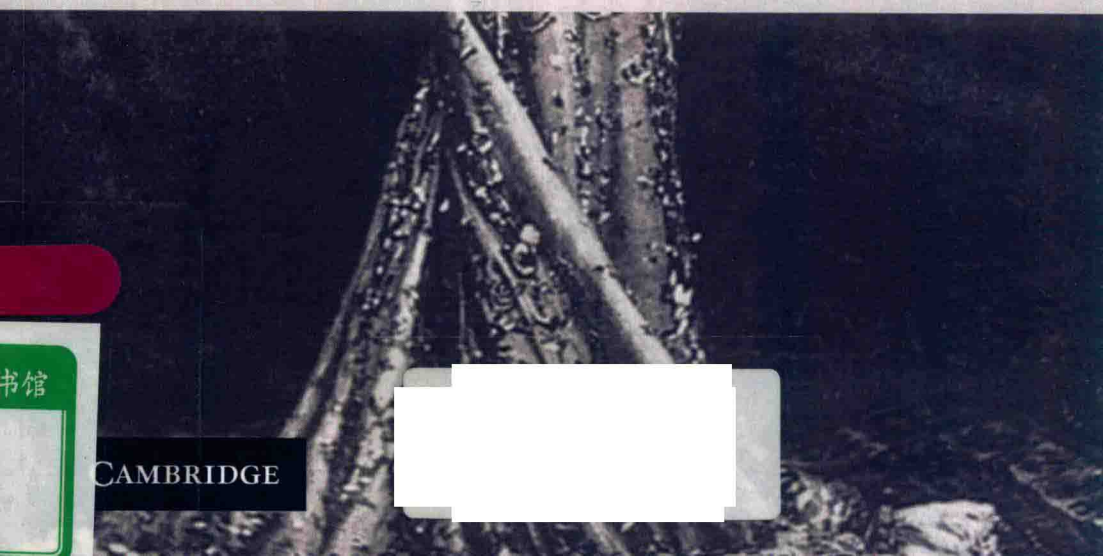




Sisters in Sin

BROTHEL DRAMA IN AMERICA, 1900-1920

KATIE N. JOHNSON



书馆

CAMBRIDGE

Sisters in Sin
Brothel Drama in America, 1900–1920

KATIE N. JOHNSON



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521105132

© Katie N. Johnson 2006

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2006

This digitally printed version 2009

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-521-85505-1 hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-10513-2 paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Sisters in Sin

The prostitute and her sister in sin – the so-called “fallen” woman – were veritable obsessions of American Progressive Era culture. Their cumulative presence, in scores of controversial theatrical productions, demonstrates the repeated obsession with the prostitute figure in both highbrow and lowbrow entertainments. As the first extended examination of such dramas during the Progressive Era, *Sisters in Sin* recovers a slice of theatre history in demonstrating that the prostitute was central to the development of American realist theatre. Plays about prostitutes were so popular that they constituted a forgotten genre – the brothel drama. The brothel drama’s stunning success reveals much about early twentieth-century American anxieties about sexuality, eugenics, contagion, women’s rights, and urbanization. Introducing previously unexamined archival documents and unpublished play scripts, this original study argues that the body of the prostitute was a corporeal site upon which modernist desires and cultural imperatives were mapped.

KATIE N. JOHNSON specializes in theatre, film, and gender studies in the English Department at Miami University of Ohio where she is Associate Professor. In 2003, she was awarded the Gerald Kahan Award for best essay in the field of theatre studies by a younger scholar. Her work has appeared in *Theatre Journal*, *Theatre Survey*, the *Journal of American Drama and Research*, *American Drama*, the *Eugene O'Neill Review*, the *American Transcendental Quarterly*, and the *Encyclopedia of American Cultural and Intellectual History*.

General Editor

Don B. Wilmeth, *Brown University*

Advisory Board

C. W. E. Bigsby, *University of East Anglia*

C. Lee Jenner, *Independent critic and dramaturge*

Bruce A. McConachie, *University of Pittsburgh*

Brenda Murphy, *University of Connecticut*

Laurence Senelick, *Tufts University*

The American theatre and its literature are attracting, after long neglect, the crucial attention of historians, theoreticians, and critics of the arts. Long a field for isolated research yet too frequently marginalized in the academy, the American theatre has always been a sensitive gauge of social pressures and public issues. Investigations into its myriad of shapes and manifestations are relevant to students of drama, theatre, literature, cultural experience, and political development.

