

“A Vision of Love and Luxury”

The Commercialization of Nineteenth-Century American Weddings

Barbara Penner

This article traces the commercialization of weddings in the second half of the nineteenth century. During this period, jewelers and silverware manufacturers recognized the possibilities of the bridal trade. They began to offer special bridal goods and services; they addressed themselves specifically to bridal couples and to those in search of presents for them; and they sought to influence the practices surrounding fashionable weddings in order to expand demand. Fancy bridal gift giving was further justified by a new sentimental attachment to goods among the middle to upper classes, whose fetishistic rhetoric remains a feature of wedding advertising today.

IN “THE WEDDING Merchants,” a review published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 2001, Caitlin Flanagan analyzes the recent popularity of white weddings. With a mix of amusement and wonder, she notes that today’s weddings, involving “flocks” of attendants and hundreds of guests, now regularly cost as much as the down payment on a house. Considering these extravaganzas, she asks, “How did we get here?” Picking through twelve contemporary publications, Flanagan identifies one clear culprit behind the change—the “standing army of professionals” in the wedding industry who are the chief beneficiaries of these rising costs and expectations.¹

In most respects, Flanagan’s analysis is clear-sighted and sharp. She quickly observes, for instance, that what typically passes for “tradition” in American wedding services is actually a freely blended cocktail of traditions from other cultures

Barbara Penner is Lecturer in architectural history at the Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London.

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¹ Caitlin Flanagan, “The Wedding Merchants,” *Atlantic Monthly* (February 2001): 112–18.

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and “bolts of pure invention.” Although she does not use the term, her identification of the modern, innovative, but seemingly timeless nature of wedding practices corresponds perfectly with the definition of an “invented tradition.”² And, as Flanagan would no doubt agree, with the exception of those surrounding Christmas, the most successful and resilient invented traditions in society today are those surrounding marriage. The “white wedding” is now ubiquitous, buttressed by a spectacular list of symbolic objects and customary practices that include wedding rings, cakes, gowns, flowers, honeymoons, and gift giving.

Journalists, critics, and academics are paying increased attention to the business of marriage, now estimated to be worth \$50 billion a year in America and generally described as “recession-proof.” Their efforts have been important in terms of demystifying the contemporary wedding industry. Some—most notably works by Ellen Rothman, Cele C. Otnes, Elizabeth Pleck, and Vicki Jo Howard—have also done much to contextualize the growth of the wedding.³ But, with

² Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 1.

³ Condé Nast Bridal Infobank, American Wedding Study, 2002, as cited in Cele C. Otnes and Elizabeth H. Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams: The Allure of the Lavish Wedding* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), p. 2. See, for example,

few exceptions, historical surveys of wedding practices tend to serve as a backdrop for what is seen as the real story—the lavish wedding’s democratization and commercialization in the period between the 1930s and the 1960s.

To fully answer Flanagan’s question, “How did we get here?” I propose that a closer look at the second half of the nineteenth century is merited, as it was during this period that the first chapter on the commercialization of the wedding unfolded. Of course, Leigh Eric Schmidt points out that excessive spending, or what Thorstein Veblen termed “conspicuously wasteful expenditure,” has always characterized celebrations—“A common feature of festivity is to overindulge, to eat, drink, or spend to excess, lavishly to use up resources otherwise diligently saved.”⁴ Yet in the second half of the 1800s, the tradition of gift giving and excessive celebration that customarily accompanied marriage began to be yoked by business to produce a powerful alliance between weddings and the growing market economy. Urban commercial establishments, particularly jewelers and silverware manufacturers and retailers, catered to and further stimulated the demand for costly presents, which suggests that they had identified the importance and potential of bridal consumers by this period.

The most convincing testimonials about the commercialization of weddings come from nineteenth-century commentators themselves who criticized the increasing amount of publicity that attended many weddings and the emphasis being placed on “externals” such as rings, gowns, flowers, and

Jaclyn Geller, *Here Comes the Bride: Women, Weddings, and the Marriage Mystique* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2001); and Chrys Ingraham, *White Weddings: Romancing Heterosexuality in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), esp. chap. 2; Ellen K. Rothman, *Hands and Hearts: A History of Courtship in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), pp. 165–74; Otnes and Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams*; Elizabeth Pleck, *Celebrating the Family: Ethnicity, Consumer Culture, and Family Rituals* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), chap. 10; and Vicki Jo Howard, “American Weddings: Gender, Consumption, and the Business of Brides” (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas, 2000).

⁴ Howard skillfully covers commercialization in “American Weddings,” although her focus on the emergence of the bridal industry leads her to draw primarily on turn-of-the-century examples rather than those between the 1850s and the 1880s, as I will do here; Howard, “American Weddings,” esp. chap. 1. Vicki Jo Howard, “‘The Evil of Elaborate and Showy Weddings’: Taste, Power, and Consumption at the Turn of the Twentieth Century,” in *Mickle Street Review* 14 (Summer 2001), <http://www.micklestreet.rutgers.edu/archive/> (accessed September 2004). Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899; repr., New York: Dover Publications, 1994), p. 51. Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 8.

gifts. Rather than being a unifying agent or the sign of a healthy republic, the celebration of nuptials was seen by commentators as being irreversibly transformed into a vehicle for business interests, class aspiration, and fashion. In the same way that significant events on the Christian calendar were becoming commodified—what Veblen calls “devout consumption”—so too was romance, both in its secular (St. Valentine’s Day) and its sanctified (matrimony) forms.⁵ Throughout the century, commentators devised tactics to counteract or contain the wedding’s materialism; however, as we will see, these too were easily co-opted or absorbed back into logic of the market.

A Nineteenth-Century Wedding

Since the 1830s and 1840s, wedding ceremonies had been undergoing a process of revision and transformation. There were still no hard and fast rules as to how weddings should be celebrated, as their size, formality, and expense ultimately depended upon the religion, social status, and taste of the families involved. Some couples invited a small number of guests to witness their marriage, others, several hundred; some had no bridesmaids, others had twelve; and some couples were married in the bride’s home, others in a church. Since the wedding of Queen Victoria in 1840, the white wedding had been growing in popularity among fashionable Protestants, but brides from dissenting religious denominations, immigrants, rural inhabitants, and the less-well-to-do still wed in color. Despite the lack of any singular practice, the average midcentury wedding was both more choreographed and more expensive than the informal celebrations of previous generations that were held in the bride’s parents’ parlor with a handful of witnesses, proceeded by a meal and perhaps a dance.⁶

In order to get a sense of the elaboration of weddings, let us begin by imagining an upper-middle-class wedding of the 1870s, using evidence provided by etiquette manuals, newspaper accounts,

⁵ Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class*, pp. 187–88.

⁶ In the Kate S. Harris fabric scrapbooks, which contain wedding dress swatches from 1819 to 1905, just 3 of the 57 swatches are white; the rest range from chocolate brown to “Ashes of Roses” to green, plaid to stripes; Kate S. Harris fabric scrapbooks, Collection 50, Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera, Winterthur Library. See also Catherine S. Zimmerman, *A Pictorial History of American Bridal Gowns* (New York: Arbor House, 1986), pp. 41–74.

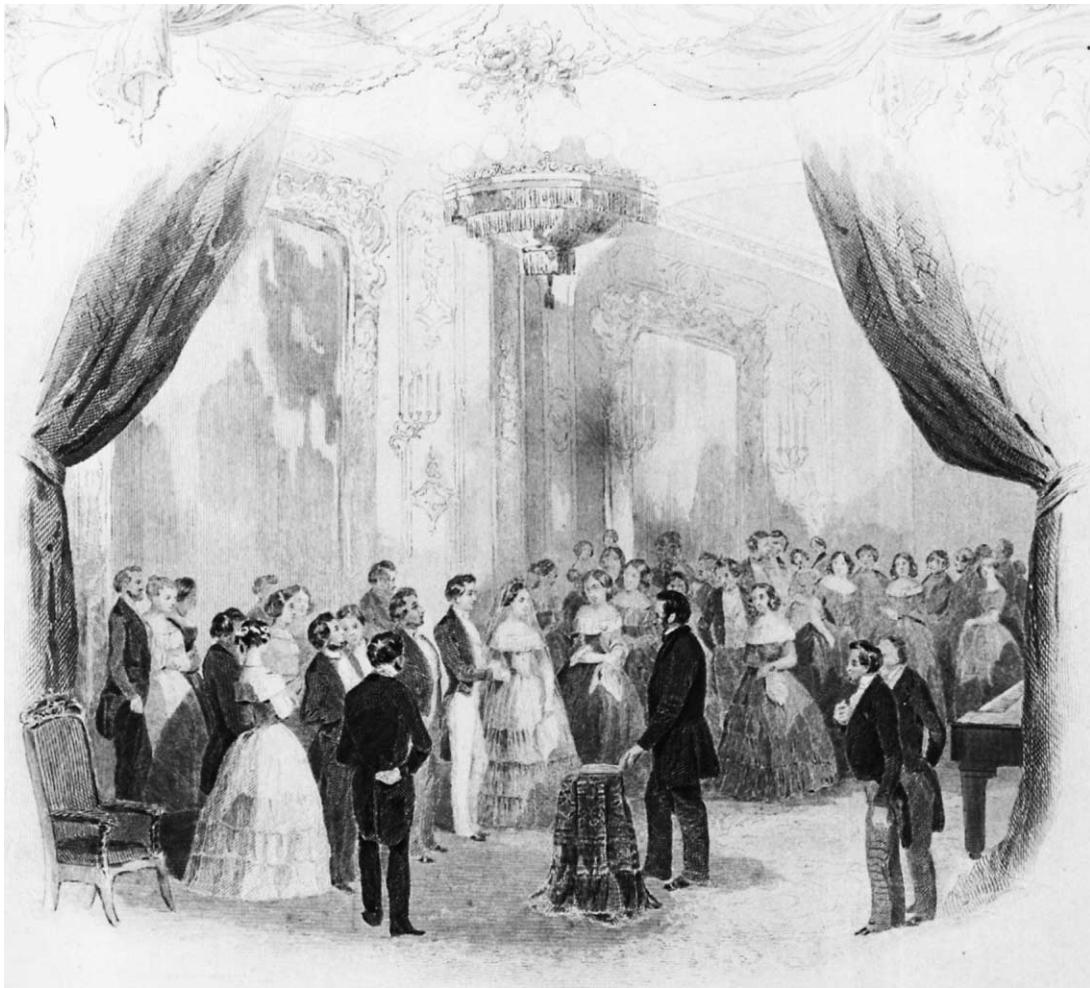


Fig. 1. Detail from a marriage certificate, 1853. (93x13, Joseph Downs Collection, Winterthur Library.)

and existing histories. This wedding is not meant to be representative of all weddings—etiquette changed too quickly and ceremonies were too diverse for that—but it does show what a fashionable wedding might have been at that time. It will be a church wedding, although it was acceptable for brides to get married in their parents' front parlor or even in splendid public rooms rented in a hotel (fig. 1). It will also be a white wedding, although this practice was not as universal as it would later become.⁷ Engraved wedding invita-

tions have been sent out to guests several weeks ago, and a rehearsal has just taken place to ensure that all key figures know their positions and roles.

