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Introduction: The Brothel Drama

As a theatre historian, my fascination with the figure of the prostitute stemmed from my constant encounter with her. She was everywhere. Not just in the shadows of a doorway, or the shady side of the underworld. On the contrary, she was center stage.

The prostitute and her sister in sin – the so-called “fallen” woman – were veritable obsessions of Progressive Era (1900–1918) American culture.¹ Streetwalkers, courtesans, and other fallen women were the ubiquitous subjects of best-selling books, vice-commission reports, pornography, fashion, and, especially important for this study, theatrical hits. From John Sloan’s paintings of prostitutes outside the Haymarket Theatre to the formation of the FBI, whose original charge was to monitor the traffic in women, Progressive Era culture invested enormously in the study, regulation, and portrayal of prostitution. Indeed, the prostitute became, as Rebecca Schneider has put it, “a quintessential object of modernist fascination.”²

If the prostitute “exemplifie[d] the modern narratable,” as Peter Brooks notes, then American theatre was a central locus of cultural interest in prostitution.³ At the turn of the twentieth century, plays about prostitutes and fallen women were so popular that they may be said to constitute a genre – the brothel drama. Between 1898 and 1922, approximately fifty plays featuring prostitutes were produced in New York City. The Library of Congress and Robert Sherman’s *Drama Cyclopedia* list approximately fifty more that were copyrighted during this time, although it is uncertain whether they were ever performed.⁴ Prostitute dramas ranged from low-brow popular entertainments to highbrow social-problem plays. In addition to the ubiquitous “girl” musicals and scores of “working girl” plays, which depicted the fall of ordinary shop girls into prostitution, there were also more serious offerings. In 1905, Arnold Daly ventured to stage Bernard

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Shaw's account of prostitution, *Mrs Warren's Profession*, only to have it shut down on obscenity charges. In spite of *Mrs Warren's Profession's* tumultuous performance history, a surprising number of prostitute-characters followed in Kitty Warren's dramaturgical wake. Just four years after that famous obscenity case, the Broadway season of 1909 featured David Belasco's smash-hit story of an actress-turned-prostitute, *The Easiest Way*. The drama not only escaped censorship, but also was embraced by mainstream audiences, running for over two years.

Obscure and well-known authors alike took their turn at writing prostitute dramas. Though American theatre historians remember Eugene Walter, Rachel Crothers, Owen Davis, and John Reed for a wide array of accomplishments, little has been said about their unpublished brothel plays (*The Knife*, *Ourselves*, *Sinners*, and *Moondown*, respectively). Scores of dramatic texts by lesser-known artists played on the stages scattered across the United States. Some of these plays dominated Broadway for over two years, whereas others had regional success, and some only a copyright date. Many, like *Queen of Chinatown* (1899) and *The Traffic* (1913), had short runs, obscure authors, and performance histories that are virtually lost to us. Yet, during their day, they were the subjects of extensive publicity and public discussion. Their cumulative presence, in scores of small productions, suggests a consistent feature of both highbrow and lowbrow entertainments: the repeated obsession with the prostitute figure. While fin-de-siècle drama was "slow to take up the challenge of portraying the sexual degenerate," as Laurence Senelick has written, one degenerate figure – the prostitute – stood at the center of Progressive Era drama.⁵ What is notable, in fact, is the prostitute's profound dramaturgical *presence* amidst her fellow degenerates' absence. As the white slave scare reached its apex in 1913, there were so many plays about brothels on the New York stage that theatre critic Charles W. Collins wrote, "I for one, am sick of the talk of white slavery."⁶ In short, the figure of the prostitute became central to the development of American realist theatre and what has loosely been called early twentieth-century modern drama.

In spite of this remarkable phenomenon, what is astonishing is the extent to which prostitution has been disavowed, or forgotten, in the history of American theatre. While important studies have mapped out the relation of modernity to antiprostitution, urbanization, consumer culture, and social hygiene, the scant theatrical scholarship regarding dramatic representations of prostitutes in the theatre either focuses on an earlier period or neglects a feminist perspective.⁷ Despite "the most

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intensive campaign ever waged against the prostitution trade in American cities,” to quote social historian Barbara Meil Hobson, modern theatre scholars have almost entirely neglected the vast body of Progressive Era prostitute plays.⁸

Commercialized vice might at first glance be an unseemly topic for a scholarly work. However, closer analysis reveals that prostitution is a vital subject because, as Ruth Rosen has convincingly argued, 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: the power arrangements between men and women; women’s economic and social status; [and] the prevailing sexual ideology.”⁹ Dramas about the sex trade were, in other words, not only part of an elaborate system for the construction and regulation of sexuality and gender, but also, at times, the site of occasional ruptures in that policing.

