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She Would Not Be Silenced: Mae West's Struggle Against Censorship

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Why All the Fuss About an Actress?

“Come up and see me sometime” is perhaps the most recognizable of actress Mae West’s impressive roster of witty quips and one-liners. In 1929, she wrote:

What few people realize is that my work has a deliberate plan and purpose... It is usually long after the death of pioneers that their work is respected and the truths they stood for recognized. Because of narrow-minded censors and silly taboos the people are unable to learn truths they are starving for...thousands of women have asked me the most personal questions about their husbands and love life...They know nothing about sex at all, for the subject is hidden from children, kept out of our of books and schools and education. (Louvish, 2005, p. xiv).

During her lifetime, West’s work was often censored for dealing with subjects that pushed the boundaries of what was deemed acceptable and for examining these topic in West’s trademark racy manner. Even though censorship contributed to the decline in her popularity, West never let censorship stop her from delivering her thought-provoking social commentary using her comedic talent and sharp wit.

Mae West made it her business to play strong female characters who held much of the power in sexual relationships. In addition to writing many plays, she wrote all of her film dialogue and often had a hand in writing entire screenplays (Robertson, 1993). By exploiting men’s desire for them, many of West’s characters were able to live lives of luxury, free from want. These characters were pleased with the way they controlled their own lives by controlling their own sexuality. Social organizations around the country, and at times the film industry itself, did not like the message that this type of portrayal sent. In fact, “West’s repeated self-characterization, as both a character and a star, as an independent lower-class woman who judiciously exercises her sexuality to gain pleasure, wealth, and social prerogatives” (Curry, 1991, p.75) was even seen as a threat to male-dominated American society. While the film industry and society in general had few qualms about exploiting female sexuality for capital gain, they did not find it acceptable for a women to use her sexuality for personal gain. It was felt that Mae West’s depiction of women in control of their own powerful sexuality would inspire women across America to begin emulating her, which was deemed transgressive and unacceptable.

Early Life and Stage Career

Mae West was born Mary Jane West in Brooklyn, New York on August 17, 1893 (Louvish, 2005). Her father, John West, had been a prizefighter and her mother, Matilda, may have spent time as a model (Louvish, 2005). Although the details of West's early life are murky at best, by the 1910 New York Census, her profession was listed as an "actress, vaudeville" (Louvish, 2005). One year later, she was referred to in a *Variety* review (Louvish, 2005), and by 1913 she was performing in a solo act (Robertson, 1993). She continued acting onstage throughout the 1910s and 1920s and in 1921 received a copyright for her first play, *The Ruby Ring* (Louvish, 2005). Five year later, she would pen the play that sent her to jail: *Sex*.

Sex opened to Broadway audiences on April 26, 1926, and ran for 375 performances (Louvish, 2005). The play, written by West under the pseudonym Jane Mast, is the story of Margy, a prostitute who is able to teach a woman from high society a lesson and expose her hypocrisy. In addition to writing the play, West also starred as Margy (Louvish, 2005). Although the play garnered both praise and criticism, the critics eventually won out due to an opinion that the play's content was transgressive and unfit to be shown in public. In 1927, Mae West and others involved in the show were charged with "producing an immoral show and maintaining a public nuisance" (Louvish, 2005, p.131). This resulted in a ten-day jail sentence for obscenity and the greatly increased notoriety that accompanied the media circus surrounding the court proceedings (Black, 1989).

Arrival in Hollywood

The eight days West spent "on Welfare Island, a former hospital and insane asylum (she got two days off for good behavior), became an essential part of her legend" (Louvish, 2005, p.136) and served as excellent publicity. When she was released, she continued to write and star in Broadway productions. One of the plays she wrote, *The Drag*, even dealt with homosexuality. In 1928, West wrote and starred in her biggest hit to date, *Diamond Lil* (Louvish, 2005). It told the story of a bawdy barroom entertainer in 1890s New York, Diamond Lil, and the legal, ethical, and romantic troubles she becomes entangled in (Louvish, 2005). The play was a

tremendous success, and West was able to use the notoriety she gained and connections she made during its run to transition to the West Coast (Louvish, 2005).

