

1. “Who Are These American Cinderellas?": Working Girls, Chorus Girls, and American Dreams for Women in the 1920s ∞

On November 18, 1919, the musical *Irene* opened at Broadway's Vanderbilt Theatre, where it quickly accelerated from an unexpected hit to a theatrical phenomenon, and, finally, to a multimillion-dollar global franchise, with far-flung productions in Bombay, Rio de Janeiro, and Buenos Aires.¹ In the title role of Irene O'Dare, a winsome Irish American shop girl, Edith Day rose to stardom singing the ballad “Alice Blue Gown”—a song as much about the democratizing power of fashion as about the heroine's charming frock. Transformed by her “Fairy Godfather,” the male couturier Madame Lucy, Irene is remade into an elegant lady merely by a change of clothes, ascending from a Ninth Avenue tenement to the Long Island “Castle of her Dreams.” At the start of a prosperous decade, Irene O'Dare captured the heart of society scion Donald Marshall, while *Irene* captivated audiences for 675 performances and inspired an influential cycle of early 1920s “Cinderella musicals.” Transposing the classic fairy tale of Cinderella to the offices and shops of modern Manhattan, these musicals reconceived Charles Perrault's heroine as young women working in the city.

Meanwhile, at the Lyceum Theatre, the actress Ina Claire played a different kind of heroine in Avery Hopwood's smash hit comedy *The Gold Diggers*, which, as produced by David Belasco, premiered on September 30, 1919—just three weeks before the opening of *Irene*. Claire, a former *Ziegfeld Follies* performer herself, starred as a financially grasping but gold-hearted chorine named Jerry Lamar, in a play that

presented a more hard-boiled Cinderella narrative than that of *Irene*. As with the latter's Edith Day, *The Gold Diggers* offered a star-making turn for Claire, who created a tartly brazen counterpart to Day's sweet and spunky Irene O'Dare. Audiences relished the play's blend of spicy innuendoes, audacious fortune hunting, and happily-ever-after. Because Jerry eventually swears off her gold-digging lifestyle, she—like Irene O'Dare—is permitted to marry a millionaire at the end of the play. *The Gold Diggers* popularized both an insidious stereotype of dependency and a powerful archetype of female self-assertion, as the gold-digging chorus girl exercised her snappy vernacular verve not only in *The Gold Diggers of 1933* (Warner Brothers' musical adaptation of the play, choreographed by Busby Berkeley), but also in many films of the Hollywood Pre-Code era.

Following in the tradition of *Irene*, the Cinderella musicals of the early 1920s glorified the Protestant work ethic: the values to which *The Gold Diggers*' title characters posed a seductive threat. While diverse in their adaptive strategies, the Cinderella musicals vibrantly celebrated the figure of the American working girl (as she became popularly termed in the early twentieth century).² These shows reimagined Cinderella in an American context, while simultaneously offering feminized variations on the Horatio Alger narrative, in which "energy and industry are rewarded, and indolence suffers."³ Reimagining the fairy tale's ashen drudgery in the public spaces of Harding-era capitalism, the Cinderella musicals offered idealized reflections of the wage-earning, young women who helped drive the US urban industrial economy in the first decades of the twentieth century. The plots of Cinderella musicals affirmed the working girl heroine's honesty and pluck through the happily-ever-after outcome of a prosperous marriage—and not infrequently, a career, as well.

Following the success of *Irene*, dozens of Cinderella musicals opened on Broadway. Shows "with Cinderellas for heroines" numbered in the dozens throughout the entirety of the 1920s, but proliferated most in the early years of the decade, in the periods 1921–1922, 1922–1923, and 1923–1924. Of the 58 musical comedies that opened during these three years (out of a total of 120 musicals), 21 focused on a Cinderella figure: "In short, over a sixth of all musicals and well over a third of all musical comedies employed the same basic story."⁴ Various centered upon shop girls (i.e., *Irene*), secretaries (i.e., *Mary*), and female stage performers (i.e., *Sally*), as well as young career women (i.e., *Helen of Troy*, *New York*, and *The Gingham Girl*), Cinderella musicals delighted audiences through inventive variations on the genre's conventions. The Cinderella

musical abounded in brisk dance numbers, sanguine ballads, and scores that blended the lilting style of Kern, Bolton, and Wodehouse's landmark Princess Theatre musicals, with the syncopated rhythms that defined the Jazz Age. The form reigned with such ubiquity on the Broadway musical stage of the early 1920s that critics soon complained about the surplus of Cinderella shows. Of the national tour of the 1923 musical *Molly, Darling*, a *Boston Daily Globe* critic opined, "The story, like that of *Sally, Irene*, and countless other popular musical comedies, has a Cinderella for its heroine."⁵

At the same time that Broadway musicals repeatedly valorized the working girl, the real-life women of Broadway's "beauty choruses" became mythologized as modern incarnations of Perrault's heroine. In 1923, Florenz Ziegfeld—as self-proclaimed Great Glorifier and impresarial Fairy Godfather—promoted the fairy tale of the *Follies* for an article in *Ladies' Home Journal*, describing the aspirations of the many thousands of young working women who flocked to New York from all over America for a shot at being cast in Ziegfeld's revues: "If her worth and beauty were only known! Or if, like Cinderella, she could only get to the party somehow!"⁶ Press agent Jack Lait echoed Ziegfeld in the preface of the 1927 chorus girl expose *Behind the Curtains of Broadway's Beauty Trust*. Lait luridly queried, "Who are these American Cinderellas? . . . Do they all marry millionaires, or end in oblivion? . . . What, in brief, is the actual truth about Broadway's hothouse flowers and the men who make them bloom?"⁷

Yet, unlike a Cinderella musical heroine, the chorus girl was perceived as an alluring refutation of the Protestant work ethic. If the chorus girl evoked the rags-to-riches rise of Cinderella, she was often represented as a working girl who did not actually work; in the idle, mercenary, and sexually enticing form of the gold digger. Whereas characters like Irene O'Dare labored honestly at jobs and careers, many plays, musicals, and films portrayed gold-digging chorus girls working manipulatively upon men in order to get to the proverbial ball: "Either you work the men, or the men work you!" resounds Jerry's war chant in Hopwood's comic battle of the sexes.⁸ In *The Gold Diggers*, the icon of the chorus girl conjures an older connotation of the term "working girl": the implication of prostitution, in a play that demonstrates the close associations between sex work and female stage performance in the anti-theatrical White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP)-Puritan imagination.

Much more so than the ingenuous heroines of musicals like *Irene*, the gold-digging chorus girl—at once Cinderella and her wicked

stepsister—represented an ambivalent interpretation of a narrative that was ubiquitous throughout the 1920s. While a perennially popular fairy tale around the world, with countless literary, cinematic, and theatrical adaptations over the centuries, the Cinderella myth held many multilayered meanings for Americans during an era of cultural metamorphosis. At once, the fairy tale resonated with an increasingly affluent nation and the expansion of the middle class; patterns of immigrant assimilation; and the public and professional ascendance of the New Woman following World War I. In both the plots of Cinderella musicals, and among the chorus lines of the *Follies* and other revues, the complexities of the 1920s New Woman played out upon the Broadway stage. These tensions included the imperatives of youth and beauty, the commoditization of sex, and the conflict of domesticity versus career.

On the most basic level, the tale of Cinderella represented the promise of democracy: a myth that Americans took fervently to heart at the start of a prosperous decade. As historian Ann Douglas observes, “America at the close of the Great War was a Cinderella magically clothed in the most stunning dress at the ball... immense gains with no visible price tag seemed to be the American destiny.”⁹ As originally created in 1697 by Perrault (who based the tale on many existing sources, dating back to ancient Greece), *Cendrillon* affirmed a historical context of European aristocracy, defined by tightly regulated class boundaries. Perrault’s tale restores Cinderella, a gentleman’s daughter, to the conditions of her genteel upbringing, even while magically elevating her to the status of a princess through her marriage with the king’s son. By contrast, 1920s American culture emphasized Cinderella’s ascension from obscure poverty to wealth and opportunity, as well as her assimilation from immigrant roots into upper-class society. As Stuart Hecht notes of the decade’s Cinderella musicals, and its frequent pairings of an Irish American working girl with an affluent WASP man: “In such a world (of European aristocracy), a Cinderella would be entirely a fantasy, practically unattainable... to an American, (the story) reaffirms the implicit promise of upward mobility.”¹⁰

The Cinderella musicals of the 1920s codified both the heroine’s Irish-American ethnicity and the WASP affluence of her beau. Generally written by second-generation American men, of European and European-Jewish decent (i.e., the Irish American George M. Cohan, the Jewish American team of Rodgers and Hart, and the Danish American Otto Harbach), Cinderella musicals positioned the Irish as a patriotically industrious (and desirably Western-European) “model minority,” and its Irish American

working girl heroines as “all-encompassing ethnic standard-bearers.”¹¹ By 1920, most Irish Americans were second or third generation citizens, and had successfully ascended into the ranks of the middle class.¹² In *Irene* and the many Cinderella musicals that followed in its pattern, the heroine conjugally absorbs her Irish-American (and, by implication, Irish-Catholic) background into the same WASP codes that have allowed her to prosper in the capitalist labor force.

The storylines of the Cinderella musical reflected these patterns of assimilation among Irish Americans. The shows’ heroines started with such names as Irene O’Dare, Alice O’Brien, Helen McGuffey, Mary Jane McKane, and Rosie O’Reilly only to end the evening with new wardrobes, new husbands, and the new surnames of Mrs. Marshall, Mrs. Patten, Mrs. Williams, Mrs. Dunn, and Mrs. Morgan.¹³ Frequently, in a trope that became common in the movies, a stuffy socialite foil—a modern counterpart to Cinderella’s stepsisters—rivaled the down-to-earth, Irish American heroine for the affections of the prince. The WASP upper-class leading men of the Cinderella musicals are also transformed in the process of courting and marrying their Irish American Cinderellas, in shows that “advocate for a more diverse defined Establishment, ultimately a more multicultural America.”¹⁴

Yet, the exclusions, as well as the assimilations, of the melting pot ideal pervade Cinderella musicals, many of which embarked on national tours beyond Manhattan’s cosmopolitan milieu. Despite the strong presence of Jewish songwriters and librettists, Jewish Cinderella protagonists very infrequently appeared on Broadway, due to creators’ anxieties about anti-Semitism and self-representation. *Snapshots of 1921*, a revue skewering current Broadway hits, commented on the themes of ethnicity and assimilability with a sketch of *Irene*, “featuring an Irene Rosensteen who didn’t ‘... wear blue gowns of Alice.’”¹⁵

Even more rarely represented were African American Cinderellas, virtually nonexistent in Broadway musicals, due to structural racism. While Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein’s groundbreaking 1927 musical play *Show Boat* portrayed something of a multigenerational Cinderella pairing in actresses Magnolia and Kim Ravenal, performer Julie LaVerne’s mulatto status deprives her of her own rags-to-rich story. In a real life context, Josephine Baker—an ex-chorus girl who had previously worked as a domestic and laundress in her hometown of St. Louis—enacted a powerful “Cinderella master narrative” in her life and career.¹⁶ Yet, the star was only permitted to play Cinderella roles after Baker mobilized her fabled 1925 expatriation to Paris, where she

appeared not only at the Casino de Paris and the Folies Bergère, but in a series of French silent films and movie musicals, including *Siren of the Tropics* (1927), *Zouzou* (1934), and *Princess Tam-Tam* (1935) that play upon 1920s models. These Cinderella films ambivalently recounted black female rags-to-riches tales through the context of white primitivist anxieties and fantasies, although Baker's heroines were never permitted to marry the (invariably Caucasian) prince.

Many of the early 1920s' Cinderella musicals portray the heroine rising above her humble origins through the means of marriage: no longer to a royal Prince Charming, but to a Long Island society scion or a Wall Street self-made man. Defining this "Cinderella mythology" as the feminine corollary of the Alger story, Lois Banner notes,

Early in the nineteenth century, a Cinderella mythology became for women the counterpart of the self-made mythology for men. Just as it was commonly believed that for men hard work and perseverance would bring success, beauty was supposed to attract wealthy and powerful men into marriage. Young men in business dreamed of rising to the top through entrepreneurial skill. Young working women dreamed of marrying the boss's son.¹⁷

In the 1920s, the Cinderella mythology continued to retain a strong hold over the national psyche, as innumerable films, plays, and books also glamorized the merits of women's marrying up. Many Cinderella musicals similarly portrayed their heroines in the act of "catching an executive's eye and heart."¹⁸

If the plots of these shows tended to invoke Prince Charming, Cinderella musicals reflected and addressed the dreams of the young, single women who comprised a large part of these musicals' audiences.¹⁹ For these working girls, a financially secure marriage may have represented an alluring transformation from the servitude of workplace discrimination, low pay, and heavy wage gaps (female workers in sales and office jobs earned little more than half the salaries of their male counterparts).²⁰ More cynically, H. L. Mencken, in his 1918 book *In Defense of Women*, noted American democracy as the ideal system for female hypergamy, cataloging a progression of steps up the feminine social ladder:

But when the whole thing is left to her own heart—i.e. to her head—it is but natural that she should seek as wide a range of choice as the conditions of her life allow, and in a democratic society, those conditions put few if any fetters upon her fancy. The servant girl, or factory operative, or even prostitute of today may be the chorus girl or moving picture vampire of tomorrow and the

millionaire's wife of next year. In America, especially, men have no settled antipathy to such stooping alliance; in fact, it rather flatters their vanity to play Prince Charming to Cinderella.²¹

At the same time, however, Cinderella musicals reflected the rapid ascendance of the New Woman in the work force and the public sphere in the early twentieth century, as a rising number of American women gained access to college educations, the world of commerce, and the professions. World War I was pivotal to the shifting roles of women in 1920s society, and the ratification of Women's Suffrage on August 26, 1920, was, in no small part, a response to women's efforts in the war, as they assumed traditionally masculine jobs on the home front. Women employed in clerical and sales positions increased from 9.1 percent in 1910 to 25.6 percent in 1920, while the percentage of women working in such professions as law, medicine, teaching, and journalism rose (if less exponentially) from 10 percent in 1900 to 13.3 percent in 1920.²² By 1929, more than a quarter of all American women—and more than half of single women—held down jobs.²³

In the 1920s' Cinderella musicals, the working girl most often marries the boss's son, but sometimes she does so while pursuing her own professional goals. This is the case in the 1923 musical *The Gingham Girl*, in which small town girl Mary Thompson follows her boyfriend to Manhattan, only to achieve her own success as the entrepreneur of a cookie company. Even in such paradigmatic Cinderella musicals as *Irene* and *Sally*, the title heroines reflect the independence of the New Woman; these characters are much more assertive than the stereotypically weepy and helpless princess-to-be that later appeared in Walt Disney's 1950 animated film. Irene is a feisty and surprisingly outspoken heroine, while Sally—a self-described "Wild Rose"—longs to become a celebrated dancer, and not merely to settle down as the wife of Long Island socialite Blair Farquhar.

