

The Whore in All of Us: Transgressive Female Sexuality  
in the Works of Lydia Thompson and the British  
Blondes, Mae West, and Annie Sprinkle

by

Emily Elizabeth Steck  
Class of 2012

A thesis submitted to the  
faculty of Wesleyan University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Bachelor of Arts  
with Departmental Honors in Theater

## Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgments</b> .....	iii
<b>Introduction:</b>	
<b>From Leg Shows to Porn Performance Art</b> .....	1
<b>Chapter One:</b>	
<b>Lydia Thompson and the British Blondes: The Bawdy British Invasion</b> ...	10
<b>Chapter Two:</b>	
<b>Mae West: “She was, after all, a ‘bad’ girl with a heart of gold”<sup>1</sup></b> .....	29
<b>Chapter Three:</b>	
<b>Annie Sprinkle: The Porn Queen of Prostitute Performance</b> .....	48
<b>Conclusion:</b>	
<b>The Reach of the Whore</b> .....	67
<b>Notes</b> .....	73
<b>Works Cited</b> .....	79

## Acknowledgments

This project would not have been possible without the help, guidance, and support of many wonderful people. I owe them all countless thanks and a huge amount of gratitude:

To the unbelievably fabulous and kind Leslie Weinberg, this project would not be what it is without you. Your wealth of knowledge, enthusiasm, and support has shaped this more than you will know. Thank you for everything.

To my readers: Rashdia Shaw, for shaping me as a writer and for your brilliant insights into popular culture, and Jack Carr, for encouraging me to audition for *The Skriker* and thus introducing me to the Wesleyan Theater Department.

To my former advisor, David B. Jaffe, you have shaped me as an artist, as a performer, and as an academic. Thank you for always understanding.

To Mom and Dad for providing me with more love and support than anyone could ever ask for and for always being in the audience. You are my number one fans, my buddies, and my inspiration. I could not have done any of this without you.

To William, for being the bravest feminist hockey player I know. You're perseverance, dedication, and fierce loyalty astounds me everyday.

To Zach, for challenging me to look harder, go farther, and do more than I ever thought possible.

To the WesBurlesque community, past, present, and future, for your celebration of sexual expression, joy, and sass. We do what we do for a reason and don't you ever forget it.

To 162 Church: Adrienne, for being unwaveringly encouraging and my on-campus mom; Lowell, for being my comedic relief; and Alex, for sharing this insane experience with me. You have enough determination for the both of us and I could not have done this without you.

To my family, related and unrelated: I am privileged to know each and everyone of you. Your humor, creativity, and guidance has made me who I am today.

To Mr. Smith, for introducing me to Candy Starr.

To Lydia Thompson, Mae West, and Annie Sprinkle, for being unapologetically true to themselves and for proving that well behaved women seldom make history.

## Introduction

# **From Leg Shows to Porn Performance Art: The Implications of the Whore in the Performances of Lydia Thompson and the British Blondes, Mae West, and Annie Sprinkle**

---

In high school I was cast as both the troublemaking prostitute Candy Starr in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and as a seasoned prostitute in one of the vignettes in Neil Simon's *The Good Doctor*. It has since been a running joke in my family that I was typecast. Playing Candy was a theatrically freeing experience; she was wild and unapologetic and it was a privilege to portray her. After one matinee performance, my physics teacher said to me: "I don't know if I should say good job, but you were great!" While I understand the complications inherent in a teacher complimenting a student on her portrayal of a "loose woman," this moment has stayed with me and has always struck me as odd. Everyone congratulated the male lead actor, who played a raucous and dangerous McMurphy, with little hesitation, despite the impropriety of his character's actions. However, something about my portrayal of female sexuality on stage was more difficult for people to embrace. In the following pages I hope to shed some light on the tension, censorship, and success that has historically accompanied the display and development of female sexuality on the stage.

This thesis will examine female transgressive performance and agency through the character of the whore/prostitute in the works of Lydia Thompson and the British Blondes, Mae West, and Annie Sprinkle. With the understanding that "the

whore position” allows women performers a unique discursive and subversive space, I examine the ways that these artists employed characteristics and actions associated with actual prostitutes to amplify the theatrical presentation of their sexuality (Pullen 2). Additionally, I consider the reactions that these tactics elicited from audiences and the general public as a means of better understanding societal conventions at the time of their production

This study is inspired by Kirsten Pullen’s book *Actresses and Whores: On Stage and In Society*, which looks at the evolution of the relationship between actresses and prostitutes beginning in the Restoration Era. The historical context that her work provides is an invaluable part of this thesis. While much of this work is in conversation with Pullen, our understanding and treatment of our subjects diverges. Our interpretations of the significance of the British Blondes is quite similar; however, we differ in our analyses of West and Sprinkle, the latter of whom Pullen does not address at all. Pullen recognizes West’s power, but overall casts her as an enigmatic figure who struggled to control her representation throughout her career; I focus on West’s perseverance, entrepreneurship, and advocacy. Pullen’s analysis of modern-day prostitution focuses on ethnographic interviews with actual escorts and the blogs of prominent call girls, which illuminate the desire among sex workers to be recognized as actresses. Pullen never looks into Sprinkle and women like her (Veronica Vera, Candida Royale, etc.) who have taken their experience as sex workers and turned it into activist and subversive art. Instead, Pullen paints a picture of present day call girls that brings to mind the trope of prostitute as victim. While clearly there are instances where women involved in prostitution are victims, outside

of Pullen's overtones of conflicted ideology, I do not read the women she interviews as such. Pullen uses the profession of prostitution and its parallels with acting to shed light on the restricting nature of "whoredom," which women succeed in spite of, whereas I look at the "whore stigma" as providing an opportunity for the female performers featured in this thesis to develop a unique artistic niche and place of authority (Johnson 3; Pullen 2).

First, however, a clarification of the idea of "the whore" is necessary. What is it that deems someone a prostitute? These characters and distinctions have evolved over time, and thus our modern day understanding of them does not always accurately describe the character or the characteristics used in this analysis. My classification of a woman as an actual prostitute relies on the following definition provided by Pullen: "prostitution is the exchange of sexual relations between two or sometimes more people for money or gifts, where the financial reward is received immediately before or after the service is rendered" (4). Thus, not all of the performers presented in this thesis are actual prostitutes in that they did not exchange sexual acts for money, but they were all branded whores and thus carried the stigma associated with prostitutes. As Pullen reminds us, "In the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries...definitions of prostitution are based on assumptions of morality and promiscuity as much as behavior; Boutell, Charke, and Thompson [female performers] were not prostitutes in a modern sense, though they were labeled 'whores'" (4). Therefore, in this paper, my use of the term *whore* is meant to refer to a perceived prostitute. Moreover, it is exactly this society-labeled space and the way in which the following women rewrite it as their own that I am interested in.

My research begins with performers perceived to be prostitutes and ends with a prostitute turned performance artist. First I investigate the contribution that was made to the American burlesque shows of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by Lydia Thompson and the British Blondes. From there I examine the written works and personal character of Mae West in her heyday during the 1920s and 30s on Broadway. I conclude with an analysis of Annie Sprinkle, a prostitute and porn star turned performance artist who gained popularity in the US in the early '80s. In all cases, I place emphasis on the ways in which each of these performers accepted the “whore stigma” that they were branded with and used it to “construct their own narratives” (Pullen 2).

The question remains, then, why is the use of the character of the *whore* by these female performers significant? I would argue that these female performers provide a unique perspective on society and its understanding of sexuality and gender through their use of the whore character. As Shannon Bell has stated, “[m]odernity through a process of othering has produced ‘the prostitute’ as the other of the other: the other within the categorical other, ‘woman’” (2). These women, while public figures of note during their respective time periods, were on the very outskirts of acceptable representations of women during their times of existence. Additionally, as Katie N. Johnson significantly notes, “a culture’s view of whoredom ‘can function as a kind of microscopic lens through which we gain a detailed magnification of a society’s organization of class and gender’” (3).

Additionally, the comedy used in the works of these performers provides us with another incite into the conventions of their time periods. As author and theorist

Umberto Eco states, comedy, unlike tragedy, is specific to “its time, society, [and] cultural anthropology,” and thus not only shows us what was in vogue at the time, but also what the great societal challenges were (269). As Eco concludes, “The comic seems to belong to the people, liberating, subversive, because it gives license to violate the rule. But it gives such license precisely to those who have so absorbed the rule that they also presume it is inviolable. The rule violated by the comic is so acknowledged that there is no need to reaffirm it (275). Thus, Thompson, West, and Sprinkle, who were all subversively comedic, were speaking against a norm so ingrained in society that its violation was comedic. This is another area where Pullen and I differ, as she understands the women’s transgression as being a result of their, in her opinion, gratuitous display of their bodies and their sex, and does not recognize the performance skills inherent in their productions. I show that these performers’ use of comedy is instrumental in their success and in their ability to display overt female sexuality on the legitimate stage.

The fears and apprehensions of American society regarding female sexuality and female agency were projected onto the bodies of these three women by virtue of the fact that they were employing tactics used by real prostitutes of their time (or in Sprinkle’s case was a real prostitute). During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the 1920s and ‘30s, and the early 1980s through the present, Thompson, West, and Sprinkle all represented their respective periods surmounting fears regarding a woman’s ability to be sexual and to use that sexuality for her own personal gain, as opposed to in service of a man. While the performance tactics of Thompson and West were considered bold for their time, Sprinkle’s techniques are marked by the sexual revolution of the

1960s and thus her explicitly sexual content seems almost worlds away from these former artists, despite its evolution out of their work.

Lydia Thompson and the British Blondes are the focus of my first chapter. This performance group challenged the 19<sup>th</sup> century “Cult of True Womanhood”<sup>2</sup> by commandeering behaviors associated with “the whore”—such as displaying the female body through cross-dressing and behaving in an erotic manner—and using them to create a successful female burlesque act for their own personal gain. They rose to fame at the same time that sexuality and the existence of different kinds of sexuality were gaining societal attention, for “it wasn’t until the Victorian period that they [sexualities] were systematically marked and identified...Scientific knowledge produced sexual/social identities, such as the prostitute, through regulation, surveillance, and the labeling of human activity” (Bell 13). The prostitute during this time represented the “great social evil” and one of the most blatant symbols of the rise of female sexuality (Pullen 121). Thus, the burlesquers’ imitation of the prostitutes’ attire and use of their bodies to make a living resonated with the audiences’ preconceived notions about and fascination with the lecherous prostitutes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

My second chapter explores the work of Mae West. In the 1920s, West rose to Broadway, and later Hollywood, stardom by writing, directing, and starring in her own theatrical vehicles. Often appearing as a prostitute in these self-created vehicles, West claimed the theatrical process as her own through her “whoredom.” West went farther than Lydia Thompson and the British Blondes by revising and rewriting the “brothel drama,” the reigning type of prostitute literature during her era (Johnson 1).

The “brothel drama” refers to plays such as Eugene O’Neill’s *Anna Christie* or Alexandre Dumas’ *Camile* where the prostitute, condemned to a dismal fate by her male author, either dies to spare the world from her sinful nature or is in dire need of a male savior. West reclaimed the genre through her prostitute characters as West always “...played a prostitute/kept woman who displayed her theatrical talents and sexual availability in order to rise financially and socially through liaisons with rich, attractive men” (Pullen 13). Gone were the Anna Christies and Camiles of the time. West capitalized on her own sexuality, showing that not only were women able to utilize their sexuality, but also that a prostitute could be a functional, powerful, female member of society. West further subverted the sexual conventions of her time by authoring two plays that positively portrayed homosexuality and bisexuality. Through West’s transgression against the acceptable feminine and sexual norms of her time, I examine the advancement of the female performer as a social reformer and agent of her own destiny and presentation.

My final chapter focuses on the performance artist and former prostitute and porn queen Annie Sprinkle. Sprinkle’s performance art evolved from her work as a porn star within the film *Deep Inside Annie Sprinkle*, which she wrote, directed, and starred in. From this revolutionary porn film, constructed from the female vantage point, Sprinkle developed into a full-fledged performance artist and activist for sex workers’ rights. This transition into the art world did not mean an abandonment of pornography, but rather a melding of the two, as Sprinkle’s primary artistic medium is pornography. Sprinkle’s work reclaims the word *whore* by using Sprinkle’s personal (and predominantly positive) experiences as an alternative to the prevailing

view of prostitutes and sexual women as “‘unchaste, ‘defiled,’ and ‘diseased’” (Bell 107). Thus, Sprinkle goes farther than West or the Blondes by not only using bolder performance tactics, but also by displaying herself and her real experience as a former prostitute on stage. Sprinkle’s use of her actual life, as opposed to a constructed mix of character and reality, is something that we do not see in the works of West or Thompson. She is not just utilizing tactics used by prostitutes of the time; she *is* a prostitute of the time.

It is important to address that much of Sprinkle’s fame originated from her work as a porn actress as opposed to her work as a prostitute. As pornography is not addressed elsewhere in this work and is in and of itself a very complex and dynamic subject, I turn to Candida Royalle’s<sup>3</sup> explanation of the relationship between pornography and prostitution: “‘Pornography [is] like looking at prostitutes. It [is] just another version of prostitution. Instead of being with a prostitute...you look at a prostitute’” (qtd. in Bell 138). Thus, for the purposes of this paper, Sprinkle’s role as a porn star will be understood as interchangeable with her role as a prostitute, only heightened by the existence of the technology that helped to popularize pornography. Annie Sprinkle resides in a very different time and moral climate than that of Mae West and The Blondes, however without the groundwork laid by their performance work Sprinkle would not be able to occupy the performative space that she does. Sprinkle’s inclusion is important in this discussion because, as Bell says, “[t]he contemporary postmodern is a unique historical moment in which prostitutes, like other others of modernity, have assumed their own subject position and begun to produce their own political identity” (2). Thus, Sprinkle’s narrative represents the

female agency gained through women receiving the right to vote and the sexual revolution of the 1960s, events which Thompson and West's successes pre-date, through its promotion of the formerly silenced political narrative of the "other other," the female prostitute.

Bell states that, "Performance is one of the most effective means for those who have been constructed by others as objects of desire and undesirable objects to enter into discourse and create an immediate subject position from which to address the social" (138). These three performers demonstrate that by performing as the whore, something that is both desirable and undesirable, they are able to insert themselves into the dominant social discourse regarding female sexuality and have their voices heard where they may otherwise have been silenced or disregarded. Throughout this paper I examine exactly how these women used their positions as sexualized whore females to inject themselves into the hegemonic discourse and write their own stories through performance. Furthermore, this thesis aims to reveal what the varying performance styles and tactics of Thompson, West, and Sprinkle tell us about the power of self-realized female sexuality and its relationship with imposed societal regulations.

