

Representing "Awarishness": Burlesque, Feminist Transgression, and the 19th-Century Pin-up

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Figures

Faye E. Dudden's book, *Women in the American Theatre*, begins with an anecdote about the author's grandmother, who once told Dudden, "with an air of considerable importance, that *she had seen Ellen Terry*" (1994:1). Whether her grandmother had witnessed a performance by the legendary 19th-century Shakespearean performer or had simply caught a glimpse of the actress in the street, Dudden could not tell. What the author did understand, however, was that the awe with which her grandmother regarded the actress revealed something of the curious status that women of the stage possessed in the Victorian era--an age in which identity for white women generally consisted of two poles of existence: the idealized domestic "true woman" or the vilified prostitute. In the theatre, the presentation of an unstable, or "changeling" womanhood--ordinarily deemed a threat to the binary order by which female identity was indexed in society--was not only an acceptable, but celebrated identity for women. Dudden concludes that to women like her grandmother: "Perhaps Terry stood for pecuniary independence, authenticity, or the possibility of self-transformation; perhaps she was simply beautiful, famous and desirable. Perhaps, indeed, she was both" (1994:2).

Tracy C. Davis also wrote of this subversive identity of the 19th-century actress:

Actresses were symbols of women's self-sufficiency and independence, but as such they were doubly threatening: like the middle classes generally, they advocated and embodied hard work, education, culture and family ties, yet unlike prostitutes they were regarded as "proper" vessels of physical and sexual beauty and legitimately moved in society as attractive and desirable beings. (1991:69)

As suggested above, by the mid-19th century the profession and identities of female performers negotiated a rare spectrum of gray areas between the period's societal binary for women. They were proof that between the bourgeois "true woman" (the feminine ideal of "four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" [Welter

1966:152]) and the low-class **[End Page 141]** prostitute existed alternative, unstable, and powerful roles for white women--transgressive identities that were celebrated and made visible in the theatre.

What interests me about the role of the actress in this period of history is the effect that these performers have had, and the parallels that one finds, in the formation and expression of feminist identities today--particularly within the discourse of the construction and fluidity of sexuality in the representation of women. Most striking are the ways in which 19th-century photographic imagery--when created to represent and promote specifically *sexualized* theatrical identities *outside* of the contained space of the theatre--was constructed, circulated, and made visible in ways that reflect similar feminist modes of self-representation today. Through the use of visual imagery to promote their theatrical identities, female performers in the mid-19th century shifted these personae from the relative isolation of the stage to mass media and popular culture. Both the burlesque tradition and the photographic "pin-up" originated in this period--and the pin-up genre was utilized and manipulated by actresses in the realm of the burlesque. As representations of female performers who explored pointedly sexual roles (both on- and offstage) between a binary cultural construction, many of these early pin-ups can be read as a parallel to and inspiration for some of the more transgressive and unabashedly feminist uses and readings of the genre today.

The early *carte de visite* pin-ups of bawdy burlesque actresses represented a space in which these transgressive stage performers could control and construct what one 19th-century burlesque actress would call an ideal of sexual "awarishness." Like the stage identities the images were meant to represent, these photographs not only called into question the legitimacy of defining female sexuality according to a binary structure, but also marked as desirable the spectrum of unstable and taboo identities as imaged between these poles. Moreover, these early pin-ups served to create a popular awareness of these transgressive sexual identities through media that was more readily controlled than and separate from the theatre. What resulted from burlesque performers' use of the pin-up genre was a "de-containment" of their unstable, sexualized performances from a specific physical site, and the establishment of the pin-up as a genre defined by the manipulation of its media and viewers by its "awarish," or sexually self-aware, representational subjects. **[End Page 142]**

As an ubiquitous signifier for the sexualized female in contemporary visual culture, the pin-up itself provides a representational genre through which one can begin a study of the contemporary feminist desire to juxtapose the seemingly contradictory binarism of sexual subject/object by way of a visual text. Feminist art historian Abigail Solomon-Godeau has succinctly defined the genre as it was developed and standardized in the 19th century:

[The pin-up developed as] an image type that could be relatively deluxe or relatively crude, but in either case was predicated on the relative isolation of its feminine motif through the reduction or outright elimination of narrative, literary, or mythological allusion [...thus depicting a] decontextualization, reduction, or distillation of the image of femininity to a [representational] subject in and of itself. (1996:131)

Solomon-Godeau also rightly suggests a separation of the erotic pin-up from pornography from its inception, reflecting the contemporary (and slippery) delineation between "softcore" and "hardcore" sexual imagery. From its birth as a representational genre, the pin-up served as an image that pointedly eliminates the explicit representation (or suggestion) of a sexual *act* by both eliminating the presence of men (and, generally, other women) and strategically covering the genital area of the female subject. ¹ In other words, the pin-up has by definition served as an *implicit* depiction of a specifically female and contemporary sexuality, devoid of the allegorical or literary pretenses that link the subject safely in a fictional or antique realm. ²

What is in turn implicit in Solomon-Godeau's readings of the pin-up in prints and photography is the fact that the pin-up is also a genre associated with mass reproduction, distribution, and consumption. As a representation where explicitly contemporary femininity and implicit sexuality are both synthesized and intended for wide circulation and public display, the pin-up itself is an interesting paradox. It represents a space in which a self-aware female sexuality is not only imaged, but deemed appropriate for display in a societal atmosphere which has, since the genre's rise, largely viewed such blatant displays of female sexuality as appropriate only for private, guarded consumption--if not downright threatening and therefore taboo. Is it possible, then, that representations of female sexuality can be interpreted as a subversion of oppressive cultural mores as readily as they are a subordination to them?

