

Gagging for it: irony, innuendo and the politics of subversion in women's comic performance on the post-1880 London music-hall stage and its resonance in contemporary practice

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on women performing comedy on the London music-hall stage after 1880, examining performers including Bessie Bellwood, Marie Lloyd, Marie Loftus, Maidie Scott, Vesta Victoria and Nellie Wallace. The work of these women as comedy has been neglected in theatre and performance histories, and their influence on the evolution of popular forms and the development of twentieth and twenty-first century comic traditions has received little scholarly attention. I argue that performing comic material offered them unique opportunities to connect directly with popular audiences, resist censorship and to challenge gender stereotypes and common perceptions of and restrictions on women and women's roles in Britain during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. As part of their performances they developed comic approaches and techniques that remain identifiable in contemporary comedy, engaging in a range of strategies, from playful and disruptive ironic representations of familiar female types, to deliberately transgressive acts of crossing the line of decency through the embodiment of comic innuendo. Their knowing interpretations of coded references in the written texts of the material performed and jokes shared with their audiences during performances frequently served as ironic socio-political commentary on their lives and experiences. Making use of a range of critical approaches from areas as diverse as performance history and historiography, contemporary approaches to gender and comedy, performance theory, humour theory and feminist literary theory, I engage in analysis of extensive archive material. Throughout the thesis I also draw direct comparisons with the work of women who use comedy in late twentieth and twenty-first century forms, including stand-up comedy and performance art, to demonstrate a continuum of comic practice existing between these female music-hall artists and their counterparts performing comedy today.

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Make the doors upon a woman's wit, and it will out at the casement;
shut that, and 'twill out at the keyhole;
stop that, 'twill fly with the smoke out at the chimney.
(Rosalind, *As You Like It*. Act 4, Scene 1, 154-156)

'Fuck them if they can't take a joke.'
(Mae West, quoted in Sochen, 1991, p.155)

Introduction: 'reweaving' women's comic performance history

All history is, as Lisa Jardine has suggested, 'constructed narrative', and central to the task of uncovering women's performance history is what she describes as 'weaving, unweaving and reweaving – the slender residue of 'evidence' which time has carried down to us' (Jardine, 1998, p.33). This research has been a process of 'unweaving' some of the existing history of London's late nineteenth and early twentieth-century popular stage and – notwithstanding the obvious limits to the reconstruction of historical performance – 'reweaving' the available residue so the narrative centres on the performances and professional lives of the women who are the focus of this study.

Though many of these women had long careers and some were hugely successful and very well paid public figures, their contributions as comedians have been, to call upon a frequently repeated phrase and the title of Sheila Rowbotham's 1973 study of women in Britain, 'hidden from history'. Despite a number of feminist scholars of the 1980s and 1990s stating the importance of including popular forms in feminist histories of women performers, for example Susan Bassnett (1989, p.108) and Elaine Aston (1995, p.33), women working as comedians on the popular stage in the UK during this period have, with a few exceptions, been neglected in both theatre and performance histories, and their influence on the evolution of the music-hall form and on the development of British comedy in the twentieth century have received very limited scholarly attention.¹ Over the last few decades,

much research concerned with women's contributions to theatre and performance has been devoted to text-based theatre, or feminist, post-structuralist or post-modernist readings of the work of performance artists of the 1960s and after.²

Music-hall performances by women have been included in a number of histories of popular culture, but frequently their contributions are not interpreted as comedy or as making any significant contribution to the evolution of popular comic forms. Certainly in popular histories, women performing comedy over the last century have most commonly been affectionately appreciated as useful foils for male comics – giggling, flirtatious eye candy, or the complaisant butts of suggestive jokes – rather than as actively funny women, creating their own jokes about their own experiences. Lana Rakow has argued that women's popular forms were a critical blind spot for twentieth-century researchers believing that: 'The disdain with which both men and women critics have tended to view women's popular culture has prevented them from seeing how it speaks to the real problems and tensions in women's lives.' (Rakow, 1986, p.32)

This research is a consequence of my frustration both with mainstream histories of British twentieth-century comedy, which have perpetuated perceptions of women's absence from the comic tradition, and with women's continuing under-representation and recognition in live comedy.³ While opportunities are increasing and there are a number of extremely successful women at the top of the industry in the US and the UK, the comedy gender gap remains significant. The career-making Edinburgh Comedy Awards main prize has had only three solo female winners since its inception in 1981.⁴ Furthermore, women comedians regularly report continuing inequalities in terms of clubs' booking policies. Lara A. King, winner of the Funny Women award told *The Guardian* in 2012 that in her experience 'People who book comedy nights do tend to think that one woman on the bill is really quite enough'. (March 20, 2012)

Inspired by a conviction that an earlier women's comic history in this country did exist, I focused, initially, on uncovering the work of some formerly unknown or forgotten women comic performers, for example, Marie Loftus (1857-1940),

Bessie Bellwood (1856-1896) and Lily Marney (n.d.), and on re-examining *as comedy* the performances of a number of women whose work and popularity has been previously recognised, for example Marie Lloyd (1870-1922) and Vesta Victoria (1873-1951). As Peter Bailey observes in his 1998 study of Victorian popular culture, in music-hall scholarship 'the text has still too rarely been made to leave the page, and the actual dynamics of engagement in the stage form remain understudied.' (Bailey, 1998, p.131). A central aim of this thesis is to address this and to examine precisely these dynamics.

The first wave of this research then, necessitated the retrieval of archive material from a range of collections.⁵ The initial data selection process was a comprehensive but fairly unstructured and indiscriminate survey of contemporaneous sources relating to music hall from the 1850s⁶, in order to answer a number of initial research questions. How many women performers worked on the London music hall and who were they? How many of these women regularly performed comic material? Of these, how many sustained careers as comic performers and/or became well known for the comic content of their work?

To address these broad questions, archived press articles, interviews, biographical/autobiographical accounts and reviews from throughout the mid-nineteenth-early twentieth century were retrieved and previously unexamined comic performances were unearthed. This source material was cross-referenced with the published song-sheets for songs performed by women between 1860 and 1920.⁷ From these sources emerged the names of dozens of women and the details of many specific performances at venues across London were identified through contemporaneous commentary and reviews.

Having established that, as Chapter 1 will confirm, a large number of women *were* performing comedy throughout this period, it became evident that (not untypically for this kind of research) I had collected far more data than I could use, including the lyrics of hundreds of songs performed by women; a reframing of my research aims and central questions and some delimitation of the parameters of the thesis was required.

This refocusing was achieved through the identification of a number of key practice-based, formal considerations of the kind that are surely at the heart of any theatre or performance research project. If these performances are to, as Bailey requests, 'leave the page' it became clear that, as well as the written texts, I needed to establish a set of comic approaches, styles of delivery and specific techniques and to examine the nature of the relationships these women established with their audiences. This raises some knotty problems and questions regarding performance analysis. Geraldine Harris has argued that after any performance it is impossible 'to produce an objective or definitive reflection of the event since ultimately all such accounts are selective, partial and impure'. (Harris, 1999, pp.4-5) I recognise that her assessment is even more pertinent when the event took place a century ago as it is, as Jacky Bratton points out, 'extremely difficult to be conclusive in retrospective analysis of performance' (1992, p.77). While, like Harris, (p.5), I am not intending to make such concerns central to this thesis, I do keep the complexities of historical analysis at the centre of my approach to my interpretations of and conclusions about the work.

To this end the identification of a number of contemporary performance parallels in conjunction with the application of humour and performance theories have allowed some illuminating comparisons to be drawn, focusing on the ways in which live comedy works on audiences. Consequently, it has become evident that, while of course this research is historical and historiographical, its potential significance is rooted not just in performance history, but also in current comic practice and a key question arising has been how far can it be argued that a continuum of practice exists between women performing comedy on the music hall and those working in contemporary comic forms? With this as a central plank of the thesis, a focus on identifying specific comic techniques and approaches used by women in both eras has become a primary method of usefully reining in my 'historical imagination' (Peter Yeandle and Kate Newey, 2016, p.6), as I engage in historical interpretations of performances that are 'lost as soon as they are made'. (ibid., p.5)

Scope of archival research and research methods and methodologies

The selection of the region and time frame of the study were defined partly by research pragmatics and partly by autoethnographic factors. There were, of course, examples of early music-hall venues springing up all over the country from the 1830s onwards, and a number of the very first halls appeared outside of London⁸. However, as a former long-term London resident – promoting, staging, writing/performing and attending comic performances in the city – and the daughter of a Londoner, from the outset my interest was immovably rooted in the evolution of comic forms permeated with London references and subjects, and with characters and language first performed on stages in buildings and streets familiar to me, either from first-hand experience or some inherited connection. Furthermore, this research is about women comedians and, although the London music hall has been the subject of several major studies of the form’s history and performance (Dagmar Kift, 1996; Michael Booth and Joel Kaplan, 1996; Bailey, 2003; Barry Faulk, 2004) comic performances by women on London popular stages have not.⁹

The start and end dates were determined by a number of factors. Firstly, the course music hall took – as a cultural form and an entertainment industry – during the last two decades of the nineteenth century is key to understanding the popular impact of the form on comedy in the century that followed and into the contemporary period. These years saw the commercialisation of music hall; the growth of the first wave feminist movement; significant changes to work and leisure patterns for working men and women; increased education and employment opportunities for women; and the creation of the first London County Council (LCC) in 1889. The LCC was the body responsible for regulating and controlling music-hall venues and, as Chapters 1 and 4 explore, the Council’s direct and indirect impacts on the development of music-hall forms is undeniable. While there have been several studies of the activities of the LCC’s Theatres & Music Halls Committee (Susan Pennybacker, 1986; Chris Waters, 1989), my examination is refocused to consider the particular attention the Council paid to women in music halls, on stage and off. Starting my examination of material produced from 1880 allowed some consideration of the kinds of material produced before and after the

LCC was established and, while the expectation was not to identify specific differences in the form and content of material performed in this period because of this change in local government, the impact of the relationship the Council established with the music-hall industry has become a particular focus in terms of direct and indirect forms of censorship of women's performances.

The decision regarding the end date for the research period was, ultimately, a practical one. Initially, 1912, the date Marie Lloyd – unquestionably the most famous of all women music-hall performers – was *not* invited to take part in the first Royal Command Performance at the Palace Theatre seemed an appropriate end point for the study, as it has often been viewed as marking the end of the music-hall era; the point when the industry officially drew a line under any association with its working-class roots.¹⁰ Lloyd's characteristic response to this snub was to host her own night of entertainment at the London Pavilion (at the opposite end of Shaftesbury Avenue). The sign outside read: 'Every performance by Marie Lloyd is a command performance. By order of the British Public.' (Baker, 1990, p.122) Notwithstanding how symbolically neat this is, the pragmatic concerns of the project have prevailed. My early archive research included the retrieval of audio and a few film recordings of performances by a range of women, some commercially available, others held in the archives. An increasing number of such recordings were made after 1912 and this material has added an otherwise absent performance dimension to my analysis of the ever-shifting styles of delivery of popular performances. As the case studies used throughout the thesis demonstrate, this material (particularly archive audio recordings of performances by Maidie Scott, Nellie Wallace and Marie Lloyd) has offered valuable insights into performers' interpretations of lyrics and vocal styles. As such, though my examination of live performances focuses on the period between 1880 and 1912, I have made use of audio and film footage from as late as 1934 to support my analyses.

The selection of performers from both the music hall and the contemporary period has been directly influenced by formal considerations. A number of recurring comic approaches, styles and techniques employed by women have emerged from

the archive. For example, it is evident from a combination of lyrics, reviews, interviews and contemporaneous accounts that Vesta Victoria most commonly created characters requiring her to engage in sustained performance irony. Her work is examined in detail in Chapter 2 and her performance style is analysed alongside performances by women working in a much later period, for example Brenda Gilhooly's 1990's creation, Gayle Tuesday.

These formal links between the work of late nineteenth century and more contemporary women have emerged throughout this research and have strengthened my conviction that women working in the earlier era contributed to the establishment and development of comic forms that continue to make audiences laugh. The later work has been selected where archive examples exist of comedians engaged in the specific performance techniques and styles that relate to those I have identified as conscious comic crafting in the earlier period. So, in the Victoria/Gilhooly example mentioned above, both performances rely on a stereotypical 'dumb blonde' character and both comedians employ irony to offer their comic critiques of the behaviour and attitudes embodied by their characters. In this way, analysis of these more recent examples has been used to inform my examination of similar techniques indicated by evidence from the earlier period and has illuminated aspects of the work not immediately evident in the written or photographic record. I have not limited the modern selection to London or even to the UK as I argue that female comic performance practice in popular forms emerged in the US and the UK through related, though culturally distinct forms. During their careers a number of the women examined here (Bessie Bellwood, Marie Lloyd and Vesta Victoria, for example) were engaged in multiple tours of the US variety and vaudeville circuits.¹¹ In the contemporary period, the cross-fertilisation of UK-US comedy is extremely well established; issues of gender and comedy are regularly debated trans-Atlantically, and a number of important studies on women in US comedy have emerged in recent years (Joanne Gilbert, 2004; Linda Mizejewski, 2014). Consequently, a selection of material not limited by geographical location but based on formal and philosophical factors has been appropriate. This focus on artists' use of comic performance techniques has resulted in an eclectic mix of work from the late-twentieth and twenty-first

century, most of which is drawn from stand-up comedy, the direct descendent of British music hall and variety and US vaudeville and burlesque comedy.¹² However, a number of the contemporary artists referenced also practice in live performance art and solo theatre forms which themselves frequently share comic conventions with popular approaches (for example: Bobby Baker, Bryony Kimmings, Janice Perry and Adrienne Truscott) and their inclusion reflects my perception of the blurring of boundaries between contemporary performance forms and genres.

A sidebar about subjectivity and relativity in humour appreciation is perhaps necessary at this juncture. Finding material that has made me laugh has inevitably been part of my method of determining which material to analyse and, in this sense, I happily acknowledge that the selection process has been somewhat subjective. However, I have also been reliant on contemporaneous sources and reviews or descriptions of performances indicating that they contained comic elements to prompt me to retrieve specific material. Problematically, nineteenth-century reviewers (who are almost always men) often fail to mention the comedy in women's performances, and with only the printed lyrics of a song remaining, it is sometimes difficult to tell if a performance might reveal implicit comic possibilities.¹³ The reliability of these accounts of performances is sometimes questionable and I have certainly taken the view that they are, like the performances they describe, in need of interpretation and contextualisation. Chapter 2 includes consideration of a number of performances that address the challenge of interpreting explicit and implicit meanings from written performance texts containing no stage directions. Comic tastes and styles alter over time and, as demonstrated in Chapters 1 and 3, the impact of changes in audience responses has become an important aspect of this study, reflecting the evolution of music-hall performance style and content from 1880s and into the twentieth century as a result of the commercialisation of the industry and broader social and cultural shifts.

From the many women whose comedy has been considered as part of this research, I have identified a small number to serve as principal performance

'micro-histories' (Maggie Gale and Ann Featherstone, 2011). The thesis makes reference to a range of other performers, but particular attention is given to the work of Bessie Bellwood, Lily Marney, Marie Lloyd, Marie Loftus, Maidie Scott, Vesta Victoria and Nellie Wallace (1870-1948). These performers have been selected because they sustained long careers as comedians on the music hall and variety stage and, collectively, their work exemplifies a key range of comic techniques used by women in the music-hall period which continue to be evident in contemporary comedy or are directly related to modern comic practices. These include: performed irony; self-deprecation; 'gagging' (in modern terms, extemporising through direct communication with the audience); subversion of gender stereotypes through comic/grotesque characterisation, and the use of comic innuendo.

The work of these women demonstrates that variations in the style and form of music-hall entertainment during the research period occurred as part of a complex of factors including the LCC's policy decisions regarding the control, regulation and censorship of places of entertainment; the syndication and commercialisation of music halls; the transformation of lower class working practices; and the slower, but nonetheless significant, changes in opportunities for and attitudes towards women.

Key theoretical & methodological frameworks

Such a tangled social and cultural scene has required me to unravel my critical thinking around contextual historical analysis and I have drawn on the work of a number of educational philosophers and scholars of critical pedagogy, notably, Joe Kincheloe who suggests that:

Any social, cultural, psychological or pedagogical object of inquiry is inseparable from its context, the language used to describe it, its historical situatedness in a larger ongoing process, and the socially and culturally constructed interpretations of its meaning(s) as an entity in the world. (Joseph Kincheloe, 2001, p.682)

This raises a problem aligned to the inherent uncertainties of historical performance analysis outlined above: the difficulty of retrospectively assessing

author/performer intention and audience reception. Author intentionality is, according to Gerald Rabkin, 'perceived within a complex matrix of interpretation' (Rabkin, 1985, p.158, quoted in Mark Fortier, 1997, p.137) and the relationship between each performer's perceived intentions and my twentieth-first century interpretations of these is acknowledged throughout the thesis, along with this project's particular complication of shifting tastes and acceptability in humour appreciation. In addition, as Harris argues regarding feminist readings of performance and performativity, it can be misleading to make assumptions about 'performativity, or mimicry or masquerade as strategies of resistance' as non-contingent, based entirely on a performer's assumed intentions, without considering staging and context and the effects these have on audience reception. (Harris, p.75)

Social psychologist, Jill Morawski agrees that contextual analysis is essential and that researchers must address 'the limitations' of their own positions. (1997, p.674) While I 'cannot guarantee the historian's neutrality' (Nancy Scott, 1992, p.37), I have attempted to take account of these interpretative challenges, and heed Bratton's warning for researchers of theatre history that:

one can no longer say that any printed or oral account of the pastimes of past times is self-evidently an authentic record, or represents meanings anticipated, shared or accepted by the sharers in the performance it describes or critiques. (2003, p.134)

Resisting such assumptions has been an ongoing challenge. Inevitably, I bring my contemporary concerns to this research and I share the conviction of founding scholar of critical pedagogy, Peter McLaren, that 'preventing the historical agent from being a casualty of history is not an easy task.' (2001, p.701) However, I attempt to do so with a growing awareness of the potential impacts of my epistemological position and with a recognition that 'knowledge is always in process, developing, culturally specific, and power-inscribed'. (Kincheloe, 2001, p.689)

Whilst uncovering new histories, generating 'micro-histories' and reviewing and reframing old ones, I have also attempted to interweave formal comic threads from

the nineteenth to the twenty-first century through performance and textual analysis and interpretation. The search for appropriate methodologies to contain every aspect of this project has led me to employ a range of approaches and draw on a number of theoretical perspectives to challenge my thinking and experiment with new ways of interpreting, analysing, synthesising and representing the material I am examining.

A methodological 'bricolage'

Acquaintance with contemporary educational research methodologies has allowed me to reassess the interminable 'search for objective knowledge' (Morawski, p.670) and accept the 'embrace of complexity' (Kincheloe, 2004, p.2), in order to resist allowing the terror of intellectual reductionism to drown the project in the sheer volume of historical 'fact' and the range of interpretive possibilities and potentially useful theoretical positions. In his examination of contemporary media culture Douglas Kellner rejects the search for a synthesising 'supertheory' (1994, p.26) and instead advocates the advantages of drawing on multiple theories because 'the more perspectives that one brings to bear on a phenomenon, the better one's potential grasp or understanding of it could be.' (ibid.)

This recognition of the strength of a multi-perspective approach to the research process has allowed me to engage with a selection of theoretical positions that address the various demands and challenges this research presents as part of a methodological 'bricolage'. This term, familiar in the visual arts to describe works created with whatever materials are available, was first used in philosophy by Lévi-Strauss (1966, p.17) as a metaphor to explain how mythological ideas and thought evolved. His designation of bricolage as a process of making use of what already exists to create something new – as a 'handyman' might recycle and reuse available materials – has been expanded and developed as a theory of research methodology by Norman Denzin & Yvonna Lincoln (2000), Kincheloe (2001; 2004; 2005) and Kathleen Berry (2004) et al. When used to describe research methodology, qualitative researcher Matt Rogers argues that Lévi-Strauss's metaphor suggests:

practices explicitly based on notions of eclecticism, emergent design, flexibility and plurality. Further, it signifies approaches that examine phenomena from multiple, and sometimes competing, theoretical and methodological perspectives. (Rogers, 2012, p.1)

The multiple ways in which archive material is combined with the central arguments drawn throughout this thesis to examine the work of women performers, and to demonstrate their distinctive significance and resonance as comedians is just such a bricolage. For example, in Chapter 2, I examine performer Lily Marney's performances of an 1898 song written by Tom Conley, *Going To Be Married In the Morning*. My analysis of this lyric and Marney's delivery of it required, firstly, some research into the content of the song and examination of contemporaneous reviews of Marney's performances and images of her characterisations on published song sheets. In addition, historical research concerning marriage trends among lower class Londoners, the average marriage age of women and the social and economic impact of women's failure to marry by a certain age informed my reading of the lyric. These include Jane Lewis (1984); Mary Shanley (1993); Gareth Stedman Jones (1982); Michael Mason (1995). Marney's ironic interpretation of the song (according to the reviewers) led me to also draw on Linda Hutcheon's important study on the theory of irony (1994); feminist theorists' analyses of women's use of stereotypes in humour including Nancy Walker (1988); Regina Barreca (1988); feminist performance theories concerning the representation of gendered roles including Elin Diamond (1997) and Harris (1999); studies of women and comedy including Gilbert (2004), Frances Gray (1994 and 1998), Laraine Porter, 1998 and Mizjewski (2014); and humour theorists on the use of the grotesque in performance including Emile Draister (1994).

This framework has fostered a responsive research process through which I have evolved ways of interpreting and analysing as the material demands to enable me to 'explore a more open, expansive terrain, to interpret and reinterpret data across the different textual and visual forms.' (Yardley, 2008) It has also made it possible to bring together a range of theoretical influences, a number of which sit uneasily together and at times, indeed, offer directly conflicting and contradicting viewpoints and interpretations. However, these contradictions have contributed to

some unexpected insights and I echo Andy Medhurst's explanation for his approach to writing about British comedy: 'no single intellectual viewpoint can hope to account for the complexities of comedy' and like him I acknowledge that 'I have made use of what will seem to some an irresponsibly broad frame of references.' (Medhurst, 2005, p.2)

The creation of a research bricolage can be linked to Lisa Jardine's idea of the 'reweaving' of history, quoted at the start of this introduction and, as she suggests, I have used the 'slender residue' of lyrics and published song sheets, press reviews and interviews, photographs, personal accounts/biographies, and early recordings and applied theoretical positions to illuminate this material and address my central research questions concerning the style and form of the comedy created by the women under study and their shared practice with and contributions to comedy in the later period.

This approach confirms that, in terms of the range of ideas they consider as part of their analysis, bricoleurs 'create rather than finding meaning'. (Kincheloe, 2004, p.5) Indeed, I acknowledge that my construction of this history results in the 'substitution of one interpretation for another' (Scott, 1992, p.35) It has been key to my approach that I consider the social and cultural contexts in which these women performed, in order that their work is examined, as Elaine Showalter urges, 'in its own terms' (1981, p.198). This has inevitably led to a '*woman-centered* inquiry' (Gerda Lerner, 1981, p.140. Original emphasis) which considers the relationship between this work and the development of women's consciousness, women's history and women's humour. It has been my intention to reveal a positive female comic tradition generating 'its own experiences and symbols which are not simply the obverse of the male tradition' (Showalter, 1981, p.204) and which reflects the lives, experiences and attitudes of women performers and the women in their audiences.¹⁴ However, such an aim raises questions about the notion of lived historical 'experience' and our translation of it in the construction of histories and the interpretive bias of individual accounts: '[E]xperience is at once always already an interpretation *and* is in need of interpretation,' says Scott. (1992, p.37)

Alongside the historical data collection already outlined and extensive historiographical research including consideration of the large number of popular and personal histories of music-hall programmes and performances written from the late nineteenth to late twentieth centuries including Baker (2005/2014), J.B. Booth (1924 and 1941), Farson (1972), Percy Fitzgerald (1890), Harold Scott (1946), Charles Douglas Stuart & A. J. Park (1895), and Maurice Willson Disher (1938). Scholarly histories of music hall have also helped define and inform key areas of interest and debate around the evolution of music hall from a popular cultural form to a significant entertainment industry: Peter Bailey (1986 and 1998), Andrew Crowhurst (1992), Kift (1996), Dave Russell (1987), Penny Summerfield (1981), Gareth Stedman Jones (1982); and its performance conventions: Bailey (1998); Bratton (1975, 1986); Tracy C. Davis (1991); Faulk (2004).

A number of key critical theorists have supported my synthesis of historical material and performance, gender and comic theory. Judith Butler's work has, inevitably, been invaluable in defining and refining the philosophical focus of the thesis regarding gender representations and the language, embodiment, performance and performativity of gender (1990, 1992, 1993, 1997 and 1998). As such her influence is evident throughout the thesis. I have also drawn on key ideas and sources from theatre historiography; feminist histories; feminist literary theory; feminist approaches to gender and performance analysis; theories of sexuality; theorists of popular culture and the carnivalesque; humour theory; critical approaches to contemporary stand-up comedy; and women and comedy.¹⁵

Humour theory and women and comedy

Given that comedy and women's performance of it is the crux of this work, some clarification of the key critical perspectives I have applied to this aspect of the thesis will be fruitful here. The thesis draws on a number of humour theories and theorists: superiority (Hobbes), incongruity (Hutcheson; Bergson), relief (Freud, 1905). In places these are employed simultaneously in the analysis of one performance. My approach to critical frameworks for the analysis of humour is that no single theory works all the time for all humour in all contexts. Rather, I share Zwagerman's view that they are all right 'somewhat and sometimes'. (2010,

p.2) John Morreall, John Parkin and Paul McDonald are the thinkers whose distillations of existing humour theory (and in Morreall's case, his philosophical extensions and expansions on it) have been most useful for my purposes here.

The concept of a specifically women's humour or comedy has been questioned in recent scholarship and the possibility of theorising what such a female approach contributes to an understanding of humour, comedy and comic performance remains unresolved. As Gilbert notes in her study of marginality in humour and comic performances: 'definitional confusion and unsupported generalizations raise concerns about the usefulness of such a discrete and delimited category.' (2004, p.xv) The problem with the critical debate concerning the nature of 'women's humor' or 'feminist humor' is that it seems to centre on ideologically loaded abstract ideas about both the nature of and the possibilities offered by an exclusively female approach to comedy. 'Never do these abstractions seem to concretize into a discussion of specific generic features and constraints'. (Gilbert, p.71) My focus on women performers here does not assume that the constructions and mechanisms that allow women's comic material to work as jokes are dictated by their biological sex. Though I do frequently argue that the content of their acts and a number of the techniques and approaches they used sometimes demonstrates the emergence of a distinctly female comic voice, this is based on my analysis of what they chose to make comedy about and how they chose to do this in the specific times and places in which they were working. The context of late-Victorian music hall determined many of the decisions women made as performers and, consequently, this context and its influence on comic form and content also dominates this thesis. Many of the examples I use demonstrate how far women and their comic freedoms were constrained in this context and I use these to establish the ways in which these constraints influenced their practice and the style and content of their comedy as they found resourceful and creative ways of responding to the limitations placed on them.

Zwagerman (2013) challenges previous claims that there is such a thing as a distinct women's humour that is distinctively positive and which avoids self-deprecation and aggressive, critical jokes (Barreca, 1988, 1991; Walker, 1988;

Merrill, 1988; Tannen, 2007).

I find myself in agreement with Diane Davis that essentialising female humour with claims that it is 'always subversive, always progressive' is an exercise in 'merely flipping the privilege'. (Davis, 2000, p.58) As Gilbert notes, there is no data to support the claim that women perform comedy that is 'particularly non-threatening and non-abusive' (p.150). Indeed, Zwagerman convincingly uses the humour of right wing US political commentator Ann Coulter to dispute the validity of such a binary distinction between masculine and feminine humour. Several of the music-hall performers used as case studies here were well known for their aggressive and outspoken personas (on stage and off). Bessie Bellwood, as Chapter 3 demonstrates, was frequently criticised for antagonistic and 'unwomanly' behaviour, particularly in her attacks on hecklers. A number of acts also presented characters whose faults, hypocrisies and weaknesses were the sources of comedy in their acts. Chapter 2 examines the use of apparently self-deprecating humour in the music hall and the current period and addresses the critical debate surrounding it to consider how far such approaches can be said to constitute performed gender critique rather than the adoption of victim status in order to secure laughs. The aim here has not been to contribute to a rewriting of history that replaces the nineteenth-century male fantasy of Coventry Patmore's 'the angel in the house' with another distorted version of femininity and female qualities. An entirely 'self-affirming' female humour, never negative or critical (particularly of other women), never self-deprecating and rejecting aggression as an exclusively male trait, seems no more complete than Patmore's impossible woman. Chapter 2 considers how far the performers I have analysed were exploiting their own failings and the faults of those around them to acknowledge shared comic truths with both the women and the men in their audiences.

In some sections of this thesis it would appear that *only* women performed on the halls as 'my' archive is, almost exclusively, an archive of female performers. In this way, I am, perhaps, 'archiving the already archived', as Gale and Featherstone suggest in their study of the role of the archive in performance and theatre

research. (2011, p.19). I acknowledge the dangers inherent in this kind of narrativising and re-contextualising of material to create a new version of the past. However, I agree with Gale and Featherstone that this is, to a large extent an inevitable part of the process of archival research and, like them, I welcome the opportunity to, as Foucault (1969) urged, 'think about the ways in which the archive might be used to explore the tensions it embodies.' (2011, p.23) Furthermore, the range of critical and archival sources informing this thesis has led to a broadening of my sense of the impact and significance of this work. For Kate Newey: 'Using evidence from scattered archives starts to reveal the kinds of agency these women had' (p.102) Certainly, in a number of case studies, contemporaneous and retrospective accounts of performances, interviews, reviews and analysis of performance texts and comic techniques have created a fuller picture of the public influence and impact performers achieved and the ways in which this allowed them to explore and expand their roles as women and performers in the public sphere.

The availability of archival material has in part determined the selection of performers/performances. While I share Susan Bassnett's reservation that simply identifying those individuals who were the 'exceptions' to the male rule (Bassnett, 1989, p.112) does not give a full historical picture, it seems inevitable that a number of the women referred to here were exceptions, the 'innovative pioneers' as Newey describes them (2016, p.95). They became extremely well-known, earned far more than many of their contemporaries, and achieved a status and level of influence within the profession which afforded them some control over the material they performed, the terms of their employment, and over the presentation of their public images. The inclusion of such examples is, to a large extent, what makes this study possible; simply because their lives and work have been documented, and evidence of their performances has survived.

Indeed, the lack of scholarly consideration of women's comic performance in the UK may be partly due to the lack of extant primary performance evidence; surely the central challenge for all researchers of historical performance? As Laraine Porter notes in her study of the representation of women in twentieth-century

British film and television comedy, there are: 'huge gaps in documentation, historical accounting and records of early women comic performers' (Porter, p.67). This project has been a process of research, retrieval and re-examination of extant records to fill in some of these gaps, source documentation for previously unrecorded or uncritiqued material and use it to support the development of a critical perspective on women comic performers. Porter suggests the lack of available materials may be because 'either there were numerically fewer female performers than male or they have simply been written out of history' (Porter, p.68). As Chapter 1 establishes, there were broadly equal numbers of men and women performing comic acts on the music-hall stage in the 1880s and 1890s, which perhaps supports Porter's alternative suspicion, that throughout the twentieth-century comic histories focused almost overwhelmingly on male performers.

My aim here is less to identify a separate tradition of women's comedy entirely distinct from men's, rather to simply acknowledge and provide evidence that women were creating comic performances alongside men during the nineteenth century, that they were perceived as comic talents in their own rights, and that their performances (and female perspectives) were appreciated by men and women in their audiences *as comedy*.

In addition to a lack of extant evidence, the absence of scholarly studies of nineteenth-century women comedians perhaps also points to a reluctance to critically examine the work of women who, although remarkable in terms of their public visibility and audibility as popular performers in this period, gained their popularity as a result of their associations with a form that developed parallel to the first wave feminist movement but never ideologically or culturally connected with it, and, as Chapter 2 explores, within which gendered female identity is constructed within fairly narrow parameters. Indeed, the routinely embraced range of popular representations of women in music hall were, a cursory appraisal might suggest, merely intended to by turns soothe or excite the late-Victorian male patron as he gazed on comforting portrayals of innocent pre-pubescent girls; blushing brides-to-be and brides; good wives and devoted mothers; titillating, 'bad'

but attractive and sexually alluring 'fast' girls; and, physically unappealing but nonetheless amusing and entirely unthreatening old maids. Lyrically, many music-hall songs do conform to familiar nineteenth-century notions of womanhood, and, as Chapter 2 demonstrates, contemporaneous press reviews in, for example, *The Era* – the weekly paper described by W.J. MacQueen-Pope as 'the actor's bible' (1951, p.274) – confirm that the ways in which women presented themselves and displayed their bodies as part of comic acts were usually limited to the evolving but well-established 'acceptable' versions of Victorian/Edwardian female behaviour. In this sense women performers were constrained if not entirely defined by Victorian attitudes to women and morality, and their work presents the contemporary researcher with some testing questions concerning gender representation, sex, sexuality and sexism in popular performance. However, as Elaine Showalter has warned, regardless of the theories or terminologies feminist critics draw on, it is crucial to relate these to the work women actually create 'not in relation to a theoretical, political, metaphoric, or visionary ideal' of what they 'ought' to create (1981, p.205) This has been valuable advice during the process of selecting and interpreting comic material performed by women; particularly when the female representations the evidence offers perhaps fall short of the empowering, uplifting or progressive images a contemporary researcher might hope to find.

The impact of the comic on these representations is crucial here. Despite the fairly limited range of female 'types' music-hall programmes appeared to have room for, there was potential for plenty of variation in the comic characterisations offered in song lyrics. Music-hall wives are, at times, selfless and longsuffering, at others humourless and nagging or strong-willed, smart and opinionated. The nature of these representations is of course inextricably associated with the genres and performance forms and styles in which they are presented. Unsurprisingly, sentimental ballads often focus on the protagonists of tragic tales of, for example, poverty, poor judgement, or misfortune; such scenarios feature blameless, pathetic women who are deceived or abandoned by cruel or treacherous men, or those 'unfortunates' whose lack of virtue and low morals lead them inevitably to wretched ends. Chapter 2 argues that, by contrast, comic representations

potentially offered women a broader palette of female characterisations with many more shades of moral ambiguity than sentimental portrayals allowed. This chapter examines the ways in which women performers have used comedy to subvert and challenge conventional roles, assumptions and stereotypes, and prioritise women's perspectives, concerns and aspirations. Parallels are drawn between performed irony and women's strategic use of irony in comic writing, identified by feminist scholars including Nancy Walker who has noted their adoption of 'familiar stereotypes of women for the purpose of mocking those stereotypes' (1988, p.9) I examine how this appropriation of accepted female roles was achieved using the conventions of music hall and – as was the case for a number of women writers of fiction at this time – through the conscious development, adaptation and parody of existing forms to create comic performances that, uniquely for the period, approached life 'squarely from the woman's point of view'. (Bratton, 1975, p.161)

Popular performers commonly appeared on stage not only as characters but as themselves, often establishing longstanding and valued relationships with their audiences in a performance style that explored the performative aspects of gender and in which performers made direct use of their off-stage public personas to inform audience perception and reception of their comedy.

Diamond's feminist re-focusing of Brecht's theory of gestic performance is used in Chapter 2 to analyse the performance style of Vesta Victoria who established a clear stage persona separate from the characters she portrayed, enabling her to offer a commentary on the behaviour and opinions of those characters. This chapter examines how she achieved this by, in Brechtian terms, *demonstrating* rather than becoming the characters and, as Diamond suggests, contributed to the 'deconstruction of gender' (1988, p.86): highlighting, commenting on and sometimes criticising her characters and their gendered behaviour.

Thesis chapter outline

The position of women comic performers at the centre of music hall during its period of rapid commercialisation gave them a striking and provocative position as women working in a public sphere. As Chapter 1 explores, any woman performing

comic material on the music hall embodied a complex range of shifting social attitudes, cultural values and moral codes. This chapter considers the ambiguous position occupied by all women performers in late nineteenth century society and, through analysis of previously either unexamined or unsynthesised materials, it traces the emergence of the 'serio-comic', the under-researched soubriquet used for a large number of exclusively female music-hall performers working in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

By the turn of the century the term 'serio-comic' had acquired a stigma that, at best, suggested moral ambiguity; at worst direct associations with prostitution. Chapter 1 uses the rise and fall of the artistic and moral reputation of the serio-comic in this period to mirror the struggle evident within Victorian/Edwardian society as it grappled with ideas about the changing roles and rights of women in private and public life.

Chapter 2 is necessarily considerably longer as it covers in depth a number of key areas of practice and examines the relevant context and theories to elucidate the finer details presented in the following chapters. The chapter examines the ways in which the comic material performed by women reflected both the anxieties and preoccupations in the popular imagination regarding women's roles as wives and mothers, and also how their approaches to this material reveal their own attitudes to changing ideas of femininity, sexuality, sex, marriage and family life. Women on the music hall performed material about the lives and experiences of their audiences every night and the content of the songs they sang offers valuable insights into the popular take on the lives of the urban lower classes during this period. Drawing on a range of critical thinking concerning gender representation in performance (Butler, 1990; Diamond, 1988; Joan Riviere, 1929) the use of irony and/or self-deprecation (Mikhail Bakhtin, 1981; Gilbert, 2004; Hutcheon, 1994), and the use and subversion of female stereotypes (Walter Lippmann, 1922; Walker, 1988), this chapter examines performances by Lily Marney, Marie Loftus, Vesta Victoria and Maidie Scott, in conjunction with contemporary parallels to consider the ways in which women in comedy make use of performed irony to subvert gender stereotypes in comedy.

Vesta Victoria, for example, performed multiple nuanced versions of the still prevalent 'dumb blonde' persona. However, as the analysis of her performances reveals, her audiences' expectations of such a character were manipulated expertly by Victoria in order to surprise them and to re-signify the possibilities it offered, as she subverted the stereotype and made them laugh; as much at their own prejudices as at her characters' foolishness. This tendency to use stereotypes to set up the possibility of presenting an alternative female perspective is usefully informed by Diamond's 1988 feminist reading of Brecht's gestic theory of performance.

Chapters 2 and 3 argue that music-hall performance offered audiences, not a documentary version or direct reflection of their lives as Londoners, but a *hybrid representation*; a comic version in which the protagonists are empowered and given comic licence and permission to have flaws, to be foolish or reckless, to make poor decisions and regret them and yet to survive. Audiences *colluded* with these versions of themselves because they offered cathartic and, perhaps escapist, but nonetheless recognisable and truthful impressions of their lives (Stedman Jones, 1982 p.108)

The idea of collusion emerges from my teaching of stand-up comedy on Middlesex University's undergraduate Theatre Arts programmes alongside Arthur Husk who coined this term to refer to audiences' agreement to 'collude' in a fictional 'truth' for comic purposes. Chapter 3, on the nature of performer-audience relationships in music hall and contemporary stand-up comedy, expands on both this idea of collusion and music-hall audiences' collective acceptance of hybrid representations of their communities alongside Peter Bailey's concept of 'knowingness' (1998) and the humour and anthropological theories around the idea of 'comic licence'. Collective, class-based acceptance of a comic version of reality points to what Medhurst identifies as 'an *active*, community pastime, not a spectacle to be passively consumed' but in opposition to 'the official languages of morality and control' (Medhurst, 2007, p.68) Examples of the practice, used in the title of this thesis, known as 'gagging', through which performers extemporised on their pre-

prepared material and directly addressed music-hall goers in a way very familiar to contemporary audiences of stand-up comedy, are examined along with evidence of attempts by the LCC to prevent performers communicating in this way.

Despite an, at first glance, overwhelming weight of evidence of a lack of female self-determination and control, the current research has revealed that this is not the full story. Women comedians were certainly no less appreciated by their audiences or less successful in performance terms than their male counterparts. As a number of contemporaneous accounts and Kift's 1996 study have shown, music-hall audiences were, from as early as the 1860s, made up of men and women of mixed classes who formed the 'popular' audience, and the developing performance conventions of the music hall and variety forms not only enabled but *required* performers to establish direct and (by Victorian standards) fairly informal relationships with their audiences.¹⁶ Popular performance demands first and foremost that performers connect with their patrons; in music hall they were obliged to assert their personalities, to speak (or sing) directly to audiences and, if necessary, to find ways to circumvent the censor and ensure that this communication had an authenticity; a down-to-earth, topical and local resonance for them. Within the theatrical conventions of the form, audiences would accept nothing less and within the social and moral conventions of the place and time, all music-hall performers, but women most of all, were forced to develop formal strategies (using language, gesture, costume, music and dance) through which they could perform entertaining, relevant material that appealed to audiences and did not overtly flout the censor or step too far beyond the shifting but ever-present line of moral decency and decorum. A number of the women who are the focus of this study built their careers on their reputations for dancing on that line and sometimes lifting their skirts as they stepped over it.

All music-hall performers dealt in easily and instantly recognisable types; they did not 'aim to present complex individuals but typical patterns of behaviour' (Kift, 1996, p.45); the individual characterisations they presented were never intended to be nuanced psychological studies. Music-hall nights often lasted four hours or more, and included packed programmes of up to 30 acts, performing (on average)

seven-minute turns. Success relied on gaining instant authority over an audience through the quick projection of your personality or that of your character, and, for comics, getting your first laugh right away:

In the music halls you have to make your hit instantly...You must go all out for your audience, for your time is brief on the stage....A music hall audience expects that every turn will be better than the last one; they expect a great deal from the stars. (Maidie Scott, interviewed about her earlier music-hall experiences by *The Era*, August 2 1922, p.11)

Such performance conventions demanded high-impact performance modes that allowed audiences to shift their attention quickly from the previous act while maintaining their interest and keeping their attention on the stage.

These women developed performance strategies and created comedy that, I will argue, further eroded Victorian certainty about the already shifting perceptions of women's roles and rights. Perhaps most germane in a study of performance, and in the spirit of resistance of earlier popular forms, music-hall comedians also found imaginative ways to use the very tools of censorship against the censor. As Chapter 4 explores, attempts to 'clean up' music-hall programmes and 'improve' the behaviour of its audiences were resisted within the industry. As numerous examples demonstrate, double entendre and innuendo became effective ways to evade the censor, and a complex verbal and gestural language of suggestion and euphemism developed as the form evolved. For all music-hall performers, but most particularly for women whose conduct was under closest scrutiny and whose reputations could be ruined by suggestions of impropriety, innuendo was an invaluable weapon. As one observer noted, there was 'an unwritten language of vulgarity and obscenity known to music-hall audiences, in which vile things can be said that appear perfectly inoffensive in King's English'. (F. Freeman in *Weekly Dispatch*, 4 February 1883, quoted in Bailey, 1998, p.142)

Chapter 4 also considers the roles of censorship and self-censorship in the development of women's comedy and draws on Butler's concept of 'excitable speech' (1998) and her thinking around censorship and the perspectives of Lacan (2001) and Freud (1894) on the psychoanalytic notion of 'foreclosure' to consider

the impact of female self-censorship on women's speech and behaviour before and during their acts. The idea of the 'unspeakable' being performed by women through comic innuendo in response to attempts to censor the sexual content of their acts is explored and a range of material containing sexual innuendo by performers including Marie Loftus, Marie Lloyd and Nellie Wallace is analysed as *performed censorship*. This chapter also demonstrates the ways in which women challenged the censor directly and indirectly on stage and off.

Chapter 5 expands the textual and verbal use of innuendo and draws on a range of feminist thinking on the representations of the female body to examine the extent of women performers' comic subversions of attitudes to the female body Butler (1988); Deborah Geis (1996); Kathleen Rowe (1995). Diamond's 1988 feminist appropriation of Brecht's theory of *gestus* is also applied here to the idea of comic attitude and the potential of women's adoption of *comic gestus*, and the embodiment of humour in performances by Nellie Wallace, Marie Lloyd and a number of contemporary examples are examined.¹⁷ Their work is interpreted with reference to theories of the carnivalesque in popular culture Bakhtin (1984); Russo (1994); Medhurst (2005) and, critical writing concerning women as spectacle: performers not only rejecting femininity through the comic content of their material, but presenting themselves, their *bodies*, in direct opposition to received ideas about physical 'attractiveness'. Such performances raise questions such as those asked by Russo in her examination of the female grotesque:

Does comic female style work to free women from a more confining aesthetic? Or are women...so identified with style itself that they are as estranged from its liberatory and transgressive effects as they are from their own bodies as signs in culture generally? (Russo, p.60)

As Butler suggests, the body is 'an active process of embodying certain cultural and historical possibilities' (in Case, 1990, p.272) The women who are part of this study would have been mindful of the possible impact(s) of the public presentation of their bodies, and their physical appearances inevitably informed the construction of their stage identities. Extending the analysis of portrayals of familiar female stereotypes in Chapter 2, this Chapter considers the impact of the female comic body and performers' costume choices on these representations and

connects this work and its context to current questions about the relationship between female comedians and their looks as explored by a number of scholars and comedians including Hannah Ballou, (2013), Mizjewski (2014) and Bridget Christie (2015)

What this thesis intends to demonstrate is that, despite the surface conservatism inherent in much music-hall content, the *form* of what was performed, and the ways in which performers communicated their meanings to audiences had the potential to, as Sue-Ellen Case suggests, 'deconstruct traditional systems of representation and perception of women and posit women in the position of subject.' (1988, p.115) Their acts frequently worked in opposition to the prescribed gender roles of femininity and decorum suggested by the explicit meanings of the text-based elements of their acts and, as Jeanie Forte argues, as such women have used performance to challenge 'the very fabric of representation by refusing that text and posing new, multiple texts grounded in real women's experience and sexuality.' (1990, p.237).

There is a useful parallel here with a duality identified by Judith L. Stephens in her study of progressive era plays by women. Stephens considers work that 'colludes with dominant gender ideology' and supports and perpetuates 'the idea of separate spheres' (1990, p.291). She notes that such work 'both challenged and reinforced the dominant gender ideology of the period' (ibid.). This thesis argues that many music-hall songs and singers were engaged in just this double-edged process and, whilst their self-representations took account of Victorian feminine ideals and preconceptions about women and in some ways therefore reinforced acceptable norms, I suggest that, because of their position as performers on the popular stage, these women were also able to push the boundaries of these representations, challenge these norms and present alternative modes of female behaviour, thinking and living for women. Did they, as Susan A. Glenn argues regarding women performers in the US popular and 'legitimate' theatre during the same period, contribute to 'changes in women's social roles and cultural representations' or become 'agents and metaphors of changing gender relations' (2002, p. 2)? My intention is to reveal the resonance of their contributions for

contemporary female artists and audiences and consider how far they were involved in what Jardine vividly describes as 'rupturing historical narrative' (1998, p.29) that suggests women have made only a peripheral contribution to the British comic tradition.

Chapter 1 begins by offering an account of the specific contexts in which comedians were performing, examining the dominant late-Victorian cultural perceptions and attitudes towards women in general and women performers in particular, and outlines attempts to regulate their behaviour on and off stage.