At the appointed day and hour (summer, 11 o'clock), the bride is brought to the church by her parents in their carriage. She is dressed in an expensive white gown, with a veil and an orange-blossom wreath. The groom, in morning dress, arrives separately in his own carriage. The group assembles in the vestry. At a signal, organ music fills the church and, in step to the music, the ushers walk up the aisle two-by-two, followed by the groom; at the altar steps, the ushers fall back to the right, leaving the groom standing alone,

⁷ In particular, this wedding is re-created with reference to the following sources: Clara de Chatelain, *Bridal Etiquette: A Sensible Guide to the Etiquette and Observances of the Marriage Ceremonies* (New York: Dick and Fitzgerald, ca. 1870); Eliza B. Duffey, *The Ladies' and Gentlemen's Etiquette: A Complete Manual of the Manners and Dress of American Society* (Philadelphia: Porter and Coates, 1877); Abby Buchanan Longstreet, *Social Etiquette of New York* (1878; repr., New York: D. Appleton, 1883); Mrs. H. O. Ward [Clara Jessop Moore], *Sensible Etiquette of the Best Society: Customs, Manners, Morals, and Home*

Culture, 20th rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Porter and Coates, 1878); Pleck, *Celebrating the Family*, pp. 206–16; and Rothman, *Hands and Hearts*, pp. 165–74.



Fig. 2. Wedding of Duncan Phyfe Whitlock showing bridal party in parlor with wedding cake, late 1850s. (99x12.3, Joseph Downs Collection, Winterthur Library.)

looking “intently” down the aisle for his bride.⁸ Next come the bridesmaids two-by-two, clad in white and carrying orange-blossom bouquets; at the altar steps, they fall back to positions on the left. Then the bride enters the nave on the arm of her father, who escorts her up the aisle. At the altar step, the bride’s father falls back and the groom steps forward, takes the bride by the right hand, and conducts her forward to the decorated altar. The marriage service is performed and a ring is placed upon the bride’s finger. After being congratulated by the clergyman, the new couple walk arm-in-arm down the aisle.

⁸ This detail—that the groom should turn to stare down the aisle at his bride-to-be—was insisted upon by several etiquette writers, and Ward specified that the groom should stare “intently,” possibly to show his eagerness; Ward, *Sensible Etiquette*, p. 340; Longstreet, *Social Etiquette of New York*, p. 137.

Because the couple has had an early ceremony, they celebrate with a wedding breakfast at the house of the bride’s father. The newlyweds, now in the same carriage, arrive at the bride’s father’s house. The ushers are already there, waiting to escort in and present the fifty guests to the new couple and their parents. A variety of foods and refreshments are served *en buffet*, but the climax of the meal is the presentation of the white wedding cake (fig. 2). The bride cuts the first slice, and toasts are then given to the health of the bride and groom. While guests inspect the presents and trousseau, the bride slips away followed by her bridesmaids, who help her put on a traveling dress. Reunited in the entrance hall, the couple say their good-byes to their parents and close friends and take their leave in a hail of rice. Their carriage takes them to the nearest railway station to begin a

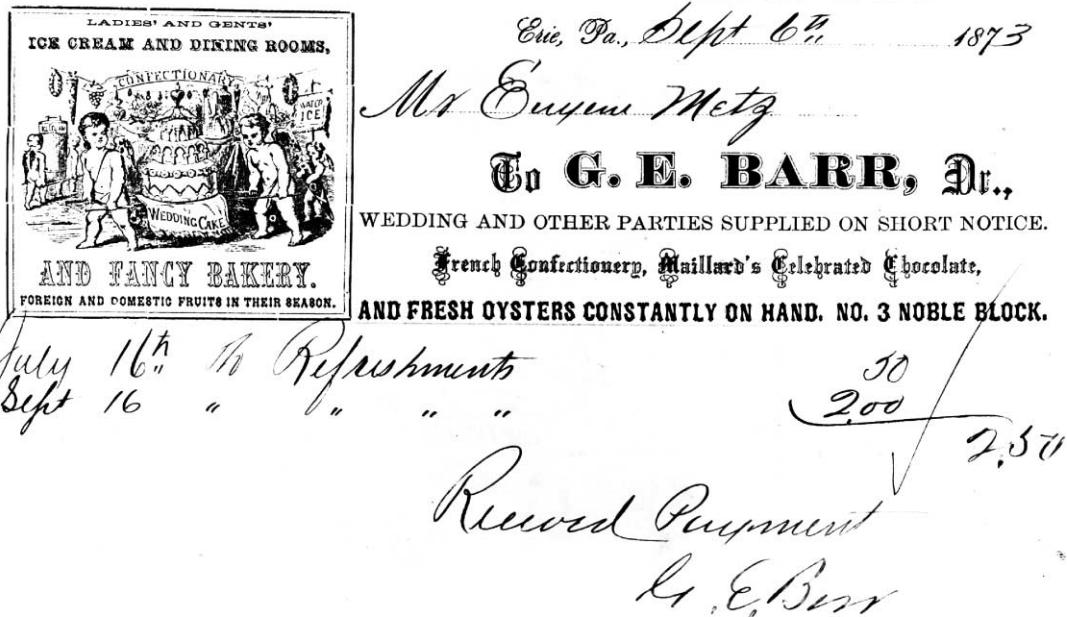


Fig. 3. Billhead for G. E. Barr, caterer, 1873. (99x3.9, Joseph Downs Collection, Winterthur Library.)

monthlong bridal tour in the northeastern United States and Canada.⁹

Commercialization

While the wedding ceremony just described might seem unobjectionable—it was fancy but by no means excessive—almost every detail of it represented some kind of commercial transaction; behind the scenes, engravers, jewelers, dry-goods merchants, florists, confectioners, and caterers, and perhaps a photographer, helped to bring the show to pass (fig. 3). Indeed, merchants spent considerable effort ensuring that their services became an integral part of marriage between the 1850s and the 1870s. They began promoting the suitability of their wares as wedding presents in newspapers and catalogues as well as offering special bridal products to the public, such as wedding cards and ready-made trousseaux.

As they began to infiltrate the celebrations surrounding marriage, merchants contributed in no

small way to raising the expectations and expenditures associated with them. In turn, the way in which wedding ceremonies were being caught up in commerce worried a range of social commentators, including members of the clergy, women's rights and social purity advocates, etiquette writers, and prominent members of the middlebrow press, who believed that, like the domestic realm itself, marriage needed to be kept separate from the workings of the market. Not only did lavish weddings go against the principles of sound domestic economy—although this was perhaps their most obnoxious feature—but they also launched a couple's married life in a whirl of excitement, an overstimulated delusional state that would leave them ill-prepared for the realities or responsibilities of the conjugal relationship.

Their suspicions of the commercial trappings of love led commentators to decry extravagant wedding ceremonies in the strongest possible terms. In Lydia Sigourney's lyrical poem *Whisper to a Bride*, an angel advises the bride-to-be on the necessity of simple wedding apparel: "O Bride! be not studious to deck thyself in costly array. Trouble not thine heart about the silks of the merchants, or the gems of the lapidary, or the fashions of the tire-woman, or the pride of gorgeous apparel.... For it is a sacred festival, and around the pure bride, there is ever a mantle of dignity, that needs no tinsel or trappings, but is debased thereby. The highest

⁹ For histories of the wedding cake, see Simon Charsley, *Wedding Cakes and Cultural History* (London: Routledge, 1992); and Wendy A. Woloson, *Refined Tastes: Sugar, Confectionery, and Consumers in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), pp. 168–78. For more on the fashionable bridal tour, see Barbara Penner, "Alone at Last: Honeymooning in America, 1820–1890" (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 2004).

guest at the marriage-rite, is the being who hath ordained it. . . . Therefore wrap thyself in purity." As Sigourney makes clear, the offense of "tinsel or trappings" was that they stripped weddings of their sacred dimension, reducing them to vulgar and worldly public spectacles. As proof, commentators repeatedly pointed to the crowds that came to the wedding ceremony not out of the desire to wish the young couple well but out of a desire to inspect the bride and her dress. (One tongue-in-cheek article stated that the inspection extended to the bride's stockings.) In fact, the obsession with viewing the bride's gown and trousseau, sometimes including lingerie and the exhibition of bridal gifts, was often cited as one of the most odious features of the modern way of wedding.¹⁰ Openly revolving around the display and inspection of material goods, the practice appeared to treat marriage as a mere pecuniary transaction and made a mockery of the ideal of "true love."

