



March 1996

"Cross Counter": The Heenan-Morrissey Fight of 1858 and Frank Queen's Attack on the "Respectable Press"

Dennis Gildea

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>

Recommended Citation

Colby Quarterly, Volume 32, no.1, March 1996, p. 11-22

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.

*"Cross Counter":
The Heenan-Morrissey Fight of
1858 and Frank Queen's Attack
on the "Respectable Press"*

By DENNIS GILDEA

READERS OF *HARPER'S WEEKLY* of 19 May 1860, scarcely a month after the celebrated bare-knuckle prize fight to a draw between English champion Tom Sayers and American John C. Heenan, were treated to the following cartoon.¹



CONSTANCE (*literary*). "Have you read this account of the 'Mill on the Floss,' dear?"
EDITH (*literal*). "No, indeed, I have not, and I wonder that you can find anything to interest you in the description of a disgusting Prize-fight!"

The cartoon reveals the layers of attitudes in antebellum America concerning prize fighting that were generated by the Heenan-Sayers bout and the Heenan-John Morrissey bout eighteen months earlier. The cartoon illustrates the level of interest in the fight (it had not escaped the notice of even the literal-minded Edith, firmly entrenched on the sofa in her library) and, equally,

1. *Harper's Weekly*, 19 May 1860, 320.

the level of revulsion to fighting felt in polite society. It also reveals a degree of interest in and confusion over the language of prize fighting. *Mill on the Floss*, of course, refers to the George Eliot novel that was published in 1860. "Mill," in the vocabulary of the ring and street, means a fight, or to beat out. Such slang or cant phrases originated, for the most part, in the working-class sections of London in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and by the antebellum period had spread to American street usage. In New York City, in particular, the contrast between the predominantly oral-culture street language and the language of the growing middle class served as a marker in a clash of cultural values.

This essay analyzes the public discourse surrounding the 1858 prize fight between Heenan and Morrissey in two New York City newspapers. The *New York Tribune* was published and edited by Horace Greeley, a Whig-turned-Republican and a reform-minded intellectual who objected to prize fighting and the gambling and urban violence associated with it. The *New York Clipper* was a weekly that covered sporting and theatrical news and that was published and edited by Frank Queen, who was born of working-class parents in the rough-and-tumble Southwark district of Philadelphia.² The language used in newspaper stories dealing with the fight is strikingly different, which in itself is not surprising. The language of the prize ring, as is the case with the language of any subculture, developed around usage and meaning peculiar to that subculture. This essay goes beyond simply citing the difference in language to focus on the social and political implications of certain key words and metaphors as they function in the debate over prize fighting. Asking how and why certain words are used and in what context helps shed light on the complexity of the cultural battle of values that was involved.³

"The flowering of pugilism," Elliott J. Gorn wrote in his history of bare-knuckle prize fighting in America, "was a cultural statement opposing the efforts by the middle class to reshape the world in its own image."⁴ Equally, newspaper accounts of the prize fights were cultural statements which tended to shape the world in the image the writers and editors preferred. Specifically, this essay examines the language of a *Tribune* attack on the Heenan-Morrissey fight and a counterattack by the *Clipper*. The point of the language used in the *Clipper*'s response, I argue, was to defend the values of

2. For the background of Greeley and the *Tribune*, see Jean Folkerts and Dwight Teeter, Jr., *Voices of a Nation: A History of the Media in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1989), especially the section on "New York Leaders" in Chapter 6. Little has been written on Queen. The best source on his life and beliefs is his own paper. In particular, see his obituary in the *Clipper*, 28 Oct. 1882, 521. Also see John R. Betts, "Sporting Journalism in Nineteenth-Century America," *American Quarterly*, V (Spring 1953), 39-56; Melvin L. Adelman, *A Sporting Time: New York City and the Rise of Modern Athletics, 1820-1870* (Urbana and Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1990), especially "Conclusion: The Press and the Ideology of Modern Sport"; and Elliott J. Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1986).

