



MAE WEST

An Icon in Black and White

Jill Watts

Mae ★

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JILL WATTS

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★ To ★

*Thomas and Doris Watts,
Donald, Rebecca, and Sarah Woo,
and
Wally*

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Contents

	Acknowledgments	ix
<i>One</i>	They Were Too Smart	3
<i>Two</i>	The Way She Does It	27
<i>Three</i>	Shimadonna	50
<i>Four</i>	Speaking of the Influence of the Jook	70
<i>Five</i>	You Can Be Had	93
<i>Six</i>	The Subject of the Dream	118
<i>Seven</i>	Good Night to the Dichotomies	143
<i>Eight</i>	If You Can't Go Straight, You've Got to Go Around	170
<i>Nine</i>	Naturally I Disagree	198
<i>Ten</i>	Bring Me Rabelais	226
<i>Eleven</i>	A Glittering Facsimile	254
<i>Twelve</i>	I Had Them All	282
<i>Thirteen</i>	I Wrote the Story Myself	305
<i>Fourteen</i>	Really a Prologue	316
	Sources	
	Archival Sources and Abbreviations	319
	Notes	321
	Bibliographical Essay	357
	Index	363

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Mae ★

★ *West*

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They Were Too Smart

Mrs. Crane Brittany: Have your ancestors ever been traced?

Cleo Borden: Well—yes. But they were too smart. They couldn't catch 'em.

—Mae West as Cleo Borden, *Goin' to Town*, 1935

In the early 1970s, rumors circulated that after Mae West's death, her deepest secret would be revealed publicly for the first time. A few wagged someone would finally verify that the celebrated symbol of brazen female sexuality was not really a woman but a man. Others speculated that a source would confirm that West had African-American roots, that one of her ancestors had passed for white. Mae toyed with those bolder journalists who confronted her with the persistent rumors that she was a man, and when one writer, John Kobal, questioned her on her racial background and preference for the blues, she admitted only that "her affinity for black music was because it's the best there is." But all those who anticipated a bombshell at her death were to be eventually disappointed. In 1980, at the age of eighty-seven, Mae West died and was buried with the secrets that she was believed to have so carefully guarded throughout her life.¹

Mae West's death certificate, signed by a physician and an undertaker, confirms that she was all woman. It is more difficult to rule out the possibility that she had African-American ancestry. While three of her four grandparents were undisputedly European born, the ethnicity of her paternal grandfather, John Edwin West, is harder to pinpoint. He first appears in public records only after the Civil War, in 1866, when the Manhattan city directory shows him living on the Lower East Side, one block from the notorious Bowery.

The one sure fact about John Edwin West is that he had been a seafarer—a rigger who worked on whaling ships. The rest of his background remains a mystery. His recorded birth date varied between 1819 and 1830; his birth-

places diverged widely and included New York, Maine, Newfoundland, and even England. His death certificate indicated that he arrived in New York in 1821, at the age of two, and that his parents were named John and Edith, but there is nothing to corroborate this or to confirm where John Edwin West really spent his young life. Perhaps, like other working-class people, he remained undocumented by a society focused on the elite and privileged. But he may have also evaded record keepers, purposefully obscuring his background.

Mae West often declared that her grandfather had come from a long line of John Wests. For visitors, she proudly displayed a genealogy of a West family, mainly from Virginia and purported to have descended from Alfred the Great. This impressive lineage may have been more a public projection than a private admission; West often exaggerated or embellished her personal history. Still, these accounts not only offered glimpses into her self-perceptions but almost always were grounded in an element of truth. She frequently provided significant verifiable information on her family—with the exception of John Edwin West, the only grandparent for whom she volunteered no information on background or origins. Perhaps this vagueness was intentional, explicable if John Edwin, or one of his forebears, had escaped bondage and passed for white. Many enslaved African-American sailors took advantage of their mobility and escaped north; some of those who were light-skinned passed. While no documents substantiate that John Edwin did, similarly none prove that he did not. But his nebulous background, the reality that 50 percent of those serving on whaling vessels were black, and his absence in public records until slavery's end suggest that it was possible. Even his wife and children were uncertain about or unwilling to discuss his origins, often giving conflicting information about his past.²

Whatever his background, of all of her grandparents, John Edwin made the strongest impression on Mae, who found him a fascinating storyteller of maritime adventures. Mae remembered him as healthy and vigorous. He must have been, for only the most able-bodied seamen had the strength and agility to work clipper ships' towering masts and endure gruelingly long whaling voyages. She also insisted that despite his long career on the rough seas, John Edwin was a pious man. A devout Methodist, he fell to his knees in prayer at each meal and at the end of family visits. She also told how in his advanced years he proudly showed off a near-perfect set of teeth, missing only one that he had decided to pull himself.

