

**James J. Corbett:
Theatrical Star
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Famous professional athletes often attempt, with occasional success, to augment their sports earnings through entertainment. The modern sports hero can easily make celebrity appearances on television programs, endorse commercial products, or lend a name to a line of merchandise. Earlier sports figures lacked these modern opportunities for profitable activity, yet still managed to aggrandize their fame through commercial entertainment. James J. Corbett, Heavyweight Champion of the World from 1892 through 1897, exemplifies efforts of professional athletes to enter the highly profitable world of American commercial theatre at the turn of the century. Corbett's success, and the means by which that success was gained, offers an instructive glimpse into both professional sport and theatre in an era of rampant commercialism. The process by which a superb boxer was transformed into a matinee idol illustrates an early phase of image-building, providing virtually a case study of press agency.

Corbett's theatrical career is particularly striking when boxing's status is considered. Boxing was a widely popular, if widely denounced, spectator sport during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Outlawed in many states, the prizefight still attracted many supporters, who frequently wagered large sums of money on a favored boxer. For the fighter himself, however, large financial gains were rare: since bouts were ordinarily financed by private clubs rather than by ticket sales, purses were far smaller than in the modern era. The successful boxer accordingly sought means to capitalize upon his reputation outside the boxing arena.¹

The most ready means available during the 1880's were exhibition or sparring matches: prizefights in public were often illegal, but displays of the manly art of fisticuffs were not. Boxers therefore frequently appeared on the stages of variety

¹See Nat Fleisher, *The Heavyweight Championship. An Informal History of Heavyweight Boxing from 1719 to the Present Day* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1949).

theatres in large cities to demonstrate their pugilistic abilities.² It is a small step from variety performances to appearing in a fully-produced play, particularly when a touring play in the 1890's could be presented at higher ticket prices for fewer performances, thereby reducing the chances of accidental injury to the boxer. Heavyweight Champion John L. Sullivan took that logical step: he appeared at the Grand Opera House, New York, during May, 1890, as part of the cast of *The Paymaster*, a spectacular melodrama.³

Sullivan was the first Heavyweight Champion of the World to seize upon the profitable potential of theatrical performance; he was by no means the last.⁴ Nor, by all accounts, was he the best. Although John L. proved that the country's theatregoers would pay in large numbers to see a champion boxer speak lines and woo heroines in addition to simply displaying his muscles, it remained to Sullivan's successor as Champion, James J. Corbett, to combine the appeal of boxer, actor and matinee idol. In so doing Corbett, far more than Sullivan, represents the commercial thrust of both the American theatre and professional sport in the 1890's. Sullivan's plays relied upon John L.'s popularity, his brawn, and reinforced the Boston Strong Boy's image as a patriotic, hard-drinking fighter.⁵ Corbett's by contrast not only capitalized upon public curiosity about the man who had defeated the mighty John L., but were conscious attempts — which succeeded enormously — to create a positive (and profitable) public image. If, as Nat Fleischer claims, boxing came of age with Gentleman Jim,⁶ so did modern press agency and the creation of celebrities rather than performers.

²Numerous engagements of boxers in New York are recorded in George C. D. O'Dell, *Annals of the New York Stage*, 15 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927-1949). See for example, XV, 142, for Robert Fitzsimmons' 1892 performance at Minor's Theatre in the Bowery; XIV, 170 for the 1888 appearance in Brooklyn by Lightweight Champion Jack McAuliffe and X, 442, for the 1878 joint appearance of American Champion John Dwyer and English Champion Joe Goss at New York's Olympic Theatre.

³O'dell, XIV, 294.