The primary intent of this series is to set up a forum of important and original scholarship in and criticism of American theatre and drama in a cultural and social context. Inclusive by design, the series accommodates leading work in areas ranging from the study of drama as literature to theatre histories, theoretical explorations, production histories, and readings of more popular or para-theatrical forms. While maintaining a specific emphasis on theatre in the United States, the series welcomes work grounded broadly in cultural studies and narratives with interdisciplinary reach. Cambridge Studies in American Theatre and Drama thus provides a crossroads where historical, theoretical, literary, and biographical approaches meet and combine, promoting imaginative research in theatre and drama from a variety of new perspectives.

BOOKS IN THE SERIES

1. Samuel Hay, *African American Theatre*
2. Marc Robinson, *The Other American Drama*
3. Amy Green, *The Revisionist Stage: American Directors Re-Invent the Classics*
4. Jared Brown, *The Theatre in America during the Revolution*
5. Susan Harris Smith, *American Drama: The Bastard Art*
6. Mark Fearnow, *The American Stage and the Great Depression*
7. Rosemarie K. Bank, *Theatre Culture in America, 1825-1860*

8. Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World*
9. Stephen J. Bottoms, *The Theatre of Sam Shepard*
10. Michael A. Morrison, *John Barrymore: Shakespearean Actor*
11. Brenda Murphy, *Congressional Theatre: Dramatizing McCarthyism on Stage, Film, and Television*
12. Jorge Huerta, *Chicano Drama: Performance, Society and Myth*
13. Roger A. Hall, *Performing the American Frontier, 1870-1906*
14. Brooks McNamara, *The New York Concert Saloon: The Devil's Own Nights*
15. S. E. Wilmer, *Theatre, Society and the Nation: Staging American Identities*
16. John H. Houchin, *Censorship of the American Theatre in the Twentieth Century*
17. John W. Frick, *Theatre, Culture and Temperance Reform in Nineteenth-Century America*
18. Errol G. Hill, James V. Hatch, *A History of African American Theatre*
19. Heather S. Nathans, *Early American Theatre from the Revolution to Thomas Jefferson*
20. Barry B. Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project*
21. Julia A. Walker, *Expressionism and Modernism in the American Theatre: Bodies, Voices, Words*
22. Jeffrey H. Richards, *Drama, Theatre, and Identity in the American New Republic*
23. Brenda Murphy, *The Provincetown Players and the Culture of Modernity*
24. Katie N. Johnson, *Sisters in Sin: Brothel Drama in America, 1900-1920*

*For Timothy and Liam
And for Ruby Gabler Fick*

Through the countless ages, and on down into our own times, the scarlet woman has been looked upon as one who in sheer wantonness had chosen her evil mode of life. "Very well," said society, "she has made her bed, now let her lie in it."

Madeleine, a turn-of-the-century prostitute

Acknowledgments

As I often tell my students, any project worth its salt undergoes extensive revision. Their jaws usually fall open when I explain just how many drafts this project has gone through. Mine does as well. But it's true: *Sisters in Sin* has been read by numerous people who have given generously of their time and intellect; without their tireless efforts, this work would never have been possible.

I am grateful to the insightful comments from my Miami colleagues: Barry Chabott, Mary Jean Corbett, Frances Dolan, Stefanie Kyle Dunning, Susan Morgan, Kerry Powell, Dianne Sadoff, Jonathan A. Strauss, and Keith Tuma. A hearty thanks goes to Miami University for providing me with extraordinary institutional support, including an assigned research leave, a summer faculty research and travel grant, plus several publication grants.

Special thanks to series editor Don B. Wilmeth for his enormous help in shaping and editing the project and to Victoria Cooper, Rebecca Jones, James Woodhouse, Anna-Marie Lovett, and the readers at Cambridge University Press.

My mentors from the University of Washington were invaluable: Barry Witham, Jack Wolcott, Stephen Weeks, Sara Schneider, and Kate Cummings. In particular I'd like to thank Sarah Bryant-Bertail for her many insights into my work. In a most incalculable way, the generous spirit of the late Michael Quinn has guided me throughout this project. Fellow graduate students at the University of Washington Drama school – Shinya Inoe, Tina Redd, Rebecca Brown, Terry Donovan Smith, and, especially, Tamara Underiner – continue to sustain me.