3. For a discussion of how this method of discourse analysis applies to social and cultural history, see Dominick La Capra, *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1983), 23-72. Also see Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1978); Penelope J. Corfield, ed., *Language, History and Class* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991); and for a particularly skillful application of the method, Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

4. Gorn, *The Manly Art*, 29.

prize fighting but also to make obvious the class difference and cultural values between the fight crowd and the *Clipper's* editor and readers on the one hand, and the editor and readers of the *Tribune* on the other. But Queen's "counterpunch" goes beyond defense to embrace a genuinely attacking posture in the socially liberating sense that Mikhail Bakhtin refers to in his study of Rabelais' language of the carnival. The *Clipper* coverage parodies the *Tribune's* and, with that parody, used the language of the ring—and the street or saloon—to subvert by laughter and ridicule the dominating relationship the *Tribune* tried to forge with its use of the standard and polite idiom.⁵ Just as the ring for the Heenan-Morrissey fight was a terrain of struggle, so, too, were the newspaper accounts of the fight.

The language of the street, as opposed to the language of the drawing room or the library, as is the case in the *Harper's Weekly* cartoon, was catalogued and defined by Britain's famed chronicler of the ring, Pierce Egan, in an 1823 work titled *Grose's Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue; Slang Phrases Collected from Tried Authorities*.⁶ In the "Preface," Egan offered the following comment by way of explanation for the book:

The many vulgar allusions and cant expressions that so frequently occur in our common conversation and periodical publications, make a work of this kind extremely useful, if not absolutely necessary, not only to foreigners, but even to natives resident at a distance from the Metropolis, or who do not mix in the busy world. . . .⁷

The "Metropolis" Egan referred to was London, but with the wave of immigrants, especially Irish, that arrived in New York City in the antebellum period, along with the growth of a primarily oral, saloon and working-class culture and the growth of prize fighting and gambling as an urban phenomenon, linguistic confusion existed there to much the same degree it did in London almost four decades earlier.⁸ In fact, in 1859 George Matsell, a former police chief in New York City who at the time owned and edited the

5. Mikhail Bakhtin, trans. Helene Iswolsky, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana Univ. Press, 1984), 8–15.

6. The title page of the 1823 edition of *Grose's Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* includes an explanatory comment from "Corinthian Tom" from Egan's *Life in London*: "A kind of cant phraseology is current from one end of the Metropolis to the other, and you will scarcely be able to move a single step, my dear JERRY, without consulting a Slang Dictionary, or having some friend at your elbow to explain the strange expressions, which, at every turn, will assail your ear."

7. Egan, v.

8. From 5 May 1847 to 31 December 1860, a total of 1,107,034 Irish immigrants disembarked at the Port of New York. Of course, not all of these immigrants remained in New York City, although figures available from 1 August 1855 through 31 December 1860 reveal that New York was the avowed destination of 284,479 Irish immigrants. The slang of the streets in New York City was common in both the Bowery and Five Points sections of lower Manhattan. For a discussion of the social life of these sections, see John F. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990), especially Chapter Four, "Venturing Forth: Bodily Management in Public." See also Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984), especially "The Republic of the Bowery," 257–70; Stuart M. Blumin, "George G. Foster and the Emerging Metropolis," an introduction to *New York City by Gas-Light and Other Urban Sketches* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1990); Alvin F. Harlow, *Old Bowery Days* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1931); Richard M. Dorson, "Mose the Far-Famed and World-Renowned," *American Literature*, 15 (1943–44), 288–300. For an excellent discussion of the vocabulary of gamblers and confidence men, see Ann Fabian, *Card Sharps, Dream Books, & Bucket Shops: Gambling in 19th-Century America* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1990). For a discussion of the political implications of the language of the working class in America, see Wilentz and Daniel T. Rodgers, "Languages of Power in the United States," in Corfield, ed.