In recent years, explicit pornographic imagery has been claimed by many feminists as what M.G. Lord calls "an unruly force that promises to unsettle social conventions, and [...serve as] a radical political act" (1997:41). However, the pin-up's historical association with the representation of women; its implicit nature through an insistence on the strategic selection of physical exposure; and the performative quality which results from such artificial constructions of sexual identity lend the genre the potential to serve as a more subtle and public statement of feminist sexuality than does legally defined pornographic imagery. ³ As art historian/performance artist Joanna Frueh says of the genre:

Using the pin-up myself, and OF myself, says that a [...] woman is erotically vital, self-consciously erotic, takes pleasure in her beauty, and also thinks that the whole enterprise of erotic/aesthetic artifice is, to some degree, ridiculous. (1997)

IMAG LINK: Feminist forays into the genre, such as Frueh's ([plate 1](#)), utilize the medium to both exploit and challenge the acceptance of the pin-up to represent, openly display, and mark as desirable an unstable, multiplicitous female sexuality. These pin-ups make tangible what Kathy Peiss has defined as a performative **[End Page 143]** space where "'lady' and 'hussy' [are] no longer the moral poles of womanhood but rather 'types' and 'moods' defined largely by external signs," which are as easily taken off as put on (1996:311). This interpretation of a feminist appropriation of the pin-up not only is viable but, through a close reading of the burlesque pin-up, can also trace a much longer tradition.

What would become known in the United States as the burlesque "leg show" in the 19th century has been defined as a theatrical performance generally based textually upon (or

parodying) a historical or Romantic fantasy drama. In it, the show's focal point was not the drama itself, but the performances of scandalously scantily clad actresses and *coryphées* (or, modern-day "chorus girls"). In early burlesque shows, women frequently performed both the male and female roles, and often used the historical texts as frameworks to either "send up" or incorporate both the venerable texts themselves and contemporary events, manners, and fashions (see Allen 1991).⁴ From the 1830s, elements of the leg show had been both prominent and a popular draw for theatregoers in France, Italy, and England, as were the actresses and ballerinas who used the brief costumes of Romantic ballet to draw attention to their figures (see McCauley 1985:36-41; Solomon-Godeau 1986:99-102). The leg show offered a space in which women were not only the visual draw, but frequently the sole actors, comedians, and writers of the material. The leg show soon evolved into the theatrical staging of a Victorian world upside-down, raising what historian Robert C. Allen calls "troubling questions about how a woman should be 'allowed' to act on stage, about how femininity should and could be represented, and about the relationship of women onstage to women in the outside, 'real' world" (1991:21).

Interestingly enough, a woman is credited with bringing the leg show to legitimate theatrical spaces in the United States. In 1860, Laura Keane, a savvy female playwright and theatre manager, sought to draw larger male audiences to her "women's plays" and away from the working-class burlesque halls and [End Page 144] concert saloons of New York City. In these venues, prostitutes often served as performers and waiter girls, entertaining the all-male audiences in outfits that bared shoulders, cleavage, and legs. As the careers of the concert-saloon performers make dramatically apparent, the identity of the female performer in the United States had, since the 19th century, fit neatly into the category of the "public woman," or prostitute. In fact, it was not until late in the first half of the 19th century that actresses began to gain recognition as either performers or theatre consumers, largely due to lingering associations of the actress with prostitution.

In Europe, 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. In fact, even when the stereotype of the actress/courtesan became increasingly confused and included among a growing spectrum of female identities later in the 19th century, the theatre nonetheless served as a site in which "society women, marriageable daughters, and courtesans participated in intricate rituals of exhibition and display" (Solomon-Godeau 1996:128). This association of the theatre with the prostitute was arguably even more firmly established in the United States, where the nation's Puritanical origins held sway over the perception of performance in general and the immorality it implied. As Allen notes in his analysis of the Puritanical influence in American theatre reception:

Whereas the actor's mimetic abilities linked the theater with the sin of blasphemy and the crimes of fraud and bearing false witness, his showing off connected it with the sin of idolatry and the crimes of exhibitionism and prostitution. (1991:49)

So strong, in fact, were American associations of the theatre with sexual display and dissipation that well into the 19th century the third tier of boxes in American theatres were

reserved for prostitutes and their clients to conduct business.

Keene was among the many theatrical managers who sought to establish a space in which live performance could be "elevated" as a virtuous and viable entertainment for a middle class of both sexes. Her attitude reflected a general drive toward the segmentation of American theatres as an increasingly diverse American theatre-going public grew. Class antagonisms had been evident since the institutionalization of live entertainment in the United States. The different mores regarding interaction between the lower-class "elements" of the pit and third tier and the upper-class patrons of the private boxes--both among one another and with the performance itself--had historically been a considerable source of tension among audience members and performers. After a riot erupted in and claimed the lives of 20 audience members in the ensuing police row at New York's Astor Place Theater in 1849, American theatres became increasingly divided; the management of each theatre courted one class or the other and catered to the tastes of that class.

The Laura Keene Theatre had a respectable location along the upscale Broadway strip, featured no discount sections and certainly no third tier, and maintained ticket prices that were competitive with other middle- to upper-class theatres. However, her theatre sought a distinct niche within the middle-class market in that it had no bar (a staple at even the most expensive locales), and courted the patronage of genteel society women. Keene's reputation for personal involvement in charitable societies and her writing and staging of plays dedicated to "women's themes," which revolved around sympathetic (and often contemporary) female lead characters, aided in her goal. Staged in 1860, **[End Page 145]** Keene's play, *The Seven Sisters*, is frequently credited as the first production to bring elements of the concert saloon's feminized spectacles to a "legitimate" American theatrical space. In line with the conventions of the Romantic ballet, Keene's play incorporated the European, short-petticoated *corps de ballet* into her narrative about a daughter of the god Pluto who visits contemporary New York City and falls in love with a young playwright. It was not, however, Keene's clever premise, but what one period critic noted as the show's "hundred miscellaneous legs in flesh-colored tights," that impressed the audiences (in Dudden 1994:143). The titillating female spectacle was a sensation among Keene's audiences, and the play went on to run for 200 performances.

Keene's move to displace the as-yet-unnamed leg show from the working-class, all male audience to a legitimate middle- to upper-class theatre for the consumption of women as well as male viewers in 1860 prompted a boom of leg show productions in the United States. Following Keene's successful introduction of elements of the lower-class leg show to bourgeois audiences was a flood of ballet- and burlesque-based performance in American theatres, as most notoriously capitalized upon by Adah Isaacs Menken, the production of *The Black Crook*, and Lydia Thompson's British Blondes troupe.