## Chapter One

### Lydia Thompson and the British Blondes: The Bawdy British

#### Invasion

---

*The peculiar trait of burlesque is its defiance both of the natural and the conventional. Rather, it forces the conventional and the natural together just at the points where they are most remote, and the result is absurdity, monstrosity. Its system is a defiance of system. It is out of all keeping...[B]urlesque casts down all the gods from their pedestals."*

— Richard Grant White (qtd. in Allen 25)

At a time when the American theater landscape and the understanding of female sexuality were simultaneously in flux, Lydia Thompson and the British Blondes were the “perfect storm” that aptly represented the cultural tensions lying beneath the surface. This chapter examines the impact these sensational and controversial female performers made on United States theater and culture during their debut season, 1868-1869, through their subversive performance. As White accurately states, Lydia Thompson and the British Blondes brought natural female sexuality into direct conflict with the conventional view of what it meant to be a “true woman” in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Blondes popularity allowed them to transgress theatrical class divisions and introduce a lowbrow brand of entertainment associated with the prostitutes of the day to highbrow audiences, thus blurring the lines that separated sex and entertainment by class and gender.

As Pullen and I are most closely aligned in our interpretation of Lydia Thompson and the British Blondes, her work serves as the contextual foundation for this chapter. In Pullen's book, *Actresses and Whores*, burlesque as a theatrical form serves to help articulate the changing theatrical and sexual landscape in the United States. While I agree that the time at which the Blondes became popular in the US is instrumental in their fame and controversy, Pullen focuses much more on the struggles of Thompson "to assert her own voice" and less on the success and influence of the Blondes as a group on the greater public's understanding of womanhood (98). I examine Lydia Thompson and the British Blondes as active transgressive agents against the feminine norms of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Focusing primarily upon their power in performance and their relationship to the prostitutes of their time, I look at the triumphs and shortcomings of the new theatrical space created for the expression of female sexuality by the Blondes.

In 1866 George Wood, a New York City theater owner, invited Lydia Thompson, a well-known English actress and burlesque performer, to perform in one of his theaters (Allen 3). By the time Thompson and her British Blondes<sup>4</sup>—Ada Harland, Lisa Weber, Pauline Markham, and Harry Beckett (the lone male member of The Blondes)—arrived in Manhattan they were slated to be the opening act at Wood's brand new 2,200-seat Museum and Metropolitan Theatre (Allen 3). Thanks to the aggressive work of Thompson's publicist Archie Gordon and Alexander Henderson, Thompson's manager and second husband, Thompson, and consequently the Blondes, arrived in New York as celebrities and debuted to a sold out crowd on September 28<sup>th</sup>, 1868 (Pullen 95). The publicity work of Thompson and her team is

not only responsible for much of the Blondes notoriety, but also for making Thompson the most notable member of the group to date.

Much of Thompson's biography has been constructed from the press statements created by Gordon, Henderson, and Lydia herself, and thus some hyperbole and inconsistencies are present. Thompson's general biography is understood to be the following: Lydia Thompson was born in London in 1836. Thanks to the success of her stepfather she was able to take singing and dancing lessons throughout her youth. At the age of sixteen she was forced to take to the stage to support her family, as her stepfather was no longer able to provide for them<sup>5</sup>. Thompson continued to work on the London stage and in 1863 married John Christian Tilbury, a businessman, and in May of 1864 gave birth to their daughter Zeffie. Tilbury was killed in a riding accident only a month after Zeffie's birth. Once again, Thompson was forced to support her family with her talents on the stage.

Henderson, then Thompson's new manager, began her burlesque career when he encouraged her to star in F.C. Burnand's *Ixion* at the Theater Royal Birkenhead, which he managed (Allen 5). Thompson became a popular London burlesque performer and, after her marriage to Henderson in February of 1868, headed to America with the Blondes to spread the burlesque fever. Lydia Thompson was thirty-two-years old when *Ixion* debuted at Wood's Manhattan theater. The Blondes' premiered to glowing reviews, such as this one from the *New York Times*: "The wildest symptoms of delight burst forth as each individual of the new company appeared, and Miss Thompson, Miss Markham, and Miss Weber were nearly lost in several floral avalanches which occurred during the progress of the entertainment"

(qtd. in Allen 13). No doubt that the publicity onslaught on behalf of the Blondes prior to their arrival played a role in their warm reception. Moreover, the beautiful, talented, and provocatively dressed Blondes filled the void left by *The Black Crook*, a ballet that utilized similarly revealing costumes and had closed two-months prior.

Unfortunately the script of F.C. Burnand's *Ixion* as performed by the Blondes no longer exists and so a precise account of the action is unattainable. However, burlesque scholar Robert C. Allen, through his extensive research and wealth of knowledge, generally reconstructs the show in his book *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture*. According to Allen, Burnand's text can best be understood as a "bastardization of the Greek myth of Ixion" that "provided no more than a skeletal structure" that the Blondes' could expand upon depending on what was in vogue or what the topical gossip was (10-12). Thompson played Ixion, the king of Thessaly, who, after murdering his father-in-law, begs Jupiter to help him ward off his enraged wife. Unfortunately, Ixion then angers the Gods as well and is bound behind a ship's wheel and left appealing to the audience's benevolence, as opposed to Jupiter's (Allen 11-12). This production was "composed in punning rhymed pentameter" and featured popular songs, dances, references to current events and gossip, aspects of minstrelsy<sup>6</sup>, and the cancan (Allen 10-12). It was common for the show to include crude and suggestive jokes, as well as "outrageous puns" made at the expense of well-known members of society (Allen 12). The Blondes were influenced by the Parisian *demimonde*<sup>7</sup> inspired fashions of the time, and thus wore body-hugging clothes that were easy to move in and demarcated as "male," such as tunics, short pants, and flesh-colored tights. The myth of Ixion served as a loose

structure that the Blondes were able to fill in with salacious, outrageous, and popular performance elements of the time.

Before delving into the Blondes and their influence on the understanding of female sexuality in late 19<sup>th</sup> century America, it is first important to understand the American acts that preceded them and thus created space for their type of performance on the US stage. The Blondes form of burlesque, as outlined previously, converted an “all-male variety of entertainment” into a combination of parodied classical myths and the leg shows featured in New York City burlesque halls and concert saloons (Pullen 93; Buszek 144). However, this use of the leg show and its demimonde-influenced male attire that highlighted the female form was not new to American audiences. It was the Blondes’ use of themselves as characters who, unlike silent dancers, spoke to the audience in a comedic and suggestive manner *as* they exhibited their bodies and selves as sexual entities that made them unique. As Pullen accurately states, “The British Blondes did not invent a new mode of representation, but rather borrowed and changed existing ones, both in terms of their performance content, which followed earlier burlesque models, and their costumes, which drew on a long tradition of breeches” (108).

The costumes worn by the British Blondes were based on those worn by concert saloon waitresses and dancers, which were essentially ballet costumes made more sexual by their context. Concert saloons developed as a result of the division of theater along class lines. Prior to the Astor Place Riot in 1849<sup>8</sup> theater was a “microcosm” of American society that catered to all classes and all tastes (qtd. in Pullen 108). However, after the riot, a “discourse of ‘culture’” was created in order to

describe (or dictate) what sort of entertainment appealed to (or was appropriate for) whom (Pullen 108). Thus, as mainstream theater was cleaned up, an underbelly developed which embraced what the upper class rejected and concert saloons were born. Concert saloons were essentially bars that catered to men with comedic variety acts, popular song and dance routines, and promiscuous waitresses in revealing outfits. In 1860 Laura Keene, a playwright and theater manager, incorporated the costuming of these seedy establishments into her production of *The Seven Sisters* in the hopes of attracting more male audience members to her “women’s plays” (Buszek 144). By using these titillating costumes on the stage of the virtuous Laura Keene Theater, which catered to the minds of “genteel society women,” Keene was legitimizing the conventions of the burlesque show and making them accessible to the mixed gendered masses (Buszek 145).

While Keene may have been the first person to market the practices of burlesque and leg shows as acceptable theatrical devices, Adah Isaacs Menken was the first performer to capitalize on the distinctive elements of the genre in mainstream American theater. In 1861, Menken starred as the lead male role, Ivan Mazeppa, in Lord Byron’s *Mazeppa* on Broadway. Women playing men was not a new sensation; this trend had been popularized by the aforementioned “breeches roles” of Restoration theater<sup>9</sup>. However, it was Menken’s approach to the final scene where Ivan Mazeppa is stripped naked, tied to a steed, and exiled into the wilderness that was culturally sensational and influential for burlesquers (Buszek 146). This scene, normally done using a dummy, was performed by Menken herself wearing “nothing more than the coryphée’s<sup>10</sup> pink body stocking and brief tunic, which would appear in

a blur to the audience as a naked woman on horseback” (Buszek 146). Menken’s performance was not only a popular success, but as a result Menken is now credited with ushering in the incorporation of “clothed nudity” which was a large part of the burlesque phenomenon (Buszek 146).

In 1866, *The Black Crook* premiered at Niblo’s Garden, considered to be the finest theater in New York City and perhaps in America at the time. *The Black Crook* used the same “clothed nudity” as Menken, which then-critic Mark Twain understood to be “half costumes” or “abbreviated ballerina costumes” (qtd in Buszek 146). The show ran for an “unprecedented 15-months,” and was said to combine “fantastic melodrama, Romantic ballet, and the contemporary leg show,” and is credited with being the first “modern Broadway musical” as well as “the first true leg show” in the vein of British Blondes burlesque (Buszek 146). The *Black Crook* was able to bring the costume elements used by Keene to a more upper-class, and thus more socially precarious place. Unlike Keene’s *The Seven Sisters*, which targeted a more middle-class audience, *The Black Crook*, as a result of its upper-class audience, received criticism that questioned the propriety of the show, thus illuminating the significance of the class-based divisions of theater. *The Seven Sisters*, *Mazeppa*, and *The Black Crook* set the stage for The British Blondes, who arrived in New York City just two months after the closing of the latter.

The critical reviews of *The Black Crook* show that despite efforts to “clean up” theater, the public still saw the real life character of the prostitute and the actress as synonymous. Whether it was through breeches roles, where actresses displayed their bodies through male dress, or through the cleavage and leg bearing outfits of the

prostitutes who staffed and performed in burlesque halls and concert saloons, the public display of the female body was associated with prostitution. Maria-Elena Buszek articulates the association between prostitution and the stage in Europe, “[the] visual display of the female performer—whether a dancer or actress—was associated with the same display and commercial ‘exchange’ of the prostitute, a profession in which most women in the theatre dabbled, if not took on as a primary source of income” (145). In the United States prostitution was such an ingrained part of the theater that the third balcony was reserved exclusively for prostitutes and their clients well into the nineteenth century (Buszek 145).

Understanding the role of the prostitute in theater, specifically US theater, is critical to understanding the rise and fall of the British Blondes. Just as *The Black Crook* was criticized for its promiscuous performance elements, so were the Blondes. However, the Blondes experience of a critical public was made more extreme by their use of behavior, speech, and clothing conventions associated with the prostitutes of their day. The Blondes blurred the lines between their performative and real selves, and thus problematized the understanding of the “true woman” and how she is capable of behaving sexually. In an attempt to contain the influence of Lydia Thompson and the British Blondes, who through their middle and upper class audiences were beginning to influence social norms, the press incited what Allen refers to as “anti-burlesque hysteria” by publicly branding the Blondes as whores (15). This label spoke to the Blondes performance style and on a deeper level to the use of their sex and sexuality on stage for profit, just as a prostitute sells sexual acts to

her customers. In what follows, I discuss how this label affected the career of the British Blondes.

By the time the Blondes' two-show run<sup>11</sup> at Wood's concluded the once welcoming city was beginning to turn on the performers. This attitudinal change was a direct result of the Blonde's move to Niblo's Garden, and thus the validation of the Blondes and specifically Lydia Thompson as legitimate theater performers (Allen 15). Wood's theater catered to what was believed to be a middle class audience, and was therefore considered to be a more appropriate venue for the Blondes, whereas Niblo's catered mostly to the upper class and was therefore more conservative (Allen 12). The Blonde's presentation of "whoredom" in a legitimate theater space violated the perceived feminine norms and theatrical distinctions of society at this point in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and thus incited "anti-burlesque hysteria."

The feminine norms that Thompson and the British Blondes, along with feminists and prostitutes of the time, transgressed were known as the Cult of True Womanhood, which "prescribed a female role bounded by kitchen and nursery, overlaid with piety and purity, and crowned by subservience" (qtd. in Pullen 116). By violating the dominant discourse of what a mid-Victorian woman should be, the Blondes were disturbing the overall structure of society. The Blondes violated the cult by recognizing *and* using their female sexuality, and later by embracing the "whore stigma" attached to them both on stage and in the public eye. The groups acceptance as a legitimate theater act gave them the ability to influence and indirectly question the divisions of society along class and gender lines from a place of power, as they performed for the middle and upper class members of society.

Prior to the aggression and attacks from the press, the Blondes use of the costuming popularized by *Mazeppa* and *The Black Crook*, and thus their use of the character of the whore, upset another conservative group: feminist Dress Reformers. The Blondes' ensembles, which were compromised of flesh-colored tights, corsets, tunics with tights, or small pants, not only showed much more skin than was socially appropriate, but also flew in the face of the Dress Reform movement, which sought to discourage women from focusing so much energy on fashion in an effort to strive towards equality. Dress Reformers strongly objected to the corset for, "it incited lust in ... men" and "encouraged vanity in women" (Pullen 118). Dress Reformers differed from the press in that they opposed the male response to the Blondes' sexuality, not the agency it produced. The burlesque performers rejected Dress Reform by highlighting their shape with feminine items, such as the corset, but also by sexualizing male items such as pants.

The "earthier sexuality" and style exuded by prostitutes was gaining popularity through its representation in the Blondes' stage shows to the point that "[r]espectable middle-class matrons [were employing] the devices of prostitutes," and thus "blurring the line between true and constructed femininity" (Pullen 119-120). The burlesquers were thus using the styles popularized by prostitutes to enhance their performance and influence the audience members who came to see them. These styles attracted both males and females, instructing in what was attractive, desirable, and acceptable dress for the Blondes' audience members regardless of class. It is this sort of influence that instigated the "anti-burlesque hysteria", for as the Blondes

became more established and thus closer to the upper class their image of a woman became more legitimized.

While the corsets and tights used by the Blondes were sensational, their use of male garments and cross-dressing had greater implications. In the U.S. at this particular time the use of male clothing by both feminists and prostitutes was critical in their specific departures from the feminine norm. Feminists who wore pants “crossed gender boundaries, and their clothing choices were understood not only as personal choices but as bids for social equality” (Pullen 118). A prostitute, on the other hand, would use “male attire to highlight her sexuality and project an aura of domination” (Pullen 120). I would argue that the prostitutes’ use of male clothing, while not a bid for social equality, did promote equality. Prostitutes fully commandeered what was understood as male power with their ability to use their bodies as entrepreneurial tools and therefore participate in the male “economic sphere” (Pullen 121). Male clothing was thus used as a means to garner and symbolize this power. By recognizing the existence and power of female sexuality, prostitutes and burlesquers alike were able to achieve the financial independence that suffragettes were striving for. Additionally, by removing themselves from the discourse of the Cult of True Womanhood, they were able to frame themselves within an individual discourse as prescribed by them. Feminists, on the other hand, were forced to work for their cause within the oppressive preexisting framework. Although the Blondes promotion of sexuality was met with backlash and may not have been entirely successful, they showed that female sexuality had a place on the stage and in society.