National Police Gazette, produced a volume similar to Egan's titled *Vocabulum, or the Rogues' Lexicon*. Beyond obvious national differences, *Vocabulum* differed from Egan's work because Matsell intended it as an aid to police officers in apprehending criminals. Additionally, he wrote it as a guidebook for members of polite society who sought to avoid being swindled by fast-talking confidence men in the city.⁹

Most noteworthy in Egan's explanation of his book is the notion that a language of the city existed that was incomprehensible to "natives resident at a distance from the Metropolis, or who do not mix in the busy world." With this comment, Egan, in the politest terms possible, struck at the core of class differences and even class antagonism. In antebellum America, a land without the pronounced and rigid class structure of Britain, language served as a social marker. Stuart M. Blumin in *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900* quotes novelist James Fenimore Cooper on the degree to which language and the "'silent laws of usage' created patterns of attraction and avoidance" in antebellum cities.

In all civilized communities, there is a class of men, who silently and quietly recognize each other, as gentlemen; who associate together freely and without reserve, and who admit each other's claims without scruple or distrust. This class may be limited by prejudice and arbitrary enactments, as in Europe, or it may have no other rules than those of taste, sentiment and the silent laws of usage, as in America.¹⁰

To amplify this point, Blumin relied on William Ellery Channing's characterization in 1841 of the different ranks of people in the growing cities. Channing wrote: "In most large cities there may be said to be two nations, understanding as little of one another, having as little intercourse, as if they lived in different lands."¹¹ Channing's point is the same as that made by British cultural historian Raymond Williams who wrote, in reference to groups of people in the same city separated by social and economic gulfs, "The problem of the knowable community is then . . . a problem of language."¹²

On 21 October 1858, the day before it devoted more than one hundred column inches to coverage of the Heenan-Morrissey fight, the *Tribune* ran a story under the following headlines: "DESCENT UPON A BROADWAY GAMBLING HELL; TEN PERSONS ARRESTED—SUSPICION OF MURDER."¹³ The story is noteworthy simply because crime news in New York City papers was common. Many New Yorkers such as *Tribune* editor Greeley and his journalistic brethren felt the city was becoming ungovern-

9. See Fabian's dissertation, "'Rascals and Gentlemen': The Meaning of American Gambling, 1820-1890," Yale, 1982, 259.

10. Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989), 241.

11. Quoted in Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class*, 243.

12. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), 171. For a discussion of the American sporting version of subcommunities and special interests, see Benjamin G. Rader, "Subcommunities and the Rise of Sport," *American Quarterly*, XXIX (Fall 1977), 355-69.

13. *Tribune*, 21 Oct. 1858.

able and that law and order were collapsing. From 1854 through 1857 Fernando Wood served as the mayor of New York, and the *Tribune* referred to him as that "bold, bad man."¹⁴ Wood was defeated in the December 1857 mayoral election by a reform-party candidate, Daniel F. Tiemann. But Tiemann was ineffective in curbing crime and disorder in the city, and Wood was marshalling his political forces for another successful run for mayor in 1859. In October 1858 his influence was still strong among the city's poor Irish-immigrant population and among the saloon keepers and gamblers.¹⁵ Prize fighting, of course, flourished among young, working-class males who frequented saloons and gambling parlors.¹⁶

The *Tribune's* story is significant because of its timing; and, more importantly, because it connected urban poverty and disorder, the Irish, and gambling. The story said that "an Irish girl named Catharine Mulhearn, who had been living for some time past in the gambling house of Bob Willis, No. 581 Broadway," was arrested on a larceny charge and, while in custody, told police of a murder that occurred at the "gambling hell." Moreover, the scenario of the murder was significant because it fuelled the belief among reformers and men such as Greeley that the city was the source of either corruption or death for many innocent men. The *Tribune* wrote: "Catharine states that about a month ago she had reason to believe that some man, to her unknown, had been roped into the house, swindled out of his money, and afterward murdered." The crime fit the stereotypical pattern of gamblers preying on the unsuspecting, and the *Tribune* rejoiced in the possibility of Willis' being arrested and charged for murder.¹⁷

The link between saloons, gambling and the political influence of Fernando Wood cannot be overstated. Throughout the 1850s, the New York Association for the Suppression of Gambling accused the mayor's office of "frigid indifference" to their cause.¹⁸ During Wood's time in office, he was consistently opposed by reformers and native Americans, who accused him of favoring the poor Irish to the detriment of the native American working class and the wealthy. New York, one Wood critic averred, was run by "Rum and Romanism."¹⁹

All of these concerns about urban disorder and political corruption played into and underlay the *Tribune's* coverage of the Heenan-Morrissey fight. Both fighters were Irish, and Morrissey in particular had close associations

14. For a discussion of the city's corruption of the innocent and unsuspecting, see Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1978). Boyer wrote: "Morally, the city was becoming an abstraction: a problem to be dealt with in isolation from the economic transformation of which even so sweeping a process as urbanization was merely a side effect," 75. For discussions of gambling and urban disorder, see Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1982); and Fabian.