⁴Sullivan was the first boxer, to my knowledge, to appear in a starring role. Many boxers before him had appeared in minor parts. In 1870, for example, English Champion Jem Mace (who was to appear with James J. Corbett during the London engagement of *Gentleman Jack*, discussed below, pp. 166-171) played Charles the Wrestler to E. L. Davenport's Orlando in *As You Like It* at Niblo's Gardens, New York. Mrs. Scott-Siddons was the Rosalind. Odell comments, "(with exquisite effrontery, the management advertised this as the first appearance of the pugilist 'on any stage in a Shakespearian character.'" (Odell, IX, 26).

⁵Sullivan toured in *The Paymaster* for the theatrical season of 1890-91. He also played starring roles in, and toured with, the following plays *Honest Hearts and Willing Hands* (season of 1891-92), *The Man from Boston* (seasons of 1892-93 and 1893-94), and *A True American* (season of 1894-95). For the season of 1895-96, Sullivan toured with *The Wicklow Postman*, but only appeared on stage for an exhibition sparring match after the final act. He headed the "John L. Sullivan Comedy and Big Vaudeville Company" on tour during the 1897-98 season; this variety troupe included a one-act playlet, "A Trip Across the Ocean," in which John L. played the leading role. After 1898, the former Champion appeared only in vaudeville and on the lecture circuit.

⁶Fleischer, p. 102.

Corbett's first public theatrical appearances followed the standard pattern : he appeared at Hyde and Berman's Variety Theatre in Brooklyn during March, 1890, billed as the "noted heavyweight . . . of California, who recently defeated Jake Kilrain" His performance consisted of a three-round sparring match.⁷ Corbett made similar appearances in 1891 and 1892 at several minor theatres in the New York area.⁸

In his early career Corbett showed no inclination toward public appearances other than those expected of boxers: exhibition matches, challenges to the audiences, and short displays of pugilism. In 1891, however, Corbett became associated with theatrical manager William A. Brady, who became the boxer's press agent, manager, and producer. Brady recognized Corbett's theatrical appeal from the start, regarding his boxing career as merely one additional means of keeping Gentleman Jim's name in print. The manager set out immediately to enhance Corbett's attractiveness as a box office draw: as he wrote forty-five years later, "among my first flight discoveries during fifty years' search for what the public wanted were Katherine [sic] Cornell and James J. Corbett."⁹

Brady was not unique among theatrical producers of his day: he was a sterling example of the solidly commercial entrepreneur, willing and ordinarily able to seize upon any public fad if it promised profit. Brady was responsible for such diverse productions as Corbett's plays, a circus-like spectacle reenacting the battle of Mafeking (featuring four hundred real Boer War veterans), a mammoth *Uncle Tom's Cabin* company featuring a double cast — two little Evas, two Topsy's, two Elizas crossing the ice, double sets of bloodhounds, all on stage simultaneously — and Lottie Blair Parker's *Way Down East*, an enormously successful evocation of Yankee life in Maine which toured continuously for two decades at the turn of the century, its chief attraction being the patented third-act snowstorm.

Brady was, in 1891, looking for a money-making attraction; he found Corbett. Brady raised enough cash to support Corbett's Championship challenge to Sullivan, then took the challenger on a barnstorming tour, fighting all comers with an offer of \$106.00 to the man who could last four rounds. Brady simultaneously commissioned a play from Charles T. Vincent, a

⁷Odell, XIV, 451.

⁸Ibid., Odell, XV, 142, 223.

⁹William A. Brody, *Showman* (New York: Dutton, 1937), p. 9. Brady's career is fully documented in Lawrence J. Wilker, "The Theatrical Business Practices of William A. Brady" Diss. Illinois 1972.

competent hack dramatist of the period, for Corbett. Both Brady and Corbett were confident of winning the championship from Sullivan; as Brady wrote:

the last act was the big fight for the championship, with a crowd of supers going wild on knockdown bleachers and an actual prize-fight on the stage. I needn't mention that the hero won, nor that, in order to make fools of ourselves with a play like that, which we were going to produce after the Sullivan fight, Corbett was going to have to whip Sullivan. But, as I rehearsed the role of Gentleman Jack's father-in-law opposite Corbett day after day, in the intervals of training, the whole thing looked¹⁰ perfectly practical. It looked that way to Corbett too.