In 1861, Adah Isaacs Menken took over the title role in the Broadway Theatre's production of Lord Byron's *Mazeppa* at what appeared to be the end of an unsuccessful run. The male role of Ivan Mazeppa required an equestrian scene in which the lead (or, rather, a dummy or double) was exiled into the wilderness, stripped naked, and tied to a charging steed, which served as the Broadway Theatre's heretofore weak spectacle draw. Taking control of

the "britches role," Menken insisted on performing the stunt herself--clothed, moreover, in nothing more than the coryphée's pink body stocking and a brief tunic, which would appear in a blur to the audience as a naked woman on horseback. With Menken as the lead, the ailing production was reborn and ran for another eight months, eventually resulting in a West Coast revival, for which the actress reportedly earned over \$100,000. ⁵ The theatrical style of "clothed nudity" which Menken helped usher into the leg show--be it Mazeppa's flesh-colored tights or, later, satirical male drag--would soon become a staple of the burlesque spectacle, as would her audacious star image (see Davis 1991:105-36).

IMAG LINK: In 1866, another important production influenced by Keene's synthesis of legitimate theatrical conventions and contemporary, feminized spectacle was a production of *The Black Crook* at Niblo's Garden. Known for its luxurious and large-capacity seating, up-to-the-minute set technology, and spectacularly staged productions, Niblo's, Allen notes, was regarded by many as "the finest theater in America," and its staging of *The Black Crook* brought Keene's conventions to an even more upscale and less gender-specific audience (1991:15-16). Combining the traditions of fantastic melodrama, Romantic ballet, and the contemporary leg show, the play is often credited with the distinction of being both the first modern Broadway musical and the first true leg show. Using the already acceptable premise of the abbreviated ballerina costume as its focal point, *The Black Crook* featured dancers in what Mark Twain--then a columnist and critic--described as elaborate "half-costumes" (drawing the most attention were those accompanying the "Demon Dance," as seen in [plate 2](#)) (Clemens 1867:85).

The play ran for an unprecedented 15 months, closing--as it had opened--to packed houses, and instigating throughout its run an astounding amount of both praise and criticism for what was viewed as the production's social and moral transgressiveness, particularly in relation to the "respectable" audiences who frequented Niblo's. Many critics lauded *The Black Crook's* ability to draw wide audiences with its novel, spectacular elements. One year into its initial run the *New York Tribune's* drama critic enthused: **[End Page 146]**

Children cry for it. Countrymen coming to town clamor for it, and will not be comforted until they see it. The rural visitor, in fact, divides his time between Niblo's Garden and Trinity Church, and he certainly sees a good deal of both places. (in Freedley 1945:14)

Many others, however, saw the crossing-over of the leg show from the confines of the working-class concert saloons (and the delectation of their all-male audiences) and into a reputable playhouse as a threat to the bourgeois social order. As the entertainment review, *The New York Clipper*, wrote on the issue:

[W]e question whether this introduction of such undressed performers at a first-class theater like Niblo's will not injure the heretofore excellent character of that house. [...W]hy not take [its] imported nudities and exhibit them in some place more suited to such exhibitions than Niblo's Garden?" (in Allen 1991:112)

Much to the dismay of its critics, however, the popular interest in the leg show continued to grow in the New York theatre district. Two months after the closing of *The Black Crook* at Niblo's, Lydia Thompson's "British Blondes" arrived in New York in 1868, hoping to

capitalize on the American popularity of the leg show with the productions and performers that the troupe had made popular in England. Shortly after their arrival, the British Blondes secured dates at Wood's Theatre and, eventually, Niblo's itself. The troupe utilized not the highbrow premise of the ballet, but the bawdy humor and satire of the burlesque as the framework for their largely all-female performances. They lampooned classical literature and contemporary culture alike (and sometimes simultaneously), as well as the very notion of the melodramatic and sentimental contemporary female that the ideal 19th-century "true woman" supposedly represented (and which the previous leg show practitioners, to a certain degree, maintained in their reliance upon classical or allegorical allusions in their performances). Their choice of stage attire was equally brazen. Whether adapting togas or male garb, their costumes always emphasized the performers' forms according to the very contemporary ideals of charismatic sexuality, which actresses like Menken established in their star images. What Thompson and her Blondes made manifest was what actress Olive Logan would vehemently criticize less than a year after the Blondes' arrival: the leg-show actress's subversive tendency to be "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" (1869:135). It was not their sexual *display* which Logan found objectionable--for that had been a residual effect of the art of actresses and dancers for generations--but the acknowledgement and flaunting of their capacity for sexual *agency* that was disturbing. Blurring the borders between character and actress, performance and reality, the leg show had created an unusual new role for its female performers--an openly sexualized ideal of what Thompson herself referred to as modern women very much aware of their "own awarishness" (in Allen 1991:18).

It was with this sense of "awarishness" that female leg show performers approached the new medium of photography in their efforts to promote not only **[End Page 147]** their productions but also themselves as celebrity figures. The invention of photography was shared by several individuals working independently in France and England in the late 1830s, but the patenting of the positive metal-plate process (or "photo-engraving") daguerreotype is credited to French photographer Louis Daguerre. By the 1850s, however, negative-positive methods were invented, lending the photograph--heretofore a singular and unreproducible image--to mass production. In 1854, A.A.E. Disdéri patented the *carte de visite* (or "calling card") process, through which a multiple-exposure camera recorded up to eight images on one negative. These images were then mass-produced and distributed by the photographed subject (if a private patron) or the photographer (if the subject was a celebrity), and prints sold for pennies apiece (see Howarth-Loomes 1974; Linkman 1993). The *cartes de visite*, generally six-by-nine centimeters, were mounted on the reverse of the conventional calling cards which European aristocracy had used to identify and document their presence upon visits to other persons of rank since the 16th century. As Elizabeth Anne McCauley notes in her study of Disdéri and the *carte de visite*, from its inception the portrait of the card-carrier served as "a legitimization of identity and proof of a certain social standing, even if the claims and titles printed on the card were bogus" (1985:30). The novel, inexpensive *cartes* were aimed at attracting, and were mainly consumed by, the expanding middle class, eager to materially demonstrate their social and cultural clout.