Moral reformers and etiquette writers were certainly not exaggerating when they claimed bridal gift giving had grown more pervasive and expensive by this time. By the 1850s an elite couple could expect to receive gifts totaling \$25,000 (roughly \$500,000 today) from their invited guests. On average, an upper-middle- to upper-class couple wed- ding in the postbellum period may receive more than 100 presents: in 1874, when Mary Pauline Foster married Col. Henry Algernon du Pont, they received a total of 128; in 1887, upon her marriage to Alfred William Carr in Boston, Adelaide Peabody Kinsley collected about 185; and in 1892, when Amy Aldis wed Richards Merry Bradley in Vermont, they received 115.¹¹

Perhaps the most striking thing about wedding gifts is that so many were for the bride's pleasure or adornment alone. Gifts were always to be sent

¹⁰ Lydia Sigourney, *Whisper to a Bride* (Hartford, Conn.: H. S. Parsons, 1850), pp. 10–11; simplicity in wedding apparel is similarly extolled in "Chit-Chat Trousseau," *Godey's Lady's Book* 41 (September 1850): 190–91. On inspecting stockings, see "Mrs. Typeset's Diary," *Harper's Bazaar* 1, no. 9 (December 28, 1867): 135; [George William Curtis], "Editor's Easy Chair: Weddings and Newspapers," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 51, no. 303 (August 1875): 448–49.

¹¹ On wedding gift totals, see *New York Mirror* as quoted in "Bridal Presents," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 28, 1855, p. 2. Suzanne Marie Regnier, "What Do You Suggest for a Present?: Flatware as Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Wedding Gifts" (master's thesis, University of Delaware, 1999), app. A; Adelaide Peabody Kinsley, "List of Wedding Gifts," 1887–89, Document 1219, Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera, Winterthur Library; Amy Aldis Bradley, "List of Wedding Presents," 1892, Bradley Family Papers, MC 424, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College.

straight to the bride, and certain pieces, such as silverware or linens, were to be engraved with her family name or initials. In addition to the jewelry customarily given by the groom to his future wife, Clara de Chatelain's *Bridal Etiquette* deemed the following items appropriate for the bride—"a watch, a couple of shawls, fans, a smelling bottle, or any elegant article for the toilet or boudoir table, such as an ornamental candlestick, a desk of inlaid wood, or a fanciful standish."¹² Existing wed- ding gift lists confirm the popularity of the pres- ents de Chatelain recommended. While in the Foster-du Pont wedding list, gifts such as a Shaker chair and an oil painting of chickens seemed intended for the household, many others, includ- ing a black lace parasol, a pink corset, and a gold scarab bracelet, were solely for the bride. Simi- larly, although Adelaide Kinsey received some goods for the home, including a Turkish rug and two clocks, a large number of gifts—four fans, a Shetland shawl, and a "charming" shell hairpin—were for her exclusively.

Etiquette writer Abby Buchanan Longstreet pro- vided one explanation for such ornamental gift giving. It was in bad form, she told readers, to send "gifts of utility" such as linens or furnishings to a couple, as it cast aspersions on the bride's family's ability to equip her with a trousseau or basic items for housekeeping. To avoid giving offense, Long- street advised, readers should give books, bric-a-brac, and embroideries, unless they were a close relative, baptismal sponsor, or lifelong friend of the bride "near and dear" enough to know her needs. What this advice suggests is that many items purchased as "wedding" gifts—Foster's pink corset, Kinsey's Shetland shawl, or Bradley's tablecloths and napkins—more properly belonged to the bride's personal or household trousseau. Yet Longstreet's need to explain how trousseau and wedding gifts differed indicates that guests themselves did not always recognize or respect the distinction.¹³

Regardless of how these gifts were categorized, the focus on the bride must be seen as a reflection of the wife's greater social, legal, and economic stake in marriage. A bride's life changed more dramatically than a groom's after the wedding; personally she found herself suddenly in charge of a household with the prospect of children on the

¹² Abby Buchanan Longstreet, *Weddings: Formal and Informal* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1891), p. 22. De Chatelain, *Bridal Etiquette*, p. 13.

¹³ Longstreet, *Weddings*, p. 23. I have borrowed the term *household trousseau* from Howard, "American Weddings," p. 59.

horizon, and legally her identity became covered over by his. Significantly, the only trace of her girlhood identity was to be found within the trousseau of wedding gifts that bore her maiden name or initials. Although this marking of goods can be seen as celebratory—commemorating the bride's passage to wifehood—it was also reassuring, as it promised that some valuables would remain in the wife's possession in the event of separation from her husband or his death. We might equally argue, however, that it was appropriate that brides be sent conspicuously wasteful presents in the sense that it was they who in their imminent roles as wives were destined to become the primary "ceremonial consumer of goods" in the home.¹⁴

As well as being bridal-centric, the listed wedding gifts were quite varied. The gift of money, usually in the form of checks, was ubiquitous. No doubt, the more substantial of these gifts were intended to help the new couple set up house, for families still did contribute to the cost of buying land or a house for the couple when they were able. But, in addition to money, bridal gift giving now included an array of smaller items too: apostle spoons, clocks, card receivers, lamps, toilet sets, jewel stands, scissors, statuary, vases, paintings, engravings, picture frames, photograph stands, inkstands, wall baskets, prayer books, leather trunks, mats, books, flowers, silver flatware, and glass and china hollowware. Gilded and handsomely bound gift books full of pithy sayings, sentimental poetry, and advice for the bride were also popular.¹⁵

Businesses in urban centers were quick to recognize and encourage this demand, consciously pursuing trousseau-buying and gift-giving customers. Beginning in the 1850s, dry-goods retailers such as A. T. Stewart's and Genin's Bazaar in New York City advertised their establishments as suitable places to equip oneself with a wedding trousseau (fig. 4). By the 1870s department stores such as Lord & Taylor and, later, Bloomingdale's sold complete sets of trousseau items to brides, along with related items from wreaths to rings. For the convenience of those entitled to give "gifts of utility," some manufacturers began to sell full sets of kitchen articles for first-time housekeepers. In their 1857 catalogue, Peterson's Manufactory and Ware

¹⁴ Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class*, p. 50; see also Rothman, *Hands and Hearts*, p. 168.

¹⁵ For examples of books, see *The Bridal Wreath: A Wedding Souvenir* (Boston: W. J. Reynolds, 1848); T. S. Arthur, ed., *Orange Blossoms: A Gift Book* (London: Knight and Son, 1857); and William Landels, *The Marriage Ring: A Gift-Book for the Newly-Married and for Those Contemplating Marriage* (London: Cassell, 1883).

GENIN'S BAZAAR.
Ladies' and Children's Outfitting Ware,
513 BROADWAY.
WEDDING TRousseau,

INCLUDING

Dresses, Laces and Under-Linen,

Ready Made and Made to Order of the most exquisite workmanship.

DRESSMAKING.

Ladies can have their own materials made by the
Modistes of the Bazaar at a few hours' notice.

Infants' Wardrobes and Mothers' Outfits,
including every necessary article for the Nursery and
Morning Wear.

Breakfast Robes,

**Robes à Chambre,
MISSES' DRESSES AND UNDERLINEN,
ALL AT MODERATE PRICES.**

GENIN'S BAZAAR,
2030 513 Broadway, under St. Nicholas Hotel.

Fig. 4. Advertisement for Genin's Bazaar. From *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* 8, no. 203 (October 22, 1859).

Room offered sets priced from \$25 to \$150 including such diverse items as lemon squeezers, furniture polish, basting spoons, beef or cabbage cutters, ice breakers, apple roasters, and wine coolers. By the 1880s, makers of domestic appliances such as sewing machines also began to target the bridal market.¹⁶ One memorable 1880s advertisement for Domestic Sewing Machine depicted a bride in full regalia being shown a sewing machine by her husband (fig. 5). By placing it prominently in the foreground and relegating a silver urn to the background, the advertisement presented the modern

¹⁶ Caroline Rennoles Milbank, "Ahead of the World": New York City Fashion," in Catherine Hoover and John K. Howat, eds., *Art and the Empire City: New York, 1825–1861* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art; distributed by Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 245–46, n. 10. "Ladies' Trousseau for \$230," advertisement for Lord and Taylor in *Godey's Lady's Book* 80, no. 476 (February 1870): 210; and Bloomingdale Brothers, *Bloomingdale's Illustrated 1886 Catalog* (1886; repr., New York: Dover Publications, 1988), pp. 4, 29, 30, 101, 132. Howard notes that mail-order catalogues began selling wedding and engagement rings from the 1890s on; Vicki Jo Howard, "A 'Real Man's Ring': Gender and the Invention of Tradition," in *Journal of Social History* 36, no. 4 (2003): 836–37. Peterson's Manufactory and Ware Room, "List of Kitchen Articles," *Catalogue of House Furnishing Goods* (Privately printed, 1857), pp. 64–66.



Fig. 5. Advertisement for Domestic Sewing Machine, 1882. (Library of Congress.)

sewing machine as being more desirable than such traditional wedding gifts.

The Rage for Silverware

The earliest and most attentive wooers of the bridal business, however, were jewelers and silverware firms, including Reed & Barton; Ball, Black, and Company; and, of course, Tiffany and Company. From the 1850s onward, one can find instances in which they advertised their wares as excellent bridal gifts, although this was not yet done in a consistent way (fig. 6). Rather, these establishments seemed to be testing the waters, working out ways in which they could appeal to specific sorts of customers and expand their sales. One particularly sophisticated attempt was made by Hartford-based importers and jewelers T. Steele and Son, who produced a beautiful catalogue, *What Shall I Buy as a Present?* in 1877. It assured customers that "OUR stock of SOLID SILVER WARE, SILVER PLATED WARE, CLOCKS, and BRONZES, VIENNESE GILT WARE, FANCY GOODS, etc., offers to our citizens an unparalleled display, from which

REED & BARTON,

MANUFACTURERS OF FINE

SILVER-PLATED Table-Ware.