15. The *New York Irish-American* hailed Wood as "the people's champion, the immigrant's hero," quoted in Jerome Mushkat, *Fernando Wood: A Political Biography* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State Univ. Press, 1990), 96.

16. See Gorn, *The Manly Art*, especially Chapter 3, "The Age of Heroes."

17. *Tribune*, 21 Oct. 1858.

18. Quoted in Boyer, 76.

19. Quoted in Harlow, 305. Also see Herbert Asbury, *The Gangs of New York: An Informal History of the Underworld* (New York: Paragon, 1990), 105-06.

with gambling and New York City politics.²⁰ In fact, on the same day that the *Tribune* featured its story on the suspected murder in the gambling den, it printed a short story about the fight excitement in Albany under the headline: "The Shoulder-Hitters at Albany."²¹ The "shoulder-hitters," who are described as "mostly with short hair, broken noses and thick boots," were toughs and often prize fighters who worked for politicians to break up opponents' rallies, physically frighten opposing voters from the polls, and assure a high turnout of loyal voters. In 1856, for example, when Wood won reelection, his opponent, the native-American candidate Isaac O. Barker, charged that more than 10,000 votes cast were fraudulent and the work of shoulder-hitters.²²

Loyalties in the Heenan-Morrissey bout ran along ethnic and political lines. Heenan, because he was a first-generation Irishman born in Troy, N.Y., and because he had only recently come to New York City from California and had not forged urban political ties, was the favorite of the native Americans. Morrissey, an Irish immigrant who was identified with the underworld, was the favorite of the foreign-born population.²³

"In order to make up our minds," Clifford Geertz wrote in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, "we must know how we feel about things; and to know how we feel about things we need the public images of sentiment that any ritual, myth and art can provide."²⁴ In the case of prize fighting in antebellum America, the job of making the rituals public fell to the newspaper reporters, and it was no easy task. Because the fights were illegal, they were contested in spots remote enough to discourage interruption by the police. The Heenan-Morrissey fight took place on a sandy spit of land jutting into Lake Erie from Long Point, Canada, which was located about twelve miles across water from Buffalo.²⁵ Both the *Tribune* and the *Clipper* were represented at Long Point.

20. Gorn, *The Manly Art*, 124–28. For an excellent discussion of Morrissey's political connections and the native-born American's attitude toward Morrissey in the wake of the 1855 murder of Butcher Bill Poole in New York City, see Gorn, "'Good-Bye Boys, I Die a True American': Homicide, Nativism, and Working-Class Culture in Antebellum New York City," *The Journal of American History*, 74 (Sept. 1987), 338–410. For a broader account of the role of prize fighters in New York City politics, see Wilentz, especially Chapter 9, "Subterranean Radicals."

21. *Tribune*, 21 Oct. 1858.

22. Asbury, 107.

23. Gorn, *The Manly Art*, 116–17. The *Tribune* noted that Heenan's colors for the fight were "the stars and stripes, in red, white and blue," 22 Oct. 1858.

24. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 82.