The chorus girl, too, can be considered part of the wave of New Women who revolutionized roles for women in the early twentieth century. In many ways, the cultural icon of the chorus girl reflected not only changing labor-force standards for women in the 1920s, but also the loosening of sexual and social barriers. The flowering of such urban amusements as dance halls and cabarets, at the start of the twentieth century, allowed women to publicly—and, for the first time, respectably—mingle outside the home with men.²⁴ In "Echoes of the Jazz Age," F. Scott Fitzgerald remarked of the 1920s' "universal preoccupation with sex."²⁵ Fueled by the

writings of Sigmund Freud, this imaginative inflammation consumed the movies, tabloid journalism, and advertising, and exploded into the chorus girl cult of the *Follies*, *Vanities*, and *Scandals*.

The chorus girl also merged with icons of a Jazz Age culture that feverishly commoditized “flaming youth” and feminine beauty. In his 1920 collection *Flappers and Philosophers*, F. Scott Fitzgerald emblazoned the name that typified the freewheeling, rebellious young women of his generation, embodied by his wife Zelda, as well as silent film stars like “It Girl” Clara Bow. Though distancing herself from the Progressive era’s feminist activists (who she perceived as severe and unfeminine), the younger New Woman of the 1920s adamantly claimed her right to sexual and social freedoms unknown to her Victorian mother. During the 1920s, thousands of young women clamored to be in the stellar *Follies* and its satellite musical revues, in the beauty contests represented by the Miss America pageant (instituted in Atlantic City in 1921), or merely to imitate the glamorously dressed actresses on the covers of *Photoplay*. Department stores across the country transformed the haute couture designs of Chanel, Poiret, and Lanvin into ready-made clothing available to the urban and the rural flapper alike, offering women new levels of personal expression and class mobility. The Cinderella myth, then, played deeply into these modes of female self-presentation, as women used the codes of fashion toward social and professional advancement.

Similar contradictions about objectification and empowerment encircled the icon of the chorus girl. On one hand, the Broadway revues of the 1920s—trading on the commodification of erotic fantasy—rendered the women at the center of the Broadway “Beauty Trust” vulnerable to patterns of exploitation. Nevertheless, many chorus girls transcended the gold digger stereotype to live out success narratives of their own design and realization. While Joan Crawford, Barbara Stanwyck, and Ruby Keeler (who apotheosized the chorus girl-as-Cinderella myth in *42nd Street*) counted among the most prominent graduates of the 1920s’ chorus lines, Broadway’s “beauty choruses” offered many less famous women the chance to attain a widened scope of economic independence, social and sexual freedoms, and professional opportunities. Similarly, while the gold-digging chorus girl was often posed as a crude caricature, authors of fiction and drama such as Hopwood and Anita Loos subversively used her image to undermine social expectations about sexuality and gender roles. Positioning the chorus girl as a wicked, wily—and sometimes amoral—manifestation of the flapper-era New Woman, these authors created a vision of a Rising Woman at odds with the Fallen Woman that

survived nineteenth-century melodrama to become a teary mainstay of the Hollywood “woman’s film.”

In the fairy tales of Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm, respectively from the late seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries, Cinderella is a figure of ambiguous agency: she may aspire no higher than her marital destiny, but she’s never entirely passive in her dreaming. In Perrault, she knowingly outwits her stepsisters, while displaying resilience and fortitude. Similarly, in the Brothers Grimm tale of *Aschenputtel*, the Ash Girl calls upon the spirit of her dead mother, enshrined in a hazel tree, to help her attain her wishes. The same instability is true of the 1920s’ manifestation of Cinderella—both as chorus girl and as the working girl heroine of a musical genre with a long history of influences.

“VIRTUOUS AND INDUSTRIOUS CREATURES”: THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CINDERELLA MUSICAL

The roots of the Broadway Cinderella musical can be traced to eighteenth-century England, where the rise of the middle class popularized the emergent genre of the sentimental novel. Indeed, one might refer to the Cinderella genre of the 1920s as sentimental musical comedy. The father of the sentimental novel, Samuel Richardson, wrote lurid, epistolary homilies, such as *Pamela: or Virtue Rewarded* (1740) and *Clarissa: Or the History of a Young Lady* (1748). Perrault’s *Cendrillon* had affirmed the heroine’s “unparalleled goodness and sweetness” of temperament.²⁶ By contrast, Richardson’s novels moralized about the virtuous means—and material ends—of feminine chastity, honesty, and hard work. *Pamela*’s titular heroine, a pure-hearted maid for the wealthy Mr. B, indignantly withstands her employer’s repeated seduction tactics and even her abduction—only to marry the “reformed” libertine at the end of the book. “(Mrs. Jervis) said I was one of the most virtuous and industrious Creatures that ever she knew,” narrates Pamela, and Richardson guerdons his heroine’s self-regard with a title and fortune. In its various editions, *Pamela* sold hundreds of thousands of copies, becoming the literary best-seller of its day, an ethical paradigm for the middle class, as well as the object of numerous literary satires.

The conventions of the sentimental novel—founded on the rise of a “virtuous and industrious” heroine—continued in both England and America in the nineteenth century. A multitude of mid-nineteenth-century novels (including Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*) posed robust,

natural heroines against stylish but artificial “belles,” as they vied for the heart of the hero. Lois Banner notes, “A central theme . . . is the danger and lure of fashion, which in their presentations threaten to undermine family cohesion, democratic procedures, and the simple virtues of regularity, trust, and modesty that defined national greatness.”²⁷ In Catherine Sedgwick’s *Clarence* (1830), “only Gertrude Clarence’s natural virtue, her ‘practical, rational, dutiful, efficient, direct, and decided’ character makes him realize the falseness of (belle Grace) Layton’s standards and ultimately persuades the hero to choose her.”²⁸

Like the sentimental novel, the earliest musicals with Cinderella narratives appeared in England at the turn of the twentieth century. These shows were substantially informed by the values of these early nineteenth century literary predecessors. At the same time, the British Cinderella musical remodeled its heroines, who appear both as natural women and consumers appreciative of “the lure of fashion.” From 1892 through 1914, at the Gaiety Theatre in London’s Strand, impresario George Edwardes captivated fashionable Londoners with a series of insouciant “musical comedies.”²⁹ These shows also rooted the musical comedy genre in a tradition of upwardly mobile female protagonists. Edwardes so identified musical comedy with both Perrault’s heroine and as an underdog genre that he called the form the “Cinderella of the drama.”³⁰

Tuneful, urbane, and laced with topical satire aimed at London types of the day, the “Gaiety Musicals” were champagne-in-a-slipper confections. Glass slipper, even: the Cinderella mythology formed an essential part of their appeal, defining both the musicals’ working girl heroines and the real life, common-born chorus girls—the “Gaiety Girls”—whose aristocratic marriages regularly grabbed newspaper headlines. Blurring fiction, fact, and offstage fancy, the Gaiety musicals suggested marital metatheater, as audiences thrilled to the idea that a chorus girl appearing onstage one night might elope with a marquis or viscount the next.

Featuring the Gaiety’s fabled chorus line of elegantly attired women, such musical comedies as *In Town* (1892), *A Gaiety Girl* (1893), and *The Shop Girl* (1894) offered audiences risqué refinement. Edwardes oriented the Gaiety shows toward the tastes of a bourgeoisie for whom theater had acquired a newly respectable luster (in part thanks to the actress-loving proclivities of Edward, Prince of Wales). The Gaiety musicals, frequently set in fashionable shops, also drew from the Edwardian expansion of middle-class commerce, driving the growth of luxurious department stores like Selfridge’s (founded in 1909 by American businessman Harry Gordon Selfridge).

The appeal of the Gaiety musical comedies straddled social strata. London’s elite patronized the Gaiety, as did the “shop girls (who) were paying their hard-earned pennies for a few hours’ pleasant escapism. A sense of immediate identification would come even if the heroine was not a lady or even an actress but just an idealized embodiment of the young women who looked down raptly from the top of the house.”³¹ The Gaiety musicals, with their air of “elegant hauteur,”³² reflected the shifting values of England’s constitutional monarchy, rather than America’s democratic ethos. Nevertheless, these musicals, which often transferred to Broadway after their London runs, tapped into aspirations common to both nations.

A common plot of the Gaiety musicals involved an honest working girl overcoming social snobbery to ascend to “a better, or at least a richer, world.”³³ Most commonly, in the Gaiety shows, the heroine makes her ascent through conjugal means. Debuting as the earliest of the Cinderella shows, the self-referential *A Gaiety Girl* (1893) featured one of the titular chorus girls as its heroine. In the show, Captain Goldfield loves Alma Somerset, despite the disapproval of his aristocratic aunt, Lady Virginia Forrest. The latter reprovingly compares “these theatre women” to the society girls that she chaperones.³⁴ Invited to entertain at a garden party with other young ladies of the Gaiety, Alma finds herself framed for stealing a jeweled comb by Lady Virginia’s jealous French maid. A jaunt to the French Riviera clears Alma’s name, and frees the lovers to marry, following Lady Virginia’s change of heart: “I don’t think I am sorry you are going to marry a Gaiety Girl after all, Charley. We like novelties nowadays, and I shouldn’t wonder if you introduced a new fashion into society.”³⁵

Edwardes’s musicals were synonymous with the Gaiety Girls, and the Gaiety Girls with their high-profile marriages. Appearing decoratively in expensive gowns and millinery, the Gaiety Girls were style-setters among women, and drew throngs of gift-bearing “Johnnies” to the stage door. Although a few of the Gaiety Girls achieved their greatest fame in professional endeavors—Constance Collier as a theater and film actress, and Mabel Russell as a Parliamentarian—they were collectively famous as the sought-after trophy brides of dukes and earls. This new class of the “actresstocracy” conflated the difference between society lady and “theatre woman.” According to Derek and Julia Parker:

During the run of *A Gaiety Girl*, eighteen members of George Edwardes’ company are said to have left to get married, and when he looked about him, he realized the Countess Ostheim, Lady George Cholmondely, the Countess

Torrington, the Marchioness of Headfort, and the Countess of Suffolk—and of course Lady Churston, the Countess Poulett and Lady Victor Paget—had all originally been stars or chorus girls under his management.³⁶

The 1920s Cinderella musical drew much influence not only from Edwardes's musical comedies, but also from the musicals of George M. Cohan, who placed a patriotic American spin on the figure of the "virtuous and industrious Creature." A decade after the Gaiety Girls first swished their skirts in London, Cohan galvanized American musical comedy with a series of brisk, brash, slangy song-and-dance extravaganzas that, in the confident and expansive years of Theodore Roosevelt's administration, bled nationalist pride: *Little Johnny Jones* (1905) and *Forty-Five Minutes from Broadway* (1906) among them. Often starring in his musicals, Cohan broadly satirized both the provincialism of small-town "rubes" and the affectations of European aristocracy (as well as its emulations by American Knickerbockers). Blue-collar, Irish-Catholics formed the core of Cohan's audience base, although his musicals played to broad popular success.³⁷ While the Gaiety musicals evoked a world of "posh homes, exclusive clubs, and liveried servants," Cohan's shows celebrated the rush and whirl of urban life, and Broadway as the center of it all.³⁸

Symbolizing Cohan's democratic values were his heroines: plucky Irish American girls who stand for unaffected common sense. Cohan's heroines, narratively obliged to choose between love and money, typically opt for the former. In *Forty-Five Minutes from Broadway*, for instance, Fay Templeton played Mary Jane Jenkins, a housemaid working at the Castleton Mansion in New Rochelle. Kid Burns, the secretary to Castleton's heir-at-law, becomes enamored of Mary because of her straightforward nature, with a name "plain as any name can be."³⁹ "She's the kind of girl I'd marry if I was a millionaire," Kid remarks admiringly.⁴⁰ Yet when Mary learns that the deceased Castleton has left her a million dollars, Kid tells her he cannot marry her now that she's an heiress: "For your sake, Mary, I wish you had thirty million. For my sake, I wish you had thirty cents."⁴¹ To prove her love to Kid, Mary tears up the will.

Although Cohan became a significant writer and producer of Cinderella musicals in the early 1920s, his musicals remained sentimental in regard to their heroines.⁴² Cohan portrayed the title character of *Little Nellie Kelly* (1922) as a pretty shop girl who is also "plain and wholesome."⁴³ In the conclusion of the musical, Nellie turns down

the marriage proposal of affluent Jack Lloyd in favor of authentic Jerry Conroy, born in the Bronx. Though the Cinderellas of 1920s musicals most frequently married millionaires, Cohan's "Marys" proved a considerable influence on the genre's heroines, in terms of their plainspoken and hard-working natures.

The 1905 operetta *Mlle. Modiste*, with music by Victor Herbert and book and lyrics by Henry Blossom, blended the Old World waltzes of operetta with both the fashionable milieu of the Gaiety shows and the Yankee populism of the Cohan musicals. Foreshadowing not only *Irene*, but such later stage musicals such as *Lady in the Dark* (1941) and the film musical *Funny Face* (1957), *Mlle. Modiste* establishes one of the central paradoxes of the Cinderella musical: the world of fashion as its frequent setting. In *Mlle. Modiste* and its descendants, fashion enshrines feminine beauty, even as it promises modes of self-reinvention. *Mlle. Modiste* also introduces another standard convention of the genre: that of the Fairy Godfather, an older male figure who aids the heroine in her metamorphosis and ascent (and who, unlike both the working girl's Prince Charming and the gold digger's sugar daddy, remains romantically detached from the heroine).

Mlle. Modiste follows the transformation of Fifi, its Parisian heroine, and, in fact, codes her as an American girl—who realizes her dreams of opera stardom with the help of promoter Hiram Bent. When Hiram is asked of Fifi, by now a famous opera diva, "Is she American?" he responds, "No, but she ought to be. I found her in a shop."⁴⁴ Patterned after Perrault's tale, *Mlle. Modiste* transforms Cinderella into orphaned shop girl Fifi, Prince Charming into Count Henri de Bouvray, the stepmother into Madame Cecile—the scheming hat shop proprietress who tries to marry Fifi off to her wastrel son—and the Fairy Godmother into "American Millionaire" Hiram Bent. In many subsequent Cinderella musicals, a patriarchal force of providence assists the heroine—for men, more so than women, wield the power, money, and influence with which to help her.

