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Acting Out: Gypsy Rose Lee, Burlesque Culture, and Sylvia Plath

The summer that Sylvia Plath spent in New York as a guest editor for *Mademoiselle* was a critical landmark in the writer's life. The site of her immersion in the overlapping spheres of literary culture, professional writing, and women's fashion was the Barbizon Hotel for Women. The hotel stood in 1953, as it does now, at the corner of the famous Lexington Avenue and 63rd Street. Just a few paces west on 63rd Street, at the Northwestern corner of the block, was the stylish apartment owned by Gypsy Rose Lee, the "literary stripper". The proximity of these two women to one another, rather than an intersection, is significant to understanding the impact that burlesque culture had on Plath's literary career. In fact, twenty-year-old Plath's final gesture to fashionable, feminine New York bears something of the burlesque: On her last night at the Barbizon, after weeks of exhaustive performances before demanding and famous senior editors and photographers, Plath hoisted her suitcase to the roof where the other undergraduate guest editors collected. The suitcase contained all of the complimentary clothing articles *Mademoiselle* had showered on Plath and her young colleagues. Before a tipsy, amused crowd, Plath "tossed each slip, stocking, sheath, and skirt into the night sky" (Winder 200). These garments, particularly the undergarments, held up one by one and then dropped before a crowd onto a public street, allude to the spectacle of a woman's removing her inner and outer layers before an audience. Plath's act has long been seen as a private gesture, especially since she fictionalized it as such in the *Bell Jar*.¹ However, in actuality, Plath had a stage, two audiences (the "street" and her colleagues on the roof), a teasingly provocative act, and a volubly ironic subtext.

Plath's act reveals the influence of burlesque or striptease culture. In fact, it is possible to see the dropped flimsy garments as the first of her engagements with burlesque and her poem "Lady Lazarus" as one of the last. During the nine years separating these events, Plath grapples with the ramifications of the exposed or disrobed female body and the attendant silencing of her voice. As voluble, witty 1930s burlesquers like Gypsy Rose Lee gave way to silent strip-teasers of the fifties, Plath's images of exposed female bodies would move in the opposite direction. Undressed bodies would gradually acquire voice in her later work. Much like Lee, whom the young writer referenced in her fiction, Plath would insist on coupling voice and irony with stripping; she would burlesque the act of burlesque by simultaneously suggesting the body's sexuality while defiantly deflecting attention from it to the culture that promoted its exploitation; she would suggest exposure while revealing little to her audience.

On the roof, Plath, tipsy and disenchanted with her experience at *Mademoiselle*, stood completely clothed, wordless but for her laughing (Winder 200). What she had yet to learn is that a woman's audible voice must accompany her burlesquing of feminine exposure, or else the ironic subtext is missed entirely. Not even her female audience on the roof fully understood her message about the restrictive and prescriptive fashions that consume, preoccupy, and define (in total) women. After all, Plath had earlier offered the complimentary garments stowed in her suitcase to one girlfriend, who shrank from taking them because she believed they were particularly fine versions of a woman's essentials and necessary for Plath's social and professional life (200). Even Plath's closest friend in New York missed the darker irony of the tossed slips completely, commenting, "It was just fun—a 'good-bye to all that' sort of thing" (200).

Long before Plath was born, Boston—the home of her childhood and youth—was astir with burlesque activity. In 1891, Bostonians formed the New England Watch and Ward Society to curtail the "burlesque shows, penny arcades, tattoo parlors, and cafes that were really fronts for houses of prostitution" (Miller 8). By the turn of the century, burlesque could be found in four of the city's prominent theaters, surprisingly even the Howard Atheneum (Shteir 54). In the 1930s, strippers' performances at the "Old Howard" amid rowdy crowds shouting for more skin were often interrupted by censors of the Watch and Ward Society. Ticket salesmen trained to recognize censors pressed a pedal that flashed a warning light to women on the stage, cautioning them to provide the "clean" Boston version of their performance.² The Old Howard would become synonymous with vaudeville, burlesque, and Gypsy Rose Lee, whom popular culture places on its stage.³ Lee certainly performed in 1933 at Boston's Park Theatre, which was owned by Billy Minsky, famed proprietor of New York City and other east coast burlesque clubs (Abbott 268), and she would later return by bringing her autobiographical play *The Naked Genius* to Wilbur Theatre in 1943 (161).

Built in the eighteenth century, the Howard Atheneum was the oldest theater in America, and when its stage, which once featured Shakespearean plays, began to feature burlesque, it was a sign of

prominent American men's infatuation with striptease. Harvard students and professors vehemently opposed Boston's Watch and Ward Society – which had also sought to ban Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* for pornography – and the students, along with members of the faculty, supported the burlesque industry.⁴ Claiming that the Old Howard's burlesque shows were as much a part of the general education requirement as English or history, or at least as well attended as those classes, Post World War II students joked that one course sequence requirement was Harvard Atheneum I, II, III, and IV (Shteir 84).

