

## SECTION II CHILDREN AND CHILDHOOD

### “INFANTILE SPECIMENS”: SHOWING BABIES IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA

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In October 1854 the prominent Unitarian minister Theodore Parker wrote to a friend that on a recent trip to the Midwest he had witnessed what he thought to be the first baby contest: “There has been a great Baby Show in Ohio; 127 babies were offered for prizes.” What Parker described was indeed the nation’s first baby contest, held at the Clark County Fair in Springfield, Ohio. Designed to increase attendance at the fair, the Ohio baby show was an all-star affair and an object of news attention across the country. Author Fanny Fern, newspaperman Horace Greeley, and abolitionist-feminist Lucretia Mott had all been invited to serve as judges. None came, but all sent letters of regret that were read aloud at the contest and widely reprinted in newspapers. “This,” noted the *Daily Cleveland Herald* “is a new feature in Agriculture shows.”<sup>1</sup> Novelty, however, was no barrier to popularity. Soon after the Clark County fair, baby shows spread to a wide range of venues both rural and urban. By the end of the century they were a commonplace form of entertainment at both agricultural and mechanics’ fairs, urban theaters, exhibition halls, and fundraising events; and well before women competed for the crown of Miss America there, Atlantic City played host to an annual baby show on its boardwalk. Baby shows were also exported abroad to London, Paris, and Milan where the notion of “exhibiting humanity in long clothes” was regarded as a distinctly American, if slightly vulgar, novelty.<sup>2</sup>

While extremely popular, baby shows were also controversial. Was putting babies on display and subjecting them to judgment a form of cherishing or degrading them? The Chicago-based *Prairie Farmer*, for example, was disturbed by news of the Ohio show. The magazine objected that the shows likened children to livestock. “Children,” the magazine reminded its readers, “are not mere animals.” Other voices joined the same chorus. “Let the Springfield show be the last, as it was the first, of these morbid attempts to improve the human race after the manner of beasts,” opined an Ohio paper. A Georgia paper described the new form of exhibition as “indescribably sacrilegious and vulgar,” while the *North American and United States Gazette* insisted that respectable men and women could only regard baby shows with “disgust and scorn.”<sup>3</sup>

As objections to the baby show suggest, in mid-nineteenth century America the public, and objectifying, display of the human body was a fraught practice. Indeed, the baby show sits squarely in the middle of two apparently contradictory cultural phenomena. On the one hand, the years during which the baby show rose to prominence were also the golden age of the dime museum and its centerpiece—the freak show and the exhibition of human beings for “amusement and profit.” Many cultural historians have traced the complex dynamic

of objectification and identification in spectacles of cultural, racial, ethnic, and (to a lesser extent) species otherness—from the agricultural fair and the halls of the natural history museum to the stage of the minstrel show and the ethnological exhibition on the grounds of museums, fairs and circuses.<sup>4</sup> In the context of rapid modernization and cultural fragmentation, displays of bodily difference functioned not only to establish deviance, but also normalcy. As one historian notes, freak shows rendered their audiences “comfortably common and safely standard by the exchange.”<sup>5</sup> Under such circumstances, it was far from clear that the *shown* were honored or appreciated—hence baby show detractors’ sense that the shows were “vulgar” and “degrading.” Such notions were enhanced by a domestic ideology that privileged the home, viewed as a world apart from the public, as the site of morality, goodness, and truth. In domestic ideology, the virtues of privacy stood in stark contrast to the degradations of publicity, particularly for women and children. If being in public and on display marked one as degraded and different, the ability to maintain one’s privacy was a mark of class- and gender-inflected respectability. Thus when the organizers of Ohio’s fair announced their baby show, a number of newspapers around the country expressed surprise that more than one hundred participants clamored for a spot. “Many persons supposed,” wrote one paper, “that very few children would be so publicly exposed.”<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, even as bodily display became tightly interlinked with the mark of otherness, the second half of the nineteenth century also witnessed the loosening of many restrictions on the exhibition of the body. How else could the clamoring of Ohioans to the nation’s first baby show be explained? Late-nineteenth century Americans became increasingly comfortable not only with the appearance of respectable women on stage and in public, but also with the notion that the self was performative. Closely linked to changing norms of bodily display, nineteenth-century Americans also began to regard the act of spectatorship differently, becoming more comfortable with viewing artistic and other objects—including fellow human beings—for pleasure rather than enlightenment. Changes in both self-display and spectatorship were, in turn, critical to the rise of a consumer culture dedicated to both pleasure and spectacle.<sup>7</sup>

Though we know that these changes took place, few historians have paid precise attention to how *being shown* was transformed from a mark of difference, as it was in the dime museum and allied institutions, to a form of esteem and a goal of selfhood, as in a consumer culture devoted to fashion and self-display. Poised in the moment of such transition, the baby show presents an instance of an increasingly common, but much less examined, form of bodily spectacle: one of *normalcy*. Of such “positive” spectacles, only the female beauty contest of the twentieth century has received much attention from scholars.<sup>8</sup> But the baby show, far from being a miniature version of that form, is actually both its predecessor and originator. It was through the bodies of children, in other words, that many Americans learned to view the objectifying “show” as a form of approbation. A hugely popular, but little-studied aspect of nineteenth-century popular culture, the baby show worked by fusing the sentiments of home to the growing, and densely intertwined, practices of commodification, consumption, and exhibition. In what follows, I explain what made baby shows popular, what made them controversial, and why objections to the shows faded as the century wore

on. In tracking both opposition to and support for the baby show, we can see how the display of children transformed nineteenth-century Americans' relationship to objectification, exhibition, and domestic ideology.

### **“Domestic Manufactures”: Babies as Popular Entertainment**

From the moment of their inception—and in spite of objections to their propriety—baby shows found eager audiences at agricultural fairs, expositions, churches, dime museums, and civic festivals across the nation. Though, as Theodore Parker's account suggests, baby shows began at agricultural fairs, they were not long confined there. Beginning in the mid-1850s, contests were also organized as benefits for community organizations, as entertainment at local, non-agricultural fairs, and by commercial showmen for profit. In the summer of 1855, less than one year after Ohio's rural baby contests, impresario P.T. Barnum began hosting baby shows at his American Museum in New York City. In typical fashion, Barnum claimed that the Ohio fair organizers had actually stolen his idea. Barnum also took the show on the road and arranged baby contests that year in Boston, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Buffalo. In towns outside Barnum's circuit, independent showmen rented halls, sold tickets, and promised prizes to babies throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. Churches, hospitals, and civic organizations used baby shows as fundraising events. By 1873, baby shows had become so popular that *Youth's Companion* magazine issued instructions to little girls interested in holding baby shows for their dolls. And in 1891, Atlantic City's entrepreneurs began organizing annual baby shows during the summer season. By the end of the nineteenth century, baby shows were no longer purely physical events. Magazines and newspapers began hosting virtual baby contests—asking mothers to send in pictures of their children, the best of which would be printed in a subsequent edition of the periodical.<sup>9</sup>