Their products embrace every variety of TABLE WARE, such as

Dinner,
Tea and
Water Sets,
Epergnes,
Cake and
Fruit Stands,
Ice Pitchers,
Knives,
Forks, and
Spoons,
Etc.

Also a large variety
of Ornamental Pieces
and Works of Art appropriate for Bridal
and other presents.

SALESROOMS:
686 Broadway, N. Y.
FACTORIES:
TAUNTON, Mass.

Fig. 6. Advertisement for Reed & Barton. From *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* 44, no. 1122 (March 31, 1877).

to select 'BRIDAL PRESENTS,' and as the articles vary in price from fifty cents up, every purse and taste can be suited in this collection." The catalogue appeared to tap into an anxiety people felt over selecting an appropriate wedding gift. It eliminated guesswork by listing a choice of presents at set prices that rose incrementally—\$0.50 bought one silver-plated bell or pickle spoon; \$10.00, a solid silver tea bell or silver-plated sardine box; \$35.00, a silver goblet. For customers with \$100 to \$1,000 to spend, T. Steele and Son announced it was "making (to order) a specialty of . . . LEATHER TRUNKS of *Silverware* for Wedding Presents." Containing anywhere from one to five drawers, these trunks contained complete sets of silverware, literally every piece a fashionable young couple would need to begin formal entertaining at a new home.¹⁷

¹⁷ In 1882 Mrs. M. L. Rayne noted that the announcement of a wedding made friends "groan in despair" because the question of a gift "tortures and vexes our souls" (Mrs. Rayne, *Gems of Department*, as quoted in Howard, "American Weddings," p. 49). T. Steele and Son, *What Shall I Buy as a Present?: A Manual* (Hartford, Conn.: T. Steele and Son, 1877), p. 36.



Fig. 7. Kidney and Johnson, New York, silver ladle in “Neptune Pattern, 12,” engraved wedding gift, ca. 1870. (Museum of the City of New York; Gift of Adele S. Osherson, 97.71.)

For the bride and groom themselves, the establishment also offered a variety of jewelry, although it emphasized that rings were its strength, and featured those made with diamonds. “A diamond ring, as an engagement or wedding gift,” stated the catalogue encouragingly, “can be produced at a cost very little exceeding jewelry made of gold alone.” Its promotion of diamond rings and wedding trunks of silverware, along with its confidential tone, suggests that T. Steele and Son’s catalogue was not responding to prevailing demand as much as trying to shape it, positioning itself not just as a provider of goods but as an arbiter, or perhaps educator, of fashion. This role was stressed in an 1875 article reprinted in the catalogue that credited the company’s longevity and growth to its use of “judicious advertising”; “new attractions,” such as T. Steele and Son’s new store; and its “cultivation of the best taste in all matters.”¹⁸

Given their attention to fashion, it is no accident that T. Steele and Son stressed silverware and silver-plated ware; it was the article that, in one form or another, most bridal couples began to receive in greatest abundance. On viewing a display of wedding gifts, etiquette writer Mrs. Sherwood noted: “The first thing which strikes the eye . . . is the predominance of silver-ware. Not only the coffee and tea sets, but the dinner sets and the whole furniture of the writing-table, and even brooms and brushes, are made with repoussé silver handles.” In particular, young couples received a staggering amount of silver flatware and hollowware: dozens, sometimes hundreds, of silver forks, knives,

and spoons; serving forks, fish knives, soup ladles, and cake-lifters; a wide assortment of cream and water pitchers; mustard and pepper pots; salt cellars; soup tureens; coffee and tea services; tea scoops and strainers; salad and ice cream bowls; olive, bon-bon, and cake dishes; sugar tongs; crumb scrapers; napkin rings; and candelabra and candlesticks (fig. 7). Despite the fact that the bride’s family and friends informally circulated information about preferred styles or pieces, gifts of silverware were often received in a diverse range of patterns and were frequently duplicated. Adelaide Peabody Kinsley, for example, was given five bon-bon tongs, five olive forks, numerous berry spoons, and dozens of coffee spoons and oyster forks.¹⁹

The new rage for silver was in part the result of a transformation of the domestic silver industry, as small artisanal silverware producers gave way to more modern, large-scale companies aimed at a national market. The latter, described by Charles L. Venable as “silversmith-entrepreneurs,” began to experiment with new methods of production, shop organization, and marketing from the 1840s onward. A few flourished as a result, so that by the 1860s there was “a consolidation of the industry in the hands of a few firms” in America, notably Reed and Barton in Taunton, Massachusetts; Gorham in Rhode Island; and Tiffany and Company in New

¹⁸ T. Steele and Son, *What Shall I Buy*, pp. 16–39, 49, 53; for other catalogues aimed at the wedding market, see Samuel Hunt and Sons, *Hunt’s Guide Book to Purchasers of Holiday, Wedding, and Anniversary Gifts* (Baltimore, n.d.); and Regnier, “What Do You Suggest,” app. C. T. Steele and Son, *What Shall I Buy*, p. 36.

¹⁹ Mrs. John Sherwood, *Manners and Social Usages* (1884; repr., New York: Harper and Brothers, 1897), p. 117. While some shops were keeping track of gifts informally by the turn of the century, proper gift registries were created by jewelers in the mid-1930s and then adopted by department stores; Barbara Tober, *The Bride: A Celebration* (Stamford, Conn.: Longmeadow Press, 1984), p. 78. Regina Blaszczyk notes that in the 1930s Lenox China and *Bride’s Magazine* also collaborated to set up a registry as a merchandising device; Regina Lee Blaszczyk, *Imagining Consumers: Design and Innovation from Wedgwood to Corning* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), p. 257. Kinsley, “List of Wedding Gifts.”

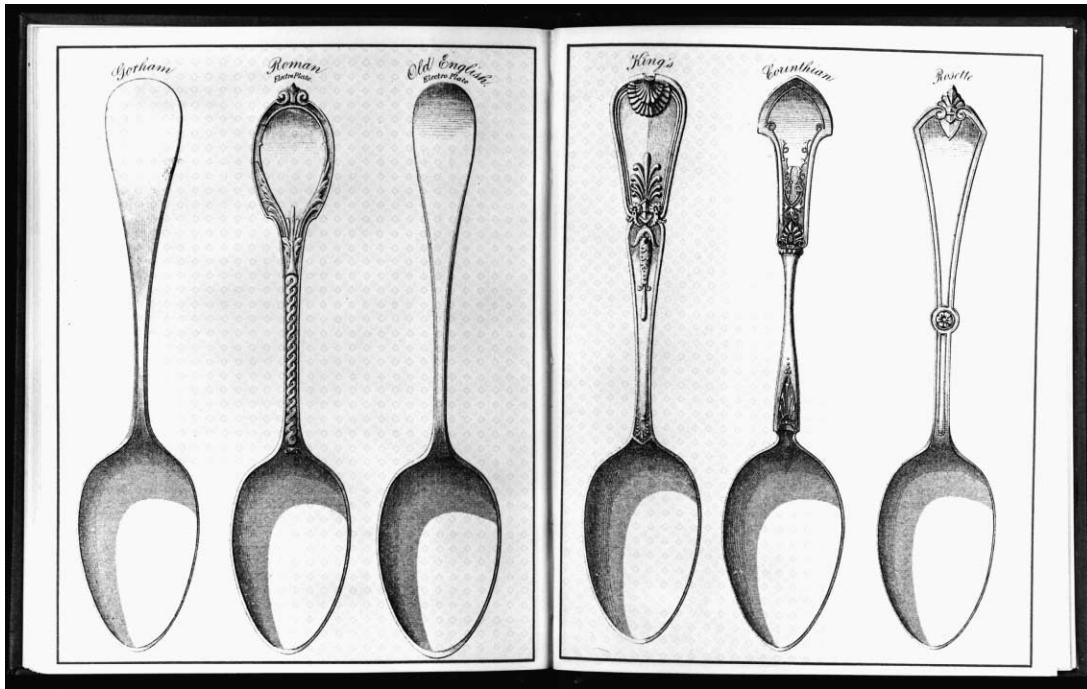


Fig. 8. Spoon patterns. From T. Steele and Son, *What Shall I Buy as a Present?: A Manual* (Hartford, Conn.: T. Steele and Son, 1877). (Winterthur Library.)

York.²⁰ These companies saw and nurtured demand for their products among the middle and upper classes, who were not only becoming wealthier but also dining in a more specialized manner.

The range of spoons available from T. Steele and Son in 1877 testifies to this specialization. One could now purchase spoons for salt, mustard, coffee, eggs, sugar, olives, tea, desserts, jellies, preserves, berries, vegetables, soup, gravy, nuts, salad, ice cream, and pap (fig. 8). The expanded list of goods reflected both the introduction of new foods to the American table (for example, salad and sardines) and the growing popularity of *service à la Russe*. Traditionally in America, dinners had featured one or two main courses in which dishes were set in the center of the table and guests served themselves. With *service à la Russe*, however, servants carved and served dishes at a sideboard, allowing the center of the table to be freed for large ornamental pieces such as dessert stands and centerpieces. As dining became more complex, with distinct soup, fish, meat, entrée, salad, and dessert courses, special eating and serving implements were developed for each.²¹

²⁰ Charles L. Venable, *Silver in America, 1840–1940: A Century of Splendor* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995), p. 22.