McCauley likewise notes that, paradoxically, such "commercial photography grew out of the popular boulevard de Crime circus and vaudeville entertainments"--and that the site at which both aristocratic pretensions and vaudeville vulgarity frequently intermingled was the bourgeoisie (1985:23). The increasing middle class of the 19th century not only had more money to spend and a proliferation of popular theatres at which to spend it, but demonstrated a demand for imagery of theatrical celebrities, a familiarity with whom the bourgeoisie asserted their modernity. As one critic of the period noted:

[T]he private supply of cartes de visite is nothing to the deluge of portraits of public characters which are thrown upon the market, piled up by the bushel in print stores, offered by the gross at the book stands, and thrust upon our attention everywhere. These collections contain all sorts of people, eminent generals, ballet dancers, pugilists, members of Congress, Doctors of Divinity, politicians, pretty actresses, circus riders and negro minstrels. (in Younger 1987:20)

The *American Journal of Photography* spoke to the democratic and even *educational* potential which exposure to the various careers and classes represented in cartes de visite could offer a collector, writing that viewers:

might take no harm from associations which now they could regard with sentiments of aversion and even of horror; indeed, much of mutual benefit might be derived from very many persons coming into contact with one another, who now stand sternly apart; and certainly, very many persons might confer most important benefits, even though they received within more than a fresh lesson in experience with both classes of individuals that are now absolutely unknown to them. (*American Journal of Photography* 1861:268-69) [6](#)

As such, "Disdéri's cartes de visite, which had been conceived as inexpensive portraits for the bourgeoisie, became a means of advertising or propaganda for the rich or talented," snapped up by middle-class consumers at photo studios, book and print stores, and theatrical venues, and displayed in **[End Page 148]** albums alongside cartes of friends and relatives (McCauley 1985:54). A technology aimed at bourgeois consumption and social "upclassing," this early photographic medium was exploited from the outset for both its identification with the middle class and for its propagandistic potential by female actors and entertainers (see Boltanski and Chamboredon 1990; Buse 1997). [7](#) French emperor Napoleon III and England's Queen Victoria used the new technology to construct and promote the imperial families as dignified and fashionable, yet unpretentiously modern and bourgeois. However, the leveling quality of the carte de visite was used instead with upwardly mobile motives by the "pretty actresses" of the *demimonde*, who used the medium to advertise and elevate the perceived status of their professions as entertainers.

IMAG LINK For decades after their invention, cartes de visite of bourgeois female subjects followed the precedents set by the medium's aristocratic subjects. The understated carte de visite imagery of Napoleon III's beautiful wife, Empress Eugénie, exemplified the feminine ideal to which bourgeois female sitters of the era would aspire in their own photographic portraiture (see [plate 3](#)). In a carte de visite of 1860, highly representative of her photographic portraiture of the period, the Empress stands, arms crossed in a stiffly

"casual" pose, against the back of a thronelike armchair. She wears a fashionably modest, full-skirted, dark satin dress with minimal and monochromatic ruffled edging and embroidery, and gazes off-camera with a look of dreamy repose in a tilted, three-quarter profile. A model of quietly virtuous, contemporary womanhood, Eugénie's cartes de visite also reflect the extent to which middle- to upper-class female subjects were influenced by fashion plates of the period--popular illustrations in, among other sources, ladies' journals--with photographic subjects imitating the sweet and courtly illustrated ideal of the "steel-engraving lady" (see Banner 1983).⁸ The passive and unengaged demeanor of the fashion plate, reflected in popular images such as Empress Eugénie's, became the ideal for women across Europe and the United States who approached the medium for its upclassing potential. Such standardization of appearances for women--notably lesser for men in both the imagery and journal "suggestions" of the day--also reflects a more subtle issue: the desire to represent the individual woman as the timeless and essential definition of *woman* (see Younger 1987). In other words, the idealized woman was a subject whose personality (like her photographed demeanor) was constant and indexical. Burlesque performers approached the medium with radically different ideals and motives.

IMAG LINK As Olive Logan rightfully noted in her criticism of the modern leg-show actress, the unsettling quality of these women was not simply their presence on the stage, but the spectacle of their conscious contemporaneity and sexual self-awareness. Worse yet was their ambitious self-promotion, the display of which, Logan lamented, could scarcely be escaped: "[Y]ou can go to almost any green-room of this period, and find their business cards stuck about in the frames of the looking-glasses, in the joints of the gas-burners, and sometimes lying on the top of the sacred cast-case itself" (1869:117). The combined popularity of the leg show and the carte de visite guaranteed the medium to be a shrewd promotional **[End Page 149]** device for burlesque performers. More importantly, it was a manner in which their transgressive, self-constructed identities could be made visible outside of the contained framework of the theatre. In line with what one scholar called her lifelong tendency toward "Barnumesque tactics" in self-promotion, Adah Isaacs Menken was among the first actresses to use carte de visite technology (her promotional photographs span from her teenaged years in 1859 to shortly before her early death in 1868) for both publicity and posterity. Successful precedents had proven that easily reproducible promotional portraiture could be manipulated to construct a favorable image of a performer's talents. **[End Page 150]** Barnum's own widespread campaign of print imagery in 1850 had helped create the Jenny Lind craze that surrounded Lind's first performances in the United States (Allen 1991:66-70). Later, Disdéri's portraits of Italian actress Adelaide Ristori as Medea ([plate 4](#)) had helped to not only internationally herald and promote her performances, but establish her reputation as an actress *worthy* of such widely circulated imagery (McCauley 1985:85-94).

