



**Donald T. Blume**

**AMBROSE BIERCE'S  
CIVILIANS AND SOLDIERS  
IN CONTEXT**

**A CRITICAL STUDY**

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Soldiers in Context

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*Donald T. Blume*



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*To those who have gone before  
and to Professor Joseph R. McElrath Jr.,  
my mentor and dissertation director at the Florida State University;  
Professor Hershel Parker, my mentor at the University of Delaware;  
and my parents, Robert and Dorothy Blume.*

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My, friends, we are pigmies and barbarians. We have hardly the rudiments of a true civilization; compared with the splendor of which we catch dim glimpses in the fading past, ours are as an illumination of tallow candles. We know no more than the ancients; we only know other things; but nothing in which is an assurance of perpetuity, and nothing which is truly wisdom. Our vaunted *elixir vitae* is the art of printing with movable types. What good will those do when posterity, struck by the inevitable intellectual blight, shall have ceased to read what is printed? Our libraries will become their stables, our books their fuel.

AMBROSE BIERCE, "PRATTLE"



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## Introduction

In 1962, fifty years after the last volume of Ambrose Bierce's *Collected Works* was published, Lawrence Berkove, in his groundbreaking dissertation, "Ambrose Bierce's Concern with Mind and Man," identified the necessity for scholars to divorce their criticism of Bierce's fiction from the cult of Bierce the man. Berkove's ability to recognize this need can be traced to (or may result from) his willingness to reconsider Bierce as a writer. In his introduction, Berkove, in laying the groundwork for his own study, called more generally for a new kind of examination: "A critical reappraisal is certainly needed, and it should center on Bierce's works instead of his biography" (4). In the decades since Berkove first charted this course, a succession of critical analyses has followed; ironically, these are often so closely focused on Bierce's literary works that they largely exclude thoughtful considerations of relevant biographical material. Of course, Berkove did not mean for scholars to disregard biographical data: he was simply trying to correct an imbalance caused by the long-standing critical fixation on Bierce's mysterious disappearance.

No products of Bierce's literary career are more in need of a critical reappraisal conducted along the lines Berkove has proposed than the nineteen stories that Bierce collected and published in 1892 under the title *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*. To properly understand these stories it is necessary to comprehend the contexts in which they were initially composed and published, and subsequently revised and ordered for republication. The first step in this search for understanding is to consider how the stories fit into Bierce's career as a professional writer. In particular, while all of Bierce's "Soldiers" stories owe an obvious debt to his lengthy service in the Union Army during the Civil War, much long overlooked evidence suggests that they and the "Civilians" stories owe an equally important, but presently less visible obligation to his service as a professional writer. In using the term "professional writer" I mean that Bierce supported himself by writing and editing for a series of newspapers and other publications and that his most typical writing,

found in “Prattle,” was topical in nature as it addressed interests predominantly local and current. Indeed, while Bierce was a proven editor and author who could produce large amounts of diverse original copy when needed to fill space, he was originally hired and long retained by William Randolph Hearst on the strength of his “Prattle” column. In other words, the writings traditionally viewed as comprising Bierce’s literary productions, including the stories of *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*, form only a relatively small subset of his professional work. A key goal of this study will thus be to reconnect the stories that comprise *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* with their original host publications and related materials.

While remembered today chiefly for his short stories, Almighty God Bierce (as Arthur McEwen of the *San Francisco Examiner* called him) had been dubbed by earlier critics the “literary lion” of the West Coast not because of his short stories but because of his authorship of the column called “Prattle.”<sup>1</sup> Once again, Lawrence Berkove was the first scholar to draw attention to the relevance of the material found in “Prattle” to Bierce’s short stories:

One after another, most, if not all, of the stories which were to be published in *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* in 1891 and *Can Such Things Be?* in 1893 were first printed in the *Examiner* between 1887 and 1893, and were accompanied by autobiographical sketches and “Prattle” articles which were closely akin to them in subject and tone. (24)

Although the focus of Berkove’s dissertation led him away from a close consideration of these “Prattle” entries, in this study they will prove to be indispensable in understanding where and how Bierce’s stories originated and developed, and how we should read them. Bierce’s “Prattle” column constituted the central core of his identity as a professional writer in California. From March 1877, when he began writing “Prattle” for the *Argonaut*, a San Francisco-based weekly paper published by Frank Pixley and Fred Somers, and through the 1892 publication of his collection of Civil War and civilian-based short stories, “Prattle” provided Bierce with a platform for communicating his views on a wide range of topics to his reading audience.<sup>2</sup> Conversely, because Bierce spent most of the years from 1875 to 1899 in the San Francisco area in voluntary and perhaps deliberate exile from the literary centers of the East Coast, his most productive years as a professional writer passed relatively unnoticed by the nation’s literary mainstream.<sup>3</sup>

Eventually Bierce did receive a measure of national recognition. Early in 1896, at the direction of Hearst, he relocated to Washington, D.C., to report on a particularly sensational congressional antitrust investigation involving San Francisco’s own resident railroad baron, Collis P. Huntington. With this

relocation, Bierce temporarily gained a national following on the strength of his considerable talents as a professional journalist. Ironically, this wider recognition led to developments that effectively obscured the importance of Bierce's earlier West Coast career. Thus in 1898 G. P. Putnam's published a revised and expanded collection of Bierce's "Soldiers" and "Civilians" stories, *In the Midst of Life: Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*, bringing the revised volume with its twenty-two stories, and the literary talents of the author, to the attention of a national audience.<sup>4</sup> This publication was eventually followed by the production of twelve volumes of diverse material in *The Collected Works of Ambrose Bierce*, published by Walter Neale between 1909 and 1912. The second volume of this work, *In the Midst of Life (Tales of Soldiers and Civilians)*, published in 1909 and containing twenty-six stories, was a much expanded and altered version of the original 1892 collection. In part because of these two later collections, the full significance of Bierce's earlier wide-ranging and yet often interrelated Californian publications during his tenure as the West Coast's generally recognized premier professional writer has never been fully appreciated by scholars.

Then again, Bierce was himself at least partially responsible for this critical neglect: during his later years he regularly and vociferously claimed that newspapers and the Hearst publishing empire in particular had mangled his prose, and that writing for a newspaper audience did not hold a writer to the more exacting standards of book publishing. Despite their apparent comprehensiveness, these statements, largely surfacing in letters to editors of Hearst publications or to Bierce's friends following his establishment of a national reputation, do not accurately reflect Bierce's experiences in San Francisco during the 1880s and early 1890s. While Bierce understandably viewed book-based republications of his more literary newspaper writings as opportunities to remove both the errata of the newspaper typesetters and the stylistic taint with which such ephemeral publications were frequently besmirched, the degree of freedom he had to publish what he wanted during his career as a San Francisco-based journalist was quite extraordinary. In other words, during the important early *Examiner* years Bierce's writings were remarkably free from the twin ravages of the incompetent typesetter and the misguided editorial pencil. This is not to suggest that Bierce did not complain of the *Examiner* typesetters: he did, but the complaints were rather muted and, when they appeared publicly in the lines of "Prattle," typically quite good-natured. And as for editorial interference, as long as Bierce was writing for the *Examiner*, which was under the direct control and supervision of Hearst, this does not seem to have been even a minor issue for Bierce. However, once Bierce's column began appearing in different Hearst publications this situation changed. In particular, the editors of the *New York Journal*



apparently quite often broke the letter of the contract Bierce had with Hearst, which guaranteed that nothing Bierce wrote for his column could be altered. Thus, one source of recurrent aggravation for Bierce came about whenever he detected such unauthorized changes. Obviously Bierce was not able to police the editing activities of all the Hearst editors at all times, and not surprisingly many of his complaints about editing policies under Hearst are due to such incidents.

Influenced in part by what may have been Bierce's own belief that his revisions of individual stories inevitably resulted in improvements, and by his suggestions that Hearst's editors and typesetters had mangled his work, scholars have generally considered Bierce's revisions of earlier writings to be relatively unproblematic examples of authoritative self-editing reflecting his efforts to produce more authoritative works. This conclusion has undoubtedly been accorded even more credence by critics in light of Bierce's self-acknowledged expertise in grammatical matters. Bierce, throughout his career, certainly expended copious amounts of intellectual energy battling misapplied punctuation marks, colloquialisms, and perceived grammatical blunders found in his writings. Upon closer examination, it becomes apparent that Bierce's interest in this area was intricately bound up with his public role as the author of "Prattle": no small part of his "Prattle"-based reputation rested on his persistent identification of the importance of paying proper attention to such details. The literary capstone on this particular pillar of Bierce's professional persona is found in his book *Write It Right*, coincidentally published by Walter Neale in 1909, the same year the *Collected Works* version of *In the Midst of Life (Tales of Soldiers and Civilians)* appeared.

Of course, Bierce was not merely a grammarian. Aside from the material collected and republished in the twelve volumes of the *Collected Works*, there is a large mass of Bierce material that remains known but largely unread. If not always literary itself, this material is often an important source of information about Bierce's literary endeavors, and as previously noted the chief repository of this information is "Prattle." Because Bierce himself at times disparaged his journalistic writings, his stance has perhaps led critics to wrongly dismiss the material's significance. In fact, the material is both of crucial importance to understanding Bierce's acknowledged literary writings, and of significant literary merit in its own right.

The history of "Prattle" is in a very real sense the history of Bierce's career as a journalist, a career that began shortly after Bierce arrived in San Francisco in the late autumn of 1866, having accompanied William B. Hazen, his former Civil War commander, on a mapping expedition westward from Omaha, Nebraska.<sup>5</sup> While "Prattle" or "The Prattler" as it was first called was launched in the *Argonaut* in March 1877, from December 1868 through

March 9, 1872, Bierce had been the editor of the weekly *San Francisco News Letter and California Advertiser*. At the *News Letter*, part of his duties, as noted by Carey McWilliams, author of the most comprehensive and reliable *Ambrose Bierce: A Biography*, had been to continue a preexisting column, "The Town Crier." McWilliams correctly points out that "The Town Crier" was effectively "Prattle" under a different header (83–85). Drawing on McWilliams's biography, it is clear that the decade of the 1870s was an interesting one for Bierce, but here the highlights will suffice. Following his December 25, 1871, marriage to Mary Ellen, or Mollie, Day, Bierce moved to England in the spring of 1872 and remained there through the summer of 1875 (McWilliams 92–114). Settling again in San Francisco, Bierce temporarily resumed writing for the *News Letter* and perhaps other periodicals before accepting the position of managing editor at Frank Pixley's newly launched weekly, the *Argonaut*, where he launched "Prattle" in March 1877 (122). Bierce's tenure at the *Argonaut* effectively came to an end in the spring of 1880 when he resigned from his editorial position for an abortive stint as an official for the Black Hills Placer Mining Company in the Dakota territory (144).

On March 5, 1881, his mining days behind him, Bierce brought his "Prattle" column with him to the *Wasp*, another San Francisco-based weekly newspaper. As the paper's editor, Bierce worked at the *Wasp* until at least September 11, 1886, usually contributing a full page of "Prattle" material in addition to weekly editorial columns and an assortment of short pieces of fiction in both prose and poetry, many of which remain formally unidentified or uncollected.<sup>6</sup> Then departing from the *Wasp*, Bierce found temporary employment at the *News Letter*, where, beginning on October 30, 1886, and continuing through March 5, 1887, he again authored the paper's signature "Town Crier" column. Ultimately, early in 1887 Bierce was hired by William Randolph Hearst and brought "Prattle" with him to the Sunday editorial page of the *San Francisco Examiner*, where it appeared for the first time on March 27, 1887.

Following his pattern established at the *Argonaut* and continued in the *Wasp*, with a few interruptions, Bierce published his column on a weekly basis in the *Examiner* from March 1887 through December 1895. While largely outside the scope of this study, the remaining history of "Prattle" should be briefly summarized. In January 1896 "Prattle" disappeared from the *Examiner* when Hearst sent Bierce to Washington to cover the investigation of Collis P. Huntington's railroad empire by the U.S. Senate. Although upon his return to San Francisco in mid-1896 Bierce quickly resumed writing "Prattle," the paper was both expanding and changing greatly during this period. Thus, though Bierce continued to publish "Prattle" (replaced by "War Topics" during the Spanish-American War), his position at the increasingly gaudy *Examiner* during these later years was arguably rather diminished. In the spring of 1899

Bierce left San Francisco for the East Coast, taking his column with him. At times under different titles and with somewhat less regularity, “Prattle” continued to appear in various Hearst publications, including the *Examiner*, the New York-based *Journal*, and *Cosmopolitan*, a literary magazine and the last Hearst publication for which Bierce wrote. Under the title “The Passing Show,” Bierce’s final columns were published in the pages of *Cosmopolitan* in 1909.