²¹ Louise Conway Belden, *The Festive Tradition: Table Decoration and Desserts in America, 1650–1900* (Winterthur, Del.: Henry

While these innovations helped to further increase the demand for silver, we should not forget it had long been a traditional bridal present. In the colonial era, however, pieces of solid silver had been an option only for the wealthiest of customers. Gerald Ward estimates that only the top 5 percent of the population owned silver. By the 1850s, it had become accessible to the middle classes, thanks to the drop in silver prices and the invention of electroplating. Silver had become so much more affordable that *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* boasted in 1868 that "there are few families among us so poor as not to have a few ounces of silver plate, and forlorn indeed must be the bride who does not receive upon her wedding-day some articles made of this beautiful metal." This claim was reiterated by *Scribner's Monthly*, which asserted that "hardly any comfortable young couple now begin housekeeping without a fair show of genuine table silver."²²

Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum; distributed by W. W. Norton, 1983), pp. 33–38.

²² Gerald W. R. Ward, "'A Handsome Cupboard of Plate': The Role of Silver in American Life," in Barbara McLean Ward and Gerald W. R. Ward, eds., *Silver in American Life: Selections from the Mabel Brady Garvan and Other Collections at Yale University* (Boston: D. R. Godine, 1979), pp. 34–35. James Parton, "Silver and Silver Plate," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 37, no. 220 (September 1868): 434; and "The Silver Age," *Scribner's Monthly* 9, no. 2 (December 1874): 198.

To see the economical advantage of silver plate, we can turn to the 1877 catalogue of Reed & Barton, a leader in America's electroplating field. This catalogue illustrates many electroplated items the manufactory produced as well as the variety of ordering options; pieces could be ordered individually or in sets, in a variety of sizes, styles, and finishes (items could be oxidized and gilded, for example, and dishes could be gold-lined). Focusing on some of the most frequently received items from the wedding gift lists—water pitchers and soup ladles—we see the wide range available. Shoppers looking for a water pitcher would have had twenty-three to choose from, varying in price from \$15.50 to \$24.00; and those seeking soup ladles could pay between \$45.00 and \$93.00 per dozen, depending upon the pattern and the amount of plating desired. For \$5.00 extra, Reed & Barton would put them in a gorgeous satin-lined case.²³

According to *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, these pieces cost approximately one-quarter of what their equivalent in solid silver would have. This savings, together with the greater selection of goods, may help explain why gift givers more often chose fancy or showstopping pieces, and brides found themselves deluged with bon-bon dishes, wine coolers, tea services, candelabra, and soup tureens. As Regina Blaszczyk has established, crystal was also an increasingly popular bridal gift in this period, and the proliferation of brilliant cut glassware and lustrous silverware together ensured that the display of presents was a visually spectacular affair.²⁴

The Exhibition of Presents

The display of presents had come into vogue in the 1850s, and, among the wealthier classes, it became common practice to set aside one room or apartment for this purpose. Presents were to be set on long cloth-covered tables and arranged to produce an impressive, "artistic" effect, according to Sherwood. Ecstatically, she described the set-up: "In opulent families each has sometimes given the young couple a silver dinner service and much silver besides, and the rooms of the bride's father's house look like a jeweller's shop.... All the magnificent ormolu ornaments for the chimney-piece,

handsome clocks and lamps, fans in large quantities, spoons, forks by the hundred, and of late years, the fine gilt ornaments, furniture, camel's-hair shawls, bracelets—are all piled up in most admired confusion." A card accompanied each present indicating its donor's name. These labels further sealed the resemblance between the display of bridal presents and the displays of goods at merchant showrooms, trade exhibitions, and world's fairs—a connection made explicit when Sherwood compared the parental home to a "jeweller's shop." Her comparison was a well-established and oft-used one by this time. In the mid-1850s, the *New York Mirror* characterized the display of presents at fashionable weddings as "equal to a jeweler's shop," while the *New York Times* complained it was akin to "a jeweler's shop or a fancy fair." An 1870 article by Rev. Henry Beecher on the display of gifts was pointedly titled "Wedding Bazaar."²⁵

Among other things, the persistent comparison with a jeweler's shop draws attention to both the elaboration of bridal gift giving and the changes that had begun to take place within American retail environments themselves. Although historians suggest that the widespread use of display by American retailers to stimulate consumer desire occurred in the last decades of the nineteenth century, it began much earlier in major urban centers across America.²⁶ Indeed, silverware manufacturers and retailers in the 1850s appeared well aware of the power of display to awaken consumer desire. During this period, it was not only improvements in their manufacturing and distribution capabilities that increased consumers' demand for silver, but also their adoption of shrewd marketing, advertising, and display techniques.

For the jewelry and silverware industries, the urban center of greatest importance was New York, where the biggest firms—Reed & Barton, Meriden Britannia, Gorham, and Tiffany and Company—

²⁵ Sherwood, *Manners and Social Usages*, pp. 125–26. "Bridal Presents," p. 2.; *New York Times* quoted in "Wedding Rites and Expenses," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 8, 1856, p. 2; and Henry Ward Beecher, "Wedding Bazaar," *Godey's Lady's Book* 80, no. 477 (March 1870): 295.

²⁶ Neil Harris, "The Drama of Consumer Desire," in Otto Mayr and Robert C. Post, eds., *Yankee Enterprise: The Rise of the American System of Manufactures* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1981), pp. 189, 192–93; William Leach, "Strategists of Display and the Production of Desire," in Simon Bronner, ed., *Consuming Visions: Accumulation and Display of Goods in America, 1880–1920* (New York: W. W. Norton for the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 1989), p. 100; and William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), pp. 15–150.

²³ Reed & Barton Catalog (n.p., 1877), Winterthur Library.

²⁴ Parton, "Silver and Silver Plate," p. 444. Blaszczyk, *Imagining Consumers*, pp. 47–49.



Fig. 9. Interior, T. Steele and Son, Hartford, Conn. From T. Steele and Son, *What Shall I Buy as a Present?: A Manual* (Hartford, Conn.: T. Steele and Son, 1877). (Winterthur Library.)

maintained showrooms. Charles L. Tiffany was one of the first to fully realize the promotional value of an elegant show space but the others soon caught on, and the competition to possess the most commodious and fashionable showrooms in New York forced most into a constant march north over the decades. These innovative metropolitan stores in turn influenced those in regional hubs, including Hartford; for example, T. Steele and Son stated that their new establishment's interior arrangements, including the glass showcases organized in "an oblong square" and along the walls, were influenced by "the latest New York and Boston plans" (fig. 9).²⁷

More generally, jewelers and silverware firms discovered the value of displaying their goods artfully in showrooms, shopwindows, and trade and world's fairs. The latter in particular were recognized as a surefire source of publicity, and the

major silverware manufacturers and retailers spent vast sums of money to mount exhibits. The 1853 New York Crystal Palace exhibition provided the first significant opportunity to present wares before a national audience, and Ball, Black, and Company mounted what was considered the most exciting and "most thoroughly American" display—one glass case featured the largest gold tea service ever seen in the country (made of Californian gold), and another held fruit bowls, tea and coffee sets, and two silver dinner sets worth \$4,000 apiece (fig. 10). In addition to the richly colored cloth backdrops that made the metal appear "more conspicuous," exhibitors used pyramidal compositions to enhance the visual impact of the displays. At the Reed & Barton exhibit at the 1876 Centennial International Exhibition, for example, a dynamic pyramid was created by arranging fancy tea services and centerpieces at the base with a splendid trophy on top (fig. 11).²⁸

On a more modest but equally important scale, firms used advertisements, press releases, and exhibitions to promote themselves or to publicize their connection to high-profile personages and events, including weddings. Ball, Black, and Company, for example, squeezed every ounce of recognition it could from its association with the dramatic 1859 wedding of Señor Don Esteban Santa Cruz de Oviedo to Frances Amelia Bartlett in New York (fig. 12). In later years, one observer recalled the Oviedo wedding as being attended "with more *éclat* than any that ever preceded or followed it here." Certainly, the wedding was the subject of an extraordinary amount of media interest, as it was covered by major illustrated weeklies and newspapers, both northern and southern. The father of the bride complained that his residence, servants, and any shopkeeper or tradesperson he visited were besieged by nosy members of the public and press as a consequence. And, despite taking the unprecedented step of issuing cards of admission for the wedding, the ceremony itself turned into a farce as invited guests fought for places to sit, women fainted, and members of the police force tried to restrain thousands of onlookers outside St. Patrick's Cathedral. As the *New York Times* described it, "Before 11 o'clock the body of the cathedral presented

²⁷ For a more detailed account of the silverware trade in antebellum New York, see Deborah Dependahl Waters, "Silver Ware in Great Perfection": Precious-Metals Trades," in Hoover and Howard, *Art and the Empire City*, pp. 354–75. Venable, *Silver in America*, pp. 35, 94–99. On the history of these commercial spaces at midcentury, see Winston Weisman, "Commercial Palaces of New York: 1845–1875," *Art Bulletin* 36, no. 4 (December 1954): 285–302. T. Steele and Son, *What Shall I Buy*, p. 9.

²⁸ Venable, *Silver in America*, pp. 37, 107–19. "Ball, Black and Co.'s Exhibition," *Gleason's Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion* 5, no. 14 (October, 1, 1853): 213. Other silverware exhibitors included Bailey's and Co. of Philadelphia and Jones, Ball, and Co., of Boston. T. Steele and Son, *What Shall I Buy*, p. 10.



CONTRIBUTION OF BALL, BLACK & CO., TO THE NEW YORK CRYSTAL PALACE.

Fig. 10. "Contribution of Ball, Black and Co., to the New York Crystal Palace." From *Gleason's Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion* 5, no. 14 (October, 1, 1853).

