher, I think. We don't need two trunks for *our* clothes” (27). These sentiments indicate that Mabel cannot function as a working woman without receiving criticism from both upper and middle class, which implies that working women are not well received in either social realm.

The only time Mabel reveals her true identity to a character is when she realizes she would otherwise be unable to keep her secret. When Allan Thorpe arrives in Granville for the summer and immediately recognizes her from New York City, she has no choice but to reveal the truth. Without acknowledging her true identity and forgoing deceit with Thorpe, it is unlikely that she would have cultivated a relationship with him that soon results in marriage. He agrees to aid in Mabel's deceit. She asks him to not use her true name. He responds with wonder and sympathy, “You have been unfortunate; you have lost your fortune and have buried yourself in this out of the way village.” She deceives him by not correcting him and adding, “Do not pity me,” she said. “I have no cause to complain. I am happy here” (70). Though not malicious, opposite Alger's typical antagonists, Mabel surrounds herself in deceit in an effort to conceal her identity; however, once her future is confirmed, she can forgo her carefully devised experiment in favor of a more accepted outcome for women: giving up her occupation in exchange for marriage.

The Most Disagreeable of All Alger's Women: *The Disagreeable Woman*

In 1885, G.W. Dillingham published *The Disagreeable Woman: A Social Mystery*, Alger's final novel with a female at its center. The subtitle of the novel is particularly interesting because it hints at secrecy and deception. The inclusion of the

word “social” is likewise thought-provoking, perhaps suggesting that Alger was thinking about the changes taking place in the late 1800s with regard to women. However, the novel was not initially attributed to Alger. Because the publisher was worried that the story would create confusion for Alger’s core audience of juvenile readers, Frank A. Munsey, publisher of the popular *Munsey’s Magazine*, suggested using a pseudonym. Through his suggestion, Julian Starr, the name under which this story first appeared, was invented (Scharnhorst, *Two Lost Novels* 18). Prior to being republished in Ralph D. Gardner’s collection, the novel could only be found in the Library of Congress, along with one other personal copy that was “auctioned in 1975 at New York’s Swann Gallery for \$475” (*Two Lost Novels* 18). This novel, like *A Fancy of Hers*, is still difficult to obtain outside of Garner’s publication.

Using the pseudonym to publish the novel is not the only deceptive practice at work within *The Disagreeable Woman*—the plot seems to be heavily drawn from another novel. Alger does note on the novel’s opening page that “in reading Miss Harraden’s charming ‘Ships that Pass in the Night,’ it occurred to [him] that if there were Disagreeable men there are also Disagreeable women. Hence this story,” but he seems to borrow the story’s plot entirely, only shifting gender roles. The “Authors and Books” section of the April – September 1895 issue of *Bostonian* hints at the similarities between Beatrice Harraden’s *Ships that Pass in the Night*, published two years earlier (687), but does not elaborate. A quick examination of Harraden’s novel suggests overwhelming similarities: a man named Robert Allitsen is termed “The Disagreeable Man” by those who board with him in the Swiss winter resort. Bernadine, the story’s protagonist, comes to know Allitsen better and discovers he is kind and tender below his disagreeable

surface. The two do not end up together, despite the novel's hinting, but she is able to realize a side to the disagreeable man that remains unknown to the other characters.

As I will discuss below, Alger's tale mirrors this plot, simply switching the genders in the relationship of Dr. Fenwick and the Disagreeable Woman. Not only did Alger hide his identity with the story's publication under a *nom de plume*, but he also misleads readers about his own story's originality. The tale contains a disagreeable character, and the plot of the story is nearly entirely the same. Similarly, like so many other of Alger's stories, the tale itself contains evidence of deceit. However, deception functions much differently, and this time the readers are likewise misled. In this short novel, Alger suggests that his audience should not be swayed by first impressions, and his representation of the Disagreeable Woman (Ms. Blagden) suggests that honesty, even when most would tell a white lie, is virtuous. Interestingly, the Disagreeable Woman can be read as a proto-feminist character; she is unmarried and independent, perhaps influenced by the "new woman" characters of the late nineteenth century. Undoubtedly, readers are led to believe that she is a very different type of Alger woman, one who refuses to conform to society's expectations, and is, as a result, viewed as "disagreeable." Her disagreeableness morphs and softens by the novel's conclusion, when she becomes like Alger's other women who conform to gain the approval of society.