Though baby shows differed in their particulars, most operated according to a similar format. After an announcement of the show was made in local newspapers, parents entered their children for competition. Shows varied widely in size. While the original Ohio show had more than one hundred entrants, a Palmer, Massachusetts show held the same year at a local “Ladies Fair” had only “six or eight” participants. But this discrepancy hardly represented a sharp downturn in the baby show's popularity. The small town of Killingly, Connecticut hosted a show with fifty entrants in 1874, and the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce baby show boasted more than one hundred and fifty participants in 1891. No matter their number, babies and their attendants—usually mothers or nurses (the rare father was the object of special notice)—were arrayed on a stage or platform where they might appear for as short as a few hours, or daily for as long as a week or more. Visually and physically separated from the audience, but still close enough to get a good look at, babies were the objects of inspection by not only the contest judges, but also by inquisitive audience members. While show audiences, newspapers noted, were primarily female, the population of judges varied widely. Some judging teams were comprised of bachelors (who presumably could be “objective” about babies), or a combination of childless men and women; others featured local worthies such as mayors, agricultural fair managers, or physicians. Still other contests opened the judging to the audience,

which voted for the best babies. For the purposes of awarding prizes, babies were usually sorted into divisions according to age, gender and, occasionally, race. Some baby shows also placed a premium on novelty and awarded prizes not just to the “handsomest and finest” baby in each age division, but also to the best multiple birth set, the fattest baby, the tiniest baby, or the baby with the reddest hair. Prizes—which ranged from cash, silver spoons, and diamond rings to perambulators, cookstoves, and sewing machines—were either provided out of entry and attendance fees or donated by local businesses.<sup>10</sup>

Wherever their location and whatever their precise procedure, contests made a spectacle of babyhood. That mid- to late-nineteenth century mothers would so eagerly display their children at fairs and dime museums is a reflection of the series of interlocked changes historians associate with the transition from a subsistence-based to a market-based economy, the rise of the middle class family, and the cult of domesticity. Although the process occurred unevenly across racial, class, and geographic lines, in general the development of a market economy removed the production of essential goods from the home and provided women with ready-made food, clothing, and other labor-saving devices. The consequences of such shifts were as much cultural as economic. As labor was increasingly defined as something done for wages outside the home, the traditional work of women lost its economic valuation and, symbolically at least, the “home” came to stand for a world spatially and morally removed from the marketplace. Among middle class families, motherhood was imagined as women’s chief function and as a sacred duty. According to the logic of domesticity, women produced children rather than economic goods.<sup>11</sup>

Just as motherhood was emerging as women’s primary occupation, complementary views of children were also developing among the middle class. The same shifts in the economy and household production that increasingly separated home and work also served to decrease the functional utility of children. When households had been the center of the family economy, children, like their mothers, had been productive agents and necessary laborers. Shrinking family size together with economic changes made children into objects of sentimental, not economic, value. Once seen as miniature adults, by the antebellum period adults all over the Western world were coming to view children as unique beings and childhood as a prolonged and protected period of dependence. Middle-class families had fewer children, removed them from the labor force, and extended their schooling. Prescriptive childrearing literature proliferated to guide American mothers in cultivating their children’s health and character. Authors of prescriptive literature cast childhood as a special time of life in which maternal guidance and cultivation of character were necessary to prepare for adulthood. At the same time, changes in educational theory and Protestant theology emphasized children’s essential goodness and malleability, positioning them as innocents in need of protection and guidance rather than as innately sinful creatures in need of discipline and salvation. Separated from the adult world of labor and commerce, middle-class children were also made into icons of purity and innocence. Like the home itself, childhood stood in symbolic opposition to the marketplace.<sup>12</sup>

These economic and cultural changes contributed not only to new ideas about home and family, mothers and children, but also to new practices of display. In

the context of a domestic ideology that sanctified the home as the seat of morality and goodness, representations of the family assumed a new cultural importance. By mid-century, the historian John Gillis writes, “family had put itself on display.” The sentimentalized iconography of the Victorian family not only centered on images of mothers and children but also encouraged mothers to display their children in more public ways. New products and technologies facilitated the display of “family” through its children. The bassinet allowed women to place babies in the parlor rather than the nursery, situating them literally and figuratively at the center of the home and showcasing them before guests’ eyes. The perambulator made parading with children on the city streets into a fashion. The commercial availability of cheap photographs enabled eager families to represent themselves and their children more easily. The practice of taking pictures of babies and young children, on which the “virtual” baby contests relied, was itself a sign of new middle-class understandings of mothers and children. Over the course of the nineteenth century, photographic depictions of children shifted from emphasizing their importance as familial heirs to picturing them as individual objects of sentiment, while other popular cultural renderings made ideal children into becurled and dimpled cherubs. Alongside this new iconography emerged a related vocabulary for talking about children, who over the course of the nineteenth century were increasingly described as “cunning” and “cute,” terms that suggest their status as objects of emotional investment and icons of home and family.<sup>13</sup>

The origin of baby shows at agricultural fairs demonstrates their relationship to changes in the household economy and the ideology of domesticity. Though fairs had long engaged in forms of display, they were spectacles of production rather than of consumption. Begun to improve stock and crop production methods in the early nineteenth century, by mid-century agricultural fairs were well established throughout the country. Agricultural fairs employed a gendered ordering of activities and products consistent with the divisions of emotional and productive labor that existed in most households—men showed livestock and women domestic manufactures. Ohio’s county and state fairs were exemplary in this respect. Men in Ohio competed to have their handcrafted farm implements—plows, wagons, and cultivators—and their agricultural products—livestock, corn, and wheat—judged superior. Women could compete at the county and state level for title to the best ten yards of flannel or lensey, or for the best butter, honey, bread, cheese, and flowers.<sup>14</sup> Though men and women showed different goods, both competed as producers rather than as consumers of goods.

And while the baby show was a novelty in the 1850s, a number of fair organizers and observers made an effort to connect the baby show with the traditional functions of the fair: to stimulate and showcase excellence in home and agricultural industry. In its coverage of the nation’s first baby show, a writer in the *Ohio Columbian* playfully emphasized the interchangeability of babies with the other goods that women traditionally displayed at the fair. In the tent where the show took place, “the flowers, vegetables, &c., had been removed, and babies put in their place.” In the minds of the Ohio fair managers, babies belonged in the space dedicated to showcasing women’s wares. Nearly twenty years later, coverage of a New Hampshire baby show described “sixty pairs of proud and lov-

ing parents, who exhibited their offspring with the same pride with which they showed their fine cattle or mammoth vegetables." The *Augusta, Georgia Constitutionalist* opined that the baby show was a "good feature" of fairs, for it served "to encourage home industry and *domestic manufactures*." And though the *Constitutionalist* punned in jest, Georgia's fair organizers made a serious effort to connect the display of babies with the display of home handiwork. Fair regulations required that "all children entered for the premiums must be clad in garments made of domestic fabrics."<sup>15</sup> Requiring that women dress their infantile entries in homespun perhaps helped uneasy fairgoers assimilate this "new feature" into a traditional venue and into traditional understandings of the home as a site of production.

The Georgia fair rules notwithstanding, the substitution of women's traditional goods with babies expressed the economic and cultural changes underlying middle class domesticity. The emergence of baby shows also indicates how such changes effected the organization of fairs themselves. Though traditional, gender-specific competition continued, by the mid-nineteenth century fairs in Ohio and elsewhere were also beginning to focus more on both consumption and entertainment. As the emergence of a market economy made factory-produced goods more readily available, fairs supplemented their educational and competitive features with displays of ready-made consumer goods. At the same time, fair organizers increased the amount of space and time devoted to entertainments—from trotting races and menageries to human freaks and "slight of hand" men. Once a forum devoted to showcasing the products of labor, the new entertainments of the fair helped transform it into a major venue for rural Americans to participate in an emerging consumer culture and in forms of popular culture more characteristic of urban areas.<sup>16</sup> In the context both of the fair's gendered division of home produce and the increasing demand for entertainment, baby shows became a regular feature of fairs around the country.

