

CHAPTER I

*Prostitution, performance, and Mae West: speaking
 from the whore position*

There's a chance of rising to the top of every profession . . . Why not? Others do it, why can't I? Why can't you? When I think of the dames riding around in swell limousines, buying imported gowns, living at the swellest hotels, terrible looking janes, too . . . It's all a question of getting some guy to pay for the certain business, that's all.

(*West Sex* 40–41)

Poured into a sequined 1890s gown, pinwheel hat dipped over one eye, diamonds glittering at her neck and wrists, Mae West beckons. Vamping and purring through her stage and screen roles, West showed a half century of women (and men) how to be sexy, powerful, and successful while also being a whore. Dressed in beautiful gowns, surrounded by servants, and inhabiting lush boudoirs, West made millions laugh, cry, and envy. In her 1920s and 1930s stage and screen roles, she played a prostitute entertainer who always got her man. In addition, West exercised an enormous amount of control over her career and image, writing dialogue for her films and publishing her autobiography. West is the descendant of early female performers who struggled to influence their reception; at the same time, her version of prostitution foreshadows contemporary prostitutes' rights activists who argue for the legitimization of sex work. She's simultaneously a camp figure and hypersexual throwback too whorish for incorporation into discourses of self-empowerment. Ultimately, West defies simple categorization: is she an agent of sexual expression, or is she a victim of a patriarchal discourse that determines a woman's worth by her body? The same question is posed by the prostitute: is she a feminist or a whore?

This book tries to reconcile those two competing discourses. On one hand, the prostitute is a victim: denied sexual agency she is also denied a voice, a place in history, an identity as an autonomous woman. On the other hand, though vilified, the prostitute can speak for and from the margins. Though these two positions are not easily reconciled, some women have drawn on this dual tradition of victim and radical to carve a space for female sexual agency.

Historically as well as in the contemporary moment, the whore^t has been silenced or ignored. This project attempts to recover whore stories, to bring these narratives into sharper focus. I argue here that particular women incorporate the tradition of transgression and marginalization in order to name their own experiences. Ultimately, the whore position may allow women a space for agency; performance is the strategy by which they expand that position to offer alternative narratives of female sexuality and experience.

The stories I tell are whore stories, but they are also the stories of female performers. Betty Boutell, Charlotte Charke, Lydia Thompson, and Mae West worked as actresses; as I demonstrate below, they used their performances to engage questions of gender identity and appropriate female sexuality. The prostitutes included, whether the eighteenth-century madam Margaret Leeson or the 1990s escorts working in Madison, Wisconsin, are also performers, albeit in less standard ways. Their narratives indicate that they perform for their clients and their reading audiences, acting out a version of femininity that simultaneously masks and projects subjectivity. While acknowledging that conflating the prostitute and the actress risks flattening out important differences between their specific performance contexts, I want to insist on its polemic and analytic value. Occupying one identity without the other is impossible and indescribable for the women I consider here.

The enduring tie between prostitution and performance, between actresses and whores, tells a great deal about Western cultural myths of women and sexuality. Though this is not a comprehensive history of either prostitution or actresses, the case histories I've chosen crystallize moments when some of these myths were vigorously debated. At these moments, I argue, the whore stigma was used to limit female experience and expression. As prostitutes' rights activist Priscilla Alexander points out, women are kept from "freely exploring, experiencing, and naming their own sexuality lest they be called whore" ("Prostitution" 184), and the boundaries between women and whores are policed in order to constrain the activities of all women. At particular historical moments, the body of the actress (assumed to be an object onto which male desires were projected) and the body of the prostitute (assumed to be an object onto which male desires were enacted) slipped discursively into one: whore/actress. Though traditionally this "slip" is viewed as detrimental, I argue that Boutell, Leeson, Charke, Thompson, and West accepted the whore stigma precisely to construct their own narratives. By turning the accusation on its head, these women provided new images and new words to construct female sexuality.