25. The *Tribune* reporter's account of reaching the site of the fight is both hilarious and the best bit of writing in the story. Reporters boarded a steamboat named the "Kaloolah" for the trip to Long Point. "In justice to the memory of the captain of the Kaloolah . . . it is necessary to state that every person who embarked on that illustrious craft, was swindled from the time he stepped on board till he left her deck. As she is a boat so top-heavy and utterly unseaworthy that she will evidently tip over someday, keel up, and leave her freight at the bottom of the lake, it really seemed too much that her passengers should incur that danger, and in addition, be cheated at every turn. At 11:30 p.m., this floating coffin left the dock, and steamed in a dismal manner up the lake. The crowd gave her a mournful cheer as she shoved off, and several persons on the shore who knew the boat, and had friends on board, bade them a sad farewell, and weeping, turned away." The reporter's concern notwithstanding, he and the other passengers survived. But not before they had to pay steamboat hands a dollar to carry them on their shoulders through the surf to dry land at Long Point. Both the reporter's narration and the fact that some passengers refused to wade through the surf indicate a class orientation, of course. See *Tribune*, 22 Oct. 1858.

In addition to the geographical remoteness of major prize fights, reporters seeking to cover them were further hampered by the fact that the participants were sworn by terms of "Articles of Agreement" not to divulge the site. An article titled "Agreement to Give No Information" read, "It is hereby agreed, that no information shall be given to any person, whereby the authorities may interfere to stop the fight."²⁶ Ironically, especially for the Heenan-Morrissey fight, the public clamored for information, as comments in both the *Tribune* and the *Clipper* indicate. In his "City Summary" column in the *Clipper*, Frank Queen wrote:

Fight! Fight! Go where you will there is no other subject talked of but "fight." If you attend the opera, the theatre . . . or even that "great symbol of morality," the Museum, you have to listen to some sporting tyre for fistic honors. We, even we, have done nothing but "talk fight" for the last two weeks; we have explained to hundreds of anxious questioners the meaning of "cross-buttock," "sock dolager," "cross counter," "upper cut," and cuts of every description.²⁷

That there was tremendous public interest in the fight is interesting in and of itself, but that the interest of polite society extended to the language of the prize ring is especially significant in the battle of cultural values that raged over prize fighting. About that cultural struggle Gorn wrote, "the ring inverted pious, humanitarian ways and upheld the impulsive values of the underworld."²⁸ The values inherent in and fostered by pugilism flourished in a working-class and saloon-oriented culture that centered on the spoken rather than the written word. Gorn further observed, "It was in the personalistic world of the saloon, where the merits of boxers were discussed, their exploits sung and their chances in upcoming battles assessed, that heroes of the ring acquired legendary status."²⁹ Newspapers used print to help spread the word of that legendary status from the predominantly oral culture of the saloons to polite society. That polite society was eager to learn the language of the ring was a fact that surely must have galled reformers.

While Queen made a point of explaining various fight terms, an editorial writer in the *Tribune*, perhaps Greeley himself, boasted that his paper covered the fight without recourse to the language of the ring.

Catering to the desire of the public, and to the duty of reporting the fights as well as the hangings and the murders of the community, we have, in language as little slang whanging and vulgar as the nature of the subject would admit, given the particulars of this contest—the chronicle of blood, bruises, pluck, desperation and defeat.³⁰

Unlike the *Clipper*, which seemed to recognize that it catered to an audience that either understood the language of the ring or was eager to learn it, the

26. Quoted in a *New York Herald* story on Rules of the London Prize Ring, 9 Feb. 1849.

27. *Clipper*, 30 Oct. 1858.

28. Gorn, *The Manly Art*, 121.

29. *Ibid.*, 98.

30. *Tribune*, 22 Oct. 1858.

Tribune explicitly stated its intention to avoid such language.³¹ In doing so, the *Tribune* implicitly acknowledged that language is a marker of class and that terms and metaphors, used in a certain context, operate socially and politically and in that way they are potentially dangerous tools of subversion. Social anthropologist Jack Goody maintains that writing makes explicit what is implicit in oral cultures.³² What was implicit in the primarily oral culture of prize fighting was a glorification of a way of life that ran counter to both the Protestant work ethic and the reform impulse in urban politics. Many in New York City in 1857 and 1858 feared a working-class insurrection and *The New York Times* identified Fernando Wood with a brand of "fiery communism." George Templeton Strong, a member of the city's elite society, denounced Wood as a demagogue who had brought "the canaille of the city" to the brink of insurrection.³³