Baby shows stood at the intersection of the fair's old functions and its new features. At a moment when some of women's traditional fair goods were being replaced by ready made consumer items, babies were, as Parker put it, "offered" both as one of women's products, like jam or textiles, and as a source of entertainment. The baby show thus positioned the exhibition of children on a continuum with fair-based displays of labor—whether of inanimate objects or farm animals—and dime-museum and sideshow-based displays of novelties, curiosities, and human otherness.<sup>17</sup> Like the fair's traditional displays, the baby show was a competition for the best, not the most curious. But unlike displays of women's home, or men's agricultural, products, the baby show claimed no didactic or "improving" function. And also unlike these—but like the freak show—it was an exhibition of human beings. Merging the conventions of the fair with those of the sideshow, the baby contests introduced a new form of exhibition: the objectification of normal human beings and of normalcy, coded as domesticity, itself. By making a spectacle of mothers and children, contests offered fairgoing families, and mothers in particular, an opportunity to validate the view that their chief function was childrearing.

Many contemporary observers saw the baby contest as an expression of domestic sentiments. Looking at babies was, reporters agreed, a source of pleasure. As one Ohio newspaper put the matter: "Who is there that does not like to

see a plump rosy-cheeked infant?" Likewise, writing to a Boston newspaper, P.T. Barnum declared—in typical bluster—that he could “conceive of nothing more beautiful and interesting than a display of fifty or one hundred of the handsomest, healthiest, and most intellectual BABIES that could be gathered together from various parts of the Union.”<sup>18</sup> Or, as the Chicago *Inter Ocean* opined about a baby show at the city’s Western Avenue Methodist Church, “a baby show is a legitimate thing. Fine, fat, plump, rosy babies are agreeable objects.” For spectators, the shows were a chance to contemplate the virtues that babies symbolized: the health of the nation, domesticity, innocence, even divinity. Misquoting the poet Alexander Pope, the *Inter Ocean* pointed out that a baby show reminded its visitors that “‘an honest baby is the noblest work of man.’”<sup>19</sup> Put simply, baby shows gave nineteenth-century Americans an opportunity to engage in a culturally significant pastime: baby-worship. Baby shows created a forum for the public display of “private” emotions and desires. Chief among these was maternal love.

Just as many observers found audiences’ desire to gaze on arrayed babies as perfectly natural, they also saw women’s choice to enter their children in baby contests as a predictable expression of proper maternal feeling. Baby shows were, after all, premised on the notion that, as Barnum put it, “every mother thought her baby the best and brightest.” They thus depended on what was seen as the entirely natural, but highly subjective and emotional, investment of each mother in her own offspring. Without the love-blind belief that her child was the best possible, a woman would not dare to offer her infant into competition. As a *Chicago Tribune* reporter said of the baby show at a local Methodist church, “there was only one really fine baby and—every mother possessed it!” Far from representing irrational zeal on the part of individual mothers, this pride and confidence was, in the minds of many, perfectly natural. In 1874, Michigan Governor John Bagley was invited by the Kalamazoo Agricultural Society to serve as a judge at the baby show in its upcoming fair. In declining, Bagley explained that it was impossible to be objective about babies. “Providence has very kindly implanted in the heart of every crow a decided belief that its ‘baby crow’ is the blackest of all crows.” And, Bagley went on, “no argument or council could ever convince the mother crow to the contrary—and this is right.” Maternal pride was not only natural, but served a protective function. Without it, Bagley gravely predicted, “we should have been drowned like kittens before we had reached our teens.” And though most commentators did not go so far as to assert that blind love prevented infanticide, most agreed that it was natural for mothers to think their children superior to all others. A baby show at a fair in Cedar Rapids, Iowa allowed participating mothers to vote for the contest’s winners. “Each baby had one vote,” papers across the country reported, and “that party speedily broke up.”<sup>20</sup> On one hand, having mothers vote in a mock civic ritual signals how the baby show brought matters of the home into public. On the other hand, the fact that reporters emphasized how the participating women were unable to rise above their own maternal biases suggests that the feelings unleashed and exhibited by the baby show were oriented to the intimate, the particular, and the private. It was precisely this tension between public and private—and the role of objectifying spectacle in destroying those distinctions—that so vexed the baby show’s many critics.

### “Vulgar Exhibitions”: Destroying Domesticity

In spite, or perhaps because, of their popularity and their rapid migration outwards from Ohio across the nation, baby shows were a subject of controversy in mid-nineteenth century America. Ironically, the same ideology that made contests popular also made them controversial. Though the culture of domesticity gave rise to a popular and public iconography of mothers and children, home and family, it also depended on a distinction between public and private, home and market. The exhibition of children threatened to destroy these distinctions. If supporters flocked to baby shows as paragons of domesticity, critics objected that exhibiting women and children violated hearth and home. In a widely reproduced letter to the *New York Tribune*, feminist and abolitionist Elizabeth Oakes Smith complained that Barnum's baby contest was little more than a “live cattle show,” an offense against womankind, and an event in which no truly respectable woman could participate. “There is something intrinsically revolting,” she wrote, “in this attempt to force aside the veil which screens and protects the chaste matron . . . within the sanctuary of the home” where she and her children can remain “exempt from the rude gaze of a prying curiosity.” Other writers, similarly dismayed at how the baby show turned private into public, echoed Oakes. The *New York Tribune* accused the shows of a “contemptuous disregard for the sanctities of home and life.” Another critic called the shows “indescribably sacrilegious and vulgar” and likened them to a “parade of unconscious innocence.” The *Prairie Farmer* agreed, explaining its brief against the contests at length. Most “sentiments and feelings connected with offspring,” the magazine explained, “can only grow in the shade of private and domestic life. To drag them forth into public view is to kill them. . . . Maternity is sacred at home, but disgusting abroad.”<sup>21</sup> In putting themselves and their offspring on display, mothers renounced fundamental canons of domesticity. They made public what should be private and they suggested that their children were, like cattle or the objects Barnum displayed in his museum, commodities.

The terms in which critics denounced baby shows demonstrates the uneasy marriage of domestic ideology, bodily exhibition, and commercial practices that characterized them. Because baby contests treated living beings as objects to be displayed, inspected, and ranked, critics charged that baby shows treated children like animals. More broadly, contest detractors worried that baby shows defined humanity in purely physical, bodily terms and ushered in a secular, materialist worldview that linked the contests to both capitalism and slavery. At the center of objectors' complaints stood the issue of objectification. Whether they worried that contests compared children to animals, slaves, or commodities, contest critics all shared the belief that the exhibition of human beings was a form of degradation rather than approbation.