Of course, Corbett did defeat Sullivan in New Orleans on September 7, 1892. Within a month, Corbett and Brady were on tour with Vincent's play, *Gentleman Jack*. *Gentleman Jack* relied heavily upon Corbett's own personality and public *persona*, even to the extent of press releases implying that the play was a dramatization of the Champion's own life.

In real life, Corbett had grown up in a lower-middle-class section of San Francisco, had worked as a bank clerk, and had fought amateur bouts at San Francisco's Olympic Club before his skill prompted him to turn professional. From all reports, he was a relatively modest individual, for a professional boxer, and was ill-suited for the saloon-oriented crowd which dominated boxing during Sullivan's tenure as Champion. In contrast to Sullivan, Corbett was a polished aristocrat, and was from the start regarded as something of a dude. Sullivan himself had held that belief: engaged to spar with Corbett for charity in 1890 in San Francisco, Sullivan insisted that the exhibition be staged with both boxers in full evening dress, a studied insult to Corbett. Corbett's nickname, "Gentleman Jim," grew from this image.¹¹

Brady turned Sullivan's insult to commercial advantage and capitalized on the "Gentleman" aspect of Corbett's public image for all it was worth, particularly in the new Champion's public appearances after the New Orleans bout. Not only was the tailor-made play entitled *Gentleman Jack*, but Brady kept the

¹⁰Brady, p. 97. Brady had tasted Corbett's heroic ability earlier by giving the boxer a small part in a production of Boucicault's *After Dark*, performed in 1891. See *Ibid.*, pp. 68-71.

¹¹For Corbett's early life, see James J. Corbett, *The Roar of the Crowd: True Tale of the Rise and Fall of a Champion* (New York: Putnam, 1925). CH. 1, and Alexander Johnston, *Ten—And Out!*, 3rd rev. ed. (New York: Ives Washburn, 1947). pp. 100-102.

prize fighter dressed in formal wear for most of the play's action. Brady also refined Corbett's entertainment outside the theatre :

Where Sullivan's grand gesture had been to march into a barroom under the elevated, throw a pocketful of silver on the bar . . . and call for drinks on the house, Corbett's style was to enter a crystal-lighted hotel dining-room and open wine for the company at some ten times the expense. His hotel bill during our tours with "Gentleman Jack" averaged round a thousand a week—the money went out in bucketfuls, but it was coming in by tankfuls, so it didn't matter.¹²

The boxer's vehicle, *Gentleman Jack*, differed little from most popular dramas of the period. The plot was concisely summarized by the *New York Herald* immediately prior to its first Manhattan engagement in November, 1892:

The play is in five scenes, the first showing the campus at Princeton, the second the private rooms of a banker, the third the Madison Square Roof Garden, the fourth, the pugilist's training quarters at Asbury Park, and the fifth the Olympic Club in New Orleans. Mr. Corbett plays the part of a bank clerk, and he and the heavy villain are in love with the same girl. The villain robs the bank and places the blame on Jack, who loses his position. The villain then sends to England for Charlie Twitchell, the English pugilist, and Jack is badgered into a match. He is pressed for money to bind the agreement, and at the right moment his sweetheart appears and furnishes him with the necessary capital. The play ends with Twitchell's defeat and the heavy villain's eternal disgrace.¹³

The character of Charlie Twitchell is a not-too subtle caricature of the real English heavyweight champion, Charley Mitchell, who had been twice beaten by Sullivan and who was to face Corbett in 1894. The Twitchell subplot was a blatant appeal to the American chauvinism particularly rampant in the 1890's. If *Gentleman Jack* had little to recommend itself by way of dramaturgy, it had two major attractions: its star and its staging.