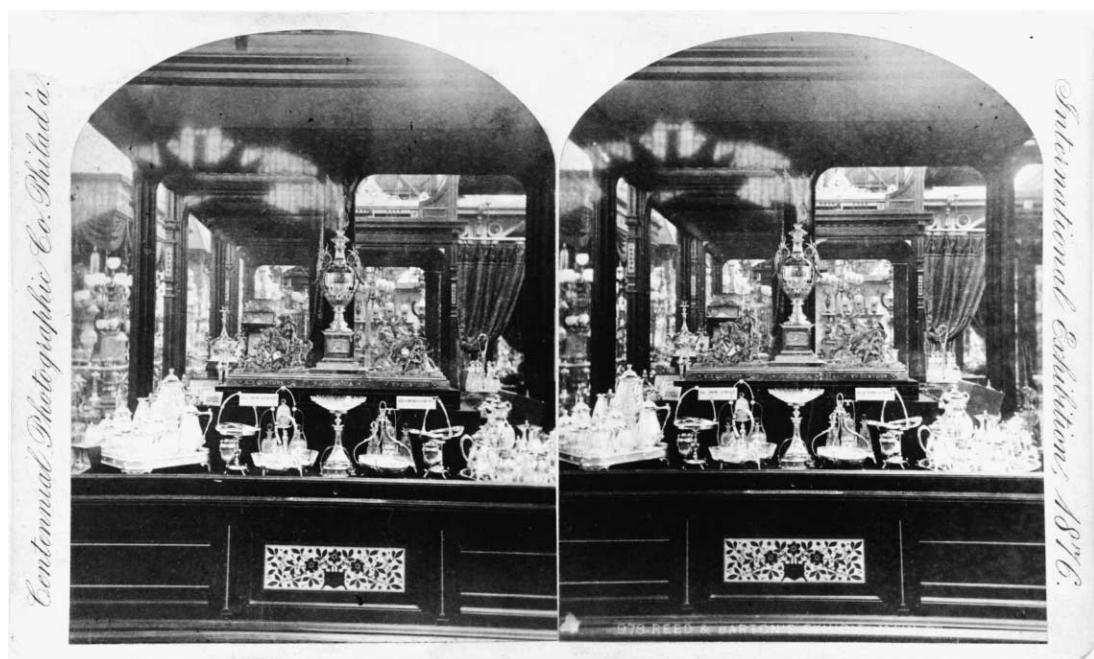


Fig. 11. Reed & Barton exhibit at the Centennial International Exhibition, Philadelphia, 1876. (68x37.5, Joseph Downs Collection, Winterthur Library.)



Fig. 12. "The Diamond Wedding." From *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* 8, no. 203 (October 22, 1859).

a scene of scrambling, shoving, clamor, crinoline, fans, fever, expectation, despair and hope.²⁹

Even today, it is not difficult to see why the union drew such fevered speculation—it involved an exotic, mysterious aristocrat; a lovely local belle; and vast amounts of money changing hands. The media expertly and cynically capitalized on these elements; for example, they compared the courtship and wedding to "the tale of Noureddin and the Fair Persian." For those readers who missed the

²⁹ Charles H. Haswell, *Reminiscences of an Octogenarian of the City of New York (1816 to 1860)* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1896), p. 524. "The Marriage of the Season," *New York Times*, October 14, 1859, p. 4; "The Oviedo Nuptials," *New York Daily Tribune*, October 14, 1859, p. 5; "New York City News: The Big Marriage," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, October 14, 1859, p. 3; "A Very Golden Wedding," *Harper's Weekly* 3, no. 147 (October 22, 1859): 675; and "The Diamond Wedding," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* 8, no. 203 (October 22, 1859): 319–20, 330, 331. The bride's father's complaint is printed in *New York Tribune*, August 22, 1859, p. 5. *New York Times*, October 14, 1859, p. 4.

reference, the *New York Times* explained that the Fair Persian (the teenaged Frances Amelia) had been bought by Noureddin (the fifty-five-year-old Oviedo) "for an incredible price and loved without any assignable limit." Estimates of the wedding's costs were endlessly debated. The bride's trousseau from A. T. Stewart's and Genin's Bazaar, for instance, was estimated by one publication to be worth \$28,000. Even more tantalizing were reports that Oviedo had showered his teenaged bride with gifts of pearls and diamonds totaling \$100,000 (more than \$2 million today). Ball, Black, and Company unashamedly capitalized on the sensation these figures caused. In addition to taking out an advertisement that boasted that the articles it supplied for the wedding were worth "THREE TIMES" that of all other jewelers combined, the company permitted *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* to present a selection of the jewelry it had designed for Madame Oviedo (figs. 13, 14). Tiffany and Company followed suit.³⁰

Quite aside from these exceptional events, it was shopwindows, those "free museums and galleries of art," that were being enlivened through the art of window dressing. Observing how these windows had transformed metropolitan shopping streets into "a panorama of forms and colors . . . wrought in silks, satins, gold, silver, and precious stones," an 1868 *Harper's Bazar* article stated, not disapprovingly, that their purpose was to seduce female purchasers into buying additional luxury items. "A purchaser is attracted not only by seeing what she wants, but just as well by seeing what she does not want, if it is charming, and awakens the desire and expectation of something else." Venable's assertion that the "proper manner of dressing a display window . . . preoccupied the trade press for decades" suggests that those in the silverware trade were equally aware of the power of display to stimulate consumer desire and sales. In fact, by the 1870s the display of jewels had grown

³⁰ The Oviedo wedding prefigured the sensational American-girl-marries-aristocrat weddings that would dominate headlines in the Gilded Age; see M. H. Dunlop, *Gilded City: Scandal and Sensation in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (New York: Perennial, 2000), pp. 1–16; and Maureen E. Montgomery, *Displaying Women: Spectacles of Leisure in Edith Wharton's New York* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 57–61. *New York Times*, October 14, 1859, p. 4. For a complete list of the trousseau, including the bride's "French embroidered elastics [garters]," see "Diamond Wedding," p. 319. Many insisted the value of the gems was higher. *Harper's Weekly*, for instance, put it at \$600,000; "Domestic Intelligence: Marriage in High Life," *Harper's Weekly* 3, no. 137 (August 13, 1859): 518. The amount of \$100,000 is cited by Haswell, *Reminiscences*, p. 524. Tiffany and Company's jewels are illustrated in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* 8, no. 23 (October 22, 1859): 331.

BALL, BLACK & CO.,
247 Broadway.

DIAMONDS,
RUBIES,
SAPPHIRES,
EMERALDS,
PEARLS,
OPALS, &c.,

unset or manufactured in the most artistic style, constantly
on hand and for sale.

Also the most extensive assortment of
SILVER WARE
to be found in the United States, all of their own manufac-
ture, 950-1000 fine.

CLOCKS,
BRONZES,
PAINTINGS,
STATUARY,
DRESSING CASES,
OPERA GLASSES,
FANS,

AND

Fancy Articles

I N G R E A T V A R I E T Y,
and all at a small advance on the cost of importation.

BALL, BLACK & CO.,

In calling the attention of the public to the beautiful
illustrations in another part of this paper, of a small portion
of the articles actually ordered of, and made by them
for the occasion alluded to, would state that they were

MANUFACTURED FROM

ORIGINAL DRAWINGS,

made by their own artist, and have never been made in a
corresponding style or magnificence in this or any other
country, *carte blanche* having been given them to produce
each article in the richest and most tasteful and *recherché*
form. And while they do not think it in good taste to
specify, in an advertisement, the amount paid for the
whole order, yet they have the

BEST AUTHORITY FOR ASSERTING THAT IT
EXCEEDS IN AMOUNT THREE TIMES
the articles supplied by all the rest of the Jewellers in the
Union.

BALL, BLACK & CO.,
2030 247 BROADWAY.

Fig. 13. Advertisement for Ball, Black and Co. From *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* 8, no. 203 (October 22, 1859).

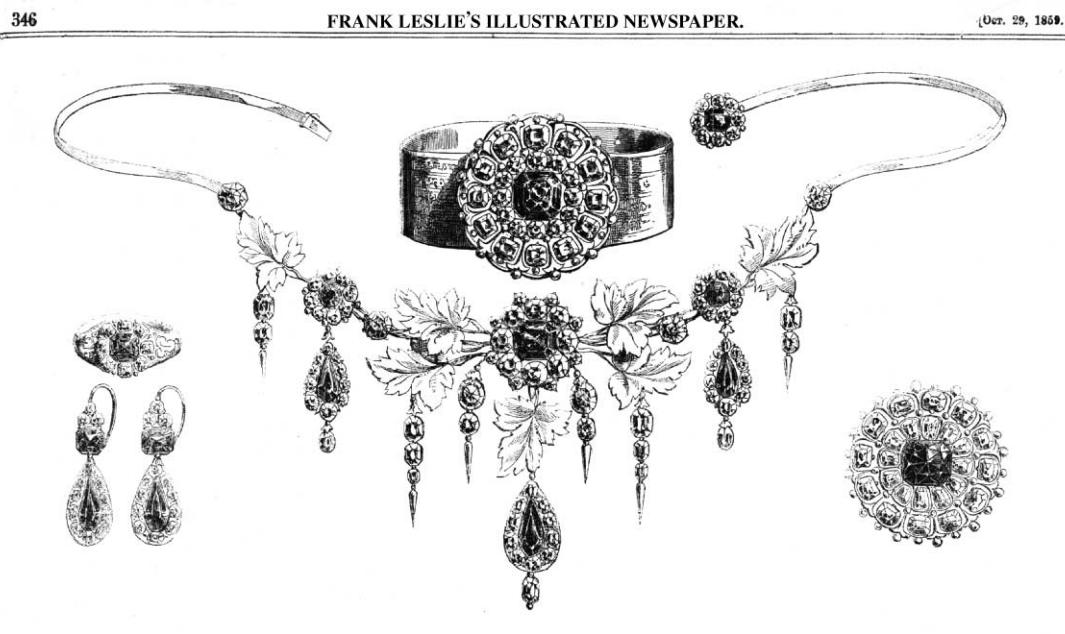
into its own mini-industry with companies devoted to making showcases, show trays, and handsome satin- or velvet-lined presentation cases that added significantly to the cost of an item (fig. 15).³¹

Considering retailers' preoccupation with display, it is not difficult to see why social reformers were uneasy about the artful arrangements of bridal gifts. The custom mimicked commercial displays, effectively reproducing the conditions of a jeweler's shop within the home and compromising the strict separation of the public and private upon which the ideology of separate spheres depended. Both the retailer's showroom and the bridal display celebrated the possibilities of consumerism; shopwindows aimed to stimulate consumer desire, while bridal gift displays provided evidence of its happy consummation. However unintentionally, the exhibition of bridal gifts testified to the increasing abundance and diversity of commodities in America as well as to the sheer delight that could be attained through material things.