Notes

¹ Among the many critical works on the social, cultural and theatrical history of music hall, there are a few notable academic studies that include analyses of the work of women performers. Jacky Bratton's collection on the Victorian popular ballad (1975) and her essay on the life and work of early music-hall performer, Jenny Hill (Bailey ed., 1986) are invaluable sources. There are also biographies of two of the best-remembered female performers (Sara Maitland's 1986 *Vesta Tilley*, about the celebrated male impersonator; and multiple accounts of the life and work of Marie Lloyd, most recently Daniel Farson, 1972; Richard Anthony Baker, 1990; Midge Gillies, 1999). Morwena Banks and Amanda Smith's *The Joke's On Us*, 1987 and Frances Gray's 1994 *Women & Laughter* also have chapters on music hall and Oliver Double's analysis of stand-up comedy includes a brief section on the evolution from music hall comedy to stand-up (2005, 2014).

² There are, for example, a number of studies focusing on nineteenth-century female playwrights and theatre actresses including Tracy C. Davis's *Actresses As Working Women* (Routledge, 1991) which includes a chapter on music-hall performers; Adrienne Scullion's *Female Playwrights of the 19th Century* (Phoenix, 1996); Gail Marshall's *Actresses on the Victorian Stage* (CUP, 1998); Kate Newey's *Women's Theatre Writing in Victorian Britain* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Kerry Powell's *Women and Victorian Theatre* (CUP, 2008). There have also been a number of significant studies of women's performance art and live art practice including: Jill Dolan, 1994; Amelia Jones, 1998; Adrian Heathfield, 2004; Rose Lee Goldberg, 2005, 2011; Deirdre Heddon & Jennie Klein, 2012; Dominic Johnson, 2015.

³ *Heroes of Comedy*, a popular Thames Television/Channel 4 television series produced by John Fisher that ran from 1995-2003 over seven series and 30 episodes of which only three were about women: Joyce Grenfell, Hattie Jacques, Thora Hird. In 2012, *Chortle*, the UK comedy news and listings website estimated that it had catalogued 1,130 men and 239 women comedians. (*The Guardian*, 20 March, 2012. Online)

⁴ The 2017 prize saw its first joint winners: Hannah Gadsby and John Robins, who both performed autobiographical shows. As recently as 2010, *Chortle* considered it notable enough to headline its announcement of the nominees for the (then Perrier) prize: 'Two Women Make The Shortlist' (Josie Long and Sarah Millican were both nominated for that year. Neither won).

⁵ These archives include the British Library, the British Newspaper Library (Colindale), the British Newspaper Archive, the National Sound Archive, the London Metropolitan Archive, the Theatre Museum and the Huntley Film Archive.

⁶ These included: nineteenth-century newspaper and magazine publications relating to music hall (most notably *The Era*); biographical and autobiographical accounts of the period such as Percy Fitzgerald's *Music-hall Land*, 1890; J.B. Booth's *Old Pink 'Un Days*, 1924, and *Seventy Years of Song*, 1941; Harold Scott's *The Early Doors*, 1946; Maurice Willson Disher's *Winkles and Champagne*, 1938.

⁷ As a result of the popular street ballad and pub form roots of music hall and the nature of theatrical licensing regarding the balance of music and spoken material in the halls, songs were absolutely predominant on music-hall programmes. This

evolution is the subject of a large number of popular accounts and academic studies including Fitzgerald (1890), Bratton (1975), Peter Bailey (1982) and Edward Lee (1982).

⁸ Geoffrey Mellor, for example, suggests that The Star in Bolton was 'one of, if not *the* first true' music hall in the country (Mellor, 1970, p.17).

⁹ Throughout the thesis I also make reference, where relevant, to performances by women who are London born or based that have been presented in other cities in the UK or internationally, particularly in the US.

¹⁰ Reasons given by commentators for her omission from the event include the risqué nature of her performance style or her private life (three divorces) making her unsuitable to perform for royalty, and her earlier involvement in the artists' strike (Farson, 1972; Gillies, 1999).

¹¹ As demonstrated later in the thesis, in the cases of Bellwood, Lloyd and Victoria, press accounts of the reception of their work by US audiences also usefully illuminates elements of their practice.

¹² This direct link between late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century popular forms and contemporary stand-up has been well established in works including Morwenna Banks & Amanda Swift (1987); Frances Gray, 1994; Oliver Double, (2014); Medhurst (2007); Mel Watkins (1999).

¹³ Bratton has identified a similar problem she encountered while attempting to uncover the comedy in nineteenth-century clown Thomas Lawrence's 1871 gag book. (Bratton and Anne Featherstone, 2006) In such cases, I have found it productive to employ a degree of subjectivity to decide if a song is funny, as well as affording some material licence to be funny in its own time, even if the comedy may be less apparent to a contemporary audience.

¹⁴ Showalter's influential 1981 'women's culture' model, though centred on women's literature, has been instructive here, in so much as it encourages the recognition of such a positive female tradition.

¹⁵ Key sources include theatre historiography: Henry Bial and Scott Magelssen, (2010), Jim Davis (2011), Kate Newey (2016), Thomas Postlewait & Bruce McConachie (1996), Thomas Postlethwait (2003, 2006 and 2009), W.B. Worthen and Peter Holland (eds., 2003); feminist histories: Mary Lindon Shanley (1993), Martha Vicinus (1975 and 1977), Jane Lewis (1984); feminist literary theory: Regina Barreca (1988), Showalter (1981), Nancy Walker (1988), Judith Wilt (1980); feminist approaches to gender and performance analysis: Sue-Ellen Case, (1988), Judith Butler (1990), Jill Dolan (1991), Diamond (1997), Harris (1999); theories of sexuality: Michel Foucault (1976), Geoffrey Weeks (1989), Michael Mason (1995); theorists of popular culture and the carnivalesque: Bakhtin (1984), Mary Russo (1994), Bailey (1998), Medhurst (2005), Davis, 1991); humour theory: John Morreall (1983, 1986, and 2009), Laurence Mintz (1985), critical approaches to contemporary stand-up comedy: Double (2014), Sophie Quirk (2015); and women and comedy: Barreca (1991), Kathleen Rowe (1995), Shannon Hengen (1998), Gilbert, 2004, Sean Zwagerman (2013).

¹⁶ Jenny Hill told *The Era* (May 5 1894) that the Johannesburg audience were 'so peculiar - nothing but men', whereas she was used to London where 'women always go to the music hall and seem to appreciate you more than the men do.' (Quoted in Bratton, 1986, pp.103-104) There was evidently a West End/East End divide in audience preferences and behaviour, as noted by F. Anstey in his article

identifying four categories of 'London Music Halls' for *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 0082. Issue 488. January, 1891. Pp. 190-202.

¹⁷ Brecht's theory suggested that through a combination of physical gestures, words and actions, a performer communicates the underlying social attitude of a performance text to an audience.

Chapter 1

'Sentiments unwomanly and unnatural': moral ambiguity, censorship and public perceptions of the serio-comic performer

It is really impossible for a woman to remain pure who adopts the stage as a profession... The freedom of life, speech and gesture which is the rule behind the curtain render it almost impossible for a woman to preserve the simplicity of manner which is her greatest charm. (Clement Scott, *Great Thoughts*, January 1 1898, p.7)

In the late-nineteenth century women performers could never be perceived as respectable. In 1898, theatre critic Clement Scott famously caused quite a furore in the theatrical community and consequently left his position at *The Daily Telegraph* when he offered an evangelical periodical his thoughts on women on the stage. Notwithstanding the indignation expressed by the profession in defence of the honour of their leading actresses in the weeks that followed, Scott's opinion is typical for the period. Working often independently, in public and usually at night, they were morally tainted-by-association with prostitution; an impression augmented by a rapidly growing market in pornographic images, which reinforced the reputation of actresses as sexually available. Of the prodigious quantity of extant pornographic material from the Victorian era, a substantial proportion contains depictions of women as performers and actresses; they were, as Tracy Davis has observed, 'synonymous with sex' (Davis, 1991, p.107).

Scott's perception of female performers in the legitimate theatre as 'impure' was inevitably extended when it was applied to women performing on the morally dubious and frequently criticised music-hall stage. From its earliest days, even music-hall supporters conceded the potential for moral ambiguity in music-hall venues: 'Many people object to the music-halls as sinks of iniquity. That they are unmixed blessings I am not going to contend, but if properly conducted they do an immense deal of comparative good.' (Sims, 1889, p.82)

Sex, or the company of sexually available women, was, according to numerous accounts, a major attraction for male spectators. The writer of a piece in *The Observer* attacking the halls in 1862 noted that: 'the real 'social evil' were the

members of the 'frail sisterhood,' who 'frequented music halls and were ever ready to pounce on innocent and unsuspecting young men.' (*The Observer*, August 4 1862, quoted in *The Musician & Music Hall Times*, August 9 1862, pp. 92-93) Not all contemporary commentators found the presence of prostitutes so problematic; one account noted that there were women who were 'pretty obvious members of a class which, so long as it behaves itself with propriety in the building, it would, whatever fanatics may say to the contrary, be neither desirable nor possible to exclude.' (Anstey, 1891, p.190)¹ As this chapter details, there are numerous well-documented instances of music-hall proprietors having their entertainment licences threatened or revoked because of prostitutes working on their premises. But, until such actions forced them to take steps to defend the respectability of their venues, most proprietors appear to have happily turned blind eyes to well-behaved, well-dressed prostitutes frequenting and discreetly conducting business in their buildings (Davis, 1991, p.82); they encouraged men to spend time and money in the bars, and kept them there when the on-stage entertainment did not appeal.

Inevitably during this period, all women working in music halls were subject to moral scrutiny, and the ambiguous position of female performers was often the subject of press commentary and public debate and featured in numerous works of art and literature. Frequently, the judgment of women on stage was severe, and even when the treatment of a character was sympathetic, such as Walter Besant's portrayal of a young woman in his 1892 fictional 'autobiography' of aspiring actress *Dorothy Wallis*, the assumption was that 'women wishing to retain their class status and stay respectable; are best off avoiding a career in music hall.' (Besant, 1892, quoted in Faulk, 2004, p.125). Even *The Era*, a natural supporter of the music halls, described it as 'the lesser stage' (October 7 1899, p.19) Performers were aware of the perception of music hall as illegitimate, or at least as less socially acceptable than other forms of entertainment: 'what a poor opinion they do entertain of one to be sure' Jenny Valmore confided to *The Era* about attitudes to 'variety artistes'. (February 3 1894, p.17) Decades later, in 1922, *The Era* published an interview with former music-hall performer Maidie Scott who described the relief she felt after her transition from variety to revue, a move many

performers made in the early 1920s: 'I thought I was always doomed to be a music hall star.' (*The Era*, August 2 1922, p.11)

At the centre of this debate, and the focus of much disapproving discourse on the morality of music hall, was the group of women performers described as 'serio-comics'. How this term was applied to female performers in the nineteenth century and the evolution of its use and eventual rejection by the press and the music-hall community – including women performers themselves – is a significant indicator of how they were defined and judged in this period.² There has been no detailed examination of the soubriquet or of the women it was used to describe in any scholarly work on the music-hall period, and it is worthwhile taking time here to consider who the serio-comics were and what kind of acts they performed.

The rise and fall of the serio-comic

The *Era Almanack* for 1868 identifies 117 serio-comic acts of a total of 835 listed 'London Music Hall Artistes' (Ledger, 1868). The 1878 edition of the Almanack included 1,883 performers; of these, 384 were serio-comics and 357 were male comic singers (a further three women and 39 men were described as 'Irish singers') (Ledger, 1878). This source does not offer a complete catalogue of performers (particularly of those who worked outside London) – as confirmed by the large numbers of reviews and advertisements for many performers working at this time but not recorded in this list – but it is representative of trends within the profession and reveal that, over the course of 30 years, large numbers of women performing in music halls were billed and reviewed as 'serio-comics'. By the end of the century the description was less commonly used: *The Official Music Hall Directory and Variety ABC* for 1899 included 1,901 performers, 325 solo comedians and 297 solo comediennes but only two performers are described as serio-comics (Voyce, 1899).

The term has escaped clear definition. Valantyne Napier's *Glossary of Terms Used in Variety* states that it referred to a 'female singer of serious and comic songs in Music Hall. Some also danced. Became soubrettes in Revues' (1996, p.45). This appears to be a straightforward description. However, the soubriquet was applied

to such a large number and broad range of female performers that it deserves closer examination. It also came to carry some extremely negative connotations both inside and outside the profession, and its widespread use signals some notable inconsistencies in the recognition and appreciation of the comic content of women's performances.

One Edwardian source, James Redding Ware's dictionary of 'heterodox English', describes serio-comic as 'the title given only to lady singers of a lively turn, and in distinction from 'comics', who are always men.' (1909, p.219). Redding Ware's definition of these performances as 'lively' is, lexicographically, rather imprecise, and his assertion that comics were *always* men is indicative of a tendency among contemporaneous commentators to make a gendered distinction between the comedy performed by men and women which will be explored later in this chapter.

Christopher Pulling (1952) and G.J. Mellor (1970) use 'serio-comic' or 'serio-comedienne' to describe a number of women performing in the 1860s 'who went in for 'Ladies' Versions,' or 'Answers' to the songs the Lions Comiques were making famous...' (Pulling, p.187) Pulling makes a distinction between these women and 'another type of comedienne...such as Jenny Hill...', but does not expand on their differences. The comparison with the lions comiques is unhelpful: this was a subset of male comic singers, creating a very specific variety of upper class 'swell' characters and parodying their perceived idleness and frequently their drunkenness. The most popular of these included George Leybourne's 'Champagne Charlie, Alfred 'The Great' Vance, and G.H. MacDermott. These caricaturists appeared almost exclusively as one comic type, unlike serio-comics, who often performed songs portraying a wide range of characters.

In her essay on the professionalisation of music-hall performers, Lois Rutherford refers to serio-comics more directly as the female counterparts of comic singers. (Rutherford, 1986, pp.93-117) which seems accurate, in light of much evidence about the content of the acts of performers of both sexes. However, the basis for the suggestion of seriousness as well as comedy inherent in the descriptor remains

open to question. This ambiguity was acknowledged by music-hall historian Louis Forbes Fergusson in 1949:

By rigid convention, the name serio-comic belonged to the distaff side of the variety profession. If you took the word literally as embracing both grave and gay, you found the male equivalent in the “descriptive vocalist”. Serio-comic was often shortened to serio – especially if the lady happened also to dance; in which case her dancing was not infrequently of greater moment than her song. The abbreviation led to the anomaly of such rollicking female *comiques* as Bessie Bellwood or Ada Lundberg being known as serios. In any case, the term must not be taken too literally. (Fergusson, 1949, p.51)

This last suggestion is probably sound advice from Fergusson. However, the exact nature of the role of the ‘serios’ requires further examination for just the reasons he identifies here. The comparison with ‘descriptive vocalists’ does not fit at all: these were singers of serious ballads, (sometimes also called ‘sentimental vocalists’, or ‘male vocalists’ and ‘lady vocalists’) rather than comic singers, and if male performers always or predominantly sang comic songs they were called ‘comic singers’ or ‘comedians’, whereas the likes of Bessie Bellwood, Jenny Hill, Marie Loftus, Marie Lloyd, Ada Lundberg, Vesta Victoria and many other women well known for performing comedy were routinely described as serio-comics during this period.³

Contemporaneous dictionary entries generally reiterate the ‘partly serious and partly comical’ (Thomas Davidson (ed.), *Chambers English Dictionary*, 1898) definition, but what relationship there is between the comic and serious elements remains unclear. In his 1971 anthology of music-hall songs, Peter Davison explains the term as ‘the name given to a performer whose act was simultaneously comic and serious (or pathetic)’, (Davison, 1971, p.222) which offers the possibility that individual songs contained both serious and comic elements. This certainly fits with accounts of performances by character comedians such as Jenny Hill and Ada Lundberg, who were well known for their studies of lower-class women in performances that were, according to contemporaneous commentators, often infused with pathos. Both were described as ‘low’ comedians/comediennes as well as serio-comics.⁴ One of Lundberg’s most popular songs, which she sang on the

halls from the beginning of the 1880s and repeated (usually as an inescapable encore demanded by fans) until her death in 1899, provides useful insights into a possible interpretation of serio-comic performance style. According to numerous reviews, she performed *Tooraladdie* (sometimes *Toor-al-lady*) as a drunken and broken-hearted woman who sings a song about a policeman who had loved and left her. Several critics for *The Era* indicate that the combined effects of Lundberg's characterisation of this 'slavey' character were funny and disturbing. A reviewer of her performance at The Bedford Music Hall in 1884 reveals his distaste for Lundberg's style: she has, he says 'chosen a line of her own in low comedy' and while acknowledging her skill admits that 'such realisations of wretchedness though unhappily truthful enough, are not to our taste'. However, the 'slavey' he concedes, 'gave a wonderful variety of expression to the song about a policeman...and the rendering was exceedingly funny.' (September 13 1884, p.7) In 1885 she is described as being 'possessed of a genuine comic talent' (May 30 1885, p.10) and her 'impersonation of a drunken old hag is one of the most truthful realisations of the effects of dipsomania that we have seen on any stage'. (July 25 1885, p.10) In 1886, the reviewer agrees that the 'extraordinary fidelity' of her performance 'is one of marked power, but by no means pleasant to contemplate.' (March 27 1886, p.10) Her performance was then clearly grotesque enough to test the mettle of these middle-class observers but the characterisation was also evidently credible as social commentary and emotive personal narrative for her audiences. She mixed the tragedy of this woman's demeaning and loveless life with physical comedy; singing, according to Henry George Hibbert, 'while she polished a boot and her nose alternately'. (Hibbert, 1916, p.58) Her performance of the character's drunkenness was so extreme that *The Era's* shocked critic felt obliged to suggest that she should not 'allow herself to be carried off the stage by an attendant'. (March 27 1886, p.10) So, while performing as a woman broken by a life of servitude and disappointment in love, she appeared fully made up as this 'smutty-faced maid-of-all-work, with her red hair knotted with rags' (October 7 1899, p.19), inviting her audience to acknowledge her hardship and laugh despite it. Such darkly comic characterisations were very popular with audiences and were often considered as all the more authentic because many in this generation of performers – Lundberg and Hill among them – grew up in poverty and often

claimed that their comic characterisations were based on people they had met. Kate Carney, a serio-comic who became known as ‘the coster comedienne’ told *The Amusing Journal* in 1894:

I have shown the English public types of the flower girls, the coster girls, the factory workers and the toilers from the slums, not as she might be supposed to be, but as she is. I know the London working girl, I ought to, for I was one. (Quoted in Baker, p.162)⁵

Lundberg was highly regarded within the profession and was cited in an article in the *Pall Mall Gazette* defending the music hall: she alone, claimed the writer ‘is enough to show the possibilities of the serio-comic’ (April 13 1892, p.1) However, while this group of character performers are clearly adhering to the definition of the serio-comic as combining serious and comic elements in their acts, there are also a large number of women described as serio-comics who did not engage in the kind of ‘lower depths’ characterisations that Lundberg, Hill and Carney were known for. While there is no clear distinction in the record, the work of this other group drew attention and often criticism for quite different reasons and further consideration of their performance approach may elucidate the full implications of the term.

The integration of comic and the serious elements is extended by *Webster’s Dictionary* of 1961, which offers a number of possible uses for the term:

serio-comic – also serio-comical.

1. Having a mixture of seriousness and sport: serious and comic.
2. Mock serious [a ~ vocalist]

Serio-comic – A seriocomic performer

The ‘mock serious’ definition is pertinent here, pointing as it does to the use of performed irony, which is so frequently central to live comedy and, as I argue throughout this thesis, was certainly very commonly used in women’s performance approaches on the music hall. The OED online confirms this connection with irony, offering the ‘partly serious and partly comic...that mixes the comic and the serious, esp. by presenting a comic plot, situation, etc., in a serious manner, or vice versa.’ (OED online, 2016). Music-hall reviewers rarely comment

specifically on irony in music-hall performances, but they often use the word 'arch' to describe a performer's on-stage persona, or refer to 'archness of expression' in performance style (*The Era*, October 8 1887, p.10). Indicative of such archness is saying one thing while meaning another, or – and often equally pertinently for women performers – saying one thing while appearing not to understand another. Irony used as a performance strategy employed by women performers will be explored further in Chapters 2 and 4.

A reviewer for *The Musician* in 1862 makes a clear distinction between two 'ladies we instantly pick out' 'the soprano, Miss Jenny Stanley for her quiet and lady-like demeanour, and Miss Emma Kerridge for her arch smile, wicked glance and auburn hair. The former is arrayed in blue silk, covered plentifully with lace, and the latter delights in a pink dress, and has her hair decked with white roses.' (June 14 1862, p.26) He notes that 'the serio-comic vocalist, Miss Emma Kerridge, with light, assured step, and arch smile, essays her powers to charm and please', and that her song apparently 'deals somewhat heavily upon the gentlemen to whom she specifically addresses it; but they take it in capital part, and applaud the young lady's sarcasms with cheers and laughter.' (ibid.) So, in the middle of the century this reviewer is plainly distinguishing between two types of women performer: a 'lady-like' singer and a serio-comic whose impact is erotically and comically challenging and though evidently appealing to him and the rest of the audience, she is described in terms that give the impression of questionable morality.

In 1891, F. Anstey, recounted what he considered a typical serio-comic performance: ... 'A young lady in a startling costume, with yellow hair, and a smile of knowing artlessness (a paradoxical expression not uncommon with lady vocalists), will trip forward and sing, or more usually half sing and half speak, some verses...' (1891, p.199)

The terms 'arch' and 'knowing' were frequently used to describe women's styles of delivery and the accuracy of Anstey's summary of the serio-comic's performance mode as 'knowing artlessness' will be considered as part of the examinations in Chapters 2 and 4 of the content of performances in which women frequently

walked the line of decency as they employed performed irony, self-deprecation and comic innuendo in their work.

It seems that the uses and interpretations of the term serio-comic were changeable and a variety of meanings were accepted in performers' and venues' publicity materials, in reviews, and in published song sheets. An examination of the content of performers' acts, indicates that the inclusion of serious material was certainly not a requirement for a performer to be described in this way. For example, in 1897 Marie Lloyd was billed by *The Era* (August 14, p.16) as the 'Queen of Serio-comedy'. In her turn at the Grand (Clapham), that month she performed *That Was A Bloomer* (Castling and Le Brunn, 1896), a song about a series of comic misunderstandings and *The Era's* reviewer informs us that she then performed a second comic song about a French maid who 'knew a lot of funny little things that are not included in the curriculum at a young ladies' seminary.' Her turn was finished with *What Did She Know About Railways?* (Cotes and Scott, 1897), but she was encored so performed another comic song, *Clever Ain't Yer?* (1896)

There is no suggestion this performance – or indeed any other by Lloyd at this point in her career – was 'partly serious', and the application of the 'serio-comic' soubriquet to her performance of this selection of songs indicates that by this time the term had taken on its own music-hall meaning. Webster's 'mock serious' definition is probably most apposite: this was also the year in which Lloyd was publically criticised for her tendency to say one thing whilst doing another in performance. The lyrics of all four songs she performed on the night this reviewer attended required sustained irony in performance. In *Clever, Ain't Yer?* she is mock furious in every chorus as she is teased by and subsequently physically threatens a series of men and in the innuendo-laden *What Did She Know About Railways?*, she tells the story of one of her favourite female 'types', the country girl visiting the city for the first time. This readjustment of the definition of serio-comic to encompass a tendency to archness and suggestive irony in performance might, in part, explain the negative shift of press and public attitudes to the performances of serio-comics by the turn of the century.

Details about the specific comic content and performance style of women's acts are frustratingly scant in reviews. My survey of reviews reveals that the quality of critical analysis of performances by both sexes was often lacking. Many reviewers have a tendency to evoke over-descriptive and under-informative, often hyperbolic phrasing which, while sometimes indicating how the 'house' received each act – which was of course the real measure of success – usually contributes very little to a close analysis of comic content. There are however gendered linguistic differences in the way the comedy is critiqued. A review of two performances given on the same night at Charles Morton's 3,000-capacity Canterbury Music Hall in Lambeth by two extremely popular comics Dan Leno (1860–1904) and Peggy Pryde (1867–1943) is informative here. The reviewer for the *The Era* in August, 1897 notes that Leno – admittedly a much bigger star than Pryde – 'evokes roars of laughter' and says of his first song: 'very funny, indeed, is this ditty, and its effect on the audience at the Canterbury is electric.' (August 14, p.18) Pryde was 'brimful of vivacity and brightness' and 'puts her hearers in the best of humours' with 'her comical account of the wedding day of a girl of the lower class, with its many absurd incidents and general jollity.' (ibid.) The review of Leno concludes with a reference to an 'old favourite', which 'still creates the heartiest merriment'. On the other hand, Pryde's 'unflagging energy and spirit give to her selections remarkable value and attractiveness.' While there is reference to the content, and he does mention the comedy in both performers' acts, Pryde's review predominantly refers to her impact *as a woman*: 'vivacity', 'brightness', 'energy', 'spirit'. The language used for Leno refers to the impact of what he *says* and *does*, not of his physical presence. He evokes a far more masculine vocabulary: 'roars', and 'the heartiest merriment'. While there were certainly no denials that comedy was present in these performances – and there are many examples of clear acknowledgements that material and delivery was funny – they are often overlaid in this way with a paternalistic, patronising tone denoting how women were perceived in the late Victorian male imagination.

Critics' and commentators' accounts frequently expose their own preoccupations and wider public expectations of women. Comments about a performer's visual appeal including her physical appearance, her costumes and her 'manner' are

common, and are frequently afforded as much significance as references to the content of a performance. In 1868, a reviewer for *The Music Halls Gazette* noted that 'Miss Etty Gray, a young lady of great personal attractions, and a charming singer to boot, gave a capital rendering of "He'll find I can beat him at that," and was tumultuously encored.' (April 18 1868, p.13). Nearly 20 years later, a reviewer of 'the gifted serio-comic' Marie Loftus' performance of three comic songs at The Canterbury joked: 'we should require the trained observation of a court modiste to describe the charming confection of plush and feathers worn by the singer. And then to dwell on her stockings! – no, we will not do that; suffice it to say they are revelations.' (*The Era*, October 8 1887, p.10). Regarding the content of her performance, he observes that her second song was 'given with much archness of expression', while in a third 'her saucy style was simply irresistible.' (ibid.) In 1892 Minnie Cunningham was described as 'delicious' by Arthur Symons in an article about the future of music hall in *The Pall Mall Gazette* (April 13, p.1).

Little had changed by 1899: 'Miss Lloyd wears some lovely confections and hats, but how can a mere man describe such things.' (*The Era*, May 27, p. 18) This review, of Lloyd's performance at the Tivoli, does at least note that in her performance of *Everybody Wondered How He Knew* (George Rollitt) 'There is piquancy in the verses, and the singer...gets every ounce of meaning out of her lines.' (ibid.) Often even when writing about such established comedians, reviewers cannot resist reductive sexual references: Sime Silverman, writing for *Variety* about Vesta Victoria's second trip to the US in a year at the height of her success, erotises her 36-minute performance at the Colonial in New York completely, noting that she 'still remains the magnetic, pretty, buxom character songstress'. (January 19 1907, p.8).

Contemporary performers continue to notice that a woman's physical appearance is a principal site of her interest as a comedian. Bridget Christie has remarked that reviewers still regularly comment on a female comic's looks when it has no apparent bearing on her act and very rarely refer to the appearances of men. (Christie, 2015, p.54). Tina Fey (2011) has made similar observations about how, despite her huge success, her looks continue to be the central concern for US

commentators on her work and career. In Chapter 5 women's use of their bodies as part of their performances is considered in relation to feminist theories about the cultural signification of the female body.

This tendency to identify women predominantly with their bodies and their erotic impact accompanied shifting perceptions of serio-comics from inside and outside the music-hall profession in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. As such the application of the term from the middle of the century on is a useful signifier of wider attitudes and concerns about the role(s) of women; loaded with anxieties and questions about women's respectability in all aspects of their lives, and their public behaviour on stage in particular. As early as 1862 *The Musician & Music Hall Times* took *The Observer* to task for publishing a vitriolic attack on the halls which gave special attention to serio-comics. As the following extensive comments reveal, *The Observer* had no doubt that women performing comic material were damaging to the propriety of music-hall establishments, and to the moral well-being of both the performers and their audiences:

One...of the most objectionable features in these entertainments, and which has done more to deteriorate them than anything else, has been the introduction of 'female comic singing.' None of these Halls now consider their company complete without one or more 'comic' or 'serio-comic' - the new name for fast and slangy dialogues - ladies. These 'comic ladies' are mostly devoid of any real talent or humour, and are generally third and fourth-rate actresses, who have failed on the regular stage as 'singing chambermaids,' and whose only attraction [sic] seem to consist in their fine dress, a liberal display of legs, suggestive attitudes, the utterance of *double entendres*, slang, and sentiments unwomanly and unnatural, and a boisterous vulgarity and brazen impudence, which, though it may excite the laughter and admiration of the fast clerk or the dissipated mechanic, causes the reflecting and judicious listener to grieve to see women placed in so equivocal a position for a few shillings per night. (*The Observer*, August 4 1862, quoted in *The Musician & Music Hall Times*, August 9 1862, pp.92-93)

From the overall tone of the article, it is safe to assume that this commentator is not a fan of any music-hall entertainment but for him, as for so many contemporaneous observers, a woman paid to perform a comic act within the popular conventions of this form is not simply 'objectionable' but both 'unnatural'

and 'unwomanly', and is placed in such an 'equivocal' position that he finds the comparison with prostitution inevitable.

Despite such reservations and the growing unease about the risks to their reputations, the term persisted, and the numbers of 'serios' grew rapidly. However, even within the profession, it is clear that by the end of the 1880s – as the syndicates began to exert more control over the music-hall market and to influence the content of programmes and the individual performers they contracted – some attitudes to serio-comics *within* the profession were beginning to alter from earlier impressions of 'charming ladies' and celebrated 'archness'.⁶ In 1887, a reviewer for *The Era*, noted that at The Metropolitan, Miss Harriett Vernon:

especially urges her claims to the flattering reception she rightly obtains by her considerable personal attractions, her piquant style, and more than all, by the absence of those conventional tricks of gesture and pose which so often mar the work of the serio-comic. It is scarcely fair to Miss Vernon, perhaps, to describe her as a serio-comic.' (*The Era*, September 3, 1887, p.10)

Within the profession there was then a growing sense that the ubiquity of the term and the sheer number of women describing themselves as serio-comics were leading to a need for quality control and there is evidence that, as they became more established performers, women were increasingly keen to distance themselves from the negative connotations associated with the term. In 1888, performer Nellie L'Estrange noted that: 'The music hall market is over-run with what are called "serio-comics' (*McGlennon's Star Songbook*, No. 4, June 1888, p.2). These negative connotations stretched beyond the UK: Marie Loftus recalled that when she arrived in New York in 1885 'the serio-comic element had become so awfully stereotyped that the people used to call them 'chronics,'" (*The Era*, April 30 1887, p.16). A decade later in 1897 the soubriquet was clearly so out of fashion that Loftus was able to perform a very successful parody of an evidently accepted stereotype of the serio-comic. One reviewer noted that her 'uproarious reception is due to the drollery she puts into her burlesque of the tenth-rate serio of bygone days who used to "stroll out with Charlay," and do extraordinary things in the way of song and dance. Miss Loftus, of course, exaggerates, but it is humorous

exaggeration, and, therefore, not only excusable, but highly necessary.' (*The Era*, November 13 1897, p.18)

Writers in a number of publications took pains to point out the differences between the respectable 'ladies' of the music hall who possessed 'great personal attractions' singing 'capital' songs in 'a most captivating and rollicking style' and the likes of 'Tottie Tartington', a fictional 'serio-comic vocalist' created by the editors of *McGlennon's Star Songbook* in 1888 to make a point about the profession's apparent intolerance of impropriety amongst women performers. Her name alone reveals precisely her supposed nature, suggesting as it does *twice* prostitution, or at least sexual availability; 'tottie' and 'tart' had been slang terms for a prostitute or sexually promiscuous woman since the mid-nineteenth century (Green, 1998, p.1183 & p.1220).⁷ Tottie's lack of success on the halls is reported as a direct consequence of her failure to remain above reproach in terms of her off-stage relationships with men. She is shunned by other members of the profession, particularly other women, and the writer claims this treatment is due to her taking 'the dubious opportunities her position affords her and is henceforth not fit to be part of the wider music-hall community' (*McGlennon's Star Songbook*, 1888, p. 2). Her chief crime appears to have been keeping company with a variety of men, and the moral of the story is clear: if young women want to be music-hall performers they must be seen to be decent and absolutely irreproachable. Having been ostracised for her behaviour, the writer informs us that Tottie returned to prostitution.

This commentator feels the need to point out that music-hall performers were, in general, no less virtuous and decent than theatrical performers. Tellingly, in justifying the role of serio-comics generally (Tottie is portrayed as an exception to their behaviour as a rule), the writer assures readers that many respectable serio-comics move on to the more reputable stages of pantomime and theatre.

That the mark of a genuinely talented, decent performer could be defined by her ability to escape to more legitimate forms echoes widespread attitudes to the halls; particularly to the women working in them. This *internal* sense that music hall may

have been the highest paid form of entertainment, but morally it was inferior to legitimate theatre led some supporters to publicly endorse music hall, its performers and their material. In 1892, in a piece claiming great moral improvements in the halls, Arthur Symons argued that in fact more women were entering than leaving the halls:

there is an exodus of actresses and operatic singers to the music-hall stage, not always to the advantage of the music-halls. They are getting to realize that to be a music-hall artiste is to gain two advantages over the artiste in "legitimate drama." First, it pays much better; then, by the very rules of the game, it affords a freer scope for individuality. (*Pall Mall Gazette*, April 13 1892, p.1)

Such public defences of the virtue of the halls often seem disingenuous and the industry's press was well aware of the appeal of the moral ambiguity surrounding women performers and reviews often directly contributed to it. *The Era* regularly took delight in (more or less obliquely) describing suggestive performances. In the same month that Symons was applauding the improved morality of the halls: 'Miss Marie Lloyd has several new songs that she sings with her wonted sauciness.' (*The Era*, April 30 1892, p.16) By the end of the century such descriptions were still commonplace: *The Entr'acte* noted that during a performance at the Oxford, Millie Hylton 'is desirably arch and insinuating...' (8 April 1899)

The London County Council's Theatres & Music Halls Committee

Throughout the 1880s and 1890s women were then both criticised and applauded for suggestive interpretations of the songs they performed and this morally ambiguous reputation impacted on their careers as they became the subject of public debates about impropriety and immorality in music-hall programmes. There is evidence that their work attracted particular attention *because* they were women, still more so if the material they performed was deemed to be in any way vulgar or salacious because it alluded to sex, or women's sexual desires; if their performance style was too 'knowing' and, to recall Anstey's phrase, insufficiently 'artless'; or if their acts were 'unwomanly' in some other way, for example demonstrating physical strength or athleticism or performing a particularly exerting dance.

From 1890 there were attempts to formalise such disapproval through the official regulation and control of music-hall programmes. How far these interventions manifestly influenced music-hall performance and style and the ways in which performances by women were directly or indirectly censored during this period is central to this thesis and, in order to gain a fuller picture of the shifts in the style and conventions of comic forms, it is worthwhile reviewing in some depth here how the regulation of London music-hall venues and their programmes operated during this period, and defining the relationship between women performers and the censor in light of wider contextual evidence that music-hall regulation reflected broader, class-based attempts to exert controls over the behaviour and leisure activities of working Londoners.⁸

In 1889, Councillor Captain Edmund Hope Verney told a meeting of the newly elected LCC on the regulation of music halls that: 'if there was one thing above all others the people of London looked to them for it was the improvement of public morality.' (*The Era*, April 27 1889, p. 15).⁹ In fact, the evidence indicates, that the moral 'health' of Londoners proved to be the obsession of the Council, rather than a concern of the majority of the people it served.

The Council had identified 'drink and moral corruption' as 'the chief causes of social unrest' (Summerfield, 1981, p. 217), and, as previous commentators have demonstrated, the popularity of music halls with their reputation for 'low entertainments' and rowdy alcohol-fuelled behaviour made them an obvious target for rationalisation and reform. In terms of regulation, they occupied the middle ground between public houses – whose existence was predicated on alcohol consumption and were therefore disapproved of in principle – and the theatre, which by the late nineteenth century was an almost exclusively middle class and highly respectable pursuit (Vorspan, 2000, p.949).

Following the creation of the LCC, local government regulation of music halls shifted from the Metropolitan Board of Works' previous focus on tightening safety regulations (Pennybacker, 1986, p.121) to more overt attempts to control the

nature of the entertainments on offer, the atmosphere of the halls and the behaviour of audiences.¹⁰ As studies detailing the evolution of local government in London reveal, an emerging municipal paternalism and an accompanying notion of moral 'improvement' underpinned the cultural policies of the LCC at this time.¹¹ Chris Waters has suggested that implicit in its approach 'were a whole series of assumptions as to what constituted 'good' culture' and 'what the components of a 'civilised' life should be.' (Waters, 1989, p.70)¹²

In 1890, LCC Councillor and prominent Methodist moral reformer and anti-music halls campaigner John McDougall stressed that the Council did not, 'desire to abolish these places, but to purify them.' (*The Era*, March 15 1890, p.14) He believed that it was 'unfair that people should be attracted to those places to seek amusements to have their moral sense stolen by the temptations by which they were surrounded when they got inside.' (ibid.) Such fears that, when at leisure, working people were so morally suggestible that they needed protecting from themselves were clearly not shared by music-hall professionals. In the same week, comic singer G.H. 'The Great' MacDermott told a meeting of music-hall performers and proprietors that, in 23 years of experience, he had 'never yet come across an audience which could not protect itself'. (*The Era*, March 8 1890, p.16)

By the time the LCC was elected, music-hall entertainment had changed considerably from the earlier disparate mix of rough and ready, sing-a-long pub forms of the 1850s and 1860s, and as has been well documented elsewhere, the 1880s and 1890s saw music hall develop into a significant entertainment business with large purpose-built venues presenting varied programmes of acts performed in an atmosphere formulated to attract an extensive mixed – class, sex and age – audience.¹³ As James Graydon, manager of the Middlesex Music Hall and Secretary of the highly influential Music Hall Proprietors' Protection Association (MHPPA), reported to the 1892 Select Committee on Theatres and Places of Entertainment (Select Committee, 1892), the number of people visiting the 35 largest London music halls by the early 1890s was 45,000 nightly; 270,000 weekly; and 14,000,000 annually (*Select Committee Report 1892, Appendix No. 15., p.461*).¹⁴

This growing popularity fuelled the drive towards 'respectability' and music-hall proprietors were keen to advertise their venues as such. However, the transformation of the halls into family entertainment was by no means complete in the 1880s and 1890s; neither was it a universally held aspiration for either those working in the profession or its constituency. Following the establishment of the LCC, William Bailey, the manager of the Metropolitan in Edgware Road told the audience at his annual benefit that, he was proud to be 'a rogue and a vagabond' as a previous act of parliament had dubbed those associated with the stage. (*The Era*, November 9 1889, p.17) He assured his audience that he would not accept the LCC's new policy regarding music-hall regulation and impending legislation: 'I have been a constant offender against this stupid old Act, and, ladies and gentlemen, I am much afraid that I shall go on offending.' (ibid.)

Music halls were valued because they offered a place where lower-class audiences, who frequently experienced economic and cultural exclusion from theatres, felt able to socialise and relax.¹⁵ The informal atmospheres in music-hall venues and the style and presentation of the on-stage performances were appealing to audiences in large part because they were free to drink alcohol, smoke in the auditoriums and walk about and mingle with members of both sexes during mixed programmes of multiple short performances (*Select Committee Report 1892*, p.57).

This social aspect of music-hall recreation greatly concerned moral reformers both inside and outside of the LCC who were convinced that the halls encouraged drunkenness and supported soliciting and that the performances offered on stage were at best vulgar, trite, and less than morally uplifting; at worst, objectionable, indecent and sometimes obscene. These campaigners saw the passing of the Local Government Act in 1888 and the subsequent creation of the LCC as an opportunity to complete the reform of the 'music hells' (Bristow, 1977, p10). However, throughout the period tensions are evident between those who worked in and patronised the halls, and those who were keen to either create a 'more moral populace' (Waters, 1989, p.50), and/or to capitalise on the respectability of the larger and wealthier audiences that the 'improvement' of the halls would potentially attract.

There is evidence of a particular focus on women's behaviour and performances in the halls and this was the subject of frequent discussions within the council.

The Theatres and Music Halls Committee (TMHC) was established by the LCC to carry out inspections of individual halls and oversee the licensing process at the its annual October licensing sessions. (LCC reports and papers: LCC/MIN 10,872, and passim) All licences were granted on the proviso that proprietors were 'to take care that nothing contrary to Sobriety, Decency and Good Manners be exhibited, presented or transacted therein...' (LCC/MIN 10,872)

The all-male committee consisted of 20 members who met four or five times a year. A number of its most influential and outspoken members were affiliated to social purity and anti-vice organisations, leading to frequent accusations of anti-music hall bias. Spencer Charrington, the wealthy brewer and Conservative MP, had, at a Council meeting in 1889, 'vehemently denounced music-halls, as being in many instances the ante-chambers to brothels' (*The Pall Mall Gazette*, May 1 1889, p. 6). Another member, John Lidgett was a leading light of the campaign for social purity; and his father-in-law, John McDougall (quoted above), was to become known in the press as 'Muckdougall' due to his apparent fixation on obscenity and indecency in music halls. (*Reynold's Newspaper*, October 13 1889 p. 5) These men were doubtless among the 'they' Lloyd was so relieved could not read her mind in 1897 when she sang a song about music-hall censorship:

So help my bob, it's a jolly good job
They can't stop a girl from thinking!
(Tabrar, Harrington and Le Brunn, 1897)

In its first year, the TMHC's records show that decisions about which halls should be inspected were made according to individual complaints received from the public, police reports concerning behaviour and conduct at particular venues, and as a result of visits made to music halls by committee members themselves.¹⁶ This was to become extremely damaging to the committee's reputation as independent and objective, as it resulted in committee members serving a quasi-judicial

function at licensing hearings whilst also effectively collecting and presenting evidence based on personal opinions and recollections.

That the TMHC exerted influence over music halls and therefore over individual performances is evident from the minutes of the first licensing sessions under the LCC in October 1889, and in press coverage of these sessions. Close examination of this material reveals that in 1889 the licences for just three halls – The Royal Aquarium (Westminster), The Trocadero (Picadilly), and The Rosemary Branch (Islington) were all initially refused on grounds of public morality.¹⁷ (*Pall Mall Gazette*, October 9 1889 p.4) In all three cases the grounds given for non-renewal related directly to the on or off stage behaviour of women. This predicted both the focus of the inspectors on moral objections to music halls and how the relationship between the council, music-hall proprietors, performers and songwriters was to develop over the following two decades.

The licensing committee recommended that the Royal Aquarium license should not be renewed because of the frequent presence of large numbers of prostitutes at the establishment. Similarly, the renewal of the licence for the Trocadero was opposed by Spencer Charrington because it was ‘nightly the resort of prostitutes’ (*The Era*, October 19, 1889, p.14). He also objected to a female trio whose performance of an ‘objectionable’ song entitled *In The Future* contained references to a ‘divorce suit and the jealous husband’. (ibid.) Prostitutes and performers were, in this way, conflated during these hearings. *The Era* reported that the three women were dismissed for singing the song (ibid.). The licensee’s defence at the licensing hearing noted that it was difficult to exclude well-dressed prostitutes if they paid the entrance fee and ‘they conducted themselves decently’. (ibid.) This was frequently the halls’ defence against accusations that they harboured prostitutes, and the duty of proprietors to deter soliciting became the subject of recurring annual discussions at the October licensing sessions (LCC/MIN, passim).

Notwithstanding the proprietors’ protestations, in reality it was common knowledge that prostitutes worked in their bars and that, providing they were discreet, many music-hall managements ignored their activities. Beyond this

apparently benign tacit tolerance, it is also evident from the record that proprietors routinely passed the blame on to prostitutes and performers while financially directly benefitting from the attractions and entertainments they brought to their establishments. The Rosemary Branch was initially refused its licence because of complaints about performances– again from John McDougall – including one by Nellie Lennox, and an ‘alleged indecent conversation between a pair of ventriloquial dolls.’ (*Pall Mall Gazette*, October 9 1889, p. 4) Mr. Lovejoy, the proprietor, attempted to defend his decision to allow Lennox to perform her song, claiming not to see any indecency. One committee member quoted a few lines from it:

They’ll sling you yarns that are warm all through
They’re as broad as the ocean, and quite as blue
It’s a way they’ve got in the navy.

Lovejoy then claimed that he believed that ‘blueness’ referred to sailors’ uniforms rather than any indecency and the council decided that ‘due precautions are not taken to secure decency in the performance at this hall generally...’ and recommended that the licence should not be renewed. (*Reynold’s Newspaper*, October, 13, 1889 p.5) Similarly, at the Oxford, the hugely successful male impersonator Vesta Tilley was required to withdraw a very popular song¹⁸ because McDougall raised an objection to it. (*The Pall Mall Gazette*, October 3, 1889, p.4) McDougall made it clear that he was willing to withdraw his objection to the song and the licence renewal, as long as the proprietor made no attempt to ‘defend’ it. He capitulated, and the licence was granted. (ibid.)

These cases indicate the sort of pressures proprietors were under not to defend performers or their material and to knuckle under and ensure their programmes were free from anything which might be considered ‘risky’, and the uneasy atmosphere in the halls as proprietors awaited licence application decisions under the new regulatory system is evident in press reports of comments from those working in the industry: ‘in consequence of the doubt expressed with regard to the licence of the Trocadero, Miss Nellie Navette has had to omit her dance during the week...’ (*The Era*, October 12 1889, p. 15) In the case of Bella Willing, the singer of

a song performed at Crowder's Music Hall (the Rose & Crown) that McDougall had objected to, the manager was required 'to make a statutory declaration that he did discharge an artiste who sang a song they considered objectionable', despite the fact that she had sung the song in London for several years without any complaints (*Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, October 13 1889, p.3.)

This confirms a tendency raised at the 1892 Select Committee, particularly in relation to John McDougall's approach; it was suggested that when challenged, as long as proprietors acknowledged that the feature the TMHC had objected to was wrong 'and gave an assurance that it should never occur again, the licence was granted. It was those who defied the council upon whom they enforced their right.' (*Select Committee Report 1892*, p. 227) James Graydon speaking as secretary for the proprietors' association claimed that on a number of occasions in order to get their licences, managers 'pleaded guilty' and apologised for things that they did not believe had taken place:

If a county councillor made objection to a lady showing her skirts, did he think it was very improper thing; the applicant said, "Well it may not have been quite according to your desire, and it shall not be repeated." (ibid.)