Either Brady's insight was correct or his careful coaching of the Champion succeeded, for Corbett was received with pleased surprise. One report of the play, from Cincinnati, noted that "James J. Corbett is an agreeable disappointment as an

¹²Brady, p. 108.

¹³Nov. 1892, p. 9.

actor . . .”¹⁴ and commented “Corbett is as graceful and easy in his manner on the stage as though he had been accustomed to stand before the footlights for several years instead of a few weeks.”¹⁵ In Boston, a newspaper reported that “while Mr. Corbett does not possess all the graces and accomplishments of a trained actor, his impersonation of Gentleman Jack . . . was refreshingly free from rant, and was thoroughly consistent with the modest, retiring and courageous college student he represented.”¹⁶ The New York papers repeated the surprised praise : “Corbett’s manner was easy. He spoke his lines, which were very many, in clear, pleasant tones, and was not unmindful of the proper inflections.”¹⁷ Even the *New York Dramatic Mirror* — ordinarily fiercely opposed to the invasion of the theatre by non-theatrical celebrities — spoke favorably :

James J. Corbett . . . made an impression on Monday that was emphatically excellent, leaving his merits as a pugilist altogether out of the question.

Mr. Corbett has a strong and intelligent face, a sympathetic and clear voice, a figure that is athletic, and not suggestive of his original profession, an easy and dignified demeanor, and a naturalness and simplicity of gesture and deportment. He shows no signs of becoming an actor of any great power, but he has a charm that is separate from his celebrity in the prize ring.

Corbett was not, however, a supremely gifted actor, despite the first reactions of the press. At least one observer in New York was not impressed : “Mr. Corbett may be able as a fighter to knock out anything that comes in front of him,” sniffed the *New York Herald’s* critic, “but as an actor he is rather handicapped Mr. Corbett can act a little — a very little.”¹⁹ Another reviewer, while praising Corbett warmly, noted that “his articulation was not as distinct as might be desired and at times it was difficult for the audience to understand what he said.”²⁰ Another described one problem in the performance, which may reveal something about the general staging provided by Brady:

¹⁴*The Enquirer*, 21 Oct. 1892, p. 5.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶*Boston Evening Transcript*, 6 Dec. 1892, p. 5.

¹⁷*The Sun* (New York), 8 Nov. 1892, p. 5.

¹⁸12 Nov. 1892, p. 2.

¹⁹8 Nov. 1892, p. 10.

²⁰*The Enquirer* (Cincinnati), 24 Oct. 1892, p. 5.

Only once was awkwardness apparent. In one speech [Corbett] had to walk half across the stage and turned back while speaking. This was too much for him, but he soon recovered.²¹

The sort of physical movement on the stage described here — a cross ending with a turn — is hardly complicated; if Corbett found it difficult, that implies (when coupled with his occasionally indistinct articulation) that the Champion was little better than an amateur on stage, carefully blocked by Brady with as little movement as possible. His inexperience probably resulted in under acting; most of the contemporary comments during Corbett's first tour (1892-93) refer to his naturalness, his easiness, or his freedom from melodramatic ranting, all of which could be taken to mean that the boxer was a talented actor. In this context, however, they rather imply that Corbett's performance was minimal and that the new Champion was acceptable primarily because he was the Champion, not because of his acting ability. When he again toured with *Gentleman Jack* for the 1893-94 season (taking time out to defeat Charley Mitchell in the January, 1894, title bout), the press spoke of the Champion's 'improvement' as a performer. In Cincinnati, where his performance had been hailed in 1892 for its "graceful and easy" manner, the same newspaper observed that Corbett had "improved greatly . . ." and that audiences "were surprised by his easy, graceful manner . . ." ²² The *New York Times* noted that he has improved decidedly as a comedian.²³

It is therefore unlikely that the Champion could have appealed because of his histrionic ability. Nor would his prize-fighting fame have been sufficient to sustain the profitable tours he undertook from 1892 through 1895 in *Gentleman Jack*. Corbett's success was aided by at least two additional elements: his public image, and the physical production of *Gentleman Jack*. Both are attributable to Brady's efforts.