Minsky himself courted Harvard's elite young students by handing out free tickets to striptease shows in his New York theaters. The sons of prominent citizens enthralled by burlesquers included those beyond Harvard. In 1935 *The Princeton Tiger* interviewed Gypsy Rose Lee, and she flirted with them while pitting them against the students from Harvard and Yale, who also had made contact with her (Frankel 30). It is not surprising then that a Massachusetts student population familiar with the burlesque clubs and Lee's notoriety was well established by the time Plath attended college.

Plath, who dated Ivy League boys while at Smith College in the early 1950s, records numerous dates with such students in her journals. One entry in particular tells of a date with, to her mind, one very dull Bill, a young man who obviously took part in the college-boy culture surrounding East-coast burlesque. For Plath, Bill's crimes ranged from proposing lackluster activities (listening to music) in his bedroom to being preoccupied with memories of his former girlfriend. What moved Plath to ire was his decision to bring her to a burlesque performance after dinner—an event she called “that disgustingly puerile burlesque show which turns my stomach when I think of it” (24). For a young woman who used her journal to study her scholastic, artistic, social, and sexual maturation, this event marked a setback in her growth. Sexually, she could not interest the young Bill or profit from his own sexual energy. Plath often sought to harness and redirect sexual energy toward her creative endeavors. She saw her creative work as “a sublimation of my sexual desires” (*Journals* 21). “I need,” she wrote, “some boy, any boy, to be captivated by my appearance” (24). There was to be a reciprocal effect in attraction. What sickened Plath was likely the male viewers' one-sided consumption of women's publicly bare bodies rather than the private, personal captivation or awe that she craved. While sexual attractiveness meant empowerment to Plath, exposure and nakedness resulted in the diminishment of power. At the end of the date, Plath carefully masks her own feelings about Bill and the date in order to salvage the evening and recuperate her sense of failure.

There is no evidence that Plath's parents ever brought her as a child or adolescent into the historic theater district, or more specifically, into Scollay Square—the location of the Old Howard and other nightclubs and bars. Yet in 1958 Plath knew enough about the scene to make Scollay Square a sightseeing destination after she and her husband Ted Hughes moved to Boston. From their apartment, they could look out across the Charles River and study the quiet sailboats, or they could enjoy the neon lights of downtown Boston, even the seedy side. Although Plath had already made at least one visit upon her arrival, she made a point of visiting Scollay Square again at midnight and was awarded with the titillating sights of “gypsies, madams, a paddy-wagon, a lit tattoo-shop” (Plath, *Journals* 419). She had also visited Washington Street, where the famed Minsky brothers' purchased the Park Theater and renamed it Minsky's Park Burlesque in the early 1930s. The residue of the Minsky brothers' business could be seen in Plath's description of the neighborhood: “Walked Washington Street, turned away from dark, cavernous bars with ‘No Ladies Allowed’” (418).

A few days after visiting Scollay Square, Plath dragged Hughes back to a tattoo parlor she had seen on her midnight walk and felt compelled to revisit during the day. Once there, the two were invited to come in from outside of the store window and observe the templates of rose, butterfly, panther, and eagle tattoos that lined the walls of the parlor. Plath was treated to a show of sorts in being allowed to observe the tattooist's work on two men, and they no doubt enjoyed her near-fainting episode. The experience led her to begin immediately writing “The Fifteen-Dollar Eagle”, a story borrowing heavily from her visits and her untutored but inquisitive perspective. Although Plath never mentions Gypsy Rose Lee, burlesque, or female nudity in her journal entries for Scollay Square or Washington Street, the short story, written in 1959, is saturated with these aspects of Boston culture.

The interlocking themes of burlesque, exposure, masking, gazing, and spectacle that are apparent in Plath's account of her date with Bill occur again in “The Fifteen-Dollar Eagle”. The story is about a tattoo artist who began his career inking identification numbers on women in the armed forces, a job that began his interest in viewing, handling, and adorning those forbidden parts of a woman's body. The artist's own tattoos include iconic images of Boston: a “schooner in full sail over a rose-and-holly-leaf ocean on his right biceps” and “Gypsy Rose Lee flexing her muscled belly on the left” (94). While Plath nowhere explicitly mentions the burlesque star in her entries about old Boston, this short story does. Part of the tattooist's repertoire of artistic creations includes other burlesque-inspired images: “cowgirls, hula girls, mermaids and movie queens, ruby-nippled and bare as you please” (94). Carmey, the tattooist,

relates his history and describes his professional detachment to a young unnamed woman, the first person narrator of the story who is testing her bravado by watching a sailor receive a tattoo. Carmey implies his voyeuristic interest in and proprietorship of the women he has tattooed in recounting stories of their hesitancy to request tattoos on their buttocks, breasts, and thighs as well as in presenting a stack of photographs of these women's tattoos. The one item he cannot convince women to pose for is the tattoo of butterfly wings positioned on the inner thighs. His description of the tattoo and its movement evoke the burlesquer's distinctive way of walking:

One wing on the front of each thigh. You know how butterflies on a flower make their wings flutter, ever so little? Well, any move a woman makes, these wings look to be going in and out, in and out. I'd like a photograph of that so much I'd practically do a butterfly for free. (103)

The invitation to glimpse naked thighs, enjoy the motion of sashaying, and succumb to the delicate glamour evoked by the butterfly are all hallmarks of 1930s burlesque. The speaker resists Carmey's suggestion that she be tattooed in this fashion, perhaps by remembering her earlier fantasy of his wife as a "come-on" for his business. In the speaker's fantasy, the wife, stripped and silenced, is on a fairground stage (another popular venue for burlesque): "Laura, the Tattooed Lady, a living masterpiece, sixteen years in the making. Not a white patch on her, ladies and gentlemen—look all you want to" (96). Laura, exposed by being bare and an inked spectacle, is doubly vulnerable and disempowered. The language "pitching" Laura as an attraction clearly anticipates that of Plath's later poem, "Lady Lazarus" (1962): "Gentlemen, ladies / These are my hands / my knees" (30-2). As Laura's antithesis, however, Lady Lazarus, will co-opt and parody the male voice and gaze that seek to appropriate and exploit women's bodies, but for now, Laura's exhibition means powerlessness to Plath.

It is not surprising that by the end of "The Fifteen-Dollar Eagle," Carmey's wife, Laura, enters and immediately commands the male-dominated space of the tattoo shop. Her body, despite the narrator's expectations that it be perpetually, scintillatingly undressed and "lithe, supple . . . [with] a butterfly poised for flight on each breast, roses blooming on her buttocks, a gold-guarding dragon on her back and Sinbad the Sailor in six colors on her belly," is actually completely covered (104). Laura is "wrapped to the chin" in a coat, and her hair is mostly covered by a scarf. She chooses to sit, not stand, and her willful silence along with her unwavering gaze fixes and emasculates the male spectators, even her husband, in the shop. Plath's message is that the unseen, lily-white, and carefully guarded female body commands the most power. Silence is also prominent—a sternly silent and well-concealed body prevents the threat of a woman's body being commandeered, exhibited, undressed, and consumed.

Yet, Plath wishes for the possibility of a woman unfettered by sexual constraints. Concerned with harnessing the power of raw sexuality that would enable her artistically, Plath experiences defeat first in her college date's attitude toward female nakedness as one-sided, male-oriented consumption and second in her portrait of Carmey—"the poet with the needle and dye, an artist with a heart". Carmey is the male artist, delighting in the flesh of sleek women, and his wife, the narrator imagines, is a breathing, autonomous piece of art and reciprocally liberated by her tattooed body. The narrator fantasizes about Carmey's wife as though she is seductively, powerfully bare on stage, her body figuratively tattooed "with Experience written all over her" (104). She is, to the narrator, "a woman to learn from in this life" (104).

But the narrator is wrong. "I should have known better," says the anonymous voice echoing Plath's experiences at the parlor. Carmey speaks of his unmarked wife with a monk-like reverence that also leaves her without any artistic role. She is neither art, nor artist. In fact, she cleans his shop. Finding no blend of the sexual and the artistic in this fictional relationship between Carmey and his wife, Plath would turn to contemplating the sexuality of the artist's sensual, young, child-bearing wife.

Two years later, Plath writes "Day of Success" (1960), a short story that follows a young wife for a day as she agonizes about her husband's fidelity. Like Plath at the time of the story's composition, Ellen is a self-conscious new mother with an attractive and literary husband for whom she acts as secretary by sending out submission packets, safeguarding his sacrosanct writing hours, and receiving and fielding calls from publishers and editors. Unlike Carmey's wife, Ellen's presence and power diminish throughout the story; she grabs at power by attempting to refashion the type of feminine sexuality burlesque made visible. The woman she perceives as a threat to her marriage is a "career woman": a confident, authoritative television producer made attractive by her success and her self-assuredness. For Ellen, homebound, aproned, and covered in baby food, the producer's attraction is augmented by her imagined fine clothes, impeccable style, and abundant red hair.