By 1932, she had moved to Hollywood and was working for Paramount Pictures. She did not have the starring role in her first film, *Night After Night* (Curry, 1991), but did act alongside her friend George Raft (Louvish, 2005). One year later, the studio released *She Done Him Wrong*, a film version of *Diamond Lil* (Black, 1989). It was followed seven months later by the release of *I'm No Angel* (Curry, 1991). However, "Although West receive approval from industry censors, accolades from the critics, and adoration from millions, moral guardians contended that she represented a total collapse of moral standards" (Black, 1989, p.174). In order to understand why the film caused such an extreme reaction, one must understand the social atmosphere in which it was created.

Censorship in the Film Industry

To some extent, the 1920s were a period of social contradiction. The popular image of the suave, pinstripes-and-spats clad gangster and his flapper moll soaking up bathtub gin far from the reach of the law was not the norm. While these shady figures did exist, many Americans harbored fears of social change brought about by the fact that the world was changing before their very eyes. Many social, political, and religious organizations were outraged by the motion picture industry's glorification of characters who lived outside the law or who did not conform to society's opinion of what was normal (Leff, 1991). Additionally, the public was repulsed by the immoral behavior of some of the notable film stars of the era, including Fatty Arbuckle, who was only acquitted of charges of sexual assault and murder after three trials (Leff, 1991). Even though he was found "not guilty," he never regained popular approval and his career was ruined. Local censors began "cutting movies to fit local tastes" (Leff, 1991, p.433) throughout the country and many organizations spearheaded boycotts of movies they found morally reprehensible (Leff, 1991).

Film studios knew they needed to take action to prevent the loss of revenue that resulted from local censorship and boycotts. At the same time, they did not want to surrender their autonomy to public or governmental control. In 1922, a group of motion picture company

presidents chose William Hays to lobby the public and government on their behalf (Leff, 1991). Hays, who had served as the Postmaster General, immediately called for self-regulation of the film industry (Leff, 1991). The studio heads and members of the newly-formed Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) supported Hays's proposed plan. This self-censorship would protect their monetary interests by fostering the creation of films that would not be cut in small, local markets or boycotted by social groups (Leff, 1991). Despite the supposed benefits, though, artists involved in all stages of the creation of motion pictures – from actors to directors and any job in between – balked at the idea that film should be subject to any form of regulation, even if it came from within the industry itself (Leff, 1991).

Regardless of how many cries of protest he heard from motion picture artists, Hays drafted many documents in the 1920s that outlined how film was to be regulated, including a list of “Don'ts and Be Careful's” that outlined “three dozen interdictions based on rules of censor boards around the county” (Leff, 1991, p.434). In 1930, the Production Code, which was written by a Catholic priest, went into effect. This code was administered by the Studio Relations Committee (Leff, 1991). Joseph Breen, a member of the Committee, was chosen to head the newly-formed Production Code Administration (PCA) in June 1934. While the Production Code had been in effect for years, controversial films were still being produced. Many production companies approached financial ruin, Catholics threatened boycotts and created the Legion of Decency, and the Payne Fund began to research the connection between crime in movies and crime in the real world. In the midst of this turmoil, Breen began an enforcement process that would directly affect West's work. After the creation of the PCA, Breen began to stem the tide of anti-Hollywood public opinion by strictly enforcing the Production Code and fostering a better public relations image of Hollywood (Leff, 1991). Mae West's persona as a “talented musical and comedic entertainer and a sexually alluring and clever woman who generally asserts control over her personal and professional destiny” (Curry, 1991, p. 59) on and off screen was seen as a threat to the morals and social structure the Code served to uphold.

Mae West, the Production Code, and the PCA

Many of the Production Code's regulations dealt with sexual content. In fact, "Sex" was the topic of the longest of the Code's twelve sections. Seven other sections, including "Dances," "Costume," "Dress," "Repellant Subjects," and "Location" dealt with how motion pictures were to depict sex. In fact, the Code created a hidden language for addressing sexual relationships onscreen (Leff, 1991). Mae West made sexual content her stock-in-trade regardless of the restrictions the Code put in place. She knew that if sex could not be discussed, then neither could the social power created by sexual relationships. West felt it was important to break down society's opinion of sex as a dangerous and taboo subject, an opinion the Production Code helped foster. She spent her entire career challenging the unequal status quo with entertainment, wit, and comedy as her weapons of choice.