America's theatres had, in the 1890's, several distinct audiences. The largest — and least profitable — was dominated by the urban working class, frequenting theatres whose admission prices (10¢, 20¢ and 30¢) gave a name to the genre of entertainment featured: the "ten-twenty-thirty" melodrama.²⁴ The audience Corbett drew upon for his public was different:

²¹The *Sun* (New York), 8 Nov. 1892, p. 5.

²²The *Enquirer* (Cincinnati), 16 Mar. 1894, p. 7.

²³4 Sept. 1894, p. 5.

²⁴The genre is fully explored in Lewin Goff, "The Popular Priced Melodrama in America, 1890 to 1910" Diss. Western Reserve 1949.

they were the genteel middle class, who paid prices of 25¢ to \$1.00 or \$1.50 for their seats. The genteel audience was captivated by the polite and discreet “Gentleman Jim” Corbett, particularly when Corbett’s own relatively decorous behavior was supplemented by Brady’s all-out campaign to implant a public image of the gentlemanly pugilist more at home in crystal-laden dining rooms sipping champagne than in the neighborhood saloon having a beer. In addition, Corbett was young and reasonably handsome; he thus became — with a little help from Brady — the first boxer to attract attention as a matinee idol. Brady’s reminiscences are often suspect as to their accuracy, and he may be overstating the case when he writes :

I won’t say the crowds [for *Gentleman Jack*] were mostly women, but it seemed that way at the time. The female of the species raised more sand over Jim Corbett than I ever saw raised over any matinee idol in the business. They got in our hair, they clogged our mail, they made themselves the worst nuisances possible—and we²⁶ took it and liked it, because it meant good business.

However exaggerated, it remains true that Corbett was the object of many a matinee girl’s dreams. The adoration he aroused was mocked by the sporting newspapers, but it undoubtedly helped to fill the theatres when *Gentleman Jack* was billed. Even an unpleasant divorce in 1894 had little effect upon Gentleman Jim’s popularity.

Brady had also shrewdly judged the temper of his times, and knew what would appeal to his audiences: the physical production of *Gentleman Jack* was carefully and elaborately realistic in its recreation of several key scenes, and thus attracted favorable comment from audiences and newspapers alike. Realism had, in 1892, an excitingly avant-garde tinge. Even the most unsophisticated theatregoer knew that foreigners with names like Ibsen, Strindberg and Shaw had created enormous controversies when produced in England. For the popular American audience, however, there was little difference between the realism purported to be practiced by the Scandinavian playwrights, and the illusionistic productions given to spectacularly melodramatic plays. Both aimed to present actuality on stage, both dealt with unpleasant events in society, both attempted the accurate pictorial representation of the contemporary world. It should not be surprising that Brady, if anything an astute

²⁶Brady, p. 107.

theatrical businessman, seized upon “realism” as the keynote for the boxing sequence in *Gentleman Jack*.

The play’s big scene, in the last act, was a faithful reproduction of the Olympic Club in New Orleans, where Corbett had defeated Sullivan. In the play’s first version (1892-93), the scene pitted Gentleman Jack against Charlie Twitchell, Champion of England, and was relatively brief, combining the play’s climax with the obligatory boxing necessary to a play starring the Heavyweight Champion. By 1894, however, the scene was larger: the Twitchell subplot had vanished, leaving the hero to face ‘Bat Houston, the Texas Bruiser.’ Brady had realized that it was the Corbett-Sullivan bout which was famed, not the Corbett-Mitchell fights; he therefore arranged the last-act battle as a recreation of the New Orleans prizefight even though the Corbett-Mitchell battle was more recent. As one press-release described it:

There will be a twenty-four foot ring in the center of the stage, a referee, timekeeper, seconds, and bottle holders. Three hundred people will be used for this scene alone.²⁶

The scene was favorably mentioned wherever *Gentleman Jack* played, usually in terms of its startling and highly effective realism.