Not long after imagining a high-powered female seductress, Ellen colors the producer, Denise Kay, as a hyper-sexualized and fully staged spectacle. Ellen has taken her child to the doctor's office, where she flips through ladies' magazines and dejectedly internalizes their language and values: "I'm homespun, obsolete as last year's hemline" (84). Page after page presents "self-possessed fur-, feather-,

and jewel-bedecked models who gazed back at her from the pages with astoundingly large, limpid eyes” (85). In a passage that recalls Plath’s days with *Mademoiselle*, Ellen animates these models, who are expertly coiffed and provocatively posed in a tableau vivant and extends, with equal parts irony and defeat, the fantasy the magazine proposes:

[T]hese women woke dewy-eyed and pink-cheeked, yawning daintily as a cat does, their hair even at daybreak, a miraculously intact turret of gold, russet, blue-black or perhaps lavender-tinted silver. They would rise, supple as ballerinas, to prepare an exotic breakfast for the man-of-their-heart—mushrooms and creamy scrambled eggs, say or crabmeat on toast—trailing about a sparkling American kitchen in a foamy negligee, satin ribbons fluttering like triumphal banners.... (85)

From the moment of their rising, these women are to be viewed,; their stylized gestures are meant to tantalize presumably male gazes. The scene blends the self-effacing domesticity of the times with the posing and teasing associated with the staged female performer. The negligee, a common element of both women’s magazines and burlesque stages, becomes an ambiguous symbol. On one hand, it is the garment that accompanies the culture of male appeasement and female service, which is apparent in the models’ preparing rich and deeply satisfying dishes. On the other hand, it becomes a garment of empowerment. Ellen changes her fantasy after envisioning Denise Kay among the women, who now recline and “have breakfast brought to them in bed, like proper princesses, on a sumptuous tray” (85). The negligee has somehow reversed the gendered roles that accompany serving and being served, though it cannot escape the shadow of its earlier context.

The negligee, as well as the corset, is a suitable symbol for the link between the fashion industry (inclusive of designers, department stores, advertisements, and magazines) and the burlesque stage. While it is common knowledge that burlesque stars like Gypsy Rose Lee performed in corsets before American soldiers during World War II, it is relatively unknown that many American department stores used similar acts to attract these same soldiers after the war. In an effort to cultivate men as consumers, stores boasted separate shopping areas for the busy, discerning man, who avoided the effeminacy of browsing or leisurely shopping (Whitaker 50). Not long after, stores advertised special shopping hours during the holidays for men, particularly when women were fully engaged in cooking or planning large meals at home. Male shoppers in stores ranging from Connecticut to Washington were treated to “playboy antics” or shows of attractive female models wearing the store’s clothes, including lingerie (50). At one Cleveland store, men were even served alcohol to better enjoy the show (50).

Meanwhile, burlesque had moved into the women’s magazines. In 1935, *Vogue* included a sketch of a nude Gypsy Rose Lee with her typewriter. In 1943, *Mademoiselle* printed two separate articles written by Gypsy Rose Lee. The March article, “What’s New in War-Wolves”, described her encounters with soldiers, sailors, and marines during their temporary leave from the warfront. Laden with layers of irony, the piece contrasts the realities of Lee’s performing for soldiers, and unexpectedly, their girlfriends—even meeting soldiers’ mothers—with Lee’s fantasies of either playing the sweetheart ready to give her virginity to a noble, death-marked youth or falling as sexual prey to a pack of lusty, animalistic men. In 1959, after the launch of Lee’s musical *Gypsy*, *Vogue* republished a photograph of Lee in her 1933 stage costume: a see-through, netted body-suit with rose petals pasted strategically for easy removal.

A perusal of the 1959 issues of *Vogue* suggests that Lee’s burlesque costume was not out of place among the magazine’s lingerie advertisements and features. Figures in filmy negligees meant to accent slight, bare shoulders and necks and curve-hugging girdles and curve-enhancing corsets are as numerous as the text on the pages. The sketched or posed women enact a posture similar to Lee’s in her 1933 photograph. Lee leans tentatively against a tall Greek-inspired urn, one hand draped across its expanding, curvaceous swell, and the other hand placed atop the urn’s mouth. She faces the camera with dreamy, heavy-lidded eyes. Lee’s photograph would have been even more appropriate in issues from the thirties. In 1939, *Vogue* printed a photograph of five women posed as Greek caryatids in a variety of silken corsets (Probert 38-9). Their heads, along with their dropped eyes, tilt down to emphasize the length of their bare, bent arms and neck. *Vogue*’s allusions to Greek statuary or pottery illustrated editors’ beliefs in “a good diet and plenty of exercise, in addition to good corseting, for the attainment of the ideal figure” (Probert 54). Readers like Plath could count on seeing image after image of the tightly fitted corsets and diaphanous negligees inspired by the late thirties along with the strapless brassieres, silken knee-length slips, and sheer dressing-gowns of the fifties (55). In fact, the link between lingerie and the bare forms of the stage was not lost on a young Plath, who as a girl, surrounded by her mother’s fashion magazines, created and outfitted her paper dolls “in pinup pose,” in “saucy Rockette frocks,” and

“creations [that] were flat-out burlesque” (Winder 20). Just as burlesque featured underwear as outerwear, *Vogue* urged women to openly study an undergarment as though it were not merely the outer garment entirely, but the body itself: “Every woman who’s reached the age of fashion-reason knows it: her figure’s as contemporary as her corsetry” (54). Or as Ellen (Plath’s heroine in “Day of Success”) puts it, “I’m [as] . . . obsolete as last year’s hemline” (85).