Huge portions of America's population soon fell under Mae West's spell, and "by 1934 more than 46 million Americans" (Black, 1989, p.173) had seen the first two films to star Mae West. Both films had been made before the PCA was created to strictly enforce the Production Code, so they both got by with relatively little censorship. Her next film, however, had no such luck escaping Breen and the review board's notice. Originally titled *It Ain't No Sin*, the film was about the fictional Ruby Carter, a riverboat entertainer who commits arson and robbery, rigs a boxing match, runs off with her criminal boyfriend, receives no punishment, and has no remorse for her misdeeds. Breen, who held a day-long conference with his employees when the script arrived in his office, was dismayed by the material and found it in complete violation of the Production Code (Black, 1991). West was forced to make so many changes to her script that the end product was barely recognizable. Although much of the supposedly immoral and threatening material was removed, the movie was condemned by conservative groups and municipalities across the country. Paramount executives were outraged (Black, 1989). They believed that one of the main reasons the Code existed was to ensure that any movie they made would meet with public and censor approval and hence make money for their studio. Breen and Hays assured the censors and outraged studio heads that since production of *It Ain't No Sin* began before the creation of the PCA, the film was the last of its kind (Black, 1989). They even agreed to rename the movie *Belle of the Nineties* (Black, 1989).

Determined to act on his earlier declaration, Breen and the PCA found much to object to in West's subsequent films, including her 1936 film *Klondike Kate*. Connections between West's character and religion were omitted, as were scenes of violence meant to establish one of the antagonist's villainous nature. Songs with overly suggestive lyrics were cut completely, as were the lines, "Men are at their best when women are at their worst," "It's a mighty cold sheet that just one sleeps under," and "Give a man a free hand and he'll put it all over you" (Curry, 1991, p.61, 64). Aside from obviously suggestive lines like those listed above, one of the problems of censoring Mae West's dialogue and films was a matter of the written versus the performed script. While many of her lines appear innocent on paper, her talent and "symbolic power was such that she needed only read an ambiguous line and listeners immediately set to work supplying suggestive double meanings"(Craig, 2006, p.238). Once, when a male co-star's character expressed his need for more time to make a decision, West replied with "That's alright, I like a man what takes his time" (Craig, 2006, p.235). On the surface, the response seems to imply that it is a good idea to make well thought-out decisions. In Mae West's hands, however, the phrase took on a sexually-charged double meaning. This was due in part to West's mastery of tone and inflection in the delivery of her lines and in part to the persona she had created. As Edgar Bergen once said of West, "If she says 'I've got appendicitis' it sounds like sex" (Craig, 2006, p.238). Since she was practically synonymous with racy sexuality, her lines were more apt to be viewed as having a sexual undertone. West knew not only what to say but also how to say it in order to provoke the biggest reaction from her audience.

The End of An Era

Even Mae West was not immune to the fleeting nature of stardom. By the end of the 1930s, a declining public interest in her work, due in part to the censorship of her films, brought Mae West's most successful Hollywood years to a close. This did not stop her from continuing to outrage censors. In 1937, she appeared on *The Chase & Sanborn Comedy Hour*, a hugely popular radio program at the time. Her skit about Adam and Eve, along with her suggestive banter with ventriloquist Edgar Bergen and his dummy Charlie McCarthy, incited outrage from Catholic audiences across the country. This provoked a serious and extensive national debate on the role of censorship in the radio industry (Craig, 2006).

In the following years, West would continue to perform, albeit not as often or as grandly as in her heyday. Throughout her life, Mae West was more than a bawdy, controversial figure who provoked the ire of not one, but three major entertainment industries. She was a smart, powerful woman who portrayed smart, powerful women on stage, on screen, and on air much to the dismay of many. Her progressive ideas about the control women should have over their own lives, especially their own sexuality, was seen as dangerous to the morality of society. Although regulators attempted to limit the scope of her work, she believed in her message of empowerment and never let censorship stop her. Rather, she worked around censorship codes and within a regulated system in order to continue to deliver her message of empowerment to generations of American women.

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