Emboldened by the play’s success and by its profits (Corbett later wrote that the profits from the first season alone were over \$150,000),²⁷ Brady then took the step of a European tour. James J. Corbett and *Gentleman Jack* were booked to open at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, in April, 1894.

The prospect of success at Drury Lane thrilled Brady, he later wrote, and he spoke grandiosly about Corbett’s future career, the Champion having at that point announced his retirement from the ring. Corbett would return to the United States after London, Brady proclaimed, for a season of “plays in which Edwin Forrest and John McCullough have appeared, among them *Samson*, *Virginius*, and *The Gladiator*.”²⁸ Since Forrest and McCullough were both renowned for their acting in muscular roles, the possibility was not entirely farfetched: the prospect of Corbett appearing in tragic parts identified with two of America’s major star actors was not regarded too serious-

²⁶The *Enquirer* (Cincinnati). 25 Mar. 1894, P. 19.

²⁷Corbett, p. 107.

²⁸“Corbett and Brady Partners,” *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 24 Mar. 1894, p. 11.

ly. Brady's comments can perhaps be read more accurately as publicity for *Gentleman Jack's* London opening and an effort to make English audiences regard Corbett as a serious performer.

Gentleman Jack's European tour was not, Brady says in his autobiography, a financial success.²⁹ One London reaction is noteworthy, however, for its high praise. It was written by Clement Scott, reviewer for the London *Daily Telegraph*. Scott, the senior London critic, loved the prize fight scene in *Gentleman Jack*. He devoted most of his review to that scene; since he most fully expresses the appeal the scene must have had for its audiences in 1894, the relevant portion of his review is quoted at length:

We will pass over the play, for it was not a play at all. The people did not come to see that. They came to see James J. Corbett, who had defeated Sullivan and Mitchell. They came to see the champion boxer of the world punch the bag and put up his fists . . . they whetted their curiosity with one of the most realistic pictures of a modern club prize fight, under Queensbury rules, with all its excitement, all its accurate and precise detail, and all its dramatic enthusiasm that the stage has ever seen.

We have no hesitation in saying that, so far as mere realism is concerned, and as far as stage effect will show it, this picture of the prize fight at the Olympic Club, New Orleans, is nothing less than marvelous. We have no idea who stage-managed the scene, who drilled the supernumeraries, or who directed the tableaux, but the greatest things in unison effect yet done pale before this extraordinary bit of life transferred to the stage. . . . Twenty odd years ago it was thought that Charles Kean's drilling of the crowds in his revival of "Richard II," when the king entered London, was the most astonishing instance of independent effect that had yet been executed. We pass over a good many years till we come to the production of "Julius Casar" by the Ducal players from Saxe-Meinigen, which drew forth the assertion that crowds had never before been better drilled; and we are not unmindful of the effect of the amphitheatre scene in the "Gladiator" when acted by the Italian, Tommaso Salvini. But Salvini's gladiatorial scene was mostly [painted] in profile, and the Saxe-Meinigen crowd scene in "Julius Caesar" always struck us as being grand in effect, but too staccato and unisonal. . . . But

²⁹Brady, pp. 139-40. After the London engagement of three weeks (21 April-12 Mar 1894) *Gentleman Jack* played week-long engagement in Liverpool, Sheffield, Newcastle-on-Tyne, Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds, all in England, and Belfast and Dublin, Ireland. Two one night engagements at Tuam and Cork both in Ireland, were performed before Corbett returned to the United States early in August, 1894.