I am grateful to those editors whose suggestions have improved my work that has appeared elsewhere in print: Rosemarie K. Bank, Noreen Barnes-McLain, Susan Bennett, Zander Brietzke, Harry J. Elam, Loren Kruger, Vera Mowry Roberts, and David Román. Thanks also to Laurence Senelick

for sharing his clipping files with me and to David Savran and the American Society for Theatre Research Gerald Kahan Award Committee. I wish to also thank publishers for permission to reprint articles, all of which have been revised for this book. These articles include: “‘*Anna Christie*’: the Repentant Courtesan, Made Respectable,” *Eugene O’Neill Review* 26 (June 2004): 87–104; “Rachel Crothers’ *Ourselves*: Feminist Dramaturgy in the Brothel Drama,” *Journal of American Drama & Theatre* 15.3 (Fall 2003): 101–121; “*Damaged Goods*: Sex Hysteria and the *Prostitute Fatale*,” *Theatre Survey* 44 (May 2003): 43–67; “*Zaza*: That Obtruding Harlot of the Stage,” *Theatre Journal* 54 (May 2002): 223–43; and “Censoring *Sappho*: Regulating the Fallen Woman and the Prostitute on the New York Stage,” *ATQ: Nineteenth-Century American Literature and Culture* 10.3 (1996): 167–86.

Many people from various archives and libraries have assisted me in perusing their materials. Ed Via and Jim Bricker from Miami University Interlibrary Loans have spent endless hours finding documents all over the United States (and sending them to me at various locations). Thanks to Bill Wortman at Miami University’s King Library; Marty Jacobs at the Museum of the City of New York; Marc Swartz at the Shubert Archive; Kevin Winkler and team at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts; the staff at the Sherman Theatre Archive at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale; and to those at the Fales Library at New York University, University of Chicago Special Collections, and Harvard University. Thanks also to Jonathan Gray at the Theatre Museum in London and to Richard Mangan at the Mander and Mitchenson Archive in London.

Tom Lisanti and Jeremy McGraw at the New York Public Library Photo Services, and Marguerite Lavin at the Museum for the City of New York were helpful in securing visuals for this project.

There are several institutions to thank as well. This project was made possible through a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Stipend. During my research leave in England I was graciously supported by Newnham and Selwyn Colleges at the University of Cambridge.

I am grateful to my students, who have taught me much about writing and critical reading. My parents, Lyle and Sally Johnson, have taught me to dream beyond the prairies of South Dakota. My former teachers – Rosie Blunk, Patrick Quade, Susan Cocalis, and Karen Warren – inspired me to study feminist theatre. And thanks go to Sinhaketu, who has guided me toward seeking equanimity and to trying to live my life with metta.

Finally, I am indebted to my partner Timothy D. Melley, whose critical eye has read these pages so many times. His insight, support, and love indelibly mark this work, as they do my life.

Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	page x
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
Introduction: The brothel drama	i
PART I The female performer as prostitute	21
1 <i>Zaza</i> : That "obtruding harlot" of the stage	29
2 That "sin-stained" <i>Sappho</i>	45
3 <i>The Easiest Way</i> and the actress-as-whore myth	65
PART II Working girls	81
4 The shop girl: Working-girl dramas	83
5 The girl shop: <i>Mrs Warren's Profession</i>	91
PART III Opium dens and urban brothels: Staging the white slave	109
6 White slave plays in Progressive Era theatre	111
7 Brothel anyone? Laundering the 1913-14 white slave season	127
PART IV The legitimation and decline of the brothel drama	163
8 <i>Damaged Goods</i> : Sex hysteria and the <i>prostitute fatale</i>	165
9 The repentant courtesan in " <i>Anna Christie</i> " and the lesbian prostitute in <i>The God of Vengeance</i>	183
<i>Notes</i>	201
<i>Bibliography</i>	234
<i>Index</i>	257

Illustrations

1. Postcard of actress Mrs. Leslie Carter.	<i>page</i> 39
2. Olga Nethersole posing for a tobacco card.	54
3. Olga Nethersole in publicity poster for <i>Sapho</i> , smoking.	56
4. Olga Nethersole in the controversial see-through gown from <i>Sapho</i> .	57
5. Publicity poster for <i>The Easiest Way</i> depicting Madison, Laura, and Brockton.	70
6. Act 2 of <i>Mrs Warren's Profession</i> with Vivie and Mrs. Warren.	97
7. Two white slaves in the censored brothel scene from <i>The Lure</i> .	130
8. Publicity flier for <i>The Fight</i> portraying corruption.	138
9. Miss Barrington and Molly from Rachel Crothers's <i>Ourselves</i> .	151
10. A Madam threatens the white slave in the censored brothel scene from <i>The House of Bondage</i> .	159
11. Anna's entrance in " <i>Anna Christie</i> " as portrayed by Pauline Lord.	187

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

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

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

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

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