Such plays were also part of a new American realism that recast the relationship between bourgeois spectators and lower-class subjects on stage. Legitimate theatre, while at first glance an unlikely venue for the marginal subject of the underworld, was a crucial site wherein tensions between legitimacy and whoredom found articulation. Bourgeois and upper-class audiences were, in fact, seduced by the practice of slumming via the theatre. In fact, much of the new theatre in the early 1900s was a sort of “voyeur realism.” While John Corbin of *Life Magazine* asked in 1909, “What is the purpose of this elaborate exploitation of the slums?,” few critics or theatre-goers questioned the voyeuristic impulses of this new dramatic realism.¹⁰ From David Belasco’s famous reconstruction of a New York flophouse (*The Easiest Way*), to the ladies section of a portside dive (“*Anna Christie*”), Progressive Era plays offered viewers a supposed authentic picture of lower-class life. At the same time, brothel entertainments afforded an opportunity for an invasive, and often regulatory, gaze – portraying, as it did, lower-class, female interiors. Offering titillating encounters with those from the so-called “lower depths,” such slum dramas constructed for bourgeois and business class audiences simulated representations of “how the other half lives,” to borrow Jacob Riis’s phrase.¹¹ As one author noted in 1913, “The American drama has evidently entered upon its most realistic period. Our playwrights attempt to reveal life as it is, but . . . they concentrate their attention upon its most unpleasant aspects . . . In at least five recent plays the crucial scene is laid in a bawdy house.”¹² Indeed, more of realism’s roots can be found in the bordello symbolic than has been previously acknowledged. In the pages that follow, we will see that high and low

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entertainments routinely bled into one another; New York upper-class and bourgeois subjects had specific stakes in the carefully controlled depiction of low spheres.¹³

As the first extended examination of such dramas during the Progressive Era, *Sisters in Sin* seeks to fill the gap between historical and theatrical studies of prostitution. Beginning with David Belasco's adaptation of *Zaza* (1899) and ending with Eugene O'Neill's "*Anna Christie*" (1921-22), this analysis intersects with both the rise of American theatrical realism and the flourishing of antiprostitution reform. The life of the brothel drama is bracketed by the formation of The Committee of Fifteen, the first vice commission in New York City in 1900, and the closing of many red light districts in 1920. It spanned the time between the inaugural obscenity case of the twentieth century and the first Pulitzer Prize for a brothel drama.

The term "brothel drama" was coined and used commonly in the 1910s to describe the persistent, and often scandalous, representation of prostitution on stage. During its day this term most often referred to the sensational white slave genre, an extraordinary run of plays about white women abducted into sexual slavery. It is used in this project to describe not only white slave dramas – surely the bulk of prostitute theatre – but also those plays that featured no brothel at all, but which included a prostitute or fallen woman character *perceived* to be a prostitute in the popular imagination. In fact, very few brothel dramas actually portrayed brothel interiors, due, in part, to fears of obscenity charges. While representations of prostitution held enormous cultural cachet, the brothel was a vexed mimetic space, proving both immensely popular and highly volatile. The brothel drama was a flourishing type of theatre whose settings occasionally included brothels and opium dens, but more often alluded to vice from a variety of more respectable settings, including drawing rooms, country estates, and department stores.

What remains consistent to the brothel drama – whether it actually depicted a brothel or not – is the centrality of the prostitute and various fallen woman characters who were understood by Progressive Era audiences to be fundamentally indistinguishable from prostitutes. The genre featured therefore not only madams and white slaves in bordellos, but also courtesans, mistresses, and women seduced by men. These fallen women and prostitute characters are collectively described throughout these pages as "sisters in sin," a rhetorical strategy to show the connectedness and constructedness of these figures. Female sexuality – particularly sexual transgression – signifies differently in the constantly shifting contexts and

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historical moments to which human society subjects itself. After all, a woman who in one decade is deemed a courtesan might, in another, be viewed as a savvy dater. It is crucial, therefore, to discuss prostitution in the context of other forms of sexuality in an effort to expose the cultural conflation of these characters and to document genealogies of cultural and sex performances.¹⁴

If the sexual female body was scrutinized and policed in certain contexts, it also signified ambiguously in performance, as actresses' performance choices both subverted and reinscribed normative gender roles and sexual scripts. Brothel productions were "ghosted," to use Marvin Carlson's formation, by actresses' public personae, politics, acting choices, and body types.¹⁵ Performances of early twentieth-century American actresses are therefore contextualized not only by their prostitute or fallen woman roles, but also by how each performing woman signified in the public sphere. Each chapter considers what Michael Quinn has called "celebrity performance," examining to what extent actresses' public lives, especially their feminist politics, collided with, or underscored, the representation of prostitution.¹⁶ From the sizzling eroticism of Olga Nethersole to the petite and "plain" Pauline Lord, the actress's body and acting style became an important signifier in the semiotics of the brothel drama.