The Blondes use of parody was key in the development of a niche for their performance style, which boldly satirized classic literature and contemporary culture, “as well as the very notion of the melodramatic and sentimental contemporary female that the ideal 19<sup>th</sup>-century ‘true woman’ supposedly represented” and which former leg show acts had upheld (Buszek 147). Therefore, the Blondes use of satire and parody and their deviation from theatrical conventions of the time allowed them, per Eco’s theory, a subversive position from which to confront both the physical appearance and the behavior of the “true woman” on the stage. Despite the importance of humor as an avenue of entertainment and presentation for the Blondes, sex was the true emphasis of the show and thus overshadowed the skill and significance of this aspect of their performance. Pullen elaborates upon this pervading theme of sex in Thompson’s life: “In her performances as well as in her interactions with her critics, Thompson spoke sex with a frankness that disturbed her audiences. Labeled and speaking as a ‘whore,’ Thompson offered alternative female sexuality to mainstream audiences” (Pullen 94). It is this open discussion, presentation, and recognition of overt sexuality, and thus the insertion of “whoredom” in the popular discourse that provoked the media backlash that would mark the Blonde’s first season.

At the end of the Blondes’ first and highly controversial season, actress Olive Logan, perfectly aligned with the rhetoric of anti-burlesque hysteria, accused the burlesque performer as being “always peculiarly and emphatically herself—the woman, that is, whose name is on the bills in large letters, and who considers herself an object of admiration to the spectators” (qtd in Buszek 147). What Logan is

referring to here is the Blondes', and specifically Thompson's, "awarishness;" a term coined by Thompson, by which she means women's awareness of their own sexuality (Buszek 147). This sexual self-awareness had only been seen in one other female archetype in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century and that was the prostitute. Thus, the anti-burlesque rhetoric centered on the negative aspects of the prostitute, whereas the Blondes' had tried to capitalize upon and highlight the positive aspects of the whore. The Blondes were accused of making "an unnecessary and lewd exhibition of their persons," yet the level of the backlash that resulted was more a reflection of the Blondes' timing and the existing social tensions over female sexuality, than of the group's behavior (qtd. in Pullen 96).

At the time that Lydia Thompson and the British Blondes descended upon New York and confronted the Cult of True Womanhood, it has been suggested, "that in both London and New York during the period from 1850 to 1900, there were more prostitutes per capita than ever before" (Pullen 121). However, due to the inconsistent modes of data gathering used at this time, the reported number of prostitutes in New York City varies from 1,200 to 10,000 (qtd. in Pullen 121). Regardless of specific numbers, prostitutes were considered the "great social evil" of the time (Pullen 121). This abundance of prostitutes, and therefore blatant female sexuality, coincided with the feminist led movement for sexual reform. Feminists, and "middle-class women wanted to end the sexual promiscuity men took for granted, and enforce celibacy before and monogamy during marriage for both men and women" (Pullen 97). Thus, at the same time that feminists sought to encourage chastity for both sexes, prostitutes and burlesquers promoted the idea that "both men

and women were equally interested in sex, and equally able to participate in even promiscuous sexual activity” (Pullen 97). All three groups were transgressing against the Cult of True Womanhood by voicing their opinions on the rights of women with regards to their bodies and, in doing so, were unsettling the standards of Victorian society.

Thompson further unsettled these standards as an individual as she utilized many male signifiers to distinguish herself as an independent woman both on and off the stage. As stated previously, the Blondes frequently cross-dressed and Thompson often starred as the male lead and “appeared cross-dressed, as an amorous and aggressive suitor for the other Blondes’ affections” (Pullen 96). The male status as an aggressor was a trait that Thompson used both inside and outside of the theater. A significant instance where Thompson blurred the line between her on-stage and off-stage personas with her aggressive behavior was the conflict between herself and *The Chicago Tribune* editor Wilbur Storey. In February of 1870, after the start of anti-burlesque hysteria, the Blondes appeared at Crosby’s Opera House in Chicago for the second time and Storey maliciously attacked them by presenting them as a group of prostitutes that should be driven from the Windy City. In retaliation Thompson, Alexander Henderson (her husband/manager), Pauline Markham (the most beautiful of the Blondes), and Archie Gordon (Thompson’s publicist) assaulted Storey outside of his home. Thompson is said to have struck Storey with a horsewhip several times while Henderson kept a pistol trained on him (Pullen 125-127). In this instance we see Thompson defending herself and her honor. She waited for no man to come to her aid, she refused to conform to the submissive virtues of the “true woman.” In the

end, Thompson, Markham, Henderson, and Gordon were all tried on assault charges and forced to pay a fine.

As a result of Thompson's aggressive and very male behavior the press tried to eliminate her from the story by focusing attention on Henderson as the instigator, therefore framing Thompson as a "damsel in distress" as opposed to her own "knight in shining armor." Storey fueled this elimination by denying his awareness of Thompson as his attacker in court. His newspaper, *The Chicago Times*, went a step further by trying to reframe the incident altogether by running, "A sensationally titled article, 'The Raid of the Prostitutes,'" which, "attempted to 'correct the misapprehensions with reference to the attack upon the editor of THE TIMES by a crowd of prostitutes and their attendants'" (qtd. in Pullen 128). *The Times* was subscribing to the notion that prostitutes were the only females in society who would operate in such a masculine manner and that if Thompson, as a sexually aware and economically successful woman, attacked a man, she was no more than a common street walker. Since prostitutes were so vilified at the time, readers would have been able to quickly pick up on references to the profession without it being explicitly articulated. For example, George Wilkes' article in *The Spirit of the Times* used the existing rhetoric of prostitutes as the cause of the spread of venereal diseases by describing the performance of the Blondes as "flaxen scrofula<sup>12</sup>" from the "slums of London" (Pullen 122-123). Additionally, by attaching the "whore stigma" to Thompson the press was not only attempting to silence and discredit her publicly, but also dissociate the glamorous life of a performer from what they understood to be the "reality" of the Blondes' lives (Pullen 124).

Despite the attempts to eliminate her from the narrative, Thompson had control of one avenue that the press did not: the stage. The evening after her trial Thompson took the stage and addressed the audience directly, stating that: “The persistent and personally vindictive assault in the *Times* upon my reputation left me only one mode of redress. [...] They were women whom he attacked. It was by women he was castigated. [...] We did what the law would not do for us” (Buszek 155). To which the crowd responded with applause and support. Thompson had long utilized the press to promote both herself and the British Blondes, and although much of the groups’ success resulted from this early publicity, I would argue that this is Thompson’s most profound usage of herself as a public figure. Thompson succinctly stated that women had the power to be their own defenders and agents of their own destiny. While the burlesquers and feminists may not have seen eye to eye, in this moment Thompson was their champion.

The actions of Storey and the *Times* are prime examples of the “anti-burlesque hysteria” and media backlash referenced throughout. With the recognition of Lydia Thompson and the British Blondes as a legitimate theater act, their overt rejection of the Cult of True Womanhood and consequently their theatrical presentation of the growing societal tensions over female sexuality became too much to ignore. The press took the prostitute image that the Blondes had capitalized upon and used it to strike fear into society and discourage the people, specifically members of the middle and upper class, from supporting the Blondes with their patronage. Buszek summarizes the fear that fueled this backlash through what scholar Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “identifies as a ‘shifting, unsecured meaning of the sexualized woman

drifting between the sturdy fixities of *femme honnete*<sup>13</sup> and *fille publique*.<sup>14</sup>” (qtd. in Buszek 157). This shifting made it increasingly difficult for female identity and sexuality to be controlled, defined, or silenced any longer, and thus created a volatile social landscape (Buszek 157). Additionally by exhibiting what was thought to be the “great social evil” in an arena that attracted those who were of the upper class, and thus presumably of influence, they were placing what was “*socially peripheral*” and making it “*symbolically central*” (qtd. in Pullen 94). The Blondes and the type of women they represented were a challenge to society and they were displaying this contradiction at center stage.

Pullen elaborates upon this challenge to society and the resulting reaction through the reality of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century prostitute: The prostitute endangered “the moral fabric of Victorian society” with her presentation of an alternative female sexuality and just as “she had to be narratively and discursively constrained” so as to curb her influence, so too did Thompson and the Blondes (121-122). Essentially, as the group became more powerful and more influential through their legitimacy as performers, they further problematized the existing understanding of what a woman could and should be by promoting what critic William Dean Howells called an “alien sex.” “[T]hough they were not like men, [they] were in most things as unlike women, and seemed creatures of a kind of alien sex, parodying both. It was certainly a shocking thing to look at them with their horrible prettiness” (qtd. in 155-156 Buszek). The “anti-burlesque hysteria” promoted by the press was a direct response to this alluring, confusing, and threatening new form of agency and active sexuality

that the Blondes embodied for their audiences, most significantly for their female audience members.

Buszek analyzes the role of burlesque in a theater divided by class hierarchy by using Allen's work on the transgressive nature of burlesque. Allen argues that it was "the presence of respectable, middle-class women and men in the audience that made burlesque so problematic, and it was only in relation to what the bourgeois theater had become since the Astor Place riot that burlesque seemed so transgressive." (qtd. in Buszek 157). As stated previously, the Astor Place Riot had divided the theater along class lines and thus "cleaned up" the bourgeois theaters' content. Burlesque complicated all of this because, "Just when sexuality in the audience had been stifled, the third tier evacuated, and the concert saloon closed, the 'leg business' put the issue of female sexuality on center stage. [...] Theater had once again become unpredictable" (qtd. Buszek 157). In his own work Allen references the work of Peter Stallybrass and Allon White when describing the burlesque performer as the "'low other': something that is reviled by and excluded from the dominant social order as debased, dirty, and unworthy, but that is simultaneously the object of desire and/or fascination" (qtd. in Allen 26). The Blondes use of identifiable characteristics of the whore on the popular stage made something that was already arguably fascinating to much of society more accessible and that much more threatening.

Throughout this analysis I have demonstrated the ways that Lydia Thompson and the British Blondes transgressed the acceptable image of what a woman was supposed to be through their theatrical representations of the whore in 19<sup>th</sup> century

America. The Blondes rose to popularity at a very delicate moment when the conventions of femininity were being challenged on all fronts. Feminists and actual prostitutes of the time simultaneously, whether intentionally or not, transgressed the popular norms of womanhood in order to move female representation to a new and more dynamic place. Pullen juxtaposes these women and the work they were doing: prostitutes “participated in the financial infrastructure of urban life,” while feminists focused their attention on equality in “financial, familial, and political transactions,” and burlesquers converted a formerly male form of entertainment into a successful and profitable female performance act (Pullen 98). What Pullen fails to note is that Lydia Thompson and the British Blondes were able, amidst a brutal media backlash, to carve out space in the changing theatrical landscape for the representation of female sexuality as interpreted by women. How this space evolves through the 20<sup>th</sup> century is of interest within the next two chapters.

## Chapter Two

### **Mae West: “She was, after all, a ‘bad’ girl with a heart of gold”<sup>15</sup>**

---

*“West showed half a century of women (and men) how to be sexy, powerful, and successful while also being a whore.”*

(Pullen 1)

Meet Mae West, the original Pretty Woman. West, a girl from the streets of Brooklyn, took Broadway, and later Hollywood, by storm with her prostitute-centric theatrical vehicles beginning in the 1920s. As Pullen states, “Capitalizing on her sexuality, West climbed the ladder of success in unconventional and even dangerous ways. Her representation of the prostitute, then stressed the possibility of upward mobility through sexual liaisons” (10). West used her feminine charms and the character of the whore to advance her career and create the sort of theater she wanted. She pushed the sexual envelope farther than her predecessors by showing a woman totally in control of herself, both on and off the stage, by utilizing songs and dances made famous by black performers, and also by providing a voice for the gay community on the legitimate stage. Just as Lydia Thompson and the British Blondes ignited burlesque backlash by bringing female sexuality to respectable venues, West’s planned introduction of homosexuality to the Broadway stage provoked serious police action. Her portrayal of female sexuality, while often considered vulgar and comparable to that of an actual whore, was not as shocking as her written work, which presented both homosexuality and prostitution positively, and thus in direct contradiction to the predominant morals of the time.

While Pullen accurately recognizes West as a revolutionary “descendent” of the British Blondes, her understanding of West’s reach and intentions regarding her use of sexuality is limited by American society’s internalization of anti-whore rhetoric, which rejects anyone perceived to be “inappropriately” or unappealingly sexual. Pullen understands West’s sexuality to be a tool used to manipulate men, whereas I show that it is a tool of personal agency, social change, and economic independence. Additionally, Pullen suggests that West was limited by the public’s perception of her “real” self; I demonstrate that West’s calculative blending of her real and performative self helped define her as one of the great transgressive performers. However, with regards to West’s advancement of female sexuality on the stage and visionary attitude towards the spectrum of sexuality, Pullen and I are in accord. Pullen insightfully illuminates the ways in which West moved the prostitute character from a place devoid of agency to a place of power: “[West’s] version of prostitution foreshadows contemporary prostitutes’ rights activists who argue for the legitimization of sex work” (1).

Using the work of Pullen and other scholars interested in West and her provocative performance strategies, in this chapter I examine the ways in which West helped to broaden the understanding of female sexuality and sexual orientation through her portrayal and embodiment of the whore in her theatrical work. In what follows, I investigate the public’s reactions to her works and the attempts to censor her in an effort to understand the conventions West was subverting. My primary focus will be on her work and influence on the stage, specifically through her plays *Sex* and *The Drag*, both of which were authored by West.

West was born in 1893 to Matilda and Jack West. West's mother was an "Austrian corset model" and her father was "a small-time boxer known in Brooklyn as Battlin' Jack" (Schlissel 3). West grew up in Bushwick, an area of Brooklyn known for its distinctive accents. While West's mother is responsible for her introduction to the stage at a young age<sup>16</sup>, her father arguably had the more profound influence. West's father often took her to fights and taught her about the life of a boxer, imparting to her the aura and smarts of a street fighter. As Lillian Schlissel writes, "by the time she was a teenager, she was all strut and swagger, moving around the stage like a bantam-weight fighter" (3). This early athletic understanding of the body may help explain West's comfort in using her figure, much like a dancer or a boxer, to support herself financially. At sixteen West briefly took to the vaudeville circuit with a "hooper"<sup>17</sup> billed as Frank Wallace, born Frank Szatkus, whom she married in Milwaukee on April 11, 1911, only to leave him that June when they returned to Brooklyn (Schlissel 4). West's connection to vaudeville is significant, as much of her technique can be credited back to vaudeville performers such as Eva Tanguay, Bert Williams, Jay Brennan, and most significantly Bert Savoy (Schlissel 4).