Despite opposition to them, the powers of the TMHC to oppose licence renewals and make complaints about performances and behaviour in music halls were very quickly accepted as part of the licensing process. Most proprietors were understandably reluctant to challenge the committee and gain a reputation for allowing objectionable acts to appear at their venues and, following the first year's decisions, it was plain that in order to protect their interests, individual halls must operate their own systems of self-censorship and encourage their artists to do the same.¹⁹

As a reflective piece on 'The Lessons of Licensing' in *The Era* suggested: 'managers will have to be more than ever vigilant as to any really indelicate act or gesture on their stages escaping their notice' (*The Era*, October 26 1889, p.13) As a result some managers began requiring the advance submission of written versions of their acts and/or asked them to sign contracts containing special clauses regarding

indecent and, ultimately, this would have an impact on the atmosphere of the venues and the nature of music-hall performances. Following the first year of inspections *The Era* concluded that as well as identifying ‘real or imaginary “double-meanings”,’ the ‘active and aggressive minority in the County Council intends to constitute itself the arbiter not only of delicacy, but of taste.’ (ibid.)

A key difficulty faced by proprietors, performers and songwriters was that individual inspectors, committee members, and ‘concerned’ members of the public who complained about the tone of performances were most commonly middle-class reformers whose objections to the halls stretched well beyond a desire to eradicate explicitly indecent material to, in their terms, ‘raise the standard’ of music-hall entertainment.

An additional, and apparently intractable problem for the proprietors, performers and writers attempting to navigate a way through the new licensing regulations – and for the inspectors attempting to implement them – seems to have been that precisely what was considered undesirable or indecent was an endlessly moveable feast. As the LCC attempted to manage its rather chaotic complaints procedure and offer some definitive guidance on the issue, it became clear to observers that the entire endeavour was fundamentally flawed. Performer Charles Godfrey told a meeting of music-hall artists that: ‘as to the question of what was proper and decent, it was to a great extent a question of opinion, for what one person approved another would disapprove.’ (*The Era*, 8 March 1890, p. 16) Furthermore, there were also suspicions that the Council’s motivation in this matter was class-based: ‘A “turn” may be very vulgar, very rough, and very coarse, without being immoral or lascivious’, argued *The Era*. (October 26 1889, p.13) Proprietors required the artists they employed to walk this line as they recognised that the appeal of their programmes was often class specific. In a letter to *The Era*, James Graydon, influential proprietor of the Middlesex Music Hall in Covent Garden and leading member of the MHPPA wrote:

Managers of music halls desire to cater for the respectable of all classes. If the managers are forced to raise their entertainment to a level of refinement which shall satisfy the squeamish sensibility of an individual committeeman, there is danger that they may elevate it over the heads of their regular audiences. (*The Era*, October 26 1889, p.13)

Complainants were frequently linked to the purity movement and moral vigilance or temperance campaigns, who saw music-hall inspections and the LCC's licensing process as a channel through which they might exert direct influence over popular audiences. Chief among these were the Social Purity Alliance, the National Vigilance Association, the Ladies' National Association, and the British Women's Temperance Association. Some prominent members of the LCC (McDougall, Charrington, Captain Verney), the TMHC and individual inspectors (William Barclay) also had direct links with these organisations.

Social and moral purity campaigners in the late Victorian period have regularly been dismissively caricatured as small-minded 'prudes on the prowl' (*The Daily Telegraph*, October 19 1894, p.3). In fact, many of these women and men were thoughtful early feminist campaigners working to prevent the sexual abuse of women and girls and refusing to accept the commonly accepted view that men's sexual urges were prescribed by nature, so prostitution was a necessary evil. The Contagious Diseases Acts of the 1850s had galvanized the likes of Josephine Butler and the Ladies' National Association, whose campaigns to repeal these laws incorporated opposition to the double standard which demanded that women were sexually pure, but accepted that men 'needed' to use women for sex through prostitution. Butler epitomises the complexity of these arguments, embodying as she does the feminist ideals of the period that campaigned against prostitution because she believed it 'destroyed human dignity' (Weeks, 1989, p. 89), but she also believed that prostitutes had rights '...the right not to be harassed, and if she was an adult she even had a right to choose to become a prostitute.' (ibid.) Campaigns such as Jane Ellice Hopkins' White Cross League attempted to persuade men to control their sexual urges, and fought for women's right to refuse sex in marriage. Probably most vilified was Laura Ormiston Chant who, in 1894, led the very well documented opposition to the licence for the Empire Theatre of Varieties.²⁰ Chant saw herself as a crusader for women's rights and social purity

and abhorred the Empire as a sexual playground for idle rich men. (*Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle*, October 13 1894, p.2)

As a result, members of these organisations targeted attitudes, material and entertainments that, in their eyes, promoted the double standard and encouraged men to assume they had sexual rights over women. The vilification of music halls was, therefore, an inevitable part of their activities, and frequently led many well-intentioned reformers into head-on collisions with the supporters of music halls throughout the 1880s and 90s and with the women who performed in them. These very off-stage concerns were linked with on-stage entertainments and were all seen as part of the same battle. In addition, the focus of these organisations on immorality and their frequently expressed notion that 'sexual desire was a moral and intellectual error' that 'could be controlled by reason and will, like the taste for drink' (Bristow, p.83), also attracted many vigilance supporters who were undoubtedly closer to the stereotypical prudes derided in the popular press, and whose views were far more reactionary and frequently based on class prejudices which led them to object to *all* music-hall entertainments.

Women, particularly unaccompanied women, were clearly the focus of much scrutiny and their presence was considered symptomatic of – if not entirely responsible for – the morally suspect tone of the halls. LCC records also reveal that not only were complaints about performances by women used to oppose licence renewals but frequently the very fact that they were performed by women provided particular reason to disapprove: 'Is that a proper song for a young lady to sing on a public stage?' asked one licence committee member Mr. Lovejoy during his defence of the song performed by Nellie Lennox at the Rosemary Branch, in 1889 (*Pall Mall Gazette*, October 9 1889, p.4) This idea of 'proper' female behaviour has frequently been and perhaps remains both an impediment and a potential weapon for women performing comedy, and their ambiguous positions in nineteenth-century popular culture led inevitably to their close scrutiny as performers and particular criticism of them if they transgressed acceptable female roles.

Performances by women on stage and the conduct of audiences in the auditorium and bars were often directly connected in multi-pronged attacks on individual halls, which did not seem to view the on and off-stage behaviour of women separately. Sexual innuendo, or potentially sexually arousing references or performance on stage – for example, being able to see a woman’s legs as she danced – was linked to an atmosphere of morally suspect behaviour, particularly the activities of prostitutes in the bars and promenades.²¹ What reformers wanted to eradicate were performances that they assumed, as Tracy Davis succinctly puts it, ‘inflamed desire and spawned solicitation’. (Davis, 1991, p.50)

The minutes of TMHC meetings document specific complaints about on-stage indecency. These include a range of objections to both the content and delivery of specific comic material: usually accusations of coarse expression in characterisations, suggestiveness or obscenity in the lyrics of songs or sketches, or lewdness in performance style. Common targets for complaints included predictable disapproval of costumes worn by women performers, particularly when they revealed too much of their bodies or the shapes of their bodies. Cross-dressing by either sex that took the form of grotesque caricature was also likely to raise complaints, as was the coarseness associated with the kind of ‘low’ characterisations serio-comics like Ada Lundberg performed. Objectionable dances (usually, but not always, by women) included those that were considered ‘lewd’, for example, energetic ‘skirt dancing’ which included the lifting of skirts to reveal the dancer’s legs or high-kicking dances like the can-can performed by Lottie Collins to accompany her huge 1892 hit *Ta-ra-ra-Boom-de-ay* (*Pall Mall Gazette*, April 13 1892, p.1) Finally, vulgarity or suggestiveness in the lyrics of songs or speech or a performer’s delivery of them was often recorded as undesirable.

Under instruction to pay ‘particular attention’ to women, inspectors were frequently so fixated on potential vulgarity or worse that many failed to consider the merits of a performance at all. They often commented exclusively and out of context on an ‘objectionable’ feature. Such abstracted reactions led to many rather arbitrary and unfair reports of offensive performances. In 1890, for example, inspector William Barclay, described as ‘smutty’ a performance by the legendary

character monologist and singer Jenny Hill at The Cambridge (Shoreditch): 'she is I hear a regular favourite amongst the lower class', he notes this is 'apparently' due to what she says in between the verses of her songs. Aside from his ignorance of Hill's status at this time as a huge star earning among the highest possible music-hall salaries (Bratton, 1986, p.99), Barclay completely misses the point of both the form and the performance style she worked in: 'she uses a great deal of slang in her discourse that might easily be left out.' (LCC/MIN 10,889) In fact the gritty, working-class characterisations Hill was famous for regularly 'made her audiences laugh immoderately' (Booth, 1924, p.337) and absolutely required her to use 'slang'. His suggestion that she could simply omit this reveals how little the TMHC attempted to consider these performers on their own terms or what they meant to their audiences, and that the committee aimed to impose not just a moral tone, but a performance style that rejected the 'vulgar' or coarse, that the likes of Hill and Lundberg – with their representations of poor, sometimes bawdy and grotesque characters – inevitably were. These records suggest the culture gap that existed between the LCC and the people it served and uncover the Council's failure to recognise the role music hall played in their lives, the nature of the relationships that developed between performers and their audiences and what their 'stars' meant to them and the sense of ownership they felt they had over them.

Chapter conclusion

What emerges from the evidence outlined above is that performers were forced to maintain a difficult balance between pleasing audiences and not falling foul of the censor. However, it is also clear that the unpredictable nuances of live comedy ensured that these women were endlessly moving targets for their attackers and any alleged wrongdoing on stage was often difficult to substantiate. The public vilification of the serio-comic in the last two decades of the nineteenth century for engaging in performance practices that either tapped into uncomfortable truths about the work and living conditions of women or were considered unwomanly and indecent is evidence of explicitly discriminatory attitudes towards women performers and a clear focus by the censor on women's behaviour. As noted earlier in this chapter, such attitudes persist in the contemporary period as women

comedians continue to attract gender-related attention regarding their appearances and the content of their acts.

Chapter 2 considers the specific comic techniques performers employed to work within the regulatory constraints placed on them by the LCC and examines the styles of delivery and material they developed to reflect their lives and experiences as women. Before moving on to examine these practices, however, a brief outline of the social context in which this material was created, particularly in terms of attitudes and expectations regarding women's marital status will inform the following examination.

Conditions for women in London improved considerably during the second half of the nineteenth century. Most significantly, in terms of their daily living conditions and health, family sizes reduced significantly in this period, and better housing ameliorated crowded living conditions for many families. Developments in the provision of education meant that by 1900 there was a marked drop in rates of illiteracy amongst adult women (Stearns, 1972, p.100). In addition, by the 1880s women's employment options had begun to broaden; more women had work in domestic service, or as clerical workers in offices and, overall, life for young, single women living in the city became more varied and their opportunities expanded.

The role of married women, however, 'changed little if at all' (Stearns, 1972, p.109). Most women in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century music-hall audiences would marry at some point in their lives, with many working-class and lower-middle class women regarding marriage as their only 'alternative to poverty' (Pat Hudson, 1995, p. 33). In 1880's England, '88 per cent of women in their forties were, or had been married' (Shani D'Cruze, 1995, quoted in June Purvis, pp. 55-56), and, according to historians R.I Woods and P.R.A Hinde, 'roughly half of the female population who got married would have done so by their mid-twenties'. (Woods and Hinde, 1985, p.127)

The number of women in the population rose steadily after 1870 and the 'Surplus Women Question' exercised the minds of policy makers and liberal and feminist

campaigners alike.²² It became 'inevitable that some women would not be able to fulfil their 'natural destiny' of marriage and motherhood' (Lewis, 1984, p.4), and there was a consequent need to expand the range of employment options available to women and increase their wages so they could support themselves. Sex differentials in wages during this period (even for very similar work) remained marked and, as Mary Lyndon Shanley has observed, 'the average wage that working-class women could command was below subsistence level.' (Shanley, 1993, p.10). In the popular imagination, this lack of financial security contributed to a continuing perception of marriage as the norm and an 'economic necessity' (Stedman Jones, 1982, p.109). 'Those women who were not married by their late twenties stood a very real chance of never marrying' (Lewis, 1984, p.4) and, consequently, remaining single after the age of 30 carried a social stigma throughout the period. The material analysed in Chapter 2 was written and performed against this backdrop and reflected these aspects of women's lives and opportunities and the accompanying anxieties, preoccupations and stereotypes surrounding their changing roles.

Notes

¹ F. Anstey was the pseudonym of novelist and journalist Thomas Anstey Guthrie.

² Early mentions of the term serio-comic can be found in the British Library's 'Collections Relating To Sadler's Wells'. Vol. 3, 1796-1809. These do not apply to performers and include descriptions of serio-comic pantomimes performed at the theatre from around 1796. The earliest uses of the term I have found to refer to performers rather than material occur in the 1860s.

³ In 1893, Bessie Bellwood was described in *The Standard* as 'comedian' on the same bill at The Oxford Music Hall as 'serio-comic Nellie Navette', so either this reviewer made a distinction or the hall did so in its printed programme (*The Standard*, February 1, 1893, p.7). How far such descriptions were the choice of individual artists is unclear.

⁴ Hill performed comic and serious character songs during her act and those that combined comic and serious elements. See Bratton, 1986 'Jenny Hill: Sex and Sexism in Victorian Music Hall', in Bratton (1986, pp. 92-110); Baker, (1988/2014, Chapter 10).

⁵ 'Coster' comedians based their characters on cockney market stallholders or costermongers, who were very common on the streets of London and had a distinct culture and dress code and were known for their creative use of slang. Kate Carney was known as the 'Coster Queen'. (Baker, p.163) Gus Elen and Albert Chevalier were the most famous male coster comedians.

⁶ See *Music Hall The Business of Pleasure* (1986) edited by Peter Bailey for a selection of essays on the evolution of the halls from independent venues to large nationwide chains controlled by syndicates.

⁷ Interestingly, Rosalind Gill notes the resurgence of usage of this term in twenty-first popular culture in recent years. (2007, p.22)

⁸ The control and regulation of London music halls has been the subject of a number of studies including Summerfield (1981), Bailey (1986), Waters (1989), Pennybacker (2005).

⁹ Two years later Verney was disgraced when he was arrested for the procurement of a young woman for 'immoral purposes' (*The Times*, May 7 1891, p. 9)

¹⁰ There had been some concerns raised in the 1870s about the morality of music-hall entertainments and the need for censorship. (*The Era* Sep 30 1877, p.4; *Pall Mall Gazette*, April 22 1879, p.11-12; *Morning Post*, April 25 1879, p.7)

¹¹ The LCC operated under the control of the Progressive Party, which held power in the metropolitan area until 1907.

¹² These policies were motivated at least as much by self-protectionist public order concerns as by solicitous interest: 'Our safety, the security of society, of our homes and families, in the long run, are concerned with the form in which they take their recreation.' (Fuller, 1875, p. 717)

¹³ See Bailey, 1986; Bailey, 1998; Booth & Kaplan, 1996; Summerfield, 1981.

¹⁴ The Music Hall Proprietors Protection Association was formed in 1860. Members included most of the most influential proprietors of the largest halls.

¹⁵ Solicitor William Fladgate, representing the theatre managers at the 1892 Select Committee on Theatres and Places of Entertainment, was clear that: ‘the class who go to the music halls do not want to go to the theatre, and do not care about it’ (*Select Committee Report*, 1892, p. 57).

¹⁶ The police also attended the annual licensing committee meetings to provide information about specific applicants and their venues (*Lloyd’s Weekly Newspaper*, August 4 1889, p. 10).

¹⁷ These decisions were later reversed by hefty majority full council votes and the licenses for all three halls were granted with conditions.

¹⁸ Numerous press reports reveal that the song was very popular with audiences. *The Morning Post*, for example, noted that audience members at the Oxford clearly knew the words to all the songs Tilley sang that week ‘and joined in the chorus of them’. (June 11 1889, p.3).

¹⁹ Later chapters will return to the issue of self-censorship in more detail.

²⁰ See THMC minutes LCC/MIN/10,803 (1894); Pennybacker, 2005, pp.162-163.

²¹ *The Era*, March 17 1894, p.16 included a report regarding a committee member’s complaints about one female performer’s objectionable skirt dancing at Collins’s Music Hall in Islington.

²² The 1861 census had confirmed that the majority of the adult population in England and Wales were women and that overall marriage rates were falling. This led to something of a moral panic dubbed the ‘Woman Question’ or the ‘Surplus Woman Question’ (Papers Reprinted from *The Examiner* 1872; Laurence, Maltby & Rutherford (eds), p. 14; Davies p.46)

Chapter 2

'A Comfort and Blessing To Man': performed irony, self-deprecation and comic subversions of gender stereotypes

Chapter 1 established the context in which music-hall performers worked, in terms of attitudes to women in general and the limitations placed on women performers specifically. This necessarily extensive chapter identifies performance approaches and techniques used by women to create comedy about courtship, marriage and family life within these constraints. Drawing on a number of significant feminist, performance and humour theories, I examine a broad range of lyrics, commentary and reviews and make use of contemporary performance comparisons to argue that comedy offered female performers opportunities to use entrenched perceptions about women's behaviour and attitudes to question their roles in their relationships with men while entertaining and often surprising their audiences.

Performers developed distinct comic personas and performance styles and worked hard to establish relationships with their audiences, manipulating familiar character types to tell women's stories from a comic perspective. As the examples used here demonstrate, this contributed to the kind of performance critique Diamond describes as the 'deconstruction of gender' (Diamond, 1988, p.86), as the comedy they produced provided a female commentary on familiar nineteenth-century gender roles in courtship and within marriage.

Class and gender stereotypes provided perhaps the richest source of material for comedians in nineteenth-century England and, arguably, still do. In *Public Opinion*, Lippmann's influential 1922 analysis of the ways social perceptions are formed and public consent is 'manufactured', he argues that the 'subtlest and most pervasive of all influences are those which create and maintain the repertory of stereotypes.' (1922, p.49) Stereotypes exist, he believes, because they offer 'an ordered, more or less consistent picture of the world' (1922, p.52) and while this picture may not be complete, it presents 'a possible world' in which 'people and things have their well-known places, and do certain expected things.' (ibid.) Certainly, in the nineteenth-century British picture, as Chapter 1 has shown, women had their private, domestic place in the world and could be consistently

reduced to a fairly limited range of types whose roles and behaviour were a known and accepted part of this order.

Through such a system of stereotypes, says Lippmann, the world is reduced to a palatable form and size and our sense of being potentially overwhelmed by the 'buzzing confusion of reality' (ibid.) gives way to a less accurate, but more manageable world-view. This flawed picture becomes central to our sense of our place in the universe and is 'a projection upon the world of our own sense of our own value, our own position and our own rights. The stereotypes are, therefore, highly charged with the feelings that are attached to them.' (ibid.)

Such universal attachment to the 'order' provided by an established set of recognisable stereotypes has long been identified as the bedrock of the creation of humour. Numerous commentators note that humour and comedy rely on stereotyping for their success: 'Social stereotypes are rampant within humor' observes Alice Sheppard (1991, p.35); 'Comics deal with generalizations, with types', says Gilbert (2004, p.15).¹

This reliance on stereotypes is not based simply on convenience, although the need to ensure that audiences quickly recognise a character portrayed or a scenario described from their own lives in order to 'see' or 'get' a joke is well documented. Michael Philips, referring to racist humour, observes that 'a joke will be incomprehensible to a person who does not have a pre-existing knowledge of the stereotypes upon which it plays.' (Quoted in Quirk, p.59) Charles Gruner believes that in comedy, stereotypes are: 'merely a very handy kind of shorthand to provide the essential framework for understanding the content of a joke.' (1997, p.99) This works, argues Gruner, because '[m]ost of us belong to at least one "reference group" based upon one or more common characteristics with which members feel a bond and a loyalty, a group which supports the individual members in observing common attitudes and behaviors'. (1997, p.88) As Gail Finney suggests, based as it is 'on shared experience, attitudes, and values', comedy 'creates in-groups and out-groups by mocking aberrations from the norm or the norm itself'. (Finney, 1994,

p.7) 'In other words', says Finney: 'men poke fun at women, women poke fun at men and everyone pokes fun at blondes'. (ibid.)

Stereotypes in humour emerge as part of this shared experience within a joke structure and some commentators have argued that they are based on truths, even if, as Ted Cohen has suggested, these are 'not truths about the specific stereotyped attribute, but truth about how the stereotyped 'are thought of'. (Cohen, p.80) Jokes exist because audiences recognise something in their society that is being joked about. As anthropologist Mary Douglas argues in her influential essay on the social function of jokes: 'If there is no joke in the social structure, no other joking can appear.' (1978, p.98)) Howard Jenkins makes a similar point when he observes that 'Jokes tend to cluster around points of friction or rupture within the social structure.' (Quoted by Maggie Andrews in Wagg, 1998, p.51)

Class, gender and sex provided the main cluster points on the halls and the representation of women was based on a series of accepted stereotypes about their attitudes, behaviour and roles.² These centred on their economic reliance on men, their passivity and selflessness, their physical attractions and weaknesses, their sexual ignorance and innocence, and their association with the home, child-rearing and the domestic sphere. My survey of around 400 comic songs performed by women during this period, reveals that, perhaps unsurprisingly, the vast majority concern courtship, marriage and family life and from these lyrics I have identified a series of frequently presented female types: schoolgirls; innocent maidens; country girls; city girls; working women (including servants, shop assistants etc.); gold diggers; brides; jilted brides; stage performers (ballet dancers, actresses); wives and mothers; spinsters. Of course this list describes roles and types but not the particulars of each character's story which varies from song to song: schoolgirls are often precocious; some wives are saintly and longsuffering, some are unhappy or nagging; most spinsters are desperate, some might be suffragettes; many country girls are ignorant, most city girls smart and flirtatious; most stage performers are not to be trusted or immoral.

As a list, this reveals nothing new about the content of music-hall material; a range of popular histories and academic studies have previously more than adequately outlined the range of male and female characters presented on the halls.³ What is missing from textual analyses of this material is the presence of the comic performer herself and, as Bailey notes in his study of Victorian popular culture: ‘we need to reanimate’ the live performance elements of music hall (1998, p.130). The relationship between the performer and her audience is the focus of Chapter 3. Here her interpretation and delivery of the material she performed and her comic attitude to it in performance is examined alongside the impact of her stage persona; her comic rendering of the content of the songs she performed; as well as her methods of characterisation and her interpretative choices regarding the female stereotypes presented in her material.

Music hall is an inherently conservative form and, as has been argued elsewhere, stereotypes are ‘reductive, inherently objectifying as they define’ (Gilbert, 2004, p.150).⁴ However, in performance, such stereotypes came face-to-face with real women and their actual attitudes and behaviour, and there is evidence that within its escapist and reductive conventions and despite, arguably *because of* its tendency to stereotype women, comic opportunities presented themselves to performers. It is these that I wish to explore and compare with examples of contemporary female practice here.

Women and marriage

Music-hall programmes were littered with upbeat, celebratory songs about courtship, marriage and weddings as numerous commentators have recorded.⁵ Bessie Bellwood’s performance of Joseph Tabrar’s *He’s Going To Marry Mary Ann*, for example, conveys a young woman’s excitement as she plans her wedding. The chorus lists the household items her fiancé, Fred, has bought with the ‘six pounds, or thereabout’ he has saved up to make their new house a home (Tabrar, 1885). Other songs tell familiar stories of flirtation and courtship. Marie Loftus’ *When Robin came a-courting Mary* (Felix McGlennon, 1888) is an uncomplicated tale of sexually charged romance which relates ‘how in the meadows they tarried’, resulting in Robin assuring Mary, that “‘The wedding bells for you will chime,’” and

ends with Loftus pretending not to know 'Why the neighbours all said, "just in time".' Working-class marriage in this period was frequently prompted by (or at least hastened by) pregnancy, so Mary's situation would be familiar to Loftus' audience. There is no comic twist in this song and, in the final verse, Loftus reveals that she is 'the maiden named Mary' and she and her 'delight' are now happily married. As examples examined later in this chapter indicate, the romance and suggestive fun of courting couples frequently presented on the halls was a celebration of the optimism of youth which, as countless songs testify, did not last much beyond the honeymoon.

Not all young women were as lucky as Mary and many songs key into popular preoccupations with finding a man to marry: either relating the stories of desperate proto-Bridget Jones characters, or offering much needed courting advice to unmarried women in audiences. Florrie Forde's *Pull Yourselves Together, Girls*, written by J.P. Harrington and performed by Forde in 1909, is not comic (or progressive) material, but it usefully epitomises this strand of 'man-hunting' song. The first verse, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, presupposes that all 'self-respecting girls' want husbands; the fate for women who fail to achieve this aim is clear. Forde clarifies the sort of female behaviour required to attract a man:

Pull yourselves together, girls! don't get left behind!
Ev'rywhere there are lots of chaps.
Waiting about with lonely laps.
Never mind the weather, girls!
Meet him at the door;
Give him a kiss, and say, "Goodnight!"
And he's sure to want some more!

The chorus offers encouragement not to lose heart. There are plenty of available men to 'hook' if you know how – and can stomach the repellent prospect of 'lonely laps' – and Forde then attempts to rouse women to be confident and bold so as to avoid the awful alternative of spinsterhood. Heterosexual appeal – but not being *too* sexually available – is the advice of the last few lines of the chorus, and the 'don't get left behind' points to the accepted social and economic desperation of women in her audiences to achieve the security of marriage before it is 'too late'.

This song is one of many reflecting a set of rather bland assumptions about female attitudes to courtship and marriage and, lyrically, a meagre range of female types who populate music-hall material and frequently appear to merely reinforce entrenched ideas about gender roles and behaviour. A much earlier song, Kate Harley's 1862, *I'll Never Get Married I Vow* (Henry Miller) features a character who has 'decided' to never get married as men are 'all untrue'. There appears to be nothing overtly comic in this song but when, in the final verse, she sings 'Tho' only 35 am I', and 'Happy I, thank goodness, still so free', the intention can only be ironic denial. The song sheet describes this as a 'Serio-Comic Song' and it certainly seems to fit the 'mock-serious' or 'arch' definition of the term identified in Chapter 1. The singer appears on the published song sheet wearing a mid-Victorian dress very suggestive of a bridal gown and carrying a posy of flowers in one hand while holding her other hand palm out in mock refusal with a knowing half smile playing on her lips. This is a comic take on the theme of female desperation to marry and it is probably a safe assumption that Harley would play it with a sense of irony.

An alternative course of action for a woman eager to marry gave rise to another ubiquitous music-hall stereotype, the gold digger, who appears in songs which – though also completely disregarding contemporary ideals such as female self-determination or self-respect – are more economically ambitious for the women in their audiences, offering explicit techniques to 'catch' a *rich* husband (rather than just any man). Amy Lyster's, *Do Dear Do*, (Tabrar, 1894) advises:

If you meet a nice old Fogie,
Worth a heap of ready cash;
Should he have a face like bogie
Shut your eyes and start to mash.⁶

This is, again, a depressing call to seduction regardless of how repugnant your suitor is, and the last few lines of the chorus reveal that Lyster's character has only economic security on her mind; the fact that she doesn't love, or even like, the man is irrelevant:

Though I wish him to Old Harry⁷,
We, as partners mean to join,
So to speak "I'm going to marry
One half man, and one half coin

There are many songs of this ilk: not manifestly comic, but apparently upbeat and no doubt delivered in what male reviewers would describe as a 'lively' performance style by women offering 'sensible' advice to women about how to make the best of a bad situation. The stereotype of the gold digger is often somewhat characterless, lacking a crucial third – i.e. comic – dimension. If read as purely observational, the stereotypes in such songs simply reinforce prescribed behaviour and attitudes that – though I am wary of presuming retrospective knowledge of audience reception and interpretation – it seems unlikely that all women and men in the audience would have identified with.

More explicitly comic lyrics may start with an apparently familiar type whose behaviour and attitudes are predictable. However, the comic view of romance is often slightly askew, offering a performer scope to adapt and reimagine her interpretation. Comic performers could engage in a range of less complaisant approaches to familiar attitudes and expectations, finding ways to deal ironically with the common anxieties of women in their audiences by acknowledging a reluctance to marry, a desire to exercise choice, or anger that they were afforded so little respect and so few rights within their relationships.

Though marriage was preferable to poverty, not all music-hall women were willing to accept *any* man and some suggest that whatever their economic situation a degree of personal dignity and a desire for happiness underpins their personal life decisions. In these more self-possessed representations, confident, witty women with evident dignity and pride were at the centre of songs whose comedy relied on ironic, frequently slang-laden language and cuttngly accurate observations about the realities of courtship and marriage for women. The character-narrator in Victoria's *Some Would Marry Anything With Trousers On* (Barclay, 1898), for example, knows exactly what she wants and – despite identifying herself as 'not good looking' – has enough self-esteem to refuse to marry for money out of

desperation as many women do. This character, a chambermaid, has had lots of offers but has refused all the men who have asked her and makes it clear that she is only interested in the love of an equal. A similarly buoyant female voice emerges in Lloyd's *Not For the Best Man Breathing* (Harrington and Scott, 1898) in which she shares the stories of a series of women side-stepping unwanted male attention and *A Bird In Hand* (Tabrar, 1894). This is a first person song about a woman avoiding marriage and taking advantage of a series of men in order to follow her parents' advice concerning avoiding being poor. She also manages to avoid getting married when, in the final verse she cheats during a game of cards in which she bet 'Mr Jones' that she would marry him if he won, and she would get his money if she won:

A bird in the hand's worth two in the bush
A bird in the hand's worth two in the bush
I won a terrible lot—well more than you'd believe,
He had the jack and the king in his hand, and I had the ace up my sleeve.

This is Lloyd at 24, extremely confident in her performance style and presenting the worldly-wise persona that she carefully cultivated with her songwriters and in the press and which became almost indistinguishable from her off-stage public persona.⁸

Appropriating stereotypes

Lippmann stresses that a sense of order and clarity is encapsulated in a collective acceptance of a series of stereotypes. 'No wonder, then, that any disturbance of the stereotype seems like an attack upon the foundations of the universe.' (1922, p.52) Such a threat to the status quo and to cherished beliefs and attitudes presents an ideal opportunity in a comic performance context. As popular amusement venues for socialising and drinking as well as absorbing the on-stage entertainments, music halls provided temporary, liminal spaces for creative and imaginative escapism. Drawing on the work of previous studies, I argue throughout this thesis that the conventions of music-hall comedy gave rise to a hybrid community that many audience members embraced.⁹ Much as Lippmann suggests, as part of this hybrid 'music-hall land' (Fitzgerald, 1899), audiences accepted the comic

stereotypes with which they and others in their community were associated. This acceptance was part of the collective enjoyment of being a member of an exclusive community. (Bailey, 1994) As Oliver Double suggests, this remains true for contemporary comedy audiences and comedians work 'to create a sense of community.' (2014, p.205)

The relaxed atmosphere of the halls fostered a sense of openness and opportunities to challenge and reinvent stereotypes in a 'safe' environment, where laughter, drink and conviviality combined to reduce the possible sense of threat Lippmann identifies. As a number of humour scholars have argued, in certain contexts, members of particular social, ethnic and religious groups frequently enjoy jokes at the expense of their own circle at least as much as they appreciate humour at the expense of other groups (Davies 1991; Gruner, 2000). This is related to the idea of comic licence, which will be examined in Chapter 3 as part of a discussion about performer-audience relationships.

In the context of the halls, women performers were given licence to appropriate female stereotypes and resignify them through comedy. In this way rather than merely restating or reinforcing the stereotype, they were sometimes able to 'use the type in order to explode the type' (Gilbert, pp.150-151) This results in a process Joan Levine describes as embracing 'the stereotype of themselves in a manner designed not to assimilate it but to smother it.' (Levine, 1977, p.336. Quoted in Gilbert p.151) Humour scholars have identified this potential for the stereotyped to appropriate stereotypes in order to comically subvert them. Paul Taylor explains that the 'potential of a joke lies in its ability to personalize stereotypes; to make the revolt against structure essentially one of liberation.' (Taylor in Chapman and Foot, p.388) Some feminist writers have identified this use of stereotypes by women as paradoxical, or at least potentially so. Nancy Walker, commenting on female comic writers, notes that the 'delicate balance between power and powerlessness', has informed their work and that women writing comedy have been 'employing familiar stereotypes of women for the purpose of mocking those stereotypes' (1988, p.9)

A music-hall example, performed by Lily Marney in 1898 addresses just this paradoxical position. When it comes to stereotypes, the most robustly pathetic of all music hall's female characters is the ageing woman desperate to marry and, in *Going To Be Married In The Morning* (Tom Conley, 1898), Marney parodies this already laughable state, offering a grotesque comic caricature which adopts the stereotype in order to laugh at it. Marney's resilient character tells the audience that:

For years my friends have told me that I never would get wed,
That through my face an old maid I should be;
But I made up my mind I would, and yesterday I met
A nice young man, and coaxed him home to tea.

This lyric suggests a range of possibilities for Marney's performance attitude. In this first verse the character could be performed as a typical music-hall representation: an exaggerated version of the stereotypical 'surplus' woman beyond the usual nuptial age, and at her wits' end. Press reviews of Marney's performance confirm that she played the character as 'a lady of uncertain age' and 'a dilapidated dame'. (*The Era*, January 29, 1898, p.14) This reviewer observes that Marney: 'does not mind making up ugly in order to obtain the results which follow the display of her humorous powers.' (Ibid.) The audience would recognise the 'type' immediately: as Harriet Margolis points out '[u]sing stereotypes to combat stereotyping invokes an ironic response' (Margolis, 1998, p.200) From Marney's perspective, the adoption of an ironic position in relation to this stereotype suggests the 'intentional transmission of both information and evaluative attitude other than what is explicitly presented' (Hutcheon, 1994, p. 11), which calls upon the audience to go further than recognition and to see both the exaggeration and the attitude it suggests.¹⁰ While by no means the exclusive domain of women, performed irony is a potent tool for the subversion of expectations and, to use Lippmann's terms, the 'disruption' of the 'order' of a world in which, for example, women who are not married by their mid-30s are assumed to be hysterically desperate. As Barreca observes, in comedy '[w]omen can defile, spoil, and ruin because they derive power from their exclusion.' (1998, p.16)

Despite the fact that she only met him yesterday and the perceived disadvantages of her age and 'face', Marney's character has *decided* that 'nice young' Mr. Macgee will marry her:

Now I've got him and he dare not go away,
I've told him that to-morrow's got to be his wedding day;
He thought I didn't mean it, thought 'twas all a bit of kid.
But after he had had some tea I let him see I did.

The one-sided nature of their lightning-quick courtship is ironically juxtaposed with her attempts to maintain English social niceties, as she saves her real threats till after tea. What is not said here pushes the character fully into the grotesque and the audience are required to read the full extent of this exaggeration. 'In setting up a differential relationship between the said and the unsaid, irony seems to invite inference, not only of meaning, but of attitude and judgment.' (Hutcheon, 1994, p.39)

In the following verse, the level of her urgency is increased, she appears desperate to the point of unhinged and, as well as making all the usual – but in this case rather frenzied – preparations and purchases for a wedding, she now also appears to be casually day-dreaming about how violent and abusive she intends to be to her husband:

I've been and bought the home up, and I've got the wedding ring,
I've been and bought a bedstead and some chairs.
There's a splendid kitchen poker that's to wallop my old man,
That'll do when I don't throw him down the stairs,
Oh, we shall be happy, Cornelius and I.
He's sure to get used to my playful manner by-and-by,
And whilst out, to-day, girls, now what do you think I bought?
I bought a little cradle, to be prepared you always ought.

Irony is not, Hutcheon tells us, 'something that simply exists', rather it is created 'in the dynamic space of the interaction of text, context, and interpreter' (1994, p.58) and – for my current purposes – through the intentional delivery of the comic performer. The last verse extends the logic of the comic exaggeration to its limits and the totality of this character's delusion is disclosed, suggesting a final shift of performance attitude into completely crazed fantasy as she invites the audience to

the wedding and imagines that, with the help of her gun, she can force Cornelius to marry and perhaps even love her:

I've got him in the cellar, he's been locked up there all night,
I tied him up in case he changed his mind;
You never know the artfulness of some things they call men,
If I let him run away I'd be unkind.
You should hear him swearing, but when I am his wife,
He's sure to love me, if he don't I'll have his life;
So tomorrow morning come to church to see the fun,
In case he should say "No," I'm going to bring a gun.

This extreme caricature of a woman so laughably longing to marry that she is willing to do anything to get her man, demands a grotesque comic characterisation; a performance that through what Diamond terms mimesis, 'representation, imitation' (Diamond, p.v) and a pre-emptively Brechtian gestic representation, both acknowledges common perceptions of women's collective terror of remaining single *and* ridicules these perceptions. Such representations of characters that audiences both identified with and laughed at, is key to understanding how music-hall comedy worked.

A number of humour theorists including Draitser have examined the relationship between the 'unreal' and the 'real' in the creation of grotesque caricature (Draitser, pp.138-139). As the reviewer in *The Era* notes, Marney was made up 'ugly' for this performance and, as 'the comic and the repulsive blend together' (Draitser, p. 141) her character becomes grotesque, both exposing and potentially mocking her prescribed desperation. This kind of exaggeration and use of the grotesque in creating humour in music-hall songs by women often required performers to present characters who, in contemporary terms, might be considered problematically self-deprecating.

According to the reviewer, her interpretation of these lyrics, created largely through her appearance and her highly physical approach including a comic dance, resulted in an ironic and at times deranged performance style that her 'delighted' audiences found 'very funny' (ibid.). This comic extension of the logic of the 'natural' female position succeeded in performance because Marney's excess and

her use of facial and physical gesture and comic attitude highlighted the lengths this woman would have to go to in order to conform to the stereotype and thus rendered those excesses strange. In everyday discourse these physical signals or confirmations of an ironic utterance (raised eyebrows, winks etc.) are referred to as 'paralinguistic markers' (Hutcheon, 1994, p.155). In performance, such physical markers are exaggerated to ensure the audience read the ironic subversion; in this case the subversion of the desire for marriage as the 'norm'. This character's behaviour is anything but 'normal' and Marney's performance potentially suggests that in order to adhere to the norm, older or less conventionally physically attractive women have to behave in extreme and aberrant ways. Chapter 5 will consider ironic embodiment of this sort in further depth and examine it as a pre-emptively Brechtian performance strategy; a form of gestic characterisation resulting in what Diamond refers to as the 'defamiliarisation of the acts' performed (Diamond, p.84). Such an effect is comparable with contemporary performance artist Bobby Baker's approach to traditionally female domestic work in her site-specific solo performance, *Kitchen Show* (1991). In this performance, even the most familiar and mundane daily tasks – making tea, peeling carrots, heating soup – are made strange as they are passed through Baker's artistic and comic filters and she forces her audience to question her identity as wife and mother (Heddon, 2007, p.43). So, her middle-class anxiety about forgetting whether friends and family take sugar in their tea or coffee is 'marked' through the taping together of her thumb and forefinger in a fixed stirring pose. As she peels carrots, she remarks how the sight of the bright orange carrots in the water results in her feeling 'shot through with joy' and, later, she reveals how she releases tension in moments of frustration or anger by 'hurling' a ripe pear at a cupboard door. The comic strangeness of Baker's actions and the marks she leaves on her body after sharing each domestic revelation result in the 'natural' status of each of these activities – and domestic chores generally for women – being destabilized and ultimately undermined.¹¹ Similarly, Marney's grotesque character goes through the motions of flirtation and courtship: meeting a young man and inviting him home to tea were familiar stages in lower-class courtships. Through a Brechtian lens, having set up the familiar pre-romantic scenario, she distances her audience from it, 'by alienating (not simply rejecting) iconicity, by foregrounding the expectation of resemblance', the gender

subversion emerges as 'the ideology of gender is exposed and thrown back to the spectator.' (Diamond, 1988, p.84) So, the comedy is created as the gender subversion emerges, and it becomes clear just how far Marney's character is from conforming to the blushing bride stereotype and hearing her wedding bells.

In both performances, an ironic representation of feminine behaviour finally results in a transgressive parody leading to what Butler describes as '[t]he loss of the sense of the "the normal," ' this, 'can be its own occasion for laughter, especially when "the normal," "the original" is revealed to be a copy, and an inevitably failed one, an ideal that no one *can* embody.' (Butler, 1990, pp.138-139)

Gender subversions

Popular performers did not, then, overplay the joys of marriage and it was very likely crucial to their credibility with audiences that they did not. Most working-class women had no illusions about what awaited them after their wedding night. As Jane Lewis suggests: 'On the whole expectations were confined – doubtless realistically – to hoping for a 'good husband': that is one who brought home a regular wage and with whom a relationship could be built upon mutual respect.' (Lewis, 1984, pp. 8-9) A number of prominent middle-class feminists and liberals of the period contended that such relationships were rare. John Stuart Mill famously observed that a wife of all classes was 'the actual bond-servant of her husband: no less so, as far as legal obligation goes, than slaves commonly so-called.' (Quoted in Shanley, p.8) Debates on these issues fuelled campaigns to reform marriage and divorce laws, calling for women's suffrage and equality in law. However, demands for greater freedoms and extended rights for women in the home and the workplace were, throughout this period, 'subordinated to family responsibility and personal respectability.' (Vicinus, 1977, p.x)

The topicality of the music-hall approach to life led to these concerns and campaigns being regular sources of material during this period and there are so many music-hall songs about marital conflict that it is safe to infer they were popular with audiences. Many songs performed by women portrayed genuine unhappiness for wives, and sentimental ballads tell tragic tales of poverty and

hardship, of drunken, abusive husbands and honest women struggling to feed too many mouths. For women in music-hall audiences, as Lewis notes, frequently ‘...the marital relationship did not enjoin romantic love or verbal and sexual intimacy, but required financial obligations, services and activities that were gender specific’. (1984, p.9) This pragmatic approach is clear in many songs and, once the women in comic songs had ‘hooked’ their men, the marriage itself was often presented as a battleground: ‘a tragi-comic disaster’ (Kift, 1996, p.176).

Marie Loftus’ 1888 performance of *Girls, Are you going to stand it?* reflects this pragmatism:

When they first come courting, how nice they behave,
For a smile or a kiss, oh, how humbly they crave.
But when once a girl’s wed, she a drudge and a slave.
Girls, are you going to stand it?

After this promisingly feminist start from John Stamford’s lyric, the chorus appears to be a rallying cry:

I say, No! Let us go on strike,
And show these men they can’t do as they like,
And tell such fibs to us poor ribs,
But we’re not going to stand it any longer.

Next the character points out women’s tolerance of drunken and abusive behaviour from their husbands, and then takes her ‘Girls, are you going to stand it?’ argument to its logical conclusion, as she imagines the breakdown of an unhappy marriage and highlights the inequalities inherent in late-nineteenth century divorce laws:

If a husband gets tired, he can get a divorce,
Girls, are you going to stand it?
And the woman must always be guilty, of course,
Girls, are you going to stand it?
But the law of the land very lately has shown
Should a woman transgress, she’s disgraced and o’erthrown,
While the fellow gets off as a person unknown,
Girls, are you going to stand it?

When she performed this song, women had few rights within marriage, which was the subject of continuing legal and parliamentary debate, as the piecemeal dismantling of the system of coverture took place.¹² Loftus' song notes, (with apparent allusions to publicised cases) the potentially devastating social impact on a woman's reputation of divorce proceedings and accusations of infidelity in which she is named while the law protects her husband's anonymity. Despite all the potential drawbacks outlined in these three verses – deception, aggression, threats, rejection and the public humiliation of divorce – the final verse upholds the status quo and acknowledges the bitter truth for women: that what they *really* cannot stand is 'being left on the shelf' and 'the thought of remaining an old maid through life'.

Such songs confirm that, whatever the commonly accepted assumptions about what they wanted, ordinary women were far from naïve about the realities of marriage. Most would, of course, have witnessed the spousal relationships of their parents and other family members and friends, and many songs performed by women portray this kind of pragmatic approach to marriage and the role of a wife. Women frequently recount the same scenarios as those described in songs performed by men, but the stereotyped nagging matriarch of the husband's version is given her voice and, rather than being the cause of the male character's comic misery, she expresses her own, frequently turning the tables, and laying the blame for her troubles at his door as she is transformed into the hard-working wife/mother struggling to keep the family afloat with little help from her husband who is frequently portrayed as lazy, drunk or both.¹³

Some songs were presented – and advertised – as women's 'answers' or 'replies' to songs previously performed by men. *That's What He's Done For Me* (no author recorded), performed by Vesta Victoria in 1896, was billed as a reply to Tom Costello's, *At Trinity Church I Met My Doom* (Gilbert, 1894). Audiences would be familiar with Costello's very popular original, which he performed regularly in 1894 and 1895, and would have enjoyed hearing the other side of the story. Both songs outline the characters' regrets about their choice of spouse. Costello blames 'foolish love' for his mistake, points out that before they were married his wife lied

about her age and how much money she had, and: 'Now we live in a top back room/Up to my eyes in debt for renty/That's what she's done for me.' In response, Victoria's character doesn't mention their courtship at all, merely castigating herself – 'lor what was I up to?' – for marrying a man who has 'a hump and a wooden leg', and telling the audience that they need to hear her side of the story. She catalogues her husband's faults, pointing out that he only married her because he thought she had money, he drinks too much, never works, beats her and 'That's what he's done for me'.

Unlike sentimental songs on similar themes, comic material frequently allows a female protagonist to reveal her *own* faults not just those of her husband. In some songs, in order for pathos and comic irony to co-exist in a single serio-comic characterisation, a level of self-awareness and sometimes self-deprecation is essential. Even if irony was not explicit in printed texts, it would often have been evident in the performer's comic attitude to the material. In Jenny Hill's *I've Been A Good Woman To You*, performed in 1878 and 1879, a wife protests about her husband's drunkenness and neglect. Despite the song's apparently earnest lyrics, a reviewer of the piece noted that it was 'a fine piece of comic acting', and that Hill performed as 'a drunken wife'; giving her story a very different slant than the lyric alone suggests (*Jackdaw*, 1879, quoted in Bratton, 1986, p.105)

Despite women's lack of social and economic power and the apparent immutability of gender roles within marriage, 'most men deferred to their wife's decision-making in domestic matters.' (D'Cruze, 1995, p.65) Many comic songs use these customarily accepted positions as starting points and then subvert them for comic purpose and to promote a music-hall hybrid representation of 'the equality of the sexes' (Kift, 1996, p.176) which differed markedly from more sentimental Victorian domestic models. Images of the ideal woman, epitomised by Coventry Patmore in his enormously popular and influential mid-century narrative poem *The Angel in the House*, pervaded the consciousness of all late-Victorian classes. This woman was a middle-class ideal, but her flawless shadow also fell over working-class women, as they were encouraged to aspire to the qualities she represented: the selfless mother and the obedient, modest, uncomplaining wife. As

ever, the music-hall response to such attempts to impose class-based 'improving' values on the music hall was comic and this image of the unattainable (and for some women, at least, unappealing) model of martyred womanhood was fair game for ironic and good-humoured parodic attack. Marie Loftus' *A Comfort and Blessing To Man* (Dodsworth, 1888) begins:

Woman in every shape and form is a comfort and blessing to man,
With a deep devotional love so warm,
She's a comfort and blessing to man.

The chorus runs:

Oh, what a comfort! oh, what a blessing!
What would you do if away from you we ran?
What would become of you? go mad would some of you,
If woman wasn't there to comfort man.