The anxiety that Ellen feels is one that reaches beyond the surface of her clothing to exhibit the lack demonstrated by her lingerie, underwear, and ultimately, her gendered body. Recognizing the kind of power available to some women in their nudity, but suspicious of the sustainability of that power and of such women’s relatively low value in the eyes of men, Ellen attempts to harness the power that staged women—both in burlesque and in the magazine—temporarily wield. Returning home, Ellen places the baby in her playpen, then luxuriously, even lovingly, bathes and perfumes her body. As she slips on “a royal blue silk Japanese jacket. . . [that is] an exquisite whispery, sapphire-sheened piece of finery that seemed to have no business whatsoever in her commonsensical world,” she clothes herself in the attire of exotic and erotic fantasy. The look is complete with a “pair of steep black heels” and the walk—“a couple of tentative waltz steps”—is perfected (89). However, the moment is an ambiguous one, for Ellen unravels “her *coronet* of braids” for a more seductive “topknot which [sic] she anchored precariously with a few pins” (89).⁵ In adopting a “precariously” sexualized power, Ellen gives up the crown of sensible, capable womanhood.

Plath’s distrust of the visible, unrestrained female body fits with Kathleen Lant’s argument in “The Big Strip Tease: Female Bodies and Male Power in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath” that though Plath “longed. . . to uncover the self, to unmask, to strip her self bare” (635), she initially understood the body to be “an icon of the poet’s vulnerability” (625). Lant reminds us that Plath was attracted to the tropes of nakedness and bareness in Robert Lowell’s confessional poetry, which had its origins in Alan Ginsberg and Walt Whitman’s use of the free and commanding bared male body. Yet Plath’s desire to achieve the same effect cannot be realized, especially since the female body in the 1950s was typically viewed as a vulnerable body at risk to sexual violence (627). If men’s bodies were conceptualized as anatomically privileged in that the phallus was both weapon and pen, then women’s bodies were bereft of both defensive and creative artistic powers (627). At this point in Plath’s career, the body in the act of burlesque symbolizes for Plath both of these weaknesses. The staged woman, fixed front and center, is subject to barely restrained masculine desires and is the creation and puppet of a male director or artist like Carmey in “The Fifteen-Dollar Eagle”. Or as in “Day of Success”, the creative woman, whose artistry is expressed in her ability to create a child, appreciate and judge her husband’s literary worth, and even substitute an authentic Japanese bedjacket for a commonplace negligee, risks losing the esteem and attention of her artistic husband to a more sensuous, more sexually provocative model of womanhood.

Despite Plath’s initial reservations of women’s exposed vulnerability on the stage, scholars, historians, and burlesque performers themselves have argued that the strip-teaser has the power to refigure social conceptions of women. Despite the fact that more privileged members of society relegate burlesquers to a low social position and use discourse to construct and devalue strip-teasers’ identities, Robert Allen in *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* argues that these women offered from the stage a counter-discourse that could “invert the hierarchy and, worse yet, threaten to call into question the right of higher discourses to determine the vertical order of culture” (26). As examples, he cites performers who responded to the nineteenth-century cult of True Womanhood by mocking opponents of women’s suffrage on the stage and engaging in gender-bending (16). Middle-class audiences of mixed sexes delighted in female performers’ donning tights, swords, and other masculine forms of apparel, adopting masculine behaviors like smoking and shearing their hair, and performing dangerous feats, like riding horses on stage. One woman proclaimed herself a Madison belle as she smoked a cigar and mooned over her lover in a song (17). Allen argues that these mid-nineteenth-century performances called into question and renegotiated the set parameters of womanhood, but that by the nineteen fifties the silent body as spectacle had largely displaced satirical discourse by eliminating the performer’s speaking voice. The movement of burlesque from private theatres to nightclubs mid-twentieth-century could have further tipped the balance of control in the favor of male audience members. Nightclubs during Plath’s time had exchanged the stage for the runway, where men could more easily reach burlesquers, and expected performers to mingle amid groping, inebriated men, who often became more than mere spectators (Frankel 35).

Objecting to Allen’s claim that burlesque became less transgressive as it moved into movie theaters (and by extension night clubs and carnivals) dominated by male audiences, Eric Shaefer argues in “The Obscene Seen: Spectacle and Transgression in Postwar Burlesque Films” that the burlesque film “had the potential to be socially transgressive in much the same way that Allen describes the first nineteenth century burlesque shows as inversive/transgressive” (52). Counter to the dominant American impulse that would reach its height in the 1950s, these performances depicted female bodies

that rejected domesticity, containment, and privacy and opted for excess and exhibitionism (53). Even if many women were as voiceless in their burlesquing as Plath herself believed, their performances of relentless, unchecked desire left men similarly speechless and their power deposed (62). On the other hand, films that included language often included subversive body comedy, which used the pun in the form of a double entendre “center[ing] on sexual desire, prowess, or bodily functions” (59).