Mlle. Modiste conflates the European fairy tale of Cinderella with the American mythos of Horatio Alger. The self-made man trope animates both the "Fairy Godfather" figure of Hiram, and that of Fifi, who is equally motivated by her determination to become an opera singer as by her love for Henri (to whom marriage is forbidden by his father, the Count). Fifi receives magical intervention because Hiram admires her work ethic: "Well, you know what the poet Tennyson said—'tis only noble to be good! I say the girl who earns her living is good enough to be noble."⁴⁵ Shopping with his wife, Hiram takes an avuncular interest in

the pretty shop girl, who is honest and industrious, but clearly unhappy. When Fifi tells Hiram that she'd like to sing opera, but "is without money or influences," Hiram settles on a plan that will not offend Fifi's pride: he will loan "this little girl in a position much like yours" the money to leave the store and create her own opportunities (and he'll buy her a few hats to boot).⁴⁶

Revealing his entrepreneurial spirit to Fifi, Hiram passes on his Algeresque creed of "pluck and luck" to the shop girl. The most significant exchange between Fifi and Hiram directly refers to a passage from Alger's 1867 serialized novel *Ragged Dick: or, Street Life in New York with Boot-Blacks*—itself a male adaptation of the Cinderella story.⁴⁷ Hiram informs Fifi:

HIRAM: . . . I've seen the time when I'd have fought a dog in the street for his bone—and I couldn't find the dog. . . . But I kept my nerve 'till I got a start, and I won. My motto is "Never give up. . . ."

FIFI: Ah, but you are a man, Monsieur. You can go out into the world, but a woman—what can she do? Do you think I have not one ambition? Do you think I'm content to sell these things and wait on a lot of people that I despise? What a chance have I for the future here? What chance to marry a man who I could love and respect?

HIRAM: Then what would you do?

FIFI: I've a voice, monsieur, and I know I can act, but without either money or influences—I am helpless. . . .

HIRAM: You have at least one requisite—self-confidence.

FIFI: Monsieur, I will show you that I have more than that. (*She sings "If I Were on the Stage"*).⁴⁸

Endowed with both ambition and self-confidence—as well as a "voice"—Blossom and Herbert's heroine decides to "go out into the world" despite the social prohibitions against it. Although *Mlle. Modiste* culminates in the heroine's engagement to Etienne, it's her character, rather than her beauty, that is celebrated. When the Count sighs, "She's fooled me at every turn," Hiram responds, "And she always will. We've got as much chance with a smart little girl as a pair of white gloves have in Pittsburgh."⁴⁹ The motifs of *Mlle. Modiste*—a musical mixing Perrault and Alger, with a plot blending the heroine's marriage and career—would reappear with much more frequency after 1919. That year, the monumental success of *Irene* launched the genre of the Cinderella musical.

IRENE, SALLY, AND MARY: CINDERELLA FEVER ON BROADWAY

The end of World War I, and the economic spirit of prosperity and speculation that followed, fueled the explosive popularity of the Cinderella musical genre a decade and a half after *Mlle. Modiste*. Cinderella fever on Broadway started with three shows, all single titles named after their heroines—Irene (1919), Sally (1920), and Mary (1920). Despite a short-lived economic recession in 1920–1921, Americans reached optimistically for the "lived happily ever after" finale that audiences savored in the three musicals. More and more Americans found themselves able to join the ranks of an expanding middle class, propelled by America's "relative affluence . . . the acceleration of technological changes, and the expansion of leisure time."⁵⁰

The fuse of American prosperity ignited *Irene's* modern Cinderella story at the box office, turning the show into "one of the greatest money-makers of the present theatrical generation."⁵¹ With a book by James Montgomery (based on his unproduced play *Irene O'Dare*), music by Harry Tierney, and lyrics by Joseph McCarthy, *Irene* ran at the Vanderbilt Theater for 675 performances, and became Broadway's longest-running musical in 1921. That year, with four touring productions crossing the United States, as well as 15 international stagings around the globe, the musical was proclaimed, "*Irene* the Ubiquitous."⁵² Critics celebrated *Irene* both for its glamorous spectacle, and as a dramatically cohesive book musical, with a "definite, well-sustained plot."⁵³

Sally represented Florenz Ziegfeld's savvy calculation to emulate, and embellish, *Irene*. As even more extravagantly mounted than the latter show, Ziegfeld's production of *Sally* managed to surpass *Irene's* box office records, running for 561 performances after the show opened at the New Amsterdam Theatre, on December 21, 1920. As Alexander Woollcott surmised of *Sally* (which featured lyrics by P. G. Wodehouse, Clifford Grey, and Anne Caldwell): "It can be imagined that (Mr. Ziegfeld) . . . sent for the tireless [librettist] Guy Bolton and that fount of melody Jerome Kern, and bade them put together a pretty little piece after the pattern and in the modest manner of *Irene*."⁵⁴ At the same time, *Sally* offered a star vehicle for the dancer-singer Marilyn Miller, the winsome and beguiling "Titania of the Jazz Age."⁵⁵ Miller epitomized the decade's Cinderella ideal in a succession of 1920s musicals, including *Sunny* (1925) and *Rosalie* (1928).

Produced by George M. Cohan, *Mary* marked the third major Cinderella musical hit of the early 1920s. Opening at the Knickerbocker

Theatre on October 18, 1920, for a run of 220 performances, *Mary* featured a book by Otto Harbach, music by Louis Hirsch and lyrics by Frank Mandel. *Mary* spawned the wildfire hit “The Love Nest,” described by the *New York Times* as a “simple but melodious number which proved so catchy that it preceded the show to town by several months.”⁵⁶ Among the millions who heard it was F. Scott Fitzgerald. The author alludes to the song in *The Great Gatsby*, where it joins with the green light as an intimation of the false romantic promises that lure Jay Gatz to his doom.⁵⁷ *Gatsby*’s hanger-on Klipspringer plays the tune as the bootlegger lights Daisy’s cigarette in the dark. Its lyrics are:

Just a love nest, cozy and warm,
Like a dove rest, down on a farm,
A veranda with some sort of clinging vine,
Then a kitchen where some rambler roses twine;
Then a small room, tea set of blue,
There’s the ballroom, dream room for two,
Better than a palace with a gilded dome,
Is the love nest you can call home!

In fact, *Mary*’s prescient plot hinges on the business opportunities provided by the economic boom, as the hero, Jack Keene, invents a line of small “portable houses,” affordable to couples living on 50 dollars a week. Jack sings “The Love Nest” to Mary while the lovers lean over a scale model of the vine-bedecked, dove-festooned mobile home.

The heroines of *Sally*, *Irene*, and *Mary* varied in character and circumstance; Sally a foundling, Irene a poor shop girl, and Mary a social secretary in the white-collar workforce. Yet, all three upwardly mobile heroines appealed to Americans who could increasingly afford to live in the suburbs, buy toasters and Frigidaires, and hope to strike it rich with their stock investments. Calvin Coolidge would not proclaim “the business of America is business” until 1925, but the decade’s ethos—reflected in *Sally*, *Irene*, and *Mary*—was already in place. Mary, the protagonist of a Cohan-produced show, is the most conservative Cinderella of the trio; her dream is simply of marrying and settling down in her cozy “love nest” with Jack. Yet, Irene and Sally are more ambitious heroines, eager to “get out of the rut” they are in⁵⁸ and keenly aware of fashion as a means of doing so.

Both *Irene* and *Sally* play upon themes of fashion as social performance, disguise and masquerade, and musical comedy’s ethos of “celebratory self-invention.”⁵⁹ Although both Irene and Sally uphold the requisite Cinderella virtues of pluck and honesty, both heroines substantially depart

from Cohan’s sentimentalized ideal of the “plain and wholesome.” In their self-assertive and fashionable working girl heroines, both *Sally* and *Irene* reflect the influence of the clothes-conscious New Woman of the 1920s. By contrast, the 1935 Josephine Baker movie musical *Princess Tam-Tam* recapitulates the themes of these musicals through the lens of not only gender and fashion, but also of race.

“IN MANNER OF FASHION”: PERFORMING IDENTITY IN *IRENE*, *SALLY*, AND *PRINCESS TAM-TAM*

In one of the most successful musicals of the twentieth century, a young working woman is transformed into a ravishingly gowned lady with the help of fairy godfathers who take a financial stake in her future, and dazzlingly debut her at a society ball. While this plot later animated the Shaw-based 1956 smash hit *My Fair Lady*, it first appeared on the Broadway musical stage in *Irene* and *Sally*. In both of these shows, clothing—rather than language—functions as the primary catalytic tool of the heroines’ reinvention and ascent. In fact, *Variety* noted the possible influence of *Irene* by *Pygmalion*, which had opened on Broadway in 1914 prior to its legendary West End production: “The basic idea of the story is . . . the same as Shaw’s *Pygmalion*, except in this case . . . through the efforts of a designer instead of a professor of English.”⁶⁰

Certainly, the transformative potential of fashion comprises a major element of the Alger novels, including the male Cinderella tale *Ragged Dick*, in which the title character’s new dress suit enables his transformation into Richard Hunter, Esquire. Yet, these musical comedies orient the convention into “clothes make the woman”: a motto sung by *Irene*’s Madame Lucy. *Irene* and *Sally* reflect a time in American social history in which, according to Marlis Schweitzer, “developments in clothing production, including innovations in the ready-to-wear and fashion industries . . . and the widespread publication of fashion information in newspapers and magazines,” enabled working- and middle-class women to “take pleasure in disrupting social hierarchies through fashion.”⁶¹ *Irene* asserts this very theme, as the newly glamorous title character and her Ninth Avenue friends sing, “We’re getting away with it/Whoops! They’ll never know.”⁶² During the 1910s, and the 1920s, too, many actresses, performers, models, and chorus girls wore custom-made, designer fashions as part of their public personae, further blurring the distinction between working women and “ladies.”

An instrumental figure in the democratization of fashion was the British couturier Lucile, Lady Duff-Gordon. One of the costume designers of

Irene, Lucile also served as the satiric source of the musical's Madame Lucy. Lucile, who gave her "personality dresses" such names as "The Discourager of Hesitancy" and "Red Mouth of a Venomous Flower," believed in the alchemical properties of clothing. As Joseph Roach observes, "Lucile knew from girlhood that (clothes) do make statements. Indeed, they can even make the kind of statements that make things happen... (and) carry the charismatic potential to turn personalities into events, events into occasions, and occasions into precedents."⁶³ Lucile joined the creative team of *The Ziegfeld Follies* in 1915, winning acclaim for fantastical creations such as the white peacock gown worn in the *Midnight Frolic* by the most prominent of her many humbly-born mannequin protégées: the stately showgirl Dolores. While the plot of *Irene* echoes Lucile's Pygmalion methods of drilling her models in posture and etiquette, the show includes a further element of gender masquerade: Madame Lucy is "just a trade name," and the designer is actually a man.

Irene transforms Cinderella into a feisty, loquacious young Irish American woman—"Mother says I've got the gift of the gab," she explains.⁶⁴ With a combination of luck and pluck that recalls *Mlle. Modiste*, Irene creates her opportunities by asserting her desire for more opportunity. Irene works as a shop girl in a furniture upholstery store to support her impoverished, widowed mother and her kid brother. A stroke of fortune sends Irene to fit the cushions for the Long Island Marshall family, whose scion Donald protects her from the advances of his cad-dish acquaintance Lawrence Hadley, and invites her to dinner in apology. Irene explains to Donald that she has met Hadley before—When she was working at a shop in Philadelphia, a newly affluent friend in jewels and furs gave her an expensive blue dress, introduced her to the wealthy Hadley, and urged Irene to join her as a kept woman—"Oh, you're a fool to work. Stay here, and I'll fix it for you."⁶⁵ Instead, the virtuous Irene fled back to New York.

Unlike *My Fair Lady*, in which the Galatea transformation of Eliza Doolittle is manufactured aesthetically and linguistically by Henry Higgins and Colonel Pickering, Irene knows she can be a "lady" at will; all she's missing are the outer trappings. Demonstrating her point to Donald, she imitates the shop customers by affecting "clear English diction." When Donald remarks, "you're a very interesting young lady," Irene responds:

Well, you're interesting too, even if you don't talk as much as I do. We girls don't meet many men like you; we don't get the chance.... I bet there are a lot

of men who would like to meet them, but even then we couldn't go out with them because we ain't got any decent clothes to wear. Clothes make an awful difference in a girl, and just because we ain't got them, don't think we don't know about them. We can't help seeing what other girls have, and in the shop windows and evening papers. Gee, I talk careless, we all talk that way, but you wouldn't know us when we put on airs. Honest, we can talk and act like real ladies.⁶⁶

Even as Donald and Madame Lucy enable her transformation, Irene herself wills it into being. Remembering the dress that she kept from her experience in Philadelphia, Irene sings "Alice Blue Gown," the musical's hit song, named after the azure shade favored by Teddy Roosevelt's daughter. She performs it as an ode to the power of clothing to embolden confidence and affect social reality:

In my sweet little Alice Blue Gown,
When I first wandered down into town,
I was both proud and shy,
As I felt every eye,
But in every shop window,
I'd primp, passing by.
Then in manner of fashion, I'd frown,
And the world seemed to smile all around....

Irene modestly concludes, "Though it wouldn't fit mother/It made a shirtwaist for brother/My sweet little Alice Blue Gown."⁶⁷

Manners of fashion directly facilitate Irene's ascent. Compelled by her "Alice Blue Gown" self-portrait, Donald devises a plan to help Irene, as well as his friend Bob, to whom Madame Lucy owes loan money. Lucy, whom Montgomery describes in his script as "not a nance, but effeminate," and who needs models to wear his clothes in public, will play fairy godmother: "Wait, in two days, she will transform you, wait until you see what she will do for you. Frocks and gowns, hats and boots and slippers, she'll make you a little princess, a little Cinderella."⁶⁸ Before long, Madame Lucy has enlisted not only Irene, but Irene's Ninth Avenue best friends, Helen and Jane, to model for him; all three shop girls beguile Fifth Avenue as "The Talk of the Town" at a party hosted by social climber J. P. Bowden. Although Bob has scoffed that women "must have style, manner, breeding inborn," he's the first to be taken in by Irene's masquerade: "Now that's what I mean by the real thing!"⁶⁹ Similarly, persuaded is Mrs. Marshall, who handsomely pays the Genealogy Society

for Irene's family tree; the bogus chart reveals Irene's descent from Irish kings. Despite Irene's eventual unveiling as a mere shop girl, Donald proposes to his modern Cinderella.

Like Irene O'Dare, the title character of *Sally* is a fashion-conscious working girl who yearns to shake off her foundling's rags for bigger opportunities. She's named Sally Green—shortened from the Bowling Green telephone district where she was abandoned, claimed by dowager-settlement worker Mrs. Ten Brock, and taken to the Elm Tree Alley Inn to work as a dishwasher. Here, the Long Island prince is named Blair Farquar, who tells Sally, "Fine clothes don't make any difference to me." She contradicts him using Irene's logic:

Sure, that's what they all say. But you walk up behind (a man) and make a noise like rustlin' silk and see how quick he'll turn around. I've tried it. . . . I used to sew sandpaper on the knees of my stockings. The effect was great, but of course as soon as they looked at me, it was cold.⁷⁰

Sally tests Blair's words when, with the help of the exiled Czerkogovian Duke "Connie" (originally played by Leon Errol), she impersonates the femme fatale Russian ballerina Madame Nockerova at a ball thrown by Blair's father. Now, the disguised, faux-accented Sally learns that fine clothes do indeed make a difference to Blair, newly besotted with Nockerova:

SALLY: Zis leetle friend of yours. . . is she nice?