The novel opens with a seemingly innocent example of deception: Mrs. Wyman, the young widow, whines about her age and regularly tries to convince her fellow boarders that she is much younger in order to suggest herself as good marriage material. The Disagreeable Woman is quickly introduced to readers when she responds to Mrs. Wyman's assertions, noting that "she looks much older" (8). The narrator, Dr. Fenwick, is

a medical practitioner from New Jersey and newcomer to Mrs. Gray's New York boarding house. He immediately inquires about the Disagreeable Woman after being taken aback by her frankness. Dr. Fenwick describes the Disagreeable Woman as

tall, inclined to be slender, with a keen face and singular eyes. She never seemed to be excited, but was always calm and self-possessed. She seemed to have keen insight into character, and as may already be inferred, of remarkable and even perhaps rude plainness of speech. Yet though she said sharp things she never seemed actuated by malice or ill-nature. (11)

Much of the novel centers on the narrator getting to know his fellow boarders, particularly the Disagreeable Woman, while they converse at the dinner table each evening.

As the story progresses, readers become promptly aware of Mrs. Wyman's real age—roughly mid-thirties—and her reasons for desperately trying to convince others that she is much younger: she is urgent in her quest to secure a husband. Another boarder informs the narrator that Ms. Blagden earned her title of "Disagreeable Woman" almost immediately, and that she, unlike the others who join for dinner each evening, does not reside in the boarding house. No one is sure where she lives or why she chooses to dine there each evening, although a young broker's clerk attempted to follow her home one evening, only to keenly be detected and confronted by Ms. Blagden (15). Dr. Fenwick soon decides that although Ms. Blagden is not beautiful or attractive, she is not "as ill-natured as she appears" (17). Other characters are introduced throughout the story, but the narrator becomes more and more intrigued by the mysterious Disagreeable Woman.

Dr. Fenwick realizes that the Disagreeable Woman is given a title that does not accurately describe her when he has a chance encounter with her one afternoon as he passes the Star Theatre. The two discuss his medical profession and his decision to move to New York despite the difficulty of succeeding at his own practice in the city while they walk back to the boarding house. Once there, Mrs. Gray announces the upcoming arrival of a new boarder, Count Pernelli from Italy, whom Mrs. Wyman immediately pursues as a potential husband. After Dr. Fenwick gets to know Ms. Blagden better, he feels she is the only person he knows who is trustworthy and can help with a situation involving his patient—a mother with a sick child and who cannot afford her care. Dr. Fenwick sets the scene:

Among my fellow boarders, I could not think of one to whom I could apply, except—well, yes, except the Disagreeable Woman. Under her cynical exterior I suspected there was a sympathetic heart, though I believe that I alone gave her credit for it. I resolved to speak to her about my poor patient. (147)

And, after relating the story of the poor girl and her family, the Disagreeable Woman responds sympathetically:

"It is very sad, doctor. How little we whose wants are provided for know of the sufferings of the poor! But fortunately," she added, and a rare smile lighted up her features and made her positively attractive, in spite of her name, "fortunately there is a remedy. When do you see this poor family again?"(148)

She unquestioningly provides the doctor with money to help the family, and this gesture leads him to ask, “How could we call her the ‘Disagreeable Woman?’” (116). She later provides additional money to the family after enquiring about their welfare and the progress of the child, further demonstrating her compassion. She also gives Dr. Fenwick a concert ticket for his humanitarian efforts. At this concert, he has a chance encounter with a wealthy elderly man, Mr. Vincent, who employs him to treat his rheumatism; like many of Alger’s male protagonists, Dr. Fenwick receives a financial boost from this chance encounter.