Origins of the brothel drama

In examining the array of dramas that feature prostitute or courtesan figures, the challenge is not in locating these texts, but rather in limiting them. The task of defining women in the brothel drama is not as clear-cut as it may at first appear. We might all agree that Kitty Warren, Bernard Shaw's notorious madam, should be included, but what about the vast number of plays about the so-called fallen woman?

It is impossible to talk about prostitution without noting late nineteenth and turn-of-the-century American theatre's obsession with fallen women's sexuality. For without *Camille*, there would be no *Anna Christie*. As Sos Eltis has written, "The epithet 'fallen' could be applied to any woman who had indulged in sex outside the legal and moral bonds of marriage, whether as a seduced virgin, adulterous wife or professional prostitute."¹⁷ Indeed, nineteenth-century and Progressive Era culture typically conflated the sexual behavior of the fallen woman with that of a prostitute.

The brothel drama emerged from the tradition of fallen women plays and within a context of what Amanda Anderson calls the "rhetoric of

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fallenness,” in which prostitution and aberrant women’s sexuality were conflated in dominant discourse.¹⁸ In such plays, the action of the drama occurs long after the dreaded sexual fall. Often, the fallen woman has assumed the identity of a lady in society, whereupon her sexual past comes back to haunt her. Once her history is revealed, she renounces her fallen ways, adopts the normative gender role she has thus far ignored, and suffers the consequences of her sexual truancy. Lesley Ferris notes that this long-standing treatment of “the penitent whore” requires not only the whore’s renouncement of her sexual sins, but also her (often severe) punishment.¹⁹ One of the striking features of late nineteenth-century and Progressive Era plays is their insistence that all fallen women – from promiscuous women to courtesans, mistresses, and streetwalkers – be understood and punished as prostitutes. Such punishment might include consumption (*Camille*), a broken heart (*East Lynne*, *The House of Bondage*), suicide (*The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, *The House of Mirth*), murder (*Olympe’s Marriage*), attempted suicide (*Branded*, *Sapho*), self-sacrifice (*Zaza*, *Lulu Belle*), or abandonment (*Mrs. Dane’s Defense*, *The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith*, *The Easiest Way*, and *Mrs Warren’s Profession*). Early twentieth-century playwright Bronson Howard wrote about the punishment that inevitably befell “erring women” in the drama of the day:

In England and America, the death of a pure woman on the stage is not “satisfactory,” except when the play rises to the dignity of tragedy. The death, in an ordinary play, of a woman who is not pure . . . is purely satisfactory, for the reason that it is inevitable . . . The wife who has once taken the step from purity to impurity can never reinstate herself in the world of art on this side of the grave, and so an audience looks with complacent tears on the death of an erring woman.²⁰

Deaths of “impure” women were staged night after night, on both legitimate and vaudeville stages, by virtually every actress of note.

These dramaturgical demises were not an invention of the Progressive Era. They were part of a long tradition of thinking in which fallen women and prostitutes were marked as degenerate and branded by their apparently unavoidable trajectories towards death. As George Ellington wrote in his *Women of New York, or the Under-World of the Great City* in 1869, prostitutes spiraled inevitably toward a pauper’s death: “Ninety-nine out of every hundred of the women-about-the-town go through these very grades, become the victims of their so-called lovers, and end their trials, troubles, and pleasures in the same oblivion – a pauper’s grave in Potter’s Field.”²¹ More

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than sixty years later, George J. Kneeland, in his foundational study, *Commercialized Prostitution in New York City* (1913), came to a similar conclusion: “The life of the professional prostitute has been estimated at five years, on the ground that she dies[,] withdraws, or is incapacitated . . .”²² Although Kneeland acknowledged there were other possibilities for the prostitute other than Potter’s Field, death and incapacitation figured heavily. What is rather remarkable, then, is that in spite of this doomed path from sin to grave, which was sketched repeatedly by so-called sex experts, the prostitute figure in fact lived on – in the brothel drama.