Language and the values denoted and connoted by language played a key role in class demarcation and polite society's dread of "the canaille of the city," as Blumin demonstrated in his treatment of Cooper, Channing, and linguistic subtleties in the growing cities. "Silent laws of usage created patterns of attraction and avoidance" in social life, Blumin argues.³⁴ Moreover, Raymond Williams argues that language can be used as a tool of social and political domination. "The deliberate, well-chiselled, polite idiom is the product of a particular education and of the leisured, dominating relationships which the education served."³⁵

In a pre-fight story, the *Tribune* used a report from the *Buffalo Republic* which exemplified how language functioned as a weapon in a cultural battle. The Buffalo newspaper noted that the crowd coming to that city to embark to Long Point for the fight was decidedly different from the ordinary citizens of the city.

A new order of language is being introduced, and one hears "nobs" and "gobs," "potato traps," "winkers," "nut," "bunches," "bread-baskets," &c., until conversation becomes a decidedly mixed affair. It makes one almost sick to think that all of this crowd has collected for the express purpose of seeing two well fed, strong, powerful men, maul, smash, bruise and wound each other.³⁶

"Conversation becomes a decidedly mixed affair," a social mix that both newspapers preferred to avoid.

Most interesting in the context of competing systems of language and knowledge is the body of the *Tribune* editorial on the fight and the *Clipper*'s

31. On the subject of his newspaper's audience, Queen wrote in the first edition of the *Clipper*, "Coming from among the masses, it is to them we mainly look for support. . . . We can boast of no college education, and, therefore, cannot promise that vast fund of factual information, instruction and advice necessarily looked for from persons of class, yet . . . we will try," 7 May 1853.

32. Jack Goody, *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986), 180.

33. Quoted in Edward K. Spann, *The New Metropolis: New York City, 1840-1857* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1981), 395.

34. Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class*, 241-43.

35. Williams, 169-71.

36. *Tribune*, 20 Oct. 1858.

response to it. They are two thoroughly different pieces of journalism that demonstrate class differences and strike linguistic blows in a clash of values. After stating that no man "who values his reputation, his self-respect, his honor or his social position" would have anything to do with prize fighting, the *Tribune* locates the sport's patrons "in the grog-shops, the brothels and the low gaming hells." Specifically, it identifies the patrons of the ring as "thimble-rig gamblers, fancy fighters, burglars, street thieves, bar-room bullies, New York Aldermen."³⁷ The simple announcement of an impending prize fight was sufficient cause for increased crime and violence in the city, the editorial contended.

For months before such a contest, the record is full of bar-room collisions, of street bullyism, of corner battles. The devil of assault takes possession of the minds of men; and with or without provocation, upon slight temptation or great, there is a perpetual breaking of heads, if haply there is not something worse.³⁸

And once at the scene of the fight, ring patrons are seduced by its irresistible baseness; they succumb to its evil influence with "feminine pliability." The metaphor evokes a spiritual, if not physical, violation.

A bruiser will be a blackguard. Not merely a vulgar and disagreeable blackguard, but one who will take your pocket-book, filch your watch, and, if necessary to his purposes, murder you. The ornaments of the Prize Ring will, when business is dull, rob you, maim you, and swindle you. They take naturally to swindling. They yield with feminine pliability to the fascination of burglary. They will even steal handkerchiefs, if nothing better can be stolen.³⁹

The editorial must have roused Queen's ire. He often referred disparagingly to Greeley as "Old Morality" and to Greeley's *Tribune* as being representative of the "respectable press."⁴⁰ The *Clipper*, which came out on 6 November, more than two weeks after the fight and the *Tribune*'s coverage, responded by taking Greeley's catalogue of offenses, magnifying them, and having both a man of social standing and a working-class man, or, more to the point, a man familiar with gambling and the ring, react to them accordingly. Moreover and significantly, the *Clipper* responded in verse, employing a ballad form which was meant to be sung or performed, as if it were the natural product of a saloon and oral culture. On its front page, the *Clipper* ran "The Champion Mill, written for the *New York Clipper* by Frosty Whiskers; Tune—Shakspeare's Seven Ages."⁴¹ Even with the misspelling of Shakespeare, Queen began to use, or misuse, language to attack the pious *Tribune*. The ballad is centered around the Heenan-Morrissey fight and an encounter later in the streets of New York between an individual named Pat,

37. *Ibid.*, 22 Oct. 1858.

