Mae ‘The Monster’ West

Note: Image generated using StableDiffusion Image Generator by Stable Diffusion AI from the prompt ‘Design an image featuring a blonde woman in a white dress standing before a majestic, lion-like creature with beastly characteristics. Capture the contrast and symbiosis between elegance and wildness within this captivating visual narrative’.

Abstract

Chapter 5
The ‘Monstrousness’ of Mae West

The ‘Monstrousness’ of Mae West examines West’s plays like Sex, The Drag, and The Pleasure Man, focusing on her innovative portrayal of characters such as sex workers, female impersonators, ‘fallen women’, and homosexual men. West reshapes established character archetypes from theatre and (sub)cultures of the early 1900s, challenging notions of monstrosity and marginalisation. Her approach involves presenting these characters in a sympathetic or heroic light, aiming to erode prejudices and raise awareness, despite facing criticism resembling contemporary cultural appropriation. The chapter delves into West’s strategic use of humour, analysing how she assigns jokes and witty lines to specific characters to expose moral hypocrisy and address serious social issues. Using the bawdy wit that became her stock-in-trade, West employs humour as a powerful tool for both entertainment and social commentary, contributing to her larger goal of challenging societal norms and perceptions.

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5
The 'Monstrousness' of Mae West

Will Visconti

West's Pleasure Principle

Between 1926 and 1928, three plays written by Mae West premiered in and around New York City. Each was the centre of heated debate and the object of public fascination. Billed as "comedy dramas", *Sex* (1926), *The Drag* (1927) and *The Pleasure Man* (1928) took liminal figures – primarily sex workers, gay men, and female impersonators – and presented them to mainstream audiences.[1] Her plays caused shock and consternation but made Mae West a household name after nearly thirty years of less impressive media attention. West played enthusiastically with the distinctions between star and *monstre sacré*, reminding her audiences that she was no angel, but had spread her wings a bit.[2] However, the focus of this chapter is not exclusively on Mae West's construction as divine or monstrous, but on her first three plays. These plays, like nearly a dozen others written between 1921 and 1931 and her quips, were the result of extensive work and editing. Her nights were not spent entertaining gentleman callers, as she preferred people to believe, but rather, refining her scripts.[3] Where she was accused of indecency, immorality, or even monstrosity, Mae West downplayed her apparent

[1] Quotes and scene references are taken from Lillian Schlissel, *Three Plays by Mae West* and reproduced with permission by Nick Hern Books.

[2] Ruggles, *I'm No Angel*.

[3] Leider, *Becoming Mae West*, 658; Louvish, *Mae West: It Ain't No Sin*, xvi.

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deviancy by defending her plays as neither monstrous nor purely sensationalised, but educational.

Within each play, West sympathetically portrays characters otherwise seen as "monstrous" by their transgressiveness, while simultaneously profiting from public fascination with alterity and scandal.[4] Each play, however, demonstrates a disjunction between plot elements intended as monstrous (murder, blackmail, assault) and the elements interpreted as monstrous by audiences, critics, and the police (transgressive or non-normative sexuality). Furthermore, the plays' basis is urban life, offering realism when fantasy was in vogue, which renders the plots more shocking and threatening by their immediacy and modern settings.[5] The language, costumes, and settings were all recognizable to audiences, if not as easily understood.[6] The plays are peppered with slang used in the nascent gay scene of the time, the language employed by sex workers, or the lingua franca of backstage life in vaudeville and burlesque. West's work brought fringe spaces to mainstream theatre, upsetting divisions between high culture and low culture and upending hierarchies of performance.[7]

What was especially monstrous was that private acts were made public.[8] Unlike *The Captive*,[9] a controversial play about lesbianism that was shut down at the same time as *The Drag*, Mae West's plays are explicit in naming sex, homosexuality, and female impersonation, and centring these narratives. Moreover, scenes of male cross-dressing for purposes other than stage performance collapsed boundaries between "acceptable" onstage drag, and behaviour that was technically illegal.

These same transgressive characters were made the protagonists and heroes by West, augmenting the plays' shock value. They are humanised and positioned within narratives that do not uniformly end in tragedy or their punishment. With both homosexuality and sex work, West shies away from narratives that insist on rehabilitation and redemption through death or marriage (though *Sex* alludes to the latter), though an element of exploitation exists with some plotlines and characters, who are grounded in reality but sensationalised to provide largely heteronormative audiences with voyeuristic thrills. The truly monstrous aspects of each story are embodied by the heterosexual or upper-class characters, or by law and society at large. Via expository dialogue or speeches in each play, West critiques the scorn unnecessarily heaped on sex workers, the refusal to acknowledge or sympathetically address homosexuality, and the transactional nature of marriage as potentially no different to prostitution.[10] She holds up a mirror to American society, exposing double

4 Hamilton, *The Queen of Camp*, 60–61.

5 Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures*, 6.

6 Robert Allen argues that during the 1920s, she may have also appeared more threatening in her physicality, given that she was younger. See Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 281.

7 Schlissel, "Introduction," in *Three Plays by Mae West*, 8.

8 Nereson, "Queens 'campin' Onstage", 517.

9 See Edward Bouret, "The Captive", in Ben Hodges (ed.), *Forbidden Acts Pioneering Gay & Lesbian Plays of the Twentieth Century*, 83–171. New York, New York, USA: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2003.