The trope of the actress/whore pervades histories of prostitution. These histories, whether medical, social, or feminist, often take as their starting

point the Greek *auletrides*, or flute girls, situating the association between actress and prostitute within the foundations of Western civilization. George Ryley Scott in *The History of Prostitution* characterizes “the female flute-players and dancing girls” as “accomplished professional musicians and entertainers” who also “had to satisfy other appetites . . . every form of sexual depravity was pandered to by these girls” (64). Thus, female performance is figured to include displaying a talent for an audience as well as catering to the sexual desires of that audience. Other prostitution histories link the prostitute and the actress throughout their narratives, highlighting sites where the actress/prostitute is particularly visible. For example, Vern Bullough and Bonnie Bullough’s *Women and Prostitution* includes a lengthy section on Restoration actresses; Nickie Roberts’ *Whores in History* highlights links between classical prostitution and theatre; and Shannon Bell’s *Reading, Writing, and Rewriting the Prostitute Body* valorizes prostitutes turned performance artists such as Annie Sprinkle who highlight the theatrical origins of prostitution within their performances. Prostitution histories attempt to validate prostitution through reference to its theatrical foundations. Further, the contemporary prostitutes’ rights movement has vigorously maintained that prostitution is “like” acting and that prostitutes should be considered actresses, a rhetorical strategy that highlights the legitimate labor involved in sex work. As the stories of the Madison escorts suggest, performance also mitigates the whore stigma, offering some prostitutes ways to distance themselves from traditional, oppressive descriptions of prostitution.

Acting histories tend to salvage the actress from her association with the prostitute by focusing on her incipient professionalization. Further, recent feminist historiography stresses the importance of untangling historicized assumptions about the sexual availability of actresses from their actual experiences. For example, Katharine Eisaman Maus and Elizabeth Howe reconsider the Restoration actress from a feminist perspective, and Tracy C. Davis’ *Actresses as Working Women* attempts to dispel notions that Victorian actresses always supplemented their theatrical income with prostitution. In the contemporary period, although the sex lives of actresses (and actors) is frequent tabloid fodder, and conservative America is assumed to consider Hollywood a hotbed of sexual activity both on- and off-screen, the explicit link between actress and prostitute has all but disappeared.²

Prostitution has been variously defined to include women who are merely promiscuous, to women who marry for financial security, to women who receive cash or gifts for sexual acts. For example, in 1936, sociologist Gladys Mary Hall defined prostitution as “promiscuous sex

relations paid or unpaid” with “the main emphasis being laid upon the fact of promiscuity” (*Prostitution in the Modern World* 21). Many second-wave feminists, especially those influenced by Marxist theory, have included marriage under prostitution’s umbrella. Andrea Dworkin, Carol Pateman, Gayle Rubin, and Kathleen Barry place marriage on a continuum with prostitution, labeling all heterosexual relations “female sexual slavery,” in Barry’s signature phrase. Most contemporary definitions of prostitution discard promiscuity and its accompanying double standards and value judgments, and most prostitutes’ rights activists and pro-sex feminists separate marriage from prostitution, if only to insist on prostitution’s specificity as paid labor. The definition I use when considering contemporary prostitution is drawn from pro-sex feminists: 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. In the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, however, definitions of prostitution are based on assumptions of morality and promiscuity as much as behavior; Boutell, Charke, and Thompson were not prostitutes in a modern sense, though they were labeled “whores.”

My study is limited to women working in Great Britain and the United States during the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries. Though male actors were also subject to sexual scrutiny and male prostitutes undoubtedly perform prostitution in ways similar to their female counterparts, an examination of their experiences was beyond the scope of this project.³ Similarly, though the association between actresses and prostitutes is cross-cultural – Binodini, the “most celebrated actress on the [nineteenth-century] Calcutta stage” was, like all nineteenth-century Indian actresses, also a concubine (Chatterjee *Nation and its Fragments* 151–54) – I limit my study of actress/whores to the West.⁴ Confining my inquiry to case histories of British and US-American actress/whores provides a close examination of how the whore position might be used to voice women’s experiences within a specific context. Further, I suggest that these specific narratives build on each other. That is, contemporary prostitutes’ rights activists claim affinities with historical actresses, West challenges conventional theatrical representations of the prostitute, and Thompson draws on Boutell’s and Charke’s experiences as cross-dressed performers stigmatized as whores.