Though some mid-century Americans likened the show of babies to that of women's domestic manufactures, others complained that the shows imitated the display of livestock. Coverage of the first baby show at Ohio's 1854 agricultural fair described the affair in terms usually reserved for the show of animals. Babies were “groomed” and “trotted out,” they were looked upon as “specimen” and “stock.” And though some reporters clearly had a good time punning on the analogy between babies and beasts, a Cleveland paper declared it “disgusting,

when the contents of the cradle and the hog pen are judged of by the same standard, when babies are estimated by the pound like fat calves in the shambles." By treating babies as cattle, the Ohio show degraded "the dignity of our common nature." The Chicago-based *Prairie Farmer* reminded readers that children, as human beings, were comprised of both a physical body and an "immortally intellectual" soul, the nature of which the baby show could not begin to measure and judge. Observing only babies' bodies, contest judges had no method for ascertaining a baby's true nature; the contest, by design, "can only contemplate physical points; judging of children as it judges of calves and chickens, by the feel of their skin and the color of their hair, the rotundity and length of their limbs, and the smoothness and symmetry of their bodies." In short, complained the magazine, baby shows "place the animal above the spiritual." Other newspapers agreed. The *Daily Cleveland Herald*, for example, urged parents, "do not degrade [your children] and the humanity to which they belong by putting them on a level with Berkshire pigs and Shanghai chickens." And while not explicitly critical of the baby show, coverage of an 1877 New York City show in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* depicted show attendees as inordinately fascinated with baby corporeality (Figure 1). As a young mother holds her baby and attempts to entertain it with a rattle, an inquisitive judge leans in to inspect the child, not only taking the child in with her eyes, but also squeezing the baby's fleshy, rounded legs. With her interest in the child's "limbs," the judge seems literally to be enacting the process decried by the *Prairie Farmer*—treating the child as mere matter.<sup>22</sup>

The problem for many observers of the baby show was that, unlike the show of blooded stock, the baby show could not claim "physical improvement" or any

Figure 1



*Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, December 15, 1877

other worthy goal for its purpose. Though Americans had become accustomed to viewing a variety of animals as proper objects of display, respectable opinion still distinguished between spectatorship that was likely to enlighten or merely to entertain. Gazing upon animals with a legitimate end in sight—to advance breeding, to gain knowledge of another part of the world, or to further one’s understanding of natural history—was acceptable. But simply looking at animals for pleasure, watching dancing dogs or trained monkeys, was suspect. This highly didactic view of animal exhibitions mirrored middle-class Americans’ larger belief that art, and hence all forms of entertainment and acts of spectatorship, should serve a moral function.<sup>23</sup> Unlike a real livestock show, however, the baby show seemed to offer spectacle without enlightenment. For, as the *Prairie Farmer* had suggested, the shows could not measure the essence of humanity, and thus could never do more than objectify human beings as mere matter. Even the *Boston Daily Advertiser*, which assured its readers that “we have no squeamishness about amusements,” decried baby shows in moral terms. The legitimacy of entertainments notwithstanding, “the showman must not pander to the low instincts of our nature,” the paper continued, declaring in conclusion: “We want no human cattle-show.”<sup>24</sup> Because mid-nineteenth century Americans believed that human beings differed fundamentally from animals, they concluded that infants could not benefit from being treated like livestock. Without a function, the baby show’s display of “infantile specimens” appeared to range dangerously close to the other amoral forms of entertainment overtaking American cities.

Though some made light of the animal-child equation, for other Americans it was plainly quite troubling. By locating the attributes of humanity in the body, baby shows not only equated children to livestock, but also raised vexing questions about race and slavery. As a structure premised on the competition between, and hierarchical ranking of, human beings, the baby show was easily transformed into a vehicle to debate racial equality. Abolitionist and women’s rights activist Lucretia Mott wrote a letter to the organizers of the 1854 Ohio fair in which she argued that “black babies should have been admitted to this exhibition and had an equal chance with the whites.” Mott’s wish was met by neither the Ohio fair nor by Barnum’s subsequent baby show in 1855. But where Mott saw a forum for equal opportunity, entrepreneurs saw an untapped market. Beginning in September of 1855, when Barnum teamed up with Colonel Wood to organize a baby show in Boston, a local shoemaker named Josiah Bateman announced that he would organize a “colored baby show” to take place on the same days as Barnum & Wood’s. Advertisements for Bateman’s show ran alongside Barnum’s in Boston papers, and Bateman promised that he would take his “colored” show to any town where Barnum went to organize an all-white show. Though the existence of parallel shows did not pit white and black babies directly against one another, newspapers speculated on which show would prove more successful, financially lucrative, and of “greater novelty.” Of course, the rivalry between showmen might have been contrived. Believing that it helped drive up public interest and ticket sales, Barnum had created false competition before.<sup>25</sup>

Whether Bateman was acting in concert or true competition with Barnum, antebellum Boston audiences took the display of African-American babies as an opportunity to refract questions of racial difference through embodied spectacle.

Bateman's show, wrote the *Boston Daily Atlas*, "will give the people a chance to test the intellectuality of the races by a new trial."<sup>26</sup> How the baby show would precisely measure such "intellectuality," the *Atlas* did not specify, but the stakes must have been clear to most antebellum Americans. Indeed, the black body was at the center of debates over racial equality and slavery.<sup>27</sup> In the context of such debates, rural fairs, museums and urban entertainments offered their mostly white audiences the chance to contemplate racial difference. Though the colored baby show was a "novelty," Bateman was hardly the first showman to provide an urban audience with racial spectacle. Blackface minstrelsy, along with exhibits such as Barnum's of Joice Heth and his "What Is It?" had made such political, moral, and scientific questions into the stuff of popular entertainment. Like the tracts of both abolitionists and polygenesists, popular entertainments offered racialized bodies up to scrutiny as signs of interior truth.<sup>28</sup> Whether the baby contests could, or should, function similarly was, to some minds, in question.

While baby show enthusiasts saw the exhibition of babies as consistent with the values of domesticity, for contest detractors, the exhibition and ranking of human beings suggested that, like animals and other commodities, humans were essentially material, physical objects. To some observers, this indelibly connected the shows not simply with the question of racial difference but also with slavery. At Ohio's first baby show, organizers read aloud a letter from Horace Greeley declaring that "much attention should be given to the development of the human constitution, in a country where able-bodied men sold for five hundred to fifteen hundred dollars a piece." The baby show, wrote one wry critic in the antislavery *National Era*, "is a very convenient adjunct to the favorite institution of the South." A correspondent in *Frederick Douglass' Paper* saw the matter similarly. He was particularly dismayed that baby shows offered prizes for multiple births: twins, triplets and, in the parlance of the day, quaterns. "We know of no one," he wrote, "but slaveholders anxious to change woman from an uniparous to a multiparous animal." Were contests to follow out this logic, slaveholders might begin "to throw aside all but the 'triplets' and 'quaterns' and reproduce from them. Who knows but that in time women would have 'litters' instead of a single offspring at a birth? Wonders never cease, but for a female to show what a good 'breeder' she is, to us is a most revolting spectacle."<sup>29</sup> Antebellum abolitionists saw in the contests the logic of slavery—not only in the comparison of humans to animals, but also in the "merchandizing" of feeling and the destruction of private domesticity, figured here as the exposition of reproduction, by the forces of the public marketplace.