10 Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 279.

standards. West's plays challenge the backlash against Jazz Age popular culture or values, which were blamed for the ills that had befallen the United States during the 1920s, and the resultant vaunting of Victorian-era ideals.[11]

Each section of this chapter addresses a different aspect of West's playwriting: her treatment of sex work (*Sex*) and transgressive behaviour; her treatment of homosexuality and drag (*The Drag* and *The Pleasure Man*); and finally, her legacy, with a focus on West's impact on the representation and performance of drag over the last 60 years. Some common elements, particularly around West's use of comedy, are shared across all three plays. For instance, within each of her plays, West uses comedy characters as foils for each other to defuse audience prejudice. Such foils constitute attempts to normalise behaviour and render it less alien, less oppositional, or less subject to disapproval, a device found decades later in sitcoms like *Will & Grace* (with Will Truman as the "straight man" to Jack McFarland).[12] It also shows how West's humour simultaneously breaks new ground while making jokes at the expense of the plays' subjects, subverting and re-inscribing ideas in comedy about acceptable or over-the-top (therefore comic) behaviour.[13] Within some plays, oppositional pairings like the villainous womaniser Rodney Terrill and the sympathetic female impersonator Paradise Dupont challenge the audience even more emphatically.

All three plays have clear antagonists, but occasionally, secondary characters steal the scene, as Mae West herself did in her first film appearance, *Night After Night*. *Sex* tells the story of Margy LaMont (played by West), a Montreal-based prostitute who finds herself fielding multiple marriage proposals including one from Jimmy Stanton, a scion of a wealthy family, as she dreams of making her fortune elsewhere. Key to the melodrama's denouement is the exposure of Stanton's mother, Clara, who goes out slumming, is drugged and subsequently blackmailed by Margy's pimp, Rocky, but rescued by Margy (*Sex* Act I Scene 2). Clara opposes Jimmy's marriage to Margy, knowing her past, and ultimately Margy ends the engagement in favour of moving to Australia with another lover (*Sex* Act II Scene 2).

The Drag's central protagonist is Rolly Kingsbury, a gay man whose spurned lover David is a patient of Rolly's father-in-law. David seeks treatment for his drug addiction and a "cure" for his homosexuality. Rolly lusts after his colleague Allen Grayson, who is incorrectly believed to be having an affair with Rolly's wife, Clair, although he professes his love for her later (*TD* Act II Scene 1). The third act of the play is devoted to a drag ball hosted at the Kingsburys' home while Clair is away. At the end of the play, David, driven mad by his rejection and self-loathing, murders Rolly. Rolly and Clair's fathers, Judge Kingsbury and Dr Richmond, conspire to rule the murder a suicide since this verdict is seen as a lesser scandal than murder by a same-sex lover (*TD* Act III Scene 2).

[11] Curry, "Mae West as Censored Commodity", 66; Maltby, "Baby Face", 28.

[12] Streitmatter, *From "Perverts" to "Fab Five"*, 115.

[13] Sypher, "The Meanings of Comedy", 242.

The Pleasure Man shares several elements with *The Drag,* particularly the drag party. With a much larger cast, it follows a vaudeville troupe that includes Paradise Dupont, a female impersonator, and her "Manly-kins" (backup dancers) alongside other female impersonators who, it is implied, are all also gay men and inclined to dress in drag both professionally and for fun. The eponymous pleasure man, Rodney Terrill, seduces and abandons several women, including simultaneous affairs with members of the troupe (*TPM* Act I, Scene III; Act II Scene 1; Act II Scene 2). One former lover, Mary Ann, asks him to honour his promise to marry her since she is pregnant. He violently rebuffs her, and Paradise is the first to help her. After Terrill and the irate husband of one of the performers come to blows (*TPM* Act II Scene 2), Terrill is fatally castrated by Mary Ann's brother as retribution so that he might never hurt anyone again, while the performers attend a party (*TPM* Act III Scene 2).

Part of the secret that West learned in presenting her characters, and something that she progressively honed with each of her plays and films, was how to use comedy as a means of "compensation". To overcome moral indignation and transmute it into laughter, she countered accusations of monstrousness by using humour to "play a bad woman successfully" (or to depict "bad men", and men dressed as women).[14] Another way that this was achieved, besides dialogue, was the incorporation of musical numbers, making each play a melange of variety, burlesque, and melodrama.

West's use of humour was a key strategy in enabling audiences to rethink their perceptions of what was unacceptable or demonised. She used humour to both defuse and emphasize the transgression of her ideas by taking serious issues and making light of them (sex, sexuality, women's roles). In performing as an insouciant, wisecracking, and assertive woman, the threat that she posed was then increased. Elsewhere, she doubled the transgressive potential of her work by featuring wisecracking men dressed as wisecracking women.

Mae West wrote these plays during a period when American masculinity sought to assert itself in response to an economic downturn, as a rebellion against prudery while capitalising on the broader popularity of sex and violence in popular entertainment. Thoroughly modern, but not without problematic elements, her plays encapsulate the zeitgeist of the 1920s: craving spectacle, seeking an escape from normalcy, and treating the Other as an object of fascination. West's use of comedy demonstrates her background as a seasoned vaudeville and burlesque performer, repurposing established performance frameworks to point out contradictions in the bourgeois ordering of sexual categories.[15] She also toyed with imperatives to reject what was designated as "low" in culture or performance, as well as the conflicting desire for the Other embodied by sex workers, drag queens, and vaudevillians, which led to public interest in West's plays, alongside legal opprobrium.[16]

[14] *New York Evening Post*, quoted in Kristen Hatch, "Mae West", 86.