The famous Gypsy Rose Lee was neither voiceless nor any less subversive than early burlesquers. In fact, with her particular style of burlesque accompanied by her spoken narrative “A Stripteaser’s Education”, she serves as a forebear of Plath’s “Lady Lazarus”, whose voice also frames, rivals, and undercuts “the big reveal”. Known as the Literary Stripper, Lee developed a new form of burlesque in which she stripped while she talked and exhibited her elite literary knowledge. She joked to the crowd that as she slipped off layers of clothes she was otherwise thinking of Cezanne or Van Gogh’s work or musing over a Racine tragedy.⁶ “A Stripteaser’s Education” toyed with the expectations and desires of Lee’s crowd. To admirers’ questions of how such an intelligent woman had fallen into a life of vaudeville and burlesque, she supplied a ridiculous biography:

Now a strip-teaser’s education requires years of concentration
And for the sake of illustration, take a look at me.
I began at the age of three, learning ballet at the Royal Imperial School
in Moscow. And how I suffered and suffered for my Art.
Then of course, Sweet Briar, ah those dear college days.
And after four years of Sociology
Zoology, Biology, and Anthropology
My education was complete. (Shteir, *Striptease* 185)

Her narrative subverts expectations at multiple levels: she works to deflect scrutiny from her actual private life and biography, flaunts a wit and voice that rivals the attraction of her disrobing body, and reflects a knowledge of a more privileged, upper class lifestyle usually denied the stripper, and very likely, her average observer. Lee’s sense of humor was so successfully disruptive that men occasionally complained, as one did, that she “makes a joke of the thing” (Frankel 26). In parodying the act of burlesque and its spectators, Lee was able to make audience members uncomfortably self-aware.

Both Lee’s narrative and act worked to create tension over the inner/outer dichotomy. Her performance was distinct in that she stripped from “the inside out” and removed “inner layers of clothing while keeping on some of the outer layers” (Shteir 186). While she kept her blouse and skirt on, she removed undergarments like garters, stockings, and petticoats. (The final item to be removed was always the skirt.)⁷ This gives the impression that the audience is privy from the start to her most intimate self, her interior and core. The narrative happily deconstructs this impression by constantly constructing identities or masks through which Lee could dazzle her audience and continue to perform. In one instant, she transforms from a famous stripper to a college student, a scholar, a fashionista, a wealthy starlet, a dutiful daughter, a churchgoer, and a domestic homebody. The rest of her script continued in this way:

And the frantic music changes, then off to my cue,
But I only think of all the things I really ought to do.
Wire Leslie Howard, cable Noel Coward
Go to Bergdorf’s for my fitting, buy the yarn for my mother’s knitting
Put preserves up by the jar and make arrangements for my church bazaar. 185)

Lee’s script presents her in all of the roles available to and expected of women at the time, but the script is also hilarious in that no 1930s or 1950s woman could theoretically be all of these personalities at the same time. Not only does Lee not bare all of herself, but she bares all by mirroring the time and culture in which she performs.

While Lee subversively denies the audience a glimpse beneath her surface, she also parodies mainstream societal values. Several of her lines evoked the frugal domesticity that depression-era society esteemed and that cold war culture, grown nostalgic, romanticized. Quiet, genteel domesticity celebrated in women’s magazines or in newspaper columns and advertisements is evoked by Lee’s supposed acts of canning, knitting, dutifully tending to one’s mother, attending church, and supporting the community through small fairs. Lee’s decision to change the name of her decades-old act from “A Stripteaser’s Education” to “The Psychology of a Stripteaser” alluded to and parodied the popularity of

Freudian psychology in 1950s culture (Shteir 62). She likens psychoanalysis to stripping and nods at the armchair Freudian in the lines “Now the things that go on, in a strip-teaser’s mind, / Would give you no end of surprise, / But if you are psychologically inclined, / There is more to see than meets the eye” (Shteir, *Striptease* 185).

