
ALEX J. BERINGER

“Some Unsuspected Author”: Ignatius Donnelly and the Conspiracy Novel

Regularity does not grow out of chaos. There can be no intellectual order without preexisting intellectual purpose. The fruits of the mind can only be found where mind is or has been.

Ignatius Donnelly, *The Great Cryptogram*, 1888

Whatever the intent may have been in writing this book, my mind is very clear that its effect, if published, would be nothing but bad, and very bad.

A.C. McClurg to Ignatius Donnelly, December 30, 1889

IGNATIUS DONNELLY, THE POPULIST POLITICIAN, bestselling novelist, and armchair historian, was never short on sensational revelations. Nicknamed “The Prince of Cranks” and the “Apostle of Discontent,” he often seems to embody the conspiratorial imagination of late nineteenth-century Populist culture. Donnelly’s novels, speeches, and essays abound with a startling array of offbeat theories and speculations. His works include a pseudo-scientific history of the lost continent of Atlantis, two massive volumes claiming that Shakespeare’s plays contained a secret code, three conspiracy-themed novels, and extensive writings claiming that international bankers had used the Civil War as a pretext for enslaving the American people. Donnelly’s conspiracy theories and sensational revelations were rooted in the essential belief that hidden human forces are at work all around us, shaping seemingly disparate events, and that these forces are discoverable through careful attention to our surroundings.¹

Arizona Quarterly Volume 68, Number 4, Winter 2012

Copyright © 2012 by Arizona Board of Regents

ISSN 0004-1610

Donnelly's fiction, much like Donnelly himself, epitomizes a philosophical and aesthetic investment in conspiracy thinking for late nineteenth-century American literary culture. His works were meant to and frequently did offer readers an avenue for converting the language of conspiracy into the kind of literary detective work that alerted them to the possibilities for deception and conspiracy in modern life. Donnelly's novel, *Caesar's Column* (1890), was a major bestseller, with an estimated 700,000 copies sold in the United States, Britain, and Germany during the 1890s (Ruddick xiii). *Caesar's Column* is a wild dystopian tale that speculates that in the year 1988 a Jewish plutocracy would be at war with an anarchist secret society known as "The Brotherhood of Destruction." Extending the detective story's characteristic investigation of a clue in pursuit of the solution to an individual crime, *Caesar's Column* constructs a setting in which clues and hints of the dueling plutocratic and anarchist conspiracies recur in public life. Donnelly interspersed dime novel plots with actual documents, newspaper articles, sociological statistics and long speeches that strung together coincidences that seemed to confirm Donnelly's underlying conclusion of a coming cataclysm. The resulting text is an eccentric fusion of literary fiction, pseudo-sociology and conspiracy theory in which Donnelly encourages his reader to imagine the tale's conspiracy narratives as plausible possibilities that can be detected through attention to aberrations in public life. In this sense, Donnelly's novel finds pleasure in conspiratorial detective work. If the mystery novel embeds clues to its solution in its plot, and the reader vicariously lives through the detective's mind (seeing the painting out of place, the thumbprint in the unexpected location), the pleasure of Donnelly's iteration of the conspiracy novel makes a similar fictional move, but with the clues embedded in the public sphere.

In its time, Donnelly's formula was so shocking and alienating that, when he first submitted *Caesar's Column* for review, the publisher A. C. McClurg feared that it would have workers rioting in the streets. In what must be one of the great rejection letters of all time, the publisher warned Donnelly, "it is very possible to make people believe that evils exist that do not exist, and that brutal and frightful remedies must be plotted instead Whatever the intent may have been in writing this book, my mind is very clear that its effect, if published, would be nothing but bad, and very bad." He closed his letter by advising Donnelly

that, if he insisted on releasing *Caesar's Column*, he should, at the very least, make sure that the book would not be sold at a price less than \$1.00, so as to keep it out of the hands of those “whom it would only harm” (*Ignatius Donnelly Papers* 90).²