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*

40. Queen wrote in the 2 May 1857 edition of the *Clipper*, "The scope of sporting literature is much more extensive than some narrow-minded philosophers (those of the N.Y. *Tribune*, for example) would like to admit, even if they were aware of the fact." On 20 November 1858, Queen, tongue in cheek, suggests a match in the prize ring between Greeley and his journalistic antagonist James Gordon Bennett of the *New York Herald*.

41. *Clipper*, 6 Nov. 1858.

who by his name and diction is obviously Irish, and Stuart, a gentleman whose Anglo-ethnic background is also reflected in his name. Pat bet on Morrissey and won. Stuart attended a fight for the first time.

Pat: It was an elegant fight, be me sowl; it was an illustrious fight! faith. How are you Stuart, how do you like it?

Stuart: Why, my dear boy, I can only say it is the first time in a long while I have witnessed an assemblage of this sort, and I will take care it will be the last—I have been, my dear boy, exceedingly disappointed not to say disgusted—my person has experienced extreme inconvenience from the weather; my stomach, my dear boy, has been much deranged at the horrid exhibition; and I have been clandestinely deprived of my property, by some adept at irregular appropriation.⁴²

If, as Raymond Williams suggests, the problem of knowing a culturally alien community is a problem of language, then Pat is totally in the dark about Stuart's comments and community. Pat says: "—I'd thank some gentleman to put that into English for me." To which an unnamed individual responds:

—I'll explain it for you, sir—he means there's been a rum squeeze at the spell, the conveyances have been at work at the scratch, the prigs have been dipping their mawleys into the swell's group, mimmed his wive, his gold ticker, and three five screen.

Pat—Well, by way of explanation, that's the plainest thing I ever heard. Hurrah! Johnny's won the fight and the money; so we'll go home, and (sings) Train away, train away, &c.⁴³

The anonymous interlocutor functions as a language broker between polite society and saloon society. His explanation to Pat makes sense only if one knows the language of the saloon or street—the language catalogued in *Grose's Classical Dictionary*. Newspaper accounts of the Heenan-Morrissey fight, and any fight of the period, for that matter, typically referred to the crowd as "flash characters." According to the Grose-Egan dictionary, "flash" means "knowing; understanding another's meaning; to patter flash; to speak the language" of the subculture. The expression "a rum squeeze at the spell," for example, means that there was a gathering of those familiar with the fight game at the scene of the fight, although "spell" could also refer to playhouse, another often chaotic scene of working-class entertainment.⁴⁴

Moreover, the contrast in diction between Pat and Stuart speaks volumes, as does Pat's plea for "some gentleman to put that into English for me," by which he means putting the "well-chiselled, polite idiom" into the kind of language he understands, the flash language of confidence men and gamblers.⁴⁵ Gambling, at this point in American history, was beginning to be controlled by Irish-Americans. Referring to Morrissey, Gorn wrote: "He was one of a small group of Irish-Americans who took gaming out of the hands of footloose confidence men and reorganized it into a complex, stable busi-

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

44. See *Grose's Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, in which the entries are arranged alphabetically without page numbers.

45. Fabian diss., 259.

ness. The new gambler-businessman maintained close ties to respectable backers for investment capital, to local politicians for protection, and to saloons, brothels, hotels and restaurants for support service."⁴⁶ Language, indisputably, was a mark of class, and a newspaper's putting that language into print made obvious the boundaries of the threat that the upper classes perceived being posed by the alliance between the working-class immigrants, the gamblers, and the politicians.