Surprisingly, much of Plath’s “Lady Lazarus” shows a markedly different attitude to stripping than in her earlier short stories. Perhaps in leaving behind a failed marriage that noble domesticity could not save and feeling exposed and studied by family and friends, Plath was more inclined to thematically embrace exposure and vulnerability, and like Lee, outfit them with verbal barbs. Even if Plath somehow never heard or read Lee’s popular narrative or others’ many imitations of it, studying Lee’s example prods us to acknowledge similar choices Plath makes in pitting the voice against the gaze and the body that is revealed against the body that was expected.⁸ After Plath’s speaker invites the “peanut-crunching crowd”, “the gentlemen, [the] ladies” to witness “the big strip tease,” directing their gaze to her hands and knees, she delivers a narrative of her history in stripping that echoes Lee’s “A Stripteaser’s Education” (27-34). Her narrative also starts with her childhood, albeit a dark one—the moment she first discovered at ten years of age that she had a talent for dying (37). Her claim that “dying is an art” echoes Lee’s supposed schooling in highbrow European institutions, as does Lady Lazarus’ insistence that she has time and again performed her feat, molding an awkward act to become a highly stylized practice. She realizes that resuscitation, too, is enjoyed by audiences as “the theatrical / comeback in broad day” and is a billable attraction for mass crowds. As she ages, she informs the audience that her innocent penchant for dying or attempting suicide becomes a readily packaged, sellable act. The audience that surrounded her after her second attempt and plucked the worms from her body becomes the captive, voiceless audience she exploits in her strip tease. They pay and pay as they spend time seeing, hearing, and touching her body. She profits from their attempts to access and appropriate it:

There is a charge
For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge
For the hearing of my heart-----
It really goes.

And there is a charge, a very large charge
For a word or a touch
Or a bit of blood
Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.

Studying Lee’s ability to subvert expectations by stripping from the inside to the outside allows us to see Plath’s play with similar expectations. The very first stanzas of the poem show us the speaker’s most inner layer of the body. Her “skin / Bright as a Nazi lampshade” immediately reveals her skeletal frame so that we do not note the exterior layer of skin as much as we witness the skull’s topography: “the nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth.” Similarly, the last item the speaker grants the audience access to and gives a price for is the piece of her removed clothing. This is the most exterior layer of her self, but it comes last in the list of items for which she charges. The most immediate items offered are the most interior: her scars, heart, blood, words. While her audience may expect to see clothes stripped first to reveal a grand finale of bare breasts and buttocks, the speaker bypasses the stripper’s usual invitation to enjoy even the bare arm or leg. Stripping here begins at the core and grotesquely reveals her skeletal frame, her body again and again in the act of decomposition. This is both an act of giving her interior to the audience and a parody of that act, for she withholds from them her reasons for dying and exposing herself and the power these acts afford her. In fact, Lady Lazarus derives power from her audience when they realize she has refigured stripping as exhibitionism. According to Eric Schaefer, a stripper harnesses control when she “dares men to look while gleefully anticipating male displeasure with what they see” (55). Inviting the audience to not only lean in but also participate in the removal of her clothes, or more accurately, “cloths”, Lady Lazarus eagerly anticipates the shock of what audiences see: “peel off the napkin / ... Do I terrify?” Instead of the often fetishized white skin, they see the residue of flesh—what the “grave cave ate” (line 17). The move from interior to exterior is made again and again, as viewers’ psyches struggle to make sense of the abject nature of the mortal body’s often obscured and hidden processes.⁹

Like Lee, the stripper who “burlesqued burlesque”, there is an undercurrent of irony that runs through Lady Lazarus’s narrative, perceivable to any viewer and disruptive of their pleasure. Lady Lazarus, like Lee, mocks her audience’s open, uncritical gazing and even her own act. When the crowd shouts, “A miracle!” Lady Lazarus dryly remarks, “That [remark] knocks me out” (55-56). Cleverly, she references her

deadly blackouts while alluding to her skill at making a scripted performance appear spontaneous, divine. Her flat, colloquial language—itself a form of commentary—disrupts the literary language narrating the event. The speaker’s decision to disclose to the reader-viewer both her scripted language and her private mockery echo Lee’s particular brand of irony, also seen in “A Stripteaser’s Education”. When Lee ostensibly sang of her girlish, naïve disposition, she simultaneously enjoyed revealing her more calculating nature: “When I raise my skirts with shyness and dexterity, / I am mentally computing just how much I’ll give to charity” (186). The reference to her substantial income is made again a few lines afterward:

[W]hen I display my charms in all their dazzling splendor,
and prove to you conclusively, I am of the female gender. [sic]
I am really thinking of . . . the bric-a-brac I saw.
And that lovely letter I received from Mr. Bernard Shaw.
I have a town house on the East River . . .
I have a Chinchilla, a Newport Villa (Shteir, *Striptease* 186).

The larger effect of this intentional slippage is to reveal that Lee is not interested in the men she is seducing and that they themselves were unaware that they were being “used” when they had thought to “use” her, unaware. Plath’s *Lady Lazarus* seems similarly interested in overturning the tables. To overlook the fact that the “amused shout” comes from a “brute” of a crowd is to miss the gender line drawn by the stage on which she undresses. While *Lady Lazarus* advertises the “charge” for her speaking to or touching another, she also slyly indicates the “charge” these men will receive when they lean over her ashes and are (actually and financially) burned in her subsequent, fiery rising.