Having set up the familiar ideal, Loftus proceeds to puncture it by acknowledging how women actually feel about their relationships, and then openly mocks the suggestion that, however badly he behaves, however far he strays from being an 'ideal' husband, a wife will remain tolerant and submissive:

And when he rolls in between two and three,
She sweetly will swear that she'll let him see.
So cheers him up in a high-toned key,
That's a comfort and blessing to man.

The ironic delivery required to uncover the comedy here was remarked on by the reviewer for *The Era* (October 8 1887, p.10), who describes 'the merry and vivacious madcap Marie Loftus' as performing it with 'much archness of expression'. The next verse indicates a need to extend the satirical edge in performance and also criticises the wife's behaviour, as she will 'tolerate his bad behaviour if there's something in it for her' and 'coax, with a sweet caress'. 'But if he refuses, the scene you'll guess/Is a comfort and blessing to man.'

By this point in Loftus' performance, it would be evident that the 'comfort and blessing' of the refrain was entirely ironic, whether her delivery overtly revealed her character's bitter sarcasm, or if she performed, as her reviewer suggests 'archly' and smiled sweetly, letting the audience see the irony for themselves. Once

again pre-empting Brecht, the performer implies what she is *not* doing as well as what she *is*, and this significantly third person performance offers Loftus the chance to consciously parody the feminine ideal and 'contains the trace of every action it represses, thus the meaning of each action contains difference'. (Brecht in Willett, 1964, p.137)

So, though a different stereotype is being employed here, as in Marney's grotesque *Going To Be Married In Morning*, the 'natural' woman's role is deconstructed for the audience. The truth is that the man in this instance does not deserve comforting or blessing, and the song points out what all married men and women in the audience already know: that Patmore's idealised 'Angel', is just that – an ideal – and that real life wives are no angels, and many do not tolerate unacceptable treatment or unreasonable behaviour from their husbands, or being taken for granted by them. At risk, once again, of speculating audience interpretation and response, it seems likely that for some women in the audience this was a refreshing comic representation of their real attitudes; for others it might offer a fantasy depiction of alternative responses to their treatment within marriage. As the song progresses, so does the fantasy and the wife becomes less and less of a comfort, snoring in bed while her husband looks after the baby. Finally she nurses him so incompetently when he falls ill that he dies, allowing her to marry again and become a comfort and a blessing to her next husband:

He's dying in bed, but distinctly hears
Her whisper how well she in black appears;
And she'll wed again soon, for she's young in years.
What a comfort and blessing to man.

The comedy in this song lies in a combination of ironic subversion and exaggeration; the subversion of expected codes of behaviour as the cliché of Patmore's submissive ideal is turned on her head, and the comic exaggeration of the domestic picture it paints as gender roles are switched. Men and women in the audience would enjoy the opportunity to laugh at this dark parody of the 'Angel', at a husband getting his comeuppance for expecting his wife's unquestioning passivity and obedience, and at the exaggerated presentation of a woman who has appar-

ently been liberated completely from her duties as wife and mother. It is likely that the source of humour for her audiences springs from both the idea of a woman boldly behaving in such a callous way, and from Loftus' parody of more sentimental musical and literary forms and common clichés. Certainly one message for audiences is clear: if wives are not “a comfort and a blessing” to their husbands, then the domestic (and natural) order breaks down and the tale will conceivably end in tragedy. What is interesting about this song, is that it is *his* tragedy, not hers.

In a sentimental rendering of this story, the wife would likely end up divorced, destitute, dead, or all three; or at least filled with remorse when her husband died. However, in this comic version there is no suffering for the wife, or even a moral lesson for her to learn. In this way comic songs served a very different function to sentimental ballads in terms of firing popular imaginations with fantasies or nightmares, reversing or challenging stereotypes, and rejecting middle-class values, particularly if these contradicted popular truths too directly. These songs sometimes divided the sexes, sometimes unified them against a common enemy (poverty, work, judgmental neighbours, or authority figures), but a comic treatment in music hall always distilled the situation it presented to acknowledge a set of commonly understood values and experiences, often responding immediately to topical and local concerns and offering an immediate commentary on them.

In performance, Loftus employed irony throughout to ensure her audiences were aware of the commentary she offered on the illusory creation of the ideal woman in the public imagination. In doing so she rejected one hybrid representation of ‘woman’ for another altogether more palatable for her audiences. It was perhaps as extreme and ridiculous to her audiences as Patmore’s and if it meant anything it was that all such images are meaningless. Her assumption of shared values – crucial for all comic performance – and a collective rejection of the supposedly accepted ideal, is central to her approach here.

A reporter for *The Era*, interviewing Loftus in 1887 shows, for a critic at this time, such uncommon interest in the nuances of music-hall performance style, that it is worth reproducing in full:

Although it seems easy enough theoretically to walk on to the stage and sing six or seven songs in rotation, it is not so easy in practice. An hour's work in a music hall fatigues her more than four hours in a pantomime, and then every song has to be subjected to careful study. The words in themselves have, on analysis, no intrinsic merit whatever, and, given a good air, all the "go" of the performance is purely of the artist's creation. Watch Miss Loftus on the stage, and she is found to be never still for a moment, and there is no *gaucherie* in her movements. She cogitates on a song for long while before she produces it in public, the result being that she always gives a careful interpretation. Her facial expression she practices in the looking-glass, and when she once has the *motif* of the words in her mind all the rest is simple. (*The Era*, April 30 1887, p.16)

This is a useful insight into Loftus process and the '*motif*' in *A Comfort And A Blessing* – the ironically unsympathetic wife – would lead Loftus to extend the subversion as the song developed to unlock the full comic potential for audiences. Contemporary subversions of female stereotypes continue to feature in women's comic performances. Comic singers Victoria Wood and Dillie Keane have both used their images as apparently conservative women to surprise audiences by recounting unexpectedly enthusiastic sexual encounters. Wood's 1997 *The Ballad of Barry and Freda: Let's Do It* is a charmingly tame but bawdy celebration of unlikely lower-middle class married sex, and Keane's far more graphic *Dogging* (2009) is as much about assumptions about middle-aged, middle-class British women who play the piano and sing in perfectly clipped RP English, as it is about the fact that she is extremely enthusiastically singing about a rather marginal sexual practice. The contemporary impact of both songs lies in the performers' delight in surprising and outraging some members of their audiences who are simply not prepared for women of this 'type' to be this carnivalesque and bawdy about sex.

Similarly, when British stand-up Sara Pascoe talks about the need to be more 'fussy' in her choice of sexual partners, she does so with an attitude suggesting gendered guilt about being sexually promiscuous, her softly 'feminine' style of delivery at this point in her act feeds an assumption that she is likely to use self-

deprecation here: 'Currently all my lovers have exactly the same thing in common: they are all slightly more attractive than a night bus. That's not fussy enough, is it?' (Pascoe, 2012) She then confides that she is 'not very good at casual sex', feigning intimacy with 'I don't know if any of you are the same? Whenever I sleep with someone I'm not in a relationship with, I get this really odd...it's kind of like a guilty feeling, in my tummy.' Again, we think she is referencing feelings of shame about promiscuity or rooted in the stereotype that women want to be in happy, long-term heterosexual relationships. The use of the word 'tummy' is childlike and innocent and comes just before: 'and it doesn't go away. I mean, even when I leave their house, and go back to my boyfriend's.' The sequence ends, not with an 'only joking' disclaimer, rather she sustains her apparently impervious suppression of feelings of guilt about these casual infidelities, shakes her head and looks perplexed: 'I'll have to stick at, I guess: keep on trying.' (Pascoe, 2012) This final resolution, apparently to keep being unfaithful until the guilt subsides, entirely subverts our expectations of her as a woman and as a 'decent' human being.

An example recorded in 1912 offers a candid rejection of prescribed femininity and a female commentary on marriage, which relies less on irony than Loftus' song and more on the kind of surprise that Keane and Wood make use of in the examples outlined above. Maidie Scott's *If The Wind Had Only Blown The Other Way* (Williams, 1912) provides a clear reversal of traditional gendered attitudes to marriage and motherhood. The text of this song is quite radical in itself but, in the audio recording of it (Windyridge, CDR16), Scott is very much the lady: conservative and feminine, undercutting the lyric and playing with a very subtle, understated level of irony. The first verse of this song sets up the familiar music hall/variety scenario of the innocent young maiden being seduced by an older man. However, unlike so many of these songs which end in the 'tragedy' of post-seduction abandonment, Scott's disaster is that she not only 'lost her heart and soul/To dashing, winking Mr. Thomas King' but she also married him and was 'just about nineteen/when a baby came upon the scene'.

To set up the chorus she notes that she 'met him on a windy day' and 'what attracted him the most was my silk hose'. The first chorus confirms her dissatisfaction and the message is clear:

If the wind had only blown the other way
I might have been a single girl today.
Instead of pushing perambulators
I'd be driving in my motor
If the wind had only blown the other way.

This outright rejection of the traditional female role is thoroughly subversive and Scott's performance of it is entirely ironic: she delivers the chorus with a mock heart-broken wail in her voice which works with the lyric to confirm her outright rejection of romance or dependence on a man. This very modern woman's desperation is for the freedom to drive – like Thelma and Louise at the other end of the twentieth century – as far away from Mr. King as possible. There is no indication that she feels a sense of love or duty to her child, only disappointment that she has lost her independence and pained resignation that she was unable to escape the dreadful fate of family life.

The last verse and chorus confirm the song's radicalism as Scott's character relates the minute details of a trip Mr. King took one day and bemoans the fact that she was denied an act of God or nature to liberate her from her familial ties:

One windy day my husband went
Down Western Street to pay the rent
The rain came pelting down with fearful force
The wind was blowing slates around
And strewing them upon the ground
But all escaped my husband's head, of course
When suddenly a fright he got,
A factory chimney near the spot
Where he was walking caught the gale full flight
And tumbling fell with awful crash
It happened almost in a flash
The chimney fell to left
My Tom was on the right

Chorus:
If the wind had only blown the other way
I might have been a single girl today
Instead of putting carabolic
Into kids who've got the colic
If the wind had only blown the other way.

The audio recording gives a clear sense of the incongruity her audiences would have enjoyed as she engages in the sort of parody of women's behaviour Linda Kintz identifies as the mimicking of 'excessive womanliness' (Kintz quoted in Harris, p.123). She sings in perfectly clipped English in a fragile, innocent and woeful voice that belies the bitter content of the song, using a highly feminised performance approach to make some rather vicious comic statements. As Harris observes such a strategy 'potentially opens up 'a gap between women and the image of Woman', in which women can manipulate this image 'without being wholly caught in it'. (ibid.) The recording of Scott does not fully reveal her live performance style, but her comic attitude comes through as her voice cracks with distress and she makes extremely 'unwomanly' statements whilst masquerading as the 'womanly' woman.

Contemporary performers continue to challenge 'natural' gendered roles regarding childrearing. US comedian Kathy Griffin entitled her 2011 live show *50 and Not Pregnant* and told a 2012 audience exactly how she felt about the prospect of motherhood: 'If I have one egg left, I'll fry it tonight (Griffin, 2012). British comic singer and comedian, Kate Lucas' *Baby Song* (2013), tackles head-on the notion of maternal feeling and questions the assumption that motherly affection is a given. Having asked if anyone has left children at home to come to her gig, she confides in them:

My fear about having kids is what if you don't like them? So this is a song about what if you had a kid and you didn't like it.

She then begins softly picking a guitar melody and, like Scott, singing in an incredibly sweet voice about the expectation of maternal emotions:

They said I'd fall in love with you, right from the minute you were born.
They said when I laid eyes on you, I'd be prepared to die for you.

Here, her vocal tone shifts with the tone of the lyric as she reveals: 'But I was grossly misinformed.' The song then takes off as she strums the guitar increasingly vigorously and angrily explains that 'when you actually came out, I said: "Is this some kind of joke?' The very unmaternal descriptions of the baby's appearance become ever more inappropriate: 'You were a scrotum with a face and I've half a mind to sue'.

The real joy of this song comes in the unsentimental and 'genuine' confusion Lucas performs as she attempts to bond with her new born, she complains that during a game of tennis 'you wouldn't grip the bat' and, accusing the baby of being lazy, asks: 'What kind of human being can't be arsed to hold its head up? Like Maidie Scott, Lucas addresses still-pervading taboos surrounding maternal feelings, uses audience expectations of women generally and mothers specifically and overlays this with a streak of liberating, unashamed selfishness and her own disarming variety of dark sarcasm:

It shouldn't be this difficult preventing you from dying.
You won't stop falling off of things, I just don't think you're trying.
You shit yourself, you piss yourself, your table manners suck.
I wiped your arse this morning; did you thank me? Did you fuck.

After admitting that her attempt to 'lose' the baby on a bus was foiled, the song is then brought to a particular time and place and a very familiar tune as she shifts back into sweet melodic guitar picking for the final few lines:

And while this might not be the place to air my views.
And yes, I might have had a glass or two.
But you were a mistake, I've spilt wine on your cake.
Happy Birthday, to you!

Self-deprecation, victims and butts

Linda Hutcheon has demonstrated that irony works not in a single way but in many, and the ways in which ironic discourse play back and forth across the performances of women such as Vesta Victoria on the music hall or Sarah

Silverman in contemporary stand-up comedy confirm both this complexity and the continuing use women make of comic irony.

Vesta Victoria is an exemplar of what remains probably the most contested form of ironic performance by women: self-deprecation. Though not exclusively employed by women, self-deprecation has been identified as a consistently successful comic strategy for female comics (Horowitz, 1997; Gray, 1994; Martin and Segrave, 1986; Lockyer, 2011), comparable perhaps to ironically assumed male arrogance for men as a method of appropriating and then comically undermining audience gender assumptions.¹⁴

Self-deprecation can be seen as a defensive strategy (Hutcheon, 1994, p.50), but it is one that continues to trouble feminist critics, risking as it does the adoption of a low status persona and sometimes being mistaken for 'self-hating' (Merrill, 1988) or a form of 'self-censorship' (Russell, 2002, p.2) and, as a form of ironic deception, it can be read as duplicitous, hypocritical even (Hutcheon, 1994, p.51)

In the contemporary period, stand-up comedian Jo Brand may make self-deprecatory statements, but in her act such material invariably follows a high status attack on, for example, men. Brand has noted that self-deprecation gives her licence to attack others in her act (Wagg, 1998, p.134). Her style of delivery is also significant as, even at her most self-effacing, she adheres to her relentlessly high-status persona which signals that she has no interest in conforming to traditional ideas of femininity and cares very little what anyone thinks of her. On the state of her marriage: 'the thing I find difficult about marriage is that bit where all the nice sort of love and all that's worn off – and you're just left with some twat in your house...d'you know what I mean?' (Quoted in Double, p. 262) Joan Rivers also employed this strategy, often making over-stated and evidently incongruous negative comments about her appearance, interspersed with attacks on celebrities (Brett Mills, 2011).

Self-deprecation has then the potential to surprise the audience and shift the balance of power during a comic performance (Lockyer, 2011, p.117). Lockyer

suggests this kind of approach might make seeing a woman on stage 'more palatable for those audience members who feel threatened'. (ibid.) However, while this may be a possible outcome, I would argue that from the perspective of the comic, a more common contemporary use of self-deprecation is audience misdirection. For example, an audience may expect her to be pathetic and the laugh comes from their surprise at what she does with that expectation; it is less about them finding her more palatable if she self-deprecates, but funnier because she does not adhere to those expectations. So, when comedian Josie Long talks about trying to find ways of making her weaknesses her strengths in her 2008 stand-up performance, *Trying Is Good*, and notes that she suffers from polycystic ovarian syndrome which 'means you carry weight around your middle and it's really difficult to shift. Especially if you want to eat up to two chocolate bars a day, which some people do...naming no names.' At this point on the film of the show, the audience are not laughing, this is self-disclosure and, potentially self-deprecatory material about feeling body conscious about weight. Long then asks: 'How can I turn this physical weakness into a strength? Well, what I do is, I dress to flatter it and...' she then entirely subverts this set up by pulling up her t-shirt to reveal a sea scene she has drawn on her belly with the word 'marvellous' written in large letters above it. The audience laugh with delight and relief and Long goes on to poke her belly and explains that the rippling of her flesh 'is the motion of the ocean!' The expectation of some tense, self-deprecating body-image-related female disclosure is punctured in a surreal and liberating moment which, surprises the audience and, as Sophie Quirk has observed: 'does attack conventional ideas of beauty and bodily taboos but...does it positively: the focus of the routine is not attack upon the convention, but the presentation of a delightful alternative viewpoint.' (Quirk, p.32)

Female self-deprecation has also been read as fulfilling a woman's need to be 'liked'. (Mills, p.155) However, for all comics, being liked by the audiences – or their enjoyment of how much they *dislike* you – is crucial and I am more inclined to read smart, conscious self-criticism as another way comedians foster shared experiences with their audiences. Mary Crawford wonders if this form of comedy has 'perhaps been confused with self-disclosure' (2002, p.162): in everyday

conversation, she argues, this is about achieving intimacy and, in Chapter 3 the importance of achieving this kind of connection with a comedy audience is explored in detail. The reticence of a number of critics concerning this performance approach is that it is not sufficiently positive or 'self-affirming' (Merrill, 1988; Martin & Segrave, 1986) However, such self-confident qualities have only rarely been notably comic attitudes for any comedian to sustain (without the intention to at some point subvert them) and, from an audience perspective, comedians mocking themselves or owning up to their flaws has long provoked comic relief; an opportunity to acknowledge and laugh at shared disappointments and failures. For women, the line between admitting flaws and, crucially, embodying or rejecting negative stereotypes has been blurred in these arguments and, while most commentators acknowledge that resistant social critique can be achieved through self-parody, there remains a critical apprehension about audience reception of intentionality and performed irony in this kind of comedy. Gilbert believes that the confusion is based on a failure to distinguish clearly between the victims and butts of jokes, which continues to cloud critical understanding of the subversive potential of women's comedy. (Gilbert, p.162)

Before addressing this important distinction, it will be useful to consider the significance of the presence of the performer herself and how this impacts on audience perception and reception of apparently self-deprecating material. Whether she is performing a comic character in the first person, as Vesta Victoria did in the examples examined below, or making self-mocking statements about her self *as her self*, as later female stand-ups, notably Joan Rivers and Jo Brand frequently have, the inherently high status nature of comic performance changes the nature of 'playing' low status (Allen, 2002; Double, 2014). Music-hall performers appeared as themselves in the first instance, taking on a series of characters for the songs in their act and – as in contemporary stand-up comedy, even if she is played low status – she was, as Mills observes in his analysis of Joan Rivers' approach, 'setting the parameters of what is laughable and what is not, and the only person in the room able to express an individual voice.' (Mills, 2011, p.154) Notwithstanding the audience's power to laugh or withhold their laughter,

this superior position defines solo comic forms. As both Russell and Mills have argued, self-mockery is not as straightforward as it might appear and the act of telling the joke in the first place, reinforces the superiority of the comic: 'the surrender of power is an illusion' (Russell, 2002, p.5)

Victoria's public persona as one of the most successful and best-paid music-hall stars of her generation informs an analysis of her performances of low-status characters. She became a huge star in the US as well as the UK, and according to Richard Baker, had a street in San Francisco named after her in 1906, earned \$3,000 a week during a US tour in 1907 and owned multiple properties on both sides of the Atlantic. (Baker, 2014, Loc. 2248) As an established music-hall star she was known to her audiences as a self-possessed woman, nothing like the naïve characters presented in her songs¹⁵; and her off-stage public persona is crucial to the audience's reading of the on-stage character. Though she performed in the first person in *Waiting At The Church* and many of her other songs, she appeared in the programme under her own name and was introduced as herself. This song was clearly presented as a character; in between songs she would exit the stage, change her costume and reappear as another character. Victoria is not acting here, she is *demonstrating*, anticipating an approach to performance Brecht identified as essential for the kind of active audience engagement central to his theatrical project. As Diamond suggests, to achieve this she 'must not lose herself in the character but rather *demonstrate* the character as a function of particular socio-historical relations, a conduit of particular choices'. (Diamond, 1988, p.87) As a role model of considerable standing for the young women in her audience Victoria could influence their reception of this character who was evidently very funny but also so extreme as to serve as an unequivocal warning to them about *their* choices. Her performance invites them to laugh with her at a woman who is daft enough to, for a start, lend 'him all my money so that he could buy a home', before the wedding. As if this were not enough, our would-be bride also notes in the second verse that every time her fiancé took her out to treat her to port: 'understand me rightly, when I say he treated me/It wasn't him but me that used to pay'.

Victoria epitomises the strategy identified by Hutcheon as an 'ingratiating' rather than 'aggressive' use of irony. (Hutcheon, 1994, p.50) Such an approach 'acknowledges the opinion of the dominant culture – even appears to confirm it – and allows the speaker or writer to participate in the humorous process without alienating the members of the majority' (Walker, 1988, p.123, quoted in Hutcheon, 1994, p.50).

Victoria's still-familiar song, *Waiting At the Church* (1906), is an example of such a self-deprecatory strand of material, featuring characters Daniel Farson has described as 'in defiance of disaster'. (Farson 1972)¹⁶ The characters portrayed in these songs were usually put upon working-class women who were invariably the victims, though not necessarily the comic butts of their circumstances. An underlying serio-comic pathos frequently contributes to the full effect of the comedy in these songs, and the performance attitudes adopted by the performers delivering them are key to an understanding of how they work as comedy.

In *Waiting At The Church*, Victoria's character is jilted via a note from her betrothed that reads: 'Can't get away to marry you today,/My wife won't let me!' Despite this witty lyric, if performed 'straight', without irony, the crushing pathos of this character's situation might quickly morph from comedy into tragedy. Victoria forged her career performing a range of characters like this, including a series of serio-comic prototype dumb blondes who almost never got their men, and a number of fiancés and wives with scathing complaints about the men they *had* got. In the year she introduced *Waiting At The Church* into her act, she told *The Era* that the songs she preferred 'are ones that afford opportunities for plenty of comedy work and burlesque acting.' (June 16 1906, p.21) She performed this song in a bridal gown, which contributed to the comic impact of the performance, according to an American reviewer for *Variety* (February 24 1906, p. 6), and irony was clearly her preferred performance mode. Her commentary *as performer* on her characters and their decisions and behaviour illuminates both a key aspect of music-hall performance style, and suggests the impact an audience's previous knowledge of a performer has on their understanding of a performance.

With these clues in the set up, the outcome is of little surprise and when the punch line – ‘My wife won’t let me’ – finally comes, the laugh is a release of the tension of discovering not if but exactly *how* this would-be bride is to be disappointed. There is defiance in the last verse, or at least a sense that she will not despair over her lost husband – ‘the one I never had’ – and irrepressible music-hall pragmatism about the need to find ‘another Obadiah’:

Just think how disappointed I must feel
I’ll be off me crumpet pretty soon
I’ve lost my husband the one I never had
And I dreamed so about the honeymoon
I’m looking for another Obadiah
I’ve already bought the wedding ring
There’s all my fal-the-riddles packed up in my box
Yes, absolutely two of everything.¹⁷

Music-hall comedy created a performer-audience relationship that fostered audience distance from the character presented; performers interacted directly as ‘themselves’ with their audiences and slipped into and out of characters as each song demanded. In this way the ‘performer-subject neither disappears into a representation of the character *nor* into a representation of the actor...’ (Brecht, quoted in Diamond, p.88). Victoria is communicating with her audiences directly in the present, and invites them to reflect with her on this character’s bad decisions and laughable naivety. She is offering up this character for her audiences’ mockery as a cautionary tale. This dialogue, a shared commentary on the characters and situations presented in music-hall song, was central to the success of the form.

This use of performed irony can be unravelled further with reference to Bakhtin’s ‘double-voiced discourse’ which, he explains in his essay about modes of discourse in novels, ‘serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking and the refracted intention of the author.’ (1981, p.324) In such discourse he suggests ‘there are two voices, two meanings and two expressions’ (ibid.). In performance these two voices (and bodies) are interconnected and the audience, while recognising the victim status of Victoria’s character, also sees her as performer and recognises that this is her comic commentary on reality, not her reality.

The 'double-voiced' impact of *comic gestus* on the audience's perception and reception of music-hall performances is considered in more detail in Chapter 5. Here, the focus on the ironic use of female stereotypes highlights performers' attitudes to certain types of female behaviour, which allowed comic commentary on women's choices, or lack of them. The audience is encouraged to laugh at the character Victoria presents here, but this woman is also one of them and her naivety and desperation leads to level of self-delusion verging on the grotesque, as in the Lily Marney example above, which combined with Victoria's comic performance critique of the stereotype, is potentially Brechtian in its distancing impact.

In the 1990s British comedian Brenda Gilhooly developed her best-known comic character, Gayle Tuesday, a page three glamour model; an extreme stereotype of the dumb blonde whose cheerful, clueless chatter about her very narrow, resolutely uneducated world view centred entirely on her looks and her perception of what men wanted her to be:

My Grant wouldn't want me to vote. 'Cos it's not very feminine having opinions. Some times when I'm in the pub I hear girls mouthin' off and they're just going on about 'I think this' and 'I think this' and I think why do you do this? 'Cos no ones gonna want to shag you now!
(*Gayle's World*, 1997)

This parodic representation makes use of the stereotype for distinct and clear comic purpose and irony operates throughout. Gilhooly's unwavering first person character performance consistently revealed attitudes to women's bodies, their sexuality, their lack of self-determination and their anxieties about how they are perceived as women: 'I like sex. Me and Grant do it whenever he wants and that arrangement seems to suit us. I'm always in the mood if he is.' (Burrow, 1997) We know Gilhooly is *not* Tuesday, the vacantly smiling exaggeration of her characterisation make this evident, just as Victoria's audience knew she was not daft enough to fall for Obidiah.

Though self-deprecation may not directly challenge the audience and might be considered a 'safe' option for female comedians (Gilbert, 2004, p160) it can make

audiences feel uncomfortable about the status quo. Gilhooly's excessively sexualised and unbelievably dim-witted character is far from a feminine ideal. Such an extreme embodiment of a character who epitomises the sexual objectification of women offers a staged performance example of what Judith Butler has identified as interventions that make 'parodic repetitions effectively disruptive'. Butler argues that the task in contesting gender identities is 'not to establish a point of view outside of constructed identities' but to 'locate strategies of subversive repetition'. (1990, p.147) Appropriating stereotypes, subverting and extending them, and turning them into something strange and grotesque in performance is surely engaging in just such a practice.

Ironic and self-deprecating accounts of married life were very popular with music-hall audiences. Husbands and wives often express remorse at their choice of spouses, or that they married at all. Katie Lawrence's *Lizer 'Awkins* (1892) tells the story of a woman marrying a man and almost immediately wishing 'I'd got some other name':

Once 'e used to wheedle
Now 'e gets the needle
That's, yer know, because I'm now 'is wife.
Talk about deceivin'
Well! It wants believin'.
Y'never saw a bloke so changed in all your life.¹⁸

Wives have frequent complaints about their husbands, asking questions like *What Did You Marry Me For?* (Sung by Vesta Victoria. Written by Henry E. Warner and Vesta Victoria, music by William Cahill, 1908) and angrily bemoaning the change in her husband in *I'll Give Him Stopping Out All Night* (Godwin & Leggett, 1896).

Daisy Dormer went even further with *Scout* (1907), in which she directly tells her husband to leave:

You don't seem to understand the meaning of the word 'Scout'
Why don't you leave me?
Can't you walk or do you want a little help from my Boot?

Dormer followed this very successful song with *I've Been Dreaming* (Charles Collins, 1909):

I've been dreaming, so sweetly dreaming!
I dreamt you left me alone, to live all on my own.
I woke this morning and I pretty near cried
To find you yawning close by my side.

The agonisingly funny pathos of this wife's genuine unhappiness is undercut by the pithy lyric and the disarmingly frank and intimate portrait it paints of domestic life and, again, the performer's interpretive choices would contribute to the impact of the comedy which is only hinted at in the written version.¹⁹

Women's dissatisfaction and unhappiness in marriage was often due to domestic abuse. Evidence from throughout the study period confirms that 'a degree of male violence was tolerated' within marriage (D'Cruze, 1995, p.62), with wives 'prepared to put up with occasional drinking bouts by their husbands and the physical abuse that sometimes accompanied them rather than lose the economic support normally provided.' (Lewis, 1984, p.10) Many sentimental ballads deal openly with this subject but the treatment of physical violence in marriage in comic songs is more challenging for the twenty-first century observer and raises the still vexed issue in self-deprecatory comedy by women, identified by Gilbert and introduced earlier in this chapter: who is the victim and who is the butt of a self-deprecating joke and when are the two *not* the same?

It is clear that Victoria's character in *Waiting At The Church* is the victim *and* the butt of her joke, because her intention is to point out the laughably poor choices this woman has made and, perhaps, deter young women in her audience from being so gullible in their romantic choices. Victoria also sang a number of songs about domestic violence. Her 1902 *Picked Me Up, Sat Me Down* is about the misery marriage has brought. In this song her character chooses to marry a man *after* he has run her over with a bus. Another of Vesta Victoria's noteworthy songs on this subject is, her 1904 *A Baby With Men's Ways*. This lyric makes complex statements about mothers' devotion to their sons, even when they are violent towards their wives²⁰. The first verse outlines the character's situation:

When I got married, just five years ago,
I was an innocent lamb, you must know.
I'd never been kissed and I'd never been squoze,
I'd heavenly eyes, and an angelic nose.
My teeth were the pearliest you ever saw,
And people all raved at the shape of my jaw;
But look at me now! what a diff'rence you'll see!
It's all what my old man's been doing to me.
The day I got married, my heart swell'd with joy;
His mother told me I'd got her 'baby boy!'

Her situation is presented – lyrically – in a rather playful way, using language that suggests the character’s pre-marital innocence, and quaint descriptive phrasing: “I’d never been squoze”. Her “heavenly eyes, and an angelic nose” mirror descriptions of young women common in popular consciousness outside the music hall, so already a level of lyrical irony is operating for her audiences. The character catalogues very specifically the pre-nuptial condition of her teeth, nose and jaw; exactly the parts of the face likely to be damaged through physical violence, and the ‘look at me now’, suggests that Victoria was made up to look as if she had been badly beaten and embodied the abused female body. A number of reports and interviews about Victoria’s approach to her work reveal that she paid very close attention to her costumes and make up for her performances. She told *The Era* in 1906 how important it was to her that she designs her own ‘grotesque’ costumes (June 16, 1906, p.21). Victoria’s abused, gendered body provides a powerful image here, what Deborah Geis has described as ‘a gestic monologue’ (p.184) would undoubtedly contribute to this dark comic song. Though a lack of reviews or other commentary on this performance make audience reception completely uncertain, it is important to note the very different attitudes to violence of all sorts and domestic violence in particular and, although this song is not explicitly autobiographical, this performance perhaps points to a very modern approach to the combination of personal pain, fear and irony in comedy.²¹ The chorus reveals the contradictions inherent in one man who can be both “mother’s baby boy” and an abusive husband:

Chorus:

Oh! He's only a baby mother's baby boy!
He's only a baby – mother's pride and joy!
Simply a baby, that's what his mother says;
Well, he may be a baby, but he's got men's ways!

Her difficult relationship with her mother-in-law is apparent: there are suggestions that her husband's mother may be complicit, at least in turning a blind eye to her son's behaviour. The second verse ups the ante, with a gruesomely graphic description of the sort of abuse she suffers:

This pretty baby, the week we got wed,
Started off lively-kicked me out of bed.
He does cake-walks on me, and thinks it's sublime;
Now, all through my beauty, I'm dressed in rag-time.

The 'all through my beauty' in this verse suggests that her husband married her for her looks, that he jealously refuses to allow her to wear attractive clothes or that they are ruined when he attacks her. Again, the approach is unnervingly light-hearted, with references to the 'cake walk' and 'ragtime'; popular dances of the period. She notes that 'His last baby-trick made me feel jolly queer/He pulled out my hair by the roots – pretty dear!' This treatment of a song about domestic violence is not easily embraced in contemporary terms. However, such handling of this issue epitomises the potential of the serio-comic approach, which offers this character the opportunity to adopt an embittered ironic stance, transmitting her comic fury and a palpable sense of injustice. Frances Hutcheson's version of the incongruity theory of humour, 'the bringing together of images which have contrary additional ideas' (Quoted in Morreall, 1987, p.32), also contributes to an explanation of how this song works as comedy: it is a grotesque take on the cheerful way women are supposed to respond to private hardships, juxtaposed with how clearly inappropriate this response is when their domestic life is as traumatic as this.

The character displays a degree of knowingness about 'men's ways' – his tendency to drink heavily and to stay in bed while she goes out to work, for example – which presumably comes with five years of marriage to this man. This darkly sarcastic

take would be shared with the women in her audience but, despite revealing through the lyric the innate irony in her denials, the character does not directly acknowledge that she sees it herself. This perhaps points to the precise location of the comedy for her audiences. Even taking account the very different attitudes to violence in the nineteenth century, is it likely that the women in her audiences would be taking the superior position and laughing at the violence she suffered, given that many of them would themselves be victims of abuse? The relief theory of humour, espoused by Freud, might also explain any pleasure taken in this performance. (Freud, 1905; Morreall, 1987) That domestic violence was commonplace is well documented, however, then as now, what goes on behind closed doors remained a private taboo so shared public laughter at the fictional experience of another of Victoria's character, who is entirely in denial about the horror of her situation could conceivably be a collective 'relief' 'worth sharing through laughter. The flashes of insight the character shows when she hints that her mother-in-law may think he's a baby, but she knows the truth, are significant. She skirts the issue of her abuse and the lyric suggests that though she is aware, she will not admit the reality of her situation. The humour and pathos is rooted in her failure to acknowledge the inappropriateness of her responses to her husband's clearly appalling behaviour.

In this performance Victoria's character is clearly the victim of the 'joke'. What is less clear is who is the butt of the joke. In Gilbert's analysis of the 'victim/butt dichotomy' (2004, p.161), this depends 'entirely upon audience identification and interpretation' (2004, p.160) which in this case would rely on Victoria's intention and performance attitude. The lack of extant recordings make this impossible to gauge precisely. As the archetypal 'dumb blonde', it is unlikely that her character engaged in the sort of confidence and defiant knowingness of performers such as Marie Lloyd or Bessie Bellwood. Her use of performed irony serves a very different purpose and she portrayed and subverted female characters who were, as in *Waiting At The Church*, in one way or another victims of men. In *A Baby With Men's Ways* Victoria (the performer) is demonstrating a kind of knowingness which, through her ironic portrayal of this character she reveals while resolutely refusing to openly admit that she knows; presumably, as many victims of abuse in her

audiences did.²² The lyrics certainly suggest opportunities for a darkly sardonic commentary on the events she describes. However, given Victoria's documented performance style, it is much more likely that she plays 'dumb' and once more, makes such behaviour seem strange through the incongruity of her 'innocent' performance style juxtaposed with the severity of her situation. Gilbert argues that 'being wise enough to play the fool suggests the ability to make others the butt or target of humor in a variety of ways not always immediately apparent.' (2004, p.161) Gilbert's point – which I am appropriating from her analysis of rape joke performed by Roseanne Barr – is that, while Victoria and all other victims of domestic abuse could be seen as victims and butts here, given the (in contemporary terms, at least) outrageously grotesque nature of her characterisation, another reading could be that any community or society that accepts domestic violence as normal or natural 'needs to have its collective unconscious radically interrogated'. (ibid.) How consciously or unconsciously this potential interpretation was either perceived or received by her audiences is unknowable at this distance. However, at the very least, Victoria's ironic characterisation operates as commentary on women's inability to publically discuss what they, their friends and neighbours already know about their relationships and allowed, as humour relief theory suggests, for a release of tension as such shared recognition of cycles of violence and the emotional and situational reasons victims of abuse tolerate continued violence would, most likely, have been the *only* forum in which such issues were publically acknowledged.

Gilbert's previously mentioned characterisation of those comedians 'wise enough to play the fool' applies to a number of contemporary performers. However, music-hall performers did not engage in sustained first-person irony with no 'out-of-character' acknowledgement. When speaking as themselves, it seems to have been important for women to remain high status, confident and in control. Low-status comedy is reserved for character pieces or, in Marie Lloyd's case, for characters in songs she delivered as worldly-wise narrator. In contemporary comedy the lines between performer/persona/character have blurred, most notably and controversially perhaps, in the work of Sarah Silverman. Silverman, I would argue, does engage in self-deprecation but does so through a high-status persona which

she never lets slip and through which she delivers frequently appalling and unacceptable rhetoric. This is an interesting development in women's use of self-deprecation as, in her own words, Silverman plays 'The unreliable narrator...the arrogant ignorant' (Silverman, 2014, in *Makers: Women in Comedy*) and masquerades as an intolerant and intolerably bigoted and self-absorbed woman: 'I want to get an abortion, but my boyfriend and I are having trouble conceiving.' (Silverman, 2005) She frequently makes racist statements as part of her act and leaves her audience to judge her and decide if they are laughing at her or at the attitudes she offers. The dangers inherent in this approach have led to much criticism of her work, as there are moments when Silverman's audiences are entirely unsure of her real opinions and attitudes. It is this ambiguity and use of sustained irony that gives her comedy its contemporary impact: she has moved beyond self-deprecation and pointing out her own flaws as part of her act, to performing as an unapologetic 'meta-bigot' (Anderson, 2005) version of Sarah Silverman.

Part of the shock value of Silverman's performance style relates to what she looks like and what audiences expect of women like her. Such subversion of audience expectations of female types is a perennial comic weapon for women. (Mizejewski, 2014) In Silverman's case her conventional attractiveness leaves audiences surprised when she makes graphic reference to sex and bodily functions, delights in fart jokes and takes an unashamedly politically incorrect stance on issues of race, gender and sexuality. As Mizejewski suggests, the fact that Silverman's looks are still cited as a reason for surprise about her comedy demonstrates, that in some ways, little has changed in terms of expectations of female attitudes and behaviour and the subversion of gender stereotypes remains a rich source of comedy for women.

Chapter conclusion

Women music hall and variety comedians' relationships with their audiences were complex and dynamic. While necessarily acknowledging morally and socially acceptable female attitudes and behaviour, these women were engaged in a comic dialogue with men and women through which they were frequently able to subvert

and challenge those prescribed roles and norms. Women performers offered not one, but a multiplicity of possible attitudes and responses to romantic love, sex, marriage, motherhood and family life. They did so variously through the portrayal of exaggerated comic caricatures; the presentation of positive *and* negative female role models; the frequent subversion of familiar types and stereotypes; and the telling and retelling of heightened but nonetheless recognisable versions of stories which undoubtedly resonated with the life experiences of the women laughing in the auditorium. As the examples used in this chapter show, many of these were stretching preconceptions about acceptable thoughts and behaviour for women by exploring new ways of 'acting female' (Glenn, 2002, p.6).

Building on the areas of practice identified above, Chapter 3 explores the nature of the relationships female music-hall performers established with their audiences and, as I have done here regarding women's appropriation and manipulation of female stereotypes and prescribed gender roles, identifies further shared practice between music hall and contemporary performers and examines a number of specific techniques used by comedians to achieve intimacy and engagement with audiences and ensure their acceptance of and laughter at material that sometimes confronts social and moral taboos.

Notes

¹ See also Murray S. Davis on the exaggeration and contradiction of stereotypes in comedy. (p.171)

² Patriotic songs and those featuring regional British and other racial stereotypes were also common.

³ Including: Baker, 1990 and 2014; Booth, 1924, 1941; Bratton, 1975; Disher, 1938; Farson, 1972; MacInnes, 1967.

⁴ The issue of music-hall conservatism versus its role as working-class expression are discussed by a number of commentators including Stedman Jones, 1982; Robert Storch, 1982; and Summerfield, 1981.

⁵ Booth, 1941 ; Macqueen Pope, 1951; Bratton, 1975; Kift, 1996.

⁶ 'Mash': Sexually attract: 'to make oneself attractive to a member of the opposite sex, to flirt with'. (Green, p.773)

⁷ 'Old Harry': the devil (Partridge, p.645)

⁸ It is worth noting Lloyd's tendency to deliver this kind of self-assured character in the first person. Unlike Vesta Victoria, she rarely played the victims in her songs until much later in her career. The victims in the younger Lloyd's repertoire were usually presented through her narration and commentary on their stupidity or bad luck. In her 40s she began performing as older women in songs such as *Don't Dilly Dally* (Leigh & Collins, 1919) and *One of the Ruins That Cromwell Knocked About A Bit* (Bedford & Sullivan, 1919/20), which according to Daniel Farson, was the last song she performed before she died in October 1922. According to him she staggered, in keeping with the 'ruin' of the song, and the audience laughed as she collapsed.

⁹ Bailey, 1994, 1998; Bratton, 1975, 1986; Kift, 1996.

¹⁰ Linda Hutcheon has tackled the sticky issue of intentionality in her impressive study of irony (1994). As she warns, irony can be used to promote a range of political motives, not all of them oppositional or subversive. It is not my intention to second-guess music-hall performers and, as indicated in the introduction, I acknowledge that my position is biased in terms of the contemporary meanings I read into the performances I have selected to examine.

¹¹ For further analysis of Baker's *Kitchen Show* see Baldwyn, 1996; Baker & Barrett, 2007; Heddon, 2008.

¹² Despite the passage of the mid-late century Married Women's Property Acts (1870; 1882); the Infant Custody Act of 1886; and the 1857 Divorce Act women did not achieve the right to equal grounds to sue for divorce until 1923. 'A husband's adultery (unless accompanied by some other failing) was a dismissable dalliance. A wife's adultery was unforgivable.' (Steinbach, 2005, Loc 5212). In addition, the cost of divorce meant that it was largely confined to the middle and upper classes until after 1914 (Lewis, p.4).

¹³ See, for example, Vesta Victoria's *I'll Give Him Stopping Out All Night* (Godwin and Leggett, 1896)

¹⁴ I am thinking here of character types such as Will Farrell's hyper-confident, pseudo-alpha male buffoon Ron Burgundy in *Anchorman* (McKay, 2004), or the over-exaggerated and frequently subverted British 'bloke' persona of Al Murray's Pub Landlord.

¹⁵ In the same year she performed *Waiting At The Church* (1906), a 'wealthy anonymous suitor' made her a proposal of marriage via the letters pages of *The Penny Illustrated Paper* (July 7th, 1906). She declined.

¹⁶ Later examples include Lloyd's *Don't Dilly Dally* (Leigh & Collins, 1919) and *One of the Ruins that Cromwell Knocked About a Bit* (Bedford & Sullivan, 1919/1920), and Lily Morris' *Why Am I Always The Bridesmaid* (Leigh & Collins, 1917).

¹⁷ 'Fal-de-riddles': most likely a deliberate spoonerism for 'falderals': silly ideas and also trinkets (Partridge, p.304)

¹⁸ This song is an answer or perhaps a sequel to Albert Chevalier's *The Future Mrs 'Awkins* in which he persuades Lizer to marry him.

¹⁹ In another of Dormer's songs, *I'm Goin', I'm Goin' – I'm Gone!*, 1906 she sets her character up as a conventional 'nag' and then defiantly, grotesquely embodies her: she literally nags her husband to death and really doesn't care.

²⁰ The conflict between women and their mother-in-laws is a favourite theme for many comic songs. See also Vesta Victoria's *Poor John* (Leigh & Pether, 1906)

²¹ According to Richard Anthony Baker both Victoria's marriages included seriously violent episodes (2014, p.92). It is also notable that there were some songs by women about domestic violence towards men. For example, Marie Kendall's *Did Your First Wife Ever Do That?*

²² The concept of 'knowingness' in music-hall performance will be examined in Chapters 3 & 4.

Chapter 3

'Can we talk?': intimacy, 'gagging' and comic licence in performer-audience relationships

Direct communication between performers and audiences is paramount in popular forms of live entertainment. This is particularly evident in comic performance where audience response can be so conspicuous by its absence. Comic singer Jenny Valmore told *The Era* in 1894 that an audience 'can do so much for you...If one's audience is dull and unsympathetic, one loses heart altogether.' (February 3 1894, p.17) Precisely how and why an audience becomes 'dull and unsympathetic' are perennially perplexing questions for comedians; though everyone present at a comic performance knows when the audience has been 'lost', as contemporary comics often describe this state.

According to comic performer, musician and teacher, Huw Thomas, comedians attempt 'to charm, attract and engage' in order 'to bring an audience into their worlds'. (Thomas, 2017) This chapter examines the rapport existing between performers and their audiences in music-hall comedy and considers how far specific techniques and approaches they used are shared in contemporary practice. In addition, I draw on humour theorists including Mintz (1988) and Morreall (2005) and the work of a number of contemporary practitioners to examine the concept of comic licence and establish how, despite the numerous regulatory constraints placed on their work, music-hall performers encouraged audiences to actively participate in the creation and enjoyment of potentially unacceptable comic meanings during their performances.

The well-documented roots of music halls in local pub singing-room settings established a set of performance conventions many of which survived the major changes to the venues, programmes and style of performance that occurred from the 1860s. Central to these conventions was a degree of relaxed informality distinguishing the halls from the 'legitimate' theatre; an atmosphere fostered by performers directly addressing spectators as part of their performances and

encouraging interactions between them. By the 1880s and 90s, as Bailey has argued, the newer, increasingly commercialised music hall still ‘incorporated much older forms and built upon the emotional resonances they carried with them.’ (Cited in Storch, 1982, p.10)

At the heart of these was the connection between performers and audiences. These relationships are frequently mentioned in performers’ accounts of their experiences of working on the halls and their stories suggest that spectators plainly communicated their feelings during acts and were often vocal in their appreciation, demands and complaints. Then as now, the success of live comic performance depended to a great extent on a performer interacting with the audience she faced on any given evening: hence expressions commonly used by comedians such as ‘reading the room’ or ‘playing the moment’. Vesta Victoria recalled audiences ‘telling her which songs to sing next’ (*The Era*, September 24 1910, p.27) and performers consistently report it being impossible to tell if a song would ‘go’ with audiences. Jenny Valmore observed that ‘Personally, I have always been very successful in songs with a refrain that the audience can take up in the way of a retort, as it were’ but ‘[y]ou never can tell how an audience is going to take a song. What you think good, your audience thinks bad.’ (February 3 1894, p.17) Minnie Cunningham agreed in 1899, noting how well her audience had received a song she had written and composed herself: ‘It is a silly song, but it got there; it’s nearly always the silly songs that *do* get there. I have a lot of good songs which never get a hand.’ (*The Encore*, February 2 1899, p.9) This unpredictability of audience response is familiar to contemporary performers who use comedy in their work: performance artist Janice Perry reiterates Cunningham’s experience as ‘audiences sometimes don’t laugh at all at things that I think are funny, and then will laugh at something that surprises me’. (Perry, 2017)

‘Gagging’ and ‘anti-gagging’

To cement their relationships with audiences, performers spoke directly to them using improvised patter known as ‘gagging’. This was commonly engaged in between verses or songs by comic singers of both sexes and was a component of music-hall performance the LCC was very keen to eradicate. Inspectors’ reports

and TMHC minutes urged that the practice, which occurred as conversations with patrons often performed from the front of the stage, should be discouraged as it was largely improvised and responsive and as such was inherently unpredictable and difficult to regulate. Committee members feared that audience interactions of this kind were likely to elicit rowdy or 'improper' responses from audience members. These unwelcome interventions also featured in the discussions of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Theatres and Places of Entertainment in 1892 centring on widespread concerns about improprieties on the halls:

there has been great difficulty in controlling many of these performers; perhaps their [manager's] back might be turned for a moment and there might be a little "gag," as it is termed, put in, something not in the programme at all...' (Former TMHC chairman, George Fardell, to the 1892 Select Committee. *Select Committee Report 1892*, p.6).¹

By this time, there were far fewer music hall 'chairmen' employed to keep order in auditoriums and on stages than there had been in the earlier halls and, as a number of studies have concluded, the atmosphere in venues was considerably less rowdy than in the decades preceding.² However, informality and direct address remained central to the performance conventions and performers spoke directly to their audiences and responded to their requests to repeat choruses or entire songs, and to perform encores.