Although the degree of Donnelly's enthusiasm for conspiracy theories sets him apart from his contemporaries, many of the era's major writers shared his conviction that the rapid pace of capitalization and internationalization in political economy had given rise to secret conflicts between the powerful and the powerless. Conspiratorial readings of incidents such as Black Friday and the Haymarket Affair were central to works that have become touchstones of the period's literary attempts to envision the nation. Texts such as Henry Adams' essay, “The New York Gold Conspiracy” (1869), Henry James's *The Princess Casamassima* (1885), Frank Norris' *The Octopus* (1901), and Thomas Dixon's infamous *Leopard's Spots* (1902) responded to and participated in deeply ambivalent public attitudes over the possibility of conspiracy: a simultaneous dread at the civic nightmare of corporate and terrorist forces in the imagined space of the nation and a fascination with these very forces as a source of sublime awe. In these works, the term “conspiracy” did not simply describe a crime, but became a vehicle through which dark suspicions about modernization and industrialization were channeled into exhilarating sensations of romance and mystery. Late nineteenth-century fiction writers added to the conspiratorial puzzles of Edgar Allan Poe and the “dens of iniquity” that appeared in George Lippard's crypto-pornographic dime novels. Looking forward, the legacy of this development in American literary culture is tangible in twentieth-century and contemporary depictions of conspiracy extending from the postmodern systems novels of Thomas Pynchon to wildly popular conspiracy capers such as Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2003).

If Donnelly seemed to embody a late nineteenth-century fascination with conspiracy, this has been an incredibly mixed legacy among modern critics. For Richard Hofstadter, Donnelly was the poster child for the political pathology that Hofstadter termed the “paranoid style” in American politics. *Caesar's Column*, Hofstadter wrote, represented a “desperate work” that appealed to “the kind of thinking” that emerges when “those who have attained only a low level of education” are “so completely shut out from access to the centers of power” that they come to perceive “unlimited manipulation by those who wield power” (*Age*

of *Reform* 70–71). Recent assessments, such as Martin Ruddick’s 2003 annotated edition of *Caesar’s Column*, generally subsume the issue of conspiracy thinking into a discussion of the utopian/dystopian genre. Ruddick writes that Donnelly’s text is a prescient indication that “the dystopian would largely supersede the utopian vision” in “fiction about the future of civilization in the twentieth century”; however, Ruddick generally underplays Donnelly’s fascination with conspiracy as a somewhat embarrassing distraction (xvi). In either maligning or discounting Donnelly’s use of conspiracy as a narrative form, critics have thus tended to displace the source of his broad appeal to late nineteenth-century audiences and the underlying importance of conspiracy thinking as an organizing motif of his work.

Donnelly was doubtlessly a bit of an eccentric; however, this is no reason to dismiss him or assume that he was incapable of producing provocative and valuable art. On the contrary, “crankiness,” defined in the slang of the period as “an enthusiastic preoccupation with eccentric notions or impracticable projects” is much of what makes Donnelly and his work so interesting to a broader critical discussion of conspiracy discourse in American literary history (*OED*, “crank” n2 def.5). In my discussion of Donnelly’s fiction, I do not necessarily try to rescue him from accusations of anti-Semitism or nativism (though as critics like Oscar Handlin have shown, this is an incredibly complex issue) as much as I try to show that more than just paranoia or madness is at work in Donnelly’s interest in conspiracy, but a grasping for styles of mental work as a form of pleasure. Donnelly drew on the language of conspiracy to engage himself and his readers in a seemingly perpetual activity of imaginative speculation. The fascination here was not just that conspiracy theories evoked heterodox and esoteric readings of American history, but they also offered a flexible narrative structure where investigations and stories of conspiracy could proliferate endlessly. In the complex fog of modern propaganda and bureaucracy, there would always be another deception to uncover or another puzzle to solve, and thus another chance to overturn one’s expectations and experience overwhelming feelings of surprise and shock.³

Donnelly’s fiction dramatizes this conspiratorial detective work by reimagining everyday surroundings as the basis for a sublime spectacle in which every sight and sound can serve as a clue to a hidden

set of forces guiding post–Civil War history. Donnelly, in other words, establishes a *semiotic system*, which encourages his nineteenth-century readers to search and sift through the public sphere for signs of hidden conspiratorial causes behind mysteries in public life. Consider, for example, Donnelly’s description of his fictional plutocracy’s war-room from *Caesar’s Column*:

This is the real center of government of the American continent; all the rest is sham and form. The men who meet here determine the condition of all the hundreds of millions who dwell on the great land revealed to the world by Columbus. Here political parties, courts, juries, governors, legislatures, congresses, presidents are made and unmade; and from this spot they are controlled and directed in the discharge of their multiform functions. The decrees formulated here are echoed by a hundred thousand newspapers and many thousands of orators; and they are enforced by an uncountable army of soldiers, servants, tools, spies, and even assassins. He who stands in the way of the men who assemble here perishes. He who would oppose them takes his life in his hands. You are, young man, as if I had led you to the center of the earth, and I had placed your hand upon the very pivot, the well-oiled axle, upon which, noiselessly, the whole great globe revolves, and from which the awful forces extend which hold it all together. (50)