NODAL MOMENTS: A METHODOLOGY

Though my approach to the trope of the actress/whore places transformations in the discourse into a historical context, I am not attempting to

write a definitive or unitary history of prostitution or even the history of the actress/whore. Rather, I am writing what Mark Cousins and Athar Hussain term “case histories.” Explicating Foucault, they describe case histories as producing tentative, incomplete, revisable conclusions. Rather than “History,” a case history focuses on the micro-narrative,⁵ examining how power works through retellings of the past. “Nodal moments” offer an opportunity to examine the notion of the actress/prostitute at a particularly contested point, when a new performance engendered new terms within discourse. What their contemporaries and modern historians have made of these nodal moments suggests that stories of female sexual agency carry precise meanings that vary according to context. Further, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot reminds us, such histories do not “[entail] an absence of purpose. They certainly do not entail an abandonment of the search and defense of values. . . . Positions need not be eternal to justify a legitimate defense” (*Silencing the Past* 153). The case histories I use here suggest particular understandings of how the whore stigma serves power, both in terms of dominant discourse and in the power of the margin. Thus, each nodal moment signals the rearticulation of tendencies within dominant ideology.

Obviously, this study draws heavily on Michel Foucault’s theory of discursive formations, defined as a group of statements, objects, and concepts that function and exist in relation to each other (*Archaeology* 38). In the specific case of prostitution, the whore is constructed through often contradictory terms: she is simultaneously dangerous and pathetic. The whore is relegated to the fringes of society but always threatens to infect the middle class; she is free from moral constraints but is always a criminal; she is young and attractive, but is always diseased or addicted; she has the accoutrements of wealth and luxury, but is always lower class; she freely enjoys sexual activity, but is always at the mercy of demanding customers and pimps. These implicit contradictions suggest that ambivalence inheres in definitions of prostitution.

Despite contradictory definitions of prostitution, most histories posit a “real” prostitute who structures understandings of female sexuality and is the extreme to which all women are compared. Even feminist historians may deploy the figure of the “real” prostitute when recovering women’s history. For example, Anna Clark writes about how gossip, specifically gossip that addressed a woman’s sexual habits, was used in Regency London to regulate and control women’s political and economic activities outside the home. Her study examines working- and lower-middle-class women’s reactions to both actual prostitution and accusations of prostitution

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and promiscuity. Clark disproves that women working outside the home were more likely to be promiscuous or to work as prostitutes than women who stayed at home, and suggests that women resisted accusations of prostitution and promiscuity by seeking legal redress from their accusers. In general, Clark's essay untangles the everyday lives of working-class women from traditional stereotypes about their sexual licentiousness. Halfway through her essay, however, Clark states "[t]he drunken streetwalker clothed only in rags, grabbing and swearing at male passers-by on a freezing winter night was a familiar and chilling sight to London women" (235). This statement is remarkable because it points to Clark's reliance on dominant discourses of prostitution. Her representation of the "real" prostitute (as differentiated from those working- and lower-middle-class women who were called whores) as drunken, rude, and desperately poor demonstrates the difficulty separating the material conditions of prostitution from its discursive construction. Despite academic acknowledgment that prostitution was a complicated economic and social system, Clark's study demonstrates how dominant discourse structures historical inquiry. Her drunken streetwalker remains stranded in discourse, bereft of the agency Clark carefully explicates for the "legitimate" objects of her study.

The metaphor of contagion further illuminates how discourse has material effects for working prostitutes. In the Victorian era, the prostitute was a contaminant, spreading venereal disease and sexual immorality to middle-class women. In the contemporary period, the association between prostitution and AIDS has continued to cast the whore as an agent of destruction. The contamination metaphor pervades debates about prostitution and limits prostitutes' discursive agency. Further, fear of contagion limits the options prostitutes have when and if they choose to leave prostitution. For the Victorians, repentant prostitutes had to be immediately quarantined and then kept from middle-class households, severely limiting their employment options; now, former prostitutes are unable to acknowledge their previous career for fear of AIDS stigmatization.