Savoy was an openly homosexual performer, which was highly unusual during the vaudeville era<sup>18</sup>. It is said that he was accepted as such because of his humor, which was very "cheeky" (Schlissel 4). He often performed in drag, playing "party girls and flirts" while wearing "a red wig and enormous pictures hats," and carried his outrageous stage persona into his real life (Schlissel 4). Schlissel aptly states: "Mae West onstage probably owed more to Bert Savoy than to any woman in

the theatre before 1920” (4). West appropriated the amplified gestures, extravagant clothing, and humor used by Savoy to mark herself as an exaggerated version of 1920s femininity. West’s performance style was reminiscent of Savoy’s in that not only did she make no attempt to hide who she really was, she also heightened that persona until her prostitute characters and her off-stage self were one in the public eye. Additionally she appealed to audiences through her “cheeky” humor, thus advocating for the understanding of females as strong and sexual beings from an entertaining, as opposed to threatening, place.

West had her big break in 1926 with the début of *Sex*, which West starred in and wrote under the pseudonym of Jane Mast (Sochen 66). *Sex*, which was actually written by a man named Jack Byrne, was purchased for West. West took *Following the Fleet*, as it was called, and altered the plot so that: “As the final curtain comes down, the hooker is heroine. Then Mae retitled the play with a single word—*Sex*. She said later that Edward Elsner, the director, kept talking about how the play exuded ‘Sex, low sex. The way he said it, it sounded like the best kind’” (qtd in Schlissel 6). This is where the investigation into the influence of Mae West through the character of the whore truly begins.

Despite West’s relative anonymity prior to the début of *Sex*, the show was wildly successful with audiences and grossed \$16,000 a week by the end of its second month (Schlissel 10). *Sex*, and all of West’s productions for that matter, used an elaborate narrative, featured a live jazz band, popular songs and dances that did not necessarily relate to the action of the play, and West’s own special brand of “comic patter and risqué stage business” (Pullen 15). While full houses and sold out shows

demonstrate the public's interest and enjoyment, the reviews from critics reveal the dominant moral thread regarding the open expression of female sexuality at the time. Pullen recounts the vicious highlights: "the *New York Times* called it 'crude and inept,' and *Billboard* complained that it was 'the cheapest, most vulgar, low show to have dared to open in New York this year'" (16). While West's on stage display of female sexuality was considered offensive, her plot line was equally transgressive. At this moment in time "brothel dramas" (such as *Mrs. Warren's Profession* by George Bernard Shaw and Eugene O'Neill's *Anna Christie*) and the remnants of "courtesan plays" (the original being *Camille* by Alexandre Dumas) were the prevailing theatrical representations of whores. It was the unwritten rule that these loose and impulsive women were either going to die or be left with nothing. West blatantly and intentionally violated this societal expectation with her controversial texts.

In *Sex*, we see Margy LaMont, the heroine prostitute, handling the men who wish they could handle her. Regarding the action of West's whores, Pullen summarizes, "West's prostitutes/entertainers exhibit a remarkable amount of textual agency; these characters drive the action, focus the narrative, and provide West with a showcase for her musical talents and comic patter" (10). In *Sex*, Margy controls every scene that she is in. She is in complete command of her actions and the actions of the people around her. For instance, in one of the first scenes Margy tells her pimp, Rocky, that she is planning on leaving him. He threatens her, but she seems completely unshaken and speaks to him as if he was a petulant child throwing a temper tantrum: "Don't wise crack at me, because I'm about ready to give you the air" ("*Sex*" 36). While seeing a woman with this amount of agency, particularly

sexual agency, was still unusual, West was able to get away with her violation of the accepted norms the same way that her idol Bert Savoy did: with a laugh.

The comedy of Mae West is one of the most distinct, yet often overlooked, characteristics of her performance style. Sochen summarizes, "as a woman and a comic talking about the forbidden subject, she [West] broke three sacred conventions at once" (63). The Broadway stage at the time of West's popularity was bound by morality, and thus if sex was discussed on the legitimate stage it was done subtly and from the male perspective. Additionally, women rarely played comedic roles, especially comedic roles with the blunt and suggestive dialogue used by West. West, a female comedic performer who not only performed sex, but also spoke it publicly, flew in the face of convention by subverting the theatrical norms of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century bourgeois stage. However, what Sochen fails to mention is that West's comedy is precisely what allowed her to be a woman addressing sex, the forbidden subject, on the Broadway stage. Schlissel examines this point thoroughly, noting that the attitude which West employed on the stage, and arguably in real life, was that of the "tough girl" and that this "self-congratulatory bravado and cocky invitation to sexual adventure" framed her sexuality and her role as a prostitute as more comedic, rather than passionate (2). This use of comedy, instead of passion, as the basis for sexual behavior on the stage was a significant departure from the courtesan and brothel dramas of the day.

Accordingly, West's comedy allowed her to define representations of female sexuality and agency on the legitimate stage in accordance with her persona and beliefs. Moreover, West's use of the popular and the past also aided her in her

destabilization of society's female expectations by camouflaging her transgression. West set the majority of her pieces at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. She did this intentionally as the fashions of this time period, décolletage enhancing corsets and big skirts, helped to accentuate West's best physical features. Pullen goes further, proposing that not only the costumes, but also "...the mise-en-scene itself contributed to West's self-promotion as a sexually desirable woman" (16). Thus, the woman the audience was looking at did not reflect the flapper women in the audience, which allowed spectators to laugh and enjoy her antics as if she were an exotic other.

However, West also used familiar settings and the language and dances often found in the speakeasies and burlesque halls of the day to link her productions to the present. The use of domestic locals in *Sex*, such as New York and Connecticut, reminded the audience that women like Margy LaMont existed everywhere (Schlissel 7). By using popular songs and dances West made the audience members accomplices in her violation of societal norms for, as Schlissel notes, "Critics might pretend outrage, but audiences recognized lines that had been honed by every top banana in the business" (8). The audience, by attending West's shows and laughing and enjoying them, was affirming West's behaviors as being "of the time." Regardless of whether they thought it was appropriate for a woman to behave in the manner that West did, they were recognizing that women had the *ability* to behave in this way. Therefore, through West's mixing of the past and the present, audiences were able to watch West without necessarily having the impulse to imitate her, while at the same time being forced to enter a new sphere of consciousness that allowed them to compare West's behavior to the current societal norms (Sochen 65).

However, not all of the popular material used by West resonated with the audience. West's incorporation of dances and songs generally done and sung by black performers was a conscious introduction of controversy:

West told reporters that she first saw the “shimmy shawabble” in 1911 in a club for “spades” on Chicago’s South Side...Songs identified with black singers were part of her signature, songs like “A Guy What Takes His Time,” “Easy Rider,” and W.C. Handy’s “Memphis Blues.” She meant audiences [*sic*] to know the black sources of her comedy and attitude. (Schlissel 9)

She thus cast herself as not only an exotic other of a different time period, but also as an outside of popular culture by aligning herself with the marginalized black community. West challenged norms—sexual, female, and otherwise—in her stage presence, in the work she produced, in her performance style, and as we will see, in her allegiance to the gay community and in her public persona.

As a result of her performative sexuality and her deviation from what a woman was expected to be, West has been called “the greatest *female* female impersonator” (Pullen 19). At the time *Sex* debuted, “Critics...suggested that the flamboyant sexuality that became her trademark was a disguise. No real woman could be so brazen, so self-contained, or so funny” (Schlissel 2). In other words, she was performing “a kind of drag,” just as Bert Savoy did (Pullen 19). However, West’s “drag,” better understood as a heightened representation of female sexuality, functioned just as setting her works in the 19<sup>th</sup> century did: to provide distance between the spectators’ reality and the morals of the play. West was not suggesting

that all females behave like her, or like a whore for that matter, but instead that all women are capable of using any of their assets (physical or mental) to be successful and independent. Furthermore, she suggested that all women are sexual beings and are capable of embracing and using their sexuality as they choose. West represented how, “some women were able to negotiate agency through the performance of female sexuality” (Pullen 19).

Just as Lydia Thompson and the British Blondes utilized the label of “the whore” to catapult themselves to success, Mae West openly embraced the whore and what she stood for. West’s theatrical characters were predominantly prostitutes. Her two most famous characters, Margy LaMont from *Sex* (1926) and Diamond Lil from *Diamond Lil* (1928), were most certainly prostitutes. West had already gone a step further than the Blondes by not just emulating a prostitute, but by playing one on the stage. Pullen observes, “West specifically deployed her physical attractiveness and capitalized on her sexual appeal; she never rejected the label whore nor denied her promiscuity” (17). Through Pullen’s observations, we can see how the sexuality of West’s characters and her own character were blurred and how she used this to her advantage.

West’s ability to capitalize upon her sexuality and “whoredom” stressed the power of prostitutes’ financial and sexual independence. While West was not exchanging sexual services for money, she was exchanging the representation of her self as a sexual being for profit and fame. For Mae West, art imitated life; the prostitutes in West’s productions are in control of their own lives and use their sexuality to get what they want. Sochen’s understanding of *Diamond Lil* provides us

with a concise reading of West's prostitutes, and thus of West herself: "She departed from the usual stereotypical treatment of prostitutes by making Lil independent, successful, and dominant; she was not a victim, used and misused by men, determined by circumstances beyond her control. West's Lil used men and was always in control" (73). West, by comparison, was also independent, successful, and dominant. She wrote (albeit in a very Brechtian manner<sup>19</sup>) her own works, starred in them, presented herself in the way she saw fit, and made no apologies. She utilized her sexuality and the public's interest in her sexuality to get what she wanted. Pullen notes that, "West troped the familiar conflation of the actress and the whore in order to depict women who successfully traded their theatrical and sexual talents for both financial and personal power, a depiction very different from conventional representations" (10). West advocated for female agency through, as Lydia Thompson stated, female "awareishness" of one's own sexuality. However, unlike Thompson, there was no "ish" when it came to West and sex. West fully embraced the power of her sexuality and made no excuses or veiled attempts at modesty.

It is to this quality, this unapologetic nature of West's audacious behavior and persona, that her effectiveness as a transgressive performer can be attributed. I would also argue that it confirms her as an unsung reformer in American women's history. Whether it was entirely intentional or not, "West's prostitutes became self-conscious feminists in the sense that they controlled their bodies, their business, and their futures," and thus West herself became an unlikely advocate for women's rights (Sochen 67). By eliminating the plot of the prostitute as victim, West was taking steps to free women from the guilt-ridden sexuality that had been their only option.

West created positive depictions of prostitutes, which helped to promote sexual equality. She believed that, “Women were sexual creatures who had brains, willpower, and energy to shape their destinies. Women need not be self-effacing, self-sacrificing, tearful, and pathetic. They did not have to rely on a man for their identity, their income, or their reason for being.” (Sochen 73). To that effect West greatly admired the entrepreneurship of prostitutes; “She was living proof of that view” (Sochen 73). Through West’s prostitutes, and through the whore traits that she herself used, West became a reformer and advocate for female sexuality and agency.

The use of the prostitute’s sexuality as a mode of entrepreneurship, and thus financial freedom, distinguished prostitutes as more “male” than “female” in the way they functioned within society. West’s control of her life, productions, reputation, and finances demonstrated her “male” place in society and thus blurred expected gender divisions: “That is, she assumed characteristics normally labeled male and acted as if it was the normal means of behaving. In this sense, her very being and her public and aggressive insistence upon her right to be bold, assertive, and sexual became a reform symbol to all of her fans and critics (Sochen 74). While West’s aim was more likely a successful career for herself, as opposed to a reform movement, she was nonetheless making an impact with her work. As Sochen recognizes, “Though the entertainer appeals to each individual in the audience, one person at a time, the ultimate effect is collective” (74-75). Through her individual and theatrical work, West undermined expectations of what was “male” and “female” in the 1920s to such an extent that she transformed from desirable performer into unintentional activist.

However, West's aggressive promotion of her beliefs on the Broadway stage came at a price. Just as Lydia Thompson's display of her sexuality and blurring of gender lines landed her in a courtroom, Mae West, too, had her day in court. On February 9<sup>th</sup>, 1927, *Sex*, along with two other popular "sex plays" on Broadway at the time<sup>20</sup> were raided by the police. This was peculiar, as *Sex* had already been running for about a year with around three hundred and fifty performances to its credit. If this play was offensive enough to warrant police action, shouldn't the police have acted with more urgency? At this time West's new play *The Drag*, which carried the subtitle "A Homosexual Comedy in Three Acts," was being previewed and, needless to say, encountering resistance from critics ("The Drag" 95). Schlissel acknowledges that "[a]lthough *Sex* was prosecuted, *The Drag* was the play under attack," and therefore open homosexuality, as opposed to open female sexuality, was the true target (14).

Nonetheless, West, her producers, the theatre owner, "and the entire cast were arrested for corrupting the morals of youth through *Sex*'s 'wicked, lewd, scandalous, bawdy, obscene, indecent, infamous, immoral, and impure' content, according to the grand jury indictment" (Pullen 17). West arranged bail for her eighteen-person cast to the tune of \$14,000. West herself was sentenced, "to ten days in jail and a \$500 fine. The arrest, trial, and resulting play closing thus suggest that West's representation of a powerful prostitute was resisted by the enforcers of a bourgeois moral code" (Pullen 17). What Pullen fails to mention is that it was not only the fear of female sexuality and agency, but also the fear of homosexuality making it to the legitimate stage that fueled this pointed resistance.

Helen Menken, the star of another raided play called *The Captive*, had all charges against her dismissed by announcing “she would have no more to do with *The Captive*” (Schlissel 15). West and the cast of *Sex* received a similar offer, contingent on their agreement to close the show. Schlissel recounts, “They refused. Timony and Morganstern [West’s producers] obtained a restraining order against police interference, and *Sex* went on, with a booming box office, until May 21, a week before the obscenity trial began” (15). West served her sentence at the New York City Women’s Penitentiary in June of 1927. After her release, West used her fame to her advantage and framed the incident on her own terms through her use of the media:

When she was released, she compared her incarceration to other state censorship attempts and aligned her cause with crusading women such as the suffragettes and Margaret Sanger. She used the \$1,000 fee she received for an exclusive interview to *Liberty* magazine to found the Mae West Memorial Library at the Women’s Penitentiary. By comparing her efforts with other censored feminists and supporting women’s education, West’s actions suggest that she understood her arrest as part of official discourse’s attempts to suppress the expression of female sexuality. (Pullen 17)

By aligning herself with the suffragettes, West clearly recognized her role as a reformer. While, as stated previously, she was not part of a group and was certainly profiting from her status, West was still working to advance the perception of women in the 1920s, 1930s, and beyond. She soon recognized that “the arrest, trial and eight-

day jail term were worth a million dollars in publicity” (Sochen 69). West would not tolerate the censorship of her ideas or of her work and she made that clear by continuing her same style of performance and writing post-incarceration.