[15] Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 279.

[16] Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 5.

Identified as a "reformer" and a feminist, though she preferred the appellation "Liberated Woman," Mae West wanted to show other women that empowerment was within their means.[17] Regardless of how genuine her aims were, West nevertheless broke new ground in trying to normalize and call for empathy where the representation of "fallen women" or sexual transgression is concerned.[18] For West, sex was neither to be taken overly seriously nor was it a source of shame, with an attitude that would today be termed sex-positivity. She sought to render sex not only less monstrous but also less distant or mysterious.

Sex and Transgression

Mae West's first play, *Sex* (which ran between 1926 and 1927), presents several "monstrous" ideas to challenge conservative audiences, and shows the genesis of West's *raison d'être* as a performance.[19] In *Sex*, moral hypocrisy is the primary "monster" to be defeated, giving way to a single standard for sexual behaviour advocated by West herself.[20] What audiences seized on, however, was her unvarnished representation of sex work and the threat of class mobility that was posed by Margy as the heroine and an unrepentant sex worker. This caused greater consternation than the exploitation of women, the moral bankruptcy of the upper classes, or the circumstances that bring about the death of Agnes, a younger and less hardened character, driven first to sex work and then suicide.[21]

West's *Sex* presents another scene that may have been conceived of as monstrous, certainly as shocking in terms of prevailing Victorian morality in theatre. In this scene, Margy, despite being lower-class and a sex worker, claims the moral high ground against her wealthy adversary, Clara Stanton. Nevertheless, the status quo is upheld and there is no enduring threat to dominant social hierarchies when Margy willingly relinquishes her wealthy fiancé and "disappears". She announces her decision to move to Australia, implicitly declaring an intention to marry Lieutenant Gregg, and Stanton keeps her reputation intact, but only with Margy's connivance (*Sex* Act III Scene 2).

Reading *Sex*, one can see the genesis of The Mae West Character as a tough-talking but not unsympathetic figure who triumphs by the narrative's end.[22] Despite tangible

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17 West, *Mae West on Sex*, 6.

18 Sochen, *From Mae to Madonna*, 63.

19 West's plays remain popular choices for contemporary performers. During Covid lockdowns, and indeed since, Zoom productions of *Sex* were launched by at least two separate groups. See Brave New Classics, "Sex by Mae West", https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVRFTv_-dRU; and Amariss Harris, "SEX by Mae West", https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wBgZwB34G6M, with a Black lead rather than other productions that have featured actors playing Margy in what amount to Mae West impersonations.

20 Curry, *Too Much of a Good Thing*, 3.

21 Hatch, "Mae West", 102.

22 Southwell, *Living Famously*; Louvish, *It Ain't No Sin*, 56.

elements of Mae West's onscreen persona, the play is more drama than comedy. Unsurprisingly, the comic sequences are primarily focused around Margy's put-downs to prospective clients, her banter with her lover, Gregg; and the badinage between her and the other sex workers Red, Agnes, and Flossie (all of which take place in *Sex* Act I Scene 1). The sparse comedy of *Sex* breaks up the tension of the other scenes, and of the setting, which drew critics' ire. *Sex* lacks the irony and "kidding" of sexuality that made West famous. Its comedy derives more from ad-libs and banter, similar to what West developed further with her camp male groupings and female impersonators in subsequent plays. Her jokes are at the expense of clients, her pimp, or Gregg, including a "bit" that would not be out of place in a burlesque act involving double entendre and the reveal of a large feather (*Sex* Act I Scene 1).[23] Burlesque had a palpable influence on the musical numbers or "shimmy" dances during the play, prompting parallels with Harlem nightclubs, and suggestions that Margy was even more threatening through "contested whiteness".[24] Certainly, West borrowed liberally (or outright copied) elements of performances she had seen in Black entertainment venues, which heightened her transgressive potential and alluded to all the fears held by middle-class white audiences about unfettered Black sexuality.[25] West's affinity with and appropriation of Black culture was sometimes used to comic effect, as when she incorporated "dirty blues" songs into *Sex* or other plays, which were laden with innuendo made famous by sexually transgressive performers like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith.[26]

All three plays include tragic and melodramatic elements alongside comedy, though there is less consistent humour in *Sex* than in *The Drag* or *The Pleasure Man* (*Sex* Act I Scene 1; *TD* Act III Scene 1; *TPM* Act II Scene 1). Within *Sex*, the group of sex workers provide a comic moment in parallel to the drag queens and "camping" scenes of *The Drag* and *The Pleasure Man*, and all three instances rely on ad-libbing. The establishment of the sex workers as comparable to gay men or female impersonators suggests a shared liminal status and points to the declining position of vaudeville in the hierarchy of "legitimate" entertainment. In some cases, the play's setting facilitates comedy alongside melodrama, as with *The Pleasure Man*'s backstage setting that allows for vaudevillians and female impersonators to intermingle tragedy and drama with patter.[27] Bergson's assertion of the incompatibility of emotion and comedy is problematised in each play, although the two spheres are not always fully integrated. As a result, the more comic scenes, particularly the drag ball scenes, add little to the narrative. Elsewhere, the integration is more successful, as with scenes featuring characters like Margy or Paradise that have their genesis in daily life and fit

[23] Making a dig at censorship, West replaced the feather on one occasion with an unfurled American flag. Hamilton, *The Queen of Camp*, 67.