Reporting on Bellwood's arrival in the US, a reporter noted that: 'The singing is the smallest part of her performance. Her speciality is what is known in bucolic circles as "sassin' back.'" (*The Weekly Standard and Express*, January 27 1894, p.2) *The New York Dramatic Mirror* reported on her appearance in New York the following year and noted that she 'has "the gift 'o gab" in the superlative degree, and her impromptu remarks between the verses of her songs were received with marked approval.' (December 7, 1895. Reprinted in *The Era*, January 11 1896, p.16)

Many performers were resistant to attempts by reformers or proprietors to discourage them from gagging. Then as now, comedians prided themselves on their ability to deal with hecklers, to shape audience responses and work with the laughter (or the lack of it) in any venue, and the idea of regulating this part of their

acts was anathema to many of them. Bessie Bellwood was renowned for her ability to handle hecklers: 'In London it is considered that the man who tackles Bessie Bellwood from the stalls has a good deal of moral courage' one US critic reported 'for her tongue is as sharp as a needle, and her wit nimble and aggressive.' (*The Weekly Standard and Express*, January 27 1894, p.2) Audiences relished this and would often deliberately 'interrupt "Bessie" in order to provoke from her the smart replies' she was famous for. (*Illustrated Police News*, October 3 1896, p.7) ³

Writing to *The Era*, in 1890, male comic singer J.W. Rowley defended the practice of 'gagging' claiming that 'spontaneous wit' was the 'backbone of the entertainments in pantomimes, circuses, music halls and minstrel shows' (*The Era*, March 15 1890, p.14) His opposition to what had been characterised in the press as the 'anti-gagging campaign' reflects a shared belief amongst performers that 'they may as well muzzle all the comedians as stop gagging' (ibid.) and indicates the nature of music hall 'liveness' and the degree of flexibility performers valued. Rowley noted that the amount of time spent gagging varied according to what was required: 'sometimes I gag for fifteen minutes, and at other times not more than fifteen seconds.' Finally, he reveals the central difficulty this practice posed for the censor: 'the success of the song depends on the gagging, and I could no more set down on paper what I say than fly.' (ibid.)

This kind of extemporising is familiar to contemporary audiences and the main source of excitement for many performers and audiences is the spontaneity and unpredictability of live comedy, the 'for one night only' quality that has contributed to the dominance of the form in the contemporary era. Sharon Lockyer and Lynn Meyers have identified a key appeal of stand-up performances for audiences is this unpredictability, the sense that they should 'expect the unexpected'. (2011, pp.175-177) In 2012 Sarah Millican told Oliver Double that her favourite parts of her act are the 'bits when I talk to the audience', it is, she says, during those exchanges that 'I feel like a proper comedian.' (Double, 2014, p.348)

Audience interaction, whether it is prepared, slightly contrived or entirely spontaneous is now so integral to a definition of live comedy that contemporary

comedians are able to subvert and parody the very idea of participation. Bridget Christie, for example, recounts introducing a 'reverse-heckle routine' during her 2012 show, *A Bic For Her*, in which she 'decided to pretend that an audience member had heckled me, demanding that I address more complex feminist issues in greater depth' because she wanted to 'sneak some of the more serious content into the show at that point'. She notes: 'I'd contrived a situation that made it look like I was trying to entertain them, but they were dragging me down and killing the night.' (Christie, p.193-196)

In contemporary stand-up comedy the relationship between performers and audiences are of course mediated by the use of the microphone, which has become an iconic symbol of the performer's ability to create a simultaneous sense of control and intimacy. Ian Brodie has examined how the amplification of stand-up comedy enables performers to speak in very conversational tones. (2008) In music hall, they needed to adopt a more theatrical style in terms of tone and volume in order to be heard in some of the largest venues. This resulted in performers needing to adopt a very forceful and, in nineteenth-century terms, unfeminine performance style, particularly if they were engaging with hecklers or rowdy audiences.

Rowley clearly believed that these interactions were at the heart of music hall and that the songs on their own were rarely the point of a comic act. Rather, the performer's commentary on them through set up and contextualisation were frequently crucial for their jokes to work. The quick establishment of a character through a few lines of introduction, a question to the audience, or a conversational exchange relating to the content of the song could ensure its success. In contemporary comedy, of course, 'gagging' has *become* the form; what music-hall outsiders evidently considered peripheral and frankly undesirable in that form is now what people buy tickets to experience.

However, audience response is not always predictable and the performer-audience relationship needs regular tweaking and adjusting, as the performer's persona, status and attitude is reaffirmed or modified throughout the act. Music-hall artists

understood the impact of a direct and fluid connection with their popular audiences and live comedy has evolved to prioritise this relationship in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Oliver Double describes an 'exchange of energy' between performers and audiences (2014, p.189) and notes that comedians 'must be able to generate energy in the audience, or they will receive no energy in return, and there will be nothing to fuel their performance.' (ibid. pp.188-189)⁴

Rachel Zerihan has theorised a comparable performance relationship in contemporary one to one performances. She notes that this work encourages audience members 'to collaborate (to greater or lesser degrees) with the performer' to 'create a shared experience – responsive and dialectic as opposed to imposed and prescribed.' (2009, p.3) While the level of intimacy sought in one to one events creates a theatrical experience that potentially triggers a very different set of spontaneous audience responses, nonetheless, as one of Zerihan's interviewees for her *Study Room Guide* of one to one performances, performance artist Jess Dobkin, notes in her work: 'the outcome of the performance is determined as much by the audience's response' as by her input. (ibid., p.24) Numerous accounts of music-hall performances confirm that if comedians could not motivate their audiences to enter into such a reciprocal relationship, the impact on the performance dynamic was, as Jenny Valmore's comments at the beginning of this chapter indicate, immediately and obviously evident. For women performing in this context these performance conventions demanded a level of not only vocal force and power, but also the ability to project a persona that commanded respect and attention and a willingness to watch and listen and laugh. This was a unique circumstance for a woman of any class at this time, and was the only place a lower-class woman could communicate with large numbers of people.

The huge public affection some of the best-known women performers experienced as a result of achieving good rapport with audiences is well documented. Harold Scott noted that Jenny Hill's success was rooted in an ability to achieve 'an intimacy with the poorest members of her audience.' (Scott, 1946, p. 207, quoted in Bratton, 1986, p. 92); and *The Dundee Courier and Argus* reported that in an 1886

performance Bellwood performed ‘as herself’ with ‘not a touch of pathos’ (September 20 1886, p.4) Seven years later, a rather patronising reviewer for the *New York Times* noted that: ‘She takes the audience into her confidence in a way audiences of this kind always like.’ (December 19 1893). That Bellwood achieved an intimate relationship with her audiences is also evident in reports of the personal information she shared with them. In 1890, she was arrested (not for the first time) for non-payment of bills and fines and committed to Holloway Prison but, as *The Era* reported: ‘Notwithstanding her committal, the lady has appeared as usual at the London Pavilion and Cambridge, and has made playful reference to the Government establishment in the Camden-road.’ (March 29 1890, p.15). She later appealed and won. This offers insight into a perhaps surprisingly contemporary confessional and autobiographical performance style through which Bellwood achieved direct, unfiltered contact with her ‘home’ audience and engaged in topical, candid self-disclosure.⁵ This approach can be directly compared to current practice: a range of female performance artists including some already referred to elsewhere in this thesis – Bobby Baker, Bryony Kimmings, Janice Perry – include highly personal material in their work, and increasing numbers of stand-ups disclose similarly confessional information and offer it up as comedy. For example, in her 2014 show, *Glam Role Model*, UK-based Canadian comedian Katherine Ryan included material about an encounter with the glamour model who she discovered had sent a ‘naked selfie’ to her partner. This formal shift into stand-up autobiography has become marked over the last decade as performers apply a comic lens to their lives and experiences – not simply to help frame a joke or provide personal detail that adds a sense of veracity or ownership to their material – but to create sustained narratives rooted in highly personal stories. The 2017 joint winners of the Edinburgh Festival Comedy Awards, Hannah Gadsby and John Robins both performed autobiographical solo shows about difficult personal experiences.⁶

This stylistic shift reveals an evolving modern form of self-revelatory practice that is a direct corollary of the close and ‘live’ performer-audience relationship evident in music-hall gagging, and which, in its responsive and unpredictable form offered opportunities to share personal information and stories and respond to topical

events. As such, it was very difficult to regulate as attempts were made by the LCC and the controllers of the new syndicates to create a more genteel and more formal environment in the halls as part of the professionalisation of the industry. (Rutherford, 1986) However, though a range of significant and well-documented changes to the industry occurred, the fundamentals of live comic interaction remained evident throughout the 1890s and well in to the twentieth century. This was denied repeatedly by music hall proprietors like J. L. Graydon, owner of the Middlesex Music Hall in Drury Lane who, in the wake of the LCC's new regulations, claimed managers exercised 'the strictest surveillance over our vocalists, to discourage gagging' he added that impromptu encore verses were prohibited. (*Pall Mall Gazette*, October 11 1889, p.1)

Comic conventions persisted because audiences enjoy being part of the event and feeling as though they have prior knowledge about a performer's personality. As Double observes, this 'gives context for the material, it gives the audience something to identify with' (2014, p.97) Given that successful performers appeared in multiple halls every night, all year round, those at the top of the profession gave hundreds of performances every year and regular attendees would be extremely familiar with their on-stage personas. Consequently, the sense that they knew their stars personally is perhaps not surprising: Lloyd was consistently referred to as 'Our Marie', a public persona she fostered throughout her career, and Bessie Bellwood was addressed as 'dear Bess' in a poem by Acton E Kelly wishing her well in New York in 1896 (*The Era*, January 11 1896, p.16)

Perceived audience ownership of both performers and venues was not always a guarantee of approval. Reflecting on her early experiences on the halls, Maidie Scott told *The Era* that audiences 'expect a great deal from the stars' (August 2 1922, p.11) and Marie Lloyd was in no doubt that audiences knew what they wanted and would demand it if need be: 'If I was to try to sing highly moral songs they would fire ginger beer bottles and beer mugs at me.' (*New York Telegraph*, November 1897) There are few reports of violent physical audience interventions, although in 1889, a cauliflower was thrown at Bessie Bellwood, 'at the Glasgow Gaiety, and she attempted to throw it back', according to *The Illustrated Police*

News (October 5 1889, p.3), before crying and leaving the stage. Later, performing her London act in New York, she was forced to leave the stage when one of a number of silver dollar and half dollar coins thrown at her by a group of (over-enthusiastic) young men 'in evening dress' hit her in the eye during a performance at Koster and Bial's. She quickly returned to the stage to apologise to the audience and berate the young men, she 'dared them to "come round to the stage door"' and said, referring to Eugen Sandow the celebrated German strongman famous for outstanding acts of strength and athleticism who was appearing on the same bill: "If I can't whip you, Sandow can!" (*The Era*, February 3 1894, p.17)

Neither of these incidents took place on Bellwood's home soil, but performers and critics also note geographical variations in audience's tastes in London. In 1892 critic and music hall supporter, Arthur Symons noted that:

Every quarter imprints its own character on its own music-halls, so that I have heard the same singer give different versions of the same song at Collins's, Islington and the Standard, Pimlico, each version calculated for the different audience. (*Pall Mall Gazette*, April 13 1892, p.1)

Jenny Hill supported his observation, noting that audiences in the East and West end of the city often had very different responses to material: 'sometimes I have sung the same song at the East-end and at the West-end; but I have had to sing it in a perfectly different way.' (*The Era*, June 17 1893, p.14) She recalled that 'thinking I knew my audience' she advised the proprietor at the Pavilion, that a song that had been extremely popular in the East-end and the provinces would not work with a West-end audience.' He insisted, so she sang it and 'You never heard anything go so flat in all your life.'⁷ Working in variety in the middle of the twentieth century, Beryl Reid recalled similar differences in geographical tastes: 'you could go terribly well one week and be a disaster the next week...when you moved to another place. There was no guarantee. (Reid, 1995)

Hill goes on to give a detailed description of the differences in London tastes, which it is enlightening to reproduce in full here:

They don't care for East-end songs at the East-end as a rule. If you want to sing a coster song at the East-end it must be without exaggeration or satire. If your songs strikes the coster as a natural, inoffensive ditty he will tolerate it; but begin to stroke an imaginary curl on your cheek, to crane your neck, or thrust your lower jaw out, and he is annoyed in a minute. Take the song I'm singing about a Southend excursion. So long as it appeals say, to a gallery full of match girls as a possible account of the humours of an eighteenpenny picnic they will laugh. But the moment I tried to sing that song from the point of view of poking fun at the picnic party and its kind, I should hear shouts of 'That's enough, Jenny!' 'Chuck it, Jenny!' (ibid.)

Hill's account confirms the proprietorial connection her audiences felt they had with the form, their local venues, and their most familiar performers, and suggests their shared perception that it was a spectator's right to challenge inauthentic, patronising or otherwise insulting characterisations. Performers could not afford to ignore censorious cues from their audiences and were constantly negotiating with their audiences to ensure their approval and challenge them within acceptable limits. Theatre critic, William Archer told the 1892 Select Committee that the best censor was 'the audience hissing' (*Select Committee Report 1892*, p.265).

Comedians continue to negotiate with audiences in performance. Contemporary comic singer, Kate Lucas, notes that in her song, *How Could You, You Bastard?* (Lucas, 2013), as the content gets 'darker and darker' she works in performed acknowledgements that the material might be challenging:

there are a few deliberate pauses in there waiting for shock to disperse but audiences feel the need to chip in and fill these gaps and people will announce their limit "No, that's too far" or "That's the line". (Lucas, 2017)

What, precisely, is acceptable is clearly a very moveable feast. Lucas notes that there is often someone else in the audience to contradict the previous heckler who 'shouts "carry on" or "keep going" and a few men have shouted out "I love you" during the final pause in that song after the darkest thing I've said'. (ibid.)

Stand-up comedian Jo Brand, has observed how quickly the sense that she shares her audience's values and opinions can change during a performance:

you might say to an audience, 'Oh, isn't so-and-so a pain in the arse,' and they'll all agree with you, and then kind of five minutes later you might find you've gone too far, and suddenly you're outside what's acceptable with them, so you then have to relate to them on that basis.' (Brand, 2004, quoted in Double, 2014, p.252)

What Brand identifies here is that, as well as being aware of the possible variations in demands and tastes of audiences in different venues and contexts, performers also need to operate a kind of continuous self-censorship. Huw Thomas describes it as 'a readiness to react to whatever is happening at that moment' (Thomas, 2017). This ability to anticipate, adapt and adjust in response to signals from the audience is central to the live comedy experience and once the relationship has been established, maintaining it while acknowledging what is happening 'in the moment' is crucial.

Jenny Hill's account above of the regional differences in audience tastes and interventions indicates the continuing spontaneity and relaxed atmosphere of the halls even in the later, increasingly organised and syndicated era when changes to auditorium seating arrangements had altered the dynamic of venues. (Crowhurst, 1992, p.17) Despite attempts by the LCC to discourage chorus singing in the 1880s and 1890s because it cultivated potentially rowdy behaviour, and claims by managers like Graydon, quoted above, that it had been eradicated, the practice remained a feature of programmes and the lyric and musical style of songs did not markedly alter within this period to accommodate the Council's aims. In 1897 *The Era* reported that Katie Lawrence was singing songs at the Clapham Grand 'with swinging choruses, and she renders them so distinctly that her hearers have no difficulty in picking up the refrains, and joining heartily therein.' (14 August, p.16) and in Vesta Victoria's later performances of *Don't Sing In the Chorus* (Castling & Collins, 1911) she ironically begs the audience not to join in the very catchy and easy to remember chorus of the song, or she will be in trouble with the manager.

As this example demonstrates, music-hall songwriters and performers acknowledged in performance the LCC's attempts to control the tone and content of their acts, and the likes of Marie Lloyd and Bessie Bellwood resisted the anti-gagging campaign by extemporising as a matter of course. By engaging in this practice these women were being doubly transgressive: as Chapter 1 explored, simply by speaking in public as women their behavior was objectionable, and – certainly through speaking their female minds in loud, direct and sometimes confrontational ways as part of joking exchanges that they initiated and were in charge of – their transgressions were all the more unacceptable in their unmanageability. Clamping down on this loose and reflexive performance approach created a knotty problem for TMHC inspectors like J.H. Greenhalgh who, when asked to report on the spoken portion of a Peggy Pryde turn in 1897, found that the 'business' he was reporting on was not repeated. When Greenhalgh attended the hall, he could only note that though Pryde did perform 'a great amount of spoken words between the verses' but the 'offending gag is not engaged in, and there is consequently nothing to report' (LCC/MIN1078, 1897)

Numerous similar incidents contributed to the derision the press and the industry heaped on the TMHC, as its inspectors and music-hall reformers chased indecency around the city, farcically following complaints from one venue to another and were often simply unable to be in the right hall at the right time. The suggestion that the solution to the gagging problem was an outright ban, as proposed in the LCC's Theatres Bill of 1890, led *The Era* to conclude that the council 'knew nothing' of the music-hall business and was 'as a body...utterly unfit to undertake, without the assistance of practical advice, the supervision of places of amusement.' (15 March 1890, p.13)

The proposed ban was not implemented because proprietors and the music-hall press strongly argued it would be impossible to enforce. Philip John Rutland, solicitor to the 'Proprietors of Entertainments Association', told the 1892 Select Committee on behalf of the proprietors that they could not be expected to watch and hear every part of every performance and 'if we are we cannot possibly regulate their gestures'. He told the Committee that the current system of control

was adequate and that if performers 'use indecent words, or make an indecent, or what may be construed as an indecent movement, the most we can do is to immediately dismiss them, as we do now.' (*Select Committee Report 1892*, p.88)

As discussed in Chapter 1, women performers were subject to particular scrutiny *because* they were women and those engaging in such 'unwomanly' acts as gagging were likely to attract further attention. The damage to reputation that followed a dismissal or warning was problematic for all performers and anxieties about licensing conditions relating to the content of programmes and the tone of the entertainments they staged led managers to be increasingly cautious. The particular and inevitably stricter attention regarding women's behaviour led to court cases involving serio-comics who felt compelled to defend their reputations by suing those accusing them of indecency. Bellwood who, as one reviewer put it, was so often 'laid on to force the fun at a late hour, and never fails to do so in her extempore lectures' (*The Era*, March 7 1891), was regularly criticised for the 'tone and decency' of her act and defended herself in court several times. In an 1889 case against a Middlesex magistrate, she claimed damages for a letter he had written to the proprietor of The Canterbury stating that she had been dismissed from three music halls. (*Illustrated Police News*, April 20 1889, p.2)⁸

Cases such as these are indicative of the perilous professional position women were in and clearly mark the edge of the actual agency or freedom of comic expression their performances afforded them. Managers were well aware of the appeal to audiences of serio-comics for their risky material and suggestive delivery, and happily employed them knowing precisely why their reputations would draw audiences, but when accusations of indecency emerged artists were commonly left to defend themselves. All but the most successful could rarely afford to take such risks with their reputations. *Punch* published an item confirming this relationship following the first LCC licensing sessions in October 1889. It was entitled 'Dramatic Contrast' and featured the fictional words of a music-hall proprietor printed under two cartoons. The first, an image of a cigar smoking, top-hatted proprietor relaxing as he watched a woman on stage was captioned 'any time of the year except September, listening to the Lionne Comique Songstress:

“She’ll do! Rather spicey! Song and Dance! Ha! Ha! By Jove! That’ll fetch ‘em! What’s the good of having a licence if you don’t take a little now and then!” In the opposite frame was an image of the same proprietor, stood in the council chamber and wearing a serious expression with the caption: ‘Portrait of the Same on Licensing Day, before the Licensing Committee of the County Council. Counsel (for the Licence): “My client agrees that the song and dance was of a most objectionable character, and that immediately he heard it he forbade the Lionne Comique Songstress ever to sing it again, on pain of dismissal.” Licence renewed.’ (*Punch*, October, 19, 1889, reproduced on victorianlondon.org)

Over the following two decades the LCC continued its attempts to operate a ban on gagging by stealth, exerting licensing pressure on venues that was frequently passed on to individual performers. The impacts of this on the music-hall form were varied; as has been argued elsewhere there is evidence that the combined efforts of the TMHC, the commercial syndication of management and architectural changes to venues led to shifts in the social make up of audiences and, consequently, the atmospheres and programmes of many of the largest and mid-ranking London venues.⁹

Comic licence, knowingness and collusion

A consideration of why the LCC and music-hall reformers were so keen to eradicate gagging and the other shared elements of the form can be informed by ideas regarding social responses to humour and laughter expressed in the work of anthropologists Victor Turner (1977) and Mary Douglas (1978) who both argue that publicly shared humour can have a profound impact on communities. ‘Laughter and jokes, since they attack classification and hierarchy, are obviously apt symbols for expressing community’, suggests Douglas (p.104). Lawrence Mintz builds on this argument, believing that ‘the *experience* of public joking, shared laughter, and celebration of agreement on what deserves ridicule and affirmation fosters community and furthers a sense of mutual support for common belief and behaviour (hence *rite*)’, as well as potentially serving as ‘public affirmation of shared cultural beliefs and as re-examination of these beliefs.’ (Mintz, 1988, p.73)

Bailey suggests that it was 'through knowingness that the skilled performer mobilized the latent collective identity of an audience...' (1994, p.145) This acceptance of a collective identity or community was appealing to popular audiences as it offered a 'flattering sense of membership' that was '*earned* by the audience's own well-tested cultural and social competence.' (1994, p.151) In comic terms, this is 'being in on the joke' and it remains a key aspect of the appeal of being part of a live comedy audience. Such competence is based on the capacity of audience members to decode topical and cultural references and the performer's success in, as Thomas describes the process, 'engaging a disparate group of people into a single breathing entity, focused, listening, smiling, laughing as one.' (Thomas, 2017) Mintz agrees: 'The comedian must establish *for the audience* that the group is homogenous, a community, if the laughter is to come easily.' (1988, p.78). On the halls, this relied on an audience's first-hand knowledge of their city, its latest news and trends, as performers presented them with filtered comic takes on their shared urban experience.¹⁰ Audiences were required to translate both topical and local slang terms and phrases, which were often embedded in music hall's ever-evolving language of short hand and innuendo, to identify performers' frequently re-signified uses of common words and phrases, and to read between the lines: as Bailey has noted, what was not said often carried as much meaning as what was (1998, p.142) So, audiences and performers created a common language and agreed a common set of familiar types. Some of these were outlined in the previous chapter and the language of knowingness will be explored in Chapter 4 in relation to the use of comic innuendo as a performance strategy used by songwriters and performers to allow them to offer comic commentary on what was being censored and the act of censorship as part of their performances. Here, it would be useful to pre-empt this discussion and consider how the creation of a hybrid representation of the city that performers and their audiences lived in was achieved and examine how audiences were engaged in the creation of this modified version of their community's assumed shared experiences and values.

Mintz's suggestion that the role of the comedian is 'leading us in a celebration of a community' (1988, p.74) can be aptly applied to this process, as audiences appear to have happily participated in the creation of a parallel comic London in which, for

example, men and women in the city engaged in (exclusively) heterosexual flirtation in public spaces. This comic view of the lives they led made use of familiar stereotypes to quickly set up jokes and to populate 'music-hall land' (Fitzgerald, 1899), which was inhabited by audiences, performers and the characters they presented in their songs.

The process by which audiences accepted alternative realities presented to them on the halls is directly related to the special privilege afforded to theatrical performers generally, and comic performers specifically. Examining Butler's differentiation between the performativity and performance of gender (1993), Harris (1999) has noted the 'doubling' effect of theatrical performance, that places it automatically 'in quotation marks' and establishes it 'as belonging to a particular realm of discourse' that is 'governed by laws and conventions' different from 'those that govern other spheres'. (pp.76-77) In humorous discourse and comic performance, this is recognised as 'comic licence' through which comedians are given permission to bend and sometimes break rules in ways that, in other contexts, would be unacceptable. Morreall has observed that audiences are not particularly concerned with 'truth or about consequences when we find something funny.' (Morreall, 2005, p.70). Quirk agrees that, when 'something is 'only a joke', we allow the speaker licence to subvert our usual standards of honesty and decency'. Mintz describes it as 'The comedian's traditional license for deviant behaviour and expression'. (1987, p. 88, quoted in Russell, 2002, p.1) In liminal and 'safe' performance contexts, this potential audience willingness to suspend their customary values and be somewhat flexible with their 'normal' levels of tolerance regarding decency and morality is commonly harnessed by comedians. They have what comedian and activist Mark Thomas has referred to as a 'licence to misbehave' and 'to say the unsayable':

You can say things through the prism of knowingness and come up with the unsayable or to come up with ideas which...wouldn't normally be accepted. And so when you do that, what that means is that you actually create a space where you can challenge ideas. (Quoted in Double, p.295)

Janice Perry agrees: 'I address a lot of sensitive issues in my work, and comedy allows me to talk about things that can make the audience uncomfortable. I believe

that humor can disempower hegemony.’ (Perry, 2017) Stand-up comedian Sara Pascoe believes there are no subjects ‘you can’t joke about because human beings are forgiving of subject matter when we find things funny.’ (Warden, 2016)

Contemporary comedians share their appreciation of comic licence with their audiences and often comment on it as part of their acts. Eleanor Tiernan reflected on the comedian’s privileged status when she told a 2010 Galway Comedy Festival audience: ‘That’s why I like to do comedy, ‘cos I get to say things...you wouldn’t ordinarily get to say in a...a conversation. Here’s a thing you can’t say at a dinner party: “You can say what you like about Larry the paedophile, but he had a lovely singing voice!”’ (Tiernan, 2010) Here, Tiernan self-referentially uses the idea of comic licence as the set up for a joke with potentially challenging content that is not about paedophilia, but about the fact that it cannot be discussed in public. Sophie Quirk argues that comic licence can be, in this way, ‘a vital social tool’ as it allows comedians ‘to challenge what is considered unquestionable’ and to examine ideas that ‘may be considered dangerous, taboo or disgusting, safe from the possible repercussions of anger or damage or reputation.’ (Quirk, 2010, p.115)

In music hall, however, the potential for performers to make use of comic licence through the suspension of rules around decorum, propriety and honesty was complicated by the late-Victorian context and the intense scrutiny of music hall, particularly the behaviour of women. Returning to Turner’s and Douglas’ ideas about the social function public jokers have within a community – to both draw a society together and to confront the limits of its taboos – is informative here: the hierarchies women on the music hall were resisting and the social and moral taboos they tackled directly concerned their own behaviour and freedoms and the representations of their own identities. This frequently demanded significant comic licence; it was certainly not possible for them to make overt statements about unacceptable subjects such as sex or sexual attraction. If they did, or if the suggestion went too far, comic licence would be withdrawn and, as Chapter 1 has shown, in some cases complaints and sanctions would follow. Coster comedienne Kate Carney’s 1901 performances of *The Twopenny Tube* – in which a bank clerk on his way to work is misled by a woman on the tube, who steals his wallet and

watch while flirting with him – resulted in multiple complaints and warnings to proprietors. An initial letter from a member of the public describing it as ‘disgustingly suggestive’ was followed up with a visit by a TMHC inspector and a letter from the LCC to Adney Payne, proprietor of the 3,000-seater Canterbury Theatre of Varieties in Lambeth. Payne’s response notes that Carney’s engagement finished on the date the complaint referred to and that the song had previously been sung all over London without similar objections. The published lyrics of this song contain nothing explicitly objectionable (although there is ample room for suggestive delivery) and the inspector’s report mentions lines not included at all in the 1900 published version.¹¹ Perhaps the fact that it was the end of Carney’s engagement at the Canterbury gave her licence to extemporise or perform unpublished verses of the song? There is certainly evidence elsewhere that performers’ versions of songs varied depending on where and when they were performing them. During a case of indecency brought against Peggy Pryde in Manchester, 1890, when it was suggested that the lyrics were read out to the court, it was noted: ‘I don’t suppose that Miss Pryde sang the song according to the copy. It is well known that a music hall artiste does not sing the printed song itself.’ (*The Era*, March 1 1890, p.17) This confirmation that material was altered, language re-signified and intention manipulated in dialogue with audiences during performances suggests that in some music-hall songs the source of the comedy was coded and required the audience to do more than suspend moral judgement or credulity through granting comic licence; rather they needed to take an active role and participate in the creation of the comedy. Some contemporary comedy also asks audiences to go a little further than granting licence for particular jokes or sections of material. For example, in character-based acts where performers create more extreme or exaggerated fictional personalities, rather than working within comic personas that are based on extensions of their own characters; or in acts that engage in sustained sections of very challenging material.¹² In these cases, audiences may be required to not just give permission to performers to allow them to exceed the boundaries of the licence (and demonstrate that they have done so through their laughter), but also to become complicit in the comic construction. This occurs when what a comic says is presented as truth but is patently untrue, for example when a distinct fictional character is created and the performer

performs stand-up comedy *as* that character, rather than as him or her 'self'; or when what she says forces us to accept the unacceptable, not for a single laugh or two, but for a sustained period. Such acts may require audience collusion in order to achieve their comic intentions.¹³

'Collusion' in comedy is a term coined by my former colleague Arthur Husk and used during our undergraduate teaching at Middlesex University. It usefully explains the process by which audiences are willing to accept extended performed 'lies' they know comedians are telling them for comic purposes. Unlike the small lies comedians regularly tell as part of the process of selecting, adapting and editing their material into the best possible shape for a laugh, this approach requires the audience to be complicit in the maintenance of the lie and both comedian and audience know this process is operating. This is a complex interaction, as Lucile Hoerr Charles' related summary of the relationship between a clown and his (sic) audience while he performs difficult or taboo material indicates: 'he knows, and his audience knows, and both he and his audiences know that the other knows, that he is not the [licentious] thing...He is playing with fire; but he is not the fire' (Lucile Hoerr Charles, 1945. Quoted in Howard Pollio and John Edgerly, 1996, p.217-218)

So, when in her 2005 show, *Jesus Is Magic*, Sarah Silverman shares her penchant for a jewel that is 'only found on the tailbones of African babies', she assumes her audience knows she is lying. As she builds this part of her act she adopts the vocal tone and physicality of mock embarrassment as she describes how the jewels are retrieved: 'they debone the babies. I know! That sounds so bad, when you say it out loud'. (Silverman, 2005) The only obvious clue Silverman offers her audience is the extremity of the exaggeration of this appalling idea. Her performance style, as explored in Chapter 2, does not overtly reveal the irony that is operating throughout; she relies on the audience to see and accept it. Through her relentlessly ironic presentation of her 'meta-bigot' comic persona (Anderson, 2005) who regularly speaks the 'unspeakable' and sometimes makes a point of placing extra emphasis on the offensive or unacceptable, she forces us to collude with her by pretending to believe that she really is this bigoted, endorsing a series

of unacceptable values and suspending our own for the sake of the joke; or rather for the sake of testing the limits of comic licence, which is central to her performance project. Silverman is given licence to deliver potentially shocking material when her audiences trust her comic intentions and choose to collude with her creation of the persona of Sarah Silverman who believes the things she says and is as self-absorbed and arrogant and she appears to be. Without audience collusion in this fiction her comedy cannot work. Indeed, her socio-political commentary on US society and values is not always appreciated and some audience members and critics choose to withhold comic licence because they are not convinced that the comic payoff warrants Silverman's often challenging, graphic, and frequently apparently politically incorrect material. The confusion emerges because her on-stage persona arguably appears to closely resemble her off-stage personality and, as she attempts to push audiences to collude beyond what is comfortable, the coded comic signs that this 'is only a joke' are not readily available in the construction of an obviously performed character.

In music hall, performers required comic licence and audience collusion in the creation of unspoken, unspeakable coded meanings. The collusion was, as in the Silverman example, in the temporary acceptance of potentially challenging values. Women performers were, through knowingness and innuendo, sometimes offering representations of British society that reflected their audiences' own taboos regarding women and gender roles, sex and sexuality. Songwriters and performers found ways of presenting material to audiences in ways that required them to collude in the creation of a comic discourse about subjects that were forbidden within socio-cultural boundaries, and encouraged them to suspend their disapproval during performances in which, as Bratton notes, 'sexuality is celebrated' (1975, p.198).

Chance meetings with strangers of the opposite sex were a popular motif for the inclusion of this kind of risky material and performances containing innuendo and familiar euphemisms in the 1890s and 1900s often featured a train or tube journey. The excitement generated by the perception of a 'fast' life of trains, tubes

and connections, and the consequent potential opportunities for close encounters, are offered as the starting points for many songs by women.

In 1894, Bessie Coleman performed *Riding on the District Railway* (Morris and Le Brunn) which offers a classic music-hall set up: an innocent 'maid' who is new to London: 'the joy she'd heard was most divine/Was riding thro' a tunnel on the District Line.'¹⁴ Rail travel of any sort remained something of a novelty throughout the UK and the London underground system, which was still under construction, was the epitome of urban sophistication, particularly for visitors to the city. So, with this set up, the metropolitan audience knew exactly what was likely to happen to an innocent maid in the tunnels of the District Railway, and would relish their shared knowingness.

Once aboard the train, the woman encounters two young men who 'both looked hard and smiled again', once more the audience is alerted: the two young men are clearly eyeing up the girl. She accepts their offer of a seat and, in a joke cheekily overturning the rules of decorum concerning a woman being alone with one man, she sits 'between them, just for safety's sake'. Once the train reaches a tunnel, however, she very quickly changes her mind and her seat and, when the train comes out of the tunnel, the two men are revealed kissing one another. Our 'innocent' maiden has escaped their initial advances. Tension builds, however, when at the next station, one of the young men alights, leaving her alone in the carriage with the other. The audience may well be thinking ahead to what he might try in the next tunnel, but the country girl's fears are for her money not her physical safety or her virtue. This last verse contains a vintage music-hall misunderstanding, a subversion of expectation, and a barely disguised specific sexual reference:

When the young man spoke her fears grew worse,
For all she seemed to think of was about her purse.
And what seemed very funny,
She'd such a lot of money,
Her purse appeared quite bulky in that railway ride.
The light came in profusion.
Imagine her confusion,
For her hand was in that young man's pocket by her side.

The narrative structure of this song has a sexual rhythm. Leaving aside the trains/tunnels metaphor, the audience is teased in each verse with little laughs and forced to wait for the final punch line. Their knowingness only goes so far; they suspect something naughty is at hand, as it were, but not that the young *woman* is going to be – albeit depending on performance choices, unwittingly – active in making it happen. The conventions of innuendo (which will be examined in detail in the following chapter) are not broken: what the maid feels in the young man's pocket could, after all, be merely his wallet. To unlock the potential of this line Coleman's delivery and the audience's reception of it need to combine to create the meaning. The 'And what seemed very funny/She'd such a lot of money', is a clear example of a woman feigning ignorance for the sake of a joke; of course the young woman knows exactly how much money she has in her purse and Coleman's gestic delivery would make sure her audience know she knows it.

Despite the apparent crude simplicity of this lyric, in performance there is in fact potential for some quite nuanced interpretive choices here, and Coleman had to perform in several modes as she presented the rather equivocal (in music-hall terms, 'arch') presumed innocence and concern of the young woman, the knowingness of herself as narrator, and offered commentary on the ultimately thwarted ardour of the young men. The audience must grant Coleman licence to be suggestive, and collude completely with her by acknowledging that they recognise the suggestion so that the double meaning is decoded and laughter can be shared.

This song and many others like it serve as a indicators of shifting societal expectations; the apparent acceptance in this lyric that women travelling alone can expect to be harassed by men – not sexual predators or criminals, but average young men about town – is now unacceptable. However, in 'music-hall land' the audience are expected to laugh at and therefore endorse the alternative version of their city that this song promotes and accept its premise that heterosexual sex was openly acknowledged in daily life, men and women flirted with one another because it was fun for both to do so and, in a battle of wits, women frequently triumphed. This celebratory approach to sexual attraction and courtship has a direct parallel in the later *Carry On* films and, as Gray notes in her illuminating

study of that iconically innuendo-laden series of films: 'One of the more refreshing assumptions in the majority of *Carry Ons* is that no means no; sex may not be very dignified, but it is fun for both parties or it doesn't happen at all.' (1998, p.102) This attitude is pre-empted in many music-hall songs performed by women: there is nothing funny about coercion or harassment, unless the woman turns the tables on her harasser or thwarts unwanted advances, as happens in this example.

Chapter conclusion

The Joan River's quotation used at the beginning of this chapter – 'Can we talk?' – became a catchphrase for her, summing up a number of aspects of her conspiratorial, often shocking and barbed comic style. Gerard Matte and Ian McFadyen have argued that she used this question in her act to give her permission to make outrageous, sometimes offensive statements, to create a sense of intimacy and 'reframe her interaction with the audience from a public situation to a private one.' (2011, p.168) Asked in a music-hall venue, the question might well serve these purposes but it could also be a literal inquiry for a woman performer, accompanied by a look over the shoulder, into the wings or to the doors of the venue to check if there was anybody listening who might disapprove of what she was about to say or do. The techniques, performance conventions and social mechanisms that often drive comic interactions and the appreciation of comedy outlined in this chapter demonstrate a number of formal similarities between contemporary and late-Victorian/Edwardian performer-audience relationships. Little has changed regarding how a solo performer establishes some connection and affection with sometimes large groups of people, in often less than intimate spaces, and how she cleverly shapes their responses to material they might otherwise find challenging or unacceptable, encouraging them to collude with her and laugh despite themselves as she challenges their shared taboos. Women on the halls were frequently testing the limits of acceptability and earned comic licence through their handling of a range of techniques. Some were given licence for their impressively quick wits and strong female personas, some were encouraged to be flirtatious, to offer themselves up to the male gaze and used this to then assert their comic personas and their opinions. However, this agency was limited and negotiating it could be precarious, particularly in an environment in which

changeable rules of decorum, decency and morality could be used to criticise and penalise women for doing the jobs they had been employed to do.

Performances like Coleman's *Riding on the District Railway*, though popular with audiences, frequently attracted the attention of the LCC and moral reformers. As Chapters 4 and 5 will demonstrate, this led songwriters and performers to work together to develop material and modes of delivery that allowed them to at once circumvent *and* acknowledge these constraints in performance in order to achieve comic licence at all. This resulted in the evolution of late-music hall performance style: the collective 'knowingness' Bailey identifies leading to a willingness to collude in the creation of a shared verbal and gestural language that enabled the public articulation of ideas that could not otherwise be licensed either on or off a public stage. In addition, the *fact* of censorship intensified the impacts of the performer-audience connection and the desire to share laughter led to a set of responses from performers unforeseen by the LCC and very difficult for them to regulate.

The relationship between the halls and the LCC was not – as popular accounts have sometimes characterised it – simply the one's plucky resistance to attempts by the other to censor and regulate its entertainments. In fact, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that proprietors co-operated with, or at least paid lip service to co-operating with the LCC. Pressures on proprietors and performers could be intense and many sought to protect their livelihoods by simply avoiding the presentation of any material that might draw the Committee's attention. For young or lower-ranking performers it was unwise during this period to take any risks of this kind. As examples discussed in Chapter 1 reveal, throughout the 1890s performers were reprimanded or dismissed for perceived indecency. Many proprietors made it clear to artists that decency and propriety were required, demanding copies of scripts in advance, posting notices in dressing rooms warning of instant dismissal for indecency and writing clauses into contracts. Following complaints about an indecent performance by Nellie Wallace in 1904, the manager of the Tivoli was required to defend his hall's licence by the LCC's licensing committee and his evidence included a clause from a Tivoli artiste's contract which noted that any

performer giving expression to 'any vulgarity, or to words having any objectionable or double meaning, or should use any objectionable gesture' on stage would be dismissed (LCC/MIN/10916). Some contracts also contained barring clauses (for exclusive performing rights) and anti-gagging clauses.¹⁵ Proprietors of a number of halls, including The Middlesex, The Queen's Palace of Varieties, Poplar; and English's New Sebright, 'Wholesome Amusement Temple' also published disclaimers in their programmes requesting that audience members reported any objectionable performances.

However, the irritation of industry insiders about the Council's interventions surfaces in numerous reports in the press around the annual LCC October licensing sessions, and my interpretation is that many performers and songwriters, and some proprietors, found direct and indirect ways to avoid or evade censorship. While there is potential to over romanticise this as popular defiance, it is evident that the well-established direct contact between performers and audiences demonstrated earlier in this chapter, not only continued but evolved to assimilate the new regulations and attempts at censorship and, in some cases, to creatively manipulate them so they became incorporated directly into the form. Out-and-out flouting of the censor through obscenity was unlikely to be accepted by audiences anywhere in the city, even in the trendier West End where halls were, according to the National Vigilance Association, frequented by 'idle dissolute young men' (Birmingham Daily Post, October 17 1894, p.8), and women performers rarely sought to shock their audiences in this way. However, the fact that censorship was operating and that some artists were being forced to change their material was necessarily addressed. In a form as topical, relevant and local as this, performers would not ignore the various press debates about licensing, indecency and moral reform any more than they ignored any other subject or popular craze exercising the public imagination. Just as the rise of the suffragette movement, lady cyclists and rational dress were given the music-hall treatment, inevitably so was a subject as close to home as music-hall censorship and regulation. Simply because it was happening, women wanted to refer either directly or indirectly to the fact that they were being censored, whilst simultaneously ensuring that they censored

themselves sufficiently to ensure they did not lose work or reputation *and* let their audiences know that such self-censorship was operating.

The social context of music-hall performance, in particular the demands of the LCC's policy of moral improvement, blurred these boundaries for women and it was difficult for them to ensure that they contained their risk taking within the limits of the 'consensus' on which Douglas argues all jokes depend for 'recognition'. (Douglas, 1978, p.107). However, as the following two chapters demonstrate, despite and in some instances because of the political, social and cultural constraints on their behaviour and their performances, individual women found ways to be the subjects of their comic performances. They presented themselves – sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously, speaking the 'unspeakable' or 'impossible speech' (Butler, 1997, p.133) – in ways that broke through existing limitations, often exposing the gendered boundaries of acceptable expression, and so potentially challenged their audiences' perceptions of female attitudes and behaviour, or connected directly with women who were also subject to self-censorship in terms of the ways they perceived and presented themselves in their daily lives. Butler is concerned that such linguistic agency is questionable, emerging as it does from 'this scene of enabling vulnerability'. (1997, p.2) With specific reference to textual and performed innuendo, Chapters 4 and 5 will consider the extent to which women created performances which not only adhered to but tested 'the boundaries of consensus' (Quirk, p.107 & p.109), and ask how far it can be argued that women performers achieved a degree of agency *through* censorship.

Notes

¹ In his evidence to the 1892 Select Committee, James Graydon, manager of the Middlesex Music Hall and Secretary of the Music Hall Proprietors' Protection Association, argued that gagging 'of an objectionable character' did not exist 'because audiences will not tolerate it'. (p.200) When pressed he said he did not believe audiences in any part of London encouraged gagging.

² In the earliest halls a Chairman was employed to sit at a table near the stage, introduce the acts and keep order. See music-hall histories including: Anstey (1891); Booth, (1924); Scott (1946); Farson, (1972)

³ Jerome K Jerome recalled an epic slanging match she won at the Star in Bermondsey in 1892 (*The Idler*, 1892) Quoted in Banks and Swift (1987)

⁴ This imperative for performers to form a direct connection with spectators during a performance could, of course be argued for all performance forms. Specific connections with the informalities of music hall are certainly evident in earlier folk and popular traditions, such as the commedia dell'arte in which the need to first attract and then keep an audience engaged required a responsive performance style that often relied on audience participation.

⁵ Bellwood's close connection to the 'Pav' lasted years and, during another of her court appearances – this time for punching Percy Courtenay, at the time Marie Lloyd's husband – Bellwood was introduced to the court as being 'of the London Pavilion' (*Reynolds's Newspaper*, January 1 1893, p.6) referring to her not just her frequent appearances and popularity with audiences there, but also to her employment by one of the newly formed music-hall syndicates which spread throughout the country by 1914, profoundly changing the nature of music-hall management and organization and establishing a circuit system of artist employment for the most popular performers. See Crowhurst (1992) and Russell (1997).

⁶ Hannah Gadsby's, *Nanette*, 2017 centres on her experience of growing up lesbian in Tasmania and refers directly to the problems of turning personal trauma into comedy; John Robins, *The Darkness of Robins*, 2017, describes his painful break-up from comedian Sarah Pascoe who performed her own candid comedy show, *LadsLadsLads*, about the end of their relationship at the same festival.

⁷ The lyric Hill is referring to here is the serious song, *Masks & Faces* (Harrington & Le Brunn, 1888).

⁸ Bellwood won the case, receiving considerably lower damages than she had demanded.

⁹ Penny Summerfield (1989) outlines this process and notes many smaller halls did not survive as they were frequently unable to adhere to new building regulations or compete once a large hall was built in their area (pp.221-222)

¹⁰ The report from the Select Committee on Theatres and Places of Entertainment, 1892 noted that topical songs were sometimes created in matter of hours. (1892, p.116)

¹¹ The song is a standard music hall warning for impressionable young men: that attractive women who approach you on public transport cannot be trusted.

¹² A performer's comic persona can be defined as the way she presents herself to audiences. This may be fairly close to her off-stage personality, an exaggerated version of one aspect of her character, or it may be a much more extreme character performance that is nothing like her 'real' personality. See also Double, 2014, pp.126-134.

¹³ For example, in the comedy drag acts of Dame Edna Everage and Lily Savage, in which Barry Humphries and Paul O'Grady dressed as women and asked audiences to accept them as such and created fictional off-stage lives and families which audiences also accepted. In comic forms this version of the 'suspension of disbelief' is not as straightforward as it is when an actor plays a character in a play or delivers a monologue because the direct address that comedy requires genuinely removes the fourth wall, rather than simply appearing to do so as during the delivery of a soliloquy, aside, or dramatic monologue. O'Grady and Humphries perform stand-up from within their characters without losing the immediacy and potential for improvisation that the conventions of this kind of direct address permits. Collusion in comedy works because part of the unspoken agreement is that both audiences and performers are aware that the other knows the truth and this knowledge is often the basis for many jokes.

¹⁴ Country visitors to London were, in music-hall song, invariably presented as easy and foolish prey for seducers and gold-diggers alike.