Unfortunately, while West used her time in jail and the raid of *Sex* to her advantage, the overall goal of keeping *The Drag* from the mainstream was achieved. The show never made it to the Broadway stage. *The Drag* (1927) tells the story of Rolly Kingsbury, a closeted homosexual who has left his lover to go “straight” and marry a woman, only to find himself attracted to his new male business partner. At the time when *The Drag* was being previewed, first in Connecticut and then in New Jersey, drag-balls were becoming very popular in Manhattan. In fact, it was quite common for members of the intelligentsia and high society to attend these balls, where they would sit in boxes and watch the queer people below (Schlissel 12). West’s play featured a drag-ball, which was said to take up twenty-minutes of the third act, and was more of a dance number than anything else. Furthermore, “*The Drag* had no star; it was meant to be a spectacle” (Schlissel 12). And while *The Drag* never made it to the legitimate stage, its existence and authorship by Mae West is significant to her role as a transgressive performer and advocate.

By authoring *The Drag*, and revising it into *The Pleasure Man* (which had a one-and-a-half show run on Broadway, as the second and final show was interrupted by the police), West was expanding the notions of sexuality and what it could be at the time. While the focus of my thesis is *female* agency and transgression through the character of the whore, the expansion of female sexuality in ways that recognize homosexuality and bisexuality is pertinent to this analysis. West, through her status,

which she achieved through the label of the whore and through the stories of her prostitute characters, was in a position to advocate for the homosexual community through her work. West was challenging sexual norms by expanding the conception and acceptance of different sexual orientations. While West does not directly address lesbianism in her plays, she is inadvertently making a space for it by recognizing homosexuality and bisexuality at all.

West used many of the tactics she had used in *Sex*, such as a live jazz band, popular songs, and a strong use of innuendo, in *The Drag*. An example of this would be the use of the song “The Woman Who Stole My Gal,” which poked fun at *The Captive*, a show that featured lesbianism in a purified and fearful way compared to West’s work (Schlissel 13). Furthermore, West used gay actors in her work. She advertised for casting at gay clubs in Greenwich Village and relied heavily upon improvisation in the rehearsal processes, so much so that the men were allowed to script their own scenes (Schlissel 11-12). Just as West utilized the language and dances of speakeasies and burlesque halls to support her display of active female sexuality with reality, West used the language patterns of actual gay men to insert reality into her display of active homosexuality. Schlissel quotes George Chauncey, who asserts that West, “moved the sort of gay act that had become a part of Times Square’s roof garden revues, dramatically expanded it, and transposed it to the legitimate stage” (qtd. in Schlissel 14). The nighttime world of homosexuals and intelligentsia was making its way into the popular discourse thanks to the work of Mae West.

However, several scholars<sup>21</sup> argue that West “cashed in” on homosexuality, as opposed to being an advocate for the community (qtd in Schlissel 25). While it is true that West profited from her use of homosexuality in her work, arguably more from scandalous publicity than from actual performances, her text dispels this notion of “using.” The stories in her gay plays (*The Drag* and its later revised version *The Pleasure Man*) present much more “real” issues than *Sex* or *Diamond Lil* (West’s most popular play). While in *Sex*, Margy LaMont does worry about legitimate issues, such as finding love and reforming her life, her concerns seem to be more fleeting and physical than anything else. As Schlissel discusses, “If one is not taken in or swept away by the drag scenes, a closer reader will find that the gay plays contain the only love stories Mae West would ever write” (27). *The Drag* and *The Pleasure Man* both contain many love stories that highlight the power of different kinds of love.

In *The Drag*, David Caldwell is so crushed by the departure of his lover Rolly Kingsbury, who has married a woman despite being very aware of his homosexuality, that he murders him. While David’s heartbreak is moving, the moment when the Doctor, a good friend of Judge Kingsbury, speaks gently about the complication of reconciling the Judge’s condemnation of homosexuality with the fact that his strong, beautiful, handsome son was a homosexual is the most honest example of love in the play (“The Drag” 140). With this dialogue West shows that by rejecting certain modes of sexuality, and thus certain people, one limits their ability to relate to and understand others. In *The Drag* West constructs a narrative of love that is dynamic, multifaceted, and emotional, characteristics that are not apparent in Margy LaMont’s story or the stories of West’s other heterosexual protagonists.

In *The Pleasure Man, The Drag* has been revised to focus on a bisexual playboy, Rodney Terrill, loosely based on Rolly Kingsbury. Terrill assaults one of his many female lovers who comes to him scared, pregnant, and begging for help. Paradise, a female impersonator, witnesses this and corner's Terrill, chastising him for his treatment of women: "and if you're a man, thank God, I'm a female impersonator" ("Pleasure Man" 187). While there are many love stories in this play, this is the most nuanced; Paradise, a homosexual female impersonator, an outsider in 1920s society, stands up to the dominant Terrill for his appalling behavior and thus stands up for what is right and decent despite his exclusion from mainstream society. Schlissel elaborates on Paradise's significance within the show, observing that he "and all the 'queers' are the world's innocents. They do not lie about who they are. Their fantastic gowns and 'disguises' confirm their identity. The 'straight' world is disguised and the gay world is 'straight'" (26-27). Thus, through West's representation of homosexuals as innocents and people capable of profound feelings of love, West is advocating for homosexuality as a legitimate form of sexuality and existence, as opposed to cashing in on the gimmick of the drag ball.

West's relationship to the homosexual community and her own status as a "drag performer" has also become entangled with theories regarding her sexuality. West's sexual orientation was never made entirely clear. Although she only played heterosexual women, her association and comfort with the gay community has led some to suggest that she was otherwise inclined. Schlissel quotes Ramona Curry, who understands West as "'a multivalent image,' an image of 'sometimes contradictory readings.'" In Mae West, sexual identities are revealed at will. None of

the masks she created is the final word” (qtd. in Schlissel 28). While it may be interesting to hypothesize on West’s sexual orientation, in the end it has no bearing on her role as one of the greatest advocates for female sexuality and an expanded view of sexuality of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

West had a prolific career, after *The Drag* she debuted *The Wicked Age*, *The Pleasure Man*, *Diamond Lil* (her most popular and well-reviewed work whose titular character is most often thought to be West’s “real” personality), and finally *The Constant Sinner* in 1931. She then left Broadway for Hollywood and, “[b]y 1935, she was the highest paid woman in the United States, and William Randolph Hearst, who tried to keep her name out of his newspapers, was the highest paid man” (Schlissel 24). She was in countless movies that she often wrote or contributed dialogue to, many of which utilized variations of the character of Diamond Lil.

Interestingly enough, West’s lengthy career also gives us the opportunity to examine the limits of transgressive female performance through the character of the whore. West’s final film *Sextette* (1977) featured an “eighty-four year old West married [to] a very young Timothy Dalton as her sixth husband” (Pullen 13). Significantly, this was the only Mae West character to ever marry a man at the conclusion of the play or film. Today, it is the Mae West of *Sextette* that is often condemned in Mae West biographies. Biographer Emily Wortis Leider views West’s aging “siren” as comical, something that “makes us laugh at, not with, her” (347). Pullen quotes Marybeth Hamilton who, “castigates West for being an ‘elderly woman who persisted in playing her much younger persona, saying those same ribald lines, making those same overblown gestures, seemingly oblivious to the passage of time’”

(qtd in Pullen 20). Asserting that West had not aged gracefully and was thus unable to “hold audiences’ sexual attention,” Pullen elaborates, “She no longer embodied her persona. The raw sexuality that she had seemed to self-consciously craft into a transgressive portrayal of the actress/whore in her early stage and film work was now mere grotesquerie” (21). Pullen aptly concludes, “Mae West biographies limit definitions of appropriate female sexuality while championing West’s seeming transgression of such limits,” a contradictory stance, which highlights the flaw in her and other biographers’ analyses (21).

The post-mortem interpretations and analyses of West and her performances confront us with the fact that female sexuality is still limited by perceptions of what is acceptable. Why couldn’t an eighty-four year old Mae West still be sexy? Why is her representation as a sexual being grotesque? Additionally, what is the significance of her sexual orientation? Would her being bisexual or lesbian make her any less influential or any less successful? How can we celebrate her as a transgressive performer, but put a limit on the appropriate timing of her transgression? Clearly, the reactions of biographers indicate that West, at eighty-four years of age was still transgressing the norms of female sexuality by representing an elderly woman as sexual and sexually attractive. From her *début* in 1926 to her last performance in 1977, West advocated a broader understanding of sexuality, both female and male, through her transgressive female performance. The prostitutes that she played, and her utilization of the whore-label in her personal life, perfectly demonstrated the power of female sexuality through these social outliers.

### Chapter Three

## Annie Sprinkle: The Porn Queen of Prostitute Performance

---

*“In porn you always tell the guy his penis is too big no matter what size. Wife swapping is a popular theme. This one is called Wet Xmas. We were really just a bunch of hippies having lots of wild sex and orgies anyways. Why not get paid for all that free love? I got \$100 for this movie, plus cab fare. (clip of young ANNIE smoking marijuana). I smuggled that pot in from Mexico myself”*

(“Herstory of Porn” 47)

This is the beginning of Annie Sprinkle’s performance piece, *Herstory of Porn: Reel to Real* (1999), which documents Sprinkle’s transition from 18-year-old porn starlet to her current mid-forties self. Sprinkle, who started as a prostitute and went on to become one of the biggest porn stars of the late 1970s and early 1980s, has now transformed into a prolific artist who, according to author Gabrielle Cody, “considers herself an activist, a teacher and sexual healer and trans-media artist. Her more recent work is, in her words, ‘feminist, spiritual, transgendered and queer’” (“Introduction” 11). However, Sprinkle did not start out this way. In fact, Annie Sprinkle started as shy Ellen Steinberg

Ellen Steinberg moved from Southern California to Tucson, Arizona shortly after losing her virginity at seventeen-years-old, which was a typical age for women of her generation to engage in sexual activity. Once in Arizona, Steinberg worked selling popcorn at the Plaza Cinema, which, at the time, was showing the biggest porn

film of the 1970s: Gerard Damiano's *Deep Throat* ("Introduction" 4).

Unsurprisingly, the theater was shut down and Steinberg was subpoenaed to appear as a witness in the ensuing trial against the theater. Here, Steinberg met not only Girardo Damiano, but also the star of the infamous film, Linda Lovelace. In Ms. Sprinkle/Ms. Steinberg's own words: "Waiting around to be called to the stand was a bit dull, so to pass the time, Damiano gave me 'deep throat lessons.' I had to take the stand briefly, which I consider my first public performance. Fortunately, lawyer Louis Nizer won this important case for freedom of expression, and Damiano and I won each other's hearts" ("Brushes and Crushes" 73). Steinberg moved to New York as Damiano's mistress and began to work at Kirt Films, which made 16mm porn films, and at Spartacus Spa, "which in the late 1970s was Manhattan's fanciest 'massage parlor' (legal jargon for whorehouse)" ("Brushes and Crushes" 73). Soon Steinberg became Sprinkle and starred in her first porn film: *Teenage Deviant*. This small film launched Sprinkle into the world of pornography and, as Sprinkle explains it: "I went on to make 150 features and fifty 8mm loops, and have my name in lights on Broadway" ("Brushes and Crushes" 74)

While West and Thompson transgressed against feminine norms through their use of the character of the whore in their popular performances, Sprinkle takes female transgression to a new level. With her prostitute/porn star performance art, Sprinkle is not only demonstrating a new form of female sexuality, but also actively questioning the place of sex and sexuality in our society from the position of an *actual* whore. Sprinkle humanizes the porn star and provides a voice to all sex workers, and thus rattles our understanding of the sexual female as a passive object.

Pullen's work focuses deeply on the desire of actual prostitutes to achieve status as actresses and on the performative aspects of prostitution, but does not engage with any prostitutes who have made the leap from prostitute to prostitute performance artist. Pullen's overall aim is to "explore the implications of thinking of prostitution as performance" (137). However, she never discusses prostitutes who *are* performers. Thus, this chapter does not engage with her work. While Pullen's work has assisted greatly in my analysis of the development of overt female sexuality in the United States, her text lacks the interpretation of artistic work that has blossomed out of the *real* whore.

For Sprinkle, pornography was proving to be a fulfilling and exciting career. However, her love affair with Willem de Ridder in 1978 changed everything. Artist de Ridder is recognized as one of Sprinkle's main influences, along with Linda Montano, who will be discussed later. Sprinkle and de Ridder left New York City for Italy and upon their return Sprinkle joined the burlesque scene, performing the beginnings of what would later become *Strip Speak: Nurse Sprinkle's Sex Education Show*. Her mentor, de Ridder, encouraged her to tell her erotic stories on stage as part of the burlesque scene. According to Sprinkle, "I created several skits which I mostly improvised while I was interacting with the (almost always all-male and sometimes masturbating) audience" ("Strip Speak" 23). In many ways, it was de Ridder who catalyzed Sprinkle's "passage from porn to 'post-porn' and 'object' to 'subject'" ("Introduction" 6). Sprinkle's close friend and fellow prostitute/porn star turned performance artist, Veronica Vera comments: "There are few people as generous as Willem de Ridder. Willem told us to think of everything we did as art. But not the

stodgy museum or academic kind of art, art that was alive, art that exuded body fluids, art that was fun” (qtd in “Annie’s Breakfast” 90). Although *Strip Speak* would prove to be Sprinkle’s entrance into the performance art world in 1985, Sprinkle had rewritten the role of the female porn star/prostitute on her own years before.

In 1981 Sprinkle wrote, directed, and starred in the second highest grossing porn film of 1982: *Deep Inside Annie Sprinkle*. This not only launched Sprinkle into porn stardom, but also marked her as a transgressive artist who was able to artfully subvert the norm. Sprinkle, in her performance piece *Herstory of Porn*, retells the process that led to the production of *Deep Inside*:

After making about a hundred porn movies, written, produced and directed all by men, I felt like I wanted to make something of my own. Something from a woman’s point of view. So I sat down at my typewriter and wrote up a six-page script. I found a guy with lots of money, gave him the best blow job I knew how, and he agreed to produce my movie. It was called *Deep Inside Annie Sprinkle*...and [marked] the beginning of a new era, pornography made by women. (“Herstory of Porn” 51)

As Cody notes, “*Deep Inside* is a subversive queering of the hardcore norm in which women are compliant and passive” (“Introduction” 7). Sprinkle altered the “normal” porn format, which has the female as an object as opposed to a character with any sort of agency. She assumed the roles of writer and director, which were typically filled by men, and scripted the film from the female perspective as opposed to the male. Just as Mae West transgressed feminine norms of the 1920s by writing her own

vehicles, thus catapulting herself to Broadway stardom, Sprinkle catapults herself to porn stardom through her own creativity. Bell asserts that, “Prostitutes are ‘spectacles’ in patriarchal discourse and much of feminist discourse; their [prostitute/porn star] performance work moves toward deconstructing female sexual spectacle” (141). The understanding of prostitutes (and porn stars) as “spectacles,” insinuates that they are to be watched, not to act of their own volition. In *Deep Inside Annie Sprinkle*, Sprinkle “deconstructs” the perceived female sexual “spectacle” by moving the focus of the film from the male perspective to the female perspective. However, she is still working within the strict genre of pornography, and thus has not fully transitioned into “legitimate” art space.