Though many northern critics of the baby show saw it as an "adjunct" to slavery, southerners charged that the shows were a quintessentially northern institution rather than the logical outgrowth of southern society. An 1865 article in the Fayetteville, North Carolina *Observer*, sarcastically surveyed the "yankee mind." "From the concrete baby show to the abstract eagle striding across the content . . . everything yankee, whether practical or ideal, is grand," it sneered. And even after the Civil War, southerners continued to decry the baby show in regional terms. In 1870, a Mississippi newspaper was "disgusted" to hear that a baby show had been held in its state, and suggested that "such vulgar exhibitions ought to be left to the Yankees, who invented them." Like proslavery apol-

ogists, southern baby show opponents defended their society as more affective, more domestic, and less troublingly commercial than the free North. True reverence for mothers and babies, the Raymond, Mississippi *Hinds County Gazette* suggested, required upholding each mother's conviction that her baby was best and brightest rather than crushing her feelings under the weight of "objective" judgment. It would be "ungallant and unkind" for any judge to tell any mother that her baby was not as beautiful as the next. "This baby show business is yankee all over," the paper concluded, "and should not be copied by our people."<sup>31</sup> Ironically, both northern and southern critics agreed on the baby show's essential problem: that it objectified children and treated them as mere things to be inspected, measured, and evaluated in terms usually reserved for commodities. North and South, detractors agreed that esteem, affection, and public exhibition were incompatible.

Baby show critics linked the contests to slavery not only because they treated human beings as mere matter, that is to say as animals, but also because, like slavery, the baby shows represented the intrusion of the market into the home. As historians and literary critics have argued, many abolitionists understood slavery in terms of the categories of domestic ideology. Slavery was a problem of the corruption of the home—and hence all that was divine—by the market.<sup>32</sup> So too was the baby show. Beginning with the first baby show at Ohio's Agricultural Fair, critics of baby shows accused organizers of seeking profit. Rather than being a display of holy innocence, the baby show was actually, detractors worried, a form of capitalist alchemy that transformed unwitting infants into profitable commodities. As the Philadelphia-based *North American and United States Gazette* noted, the baby show was invented by the management of the Ohio fair in order to increase attendance and, not coincidentally, receipts. Though it was more sanguine about the Ohio baby show, the *New York Times* saw its benefits in commercial terms: "it brought in much company to the city, helped the hotels, improved the milk trade and did good to the venders [sic] of toys." And while a few observers detected an economic logic at work in the fair-based Ohio contest, once P.T. Barnum announced his intention to enter the fray, the profit-making dimensions of the baby show became acutely clear. Barnum was already famous for using all manner of advertising, showcasing, and humbuggery to draw patrons to his American Museum in New York City, and critics immediately declared his baby show "clap-trap to draw at his Museum" and a piece of "Yankee speculation." "The grand object" of the baby show, concluded one protest, was "the musical ring of the quarters." Accounts of Barnum's shows never failed to mention that "his baby show put money in his pocket," and many went so far as to report, often in great detail, how much Barnum earned each day that his Museum hosted such a show. During the first three days of his first baby show, in June of 1855, Barnum sold over forty thousand tickets and took in over eleven thousand dollars, the *New York Times* calculated. According to other sources, the baby show was Barnum's greatest single moneymaker since he had organized the sensational tour of the "Swedish Nightingale," Jenny Lind. In Barnum's world, it seemed to contest detractors, nothing was sacred and everything was for sale.<sup>33</sup>

Many mid-nineteenth century Americans could probably forgive P.T. Barnum for engaging in a little "yankee speculation." As nineteenth-century feminist and journalist Jane Gray Swisshelm put it, "nobody expects any respect

for humanity from Barnum.” But Barnum was not alone in approaching the baby show as an economic entity. The fundamental unsoundness of baby shows seemed to be confirmed when newspaper accounts linked avowedly illicit forms of commerce with contests in several cities. In Boston, where Barnum organized a baby show in September 1855, local papers reported that the city’s police court docket was overflowing with new cases “owing to the influx of strangers to see the Baby and other shows.” At the Boston baby show, pickpockets were active. The *Boston Daily Atlas* saw a continuum between thievery and the show, wryly noting that although Barnum dutifully warned the crowd to beware the thieves in their midst, he added that “if anybody was going to meddle with other people’s pockets, he should prefer to have a hand in it.”<sup>34</sup>

Pickpocketing was not the only form of fraud attached to baby shows. In several widely reported instances, the show itself was a swindle. In some towns, show organizers fled with the ticket receipts before awarding the prizes to competing mothers and children. In Worcester, Massachusetts, for example, the organizers of a baby show “stepped out,” never to return, while anxious mothers awaited their prize money. Twenty years later, a similar fate befell Newark, New Jersey mothers who were cheated out of their awards when show manager R.F. Porter absconded with the purse. And in 1877, a crowd of “irate mothers” threatened the manager of a baby show at New York City’s Midget Hall after he renegeed on his promise that every contestant, rather than just the winners, would receive a prize.<sup>35</sup> And while pickpockets and con men were the exception rather than the rule at the nation’s many baby shows, their presence laid bare the fact that, at bottom, baby shows turned children—and domestic affections—into money.

More troubling still, it was not just the organizers of such shows who seemed to view their potential in economic terms. The lure of prize money and goods suggested to mothers that they too, could view their children as cash cows. In a humorous article, the *Southern Cultivator* observed about one upcoming baby show, that “all motherdom is becoming interested in the premiums offered”—silver pitchers to “decorate her side-board or parlor mantle-shelf.” Disgusted by this crass materialism, a poet in an 1855 edition of the *Daily South Carolinian* chided “unnatural mothers” with a “greedy thirst/ For tempting prizes.” Far from believing that baby shows were an expression of natural maternal feelings, the Carolinian poet believed that the shows induced women to adopt the “unnatural” view that their children were a form of human capital. In 1862, an Ohio newspaper lamented that baby shows offered parents money for oddities: the fattest baby, the smallest baby, the greatest number in a plural birth. “To the parents of Ohio,” the paper complained, “is now held out the stimulus that the greater human infantile monster they can produce, the more money it will bring.” And in 1877, when the defrauded mothers of the Midget Hall exhibit explained their rage to a *New York Times* reporter, they pointed out that “when they consented to exhibit their children they had been promised that each mother would receive something, but now, not only did they not get a prize, but they had not received a cent for their two week’s attendance at Midget Hall.” Rather than protesting the immorality of show’s manager or charging him with desecrating maternity, the mothers were upset that he had failed to uphold his end of a transaction that was at base economic: babies + time spent on stage = prizes.<sup>36</sup>

In responding to the rapidly spreading baby show, mid-nineteenth century Americans focused their attention on Barnum's business tactics, swindling showmen, and greedy mothers, because each hinted that the line separating public and private, home and market, was not only violable, but was in fact fictional. When they complained that baby shows analogized infants to animals and slaves, mid-nineteenth century critics of baby shows operated on the assumption that displaying human beings as specimens for inspection and evaluation was a form of degradation and commodification. Critics likewise assumed that respectability, domesticity, and privacy were, on one hand, indissolubly linked and that, on the other hand, they were inherently counterpoised to the equally intertwined arenas of commerce and exhibition.

### **“The Darlings Are Made a Show Of”: Eroding Opposition**

Criticism of baby contests was strongest during the third quarter of the nineteenth century, but by century's end most opposition to baby contests had eroded. Though a number of important events and intellectual developments undermined critics' claims—the Civil War ended slavery and Darwinian evolution made the comparison of humans to animals less perilous, for example—baby shows did not simply mirror larger trends. Rather, by introducing a new form of display—the exhibition of the normal—baby contests helped to usher in a culture in which traditional oppositions such as public and private, home and market, objectification and approbation, were complementary rather than contradictory.