IMAG LINK **IMAG LINK** What Lind and Ristori represented--in their promotional imagery as in their on- and off-screen star images--was an image of the actress in accord with an ideal of the virtuous female performer. These actresses clearly rejected the unseemly theatrical tradition of the actress-courtesan by thoroughly denying a sexualized identity. Their identities asserted the potential of the true woman to exist in the sphere of the theatre as in

the home; a type of actress lauded by Logan as a woman "of tender feelings, holy passions, such as every author loves to paint" (1869:115). Menken's photographs, however, tended to highlight both the scandalously scanty and/or masculine costuming of her performances, and her very contemporary and scandalous sense of personal style. Her cartes de visite presented her in a manner quite unlike the charming portraiture of Lind (the very epitome of the true woman), or the *tableaux vivant* style of Ristori's performance "stills" as the venerable, antique (and modestly attired) Greek character. In Menken's cartes de visite for *Mazeppa*, the actress posed in both the embroidered breeches costume and the veiled noncostume of her stage character. In either case, the photograph's focus was upon Menken's voluptuous physique and dramatic, charismatic sexuality. In cartes de visite for *The French Spy* which she performed in several times between 1860 and 1869 ([plate 5](#)), Menken was photographed as a glamorous feminine beauty "passing" in remarkably convincing male drag, posing with a butch swagger that predated Marlene Dietrich's similar vamping in *Morocco* by nearly 80 years. As a clever form of bait-and-switch promotion, Menken even constructed cartes de visite of herself in shocking topless costumes ([plate 6](#)), which she never attempted on the stage yet hoped would tantalize fans to attend performances in hopes of witnessing the display the pin-up seemed to advertise.

A published poet and essayist, lecturer for the political causes of the Women's Rights movement, and self-described bohemian, Menken "smoked cigarettes, cropped her hair, and cultivated her flair for the outrageous," marrying and divorcing four times and openly taking male lovers (Mankowitz 1982:163). It was on these same transgressive qualities that she sought to capitalize by constructing herself, in carte de visite pin-ups as on the stage, as the new model for theatrical femininity, which fell somewhere between the binary poles of prostitution and domesticity. Menken's negotiation of a space between virtue and vice in her acknowledgement and representation of a self-aware feminine sexuality [**End Page 151**] would come to fascinate the increasingly permissive bourgeois theatregoers of the era. Menken's precedent also set the standard for many female performers who came after her, as the word "Mazeppa" became synonymous with the unstable sexual identity of the burlesque actress (Dudden 1994:159).

Lind had counteracted this unstable identity of the female performer with acts such as donating proceeds from her concerts to local charities, cultivating a national reputation "as one of the most admirable and saintly women in the world" (Allen 1991:70). Menken instead reveled in her professional ability to disrupt conventional feminine ideals from her first press conference. After her first performance as *Mazeppa*, "The Menken" (as she would come to be known) accepted members of the press at her upscale Albany hotel while "reclining on a tiger-skin, sipping champagne, feeding bonbons to a French poodle," and wearing an open-collar blouse over a "daringly short skirt [...with] a total absence of petticoats" (Mankowitz 1982:11). Unapologetic about her disdain for and desire to transgress the contemporary ideal of domestic womanhood, late in her life Menken wrote:

I don't believe in women being married. Somehow they all sink into nonentities after this epoch of their existence. That is the fault of female education. They are taught from their cradles to look upon marriage as the one event of their lives. That accomplished nothing remains. However, Byron might have been right after all: "Man's love is of his life a thing

apart, it is a woman's whole existence." If this is true we do not wonder to find so many stupid wives. [...] Good women are rarely clever, and clever women are rarely good. (in Mankowitz 1982:172)

She refused, however, to be treated with the disrespect afforded the prostitute, regardless of her flaunting of conventions. Pinched in the thigh by a male cast member of *Mazeppa*'s British cast during the course of a performance, the actress soundly chastised the perpetrator with a blow from her prop whip--an event delightedly reported upon and widely illustrated in the British and American press.

IMAG **IMAG** Known to be conscious and controlling of her star image, Menken was exacting **LINK** **LINK** in her approach to the carte de visite and its representation of her image, as was recalled by American photographer Napoleon Sarony, who first photographed the actress in 1865 in a variety of "street dresses" and costumes. As a condition of his commission, Sarony had to agree with the actress's demand for control over her own poses, and she instructed her agents to make available for sale at every city she played only the photos of her choosing (Bassham 1978:11). Moreover, Menken's use of the carte de visite denied not only a binary sexuality in the roles of women on the stage, but off the stage as well. Blurring the line between life and performance, Menken circulated imagery of herself in both stage and street clothes, performing her "real" identities with the same dramatic flourish and plurality as her stage roles (plates [7](#) and [8](#)). In one carte de visite, Menken stands in rich, contemporary feminine clothing (with the conspicuous *inclusion* of petticoats), smiling shyly up at the viewer, eyes peering up through her eyelashes from her slightly downcast face. Appearing as if caught momentarily exposing her face from beneath the ornate fan which rests lightly against its right side, the notorious Menken successfully represents herself in the role of a shy and submissive object of desire. In the other, Menken poses in a fashion far closer to her image as a tempestuous wit and libertine. Clothed in what appears to be an elegant adaptation of gypsy folk dress (here with her trademark absence of petticoats), Menken stands firmly, arms crossed tightly and lifted across her chest in an iconic pose of resistance. Looking off-camera with a furrowed brow and intense stare, **[End Page 152]** Menken becomes the picture of defiance. This dramatic juxtaposition of cartes de visite demonstrates the lengths to which Menken was able to go--before the age of the image-controlling paparazzi--in selectively doling out constructs of her star image. This juxtaposition also underscores the way in which her selections of promotional imagery thwarted the potential of that image to become static, easily definable, or entirely separate from her stage personae. **[End Page 153]**

Menken's delight in constructing and promoting a shockingly subversive public identity for herself reached its most infamous level when she posed for and circulated cartes de visite of herself in embraces with the elderly Romantic writer, Alexandre Dumas *père*, with whom she was rumored to have had an affair during her Parisian theatrical engagements in 1866. Hundreds of copies were sold by the session's photographer and prints and caricatures appeared in the French press.