As the above examples demonstrate, discourse is a mode of power, one that acts as a constraint on the material actions of real men and women and the representations of those actions. As Alan Sinfield points out, however,

dissident potential derives ultimately not from essential qualities in individuals (though they have qualities) but from conflict and contradiction that the social order inevitably produces within itself, even as it attempts to sustain itself. Despite their power, dominant ideological formations are always, in practice, under pressure, striving to substantiate their claim to superior plausibility in the face of diverse disturbances. (*Faultlines* 41)

Taking Sinfield's observation as a corrective to Foucault, discourse is not seamless, but rather riven by internal contradiction: that contradiction provides for the negotiation of agency. The discourses of prostitution are multiple and fluid, deployed and inflected differently by different women at different historical periods. I argue that agency has always been a part of the discourses of prostitution; the tension between the prostitute as exploited victim and sexual predator in dominant discourse is just one example of the dissident potential inherent in discursive representations of prostitution. The way a prostitute performs discourse determines the amount and kind of agency she is able to negotiate.

Though performances do not easily lend themselves to historical empiricism, theories of performance and performativity suggest historical events are understood as enactments of specific discourses. In this framework, performance draws from the models of human interaction suggested by Erving Goffman in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. For Goffman and those who have developed his models, performance refers to the conscious actions of people to convince others of their competence, trustworthiness, character, and purpose (14). In daily life, people attempt to create the illusion that they are something better than they are. Through this performance and its acceptance, the illusion is made real and the practice it represents is legitimated.

New historicists have also deployed a meta-theatrical framework in order to explain cultural shifts. Steven Mullaney reads the creation of an "authentic" Brazilian rain forest and the staged battle between members of the Brazilian Tabbagerres and Toupinaboux Indians imported for the occasion of Henri II's 1551 royal entry into Rouen as a "rehearsal of culture" ("Strange Things" 48). This kind of performance "allows, invites, and even demands a full and potentially self-consuming . . . consummation, colonization, or less clearly defined negotiation between a dominant culture and its Others" (49). Following from Mullaney, the performances of the first generation of English actresses, eighteenth-century female memoirists, and early female burlesquers are a "rehearsal" of anxieties over shifting ideologies of gender. What happens onstage and in print is not merely a reflection of life, but also a site for contesting and legitimating dominant culture.

"Performativity" is used to describe the relations between individuals and society, and between individuals and other individuals. Judith Butler defines this kind of performativity as "not as a singular or deliberate 'act,' but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (*Bodies* 2). Thus, Butlerian performativity

depends on a collective knowledge of gendered behavior. For example, when actresses and prostitutes perform a version of femininity for their audiences and clients, they are citing established and historicized behaviors. The historical background of these behaviors insures that they will be read as specifically female and sexual. This history, however, does not completely limit the dissident potential of enacting discourse: “[P]erformance’ is . . . a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint . . . controlling and compelling the shape of the production, though not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance” (95). Following from Butler, I read the self-conscious performance of femininity by early actresses, memoirists, burlesquers, and contemporary prostitutes as drawing on a history of feminine behaviors. Importantly, their performances rely on dominant codes as well as dissident traditions. These women occupy the whore position and behave within its historicized constraints; as Butler promises, however, this constraint is not absolute. Thus, Mae West performs female sexuality more candidly than Betty Boutell, and contemporary prostitutes tell more complex stories than Margaret Leeson. Whore performances, embedded in discursive practice, expose contradictions within discourse and offer an opportunity to inflect dominant ideology with new perspectives.

The story of Elizabeth (or Betty) Boutell, a middle-range actress known primarily for her breeches roles and her sexual availability, demonstrates again that Restoration commentators were preoccupied by actresses’ sexuality: dozens of lampoons, memoirs, critical reviews, and even play texts themselves record the specific sexual peccadilloes of most of these women. Historians have used this primarily anecdotal record in order to continually link Restoration actresses with prostitution, building a nearly seamless narrative of the Restoration actress as a prostitute. Boutell provides a case study of the average Restoration actress and her construction as a prostitute. Though little “evidence” supports the assumption that Boutell worked as a prostitute, her contemporaries called her a whore, a designation historians have continued to use. This chapter investigates history’s complicity with dominant ideology, determining that historical narratives elide the potential agency of the Restoration actress. Further, alternative narratives of Boutell’s life suggest that rather than being stigmatized by her sexual notoriety, she used it to further her theatrical career.