Each aspect of Donnelly’s setting takes on a slightly allegorical quality as seemingly mundane objects and happenings take on added significance in their potential linkage to a larger set of ideas and anxieties about the course of history. The newspapers that Donnelly’s protagonist reads, the unusual behavior of the police, the outcomes of elections, even strange expressions in the eyes of the people at his hotel—each creates a vantage point from which to view the underlying powers in society in the form of “the very pivot . . . upon which . . . the whole great globe revolves.” Donnelly thus depicts a heterodox perspective that allows his protagonist to simultaneously affirm his own modernity (in his canny ability to overcome modern forms of deception) *and* indulge in a variety of sublime experience (through his visions of incalculably large power). In this manner, Donnelly’s conspiracy fiction encourages its reader to

feel smart, thrilled, and terrified all at once and thus suggests a synergy between rationality and emotion.

‘AN ALERT AND TINGLING SENSE’

The conspiratorial spectacle that we see in *Caesar's Column* exemplifies a broader change in the language of conspiracy in the late nineteenth century. The post-Civil War era marks a time when the republican melodrama of conspiracy shifted in response to the changes of modernization and industrialization. Many were convinced that American society had become a battleground for a secret war among the powerful and the powerless and that evidence of the radical transformations that would follow could be located by ferreting out signs and symptoms of conspiracy. Where early American and antebellum conspiracy narratives usually hinged on the question of outsiders and insiders in the new republic, later nineteenth-century narratives dealt with a crisis in faith over the republican project emerging with the country's economic and social modernization. As Robert Levine notes, “the very idea of conspiracy was itself becoming more broadly conceived in relation to larger historical forces and transformations” especially capitalist industrialization, tactics of surveillance and propaganda, and a perceived breakdown of “confidence in the homogeneity of American culture” (233).⁴ In literature, politics, and popular culture, the antebellum uproar over Masonry, slave-owners, and other conspiratorial threats were gradually displaced by narratives that looked to conspiracy as the prism through which to view a modernity in which the individual self was becoming increasingly wrapped up with large networks of interdependence. If Poe and Lippard imagined labyrinthine underworlds of freemasons, Illuminati societies, and Catholic cloisters, fiction writers of Donnelly's generation envisioned their conspiratorial underworlds as increasingly secular and increasingly linked to an array of the powerful of the postwar era, such as the dread figures of corporations, high-stakes finance, tightly-disciplined terrorist cells, and indeed, the U.S. government itself.

The notion that access to conspiracy would help to explain modern life was at play in many of the events that have come to define our understanding of the culture and history of the late nineteenth century. The Populist Movement as it emerged in the People's Party and the

Grange movement warned that “money power” was secretly manipulating the national economy in order to mold America into a nation of vast material inequalities. Labor radicals splashed across middle-class periodicals in the form of iconic figures such as the mad-bomber or the anarchist newspaper editor. Discussions of the perceived failure of Southern Reconstruction were dominated by debates over conspiracies of radical republicans or the white supremacist terrorism of the Ku Klux Klan and other groups. In the West, some blamed corrupt railroad companies for the loss of an agrarian frontier paradise while figures such as the evangelical minister Josiah Strong sounded the alarm that Mormons, socialists, and Native Americans were scheming to halt progress at any cost. As diverse as these cultural motifs were, they were unified by a common set of anxieties that emerged from the reorganization of perceptions around a new socially defined self, sensitive to new hierarchies of social control and pressures on vision.⁵ This shift in thinking was more than just an intellectual appreciation of the new possibilities for conspiracy; it was also a deeply emotional experience. As Walter Lippmann described it, the last decades of the nineteenth century seemed to many observers a moment in which “the honeymoon” of traditional American consensus and optimism “was over,” and in its place was “an alert and tingling sense of labyrinthine evil.” Lippmann’s analysis attributed these paranoid sensibilities to the “rack and strain of modern life” at the paired experiences of the growing anonymity of American social life and the increased visibility of corporate and industrial influence over the day to day lives of Americans (2, 5).