Despite his enigmatic early years, later records show that in 1852 John Edwin took a wife, a twelve-year-old Irish Catholic immigrant named Mary Jane Copley. The daughter of Julia (née Copple) and Martin Copley, Mary Jane had come to the United States in 1848, joining thousands who fled Ireland

during the potato famine. At the age of fifteen, she bore a daughter, Edith, who was probably born in Brooklyn.³

The West family initially remained small. Although Mary Jane eventually bore eleven children, she lost five in infancy. Her second healthy child was the hearty and spunky John Junior, who was born in March of 1866, over ten years after his older sister. Known as Jack, he was born in his parents' home on the Lower East Side. An early photograph of him shows a determined toddler with wavy black hair and steely eyes gazing steadily into the camera.

Jack West came into a turbulent world. A year before his birth, the Civil War ended and President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated. His father did not serve in the conflict; sailors were needed to keep northern commerce flowing. But everyone in Manhattan was affected by the war, which left the city's economy in ruins. Particularly hard hit were impoverished sectors like the Lower East Side, where residents, ravaged by smallpox, cholera, typhoid, tuberculosis, and pneumonia, were crowded into dilapidated tenements. Between 1866 and 1870, the Wests lived in several locations in this area, finally settling in a tenement with eight other families near Tompkins Square Park. They subsisted on John Edwin's wages and whatever Edith, the oldest daughter, now working as a seamstress, could earn.

Jack West spent his formative years on the Lower East Side's rough streets surrounded by poverty, despair, and crime. Powerful gangs controlled the neighborhoods; their influence became so strong that it eventually extended over the city government and police. Their violent exploits were legendary, and many Lower East Side boys regarded notorious gang leaders as heroes. At some point, Jack must have joined a gang, for as writer Luc Sante observes, they were "the basic unit of social life among young males in New York during the nineteenth century." Beginning in childhood, Jack found himself suspended between the honest hardworking poor and the unruly Lower East Side gangs.⁴

Mae remembered her father as outgoing and, at times, gregarious with a wide assortment of friends and acquaintances. But slum life's insecurities and poverty hardened him. A small, wiry youth, he was feisty and strong, and on the streets and in the alleys, he learned to fight. Mae remembered her father boasting that even as a child "he'd rather fight than eat." While he could be personable, according to Mae, he was "always ready to do physical violence when the urge was on him." Easily angered, he had a fiery temper. "Oh, my father was cruel, you know," she recalled in 1969. "But later, I realized all his fighting was done doing other people's fighting for them."⁵

In addition to his immersion in a culture of violence, Jack also confronted festering ethnic and racial bigotry. Nineteenth-century New York City be-

came home to peoples of many races, ethnicities, and nationalities. Deep divides developed, and hostilities sometimes spilled over into violent clashes. These tensions were promoted and augmented by the dominant culture's denigration of anyone who failed to fit the mold of white Protestant Victorian America. Jack West, even if his father was not African-American, must have experienced some of the bruising effects of the ethnic prejudice directed at Irish Catholics. White Anglo-Saxon Protestants defined the Irish as a separate, nonwhite race, disparaging them as "savage," "bestial," and "lazy," degrading stereotypes strikingly parallel to those thrust upon African Americans. And while Irish Americans attempted to claim whiteness, throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, prejudice against them remained constant. In a sense, the dominant culture pressured Jack West and his family to "pass," to deny their heritage and seek inclusion in the white and Protestant Victorian middle class. This struggle with white identity combined with poverty's entrapment could only have served to heighten Jack's frustrations and combative spirit.⁶

In 1873, when Jack was seven, the Wests left the Lower East Side for Brooklyn. They may have been drawn there by Martin Copley, who with a brother, William, operated a gardening and floral business. By this point, John Edwin and Mary Jane's family included two more daughters, Julia and Emma. They first settled in Red Hook, on the waterfront, but within a year they moved again, this time to Brooklyn's Greenpoint district. In direct contrast with the Lower East Side's impacted slums, Greenpoint in the 1870s remained somewhat rural, and open fields surrounded houses and businesses. There Mary Jane gave birth to two more boys, Edwin and William. By 1882, the Wests were able to rent their own home. But heartbreak soon followed: the next year, Emma, aged twelve, was lost to rheumatic fever.