conceive the stage of Drury Lane piled up and packed, for three sides of it, with tiers and tiers of men from the floor right up to the topmost gas-boarders. . . . The sensation when this mass of men is seen is electrical. The first startling effect, however, is nothing to the subsequent ones. They do not rise together, or sit together, or talk at the same moment, or hush at the same instant. They are not moved like automata by the wave of a red flag. It is a case of independent action. Each man in that vast assembly, each one of these hundreds, seems to have a separate individuality, and to be acting not by rote but by impulse. That is the great secret of the success. It is not theatrical, but natural. There are fights, there are buffetings, there are wild screams and ejaculations, and the hush when it comes is simply the natural hush due from interest in the battle below. Whoever staged managed that prize-fight scene is certainly a master of his art. It was not likely that so experienced an authority as Mr. William A. Brady would show any mere detail of the battle to be misrepresented. . . . The address calling for fair play, the description of the combatants, the weighing of the gloves, the warning of the men, the sound of the gong to start the rounds, were all as lifelike as possible, and the excitement may be guessed when Corbett went at it hammer and tongs—Corbett with his greyhound movements and his tremendous reach—until the fatal moment, when Bat Houston of Texas, was floored, and Corbett pronounced champion of the world as the curtain fell. No horse-race or fire or shipwreck on the stage was ever so accurate and realistic, and in a measure so effective, as this prize-fight with officers and combatants with whom the public here is familiar.³⁰

Scott's glowing praise delighted Brady, who immediately reprinted the entire review in the *New York Dramatic Mirror*, carefully underlining the praising sentences. Brady later took some pleasure in gleefully describing how the realistic effect had been attained: he sent thousands of free tickets to all the London pubs and sporting clubs, promising the bearer free admission to see Corbett box, subject to available space. By this means, the stage of Drury Lane was crowded each night for the final scene with several hundred unpaid supernumeraries, all eager boxing fans anxious to see the American champion. The staged battle itself was apparently exciting enough to keep the supers engrossed; Brady served as referee, and directed

³⁰The *Daily Telegraph* (London), 23 April 1894, as rpt. *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 12 May 1894, p. 16. A similar, if less effusive, reaction is recorded in "Drury Lane Theater A Pugilistic Drama," *St. James's Gazette*, 28 (April 23, 1894), 12.

the crowd with prearranged arm signals, thus ensuring that the crowd would respond properly at climactic moments.³¹

Gentleman Jack, therefore, had the benefit of Corbett's personal appeal and his popularity as the Heavyweight Champion as well as the attraction of a spectacularly realistic final scene. All of these elements added up to a major success, at least in the United States: Brady kept Corbett on the road with *Gentleman Jack* for three solid years, with only short breaks for vacation and for preparation for the Mitchell title bout. Profit came not only from ticket sales (which were boosted after the unsuccessful European tour by extravagant claims that the American champion had dazzled all of Europe; Brady even produced one poster showing Corbett surrounded by the admiring crowned heads of the continent, none of whom had met the boxer), but from all possible sources. At one point, for example, Brady and Corbett made a handsome profit by selling the rights to cast Corbett's right hand in plaster of Paris. Sold as the hand that had knocked out John L. Sullivan, thousands of plaster hands weighed down papers across America for the next several years.³²

Corbett and Brady continued their partnership for three years after *Gentleman Jack*. Corbett toured in a new vehicle, *A Naval Cadet*, from 1895 through 1898, reaping large profits even after his 1897 defeat by Robert Fitzsimmons. The ex-Champion later appeared in an adaptation of George Bernard Shaw's *Cashel Byron's Profession* (1906), without success. After several tours with light comedies, Corbett turned to vaudeville, where his bag-punching act, interspersed with jokes and a comic dialogue, proved highly successful; he later appeared on lecture tours and, in the 1920's, as a radio commentator and author of several magazine articles on boxing and professional sport.

That James J. Corbett sought, both during and after his tenure as Heavyweight Champion of the World, to cash in on his title is not surprising. In going upon the stage, Corbett, as Sullivan before him, did break new ground for the exploitation of public interest in the professional athlete. Before these Champions learned lines and appeared on the theatrical scene, prizefighters had been content to display themselves in exhibition bouts, performing solely as boxers and not as actors. Yet although the theatrical tours undertaken by Corbett and

³¹Brady, pp. 135-139.