In January of 1984, Sprinkle transitioned from the screen to the stage with the premiere of *Deep Inside Porn Stars* at Franklin Furnace in New York. Sprinkle and her porn star sisters<sup>22</sup> were invited to participate in *The Second Coming*, a performance series initiated by a feminist performance group whose aim was: “to explore a new definition of pornography, one that is not demeaning to women, men, and children” (“Introduction” 8-9). With the creation of this piece, the shifting context of Sprinkle’s work becomes apparent. She left the screen, which provides anonymity for the audience, as well as for the performer in the lack of real human reactions, and entered into the realm of live theater. *Deep Inside Porn Stars* developed out of a “consciousness raising group” of porn stars called *Club 90*, which met every three weeks (Bell 144). The show begins in a reproduction of Sprinkle’s living room. As each woman arrives they changes from their “porn star” clothes into their “normal” clothes. Thus, the line between bad girl (porn star) and good girl

(normal person) is blurred, as they appear to be one and the same. This blurring is taken further as Sprinkle offers each woman tea and cookies upon her arrival, and one of the women's children is present throughout the entire piece and is held by each woman at different intervals. The play's dialogue is filled with banter latent with double entendre. For example, Candida Royalle coyly asks the women, "How are your little pussies doing?" (qtd in Bell 145). She of course means "pussies" as in cats. As the play progresses, each woman tells her story using a slide show of photos from her life.

As Bell summarizes, "The viewer is bombarded with conflicting images: women stripping, typical little girls, women who are singers and dancers, women with babies, women who have been represented by the hegemonic pornographic genre as only sexual critiquing the industry; articulate, intelligent pornographic women" (147). Thus, Sprinkle and the other porn stars are actively and intentionally rewriting their genre and themselves through performance. They are blurring the lines between bad girls and good girls, whores and mothers, porn stars and people. Bell quotes Candida Royalle, who was instrumental in the production and creation of *Deep Inside Porn Stars*,

The media suddenly took a tremendous interest in us from a whole new angle. We were not just to be written off as bimbettes or victims ... We were women who really could think ... It was controversial because people would rather think of women who choose to be sex workers as stupid or victims. The idea in this culture that women would choose in their right mind to do this work was very threatening. (qtd in Bell 143)

Sprinkle's work *Post Porn Modernist* evolved out of this piece, however her performance of *Strip Speak: Nurse Sprinkle's Sex Education* in Richard Schechner's *Prometheus Project* in 1985 marked her first solo performance in a legitimate art space.

Schechner, who recognized Sprinkle as an individual artist who used pornography as a medium, extended the invitation for Sprinkle to perform in the *Prometheus Project* after seeing one of her *Strip Speak* shows at a seedy 42<sup>nd</sup> Street burlesque club (qtd. in "Dinner with Schechner" 110). Cody recognizes this performance, "in 'legitimate' fringe art space," as what, "provided her [Sprinkle] with a formal entrée into New York's emerging performance art scene" ("Introduction" 9). Sprinkle herself acknowledges this performance as a turning point in her career: "This was the perfect bridge for me to cross over into the high-brow theater world. Being quite shy, I'm certain I never would have had the courage to go on stage and do a one-woman show in an art venue if I hadn't had this basic stage experience in strip clubs" ("Strip Speak" 23). Sprinkle had done the artistic work in both *Deep Inside Porn Stars* and early performances of *Strip Speak* to deserve to be featured as a soloist in this sort of space—Schechner just opened the door.

The show begins with Sprinkle allowing an audience member to hug her, she then has the audience help undress her, allowing them to touch her nipples and her breasts, and at one point she even wraps one audience member's head in her breasts. As the audience physically engages with Sprinkle she is interviewing them. For instance when an audience member's head is between her breasts she asks them questions about their experience, which they answer, albeit in a muffled voice. She

does all this with the demeanor of a kind teacher, phrasing everything simply, overreacting to the audience in an excitable and gentle manner. The second half of *Strip Speak* is more pornographic than the first, as Sprinkle discusses sex frankly and displays her own vagina to demonstrate her educational instruction. After the audience has undressed Sprinkle, she allows them to look at her vagina with a flashlight and magnifying glass as she manipulates the vulva. She discusses the difference between the female “love hole” and the male “love pole” and the different kinds of attention they need (“Strip Speak” 25). Finally, she declares she is going to demonstrate how to perform fellatio, and asks if there is anyone in the audience who would like to volunteer for this activity. Generally no one volunteers, so Sprinkle prepares to demonstrate on a dildo, however,

Just as ANNIE is about to kiss the dildo all the lights in the theater come up brightly. ANNIE and all the performers stare at the spectators. The DIRECTOR, carrying a camera, walks slowly out into the performing area and begins to take pictures of the spectators. The lights remain on very bright for about 30-45 seconds. When the bright lights go off and the theater lights come on again and ANNIE is about to begin sucking, the MC comes on.

(“Strip Speak” 26)

As the stage directions make clear, Sprinkle flips the role of the voyeur. Just as *Deep Inside Porn Stars* is “voyeuristic of the persons behind the personas,” *Strip Speak* is voyeuristic of Sprinkle *and* the spectator (Bell 144).

*Strip Speak* violates the norm of the anonymity assumed in pornography and typical strip shows, as the identity of viewers is made clear through audience

participation and the flipping of the voyeur. Furthermore, Sprinkle manages to de-eroticize her body parts and actions by asking the audience members to not only comment on them in the moment, but also to examine them. According to Robert Schechner, Sprinkle would begin her performance with the manner of a porn star, inviting the audience suggestively, “I bet you want to look at me,” but once they agree, “she subverts the gaze by giving them a magnifying glass” (qtd in “Dinner with Schechner” 106). By framing herself as a nurse, an instructional medical “professional” who is openly interacting with and instructing her audience Sprinkle is eliminating “the whole idea of the pornographic gaze,” which is, “anonymity, distance, to fulfill the fantasy” (qtd in “Dinner with Schechner” 106). Schechner refers to all of this action and play as “the business” (qtd in “Dinner with Schechner” 106). In this piece, Sprinkle is aware of herself as an artist, a subject, and an object, and plays with that to move the audience to a space not normally associated with the archetypal stripper or porn star.

When asked if Sprinkle was critiquing pornography with her performance, Schechner responded that he believed Sprinkle was “critiquing it profoundly,” and that “her sense of humor, gives her a different niche [...] I never thought of her performance as pornography. Annie was doing a take-off on it” (qtd in “Dinner with Schechner” 108). Here we see a mode of subversion utilized by Lydia Thompson and especially by Mae West. The incorporation of humor was instrumental in both Thompson and West’s performances. It allowed them to examine forbidden topics (sex, female sexuality, etc.) by making the audience complicit through their enjoyment. Additionally, since they were “poking” fun, it added an air of lightness as

opposed to the severity of a direct and serious critique. Sprinkle's use of humor allowed her to critique the industry that made her famous, and therefore critique the notion of females as passive sexual actors in a relatable manner that allowed the audience to listen in a safe space.

With Sprinkle's entrance into the performance art world, the focus and intention behind her work begins to change. Furthermore, her introduction to Linda Montano in 1988 at Montano's Summer Saint Camp at the Art/Life Institute in Kingston, New York, proved to be very influential as, "Annie speaks of her encounter with Montano as something akin to a 'religious experience'" ("Introduction" 9). Together they developed two sexuality workshops, "Sacred Sex" and "MetamorphoSex," where they would work with a small group of women to help them better understand their own sexuality. These workshops often culminated in informal performances. It was at the Summer Saint Camp that the idea for Sprinkle's piece *Post Porn Modernist* began to gestate. After this encounter with Montano, Sprinkle produced the film *Linda/Less & Annie – the First Female-to-Male Transsexual Love Story* (1989) where, according to Sprinkle, "I tried out [Linda/Less'] brand-new surgically constructed penis for the very first time. I created a new film genre I coined 'docu-porn.' It was a big hit on the gay and lesbian film festival circuit" ("Herstory of Porn" 59). She also produced *The Sluts and Goddesses Video Workshop* (1992), a film that focused on the union of the "slut" and the "goddess" in all women and can best be understood as an extension of her "Sacred Sex" workshop. Sprinkle's reasoning for creating the film is as follows: "The truth was I had become...a lesbian. But no one would believe that *I* was a lesbian. I was

having trouble-meeting women. So I made this film to help gain access into the lesbian world. And it worked!” (“Herstory” 59). Sprinkle’s introduction to Montano greatly effected the caliber, content, and intention of her work. Her work began to explore the depths of our collective understanding of sexuality, its limits, restrictions, and intricacies.

*Post Porn Modernist*, Sprinkle’s one-woman show and one of her most memorable works debuted, in 1989. The show, comprised of vignettes, “traces Annie’s life story from the days of shy Ellen Steinberg, through her early years as porn starlet, to the burlesque years of her Nurse Sprinkle act, to her healing work as a New Age Tantric priestess” (“Introduction” 11). Sprinkle herself defines the term “Post Porn Modernist” in this way: “‘Post porn’ implies something after porn, ‘postmodernist’ implies something artistic, ‘post porn modernist’ is a term we use to describe a genre of sexually explicit material: more experimental, more political, less exclusively erotic” (qtd in Bell 148). In the same vein of *Deep Inside Porn Stars*, Sprinkle takes you into her world and blurs the line between porn star and “normal human woman.” She goes further by discussing the pros and cons of sex work and confronting the audience with the visual realities of her profession.

The show, itself, begins with Sprinkle contrasting the personalities of “Annie” and “Ellen” through photos of each and through her own analysis, ultimately concluding that, “I suppose Ellen Steinberg really is Annie Sprinkle, and Annie Sprinkle is really Ellen Steinberg” (qtd in Bell 149). Or in the larger context, the Shy Girl Next Door is the Porn Star and the Porn Star is the Shy Girl Next Door. Sprinkle’s status as a porn star represents a heightened sexuality, but a female one

nonetheless, and her assertion that this ferocious sexuality lies in “everyday” women still serves as a revolutionary idea. She drives this point home with the next vignette, the “Transformation Salon” where she shows photographs of women dressed as both “Regular People” and “Sex Stars” (Bell 149). She then delves into a vignette entitled “Pornstatistics,” in which she uses computer graphs to examine the pros and cons of her profession. The charts include “Why I Did It: Advantages,” “Why I Did It: Disadvantages,” “Amount of cock sucked,” a graph of her weekly income (\$4,000), compared to the average monthly income of American women (\$1,500), and finally Sprinkle’s seventeen hour work week versus the average forty hour (Bell 150-151). Sprinkle uses graphs, a feature of the common workplace, to demonstrate the logical reasoning for her decision to be a sex worker and also to highlight the reality of the occupation. As an example of these realities, at one point during the performance she visually measures her “Amount of cock sucked” chart against an image of the Empire State Building. As Bell states, this visual statement revealed to her audience that “placed end to end the former equals the latter minus the antenna” (151). As the audience digests this startling statistic, Sprinkle concludes that despite the trials, tribulations, and controversies inherent in her occupation, the Pros far outweigh the Cons.

However, just as the audience is either in agreement with Sprinkle or horrified with her promotion of prostitution and pornography, Sprinkle begins the vignette “100 Blow Jobs,” in which she performs “fellatio on a dozen dildos nailed to a board while male voices on a taped soundtrack make angry demands” (Bell 151). Significantly, this sexual performance act does not end with humiliation, but instead

with Sprinkle giving herself the “Aphrodite Award for sexual service to the community” (Bell 151). As Cody notes: “Her ‘post-porn’ pornography finds its inspiration in radical feminism’s somewhat romanticized notion of an ancient, matriarchal-sacred, as well as the confrontationalism of high modernism” (“Introduction” 15). Thus, Sprinkle exhibits something incendiary that would produce an obvious reaction and then counters that with her personal feeling of it; the latter of which is one perspective that people often leave out of the debate over sex workers. Thus, the humiliation we are predisposed to feel is negated by Sprinkle’s celebration of her work and skill.

From this somber and moving ceremony, Sprinkle transitions into the “Bosom Ballet” and “A Public Cervix Announcement,” her two best-known performance vignettes. In the “Bosom Ballet” Sprinkle’s breasts are the ballerinas that dance to Strauss’ “Blue Danube Waltz” (Bell 151-152). By moving her breasts around comically as if they were ballerinas she is desexualizing them and showing them as any other body part, consequently rewriting the understanding of breasts as solely sexual entities. In “A Public Cervix Announcement,” Sprinkle inserts a speculum into herself and allows the audience to examine her cervix with a flashlight (Bell 151-152). With this piece Sprinkle is “[cutting] through norms of pornography,” by “return[ing] ownership of the whole sexual organ to Annie” (“Introduction” 11). The norm of porn is to focus on the exterior of the vagina as opposed to the interior, an arguably much more sacred place as all people pass through this place in their lifetime. As Schechner said before, by eliminating the “anonymity” and “distance” of

pornography and adding a “medical” or “clinical” gaze, Sprinkle is altering peoples’ perceptions of the pornographic female body (qtd in “Dinner with Schechner” 106).

Sprinkle then performs “New Ancient Sex (Theory)” and “New Ancient Sex (Practice),” both of which serve to promote the “presentation of the female body as a sacred temple and [the] celebration of the ancient sacred prostitute” (Bell 153). These pieces represent Sprinkle’s expansion of her own understanding of the roles of sex and the prostitute in society. During “Theory” Sprinkle tells the story of the Temples of the Sacred Prostitute, a story of ancient times when prostitutes were thought of as powerful healers, counselors, magicians, and “channels for the Divine” (qtd in Bell 153). Interestingly enough, this is a story that Sprinkle thought she had made up, but is in fact present in Plato’s texts as the *hetairae* (Bell 186). Next, in “Practice,” Sprinkle performs “The Legend of the Ancient Sacred Prostitute,” where Sprinkle uses a vibrator to bring herself to climax while the audience participates with shakers that they shake in relation to her bodily sounds. Sprinkle has been quoted saying that she “learned and experienced more from doing that piece than anything else I have ever done in my life, and many people told me they were inspired or touched by it. I wished that everyone could have the intense experience of going into ecstasy on stage in a theatrical setting” (“MetamorphoSex” 31). Sprinkle’s more spiritual relationship with sex is evident in this commentary. This sexual moment is not about an unspecified voyeur, but about the collective spiritual experience of “ecstasy” and the effect it has on all participants. Thus, Sprinkle has moved away from her examination of female sexuality within the constraints of pornography and into the greater understanding of human sexuality.