BLAIR: She's charming—just as you are. . . . You are just what I wanted to have made of her.

SALLY: Oh, you don't like her as she is.

BLAIR: Yes, I do—but of course she hasn't had the education you have—or the experience in life. . . . And though she looks like you she isn't nearly as pretty.

SALLY: You don't zeenk zat might be just ze clothes?

BLAIR: (*contemptuously*) Certainly not.⁷¹

Initially dismayed by the glamorous danseuse's exposure as a mere dishwasher, Blair repents with a marriage proposal. Transformed by the "Great Glorifier"'s magic wand, Sally also becomes the prima ballerina of a *Follies*' "Butterfly Ballet"—a metatheatrical vision of Ziegfeldian self-advertising, scored to the ballet music of Victor Herbert.

Sally's themes echo the ethos of its impresario, a man "who lived and thrived upon publicity," and whose love for fashion and celebrity fueled the

spectacular showmanship of "The Ziegfeld Touch."⁷² In fact, Sally is a less "virtuous and industrious" heroine, in the Richardsonian sense, than the typical Cinderella heroine. She wants to be a dancer, and a celebrated one. To one of her coworkers, she protests her drudgery: "Gee, if there's one job I hate it's bathing dishes. . . . I want to be famous."⁷³ Although Marilyn Miller soared to fame with "Look for the Silver Lining"—the sugary ballad she sings to Connie over her dirty dishes—Sally's other songs project less wistfulness than willfulness. In "Joan of Arc," one of the two *Sally* songs with lyrics by P. G. Wodehouse, Sally reimagines the Maid of Orleans as a pugnacious flapper: "I wish I could be like Joan of Arc. . . . She loves to fight and when foe-men came in sight/She would hand them Dempsey punches/Where they used to eat their lunches/For you can't keep a good girl down."⁷⁴

As in *Irene*, the essentially honest Sally finds liberation in the act of masquerade. Impersonating the Slavic siren to the hilt as Nockerova, Sally throws off her inhibitions in "Wild Rose." She dances freely as chorus boys serenade her in adoring obeisance, and sings that she is no "prim and mild rose," but rather a "wild rose" who cannot be tamed.⁷⁵ Structured toward a marital climax, with Sally and Blair's wedding at the "Little Church Around the Corner," *Sally* concludes with an elaborate wedding tableau following Sally's triumph in the *Follies*. Yet, as in *Mlle. Modiste*, the title character of *Sally* never announces her retirement from the stage, in a show that indicates its heroine's continued fame as a Ziegfeld prima donna.

Through the symbolism of fashion, *Sally* mythologizes American identity itself as a performance. Striving to dissolve boundaries of class, ethnicity, and femininity into the transformational flux of musical comedy, *Sally* echoes H. L. Mencken's prescription that the "chorus girl or moving picture vampire of tomorrow (might become) the millionaire's wife of next year."⁷⁶ In Flo Ziegfeld's vision of America as "Butterfly Ballet," an orphaned dishwasher can become, at will, an aristocratic Russian femme fatale, Mrs. Blair Farquhar, and a glamorous Broadway star (see Figure 1.1)

This is much less the case in the 1935 movie musical *Princess Tam-Tam*, starring Josephine Baker, directed by Edmond T. Gréville, and written by Pepito Abatino and Yves Morande. *Princess Tam-Tam* elaborates upon the American model of the 1920s Cinderella musical, although produced in France in the following decade. Yet, by contrast to *Irene* and *Sally*, *Princess Tam-Tam* reveals the limitations of "manners of fashion" as a means to social mobility, when juxtaposed with matters of race.

In the film, Baker played Alwina, a high-spirited Tunisian shepherdess taken under the wing of a white French novelist named Max de Mirecourt



Figure 1.1 "America as Butterfly Baller": Marilyn Miller, in various guises, in the title role of *Sally*. *The Theatre Magazine*, April 1921. Photos by Campbell Studios. Courtesy of the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

(Albert Préjean). Max travels to rural Tunisia in search of literary inspiration, only to exploit Alwina as the subject of a new novel—and the object of a social experiment. Like *Irene*, *Princess Tam-Tam* reveals the influence of Shaw's *Pygmalion*. Yet, even more so than *Irene* and *Sally*, *Princess Tam-Tam* draws origins from the Pygmalion myth, which first appeared in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and in which the sculptor wills to life his beloved statue Galatea. Often interwoven with the Cinderella story, the Galatea myth depends upon the essential alternation of the woman by the man, as well as upon the heroine's transformed appearance.⁷⁷ In *Princess Tam-Tam*, the alteration involves the "civilizing" of Alwina, from pickpocket "savage" (as she is repeatedly called by Max and his secretary and confidante, Coton), to the exotic "Princess of Parador," who stuns high society at a Parisian Embassy ball.

Princess Tam-Tam strongly drew upon the expatriate style and glamour of Baker's star persona. Recognizing the United States not as a democratic Butterfly Ballet, but as a country rife with prejudice and circumscribed opportunities for African Americans, Baker had left New York for Paris in 1925. Despite her banana-girdled exploitation and exoticization at the Casino de Paris and the Folies Bergère, Baker embodied a powerful Cinderella myth as she expatriated to the country where Perrault's tale originated. In France, the star transformed "her public persona from the exotic savage to the sophisticated, modern woman."⁷⁸ Projecting the off-stage image of a gorgeously dressed siren courted by French aristocrats, Baker sported "emeralds in my bracelets, diamonds in my rings/A Riviera château and lots of other things" (as described in the Baker-inspired Irving Berlin song, "Harlem on My Mind"),⁷⁹ even while she continued to be saddled with primitivist stereotypes in her stage and screen work.

In the tradition of *Irene* and *Sally*, clothing plays a crucial role in Alwina's metamorphosis. Reluctant to leave Tunisia behind, to serve as Max and Coton's "protégée," Alwina is both intrigued by, and skeptical toward, Max and Coton's descriptions of Parisian elegance:

MAX: Alwina... Wouldn't you like to sleep indoors? And have pretty dresses?

ALWINA: Pretty dresses?

MAX: No more need to steal. And everybody would treat you nicely.

ALWINA: Why would they treat me nicely?

MAX: Because you'd be well dressed.

ALWINA: To get treated nicely, you have to be well dressed?⁸⁰ (See Figure 1.2)



Figure 1.2 “To get treated nicely, you have to be well-dressed?” Albert Préjean as Max, and Josephine Baker as Alwina/the Princess of Parador, in *Princess Tam-Tam*. Courtesy of Kino/Photofest.

At first, Alwina resists her process of “civilization”—“In some areas, she’s made some progress. But getting her dressed is a problem,” complains Cotton to Max (in a relationship paralleling Colonel Pickering and Professor Henry Higgins in *Pygmalion*).⁸¹ *Princess Tam-Tam* shows Alwina gradually becoming a “lady,” as she learns to walk in high heels, submit to manicures and piano lessons, and model expensive, if suitably exotic, Parisian couture for her first appearance as the Princess of Parador. In a scene that anticipates Eliza’s visit to the Ascot racecourse in *My Fair Lady*, Alwina (as the Princess) also appears modishly alongside Max at the Longchamp races.

Princess Tam-Tam used its Cinderella/Galatea narrative to play upon Baker’s status as a style icon, while ultimately affirming French Colonialist ideologies (Tunisia was a French protectorate until 1956). In the climax of

the film, Max’s jealous French wife Lucie tricks Alwina into performing a “savage” dance in a supper club floor show; Alwina flings off her couture gold lamé gown, and to the beat of African drums, dances wildly in her lingerie. While *Sally* had depicted the title character’s dance as the “Wild Rose” Madame Nockerova as a freeing charade, *Princess Tam-Tam* asserts Alwina’s primitivism as an ineluctable fact, and her blackness as an insurmountable impediment to both “civilized” respectability and romance with the white Max (who has cruelly deceived Alwina, for the purposes of his novel, that he loves her).

In the self-reflexive conclusion of *Princess Tam-Tam*, Alwina’s Parisian makeover turns out to be merely an episode from Max’s novel *Civilization*; Alwina has never left North Africa. Rejecting the assimilationist ethos that drove the plots of the American Cinderella musicals *Irene* and *Sally*, *Princess Tam-Tam* asserts that Alwina is “better off” outside a snobbish and corrupt Western civilization. The film conservatively advocates the opinion of Dar (Georges Pécelet), Alwina’s Tunisian suitor: “African flowers aren’t meant for parlors.” Though produced in France, and centering upon French and African characters, *Princess Tam-Tam* points to the racial contradictions and hypocrisies at the heart of the American rags-to-riches narrative. At the same time, the film vibrantly showcased the talent and charisma of its star. Recognizing the power of Irene O’Dare’s observation, “clothes make an awful difference in a girl,” Baker used her status as a fashion icon to blur not only social, but also racial, boundaries. Throughout the course of her career, Baker continued to defy the limitations and stereotypes imposed by American and French society, and reflected in the plot of *Princess Tam-Tam*: a distorting mirror of the 1920s Cinderella musical.

“LITTLE GIRL SHOWED YOU UP”: CAREER GIRL CINDERELLA MUSICALS

The democratic fable *Sally* implicitly suggested that the modern woman might not only use fashion toward professional success, but also combine marriage with her career. In *Sally* and many other Cinderella musicals, as well as earlier examples like *A Gaiety Girl* and *Mlle. Modiste*, the heroine works upon the stage: as an actress, singer, or dancer. Yet, this is not the case of all 1920s Cinderella musicals. A small, overlooked subset of the genre asserted the ambitions of heroines presented as business- (rather than show business-) oriented career girls: young women who become entrepreneurs,

designers, and inventors, even as they also marry their obligatory Prince Charmings. In *The Gingham Girl* (1922), and George S. Kaufman and Marc Connelly's *Helen of Troy, New York* (1923), the heroines are, respectively, Mary Thompson, who comes to Manhattan to make a success of her cookie company; and Helen McGuffey, who invents a semisoft collar for the Yarrow Collar Company. Laudatory of their heroines' cleverness and acumen, these musical comedies reflected the heightened visibility of businesswomen (or "business girls," as they were frequently termed) at the start of the decade. "Thousands of women have joined the business ranks in every line of endeavor; and in the majority of cases, these women have added much to the value of business," *Green Book Magazine's* Elizabeth Sears wrote in a 1920 editorial.⁸²

Both business satires set in New York City, *The Gingham Girl* and *Helen of Troy, New York* share a number of plot conventions, in addition to winsome yet driven heroines. Father-son competition is one characteristic. Drawing upon a comedic template that first appeared in Walter Hackett and Roi Cooper Megrue's hit farce *It Pays to Advertise* (as produced in 1914 by Cohan and Harris), *The Gingham Girl* and *Helen of Troy, New York* both feature some variation of the heroine falling in love with the boss's son, and teaming with the son to outdo—or buy out—the father's business. While ultimately reaffirming a Harding-era capitalist ethos, in the guise of their respective business-girl Cinderellas, both musical comedies poke satiric fun at corporate greed and advertising ballyhoo.

The Gingham Girl pairs an efficient and hard-working heroine with something of a wastrel. As the *New York Tribune's* critic implied: "The plot concerns two young country people who go to the city to make their fortunes. He strays, but she makes a mint by establishing a cookie factory."⁸³ Mary (a role originated by Helen Ford) follows her small-town boyfriend John Cousins to Manhattan. Here, John has been enticed by two contrasting vamps, representing the forces of Wall Street and Washington Square: mercenary chorus girl Mazie Lelewer and bohemian painter Sonia Maison (who urges John to "shun all gold, and live only on love," even as she accepts large commissions for magazine advertisement illustrations).⁸⁴ Ultimately, Mary's working-girl honesty wins John away from the gold-digging Mazie and Sonia. With music by Tin Pan Alley composer Albert Von Tilzer, lyrics by Neville Fleson, and a book by Daniel Kusell, *The Gingham Girl* was a substantial hit both on Broadway and in road companies. The musical ran for 322 performances at the Earl Carroll Theatre, where it opened on August 28, 1922.

The Gingham Girl evoked a tension that would be further debated in such 1940s musicals as *Lady in the Dark* and *Annie Get Your Gun*: can a working woman attain personal fulfillment through mere professional achievement? Following traditional musical comedy formulas, *The Gingham Girl* answers these questions in the negative. Singing of the hollowness of success without love, Mary remembers that back in Crossville Corners, New Hampshire:

I had a sweetheart who carved my name
On that old apple tree down the lane.
That was long ago, still I confess,
I'd give whatever I possess
If I could wear a gingham dress
And be a Gingham Girl once more.⁸⁵

Yet, to a certain extent, *The Gingham Girl* allows its heroine to have her cookies and eat them, too. Following John to New York City at the end of the first act, Mary endeavors to find "the advertising and capital" to support her fledgling company Bluebird Cookies. She tells an acquaintance, "It isn't the money I'm after. . . . It's just being successful. Accomplishing the thing you set out to do."⁸⁶ Mirroring *Mlle. Modiste's* Fifi and Hiram Bent, and Irene and Donald/Madame Lucy, Mary finds a fairy godfather-figure—rival cookie manufacturer's son Harrison Bartlett, who provides the funding to compete with his father. Before long, Bluebird Cookies is doing sell-out business, and Mary, with one exception, "only employing women folk."⁸⁷ Although Mary forgives John for straying, and invites him to become a third partner in the company, *The Gingham Girl* ends with its enterprising heroine happily straddling domestic and professional kitchens.

George S. Kaufman and Marc Connelly's *Helen of Troy, New York*, with a score by Bert Kalmar and Harry Ruby, appeared as the most incisive of the career girl Cinderella musicals.⁸⁸ Like *The Gingham Girl* and the following year's *Peggy-Ann*, the musical comedy starred Helen Ford, who herself hailed from Troy, New York, and who had come to rival Marilyn Miller as a musical comedy ingénue. Yet, whereas Miller projected ethereality, the "piquant" Ford conveyed an earthy appeal that allowed her to play career girl roles and unconventional, even cynical, heroines: Cinderella for the Smart Set.