"An Onerous Tax . . ."

The penetration of the market into the home was effected not just by the display of goods but also in the introduction of a competitive spirit into bridal gift giving. Wealthy families sought to outdo one another in the magnificence of their gifts, driving the prices of presents ever upward. And the more silverware and jewels on display, the greater the security risk and fear of theft, occasionally necessitating the hiring of detectives for protection. Moreover, by showing presents side by side, nuptial couples pitted gift givers against one another, and guests were well aware that their offerings would be subjected to appraising inspection. Henry Beecher commented: "It is sad to think that such presents should be made a matter of calculation, but they are. The very bride does not shrink from calculating the probable gifts. And after the wedding bazaar is closed, an account of stock is taken. For the moment, they are the best friends who have given the most choice and flattering gifts. The meanness of some, the stinginess and neglect of others is severely noted. The fiend has overleaped

³¹ For shopwindows as free museums, see Parton, "Silver and Silver Plate," p. 436. "Shop-Windows," *Harper's Bazar* 1, no. 8 (December 21, 1867): 119. Venable, *Silver in America*, p. 99. See advertisements in the *Jewelers' Circular and Horological Review* 10, no. 8 (September 1879): xxv, xlvi, xlvi, and back cover; and Fersch and Son, *Catalogue of C. Fersch and Son, Manufacturers of Show Cases* (New York: James Batchelor, Printer, ca. 1870s).



THE JEWELS OF THE OVIEDO WEDDING—THE RUBY AND DIAMOND SET, MANUFACTURED BY BALL, BLACK & CO.—SEE PAGE 245.

Fig. 14. "The Diamond Wedding—The Jewels of Madame Oviedo.... Furnished by Ball, Black & Co." From *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* 8, no. 204 (October 29, 1859).

S. C. JACKSON,
MANUFACTURER OF

180 BROADWAY, N. Y.

A specialty in Show Case Trays, and Silver Cabinets, made from the finest hard woods, and polished.
All kinds Sample Cases made to order. A full assortment of a cheaper grade of Jewelry and Silverware cases in stock.
New and elegant Styles now ready, including our paintings on silks, and satins, together with novelties from China and Japan, specially ordered.

Fig. 15. Advertisement for S. C. Jackson, Manufacturer of Fine Cases for Jewelry, Watches, Silverware, &c. From *Jewelers' Circular and Horological Review* (September 1879). (Winterthur Library.)

the wall of paradise, and soiled the brightness and innocence of the early hours of a new life."³²

James Wells Champney captures the eager manner in which female relatives scrutinized gifts in his 1875 painting *Wedding Presents* (fig. 16). Notably, despite being at the center of the composition, the bride remains aloof from this inspection and gravely gazes toward the reader instead. In keeping with the ambiguity of many sentimental representations of brides, the exact cause of the bride's solemnity is unclear, but it seems reasonable to speculate that Champney, like Beecher, was highlighting the triviality of such baubles when measured against the responsibilities of the bride's new state.

In addition to introducing the spirit of calculation to the wedding day, the custom of exhibiting and labeling wedding gifts was blamed by both Beecher and Eliza Leslie for inducing those of modest means to spend more on a present than they could afford. To make her point, in *The Behaviour Book* Leslie gives the example of Miss Cassin, who spends ten dollars on a brooch for her fashionable friend. While it represents a fortune to its

³² Detectives were hired for the Oviedo wedding; see "The Oviedo Nuptials." The anxiety about theft is the theme of Harriet Prescott Spofford, "Wedding Presents," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 44, no. 261 (February 1872): 441–47. Beecher, "Wedding Bazaar," p. 295.



Fig. 16. James Wells Champney, *Wedding Presents*, ca. 1875. Oil on canvas. (Museum of the City of New York; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Luke Vincent Lockwood, 42.254.)

impoverished donor, according to Leslie, the brooch looks shabby when displayed alongside the other presents and “elicits perhaps some satirical remarks, that would be very mortifying to Miss Cassin.” Leslie and others also condemned the obligatory nature of the gifts, or what Abby Longstreet decried as their “universality.”³³ Gifts certainly were expected, particularly if the family of the bride or groom had given a wedding present to a member of the guest’s family in the past.

Leslie deplored such mercenary behavior, arguing that fashionable young women given substantial trousseaux by their fathers had no right to expect presents from anyone but immediate family members, “and only to such of *them* as can well afford it.” Similarly noting that the cost of wedding presents placed “an onerous tax upon society,” writer Eliza B. Duffey in *The Ladies’ and Gentlemen’s Etiquette* expressed her hope that “the better sense of community will yet prevail, and wedding presents be recognized as spontaneous rather than

obligatory gifts.” In her estimation, the “surest way to accomplish this would be to receive the gifts privately and refuse to put them upon exhibition.”³⁴

In fact, some families in this period did forgo the exhibition of gifts. Others, like the besieged Bartlett family, limited the viewing of presents to intimate friends and relatives (although the bride’s father appears to have initially shown them to anyone who applied by letter.) Although some families may have initiated these restrictions in order to put guests at ease, no doubt others followed suit simply to conform to what they believed was the prevailing etiquette. Like most wedding customs, however, the display of bridal gifts fell in and out of fashion rapidly, rendering etiquette writers’ advice on the subject contradictory and confusing. Just one year after Duffey told brides that “presents are arranged in an apartment for display before the wedding-guests,” Ward informed them that “the room for bridal presents is no longer thrown open.” Sherwood claimed that whether or not to exhibit depended entirely upon personal taste,

³³ Beecher, “Wedding Bazaar,” p. 295; and Eliza Leslie, *The Behaviour Book: A Manual for Ladies* (Philadelphia: Willis P. Hazard, 1853); quotation on p. 177. Longstreet, *Social Etiquette*, p. 171.

³⁴ Leslie, *Behaviour Book*, pp. 177–78. Duffey, *Ladies’ and Gentlemen’s Etiquette*, pp. 194–95.

while Longstreet insisted that presents could be shown but only to “very intimate friends and kinspeople” before or after the wedding day.³⁵

This lack of coherence testifies to the changeable and largely improvisational nature of many wedding “traditions.” In *The Age of Innocence*, Edith Wharton brilliantly satirized the anxiety this lack of fixity could cause in her portrayal of the wedding of May Welland and Newland Archer in 1870s New York. Even the Wellands, despite their bona fide claim to represent Old New York, seemed ultimately uncertain about what should be “done,” a question given real urgency due to the family’s desire to set themselves apart in every particular from the city’s arrivistes. Wharton particularly focuses on a stormy debate over whether the wedding presents should be “shown.” This question is memorably decided in the negative by Mrs. Welland who protests with indignant tears: “I should as soon turn the reporters loose in my house.”³⁶

As the reference to reporters makes clear, what the status-conscious Mrs. Welland found repellent was the publicizing of the bridal gifts rather than bridal gift giving per se. Most etiquette and advice writers also seemed to follow this line. Despite widespread criticisms of the obligatory nature of bridal gifts and their display, only a small handful of writers condemned fancy presents outright or advocated giving brides basic necessities or handmade presents instead. The silence of Leslie and Duffey on this issue is surprising, for the majority of bridal gifts were ornamental, even frivolous, and both writers were quick to attack any form of excess, particularly in housekeeping arrangements, in their other publications. Their failure to take a stand is odder still given that, as Leigh Eric Schmidt notes, the question of what constituted an appropriate gift was the subject of a lively debate during this period, one that openly pitted the spirit of romanticism against that of commodification. Specifically, Schmidt describes how the eclipse of handmade valentines by store-bought ones aroused the anxiety of many critics who believed it symbolized “the loss of sincerity and authentic self-expression at the hands of industry, commerce, and mass production.” These criticisms rested on the romantic belief that presents should always be in some way a manifestation of the character or

³⁵ “Diamond Wedding,” p. 319. Duffey, *Ladies’ and Gentlemen’s Etiquette*, p. 195; Ward, *Sensible Etiquette*, p. 341; Sherwood, *Manners and Social Usage*, p. 126; and Longstreet, *Weddings*, p. 23.