Burlesque stars’ ability to parody the popular language of their time is also taken up by Plath’s speaker. Plath, both a reader of *Ladies Home Journal* and *Mademoiselle* and a careful wordsmith, would have been attuned to the language these periodicals used to discuss the minutiae of women’s lives. Both articles and advertisements placed attention on women’s skin, their domesticity, and their goals as wives or workers, among other items. In a Palmolive soap advertisement placed in the *Ladies Home Journal* of July 1953, the text boasts “Softer, Smoother, Brighter Skin” for those women who use its product, and “Nature’s Chlorophyll Is In Every Cake Of Palmolive Soap.” In the foreground of the advertisement a young woman, mouth parted to reveal white teeth, smiles brightly. In the background, six more young women with “Schoolgirl Complexion[s]” perform the same smile. Like Gypsy Rose Lee, Plath’s *Lady Lazarus* uses much of the magazine’s language satirically—embedding images of exposed decay and atrocity within advertisement-oriented phrases. She describes herself as “a smiling woman” with “skin / Bright as a Nazi lampshade” (19, 4-5). Scrupulous attention given to table linens and interior décor are parodied in *Lady Lazarus*’s description of her face as a “featureless, fine / Jew linen,” a “napkin” that conceals a grinning skull. When she burns before the crowd, the materials left behind in the ash are “a cake of soap” and “a wedding ring,” both images expressed in familiar language on the pages of the *Journal* (106-7). Other common, often culturally feminine one-liners occur: “This is Number Three,” *Lady Lazarus* says—not of her children, but of her death-stunts. “I guess you could say I’ve a call,” she says as other women might have said about teaching, or nursing, but not about dying. *Lady Lazarus-as-stripper* is the antithesis of the industrious, contented housewife: she is unnervingly uncontainable and undomesticated.

Attending to stripping as a theme in Plath’s work allows us to contemplate the impact of aspects of popular culture seldom considered related to domestic women’s culture or women’s magazines and literary production. Burlesque culture, which entered family and women’s magazines, is present within Plath’s fiction and poetry and provided her with opportunities to track the power or vulnerability associated with women’s sexualized and exposed bodies amid the male-dominated realms of the home, the workplace, and the street. Plath’s *Lady Lazarus* should be considered in light of the tradition of Gypsy Rose Lee and those burlesquers preceding her. Doing so allows us to see the role that voice, particularly irony, plays in changing the power dynamics of a usually silent strip-act. Like the scripts of Gypsy Rose Lee, *Lady Lazarus*’s voice exposes the popular language that figures women’s identities in the fifties as domestic housewives, psycho-analysands (a psychoanalysis patient), seductresses, and girls-next-door. *Lady Lazarus* acts against these voices and their desires by satirizing them, defusing their power, and then enacting a burlesque of burlesque, stripping away gender to reveal only the mocking female voice.

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NOTES

- 1 *The Bell Jar*'s Esther Greenwood stands on the deserted roof of the Amazon Hotel and waves her slip in the night air as a token of retreat before dropping it and her other garments over the edge.
- 2 Evidence for this practice comes from Ann Corio, one of Lee's peers who performed at the Old Howard and wrote an engaging account of the disruption caused by censors' sudden entrances. See Corio's *This Was Burlesque*, page 175.
- 3 I have not been able to verify that Gypsy Rose Lee ever performed at the Old Howard.
- 4 According to Michael Gruen of the *Howard Crimson*, "Harvard men ... came partly to see the great burlesque stars, such as Gypsy Rose Lee. But they also came ... to admire its fine sculpture iron balcony rails, and the huge gas-light chandelier." Gruen's article is written in 1961, the moment when city planners are set to raze Scollay Square and many of the buildings like the Old Howard, which preservationists sought to save.
- 5 The italics are mine.
- 6 For the full transcript, see Rachel Shteir's *Striptease*.
- 7 Lee was known as the stripper who didn't "give her all" as *Life* magazine (Dec 14, 1942) put it (99). According to the media, this, coupled with her ability to laugh at herself and encourage the crowd to laugh alongside her, catapulted her into primetime media at a time when censors were rigorously controlling television and Hollywood.
- 8 Lee's recitation and strip became a life-long act (Shteir 185). One version of the act was made suitable for movie-viewing in *Stage Door Canteen* (1943). Lee herself performed her number in the film. Imitators like Ann Corio, a Boston favorite who "claimed to be reading Spinoza," proliferated (195).
- 9 It is fitting that Lady Lazarus performs as a kind of circus side-act. Even Gypsy Rose Lee eventually brought her act to the circus after burlesque had run its course. Mary Russo finds the female grotesque body representative of carnival: "The grotesque body is open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple and changing; it is identified with non-official 'low' culture, or the carnivalesque, and with social transformation" (8).