[24] Watts, *Mae West*, 77.

[25] Hatch, "Mae West", 95.

[26] Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures*, 20.

[27] Rosen, *Adventures of a Jazz Age Lawyer*, 240.

more easily in their evocation of how toughened sex workers and sassy vaudevillians might respond and interact with each other.[28]

In comic scenes like the dialogue between the sex workers, West also lays bare another element that was scandalous for the time, namely, her non-judgmental treatment of sex work. She portrays it neither as sinful nor glamorous.[29] Here, sex work is transactional, unappetizing, and lacking in depth of pleasant feelings for anyone involved. Nevertheless, West's writing vacillates between the gritty and the stylised, since her protagonist upholds existing hegemonic structures to an extent by refusing to marry her wealthy suitor. Instead, Margy proves her point about hypocrisy and vengeance against Clara Stanton by leaving (*Sex* Act III, Scene 2). Margy does not, however, do so without haranguing Clara about her use of wealth to hide her moral and legal corruption – as pertinent an issue now as it was then.

Elsewhere, Margy decries the monstrousness of men, attributing her flaws to them when she says "all the bad" in her was "put there" by the men whom she has encountered in her life (*Sex* Act II, Scene 2). Therefore, the real threat in *Sex* is not the mythicised predatory sex worker, the ruffians around her, or the ills of sex itself, but moral double standards and their exposure. Margy threatens to "dig under the veneer" of respectability to which people like the Stantons cling (*Sex* Act II Scene 1). Because of Margy's identification as lower-class and semi-criminal, to give her the upper hand against her social "betters" was a thoroughly transgressive step to take. Creating such a resolutely working-class figure (as many of Mae West's characters were, and indeed to an extent, so was West herself, however wealthy she became), West relied on her working-class background and experience in burlesque to create a more authentic character, even if her circumstances are pure melodrama.[30] For all the hyperbolic plotting and sensationalised use of sex workers and gay men as subjects, her characters were believable because they were anchored in everyday experience. West attracted criticism for her true-to-life depictions of unconventional characters as a result. Reviews were damning of *Sex* as a "monstrosity" and "destined for the sewer".[31] West was charged with obscenity and spent a few days in prison.[32]

Sex, and to an extent, *The Drag*, reflect the efforts to control sex and performance on and offstage. This conflict reflected a larger societal trend, as cities tried to cope with changes to the urban and political landscape during the early 1900s.[33] Urban change in turn was allied with nationalism and the representation of national or municipal character onstage. The cast of *Sex*, *The Drag*, and *The Pleasure Man* resists reduction to binaries of masculine and feminine or of good and bad. Likewise, Margy oversteps the binaries of the upper and lower class with her engagement to Jimmy

[28] Bergson, *Laughter*, 68.

[29] Hamilton, "Mae West Live", 87.

[30] Poole, "Indecent Ingénues", 526–527.

[31] *New York Daily Mirror*, 30 April 1926, *Sex* clipping file; Hamilton, *The Queen of Camp*, 41.

[32] Hamilton, "Mae West Live", 85.

[33] Mosse, *Sexuality and Nationalism*, 9.

Stanton. Consequently, the audience is forced to question what makes a man or woman, and more importantly, what makes a good person. Female impersonators in West's plays, along with sex workers, problematise long-held images of (white) women as bearers of virtue. In West's work, these typically vilified characters emerge as the moral compass of their respective plays and are shown to be more virtuous than their normative counterparts.[34] The instances where these characters use humour are also significant, since they upset orthodox notions of gender and seriousness. Whereas the gay or dragged-up men are frivolous, Margy is comparatively serious. Effectively, West inverts the association of masculinity with earnestness, and femininity with frivolity. Paradise complicates matters even further, as a female impersonator and gay man who offers scorching rebukes of Rodney Terrill or saucy jokes (*TPM* Act I; Act II Scene 2).

Much of the "badness" of characters like Margy, the men of *The Drag*, or indeed any of West's subsequent characters, lies in their non-normative sexual availability, promiscuity, and assertiveness. Yet, their behaviour contradicts their perceived wickedness and monstrousness in each narrative.[35] Paradise and Margy both counter accusations of monstrousness in their solidarity with characters like Agnes or Mary Ann, with Paradise explicitly saying she came to the aid of "a sister in distress" (*TPM* Act II Scene 2). Here, the unwed assault victim and homosexual in drag are drawn together by shared marginality. Rather than "wicked" or "bad" in the sense of being villainous like Rodney Terrill or Rocky the pimp, West and her characters are transgressive but not "bad" per se, let alone fully monstrous. Such behaviours, along with sex work, transvestism, and homosexuality could be argued to constitute a puzzle for middle-class audiences.[36] Incomprehension and alterity then result in disapproval or demonisation, to be counteracted in the sympathetic or heroic representation of these "puzzling" figures.

West's subjects, and her use of humour, draw parallels between the oppression of sex workers (and women more generally) and of cross-dressers or gay men. Pamela Robertson also argues that West's performance of femininity is a burlesque double-bluff to show the flaws and illogicality of expected models of femininity via comedy and parodic elements.[37] Similarly, Mae West's comedy demonstrates the need for double decoding, to determine how much her material follows or challenges dominant ideas.[38]

Where West's playwriting conforms to dominant stylistic models is the minimal depiction of violence. Many of the most shocking and grotesque elements of the plot in all three plays occur offstage, rather than being made part of the central focus as might be the case in a typical "blood and thunder" melodrama. Agnes' suicide in *Sex*, Rolly's murder in *The Drag*, and Rodney's castration/murder in *The Pleasure Man* are

[34] Ibid, 17.