Ford played crafty stenographer Helen McGuffey in *Helen of Troy, New York*, which opened at the Selwyn Theatre on June 19, 1923, and ran for

191 performances. While acknowledging “the watchful eye of the God of Musical Comedy, who has decreed that nothing shall ever be produced that is not built in his image,” Robert Benchley in *Life* enthused over Kaufman and Connelly’s trenchant book, and capitulated, “But aside from its conformity, *Helen of Troy, New York* is very good entertainment, and we have never heard that conformity militated against a show’s success. . . . In fact, looking back over *Helen of Troy, New York*, we aren’t so sure that it isn’t fairly unusual, at that.”⁸⁹

While *Helen of Troy, New York* skewers “the efficiency expert and the tired businessman,”⁹⁰ Kaufman and Connelly aim satiric darts at the “Arrow collars” of the Troy-based Cluett-Peabody and Sons Company. In the 1920s, the company’s advertisements by J. C. Leyendecker turned the effete handsome “Arrow Collar Man” into a national symbol of upscale masculinity. (It was an open secret to cognoscenti like Kaufman and Connelly that Leyendecker was homosexual—and so, often, were his male models). In *Helen of Troy, New York* satirizes Leyendecker as the Baron de Cartier—a composite parody of the commercial illustrator and *Vanity Fair* art photographer Baron Adolph de Meyer, the “Debussy of photography.” Described as “a beautifully dressed and slightly effeminate—only slightly—gentleman,” Baron de Cartier brings with him to the “Yarrow Collar Factory” his favorite male model, Theodore Mince.⁹¹ The dim-witted Mince elicits the musical’s funniest wisecracks, courtesy of Helen’s kid sister Maribel: “You do all your work with the outside of your head, don’t you.”⁹²

As in the playwrights’ *To the Ladies*, women demonstrate more business savvy than do the men for whom they work. Kaufman and Connelly satirize the ineptitude of the Yarrow Collar Factory’s “Efficiency Department,” whose director, Warren Jennings, steals ideas from the resourceful Helen. When Helen quickly retrieves a letter that Jennings has lost, Yarrow grins at the latter, “Little girl showed you up.”⁹³ The plot of *Helen of Troy, New York* climaxes with a stratagem that the stenographer employs when Jennings takes Helen’s idea for a semisoft collar, fires her, and passes it off as his own. At the Baron’s New York City photography studio, Helen unleashes her “Trojan Horse”:

HELEN: Will you turn (the collar) inside out and read what it says there?

YARROW (*reading the inside of the collar*): I stole this idea from Helen McGuffey. Signed C. Warren Jennings.⁹⁴

As in *The Gingham Girl*, Helen wins both professional esteem and romantic fulfillment. In this case, she accepts the marriage proposal of David Williams, the son of Yarrow’s former business partner. After Jennings’ exposure (and after Helen, David, Mince, and Maribel trick Yarrow into selling them his company), Yarrow agrees to give a “royalty of ten cents a collar to Helen.”⁹⁵

As office-place spins on the Cinderella musical, *The Gingham Girl* and *Helen of Troy, New York* balance conservative values with narratives of female self-assertion. Neither of these musical comedies portrays their heroines embarking in business without a male partner, or arriving at professional accomplishment without the accompanying sanctions of love and marriage. Mary and Helen both work in more feminine spheres of commerce: baking and fashion, respectively. Nevertheless, the career girl Cinderella musical represents a notable departure from the domestic trajectories of *Irene* and *Mary*. These shows illustrate not only the professional progress of women by the mid-1920s, but also the considerable extent to which musical comedy writers were willing to celebrate ambitious and intelligent “business girl” heroines in the context of American capitalist enterprise. By this time, the Cinderella musical genre was approaching its decline as the dominant musical comedy genre of the 1920s, and was ripe for parody by two on-the-rise talents—Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart.

PEGGY-ANN: SATIRIZING THE “CINDERELLA STUFF OF MUSICAL COMEDY”

Whereas *Helen of Troy, New York*’s business satire fits comfortably into the Cinderella musical mold, *Peggy-Ann* (1926) satirized the genre itself. Also starring Helen Ford, *Peggy-Ann* sat at the forefront of a series of Rodgers and Hart shows that earned the team recognition as, in the words of *The Daily Mirror*’s Robert Coleman, “among the foremost ranks of our youthful and talented showbuilders.”⁹⁶ Following the team’s earlier hits *The Garrick Gaieties* and *Dearest Enemy* (both 1925), *Peggy-Ann* proved innovative not only for its ironic treatment of the Cinderella rags-to-riches narrative, but for its status as the first major musical comedy to deliberately integrate the theories of Sigmund Freud. The psychoanalyst’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*—first appearing in English translation in 1913—consumed the conversations of 1920s intelligentsia, including that of Rodgers and Hart. In his memoirs, Rodgers recalled, “By 1926,

Freud's theories, though much discussed, had not yet found expression in the (musical) theatre... and the time seemed ripe for a musical comedy to make the breakthrough by dealing with subconscious fears and fantasies."⁹⁷ In its mixture of fashion and Freudianism, *Peggy-Ann*, too, anticipates the 1941 milestone musical *Lady in the Dark*.

Peggy-Ann emerged among the biggest Broadway hits of the mid-1920s. Featuring a caustically funny book by Herbert Fields, the musical played for 333 performances at the Vanderbilt Theatre. Alan Dale, of the *New York American*, called *Peggy-Ann* the "daintiest, most whimsical, unusual-est (sic), and captivatingly concise and imaginative little musical play we've had for some time."⁹⁸ For all its originality, the show was a reworking of the musical comedy *Tillie's Nightmare*, a Marie Dressler vehicle produced in 1910 by Lew Fields, the father of Herbert and Dorothy. In both musicals, the heroine is a boarding house drudge who falls asleep, and dreams herself into richer, more glamorous surroundings.

At a time in which critics declared Sinclair Lewis, an American literary prophet, with his scathing attacks on Main Street materialism and "Babbitry," *Peggy-Ann* more lightheartedly satirized a nation consumed by consumerism. The musical comedy (Rodgers' personal favorite of his 1920s shows) brims consistently with cheerful cynicism; "No mawkish sentiment creeps in for long; no pathetic Cinderella is *Peggy-Ann*," noted *The Boston Daily Globe*, while the "transformation of *Tillie's Nightmare* into *Peggy-Ann* was in fact a radical re-working of the Cinderella musical by way of Freud's couch and the Algonquin Round Table."⁹⁹ With an original production drawing playfully upon the visual aesthetics of surrealism and expressionism (movements then popularized in the productions of the Theatre Guild), *Peggy-Ann* transports its heroine into a strange dream involving pink-mustached policemen, a talking fish who takes her to Havana, and a foiled shipboard wedding in which Peggy appears in her negligee.

Opening with a reality-set prologue, *Peggy-Ann* shifts into the realm of dreams in the show's second act. Peggy, engaged to grocery clerk Guy Pendleton, is forced to stay home in Glen Falls, New York, "putting up jam" while her mother and wicked stepsister Dolores go to the theater. Peggy—who frankly wishes that Guy were rich—falls asleep over newspaper advertisements that trigger her extravagant dream exploits:

Ocean liners cross the ocean in four days!... Great sale of gowns and wraps for Milady—frocks reduced to \$350.... I bet it took a lot of sables to make that (sable coat)—yes, and a lot of money to buy it. Money—huh, there's a lot of

things in this world better than money—but it takes money to buy 'em!... I wish Guy had a lot of money.... I'd go to Havana... and the races... maybe then I'd start buying clothes! I'd have prettier clothes than Dolores.¹⁰⁰

In Peggy's dream, her fiancé—no longer a humble A&P worker—owns an opulent Manhattan department store. Here, at Guy Pendleton's Dry Goods Store, salesgirls work behind surreal displays of female accessories and lingerie, while the store's complaining customers all appear to Peggy as doppelgangers of Dolores. Even in her fantasies, Peggy finds her wedding constantly thwarted by her vindictive stepsister (who successively appears in locations including the Dry Goods Store, a yacht, and Havana).

In their score to *Peggy-Ann*, Rodgers and Hart satirized the sanguine storytelling and fairy-tale wish-fulfillment of the early-1920s' Cinderella musicals. Unlike Sally Green, a more materially fortunate dishwashing drudge, Peggy-Ann Barnes expresses little patience for facile optimism, as she is perpetually unable to attain her dream marriage as a millionaire's wife. As Dolores once again scuttles Peggy's wedding, the latter launches into "Where's that Rainbow," a song that spoofs Sally's "Look for the Silver Lining," Mary's "The Love Nest," and even "The Blue Room" (a song from Rodgers' and Hart's own hit *The Girl Friend*). Complaining that "Pollyanna stuff, too/Is tough to endure," Peggy sings:

Where's that rainbow they cheer about?
Where's that lining you hear about?
Where's that love nest where love is king ever after?
It is easy to see, all right,
Everything's gonna be alright—
Be just dandy for everybody but me!¹⁰¹

For *Peggy-Ann*, Rodgers, Hart, and Fields created a happy ending that undermined the rags-to-riches extravagance of Cinderella musicals like that of *Sally*. In the last part of her dream, Peggy imagines attending the races in Havana. Here, Peggy dreams that she herself is a race horse (also named Peggy), whom she frantically urges to triumph at the finish line. Finally, she awakens, with Guy standing solicitously by her side. Having confronted her curiosity and anxiety about sex (as Peggy confesses in "A Little Birdie Told Me So") through a Freudian succession of dream imagery (i.e., fishes, ships, and riding horses), Peggy realizes that marriage to Guy—not winning the race of material success—is what she really wants in life, and resigns herself to love on a low income. In its equation of American consumer capitalism with a lavish, yet perpetually aggravated,

dream of wealth, *Peggy-Ann* can be regarded as a cleverly comic subversion of Cinderella fantasies. At the same time, with its affirmation of female domesticity, *Peggy-Ann* lacked the assertive female Alger narratives driving the stories of *Sally*, *The Gingham Girl*, and *Helen of Troy*, *New York*, among earlier Cinderella musicals.

Peggy-Ann appeared on Broadway at the same time that critics complained of the Cinderella musical surfeit. By the mid-1920s, America's cultural climate had changed, marked by a "decline of sentimentality."¹⁰² The Cinderella musical genre, with its blend of wistful charm and jazzy joie de vivre, gave way to the racy modernism of Rodgers and Hart, the Gershwins, and Cole Porter, among others. As the heroines of musical comedy, pleasure-chasing flappers gradually began to replace the winsome Irish American working girl (whose ethnicity, as Stuart Hecht suggests, may also have hastened the genre's decline with the Immigration Act of 1924, and increasing nativist sentiment throughout the 1920s).¹⁰³ A new style of brisk "leisure musicals," set at college campuses, country clubs, and Palm Beach resorts, and epitomized by *No, No, Nanette* (1925), also gained popularity, as the national standard of living continued to rise.

Though writers of musical comedy continued to draw upon the template of the Cinderella musical, the genre declined on Broadway, migrating west to become a subgenre of the Hollywood romantic comedy. After silent film adaptations of *Sally* (1925) and *Irene* (1926) appeared—both starring the Irish American gamine comedienne Colleen Moore—more and more films began to replace an earlier style of sentimental Cinderella narratives (most associated with Mary Pickford) with settings of urbane modernity, navigated by fashionable, working New Women.¹⁰⁴

Cresting in the years 1925–1928, this new subgenre—what might be called the "Shop Girl Cinderella Film"—spoke to an America at the height of the Jazz Age, as the forces of industrial prosperity and mass production continued to mobilize large numbers of single women into the urban labor force. From the mid- to the late 1920s, dozens of these films (including Moore's Hollywood Cinderella fable *Ella Cinders* [1926], and Clara Bow's *It* [1927]) flooded the cinematic market. In 1925, *The Chicago Daily Tribune's* Roberta Nangle identified the strong influence of the Cinderella musical while describing MGM's *Slaves of Fashion*, starring Norma Shearer as "little country girl" Catherine Emerson:

(She) wanted to be a butterfly, so when Broadway winked at her, she winked back and played with the proverbial fire in an innocent way. She wasn't burned,

of course—not even singed—for this is a happy movie, made of the Cinderella stuff of musical comedy.¹⁰⁵

This Shop Girl Cinderella film genre swelled in popularity into the early 1930s, when Joan Crawford (*née* Lucille LeSueur) epitomized the girl "from the other side of the tracks" who makes good, in such Depression-era films as *Sadie McKee* (1934). In her offscreen life, as a veteran of Broadway revues, the ambitious Crawford had mobilized her own singular rags-to-riches story as a "Cinderella on the Main Stem."¹⁰⁶ Crawford rose from among the legion of young women who riveted the American public's fascination, fantasies, and anxieties throughout the 1920s: chorus girls.

THE BROADWAY BEAUTY TRUST AND THE CULT OF THE CHORUS GIRL

In 1919, when *The Gold Diggers* opened on Broadway, her image reigned omnipresent. It was very much a dual representation. As a beautiful young woman of the working class, she symbolized American democracy in such movies as *A Chorus Girl's Romance* (1920) and *Susie of the Follies* (1917), even as a myriad of magazine and newspaper articles, bearing such titles as "There is Hope for a Wicked World When Even One Chorus Girl Reports No Temptations," perpetuated her reputation as an ensnarer of millionaires, leaving a trail of broken hearts and breach of promise charges in her wake. At the turn of the twentieth century, the public intensified a powerful obsession with actresses, the stage stars and silent movie idols whose images decorated countless cigarette cards and rotogravure sections. Yet, "more than any other figure on the American stage, it was the chorus girl who fascinated the American public."¹⁰⁷

As the New Woman appeared on the twentieth century's horizon—and, increasingly, in urban workplaces across America—the chorus girl magnetized not only the public's attention, as the sexy, independent "image of the modern girl," but was also at the center of "tensions that women and men found with the new informal personality, the lowering of barriers and the subsequent inability to discern confidently which women were 'true' and which were not."¹⁰⁸ In some ways, the chorus girl assuaged anxieties about the working woman: it was popularly assumed that she attained her success primarily through her beauty and sexual allure, rather than through substance and merit. Susan A. Glenn notes the formal resemblance of chorus lines to suffragette marches, and how the media undermined the activism

of the latter through the scopic pleasure of the former: "The overriding tendency of the press and the Broadway establishment, however, was to absorb the Amazonian threat of the female army into the more pleasurable image of the Broadway beauty chorus."¹⁰⁹

Yet, even as they drew upon a Cinderella mythology rooted in youth and Caucasian standards of beauty, chorus girls also posed a potent threat. On one level, these young women earned unusually high salaries: in 1924, the average New York chorus girl earned \$35–\$40 a week, while showgirls in the *Follies* and other revues could earn at least \$75–\$100 a week (by comparison, the average female office worker in New York City made a weekly salary of \$27).¹¹⁰ Chorus girls also experienced an expansion of personal independence, class mobility, and sexual expressiveness. While only a small percentage of chorus girls attained the mythic grail of stardom, many dozens did—and it was this remote, but quite tangible, possibility that compelled many thousands of women to join the Broadway chorus pilgrimage. Lillian Russell, the former chorine turned "American Beauty" soprano of the Gilded Age, "pointed out (that) although not more than one of every hundred chorus girls advanced beyond the chorus, every star had once been a chorus girl."¹¹¹