Plays about fallen women’s sexuality relied upon a distinctly gendered sexual paradigm: women’s sexuality was defined as either virtuous or deviant. Trapped by this binary, women could only fall from or be elevated upon a moral pedestal; there were no in-betweens. The early American sex reformer William Sanger, chief resident physician on Blackwell’s Island Hospital and author of *The History of Prostitution: Its Extent, Causes and Effects Throughout the World* (1858), followed in the wake of William Acton’s *History of Prostitution*.²³ Sanger’s study was wide in scope, outlining the history of prostitution in the world since ancient time, but he devoted six chapters to prostitution in New York. Sanger contrasted the fallen woman with her sexually moral counterpart this way: “the full force of sexual desire is seldom known to a virtuous woman.”²⁴ Facilitating the double standard on sex that dominated the nineteenth century, Sanger continued: “In other words, man is the *aggressive* animal, so far as sexual desire is involved. Were it otherwise, and the passions in both sexes equal, illegitimacy and prostitution would be far more rife in our midst than at present” (original emphasis).²⁵ Such views were echoed throughout turn-of-the-century American culture by sexologists, antiprostitution reformers, politicians, and, of course, theatre artists.

The theatre itself had provided ample opportunities to circulate this punitive, regulatory model of female sexuality. From the middle of the nineteenth century, no other character epitomized the demise of the good-hearted fallen woman better than Marguerite of *La Dame aux Camélias*, popularly known in the United States as *Camille*. Emblematizing the penitent whore model, *Camille* became the prototype on which the brothel drama would later be molded. Marguerite is a courtesan “rehabilitated” by love, expressing self-sacrifice for her lover Armand, even in her dying moments. Based on the life of a real French prostitute, Marie Duplessis, *Camille* articulated the prevailing sexual ideology even as it conjured sympathy for its central character. *Camille* soon became the iconic hooker-with-a-heart-of-gold whose story would seduce audiences every Broadway

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season. The Americanized *Camille* was first introduced under the title *Camille: or The Fate of a Coquette* in 1853, featuring Jean Davenport. Revived throughout the nineteenth century, the drama was never as popular as it was during the Progressive Era. Between 1900 and 1918, *Camille* was revived at least forty times on the New York stage, making it one of the most frequently performed plays of the period.²⁶

Camille is an important precursor to the brothel drama not only because it made the fallen woman a central dramatic character, but also because it fueled one of the central myths of Progressive Era sexual ideology: the notion that performing women were themselves promiscuous women or prostitutes. There are many reasons for this mistaken assumption. One of them is while male actors had an array of exciting tragic roles beyond the Shakespearean canon, actresses found the strongest female characters in fallen women plays like *Camille*. Because *Camille* was a standard piece in many great actresses' repertoires, it constituted a crucial link between the depiction of prostitution and the advancement of actresses' careers. Matilda Heron, for example, popularized her own version of *Camille* and, according to Stephen Stanton, from 1855 to 1864 acted this adaptation "over 1,000 times in the major cities of the United States."²⁷ Eleanora Duse, Olga Nethersole, Mrs. Patrick Campbell, Clara Morris, Mme. Réjane, Ethel Barrymore, and Helena Modjeska, to name a few, all had their own try at portraying the lady of the camellias.²⁸ In the season of 1895-1896 alone, *Camille* was performed by virtually every great actress in New York: Modjeska, Nethersole, Bernhardt and Duse. So many actresses devoted themselves to performing *Camille* in the 1895 season that when Mrs. Fiske did not, she caught the attention of Chapman and Sherwood, who observed: "Mrs. Fiske eschewed *Camille* but managed *A Doll's House*."²⁹ A review from the *New York Spirit of the Times* in 1894 noted, "New York has seen all sorts of *Camilles*:"

First there was Matilda Heron, who made the Parisian heroine an Irish washerwoman but still won the sympathy of the public. Then Jean Hosmer and Mrs. Lander, both cold and prim and virtuous. Then Clara Morris, so homely that she could not possibly have attracted any Armand except Charles Thorne, who could make love to anything. Then Bernhardt, who was too keen and calculating for *Camille's* love scenes. Then Duse, whose *Camille* was an Italian. The *Camille* of Miss Nethersole is like none of these. It is a *Camille* of costumes.³⁰

Comparisons with "other and famous Marguerites, past and present" were inevitable, and subject to constant reinterpretation, like the renegotiation of