[35] Tyler, *Screening the Sexes*, 3.

[36] Nereson, "Queens 'campin' onstage", 522.

[37] Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures*, 33.

[38] Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body*, 406.

only spoken of. The latter two incidents occur at the end of the play, undercutting the comical party scenes.

The Drag and Homosexuality: Mad, Monstrous, or Misunderstood?

Where West used her own body and physicality to protest the demonisation of the sex worker in *Sex*, she found proxies in the drag queens of her plays to combat sexual hypocrisy. Her later incorporation of their lines and mannerisms into her own public persona and her exaggeration of femininity was such that she was described in 1934 as the best female impersonator since Bert Savoy, a famously brassy counterpart to the more "ladylike" Julian Eltinge.[39] With her manager, James Timony, West visited Greenwich Village nightspots and invited resident "queens" to *Sex*, and then to auditions afterwards for *The Drag*. Ad libs in rehearsal grew into a script with scope for more improvisation as the driver of the play's comedy, knowing that she could draw on it for freshness, realism, and an edge over concurrent productions (*TD* Act III Scene 1 stage directions reveal ample space for performers to ad lib). "Natural and spontaneous" results from this pre-show process were seen as the primary appeal by the media, even going as far as to suggest tickets should be sold for watching rehearsals.[40] Again, West brought street culture into the theatre in a way that was at once fascinating and threatening, particularly since the drag queens' dialogue was unfamiliar but recognisable enough to be subversive.

There was a longer precedent in depicting same-sex sexuality onstage than might be otherwise believed, and certainly a long history of representing sex work in theatre, opera, and other genres.[41] Where West diverges, however, is not the tragedy of her melodramas, but in her injection of comedy, and the refusal of some characters to behave as tragic figures, victims, or objects of derision. Bringing early twentieth-century gay subculture to a broader audience, she defended her decision by saying that she "glorified" queerness and treated the topic "very sympathetically".[42] This treatment, however, was often framed by dominant ideas of the period, like the "inversion" theory that homosexual men were women in male bodies.[43] Critics have argued that West was less interested in the dignity of her subjects than in exploiting public curiosity.[44] Exploitative or not, West tapped into trends with humour and entertainment that were either current or ahead of the curve, as she did with the taste

[39] Davis, "The Decline of the West", 46 and 82; Goracci, "Playing it Fashionably Queer", 64.

[40] Hamilton, "Mae West Live", 92; Eells and Musgrove, *Mae West: A Biography*, 65.

[41] Curtin, "*We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians*", 17–20.

[42] Hamilton, "Raquel Welch, Mae West Talk" cited in Hamilton, *The Queen of Camp*, 49.

[43] See Bjornsdottir and Rule, "Emotion and Gender Typicality Cue Sexual Orientation Differently in Women and Men".

[44] Hamilton, *The Queen of Camp*, 58.

for sex and violence onstage. Within *The Drag* and *The Pleasure Man* is evidence of burlesque "nance" humour, and the popularity in mainstream theatre for narratives of transgression. Moreover, she anticipated the "pansy craze" in music of the 1930s.[45]

Questions of what constitutes monstrosity in *The Drag* are intermingled and murky, beginning with the expository debate in the play's first scene, between Dr Richmond and Judge Kingsbury (male heterosexual authority figures and *patres familias*) about whether homosexuality is a crime or an affliction. As the media coverage of *The Drag* demonstrated, the public tended to view it as something to be criminalised rather than pathologised.[46] In West's plays, gay men themselves reject both labels and even find them to be laughable, like the etiquettes and societal structures parodied via the ball, or their daily interactions (*TD* Act II, Scene 1; Act III Scene 1).

Outside of the "queens'" circle, gentlemanly manners are prized above masculinity itself, and to neglect them invites equal condemnation as sexually transgressive behaviour. Rolly, for instance, is explicitly criticised as monstrous by Allen Grayson. Not only are Rolly's advances towards Allen rebuffed, he calls Rolly "contemptible" for his treatment of his wife, and for duping the naïve Clair into a loveless marriage of convenience (*TD* Act II). In *The Pleasure Man*, the most gentlemanly figure is Paradise, who simultaneously emerges as a motherly, nurturing character.

Associated with gentlemanly behaviour is the question of class, which is as fluid as the gender presentation of many characters. Like *Sex*, *The Drag* prompted "rage" which was more vociferous because of its references to class difference. When critics of *The Drag* wrote that it "crudely exploited" homosexuality and created an atmosphere more akin to a zoo or freak show, because the play offered a voyeuristic window into New York's gay subculture, and recreated the experience of nightclub slumming within the theatre.[47] Conversely, later plays like Gordon Whitehouse's *Dangerous Corner* suffered less harsh criticism, as did *The Captive*, which had a more genteel setting but was also more linguistically circumspect since terms like "invert" or "lesbian" were never used.[48]

Cross-class mingling appears as threatening in *The Drag* as any camp behaviour, since architects, engineers, taxi drivers and everyday men are portrayed as pursuing sex with other men either as "inverts" or "rough trade". These plays may have offered an additional glimpse of further, more subversive, types of drag that call to mind Margy LaMont's threat to extant social hierarchies. Giada Goracci identifies the pantomime dame and glamour girl as the two dominant styles of early twentieth-century drag.[49] I would argue that there is a third form that is more socially indeterminate, embodied

[45] Visconti, "Too Far West", 100.