Sprinkle ends the show by saying, “Maybe there’s a little porn star in you. Maybe not. But I can tell you from experience . . . there’s a little of you in every porn star” (qtd in Bell 150). Sprinkle takes you on a journey through her life, showing you that despite her line of work, she is just like anyone else. She has humanized the prostitute/porn star and therefore made inroads into the elimination of the understanding of the sexual female as a passive object for voyeurs to project their fantasies on. Through her experience, she demonstrates a new viewpoint that is generally not promoted in Western civilizations: sex as spiritual and healing, not taboo and dirty. Bell accurately summarizes, “*Post Porn Modernist* is a transgression of the profane to the sacred and then a re-transgression from the spiritual to the flesh as Sprinkle and the audience collectively produce a sexually aroused orgasmic body” (154). The communal relationship to Sprinkle’s sexual ecstasy is especially pertinent when you consider her fans are, as she asserts, “twenty-year-old female students getting degrees in Performance Studies, not men in trench coats...” (qtd. in “Labor of Love” 82). To be sure, when young women engage with the kind of awareness and sexual journey that Sprinkle presents, they are thus provided with another dialogue with which to analyze their own sexual existence.

As Sprinkle’s career developed, America saw her move off the stage and into the real world. With *Peace in Bed* (1996) and *Liberty Love Boat* (1998) Sprinkle takes her transgressive behavior out of the theater, thus subverting the convention of not only the fourth wall, but also the notion that theater is “acting,” and thus separate from the everyday world. Sprinkle’s *Peace in Bed* was a recreation of John Lennon and Yoko Ono’s “Bed-In” protests of the Vietnam War<sup>23</sup>. Sprinkle, however, was

protesting the “war going on in people’s bedrooms” (“Peace in Bed” 38). Sprinkle performed this not with a man, but with her wife, Kimberley, while on their honeymoon. With their “Bed-Ins,” which took place in Australia, Zurich, Hamburg, Montreal and Northampton, Massachusetts, Sprinkle and Kimberley advocated a greater sexual awareness and openness and better sex education (“Peace in Bed” 39).

To Sprinkle, this piece was an extension of her long-term relationship with the media: “For years I made myself available to the media. The arrangement was mutually beneficial. They got some provocative, titillating stories. I got to disseminate my messages: a call to decriminalize and destigmatize sex work, to promote sex-positive attitudes and encourage more and better sex education” (“Peace in Bed” 37). Just as West and Thompson utilized the media attention they received to promote themselves and their message, so did Sprinkle. However, where Thompson and West focused on promoting themselves as independent women of agency, Sprinkle goes farther by not only promoting herself in a similar way, but also by using her notoriety to crusade for a cause and for others.

Sprinkle’s *Liberty Love Boat* is arguably her most effective and memorable activist piece. The *Liberty Love Boat* took place on October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1998 amidst former Mayor Giuliani’s crusade against the sex industry in New York City. Sprinkle had returned to New York after time away only to find many friends out of work and her former stomping ground of 42<sup>nd</sup> Street devoid of its former “sleazy charm” (Sprinkle 41). On October 12<sup>th</sup>, around “200 artists and sex workers showed up, most of them dressed in ‘wild’ clothes and costumes” to take a photograph and a boat ride to the Statue of Liberty (“Liberty Love” 41). Upon their arrival they were bombarded by a

slew of policemen from the sea, air, and street. According to Sprinkle, “They videotaped our every move and really harassed us. It seems that because of the way we were dressed, they assumed we were going to bomb the Statue of Liberty” (“Liberty Love” 41). Despite the NYPD’s best attempts, Sprinkle and her brothers and sisters in arms made it to the Statue of Liberty where they formed a circle around Lady Liberty and passed around a megaphone as each person performed what they had prepared. As Sprinkle states, “Tourists from all over the world were either shocked or delighted by our presence and asked if their families could pose for snapshots with us. The Goddess of Freedom smiled down upon us” (“Liberty Love” 41).

Just as West made her audiences accomplices through their laughter and shared cultural knowledge of the origins of her material, Sprinkle and her cohorts pointed out the ridiculousness of the NYPD and mayor Giuliani’s attempts to crack down on sex workers. From the joyful reactions of the tourists that greeted them, it was quite clear that sex work, and the attire and behavior that denoted it, was already woven deeply into the fabric of our collective conscious and no amount of laws or regulations could truly eradicate that fact. Sprinkle, through her transgressive appearance and stance on sex work not only advocated for the rights of her own community, but also for the freedom of expression for everyone. Furthermore, as opposed to working to better conditions for sex workers, Giuliani and the NYPD vilified them and, on October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1998, vilified self-expression as well.

Sprinkle’s theatrical piece, *Herstory of Porn: Reel to Real* (1999), is similar to *Post Porn Modernist* in its construction, however instead of analyzing Sprinkle’s

personal transformation through her career, this piece analyzes the evolution of pornography throughout her career. In *Herstory of Porn* we see Sprinkle interact with seven of her own porn films and the persona that she embodied at the time of their production. Each film is “shown” in a different theater, with a different projectionist (who is not real), and a different incarnation of Sprinkle serving as the MC of the theatrical event. Once again Sprinkle is blurring the lines between porn star and person by humanizing and subverting the archetypes of female sexuality present in these films with her physical presence on the stage. Additionally, this work carries the tone of activism that has begun to mark Sprinkle’s work. Two of the most poignant moments within the seven-film piece are Sprinkle’s Safer-Sex video, which she released in response to the 1980s AIDS crisis as a way of encouraging the porn industry to use safe sex practices<sup>24</sup>, and the final film where Sprinkle examines her relationship to men and her “passing of the torch” as a sexual healer and sacred prostitute. Both of these chapters reflect the insights and maturity regarding sex that Sprinkle has developed with age. Unlike Mae West, who continued to do the same sort of work in her old age that she did as a young starlet and who is now criticized for it, Sprinkle’s work has matured with her age and thus seems more appropriate and therefore more effective.

Through Sprinkle’s artistic works, we can see her transformation from eager young porn star to activist artist. While Sprinkle operates in a much more liberal space than the other women featured in this work, it is still clear that there is much work to be done in the name of female sexual expression. Sprinkle’s definition as an artist, as opposed to simply an entertainer, has provided her with a platform that

neither Mae West nor Lydia Thompson had. As a 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century woman artist, she exists in a community that more openly accepts the questioning of social norms. However, even within that space she has broadened the realm of what is acceptable “Prostitute performance artists have not only transgressed public space and academic space by bringing the pornographic, the carnivalesque, into these realms, but in so doing they have produced a new social identity—the prostitute as sexual healer, goddess, teacher, political activist, and feminist” (Bell 184). By operating from the position of a real life whore and porn star, as opposed to a performer embodying this role, Sprinkle adds a very personal dimension to the origins of her agency. As opposed to relying solely on the power of her female sexuality, as was the case with Thompson and West, Sprinkle uses her command of her own sexuality to perform “the deconstruction of arousal” (qtd in “Dinner with Schechner” 109). She is not just using her whoredom to further her career, but to expand our perception of sex and female sexuality. Just as Veronica Vera states: “We are artists and sex is our medium” (qtd in “Annie’s Breakfast” 91).

## Conclusion

### The Reach of the Whore

---

Lydia Thompson and the British Blondes, Mae West, and Annie Sprinkle all transgressed against the feminine norms of their time by embodying and representing the prostitutes of their era on stage. While the different periods—the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the 1920s, and the 1970s—account for many of the differences in their work, these performers have many significant similarities. They all revealed their bodies by costuming themselves in the fashions of prostitutes of their time, used comedy and satire as a way of accessing a taboo subject, female sexuality, on the legitimate stage, and faced aggression from the press and the more conservative facets of society that resented the performers stretching of the norms. While there are differences in the ways these performers employed the tactics discussed above, they all used them to advocate for women's rights and thus made room for the next generation of performers to expand upon their work and take the understanding of female sexuality to new and more honest places.

The Blondes arrived on the US stage at a time when public contention over female sexuality was reaching an emotional peak. Despite slanderous and hostile press, the Blondes were able to convert a salacious and low-class form of entertainment into popular entertainment for the masses. The Blondes, through their perseverance and performances, demonstrated that women could become successful by using their God-given body and sexuality in service of themselves. They disseminated sexual self-awareness into the consciousness of their audience members,

specifically their female audience members. West took this awareness, this recognition of the power of female sexuality, and broadcasted it in a bigger and more explicit way. West wrote, directed, and starred in her own theatrical vehicles, which promoted the entrepreneurship of the 1920s prostitute. West's female prostitute characters were strong, self-aware, sexual, and unashamed. West, herself, was also all of these things and unabashedly presented herself as such in the public eye. Additionally, West featured homosexuality and bisexuality in her work, thus promoting a multifaceted image of female sexuality that would later be expanded upon by Sprinkle. West's ability to capitalize upon her own sexuality makes the male-managed erotic acts of the *Blondes* look subtle; however, without them, the theatrical niche West commandeered would not have existed.

While it is quite easy to trace the similarities between West and Thompson, Sprinkle is a horse of a different color. Sprinkle does not just emulate prostitutes, she *was* a prostitute and a very successful porn star. Sprinkle's experience as a sex worker provides her with an understanding that surpasses the fashion and perceived behavior, which is apparent in her work. Furthermore, Sprinkle was not a mainstream entertainer. After leaving her porn career, Sprinkle carved out space for herself in the performance art community, and thus has a more open and accepting audience compared to middle-class Broadway theatergoers. If Sprinkle's work had debuted next door to *Jersey Boys* or *Beauty and the Beast*, she may not have been so warmly received or had the opportunity to become the prolific artist and teacher that she is. Sprinkle not only continues to expand our understanding of overt female sexuality,

but also provides a voice for sex workers and questions our Western understanding of sex and sexuality.

As stated earlier, Pullen's work *Actresses and Whores: On Stage and In Society* served as a very inspirational catalyst for this work. However, while I agree with many of Pullen's interpretations regarding The British Blondes and West, our works have different aims and overtones. Pullen uses actresses associated with prostitution to better illuminate the realities of prostitution at the time the actress in question was in vogue. However, Pullen fails to examine prostitutes who have made the leap from sex worker to artist. Pullen neglects Sprinkle and women like her, favoring instead interviews with Madison, Wisconsin escorts and escort blogs. While this ethnographic research is stimulating, it brings to light the issue of tone that I am referring to. Pullen's interviews, and much of her analysis for that matter, do not seem completely detached from the notion of whores as victims and thus warranting pity. This rhetoric, while only subtly present in Pullen's work, stifles the liberating and empowering work done by many of the women she analyzes by making it seem unproductive and to no avail. Pullen's discussion of West and the Blondes suggests that these female performers achieved success *despite* being labeled as whores, whereas I have shown that these women achieved success *as a result* of their whore label and their acceptance and celebration of their own sexuality.

The use of humor by the Blondes, West, and Sprinkle is critical in their ability to subvert dominant norms and still be successful. As I have shown, the satire and parody present in the different works done by these women makes them more accessible and more easily considered by the audience, as they are not aggressive. As

discussed in the introduction, theorist Umberto Eco understands comedy as inherently subversive of the accepted conventions at the time of its production (275). Thus the comedic performer can be understood as social reformer, or at least as identifier of social stagnancy. Comedy allows performers to boldly go where others will not or cannot go, while at the same time protecting their radicalism with the veneer of entertainment. The same enjoyment and laughter that made audiences accomplices in Thompson, West, and Sprinkle's performances can be understood as an affirmation of the public desire to violate the restrictions placed on the expression of female sexuality. Therefore, despite the casting of the whore as an outsider, these performers were really advocating for the underlying desires of their time, evidenced in subsequent events such as the ratification of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 1920, the development of Planned Parenthood Federation of America between 1916 and 1942, and the "free love" movement of the 1960s.

But so what? Why is any of this significant now? So these women wore smaller clothes, made suggestive jokes, embraced their whoredom, and developed careers out of sex. Sex sells. Why does it matter that these three women sold sex? In a world where Rush Limbaugh can publicly call a female law school student a "slut" for advocating for insurance coverage for contraception and say that her use of contraception means she is having "so much sex" that she is "a prostitute who wants to be paid to have sex," and not immediately incite outrage in all of our public officials, we have a problem ("ABCNews"). The fact that Mr. Limbaugh would feel *comfortable* to publicly state that, "If we're going to have to pay for this [contraception], we want something in return Ms. Fluke and that would be the videos

of all this sex posted online so we can see what we are getting for our money,” only serves to demonstrate that the overall American understanding of female sexuality has yet to evolve to meet the intellectual level of Sprinkle’s work (“ABCNews”). Has Mr. Limbaugh voiced his concerns over the existing insurance coverage for Viagra, a product that’s sole purpose is to allow men to have sex? No, because male heterosexuality and promiscuity is celebrated and accepted in the United States. Mr. Limbaugh is attempting to eliminate sexual women from the narrative, just as the 19<sup>th</sup> century American press attempted to eliminate Thompson and the Blondes from the public narrative, by aligning us with prostitutes. The notion that the US government would be concerned with women’s sexual health and sexual well-being is so outrageous to Mr. Limbaugh and people like him because the idea of a sexual female is *still* taboo in our society, thus making it clear that we need more performers like Thompson, West, and Sprinkle who are willing to boldly place themselves outside of the dominant discourse in the service of women.

Female sexuality and women’s acceptance of their sexuality is still not considered “appropriate” in American society. Women can be sexual for *others*, for the enjoyment of others, but if we are sexual of our own accord, for our own enjoyment, we are sluts and whores who owe people something for being sexual, for being human. The work of women like Thompson, West, and Sprinkle is not done. We see vestiges of activism that embrace the “whore stigma,” such as the SlutWalks done in response to a Canadian police officer’s statement that to avoid sexual assault and rape women should “avoid dressing like sluts” (Stampler). The SlutWalks movement quickly spread from Canada to the United States and encouraged women

to march as “sluts” in protest of this kind of behavior. The group states on their website that their action was not a result of just this police officer, but a culmination of events, a sentiment, which is reflected in their mottos: “Because We’ve Had Enough” and “My Body’s Not An Insult” (“SlutWalk”). Women came out in the thousands in a variety of slut attires ranging from jeans and t-shirts to sexy lingerie, proving Annie Sprinkle’s comment that “Maybe there’s a little porn star in you. Maybe not. But I can tell you from experience . . . there’s a little of you in every porn star” (qtd. in Bell 150). All women, all people are sexual. The fact that anyone would stand for the suppression and distortion of human sexuality is appalling. We should celebrate female sexuality and females who embrace their sexuality, not castigate and criminalize them.