The story nears an end with the characters getting what they deserve through the typical Alger punishment and reward system: the doctor is handsomely rewarded by his new patient, which allows him to succeed at his practice while earning a very good living; the widow, Mrs. Wyman, marries the Count because she believes he is rich, only to discover that he has deceived her—he is not rich nor is he a count; and, Ms. Blagden is deemed an agreeable person, no longer the Disagreeable Woman, by the narrator who has had the opportunity to get to know her. In an ending that seems tacked on as an afterthought by the author, Dr. Fenwick meets with a patient, who informs him he is too poor to pay for his services, but the doctor decides he must be seen. Dr. Fenwick relates his story to Ms. Blagden, who wishes to help, and asks for the patient’s name. When he tells her it is Philip Douglas, she is shocked and reveals that he was once her fiancé, but she was foolish and left him—a mistake she still regrets. The two go to visit Douglas, where he is astonished to see Ms. Blagden, and she suddenly looks “ten years younger” at the sight of him (186). She offers to stay on as Douglas’s personal nurse, and tells him if he recovers it will “be as [he] wish[es] (187), indicating her promise to marry him, as *he*

wants. His condition deteriorates as he slips into a coma for days, and Ms. Blagden waits at his bedside. The last two sentences end with Douglas waking, the doctor declaring he will live, and Ms. Blagden rejoicing.

Mrs. Wyman, although not the stereotypical Alger villain who typically utilizes thievery, is punished for her deceit because of her malicious intent. She often lies about her age, which is emphasized multiple times in the novel when she claims that she was “quite a girl when [her] dear husband died” (118), only to make herself appear more eligible for marriage to any man she felt was wealthy enough. Once Mrs. Wyman meets Count Penelli and is convinced that he has “a large estate in the South of Italy” and has only come to New York as a leisurely visit and to “see the country and get acquainted with the people [so] he may write a book” (127), she pursues him more obstinately. The narrator also emphasizes that “she was bent on making a conquest of the young nobleman” (131). At the same time, the Count is led to believe that Mrs. Wyman is “very rich” (159), and Doctor Fenwick begins to question his authenticity. By the story’s end, both the Count and Mrs. Wyman are conned by each other—both entering into marriage believing the other to be wealthy, along with Mrs. Wyman thinking the Count is a nobleman when he has stolen another man’s identity, and he assuming she is as young as she regularly suggests. Both deceive each other, and because they are adult cons (versus conning youth, who are permitted the opportunity to reform prior to adulthood as I described in Chapter Two), they are punished and sent away to Philadelphia, just as Alger’s more villainous cons are banished from New York City or to the Tombs.

Throughout the story, Alger creates a feminist character with Ms. Blagden, and leads readers to believe that this woman will experience a much different outcome than

other Alger women. The widow, Mrs. Wyman, represents many unmarried females in literature of this era. She is always prepared and makes a point of presenting well by being charming, feminine, and youthful (often times lying about her age) in order to secure a wealthy husband who can take care of her. For example, she “paid attention to every male boarder at the table, neglecting none” (109). The never-married Ms. Blagden, as her personal title suggests, is quite the opposite, regularly speaking her mind despite the audience: “Yet though she said sharp things she never seemed actuated by malice or ill-nature. She did not converse much, but was always ready to rebuke pretension and humbug (108-09). As noted in Chapter Two, Hildegard Hoeller is chiefly concerned with Alger’s connections to Barnum and the use of humbug, but particularly for evaluating how the two function in *Ragged Dick*. Alger only references “humbug” in *The Disagreeable Woman* to show Ms. Blagden’s disapproval of such practices. Alger’s central female characters do not engage in humbug. While Hoeller equates Dick’s lies with humbug, she does clarify that it is not intended to be used for fraudulent purposes, but “it allows the customer, as well as Alger’s middle-class readers, to laugh away with Dick the presence of his own abject poverty” (194-5). Alger’s heroines do not lie to maliciously deceive, but do so out of necessity (Helen to keep the hurtful truth of their financial situation from her father; Tom only to placate her grandmother in instances that require her to do so for her own survival, or to embellish, using the same joking-tactics that Dick is known for, to persuade passersby to purchase newspapers; and, Mabel to keep her identity concealed).