This "cult of the chorus girl" reached its zenith in the 1920s, with the ascendance of the "Broadway Beauty Trust." Press agent Will A. Page coined the term in 1925 to describe the erotic economy constellated by such revues as *The Ziegfeld Follies*, *The Passing Show*, *The George White Scandals*, and *The Earl Carroll Vanities*. Extravagantly produced, and the bane of censors, these Beauty Trust revues not only exemplified the decade's appetite for sexual titillation, but for conspicuous consumption. In 1923, Edmund Wilson noted of the *Follies*, which Ziegfeld had declared a "national institution" three years earlier: "Among those green peacocks and gilded panels, in the luxurious age of the New Amsterdam, there is realized a glittering vision which rises straight out of the soul of New York. The *Follies* is such fantasy, such harlequinade as the busy, well-to-do New Yorker has been able to make of his life."¹¹²

While vibrantly abounding in song, dance, and comic sketches, the Beauty Trust revues traded immensely upon the fantasy and currency of female flesh. The *Follies* and its Main Stem competitors "glorified" the "white, heterosexual, bourgeois body."¹¹³ At the same time, a thriving entertainment industry in Harlem (and in Broadway "Negro revues" and musical comedies like the 1921 sensation *Shuffle Along*) drew many young women of color to the profession of chorus girl, with the Cotton Club's light-skinned chorus line famously billed as "tall, tan, and terrific."¹¹⁴

While the "beauty chorus" comprised an important element of musical comedy, burlesque, and nightclubs (most famously the floor show of Texas Guinan's El Fay Club), feminine pulchritude formed the very pillar of the revue: the undraped bodies of the ponies, chorines, and showgirls.¹¹⁵ In the preface of Page's *Behind the Curtains of Broadway's Beauty Trust*, fellow press agent Jack Lait wrote:

The "girl revue," wonder child of the old 'musical comedy,' has become a gigantic institution. Eight stupendous revues, and scores of lesser ones, blaze anew on Broadway every autumn. The cost of producing one of them would have beggared P. T. Barnum. . . . The institution is literally, a billion dollar gamble. This is the Beauty Trust, so called because the keystone of the colossus is feminine beauty. These millions are risked and lost and won, and risked again, on a pretty face or form, which yesterday perhaps graced the village drug store in some middle-western town or a tenement in Brooklyn.¹¹⁶

"Surely everybody knows/Chorus girls are put in shows/Just to please the tired businessman," wrote Kalmar and Ruby for *Helen of Troy*, *New York*, satirizing the chorus girl's appeal to the steadfast "TBM" (according to the popular acronym) for whom she might serve as a glamorous status symbol. Critics and writers, too, were certainly not immune to singing the praises of chorus girls. George Jean Nathan waxed rhapsodic about the "toothsome sweetmeats" of the girl shows, while e.e. cummings breathlessly evoked the luxurious, "peacockappareled" splendor of showgirl Dolores in one 1926 poem.¹¹⁷

If men (and some women) erotically fantasized about the chorus girl, many women also found in her an emotional fantasy figure, dreaming of "the lace-and-gold, lingerie-and-coquetry"¹¹⁸ world that she seemed to inhabit. Zelda Fitzgerald identified with her in a less romanticized manner: in Fitzgerald's 1929 story "The Original Follies Girl," the author imagined her protagonist Gay, as "so airy, as if she had a long time ago dismissed herself as something decorative and amusing, and not to be confused with the vital elements of American life"—a description almost certainly echoing Zelda's own sense of ornamental relegation among the "Lost Generation" elite.¹¹⁹

As a "drama of lowly birth and enchanted ascent,"¹²⁰ the stereotypical chorus girl/Stage Door Johnny pairing had its roots in the Restoration- and eighteenth-century-era coupling of the demimondaine (usually comic) actress, with the aristocratic rakes of the English court. For example, Lavinia Fenton, the original Polly Peachum in *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), cloped with the third Duke of Bolton, trading the theater for a life of

comfortable respectability. Of all these Cinderella actresses, Nell Gwynn towered most mythically. A pert Drury Lane orange-seller, Gwynn rose to become the most celebrated comic actress of the Restoration stage, and, as the self-admitted “protestant whore,” to “sway the scepter” of Charles II.

The association between actresses and prostitutes lingered well into the twentieth century, and certainly tinted the mainstream public perception of chorus girls, who, as characters in plays and films, often spoke of their Stage Door Johnnies as “Johns.” This stereotypical cocktail was compounded, to varying measures, of social snobbery, fear of women’s sexual agency, and anti-theatrical Puritan sentiment (which lingered persistently at the fringes of the Jazz Age pleasure ethic). In Dorothy Parker and Elmer Rice’s 1924 play *Close Harmony: or, The Lady Next Door*, the authors depict all these forces at work, as two prim matrons condescendingly pay a visit to their new neighbor: ex-chorus girl Belle Sheridan (note the eighteenth-century-flavored name). Honest about her abilities—“I never was any Bernhardt, but made a pretty good rowing girl in *Little Miss Spitfire*”—Belle has married a philandering letdown of a “Dream Prince” and moved to the suburbs.¹²¹

Certainly, chorus girls—despite their varied range of abilities, and often-grueling workdays and nights of rehearsals and performances—faced stereotypes of frivolity and indolence. Associated, since the late nineteenth century, with lobster-palace debauchery (and with the practice of the “bird and bottle supper”), they were often perceived in the media as less industrious than actresses who assumed a fourth wall and the mimesis of characterization.¹²² Even more so than the actress, the chorus girl’s expression of feminine spectacle paradoxically mixed ornamental masquerade and naked self-display. For example, in Cohan’s *Forty-Five Minutes from Broadway* (1906), Mary Jane Jenkins’s foil is the spoiled Flora Dora Dean, who “isn’t even a regular actress! She’s one of those chorus gals that just stands on the stage and joins in.”¹²³

Some articles in the popular press focused on an outstandingly industrious young woman, and many newspaper and magazine features celebrated the chorus girl’s democratic ascent to stardom. In a February 1920 essay in the magazine *Shadowland*, Louis Raymond Reid echoed this rhetoric of the chorus girl as populist feminine icon:

Considered from the standpoint of governmental philosophy, she belongs to both the classes and the masses. Neither a Morgan nor a Marx can deprive her of this privilege. . . . She can meet marquis or millionaire upon her own reservations and hold her assurance in the face of ostentatious matrimony. But

she maintains equal poise in a proletarian character. She is able at all times to exert a defiant respectability. She can run the gauntlet of the Johnnies with a proud humility and toss her salary without protest into the lap of a poor and industrious mother.¹²⁴

Nevertheless, a tone of titillated censure underlies much of the chorus girl discourse, and such films as *Broken Hearts of Broadway* (1923), starring Colleen Moore, juxtaposed one virtuous chorus girl against dozens of immoral ones: “So you’ve decided to join that grand and glamorous army of gold diggers,” Moore’s misled boyfriend sneers.¹²⁵ As journalist Betty Van Deventer observed in her 1928 booklet “The Lives of Chorus Girls,” “the chorus girl makes a good spot in a newspaper feature story because the public likes to regard her as a thing of beauty and wickedness.”¹²⁶ Yet, even as the profession of chorus girl was fraught with misconceptions, as well as women’s physical objectification in musical comedies and revues, the “Beauty Trust” provided a powerful system of advancement for many women—particularly in Hollywood, where the nascent superpower of the movies was perfectly timed to accommodate their ambitions.

FROM BEADED BAG TO HOLLYWOOD STAR: THE PARADOX OF THE BROADWAY BEAUTY CHORUS

Never much of a fan of the revues’ feminine spectacle, Robert Benchley—then, a theater critic for *Life Magazine*—frequently mocked the masques of erotic allegory featured in the Beauty Trust revues. These stunning and ornate configurations were staged by such dance directors as *The Ziegfeld Follies*’ Ned Wayburn, who compared the chorus girl to a “creation (as) completely thought out . . . wired and flounced, beribboned and set dancing, as any automaton designed . . . to excite an audience with sheer sensuousness.”¹²⁷ Benchley wrote of the *Follies of 1924*:

As a general thing, I am not one to murmur ecstatically over those big production numbers in which a succession of chorus-girls, each dressed to represent some flower, come on and offer themselves to the Queen Bee to be made into a gigantic wreath for the wedding of the Humming-Bird and the Ruby-Throated Crossbeak.¹²⁸

It is a paradoxical irony of the Beauty Trust, that by contributing their skills to an institution that presented them either as a voiceless image (the silent showgirl), or the multiplied “mass ornament” of the singing,

dancing chorus line, many chorus girls were able to attain singular identities on stage, film, and in other performing arts.¹²⁹ Many dozens made the transition to musical comedy stars and actresses on the “legitimate” stage. Even more frequently, they acted in silent films, where the lack of speaking parts proved not a deficit, but a potential advantage (as chorus girls “never spoke lines anyway”).¹³⁰ As the October 1921 issue of *Photoplay* captioned a photograph of the actress Shannon Day: “The most commonplace thing about her is the fact that she came from the *Follies* to the films.”¹³¹

The 1920s revues drew upon a visual vocabulary of objectification and consumption, although none of the impresarios expressed the frank misogyny of Earl Carroll. The producer philosophized, “Girls are a commodity the same as bananas, pork chops, or a lot in suburban development.”¹³² Even as the impresarios’ avant-garde contemporaries, surrealists like Man Ray, transformed their muses into statues and violins, the *Follies*, *Vanities*, and *Passing Shows* portrayed showgirls metamorphosed into a litany of flora, fauna, fruits (i.e., “Peachland” in the *Follies of 1914*), lingerie, cosmetics, the items of a wedding trousseau, and jewelry—as when Joan Crawford, then Lucille LeSueur, appeared as a “beaded bag” in the *Passing Show of 1924*.¹³³ *The Theatre Magazine* described the “Dining Out” number of the 1921 *Music Box Revue*, in which chorines costumed as oysters were “hoisted” up an archway to be served to a dining couple.¹³⁴ They also appeared dressed as poultry; a popular slang term for chorus girl was “chicken”—the petite “squab” and the medium-height “broiler.” *Green Book* critic Channing Pollock noted in 1914:

There are all sorts of girls in the *Follies*—all sorts but ugly girls. . . . There are little girls, and medium-sized girls, and big girls; squabs, and broilers, and show girls; dimpled darlings and amazing Amazons.¹³⁵

In addition to physical attractiveness, youth was deemed the *sine qua non* of the Beauty Trust chorus girl; the vast majority of chorines were in their late teens and early twenties.

Yet, the revue culture of the 1920s offered a paradoxical system of advancement to the thousands of women who, drawn to the chorus girl’s Cinderella mystique, found work in Broadway musicals and revues. In 1921, an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 women worked as chorus girls in the United States alone.¹³⁶ From countless newspaper and magazine features, as well as movies, these women were well-aware that their appearance as chorus girls might lead to either a prosperous marriage, as with the legendary Gaiety Girls and their American counterparts, the Florodora

Girls, or to being scouted by the theater and movie producers who regularly “shopped” at Broadway revues and musical comedies. Decades earlier, Theodore Dreiser had observed the liberating potential of the chorus girl’s work in his 1900 novel *Sister Carrie*, whose title protagonist Carrie Meeber progresses from her rural penury to Chicago kept woman, to New York chorus girl, to, finally, a Broadway leading lady. Carrie’s salary as a chorus girl at the Casino Theatre allows her to break free of her controlling, and increasingly abusive, paramour George Hurstwood.

At a time of limited professional options for women, in which the average saleswoman earned only 42–63 percent of a salesman’s in the same position, the role of chorus girl held a powerful appeal to “stage-struck girls,” generally young, working- and middle-class women who sought lives beyond the prescribed roles of feminine domesticity.¹³⁷ With the exception of the petite, dance-trained “ponies,” little, to no, experience was required to get started—though Van Deventer noted “sweetness, vivacity, style. . . .(and) a sense of humor” among the “varieties demanded of a chorus ensemble.”¹³⁸ For such women, the possibility of advancement was both tantalizing and considerable.

Hyperbolized rhetoric, about the stepping stone nature of the chorus line, abounded in the media (and the 1933 Busby Berkeley-choreographed film *42nd Street* later immortalized the concept of “going out a youngster and coming back a star”). Still, many women materialized the myths. A handful of chorus girls would become cinematic superstars; from the *Follies* chorus alone, Louise Brooks, Paulette Goddard, and Barbara Stanwyck. Similarly, Josephine Baker—an effervescent cutup—broke out of the chorus line of the 1921 Broadway smash *Shuffle Along*, while Lena Horne did similarly at the Cotton Club in the 1930s. Others built upon their success as chorus girls to establish careers outside of performing, such as the British-born gossip columnist Sheila Graham (also famous as the lover of F. Scott Fitzgerald in Depression-era Hollywood).

Despite their opportunities for professional advancement, very few chorus girls lived the kind of life that Betty Van Deventer idealized in 1929 as “completely free.”¹³⁹ The imperatives of youth and physical attractiveness, coupled with the professional obligation to please men, severely circumscribed this freedom; women passing through the profession were compelled to plan for their future stability, or to risk falling into penury and precarity. A moderate, yet conspicuously well-publicized, number of chorus girls entered into wealthy marriages, or sexual alliances, with rich and powerful men. It was this aspect of the chorus girl cult, as well as social anxiety about her overt sexuality and expanding independence, that drove the most persistent of her stereotypical identities: that of the gold digger.

THE CHORUS GIRL AS GOLD DIGGER: ORIGINS IN THE "MERRY MERRY"

If Avery Hopwood added the term "gold digger" to the English lexicon, the playwright certainly did not create the concept of the gold-digging chorus girl. In Hopwood's 1919 play, the puritanical Stephen, opposed to his son's marriage to showgirl Violet, defines the term as follows:

A gold digger is a woman, generally young, who extracts money and other valuables from the gentlemen of her acquaintance, usually without adequate return.¹⁴⁰

In a sequence of popular stories, novels, and plays that proliferated in the first decade of the twentieth century, writers vigorously exercised the gold digger stereotype, most prominently in Roy McCardell's *Conversations of a Chorus Girl* (1903), and *The Show Girl and Her Friends* (1904); and Kenneth McGaffey's facetiously titled *The Sorrows of a Show Girl* (1908). Sketches of the chorus girl's floating world (commonly referred to as "the Merry-Merry"), these works share New York City settings—the Runyonesque milieu of Rector's and the races—as well as slangy caricature-heroines, who speak in an argot rich in terms like "live one," "rave" (both early versions of "sugar daddy"), and "grafting" (the exchange of a free meal for a date). These pieces direct a breezily humorous, sympathetic satire toward their chorus girl protagonists. Nevertheless, these works—emphasizing their heroines' commodity value, and their valuing of commodities—collectively solidified the stereotype of the chorus girl as a matrimonial huntress.