Throughout its run, “Prattle” was wide ranging in its material: literary criticism rubbed shoulders with political and cultural commentaries and personal attacks, and excerpts of letters from Bierce’s enemies and snippets of bad verse from aspiring poets were often cheek and jowl with Bierce’s own satirical poetry (which he insisted was merely verse). While a sampling of “Prattle” is found in a collection of Bierce’s writings published in 1998 by S. T. Joshi and David E. Schultz, *Ambrose Bierce: A Sole Survivor; Bits of Autobiography*, except for this volume and bits and pieces culled by Bierce for inclusion in various projects—such as his poetry and essays—and his *Examiner*-based Spanish-American War writings, which have been edited by Lawrence Berkove and published in *Skepticism and Dissent*, the vast bulk of this material has not seen fresh paper in a century. In sum, “Prattle” was a public journal of Bierce’s thoughts. In terms of its physical format, “Prattle” usually occupied a full page of the magazine-sized *Wasp* and typically spanned a full column and a half or more in each of its many appearances in the broadsheet-sized *Examiner* from March 1887 through 1895. The sheer volume of “Prattle” Bierce produced is impressive in its own right. Although the run of this column in the *Examiner* during this period is punctuated by three dozen or so gaps of two or occasionally more weeks, “Prattle” still appears some four hundred times. By way of comparison, the nineteen stories included in Bierce’s 1892 *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*, sixteen of which were initially published in the *Examiner*, provide material equivalent to only thirty weekly “Prattle” entries. Bierce also contributed a sizable body of additional material, much of which remains uncollected, to the *Examiner* during this same period.

Indirectly, this abundance of uncollected material has meant that the few scholars who have examined Bierce’s newspaper publications in any detail have generally ignored the original appearances of works Bierce republished in book form.<sup>7</sup> One of the grossest misconceptions attributable to this neglect is the belief, apparently originating with Walter Neale, that Bierce had difficulty placing his short stories with literary journals. There is, to be fair, evidence supporting this point of view. Bierce undoubtedly destroyed or weakened many potential and actual bridges to various journals through his biting and often repeated criticism of their shortcomings in his column. The revived *Overland Monthly*,<sup>8</sup> for example, often fell prey to Bierce’s cynical pen, as a June 1, 1890, “Prattle” entry illustrates:

The Warmedoverland Monthly is taking so kindly and paternal an interest in this paper, its character and affairs, that gratitude impels me to imitate its contributors and write something for it for whatever it thinks it right to charge me. As it has been practically dead for a long time, I can think of nothing so suitable as an epitaph.

Pause, stranger, pause: a magazine lies here  
Which claims the passing tribute of a tear  
(In death, as life, its character the same,  
And seen, as ever in a salted claim.)  
“As Phoenix from her ashes rises light,  
And butterflies are sun-warm grubs in flight;  
As torpid snakes revive at touch of Spring,  
And frozen bugle-notes when thawed will sing:  
So,” said a fool, “my stewpan shall restore  
Harte’s Overland to what it was before,”  
So straight he put the stuff astew, and then  
With diligence upstirred it with his pen.  
But lo! no sooner are the viands warm  
Than flyblows incubate and maggots swarm!  
Alas, how brief and brilliant their career!  
They squirmed and then the mass was buried here.  
How dead it is! Up to the throne of God  
Its soul, suspiring slowly through the sod,  
Speaks to the nose in so appealing way  
That those who come to scoff refuse to stay.  
Good Satan, heed my impetrating rhyme,  
Nor warm it over for the second time;  
And, Heaven, ere yet eternity begins,  
Forgive, O pray forgive, its deadly Shinns!<sup>19</sup>

Despite such published attacks, the suggestion that Bierce was reduced or forced to publish his stories within the pages of Hearst’s *Examiner* appears on closer examination to represent a flawed analysis. Another theory is possible and seems more probable: during his years at the *Examiner* Bierce creatively lived and breathed within the milieu of the newspaper and nothing could be more natural than for him to seek to fit appropriate products of his art into it.

For an illustration of how Bierce used the newspaper environment to his creative advantage, we need only consider his “Prattle” column: successively within the *Argonaut*, the *Wasp*, and the *Examiner*, Bierce wrote copy for “Prattle” in response to topical material that surfaced either in the host publication or

elsewhere. Writing in particular for the *Examiner*, Bierce found that certain newspaper subjects supplied almost inexhaustible sources of material for his pen. Early in his *Examiner* career, on August 7, 1887, Bierce discoursed in “Prattle” at some length about his approach and its personal consequences:

I am prone to the conviction that much of that which passes for wisdom, having sanction of popular philosophers through all the ages, will not do. For example, we are told with seasonable and unseasonable iteration that he who lightly makes enemies shall come to sorrow; his days shall be bitter and the end of that man is wrath. I know a chap whose trade is censure; fools are his theme and satire is his song. Knaves and vulgarians, impostors, sycophants, the variously unworthy and the specifically detestable, no sooner draw his eye than he is on to them with bitter abuse. For a decade-and-a-half this sour-spirited malefactor, this smircher of reputations, this tarnisher of escutcheons, has builded implacable enmities in a single town at an average of six a week—312 a year—4,680 for the period. (Some slight deductions may be made, though the flagitious never forgive, rarely die and having moved out of town always come back.) It is a safe assertion that at some time every unit of this hostile mass has been a disseminating center of retaliatory calumnies; for I have heard the offender say that his enemies have but a single *organum talionis* [organ of retaliation]: they lie like Satan; and he avers, with dubitable accuracy, that their boasts of having thrashed him are instances in point. Moreover, this fellow’s social habits are consistent with his literary: he is imperfectly civil to the rich and distinguished, coldly declines introductions, utters his mind with freedom concerning people’s characters, takes an infantile delight in cutting men whose acquaintance he deems on [*sic*]<sup>10</sup> longer desirable, cherishes the most shocking convictions, maintains a private system of morality and is not in sympathy with civilization. From the books and proverbs it is clearly deducible that this person ought to be the most miserable of men, tormented of conscience, baffled by secret and overt antagonisms, hunted by the dogs of hate reared in his own kennels, and roosted on by homing curses thicker than blackbirds on a tree. So far as I can see, the wretch is mainly engaged in more deeply imbedding his kidneys in broader layers of leafy fat, peacefully nourishing an oleaginous and comfortable content, gratifying his soul with a bird’s-eye view of human ilfare, happy in the prospect of a green old age and indulging fascinating dreams of a blessed hereafter.

Although Bierce clearly intended this manifesto to apply specifically to his role as the author of “Prattle,” it can also be applied to much of his other

writings, including the stories that are the subject of this study. Given the light of fame “Prattle” cast on Bierce and that he alludes to above, the stories that Bierce eventually collected under the title *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*, because they appeared first in newspapers that hosted his famous column, inevitably fell within the same circle of illumination. In fact, the stories existed first in a symbiotic relationship with “Prattle” and other material—including additional contributions by Bierce and general material—published within the pages of the *Wasp* and *Examiner*: themes and concerns raised in individual stories can be shown to almost always have previously or subsequently been addressed within “Prattle” and occasionally within other Bierce contributions, and, especially within the *Examiner*, these themes on more than one occasion are drawn from or inspired by general news stories.

The following chapters will examine the histories of the nineteen stories that Bierce included in his 1892 collection, *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*, considering, in particular, the complex milieu of the *Examiner*, where most of them first appeared in print.<sup>11</sup> In addition to documenting important textual changes between the original versions of the stories and the versions included in the 1892 collection, this study will also address some of the additional textual changes Bierce and others introduced into the stories that he retained in the 1898 and 1909 collections. The goal of these chapters will be to show that Bierce’s original newspaper-based versions of the stories included in the 1892 collection are critically important in their own right and that the 1892 collection possesses a special literary significance since Bierce produced it with a set of intentions that owed much to the *Examiner*. Furthermore, since these intentions were so closely intertwined with Bierce’s “Prattle” commentary and the newspaper environment, we will see that they were not arguably as important for Bierce as he prepared the 1898 and 1909 collections.

While now is not the time for an exhaustive analysis, the clearest evidence for the above assertion is found in the fact that the stories included in these three authoritative collections did not remain constant. Bierce’s 1892 collection, *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*, contains nineteen stories. Appropriating the title given the 1892 English edition by its publishers, Chatto and Windus, but retaining as a subtitle the title of the original collection, the 1898 collection consisting of twenty-two stories published by Putnam’s became *In the Midst of Life: Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*. And the final authoritative collection, *In the Midst of Life (Tales of Soldiers and Civilians)*, the second volume of Bierce’s *Collected Works* published in 1909 by Walter Neale, contains twenty-six stories. Beyond the increase in the number of stories contained in each collection, the nineteen original stories, while retained in the 1898 collection, are not all retained in the 1909 collection. When that volume was being prepared, four of the stories present in the 1892 and 1898 collections were

moved by Bierce into the third volume of his *Collected Works*, *Can Such Things Be?* Similarly, eight stories included in the 1909 collection of *In the Midst of Life (Tales of Soldiers and Civilians)* had been initially collected in the original 1893 edition of *Can Such Things Be?* Finally, one story, “The Damned Thing,” added by Bierce to the 1898 edition of *In the Midst of Life: Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*, was moved to *Can Such Things Be?* in the *Collected Works*.

While no galleys or page proofs of the 1892 volume are extant, the typesetting paste-up copytext bearing Bierce’s inked-in corrections and emendations does survive. This printer’s copytext, composed of copies of the original periodical publications and bearing compositor marks for galley divisions, is available in the Barrett Collection at the University of Virginia.<sup>12</sup> Although publication information about the individual stories—including the names of the host publications and the publication dates—was removed during the preparation of the copytext, a review of the relevant *Wasp*, *News Letter*, *Examiner*, and *Wave* issues has yielded identical *in situ* versions of eighteen of the nineteen stories and a nearly identical version of “The Coup de Grâce.” As no earlier versions of the stories are known to exist, these versions are presumed to be the earliest available texts of the stories and will be referred to as such. While the copytext for the 1898 Putnam’s edition has not apparently survived, the copytext for the 1909 *Collected Works* volume, composed of pages cut from the 1898 Putnam’s edition and Bierce’s 1893 book, *Can Such Things Be?* is part of the Bierce holdings at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California.

The following discussions of the nineteen stories that comprise the 1892 collection are arranged according to their first known publication dates. Each story is introduced, summarized, and examined in the light shed by relevant “Prattle” entries from the *Wasp* and the *Examiner*, related *Wasp* and *Examiner*-based articles including but not limited to other writings by Bierce, and other historical and biographical materials. Building on what precedes it, the concluding chapter considers the production of the 1892, 1898, and 1909 collections and, by illustrating how Bierce’s intentions regarding the collections changed over time, argues that the original 1892 collection remains his “main and best ambition.”

## 1. “A Holy Terror”

The earliest and longest of the nineteen tales collected in *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*, “A Holy Terror” appeared in the San Francisco-based *Wasp* on December 23, 1882.<sup>1</sup> Because of this early date of first publication, the inclusion of the story in the 1892 collection initially appears problematic since the remaining stories all appeared in print within a five-year span from December of 1886 through April of 1891. In fact, despite its early appearance, “A Holy Terror” is thematically linked to many of the tales in the 1892 collection and Bierce’s decision to include it in the collection is readily defensible. As will become clear, the story is also a particularly appropriate and illustrative opening subject for this study.

A central feature of Bierce’s treatment of “A Holy Terror” concerns the way he used his editorial position at the *Wasp* to carefully integrate the story into its host publication through the publication of related material over a span of many months. Of particular interest is the fact that the elaborate staging of the story anticipates Bierce’s subsequent treatment of many of his tales destined for *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*. While the elaborate prepublication groundwork for “A Holy Terror” appears to have been directed at regular readers of the paper, Bierce also took steps to make the story more accessible to new readers. Thus, assuming that many people would be reading the publication for the first time, the Christmas editorial of the *Wasp* pointedly albeit cryptically warned new readers that they needed to pay careful attention to the details of things. Even though Bierce deliberately introduced the subject matter of the story and embedded subtle hints as to its meaning in the Christmas editorial, many readers must inevitably have extracted uninformed interpretations. Bierce apparently had these flawed interpretations in mind when in the months that followed the December 23, 1882, appearance of the story he continued to provide retrospective material with clear connections to “A Holy Terror.” While it seems unlikely that Bierce deliberately planned out the full details of his multifaceted presentation and



even though he did not entirely reprise the performance while he was at the *Wasp*, understandings gained by carefully examining Bierce's staged presentation of "A Holy Terror" remain instructive when and where his later tales are considered.