Unlike Mrs. Wyman, the Disagreeable Woman ostensibly earns her name because she is the opposite of what is expected of a single woman. She never engages in coquetry

and is quick to confront deceptive behaviors in order to promote transparency. Her interest in marriage and men is never highlighted, at least until the story's end, which completely reverses her persona that has been, up to this point, vastly different from Alger's other women who conform to society's demands. The Ms. Blagden whom all of the boarders have grown to know is self-assured, frank, and open despite how her demeanor and comments may be perceived. She values forthrightness and clarity above all else. For example, when Professor Poppendorf finishes a song after dinner one evening, he is encouraged by Mrs. Wyman who begged him to "do favor us!" with singing (139). Unlike the patronizing that Mrs. Wyman displays, the Disagreeable Woman offers her true opinion to the professor when she responds, "you are more accomplished than I supposed. I like your song better than I did your lecture" (139). Her comment to the professor is illustrative of her usual unapologetic frankness.

The Disagreeable Woman's personality alters drastically after reuniting with her former fiancé. In the chapter where she first re-encounters him, the narrator refers to her not as "The Disagreeable Woman" or Miss Blagden, the only previously-used titles, but instead uses her first name, Jane, making her appear instantly more relatable, feminine, and approachable. It is also the name that Philip Douglas, her former fiancé, uses when he calls out to her a moment of surprise. Immediately upon recognizing Philip, she cries out, "Can you forgive me, Philip, dear Philip?" He responds telling her there is nothing to forgive, and Jane Blagden reveals to him, "Since we parted I have been lonely—desolate. I let my pride and my obstinacy come between us—but I have been punished" (186). Not only does her name indicate a shift in the personality of the Disagreeable Woman, but her humility and immediate willingness to accept blame for a situation that Philip says was

not her fault suggests she has transformed, making her personality unrecognizable from the previous hard and cold exterior she exuded and that earned her the title “The Disagreeable Woman.” Similarly, her looks also metamorphose, indicated when Dr. Fenwick observes, “I looked at the face of the Disagreeable Woman. I saw upon it an expression I had never seen before—an expression that made her look ten years younger. I could not have believed in the tenderness, the heart-warmth which it showed” (187). Like with Tattered Tom Helen Ford, and Mabel Frost Fairfax, the protagonists begin as potentially proto-feminist, but end up reverting to a conventional ending.

Further solidifying her transformation, the Disagreeable Woman tells Philip that he must become well for her sake, and that if he does it will be “as you wish,” (187) indicating that if he wants to marry her, she will gladly consent. Through Philip’s three-day recovery, the Disagreeable Woman waits by his bedside. When Dr. Fenwick announces he will live, “‘Thank God!’ she breathed, fervently, and a look of grateful joy lighted up the face of the Disagreeable Woman” (188). The Disagreeable Woman, after her brief, two-chapter conversion, can no longer carry her moniker, hence the introduction of her given name, Jane, which serves as another example of changing names to suggest a changing identity (Ragged Dick to Richard Hunter and Tattered Tom to Jenny). It is important to note that she only becomes agreeable after reuniting with a man. Up to this point, she is never depicted as soft, feminine, yielding, or patronizing, but rather strong, frank, and one who values honesty. She was previously unconcerned with society’s perception of herself, making it unnecessary for her to deceive or even patronize others; she instead preferred offering honesty and straightforwardness. Until the point of her transformation, she was the only Alger female character who did not rely on some