The sensational 1900 Broadway hit *Florodora*, and the mythology it generated, informed this "Merry Merry" cycle. Onstage at the Casino Theatre, the musical's "sextet" of pink-gowned, parasol-twirling chorus girls had coquettishly answered the "Tell Me, Pretty Maiden" entreaties of six less celebrated chorus boys. Offstage, in the pattern of the Gaiety Girls, all six had married fabulously wealthy (if untitled) men, as did another *Florodora* chorus girl—Evelyn Nesbit.¹⁴¹ Legends about the *Florodora* Girls quickly circulated; one recounted the marriage of Marjorie Relyea to Richard Davis Holmes, nephew of Andrew Carnegie: "Holmes dropped dead of excitement one night before the curtain rose at the Casino. Subsequently, Miss Relyea married a Wall Street broker."¹⁴² The *Florodora* Girls, "embodying a powerful Cinderella myth . . . were goddesses, the first of their class to immortalize the chorus girl . . . Americans found in the

chorus girl proof that high attainment was possible for women," as Lois Banner observes.¹⁴³

Yet, even as the public extolled the beauty and glamour of the *Florodora* sextet, stereotypes formed a steady backlash. On the other side of the Cinderella myth lay the gold-digger effigy. If the chorus girl resembled a cartoon, she was literally rendered into one by the *New York World* humorist, and later motion picture scenarist, Roy McCardell, "a significant publicizer of chorus girl life."¹⁴⁴ Featuring the cartoon illustrations of Gene Carr, McCardell's comic novels *Conversations of a Chorus Girl* and *The Show Girl and Her Friends* followed the fortune-hunting misadventures of Lulu Lorrimer.

The Show Girl and Her Friends paints the gold-digger stereotype with a particularly brazen sheen. As Lulu, the novel's narrator, informs a journalist friend, she was part of the Original *Florodora* Company, No. 9, which she joined after a stint with Bessie Bell's Boisterous Blond Burlesquers. While Anita Loos never acknowledged reading McCardell's work, it's likely that *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes'* Lorelei Lee inherited some literary DNA from Lulu Lorrimer, who dispenses such maxims as "What I like is a perfect gentleman who can spend his money gracefully."¹⁴⁵ Like the faux-refined Lorelei to the earthy Dorothy Shaw, blond Lulu boasts a proudly vulgarian brunette sidekick in Amy de Branscome. While Lulu and Amy exploit the generosity of businessmen Louie Zinsheimer and Abie Wogglebaum—described by Lulu as "the human meal tickets"—the showgirl ends the novel on the brink of marriage with her "new rave, Mr. Burlap, the coffee broker. He says he loves me 'with a Florentine frenzy!'"¹⁴⁶

In Kenneth McGaffey's *The Sorrows of a Show Girl* (1908), a comic novel in the McCardell mode, the author similarly depicts his protagonist Sabrina as a slangy, quick-witted charmer fond of "juggling the loose talk . . . the George Cohan style of repartee."¹⁴⁷ Frequently touring in small-time musical comedy, Sabrina admits to supplementing her wages: "Sure I got an allowance from fellows I'm engaged to . . . I was betrothed to six at a time, and the diamond rings I wore made the prima donna bite her fingers with jealousy. Oh, I had a great graft."¹⁴⁸ Relating her stories in the first-person, Sabrina can be considered an unreliable narrator of ambiguous moral standing. As McGaffey writes in his prefatory "Explanation": "Fate may compel (Sabrina) to earn her own living or she may receive an income from a source that has nothing to do with these stories. . . . Hundreds of her like may be found any evening after the theater in the cafes and restaurants of the 'wisecres' known as the 'Tenderloin.'"¹⁴⁹

The “likes” of Sabrina were, some years later, termed “salamanders.” Susan A. Glenn describes this feminine type, named after the title of Owen Johnson’s 1914 novel and play, as the prototype of the gold digger. A young working woman, often (but not always) a chorus girl, who exploited her sex appeal in return for financial gain, the salamander “claimed the same right as a man to experiment with the opposite sex, to expose herself to evil and danger, to defy ‘etiquette,’ to go forth eager and unafraid while holding onto her ‘innocence.’ Like the mythical lizard, this human Salamander wanted to ‘flit miraculously through the flames’ without being burned.”¹⁵⁰

Avery Hopwood and Anita Loos undoubtedly worked upon the stereotypical ground paved by McCardell, McGaffey, and other chroniclers of the “Merry-Merry.” Yet, if McGaffey portrays Sabrina as a salamander/gold digger, the author depicts her sympathetically as a brash, streetwise working girl: the New Woman fitted to cartoon scale. Sabrina hardly fits the stereotype of a “vapid chorus girl.”¹⁵¹ The character wields a dynamic command over the English vernacular and a deliberate sway over men. Expanding upon such works as *The Show Girl and Her Friends* and *The Sorrows of a Show Girl*, Hopwood and Loos used the comic gold digger as a powerful symbol of social and sexual subversion. At the underside of the American Cinderella myth, she stands as the quintessential anti-heroine of the Jazz Age, and among the era’s defining cultural icons.

THE COMIC GOLD DIGGERS OF AVERY HOPWOOD AND ANITA LOOS

The 1920s gold digger blazed to life through the works of Hopwood and Loos: the former a deft Broadway craftsman, frequently taken to task by “highbrow” theater critics; the latter a pint-sized, acid-penned satirist and Hollywood screenwriting veteran, adored by George Jean Nathan and H. L. Mencken’s *Smart Set* circle.¹⁵² If Hopwood anointed the gold digger with his influential 1919 comedy (the source of *The Gold Diggers of 1933*), the acerbic Loos immortalized her in the chiseling form of Lorelei Lee. Loos transformed her sensational *Harper’s Bazaar* serial into a best-selling 1925 novel that she followed with a 1927 sequel *But Gentlemen Marry Brunettes*, as well as with a brazen gallery of cinematic Pre-Code-era gold diggers.

Beyond their enduring stage and screen transmutations, Hopwood’s play and Loos’s theatrically flavored novel share similar themes and

subjects, revolving around a set of narrative and performative strategies defined by Pamela Robertson as “feminist camp.”¹⁵³ Like the gay male sensibility with which camp has traditionally been identified, feminist camp destabilizes fixed representations of gender, but does so through the evocation of female subjectivity and appeal to female spectators.¹⁵⁴ Even as both works perpetuated the myth of the chorus girl as a capitalist sex (and status) symbol, the two works incisively explore issues of female representation, through what Robertson describes as the masquerade of “the comic gold digger.”¹⁵⁵ This icon “is to feminist camp what the dandy is to gay camp—its original personification, its defining voice.”¹⁵⁶ Through transforming the stereotype of the mercenary chorus girl into the narrative device of the comic gold digger, both Hopwood and Loos trenchantly use strategies of feminist camp to blast sexual hypocrisy, censorship, and anti-theatrical Puritanism. At the same time, both authors critique the limited roles available to women, particularly in the performing arts.

Like the profession of chorus girl, the comic gold digger is herself a highly performative role, skilled in artifice as a means of self-preservation. Shrewd and brazen, the comic gold digger avoids the self-sacrificial doom of the “tragic prostitute” as she “estheticizes and makes a joke of prostitution; she parodically appropriates the behavior of the prostitute for camp effect.”¹⁵⁷ Gender parody functions as a strategy of feminist camp, echoing principles articulated in Joan Riviere’s influential 1929 essay, “Womanliness as Masquerade,” in which Riviere (over sixty years before Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*) proposed “genuine womanliness” and the performance of femininity as one and the same.¹⁵⁸ In both the Hopwood play and the Loos novel, protagonists Jerry Lamar and Lorelei Lee assume a series of masks and poses, gleaned from the popular archetypes of the stage and movies—the fallen woman, the virgin, and the vamp—to gain strategic advantage over those men who would censure (and censor) them.

Both Hopwood and Loos, too, drew inspiration from *Ziegfeld Follies* showgirls in the creation of their comic gold digger protagonists. Hopwood’s source was his friend Kay Laurell.¹⁵⁹ H. L. Mencken also cited Laurell as the muse of his 1918 book *In Defense of Women*. With this influential comic treatise, the “Sage of Baltimore” helped to replace outworn female stereotypes with newer ones, toppling the Victorian ideal of women as weak vessels, and recasting them as sexually assertive, calculating vixens. Mencken wrote of Laurell, who had appeared for Ziegfeld in 1918 with one breast bare, atop a revolving globe, as the “Spirit of the Follies”: “she possessed all the arts of the really first-rate harlot,” marveling at Laurell’s ability to

extract money and gifts from men without a sexual trade-off.¹⁶⁰ In her memoirs, Anita Loos recalled more overt courtesantry among Broadway's elite showgirls, many of whom Loos counted among her friendly circle of "Tuesday Widows." Loos conjured a sort of "love nest" quite different from the "cozy and warm" cottage of the Cinderella musical *Mary*: "(The 1920s) was the era of the gold digger, abounding with millionaires who kept their sweethearts in love nests that dotted Manhattan all the way from Murray Hill to Riverside Drive."¹⁶¹

According to Hopwood, Laurell passed on to him the idea, and title epithet, of his most famous play, when sitting at the Ritz with Hopwood, she called out to a girlfriend, "Hello, Gold Digger." When a puzzled Hopwood asked Laurell what she meant, the Ziegfeld Girl explained: "That's what we call ourselves! You men capitalize your brains, or your business ability, or your legal minds—or whatever other darned thing you happen to have! So why shouldn't we girls capitalize what nature has given us—our good looks and our ability to please men?"¹⁶²

The Gold Diggers capitalized upon Hopwood's collaboration with David Belasco, who staged the original production. After his conversation with Laurell, Hopwood filed away the idea for a play, and when Belasco approached him to write a show around the talents of his contract star Ina Claire, the two men shaped *The Gold Diggers* into a prodigious commercial success: Hopwood with scintillating dialogue (i.e., "When the men lose interest, a girl loses her capital!"), risqué situation comedy, and a lavish Belasco production.¹⁶³ The play, also a hit in London with Tallulah Bankhead playing Jerry, ran for 282 performances at Broadway's Lyceum Theatre. *The Gold Diggers* became an even more enduring property in Hollywood, where it was first adapted as a 1923 silent film, then as a partly-Technicolor 1929 musical film adaptation, *Gold Diggers of Broadway*, and finally, as *The Gold Diggers of 1933*.

The original play follows three chorus girls sharing a Manhattan penthouse: cynical Mabel Munroe, innocent Violet Dayne, and worldly (but not wicked) Jerry Lamar. Violet's engagement to socialite Wally is threatened by his uncle Stephen, who, although he has never met one, regards all chorus girls as "vampires" and "designing hussies."¹⁶⁴ When Stephen, coming to the girls' apartment, mistakes Jerry for Violet, the former devises a stratagem: she'll play such a hell-raising vamp for Stephen that he'll think Violet a paragon in comparison, thereby consenting to his nephew's marriage. Instead, "Uncle Steve" falls in love with Jerry, whom he praises as "refreshingly natural."¹⁶⁵ After a series of complications, Violet ends up with Wally, Jerry with Stephen, and Mabel—the oldest of the women,

most anxious about aging—receives a bank deposit from Stephen's friend Blake (who has recovered from his virulent antipathy to chorus girls).

Hopwood admitted that he wrote *The Gold Diggers* in a spirit of frank commerciality. With a plot involving the confused identities of chorus girls and sex workers, *The Gold Diggers* closely resonates with the accusations Hopwood faced throughout the 1920s of artistic prostitution (a connection more explicitly made by the author in his posthumously published novel, *The Great Bordello*).¹⁶⁶ During this decade, the maturation of American drama—and the rise of playwrights like Eugene O'Neill—relegated Hopwood's preferred genre of bedroom farce to the bottom of the theatrical hierarchy. Critics who had once hailed his adroit craftsmanship and sparkling dialogue, such as George Jean Nathan, denounced him as a sell-out, as Hopwood's plays turned increasingly titillating, with such titles as *The Demi-Virgin* (both 1921).

The formulas, and female forms, sold. In 1920, Hopwood was the most financially successful playwright of his generation, with four plays, including *The Gold Diggers*, running simultaneously on Broadway.¹⁶⁷ In a 1921 article in *The Theatre Magazine*—subtitled "Avery Hopwood, author of countless Broadway successes, explains how he turns the trick"—the playwright leveled, "I admit I do write for Broadway, to please Broadway." Hopwood continued:

(It's) no cinch to put a girl into that (backstage) circle, keep sympathy for her, keep her clean, get her a 'good man in marriage' at the end and still let the thing be a fairly true picture of that life. I worked myself woozy over the scenario.¹⁶⁸

Given the commercial strictures upon his writing of *The Gold Diggers*, Hopwood pushes the play only so far into "trick-turning": Jerry may extract furs and jewels from men, but she's clearly a virgin, and the play legitimizes her coquetties with marriage. Hopwood exploits the stereotype of the chorus girl as gold digger, particularly in the character of Mabel Munroe ("That's my idea of matrimony—the kind that ends in alimony!").¹⁶⁹ At the same time, the playwright challenges, and criticizes, the harshness of the Broadway Beauty Trust system, which rejects chorus girls at the first encroachment of aging. As Jerry urges her fellow chorus girls (who are portrayed frequently doing crunches and leg stretches in the apartment):

Well, here we are—all of us—in the musical comedy game. We're young, we're not bad-looking, but we won't be young forever. . . . Men will do a good deal for

us now, but oh girls, lose your figures or your complexions. Get a few lines in your faces—get tired and faded looking and a little passé and the fellows that are ready to give you pearls and sables now—well—they'd turn the other way when they saw you coming.¹⁷⁰

In *The Gold Diggers*, Hopwood (who, as a closeted homosexual, was accustomed to the necessity of social subterfuge) points ironically to the artifices of women's representation, on stage and film. In the first scene of the play, Mabel introduces the theme of woman as allegory and icon, complaining to her girlfriends about having to pose as "Liberty Enlightening the World" in a World War I-era, *Follies*-type revue. She moans, "You know, I'm getting darned tired of all these statuesque jobs they're always handing me in shows. I've got so I don't feel natural unless I've got one arm up with a torch in it!" First, she was "Columbia, then France, and then the Battle of the Marne! I wonder what they'll cast me as next—the League of Nations?"¹⁷¹ With Mabel's observations, Hopwood sharply undercuts the gendered pattern, throughout World War I, of portraying women as patriotic abstractions. The recruiting posters of such commercial artists as James Montgomery Flagg, as well as Ben Ali Haggin's sumptuous tableaux vivants in multiple editions of the *Follies*, commonly presented allegorical female figures embodying American strength and power, "despite women's lack of power within (the nation)."¹⁷²