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all historical narratives. This review of Margaret Anglin's *Camille* in April 1904, for instance, remembered the play's previous leading ladies more positively: "[M]ost of us are familiar with the luxurious Marguerite of Bernhardt, the soulful Marguerite of Duse, the passionate Marguerite of Clara Morris, and the fine performances of Helena Modjeska, Olga Nethersole, and Jane Hading. Miss Anglin's interpretation can rank with none of these."³¹ A concurrent production of *Camille* featuring Virginia Harned elicited this remark in *Theatre Magazine*: "*Camille* cannot be whistled down the wind. It has a history that cannot be denied, and in its existence of more than half a century, it has employed some of the best genius of the stage, and has wrought upon the sympathies of innumerable theatre-goers."³² *Camille* was here to stay. As Hamilton Mason notes in his history of French theatre on the New York stage, "Over eighty years of coughing has not impaired her theatrical health,"³³ and if the recent blockbuster film *Moulin Rouge* (2001) demonstrates anything, it is that the story of the consumptive hooker-with-a-heart-of-gold is still compelling to modern audiences.

Bernhardt's performance of *Camille*, and other courtesan roles, deserves special attention, not only because of her devotion to reviving the role, but also for its uncanny literality: Bernhardt herself had once been a courtesan.³⁴ *Camille* was the first role Bernhardt ever performed in the United States. Moreover, as Leigh Woods notes, "Bernhardt made *Camille*, the only part she played on both her tours, her most durable attraction in vaudeville."³⁵ Significantly, all five of Bernhardt's "Farewell" American Tours included performances of *La Dame aux Camélias*.³⁶ *Camille* was Bernhardt's cash cow, a role she performed more than 3,000 times over nearly forty-five years.³⁷ In 1912, an article in *Current Opinion* remarked that in "*La Dame aux Camélias*, still, she [Bernhardt] shows herself as an actress, the greatest actress in the world."³⁸ Bernhardt's career was so associated with the role that, as Cornelia Otis Skinner remarks, "'La Bernhardt's' final New York performance was a matinee of *La Dame*."³⁹ In sum, Bernhardt's entire acting career in New York was framed by her performance of Marguerite Gautier and was ghosted by her own brushes with prostitution.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the popularity of *Camille* had made it a virtual requirement that great actresses portray fallen women. As Progressive Era culture became increasingly interested in the figure of the prostitute, many actresses built repertoires that were comprised almost exclusively of parts from fallen women plays, many of which were, at some moment, labeled obscene. For example, in 1902, Mrs. Patrick Campbell's repertory included: *Magda*, *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, and *The Notorious*

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Mrs. Ebbsmith.⁴⁰ Likewise, Mme. Réjane's repertory of 1904 included: *Lolotte*, *La Dame aux Camélias*, *Sapho*, and *Zaza*. "*Camille*, *Carmen*, *Zaza*, and *Sapho*," Mason observes, "have made four outstanding contributions to the stage by the actresses who played them and the audiences who supported them."⁴¹ In short, by the Progressive Era, the fallen woman had become a quintessential figure on the American stage, as integral to the staging of American identity as the more familiar types noted by theatre scholars, such as "bullying businessmen, desperate slaves, emancipated women, and savages (both murderous and noble)."⁴² *Camille* can be seen as the dramaturgical ancestor to the brothel drama, influencing the emergence of new prostitute characters during the early twentieth century.

What distinguished Progressive Era drama from its nineteenth-century predecessors was an increased emphasis on depicting the social conditions leading to, and the consequences of, prostitution, rather than the whore's repentance and punishment. Intersecting with the rise of antiprostitution reform, the brothel drama staged what vice commissions studied: how to remedy commercialized vice given the emerging problems of twentieth-century urban life. Just as social science began to clarify social ills, so too the drama of the period sought to portray various vices more scientifically (some with more success than others). Although scores of prostitute characters appeared in the brothel drama genre, seven new archetypes emerged in the wake of *Camille's* repentant courtesan: the performing woman, the shop girl, the madam, the white slave, the *prostitute fatale*, the legitimate courtesan, and the lesbian prostitute. While the consumptive hooker would still be found coughing on the stage during the early twentieth century, prostitute characters in the brothel drama would also move beyond the penitent tragic end. Some of these characters appear to channel their fallen women predecessors, yet they also cover new ground. There were still lingering expectations for the penitent whore to suffer and perish, but most of these characters *survive* when the curtain is finally drawn. In the new landscape of the early twentieth century prostitute characters in the brothel drama had more opportunities – and, paradoxically, limitations – than their nineteenth-century sisters in sin as they confronted working life, non-normative sexuality, display culture, and leisure entertainments.

The modern prostitute-construct

The brothel drama's stunning success reveals much about early twentieth-century American anxieties about sexuality, contagion, eugenics, women's