form of deceit in order to function within the parameters defined for women. However, the Disagreeable Woman's deceit only surfaces when she seems to become untrue to herself, converting into the stereotypical nineteenth-century woman whose objective is to please a potential husband. Her true self seems to be reflected in the character she is for the majority of the novel, the one who is frank and unwavering, despite how she is perceived by others. Ms. Blagden's decision to leave her former fiancé and live independently, choosing not to pursue a husband, seems a choice she made and is content with, regardless of the way it is viewed according to nineteenth century standards. When her outcome suddenly shifts toward domestic norms and sudden remorse for leaving Philip, her looks suddenly become an important focus ("she looked ten years younger" and her face lit up); she is unnecessarily apologetic and accepts blame when she is not at fault. She submits herself entirely to the demands of a man when she declares that it will be as Philip wishes—indicating that her own feelings and opinions are no longer of any importance. Alger presents a female character who seems self-reliant throughout the novel only to break character when a man she was once in love with reappears in the last two chapters. She softens, becomes more ideally feminine, and promises to do anything just to keep him healthy and happy. Just as with Helen Ford, Tom, and Mabel, Jane Blagden's story, too, has to end with traditional happily-ever after. In the ending to her tale, the Disagreeable Woman's previously unnoted misery is declared and a man is the only cure for her disagreeableness, former drab appearance, and abrasive frankness.

While Alger's stories with women at their centers appear to follow the same formula that he uses in his novels with boy heroes, there are many variances. Women are unable to become "respectable" in the same sense Alger's boys do and instead trade self-

reliance for domesticity and conform to society's expectations. They do, however, like Alger's boys, reform any deceitful practices in which they may have previously engaged. Just as Alger's boy heroes have to give up deceit in order to transition into young men who are respectable, rather than end up as the confidence men who are punished, Alger's women must also abandon any deceitful practices and morph into proper ladies. They set their sights on marriage and being exemplary recipients of inheritances. Alger's young women, just like his young men, must perform as good adults are expected. Alger's formula is further complicated because it hinges upon the message of "pulling yourself up by the bootstraps": like the male protagonists who heavily rely upon luck and benefactors in addition to their own efforts, the female protagonists only get their socially acceptable ending by relying on others.

CONCLUSION

“It’s a lie—an outrageous lie!”

-Horatio Alger, Jr., *Adrift in New York: Or, Tom and Florence Braving the World*

Taken from Chapter XIV of *Adrift in New York*, the epigraph for this chapter is bellowed from a third-story window as Dodger, the story’s hero, declares his innocence to a passerby below. In this scene, Dodger is falsely imprisoned by the story’s villain, Curtis Waring. In an innovative attempt to free himself, he hastily composes a letter that details his imprisonment, and waits for someone to walk by to catch the note. The recipient initially believes Dodger’s declaration of innocence, attributable to his clean face and honest appearance; however, once he decides to check out the boy’s story with the house servant, he is fooled into believing that Dodger is “as crazy as a loon ... [and the] artfullest lunnytick you ever seed. He tried to kill his mother last week” (147). When the stranger tells Dodger that he will not help him escape because he has learned of his maniacal tendencies, Dodger declares that the information is deceitful and shouts the opening quote. This scene of dishonesty is one of many that appears in *Adrift in New York*, a common theme in Alger’s stories.

Throughout this project, I have examined the overarching topic of deceit within select Horatio Alger novels. Alger has historically been regarded as a producer of wholesome tales, mostly for young boys, that feature atypically moral and honest heroes. In fact, for decades, Alger’s own life was believed to echo the stories of the characters about which he wrote, positioning him as the quintessential authority on the pursuit of the

American Dream in nineteenth century New York City. By investigating the ways in which deceit is used in several of his novels, I suggest that Alger's heroes, who are generally celebrated as honest, hardworking, and untarnished by significant vices, are not exempt from the deceptive practices characteristically attributed to the stories' villains.

Similarly, Alger and several of his later biographers were less than truthful about his life, especially a scandal during his short-lived time in the ministry that involved young boys. As detailed in Chapter Two, Gary Scharnhorst's work not only uncovered years of misrepresentations associated with Alger's biography, but seems to have influenced a small resurgence of interest in Alger studies among scholars in the latter half of the twentieth century. Without Scharnhorst's years of research to publish a more accurate portrayal of Alger's life, this dissertation would not have been possible. Carol Nackenoff's research in *The Fictional Republic* is also important in establishing how Alger's work exemplifies nineteenth century ideals, specifically related to social mobility and the importance of honesty to a character's success. Nackenoff's work demonstrates how Alger's characters serve as an allegory for the American Republic as they as they encounter hardship and obstacles during their pursuit of the American Dream. Although Nackenoff addresses the abundance of "scoundrels and foils [who] practice the arts of fraud and deceit" that lined city streets during this era (61), her work does not specifically address the deceptive practices that occur among all types of Alger characters, both heroes and villains. Other scholars, such as Glenn Hendler, Hildegard Hoeller, David Leverenz, and Michael Moon, examine deceit in Alger's novels, and their work provides the foundation for this study; however, their research focuses almost entirely on the *Ragged Dick* series and does not fully consider the complicated role of deception in con