Although the quality of life in Greenpoint may have been better overall, the Wests always struggled. Steam power rendered John Edwin's skills as a rigger obsolete; he eventually found work as a janitor. To make ends meet, the family took in boarders; as the oldest son, Jack was expected to help out. Mae often bragged that he owned a livery stable, but more likely as a youth he drove rigs for the local transit company whose stables and car barns were directly across the street from his home. By 1880, his father had apprenticed him to learn boilermaking, a hard but honest trade.⁷

But John Edwin's spirited son had already set his sights on another calling. At the age of eleven, the sturdy youth fought in his first boxing match. From that point on, Jack aspired to become a bare-knuckle prizefighting champion. It was a dangerous ambition, for boxing of this era was a deadly sport with unlimited rounds that ended only with a concession or knockout. Al-

though small, Jack was muscular and fierce, fighting as a featherweight. Reportedly, after he retired from the ring, he entertained Coney Island crowds by fighting and beating any challenger.

Mae insisted that her father was known around Brooklyn as "Battling Jack." His moniker probably derived more from victorious street brawls than triumphs in the ring, for Battling Jack never held a title, at least not an official one. New York strictly regulated prizefighting, and championship bouts were difficult to secure. This drove unknown pugilists, like Jack, to fight underground, in illegal matches secretly arranged by local racketeers.⁸

Sometime in the late 1880s, however, Jack was sidetracked from his ambitions by a young German immigrant, Matilda Delker. Known by her friends as Tillie, she was the daughter of Christiana and Jacob Delker, who were married in Germany in 1864. She was born in 1870, probably in Württemberg, where her father had worked in a sugar refinery. She arrived in the United States in 1882 with her mother and five siblings, following her father, who had immigrated the year before.⁹

Several factors probably compelled the Delkers to leave Germany, which at the time was experiencing extreme social, political, and economic upheaval. Anti-Semitism may have driven them out—Mae had even the most discerning observers convinced that her mother was Jewish—but by the time the Delkers reached America, they were Lutherans. It is more likely that they were drawn to the United States by economic success enjoyed by relatives who had already settled in New York. Mae often claimed her grandfather was a cousin of Peter Doelger, who had arrived in the States penniless but had earned a fortune as one of Manhattan's most successful brewers. Certainly the families shared some kind of relationship. In later years, Mae publicly claimed Henry Doelger, a San Francisco developer and Peter Doelger's nephew, as her cousin.

However, Jacob Delker was, at best, a poor relation to Peter Doelger. In 1884, Jacob settled his family in Bushwick, a working-class Brooklyn neighborhood that was the center of the city's German brewing industry. He struggled to support his wife and children as a laborer, painter, and coffee peddler. In the 1890s, he served with the Brooklyn Fire Department, indicating he had established some connections with his local political boss; such opportunities usually came as reward for support from loyal constituents.

Still the Delkers remained poor: The American dream as lived by Peter Doelger eluded them. When Tillie was fourteen, her family rented rooms behind a bakery, next to the blazing outdoor oven. After several more moves, the Delkers settled near bustling Bushwick Avenue, along a street of tenements sandwiched between businesses, factories, and stores. Most

likely, Tillie had to help support the family. A skillful seamstress, she could do piecework, sew for private families, or even work in one of the local garment factories.¹⁰

Like other immigrant daughters, Tillie was caught between old-country traditions and the enticements of her new American home. According to Mae, Tillie's ambition was not to sew but rather to become an actress on the American stage. Popular culture, specifically theater and vaudeville, provided Tillie, and many other immigrants, with an introduction to American society—its norms, values, stereotypes, and ideals. These amusements were leisure-time mainstays for Tillie's generation. From a poor immigrant girl's perspective, they were more than just diversions. The glamour of show business, in a country reputed to be the "land of opportunity," seemed to promise escape from impoverishment, dreary tenements, and a life of hard labor.