IMAG **LINK** Lydia Thompson also understood the power of the photograph to promote her shows and the personalities of her "Blondes"; the troupe members posed for many cartes de

visite in the attire of their burlesque roles. While the Blondes' photographs did feature the actresses in revealing garments, the level of parody involved in both the costumes and poses differed greatly from Menken's. Unlike the sheer shock value of semi-nakedness and straight male drag prominent in Menken's pin-ups, in their own cartes de visite the Blondes drew upon the *comical* stage texts and gender connotations of their stage productions. Dressed in pointedly contemporary versions of antique costumes and humorous, feminine adaptations of male garb, in cartes de visite the Blondes usually addressed the viewer with an even gaze and grinning expression that reflected the attitude of their satirical stage send-ups. The always-corseted britches role costumes parodied the feminine frills of modern men's fashions and the self-conscious, mannered demeanor of genteel bourgeois, upper-class and historical men. In Thompson's "Girl of the Period" carte de visite, the actress even mocked her own public identity as an ostentatiously "awarish" modern girl, posing in ridiculously man-tailored women's wear, complete with a riding crop and stuffed-squirrel hat ([plate 9](#)).

Thompson's "Girl of the Period" character was a parody of Elizabeth Lynn **[End Page 154]** Linton's influential *London Saturday Review* critique of what Linton saw as the various ills plaguing contemporary womanhood. (It was also in Thompson's "Girl of the Period" monologue that she christened the term "awarishness" as descriptive of the sexualized modern ideal which Linton's article denounced.) In her article, Linton attacked what she viewed as the emergence of a manipulative, self-consciously sexual "girl of the period" in Britain, adopting the styles of the celebrities and obscurities of the *demi-monde*. Among other vices, Linton proclaimed that such imitation led girls "to slang, bold talk and fastness [...] the love of pleasure and indifference to duty [...] to uselessness at home, dissatisfaction with the monotony of ordinary life, and horror of all useful work" (1868:28). ⁹ Henry James, in a review of Linton's essays on modern womanhood, saw in many American women a similar attitude, reflective of the stage personalities of the burlesque: "Accustomed to walk alone in the streets of a great city, and to be looked at by all sorts of people, she has acquired an unshrinking directness of gaze. She is the least bit *hard*" (in Allen 1991:140). ¹⁰ The Blondes, it seemed, were the very epitome of this type of "unshrinking" and irreverent modern woman.

The British Blondes' star images fluctuated between historical and contemporary, masculine and feminine roles, yet remained--by virtue of their flowing, dyed-blonde hair and tight-laced figures--pointedly female and contemporary. Moreover, the Blondes took the audacious precedent of the sexual *bohémienne* established by Menken's ever-oscillating, dramatic persona and adapted it for the purpose of a female-based parody and critique of modern society. Like Menken, the British Blondes took seriously attacks on their virtue: When *Chicago Times* editor Wilbur F. Storey wrote a series of personal attacks on Thompson, Thompson and fellow "Blonde" Pauline Markham ambushed and horsewhipped him outside of his home. After being chastised and fined in court, Thompson returned to the stage and defended her actions to her audience, stating:

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. (in Allen 1991:20)

While they were willing to flaunt convention, the Blondes also reminded the public that they would not allow their sexualized identities to be categorized or criticized as easily as so many disempowered prostitutes.

Dudden writes: "Linton's ['Girl of the Period'] essay became enormously popular because it addressed male fears about independent women, and Thompson's burlesque seems to have done the same" (1994:167). Yet, though they mocked the "girl of the period," perhaps easing the threat she posed to a binary construction of womanhood, the British Blondes nonetheless *embodied* this same unstable, threatening persona. As critic William Dean Howells wrote in 1869 of the disturbing appeal of the Thompsonian burlesque actress: "[T]hough they were not like men, [they] were in most things as **[End Page 155]** 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" (1869:642-43). Returning to Thompson's "Girl of the Period" carte de visite, it is easy to appreciate how this "horrible prettiness" was being played out in the visual economy of the burlesque pin-up. In an unwavering frontal pose, grinning at the viewer with mock sweetness, the lovely Thompson speaks at once to the modern ideals of female beauty and, draped in the accoutrements of vilified and unfeminine womanhood, its opposite. In the "horrible," yet sexually alluring, pin-up representations of their "alien sex," the British Blondes--like Menken--used the genre and its medium to insert the complex and multiplicitous identities which they had constructed in the theatre into the environment and discourse of extra-theatrical life.

IMAG
LINK Naturally, scores of other actresses, as well as photographers, viewed reproducible photo technology as holding considerable potential for constructing and promoting an identity for contemporary performers--particularly if the imagery (like the shows from which the actresses generally came) was titillating. For actresses, the sale and circulation of photographs meant the potential success of their shows and name recognition associated with their images, as well as a great profit for the actress herself. Photographers such as Sarony were reputed to pay thousands of dollars for the privilege of capturing the image (and owning the negatives) of the most popular stars, and actresses were well aware of the financial benefits of capitalizing on the popularity of their stage personae through the sale and circulation of cartes. Logan herself discussed the necessity of the carte de visite in theatrical promotion and her own experiences with the process in a chapter from her 1869 book, *Apropos of Women and Theatre*. From the discomfort of the photographer's headrests (used to aid in keeping the head still for the relatively long exposures needed for the cartes), to that of the gallery's walk-up ("what carriage can mount a half a dozen flights of stairs? [...] Mazeppa's may, but I am not Mazeppa."), Logan found the experience a trial, suffered only because: "The sale of these photographs is immense [...] and] people buy cartes de visite of well-known persons for as many reasons as other people resort to the convivial tumbler" (1869:57-61). In addition to their sales at studios and stores, photographers and barkers sold the pin-up carte de visite portraits of famous performers in the streets of the theatre districts in the same way in which programs and tour paraphernalia are sold at concerts today; a manner which Logan herself found in

scandalously poor taste and claims led to her personal boycott of the medium. (Five years later, her commission of cartes advertising her status as "The Best Dressed Woman in the Country" [[plate 10](#)] and reflecting the polite and reserved bourgeois "Empress Eugénie" ideal, indicates that the "boycott" was short-lived.)