[46] Curtin, "*We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians*", 97–98.

[47] "Play on Broadway," *Variety*, 10 February 1954; cited in Curtin, "*We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians*", 303.

[48] Curtin, "*We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians*", 161; also see Bourdet, "The Captive", 83–171.

[49] Goracci, "Playing it Fashionably Queer", 66.

by Bert Savoy's Bowery-inspired "tough girl" and the class-crossing drag queens who are duchesses by night and labourers by day.[50]

Questions about hierarchies of class and performance extend to *The Pleasure Man*. In the play, vaudeville and burlesque are brought to Broadway even more overtly than in the previous two plays and are presented to "respectable" audiences. This decision, while lucrative, was redolent with a frisson of misbehaviour and slumming, upending notions of respectability in performance. Not only are the jokes worthy of vaudeville sketches, but there are "turns" during the drag ball that feature songs and dances (*TD* Act III Scene 1). *The Pleasure Man* replaces skits with patter between performers, while *The Drag* includes fights and slanging matches between queens, which was seen as dredging up crass humour in the theatre.

The world of vaudeville and the drag queens is something wholly allied with conceptions of the low Other and the world of the carnivalesque.[51] Parody, travesty, and festivity merge in a world where heteronormativity is satirised in titles, hierarchies, and behaviours. Here, men are dressed as women, ludic titles like Duchess and "queen" are used and men talk openly about their "husbands". One of the characters, "Hell's Kitchen Kate", goes so far as to quip "which one, dearie, which one?" (*TD* Act II Scene 1). Though representative of real life beyond the theatre, these details appeared threatening to audiences because they blurred demarcations between parodic behaviour onstage and life offstage.

Despite the contempt with which gay men and drag queens were treated, female impersonation was not seen as inherently degenerate or worthy of condemnation when onstage. Female impersonators like Julian Eltinge enjoyed mainstream success, and received praise in the popular press alongside articles that highlighted his virility and pursuit of typically masculine interests when not performing. Bert Savoy was not necessarily seen as an invert for playing more comical and exuberant characters in drag, his homosexuality offstage notwithstanding.[52] The *Pleasure Man* linked female impersonation with male homosexuality by depicting female impersonators who wear drag offstage. This association, which was heretofore less common, drew the ire of critics who viewed professional performers as a class apart from men who cross-dressed for pleasure.[53]

Among the primary devices employed in *The Drag* and *The Pleasure Man* is the deployment of camp as a strategy of subversion. Camp, or "camping" as it is used, becomes a coping mechanism, a weapon, and a means of self-assertion. The over-the-top behaviour of the working-class "queens" and their "camping" in *The Drag* are part of a spectrum, in contrast to David and Rolly. The quartet of Rolly's friends encountered both in and out of drag, demonstrate none of David's sadness or anguish, nor are they in any way ashamed or shy like Rolly. They burst onto the stage to trade

[50] Hamilton, *The Queen of Camp*, 10–12.

[51] Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 7–8.

[52] Curtin, "*We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians*", 18.

[53] Hamilton, *When I'm Bad, I'm Better*, 64, 141, and 143; cited in Schlissel, "Introduction", 28.

cheeky barbs about their conquests, discuss who is more attractive, and compare what they intend to wear to the ball in *The Drag*'s third act (*TD* Act II Scene 1). All four use female names, like Doll and The Duchess, though Winnie uses the same name in and out of drag. Much of the camp dialogue was not scripted, except for a few specific jokes. What the script does show is that the drag queens' scenes are punctuated with shrieks, directions to strike "artistic" poses, and calling each other "dearie" or "her".

Some accusations of awfulness against *The Drag* were not for the subject matter but for its writing and pace.[54] It is perhaps telling that the ad-libbed scene at the drag ball and the scenes featuring the "queens" are what most reviewers discussed, rather than the plot points or the details of West's writing that did not rely on queer argot or cheeky gags. Critics noted that the dialogue from the drag ball and between gay characters needed translation for some audiences, which the press had to provide.[55] West attempted to make homosexuality more legible in general, while also trying to give the play some educational value, with Dr Richmond offering didactic exposition to sneak substance in alongside "slumming" thrills.[56] To some, this exposition appeared more like the dialogue tacked on to pornographic films in a flimsy attempt to present them as educational.[57] The double perspectives of legal and medical characters discuss the medical and psychological or legal implications of the treatment of homosexuality – there is a to-and-fro of discussing a cure alongside advocating a compassionate approach rather than a legally punitive one, arguing for a case of nature over nurture. Here, West used a copy of an unspecified Karl Heinrich Ulrichs book as a prompt for expository dialogue about sexology, which continued between Dr Richmond and Judge Kingsbury later (*TD* Act I Scene 1).

The drag ball subverts and rejects the notion of "inverts" as sick or pitiable, or, except for David, their self-perception as monstrous. Even Rolly, the object of David's unrequited affections, is circumspect in his manner, but not troubled by his inclinations in the same way. West's homosexuals are largely free of self-loathing, and the "queens" use humour to forge a positive identity, providing an early example of camp as a mechanism to cope with or defuse hostility.[58] Similarly, Margy in *Sex* and Paradise in *The Pleasure Man* lacks self-loathing but not self-awareness, and the brazenness of their behaviour is read by some reviewers as monstrous for the absence of shame.