games, gender performance, and class mobility for both male and female characters. Indeed, most Alger scholars neglect his female protagonists entirely or read them as mirror images of male characters.

This project fills a gap in Alger research by highlighting how the deceit works differently for Alger's heroes and villains; his protagonists can lie and deceive on the path to success but only within certain limits and for certain reasons, often based on conformity to gender roles. It builds upon Scharnhorst's biography by showing how, like Alger himself, his characters are not as virtuous as they appear—all of the protagonists I examine engage in some kind of deceit, most often to play a role necessary for success. More importantly, this dissertation reveals hierarchy of deceit within Alger's stories: a character's outcome (the possibility of a happy ending according to Alger's formula) often depends upon his or her level of deceit. Those who tell "white lies" are given the opportunity to reform, but they never attain the level of success achieved by the stories' heroes (for example, Micky Maguire, Tim Bolton, and Mr. Sharp all receive acceptable outcomes but fall short of the "riches" reserved for Ragged Dick and other protagonists). Alger's boys sometimes participate in con games, but they receive a more positive outcome than con men. I propose the term "confidence boys" for Alger's protagonists who deceive others on the path to success. Confidence boys, unlike confidence men, are given the opportunity to reform. If they continue their deceitful practices into adulthood, they cannot achieve respectability, and they are usually punished (removed from the city, banished to the Tombs, among others).

Additionally, throughout this project, I build upon the notion of the "Horatio Alger Myth," which is the idea that individuals can easily achieve success if they simply

work hard, i.e., the American Dream. This idea is deceptive and ignores important aspects of Alger's plots because Alger's heroes are always the recipients of luck, often in the form of a wealthy benefactor. I suggest three "Horatio Alger Myths" exist, rather than just one. The second, and more straightforward, myth is related to Alger's biography and the public persona that false information, especially in the work of Herbert Mayes, helped to create and to perpetuate well into the twentieth century. In his pioneering biography *The Lost Life of Horatio Alger, Jr.*, Gary Scharnhorst unearths many secrets related to the life that Alger actually led and presents him as a much different persona than the one created by previous biographers. The third Alger myth, which I explore in Chapter Three, centers on women and the American Dream. In the remarkably limited scholarship that has been conducted on Alger's novels featuring female protagonists, critics tend to view these characters as synonymous with his archetypal male heroes. For example, Bruce Lohof refers to *Helen Ford* as "an oddity: *an Alger for girls*," emphasizing the relative obscurity of Alger texts with female protagonists (97). More importantly, and critical to my point, is his claim that *Helen Ford* "perfectly reflect[s] the rags-to-riches scenario that Alger's name came to signify" (100). When scholarship does exist on Alger's stories for girls, it treats these texts as though they do not deviate from the standard Alger formula. Chapter Three shows that Alger's female protagonists are markedly different than his boys. Female protagonists receive a socially acceptable outcome—inheritances and/or marriage—they never attain the esteemed "respectability" tied to a public identity that always motivates Alger's male heroes in the face of obstacles.

Gender and Dual Protagonists in *Adrift in New York*

Published five years after Alger's death, *Adrift in New York: Or, Tom and Florence Braving the World* is not unique in the sense that the formula remains largely the same, along with stock villains and the typical characters who help propel the protagonists' social ascension. What makes this novel unique is that it contains two protagonists, one male and the other female. In order to draw more well-rounded conclusions about how gender influences deceit in Alger's work, it is important to briefly examine Alger's novel that examines both a male and female protagonist.