As touched on earlier, despite their best intentions, most *Wasp*-based readers of "A Holy Terror" must have extracted readings that, whether grossly wrong or simply incomplete, Bierce would have judged uninformed. As we shall see, many of Bierce's tales elicit similarly uninformed readings by modern readers, and in light of this general fact it is useful to begin discussing each story by providing a deliberately cursory reading. In the case of "A Holy Terror," once an unenlightened reading is established, we can turn our attention to restoring the original context of the story as it appeared within the *Wasp* both by making extensive use of "Prattle" excerpts and other material, and by noting and analyzing significant textual differences between the initial and subsequent versions of the story. This process of recontextualization allows the recovery of additional details, meanings, and interpretations missed during the initial reading, and, ultimately, out of these various strands of inquiry a much more fully realized close reading of "A Holy Terror" emerges.

"A Holy Terror" is subdivided into five sections or chapters. The first section of the story begins with a cryptic introduction of "the latest arrival at Hurdy-Gurdy," a small abandoned mining camp in California. After a brief summary of the tawdry history of the camp, which concludes with a vivid description of its present advanced state of ruinous decay (in short, Bierce takes pains to point out that the camp is dead), Bierce begins the second section by describing the actions of the still unnamed man "who had now rediscovered Hurdy-Gurdy" as he paces off and stakes a claim in the cemetery of the decaying camp. At the end of this section we learn that the man is named Jefferson Doman. In the third section Bierce explains how Jefferson Doman has come to be in Hurdy-Gurdy. Six years previously Doman came west from New Jersey in search of gold, leaving his girl, Mary Matthews, behind; left to her own devices, Matthews falls into bad male company in the form of a gambler and after the gambler catches her stealing he bestows upon her a disfiguring facial scar. Matthews, craftily playing all her cards, duly informs the still faithful Doman of her disfigurement in a letter, complete with a revealing photograph, albeit attributing the scar to a fall from a horse and omitting any mention of the man's role in the affair. Predictably, the faithful and rather naïve Doman reacts to the news by cherishing Matthews all the more. Turning again to Doman's more immediate story, Bierce explains that after years of failure, thanks to a revealing letter sent by a friend, Barney Bree, then living in Hurdy-Gurdy, Doman looks to be on the verge of striking it rich. The letter, which Doman has inadvertently misplaced for

two years, during which time Bree has expired from overindulgence in drink, explains that Bree had found gold in the graveyard. Specifically, Bree's letter reveals that a rich gold vein is located at the bottom of a grave that holds a certain "Scarry," a local woman of some repute for her exploits.

The fourth section of "A Holy Terror" begins with Doman standing over Scarry's grave and reminiscing about the woman he has never had a chance to meet due to his "vagrantly laborious life" as a prospector. Subsequently, after rather gleefully pronouncing that Scarry "was a holy terror," Doman quickly sets about excavating her grave. As darkness descends, Doman reaches Scarry's casket, finds it has no handles, feverishly enlarges his mining shaft around it, and levers it onto one end in the open grave, which is now illuminated only by the light of the recently risen full moon. Throughout this section Bierce has painstakingly established the intricately layered elements of the scene that conspire to facilitate Doman's undoing. Doman is not merely in a cemetery located in a deserted and decaying mining camp at night: at this point in the affair he is standing, "up to his neck," next to a coffin in a relatively recently occupied newly reopened grave, near the overhanging "black branches of the dead tree"—a hanging tree—with a "weather-worn rope that dangled from its ghostly hand." Further heightening the moonlit scene's oppressive atmosphere, readers next learn that Doman is being serenaded by "[t]he monotonous howling of distant wolves, sharply punctuated by the barking of a coyote." And yet more ill omens confront Doman: first an owl "flapped awkwardly above him on noiseless wings," and then, with "his senses all alert," "during this lull in the battle," which we are told occurs as "[t]he Assassin was cloaking the sword," Doman "became sensible of a faint, sickening odor." Doman attributes the odor to a rattlesnake,<sup>2</sup> and Bierce uses this misinterpretation to introduce another traditional harbinger of death into the scene. Thus, as Doman looks into the "gloom of the grave" surrounding his feet for the imaginary rattlesnake, "[a] hoarse, gurgling sound, like the death-rattle in a human throat, seemed to come out of the sky, and a moment later a great, black, angular shadow, like the same sound made visible, dropped curving from the topmost branch of the spectral tree, fluttered for an instant before his face, and sailed fiercely away into the mist along the creek. It was a raven."

Only after this litany of this worldly as opposed to otherworldly horrors does Bierce allow Doman's attention to focus again on the coffin. Fully primed for the Assassin's sword, Doman now discovers that the casket has been put into the grave upside down. After momentarily trying to read the words engraved on the identifying metal plate of the coffin from his end of the open grave, the thought that Scarry's remains are facing him, separated from his sight only by the rotting redwood boards of the casket, takes hold of Doman and soon he is imagining the "livid corpse of the dead woman" and a possible

connection between her descriptive name and his own beloved Mary Matthews's disfiguring scar. A long paragraph documents Doman's futile struggle with the Assassin, a struggle that revolves around Doman's attempt to determine if the woman known as Scarry could possibly be Mary Matthews. Emerging from this "agony of anticipation," which threatens to kill him even before his curiosity can be gratified "by the *coup de grâce* of verification," in the next paragraph Doman initially believes that the coffin has moved toward him. When he realizes that his enemy had not advanced upon him, but rather "he had advanced upon his enemy," Doman smiles because he realizes the coffin cannot retreat and strikes the metal plate on the decayed coffin lid with the hilt of his knife. With "a sharp, ringing percussion, and with a dull clatter" the wood shatters and falls away to reveal to the now "frenzied, shrieking man" the "woman standing tranquil in her silences." Confronted by the woman's remains, Doman dies of terror.

Bierce concludes "A Holy Terror" with an appropriately pithy final section. Some months after Doman's demise, a party of travelers on their way to Yosemite Valley from San Francisco stops in Hurdy-Gurdy for dinner. Paying a visit to the hanging tree and the cemetery, they find the opened grave containing the skeletal remains of two bodies. While the men are entertaining themselves with the grave's contents (including the discovery of iron pyrite, or fool's gold, in the grave), one of the women, Mrs. Porfer, wanders away, ostensibly because of her inability to "endure the disagreeable business" of the grave looting, and finds Jefferson Doman's abandoned coat. After assuring herself that she is not being observed, Mrs. Porfer "thrust[s] her jeweled hand into the exposed pocket" and is rewarded with the discovery of a pocket book. In the book are a bundle of letters from New Jersey, a lock of blond hair, and photographs of Miss Matthews before and after her disfigurement. Not long after Mrs. Porfer's discovery, the other members of the party make a discovery of their own: Mrs. Mary Matthews Porfer has "had the bad luck to be dead."

In including "A Holy Terror" in *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*, Bierce was clearly aware that the story, despite its origins in the *Wasp*, was appropriate for a collection consisting largely of tales published in the *Examiner*. Beyond a subtle literary link to "An Heiress from Redhorse,"<sup>3</sup> the concluding tale in Bierce's 1892 collection, two key elements of "A Holy Terror"—Doman's altered mental state prior to his demise and his death from an excess of irrational fear—connect it thematically to many of the other stories included in *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*. Although all the stories in the 1892 collection involve elements of an altered mental state, Bierce most obviously reprised or expanded upon the implications of Doman's altered mental state in the following stories: "A Horseman in the Sky," "An Occurrence at Owl Creek

Bridge,” “One of the Missing,” “A Tough Tussle,” and “The Man and the Snake.” Furthermore, Jefferson Doman’s death from an excess of irrational fear or terror is echoed by similar deaths in “One of the Missing,” “A Tough Tussle,” and “The Man and the Snake,” and, with slight variations, in the deaths of characters in several additional tales: “A Watcher by the Dead,” “The Suitable Surroundings,” and “The Middle Toe of the Right Foot.”

Beyond these thematic links, “A Holy Terror” and Bierce’s *Examiner*-based stories are similar in that they are carefully fit into their host publications. Although the weekly *Wasp*, with its emphasis on literary and political concerns, lacked the full range of supporting material that Bierce was able to draw upon or make use of when writing stories for publication within the *Examiner*, Bierce as the editor of the paper was able to stage the story with a great degree of control. Critics and readers lacking familiarity with the story’s original host publication have thus been at a significant interpretive disadvantage. Indeed, to read “A Holy Terror” as Bierce meant it to be read by those who could unlock its secrets, it is essential that the *Wasp*’s role as the story’s original host publication be understood; moreover, in exploring the story’s staging in the *Wasp*, we gain a great deal of general insight into the hidden complexities of Bierce’s art.

At the time “A Holy Terror” was first published the *Wasp* was a weekly journal that was then remarkable for its brilliantly cynical and satirical editorial style, a style that, from early 1881 through the summer of 1886, was personified by Bierce, the paper’s editor and most important and prolific contributor. In late 1882, under Bierce’s idiosyncratic editorial hand, the *Wasp* was thriving: a year earlier, less than seven months into his tenure, the editorial for October 7, 1881, proudly announced that the circulation of the paper was “upwards of 11,000 copies,” which the *Wasp* thought “the largest circulation ever obtained by a weekly paper in California,” and then reproduced two official letters testifying to its rapidly increasing circulation. The first letter, officially notarized, proclaimed that “the circulation of the *Wasp* since April 15th last has increased more than twenty-one hundred (2100) copies by actual count.” In the second letter, the paper’s subscription agent, having just completed a “tour in the southern counties” of California, announced that in “about seven weeks” he had added “five hundred and fifty-six (556) new subscriptions to the *Wasp*, of which most were yearly.” According to the same editorial, the *Wasp* was

the only cartoon paper printed in colors west of the Rocky Mountains, and combining, as we venture to think, both literary and artistic excellence, has a double claim to support, which is in process of full recognition. It is not a journal that is read and thrown away, as is amply shown by

the constant demands made upon us for covers and bound volumes. In this form the back numbers are preserved and will be read for years concurrently with the weekly issues. (228)

Similarly, five months after the publication of “A Holy Terror” the paper continued to thrive. On May 26, 1883, the *Wasp*, claiming to reach “every part of the Pacific Coast,” reported that its circulation was “nearly 14,000” and that it had added “1,107” new subscriptions since March 1, 1883. In other words, by December 23, 1882, the *Wasp* had in effect become a public stage for Bierce’s wide-ranging performances: he typically penned the lengthy and often diverse editorials that appeared in the paper, and his famous and devastatingly satirical “Prattle” column usually filled the following page; in addition, in almost every issue, either under his name or initial(s) or pseudonym(s), or even at times anonymously, he contributed other works ranging from serious critical commentaries about contemporary issues, to installments of his “Devil’s Dictionary” or “Little Johnny” columns, to poems and other pieces of variously satirical, cynical, and sardonic prose fiction and commentary. In short, having taken up the editorial reins of the journal in March 1881 after his frustrating foray into the Black Hills, by December 1882 Bierce had quite literally become the human embodiment of the *Wasp*, and in the mold of Juvenal, Addison, and Swift he was rapidly becoming the most influential literary journalist on the West Coast. Thus, when Bierce placed “A Holy Terror” in the journal’s Christmas number that year, he arguably did so with a well-developed and fully-conscious intent to both reward his more perceptive regular readers with a richly ironic holiday feast of cynicism and satire, and to concurrently afflict his less perceptive readers with a holy terror.

Given its demanding nature, “A Holy Terror” has long been more widely successful at befuddling its less perceptive readers than it has been in entertaining its more perceptive ones. Certainly, less perceptive or uninformed readers of “A Holy Terror” are unlikely to comprehend the many hidden intricacies and ironies of the tale even though the elements that cause them to stumble are often the clues and keys to understanding. For example, if they are wholly unable to penetrate Bierce’s system of grammar, readers and critics may never realize that the woman whose grave is violated was in life a whore. Recent critics who have unwittingly fallen into this popular category of readers have somewhat understandably but nevertheless erroneously concluded that the story has no significant literary depths. But this is as Bierce meant it to be: only informed and careful readers were expected to unlock the story’s secrets, and few recent critics or readers are up to the task. As already touched upon, in 1882 the situation faced by *Wasp*-based readers was

somewhat more promising. Some, for example, presumably possessed valuable personal experience gained in the mining camps of the region, experience that would have taught them much that could be useful in reading “A Holy Terror.” On the other hand, within the context of the *Wasp*, it is not necessary to be a forty-niner to unseal the tale. Bierce knew that the *Wasp*’s regular readers were well versed in the need to read carefully where his satirical writings were concerned, and he clearly intended that some of them would discover the secrets of his tale on the strength of their own probing intellects. Helping to facilitate this outcome, in the months leading up to the publication of “A Holy Terror,” Bierce in his roles as editor and author had brought several instructive examples of holy terrors to the attention of this audience. Additionally, knowing that the well-promoted Christmas issue would attract new readers, Bierce employed the paper’s editorial page to pointedly warn new readers (and old) whose “unconsidering orbs persist in seeing things not as they are, but as they should be,” that the *Wasp* saw things with a greater degree of clarity. Nevertheless, despite even this last warning, it is evident that many *Wasp*-based readers, like their more recent counterparts, must still have come away from “A Holy Terror” with what Bierce would have perceived as foolishly misinformed interpretations: to successfully serve its two distinct audiences as he desired it should, the tale had to produce such an outcome.

