Halfway through her second novel, *Four Girls at Cottage City* (1895), Emma Dunham Kelley introduces a startling difference between what this novel has to say about the propriety of attending dances and dramas and the attitude advocated less than four years earlier by some of the characters in her first novel, *Megda* (1891). Whereas in *Megda* the balance had come down heavily against young adults’ participation in or attendance at drama productions and dances, the four young female protagonists in *Four Girls at Cottage City* (Jessie, Allie, Vera, and Garnet) reach the conclusion that dramas are not necessarily dangerous to their moral health. Their debate is a pressing one, because the four girls are vacationing alone in Cottage City, a resort on the island of Martha’s Vineyard, where entertainments and dance venues are thick upon the ground, yet are also good Christians, seeking to work out how they should behave in a resort finding its origins in an antebellum alcohol-free Methodist Camp Meeting Ground.¹ The young women are perhaps aware of Cottage City’s sober origins (for example, they identify a Church they might attend at the first opportunity), yet they are also enticed by the resort’s attractions and decisive when finding dancing and theater going permissible. This article sets out to explore why such a sharp change in attitude towards dancing and dramas occurs in Kelley’s fiction between 1892 and 1895, and what trying to answer this question reveals about the process of stepping out in the late nineteenth century for young women.

A starting point for such an enquiry is to note the way in which the later novel, *Four Girls at Cottage City* deliberately invites comparison

between itself and *Megda*. The passage in which *Cottage City*’s four protagonists countenance participation in promenading, band concerts, dance, and drama as legitimate social activities for Christians is closely followed by a surprising cross-reference between Kelley’s two novels:

“I have just discovered that this cottage [where the girls are vacationing] is the same described in ‘Megda,’ where she and ‘Del’ and ‘Laurie’ came that summer, and this is the very room they occupied.”

“I’ve read that book,” said Vera.

“Which character did you like best?” asked Allie.

“… I liked ‘May’ best,” said Jessie, emphatically. “She was the bravest.”

… “Why, wait until you read the sequel to the book,” said Vera, “perhaps ‘May’ will be married in that.”

“Is there a sequel to ‘Megda,’” asked Allie.

“Not yet, but there is going to be.”

On one level this is merely a species of advertisement, placed in *Four Girls at Cottage City* by Kelley, in order to announce an intended sequel to *Megda* that, so far as is known, was neither published nor even written. However, the conversation also operates self-reflexively. Though such reflexivity was common enough in fiction by the late nineteenth century, in this instance it seems to me to be particularly complex – a complexity sign-posted by the way it is so heavily underscored in the text: the four girls’ discussion of *Megda* goes on for nearly a page and is quite out of line with the rest of the book.

*Four Girls at Cottage City* works broadly within the general expectations of the sentimental’s “classic realist” mode and its

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2 See Emma Dunham Kelley, *Megda*, Boston: James H. Earle, 1891, and Emma Dunham Kelley-Hawkins, *Four Girls at Cottage City*, Boston: James H. Earle, 1898 (all subsequent references are to these editions, unless otherwise stated: *Four Girls at Cottage City* was published under the name Kelley-Hawkins and will be cited as such). Holly Jackson, in her article, “Mistaken Identity: What if a Novelist Celebrated as a Pioneer of African-American Women’s Literature Turned Out Not to Be Black At All?”, *The Boston Globe*, 20 February 2005 (http://www.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/2005/02/20/mistaken_identity/), discovered that this 1898 edition is a reprint of a novel first published in 1895 (Providence, RI: Continental Printing Co.). Thanks are due to Alison Easton for her perspicacious suggestions.