Performers like Thompson, West, and Sprinkle are so invaluable because they rewrite the destructive rhetoric of those like Rush Limbaugh, a rhetoric that encourages the sexual, physical, and verbal abuse of women. They provide an alternative mentality and ideology that young women can use to define their own lives and own sexuality outside of the constraints of sexism. As a young woman facing adulthood in an age where my rights and sexuality are being attacked and insulted I can attest to the importance of the bravery, resolve, and self-respect demonstrated in the performance of Lydia Thompson and the British Blondes, Mae West, and Annie Sprinkle. Now, more than ever, we must embrace the whore in all of us and fight, as these performers did, for the respect and agency we deserve.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sochen, 66.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century the role of women was prescribed by what “women’s magazines, gift annuals, and religious literature” called the “Cult of True Womanhood” (Welter 151). The cult defines a woman by four virtues: “piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity,” which effectively made women “the hostage in the home” (Welter 151-152). It was against these conventions that the Blondes rebelled.

<sup>3</sup> A former prostitute/porn star turned performance artist and a good friend of Sprinkle’s.

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that several members of Thompson’s troupe would later step out from her shadow and form their own group under the same name, The British Blondes (Allen 162). However, for the purposes of this thesis, “The British Blondes” refers to the original incarnation of the group *with* Thompson.

<sup>5</sup> It has been suggested that Thompson’s stepfather’s death forced her on to the stage, however her stepfather’s business failure has also been cited as the catalyst.

<sup>6</sup> Minstrel shows and burlesque used many similar modes of performance including: “songs, and dances, stereotypes played for comic effect, topical humor, parodies of politicians and political speech-making, and a walk-around, where each performer paraded in front of the audience displaying his particular talent for applause” (Pullen 114-115). Lydia Thompson and the British Blondes used all of these conventions, but placed a greater emphasis on the walk-around, except, according to Pullen, instead of displaying a talent “the British Blondes displayed little more than their bodies” (Pullen 115).

<sup>7</sup> *Demimondes*, as described by the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, are: “A class of women on the fringes of respectable society supported by wealthy lovers” (“demimondes”). Within the context of this these demimondes can be understood as French courtesans.

<sup>8</sup> The 1849 Astor Place Riot were the result of building tensions between the fan bases of two popular actors, Macready who was British and appealed to the upper class, and Edwin Forrest who was an American working class hero. Macready and Forrest represented something much bigger than themselves: a growing class rivalry in the US. In the spring of 1849 Macready and Forrest were both performing the same role, *Macbeth*, in two different theaters, which were very obviously polarized by high and low class audiences. The working class fans of Forrest resented Macready’s presence and protested his appearance. Forrest’s fans were able to stop the first of Macready’s performance by making a ruckus, however Macready, at the request of upper class patrons, attempted to perform again later that week. The theater, the Astor-Place Opera House, where Macready was playing made special arrangements to keep working-class people out, but this only fueled the fire. The working class Forrest fans were so enraged that they began to riot in the streets. The National Guard was called in and ultimately fired upon the rioters. As a result of the Astor Place Riot twenty lives were lost. The Astor Place Riot was “an explosion of class conflict” that resulted in the clear division of theater based on social hierarchy (Berthold 440).

<sup>9</sup> Restoration Theater refers to a period of great theatrical growth in England, beginning with the restoration of Charles II, a great patron of the theater, to the

throne. Additionally, and of importance to this thesis, Restoration Theater marks the introduction of women, and thus the female body and female sexuality to the English stage (Ritchie). Several techniques used to exploit this newfound presence were breeches roles, rape scenes, and couch scenes (Ritchie). All three of these theatrical conventions highlighted female sexuality, but breeches roles especially as the female body was highlighted by male attire and the female was able to behave in a male fashion onstage. It should be noted that at this time an actress' sexual availability was public knowledge and most actresses subsidized their income with prostitution.

<sup>10</sup> Coryphées can be understood as “modern-day ‘chorus girls’” (Buszek 144).

<sup>11</sup> The Blondes run at Wood's included productions of both *Ixion* and *Erani*.

<sup>12</sup> Scrofula, according to the National Institute of Health, “is a tuberculosis infection of the lymph nodes in the neck.” By calling the Blondes “flaxen scrofula” George Wilkes was suggesting they were the blonde haired version of this disease (“Scrofula). Tuberculosis is often associated with prostitutes as a result of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century assumption that prostitutes were the cause of the spread of venereal disease. There has been a suggested link between syphilis and tuberculosis, but there is no conclusive medical evidence.

<sup>13</sup> An honest woman.

<sup>14</sup> A prostitute or public woman.

<sup>15</sup> Sochen, 66.

<sup>16</sup> It is said that West's mother introduced her to the stage at six years of age (Schlissel 3).

<sup>17</sup> A professional dancer.

<sup>18</sup> Vaudeville was a popular mode of entertainment that dominated the United States between the 1880s and 1930s and featured many different variety acts, exhibited a range of talent, and could be very lucrative for performers. It is a true example of theater as a “microcosm” of society as the spectrum of performance was so broad (qtd in Pullen 108).

<sup>19</sup> Alfred Kerr’s accusation that Bertolt Brecht had plagiarized the songs of François Villon in Brecht’s work, *Threepenny Opera*, in 1929 sparked a controversy and rhetoric that would follow Brecht for the rest of his career and remain even after his death (Horak). While Brecht ultimately gave Villon credit, the damage was done. It has been suggested, however without any concrete proof, that Brecht also plagiarized the work of his female secretaries and lovers. Regardless, within the context of this thesis the term, “Brechtian manner” refers to unconfirmed plagiarism.

<sup>20</sup> *The Captive* and *Virgin Man*.

<sup>21</sup> Lillian Schlissel references the works of both Kaier Curtin (“*We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians:*” *The Emergence of Lesbians and Gay Men on the American Stage*. Boston: Alyson Publications, 1987. Print. p.137-138) and Marybeth Hamilton (*When I’m Bad, I’m Better: Mae West, Sex, and American Entertainment*, New York: HarperCollin, 1995. Print. p. 47) on page twenty-five of her introduction to her book, *Three Plays by Mae West*. It is interesting to note that Hamilton is also one of the scholars that criticizes Mae West’s performance and sex appeal in *Sextette*.

<sup>22</sup> *Deep Inside Porn Stars* developed out of “bimonthly consciousness-raising sessions among seven of New York’s top porn stars: Candida Royalle, Annie Sprinkle, Veronica Vera, Gloria Leonard, Sue Nero, Veronica Hart, and Kelly

Nichols. Club 90 [as it was called] formed in 1983; five of the members still meet” (Bell 143). These women were each other’s confidants and “sisters” as they were all able to openly discuss and analyze their careers in the porn industry in a safe and nonjudgmental atmosphere. The actual cast of *Deep Inside Porn Stars* differed slightly as it was a group of six prostitute performance artists, however it included several of the original Club 90 members: Candida Royale, Annie Sprinkle, Veronica Vera, Gwendolyn, Janet Feindel, and Scarlot Harot.

<sup>23</sup> Sprinkle on John Lennon and Yoko Ono’s inspiring Bed-ins: “The idea of publicity stunts and media events has always intrigued me, ever since 1969 when I heard about my favorite Beatle, John Lennon, getting married to conceptual artist Yoko Ono, and inviting the press into their honeymoon suite. John and Yoko utilized the enormous media attention their marriage was getting to protest the war in Vietnam. They stayed in bed for one week in an Amsterdam hotel, and again in Montreal. Naturally, the press expected to Mr. and Mrs. Lennon make love, or to at least see them nude. But instead they were wearing white pajamas buttoned up to their necks. *Peace in Bed* was brilliant, and it definitely contributed to the war ending” (“Peace in Bed” 37).

<sup>24</sup> Shortly after Sprinkle filmed *Rites of Passion* the main male actor died of AIDS. Sprinkle felt lucky that there was no penetration feature in this film. She seriously considered leaving porn, but instead started “Pornographers Promoting Safer Sex” (Sprinkle 56). Sprinkle used this group to encourage the porn industry to become a more responsible enterprise: “I called on the porn industry to help educate the public. I figured if everyone in porn started using safe sex, people could see exactly how to do it and see that safer sex could be hot sex. I thought it could have a huge impact

and saves lives. Unfortunately the heterosexual porn industry didn't take the challenge to use safe sex, and continued to use almost all unsafe sex. That's when I realized that for the most part, the porn industry wasn't a community that cared about people, but a business that really only cared about money. I was very disappointed" (Sprinkle 56). From that point on, Sprinkle used safe sex practice in any pornography that she made (Sprinkle 56).

### Works Cited

- ABCNews. "Rush Limbaugh Calls a Female Georgetown Student, Sandra Fluke, a 'Slut.'" *YouTube*. 2 Mar 2012. Web. 7 Apr. 2012.
- Allen, Robert C. *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 1991. Print.
- Barnes, David S. "Morality and Mortality: Alcoholism, Syphilis, and the 'Rural Exodus' in the War on Tuberculosis" *The Making of a Social Disease: Tuberculosis in Nineteenth-Century France*. Berkeley: University of California, 1995. 138-174. Print.
- Bell, Shannon. *Reading, Writing, and Rewriting The Prostitute Body*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994. Print.
- Berthold, Dennis. "Class Acts: The Astor Place Riots and Melville's 'The Two Temples.'" *American Literature* 71.3 (Sept. 1999): 429-461. *JSTOR*. Web. 9 Apr. 2012.
- Buszek, Maria-Elena. "Representing 'Awarishness': Burlesque, Feminist Transgression, and the 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Pin-Up." *TDR* 43.4 (Winter 1999): 141-162. *JSTOR*. Web. 20 Oct. 2011.
- Cody, Gabrielle. "Commentary: Annie Sprinkle from Reel to Real." *Hardcore from the Heart: The Pleasures, Profits, and Politics of Sex in Performance*. Eds. Gabrielle Cody and Annie Sprinkle. London: Continuum, 2001. 65-69. Print.
- . "Dinner with Richard Schechner and Gabrielle Cody: She Wanted a Better Life." *Hardcore from the Heart: The Pleasures, Profits, and Politics of Sex in*

- Performance*. Eds. Gabrielle Cody and Annie Sprinkle. London: Continuum, 2001. 105-110. Print.
- . "Commentary: A Labor of Love." *Hardcore from the Heart: The Pleasures, Profits, and Politics of Sex in Performance*. Eds. Gabrielle Cody and Annie Sprinkle. London: Continuum, 2001. 82-84. Print.
- . "Introduction: Sacred Bazoombas." *Hardcore from the Heart: The Pleasures, Profits, and Politics of Sex in Performance*. Eds. Gabrielle Cody and Annie Sprinkle. London: Continuum, 2001. 1-19. Print.
- "demimonde." *Merriam-Webster.com*, Merriam Webster, 2012. Web. 8 Apr. 2012.
- Eco, Umberto. "The Comic and the Role." *Travels in Hyperreality*. Trans. William Weaver. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986. 269-278. Print.
- Horak, Jan-Christopher. "Three Penny Opera: Brecht vs. Pabst." *Jump Cut*, 15 (1977): 17, 20-21. *JSTOR*. Web. 11 Apr. 2012
- Johnson, Katie N. *Sisters in Sin: Brothel Drama in America, 1900-1920*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Print.
- Leider, Emily Wortis. *Becoming Mae West*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997. Print.
- Pullen, Kirsten. *Actresses and Whores: On Stage and In Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. Print.
- Ritchie, Fiona. "Shakespeare and the Eighteenth-Century Actress." *Borrowers and Lenders* 2.2 (Fall/Winter 2006): n. pag. Web. 7 Apr. 2012.
- Schlissel, Lillian. "Introduction." *Three Plays by Mae West: Sex, The Drag and The Pleasure Man*. New York: Routledge, 1997. 1-29. Print.

“Scrofula.” MedlinePlus: Medical Encyclopedia. A.D.A.M., Inc. 21 Mar 2012.

Web. 10 Apr. 2012.

*SlutWalk Toronto: BECAUSE WE’VE HAD ENOUGH.* SlutWalk Toronto. n.p. n.d.

Web. 7 Apr. 2012.

Sochen, June. *From Mae to Madonna: Women Entertainers in Twentieth-Century America.* Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1999. Print.

Sprinkle, Annie. “Annie’s Breakfast with Veronica Vera: The Art of Sex Work.”

*Hardcore from the Heart: The Pleasures, Profits, and Politics of Sex in Performance.* Eds. Gabrielle Cody and Annie Sprinkle. London: Continuum, 2001. 87-92. Print.

---. “Annie Sprinkle’s Herstory of Porn.” *Hardcore from the Heart: The Pleasures, Profits, and Politics of Sex in Performance.* Eds. Gabrielle Cody and Annie Sprinkle. London: Continuum, 2001. 45-64. Print.

---. “Liberty Love Boat.” *Hardcore from the Heart: The Pleasures, Profits, and Politics of Sex in Performance.* Eds. Gabrielle Cody and Annie Sprinkle. London: Continuum, 2001. 41-43. Print.

---. “MetamorphoSex.” *Hardcore from the Heart: The Pleasures, Profits, and Politics of Sex in Performance.* Eds. Gabrielle Cody and Annie Sprinkle. London: Continuum, 2001. 31-35. Print.

---. “My Brushes and Crushes with the Law.” *Hardcore from the Heart: The Pleasures, Profits, and Politics of Sex in Performance.* Eds. Gabrielle Cody and Annie Sprinkle. London: Continuum, 2001. 73-77. Print.

- . "Peace in Bed." *Hardcore from the Heart: The Pleasures, Profits, and Politics of Sex in Performance*. Eds. Gabrielle Cody and Annie Sprinkle. London: Continuum, 2001. 37-39. Print.
- . "Strip Speak: Nurse Sprinkle's Sex Education Class." *Hardcore from the Heart: The Pleasures, Profits, and Politics of Sex in Performance*. Eds. Gabrielle Cody and Annie Sprinkle. London: Continuum, 2001. 23-26. Print.
- Sprinkle, Annie and Gabrielle Cody. *Hardcore from the Heart: The Pleasures, Profits, and Politics of Sex in Performance*. London: Continuum, 2001. Print.
- Stampler, Laura. "SlutWalks Sweep The Nation." *The Huffington Post*. The HuffingtonPost.com, Inc. 20 June 2011. Web. 7 Apr. 2012.
- Welter, Barbara. "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860." *American Quarterly* 18.2, Part 1 (Summer 1966): 151-174. *JSTOR*. Web. 2 Nov. 2011.
- West, Mae. "Sex: A Comedy Drama (1926)." *Three Plays by Mae West: Sex, The Drag and The Pleasure Man*. Ed. Lillian Schlissel. New York: Routledge, 1997. 31-92. Print.
- . "The Drag: A Homosexual Comedy in Three Acts (1927)." *Three Plays by Mae West: Sex, The Drag and The Pleasure Man*. Ed. Lillian Schlissel. New York: Routledge, 1997. 95-140. Print.
- . "The Pleasure Man: A Comedy Drama (1928)." *Three Plays by Mae West: Sex, The Drag, and The Pleasure Man*. Ed. Lillian Schlissel. New York: Routledge, 1997. 143-200. Print.