The Wayward Woman: Progressivism, Prostitution, and Performance in the United States, 1888-1917

Barbara Antoniazzi

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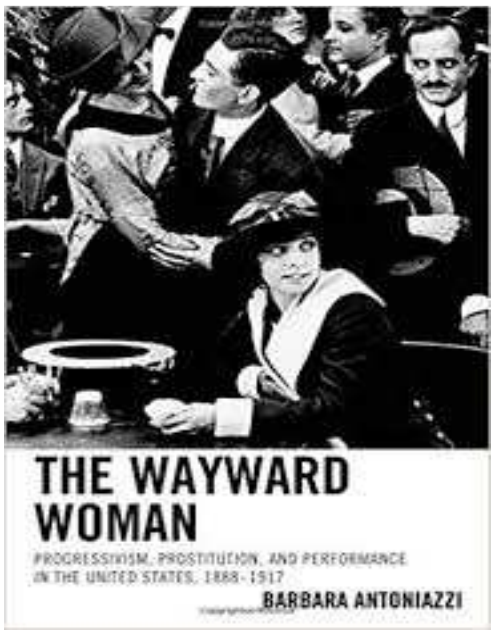

Review by Serena Fusco[*]

Centered on the titular *Wayward Woman* as a complex, composite figure inhabiting the three decades (1888-1917) regarded as the age of Progressivism in the United States, Barbara Antoniazzi's book is an intelligent, compelling, and original contribution that convincingly combines historical research with textual and cultural analysis. Antoniazzi's working hypothesis is the existence, during this period, of a "continuum of waywardness"," ideally connecting two emblematic figures at its poles: the New Woman and the white slave. The author focuses "on the intersection between performance and performativity, between theatrical acting and political action" (3). Both the figure of the New Woman and that of the white slave, Antoniazzi maintains, acquired a new type of visibility thanks to various public "performances" – theatrical, but also political. In order to investigate her posited "continuum of waywardness," Antoniazzi convincingly discusses political activism, as well as legal procedures – such as trials – as performance acts, addressing a public or an audience; simultaneously, theatrical script and theatrical performance are discussed as stages for bringing social, cultural, political, and legal matters to the attention of the public, turning/consolidating them into matters for public debate. "Performance" in the theatrical sense and "performativity" in the social/legal sense are shown in historical dialogue. Legal reform is seen as influenced by public debate, which is in turn influenced by the theatre as a machine for constructing "the public;" the public sphere is, in turn, a stage where different versions of female "waywardness," negatively or positively charged, are displayed and/or display themselves.

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The book is divided in five chapters. The Introduction presents a discursive genealogy of white slavery, possibly the central category of the book – a concept frequently used in lieu of "prostitution," that reached its peak of credibility and influence on American society in 1910, when the White Slave Traffic Act – also known as Mann Act – was passed. In Antoniazzi's analysis, white slavery is regarded as a myth in the Barthesian sense: when it was coined and began circulating, the concept acquired a "reserve of history," a historical foundation, by emptying out and appropriating the meaning of a previously existing concept – namely, (race) slavery.

Chapter One introduces the "intersection between performance and performativity" by discussing two typologies of New Woman going public: the suffragette and the working-class girl on strike. While the two groups of women belonged to different social classes and often had different interests and political objectives, both, Antoniazzi argues, accurately staged a visible presence in public spaces, and deemed their "public performances" a key to attaining strategic aims. In spite of their differences, both groups consciously "walked out" in the streets, reclaiming public visibility and contributing to the transformation, for women, of the possible meanings of such visibility; they did so by walking the fine line between respectability and moral stigmatization. In an accurate historical reconstruction, Antoniazzi details salient moments in the sociopolitical changes brought about by the two groups, chronicles the history of their (temporary) strategic allegiances, and narrates how and why women in both groups were repeatedly associated with the realm of prostitution on the part of their detractors.