Much of the humour, and the objectionable content (or potentially objectionable content) within plays like *The Drag* and most crucially *The Pleasure Man* is absent and even today presents problems of legibility to an uninitiated reader because the song lyrics from various numbers are not included. Surviving scripts only mention some song titles, and their delivery was so key to the charges of offensiveness that, like Marie

54 Curtin, "*We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians*", 70.

55 Hamilton, *The Queen of Camp*, 55–56.

56 Nereson, "Queens campin' onstage", 519–520.

57 Eells and Musgrove, *Mae West*, 65.

58 Babuscio, "Camp and the Gay Sensibility", 27.

Lloyd and music-hall singers well before *The Pleasure Man* trial, when delivered with perfect decorum, no offence could be taken.[59]

However offensive *The Pleasure Man* and its characters were deemed by critics, Paradise displays virtues that were typically associated with masculinity and femininity together. On one hand, she creates a problematic character for audiences to understand, given her indeterminacy and movement between genders. On the other, her divergent qualities give her a sense of balance. Exhibiting maternal care for Mary Ann alongside assertiveness against Rodney Terrill, Paradise is one of only two characters to directly stand up to Terrill, and challenges notions of what masculine virtues can entail. Terrill is an inveterate womaniser without scruples. Paradise is gay and effeminate but stands her ground and can readily banter with stagehands (*TPM* Act I Scene 1). At its most basic, *The Pleasure Man* is critical of men's exploitation of women (like *Sex*) and of the disapproval of gay men (like *The Drag*), yet the violence of its ending and the queerness of its cast drew attention away from any substantive discussion of sexual hypocrisy.

From the outset, Paradise is wise to Terrill's behaviour, who is positioned as the monster opposing Paradise's protective figure (*TPM* Act II Scene 1). Paradise embodies the heart and brains of the piece, melding comedy and drama. During an argument with Terrill, she employs a very precise form of acerbic humour with the line "If you're a man, thank God, I'm a female impersonator" (*TPM* Act II Scene 2). Paradise deflates Terrill and self-deprecatingly cites her own nature as a female impersonator (with the implicit addition of effeminacy and homosexuality) as a pre-emptive quip at her own expense, leaving Terrill without a comeback. This self-aware humour to critique dominant power structures has continued in drag to the present and is at the heart of drag acts that, like Mae West, discuss serious ideas using drag's inherent comedy and mask to grant the speaker further licence.[60]

Reviews of *The Drag*, as with West's other plays, were schismatic in their assessment of the content and delivery. Some reviewers had no issue with homosexuality but were appalled by the play; conversely, others expected filth but found it relatively tame.[61] Some of the same criticisms were levelled against *The Pleasure Man*, calling it "coarse, vulgar and poorly written".[62] Elsewhere, Mae West was criticised for vulgar and false sentiment in exploiting her subjects.[63] West responded to this criticism by arguing that audiences at the time were still not sufficiently mature to grasp the significance of her play. She positioned herself as speaking out against bigotry by trying to enlighten viewers, and she viewed herself as ahead of the curve in terms of teaching or

[59] Rosen, *Adventures of a Jazz Age Lawyer*, 247.

[60] Doonan, Drag: *The Complete Story*, 138.

[61] Curtin, "*We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians*", 81–82.

[62] "Raid Mae West Play, Seize 56 at Opening", cited in Curtin, "*We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians*", 133–134; Gabriel, "Last Night's First Night", cited in Curtin, "*We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians*", 133–134.

[63] *Variety*, 2 February 1927, cited in Curtin, "*We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians*", 84.

knowledge.[64] Following the court case attempting to prosecute the cast of *The Pleasure Man* for obscenity, an article entitled "Sex in the Theatre" was published, discussing West's early plays. It quoted her expressing a dedication to educating audiences about issues, "truths" and "problems" around sex in society. She argued that her depiction of questionable and transgressive sexual behaviours had an educational function, and that later plays like *Diamond Lil* drew attention to the need to dispense with outdated moral double standards.[65]

Mae West's Legacy

The immediate impact of West's plays was seen in the 1927 Wales Padlock Law and legislation to limit questionable material, which made the court cases prosecuting her plays the testing ground for new laws that ultimately proved toothless. In the slightly longer term, her work as a playwright translated into privilege when she got to Hollywood, despite mixed successes and receptions.[66] Characters, dialogue and scenarios from each play were also adapted into her films. West's plays provide the nucleus for her own work and character and set a precedent for subsequent representations of minorities onstage and onscreen. Jokes and names used by drag queens were refined and reprised by West herself onscreen, and elements like vaudevillian troupes, banter between maids and West's frequent appearances as a sex worker or "kept woman" were all continued in the films where she had sufficient creative control.

Later in her career, Mae West boosted her prominence not only as a key figure in the "Canon of Camp", but as a celebrity at the vanguard of gay rights as it existed in her lifetime.[67] During interviews, she explicitly expressed support for the LGBTQ+ community (or at least, for gay men), despite framing it with dated language.[68] In telling and retelling her story, both as the furore erupted around her plays and in later life when she was an established star with a vocally queer fanbase, Mae West not only made sure to position her work as humanizing typically vilified minorities, but in the process, elevating herself to the status of saviour. By her reckoning, the goddess of sex had become a mother goddess to the oppressed.