Baby contests acclimated Americans to the display not simply of domesticity, but of respectable women's bodies. The practice of exhibiting mothers as well as children helped erode the public/private boundary and demonstrates how the contests generated forms of display that showcased normalcy rather than difference. As the *Boston Daily Advertiser* pointed out, baby shows put women as well as children on display. Because mothers or nurses had to accompany children on stage, who could be assured that spectators were not looking at female rather than infantile forms? “No small share of attraction,” said the *Ohio Columbian* of the first baby contest, “was due to the magnetic forces of the mothers, most of whom were young, and many of them were very beautiful.”<sup>37</sup>

Shows provided the chance not only to gaze at beautiful women, but also to peer into the mysteries of sexuality and reproduction. Several reports of Barnum's first baby show in New York City lingered on the details of infant feeding and, more broadly, on the connections between babies and sex. Humorist Philanderer Q.K. Doesticks noted that many mothers on Barnum's stage had “movable fronts to their dresses.” He also predicted that in a year's time, Barnum would not be content with merely showing babies, but would instead “show the world the modus operandi of baby birth, with illustrations by the mothers of the babies who took the prizes this year, and who in another twelve-month will probably have no shame at all in the matter.”<sup>38</sup>

Having babies, and hence women, on stage, inevitably raised the issue not only of how babies were produced, but also how they were maintained, and this too led back to women's bodies. A nursery, noted the *New York Times*, had been

set up in the American Museum for the comfort of mothers and their children. The sign on its door barred all others from entering. Though the *Times*' reporter could not gain entrance to the nursery, the matron in charge of it explained some of the contents to him: cradles, jumpers, and sugar-tits. "But," noted the reporter, "there were many things concerning the use of which the good lady was, very properly, no doubt, silent." Among these, the reporter was particularly drawn to a display case advertising "Dr. C.H. Needham's patent improved breast pumps and nipple-shield." The reporter demurred that he had "not a shadow of an idea" what such devices might do, but noted their presence only "for the benefit of the initiated."<sup>39</sup> The presence of Needham's nursing products indicated both the interpenetration of home with consumer marketplace and the thinly veiled interest in women's bodies that baby shows aroused.

Though the chance to gaze at beautiful women may have been an incident to the baby contest's avowed purpose, some regarded it as the main feature. The *Chicago Tribune* reported that Barnum had constructed "a raised platform" at his show "in order that the ladies may be seen to better advantage by the crowd." The Savannah, Georgia *Daily News and Herald* suggested that it was not just the mothers and nurses of babies who formed part of the attraction for men. Rather, the baby show initiated a chain of gazes: mothers went to look at their babies, fathers went to look at their wives, young women went to look at the babies, and "the young men—ah—what must the young men go for?" the paper asked. "Why, to see the young ladies, of course."<sup>40</sup> The notion that in displaying their wares at fairs, women were actually displaying their bodies and providing access to female sexuality was not particular to baby shows, but also dogged women's ubiquitous fundraising fairs and bazaars throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>41</sup> By bringing throngs of women together in a public space, baby shows became a spectacle not just of childhood, but also of the female form.

Commentators saw the exhibition of women as an extension of baby shows, and the two were in fact linked both conceptually and practically. In 1855, the *New York Express* reported that Barnum's "exhibition in the *human* line, had [not] ended with the Hairy Woman and the Baby Show." The "great showman" was now going to put on a show "of the prettiest women in America." But Barnum's contest was a virtual one. He would receive daguerreotypes from around the nation, post them in his Museum, and allow the public to come and vote for its favorite. The winners were to be entered into a book, being published by a Parisian house, featuring "the most distinguished female beauties in the world." In 1870, the *New York Times* sarcastically remarked that if the logic of baby shows were carried to its "legitimate conclusion," we should have "not only baby-shows, but men and women shows as well."<sup>42</sup>

More than just logically connected, baby shows and female beauty contests were organizationally connected as well. What seemed a joke to the *Times* in 1870 was, a few years later, a reality—at least for women—as an 1873 baby show in San Francisco added a prize for the "handsomest mother," an innovation subsequently repeated around the country.<sup>43</sup> Like Barnum, other impresarios often traded in all manner of human display and began, after successful baby shows, to branch out into beauty contests. Benjamin Hitchcock, for example, who had organized the Baby Show at New York City's Midget Hall in 1877, of-

ferred the “Congress of Beauty and Culture” at Gilmore’s Garden one year later. The “congress” was little more than a hundred-odd women standing on a stage, accompanied by a brass band.<sup>44</sup>

As the baby show gave rise to female beauty contests it stood squarely in the middle of what theater historian Robert Allen has described as a mid-nineteenth century “struggle between spectacle and mimesis” in the display of the female body. In antebellum American dramas, women appeared on stage chiefly as representatives of domesticity and its allied virtues—purity and piety. Costuming deflected attention from the female body on stage while the play’s mimetic characteristics—its narrative and scripting—“covered” the female actresses’ body in virtue and made her presence on stage a means to a respectable end, the transmission of a moral message. When American sculptors began to craft female nudes and semi-nudes in the style of the ancients, they worked hard to situate their work within the conventions of high art and to spin accompanying narratives that might symbolically clothe the female body in meaning, defusing spectacle—sheer gazing and pure pleasure—in favor of mimesis. But beginning with the introduction of ballet in the late 1820s and tableaux vivants in the 1830s, American theater audiences were alternately delighted and outraged by the emergence of less narrativized, more spectacular displays of the female body. And in the postbellum era, novel forms of theatrical entertainment such as burlesque provided ever more daring stagings of female arms and legs.<sup>45</sup>

Baby shows sat somewhere between conventional melodrama and newer, more explicitly spectacular forms of entertainment. By holding babies on their laps, female participants performed a mimesis of maternity and domesticity and were thus clothed by conventions similar to those operating in contemporary theatrical melodrama. But, of course, in the baby show there was no real script and no plot aside from the implied story of motherhood in the background and the drama of competition in the foreground. Baby show mothers, moreover, simply sat on stage for hours allowing, indeed asking, anyone who entered to look at them. Not fully “covered” by their small infants, participating mothers could easily be looked upon not as a means—as in mimesis—but as an end—as in spectacle. Like critics’ claim that, because baby shows erroneously equated children with animals, they served no function, the shows’ display of women seemed to underline their status as amusement and spectacle. No wonder, then, that the nineteenth century baby show was not only a source of both outrage and thinly veiled erotic pleasure, but also a gateway to the overtly spectacular female beauty contest.

In linking domesticity with public spectacle rather than with the “shade” of privacy, the baby show was joined by other late-nineteenth-century cultural phenomena. From the middle of the nineteenth-century forward, the links between gender, respectability and privacy were both loosened and rearranged. With the rise of matinee theater designed for “respectable” women, the emergence of department stores and urban shopping districts such as Ladies Mile in New York City, what Richard Butsch calls a new “gendered geography” took shape in the nation’s cities. Where norms of respectability formerly barred women from public spaces, in the late-nineteenth century public spaces were deemed reputable or not according to whether women could safely enter them. As on the stage, respectable women’s presence in public still had to be carefully

managed to avoid the imputation of sexuality. To manage such contradictions, nineteenth-century etiquette manuals spelled out elaborate rules for comportment in the crowded, public, and overly-familiar spaces of the nation's expanding metropolises. Women, advice authors knew, would inevitably be looked at as they ambled city streets and sat on streetcars and railroads; but a woman could create a zone of privacy around herself by refusing to return the gaze and by practicing a closed body language. The goal was to be able to navigate public space shrouded by what one manual called "a symbolic shield of privacy." Just as holding a baby on one's lap might help transform spectacle into mimesis, women's clothing and bodily comportment were used to mediate between public and private in spaces where such boundaries were not apparent.<sup>46</sup> Besides women's techniques of self-management, architecture and interior decoration too helped create spaces of safety for women in the city. By decorating hotel lobbies, railcar interiors, and department stores in the manner of middle-class parlors, mid and late-nineteenth commercial entrepreneurs extended the idioms of domestic space outward from the home into the city.<sup>47</sup> And though this extension was predicated on the difference between domestic and public space, the practice of course collapsed the two. Bringing women out into public—and literally onto the stage—in a spectacle of motherhood, baby shows similarly eroded such boundaries.