The circulation of cartes de visite also had the potential to extend far beyond their individual purchase and consumption. Long fascinated with representations of both the theatrical and off-stage exploits of actresses--particularly leg-show performers--newspapers such as the *National Police Gazette* commissioned prints based on cartes de visite of the performers its writers fancied, from local newcomers to venerable international performers such as Sarah Bernhardt. For these female performers, a provocative pin-up portrait meant not only a place in the bourgeois collectors' photo albums, but a headline in the papers. Moreover, the undifferentiated use of the photographic imagery of both the transgressive coryphées and the more respectable grande dames of the theatrical community in such a manner served to blur the once distinct roles of female performers and the nature of the theatrical roles they embodied--which likely contributed to the disdain with which actresses such as Logan came to approach the medium of photography. **[End Page 156]**

Another factor in the transformational and transgressive appeal of the carte de visite was paradoxically due to the popular perception of photography running counter to both the subjects' willful and the media's unwitting manipulation of the medium as discussed above: the belief in the truthful and objective nature of photographic media. While many treatises on the art of photography complained of the medium's difficulty in capturing a "natural"--or even flattering--image of the subject, there were nonetheless a great many more that hailed the medium's ability to capture not only the physical but the emotional and intellectual likeness of the sitter. Writing in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Oliver Wendell Holmes articulated the period's physiognomic approach to photography:

The picture tells no lie. [...] There is no use in putting on airs; the make-believe gentleman and lady cannot look like the genuine article. Mediocrity shows itself for what it's worth, no matter what temporary name it may have acquired. Ill-temper cannot hide itself under the simper of assumed amiability. The Querulousness of incompetent complaining natures confesses itself almost as much as in the tones of the voice. The anxiety which strives to smooth its forehead cannot get rid of the telltale furrow. The weakness which belongs to the infirm of purpose and vacuous of thought is hardly to be disguised [...]. (in Younger 1987:11)

Stage performers manipulated their photography as easily as their performances, yet it was perceived by the public as being scientific and objective proof of the subject's essential personality. To this end, the cartes de visite as constructed by its female burlesque patrons held the potential of not only de-containing their diverse character identities, but *concretizing* them--every one of them--as fact, rather than theatrical fiction.

The new range of sexualized roles for women which the burlesque presented in legitimate theatrical spaces--both in performance and management--resulted in what

Solomon-Godeau identifies as a "shifting, unsecured meaning of the sexualized women drifting between the sturdy fixities of *femme honnête* and *fille publique* [...and] confound[ing] the social need to define that is an inseparable component of the power to name, regulate, survey, and control" female identity and sexuality (1986:102-03). In the theatre as in the market for the *carte de visite*, the presence of a bourgeois audience had helped in both the creation and the de-containment of these pluralistic sexual roles for women. As Allen writes of this phenomenon:

Ironically, 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. [...] 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. (1991:77-78)

Formerly associating the presence of female performers with prostitution, the increased involvement of and bourgeois interest (of both sexes) in the theatrical spectacles of which women's participation was integral further problematized the once stable identity of these performers solely by virtue of their profession. Their patronage in the rise of the leg show within the recent segmentation of the American theatre had actually assisted in not only the upclassing, but the very construction and acceptance of the leg show--and by extension its unstable representations of female sexuality. Fluctuating variously [**End Page 157**] between the behavioral signifiers of prostitution (through their trade in physical exhibition, flaunting of self-aware sexuality, and public visibility) and "true womanhood" (through their beauty, desirability, and struggles for respectability), the burlesque performer effectively disrupted the binary which had named and controlled female sexuality in the Victorian era. In addition, the bourgeois audience had not only problematized the sexual identity of the burlesque performer, but had begun to go so far--as Linton's and James's essays make clear--as to desire and emulate her style and attitudes outside of the theatre. Before long, the fashions and ideals of bourgeois female beauty grew closer and closer to the look of stage women (see Banner 1983).

With the proliferation of leg-show conventions in ballet and burlesque, and the popularity of the celebrities created by the phenomenon, the *carte de visite* pin-up threatened to break down even further not just this distinction between the "honest" and the "public" woman, but also the literal containment of the transgressive female within the walls of the theatre space. Individuals who had never stepped foot in a theatre could not only read accounts of the [**End Page 158**] productions but see the highly individuated and realistic photo images of leg-show actresses taken directly from life; a "reality" which the performer could manipulate and control to her specifications. This reality, in turn, had a good chance of being read as a scientifically rendered truth of her essential nature--a "nature" disrupted by the proliferation of guises and personalities which the performers' multiple-role cartes conveyed. The novelty and status of these cartes de visite as markers and objects of bourgeois culture also meant that even the most scandalously attired showgirl--and the transgressive, unstable feminine identity she embodied--could likely be contemplated alongside one's aunt or political figures in a collector's album. The combined upclassing of

the medium and the unprecedented visibility and bourgeois acceptance of the formerly demonized female performers which the burlesque produced (and the pin-ups reproduced) lent itself to a potential widespread questioning of the binary social and sexual identities previously available to women of the period. As such, Allen observes that the "awarish" identity of the burlesque pin-up "provoked desire and at the same time disturbed the ground of that desire by confusing the [binary] distinctions on which desire depended" (1991:148).

By the 1870s, however, the burlesque slowly backtracked: it lost its popularity among the bourgeois and returned to its marginalized status as a form of working-class entertainment. Allen notes that chief among the factors of its decline were the critics who had stressed the genre's corrupting influence upon genteel culture. Such questioning and criticism of the burlesque performers' ability to mock gender and sexual binaries had succeeded in convincing its bourgeois audiences that its subject matter was too base an inversion of its principles to be defended as mere entertainment:

If burlesque was an epidemic of "flaxen scrofula," then its patrons were, by extension, its infected victims. If burlesque impudently ridiculed what should have been above ridicule, then its patrons abetted in this anarchic transgression. If burlesque was tantamount to prostitution, its patrons were consorts. Furthermore, it is possible that the discursive construction of burlesque and its audience helped to change the social constitution of burlesque's "real" audience, making it more difficult for "respectable" (read: middle class) women to attend without stigma. (Allen 1991:132)

In the end, the rise of burlesque through its cross-class, cross-gender appeal would mean its demise. Between the 1870s and 1930s, burlesque would come to merge with vaudeville and carnival circuits and become relegated to its own theatrical venues. Eventually, the sexualized female performer was reduced to nothing but physicality--with the designation of satirical performances to men and dancing and striptease to women--all but obliterating the influence and voice of the original burlesque woman. Nonetheless, the ideal of the sexually "awarish" burlesque performer had served to define the pin-up genre, evolving out of the visual material based on and surrounding these stage identities. Although consistently reflective of the changing ideals of womanhood in the periods in which they were constructed, by nature of their controlled and sexualized subject matter, pin-ups through the present day maintain the aura of "awarishness" with which their burlesque subjects imbued the genre at its origins.