³⁶ Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, in *Three Novels of Old New York* (1920; repr., New York: Penguin Books, 1994), pp. 769, 843.

talents of the giver. In Ralph Waldo Emerson’s words: “The only gift is a portion of thyself. Thou must bleed for me. . . . But it is a cold, lifeless business when you go to the shops to buy me something, which does not represent your life and talent, but a goldsmith’s.”³⁷

While we can only speculate as to why critics such as Leslie and Duffey relaxed their usual antimaterialist stance on this issue, it may have been because wedding presents enabled less well-to-do couples to begin married life with at least some of the accoutrements of middle-class respectability, such as good table silver, cut glassware, or china. Indeed, without the help of family and friends, these items—so essential to Victorian rituals of hospitality and hosting—may well have taken a young couple years to acquire on their own. Perhaps, too, as Otnes and Pleck have argued with regard to contemporary weddings, nineteenth-century critics regarded the wedding as a unique life event, rendering otherwise excessive expenditures permissible just that once.³⁸

Moreover, we should not assume that such writers had abandoned the romantic notion of the gift as a personal token of the giver altogether. Often they attempted to enforce this view by focusing on the behavior of the recipient rather than the donor. A good example is their promotion of thank-you notes. Even if gifts were to be “shown” publicly, etiquette writers stressed, brides were obliged to acknowledge each one privately by letter. This task could not be allocated to printers or bridesmaids for to have validity it was imperative that notes be in the bride’s “own hand.”³⁹ It was by means of this note, still so much a part of wedding ceremonies today, that advice writers made their bid to establish an emotive chain directly linking the giver, the gift, and the bride. Rather than being judged against a pool of gifts, as in the bridal

³⁷ For criticisms of fancy bridal presents, see Spofford, “Wedding Presents,” p. 444; Mary Wood-Allen and Sylvanus Stall, *What a Young Woman Ought to Know* (Philadelphia: Vir Publishing Co., 1898), p. 261; and Sylvanus Stall, *What a Young Husband Ought to Know* (London: Vir Publishing Co., 1897), p. 229. Eliza Leslie, *Mr. and Mrs. Woodbridge; or, A Lesson for Young Wives* (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1847); and Eliza B. Duffey, *What Women Should Know: A Woman’s Book about Women Containing Practical Information for Wives and Mothers* (1873; repr., New York: Arno Press, 1974). Schmidt, *Consumer Rites*, p. 87. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Gifts,” in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1971), p. 94.

³⁸ Otnes and Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams*, p. 23.

³⁹ Duffey, *Ladies’ and Gentlemen’s Etiquette*, p. 195; Ward, *Sensible Etiquette*, p. 341; Sherwood, *Manners and Social Usages*, p. 126; Longstreet, *Weddings*, p. 23; and Longstreet, *Social Etiquette*, pp. 143–44.

display, the gift was now to be appreciated by the bride individually on the basis of its own merits and those of the person presenting it.

At first glance, this seemed to be a moderately successful tactic to resist the commodification of weddings. As the bride was deluged with more commercially produced goods (often in duplicate or even quintuplicate), thank-you notes demanded that she respond to each ever more personally, downplaying its market value in favor of its sentimental one. If each object “told its own story of personal affection,” the rationale went, then each one was deserving of appreciation. Longstreet summed up the attitude perfectly: “Even the slightest gift [should be] acknowledged,” she instructed, “its value frequently being in the loyal and tender affection that prompted the sender to make perhaps a great sacrifice in presenting it.”⁴⁰

Longstreet’s use of the word *sacrifice* appears to echo Emerson’s desire that the donor “bleed” for the recipient, as does her mention of the “tender affection” represented by the gift. The pervasiveness of this belief—that gifts embodied the sentiments of the donor—is possibly another reason why most writers did not condemn bridal gift giving completely; the ability of objects to tell of stories, emotions, or memories was the means of their redemption. And, unlike Emerson, who denounced commercially made goods and called the giving of rings, jewels, gold, and silver “barbarous,” most writers were more pragmatic, accepting that manufactured or fancy objects could produce sentimental associations as well. In *Little Women Married*, for instance, Louisa May Alcott remarks that the silver vase adorning Meg and John’s cottage is “eloquent of home love and tender forethought.” Debby Applegate convincingly argues that this sentimental engagement with goods was so widespread that “commodity consciousness,” along with sympathy, affinity, and individualism, should be seen as a defining feature of the emerging “middle-class consciousness.”⁴¹

The seriousness with which the exhibition of bridal presents and the writing of thank-you notes were discussed and debated reminds us that these

⁴⁰ Wood-Allen and Stall, *What a Young Woman Ought to Know*, p. 261. Longstreet, *Weddings*, p. 23.

⁴¹ Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women Married* (1869; repr., London: George Routledge and Sons, [1873]), pp. 4–6. Debby Applegate, “Henry Ward Beecher and the ‘Great Middle Class’: Mass-Marketed Intimacy and Middle-Class Identity,” in Burton J. Bledstein and Robert D. Johnston, eds., *The Middling Sorts: Explorations in the History of the American Middle Class* (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 107–24.

practices were believed to touch upon issues of national concern. The antimodern and romantic underpinning of writers’ sentiments speaks of a deep-seated ambivalence about America’s emerging commercial culture and of a sincere desire to counteract its perceived negative social effects. It is ironic, then, that the sentimental rationale for gift giving ultimately diluted the moral critique of luxury as reformers became caught up in the ambiguities and internal inconsistencies of their stance.

Perhaps no one better illustrates the difficulties of the sentimental balancing act than Beecher. At the same time that he eloquently decried the fashionable display of presents, he enthusiastically defended what he called gifts of love. Gifts not given in the correct spirit, he claimed, “eat out the value of those . . . which should come only from love.” Underlying his view was the belief that material goods have a communicative power, so that gifts were to be appreciated “not for what they are, but for what they express.” When given out of affection rather than duty or pride, gifts were not only welcome but could not be “too profuse.”⁴² For Beecher, it was the donor’s intentions, not the objects, that counted—the very same silver berry spoon could be a sign of calculation or a sign of love—a notion that posited a transparent relationship between inner feeling and object. But, in truth, an object’s true meaning rarely yielded itself so easily; confronted by two identical commercially made gifts, for instance, how was a recipient to detect any possible difference in their donors’ motives?

Not surprisingly, far from curbing the influence of manufacturers and retailers, this uncritical promotion of the magical qualities of goods ended up providing an ideal justification for luxury consumption. The same logic that redeemed goods could also be used to sell them. *Scribner’s Monthly*, for instance, in a thinly disguised plug for the Gorham firm in 1874, framed an argument for buying expensive silver wedding gifts in these terms: “Well-selected silver articles for the table, particularly, are permanent keepsakes, like nothing else, almost, that can be thought of; cherished for their unchangeable usefulness, beauty, and value, as well as their associations. . . . Silver reigns in the marriage feast, and in all its after memento, perfect, matchless symbol of the permanence, preciousness, purity, beauty, and homely use, that meet in the most sacred relation of human life.” While proper advertisements of this period did not

⁴² Beecher, “Wedding Bazaar,” p. 295.

yet feature such fetishistic rhetoric, even the briefest flip through *Modern Bride* or *Bride's Magazine* will confirm how it came to dominate twentieth-century bridal advertising.⁴³ Through the use of words such as *cherish*, *associations*, *memento*, and *symbol*, the pecuniary value of silverware was downplayed, and advertisers focused on its emotive and "sacred" qualities instead. Rather than being the result of a financial outlay, silver pieces became emblems of sentiment and souvenirs of that most happy event—the marriage that was the foundation of the family home.

This study has investigated the way in which certain businesses, primarily jewelers and silverware manufacturers, increasingly ingratiated themselves into America's way of wedding over the course of the nineteenth century. Yet it would be misleading to suggest that the businesses that were involved in weddings constituted a nineteenth-century equivalent to the professionalized wedding industry of the mid-twentieth century. The differences between the former and the latter are significant.

Though earlier commercial establishments profited from weddings and seemed to view them as a means of boosting sales, none were as dedicated to the wedding business or targeted the bridal market as exclusively as they later would do. (Indeed, according to Howard's definition, the "bridal market" as such did not exist.) The white wedding did not become standard among all social groups until the 1950s, and many of the innovations that would transform the white wedding into a mass product—bridal departments in department stores, bridal salons, bridal gift registries, bridal consultants, and bridal magazines—were still many decades away.⁴⁴ The spectacular white weddings depicted on film, on television, or in national ad-

⁴³ "The Silver Age," p. 209. The best-known example in advertising is the De Beers "A diamond is forever" slogan; Otnes and Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams*, pp. 62–66.

⁴⁴ That weddings were good for business was acknowledged in trade literature; see, for example, "Weddings Keep the Louisville Jewelers Busy," *Jeweler's Review* 3, no. 7 (November 17, 1888): 88. Howard, "American Weddings," p. 60. The rise of the white wedding is traced by Pleck, *Celebrating the Family*, pp. 206–16, 224–32. The innovations described and the creation of new invented traditions such as bridal showers and the double ring ceremony are described in Howard, "American Weddings"; Howard, "A 'Real Man's Ring,'" pp. 837–56; and Otnes and Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams*.

vertising campaigns were years in the future as well, although, as we have seen, details and images of notable weddings were already disseminated widely by the print media in the nineteenth century.

Nevertheless, by the second half of the nineteenth century, the first phase of the commercialization of weddings was clearly under way. Even if they did not target the market in a systematic manner, dry goods merchants, jewelers, and silverware manufacturers and, slightly later, makers of American glass and chinaware seemed to recognize the importance and potential of bridal customers.⁴⁵ They began to offer special bridal goods and services; they began to address themselves specifically to bridal couples and to those in search of presents for them; and, through their promotional literature and their well-publicized association with wedding celebrations such as Oviedo's, they sought to influence the practices surrounding fashionable weddings in order to expand demand.

Of course, the Oviedo affair is hardly representative of the average wedding; it was newsworthy precisely because it was exceptional, and its opulence fascinated and repelled audiences in equal measure. But, by midcentury, one did not need a fortune to be a customer of A. T. Stewart or Ball, Black, and Company. While most bridal couples continued to receive at least some handmade goods, a greater number were also enjoying commercially made, store-bought items, from silver-plated spoons to gold rings. It is in this context that the emergence of a sentimental rationale for consumption, especially around objects that beautified the home or memorialized significant events in family life, became important. Quite apart from anything else, it meant that the wedding was no longer regarded as a straightforward indicator of wealth or privilege. Increasingly, nineteenth-century couples who planned a white wedding or were given expensive gifts were not only expressing their socioeconomic status but also declaring their allegiance—and that of their community—to the sentimental sensibility and genteel lifestyle that marked the middle class. And in so doing, they justified and boosted a demand for a luxury bridal gift giving that is universally accepted today.

⁴⁵ Blaszczyk, *Imagining Consumers*, pp. 47–49.