Using strategies of feminist camp, Hopwood contrasts such passive depictions of woman-as-allegory with the self-determined agency of the comic gold digger. If Mabel comments upon the reductive image-making of women in the performing arts, Jerry acts upon it, deliberately exploiting feminine stereotypes through virtuosic self-performance. While Mabel performs "statuesque jobs" in a Broadway revue, Jerry leaps off the pedestal, staging herself first as a voracious silent film vamp, and then a lachrymose fallen woman. Planning her vamp persona, Jerry vows to Violet, "I'll get one of the girls to lend me her limousine. . . I'll have ruined men piled six feet deep all around me!" Before long, Jerry is making a grand display of swilling cocktails, smoking cigarettes, and even "riding on top of a taxi."¹⁷³ Jerry boasts to Stephen of her "little coffin nails": "Know how many I've smoked today? Seventy. They call me Lizzy the Dope!"¹⁷⁴ (See Figure 1.3)

Just as the chorus girl affects a smoldering siren in the manner of Theda Bara, Jerry also puts on the guise of the repentant Magdalene. Audiences of 1919 easily recognized the type not only from silent films, but such



Figure 1.3 "They call me Lizzy the Dope!" Ina Claire as Jerry Lamar in *The Gold Diggers*. *The Theatre Magazine*, February 1920. Photo by Ira L. Hill. Courtesy of Sterling Memorial Library.

stage melodramas as Dumas fils's *La Dame aux Camélias* (1852), numerous Belasco-produced dramas in the *Camille* mold, including the impresario's own *Zaza* (1899) and *Du Barry* (1901), and Eugene Walter's *The Easiest Way* (1909). The latter drama centered on the chorus girl-turned-Broadway courtesan Laura Murdock. In *The Easiest Way*, Laura lies to, and loses, her one honest love—journalist Jim Weston. Belasco's production of the play scandalized audiences with Laura's "grief-wrung" final return to courtesan life (and her infamous closing line, "I'm going to Rector's to make a hit and to hell with the rest").¹⁷⁵ Given *The Gold Diggers'* production by Belasco,

Hopwood's satire of the repentant Magdalene figure seems to indicate a sly metatheatrical joke at the impresario's history of prostitute plays, and what Kim Marra describes as their "cycle(s) of the sin and redemption of wayward womankind."¹⁷⁶

In *The Gold Diggers*, Hopwood spoofs moralizing representations of "the easiest way" common to both stage and screen melodramas. When Jerry's vamp routine endears, rather than estranges Stephen, Jerry decides to switch tactics. She tells Stephen a sob story about being led astray as a young girl in "a lil town called Chillicothe":

JERRY: I was so young—and so innocent! And then came the call of the city!

STEPHEN: The city!

JERRY: Looking back now, I can see it was a movie that started it all! It was called *Geraldine's First Mistake*—and oh, it made it all seem so easy. She just let a man hold her hand—and then the very next thing, she had a limousine! Of course, I realize now they left out part of the movie—but I was so young, Uncle Steve—I didn't know—I didn't know!¹⁷⁷

As Stephen tries to console the sobbing Jerry, the chorus girl embellishes her tale of woe, describing seductions by Harold, then Herman, Johnnie, Ferdie, and Alonzo, after which "I took the next train to Newark. I was desperate! I wanted to get away from it all—away from the world—away from men, but oh, Steve—there are men in Newark!"¹⁷⁸ Only when her mother pays a surprise visit, revealing that Jerry hails from Columbus, Ohio, does Stephen wise up to Jerry's story. Yet, the two are romantically reconciled: Jerry, dismissing an offer to star on Broadway (previously her dream), agrees to marry Stephen instead. Written in a broadly commercial vein, *The Gold Diggers* does not challenge the status quo in its conservative dénouement. Yet, the playwright's perceptions about the construction of feminine image, on stage and on screen, remain insightful and relevant.

If *The Gold Diggers* pits the wiles of Jerry Lamar against the moral censure of Stephen and Blake, Loos's 1925 novel *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, subtitled *The Intimate Diary of a Professional Lady*, portrays Lorelei Lee's outwitting of—and eventual marriage to—an actual movie censor: Pennsylvania society heir Henry Spoffard III. The latter character evokes a long line of anti-theatrical Puritan polemicists, ranging from Jeremy Collier to 1930s' Hollywood "Morality Czar" Will Hays.¹⁷⁹ As narrator-diarist

Lorelei recounts, Spoffard "really does not mind what a girl has been through, as long as she does not enjoy herself at the finish. . . . Henry said that when girls like Dorothy do not pay, and pay, how are all the moral people going to get their satisfaction out of watching them suffer. And what would happen to Christianity?"¹⁸⁰ In *Blondes's* topsy-turvy moral universe, Loos not only allows "immoral" women like Lorelei and Dorothy to evade suffering and enjoy themselves to the finish, but to make men like Spoffard "pay"—with the "diamond and safire bracelets (that) last forever."¹⁸¹ Lorelei, the embodiment of Id, is so opposed to the mandates of Judeo-Christian suffering that, when Lorelei visits Vienna, Sigmund Freud advises her to "cultivate some inhibitions."¹⁸²

A more caustic work than *The Gold Diggers*, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* portrays Lorelei as an unreformable variant of Jerry Lamar, who increasingly resembles a Cinderella heroine throughout Hopwood's play. On one level, the crassly materialistic, philistine Lorelei, for all her inversion of the social order, remains very much an anti-heroine. Loos wrote that she intended her shrewd dumb blonde, hailing from Little Rock, Arkansas (H. L. Mencken's "Sahara of the Bozarts"), "to be a symbol of the lowest possible mentality of our nation."¹⁸³ At the same time, Loos uses her comic gold digger protagonist to criticize the patriarchal and classist inequalities restricting the agency of women like Lorelei.

Gentlemen Prefer Blondes emerged as one of the major literary sensations of the 1920s. Studded with the captioned illustrations of Ralph Barton, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* sold out overnight, and went into its ninth edition by 1926 (the same year that Loos adapted her novel into a hit Broadway play). Despite the novel's popular fiction origins, as a magazine serial published in *Harper's Bazaar*, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* drew the accolades of Mencken, Aldous Huxley, William Faulkner, and Edith Wharton, who wrote to a friend (the same year as *The Great Gatsby's* publication): "I am just reading the Great American Novel—at last! . . . (the author) must be a woman of genius."¹⁸⁴ James Joyce, too, declared himself an ardent admirer of *Blondes*, and its anti-censorship satire. Having emerged from the 1921 *Ulysses* obscenity trial, and the banning of his masterpiece, Joyce wrote that, despite declining eyesight, he had been "reclining on a sofa and reading (*Blondes*) for three whole days."¹⁸⁵

Like Hopwood with *The Gold Diggers*, Loos drew upon both Hollywood iconography and Ziegfeld Girl lore in her creation of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. Then famous as a Hollywood scenario writer (with credits including D. W. Griffith's 1916 masterpiece *Intolerance*), Loos conceived the novel's Lorelei as a former movie extra and Hollywood

starlet, rather than as a Broadway chorine.¹⁸⁶ Nevertheless, the character is closely connected to the era's "cult of the chorus girl," and Lorelei's best friend Dorothy Shaw in fact works as a Ziegfeld Girl in the *Follies*, "from which movie starlets were constantly being recruited," and with whose "lot (I) had fallen in," as Loos wrote.¹⁸⁷ While living in Manhattan in the mid-1920s, Loos belonged to a social circle that included Marion Davies, Marilyn Miller, and "an assortment of chorus girls kept by prominent gentlemen."¹⁸⁸

Like Hopwood, Loos expressed a complex but ultimately sympathetic fascination with the icon of the gold-digging chorus girl—and particularly the Ziegfeld Girl—throughout multiple works in her writing career. In her creation of Lorelei, Loos acknowledged inspiration by one of the most notorious women of the 1920s: another figure named Joyce who equally scandalized censors. This was ex-Ziegfeld Girl Peggy Hopkins Joyce, the much-married (and much-quoted) tabloid courtesan of the age. Originally a farmer's daughter from rural Virginia, Joyce had vowed, "I am not going to have a Dull & Dreary life. I am going to have a thrilling and exciting life full of Ginger and Glory" (as Joyce recounted in *Men, Marriage and Me*, her own 1930 "diary of a professional lady").¹⁸⁹ Born in 1893, the Gatsbyesque Joyce passed herself off as a Norfolk society belle, married her first millionaire at the age of seventeen, and by 1923, headlined the *Earl Carroll Vanities* in a \$20,000 chinchilla coat. In *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, Loos cheekily inserts Joyce into the narrative, as a friend of Lorelei attempts to introduce the gold digger to Henry Spoffard: "Mr. Spoffard turned on his heels and walked away. Because Mr. Spoffard is a very very famous Presbyterian and he is really much to Presbyterian to meet Peggy Hopkins Joyce."¹⁹⁰

Loos's great joke on Spoffard, and the hypocritical reformers of his ilk, is that he not only meets a woman like Peggy Hopkins Joyce, but marries her (although Lorelei, at the end of the novel, has ensured that Henry will keep out of her way by working as a professional Hollywood censor, under the production company of her handsome new lover Gilbertson Montrose). Earlier, Lorelei had wryly noted Henry's belonging to a censorship society (that):

cuts out all of the pieces out of all the photoplays that show things that are riskay, that people ought not to look at. So then they put all of the riskay pieces together and they run them over and over again. So it would really be quite a hard thing to drag Henry away from one of his Thursday mornings and he can hardly wait from one Thursday morning to another.¹⁹¹

Loos infuses *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, and its less famous sequel *But Gentlemen Marry Brunettes*, with astute criticism of Hollywood image making. At the same time, Loos comments upon women's representation on the stage, where the sarcastic Dorothy, Lorelei's non-gold digging foil, had appeared in the *Ziegfeld Follies*. Echoing Hopwood's satire of the Ben Ali Haggin tableaux in the *Follies*, Loos wittily tweaks the Ziegfeld mystique of "Glorifying the American Girl," while underscoring the impresario's marketing savvy. As Lorelei observes:

Dorothy says that most of the girls in the *Follies* would be passed up by practically every broker in New York, before Mr. Ziegfeld has 'glorified' them. Because when brokers are left to themselves, they always make a mistake and pick out some sophisticated girl that is quite well-groomed, and they keep wondering what is the matter with her. Because hardly any broker seems to have enough Psychology to realize that the real ideal of his dreams is some small town village bell that he used to weave a romance around when he was age sixteen. . . . And Dorothy says that about all Mr. Ziegfeld does to "glorify" them is to get them to comb the hay out of their hair, and give up starch in lingeray.¹⁹²

Like the heroine of *The Gold Diggers*, Lorelei knows how to manipulate male "psychology" to her own ends, and like Jerry, she delights in assuming the archetypal clichés of the stage and screen. Yet, whereas Hopwood had presented Jerry as a commercially viable wise virgin, Lorelei makes no pretense in her diary of being sexually pure. To Henry, however, Lorelei claims "old fashioned" values, and disdain for the modern flapper. She tells him that she's set about to "reform" her best friend, even though "a girl like Dorothy will never have any reverence" (sic).¹⁹³ When her virginal ruse with Henry is foiled by rumors about her past (where, indeed, she shot down a would-be rapist in self-defense), Lorelei plays the repentant fallen woman: "He kissed me on the forehead in a way that was full of reverence and he said I seemed to remind him quite a lot of a girl who got quite the write-up in the bible who was called Magdellen."¹⁹⁴ Lorelei's masquerade as "Magdallen" echoes Jerry Lamar's as the "lil girl from Chillicothe," led naively astray by a screening of *Geraldine's First Mistake*.

The subversive edge of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* was smoothed in the numerous versions of the story that followed—including the classic 1953 Howard Hawks movie musical starring Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell. Yet, Loos set up themes in her novel that she would continue to draw upon in her satiric Pre-Code screenplays, such as *Blondie of the Follies* (1932) and *The Girl from Missouri* (1934): the triumph of women from "low

enviraments" (sic) over the high and mighty of society, and the honestly raffish—and "riff-raffish"—over the pompously self-righteous.¹⁹⁵ For all the satiric thrust of her fiction and screenplays, Loos humanizes women at the margins of conventional morality, awarding them the happy endings traditionally reserved for movie ingénues.

Female friendship forms another constant of the Loos gold digger oeuvre (and of the gold digger genre, in general). Lorelei and Dorothy may squabble over men and money, but they are truer to each other than they are to any husband or beau. Zoë Akins, whose 1930 *The Greeks Had a Word for It* evokes the work of both Hopwood and Loos, also plays upon the theme in the triangular confederacy of showgirls Jean, Polaire, and Schatzi: the feuding but affectionate "Three Musketeers of Riverside Drive." At the end of the play, Schatzi drunkenly tears off her wedding dress, and deserts her sugar daddy fiancé to sail off to Paris with Jean and Polaire. With a title changed to the even racier *The Greeks Had a Word for Them*, Akins' own subversive treatment of the comic gold digger was adapted into a 1933 film, with *The Gold Diggers'* Ina Claire as the cunning Jean.

With the onset of the Great Depression, the icon of the gold digger shifted from a woman of leisure and consumption to one of crafty survival instincts, and a subgenre of films—featuring actresses like Jean Harlow and Joan Blondell—depicted her as a symbol of world-weary heroism. Brazen and witty, the fast-talking comic gold digger animates not only Loos's films, but Akins' *Girls About Town* (Paramount 1931; directed by George Cukor), and *The Gold Diggers of 1933*, in which the indelible Busby Berkeley image of chorus girls costumed as coinage, in "We're in the Money," comments on the commoditization of the female performer. After the enforcement of the Hollywood Production Code, in 1934, she would continue to dig, but with diminished vitality.

Even as Broadway and Hollywood sentimentalized the "virtuous and industrious" working girl, Loos—drawn less to shop girls than to showgirls—built upon Hopwood's play to subversively reorient the Cinderella narrative around the artifices of her comic gold diggers. An *avant la lettre* practitioner of feminist camp, Loos boldly represented her anti-heroines as pragmatists and survivors during a time in which "a woman is still at a great disadvantage in the economic world," as Betty Van Deventer noted in 1929.¹⁹⁶ Aware that society's cards are stacked against her, the guileful Loosian gold digger uses her beauty to disarm the dealers, and her wit to beat the house. Appropriating an insulting stereotype, Loos

transformed the gold-digging chorus girl into a carnivalesque symbol of female agency: a woman who thumbs her nose at conventional definitions of moral virtue to create her own "merry merry." Throughout the next decade, the Cinderella ideal continued to shape the image of the Broadway musical's women—but as transformed into the brassy burlesque of the outspoken broad.