Some of the most significant recent literary criticism has understood conspiracy to be central to the politics of late nineteenth-century American literature. Jeffery Clymer’s *America’s Culture of Terror* offers a thoughtful account of the prominent role of conspiracism in late nineteenth-century American novels about anarchist, white supremacist, and Fenian terrorism. In each case, Clymer traces the significance of conspiracy narratives to their ability to offer “discursive coherency.” According to Clymer, conspiracism creates “a simple and absolute ‘us vs. them’ binary” that condenses complex social problems to a simple melodramatic plot that provides the basis for novelistic readings of politics (53). David Zimmerman’s *Panic!* puts a distinctively pedagogical spin on this insight. Where Clymer sees conspiracy as sociology, Zimmerman emphasizes how writers such as Frederic Isham and Upton

Sinclair turned to narratives of finance conspiracy “to makes sense of new economy’s confounding matrix of expectations, intentions and actions” by “tracing economic outcomes no matter how embracing or diffuse, to the villainous intentions of specific groups” (33–34). These authors, Zimmerman insists, did so with the understanding that they were simplifying and condensing specific economic processes into terms that would have been comprehensible to popular audiences. As these studies have shown, the language of conspiracy was deeply intertwined with how novels constructed national consciousness and negotiated racial, ethnic, gendered, and socioeconomic difference. But these readings of conspiracy in the late nineteenth-century American novel seem unsatisfactory when it comes to accounting for the deeper philosophical and emotional elements of conspiracism. In placing so much emphasis on conspiracy narratives’ ability to map the development of social and political trends, these critics have tended to underestimate the emotional and imaginative dimensions of conspiracy thinking.

The simultaneous association of conspiracy with rationalist investigation and sublime flights of imagination made for a potent combination when it came to writers and audiences of literary fiction. On one hand, conspiracy was closely identified with distinctively modern modes of skepticism. To speculate on clues and signs of conspiracy was to identify oneself as being attuned the perils of modern propaganda and of the individual’s entanglement with new forms of bureaucratized and organizational power. In many cases, this merely constituted thoughtful observation, as there were good reasons to be afraid of the role of conspiracy in modern life. On the other hand, conspiracism often manifested as an extension of folklore and supernatural thinking. Allegations of conspiracy were catharsis for Populist camp meetings, plotlines for pulpy detective novels, and fodder for muckraking newspaper articles. In this respect, conspiracy theory was a central term of the fascination with deception that scholars such Michael Leja, James Cook, and Karen Haltunnen identify as a hallmark of nineteenth-century popular culture. Where these irrationalist elements increasingly relegated conspiracy to a place of non-respectability in political and social discourse, it created a host of possibilities for what it could signal to the public. For artists and for ordinary people, conspiracy theory could evoke skepticism towards the official dogmas of professional science, the mainstream press, and educational officials, to favor individu-

alist thinking and a romantic openness to surprise. The point is not to treat these irrationalist dimensions of conspiracy theory as mere kitsch or indicative of a lack of sophistication, but to understand the philosophical and emotional complexities that underpin them.

This fascination with using conspiracy as the basis for excursions into heterodoxy is precisely where an individual like Donnelly becomes so significant to late nineteenth-century literary history. More so than virtually any figure of the period, Donnelly sustained a literary practice that elevated conspiracy thinking to bizarre and melodramatic heights. Few were more skilled than Donnelly at mobilizing narratives about investigation and hidden human intentions in order to inspire a passionate response in a variety of political and cultural arenas.

Conspiracy thinking was central to Donnelly's political career, first as a Radical Republican Congressman, then a Lieutenant Governor for Minnesota's People's Party, and in his activism with a number of agrarian anti-trust movements such as the Grangers, the Anti-Monopolists, and the Greenbackers. A master of the spellbinding oratory so familiar to the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, it was not uncommon for Donnelly's appearances to inspire fanatical levels of enthusiasm among followers. In one speech in St. Paul Minnesota, the audience was, according to Martin Ridge, "so deeply moved and so completely captivated by his personal magnetism" that they "applauded for a full five minutes when he appeared upon the platform, throwing their hats into the air, stamping their feet until the building shook." Once Donnelly began speaking, he was interrupted by "yells and whoops typical of western camp meeting" (117). Donnelly inspired such enthusiasm thanks largely to his knack for weaving middle- and working class status anxieties into grand narratives of good versus evil. This was exemplified by Donnelly's preamble to the People's Party platform, a piece that Robert McMath describes as a "distillation of Populist thought" developing through the 1870s–1890s. This speech created a minor sensation when Donnelly delivered it at the 1892 convention. Donnelly suggested a world in which the old idyllic relations of the early nineteenth century had been replaced by a frightening new world order:

We meet in the midst of a nation brought to the verge of moral, political and material ruin. Corruption dominates the ballot box, the legislatures, the Congress, and touches

even the ermine of the bench. The people are demoralized. Many of the States have been compelled to isolate the voters at the polling place in order to prevent universal intimidation or bribery. The newspapers are subsidized or muzzled; public opinion silenced; business prostrate, our homes covered with mortgages, labor impoverished, and the land concentrating in the hands of capitalists A vast conspiracy against mankind has been organized on two continents, and it is rapidly taking possession of the world. If not met and overthrown at once it forebodes terrible social convulsions, the destruction of civilization, or the establishment of an absolute despotism. (90–91)

Similar to *Caesar's Column*, Donnelly's oratory worked to inspire a simultaneous recognition of a secret history of the late nineteenth century while whipping his audiences into a frenzied rush of emotions. In this sense, Donnelly's oratory made use of an internal tension in the language of conspiracy. On one hand, conspiracy theory offered him a means of initiating a rationalist style of investigating historical causality in search of clues such as fudged elections and bad mortgages as evidence of conspiracy. On the other, Donnelly's invocation of a highly personalized "vast conspiracy against mankind" confronts his audience with overwhelming trains of images that work to sway them to action less through logical reasoning than through a visceral brand of sensationalism. In this manner, Donnelly's oratory presents the language of conspiracy as a means of simultaneously spelling out the logic of his reading of post-Civil War history and an excursion into overwhelming and even sublime feelings of shock and awe.

Donnelly's fascination with sensational revelations and conspiracy neither began nor ended with his political claims of "vast combinations" of monopolists and corrupt politicians. There was, for instance, his conspiracy theory about Shakespeare, which appeared in *The Great Cryptogram*. Here Donnelly claimed that Shakespeare's plays concealed an elaborate code that revealed Francis Bacon to be the author as well as a hidden "Cipher-story" about the inner-workings of the Elizabethan court. Donnelly had not studied cryptography and, in order to compensate for gaps in his cipher, he adjusted some numbers, rearranging his decoded texts until they fit his narrative. While at first it may seem odd that a professed egalitarian like Donnelly would argue in favor of

the genteel Bacon, this detail was less important to Donnelly than the suggestion that the presence of the cipher might validate an esoteric style of knowledge production. No small part of the appeal here was the implicit suggestion that anyone—especially an open-minded amateur—could apply a critical reading in order to discredit official dogma. Not only does he confront a hyper-canonized body of works whose beauty is considered unimpeachable by the critical establishment, but he suggests that in order to truly appreciate the beauty of these works, one must understand the complex mathematical structures and hidden political agendas that supposedly underpin their creation. The version of sixteenth-century England that emerges in Donnelly's cipher is a thinly veiled, if unintentional, allegory for late nineteenth-century politics. Queen Elizabeth resembles the head of a modern police state while Bacon is a frustrated politician who shares Donnelly's own passion for democratization in his efforts to "make history familiar to the common people" and hence "prepare the way for the day when Charles I was brought to trial and the scaffold" (*Great Cryptogram* 239).

His Baconian theory offers a striking example of how Donnelly's particular style of conspiratorial reading and thinking could be converted into a form of mental-work-as-pleasure through the endless proliferation of investigative practices and puzzles. One almost needs to physically handle the text of *The Great Cryptogram* to appreciate the extent of Donnelly's fixation on the investigative processes surrounding his theory. At nearly 1000 pages, it is the size of a large hardbound dictionary and it features a staggering number of charts, graphs, and calculations that explode across the text's pages. Similar to the modern detective novel (Figure 1), *The Great Cryptogram* presents its sense of aesthetic value in terms of a given text's ability to facilitate a process of investigation. Throughout the book, he argues that the cipher reveals a heretofore unappreciated beauty in the plays in "wonderful complexity" that can only be accessed via the specialized expertise of the cryptographer (639, 719). The appeal of the cryptogram for Donnelly thus resided in the possibility of indefinitely repeating the process of revealing a deeper body of knowledge about intentions and agendas that push history along. It is, therefore, fitting that Donnelly's *Great Cryptogram* ends, not in a final revelation, but in the claim that those future decoded portions of the "Cipher story" will expound on his startling discoveries

Observe, here, how precisely the same number brings out *seas* and *ill*; compare the numbers in groups; — 516—516; — 167—167; — 349—349; — 22 *b & h*—22 *b & h*; — 327—327; — and going up the first column of page 76 with 327, we find *seas*; while going up the first column of page 75 with 327 brings us to *ill*.