I believe that it is the pin-up's history of depicting and marking as desirable an unstable, performative sexual identity that leads its contemporary feminist subjects to their explorations of the genre today. The actress in the Victorian era made visible--to audiences of unprecedented number--the possibility of an existence and acceptance of a plural female identity; the burlesque performers among them broadened this to include sexual identities as well. With **[End Page 159]** the establishment of a pin-up genre in the residual visual imagery of these theatrical identities came a manner in which their unstable, yet desirable, constructions could be further controlled by their subjects and witnessed by audiences both within and outside of the theatrical world. As such, the pin-up genre developed as one in

which the transgressive identities that emerged and oscillated between a sexual binary of domestic/public woman were visually expanded beyond the confines of the theatre and therefore discursively expanded broader, extra-theatrical ideals of female sexuality. The media and issues surrounding contemporary pin-ups have changed dramatically since Adah Isaacs Menken first approached the as-yet-unnamed genre in 1859. However--if the current debates over sexualized representations of women are any indication--the drive behind many women's adoption of the genre has not.

I would like to return here to the words of Joanna Frueh, who today uses the pin-up for its potential to suggest "that a [...] woman is erotically vital, self-consciously erotic, takes pleasure in her beauty, and also thinks that the whole enterprise of erotic/aesthetic artifice is, to some degree, ridiculous" (1997). Representing its beautiful/beautified subjects as not only self-aware sexual beings, but beings whose sexual identities can be self-constructed, self-controlled, and changing, the pin-up holds the potential to represent and mark as desirable the range of female sexualities possible between an established societal or moral binary. Considering the contemporary attacks on sexualized feminist imagery from within the feminist movement itself, it comes as no surprise that the pin-up's ability to confuse the notion of a stable, binary female sexuality (regardless of origin or ideology) has been summoned by feminist artists to address and critique binary sexual ideals. "Always peculiarly and emphatically herself," the 19th-century burlesque pin-up left a legacy for contemporary feminists in the acknowledgement and performance of her own power for sexual agency--a modern idea for which "awarishness" is a virtual metaphor. Moreover, the pin-up's popular and familiar visual language and intent for wide distribution and visibility lend the medium an audience for feminist expression not afforded the more exclusive and often less direct expressions of the gallery or performance space. The extensive and reproducible photographic pin-up work of feminist artists such as Frueh (most notably, performance artists Annie Sprinkle and Ann Magnuson) is, like that of the burlesque, intended to make these artists' critiques of limited attitudes toward female sexuality visible outside of the theatrical space. Attempting to exploit the genre for its erotic yet performative and self-aware depiction of female sexuality, feminist artists appropriate the pin-up, effectively rearticulating the ability of the original burlesque pin-up to not only image and provoke desire but, by penetrating and influencing the culture of bourgeois fashion and consumption, change the rigid terms by which desire has been historically framed.

Notes

1. See Solomon-Godeau's notes in "The Legs of the Countess" (1986:94).
2. As Mark Gabor notes in *The Pin-Up: A Modest History* (1982), even when the genre has historically been used to depict men, the overwhelming cultural association of the genre as one designated for the depiction and, arguably, visibility of women has frequently resulted in the "feminization" of men so represented.
3. Taking Susie Bright's cue, I feel that--while pornography is inevitably defined in the eye

of the beholder--as long as individuals are being legally prosecuted as "pornographers," imagery, objects, and cinema which meets local and national standards of pornography needs to be recognized as such; see Susie Bright's *Sexwise* (1995).

4. For a thorough study of the burlesque tradition and the complex and shifting roles of women within the genre, see Allen (1991). Allen's work succinctly defines early burlesque theatre and its implications regarding the residual imagery that the theatrical genre produced.

5. For detailed accounts of Menken's performance and success in the role of Mazeppa, see: Dudden (1994:157-64); Allen (1991:96-101); Lewis (1964); and Wolf (1982).

6. Note the author's use of "*both classes*" (presumably "above" and "below" the bourgeoisie), implying a middle-class reader as well as *carte de visite* collector.

7. Here, I borrow the term and concept of "upclassing" from Boltanski and Chamboredon's discussion of the identity of professional photographers (1990), but the same issues of upward-mobility can be attributed to the subjects and collectors of the *carte de visite* at this period.

8. McCauley also asserts that not only aesthetics, but also the French fashion industry motivated Eugénie's "fashion plate" poses (1985:64-68). Lois Banner's *American Beauty* (1983) uses as its focus of 19th-century physical ideals for women what Banner dubs the ubiquitous "steel-engraving lady" of the period's fashion plates, whose bell-like proportions were both emulated by bourgeois women and rebelled against by burlesque performers.

9. Not surprisingly, Linton was also a prominent anti-suffrage essayist, whose criticism frequently railed against both actresses and suffragettes. (Many early women's rights activists were indeed both.) See Peter Gay's *The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud* (1984:210-12) for further information on the Linton article and its influence in British and American society.

10. Of the subject, Logan wrote:

[T]he inevitable small boy, with ill-kept nose, came to visit me in every town, and took away several dozen of cartes de visite. But pray mark the mode of procedure of the inevitable small boy with ill-kept nose! In a fiendishly exultant manner, he rushes up to an inoffensive spectator, and, thrusting the picture under the visual organs of the aforesaid, cries out, in a shrill voice: "Have Olive Logan, sir? Street dress and costume. *Do* take Olive Logan, sir. *Only twenty-five cents!*" [...] Is it extraordinary that, under these circumstances, I immediately stopped the sale of my photographs? (1870:241)

On Logan's later cartes, and "Best-Dressed" distinction, see Dudden (1994:176-77).

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