As noted, in 1882 Bierce was recently returned from the Black Hills where he had gained firsthand knowledge about the mining industry and its colorful culture. “A Holy Terror” is in part the product of this knowledge, and it is enriched with details that Bierce extracted from his experiences. Thus, in a literary variation on the practice of carefully salting a worthless mine with rich ore in order to lure in a gullible buyer, Bierce has strategically salted “A Holy Terror” with a freight of rich verbal ore, and, as with many of his stories, much of the rich ore in this tale can only be correctly assayed by perceptive and careful readers. As its present depressed literary reputation attests, the rich ore present in “A Holy Terror” has never been accurately critically assayed, and thus the tale has long appeared bereft of literary value.

Crucially, while even uninformed readers and critics are likely to stumble upon at least some of the ore embedded in the tale, such unwitting encounters do not guarantee that readers will fully comprehend the significance of what they read. Thus, uninformed readers will typically conclude that Jefferson Doman is simply a rather foolish individual—an “unlearned ‘tender-foot’” to quote Bierce’s description of the kind of men who listened to the alcoholic nonminer Barney Bree on the subject of mining—who in dying gets what he deserves for foolishly desecrating a woman’s grave in search of gold. Furthermore, these uninformed readers will in all probability also blithely acquiesce

to Bierce's parting assertion that the death of Mary Matthews Porfer is mere "bad luck," and the critics among this group may thus understandably conclude that this closing scene is merely a poorly contrived, improbable denouement. Finally, such readers are likely to apportion only a minimal significance to "Scarry," the tale's titular holy terror.

Perceptive informed *Wasp*-based readers of "A Holy Terror" were rewarded with a dramatically richer reading experience than their uninformed counterparts. Moreover, since presumably some of these informed readers gained their status via instructive material supplied elsewhere in the paper by Bierce, the *Wasp*-based publication of "A Holy Terror" stands as an important precursor to many of his *Examiner*-based "Soldiers" and "Civilians" tales that were similarly incorporated by Bierce into that paper's milieu. As is the case with the later *Examiner*-based stories, material bearing variously on "A Holy Terror" appeared in the *Wasp* over a period of many months, and continued even after the tale was published. Thus, an important thematic antecedent of the story surfaced within the *Wasp* during the autumn, winter, and spring of 1881 and 1882. During these months Bierce focused his attention on certain overly zealous members of San Francisco's religious population who were then promoting the enforcement of a local "Sunday Law," which prohibited business transactions of various kinds, including the sale of intoxicating drink. Bierce found this and other effects of the Sunday Law so inimical to his secular interests that he waged a very public and yet personal anti-holy war against the people behind it via material he included in the editorials of the *Wasp* and "Prattle." Because Bierce directed his ire at these individuals for several months and in substantial detail, it will have to suffice here to note that his commentary was both incendiary and insightful: Bierce was, in effect, a holy terror. And, even though "A Holy Terror" was almost certainly not even a glimmer on Bierce's brain when he began it, through this campaign elements of Bierce's future Christmas tale began to be mustered into public view.

On January 6, 1882, almost a full year before his "A Holy Terror" appeared in the *Wasp* and in the midst of his campaign against San Francisco's intolerant religious zealots, Bierce placed a story with an identical title in the paper. Whether or not Bierce is the "D." given credit as the author of this "Holy Terror," the appearance of the story certainly effected a timely introduction of holy terrors to Bierce's regular readers.<sup>4</sup> In the story, a pious but ungrammatical church deacon named Blount recounts the unholy antics of a servant girl named Myra whom he has taken into his house. To Blount's embarrassment, Myra, the unfortunate daughter of a belly dancer and a theater doorkeeper, when exposed to certain kinds of music, unpredictably breaks into uncontrollable fits of high-kicking dancing more appropriate to disreputable dance halls or saloons than to a Christian home. According to the dea-

con, when it came time for him to host the congregation's regular prayer meeting, which on that occasion, "was quite a large gatherin' . . . as the interest has been growin' lately," Myra experienced yet another fit. In response to the embarrassment inflicted upon his congregation, his office, and most importantly his person, the virtuous deacon sends Myra away, an act that he justifies by ungrammatically declaring that "if the Lord meant this trial for His people, I think its somebody's else turn" (2). Obviously, within the context of Bierce's own ongoing anti-holy war, this tale of a parson's sore trial at the hands or, more properly, the legs of a holy terror can be viewed as a skirmish in a larger struggle, and it possibly set the wheels in motion that led to the Christmas story that shared its title.

In the autumn of 1882 Bierce found occasion to insert two additional examples of holy terrors into the *Wasp* that exhibit much clearer ties to his forthcoming story. First, on October 7, 1882, Bierce used the epithet in his "Prattle" column to describe a particularly unpleasant newspaper writer:

The *Sonoma Democrat* has a writer on its staff who is a holy terror. When he walks out, the houses and the trees strain back as hard as ever they can to get away from him. When he sleeps, all nature holds its breath lest he wake, and the stentorian cats are stilled along the ridge-poles. The earth bends like thin ice beneath his tread; the East observes his course, and says to the West, "Look out!" And his name is Schnabel.

In his column's next paragraph Bierce continued his attack on Schnabel. Although he does not again employ the key epithet, Bierce's words and subject matter subtly foreshadow his Christmas story, which at this point in time was still over two months from being set in type:

Cruel is the soul of Schnabel. The ghosts of his victims shriek upon the red streams of the tempest. He poises his pen and the widows of Sonoma weep. About that weapon cling like bats the disembodied souls of rival writers, a gloomy company, intent on its arrest. But strong is the hand of Schnabel, and his smile is like the lightning glimmering above the hills of Morven. His scowl depopulates a township. He toys with the locks of his enemy and dallies familiarly with the nose of him; explores curiously the dark corners of his visceral cavities, uninking the reluctant entrail and readjusting the lobed liver. And then he writes: "Having dragged him from his obscurity, I will leave him there, blinking under the burning gaze of the multitude." Straightway the multitude ensues, shoveling fresh coals upon its eyes to singe the Schnabelian victim, and there is a smell of scorching meat. It is the biggest barbecue of the season.



It appears Schnabel, like Jefferson Doman, attracted Bierce's critical attention because of a disrespect for the dead. This timely and specific thematic link between Doman and Schnabel, complete with references to a depopulated town and a disinterred body, suggests that Bierce's Christmas story was already taking shape.

One week prior to the publication of "A Holy Terror," on the editorial page of the *Wasp* for the December 16, 1882, issue, Bierce included the epithet at the end of the carefully constructed paragraph that concluded the editorial. Anticipating the richly ironic world of "A Holy Terror," the illustrative example turns on the unholy aspect of a traditionally holy practice:

Judge Hunt, of the Superior Court, has given a decision that appears to be applicable to other cases than the one before him: He has awarded damages to a man whose nerves were upset and his sleep disturbed by the noise of pounding clothes in a Chinese laundry. . . . In his decision he refers to another, by the Supreme Court of Massachusetts, in which it is stated that "noise which constitutes any annoyance to a person of ordinary sensibility to sound, such as to interfere with the ordinary comfort of life and impair the reasonable enjoyment of his habitation, is a nuisance to him." If that does not cover the clamor of church bells, strenuously pounded for the early Bridget at six o'clock in the morning, we do not know what application it has. The screaming church bell has, no doubt, a prime lot of holy associations connected with it, and derives a certain sanctity from the very fact of its finishing off so many of our loved ones with frail nerves; but in these days of three-dollar watches and four-dollar clocks, its mission is a purely destructive one. If the Chinese launderer spanking our soiled linen is a nuisance, the sexton punishing his howling bell is a holy terror.

Through this seemingly rather insignificant example, Bierce used his unique position as editor and author to insure that the regular readers of the *Wasp* were unwittingly primed to note that the publication of his Christmas story of grave desecration and other acts of moral turpitude coincided with what its author and editor satirically considered to be the unholy ringing of Christmas church bells.

One week later, on December 23, 1882, Bierce elaborately introduced "A Holy Terror" and a range of other similarly irreverent "Christmas" stories on the Christmas editorial page of the *Wasp*. While this material was presented to first-time readers as a general explanation of the satirical nature of the *Wasp*, it more specifically helped readers perceive the underlying satirical nature of "A Holy Terror." Writing as "The Editor," Bierce began *this* warmly satirical Christmas editorial with what almost passes for a pious invocation:

“In civil and customary recognition of Him upon whose natal day the angels—probably with a mental reservation—proclaimed peace on earth and goodwill to men, the *Wasp* permits itself to be pervaded by a truly Christian spirit for as much as a week.” These seemingly kindhearted Christmas sentiments continued in the following lines:

The editorial lightnings are decently blanketed, the editorial thunders hushed, the editorial gall and wormwood turned off; and above the heads of all mankind—our enemies alone excepted—we spread in benediction palms which have never been soiled by a dishonest dollar. This rite, we beg the good reader to observe, is a more gracious and impressive performance than the customary hollow and hackneyed ceremony of wishing him “a merry Christmas”—to the which meaningless salutation we have a sharp and lasting antipathy. In place of wishing our friends “a merry Christmas,” we have endeavored to make them one by the publication of this present Christmas number—which we submit to them in the sure and certain hope that in the perusal of its letter-press, and in the contemplation of its pictures, they may find a more tranquil and less expensive delight than we found in its making.

Even while ostensibly holding out the olive branch to his enemies, in the next paragraph of his editorial Bierce begins to rattle his satirical bones at a cast of characters that his regular readers were intimately familiar with:

Some small measure of Christmas merriment we concede also to our enemies. Messrs. Stanford, Crocker and Huntington may ingest their respective birds in peace; we shall set up no skeleton at the feast, to rattle its reminding bones. Frank Pixley, under their table, shall eat of the children’s crumbs, unterrified by the apparition of a lawless boot. Sammy Backus shall annoint [*sic*] his locks with fat, display his cuffs and, parting the coat-tails of his face, kick himself with a turkey-leg without let or hindrance.<sup>5</sup> We might write him a saucy letter if the management of the Post-office were such as to encourage the hope that it would be delivered, but he shall have a week’s rest from public censure. The militia shall go peacocking without fear that they may be attacked and routed by the boy in our office. The windows of the parson’s mental heaven may be opened to pour a deluge of bosh upon the earth; we shall silently climb to the uplands of reason till the shower blows over. The Lily of the Valley shall bloom unmolested, and the ladies of the Palace Hotel pot him unafraid. Rogues, fools, impostors and disreputables of all sorts of kinds shall have a week of as perfect immunity from justice as if God were asleep.

Although Bierce intimates in this passage that in the spirit of the season he is taking the week off from his usual job of wreaking vengeance as a just God, it is obvious that the ink he is intimating such cheerful thoughts with is smoking with righteous wrath. Moreover, in this paragraph, Bierce begins to incorporate elements—the reminding bones of the absent skeleton, and the fools and impostors—that anticipate his story.

Clearly relishing his role, Bierce, in the next paragraph of the editorial, gladly ladles out the *Wasp*'s peculiar blend of Christmas spirit in even more refulgent terms. Here too elements of "A Holy Terror" surface:

This is a noble forbearance, for California has an opulence of persuasive backs inviting the cudgel. It is the land of the fool and the home of the rogue. Here the vulgarian runs riot; here the impostor flourishes luxuriant, and the knave plies his various prank [*sic*] upon the unguarded pocket. Male and female created He them: the vulgarienne is to the fore in quantity, the imposter prevails, and from Siskiyou to San Diego, from the Sierra to the sea, the knavess performs sedulously her appointed function. Seated lordly atop of his social eminence, the parvenu chap floats in the sunshine of his accidental supremacy, with never a hand but ours to deliver him a loving stab for the liberation of the gasses of conceit wherewith he labors in the sides like a crocodile done to a turn on Nileside sands. His ears are stuffed with the music of adulation, his tense hide basted with literary butter. Billows of flattery beat upon and break against him; he pores them like a sucking sponge nor knows the luxury of the glad tidings "Thou fool!" Like a noxious fetish-tree in a burial-place, he has thrust his exacting tap-root down among the rich reverences that minister fatly to his preposterous growth. Circling about him in maddest of devotional can-can, the seraphim and cherubim of the sycophant press continually do cry. *Chapeau bas, Messieurs*: one thousand San Franciscan parvenu are worshipping themselves! But shall *we* blow the wild bugle and punish the mellow gong until the face of us is royally empurpled, adding our clamor to quell the still, small voice that whispers of the gilded villain's feet of clay? Nay, we know the wretch for what he is—a tallowy, hide-bound and unwholesome dolt whose longest reach of reason can grasp no higher truths than that he is great because rich, wise because successful and good because unchanged. This paper exists for his affliction, and if, in deference to the season, we forego that congenial function, we nevertheless debit him with the forbearance and shall exact an accounting.