	Word.	Page and Column.	
516—167—349—22 <i>b & h</i> —327—284—43. 447—43 —404+1—405+3 <i>b</i> —408.	408	75:1	that
516—167—349—22 <i>b & h</i> —327—254—73—15 <i>b & h</i> — 58. 448—58—390+1—391.	391	76:1	More
516—167—349—22 <i>b & h</i> —327—50—277—50 (74:2) —227—1 <i>h</i> —226.	226	74:1	low
516—167—349—22 <i>b & h</i> —327—254—73—50 (76:1) —23—1 <i>h</i> —22.	22	76:1	or
516—167—349—22 <i>b & h</i> —327—30—297—254—43 —15 <i>b & h</i> —28.	28	75:2	Shak'st
516—167—349—22 <i>b & h</i> —327—248—79. 198—79 —114+1—115+ <i>b & h</i> —(121).	(121)	75:1	spur
516—167—349—22 <i>b & h</i> —327—254—73—15 <i>b & h</i> — 58. 498—58—440+1—441.	441	76:1	never
516—167—349—22 <i>b & h</i> —327—50—227—7 <i>b & h</i> —	220	76:2	writ
516—167—349—22 <i>b & h</i> —327.	327	76:1	a
516—167—349—22 <i>b & h</i> —327—145 (76:2)—182. 498—182—316+1—317.	317	76:1	word
516—167—349—22 <i>b & h</i> —327—198—184. 248— 134—114+1—115.	115	74:2	of
516—167—349—22 <i>b & h</i> —327—254—73—15 <i>b & h</i> —58—5 <i>b</i> —58.	58	74:1	them.

Figure 1. An example of Donnelly's method: page 716 of *The Great Cryptogram*, 1888.

and, more importantly, with the promise that the recovery process will continue indefinitely. The appeal of Donnelly's quixotic attempts to establish authorship of the plays then resides precisely in the possibility of an indefinite repetition of his faux-cryptographic methods. As long as he could keep decoding, he could maintain the suspense of expecting further revelations.

Although Donnelly's theories about Shakespeare might at first seem far afield from either literary fiction or populist outrage over "money power," they illustrate the extent to which his thinking tends to recognize power in society as conspiratorial. Whether describing invisible bureaucratic networks of government and business or the centuries-old schemes of Elizabethan aristocrats, Donnelly assumes that there is an underlying set of human intentions organizing the course of history and

that this could be discovered through styles of investigation that seem counterintuitive to the public. By this logic, excursions into heterodoxy provide a means of establishing a form of investigation available to the non-expert and thus a means of establishing forms of intellectualism that assail the primacy of expertise and professionalism.

‘CAESAR’S COLUMN’

Caesar’s Column is the high water mark of Donnelly’s conspiracy writing. Both the actual text of novel and the sensational marketing campaign state that *Caesar’s Column* would equip readers—and particularly working classes—with a means of discerning anarchist and plutocratic agendas developing in American society. Donnelly’s publisher released the book under the pseudonym “Dr. Edmund Boisgilbert M.D.,” and worked to surround it with an air of mystique by leaking to newspapers the suggestion that author was “a man of wealth and high social position” who “takes as his text the dangerous tendencies of our age” (*IDP* 133) Donnelly’s preface deepened these ambitious claims by announcing that *Caesar’s Column* will serve as “an instrumentality of good for mankind” by providing audiences with a behind-the-scenes glance at the workings of power. Donnelly claims that his book will expose the “cancer” of “rank corruption, mining all beneath” American society and illustrate “the acceleration of movement in human affairs” (4). Initial reviewers saw *Caesar’s Column* as a landmark book precisely for its ability to inspire a skeptical consciousness in its readers. An early sympathetic review identifies it as a work “likely to attract a class of readers hitherto beyond the reach of thoughtful men who have tried to awaken them to the dangers menacing the country and society.” This is, the review continues, because the various elements of “adventure, scheming, plotting, tragedy, strategy, political economy, science, [and] philosophy,” are “so interwoven that the reader must read the one to get the other.” This characterization of *Caesar’s Column*’s as a book that would “awaken” this “class” of unreachable readers suggests a great deal about what was considered popular taste and how conspiracy narratives fit into this picture. With the novel positioned as a tutorial on “political economy, science, [and] philosophy,” the review imagines a readership that wants for a deeper interpretation of history on the one hand while, on the other, needs to receive this awakening in a literary form that will draw them in with suspense and melodramatic excess (*IDP* 163).