³²Ibid., pp. 107-108.

Sullivan were in some measure innovative, they were so only in contrast to the previous practice of professional pugilists. For the American theatre in the 1890's was rapidly becoming a centralized and commercialized business venture. The 1880's and 1890's were the decades of Trusts, and of efficient business methods applied to all sectors of American society. The entertainment industry was no exception.³³ It was, therefore, a matter of time before some theatrical entrepreneur recognized the potential profit in linking highly popular figures from the sports world with the increasingly efficient touring combination. John L. Sullivan, as Champion of the World, and James J. Corbett as his immediate successor were the most visible and therefore the most attractive of the possible sports figures for such a purpose.

James J. Corbett proved to be Sullivan's better on stage as in the ring. His initial reputation as a dandified and overfastidious bank clerk was carefully shaped and molded by his manager-producer, William A. Brady, and helped to make boxing more respectable as a spectator sport as well as mollifying middle-class fears that his stage productions would be vulgar and crude. As Gentleman Jim (a name which stayed with the boxer all his life), Corbett proved a competent actor with appeal broad enough to attract a wide audience into the theatres he played. Corbett's cultivated image also fit more readily into the pattern of the 1890's popular theatre. He was perceived by his audiences as a modest, virtuous, decorous, and clean-living young man who happened also to be a superb fighter. Corbett was thus a close match for the theatrical hero, as described by a contemporary critic:

The sixth convention of the popular play demands that the hero and heroine be exact observers of the Ten Commandments. This rule is absolute for the heroine, admitting only of exceptions that prove its universality; it is not so absolute for the hero, whose past may not have been spotless. It is absolutely necessary, however, that during the action of the play he should be perfection on this point. He must be honest, sober, chaste, clean of speech, devoted to his parents, pure, upright, honorable, the defender of women, truthful to excess, faithful to his friends, helpful to his neigh-

³³ On this point see Jack Poggi, *Theater in America: The Impact of Economic forces 1870-1967* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1968), and Dorothy Gilliam Baker, "Monopoly in the American Theater A study of the Cultural Conflicts Culminating in the Syndicate and its Successors, the Shuberts" Diss. New York Univ. 1961.

bor, true to his country and generous and forgiving to his enemies.³⁴

Corbett's *persona*, carefully nurtured by Brady, was fully exploited in *Gentleman Jack* as well as the later *A Naval Cadet*. In both plays, the heroes are college students (at Princeton and Harvard, respectively) ; the characters are thereby given an explicit social status matching the impeccable moral status ingrained in Corbett's public image.

Neither James J. Corbett's acting career not his partnership with Brady long survived his loss of the Heavyweight Championship. Although he performed in several plays after 1900, he was unable to repeat the success of *Gentleman Jack*. Corbett remained a popular celebrity in other fields of entertainment, but seemingly no longer had the broad appeal necessary to support a theatrical tour. His success then was that of the celebrity rather than of an actor: the roles performed provided an excuse for audiences to see Gentleman Jim Corbett, and the plays were carefully constructed vehicles for the Champion. That the plays were written purely to supply the theatrical public with a chance to view the Champion indicates the growing social acceptability of boxing as a sport, while the masterfully developed public image Brady created for Corbett provides a clear (and early) example of the commercial business that American entertainment became in the modern era. Corbett was packaged and sold to the public as a commodity. As soon as his commercial value declined, he was discarded by his original manager, who sought a new product. While he certainly was not the first professional athlete to be sold to a mass audience (and was far from the last), Corbett's marketing succeeded on a larger scale than any earlier efforts, thus making a major step in the American commercialization of both sport and theatre.

³⁴John Talbot Smith, "The Popular Play" *American Catholic Quarterly Review*, 28 (1903), 341.