Each of the types Bierce lists—from the fool and rogue, to the knavess and parvenu chap—is identifiable in the characters present in "A Holy Terror."

Even more clearly, the “noxious fetish-tree in a burial-place” describes the hanging-tree, complete with its remnant noose, that stands near the grave of a noxious whore. And the fool’s “exacting tap-root” that has been thrust into “rich reverences” similarly evokes images of Jefferson Doman’s pick that is thrust into the possibly rich grave of that whore. The links continue in the ensuing sentences: the reference to a “still, small voice that whispers of the gilded villain’s feet of clay” faithfully anticipates Doman’s fearful contemplation of the upright casket in the opened grave, and the description of a man who “is great because rich, wise because successful and good because un-hanged” similarly anticipates with precision the status of Mr. Porfer.

Having seemingly merely categorized California’s population of prominent doltish villains and noted that the *Wasp* existed to afflict them, Bierce used his next lengthy paragraph to specifically extol the virtues of the present issue. While the latter two-thirds of the paragraph largely detailed the practical steps taken to prepare the issue, the opening sentences pointedly drew attention to the high quality of the articles published in the paper:

We do not flatter ourselves that that incurious person, the general reader, is unduly interested in our own affairs to the neglect of his own. We have not the satisfaction of thinking that he cares much more for the details of our efforts to supply him with provend for his mental tooth than we for the means whereby he obtains the coal we buy of him (at an unkindly high price, we are sorry to say), or for his fashion of adulterating the food which it is our blessed privilege to procure at his corner grocery. It is our impression that when a newspaper talks very much about its internal affairs the motive is the same that inspires a man to lead a conversation round to the subject of his deceased liver—vanity.

Although this admission of Bierce’s editorial vanity ostensibly embraces the entirety of the Christmas issue, it is difficult to imagine that “A Holy Terror” did not take pride of place in Bierce’s mind when he wrote these lines. Essentially, Bierce is again obscurely hinting in this passage that “incurious” or “general” readers unwisely do not pay enough attention to literary details. While an explanation as to why Bierce apparently referenced coal in this context will be withheld for a time, the reference to adulterated food deserves an immediate clarification: at the outset of the new year, beginning with a “Prattle” column of January 6, 1883, Bierce waged a six-week-long, vituperative campaign against oleomargarine that emphatically filled this particular lacuna in the editorial bill of fare offered by the *Wasp*. Suffice it to say for the moment that Bierce’s reference to coal is anticipatory of his Christmas story.

Bierce concluded his Christmas editorial with a final paragraph addressed to first-time readers of the *Wasp*:

To the many thousands of readers who will this week see the *Wasp* for the first time, we beg to explain that this is not a “sample” number. While the *Wasp* is not in any sense a comic paper, it is perhaps overmuch given to the besetting sin of dealing with all human interest with a coldly unenthusiastic familiarity exceedingly distasteful to the optimist, whose unconsidering orbs persist in seeing things not as they are, but as they should be. We are not enamored of the world as it is. We find it is peopled with a thousand-and-odd millions of inhabitants, who are mostly fools, and it is our custom to set forth and illustrate this unsatisfactory state of affairs by instancing conspicuous examples. We also exercise the prerogative of superior virtue by admonishing men and making suggestions to God. In short, the *Wasp* is what is rather vaguely called a “satirical journal.”

It should not escape notice that this concluding paragraph has some degree of relevance to the conspicuously foolish and yet still deceptive adventures of Jefferson Doman in “A Holy Terror.” This then was the stage as Bierce set it for readers of “A Holy Terror.”

While the above material precedes or coincides with the publication of “A Holy Terror” in the elaborate December 23, 1882, Christmas issue of the paper, several *Wasp*-based publications postdate the publication of the tale and yet exhibit clear thematic links to the story. Bierce opened the January 6, 1883, editorial of the *Wasp* by denouncing the practice of paying for newspaper reports about “private entertainments,” which he claimed was fed by a “rage for social distinction” that had “assumed the character of a madness destructive alike to the social graces and the domestic virtues.” According to Bierce, the social distinction purchased by such practices tended to laud most emphatically those least deserving of such recognition:

The field being open to any one who chooses to enter by the payment of money (and we cannot too often assure our readers that it is by direct payment of money that this kind of distinction is obtained) the vulgarians, upstarts and disreputables have naturally thronged through the gates and usurped all the commanding eminences of the wide domain. . . . As those who[se] tastes are low and whose lives are disreputable have most coin and least scruple; as it is they who most strongly believe that a shining mantle best hides a dirty skin—that social conspicuousness atones for obscure birth and faulty breeding, it follows that in the struggle for front place they are first.

Bierce went on to point out that though their “unholy craze for the cheap honors of print” the names of “society ladies” and “the names of their daughters are made familiar in the mouths of gamblers, hoodlums and all manner of blackguards by display at the bootblack stands, on the beer tables of low saloons and by being posted upon the walls of dives under the ‘latest stock quotations,’” and then he drew attention to a recent innovation in social depravity:

One of the latest and most outrageous developments of the “society reporter’s” black art is the custom of printing on the last days of December a list of “ladies who will receive” on New Year’s Day. If only women who are otherwise decent made advertisement of themselves by this monstrous method it would be bad enough to keep every well-bred gentleman from their doors; but the temptation to advertise also the *demi-monde* is too strong to be resisted, and sandwiched in among the other names are the “announcements” of notorious courtezans who pay roundly for this annual privilege. We solemnly assure our lady readers that this almost incredible statement is bald and frosty truth. . . . Every woman who permits her name to be used in these lists of “ladies who will receive,” is made an accomplice in this immatchable crime against morality.<sup>6</sup>

While this linking of San Francisco’s society ladies to the unsavory world of the demimonde may seem to have only a tenuous link to Bierce’s Christmas story, it actually cuts to the heart of the matter where Mary Matthews Porfer is concerned. Like the “notorious courtezans” whom Bierce saw brazenly flaunting their high social status in the newspapers, Mary Matthews Porfer is a member of the demimonde who has established her social reputation in the exact manner Bierce describes in this editorial: despite her sordid past as a gambler’s moll, she comes to San Francisco and becomes not merely another gambler’s wife, but “a lady famous in San Francisco for the costly nature of her entertainments and her exacting rigor with regard to the social position and antecedents of those who attended them.” With a particularly instructive editorial under his belt and a rapidly expanding war on oleomargarine to prosecute, Bierce at this juncture could have dropped “A Holy Terror” from his weekly bill of fare, but he did not.

Almost certainly aware that his Christmas tale was still proving a holy terror to readers, in the January 13, 1883, issue of the *Wasp* Bierce anonymously published “Flotsam: A Tale of the Prodigious Dampness of 1852,” a story that illustrates the lengths to which Bierce was willing to go in making a point. In “Flotsam,” Bierce appears to tell a farcical tall tale set in “Jackass Flat,” a mining camp modeled on Jackass Hill, California,<sup>7</sup> but “Flotsam” can in fact be read as a creative rehashing of Bierce’s Christmas feast. In

short, the tale is a humorous, subtle parody of “A Holy Terror,” seasoned with a suitably spicy literary *mélange*. Specifically, while the piquant flavor of “Flotsam” owes much to a raft of material produced by Bierce’s literary predecessors in the goldfields of California, the echoes of “A Holy Terror” couched within “Flotsam” vie for attention with material and themes extracted from three more widely circulated texts: Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *Paul Clifford*, George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss*, and the biblical account of Christ’s nativity. Bierce opened “Flotsam” with a sentence that broadly alludes to the difficult reading experience presented by his recent Christmas tale and continued with several sentences that variously hint at the environs of Hurdy-Gurdy and its cemetery even though they appear deeply submerged beneath the floodwaters that besiege Jackass Flat:

I presume most of my readers retain a tolerably wholesome recollection of the annoyances they suffered at Jackass Flat in 1852. They remember how bad the walking was, with eighteen or twenty feet of running water on the sidewalks; and how cold the water was. They cannot have wholly forgotten the vexation caused by their houses thumping against one another, lodging in the tops of trees, and turning round so as to let the sun in on the carpets. Those of them who lived in *adobe* cottages, it is true, escaped these latter evils by their habitations simply melting away and seeking the sea by natural outlets. Still, there was a good deal of discomfort for all.

Ostensibly settling into his account, in the next paragraph of “Flotsam” Bierce reminded his readers that their dining-table recollections of “A Holy Terror” should have included a particular annoyance:

One of the greatest annoyances in those days was the unusual number of dead bodies cruising about—privateers, steering hither and thither without any definite destination, but aiming at making themselves generally disagreeable. There were always some of the fellows sailing about in this desultory way; and they were responsible, one way and another, for considerable profanity. I knew quiet, peaceable citizens to get as angry as ever they could be when some waif of this kind would lodge against their dining-room doors while the family were at supper.

After appending to the above description a brief litany of related horrors appropriate to “Flotsam,” Bierce noted that “[a]ll these things made Jackass Flat practically untenable” and thus hinted at Hurdy-Gurdy’s depopulated condition. Bierce began the next paragraph of his tale with what was literally another introduction by creatively echoing Bulwer-Lytton’s infamous open-

ing lines to *Paul Clifford*,<sup>8</sup> before shifting back to Jackass Flat and more opaque matters appropriate to a tall tale set in a mining camp:

It was a wild black night in Bummer street.<sup>9</sup> The wind fairly howled! The rain scourged the roofs, twisting in wet sheets about the chimneys, and pulling them down, as the velvet train of a lady clings to the ankle of the unwary dancer, and upsets him in a minute. There was more water in Bummer street than you would have thought from merely looking at the surface; because, as rule, you can't see very far into water every cubic mile of which holds in solution a small range of mountains and two or three mining towns.

In San Francisco in 1882 a reference by Bierce to a lady dancer and her unwary partner would inevitably have reminded some readers of *The Dance of Death*, a locally infamous little book about the moral dangers of the waltz pseudonymously published in 1877 that Bierce was known to have had a hand in writing. In effect, this obscure reference worked to draw attention to the fact that Doman's interaction with the woman in her obscurities was in its own way a dance of death.

Having hinted that the waters obscuring Jackass Flat held more than readily met the eye, Bierce quickly worked in a reprise of Hurdy-Gurdy's forlorn appearance before segueing into an echo of material found in George Eliot's prodigiously damp "Final Chapter" of *The Mill on the Floss*, an echo that is only briefly interrupted with material original to the story transpiring in Jackass Gap before Bierce stirs in additional elements lifted from Eliot's novel and "A Holy Terror":

The boarding house of Mrs. Hashagen presented, however you might look at it, a very dejected aspect. There was one tallow-candle burning dimly at an open upper window; and beside it sat, in anxious expectancy, the landlady's old mother-in-law, plying the busy needle. Her son, the man of the house, who was "having a little game with the boys" behind a dormer-window at Clawhammer Jake's, had promised to return at ten o'clock if he had "any kind o' luck"—which meant any kind excepting bad or indifferent luck—and it was now eleven. There was no knowing, either, how soon it might be necessary to take to the boats. Presently something bumped against the side of the house, there was a murmur of subdued swearing outside, a scow was pushed up to the window ledge, and Mr. Hashagen stepped into the room.

While the surname Hashagen clearly is meant to suggest "Hash again," Joseph Hashagen more specifically reprises the roles played by two characters



in “A Holy Terror”: Mr. Porfer, the husband of Mary Matthews Porfer and the second professional gambler to feature in “A Holy Terror,” and Jefferson Doman, the fatally foolish prospector who, at the corresponding point in his story, arrived in the deserted ruins of Hurdy-Gurdy, and made his way to the abandoned mining camp’s cemetery where he tied up his mule before going about his business of grave desecration.