Perhaps fittingly, Barnum's American Museum is widely regarded as a vanguard institution of "respectable," female-friendly urban entertainment. Indeed, his baby contests helped him to cement this reputation. In addition to arguing that baby shows expressed rather than destroyed the finer feelings of home and family, show defenders like Barnum pointed out that in reality women and children did not spend their lives cloistered by the hearth, but were often "on display" in the course of daily living. Indeed, Barnum suggested that maternal pride transformed scenes from everyday life into a series of baby shows. Mothers of "unusually fine" children, he claimed, "take great pleasure in exhibiting them, whether in the family circle, the steamboat, or railroad car." The *Chicago Tribune* similarly remarked that baby shows were but an extreme form of a daily occurrence, and "are a necessity to maternal and paternal existence . . . From the time of their birth until they cast aside the swaddling clothes . . . the darlings are made a show of." Prominent female physician Lydia Fowler made a similar point in a speech she delivered at Barnum's baby show. Fowler acknowledged that critics called baby shows "cattle shows," but she retorted that merely being in public was not degrading. "We have just as much reason to say that the five hundred school children who visited the Crystal Palace a few days since were a cattle show, as the hundred beautiful babies here exhibited."<sup>48</sup> When Barnum and Fowler reminded baby show critics that women and children were always on display in urban spaces they not only linked the baby show and the home with the world of the theater and the world of the street, but also they repudiated the invisible boundaries that advice manuals sought to erect in the face of women's—and children's—publicity.

Echoing the argument that pride and love led inexorably to exhibition, comments like those of Barnum's and Fowler's seamlessly connected the "private" space of the home with the avowedly "public" spaces of transportation. Like those who assumed that showing babies was the perfect expression of parents'

natural feelings of love and pride, these comments pointed out that parents continually displayed their babies and that children congregated in public all the time. What made some forms of publicity acceptable and others degrading? Some agreed with Barnum's and Fowler's logic; by the end of century any large gathering of children in public, whether an organized contest or not, might be referred to as a "baby show." The *New York Times*, for example, called the throngs of women with baby carriages on the city streets a "veritable baby show." Like Fowler and Barnum, the *Times* recognized that whenever women and children ventured out, they were on display. In calling the presence of women and children on the street a "baby show," the paper, moreover, identified the contests as the archetypal and original form of such public display.

Part of the reason that baby shows led in the direction of beauty shows was because they turned the exhibition of human beings from freakery to normalcy. Though detractors worried that all human display was tainted by association with the freak or livestock show, defenders and promoters of the shows suggested that being an object of display was consistent with domestic values. In the baby show, domesticity rather than difference was performed by mothers and children and witnessed by spectators. This is perhaps most clearly demonstrated by the increasing embrace of baby shows among African Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

While "colored" baby shows were, as we have seen, even more perilously linked to spectacles of difference for African-Americans than for whites, baby shows also offered a chance to perform normalcy in terms defined by the culture of middle-class domesticity. African American participants in such shows understood the possibilities and the perils of putting their children on display. In the late 1890s, a dispute broke out between African-American parents and the organizers of a "colored" baby show at an exposition in Los Angeles. After the show's organizer had printed up handbills that apparently described the show's participants as "little coons" and "pickanninies," a delegation of mothers protested to the management. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, the mothers explained that "the Afro-American of today was a very different being from the old-time 'nigger' and would not tolerate the same treatment from the white people." They demanded that the manager forbid the press from referring to their children in derogatory terms and, after the manager said he could offer no such assurances, all but a handful of mothers withdrew their babies from the show.<sup>50</sup> Though this Los Angeles show clearly illustrates the continued appeal of racially degrading spectacles in mainstream popular culture, it also demonstrates how African-American mothers viewed the baby show as a chance to claim public space in a manner that would function to include rather than degrade their children.

As an alternative to such commercial, white-managed shows, some African-American churches and community organizations organized their own baby shows. During the nineteenth century, A.M.E. and Baptist churches, for example, used baby shows as forms of entertainment and as fundraising tools, a practice that continued into the twentieth century with church-sponsored contests in cities and towns from Illinois and Wisconsin to Ohio, Minnesota, Texas, and Michigan. In the 1910s, Chicago's African-American, south-side Clotee Scott Settlement organized a baby show at which Ida B. Wells presided as a judge. As

the *Chicago Defender* explained, the contest's purpose was both to draw audiences to the settlement and to arouse "race pride." Continuing the latter, in the 1920s, women in local chapters of the NAACP used baby contests as a fundraising tool and the organization's magazine, *The Crisis*, regularly featured virtual contests, lining its pages with portraits of African-American babies.<sup>51</sup> Whereas earlier in the nineteenth century, respectability had been linked through domesticity to privacy, by the turn of the century a class-based politics of respectability among African Americans tied the spectacle of childhood to the expression of what Michele Mitchell identifies as a postbellum politics of "racial destiny."<sup>52</sup>

Baby contests helped erode traditional oppositions not only between public and private, objectification and esteem, but also between home and market. Showmen and other capitalist impresarios alike understood that love for children could be a source of great profit. Ironically, the middle-class ideology of domesticity, with its forms of purportedly non-economic investment in children, gave rise to a consumer market in child-specific goods. During the same years as the baby show's ascendance, from the second half of the nineteenth century forward, this market multiplied. Not only could mid- to late-nineteenth century parents read more childrearing advice than ever before, but they could now also purchase more products made specifically for children than ever before. From special formulas and baby foods to toys and prams, the designation of childhood as a separate, special period of life had its parallel in the creation of children's products as a niche market.<sup>53</sup> While the middle-class view of children required removing children from the market as producers, it reintroduced children—or their parental proxies—as consumers.

The logic of the baby show—parental investment in children as objects of display—could inspire great expenditure on the part of participating families. After a baby show was cancelled in Cincinnati, one man jokingly wrote a letter to the editor demanding that the proprietors of the failed show compensate him for "the trouble I have been put to, in getting my baby ready for the exhibition, and for the pecuniary expense to which I have been subjected in consequence." In addition to itemizing the cost of his own mental distress, the disappointed father listed the costs of blue ribbon "for trimming baby's sleeves," pap for fattening the baby, a tin rattle and a pound of peppermint candy "for keeping baby quiet during exhibition," and a piece of oiled silk. The father's lament was echoed years later by one reporter who noted that at the baby show, "all are gotten up regardless of expense." A Buffalo, New York baby show was, newspapers reported, successful at "bringing a shower of dimes into the pockets of vendors of Victoria pins, baby jumpers, Godfreys cordial, patent diaper folders, catnip wind expellers, and double distilled blackberry syrup." *Vanity Fair* likewise joked that in preparation for an 1862 baby show at Barnum's Museum, mothers were buying up baby-improving potions by the gallon, inventors were hard at work on contraptions to sell at the show, and merchants were compiling rattles, ribbons, and other "Baby's Notions."<sup>54</sup>

By the end of the century, it was commonplace for reportage to describe participating babies as lavishly attired, or to comment on how "proud mothers" were busy "making extensive preparations to have their darlings dressed in the sweetest and most becoming attire" for the baby show. One newspaper promised its readers a full description of the "many elegant baby dresses" worn

by show participants, “for babyhood has its fashions as well as womanhood.”<sup>55</sup> If, as William Leach has suggested, a core value of fin-de-siecle consumer capitalism was “the concept of show,” then the baby show was an important institution in its development.<sup>56</sup> Baby shows not only helped habituate Americans to think of human display and objectification as a form of esteem rather than a means of degradation, but also were functionally integrated into the emergent consumer culture of late-nineteenth century America.