¹⁵ See the following sources for specific references to clauses in performers contracts, warnings and notices regarding performers' behaviour: *The Era*, Saturday October 26, 1889, p.13; *The Era*, 8 March 1890, p16; *Select Committee Report 1892*, p. 28; 'Some of Miss Jenny Hill's Reminiscences', *The Sketch*, 15 November 1893; Issacs, 1927.

Chapter 4

'I mustn't tell you what I mean': knowing, not knowing and comic innuendo as performed (self) censorship

I musn't tell you what I mean!
Mustn't tell you what I've seen!
Ev'rything that's risky must be dropped
Well – I've been stopped for winking!
Mustn't tell you what I've heard!
Mustn't say a naughty word!
So help my bob, it's a jolly good job
They can't stop a girl from thinking!
(Tabrar, Harrington & Le Brunn, 1897)

According to Marie Lloyd's sister, Alice, she had asked her friends Joseph Tabrar, John P. Harrington and George Le Brunn to write this song for her to perform as a public response to criticisms of her work for indecency in 1896 and 1897. (*Lloyd's Sunday News*, 15 October 1922) In this lyric she shares her experience of censorship directly with her audience, offering a personal commentary on the pressure to self-censor and how she feels about it and demonstrating that, like nineteenth-century women of all classes and ages, she was well acquainted with what was expected of her as a woman and with the limits these expectations placed on her public behaviour and performances.

It was not simply more acceptable for women to appear naïve than to acknowledge sexual awareness in Victorian England: female ignorance about sex was taken for granted. While William Acton's mid-century opinion – that 'the majority of women (happily for them) are not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind' (Acton, 1857, p. 112) – was by no means universal, neither was it remarkable. For Acton and for many other commentators: 'The best mothers, wives and managers of households, know little or nothing of sexual indulgences.' (ibid., p.113)

This assumption of innocence was, as Lewis has suggested in her history of women in England, a lose-lose situation for women because, as unworldly and childlike, they were also often 'considered to be in need of protection' and 'more likely to do wrong' than men (Lewis, 1984, p.126). Furthermore, if they lost their innocence,

they immediately transformed into 'potential seducers' (ibid.) and corrupters of otherwise decent young men: 'when the beast and the harlot have taken the woman's place, there is no depth of shameful sensuality into which she is not prepared to sink.' (Moral Reform Union leaflet, 'The Fallen Woman!' n.d., quoted in Bland, 1995, p.116) Even campaigning nineteenth-century feminists who were, ostensibly, working to ensure the safety of young lower class women on the streets of London, demonstrably disapproved of young women's sexuality. Judith Walkowitz has argued that their apparent wish to protect concealed a middle-class determination to discourage the sexual urges of poorer women and control their behaviour. (Walkowitz, 1980, p.249)

The overwhelming majority of the performers under examination here were lower class and, as discussed in Chapter 1, their profession meant they were frequently perceived as either directly analogous with prostitutes or at least unavoidably morally corrupted by their largely nocturnal lifestyles.¹ Every performer would be aware of these presuppositions and – whatever her public image off stage, her dominant on-stage persona, or the range of comic characters she assumed for specific first-person performances – these prevailing attitudes formed the backdrop of her discourse with her London audiences and with wider nineteenth-century society.² Journalists and commentators freely offered their opinions on the perceived acceptability of performers' acts when they revealed their sexual knowledge. A writer for the Dublin weekly *Pat*, reviewing a performance by Ada Lundberg in 1880, observed that 'When that lady ceases to mistake *double entendre* for wit she will please better'. (April 17, 1880) This remained true for women performers well into the twentieth century. Variety performer Anne Emery recalled that when she was performing comedy in the 1960s: 'You're not a lady if you get a laugh saying something naughty. Men couldn't take it.' (Emery, 1998) In the twenty-first century, Amy Schumer has observed that she is often labelled as a 'sex comic', a description she believes is only applied because of her sex: 'A guy could get up here and literally pull his dick out and people would be like: "He's a thinker!"' (HBO Special, 2015)

To avoid reproval, women in music hall became proficient in the art of appearing *not* to know about sexual matters and this chapter examines the performance styles and techniques they employed to work within these limitations, considering in particular how comic innuendo emerged as a direct result of the need to self-censor in response to Victorian attitudes to sex, offering audiences alternative ways of perceiving female sexuality.

As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, performers frequently manipulated stereotypes of womanhood and femininity in their acts for comic effect, but complaints to the LCC and the Council's subsequent interventions regarding specific performances indicate that those outside the music-hall community limited the range and scope of these comic subversions. These overtly censorious influences on the content and form of music-hall programmes generally, and women's performance practice specifically, interconnected with less conspicuous internal social and cultural constraints leading to self-censorship in music hall, the implementation and effects of which are more difficult to assess.

Political philosophers Philip Cook and Conrad Heilmann (2013) have considered individuals' reactions to political censorship and identify two distinct types of self-censorship, which are helpful here. The first, public self-censorship, is broadly defined as individuals' reactions to their internalisation of some aspects of the censor and their consequent censorship of personal expression (2013, p.178). This part of Cook and Heilmann's thesis is supported by evidence of widespread public self-censorship within the music-hall industry in response to pressure from the LCC and other reformers. As the cases outlined in Chapters 1 and 3 reveal, in order to protect their licences, when necessary proprietors made it publicly known that they were taking steps to censor any potentially indecent performances in their establishments. Consequently, to ensure their continuing employment, performers needed to be seen to be above reproach and many censored themselves to avoid giving proprietors any reason to penalise them. However, what is often apparent from the tone of music-hall press commentary on the LCC's policies regarding music hall and, most informative here, on the performance style and content of music-hall comedy, is that this appearance of compliance often masked an

unspoken shared rejection of censorship within the established music-hall community of proprietors, songwriters and performers and many in their audiences.

Before examining in more detail the impact of this kind of public self-censorship on music-hall performance, it is worthwhile briefly considering the distinction Cook and Heilmann make between this response in order to avoid sanctions and a more private form of self-censorship. This, they argue, occurs even when there is no external censorship, as an individual's suppression of 'his or her own attitudes' and 'is a process of regulation between what an individual regards as permissible to express publicly, and that which he or she wishes to express publicly.' (2013, p.179) This definition can be linked to the psychoanalytic process of 'foreclosure', which emerges from Freudian and Lacanian theories of repression and the unconscious mind (Freud, 1894, 1915; Lacan, 2001) and has been adapted by Judith Butler (1997) and Angela Failler (2001). In psychoanalysis, foreclosure operates as 'prior censorship' (ibid. p.52), through which acts of speech are conditioned, or pre-conditioned, by unconscious repression and exclusion of thoughts, desires or ideas that, as Failler puts it, 'exceed the bounds of social norms'.³ (ibid. p.51) At risk of over-simplification, I have followed Butler's lead to 'actively misappropriate' (1997, p.138) this concept and her own ideas about 'the unspeakable' explored in *Excitable Speech* (1997) and 'Ruled Out: Vocabularies of the Censor' (1998) to inform my consideration of the ways in which gendered and class-based (self) censorship was inherent to what women performed on the halls and how they performed it.

As outlined in Chapter 2, the conventions of music-hall performance permitted a fairly narrow range of stereotypical representations of women. This selection necessarily broadly adhered to familiar characterisations of 'acceptable' types in terms of gender and class, in order that audiences could recognise and accept them as comedy. Songwriters worked within this permissible range and, as previously demonstrated, performers gauged how audiences would perceive and receive each female type and could exploit the comic potential offered by popular characterisations such as the city girl visiting the country, the unhappy wife, or the ageing spinster. That these versions of femininity were presented as the potential sources of jokes at all suggests that, to recall Douglas' argument noted in Chapter 2,

performers and audiences shared an understanding that at some level there was a joke to be found. (Douglas, 1978, p.98) The jokes in the Victorian social structure regarding women's roles appeared on the halls in a number of forms. Firstly, as shared recognition of the broad character types and situations presented, such as in Vesta Victoria's 1900 portrayal of a Londoner's attempts to describe her visit to a country village which, because she has no other frame of reference, are limited to city-based observations such as 'sheep's heads with their bodies on are skipping all the day/Well, it's absolutely 'Ackney with the 'ouses took away!' (Bateman & Le Brunn, 1900) The joke might also relate to the audience's recognition of the risible limitations of the female stereotype being parodied, as in Marie Loftus' previously discussed dissatisfied wife in *A Comfort and A Blessing To Man* (Dodsworth, 1888) or, most pertinently for the current discussion, it might relate to the comic possibilities offered by the limits of acceptability regarding female sex and sexuality. For example, in Nellie Wallace's *Under The Bed* (Wallace), her response to her mother's warning to always check under the bed before going to sleep in case 'there's a man about' subverts the expected fear with an expression of sexual desire: 'I always do, you can make a bet/But it's never been my luck to find a man there yet.'

Judith Butler has asked if censorship is, 'despite its constraining and regulatory function, a way of *producing* speech?' (1998, p.248) Her argument is that censored material 'takes on a new life as part of the very discourse produced by the mechanism of censorship.' (1998, p.249) Such 'paradoxical consequences' (ibid.) are evident in the comic practice of women performers working during this period of heavy-handed regulation and it is my suggestion that there were inadvertent outcomes to the LCC's attempts to clean up the music halls in the 1890s.

Women's foreclosed, 'unspeakable' speech was contained by culturally determined Victorian versions of femininity and acceptable female types and behaviour, which were perceived as 'natural' and fixed conditions and which very few women ever publicly challenged. These socially ingrained attitudes imposed constraints on comic expression, by restricting the range of gender roles available and pre-determining the possible versions of female identity and sexuality performers could imagine and offer audiences, as well as curbing the ways they could speak

about their own attitudes towards sex and sexuality. Such cultural foreclosure is what Butler would identify as the repetition of implicit acts of prior censorship within a community that determine what can and cannot be said. (Butler, 1998, pp.258-259) Implicit forms of censorship such as these are, suggests Butler, potentially far more effective methods of control than more explicit types:

Censorship is exposed to a certain vulnerability precisely through becoming explicit, and escapes it most shrewdly when it operates without becoming clearly identifiable. (Butler, 1998, p.250)

The LCC's methods of inspection and reporting were blunt tools and those employed to wield them apparently possessed little understanding of, or interest in, the cultural significance of the form and barely a rudimentary grasp of its conventions or its roots in popular traditions. Indeed, discussions of music-hall comedy by those outside the industry reveal a frankly laughable ignorance about how popular humour works. The evidence given by a Mr. Bailhache to the 1896 LCC theatre and music-halls licensing sessions is a useful case in point in which the sound of him scratching his head in confusion is almost audible through the hand-written minutes. Representing temperance campaigner Carina Reed, who brought a complaint about Marie Lloyd's performance of *Johnny Jones* at the Oxford Music Hall, Mr. Bailhache read out the lyrics of the song and commented:

You see, sir, there seems to be something amusing in the song. It is exceedingly difficult...to see what amusement there is in the song: but if there be any amusement in it it must be something suggested by the song and that seems to be the impression here, and that is the impression at the Music Halls. (LCC/MIN/10,868. October 14, 1896)

Such incomprehension, while leading to much time-wasting cross-examination in licensing hearings, also undoubtedly advantaged those music-hall writers and performers keen to risk the risqué and, as the 1890s progressed, writers adapted the combined potential of written and performed texts to ensure a song appeared decently 'closed' on paper, while remaining sufficiently 'open' for a performer to have her wicked interpretative way with it in performance.

The LCC's attempts to censor were so overt that, as outlined in Chapter 3, to adhere to the comic conventions of music hall, performers had to acknowledge censorship and share their attitudes towards it with their audiences. Visits to music halls by notebook-wielding inspectors and committees discussing their reports alongside complaints from purity campaigners were so obvious and so widely discussed within the music-hall community as to warrant inclusion in performances as jokes.

As such, I would argue that explicit censorship gave women performers agency, certainly over the more contingent and transparent forms of moral and social censorship imposed by would-be reformers. In performance, comedians could exploit this contingency and the in-built comic potential of sending men to make notes about possibly indecent jokes. To return to Mary Douglas' explanation of joking: censorship became one of music hall's favourite conditions for a joke (1978, p.98). Performers certainly took advantage of the opportunities this offered, through direct references such as Lloyd's *You Can't Stop A Girl From Thinking* quoted at the beginning of this chapter and also through the kind of self-aware performance commentary on what they were not allowed to say that is the focus of the rest of this chapter.

As the examples below show, writers and performers increasingly combined skill sets, using the slipperiness of the English language with its potential for double meanings in conjunction with undetectable, certainly after the event, performed innuendo and suggestion to make it troublesome for the TMHC to ferret out alleged obscenity and follow up on individual complaints.

What should also be considered as part of this analysis of the influences determining what was 'speakable' and 'unspeakable' in music-hall comedy is the previously considered impact on comic practice of the licence comedians are given in performance, and the necessary live editing they engage in in response to audience reaction to ensure they maintain the continuous direct connection with their audiences identified in Chapter 3. This was spontaneous and dynamic, rather than static or strictly prescribed and – as they continue to do in contemporary practice

– during performances audiences became part of a process that either fuelled existing pre-emptive self-censorship or encouraged comedians to go further and push the boundaries of acceptability. As suggested in Chapter 3, performers would know ‘in the moment’, or soon learn, what sort of material could be performed where and what was likely to over-step the mark. Jenny Hill’s remarks about differences in East/West-end audience preferences and Jo Brand’s contemporary account of the need to adapt to audiences who do not consistently share her values confirm this need to spontaneously adjust and censor in performance.

Performers pre-emptively self-censored: privately, as women performing in this era and context working within the limitations outlined above; publicly because they did not want to risk their reputations or lose work; and, as comic performers in all eras do, they adapted their performances to continue to engage and entertain their audiences and to get laughs. As part of this complex of exchanges, foreclosure and self-censorship were suspended on stage through the comic licence afforded to performers, and audiences publicly colluded with them, as they continue to do in contemporary comedy, in the creation of forbidden meanings through a shared enjoyment of the self-aware knowingness Bailey has identified, as discussed in Chapter 3.

Given its proliferation throughout this period, music-hall audiences certainly appear to have appreciated material that addressed sexual taboos and required them to decode hidden meanings. There is evidence of keen anticipation of the acts of performers, like Lloyd, known for their tendency to deliver ‘risky’ material. Bessie Bellwood, whose propensity for ‘gagging’ is examined in Chapter 3, was credited with a ‘genius for slang’ that amounted to ‘a voluble flow of metaphors which only a music-hall audience would fully appreciate.’ (*Reynold’s Newspaper*, September 27 1896, p. 5) The use of metaphors requiring decoding appears to have extended to off-stage exchanges in music halls. In 1889, a writer for *The Era* overheard two ‘habitués of the Pavilion’ (Bellwood’s home crowd for much of her career) discussing the weather: “It’s cold this evening, isn’t?” Yes, it is,” was the reply, “but it will be much warmer when Bessie comes”.’ (January 5 1889, p. 16) At the height of her fame, during the early days of the LCC’s anti-vulgarity campaign,

one reviewer noted: 'The daring nature of Miss Bellwood's patter never fails in its effect'. (*The Era*, September 12 1891, p. 16) Like Mae West who, 80 years later would tell *Playboy*: 'Censorship made me' (Jennings, 1971, p.6), Bellwood's success and wealth were built on this reputation and music-hall managers relied on it as a major draw for her fans.⁴ Similarly, after Marie Lloyd's death her sister, Alice, suggested that complaints and accusations of indecency provided her with publicity that undoubtedly fuelled her success. (*Lloyd's Sunday News*, 15 October 1922)⁵ Foucault was unequivocal about the possibilities of publicly violating sexual codes in this way:

If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression. A person who holds forth in such language places himself to a certain extent outside the reach of power; he upsets established law; he somehow anticipates the coming freedom. (1978, p.6)

It was certainly true that Bellwood sought to place *herself* 'outside the reach of power', and her regular misdemeanours and indiscretions endlessly delighted her fans. However, regardless of her popularity, her on-stage and off-stage behaviour was intensely scrutinised and on numerous occasions managers were required to either defend her performances at LCC licensing hearings, or claim that her infringements were delivered without their prior knowledge or consent. Given that she 'was not one of those who aimed at improving the tone of the music-hall' (*Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, September 27 1896, p.9), and the records and reviews of her performances bearing witness to her resolute refusal to alter either her performance style or her material, condemnatory attention from reformers was inevitable. In June 1892, one complainant wrote to the LCC about a performance at the Tivoli, a reference to the lack of sex education:

Miss Bessie Bellwood... said in her patter the other evening, "that instead of the London School Board teaching their girls the Rule of Three, it would be far better to teach them to keep their legs closer together", a gratuitous and disgusting piece of insult considering the earnest and good work that is being done by...teachers in our big city just now. (LCC/MIN/10,916)

Unsurprisingly, a month later when the TMHC inspector, Mr Bullock, was despatched to see her perform at the Tivoli, though Bellwood was still engaged there, there was no such mention of schools.

Comic innuendo: performed censorship

As part of the psychoanalytic process of foreclosure, 'unspeakable' thoughts may not be directly spoken, but they are still residually evident in an individual's speech or, to bring the argument back from the performative to staged performance, what is censored remains present in a comic performance. In music hall the 'unspeakable' was most commonly the direct sexual reference and the fact that it remained unspoken was to become central to the form; an unspoken sexual allusion was performed but not directly spoken by the comedian and perceived and received by the audience through comic innuendo. Innuendo relies, as Failler summarises, on 'a simultaneity of meaning' between what is said and what is not said and on 'the tension between the stated and the implied' (Failler, 2001, p.58) So, when Marie Loftus sings, 'she'd never been there before, but now she's going there every night' (Murray, Leigh and Le Brunn, 1898), she ensures her audiences understand the stated and the implied. The simultaneity must be left in place and the implied never overtly stated; so audiences are left to crack the coded meaning and to demonstrate that they have and that the tension created has been released through the shared laughter of recognition. Bailey has noted this use of language demanded a degree of 'competency in its decoding' (1998, p.142) and Bratton argues that the satisfaction audiences derived from being party to the re-signification of language and imagery, should not be underestimated: 'our knowingness about what the song is getting at is a vital part of our pleasure'. (1975, p.198)

Loftus' episodic *She's Going There Every Night* (1898) demonstrates the potential versatility and perhaps surprising complexity of innuendo as it introduces new characters in each verse who discover something they did not know they would like with the same refrain.⁶ So, in verse one her shy sister, Sue, sits for the first time on her boyfriend's knee; in verse two a policeman keeps a 'lonely' cook company on a dark night; in the third verse a woman rummages in her 'stingy' husband's trouser pockets for money while her sleeps; and, finally, a preacher goes

backstage at the ballet to 'preach' to the dancers. This kind of episodic structure, which became very common, serves innuendo well as each verse offers the audience another way of interpreting the key loaded line of the chorus, so that every time it comes the audience sees the joke – the doubled meaning – again, in a slightly different way. Lyrically, this song is close to edge of acceptability and the explicit textual innuendo would require Loftus to tiptoe through each verse very lightly in performance, carefully gauging her audience's responses and adjusting her interpretation accordingly. The third verse – operating as a comic 'three' – subverts the established pattern by offering the only scenario in the song in which a couple are married and surprises the audience by *not* concerning sex but marital friction over money. Finally the song returns to sex, the source of most tension and therefore potentially the most laughter, as Loftus introduces a preacher for whom the risk of damage to his reputation and possible sanctions for any indecent misdemeanours are the greatest. This character happily gives himself over to the joke's suspension of the usual rules, surrendering to music hall's thoroughly unprogressive but celebratory hybrid representation of an over-sexualised community which apparently includes ballet girls who will happily flit about in tights to pamper and titillate a delighted man of God as he changes his mind about ballet girls once they have 'curled his hair' and 'showed him the way to dance'. As Bratton suggests, this is an example of a song 'of a very ordinary kind' that had 'highly intricate and varied patterns of innuendo playing backwards and forwards across the text' (1975, p.195). These 'patterns' of innuendo were of course augmented once embodied in performance and it is in the performance of this knowing delivery that the unsaid can be spoken. Such physical and gestural, interpretive performance is manifestly the most challenging for an historical researcher to reanimate, but it is here the performer would draw attention to the intended unspoken meanings and enhance the implicit suggestion in the lyric with vocal and physical signals for her audience to read. The role of the audience at this point in the performance is to collude with the performer and unleash the latent double meaning and acknowledge their comprehension and appreciation of it through laughter. The lyrics examined below are all examples of those that indicate possible implicit sexual meanings that would have relied on the controlled performance of vocal delivery and rhythms, facial cues and knowing physical

inferences. In Lloyd's performance of Joseph Tabrar's 1894, *A Bird In Hand*, in which she deceives a series of men into buying her things, the fact that the unspeakable cannot be spoken is even commented on and the fact that it cannot be spoken becomes part of the joke:

A bird in the hand's worth two in the bush at any time
A bird in the hand's worth two in the bush at any time
He bought me a diamond ring
Well you can understand
He had the bird in the bush, and I had the ring on my hand.

Here, a play-on-words is combined with the linguistic reversal of a familiar proverb, so Lloyd's performance requires only a gentle gestural nudge in either direction to confirm the latent suggestion of a sexual encounter or adhere to the original meaning of the proverb so the man is left disappointed. Evidence of the unspeakable remains in the innuendo and, to recall Bailey's explanation of how knowingness in music-hall performance operates, Lloyd re-signifies the proverb and tells her audience that they 'can understand' the coded sexual reference, without her having to say the unsayable. This lyric – written specifically for Lloyd, as many of her songs were during this period – demonstrates her assumption that her audiences trusted her and shared her perspective on the narrative she presented and were quick enough to get the joke. Her performance of the unwritten and unspoken would confirm the meaning and ensure the audience's full appreciation of the possibilities held in the lyric. Her reliance on the audience's shared values – still a crucial factor in the success of comic performance, as outlined in Chapter 3 – was essential both in this process and in the building of her relationship with her audience. In this way, Lloyd was granted comic licence as her audiences publicly colluded with her in the creation of forbidden meanings through the shared acknowledgement of innuendo. In an earlier song, *Twiggy Voo?* (Morton and Le Brunn, 1892), Lloyd asks if the audience – specifically the men in the audience – understand the allusions in the song. A young woman, hailing a bus with her umbrella:

Waved her gamp, and shouted just as ladies do;
"O conductor, do you go
As far as – well, er – Pimlico?"
*Twiggy voo, my boys? Twiggy voo?*⁷

What the audience needs to 'twig' here is indicated by the hesitation – 'well, er...' – in the lyric, which offers a signpost to suggest assumed embarrassment due to Pimlico being synonymous with prostitution. In performance, delivery of this line would require Lloyd to assume this attitude while also pointing out the extra layer of meaning in this hesitation and letting the audience know that she – Lloyd rather than the character – is aware of the extra meaning before the lyric requires her to check with them verbally:

Twiggy voo, my boys? Twiggy voo?
Well of course it stands to reason that you do;
All the force and meaning in it you can "tumble" in a minute,
Twiggy voo, my boys? Twiggy voo?

Though this lyric is directed flirtatiously at 'boys', Lloyd also encouraged young women to take advantage of the opportunities their increased independence offered and have fun; she was perhaps most disapproved of as a pleasure-seeking role model for young women, for offering '...some rather dangerous, but unmistakably comic, advice to young ladies, which they may profit by, if they like.' (*The Era*, August 15 1891, p. 14)

Among the middle-class reformers, including a number of prominent feminists, who were campaigning in the 1880s and 1890s for sex education and birth control, a few did demand sexual freedoms for men and women. (Jana Funke, 2016, p.2) Music hall too acknowledged women's heterosexual desires and supported their rights to sexual pleasure in some songs but this was of course unspeakable and such intimations were necessarily covert, so explicit textual evidence of sexual passion is rare. Nellie Wallace's *Three Times A Day* (Liddy, 1904) recalls:

I used to have sweethearts, three times a day,
They bought me tea and tarts, three times a day.
One summer's afternoon, met a chap, got married soon,
We used to sit and spoon, three times a day.⁸

'Spooning' was the go-to music-hall word for intimate contact: admitting that she would like physical affection, a Marie Loftus' character in *I'm So Shy* (Dodsworth, 1888) declares that, despite being shy 'I'd like some spooning now and then if I were not so shy; It's nice to feel your lover's arm press gently round your waist'.

Vesta Victoria performed *The Lass Who Loved A Sailor* in 1908 (Harrington and Powell). The lyric of this song demands her gestural translation of the unspoken, in this case making explicit the intense sexual impact this encounter clearly had on her character:

William Taylor came from sea
A bold Jack Tar? Not half!
He measured fifty round the chest,
And twenty round the calf.
William Taylor won my heart
First time he cried, "Heave to!"
For, oh! Girls, Oh! You know,
I *do* so love a bit of blue.
William cried, "Avast, there!"
Straight! I thought that I was shot.
Though I don't know what "A-vast" means,
I "A-vasted" on the spot.

Female (hetero)sexual attraction is also a feature of an example of impromptu spoken innuendo from 1890, cited as part of a court case against a music hall proprietor for indecency (Manchester Folly Variety Theatre, *The Era*, March 1 1890). The offensive material included a risqué song performed by Peggy Pryde in which she played a servant and sang about the various sexually charged encounters she saw when she peeped through keyholes in her employer's home. A witness in the case confirmed that Pryde extemporised during her act:

in the "gag" the singer said she had a young man of her own. She described him as an idiot because he "would not do anything." He used to come into the kitchen and do nothing but eat and drink. (*The Era*, March 1, 1890, p.17)

This is an example of the conscious shaping as comic material of a very rarely recorded public acknowledgement by a woman of sexual desire and frustration outside of marriage, which clearly crossed the line of decency. Here, Pryde speaks the unspeakable directly to her audience and so engages in the very contemporary comic practice of supporting her prepared material through reference to an experience from her own life.

Marie Lloyd, of course, also regularly advocated, or simply assumed, equal rights for men and women to share sensual and sexual fulfilment. In one of her best-remembered songs, Fred Leigh and George Arthurs' 1915 *A Little of What You Fancy Does You Good* Lloyd, now a woman of 45, shares her insights into middle-aged marriage in which she tells the audience that while on holiday 'As we watched the ladies bathing in the sea' her husband said that 'what a man requires is a change of everything' and he should 'take his holidays alone'. Lloyd knows exactly what he is *not* saying and her vintage response is:

So, I said, "Very likely
Well if you prefer a fortnight on your own.

"I always hold in having it if you fancy it,
If you fancy it – that's understood!
But if that's your little game I shall want to do the same,
'Cos a little of what you fancy does you good. Aye good."⁹

Whether she is calling his bluff (she might assume her husband would never agree to a deal in which she was given an equal chance of adultery) is not made clear by the lyric. At face value it is a liberal and very modern call for equality that lets her husband and the audience know that she is not falling for his 'innocent' request to go away without her and knows exactly what his 'bloomin' game' is. In the final verse she encourages the newly weds with whom she is sharing a train carriage to 'spoon' whilst she takes 'a nap'. In the 1915 audio recording of this song Lloyd sings in her rasping London tone, half speaking many of the lines; her voice oozing confidence, suggestion and life experience. At the end of the recording she repeats the chorus with a slight variation: 'I always hold with having it if you fancy it/Get

on with it/Don't waste no time/And while you young couple spoon/I'll dream of my honeymoon/'Cos a little of what you fancy does you good.' (Windyridge CDR6)

It is worth noting that these songs are rooted in popular realities and they often end with marriage and/or a baby being born so, while there is sexual anticipation, flirtation and often pleasure for both sexes, conventional heterosexual relationships, family realities, and the fulfilment of pre-assigned gender roles are presented as happy endings and there is little possibility of sex for its own sake outside of marriage or courtship.

Knowing and not knowing

Lloyd's matter-of-fact approach to women's sexual desires and her expression of them through her performances epitomises the potential of women's evolving comic practice to use the forbidden to create comedy about this unspoken aspect of Londoners' lives. In performances during the period of the LCC's concerted attempts to clamp down on the content and style of music-hall performance, the interplay between knowing and not knowing became in this way the site offering the most comic jeopardy and therefore potentially the biggest laughs. This need for taking risks in comedy and finding ways to be granted comic licence to say the unsayable continues to be what excites performers and audiences about live comedy.

One way women incorporated knowing/not knowing into their comedy is, in terms of contemporary perceptions, among the most alarming examples of women performers using innuendo to allow them to speak the unspeakable and perform material about sex and sexual attraction. This is a group of songs in which performers in their late teens and 20s portrayed the characters of schoolgirls. This disturbing version of the nineteenth-century tendency to infantilise women (in terms of physical, mental and emotional capacity) was a method of enabling adult women to perform potentially salacious material under the guise of innocence, which had existed in the earlier music hall but became very popular during the 1890s. Will Godwin's 1897 *I Want to Play With Little Dick*, for example, was

performed by Vesta Victoria dressed as a young girl and singing about her fascination for her daring friend, Dicky Green:

Chorus:

I like to play with little Dick, Dick, Dick,
I like to play with little Dick, Dick, Dick;
Cakes and toys don't do for me,
I'm a big girl, now, you see,
And I love to play with little Dicky, Dicky, Dicky. Aye Dick.

Victoria's costume and aspects of her characterisation may have presented her as younger and less knowing than she actually was, but her performance was not meant to dispel the sexual overtones of Godwin's lyric: if the sexual connotation was not intended, then the boy she wanted to play with would be called Tom or Harry, not Dick.¹⁰ The frisson offered by this potentially smutty lyric was the starting point for Victoria's grown up game of suggestion with her audience and the line in the chorus 'I'm a big girl, now, you see' brings attention firmly back to her as a 24-year old woman who could deliver this line with clear emphasis on her own sexuality. Disquieting though this strand of music-hall practice is, it remains that such schoolgirl characters were another way women could pretend *not* to know about sex and so speak the unspeakable in their performances. As Chapter 4 will consider in relation to the embodiment of her jokes, the presence of the performer as a woman becomes crucial here and provides the performative layer of innuendo and adult meaning which is overlaid on the childlike unknowing to create another example of Bakhtin's 'doubled-voiced discourse', like those highlighted in the Chapter 2 in which gender stereotypes were established and then subverted. Here, the audience see her as both the child and the woman; the performer performs as the woman who knows but cannot say and the child who does not know that she is saying what she should not. The overlap between the two is where the performed unspeakable occurs and this is where the performer had to carefully gauge how to blend childish inquisitiveness and adult suggestion in her gestures, facial expressions and physical interpretation. It is of course at the very least highly cynical and potentially dangerous to blur this line and put the unsayable in the mouths of sexualised pre-pubescent girls as a tactic to avoid

ensorship, though it should be noted that in the examples I have analysed, there seems to have been little attempt to actually perform as children. *Johnny Jones*, subtitled *I Know Now* (Lytton and Le Brunn, 1895), features another schoolgirl, this time performed by a 26-year old Marie Lloyd. Her interpretation of this song attracted a good deal of criticism and press coverage and was cited as evidence in the refusal of the licence for the Oxford Music Hall on Oxford Street following the 1896 LCC licensing sessions. The girl in this song has many questions about courtship, sex and reproduction and, because she gets no answers from school or from her parents, she asks a local lad, Johnny Jones, who apparently willingly fills in the gaps in her knowledge:

Chorus:

"What's that for eh? oh! tell me Ma
If you won't tell me, I'll ask Pa;"
But Ma said, "Oh, it's nothing – shut your row"
Well, I've ask'd Johnny Jones, see!
So I know now.

According to LCC records and press reports, concerns over Lloyd's performances of this song were due entirely to her sexually provocative and adult performance style. The crucial difference between this song and other representations of young girls, like the *Vesta Victoria* example above, is that this character is portrayed as wanting to know about the facts of life. In performing this satire on the restrictive approach of late-Victorian society to sex education Lloyd was also exposing an underlying truth: in Mary Douglas' terms, the joke in the 'social structure' is that regardless of disapproval and censorship, young women and men are extremely interested in sex.

The reality of *not* knowing for a lower-class young woman could be personally catastrophic as she would be vulnerable to seduction and exploitation and so ran the risk not just of damaging her reputation and suffering the stigma attached to promiscuity, but of also falling victim to the disastrous state of unmarried motherhood. There was little doubt that 'sexual ignorance was a serious problem' at the end of the nineteenth century and 'women needed to have access to all forms of education, including sex education' (Funke, 2016 p.3) The majority of feminist

campaigning for sex education for women, as Bland suggests, was not 'centrally, if at all, about a woman's right to sexual pleasure' (1995, p.143); rather it was about educating women to understand what their husbands would expect of them sexually, and to encourage them to believe they had the right to refuse sex. (ibid)

In music hall's down-to-earth interpretation, knowing was frequently presented positively and non-judgementally, as an empowered state for women and the comic treatment of these subjects was an expression of popular concerns. For female characters in many music-hall songs, sexual knowingness – being street wise regarding men and their sexual advances – was far better than being a 'J.A.Y.' (a fool). Songs featuring female characters who reveal their sexual knowledge might need to be 'double voiced' and masked as *not* knowing and they might serve to titillate audiences, but they also constituted a publicly shared acknowledgement of sexual truths and offered a comic alternative that encouraged women to consider that ignorance was *not* best, that – despite the widespread perception that a 'good' woman did not have sexual desires and did not think or talk about sex – a level of honesty and openness might help them avoid unwanted sexual encounters before marriage and perhaps control sex within marriage, thus limiting the size of their families and avoid the venereal diseases commonly transmitted to wives by adulterous husbands. (Funke, 2016; Bland, 1995).

At the very least the halls offered some representations of confident, sexually aware young women who often gained the upper hand in their encounters with men. Ignorant, unworldly women, like Vesta Victoria's naïve and easily misled characters were frequently ridiculed, not because they were innocent (a state sentimentally valued on the halls), but because they could so easily be taken advantage of and turned into victims. Men, and improving male attitudes to and behaviour towards women, may have been the targets of campaigner Josephine Butler, the White Cross League et al, but for Lloyd the message to the women in her audiences was that they could not rely on either men or middle class reformers of either sex to protect them. They had to take responsibility for their own physical safety, their reputations, and their economic and marriage prospects.

That uninformed women were the butts of jokes in many comic songs ensured that women in music-hall audiences did not want to be associated with them but with the likes of the witty, successful and rich Marie Lloyd. If they were 'knowing' and in on the jokes she performed, then they were smart and 'savvy' enough to negotiate the complexities of life in a city that demanded a certain amount of wariness, particularly for women. Many songs tapped into this increasing appeal for young women of the image of the independent city girl who was, as Jane Traies has suggested, able to 'exercise choice, to defend her virtue against all comers...and to outwit men by a combination of sexual attractiveness and cunning'. (1986, p.39) Their shared laughter confirmed they were, like her, knowing (i.e. smart enough) to spot any physical or moral perils and avoid them, with a little cheerful guidance from Lloyd.

Any references to sexual encounters or acceptance of popular realities regarding sexuality were inevitably disapproved of by middle-class reformers and moralists, but what Lloyd and many other female music-hall performers 'preached' through their coded performances was that – in the fast-evolving metropolitan environment where she was inevitably spending more time alone at work, on public transport and at leisure – the modern woman, 'the new working girl' (Traies, 1986 p.36) needed to arm herself with information in order to survive the minefield of late-Victorian morality and social expectations and, as discussed in Chapter 3, given the increased opportunities for close encounters with strangers (Bailey, 1998, p. 147; Traies in Bratton, 1986, pp.38-39) to enjoy herself while also defending herself from the unwanted sexual advances of men. As the Bessie Coleman example in Chapter 3 demonstrates, the use of public transport as a signifier for these possibilities finds its way into many songs. Lloyd performed a number of these: *She'd Never Had Her Ticket Punched Before* (Scott, 1897) in which she tells the story of a young country woman's misinterpretation of the railway guard's apparently innocuous request to 'punch her ticket' as she arrives in London for the first time. This necessitates her protecting her honour (her 'ticket') and leads to her turning violent and ending up in court for spectacularly attacking twelve porters. In *I've Never Lost My Last Train Yet* (Rollit and Le Brunn, 1906), she takes on the character of a woman who is bored of provincial life:

And I'm longing for sensations
Such as gentle dissipations,
Which I always find in London when I go.

She goes on to describe all the fun and 'fiz' she has enjoyed in London but notes that despite learning 'to know the bliss/Of a stolen little kiss' and having found herself 'wrapt in amorous embrace', she has still never 'lost my last train yet'. This song was a perfect fit for Lloyd's on-stage persona and it is notable that she sings it in the first person, unlike the previous example who is a silly girl whose story she told as narrator; Lloyd, unlike Vesta Victoria, did not identify personally with this kind of self-deprecatory weakness early in her career. The performed knowingness here is barely disguised and the 'last train' as a euphemism for her virginity becomes clearer as the song progress. She notes that she would 'love to have a flat in Piccadilly' because this would allow her to:

go and do exactly as I choose,
For had I my habitation
In a West End situation,
Then of course, I would not have a train to lose.

The suggestion here is that, living independently in the West End as part of the 'fast' set, she imagines that she would not remain a virgin long.

What emerges is that – though certainly not entirely unequivocally, given that most were written by men – many songs performed by women in this period do address women's shifting attitudes to their social positions, their gendered roles and to their relationships with men; and indicate that their confidence and independence were increasing, along with the desire to express their understanding of the modern world and their place within it, and to not to be mistaken for innocents, ignorants or victims. Through their shape-shifting, self-consciously knowing performance styles, serio-comics found ways of sharing experiences and articulating the unspoken realities that increased possibilities for sexual encounters provided and some also offered strong and independent female role models whose on-stage personas embraced their sexuality and demonstrated

that knowledge was nothing to be ashamed of and that nothing good happened to ill-informed women.

Performing censorship off stage

Off stage performers often needed to self-censor, performing acceptable versions of femininity for the press and denying any sexual knowledge or that there was any sexual content in their acts. Lloyd's public image, like Bellwood's, was carefully maintained over the course of her career. Both had risqué reputations that guaranteed their popularity and periodically required them to defend themselves in the press and, in Bellwood's case, in the courts. Her comic practice of unscripted gagging, with raucous coded slang and innuendo, made it virtually impossible for the LCC or managers to clamp down on her in any sustained way and, as noted in Chapter 3, she defiantly defended her reputation in court several times.

Such unequivocal public denials of indecency were crucial for successful women performers and Lloyd and Bellwood frequently rebelliously used the nature of innuendo to defend themselves. Lloyd also regularly responded to criticisms of her performances and apparently relished the opportunity to do so, often writing letters and taking out advertisements in the press to answer her detractors. In 1897, during a visit to New York, she published a piece written in the first person for the *New York Telegraph* categorically denying that any of her performances were improper and cleverly using the potential of innuendo to create double meanings to defend her frequent use of innuendo. This was the year in which Lloyd was particularly exercised by this issue, as social purity campaigners had directly attacked her performances at the LCC licensing sessions of the previous October. Her denials in the article read like an extension of her teasing on-stage persona as she performs the innocent victim and quotes the lyrics of a number of her songs, disingenuously asking her readers: 'Can you see where the thickness comes in? Why, even a parson couldn't see it was blue unless someone told him.' She claims: 'Just because I sing them they are suggestive and vulgar...I'll bet if I sang the songs of Solomon set to music I would be accused of making them bad'. She uses the

lyrics of *From Saturday To Monday* to defend herself, claiming that 'The words are absolutely clean':

Oh, will you come with me
To Brighton-by-the-sea,
And will you go upon my yacht on Sunday?
If you only say the word,
I'll take you like a bird,
And bring you safely back to town on
Monday.

The inference in the song is obvious: the chorus girl – shorthand for the quintessentially 'fast', promiscuous woman in the music-hall imagination – is to stay overnight on the young man's yacht. But, as Lloyd points out, the words *are* absolutely clean. Using *She'd Never Had Her Ticket Punched Before* as an example of another misjudged lyric she, once again, pleads innocence: 'It isn't really bad, you know. It's not at all thick, and yet the people get clever and say it means all sorts of things. I can't help that, can I? I can't make people think straight.' This deflects attention from her performance and suggests that anyone accusing her of immorality would have to admit that they were sufficiently sexually 'knowing' to identify and decode the intended double meanings they were attacking her for presenting. She makes it clear that she certainly is not going to make such accusations easy for them; she does not even acknowledge the possibility that *Saturday to Monday* could be interpreted as a suggestive song, steering well clear of admissions of any sort of impropriety. Her refusal to accept responsibility for the creation of any indecency in her performance reveals that she understands precisely how innuendo works; that double meanings in comic performances are created when audiences recognise them, not simply when writers write them, or performers deliver them.

What is most notable about this article is what she pretends not to know. She uses her lyrics to defend herself, but the lyrics were not the reason she was criticised: her performances were. Lloyd was, of course, well aware that the comic meaning in music-hall songs was located not in written texts but in performance, and equally well aware that the words of the songs she interpreted were sometimes

suggestive, but never explicitly indecent. Given her well-documented skills of interpretation and re-interpretation, her text heightening (and frequently subverting) use of gesture, facial expression, and direct address of audiences, it is difficult to read her indignant evasion of a discussion about her performance in this article as anything other than knowing and arch. This press 'performance' is reminiscent of one of her misunderstood innocent maiden characters and offers the most telling evidence of the strategy she employed when dealing with the press and her critics throughout her career.

Chapter conclusion

As Susan Bordo has suggested, reflecting on Foucault's ideas about power: 'Where there is power...there is also resistance' (Bordo, 1993b, p.27) and, while the dominant culture may not be radically altered by every dirty joke told by a woman or every suggestive gesture she performs, subversive and transformative acts bring about change incrementally 'through local and often minute shifts in power' (Bordo, 1993b, p.28), sometimes inadvertently and in surprising ways. 'Every joke is a tiny revolution', said Orwell in his 1945 essay on humour in which, echoing Bakhtin, he suggests that 'obscenity is a kind of subversiveness'.¹¹ (Orwell, 1945) Franca Rame suggested that it has 'always been...the most effective of all weapons in the struggle to free people from...a sense of guilt or shame, and an anxiety over sinfulness', and that relieving this anxiety through comedy 'has always been the principal task of comic writers and performers, especially the women among them.' (Rame in Fo, 1991, pp.196-197) My intention here has been to demonstrate that these women were engaged in performing nightly acts of creative subversion and resistance, challenging and contradicting expectations about their behaviour and confounding attempts to control their comic expression of commonly understood but 'unspeakable' popular realities and truths about sex. Their paradoxical relationship with the censor is why innuendo became so ubiquitous in music-hall programmes and why audiences took such pleasure in their active roles in its creation as part of the 'conspiracy of meaning' (Bailey, 1998, p.137) through which performers led them to share their enjoyment of the unspeakable and to not simply reject censorship, but to incorporate it into their entertainments. Censorship had the unintended consequence of influencing the style and content of

music-hall comedy in this period and of increasing audience enjoyment by prompting performers to offer a subversive commentary on what was implicitly and explicitly censored throughout Victorian society. The late-nineteenth/early twentieth-century discourse about sexuality and gender roles and behaviour was extensive and popular entertainers undoubtedly contributed to it in this way. The popular approach did not intersect with the ideas being espoused by radical feminism or the scientific propositions of the sexologists, however, as an increasingly culturally significant form, music hall was inevitably part of the debate. Arguably, because of the large numbers of people who attended their performances every night, their role was more significant in terms of influencing attitudes towards sex and sexual pleasure and broadening understanding of what women's roles in society should or could be. While some representations of women doubtless provided opportunities for the male gazer to project whatever fantasies were most agreeable to him, the range of examples included in this chapter demonstrate that there were also many comic performers who transcended mere titillation. Simply publicly acknowledging that female sexual thoughts and attraction existed, revealing this through coded verbal and physical gestures and reassuring women in audiences that such thoughts were 'normal' while sharing laughs about both the pleasures and embarrassments associated with their sexed and gendered bodies were, to recall Orwell's phrase, tiny revolutions on the road to greater female sexual freedoms.

This chapter has considered the impacts of a number of forms of music-hall censorship on the content and style of women's performances, particularly those about sexual attraction and sexuality; how they – in the moment – performed innuendo and therefore censorship and the unspeakable. The 'unspeakable' remained unspoken, but there was a shared public acknowledgement and endorsement of it through laughter. What is evident is that their knowing performances of what they were (publicly) assumed to be ignorant about created a fracture in this perception. As many music-hall examples demonstrate, women used coded performance techniques to confirm for their audiences what they already knew: that their presumed innocence and ignorance was simply not true.

To return to the argument made at the end of Chapter 3: performers working within the conventions of such an immediate popular form could not pretend that women were, or wanted to be, as unknowing as representations of Victorian women often suggest. The liveness of popular forms demands, in this sense, authenticity and – while the position of women as objects is rarely even a consideration for these women – they were achieving agency and a level of genuine connection with audiences. This chapter has focused on the transmission of meanings through the performance of verbal innuendo. However, the significance of the female body in transmitting both coded and explicit meaning as part of this process should not be underestimated. The body is, as Butler says, ‘a cultural sign’ (1988, p.522) and the following chapter is concerned with the physical aspects of women’s performances that were used to underline, emphasise or subvert the content of the kinds of verbal play examined above. Judith Butler argues in *Excitable Speech* that as speech ‘is taken to be a sign of agency’ (Butler, 1997, p.84) it can forcefully display a woman’s impact on those around her. But the female body is also a site of potentially hugely significant influence for women and ‘no act of speech can fully control or determine the rhetorical effects of the body which speaks.’ (1997, p.155). This potentiality is riven with paradox; theories about the sexual agency offered to women through their presentation of the sexualised female body continue to be contested. We cannot fully know the impact of the body on an audience or assess, particularly from this retrospective distance, precisely how audiences reacted to the range of ways in which women comedians enlisted their bodies and their sexuality to create humour. Nevertheless, the following chapter will build on the examples raised here and make use of a range of critical perspectives to examine how the woman comic performer was and is able to use her body and the ways in which she can do so and remain an ‘active agent’ (Harris, 1996, p.78), rather than being simply objectified.

Notes

¹ See Rutherford (1986) for an account of the class demography of music hall performers. Contemporaneous biographies, interviews and commentaries indicate that the majority were drawn from the lower classes.

² Noteworthy here, in terms of its influence on the later development of ideas to explain sexual behaviour, is the emergence of 'sexology' in Europe during the two decades following the publication of Darwin's 1871 *Descent of Man*. According to Sheila Jeffreys (1995) advocates of this new determinist science believed men could not escape their sexual urges because they were 'ordained biologically and could not be controlled'. (p.199) Such claims were disputed by many feminists of the period who identified male sexual urges as a social issue, and prostitution as a matter in need of debate and education, rather than punishment for women. (Jeffreys, p.195; Funke, p.1) See also Lucy Bland, 1995.

³ Butler attributes the English translation of the concept of 'foreclosure' to Lacanian psychoanalysts Jean Laplanche and J.-B Pontalis which she defines as a 'primordial rejection of that which remains outside of the symbolic universe of the subject.' This is distinguished from more conscious repression of certain kinds of speech. (Butler, 1997, p.138 and pp.178-179).