The first chapter, aptly titled "The Missing Heir," introduces the female protagonist, Florence Linden, her cousin Curtis Waring, and their uncle, John Linden. John Linden is reminiscing about his missing son, Harvey, and Waring immediately presents himself as the story's villain when the reader learns that he has his sights on inheriting his uncle's fortune. In characteristic fashion, Alger clues readers in on Waring's status as villain by describing him as dark and sinister: "He was a tall, dark-complexioned man, of perhaps thirty-five, with shifty, black eyes and thin lips, shaded by a dark mustache. It was not a face to trust" (2). To receive his uncle's inheritance, he needs to ensure that his lost cousin never resurfaces. Readers also learn that Waring is responsible for Harvey's disappearance. It is in Waring's best interest to marry his cousin Florence, as he stands entitled to more of their uncle's inheritance if he does. Florence, however, reminiscent of the frankness displayed by Ms. Blagden in *The Disagreeable Woman*, boldly dismisses her uncle's wishes for her to marry Waring, regularly declaring that she will not marry someone she does not love. She opts to be banished from her uncle's home and disentitled from his fortune in order to evade marrying Waring. In this

sense, the plot works much like that of domestic fiction or Gothic tales that focus on a heroine at the mercy of nefarious relatives.

Tim Bolton, a former employee of Linden's, was paid by Waring to kidnap Harvey fourteen years ago. As soon as Florence needs assistance—after all she cannot be expected to “brave the world,” as the title suggests, alone as a girl—she conveniently meets Dodger, who is actually Linden's son Harvey. Florence meets Dodger when she intervenes while he is in the act of stealing Linden's will under Bolton's direction. Because of Florence's immediate influence, Dodger vows to become a model boy and, of course, sets his sights on respectability. Florence helps to educate and refine Dodger, while Dodger acts as protector for Florence—Alger does not diverge from his customary gender roles in this novel. Curtis Waring plots, schemes, lies, and deceives in the way Alger con artists always do, and is ultimately found out. Dodger, the novel's clear hero, experiences a series of unlucky circumstances before meeting his benefactor, Randolph Leslie, who helps to provide his lucky break. At the novel's conclusion, Dodger is returned to his father and his inheritance is reinstated, Florence is welcomed back by her uncle and will presumably marry Dodger in the future, and Waring is banished to a different city and loses his entitlement to his uncle's fortune.

Despite having two protagonists, the Alger formula is much the same. The hero, Dodger, has been wronged, and the story is built upon following his journey of being reunited with his wealthy father. He encounters hardship alongside lucky breaks (including the chance meeting with a well-to-do benefactor, Randolph Leslie), and all of his misfortune is due to the villain's schemes—just like in any other Alger tale. Dodger displays his only dishonest tendencies when he breaks into Linden's home in order to

steal his will. Florence catches him in the act, asks him if he is a thief, and he admits he is. She asks, “Why don’t you earn your living by honest means?” and he tells her that he cannot because he “must obey orders” (36). Dodger is further persuaded by Florence’s desire for him to reform when she says, “Oh, I wish I could persuade you to give up this bad life . . . and become honest” (37). Dodger’s propensity for goodness is confirmed when Florence mentions that he has “a good face . . . [and he is] meant to be good and honest” (37). By the end of the third chapter, Dodger vows to abandon his deceitful ways, and, instead, seeks “bein’ respectable, and growin’ up to be somebody” (41). Just like the classic Alger hero, Dodger realizes he must give up lying and deceit in order to achieve respectability. Dodger is eighteen years old at the time he first encounters Florence, and on the cusp of adulthood. An example of the confidence boy concept outlined in Chapter Two, Dodger is able to reform before evolving into a confidence man who is beyond redemption. The markings of Dodger’s transformation are visible when he quickly begins altering his appearance. Soon after meeting Florence, he begins keeping his face clean and wears more presentable clothing. He also begins to look “quite respectable,” because of his now observable “bright eyes” and “frank and handsome face” that were somehow previously overlooked (58). Alger positions Dodger as the clear hero, and concludes his story by noting that he achieves respectability. The story’s villain, Waring, is banished from the city like all other malicious villains. Tim Bolton, like similar Alger characters from other stories, is given the opportunity to improve because he was only deceitful due to his unfortunate life circumstances. The narrator regularly emphasizes that Bolton is “not so bad” when stressing that he refuses to cause physical harm to his charge.