Shows not only aroused consumerist impulses in mothers, but also provided an advertising platform for merchants, who began to sponsor contests, contribute prizes, and use prize-winning babies to advertise products. In an 1870 baby show held in Memphis, local merchants Wheeler, Pickens & Co. presented a “beautiful little perambulator” to the prize-winning infant and her mother. And in 1873, “dealers in baby-wagons, cradles, sucking bottles, wearing apparel, dolls, toys, &c.” flocked to a San Francisco show “to exhibit samples of their goods” before the assembled crowd. This trend continued as local businessmen across the country contributed their wares—from strollers and cribs to stoves and sewing machines—in exchange for recognition of their sponsorship at the show and in the newspaper. When a St. Louis reporter followed Harry Gilbert, a commercial baby show organizer, as he made his preparations for an upcoming contest, Gilbert explained that he always got all the necessary chairs and other services donated by local companies. “Generally [I] get some big chair firm into that; it’s an advertisement,” he explained, “and then, again, some enterprising photographer usually presents the best babies with their pictures.”<sup>57</sup>

While contest detractors worried that participating mothers might be in it just for the prize money and goods, the baby show was clearly viewed as a profit-making boon by any businessman who could plausibly connect his wares to the love—and display—of children. By the 1890s, baby shows were a regular, and highly popular, feature of Los Angeles’ Home Products Exposition and many department stores reversed the direction of travel—instead of showcasing their wares at baby shows, they had women come into department stores to showcase their babies. And manufacturers, such as the makers of soothing syrups, Grape Nuts cereal, and Ripans Tabules (Figure 2), used prize-winning babies to endorse their products.<sup>58</sup>

While mid-nineteenth century baby shows were likely to literally or imaginatively combine children with livestock, late-nineteenth century shows equated children with consumer goods. In Milwaukee, for example, an 1895 show was a joint “baby show and doll exposition,” while the prettiest baby girl in a Galveston, Texas show earned a “doll and doll buggy”—a reproduction of herself in commodity form. The next year, Galveston organizers promised that when the 200 or 300 babies were arrayed “on exhibition” they would be “as pretty as the pictures on the modern souvenir advertising card.” And indeed, the comparison was apt: children proliferated as advertising icons in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>59</sup> The interconnection of children with consumer products was also evinced when some newspapers regarded an exhibition of products designed for the home nursery as fulfilling the final logic of the baby show. “A baby’s exhibition without the baby is the latest in the line of shows,” reported the *Milwaukee Journal*. The show will “give a clear idea of all the appliances most useful to the monarch of the nursery and his attendants.” Among the novelties

Figure 2



New York Times, August 19, 1897.

presented at this show was a corset designed especially for babies. Though the *Journal* admitted that some might be shocked by the thought of "arraying infantile forms in a 'horrid' corset," the paper explained that they were valuable for babies "unable to hold their small selves together long enough to sit up and look pleasant."<sup>60</sup> The need for infants to "sit up and look pleasant" was a goal, needless to say, intimately connected to the baby show.

When they began in 1854, baby contests were both embraced as a means of expressing personal and cultural adulation for children, and strongly criticized as "indescribably sacrilegious and vulgar," in their "disregard for the sanctities of home." "Keep the little ones by the fireside," wrote one objector, "where they are truly regarded as treasures."<sup>61</sup> In the mid-nineteenth century, it was far from clear that putting babies on display was a form of approbation. Indeed, in subjecting children to public examination, evaluating them in strictly physical terms, and offering cash rewards to participants, the baby show seemed to objectify children, slotting them into the same category as animals, freaks, and slaves. But by

the turn of the century, most such objections to the baby show were subsumed by a general acceptance of the contests as fun, harmless, and expressive of domestic sentiments. The waning of opposition to baby contests was, in part, a product of changes wrought by the shows themselves. By putting women and children on display and suggesting that their exhibition was consistent with domesticity, baby shows helped erode the boundaries between public and private, home and market, objectification and esteem. Contests helped to create a culture in which human beings could be displayed as exemplars of normalcy and exhibition could be a form of love.

By the early twentieth century, baby shows were not only acceptable, but represented an orthodoxy of their own. Beginning in the 1910s, child welfare reformers began a campaign to replace what they regarded as the prideful, subjective, and sentimental baby show with an objective, scientific, and educative form of baby contest. To the promoters of the new baby shows, which they called "better baby" contests, the problem with the orthodox baby show was not that it treated humans like commodities such as cattle (and slaves), or that it dragged private feelings into the public sphere, but rather that it failed to do so. In a *Woman's Home Companion* article covering one of the first better baby contests at the Iowa State Fair, reporter John J. Biddison described fair-goers' shock when the usual baby show was replaced with the new health contest: "Something was wrong. There was no array of smiling mothers and babies listening to fulsome compliments. There were no fatherly judges patting baby heads and chucking dimpled chins. There was no balloting for the prettiest and sweetest."<sup>62</sup>

Instead, wrote Biddison, the new contests would follow the model provided by other divisions of the fair. "For several decades," he explained, "Iowa has been standardizing corn, cattle and hogs. Now, by precisely the same scientific methods, they have begun to standardize their babies." Writing in his weekly *Chicago Tribune* column, physician W.A. Evans explained to readers that unlike the old baby shows, "in the new style baby show the babies are scored in minutest detail and the award is on a mathematical basis."<sup>63</sup> Where mid-nineteenth century Americans had either disavowed or decried the baby show's equation of children with livestock, in the early twentieth century, better baby contest organizers criticized the old shows for *failing* to do precisely what the *Prairie Farmer* and others feared: to define and evaluate children in purely physical terms. Better baby contests were, like the original shows, after normalcy, but they defined the "normal" in statistical rather than sentimental terms.

The distance between the fears of nineteenth century baby show critics and the hopes of twentieth-century better baby contest boosters no doubt owes a great deal to the end of slavery, to changes in the relative authority of religion and science, and particularly to the influence of Darwinian and eugenic paradigms. But it also speaks to how thoroughly Americans had come to reconcile sentiment with spectacle. If mid-nineteenth century critics feared that the display of children destroyed domestic feelings, twentieth century reformers feared that the show of babies was nothing *but* sentiment. What the latter failed to realize was how much the orthodox baby show had already transformed the terms of human display by integrating the display of children's bodies with the values of domesticity and by collapsing modes of exhibition, practices of consumerism, and sentiments of home. Only by ignoring the transformations of the

previous half-century could the new contests organizers see their call to treat children as livestock as revolutionary rather than redundant.

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## ENDNOTES

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