Tillie's dreams were epitomized by a single American actress—Lillian Russell. Celebrated as "a truly remarkable beauty of face and form," Russell projected the Victorian female ideal of white womanhood: blond hair, blue eyes, a heavily corseted figure, and a "peaches and cream" complexion. Tillie worshiped Lillian Russell and envisioned herself in the actress's image. Mae insisted that people often mistook her mother for the beloved actress. However, no matter how beautiful the young Tillie Delker was, Russell's WASPish qualities contrasted greatly with Tillie's dark brown hair and eyes. These attempts at remaking herself evidence Tillie's own struggle with identity. Although not subjected to the vehement discrimination unleashed against the Irish, Germans were also considered inferior, outside the realm of acceptable white norms; they were stereotyped as drunken and violent or silly and ignorant with laughable accents. Tillie battled these negative attitudes by adopting Russell's image. Mae proudly displayed a picture of her mother, anonymously retouched to make her look more like Lillian Russell and less like Matilda Delker.

Tillie met resistance as she aspired to follow in Russell's footsteps. An acting career for a newly arrived German girl who was just learning English was a remote dream, especially with parents who forbade the pursuit of such a disreputable profession, but Tillie, as many remembered her, maintained a quiet resolve. Mae claimed that Tillie secured a position as a "corset and fashion model," a profession accessible to an immigrant seamstress with unsteady English. If true, Tillie pursued this without her parents' consent. It was far from respectable; buyers were known to make sexual advances, and she could not have rejected their demands and kept her job long.¹¹

She may well not have rejected them. Historian Kathy Peiss has found that young working-class women of Tillie's generation, known as "tough girls,"

commonly rebelled against their parents' standards and experimented with premarital intimacy. In Tillie's adolescent world, crowded tenements and eroded parental supervision allowed young people to experiment with sex. The ritual of working-class dating, in which young male suitors footed the bill for their impoverished dates, often resulted in an exchange: cultural amusements for sex. Ultimately, it would be Tillie who nurtured Mae, shaping her attitudes about sex, men, and money. Mae recalled her parents battling over her early flirtations with the boys. "My father used to want me to come home and all that, but my mother used to say, 'Oh, let her go, she can take care of herself,'" Mae recalled. "I guess she wanted me to learn all that right at the beginning." In many ways, Tillie was not only the motivator for Mae West's libertine ideals but the prototype for her sexually transgressive persona.¹²

Tillie's youthful defiance soon met its end with Jack West. Initially, the couple formed a passionate bond. Mae insisted that Jack was so jealously obsessed with Tillie that he once attacked a group of men after one had dared to flirt with her. Tillie was equally infatuated. "You see," Mae told an interviewer, "my father had swept her off her feet."¹³

Jack and Tillie appeared an odd match. He was loud and talkative with a quick temper and a love of horse racing; she was reserved and, as one journalist described her, "plain, comfortable," and "kindly." According to Mae, Jack craved bloody and bruising battles, while her mother "loved pretty things about her." Tillie adored the theater and never drank, except a rare glass of champagne—for which Jack nicknamed her "Champagne Til." At the same time, Jack and Tillie had much in common. Both rebelled against parental expectations, Jack through sports and Tillie through her dreams of a theatrical career. They both also made their livelihood, at least in part, through the exploitation of their bodies. Jack and Tillie shared a stubbornness and willingness to test tradition. And, importantly, both knew very well the underside of working-class life, its difficulties, its disappointments, and its challenges.¹⁴

On January 19, 1889, in Greenpoint, Battling Jack West and Tillie Delker took their wedding vows before a local minister with Jack's sister Julia acting as maid of honor. Jack was twenty-four and Tillie was nineteen. He quit boxing, and Tillie abandoned both corset modeling and, at her husband's insistence, her hopes of becoming an actress. The couple moved in with Jack's parents. In August 1891, Tillie gave birth to her first child, Katie, in Jacob and Christiana Delker's Bushwick home.

Sadness soon befell Jack and Tillie. Only a few months after her birth, Katie died, probably a victim of cholera, common in such working-class enclaves. According to Mae, Tillie was devastated and grieved deeply.