Interviews given during the 1950s had said nothing of the sort, suggesting either revisionist history (hagiography) engineered by West, or greater opportunities to vocalise support for LGBTQ+ people in a way that was not possible in McCarthy's America. Some critiques during the same period argued that she embodied exploitative

64 *Parade*, September 1929, cited in Curtin, "*We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians*", 84.

65 Curry, *Too Much of a Good Thing*, 3.

66 Hatch, "Mae West", 87.

67 See Sontag, *Notes on "Camp"*.

68 West, *Goodness Had Nothing To Do With It*, 80 and 83.

heteronormative images of women and female impersonation, in the context of her own act as an over-the-top "female impersonator" rather than her onstage characters like Paradise or the other impersonators. It was after her death that a re-evaluation of her *oeuvre* came to recognize her performance as a parody of social constructions of gender.[69] This reappraisal, combined with a fanbase among gay men and her status as a camp icon, has led to the creation of epithets like "Mother Superior of the Faggots", a title that she may not have found entirely disagreeable.[70]

Not all of West's impact has been judged as positive. Kaier Curtin argues that *The Drag* and to a lesser extent *The Pleasure Man* did more harm than good in terms of representing homosexuality to a heterosexual audience.[71] In this way, West's impact is comparable to other now-iconic texts of recent years, such as *RuPaul's Drag Race*, which could be argued as a double-edged sword in terms of increasing queer visibility at the same time as contributing to its commodification and a degree of exploitation as a reality-TV series.[72] Curtin argues that West sensationalised the representation of gay male sexuality in a similar way that can be said of texts like *Drag Race* or *The Adventures of Priscilla: Queen of the Desert*, which potentially foster assumptions that the behaviour and style exhibited are representative of the entire community.[73]

Today, invocations of Mae West rely more on her prominence as a camp icon and gay idol than any substantive engagement with LGBTQ+ issues, or her stance on race relations, though her status as a feminist icon is sometimes mentioned. Her prominence is primarily due to her film appearances rather than her stage career, which continued after only eleven years in film. Her camp iconicity became part of a referential loop from the 1960s until the early twenty-first century, though her prominence as a muse gradually dwindled. Several well-known female impersonators who appeared as West each seized on different aspects of The Mae West Character to create new "erotic and comic links" via impersonation, as they did in their impersonation of other celebrities like Tallulah Bankhead, Marlene Dietrich, or Bette Davis.[74] Charles Pierce played on the caricatural elements of West's persona, creating an over-the-top parody.[75] Craig Russell, who had briefly worked with Mae West and praised her for teaching him what he knew about comedy, performed musical acts based on West and several other performers.[76] Marketing himself as a "Glamour Monster" (the title of his 1987 record), Russell's was as a gentler form of parody and impersonation, drawing directly from film quotes and song lyrics. Jim Bailey, a gender "illusionist", performed as West in

69 Curry, *Too Much of a Good Thing*, 114.

70 Tyler, *Screening the Sexes*, 1.

71 Curtin, "*We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians*", 137.

72 Buck, "Et Tu Ru?".

73 Ibid, 102.

74 Dinshaw et al, "Theorizing Queer Temporalities".

75 kongandgooshow Babu, "Charles Pierce Mae West", https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ul--vYHV92A.

76 Maclean, "Resurrecting Russell".

a closer style to Julian Eltinge and the female impersonators of Mae West's time in vaudeville, melding songs and patter.[77]

In the last decade, West has reappeared as a point of reference since a 2016 episode of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, where contestant Alaska Thunderfuck appropriated the "irresistible repeatability" of Mae West's dialogue, with unique variations on West's quips.[78] Thunderfuck's choice of impersonation was subsequently praised as a "herstory" lesson for viewers who had previously not heard of Mae West. RuPaul Charles has explicitly acknowledged West as one of several amalgamated influences in the creation of their drag persona, prompting Charles' self-identification with Frankenstein's monster.[79] In 2020, West was once again referenced on the show, by which time knowledge of her *oeuvre* was treated as assumed knowledge.[80] Moreover, throughout subsequent seasons like Season 5 of *Drag Race UK* in 2023, Mae West quips and punning adaptations thereof have frequently been used by judges as comic appraisals of contestants' runway looks, as has the adoption of a Westian drawl.

Positive representation

What is most remarkable about Mae West's plays is that the more outrageous characters survive where others do not. Though it is ambiguous whether Margy follows through with a decision to leave sex work, and the homosexuals in *The Drag* remain "uncured", none of them die or are punished for their behaviour (that is, for being sex workers or being gay). They are constructed as sympathetic but made of sterner stuff, and they help other characters during each play rather than acting out of self-interest or malice. West brings liminal figures from liminal spaces into the limelight as the central focus, not as props to a hero's journey or as antagonists to be defeated. From dressing rooms, brothels, and secret parties, characters as mysterious as they are criticised are ultimately created as more rounded characters, setting a new precedent towards positive representation on stage and eventually in film.

By using humour and by giving her misunderstood characters redeeming qualities, West's plays recognised non-normative lifestyles in a way that other authors did not. Undermining heteronormative rules, however, plays right into her credo that those who are easily shocked should be shocked more often.[81]

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77 Senelick, *The Changing Room*, 386–387.

78 Failler, "Excitable Speech", 95; *RuPaul's Drag Race*, "All Stars Snatch Game".

79 RuPaul, *Lettin' It All Hang Out*, 64.

80 RuPaul's Drag Race, "Gay's Anatomy".

81 Mae West, quoted in Rutledge.

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