At this point in “Flotsam,” readers learn that the cards have not been with Hashagen on this night; indeed, Hashagen believes fate is set against him even though he claims to have come away from the table with up to twenty dollars:

“How’s business, Joseph?” was the laconic welcome from the aged mother.

“Disgustin’!” was the unamiable reply of her son, as he chained his barge to the shutter. “Never held such derved hands in my life. Beat the game, though. Ten or twenty dollars, I should say. But ’tain’t no use fer me to keep up *that* lick. Fate’s dead agin me—that’s how *I* put it up.”

Apparently, as Hashagen is a professional gambler, he views these paltry profits as insufficient—as would the wealthy Mr. Porfer. On the other hand, Hashagen’s at best indifferent luck also mirrors that of Doman, prior to his arrival in Hurdy-Gurdy. In any event, Hashagen’s mother agrees with her son’s assessment, but notes that the boardinghouse has enjoyed a more profitable evening: “‘Quite true, Joseph,’ replied the old lady, mildly; ‘we done better’n that to home.’” Intrigued, even as Doman was intrigued by Barney Bree’s cryptic letter, Hashagen responds with a query, but in the pregnant silence that separates Hashagen’s “Did, hay?” from his mother’s response Bierce embeds further echoes of Eliot’s story and his own:

There was a long silence, broken only by the pounding and chafing of Mr. Hashagen’s galley against the side of the house. The wind had died away, or moaned only at long intervals, like the warning wail of the Banshee. Some solemn and mysterious spell seemed to brood upon that household; a vague but ghostly presentiment was at the heart of Mr. Hashagen—a subtle sense of helplessness and dread in the presence of some overshadowing Presence. He rose and looked out upon the moving waters.

While the portentous “warning wail of the Banshee” that personifies the wind in “Flotsam” does portend something for Mr. Hashagen, at this stage of the game it more accurately alludes to the fate of Jefferson Doman in “A Holy Terror,” who has been busy sonorously thumping his pick deep into “Scarry’s” grave to the mournful accompaniment of howling wolves and a barking coyote.

Back in Jackass Flat, as Mr. Hashagen looks “upon the moving waters” below the boardinghouse, his mother finally interrupts his reverie to inform him that the boardinghouse has a lodger. This seemingly innocuous revelation is only the first part of an exchange that echoes several key passages in “A Holy Terror” that obscurely reveal Scarry’s profession by recounting Doman’s attempts to recollect descriptions of her given him by her casual partners over campfires long ago:

“Mary Ann’s got a customer, Joseph,” said the old lady, with an air of forced cheerfulness, as if to dispel the gathering gloom by idle talk.

“What is he?” inquired her son, mechanically, not even withdrawing his eyes from the window—“roomer or mealer?”

“Only a bedder at present, Joseph.”

“Pay in advance?”

“No, Joseph.”

“Any traps?”

“Not even a carpet-bag.”

“Know him?”

“We never none of us ever seen him afore.”

In the next two paragraphs of “Flotsam,” Hashagen thinks things over and in the process reprises several more key moments from “A Holy Terror.” In the first, Bierce indirectly recalls for readers of “A Holy Terror” the fact that Jefferson Doman paused during his excavation both to contemplate a coffin that had been put into the ground upside down, and to recollect as best he could the identity of the prostitute who resided therein. The second paragraph, while it contains information specific to the plot of “Flotsam,” also recalls Barney Bree’s letter to Jefferson Doman and Doman’s suggested nickname:

There was another pause. The conversation had recalled Mr. Hashagen’s faculties to the cares of the lodging-house business, and he was turning something over in his mind, but did not seem to get it right side up. Presently he spoke:

“Hang *me* ef I savvy! He didn’t pungle, he ain’t got no kit; and nobody don’t know him! Now it’s my opinion he’s a dead beat—that’s how I put *him* up! He lays out to get away with us—to play roots on the shebang. But I’ll get the drop on *him*; I’ll ring in a cold deck on him, or I’m a Chinaman; you just dot that down—that’s *me!*”<sup>10</sup>

Despite this cheerful assertion that he will get the best of a boarder he suspects to be a deadbeat, Hashagen, perhaps somehow cognizant, though he

can know not how, that Barney Bree had once shared similarly grammatically fractured and falsely optimistic sentiments, quickly reveals that he fears he is not to be so lucky. Of course, in his role as Jefferson Doman reprised, Hashagen's fear is well grounded. Still, just like Doman, he attempts to convince himself that all is well, despite the mute presence of his mother, who is now reprising Scarry in her ominous coffin-bound obscurity:

But all this time there was a chill fear creeping about Joseph's heart. He talked very bravely, but he felt, somehow, that it didn't help him. He didn't exactly connect this feeling with his mysterious lodger; but he thought he would rather have taken in some person he knew. The old lady made no further attempt to put him at his ease, but sat placidly sewing, with a face as impassive as that of the Sphinx.

Despite the warning silences of his mother in her guise as the Sphinx, a female monster famously inclined to kill those unable to answer her riddle, Hashagen vows that he will go in while the lodger is asleep and steal his clothes, and then he impetuously sets off, like Jefferson Doman in the open grave, to meet his fate:

And seizing the candle this provident landlord strode into the hall, marched resolutely to the proper door, laid hold of the knob, and then, as he afterward described it, "you could have knocked him down with a one-dollar bill.["] However, he pushed open the door and entered.

And there, stretched out upon a bed and decently sheeted from sight, lay the motionless form of Mary Ann's lodger. Mr. Hashagen resolutely advanced and drawing off the covering exposed the whole figure, which was about ten inches long, and rosy as a summer sunset. The new bedder was as much as three hours of age and quite hearty.

At the end, even as Hashagen "resolutely" advances toward a shrouded, silent, and "motionless" form, Bierce finally relents and in lieu of Doman's recent fate inflicts upon Hashagen a much older one more traditionally appropriate to Christmas: like Joseph, the biblical husband of Mary, Joseph Hashagen, the husband of Mary Jane, upon drawing back the sheet that conceals the lodger from his sight, is surprised to discover that in his absence he has miraculously become a father, a fate that Bierce has satirically suggested is worse than death.

Two months after the publication of "A Holy Terror," in his "Prattle" column of February 24, 1883, Bierce published a brief but telling passage that seems to have been a final proud "hurrah" on Bierce's part for his Christ-

mas tale. Ostensibly directing his ire at a “Mr. P. S. Dorney” whose poetry had appeared in the *Sacramento Bee*, Bierce satirically criticized the imperfect mastery of the English language demonstrated by the poet in his poetry: “Its sense is so subtle and its charm so elusive that it evades the understanding, and it mixes up the sensibilities worse than a pack of hounds after a jackass rabbit. This bard has a vocabulary that is a sealed book to mortals, and his private system of grammar is a holy terror to those who have not the clue.” Tellingly, the poem Bierce cited as an example of Dorney’s suspect art, “The Last Redoubt,” addressed the last resting place of the Civil War’s “great dead” as revealed by the six lines Bierce reproduced:

Bivouac forever—great dead—  
Immortal, wooed and truly free:  
Tho’ cold your lips and still’d your tread—  
Did not I love I’d envy thee;  
I’d envy thee though wrap’t in rout,  
And stacked and stark in the last redoubt.

Drawing attention to the fact that these lines failed to clarify whether Dorney’s late subject was singular or plural, Bierce wrote in part that “[t]he appalling conundrum suggested by Mr. Dorney in affirming that his ‘great dead’ were (or was) ‘wrap’t in rout’ might perhaps be answered by an undertaker.” At least a few readers of this criticism who had read “A Holy Terror” were likely to recall that Hurdy-Gurdy’s gravedigger, Jefferson Doman’s friend Barney Bree (whose surname appears once, possibly intentionally, as “Bee” in the *Wasp* text), had his own “private system for the communication of ideas” and was the putative source of the “innovations in grammar and experiments in orthography” that characterized the grave markers in Hurdy-Gurdy’s cemetery. And, as “A Holy Terror” told the story of a singular grave with a plurality of occupants, readers of this “Prattle” commentary might have also noted the thematic connection between Dorney’s “appalling conundrum” and the grave consequences of the arrival in Hurdy-Gurdy of a “White-headed Conundrum.” Ultimately, the far-fetched but nevertheless probable conclusion is that Bierce made these late “Prattle”-based remarks to indirectly and proudly acknowledge that his Christmas tale had proven to be a holy terror for readers unable to unseal its message.

Following this review of the material that originally anticipated, accompanied, and followed the publication of “A Holy Terror,” it should be obvious that making sense out of “A Holy Terror” has never been easy to do. Even when it first appeared in the San Francisco-based Christmas issue of the *Wasp* on December 23, 1882, “A Holy Terror” must have sent many readers

running after jackass rabbits, but later generations of readers have faced a significantly more daunting task because so much of the carefully hidden ore that enriches the tale has faded from sight. However, when the tale is recontextualized into the milieu of the *Wasp*, it is possible to read Bierce's tale as he arguably intended it should be read. And it is, as shall be made clear, a very good read.

As noted, to arrive at this informed reading it is important to realize that Bierce has strategically salted "A Holy Terror" with a freight of rich and critically important ore. For example, each of the three principal characters in the story, Jefferson Doman, "Scarry," and Mary Matthews Porfer, are linked to nicknames or epithets that yield variously useful insights when thoughtfully interpreted. Quite deliberately, Bierce draws attention to the significance of nicknames and the intellectual peril posed by hasty interpretations in the opening lines of the tale:

There was an entire lack of interest in the latest arrival at Hurdy-Gurdy. He was not even christened with the picturesquely descriptive nickname which is so frequently a mining camp's word of welcome to the newcomer. In almost any other camp thereabout this circumstance would of itself have secured him some such appellation as "The White-headed Conundrum," or "No Sarvey"—an expression naïvely supposed to suggest to quick intelligences the Spanish *quien sabe*. (819)

As Bierce hints, a more probing intelligence is required to extract the full significance of these nicknames that are put forward as being possibly appropriate for Jefferson Doman; thus, "The White-headed Conundrum" can be verbosely but helpfully translated into "the blond-haired riddle whose answer involves a pun that humorously suggests another word similar in sound," and, foreshadowing the significant orthographic and grammatical "innovations" of Barney Bree, "No Sarvey," which Bierce suggests is vaguely related to the Spanish phrase *¿quién sabe?* (who knows?), derives from "No Savvy" and thus can be variously rendered as "not well informed" or "unknowing" or "unwise." All are accurate epithets for Jefferson Doman.

The story becomes more convoluted where the meaning of "Scarry" is concerned, but some readers—especially informed ones—should nevertheless be able to deduce that Scarry, whom Bierce at one point tellingly labels a "mountain Messalina," had been in life a camp prostitute and thus was quite properly known as "a holy terror": her person and profession certainly would have terrorized the virtuous. But the most important bit of verbal wordplay concerning Scarry's name remains to be considered and draws on the previously explored meaning of "conundrum." In short, evidence carefully em-

bedded in the text reveals that the epithet “Scarry” is simply Barney Bree’s flawed attempt at a rendering of “Scary,” a sobriquet that is entirely fitting for a whore who in life was also known as “a holy terror.” This concealed pun is potentiated early on in the story when Bierce openly informs readers that the graveyard is “not altogether exempt from innovations in grammar and experiments in orthography” that are displayed on “a score of rude headboards” (819, 205). Although they are not mentioned again, these headboards are nevertheless nearby when much later in the story Bierce explains that Doman, from within the open grave, “tried with imperfect success to recall the exact nature of the disfiguration that had given the woman her ugly name,” before simply resorting to “fancy” for a solution that was for Doman stamped “with the validity of conviction” (820). Within the fiction of the tale, this solution has no connection to the reality of the surrounding circumstances, which Bierce so carefully describes; certainly, Doman’s solution does not account for the lettering on twenty misspelled grave markers.

For now, let it merely be said that the other principal character of the tale, Mary Matthews Porfer, also has an appropriate nickname, “Split-faced Moll,” and an explicitly appropriate fate: her well-documented proclivity for reaching her hand into other people’s pockets precipitates her death. Despite such ready revelations, a much more detailed and demanding examination of “A Holy Terror” is required to reveal the full range of its hidden mysteries. Fortunately, while it must have been difficult for even informed readers of the original *Wasp*-based text of “A Holy Terror” to independently solve the riddle posed by “A Holy Terror” even with the clues they had at hand, Bierce has inadvertently provided us with additional assistance in the form of emendations made while preparing the 1882 text of “A Holy Terror” for inclusion in *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*. During his revision work, which was conducted nearly a decade after the original creative act, in addition to removing minor typographical errors and stylistic weaknesses, Bierce problematically pared down two key passages and made several variously significant descriptive alterations. Ironically, analyzing these changes offers important critical insights into the story.