For almost two years after Katie's death, Jack and Tillie remained childless. For Tillie, stifled in her aspirations for a stage career and suffering from the loss of her first child, married life proved to be disappointing and unhappy. Her pain was compounded by Jack's temperamental outbursts. Mae recalled that his impatience was so intense that "when he couldn't find what he wanted, he'd pull the whole drawer out and dump it on the floor and swear and everything—and my mother would have to come and find things for him." She maintained that her mother "always felt she had made a big mistake marrying him."¹⁵

But in 1893, life changed for Tillie. That year, she and Jack moved into a Bushwick tenement on Willoughby Avenue where, on August 17, she gave birth to a healthy baby girl. Named Mary Jane for her grandmother, but called Mae by family members, she was delivered by an aunt. (The Wests spelled it May; Mae later changed it herself.) Mae immediately became her mother's greatest treasure. Tillie doted on her, indulged her every whim, and lavished her with praise and attention. Although there were more West children to come, Tillie, according to Mae, always considered her special and handled her differently. "I was her whole world," Mae recalled. "She treated me like a jewel." Mae's first memory was of "Mama" gently rubbing her with baby oil after a bath.¹⁶

A firm and loving, as well as often consuming and obliging, bond developed between Mae and her mother. Mae always credited Tillie as her driving force; Tillie's impact on Mae was profound. "She tried in every way to understand me," Mae wrote. As evidence, Mae often recounted three episodes from her childhood, all occurring at age four. In the first, Tillie indulged Mae in her refusal to be photographed without a particular black and white dog. The second incident took place in a busy department store where her mother insisted harried clerks fetch a doll that Mae had spotted on an impossibly high shelf. The third transpired in an elderly "spinster's" home. When little Mae, admiring some glass flowers, touched them, the old woman harshly reprimanded her. Reportedly, Mae marched out of the room, collected her coat, as well as Tillie's, and returned commanding, "We go home, Ma." They did.

While Mae offered these incidents to demonstrate her inborn determination and temperament, they also reveal much about Tillie. She insisted that her daughter be "humored" and coaxed, never harshly disciplined according to standard Victorian childrearing practices. Mae attributed the evolution of her unique personality to this special treatment. "She is not like other children," Tillie cautioned John when he tried to discipline Mae. "Don't make her like the others." Tillie shaped her daughter not only with an unconven-

tional upbringing but also by fashioning her memories. Mae did not directly remember any of these early incidents; all had been told to her by her mother. By imprinting memories on Mae, Tillie constructed her daughter as willful, strong, and innately resistant to authority. Tillie emerged as equally unyielding, tenaciously insisting that her daughter's demands always be satisfied.¹⁷

Tillie concentrated on nurturing Mae into her ideal image, instilling self-assuredness and pride in her daughter. According to Mae, her mother stressed the importance of physical appearance and beauty. Mae recalled strolling past Brooklyn storefronts, admiring her reflection in the windows and refusing to carry packages, believing they marred her appearance. Tillie also excused Mae from the household chores normally imposed upon young girls of her generation. Tillie had a vision for her daughter, and it had nothing to do with domesticity.

Reportedly, neighbors were critical of Tillie's parenting techniques. Those who remembered the West family later described Tillie as "too easy" and criticized her for allowing her little daughter to "push her around." Mae, like her father, had an explosive temper, lashing out angrily at other children. Reportedly, she was just as likely to "smack a boy on the nose as she would a girl." Behind the fearsome Battling Jack's back, the neighbors described "that West kid" as a "brat" and "holy terror."¹⁸

Mae's outbursts, easy frustration, and propensity to strike out indicated that, despite Tillie's efforts, she was hardly a secure child. Some of Mae's problems came from Jack West; she often admitted as much. She frequently compared herself to Jack, claiming she possessed not only his tireless energy and strength but also his extreme temperament. She never once cited similarities between herself and her mother, whom she worshiped.

While Mae and Tillie shared a deep bond, her relationship with "Papa" was difficult, complex from the beginning. She told one interviewer that her father had wanted a boy, not a girl. Reportedly, Jack alleviated his disappointment by teaching little Mae the manly arts of boxing, acrobatics, and weightlifting. He immersed her in his world of physical brutality, taking her to the gym and to prizefights. She claimed she enjoyed it and was fond of his boxing pals, but her introduction to violence went even deeper: Mae remembered battling her father in one-on-one boxing matches. Pitting a grown man, a trained boxer, against a small child was not mere play; it was abusive. The relationship between violence and power consumed Mae as an adult, and she often associated it with her father. Her fondest memory of him was of a trip they took to a Coney Island circus. Mae, entranced by the famous Bostick and his lions, was captivated by the struggle between animalistic brutality and human intellect.