⁴ Bellwood's immense popularity is indisputable: in the summer of 1890 there were reports of a scene approaching a riot at the Gaiety Concert Hall in Birmingham when she failed to appear due to a sprained ankle. (*The Era*, July 19, 1890, p.16)

⁵ This increase in popularity is supported by a piece in the *Entr'acte & Limelight Theatrical and Musical Critic and Advertiser* (October 17, 1896 p.5) reporting considerably increased sales of the sheet music of *I Know Now* follow the publicity surrounding the complaints to the LCC about Lloyd's performances of the song.

⁶ Bailey has noted the shift in music hall songs from narrative ballads to episodic structures like this. (Bailey, 1998, p. 134)

⁷ Gamp: type of umbrella (after Mrs. Gamp who carried one in Charles Dickens' 1844 *The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit*). Twig: to understand (Green, 1998, p.1239)

⁸ This song was described as 'suggestive and undesirable' by the TMHC inspector who reported on Wallace's performance of it at the Tivoli in May 1904. He said that parts of the song 'were intended and were taken by the audience as indecent'. (LCC/MIN/10916)

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¹⁰ 'Dick' became commonly used as a slang term for penis from this period. (Green, p.327)

¹¹ Although for Orwell this subversion was not for women: he also said that '[a] woman cannot be low without being disgusting'. (Orwell Vol. 12. p.253)

Chapter 5

'Every Little Movement Has A Meaning of Its Own': comic gestus and the ironic embodiment of gender

Comedy with its essential anarchism is perhaps the most appropriate tool to mock canonical attitudes towards the female body. (Porter, 1998, p.81)

The discourse surrounding the female body on stage raises a series of ongoing ideological challenges and questions that it is well beyond the scope of this thesis to consider in depth. In this chapter, it is my intention to achieve a more modest goal, making use of recent shifts in feminist thinking around representations and readings of the female body, in conjunction with Brecht's theories about performance attitude and Diamond's feminist re-readings of these along with contemporary perspectives on the practice of stand-up comedy and a range of specific performance analyses, to consider the ways in which the body of the female comic has been – and continues to be – perceived and received by audiences, and to identify how far women comedians can be said to have contributed to the discourse surrounding their comic interventions by creating performances 'in which social attitudes about gender' are 'made visible.' (Geis, 1996, p.169)

Embodying the joke

As Porter suggests, women's comic performance has been defined 'by physicality and sexuality' (1998, p.70) and, in music-hall entertainments, there was evidently an acceptability gap between suggestive innuendo and unfettered obscenity: a gap that women performers were frequently attempting to straddle. Success depended on an individual performer's ability to keep in delicate balance her material as it was written, the nuances of her verbal delivery and the necessary subtleties (or not) of the physical and gestural skill the piece demanded. If this balance was maintained, her adoption of common female stereotypes and manipulation of audience perceptions for comic purposes allowed a raft of potentially challenging attitudes and ideas to be shared with and enjoyed by audiences.

A woman was *performing herself*, as subject and object of her performance and was, as John Berger observed, watching herself performing and always aware of the impact of her embodiment of gender (1972). I am using the term embodiment here after Butler: as a means of exploring the ways in which 'cultural values emerge as the result of an inscription on the body' (1990, p.130)

As I argue in the previous chapter, women took on a range of comic characters to explore the suggestive limits of 'knowing artlessness' in their acts. Male comics did, of course, also play the ignorant or the innocent for laughs and music-hall lyrics are littered with clueless country boys, Champagne Charlies, 'nice but dim' rich buffoons being taken advantage of by head-turning, worldly-wise gold diggers, and vicars or schoolteachers 'accidentally' getting into discomfiting predicaments with smart young ladies. However, feigned innocence performed by a woman held far more incendiary potential during the performance itself as she simultaneously embodied presumed purity and the suggestion of sexual availability. Alternatively, if she took on a narrator's voice, a female performer necessarily revealed a degree of knowingness and therefore her own carnal awareness or experience. Men performed suggestive material and were frequently criticised for it, but they were not embodying the morally ambivalent possibility of forbidden sexual pleasure as women were.

For women performers and the women in their audiences, their 'embodied reality' (Janet Price & Margrit Shildrick, 1999, p.19) was the experience of being under constant surveillance *as women*; of being identified with the body, indeed, *as the body* (ibid. p.17), as has been the case in their representation in much Western philosophy, art and culture. As numerous feminist thinkers have argued, women's gendered bodies are more directly implicated in their public activities than are men's. The body is 'a text saturated with gendered symbols and meanings' (Bordo, 1993a, p.24). Foucault's frequently referenced theory about the impact of history on what he referred to as the 'docile body', has been deftly adapted by feminist theorists (including Bordo, 1993a; Butler, 1993) and applied to women's experience of 'becoming' women (Beauvoir, 1953) and taking on their gendered identities, and to theorise the control and manipulation of the body and the ways

in which women's behaviour is constructed and shaped by history, capitalism and patriarchy. As Price and Shildrick neatly summarise:

the deployments of the body through acts and gestures, especially in terms of gendered sexuality, are, through a process of reiteration, productive of a discursive identity that is both open and constrained. (1999, p.9)

These reiterations were acutely evident in late nineteenth-century English society in which performers' bodies were commodified as part of their acts; embodying sexual availability alongside those of the prostitutes who worked the halls. This position led to a complex power relationship between women performers, their audiences and wider society. As Foucault suggests, and Bordo reframes from a feminist perspective, this relationship is not straightforward; rather power is 'a dynamic or network of non-centralized forces' (1993a, p.26). There is dominance at play here, but it results in a complex of surveillance, desire, embodiment, 'self-surveillance and self-correction to norms' (ibid. p.27). In this way, serio-comics were projecting their personalities through their comic agency; they provoked laughter and desire and were both admired and disapproved of.

Some key feminist criticism of the 1980s and 90s argued that women routinely engage in behaviours that reinforce the construction of gender. While I recognise the dangers of the reductive application or rejection of these theories, some consideration of them in relation to the constitution of female comic identities through the body is indispensable here. According to such frameworks, women performing bawdy or suggestive humour, who are 'masquerading womanliness' (Riviere, 1929; Butler, 1990, Mary Ann Doane, 1982), are in danger of making use of their normatively gendered bodies as part of performances which can be read as naïvely colluding in the perpetuation of negative stereotyping. They are either 'self-disciplining' because they are 'invested' in 'the perpetuation of certain forms of femininity' (Bartky, 1988, p.77), or as Monique Deveaux summarises some critiques of female responses in her reading of Foucault's 'panopticon' paradigm: they 'lack the critical distance necessary to contest' the internalised 'feminine ideal' (1994, p.226).¹

I hear the echo of Showalter's words, quoted in the introduction to this thesis, regarding the importance of accepting women *on their own terms*. While the concept of individual lived 'experience' through the body as the primary focus for feminist analysis of the historical relationship between gender and sex has been contested as a limiting rejection of social and political hierarchies and processes by some feminist readings (Scott, 1992), it can also be seen as valuable recognition of the 'historically contingent' and as 'highlighting the importance of the particular, the local and the pragmatic' in an understanding of women's historical subordination (Howson, 2005, p.146). Readings of the popular which disregard the historical 'embodied realities' of sex and sexuality for both sexes, and which do not recognise the significance of the ways in which women have owned and embodied their sexuality and used their bodies to contest essentialist social and moral constraints, run the risk of reducing all women to 'passive' entities; treating them, as Deveaux argues, 'as robotic receptacles of culture rather than as active agents who are both constituted by, and reflective of, their social and cultural contexts.' (1994, p.227)

There is, for example, nothing robotic about the 1915 audio recording of Marie Lloyd performing of *A Little of What You Fancy*, which she sings in her rasping tone and clipped Cockney accent. Half speaking many of the lines, her voice oozes mischief, suggestion and all the life experience of her 45 years. (Windyridge CDR6, 1915)

A rejection of biological essentialism regarding the female body is not incompatible with a positive reading of women's comic performances containing heteronormative innuendo and suggestion and behaviour which potentially titillated many men and women in their audiences, as well as making them laugh at comic representations such as the desperate spinster or less than ideal mother sometimes had other consequences. Gender construction is, according to Butler (1990, p.147), the place where agency can be articulated. I am arguing that women's embodiment of a range of comic characters allowed their audiences to recognise both the construction of and the failure or subversion of gender. Their work demonstrates that they had creative agency despite 'overarching social constraints' (McNay, p.12).

Moreover, women are not immune to the bawdy humour of dirty jokes and, frequently, their own bodies form part of these jokes. Freud (1905) and Gershon Legman (1968) may have concluded that women can only be the objects of humorous smut, never its creators, but many female performers from all eras would beg to differ. In stand-up, for example, as part of the 2001 film of the US *Queens of Comedy* tour, 'Queen' Mo'Nique performed an unapologetically celebratory acceptance of sexual realities in an act largely focused on racial and gender weight and body issues and included a number of extended and extremely graphic descriptions of sexual encounters and sexual advice to women, including an explanation of the practical difficulties of two 'fat motherfuckers' having sex. Throughout this sequence she giggles and laughs infectiously both at the memory of a specific encounter and in direct response to her Memphis audience's shocked and delighted reactions to her physical and vocal embodiment of remembered sexual frustration: 'It's too much! It's too much...you're lying there: he's looking for your shit, you trying to find his shit!' (*Queens of Comedy*, 2001)

In 2012, British live artist Bryony Kimmings performed a very different but equally graphic take on the female body in her *Fanny Song (or Subterranean Vaginal Blues)*, which features Kimmings and dozens of volunteers who appear in the accompanying video, performing through heightened gesture and costume a list of several hundred alternative words for vagina².

Increasingly, feminist approaches to the role of the body in female art and culture recognise the value of women making strategic use of their bodies and sexuality. Lois McNay employs Luce Irigaray's ideas about how women 'may block the patriarchal logic' regarding femininity, (1992, p.20) She suggests Irigaray's 'articulation of a female sexuality through a notion of the biological body' can be read as 'purely strategic rather than essentialist.' (ibid.)

In 2015/16 Adrienne Truscott performed *Asking For It*, her stand-up comedy show about rape, naked from the waist down (except for her platform heels).³ Truscott has described feeling 'totally powerful and at ease and happy' during her

performances, noting that during the act she could observe male responses shifting from anticipating titillation to discomfort while they laugh: 'I'm not a stripper...there's nothing about my nudity that is on display for them in that particular way that they are accustomed to.' (Hairston, 2016)

In the late twentieth century, performance artist and former sex worker Annie Sprinkle similarly re-contextualised images of the female body and engaged in a subversion of her identity as former sex worker and porn actress. During her frequently very humorous autobiographical piece, *Post-Porn Modernist* (1989–1996), and in other performance contexts, she has performed a *Bosom Ballet* in which 'I stretch, pinch, squeeze, twist, rock, roll and jiggle my breasts' in time to *The Blue Danube*. 'I wear opera-length black gloves and a tutu' (Sprinkle) She has also sold 'tits on your head' photos as part of this 'parodic show-and-tell of her life as a sexual performer' (Williams, 1993, p.117) The potentially challenging content of this show led to mixed criticism. However, 'sex positive' Sprinkle maintained that audiences were free to respond to the work however they did, and that she did not mind if sexual arousal was one of these responses. Williams argues that Sprinkle's 'sexual performances, firmly rooted in the conventions of pornography and the persona of whore, are provocative instances of agency that draw upon the performative traditions of the sexually saturated woman without simply duplicating them'. (ibid., pp.119-120)

Also using nudity, performance artist Janice Perry has drawn on the very different conventions of high culture and art, gaining agency from her nakedness while satirising the use of the female body in art in her autobiographical piece *Naked At The Met* (first performed 2013). As part of this performance, she recalls working as artist-in-residence at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and being asked to present a performance response to a colloquium on art during which seven speakers (six women, one man) 'made reference only to white male artists' (Perry, 2014, p.299). She performed her response – a poem made up of the 'hackneyed phrases I had collected from the day's presentations' (ibid.) – while simultaneously showing a video she had shot during the day of 'a woman custodian and a male security guard, people of color, slowly walking down a long hallway hung with self-

portraits by children.’ (ibid.) While she played the video of these Met employees as they stopped to comment on each child’s piece, she removed all her clothes, which, as she was standing behind a lectern, it took the attendees some time to notice. In her subsequent performances of this event, Perry performs what Richard Schechner has called ‘twice-behaved behavior’ (1985, p.36), by re-enacting the same actions for her current audience and reiterating her original intention by imitating the historical position of women in art as the naked objects of art made by men. Perry tells her audience that, at the end of her Met performance, all the attendees’ comments concerned her body or the removal of her clothes, rather than the content/meaning of the piece. Her serious intent and the surprising and comic strategy she employs to achieve it, makes use of her body in a way that, like Sprinkle, is both imitating the historical position of her gender in culture and using comedy to subvert the appropriation of the female body.

In her 2013 article about comic performances by contemporary female performance artists, Hannah Ballou argues that ‘the normatively sexy female comic body can derive or enhance its comic proposal via the incongruity of its designated unfunniness.’ (2013, p.180) The assumption that ‘normatively sexy’ women cannot be funny – prevalent throughout the twentieth century – is being constantly challenged in the contemporary period, following the outrage that accompanied Christopher Hitchens’ now tediously notorious 2007 *Vanity Fair* article, ‘Why Women Still Aren’t Funny’, which I will dwell on no further than to quote British comedian Bridget Christie’s response:

If Christopher Hitchens was right about this, and men are funnier than women because they need to be in order to have sex, then why do so many men have to pay for sex so often? There must be a shitload of unfunny men out there, because sex work is going really well. (Christie, 2015, p.65)

In the wake of Hitchens’ article Christie, Silverman, Fey, Amy Poehler, Kristen Wiig, and several other US and British women comedians engaged in a public discourse about the female body, notions of attractiveness and sexism in comedy: ‘the pretty versus funny debate’ (Stanley, 2008; Mizejewski, 2014). At the heart of this debate is the changing role women’s looks have played in their perception and reception

as comedians. According to Alexandra Stanley, in her 2008 riposte to Hitchens for *Vanity Fair* 'Who Says Women Aren't Funny?': 'It used to be that women were not funny. Then they couldn't be funny if they were pretty. Now female comedian has to be pretty—even sexy—to get a laugh' (Stanley, p.185) Ann Emery, a British variety performer performing comedy in the mid-twentieth century confirms the pretty/funny divide part of Stanley's hypothesis: 'I poked fun at myself because you're not supposed to be pretty or glamorous if you're funny.' (Emery, 1998)

Mizejewski argues that 'no matter what they look like' women comedians 'have been located in opposition to "pretty," enabling them to engage in a transgressive comedy grounded in the female body.' (2014, p.5) For women comedians, likely audience attitudes to their bodies, perceptions of their attractiveness and their appearance *as* women does continue to foreground and inform their performance choices before they walk on stage, and the relationships nineteenth-century women had with their audiences, and with wider society have compelling contemporary resonances. Numerous women comedians working in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and commentators writing about them, have noted that women are required to negotiate a range of gender-loaded expectation and assumption before they attempt to make audiences laugh. Porter notes that they are 'locked into a battle for control of meanings circulating around their bodies' (1998, p.80) which leads, as Linda Mizjewski suggests, inevitably to much of their comedy being 'grounded in the cultural body' (2014, p.15). Drawing specifically on John Berger's influential argument concerning women as visual objects and 'women's internalization of male surveillance' (1972, p.14) and echoing Mulvey (1975) and Foucault (1977), Mizjewski argues that 'the dynamic of stand-up performances by women often entails the male gaze even if the point is its subversion or elision'. (2014, p.15)

There is evidence that many contemporary women comedians' experiences of performing comedy routinely include dealing with male responses to their appearance either as sexual objects, or as physically undesirable, vulnerable or weak. Throughout her early career, comedian Jo Brand made frequent pre-emptively self-deprecating references to her own appearance, according to Brand

herself, before someone else (a man) in her audience did so.⁴ According to *The Observer*, 'Fuck off, you fat cow' was shouted repeatedly by a male heckler during her first ever stand-up performance. (*The Observer*, 15th May 2016) In the US, Fey writes and speaks very eloquently about the inherent sexism she and her female colleagues have experienced during their comedy careers, and of the assumptions people made about her early in her career because of her small stature and 'wholesome girl' looks. (Fey, 2011) Like all women, frequently 'women comics are judged for their looks before they have a chance to speak.' (Mizjewski, 2014, p.14)

The nineteenth-century performer was similarly visually scrutinised and appraised by audiences and, as the immediacy of popular comic forms demand, in order to get laughs, she needed to acknowledge, in the moment, what was evident to all: that her body was being presented as part of her comedy; that she embodied her jokes. Her female body was, in this way, 'the political, social, and cultural object par excellence'. (Grosz, 1994, p.18) The constant appraisal of women in public life, particularly regarding the ways in which their bodies were presented in conjunction with the LCC's sometimes obsessive desire to censor any reference to sexual matters in public performances, resulted in attention frequently being on a performer's body rather than on her comedy and, as demonstrated in Chapter 1, the music-hall press contains many references to what female comics wore and how they looked.

While attitudes to the content and performance style of women's comedy have altered, in this sense the nineteenth-century performer shares a parallel experience with her contemporary counterpart. As Porter suggests, this 'implies the persistence of myths around the female body and the trans-historical desire for the woman to conform to notions of physical beauty.' (1998, p.80) Women performing comedy in any era have made use of such 'myths' and incorporated them into their acts. It is inevitable that to create successful comedy performers must acknowledge and offer commentary on perceptions about women, gender roles, sexualities and their relationships with and distinctness from men. Central to this commentary is the female body and with 'every action, every utterance, she calls attention to herself – as art, as entertainment, as commodity.' (Gilbert, 2004, p.154)

It is worth noting that the surveillance of women's bodies and the need to control how they were used and presented in music-hall performance was not exclusively concerned with explicitly suggestive material, often extending to physical sections of acts and those that were predominantly based on physical skills. Women music-hall artists often demonstrated a high level of physical strength, skill and fitness. Jenny Hill, for example, often included physical comedy in her performances and was a talented exponent of highly acrobatic dances including the hornpipe. (Bratton, 1986, p.107) Frequently, these dances were closely scrutinised and often assumed to be indecent.⁵ Lottie Collins – interviewed about her huge 1891 hit song with its accompanying extremely physically demanding high-kicking 'skirt dance', *Ta-Ra-Ra Boom-de-ay* (Sayers, 1891) – was at pains to point out how hard she worked to ensure her performance was not vulgar:

I am very careful on this point. Just as soon as I find myself getting a little too free on a word, I immediately tone myself down on the words that follow. My idea of the song is that it represents a young woman who is really not so bad as she seems to be, but who takes advantage of the absence of her elders to have a harmlessly lively time by herself. You will notice that I throw a great deal of emphasis on the assertion 'I'm not too good, but not too bad,' and the audience has to accept that." (*The Era*, October 8 1892, p. 13.)

Collins is, of course, speaking to a journalist here and is keen to uphold her reputation for decency, and as Davis observes, this performance had an undeniably erotic impact. She was accused of vulgarity a number of times, a testament perhaps to the threat of female physical abandon it suggested by connecting the possibility of a sexual encounter with, by all accounts, breath-taking athleticism and glimpses of her undergarments. (Davis, 1991, p.117)

However, unlike Lloyd's tongue-in-cheek denials of innuendo in the *New York Telegraph*, discussed in Chapter 4, this interview offers a glimpse of the careful line women had to tread during a performance. Collins' acknowledgement that, whilst delivering one line she might realise that she needed to hold back on the next or risk going too far, suggests a level of critical self-awareness and close performance analysis rarely credited to nineteenth-century popular performers.⁶

'Every joke is a Brechtian device...'

I noted in Chapter 2 how Diamond's re-reading of Brecht's theory of *Gestus* from a feminist perspective as 'gestic criticism' can be usefully applied to deconstructions of gender in comic performances. Here I would like to return to both theories and consider their use in developing an understanding of women's embodiment of their comic performances. Lily Marney's *Going To Be Married In The Morning* (Conley, 1898) is a helpful example of this process and certainly her exaggerated, parodic version of marriageable womanhood and her physical presentation as grotesque and psychotic feed into an interpretation that subverts the familiar and acceptable. The pleasure for the audience is in the rejection of the norm, or in Marney's physical embodiment of a character who is so far from the norm that the norm itself is called into question. (Linda Kintz, 1992; Rowe, 1995)

A definition of Brecht's 'gestus' is far from straightforward but, for the purposes of this thesis, it can be summarised as the way that, through a combination of physical gestures, words and actions, a performer communicates the underlying social attitude of a performance text to an audience. For Brecht, this attitude should of course also embody the social conditions and history of the performer/production. Awareness of this technique is extremely useful in any analysis of comic performance. As my former colleague, stand-up comedy and Brecht specialist Arthur Husk used to say: 'Every joke is a Brechtian device, though not every Brechtian device is a joke.' Husk's joke relates to his understanding, evidently shared with Brecht, that laughter and the recognition and appreciation of humour often result in cognitive detachment; a tendency that has been examined by numerous commentators from a range of disciplines.⁷

Gestus was not developed specifically as a comic tool, but it can be applied very effectively to performed comedy. Ekkehard Schall, leading Berliner Ensemble actor for over 30 years illustrates the point in his accounts of working on Brecht's productions, noting that the '*Gestus*, or the stance that someone takes towards a situation, does not always agree with the meaning [*Sinn*] of the opinions and thoughts expressed in the situation.' (Schall, 2012, pp. 68-70) He goes on to explain that:

What's true at the theatre is true in life: the speaker's stance takes precedence over the meaning of the text, the first subordinates the second. Every text, every spoken thought can be manipulated. 'The truth is concrete' means that it asserts itself either perceptibly or covertly. (ibid.)

In comedy, audiences may receive and perceive the 'truth' in an ironic performance in stages through various performance modes and, in this sense, *gestus* – the performer's 'stance towards the text' – perfectly describes the position or 'attitude' a comedian takes in telling a joke. Comic attitude is not static, rather it shifts throughout a performance leading the audience up one path in order to surprise them into a laugh by quickly reversing or changing paths completely. This is comic signposting: revealing just enough, not too much too soon; letting the audience perceive a glimpse of your ironic *gestus* but not exposing it completely, so they cannot know for sure until you deliver the punch line; in music hall, this is usually located in the chorus of the song.

Comic attitude is revealed through a combination of what a comedian says and how she says it; what her gestures, facial expressions and physicality reveal about the words she has spoken. Attitude is not the comedian's intention alone, but this will be evident in her delivery and the recognition of a surprising, inappropriate or subversive attitude to a piece of material reveals much about a performer's intention and how she wants the material to resonate for them.

As I frequently remind my stand-up comedy students, it is often a comedian's *attitude* to an idea or an event that turns it into comedy. During a workshop on comic attitude I was leading in occupied Palestine, one performer presented the traumatic moment when Israeli soldiers woke her household and dragged her Palestinian husband away in the middle of the night. She 'flipped' her 'real' attitude to the event, re-telling the story as a celebration. So, the soldiers she embodied became charming and overly apologetic and were banging on the door because the couple had won the Israeli lottery, a jeep, and an all-expenses paid trip to the beach.⁸ In later performances for Palestinian audiences, for whom visits from the Israeli military in the night are not uncommon and are never good news, the

laughter this re-imagined scenario elicited was both cathartic and politically charged.

Comedians are well versed in adopting an ironic 'stance' towards a given subject and, in presenting this kind of ironic 'truth', the performer's presence *as performer* mediates the ironic attitude. While Brecht intended audiences to be aware of the actor's presence and history, in terms of the 'concrete truth' of a given character, in the comic *gestus* I am identifying here, the comedian is able to slip in and out of attitude far more fluidly and, once the audience have laughed, to return to her own 'voice' as comedian. The Palestinian audience knew that this performer was not being flippant but deadly serious about the situation, that she was actually terrified and desperate when her husband was taken; and that her embodiment of an entirely inappropriate and exaggerated attitude was a form of comic revenge on the individual soldiers and the regime they represent. She gave the soldiers sickly smiles, behind which a lingering hate-filled threat of violence was still discernible. In an instant, all at once, she demonstrated the soldiers' apparent attitudes and the hints at their menace, combined with her own presence, her memory of the lived experience and her 'real' relationship with the soldiers to form her comic *gestus*. The mix of anger and comic release she and her audience felt as a result of her reframing the event as a joke was audibly palpable in the huge laughs she received for this section of her act.

Jenny Hill's previously mentioned song, *I've Been A Good Woman To You*, which, Bratton (1986) notes, she performed as a drunken wife, offers an excellent example of comic attitude or *gestus*. As commentary on the 'woman's place', Hill's approach to her husband's neglect and *his* drunkenness is arguably far more illuminating, entertaining and truthful, than the application of a pathetic or sentimental attitude might provide.

***Gestus*, innuendo and the parody of sex appeal**

In songs driven by sexual allusion, the performer's comic *gestus* encompassed both the innuendo *and* an embodied acknowledgement that she was tricking the censor. To return to a specific example used in the previous chapter, the witness in the

1890 Peggy Pryde court case referred to several of the performer's 'lewd' gestures. Pryde performed these either synchronously with specific lines from the song or retrospectively, once the line had been delivered. These gestures evidently unlocked the potential of the implicitly suggestive lyric, transforming the sexual innuendo into explicit, embodied smut. One such, the male witness told the hearing, was a 'squeezing gesture' she made after delivering the line 'And it would make you feel so funny if you saw them go like this'; another followed the line 'And it would make you feel so funny if you saw them—' after which, apparently, 'there was a dead stop and a pause' followed by 'a gesture that I cannot describe just now but which was interpreted by the audience'. (*The Era*, March 1 1890, p.17) Whether the witness could not find the words to describe Pryde's physical gesture or could not bring himself to remains unclear, as does exactly how the audience 'interpreted' her gesture.

What is evident from this case is that performers were making use of their bodies to drive home the implicit meanings offered by the lyrics of their songs and they were doing so in dialogue with their audiences. This is what many committee-meeting discussions about obscenity and objectionable elements during this period indicate. While scripted words on paper were to some extent controllable – provided that performers actually delivered the words on the page – what the LCC was unable to legislate for, or to comprehend, was the physical presence of the performers; the combined gestic impact of their bodies, their interpretive choices and their audiences' direct engagement in the creation of intended and sometimes unintended meanings. These women and their bodies were 'unruly', and the LCC was not equipped to censor them. What the Council was also unaware of was the impact its own interventions would have on the performance process. It was this complex collision of values and competing demands that the most highly-skilled comic performers harnessed in their work.

Price and Shildrick have argued that 'the questions feminists ask about the body should be ones set within the context and concerns of particular historical moments.' (1999, p.17) The kind of over-sexualisation of the female body, based on heterosexual appeal and dependent on an overtly flirtatious performance style

evident in music hall is rooted in nineteenth-century attitudes to women's bodies. Such representations are problematic in terms of feminist criticism and, in so far as they appear to reinscribe Victorian gender stereotypes, these women are in danger of being accused of colluding in the commodification of their bodies through acts of 'self-objectification' (Gilbert, 2004, p.139). However, it is possible to read these comic representations as cultural critique, and to instead see them as presenting women as the *subjects* of their own bawdy comedy. The unruly woman is 'transgressive above all when she lays claim to her own desire', says Rowe (1995, p.31), and in comic performances the likely butt of a woman's joke centring on her sexual desire is frequently a man.

In the 1990s, US comedian Stephanie Hodge performed a piece of exaggerated sexualised posturing as part of her routine that it is useful to quote extensively here. It begins with her common complaint 'I can't find a man', delivered in her sexy, rasping, hostile tone. She then admits:

I know why it is. I'm not the woman that men actually like, you know. I'm not feminine [rolls her eyes sarcastically at someone in audience synchronously with this word] enough for men. Don't look at me like that. It threw my back out, I had to give that crap up. You understand. For some reason men like those little squiggly, femmy, just jiggly women, don't they? [She embodies the kind of woman she means in a snapshot characterisation. Making a sexual, whining sound, arching her back, sticking out her backside and waving her hands about. The audience cheers and laughs]. It's like she has to pee and there's nowhere to go. I don't understand that. Women like that will take anything in the world from you. Don't you know that? (*Straight Up*, 1991)

Throughout the remainder of this set piece, she then repeatedly slips back into and out of the characterisation, which gets more and more physically grotesque whilst remaining sexually charged. Her deep, sardonic delivery as she translates the woman's behaviour for the audience is juxtaposed with the high pitched and increasingly irritating voice of her character. This switching between the two versions of female behaviour undoubtedly 'splits the gaze' of the men and women in the audience (Diamond, 1997, p.53). Hodge – or, rather, her comic persona – is present as one strong, independent if rather hostile and frustrated woman and so

is this other version of womanhood: the one that she performs and pretends to think men want:

But the thing is, if that's what men want; if they want gesturing, pulsating, undulating and throbbing, why did we stop? You can get anything you want. I say bring it back. Start it up again. It's easy. All you have to do is learn to over-enunciate everything you say. (ibid.)

She then demonstrates a breathy, quivering-lipped, incredibly sexual request for a cup of coffee. For the finale, she suggests the audience meet her in McDonald's the following day to test her theory out and she shows them how she would order with ridiculous over-enunciation and a series of increasingly surreal and positively pornographic gestures, sounds and facial expressions. Once the laughs, whoops and cheers have died down she says:

I know what you're thinking. It's humiliating the first few times, sure. But you get your food for free, so who the hell cares?

Hodge's masquerade of over-sexualised femininity in this routine becomes laughably excessive, whilst her own 'normatively attractive' body is also defiantly on display. As such, the comedian's extremely high status and frequently hostile comic persona is offset here by the effectiveness of her seductive posturing. Ultimately, the butts of Hodge's jokes are not the women she appears to be lampooning (because they are smart enough to get free food, after all) but the men who buy into such behaviour. She slips on the mask of heterosexual seduction with such ease as to expose its artifice completely while also offering a commentary on male and female attitudes to gendered sexual stereotypes and acknowledging a number of key dilemmas and paradoxes for both sexes.

This performance from the end of the twentieth century is an interesting example of the conscious adoption of parodic female behaviour. In music-hall performances we rarely know the intentions – strategic or otherwise – of most comedians or if their performances were interpreted by audiences as in any way subversive. As explored in Chapter 4, Marie Lloyd was the uncrowned queen of music-hall innuendo, despite her public denials. A number of her songs pre-empt the Hodge

example and suggest 'what men want', offering advice to women in the audience about how to behave and how not to behave if they want to have a good time, whilst maintaining their reputations for decency *and* not being taken advantage of. She may not be parodying the behaviour in the way that Hodge is, but she is asking women to think about strategically using 'what men want'. She was known from very early in her career as 'the girl with the wink'. This moniker stemmed from her 1891 performance at the age of 21 of *Then You Wink The Other Eye* (Lyrics by W.T Lytton, music by George Le Brunn), a song that, she later recalled, she and Le Brunn began writing together at a party. (*The Sketch*, December 26 1894, p.7) A number of her later songs referred back to this one; the 'wink' would become emblematic of her performance style, epitomising the conspiratorial tone of the relationship she was to establish with her audiences which developed into an intimate rapport based on their collusion with her suggestiveness and enthusiastic deciphering of the coded meanings in her performances.⁹ The embodied knowingness of the wink was a doubled gestic comment which she used to signpost the risqué reference or allusion, to drive home 'the offensive point' (Agate, p.211) and ensure that no one missed either that *or* the fact she was not supposed to be presenting it and they were not supposed to be receiving it, or enjoying it. Clayton Calthrop, recalling Lloyd's impact on audiences a few years after her death, commented on the power of that gestic wink: 'a WINK, and a husky voice and the energy of ten strong men' a wonderful vulgarity, a way of ploughing the audience with a wink, a sense of wild Bank Holiday high spirits' (Calthrop, 1925, p. 81.)

Such overt demonstration of what was supposed to remain hidden confirms Lloyd's consistently defiant response to the censor. She knew her success was reliant on direct communication with her audiences, on 'playing the moment' and acknowledging the 'truth', i.e. by not ignoring the suggestive elephant in the room. Her reputation guaranteed her performances a sexual frisson and she worked with songwriters to carefully cultivate this image, whilst, as noted in Chapter 4, periodically being forced to defend herself against it in the press. This press coverage fed back into her act as she began to perform self-referential material, commenting directly on reactions to her on-stage performances by the LCC and music-hall reformers, and referring to controversies the audience may well have

read about in the press: 'Well – I've been stopped for winking!', as she sang in *You Can't Stop A Girl From Thinking*. As such, attempts to censor sexual material backfired on the LCC as it served to create a sense of connection and conspiracy between performers and audiences (Bailey, 1994) akin to the 'shared history' or common experience that contemporary stand-up performers often seek to establish in their acts (Double, 2014, p. 216). The 'wink', which, along with a nudge, has since been disparagingly used as shorthand for the tawdry, sexist attitudes thought to encapsulate music-hall innuendo, can be read as the embodied emblem of this shared knowledge and resistance.

Costumes and gender transgressions

Costuming was undoubtedly central to women comedians' acts. The examples given in Chapter 1 reveal how commonly their costumes and appearances were referred to by reviewers; very often the few lines afforded to describing a woman's act made reference to this a clear priority over appraisal of her comic abilities. Costumes were used to enhance visual appeal and character recognition and frequently to enhance the narrative and humorous intent of a song. In Lily Marney's *What Will The Neighbours Say?* (Harrington and Le Brunn, 1901) she plays a character who borrows her outfit for her daughter's wedding from a number of neighbours as she cannot afford to buy one and, in the wedding fight – a common motif in music-hall song – that follows her 'speaking her mind' and offending the new in-laws, all the items she borrowed are now ruined. In performance, Marney wore a 'ribboned' outfit and there is clearly great potential for the use of costume and props, all of which would be in fairly sorry state as a result of the fight. The Francis, Day & Hunter 1901 piano sheet music cover for the published version of the song shows Marney dressed in tatters, arms open in a gesture of helpless resignation holding a shredded parasol, with a look of post-battle, amused stoicism on her face. Down one side of the title page, a panel of boxes shows some of her po-faced, and entirely unamused neighbours; opposite these is a close up rendering of the wedding fight in full flow, fists and chairs mid-air. As she listed them Marney would have displayed each tattered item for her audience and the scope for comedy is evident in lines such as 'this used to be Mrs Spriggin's shawl'. The informality and warmth this song exudes lyrically would

have been greatly extended in performance as the character shared the exaggerated details of her tricky situation with her audience, let them know that she started the fight by insulting the groom and asked them the direct questions of the chorus: 'What'll I say to the neighbours, and what'll they say to me?'

With several songs to perform in each appearance at a number of halls every night, performers needed to perfect the skill of making multiple 'lightening changes' of costume. Marie Loftus told *The Era* in 1887 that 'I have changed my clothes, washed my face, and gone in for general titivation whilst flying through London in a hansom.' (April 30, p.16) Sometimes costumes needed to be specially adapted for the purpose of the quick change. In the same interview, Loftus noted that on the US vaudeville circuit, artists usually wore the same dress throughout their act because the changeover between songs was so fast. Loftus' need to shift character completely for each song meant that she had to change her costume: 'so my frocks were made to fasten down the back, and my dresser used to tear out all the buttons each night.' (ibid.) This kind of care and expense over wardrobe was not uncommon with performers usually designing and sometimes making their own outfits. Jenny Hill, who prided herself on the gritty accuracy of her costumes and hair, frequently bought clothing for her East End characters from local second-hand shops. (*The Era* June 17 1893, p.14)

As Calthrop's description of Lloyd above suggests, she – along with many other music-hall comedians – tapped into her audiences' mutual enjoyment, including the celebration of topical crazes, fashions and the key debates circulating the city and the nation. In such songs women wore the costumes associated with a particular character or fashion. In *Salute My Bicycle* (Harrington and Le Brunn, 1895), for example, Lloyd cycled on stage wearing the divided skirt of rational dress, which was controversial not least because, as Lloyd sang: '...in this garb/They scarce can tell whether I'm a boy or 'gel.' Given Lloyd's well-established on-stage persona, it is extremely unlikely that she intended to ever be mistaken for a boy. One Lloyd biographer suggests that the 'daring flirtatiousness' of this song appealed to men and also to a growing number of young women who 'looked up to Marie for her heady lifestyle and free-spiritedness'. (Gillies, 1999,

p.100) Her adoption of rational dress was hardly a progressive feminist statement, it was, rather, classic Lloyd: a mildly mocking bit of fun combined with an opportunity for comic suggestion and flirtation:

You see I wear the Rati'nal Dress
Well, how do you like me? eh, boys?
It fits me nicely – more or less
A little bit tasty! eh, boys?

Nonetheless, this is a relevant, popular take on a topical, live debate about women's physical freedoms and the constrictive nature of their clothing and, the final verse reveals the problem late-Victorian society was having adjusting to the anticipated change as, after getting a puncture in her tyre, Lloyd reveals that 'people give me looks that freeze/When I'm walking home in these!' So, while she can get away with looking 'saucy' in trousers onstage, and there was a reluctant acceptance that the proto-feminist 'New Woman' might wear them while cycling, the idea that they could become everyday female attire was laughably unacceptable. This was one of many popular performances in the 1890s that commented directly on the shifting roles of women and the rise of the suffrage movement and spoke to audience concerns about these challenges to the 'natural' order vis-à-vis gender. Such parodies were not radical gender play – music hall was conservative to its core in this regard, as so many others - but served as comic commentaries on news around town. Women's rights campaigners were presented almost exclusively as po-faced comic caricatures in songs foretelling the most exaggerated versions of projected fears about changes that were already underway and dissipating anxiety these generated through shared laughter about the perceived threats they posed.

In the same year that Lloyd performed *Salute My Bicycle*, Bessie Bellwood was criticised for a dance she performed while singing a song about 'the thoughts of the "old woman" on "the new woman"' (*The Era*, February 9 1895, p.16). The so-called 'new women' were perceived as Sally Ledger suggests as 'mannish, over-educated, humourless bores' (1995, p.26) and in this song Bellwood's character suggested that women would soon be wearing trousers like men and, at the end of the song, performed a dance during which she lifted her skirts to reveal men's trousers. The

LCC inspector attending this performance raised an objection to this as an undesirable element. His objection was probably to her well-documented 'coarse' performance style and to the way she lifted her skirts, as much as to the fact of her revealing trousers. While the idea of ordinary women wearing trousers may have been repellent, women performing as men was a common convention on the late Victorian stage. In the 'legitimate' theatre boys were frequently played by actresses in the nineteenth century (Bratton, 1992, p.83), and of course women routinely appeared as principal boys in pantomimes wearing male-tailored coats, often with corsets and tights.

On the halls there was also a large group of women who performed as male impersonators from the 1870s onwards. These female cross-dressers wore men's clothes and sang songs from the perspective of a range of male characters. Some, the top rank of which included Vesta Tilley, Bessie Bonehill and Hetty King, became known exclusively for performances as men, others, like Jenny Hill, performed as men alongside their stock of female characters. Nelly Power parodied the original 'Champagne Charlie', George Leybourne: 'Wearing a jaunty bowler hat and jacket over tights, Nelly sang of city 'toffs' whose abundance of style masked their paucity of funds.' (Barry Anthony, 2012, p.16)

Precisely how these drag performances contribute to the current analysis of female embodiment of music-hall comedy is open to question. Not all male impersonators were comic and the intricacies of the debate surrounding drag performance are well beyond the scope and specifically comic remit of this thesis. As Bratton points out 'The bizarre complexity of the practices of dress and display on the late-Victorian music-hall stage should never be underestimated.' (1992, p.77) A number of studies were written in the 1980s and 1990s about the role of male impersonators on the late-Victorian popular stage, and there has been a range of mixed critical responses to and claims about the perceived gender radicalism of their contributions.¹⁰ As stated in earlier chapters, second-guessing historical intentionality in performance is problematic and a full consideration of the range of possible intended meanings/messages in these performances and how spectators received them is the work of another thesis. That they parodied

male types like the over-privileged layabout city 'swells' is clear. However, in many examples, the male stereotypes selected for comic treatment were already laughable, and it can be argued, were simply being made more so by the fact that women are playing them. An alternative reading is that they offered potentially liberating images of women by presenting them engaging in behaviours and displaying attitudes normally reserved for men. (Vicinus, 1997) Perhaps they offered images of liberation and freedom to women as they heard, for example, Hetty King sing 'It's my birthday, fill 'em up', in her feminine voice, wearing trousers.

This use of male characters to allow them presentation of female activities that would be impossible for them to engage in is mirrored by contemporary comedian Christie's observation that in her early character work she was able to do some things dressed as a man that an audience would not accept if she performed them as her self. In one of her two shows performing as Charles II, and multiple characters performed *by* Charles II, she appeared as the monarch's impersonation of Samuel Pepys who read modern-day blogs which, says Christie 'he found boring, and so to illustrate how boring they were, he would make the audience watch him eat an entire stick of celery.' (Christie, p.62) Her assessment is that she 'could eat celery for ages on stage as a historical man, but not as present-day me.' (ibid.)

A further possibility is that some cross-dressers offered audiences the opportunities to see men, as Maurice Willson Disher argues Vesta Tilley did: 'not as we could see them in real life but as they were viewed through a clever woman's eyes.' (Disher, 1938. p.74). Anthony suggests they merely, 'gently satirise masculine characteristics while eliciting admiration of their own feminine attractiveness.' (Anthony, 2012, p.77)

In performance terms, they represent a kind of gender palimpsest as their already performed femininity shows through the appropriated male dress and mannerisms. Numerous contemporaneous reviewers comment with relief on how 'ladylike' male impersonators are. Bessie Bonehill, one US reviewer noted, 'looks like a handsome boy and dances like a sprightly girl.' (Baker, Loc. 4063) Similarly, a reviewer for *The Era* noted that Tilley, early in her career 'dresses remarkably

well and conducts herself like a lady' (31 March, 1878) Tilley, and numerous other male impersonators, also sang throughout her career in a clear female soprano voice and, while paying famously careful attention to the accuracy of her male dress – which seemed to be the location of her primary interest in this performance style – certainly never attempted to vocally persuade anybody that she was *actually* a man. She remained, as Aston has observed, 'always unequivocally and irrevocably, a 'lady'.' (Aston, p.248) Indeed, the most commonly adopted style of this genre on the halls seems to have been women dressed as men rather than women in any way *becoming* men.

Nonetheless, physically, some performers did work on performing male gender and emulating masculine mannerisms, male stances, walks and intonations; photographic images frequently depict them adopting confident male stances and gesturing in typically male ways. According to Martha Vicinus '[f]in-de-siècle admirers of the male impersonator could use her gender ambiguity to imagine a different structure of sexual relations between women and men or to identify with masculine freedoms.' (1997, p.190) However, these potential responses are difficult to confirm and, in Tilley's case, notwithstanding Disher's claim that her empathy for her characters was evident (1938, p.74), and Aston's view that her performance contained 'the interplay between male and female codes' and was sexually ambiguous in its androgyny (p.256.), her own *comic* voice seems doubly concealed through the twin layers of Victorian femininity overlaid with an assumed version of masculine posturing and any evidence of real gender subversion or instability is less conclusive here.

There were hundreds of male impersonators on the halls in this period and, while some lesbian or gender fluid coded messages or feminist calls for liberation or equality may have been smuggled past proprietors and LCC inspectors, and understood or appreciated by audiences, most were likely quite conservative in this regard.¹¹ While the ever-present ambiguity of drag that Butler refers to in *Gender Trouble* is of course evident in these displays of interweaving gender codes, there seems to be something less of the positive, purposeful and assured *female*

voice here than there is in the comic subversions of female stereotypes considered in Chapter 2, and the grotesque representations of femininity discussed below.

***Gestus* and grotesque embodiment**

A number of women made ironic use of their unconventional appearances in their acts. Nellie Wallace (1870-1948), 'The Essence of Eccentricity', is a useful case in point. Wallace, who began performing on the halls in the 1880s as a child clog dancer, had a long career playing against conventional notions of attractiveness and was known for her bizarre appearance and surreal sense of humour. Her material often – but significantly, not always – concerned her desperation to find a man and her frustration that she did not fit the bill physically and could not attract one. *Look Under The Bed*, a warning from her mother to always check under the bed in case a man is hiding there, was one of her most popular songs:

My mother said, always look under the bed
Before you blow the candle out,
See if there's a man about.
I always do, you can make a bet.
But it's never been my luck to find a man there yet.

A much later audio recording of this song demonstrates her highly idiosyncratic delivery. She sings a deliberate rhythmic counterpoint to the melody, unnaturally drawing out syllables and abruptly ending lines with unnecessary emphasis (Windyridge CDR16, 1930). At the end of the song she launches into a celebratory yodel, following a half chortled, half spoken line or two, 'Ah, what a life. Full of disappointments.' There is, however, no sense of disappointment in her delivery, and certainly no desperation.

Wallace carefully cultivated her grossly exaggerated physical image through her costume and physicality. Alec Guinness recalls seeing her perform at the Coliseum late in her career when he was a small boy:

I think I was a little scared, she looked so witch-like with her parrot-beak nose and shiny black hair screwed tightly into a bun. She wore a loud tweed jacket and skirt, an Alpine hat with an enormous, bent pheasant's feather, and dark woollen stockings which ended in neat but absurd button boots. (*The Sunday Telegraph*, September 26 1982)

Denis Gifford's description confirms a conscious embrace of the grotesque through her costume choices:

a baggy skirt branded with the terrible tartan of a wild highland clan, one which flapped freely to permit tantalisingly off-putting flashes of red flannel, elastic-sided boots that buckled up her great flat feet, and round her neck the crowning touch: a mangy, moth-eaten foot of fur, "me little bit of vermin!" (Gifford, 1984/85)

As noted in Chapter 2, Vesta Victoria was also known for her 'grotesque' costumes and and make up.¹² Her performance as an abused wife in *A Baby With Men's Ways*, discussed there, is a case in point. However, Victoria also engaged in some far more surreal physical displays. Following her 1910 tour of the US, *The Era* reported that she had performed her song *Chantecler* dressed in 'a perfectly modelled hen dress, and in this connection she recalls an occasion when her wings prevented her taking a magnificent floral offering hand her over the footlights, much to the merriment of the audience.' (September 24 1910, p.27)¹³ Equally bizarre, though with far clearer contemporary intent, Bridget Christie performed as a series of characters including, as previously discussed, Charles II, and appeared in surreal costumes to perform as Japanese knotweed and an ant, having convinced herself that:

An ant talking about being an ant comedian would be far less alienating to a comedy audience than a woman talking about being a woman comedian. I'd just make it about ant comedians rather than female comedians. (2015, p.70)

The show, *A.Ant* consisted of Christie in a self-consciously poorly constructed homemade ant costume, talking about the prejudice she experiences as an ant comedian, making direct and obvious parallels with sexist attitudes to women comics:

Even before an ant has got to the microphone, you've already made assumptions. I saw you two looking at each other when I came out: 'Oh no, not another ant, talking about jam and the division of labour.' We don't do that stuff any more. We've moved on. (2015, p.71)

Such purposeful wearing of this gender-free costume both disguises the female body and ironically and brazenly critiques the treatment of women in comedy. It also reveals Christie's willingness to not just risk looking physically absurd, but also to appear slightly pompous by making transparently feminist statements while assuming an attitude of subtlety and sophistication.