Stuart's catalogue of complaints echoes the list of offenses that appeared in the *Tribune's* editorial and its report on the fight. Stuart "experienced extreme inconvenience from the weather," as does the *Tribune* reporter who complains of having either to wade ashore through the cold Lake Erie water at Long Point or pay a steamboat hand a dollar to carry him ashore on his back. He opted to wade ashore, and spent the ensuing time shivering in the late-October cold. Stuart's stomach was "much deranged at the horrid exhibition." The editorial observed, "Many men and, perhaps, some women, who will talk volubly enough of the affair, would not have cared to look upon it." And Stuart was robbed of his "gold ticker" (his pocket watch), "three five screen" (paper money), and his "wipe" (his silk handkerchief); the editorial noted: "They will even steal handkerchiefs, if nothing better can be stolen."

Language is rich because it has layers of meaning, contexts that go well beyond the text. That seems to be precisely how the *Clipper's* language operates in this instance. It is important to note that "The Champion Mill" is not a response in kind, that is, an editorial response to the *Tribune's* editorial. Rather, it is a ballad, a product of the oral culture in which prize fighting flourished and one that literally sings the praises of the values of that subculture.⁴⁷ In addition, the form of the language in the *Clipper* is radically different from that in the *Tribune*. The *Clipper's* front page of 6 November 1858 is illustrated by five woodcuts and everything on the page except for a two-column story at the bottom right dealing with a sparring exhibition in Albany is in verse. In contrast, the *Tribune's* coverage of the fight in its edition of 22 October is displayed in a form typical of the paper and typical of the appearance of news stories at the time in what Queen termed "the respectable press." The story runs under a single-column headline and continues unbroken by anything but sub-headlines for a full five columns of print. Even in appearance, then, the *Clipper* is more consistent with the flavor of an oral saloon culture.

It is in the language, though, that Queen directs his most effective cross-counter punch at Greeley. The point of the verse by "Frosty Whiskers" is to parody the *Tribune's* editorial, to ridicule the charges made therein, and to diminish the fear, unwarranted in the *Clipper's* opinion, the middle class har-

46. Gorn, *The Manly Art*, 125.

47. For examples of ballads that proliferated around English prize fights, see Pierce Egan's *Book of Sports* (London: T. T. and J. Tegg, 1832); and Egan, *Selections from the Fancy* (Barre, Mass.: Imprint Society, 1972). This book is a selection from a two-volume work first published in London in 1826. Also see Gorn, *The Manly Art*, especially Chapter 3, "The Age of Heroes."

bored for the class of prize fighters and the fancy, or patrons of the ring. The *Clipper* parody functions, as Bakhtin notes about the spirit of parody in general, as "the popular corrective of laughter applied to the narrow-minded seriousness of the spiritual pretense."⁴⁸ In addition, "The Champion Mill" includes in its comedy a sharp political, social, and professional edge. The parody defends not only the fight and the fight crowd, but also the vehicle in which it appears. Queen clearly means to defend the *Clipper* against the *Tribune*'s attack.

Prize fighting and Frank Queen's coverage of prize fighting (and, for that matter, his coverage of the theater and other sporting events) were nineteenth-century examples of a genuinely popular culture—a culture of the people.⁴⁹ Media scholar John Fiske notes that popular texts are terrains of struggle for meaning that are "structured in the tension between forces of closure (or domination) and openness (or popularity)."⁵⁰ A weapon against the force of closure, Fiske maintains, is the excessive and punning nature of popular texts. "Popular culture is full of puns whose meanings multiply and escape the norms of social order and overflow their discipline; its excess offers opportunities for parody, subversion, or inversion."⁵¹ Most significantly, according to Fiske, "Popular culture is the culture of the subordinate who resent their subordination."⁵² In reading "The Champion Mill," it would make sense, in a larger social context, to substitute for the anonymous interlocutor, who speaks the language of the street and ring as well as the language of polite society, the public voice of Queen's *Clipper* and to substitute for Stuart, who speaks only the language of the "well-chiselled, polite idiom," Greeley's *Tribune*. In the linguistic mill that ensues, the *Clipper*'s cross-counter punch surely draws "first blood."

48. Bakhtin, 22.

49. John Fiske in *Reading the Popular* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989) defines popular culture as that "made by various formations of subordinated or disempowered people out of the resources, both discursive and material, that are provided by the social system that disempowers them," 11–12.

50. *Ibid.*, 5.

51. *Ibid.*, 6.

52. *Ibid.*, 7.