Masquerade and memoir are two eighteenth-century technologies of self. Charlotte Charke and Margaret Leeson extended both forms to fashion a self outside polite society. Charke, daughter of playwright, actor, and fellow memoirist Colley Cibber, is perhaps best known through

her published narrative detailing her adventures as a cross-dressed strolling player. Her memoirs, the first by an English actress, use performance metaphors throughout: Charke is not so much living her life as performing (both in print and everyday) for an audience who delights in her exploits. Leeson, a brothel-keeper who wrote one of the earliest English first-person prostitute narratives, masquerades in her narrative as in life. In her memoirs, Leeson performs remorse, praying to be redeemed and made as chaste as the goddess Diana she once portrayed at masquerade balls. Leeson offers first-hand testimony to the agency offered by performing inside and out of the whore position. Both Charke and Leeson constructed an other world, one that drew on eighteenth-century feminist philosophies as well as traditional discourses of femininity to privilege female experience and community.

Lydia Thompson struggled to participate in her own discursive representation. Like the first generation of English actresses, the first generation of female burlesque performers instigated public debate on the proper display of female sexuality and forever changed the face of (US-American) theatre. Female burlesque performers reinterpreted what had previously been an all-male variety entertainment, and the inclusion of women into an all-male form illuminated tensions about the kinds of theatrical entertainments in which women could participate. The Blondes occupy the gap between the ideal, as personified in the Cult of True Womanhood, and the real, as marked by nineteenth-century women's attempts to participate in the public sphere at greater levels than before. The Cult of True Womanhood "prescribed a female role bounded by kitchen and nursery, overlaid with piety and purity, and crowned with subservience" (Smith-Rosenberg *Disorderly Conduct* 13); feminists, prostitutes, and female burlesquers challenged this domestic ideology, suggesting that women could successfully engage in masculine activities and that female sexuality was not necessarily determined by masculine desire. The British Blondes, whose stage performances featured barely dressed women joking about romance, vigorous and suggestive dancing, and sexually aggressive, cross-dressed characters, triggered existing Victorian debates over gender and sexuality. Thompson struggled to influence and control her own discursive representation; recovering this labor reflects feminist historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's warning that historians must be careful to "hear women's words" as embedded in other powerful discourses (25–26).

Late twentieth-century feminism is divided by debates over prostitution and pornography. Theoretical models of performance and performativity

open up analytic space between the poles. The narratives of Madison, Wisconsin escorts indicate how performance is a strategy to mitigate the whore stigma. Further, the trope of the actress/whore offers working prostitutes an opportunity to both legitimate their work and claim kinship with a sisterhood of historical women who transgressed gender norms by using their sexuality to reap economic and (sometimes) political and social rewards. Placing the work prostitutes do with their clients into a framework of acting theory and technique, some prostitutes may negotiate agency by thinking of sex work as a performance. These escorts occupy the whore position, and use performance to account for their experience.

MAE WEST: THE PERFORMER AS PROSTITUTE

Before turning to the extended case histories of the following chapters, I want to focus on Mae West, whose career and image bridge historical performers and contemporary whores. Mae West's 1926 production of *Sex* offers a potent site for examining shifts within the discursive formation of the actress/whore and the resistance with which such shifts were met. As Margy LaMont, West laid the foundation for her iconic status as an unrepentant, social climbing prostitute/entertainer who liked men nearly as much and as often as they liked her. Frustrated by a lack of Broadway roles appropriate to her style, West wrote *Sex* under the pseudonym Jane Mast to spotlight her particular talents and persona. As Margy LaMont, as in all of her stage and screen star turns, West played a prostitute or "kept woman" who rose through society by rejecting one lover when a richer one came along. Further, Margy, like all West's roles, was also an entertainer who used the stage to advertise her sexual charms and availability. 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. 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.

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. The prostitute in most canonical plays is usually a peripheral figure who displaces tension over correct female behavior alluded to in the main plot or serves as a vehicle for the playwright and his society's deep-rooted misogyny. Before the nineteenth century,