The first key passage subjected to problematic editorial pruning is located in the fourth section of the tale shortly after Doman has upended the coffin in the reopened grave. In the 1882 version the coffin “stood propped against the end of the open grave like a colossal note of admiration marking an emotion appropriate to the tragic situation” (820). On the printer’s copytext for the 1892 collection, Bierce struck everything after “grave” (100, 214).<sup>11</sup> Although the excised portion is verbose, it is not without a peculiar merit: in effect, Bierce is suggesting that the upright coffin serves as a human-sized exclamation point to Doman’s act of desecration. In the original version of the story this difficult metaphor forced attentive readers at this crucial point

in the narrative to pause—even as Doman does—and recognize the magnitude of Doman’s act just as he is forced to; in the revised versions, readers are likely to rush through the paragraph without such a pregnant pause.<sup>12</sup> Picking up the thread of the story, in the same paragraph’s concluding lines Doman finds temporary respite in quiet laughter and in the antics of his shadow as it plays across the upright coffin. In the original *Wasp*-based text, Bierce then included a paragraph that carefully recorded the scene as Doman observed it:

He now observed in succession several extraordinary circumstances. The surface of the coffin upon which his eyes were fastened was not flat; it presented two distinct ridges, one longitudinal, the other transverse. Where these intersected at the widest part, there was a corroded metallic plate that reflected the moonlight with a dismal luster. Along the outer edges of the coffin, at long intervals, were rust-eaten heads of ornamental screws. This frail example of the undertaker’s art had been put into the grave the wrong side up! (820)

On the paste-up copytext, in revising this paragraph for his 1892 book, Bierce, quite possibly no longer recollecting the subtleties of his own art, problematically reworked the last two sentences to produce a more prosaic effect: “Along the outer edges of the coffin, at long intervals, were rust-eaten heads of nails. This frail product of the carpenter’s art had been put into the grave the wrong side up!” (100). Beyond their much more readily observable nature in the dim moonlight, the “ornamental screws” present in the original passage arguably conceal a pun on Scarry’s profession insofar as the concluding original sentence does not describe the coffin, but Doman’s extraordinary realization that Scarry—euphemistically a frail sister—has been put into her grave face down. Bierce lends credence to this interpretation at the close of his unaltered succeeding paragraph where he writes “However it had come about, poor Scarry had indubitably been put into the earth face downward.” In this light, the original lines much more effectively and appropriately dramatize Doman’s initial realization of Scarry’s fate.

Another problematic excision has already been briefly addressed. In the original *Wasp*-based text Bierce included a sentence describing the effect the sounds of howling wolves and a barking coyote have on Doman: “The monotonous howling of distant wolves, sharply punctuated by the barking of a coyote, affected him as something that he had heard years ago in a dream” (820). In revising the passage for his 1892 collection, Bierce, either bowing to the fact that wolves were rare in California, or seeking to avoid a cliché, eliminated the wolves and increased the number of coyotes: “The monotonous barking of distant coyotes affected him as something that he had heard

years ago in a dream" (101, 217). It is relatively obvious that the howling wolves in the original passage are more likely to produce the apparently eerie reaction Doman experiences than the barking coyotes alone are called upon to effect in the revised passage: in terms of their respective fear-inducing abilities in humans, wolves, with their familiar archetypal presence in folk tales are certainly greatly ascendant over coyotes. Readers of the revised sentence, unaware of the previous presence of howling wolves, might quite reasonably wonder just what affect the barking coyotes had on Doman. Ironically, despite his deliberate efforts to eliminate the wolves from the story, Bierce failed to do so: in the final section of all the published versions of the story, wolves, and not coyotes, are said to have assisted the buzzards in picking clean the bones found in the open grave. Indeed, on the copytext of this story that he hand-corrected for his 1909 collection, Bierce caught and corrected this oversight, but his clear handwritten correction (the simple substitution of "coyotes" for "wolves") did not appear in the published text.<sup>13</sup>

Although they may at times run counter to Bierce's reputation as a perfectionist and editor of great ability, collectively, these first problematic examples are not extraordinary and in fact reflect the kind of difficulties Bierce encountered in revising complex stories originally written many months or years earlier. On the other hand, presumably both because of its much earlier date of composition, and its especial degree of complexity, "A Holy Terror," when compared to the other eighteen tales included in Bierce's 1892 collection, exhibits a particularly extensive array of emendations, some problematic and some not.

The earliest minor alteration Bierce made in preparing "A Holy Terror" for his collection came thirty lines into the original version. In the second paragraph, after explaining that Hurdy-Gurdy had been the scene of "a few weeks earnest work" by most of the "two or three thousand males" who had come in response to the rumors of gold spread by an "imaginative gentleman," Bierce originally wrote that "Some of the inhabitants had lingered a considerable time in and about Hurdy-Gurdy, but now all had been long gone" (819). In revising the story he apparently decided that the crowded graveyard in the mining camp required a more convincing explanation: "Still, his fiction had a certain foundation in fact, and many had lingered a considerable time in and about Hurdy-Gurdy, though now all had been long gone" (95, 201). Within the context of "A Holy Terror" this minor emendation merely provides a slightly more plausible explanation for the populous cemetery at the expense of a more awkward construction, but when considered as an example of Bierce's art it serves to highlight his interest in grounding his improbable stories "in fact," sometimes at the expense of his art. The next minor alteration, only four sentences further along, illustrates Bierce's editorial eye for detail. In the



original version of the story Bierce personified the abandoned dwellings of the camp, describing them as being “emaciated, as by famine, to the condition of mere skeletons,” and then turned his attention elsewhere: “The little valley itself, torn and gashed by pick and shovel, was unhandsome with long, bending lines of dilapidated flume, resting here and there upon the summits of sharp ridges, and stilting awkwardly across the interspaces upon unhewn poles” (819). In revising this sentence for his 1892 volume, Bierce replaced the word “dilapidated” with “decaying,” a substitution that both eliminates the awkward note of the ordinary that the original use of “dilapidated” sounded, and artfully continues the theme of personification initiated with the description of the starving and skeletonized dwellings (95, 202). Slightly altering the preceding trope, the story’s succeeding unchanged sentence sums up the contents of the valley in language that suggests what remains of the camp is a kind of abortion: “The whole place presented that raw and forbidding aspect of arrested development which is a new country’s substitute for the solemn grace of ruin wrought by time” (819, 202).

Another much more problematic alteration of the original text is found in the third section of the story where Mary Matthews’s similarly premature and ungraceful disfigurement is revealed to Doman via a letter and accompanying photograph. In the *Wasp*-based version Bierce wrote that “The letter failed in a signal way to accomplish its object; the fidelity which had before been to Mr. Doman a matter of love and duty, was thenceforth a matter of honor also; and the photograph, showing the once pretty face hideously disfigured as by the slash of a knife, was duly installed in his affections, and its more comely predecessor treated with contumelious neglect” (819).<sup>14</sup> On his paste-up copytext Bierce emended “hideously disfigured” to read “sadly disfigured” (97).<sup>15</sup> Although the change from “hideously disfigured” to “sadly disfigured” appears to be the result of a simple authorial decision to shift the descriptive point of view from the narrator to Doman, it has wider and more problematic consequences than Bierce apparently recognized. As originally conceived by Bierce in 1882, Mary Matthews’s facial scar truly is hideous—it is in point of fact the source of the first hyphenated half of her apt sobriquet “Split-faced Moll”—and despite this fact Doman makes the photograph showing it the object of his affections. In the revised passage, Matthews’s scar is merely sad and thus the revised description no longer communicates to readers the same visible stigma: this change means that readers of the 1892 and later texts may not and indeed cannot fully realize that Matthews’s disfigurement really is hideous enough for her to truly despair of “becoming Mrs. Doman” (207). In addition, at a later point in the fourth section of the original version, Doman pointedly compares his memory of Matthews’s “most lovely” face “with the most hideous that he could conceive,” a face he imag-

ines Scarry possessed (820). Although Bierce emended “lovely” to “beloved” on the copytext apparently to more accurately express the visible sense of the situation, the significant change is the prior substitution of “sadly” for “hideously” (102, 97). This earlier substitution mutes the impact of Doman’s subsequent comparison made in the open grave: in the original version readers have been primed by Bierce’s previous description of Matthews’s scar to experience the same thrill of coincidence as Doman because they know that Doman’s “most lovely” object is truly most hideous to behold; strictly speaking, in the 1892 and later texts, as far as readers can know Doman’s crucial comparison is no longer of one hideous face to another, but of a sad face to a hideous one (218). Clearly the original wording served as a kind of “parted-clue,” a technique several critics have noted Bierce was adept at employing whereby a clue is divided into two or more parts that are then carefully distributed in the text. Ironically, I have found several like instances in other tales where carefully prepared parted-clues inadvertently departed during editing sessions. Apparently Bierce, often years or decades removed from the initial creative act, was not always fully aware of how his localized later revisions affected the artfully achieved integrity of specific tales.

For their part, readers of the later versions of “A Holy Terror” who fail to appreciate the severity of Matthews’s disfigurement may also fail to appreciate the full horror Doman experiences in the open grave when he imagines Scarry to be Matthews. Certainly, readers of the original version are much more favorably positioned to comprehend the import of the dawning awareness gripping Doman: he has just theorized both that the woman he still loves and almost certainly still dreams of marrying is dead, and that her death is the indirect result of her hideous disfigurement that has forced her into a short, unhappy life as a prostitute. Although Bierce is careful to avoid making Doman’s discovery too obvious, in effect it is truly shocking: Doman at this moment believes the woman he has long loved and cherished had, before her death, been bedded by many of the men in Hurdy-Gurdy and the other mining camps she had plied her trade in. Of course, aware that his tale’s strength lay in its hidden subtleties, Bierce partially concealed these facts about Scarry’s career by embedding them strategically in his story. For example, long before readers have any reason to note its significance, Bierce observes at the outset of his tale that the men in Hurdy-Gurdy once numbered two to three thousand, while the women were at the same time awkwardly accounted “not fewer than a dozen” (95, 200). The hidden implication of this revelation is that while the men have come to Hurdy-Gurdy in order to extract their share of gold from the ground, the dozen or so women have come to extract their share of the same gold by servicing these two or three thousand men. Thus, the lack of significant gold proved a disappointment to both groups.

Similarly, readers eventually learn in the fourth section of the story that when Scarry, one of that small and therefore presumably very busy group of women, “had been prevalent” in the area’s various camps and “in the plenitude of her power,” “Doman’s fortunes had been at low ebb, and he had led the vagrantly laborious life of a prospector.” However, these same readers do not necessarily realize that what Bierce is saying is that Doman could not afford to pay for Scarry’s services if he had desired them; presumably, ever faithful to Matthews, he did not (820, 211). Furthermore, readers also learn at this point in the narrative that Doman lived in the mountains with a series of companions and that “[i]t was from the admiring recitals of these casual partners, fresh from the various camps, that his judgment of Scarry had been made up” (820, 211). Significantly, the “casual partners” referred to in this sentence are both Doman’s companions and Scarry’s customers. Bierce at this juncture reveals that Doman has not “had the doubtful advantage of her acquaintance and the precarious distinction of her favor,” and yet even this revelation is so subtle that many readers may fail to realize exactly what an acquaintance with Scarry entails. After divulging this information, Bierce finally provides what should be an unequivocal clue to Scarry’s profession when he calls her a “mountain Messalina,” but this clue comes only after several carefully placed and deliberately vague intervening lines about Scarry’s death and her humorous obituary that tend to separate the labeling of Scarry as a mountain Messalina from the corroborating evidence of her career (820, 211–12).<sup>16</sup> Doman, however, certainly recognizes Scarry for what she was: immediately following the narrator’s revelation about Scarry’s profession, readers learn that Doman, “perhaps with an unconscious attempt at self-justification, repeated that she was a holy terror, and sank his pick into her grave up to the handle” (820, 212). In other words, Doman appears to justify his violent initial penetration of the woman’s grave with the knowledge that he is merely excavating the unsanctified burial site of an unholy whore.