Nellie Wallace's comedy also often worked through her ironic adoption of a misjudged sense of sophistication and, when she attempted to masquerade womanliness, she did so to incompetent excess. Guinness recalls that later in the Coliseum performance he attended, she 'turned up in a bright green, shiny and much too tight evening gown.' In this ineptly feminine costume she then 'kept dropping things – bag, fan, handkerchief, a hairbrush – and whenever she bent to retrieve them the orchestra made rude raspberry sounds as if she had ripped her dress or farted.' (ibid.) This performance suggests a tendency identified by Linda Kintz to mimic 'excessive womanliness', potentially opening up 'a gap between women and the image of Woman', a space in which women can manipulate this image 'without being wholly caught in it' (Kintz, 1992, p.133)

Such a degree of physical clowning marginalised Wallace as she took advantage of what Larry Mintz calls the 'comedian's traditional licence for deviant behaviour and expression.' (Minz, p.88) Moreover, as a woman, adoption of the physically grotesque also gave her the freedoms that Rowe associates with her model of the 'unruly woman': 'woman as rule-breaker, joke-maker, and public bodily spectacle' (Rowe, p.12). This presentation of herself, *choosing* to embody the grotesque, positions her in what Russo describes as the 'powerfully resonant' position of 'the female transgressor as public spectacle' (Russo, p.61), allowing her 'affirmatively to destabilize the idealizations of female beauty, or to realign the mechanisms of desire.' (Russo, p.65) Natalie Zemon Davis (1965) gives early European examples of the possibilities offered by the image of the carnivalesque 'disorderly woman' as

a way to undermine traditional power structures and ‘widen behavioural options for women.’ (Davis, p. 131)

There is certainly an engagement with the kind of bodily abandon Bakhtin associates with the carnival body in Guinness’ description of the fart sounds suggested by the orchestra during Wallace’s comic aping of the feminine. Other descriptions of her physicality note a bizarre sideways crabwalk and much of her physical comedy was rooted in her ironic approach. However, as Guinness’ account suggests, she frequently played it straight, and did not reveal any acceptance that she did not fulfil the feminine norm. He recalls ‘her frozen indignation’ following the orchestra’s emissions of fart noises. (op. cit.)

In light of the discussion in Chapter 2 about the distinction in some performances between the victim and butt of a joke (Gilbert, 2004), Wallace’s performance style raises a number of questions regarding what I am presenting here as an entirely celebratory rejection of femininity. If, as it appears, Wallace ‘plays it straight’ rather than letting the audience know that she is joking then how does her comedy work? Does it serve to demonstrate that, as Anne Hole has observed in her article about Dawn French’s comedy ‘if one or two women cannot achieve this act of “womanliness” then its contingency is exposed. That it is in the failure of an “act” that we recognize it is an act? (Hole, p.323).

A number of Wallace’s reviewers and obituarists stressed the ‘frustrated spinster’ element of her persona.¹⁴ However, her high-status ironic masquerading of glamour, her conscious failure at femininity and her use of the grotesque body signify something other than straightforward self-deprecation. Some of her later material is informative here. She composed a number of her songs herself and several of these are quite surreal in tone, making little or no reference at all to her marital status. *Mother’s Pie Crust* starts with a reference to being ‘alone, broken hearted’ and having no choice but ‘but suic-i-i-ide’ – delivered in Wallace’s deliberately over-emphasised Scottish accent and laughably melodramatic tone. The lyric then shifts into the absurd, with the chorus: ‘I don’t like my mother’s pie crust/Eat it? No! I’d rather die first!’ She pictures herself tying the piecrust around

her neck and throwing herself into the sea. Her need to resort to suicide because she is lonely is simply a comic hook, this is not a comment on spinsterhood, it is a piece of nonsense poetry with shades of Spike Milligan or Pam Ayres, and Wallace delivers the 'failed copy' that Butler identifies as offering the possibility of 'subversive laughter', a 'pastiche-effect of parodic practices in which the original, the authentic, and the real are themselves constituted as effects.' (1990, p.146) Wallace's style of delivery works in direct opposition to the 'normal' idea of a broken-hearted woman and, unfeminine as she is, the persona she presents on stage has nothing to do with this stereotype. As Butler suggests: 'the loss of the sense of 'the normal'...can be its own occasion for laughter, especially when 'the normal,' 'the original' is revealed to be a copy...an ideal that no one *can* embody.'" (1990, pp.138 – 139)

In *Tally Ho!*, another of her own compositions, the rejection of the normal is extended further as she simply complains in word and sound about how sore she is after going riding with the hunt:

Tally ho! I'm in pain
I shall never be able to sit down again!

In both performances she engages in bursts of vocal insanity which serve as 'hyperbolic exhibitions of "the natural" that, in their very exaggeration, reveal its fundamentally phantasmatic status.' (Butler, 1990, p.147) I would argue that Wallace's performances are anarchistic celebrations of the surreal abandon that have very little to do with men. As such, to reverse Gilbert's victim-butt formulation, she may be the butt of her many physical jokes – embracing as the clown she is, the status of fool – but she does not care enough to be anybody's victim.

Chapter conclusion

This chapter has explored the ways in which the particular scrutiny of the female body has become an inevitable part of women's comedy. This female embodiment of jokes is evident from the music-hall period into contemporary practice, as the stand-up comedian and the performance artist makes use of the discourse surrounding the body to perform herself, as both subject and object of her comedy.

Making use of self-aware gestures and of her carefully manipulated performed attitudes to her body and how it is perceived, women continue to create their comic gestus and engage in a range of self-representations to create humour. In music hall some of these were bawdy and sexualised embodiments, creative coded acknowledgements of sexual truths, in which they made use of their sexual appeal as part of their acts. As Ballou (2013) has argued, their perceived physical attractiveness was, in music hall's pre-feminist era, contentious only if it was considered indecent. This ability to make covert use of their sexual appeal during performances in order to misdirect audiences can be directly related to work by contemporary performers whose comic approaches also consciously incorporate their bodies: often the attitude of the audience to women's bodies and their sexualities is the subject of their performances. Women continue to embody ideas surrounding beauty and funniness, adopting ironic and often unlikely comic attitudes and appropriating the male gaze in ways that require men and women to re-examine their preconceptions. As Nellie Wallace's approach reveals, sometimes the grotesque and incompetent adoption of feminine ideals has a similarly disruptive comic outcome, as the instability of female identities grounded in fixed ideas about beauty and femininity are exposed through transgressive physical comedy.

Notes

¹ Foucault's metaphor for social control, articulated in *Discipline & Punish* (1977). In the panopticon prison, designed by 18th-century social theorist and philosopher Jeremy Bentham, prisoners engage in an internalised acceptance of constant surveillance and so self-discipline and in feminist readings such as Bartky's the impact of power on the 'docile body' explains the ways in which women internalise and accept versions of femininity as a form of 'obedience to patriarchy' (Bartky, 1990, p.80)

² The song was originally written in 2010 for *Celebrityville* as a cover of the Bob Dylan 1965 classic, *Subterranean Homesick Blues*.

³ Truscott also wears three blonde wigs, three denim jackets and three push up bras; she removes two layers during the performance. As she tells Tahirah Hairston, a subversive play on the comedy 'three' (Hairston, 2016)

⁴ At the beginning of her career Brand was billed as 'The Sea Monster'.

⁵ This thesis focuses almost exclusively on serio-comics and female comic singers. However, the non-musical variety acts on music-hall programmes frequently included women dancers, acrobats, aerialists, strength and endurance acts etc., such as the extraordinary Victorina, a strong woman of phenomenal physical prowess. Further research on the work of these women is much needed.

⁶ In a related sidebar, the performance of a song by Katie Lawrence, *Oh! Ta-ra-ra*, about how irritating she found Collins' song (because it was so ubiquitous throughout 1892), was criticised in *The Era* and, while acknowledging the popularity of her performance with the audience, the critic feels: 'Her kneeling in an attitude of prayer we think is uncalled for, and is better omitted, as it is apt to be a cause of offence to sensitive persons.' (*The Era*, April 30, 1892, p.16) Whether the objection might be to a potentially blasphemous act, or for something else Lawrence intimated through her gestures while kneeling is not made clear.

⁷ John Morreall, 1983, recounts the case of psychiatrist, William Sargeant, who reported based on his experience of working in WW2 concentration camps, that if at any point in the brainwashing process the subject laughed then the process was wrecked and had to be started again. (1983, p. 105.) For other perspectives on the distancing effects of humour and the flexibility of thought required by/cognitive shift that accompanies humour appreciation see also Chapman & Foot (eds) 1996; Freud, 1901; Morreall, 1987; Durrant & Miller, 1989.

⁸ The beach for Palestinians is among the most contested and symbolically significant of all their Israeli-occupied territories. The majority of Palestinians under the age of 30 have never seen the sea. This performance took place as part of a series of comedy workshops with theatre students and other young people in occupied Palestine in 2016/7.

⁹ One TMHC inspector's report described Lloyd's 'knowing nods, looks, smiles and winks full of suggestiveness' (LCC/MIN/10,869)

¹⁰ See Aston (1988), Bratton (1992), Senelick (1992), Vicinus (1997).

¹¹ There were undoubtedly exceptions such as Annie Hindle in the US who attempted to fully conceal her sex in her private as well public life (Senelick, 1982) Numerous sources also note that performers received love letters and marriage proposals from both sexes. (Baker; Senelick; Bratton)

¹² She told *The Era* (June 16, 1906, p.21) that she designed all her costumes and they were made by her mother.

¹³ This song was likely inspired by Edmond Rostand's play *Chantecler*, in which all the characters were farmyard animals. It premiered in the same year.

¹⁴ See Wallace obituaries in *The Times*, November 25, 1948; *The Daily Mail*, November 25, 1948 and Denis Gifford's profile of her in *Theatrephile*, Vol.2. No. 5 Winter 1984/85.

Conclusion

'I'm a comedian: that's what I do.'
(Sarah Silverman, *Jesus Is Magic*, 2005)

This thesis has drawn together an at times unruly combination of histories and methods of reading and interpreting histories in order to examine women's contributions to solo comic performance traditions. Initially, my intention was to identify from archive sources the numbers and names of women performing comedy on the music-hall stage in London at the end of nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, and to examine the style and content of their work. I sought to determine how they fit into the twentieth-century narrative of popular entertainment, which, as I noted in the introduction to this thesis, seemed to suggest that British comedy was forged almost exclusively by men with subsidiary contributions from a few exceptional women. (Porter, 1998, pp.67-68)

As Chapter 1 established, many women did perform comedy on the music-hall stage. The *Era Almanack* of 1878 lists roughly equal numbers of women serio-comic singers and male comic singers. This list provides only a partial picture, but when compared to the numbers of women currently making a living from comedy in the UK, it seems quite extraordinary. Statistics published in *The Guardian* suggest that the percentage of tickets for female comedy events sold had increased from 2% to 14% of the total in the five years to 2014 (30 November, 2014). Even taking account of the mixed content of acts being performed by serio-comics – to which I will return below – the disparity is surprising.

Having identified this enormous presence and therefore, as Jardine has suggested, begun to 'rupture' the existing narrative, the research shifted focus to consider the nature of these performances, the ways in which women communicated with their audiences and their treatment within late-Victorian and Edwardian British society. As outlined in Chapter 1, this relationship was problematic and women comedians were constantly negotiating their positions as women with their audiences, the (predominantly male) management of the music-hall industry, and wider British society. Perceptions of women performers as morally suspect or at risk of

becoming so as a result of the dubious nocturnal and independent nature of their work, before they even got on to a stage, are embodied by the serio-comics. This group of women were frequently the subject of much criticism for their performance styles: they were associated with either presenting gritty and witty realistic takes on the lives of lower-class women, or with modes of delivery that included 'archness' and 'slangy dialogues', in the form of very contemporary direct communication with their audiences. As Chapter 1 argues, their work has received little scholarly attention and their treatment in the late-Victorian press and by the censor is indicative of wider attitudes to women, women performers, and particularly those who performed comic material about women's hardships and pleasures or asserted their distinctively female voices through comic exchanges with audience members. This chapter considered the impact of the methods of censorship the LCC employed, highlighting the extent to which the Council attempted to influence the conduct of women in audiences and on stage, with particular focus on individual complaints against women and attempts to regulate material considered objectionable. Through its class-based policy of 'improvement' – which amounted to concerted but poorly judged and clumsily executed attempts to refine music-hall entertainments through a range of reforming measures – the Council and the growing commercial interests controlling the music-hall business influenced the systems of management and the character of music-hall venues which had a gradual but significant impact on the content and style of programmes, including performances by the large numbers of women comedians emerging as part of the form.

The analysis of historical performances can rarely reveal an artist's original intentions and I have sought to avoid the mistake of assuming that all women were attempting to present performances that were in some way subversive or that these women shared the same, or even similar perspectives on their work or their relationships to their audiences, their employers (music-hall managers/ proprietors) or the regulators. Scott, in her provocative essay on the problems of historicising experience and identity, recognises the tendency of some feminist scholars to 'universalize the identity of women and so to ground claims for the legitimacy of women's history in the shared experience of historians of women and

those women whose stories they tell.' (1992, p.31) I approached the selection of performances and texts for analysis with an awareness of the risk of appropriating material and reading it as subversive when, as Harris, has suggested, its originators and first audiences would not have had access to the theories and contemporary perspectives that I am applying to it. (1996, p.79) By grounding my analysis in individual comic practice and reflecting on noteworthy formal similarities to (and differences from) contemporary comedy, I have tried to avoid making universal assumptions regarding female performers' intentions or the impacts of their work on audiences, and focused instead on what has emerged from the analysis of the lyrics of songs and audio recordings of later examples; interviews with serio-comics and 'comediennes' and the reviews of their work; and the minutes of committee meetings about music-hall performances. From this primary material, some of which was previously uncritiqued, what became clear was that the female voices I was hearing were using similar comic techniques to those currently employed by contemporary female and male comics. There was evidence, for example, of performed irony, of laughs achieved through the subversion of audience expectations, of self-deprecation and of women presenting comic material that directly addressed late-Victorian and Edwardian taboos regarding sex. Direct performance parallels demonstrating shared techniques and approaches between artists working in the two eras became apparent and – perhaps unsurprisingly and notwithstanding socio-historical shifts in taste and values – it became obvious that what was funny then, often remains funny now. As a consequence, a key focus of this research has been to identify the specific performance forms and techniques shared by music-hall artists and contemporary practitioners and to reflect on these comparisons in order to contribute to a growing understanding of women's comic practice in both eras. Bessie Bellwood's direct and conspiratorial relationship with her audience, examined in Chapter 3, for example, has echoes throughout the contemporary stand-up practice of women and men; Vesta Victoria's ironic presentations of the 'dumb blonde' caricature in, for example, *Waiting At The Church* (Leigh and Pether, 1906), as discussed in Chapter 2, has a direct 1990's parallel in Brenda Gilhooly's page three 'glamour model' character, Gayle Tuesday. Such parallels provide examples of what Bush-Bailey and Bratton have described as the 'marks' of an earlier form that can be

seen to 'remain, persist and return' as a kind of 'embodied palimpsest through which earlier approaches might be perceived in current practice' (2011, p.104)

This approach to synthesising work through shared comic style and form, and identifying contemporary parallels in a range of performance genres that connect to the earlier form via specific techniques has enabled me to examine as performed comedy work which has previously, to re-use Bailey's phrase 'rarely been made to leave the page'. (1998, p.131)

A central challenge of this research has been my unavoidable reliance on historical accounts, particularly the reviews of performances, which in many cases have been the only record that the event took place. Their reliability as records of these performances is questionable and I have certainly taken the view that they are, just as the performances they describe, in need of interpretation and should to be considered as a product of their context and placed within the broader historical discourse surrounding women, sex and class.

As outlined in the thesis introduction, the methodological 'bricolage' (Kincheloe, 2001, et al.) I have established to synthesise the strands of performance practice and the range of theoretical frameworks informing my interpretation of this material has enabled an open and responsive approach, not limited by a single critical perspective, but acknowledging that the re-construction of historical performances by women and the comparison of these with modern forms demands an eclectic research methodology. This necessarily acknowledges my interpretive role in the 'uncovering' of these histories and draws on a range of theoretical positions and existing literature from areas as diverse as the performativity and performance of gender, women's comic performance, humour theory, feminist theory, music-hall history and performance theory. This multi-perspective approach has, at times, challenged my ideological suppositions and speculative responses to the material and has required me to recognise the limitations of, as noted above, expecting all women's comedy from this period to be in some way subversive, or feminist, or funny.

As the 'lively' but not funny examples mentioned in Chapter 2, such as Florrie Ford's *Pull Yourselves Together, Girls* (Harrington, 1909) suggest, many music-hall songs supported the gendered status quo. Representations of women, or advice offered to them through music-hall material sometimes simply restate the perceived 'natural' roles of women and appropriate female behaviour and attitudes. However, even this unprogressive material forms part of the popular discourse women participated in during this period and my analysis of many songs has revealed some nuanced distinctions between the available printed lyrics of the kind of material that merely states facts of life and reinforces accepted gender roles, apparently leaving little space for a performer's own voice, and those that suggest how her contribution might be animated in performance. The 1860's lyric of an example, mentioned in Chapter 1 and performed by Kate Harley, *I'll Never Get Married I Vow*, appears to be anti-marriage but actually indicates the need for comic irony in performance. Some songs and women's performances of them would exemplify what Stedman Jones has described as music hall's 'culture of consolation' (Stedman Jones, 1982, p. 117), as the form clearly encouraged the public acknowledgement of shared experiences and problems. For women, this included the expression of how they felt about the choices – or lack of them – afforded by their private and public positions in marriage and in Victorian/Edwardian society more generally, and perhaps shared laughter offered some solace to those trapped in unhappy marriages, or anticipating being so. However, as other examples given in Chapters 2 and 4 show, women performing comic material about these subjects also offered more proactive messages, urging women not to accept the unacceptable in their relationships, sometimes criticising them for making poor choices, or encouraging them to stand up for themselves and to recognise the opportunities offered by their changing status and their 'widening sphere'. (Vicinus, 1980)

Analysis of song lyrics, such as those examined in Chapter 2, has also revealed fascinating glimpses into every presumed stage of a lower-class woman's life in this period; from girlhood to single working woman, through love and courtship, to either spinsterhood or a wedding day and marriage; and then into motherhood, family life and old age. The comic perspective of the (usually male) music-hall

lyricist and composer and the performance attitude of the singer combined to apply music hall's very particular down-to-earth and – not quite carefree but, usually ultimately optimistic - comic spin on all the most important moments in a woman's life. Music hall was in this way, as Stedman-Jones has noted, 'both escapist and yet strongly rooted in the realities of working-class life.' (1982, p.108) The representation of courting women, for example, offered audiences a city populated by one group of celebrated characters who knew their minds, could look after their bodies and made smart decisions, and another group – presented in exaggerated cautionary tales – who fell in love too easily, believed what unscrupulous and inconstant men told them, and ended up rejected or worse.

Engagement with music-hall comedy problematises some common assumptions about the relationship between women and humour, including the ideas that female self-deprecation is always negative, female stereotypes are imposed and reductive, and material in which women present themselves as heteronormatively attractive or sexually active are often driven by their position as sexual objects rather than subjects. The examination of song lyrics in Chapter 2 identified a number of female stereotypes portrayed and I considered the potential for these to be manipulated and subverted through comedy. Women's comic attitudes to courtship, marriage and motherhood and the ways in which they used audience expectations concerning these 'natural' states were compared with contemporary performances. The continued use of stereotypes by comic performers in contemporary practice has provided insights into the ways in which potentially troubling areas of representation for women, notably self-deprecation, have been used and critically examined in relation to women's humorous writing and performance.

These comparisons have revealed how women's comedy can operate as what Russo describes as 'a site of insurgency' (1994, p.62): women's comic subversions of accepted and acceptable versions of femininity and women's attitudes were often used to offer individualised, unsteretyped and sometimes socially radical commentary on women's roles in society. A number of performers engaged in representations that at times suggested they were acutely aware of the weight of

womanhood and the 'feminine ideal' they were expected to shoulder. In her ironic take on the role of the wife *A Comfort and Blessing To Man* (Dodsworth, 1888) Marie Loftus, for example, parodied the Victorian notion of the moral superiority of women as guardians of male morality and the domestic sphere. Her comic characterisation of an indifferent, lazy and unsupportive wife who sleeps in and leaves the childcare to her husband called into question those conventional attitudes and suggested they were certainly not universal. Butler has stated that the construction of identity 'is not opposed to agency; it is the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible'. (Butler, 1990, p.147) Comic performances by women, particularly those that, – as in the cases of Lily Marney examined in Chapter 2 and Nellie Wallace, analysed in Chapter 4 – embody the construction of femininity *and* subvert it by failing to achieve it were, in the nineteenth-century context, public repetitions and subversions of these constructions that, Butler notes, make it possible to contest the social construction of gender. (ibid.)

The use of contemporary examples to illuminate the comic practice operating during these stereotypical representations has shown the potential for women to make woman-centred jokes that do not simply portray them as the butts of male jokes and, as Chapters 4 and 5 have explored, that present humour in which a woman's sexuality extends beyond her function as the sexual object to a male sexual subject (Porter, p.69-70) Often women's manipulation of stereotypes (Vesta Victoria, Marie Loftus, Maidie Scott) and of their negative position in the culture, their subordination, and their assumed desperation and need of men (Lily Marney, Nellie Wallace) have been the primary sources of the comedy. Contemporary performers reinforce this contention: Jo Brand has observed that she has built her career on this ability to manipulate audience expectations by appearing to embody a self-deprecatory stereotype and then surprising them with an extremely confident, if entirely disinterested, female voice (Wagg, 1998, pp.134-135)

Judith Wilt has suggested that women's comedy has been, too often, merely 'survival humor' (Wilt, 1990, p.193) rather than offering any genuine opportunities

for 'empowerment'. I have argued that while perhaps rarely directly 'challenging the very fabric of representation' (Forte, 1990, p.237), music-hall comedians were the first popular female performers to publicly share with large mixed audiences ideas about womanhood and offer insights into their pleasures, desires, regrets, dissatisfactions, anger and humour. Given that most women performed material written and composed by men in venues controlled mostly by men, just how authentically 'female' this music-hall voice was required careful consideration. However, as the analyses in Chapter 2 demonstrate, meanings in music hall are located in performance rather than in the printed texts of songs and these performers frequently formed consciously ironic relationships with their material and through their dialogue with their audiences – many of whom were women – potentially influenced popular attitudes and opinions. At the very least, those who sustained careers on the halls were smart and successful female voices being heard nightly on multiple stages across the city and the country. In the late nineteenth century, the rigidity of class and gender conventions – already under strain from a range of mid-late century reform movements, including early radical feminist thinkers – were frequently tested by these performers who were presenting themselves as not just sexually attractive or available, but sometimes as sexually active and sexually driven, and even unruly, disruptive and grotesque. The work of the specific performers examined throughout this study reveals their enactments of a range of 'cultural blasphemies' (Glenn, p.6) and the ways in which audiences' perceived ideas and images of womanhood were stretched by their representations. In this regard, Wilt's challenging ideas about the complicit nature of women's comic engagement with images of women must be seen within the context of the huge impact of music hall as a popular form, and the specific impacts individual performers potentially had on the perceptions and attitudes of their audiences.

It is, however, pertinent to remember that these women were working comedians whose central aim was, essentially, to get laughs and entertain. As previously mentioned, it is naïve to assume that their intentions were always or, indeed, often consciously subversive; or that music-hall audiences recognised their work as such. However, they were frequently engaged in comic practices the by-products

of which were perhaps what Mizejewski describes as ‘accidental feminisms’ (Mizejewski, p.26) that the twenty-first century researcher can retrospectively read as positive and progressive. Frequently, these occurred, as Chapter 3 has explored, as a result of the very practical necessity for comics to connect directly with their audiences and demonstrate their ownership of their material and the authenticity of the comic perspectives they shared about life in the city they were so often singing about.

Making use of humour theory concerning comic licence and the social role of the joker, I concluded in Chapter 3 that women comedians were, as performers, bound to speak the ‘unspeakable’ (Butler, 1990, 1997) subjects of sex and sexuality because these were the forbidden subjects for their audiences and, as Douglas and Turner have observed, the function of the joker is to challenge the hierarchies and structure of societies and to test the acceptable limits of comic licence by confronting social or moral taboos (Turner, 1977; Douglas, 1978). In order to be granted comic licence to do this within the constrictions of late-Victorian London, they needed to establish very personal connections to engage audiences and encourage them to collude with them in the creation of coded meanings. This allowed them to share laughter that tested the censor, while simultaneously censoring themselves in order to carefully dance along that line of decency and not risk losing their audiences or their livelihoods. Consequently, women comedians explicitly influenced the development of the music-hall form as it evolved in response to regulation and censorship. This included performers’ engagement in self-representations that took account of public opinions and preconceptions, and male desires, but did not cross over into the indecent or unacceptable. Chapter 3 combined the idea of comic collusion and Bailey’s (1998) concept of knowingness in music hall to suggest that performers established a hybrid representation of the communities in which their audiences lived; creating a marginal comic reality that resembles the real world and in which they could publicly address some of its most difficult issues. It is evident that by far the most popular music-hall performers – and the most objectionable for the form’s would-be reformers – were those who not only talked directly to audiences, but also encouraged them to respond, reacting to them ‘in the moment’. These performers achieved an exceptional

position in the late-Victorian and Edwardian context and the significance of their regular public interactions with audiences should not be underestimated. However, while this chapter demonstrated clear continuity of practice in a number of techniques employed to create bonds with audiences that help shape their responses to potentially challenging material, the experiences of a number of performers examined also revealed that the community bonding and liberating mechanisms of comic licence, as outlined by Turner, Douglas and Mintz were often curtailed in music hall, particularly for women.

Addressing how much comic licence performers were granted through the connections they made with their audiences, and exploring the impact of censorship and self-censorship on their acts, Chapter 4 considered the impact of 'foreclosure': a form of 'prior censorship' (Failler, 2001, p.52) which results in speech acts being repressed as individuals engage in self-censorship to avoid saying what is socially unacceptable. For women performers, psychological and cultural foreclosure operated as consequences of existing constraints on women's behaviour. In practice, this led to constraints on the range of female 'types' presented on the halls. However, this chapter argued that the LCC's approach to music-hall comedy led to unexpected responses within the industry and the increasing use of comic innuendo as a form of 'performed censorship'. This occurred as the LCC's attempts to control the form (through the imposition of licensing conditions regarding the content of programmes) became public knowledge. This resulted in a process proposed by Butler, whereby censorship *produces* speech by forcing adaptations that occur as a direct result of censorship. (1998, pp.248-249) In music hall, this led to the performance of material that took account of increased restrictions as performers worked creatively with songwriters *and* audiences and shifted the performance style of the form. Though the earlier, less formal halls were rougher and rowdier, staging material more likely to be 'vulgar' or bawdy in content and performance style, indecency and obscenity were rarely tolerated on public stages, so suggestion and double entendre were already features of performances. However, the LCC's stated policy to 'clean up' the halls and eradicate these elements intensified the need to submerge sexual references and suggestive intimations in layers of coded

meaning. Further analysis of the texts of songs written between the 1860s and 1880s, which is beyond the remit of this thesis, may establish a clear stylistic shift in the content of lyrics between the earlier and later periods. However, in terms of performance, what is evident from my research is that the public discourse surrounding decency forced it to the forefront of performers' and audiences' minds. The tendency for comedians to focus on subject areas that produce the most tension in a society, and therefore the greatest release of tension through laughter was discussed in Chapter 3 (Turner, 1977; Douglas, 1978; Mintz, 1988) and, after 1890, censorship necessarily became a focus of comic attention on the halls, as a potentially exciting and 'dangerous' area for artists to explore in their acts. Hence, Lloyd's self-reflexive questions to audiences, such as: 'twiggy-vous?' to check everyone was keeping up with the hidden inferences in her songs, and the perfectly timed and pitched invention of her persona as 'the girl with the wink' from the early 1890s.

Chapters 3 and 4 have shown that as a result of this process attempts at censorship became explicit – which, as Butler (1998, p.250) has noted, renders it less powerful – and publicly joked about, which reduced its authority still further. Performers and audiences shared exchanges about the Council's attempts to stop them laughing about sex and the fact that the LCC and music-hall reformers thought they could 'stop a girl from thinking' became a joke women could share with audiences. Having identified the significance of performers saying what they were not allowed to say, Chapter 4 demonstrated how this influenced the development of the music-hall form through the use of knowing innuendo – which was now some performers' weapon of choice in the battle between the reformers and the inhabitants of 'music-hall land'.

This is a history of women's comic performance and it has been fuelled by my own very contemporary concerns regarding 'transgression and rebellion'. (Newey, 2016, p.92) To a large extent I have focused on uncovering or reconsidering the material that demonstrates the positive contributions women comedians made to performance history and the ways in which they contested received ideas about women. In terms of women's use of their bodies and of comic innuendo in their

performances, this has led to a focus on material that, rather than reinforcing the limits of cultural foreclosure and enforced self-censorship, has tested these limits and so demonstrates the possibilities of innuendo and material about sex as sites of resistance for women. However, I have also attempted to maintain what Newey describes as a 'sceptical critique of the structures within which they are positioned as historical agents or actors'. (2016, p.85) This has required both an acknowledgement of the fundamental sexual inequalities at work in the music-hall industry and an understanding of what Scott has described as 'the operations of the complex and changing discursive processes by which identities are ascribed, resisted, or embraced' (p.33)

A number of the women whose work is examined here absolutely embraced their gendered identities: being subject to the male gaze was a key element, for example, in Marie Lloyd's impact on stage and her performance persona developed to take account of this as she made verbal and gestural reference to it throughout her career. While it is possible to reject such a strategy as a woman's collusion in the commodification of her body through acts of 'self-objectification' (Gilbert, p.139), I have attempted, as Newey suggests, to understand the 'negotiations of individuals with the constraints of the social structures with which they live.' (2016, p.102) A more positive reading of Lloyd's performance style is, as argued in Chapter 5, connected to Rowe's 'unruly woman' who she argues, poses the greatest risk to hegemony when she is the subject of her own bawdy humour and 'lays claim to her own desire'. (Rowe, 1995, p.31) Chapter 5 also highlighted the work of a few of the many contemporary performers who make conscious use of their sexualised bodies in performance. Annie Sprinkle, for example, has always been clear that she is entirely comfortable with her audiences' varied responses to her nakedness and sometimes erotically charged performances.

Central to this thesis is not that these women were performing sexually progressive or feminist comedy but, as Chapter 5 shows, that the performance conventions of the form, and their practical roles as comedians in shaping these, resulted in regular interactions through which they were not merely making use of their normatively gendered bodies as passive spectacles for men. Frequently,

music hall gave them the space and opportunities to be personalities *as well as* spectacles. In this way, as Glenn has argued, 'in the interplay between active and passive female spectacle' (2002, p.3) these women can be seen as indicators of shifts in the agency of women. Glenn suggests that women performing in American theatre and vaudeville at the turn of the twentieth century were exploring ideas and themes on stage that were later to become the off-stage concerns of early feminist campaigners. Whether the same can be said of the impact of women appearing on the British music-hall stage is a potentially rich subject for further research. What can be argued here is that within the late-nineteenth century British discourse surrounding female representation, sexuality, prostitution and gender essentialism, as outlined in Chapter 1, women publicly performing material about the lived experience of these shifting roles and perceptions were clearly provocative contributors to this debate. As specific performances examined throughout the thesis have revealed the emerging popular comic tradition in Britain included women's frequent disruption of prescribed gender roles and their direct rather than tacit engagement with the impact of their gendered bodies as spectacles. Their verbal and gestural expressions of actual, exaggerated and imagined womanhood and their embodiment of these in dialogue with their audiences were, by the beginning of the twentieth century, part of popular consciousness and imagination. As such they were, as I have argued in Chapter 2 and Chapter 5, manipulating existing images of femininity and, as Kintz suggests, opening up 'a gap between women and the image of Woman' (1992, p.133)

In the context of the nineteenth-century *fin de siècle*, the use of the female body by women was a powerful example of what Bordo has highlighted as the way in which 'beauty and sexuality can function as a medium of power and control for the otherwise powerless.' (1995, p.29) In order for her performed sexuality to offer the individual woman control she needed to find a comic persona and performance style that enabled her to achieve the delicate balance between having a voice, giving voice to her body and preventing, as Hole (2003) suggests, 'the weight of traditional meanings' from pushing her body 'back into the place of object' (p.315)

Central to my argument is the distinctive potential of comedy to offer women the tools and context to achieve this balance. As argued in Chapter 2, regarding the performer's use of stereotypes to hide, as Barreca puts it 'the subversive edge under the apparently complacent cover' (in Dickinson, P. et al., 2013, p.xiii); and Chapter 5, in terms of her physical embodiment of jokes, comedy offers the woman comedian agency. Her performance as a lower-class British woman gave her a comic voice and in this context, to echo Butler, having a voice *is* agency (1997).

As Chapter 3 has shown, the dominant convention of popular comedy was, as it remains, the performer's direct communication with audiences. This connection has several potentially positive effects in terms of her achieving individual agency. Firstly, it requires her to establish a level of performance 'intimacy' with them that allows her to assert her voice (so she can be heard in all parts of the performance space) and her public persona. In music hall and in contemporary forms, this allows a level of responsive engagement, which in performance terms is essentially high status and in control. In contemporary stand-up comedy this perception of both control and intimacy is increased by the use of the microphone. Secondly, direct address enables a performer to avoid being subsumed entirely by a character as she most commonly is in conventional theatre. Her attitude to her material remains evident through her comic *gestus* which – as the exploration in Chapter 5 of how Diamond's intertextual re-reading of Brecht's theory of *gestus* can be applied to performed comedy revealed – frequently allows an alternative ironic, parodic or strategically exaggerated position to be taken to the comic realities she presents, or the female identities she embodies. In live comedy, even when she plays a character in a song, the performer or her public/comic persona cannot be separated from what she presents. The audience see her, as Diamond argues, not simply as 'an unmediated presence', but also as 'a signifying element'. (1997, p.52) Diamond is referring to the historicising and representation of the female body in Brechtian theatre. In comedy, with arguably greater immediacy and efficacy, the female performer comments on the representation of 'woman', 'femininity' or perhaps her failed copy of it *and* on her own verbal and physical comic presence as she performs her commentary on the image she presents. Baker's *Kitchen Show* (1991), considered in Chapter 2, in which her nuanced comic

takes on the oddly ritualised pleasure she takes in the most mundane of domestic tasks is combined with her identity as an artist. This attitude is encapsulated in a series of gestic comments throughout the piece as she 'marks' her body to connote each action and her feelings about it.

In Chapter 5, Lloyd's status as 'the girl with the wink' demonstrates a very different version of the impact of a doubled gestic comment, this time on an audience's reception of a sexualised female body that 'is available for *both* analysis and identification, paradoxically within representation while refusing its fixity'. (Diamond, 1997, p.52) Lloyd's suggestive gestic commentary on the risqué material she presented 'split' her audience's gaze as they saw what she pretended to present, what she intended to present and what she thought about the gap between the two. In contemporary practice, women make use of comic attitude or *gestus* to explore and contest a range of ideas about representation and the female body and address these contemporary preoccupations through performance modes that are surprising and challenging for twenty-first century audiences. Women working in stand-up comedy and as performance artists, such as those identified in Chapter 5, continue to use entrenched assumptions about acceptable or 'natural' female behaviour to create comic material. US comic Sarah Silverman, whose approach was examined in Chapters 2 and 3, has challenged traditional perceptions by presenting a persona who transgresses multiple taboos concerning gender, race and religion throughout her act. She also uses her comedy to contest any notion that femininity is demure or shy about bodily functions or fluids or graphic humour. Her embrace of Bakhtin's carnivalesque body, despite her frequently referred to 'classical' looks is challenging to contemporary audiences in its contradictory, stubbornly oppositional nature. We still do not expect normatively 'beautiful' women to be puerile, filthy minded and wallow in gross references to their bodies in ways that undermine traditional notions of female beauty. The changing nature of the taboos addressed by women comedians is another potentially valuable area for future research.

Douglas suggests that 'a joke implies that anything is possible.' (1978, p.108) Comedy always offers alternative perspectives and ways of thinking and being, by

unsettling spectators' fixed positions; challenging what we thought we knew and offering new ways of looking at the world, our place in it and our responses to it. Kenneth Lash suggests this tendency to see a fuller picture of the world through humour occurs via 'the agency of imagination'. (1948, p.117) For women, so many fixed ideas surround their looks and their bodies, their behaviour and their abilities that the opportunities to subvert and offer alternative ways for audiences to see them are myriad. As Quirk points out, Josie Long's seascape drawn on her belly, described in Chapter 2, creates just such an imaginative possibility for her audiences, 'suggesting an alternative approach to beauty as a substitute norm' (Quirk, 2015, p.34) Crucially, because Long presents this as part of her comedy she invites us to see her seeing it as different. This is a unique aspect of live comedy through which comics are able to talk and walk us through their thought processes and lead us to the alternatives they have identified. At other times their intention may be to surprise us into a laugh by presenting an alternative with no foregrounding or by using the incongruity inherent in a direct juxtaposition.

Bailey has suggested that in music hall '[s]ongs served largely to confirm the experience of working-class life rather than to offer escapes or alternatives.' (1982, p.198) The essence of music hall was very much to engage in the collective sharing of experience through songs and laughter, and as Jenny Hill and Marie Lloyd observed in interviews about their relationships with audiences, performers needed to ensure they presented authentic and recognisable versions of the London experience. However, in performance, I have argued, some of the comic strategies they employed enabled women to also challenge their audiences and offer alternatives. Music-hall comedy offered what I have referred to throughout this thesis as a 'hybrid representation' of the London that its audiences lived in. This alternative city was frequently escapist, often presenting a (male) fantasy world where boys could be boys and women were compliant and flirtatious and open to sexual attention. However, this is not the full story and the women who performed comedy on the halls populated their version of the city with capable female characters who could curb male over-enthusiasm and ensure that their individual women's voices and perspectives as performers were clearly heard. They did this by combining what Mizejewski has identified as 'the interface of

identification and defiance of gender.’ (2014, p.41) Women recognised the characters presented and the ideas or emotions performers expressed and they did so by being honest about their gendered roles and about how they felt about them. Maidie Scott, for example, accepts her roles as wife and mother while fantasising with her audience about what might have been if she did not have to. Lloyd is happy to appeal to the men in her audience but, through her hugely confident public persona, she also makes herself the subject of her act and appeals to the women in the crowd as she acknowledges her/their desires and epitomises a woman who is in control of her life and likes men but does not *need* one. In comic songs men rarely got away with attempted seductions without some comeuppance and as the examples in Chapter 2 and Chapter 4 show, the female characters in these songs were frequently presented as women who refuse to be taken for victims or fools. Wives were likely to follow men to the pub and demand they came home, as Loftus does in *Hullo! I've Been Looking For You* (Harrington and Le Brunn, 1901), or give them hell when finally arrive home as Victoria does in *I'll Give Him Stopping Out All Night* (Godwin, 1896). Through these comic approaches, beyond the collective alternative of the music-hall community, individual women encouraged what Mizejewski describes as the ‘shift in perspective’ that women comics can provide (2014, p.40-41), by honestly revealing their failings and faults, embodying exaggerated versions of gender norms their audiences recognise to be true, or offering alternative, unorthodox versions of what women could do or be.

Scott has suggested that we should not look at the past in any way that ‘takes meaning as transparent’. (1992, p.778) In historical performances, these meanings are ever more opaque and the attempts I have made to achieve retrospective clarity have not been to confirm absolute meanings, but to reinscribe these performances with their live potential, so the range of interpretive possibilities they hold as comedy are more visible.

While this research has demonstrated that comic alternatives presenting ‘woman as subject’ (Rowe, p.31) were performed, audience reception of the versions of womanhood female comedians embodied has been much more difficult to demonstrate. Because women performed them, these constructions inevitably

drew attention to existing social hierarchies and to 'cultural fissures and fault lines' (Gilbert, 2004, p.177) but, '[w]hether female comics truly subvert patriarchal norms through their discourse is, of course, contingent upon audience interpretation.' (2004, p.157) As accounts of these performances are limited primarily to the opinions of male reviewers, middle-class (usually male) recollections and a small number of interviews with performers, my conclusions about the impacts of this work are based on this 'slender residue' (Jardine, 1998, p.33) and the application of humour and performance theories, in conjunction with the examination of contemporary comparisons demonstrating the potential of the presence and comic persona of the comedian in the creation of female rather than male comic constructions of femininity.

The complex relationships between form, content and context have been evident in some of the material examined, as performances such as Vesta Victoria's presentation of a woman suffering serious domestic abuse in *A Baby With Men's Ways* (1904). In a sentimental song on this subject the audience position would likely be simply one of pity for the victim. In this representation, the character's evident denial of her situation changes the way the audience is being asked to respond to her and explores a darkly comic approach to a common problem for women. Contemporary performers' comic perspectives on analogous subjects indicate similarly challenging comic attitudes. Truscott's 2015 piece about rape *Asking For It*, performed naked from the waist down, was unsurprisingly uncomfortable for some audience members, as noted in Chapter 5; and Silverman's *Jesus Is Magic* includes a joke about being raped by a doctor which, she declares, 'is so bitter-sweet for a Jewish girl'. In this sequence, once the audience's shocked laughter and applause subsides, Silverman waits, looks around the room and says softly, 'Oh. Thank you. I knew something good would come out of that...out of rape'. (Lynch/Silverman, 2005) As she delivers this line, which uncomfortably undermines the previous laugh, she places the responsibility for laughing with the audience, reminding them that this is what they have found funny.

What these comparisons between performers from the two eras have revealed is that the job of the comedian has not changed significantly. In order to achieve the

obvious goal of making her audience laugh, she needs to variously – and of course, dependent entirely on her comic persona and her established relationship with her audience – make use of what people are likely to know or assume about her (as a public persona or from what she reveals to them in performance); what she knows about them and what their shared obsessions and preoccupations are; sometimes what they fear, or disapprove of, or find unacceptable and will feel uncomfortable hearing. Inescapably she must still, as Chapters 2 and 5 concluded, take account of how she appears to them physically as a woman; how her body and her sexuality are connected to the ways in which she is perceived as a performer, and the impact they have on the ways on which she can or cannot be funny. As Chapter 5 confirmed, the relationship between a woman's body and humour remains complex and female comics continue to be assessed for their physical appearances 'before they have a chance to speak'. (Mizejewski, 2014, p.14) However, Ballou argues that the 'normatively sexy female comic body' can make use of its 'designated unfunniness' (2013, p.180) to surprise audiences and overturn their expectations. Unsurprisingly, women comedians continue to be intensely scrutinised and defined by their looks to a far greater extent than their male counterparts and, while the discourse around continuing inequalities is far more open on stage and off than in the music-hall period, a great deal of female comedy still has – at least as its starting point – the male gaze and the interplay between what a woman says (verbally) and how her body 'speaks'. She continues to embody her jokes in a way that is simply not the case for men. Rosalind Gill (2007) has commented on the relentless surveillance of women's bodies in twenty-first century popular culture. A full discussion of current trends in women's comic performance and the impact on this of postfeminism (itself a complex and contested term) is well beyond the reach of this thesis. However, McRobbie's concerns about the impact of postfeminism on female representation (2007), and Gill's discussion of postfeminist approaches to female sexual desire and the construction of the female identity in contemporary popular culture as one that identifies with a pornographic male fantasy are resonant in light of the discussion here about constructions of femininity and the potential for objectification evident in music-hall representations. Women's shifting attitudes to their bodies, sex and

their sexualities in the twenty-first century, and how they approach these areas through the comedy they produce deserves scholarly attention.

That music hall contributed to the circulation of stereotypes cannot be denied; the influence of the form and what remains of it in national memory is largely sexual innuendo delivered by very broadly drawn characters. However, songs about female victims or foolish women falling prey to deceitful men such as Vesta Victoria's various dumb blondes, while at first glance merely reiterating negative stereotypes of women's stupidity, also used performed irony and offered gestic commentary that suggested being gullible or reliant on men, or believing whatever they told you was laughable. In combination with Victoria's pseudo-victims, Loftus and Scott's proto-feminists and Wallace's unruly grotesque, the likes of Bellwood and Lloyd would present strong, opinionated female characters who confirmed that women could take control of their own bodies and make choices about who they had sex with and when.

I have argued for the agency women were afforded through their representations of themselves and their constructions of their identities because of the unique potential that the establishment of their comic voices held and the social critiques their direct relationships with audiences allowed them to perform. I have suggested that this specifically comic voice allows a woman to make use of established gender assumptions and stereotypes to create comedy that sometimes transgresses acceptable limits and points out to audiences that they hold entrenched positions, which may not always be appropriate. Comic forms demand unpredictability and confusion and inversions; these, Rowe argues, are central to a woman's comic unruliness and, as Sharon Lockyer and Lynn Myers have shown, audiences expect and highly value this unpredictability in comedy (2011).

According to comedian Katherine Ryan, in response to the question 'what is it like being a woman in comedy?', Australian comic, Bec Hill, answered: 'It's exactly like being a man, only you get asked this question.' (Groskop, 2014) Hill's pithy one-liner reply reveals her understandable irritation that the question is being asked at all and her point is well made: the fact that it is being asked is its own answer. Is

the root of the question an observation that, despite a rise in the number of successful women comedians appearing in mainstream comedy there is still a clear gender gap in terms of the number of female acts being booked, represented and promoted on the stand-up circuits in the UK, the US, Australia and elsewhere? Such marginalisation and under-representation of women comedians in the contemporary form is perplexing given that, as this thesis has confirmed, large numbers of women were so central to the development of comic performance in this country in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Or perhaps the question concerns the reputation of stand-up as 'masculine' that grew with the form through the twentieth century; the persistent perception that solo comic performance is 'naturally' a male, rather than a female form of communication and expression?

Although my focus has been on comedy created by women, this research has not revealed evidence to support gender binarism in terms of either humour production or reception. However, the socio-political position of women at the end of the nineteenth century did produce a particular set of pressures and constraints, which women performers necessarily responded to in gendered ways. The distinctive female comic voices that emerged against this backdrop were creative responses to existing cultural norms and social restrictions on women in Victorian/Edwardian society which were inflected by ambiguous and constantly conflicted reactions to the representation of women and their bodies on stage. In addition, the imposition of class-based perceptions of morality through regulation and a market-focused drive towards respectability influenced the production and content of popular entertainments and, in terms of women's performance, these coalescing forces and interests resulted in the merging of older and newer styles of popular comedy.

As examined throughout this thesis, women developed performance strategies to allow them to work within, despite and sometimes in opposition to the limitations placed on them and many of these strategies remain evident in contemporary comedy. The use of performed irony and the subversion of female stereotypes, of self-deprecation, of attitudes to the female body and its erotic impact continue to

be used by women comedians. Underpinning all of these is 'gagging': the unmediated and unpredictable direct contact between a performer and her audience which has evolved from its place as the improvised patter performers delivered in between songs – an uncontrollable element of music-hall performance the censor wished to eradicate – to become the defining feature of the modern form. It is through this direct connection that she continues to provoke, conspire with and delight her audiences; disrupting their thinking while they laugh, as she asserts her individual comic voice.

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