Similarly, as the above summary suggests, Florence's happy ending mirrors that of the other female protagonists discussed in Chapter Three. After being disowned by her uncle, she begins her journey by having to pave her own way—working as a governess and a brief stint with sewing—only to receive the traditional and socially accepted outcome at the end, when it is implied that she will soon marry Dodger. In fact, the only statement about Florence's outcome is that “it is possible that [she] may marry a cousin, after all” (296). She also begins the story as an assertive girl who refuses to conform to her uncle's demands for her marriage to Waring, bringing to mind the determined nature of Ms. Blagden in *The Disagreeable Woman*. Florence begins as the girl who declares, “I can protect myself” (8), only to become dependent on Dodger's protection as she conforms to traditional roles. However, Florence seems to be able to easily take care of herself while Dodger is away in California, and, at the beginning of the story, she acts as a benefactor figure for him, encouraging him to give up his lifestyle in favor of one that will lead to respectability. Like Ms. Blagden, Florence is seemingly emblematic of the “new woman” at the story's opening, but softens and loses her independence once Dodger is firmly on his path toward respectability. Once Dodger emerges as the story's hero, Florence's character shifts. The two protagonists experience similar paths until the conclusion, where the gender roles are re-inscribed. Dodger's outcome is respectability, as it is for all Alger heroes; Florence's outcome is (eventual) marriage and relying on another's inheritance (Dodger's), just as the female protagonists discussed in Chapter Three do. *Adrift in New York*, although it has two protagonists, differs little from the other Alger stories discussed in this dissertation: boys become respectable while girls transform into the domesticated women society expects. Both boys and girls conform to

standard roles. *Adrift in New York* also showcases the deceptive aspect of the upward mobility that Alger's female characters experience, especially when they are portrayed as strong and independent at the story's onset. Florence is no different—she simply conforms by the story's end.

Future Directions

As my brief exploration of *Adrift in New York* suggests, there are countless versions of the same Alger formula at work within his numerous stories. Because Alger composed over one hundred novels, the daunting task of examining how deceit functions within all of them verges on impossible. Future research might explore the role of deceit in other novels, particularly those that do not have an urban setting. Alger's formula operates most famously in New York City, the backdrop for his *Ragged Dick* series and others. However, Alger also tends to use the same formula when his characters go west in his *Pacific Series*, as well as rural settings in novels such as *Luck and Pluck: Or, John Oakley's Inheritance* and *Struggling Upward: Or Luke Larkin's Luck*. Similarly, as noted in Chapter One, Alger composed biographies of non-fictional individuals who grew up outside of the city, but only those stories he could tell using a rags-to-riches theme.

Additional explorations might consider how *Marie Bertrand; or, The Felon's Daughter* works with the Alger formula. It is one of very few Alger stories that was not published in novel form, and was not readily available at the time of my research. Stories like *Marie Bertrand*, alongside the Alger novels featuring female protagonists, could potentially be further developed in light of more recent gender studies scholarship.

Another important area for continued exploration is the ways in which confidence boys function in the literature of other nineteenth century authors—are all confidence boys permitted the option of reformation in order to become respectable rather than continuing to descend into con man territory as they near adulthood? In *Little Men* and *Jo's Boys*, Louisa May Alcott describes several con boys who develop into honest and respectable men, though her formula does not require financial success as Alger's does. Mark Twain's famous Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn are more ambiguous; both characters certainly fit the con-boy role, but Twain leaves their adult lives unwritten. A longer version of this project might explore interesting connections to other writers.

In addition to exposing the deceit at the heart of the Alger formula, this study emphasizes the important space that Horatio Alger's tales occupy. His tales, despite their extremely formulaic nature, have had a momentous impact on nineteenth-century literature and American literature as a whole. Alger's stories help to define and mobilize the notion of the American Dream, a term that permeates the nineteenth and twentieth century culture and continues to be an important topic today.

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