Chapter Two brings forth an argumentative strand that will be fruitfully developed throughout the book – i.e., an exploration of the racial(ized) discourse informing many proposals for reform and fighting vice in the urban environments of the Progressive Era. Initially elaborated around black bodies in the era of chattel slavery, the rhetoric of abolition was transformed and redeployed during Progressivism, Antoniazzi argues, for the purpose of saving (white) women from vice – i.e., disreputable behavior and, eventually, prostitution. The chapter presents a parallel analysis of Jane Addams' writings, wherein she advocates social and urban reform, and Alice Wellington Rollins' *Uncle Tom's Tenement*, a novel explicitly modeled on Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, depicting the life of Irish immigrant women in New York City's slums. Thanks to an acute textual analysis of such disparate products, Antoniazzi underscores "the ideological pitfalls inherent in reform work" (17). In Jane Addams' discourse, Antoniazzi maintains, the women to be rescued tend to be cast – using a paradigm historically modeled on black women – as inherently helpless against vice and devoid of agency; on the other hand, a work such as *Uncle Tom's Tenement* displays a more subtle perspective and casts its female characters not as mere victims but, instead, as women endowed with agency, struggling to survive within a reality where reform is often a disguised taming strategy begotten by the class oppression inherent in capitalism.

Chapter Three discusses two legal procedures – as well as their background, impact, and discursive value – taking place in the time frame between 1910 and 1913, at the peak of the white slavery scare. The first part of the analysis focuses on Belle Moore, a black woman taken to trial in 1910 with the charge of having sold two white women into sexual slavery. The second procedure under consideration in the chapter is the white slavery trial of Jack Johnson, an African American boxing champion: in this second case, the author focuses on the figure of Belle Schreiber, the key witness in Johnson's trial. Through a careful analysis of the rhetorical strategies employed by several agents in these two legal procedures, both culminating in a guilty verdict, Antoniazzi argues that these two trials enacted – and, as a consequence, strengthened in public perception – a full conflation of whiteness and womanly "innocence," in the double sense of moral non-accountability and incapacity of self-governance. At the same time, the new figure of the "slaver" fully became, in the public imagination, that of a racialized character preying on whiteness, thus enacting a paradoxical reversal of the positions – black slave and white slaver – existing at the time of chattel slavery.

Chapter Four goes back to theater in a more "literal" sense, focusing on Rachel Crothers' play *Ourselves*. In Antoniazzi's reading, Crothers creatively re-appropriates the trope of white slavery, being the main theme in a number of extremely popular Broadway plays during the 1913-14 season. "[C]ontrary to [an] identification of the theater as a kaleidoscope of the double standard, and also in contrast to the conservative rhetoric upheld by most white slave plays" (124), Crothers was, Antoniazzi maintains, one of the playwrights who exploited the stage to take part in the public debate around white slavery – and, in so doing, opened new directions for the debate itself: these new openings were predicated on placing the involved women

themselves – not someone else, man or woman, speaking on their behalf – at the center of the discourse on prostitution, while showing how such discourse, albeit well-intentioned, was way too often deployed through a repression of female sexual desire and agency. Both following and breaking a previously existing theatrical tradition, *Ourselves* also worked creating a "wayward (female) audience" by means of a clever use of the emotional charge attached to the theme and represented situation.

In the last chapter Antoniazzi demonstrates how an increasing anxiety about the health of the American nation – a key feature of several reforming efforts during the Progressive Era, reaching a peak with the outbreak of WWI and the necessity to preserve the health of the male military body – was predicated on, and often resulted in, a disregard for the right of women to choose for themselves in health matters. Analyzing two more plays – Eugene Walter's *The Knife* and Eugène Brieux's *Damaged Goods* – the chapter discusses the theatrical stage not only as space for debating reform issues, but also as an instrument for pairing the scare of vice and white slavery with a promotion of medical, scientific intervention – often in extreme forms and resulting, at least in part, in less freedom for women and in the buttressing of male power at their expense. Creating, once again, a conversation which brings together the theatre world, the public space, and the level of legal discourse and law enforcement, Antoniazzi retraces the fundamental ambivalences inherent in Progressivism, showing how the anxiety around the topic of white slavery was, in very concrete terms, "instrumental in obtaining wide acceptance of otherwise inadmissible measures of public intervention" (172); such measures would have long and lasting influence on the life of American (women) citizens.

To conclude, Antoniazzi effectively explores the contradictions brought to light by the simultaneous emergence, in the public sphere, of the assertive New Woman and the victimized prostitute, especially in her incarnation as the "white slave." Overall, the volume displays engagement with and mastery of a broad range of discourses, as well as a nuanced, expert, and convincing handling of the selected topics – from the theater to the law, from writing to public health, from the realm of representation to fundamentally biopolitical forms of individual and social control. This fine work can be of interest to scholars in a number of fields, among which one can include American studies, feminist studies, cultural studies, and theater studies. It is a space and a bridge, clearly and brilliantly written, bringing together issues that are highly topical nowadays.