Although some key elements of the plot have become more apparent, we have not yet fully considered how Doman ultimately connected Scarry to his “lovely” or “beloved” Mary Matthews. In all the versions of the story, when Doman finally does make the connection, he is understandably confused by his inability to exactly recall the source of Scarry’s name: “Remembering the many descriptions of Scarry’s personal appearance that he had heard from the gossips of his camp-fire, he tried with imperfect success to recall the exact nature of the disfiguration that had given the woman her ugly name; and what was lacking in his memory, fancy supplied, stamping it with the validity of conviction” (820, 219). Because the “many” men who have described Scarry to Doman have provided “admiring recitals” of her charms, Doman is understandably at a loss “to recall the exact nature” of Scarry’s disfigurement. None

of the many men who have recited Scarry's various charms have communicated anything to Doman about Scarry's disfigurement because Scarry is free from such a mark. Actually, Bierce has provided readers with more than enough evidence to enable them to conclude that Barney Bree's inaccurate spelling of a nickname, combined with the similar pronunciations of Scarry and Scary, has initiated the series of misapprehensions that lead Doman to rely on "fancy" for an explanation.<sup>17</sup>

In the final section of "A Holy Terror" any possibility that Scarry and Mary Matthews are the same person is wholly dissipated, but Bierce accomplishes this clarification in stages that allow him to maximize the dramatic impact of the revelation. The section opens "[s]ome months" after Jefferson Doman's demise with the arrival in Hurdy-Gurdy of "a party of men and women belonging to the highest social circles of San Francisco." The first individual in this gathering of San Francisco's social elite whom readers meet is Mr. Porfer, a man who "in the days of [Hurdy-Gurdy's] glory" had "been one of its prominent citizens." Readers are told that "it used to be said that more money passed over his faro table in any one night than over those of all his competitors in a week," and then they are introduced to Mr. Porfer's "invalid wife, a lady famous in San Francisco for the costly nature of her entertainments and her exacting rigor with regard to the social position and antecedents of those who attended them" (821, 221). The party soon finds its way to Hurdy-Gurdy's cemetery where their social graces are quickly shown to be decidedly lacking. In this way, despite Mrs. Porfer's protestation at the various liberties taken by her husband and other members of the party, Bierce makes it clear, even before her identity as Mary Matthews is revealed, that Mrs. Porfer is not a true lady. Once Bierce reveals Mrs. Porfer is actually Mary Matthews, this passage can be reread and reinterpreted in a much more revealing light: Mary Matthews Porfer is in fact a member of San Francisco's demimonde who has bought her way to social prominence with her husband's ill-gotten wealth (821, 221).

The story unfolding in Hurdy-Gurdy's cemetery is not yet finished. After the party has discovered the open grave and its human remains, Bierce reveals, via the recovered coffin plate, Scarry's actual name. Making the textual situation somewhat more complicated, the particulars of Scarry's coffin plate were carefully revised by Bierce in preparing the story for his 1892 collection. In the original *Wasp* version, with the exception of the concluding epitaph, the information on the coffin plate that Mr. Porfer reads aloud to his graveside audience was intrinsically unremarkable unless readers noted that the woman's plain name is a foil to Mary Matthews, or that a woman (or, accepting the epitaph's exhortation, many women) born in San Francisco could be a whore, or that a forty-seven-year-old whore could be the subject

of many admiring recitals: “JANE JARVIS. Born in San Francisco—Died in Hurdy-Gurdy. Aged 47. *Hell’s full of such*” (821). On his paste-up copy of the story, Bierce emended the text of the coffin plate in a fashion that both drew attention to the revised Scarry’s humble origins and introduced an even more pronounced note of alliterative similarity in the names of the two women: “Manuelita Murphy. Born at the Mission San Pedro—Died in Hurdy-Gurdy. Aged 47. *Hell’s full of such*” (103, 223). Obviously, the name Manuelita Murphy is intended to suggest this revised Scarry is of Mexican-Irish descent. Both of these ethnic groups had their ready detractors in San Francisco in the early 1890s, and Bierce compounded the import of this revised Scarry’s birth by locating it at a Catholic mission with the implication of illegitimacy and poverty such a birth suggested, and a concomitant satirical swipe at the mission’s failed efficacy in preventing its charge from falling into a life of sin.<sup>18</sup> In either case, Mr. Porfer’s dramatic recital of the inscription results in a “spontaneous and overwhelming recognition” whose “painful impression” Bierce claims he has largely withheld “[i]n deference to the piety of the reader and the nerves of Mrs. Porfer’s fastidious sisterhood of both sexes” (821, 224). In other words, while they were as yet unaware of certain approaching developments, Scarry’s unholy profession was immediately apparent to Mr. Porfer and his party.

Interestingly, in revising the story for his 1892 collection, Bierce introduced Scarry’s Mexican roots even as he or another subdued a clue that revealed she could not be mistaken in life for Mary Matthews: in the original version of the story the grave yields to “the ghoul in the grave . . . a long tangle of coal black hair” (821). After the copytext for *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* was prepared, the word “coal” was dropped, possibly because it no longer served its original purpose and had thus become merely redundant. In the original *Wasp*-based version of the story, beyond emphasizing the blackness of Scarry’s hair, the adjective “coal” is foreshadowed by Bierce’s apparently unrelated earlier editorial reference to the annoyingly high price of coal. In fact, Bierce’s editorial reference to the mineral coal is intended to draw the attention of these *Wasp*-based readers to the “means” through which coal is made available: it, like Scarry’s hair, is mined or extracted from the earth. More significant, within the context of the *Wasp*, Bierce’s synergistic uses of “coal” subtly draw attention to what he suspects will be his tale’s fate at the hands of inattentive readers. Like the members of the party from San Francisco who heedlessly despoil Scarry’s previously desecrated grave, these readers will fail to make sense of the evidence Bierce has carefully provided. Thus, just as Bierce, speaking as the editor, has warned his theoretical reader that he cares not enough “for the details of our efforts to supply him with provend for his mental tooth,” to the party gathered at the graveside, obli-

ous as they are to Doman's fear that he has desecrated the relicts of the blond-haired Mary Matthews, the disinterring of the "long tangle of coal-black hair defiled with clay" from the grave "was such an anticlimax that it received little attention" (821). Of course, in the *Wasp*-based version this visible display of coal-black hair is the only physical evidence that distinguishes Jenny Jarvis from the notably blond Mary Matthews. In the later versions of the tale, because they lack the elaborate staging found in the *Wasp*, the adjective "coal" could no longer serve the same subtly meaningful purpose. Still, even in these revised versions Bierce clearly wanted to somehow emphasize the fact that Doman's never realized putative surprise at this revelation of Scarry's black hair could have proven to be a welcome anticlimax; consequently, he rechristened Scarry "Manuelita Murphy" and thus further removed her from possible contention as a Mary Matthews look-alike through her implied Mexican heritage.<sup>19</sup>

In all the versions of his story, whether Scarry is named Jane Jarvis or Manuelita Murphy, Bierce adds further insult to his injurious mockery of Jefferson Doman's foolish inability to recall even the most basic details about Scarry's physical appearance by revealing yet another anticlimactic fact about the contents of the open grave when a rock is found exhibiting a "yellow luster," only to be dismissively pronounced "fool's gold" by Mr. Porfer. At this precise moment, Bierce causes Mrs. Porfer to resurface in the story and quickly reveal "a tress of golden hair" (821, 224). In a deliberate ironic twist, these several brief revelations are at once artfully anticlimactic and ante-climactic: Jefferson Doman, the one individual who could have benefited from a more timely discovery of Scarry's hair color and the fact that Barney Bree's gold is worthless "fool's gold," has already mingled his bones with those of Scarry, and Mrs. Porfer is poised on the brink of her own fatal discovery.

The full significance of Mrs. Porfer's fatal discovery can benefit from a final reconsideration of her carefully constructed links to Scarry. As previously noted, in calling Scarry a "mountain Messalina" Bierce is being rather coy about the woman's actual status, but this coyness masks another interesting aspect of the appellation as Bierce employs it: the original Messalina's callously immoral and as it developed fatal act of bigamy is quite closely mirrored by the actions of Mary Matthews. As Bierce explains, despite being deeply installed or instated in Jefferson Doman's heart, Matthews is dismissive of his affections from the moment he departs to try his luck in the gold-fields: whereas Doman "went to California to labor for her through the long, loveless years with a strong heart, an alert hope, and a steadfast fidelity that never for a moment forgot what it was about," Matthews, like her historical counterpart Messalina, upon being left behind quickly abandons her responsibilities to Doman and falls into a relationship with a gambler bearing the

interesting name of Jo Seeman and eventually receives a vicious knife slash from the same when he catches her both stealing his coins out of the bags into which she is ostensibly sacking them “and bestowing them upon his local rivals” (819, 206–207). The implication of this revelation is that Matthews, already unfaithful to Doman, is also unfaithful to Seeman in monetary and presumably in sexual matters as well: “moll”—the second half of Matthews’s apt sobriquet—is typically understood to refer to either a gangster’s girlfriend, or a prostitute; as applied to Matthews it is clearly meant to embody both meanings.

In the aftermath of her falling out with Jo Seeman, following a brief play for Doman’s sympathies with a fabricated story about the origins of her disfigurement, Matthews, readily deducing that Doman is not going to keep her busy sacking and unsacking coins, gravitates to San Francisco where she cunningly retires to the upper reaches of society in order to more effectively conceal both apt particulars of her identity as a “Split-faced Moll,” and marries, presumably upon the twin strengths of her coin sacking and sexual abilities, Mr. Porfer, a millionaire who formerly ran a wildly profitable faro table in Hurdy-Gurdy. Under the shade of the hanging tree that had nearly hosted Mr. Porfer, presumably due to some irregularities at his profitable faro table, and within spitting distance of an open grave that contains the remains of her unlucky fiancé and a whore, Mary Matthews Porfer’s own string of monetarily successful but immoral adventures finally reaches its abrupt and permanent end. Using her skill at finding profitable pockets to plunder, near the open grave she finds a fragmentary old coat and surreptitiously “thrust[s] her jeweled hand into the exposed pocket and [draws] out a moldy pocket-book” (821, 225). Following so many other revelations of artful wordplay, it can hardly come as a surprise that Bierce’s seemingly innocuous reference to an exposed pocket is quite deliberate: in the vernacular of the mining camps, the phrase “exposed pocket” describes a small but rich source of visible gold.

Greatly to Mary Matthews Porfer’s misfortune, examining the contents of this last exposed pocket proves fatal. Like her historical counterpart Messalina, who also fatally pushed her luck too far in marrying her lover during her husband’s absence, it is only reasonable to conclude that Mary Matthews Porfer is killed by her rightful, albeit unrequited and deceased, husband Jefferson Doman upon their reunification at the side of an open grave: one critical piece of evidence supporting this interpretation appears in the penultimate paragraph of the original *Wasp*-based text of “A Holy Terror” where Bierce apparently mistakenly but actually tellingly slips and refers to the recently deceased Mrs. Porfer as “Mrs. Doman”: “A few moments later a group of anxious gentlemen surrounded Mrs. Doman as she sat motionless at the foot of the tree, her head dropped forward, her fingers clutching a crushed photo-

graph” (821). Further evidence of Mary Matthews Porfer’s prior binding betrothal is contained in Bierce’s initial vague reintroduction of her as Mr. Porfer’s “invalid wife” (821, 221). The word “invalid” has two meanings. Before Mrs. Porfer is identified as the former Mary Matthews, the use of “invalid” calls attention to Mrs. Porfer’s state of health: she seems to be either sickly or infirm. Once readers know Mrs. Porfer is actually Mary Matthews who has been horribly disfigured by a knife this interpretation, while still valid, is revealed to be incomplete. In short, “invalid” proves to have a second meaning and, as is so often the case in “A Holy Terror,” this second meaning is equally in force: Mrs. Porfer’s legal status as the wife of Mr. Porfer is, if Jefferson Doman’s claim is granted priority, invalid, or “without foundation or force in fact, truth, or law.”<sup>20</sup>

Before he let his readers rest in peace with a final sentence that mildly noted “Mary Matthews Porfer had the bad luck to be dead,” Bierce forced them to look once more upon the face that had proven so unusually fatal: “Her husband raised her head, exposing a face ghastly white, except the long, deforming cicatrice familiar to all her friends—which no art could ever hide, and which now traversed the pallor of her countenance: a visible curse.” This last revelation is not merely a reminder that Mrs. Porfer’s scar is too terrible to hide under makeup as a prostitute or any other woman with social aspirations might reasonably try to do. In specifically labeling the scar a “cicatrice,” Bierce is playing on the idea that Mary Matthews Porfer’s scar is caused by the removal of Jefferson Doman who fits the word’s specific definition as a type of scar produced by the removal of a previously attached part. The scar served, after all, as Mary Matthews’s excuse for breaking off the couple’s long-standing engagement. Thus, although she was never officially joined to Jefferson Doman in marriage, readers are clearly encouraged to conclude that in an inversion of the usual order of such things “Mrs. Doman” has been permanently reunited with her husband in death. That is to say that Bierce must have hoped that those readers of “A Holy Terror” not engaged in the pursuit of jackass rabbits would ultimately surmise that the undoubtedly grief-stricken Mr. Porfer would have found room enough in that doubly occupied but conveniently situated open grave for one more body.



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