Mae's contact with her father was limited. In the evenings, he came bounding home, ate dinner, and, before long, was off for the night. While Tillie worked at making home life pleasant and stable, Battling Jack made it difficult. In addition to his hair-trigger temper, he was restless. In the first seven years of Mae's life, the Wests lived in at least five different locations in Bushwick and Greenpoint. By 1895, Jack had abandoned boilermaking to become a night watchman, guarding local warehouses and businesses. He also worked as a bouncer at local theaters and dance halls. In the 1900 census, he identified himself as a "special policeman"; most likely he was providing muscle for local businesses and crime bosses. That year, he was making enough money to lease a home for his wife and children. Shortly afterward, he went into business as a private eye and organized a "private police force" that he hired out to those seeking help and protection. He could have only undertaken such an endeavor in connection with the New York underworld. It was common for businesses, theaters, and saloons to rely on local crime syndicates to guard their establishments. According to one source, Jack was also respected by the local police, not surprising given their own ties to gang bosses.¹⁹

As Jack and Tillie settled into the criminal underworld's subculture, their family began to grow. In December 1898, Tillie gave birth to another baby girl, Mildred. Soon afterward, in February 1900, came a son, named John Edwin for his father and grandfather. Although the new babies diverted some of Tillie's energies, Mae believed that her mother favored her over the other children. Tillie's permissive nature did not extend to Mildred and little John; she disciplined them harshly and even permitted an occasional switching; Mae claimed she always escaped such punishment. Tillie became increasingly convinced that Mae was exceptional.²⁰

According to Mae, even before her siblings arrived, she had begun to fulfill her mother's expectations. She claimed that by the age of three she exhibited an extraordinary talent for mimicry, routinely impersonating family, friends, and acquaintances. It set the Wests howling with laughter. In an era when children were to be seen and not heard, Mae won attention and approval while commenting on a world in which she was powerless. She was too young to realize it then, but she had discovered something mighty.

A steady diet of mass culture fostered Mae's special abilities. Tillie took her along to plays and vaudeville, and Mae was enthralled. In her later years, she reminisced about long-forgotten singers, jugglers, acrobats, and dialect comedians. "I laughed with the Yiddish, Dutch, and Italian comics," she recalled. "I listened all ears to the patter of the song and dance men." While she remembered numerous entertainers fondly, one stood out as her favorite: the African-American performer Bert Williams. For most of her professional life, Mae West credited him as her earliest influence.²¹

The young Mae West was not alone in her adulation. By the early 1900s, Williams and his partner, George Walker, had become two of America's most popular entertainers. Famous for their cakewalk, an elaborate, high-stepping African-American dance originating in slavery, they were among the first blacks to break into white vaudeville and Broadway. Williams's clowning made him the favorite of the duo. Light-skinned, he borrowed from white American minstrelsy, performing in burnt cork makeup with a large white greasepaint grin. His stage persona was dim-witted and silly; his timing was calculated to be excruciatingly slow.²²

While on the surface Williams's performances reified racism, he subtly challenged it by grounding his performances in black comedic tradition. Williams's stage presence emerged from the African-American practice of signifying, a subversive rhetorical device that uses multiple and conflicting messages to obscure rebellious meanings. Black signifying rests in double-voicedness and encompasses innuendo, double entendre, parody, pastiche, cajoling, rapping, boasting, insulting, and many other verbal, visual, and/or literary forms. Importantly, as scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. has demonstrated, black and white signification are distinct practices. In the white community, signifying refers to implying meaning. But among African Americans, signifying involves the *act* of implying meaning. Hence the process of creating double meanings is as important as the double meanings themselves.

Gates has traced the origins of black signifying to African and African-American trickster-heroes whose double-voicedness operates as a playful but deadly serious rebellion. These tricksters engage in language games, or signification, that impart multiple and contradictory meanings. By generating a dizzy spectacle where everything is subject to constant repetition and revision, trickster-heroes, or signifiers, reorder the world through disorder. Gates describes black signifying as "a bit like stumbling unaware into a hall of mirrors: the sign itself appears to be doubled, and at the very least, (re)doubled upon ever clear examination." But, he writes, "It is not the sign itself . . . which has multiplied. If orientation prevails over madness, we soon realize that only the signifier has been doubled and (re)doubled." In the end, meaning evaporates and all that remains is the messenger, the signifying trickster.²³

Williams embraced the trickster's role and, empowered by signifying, interrogated white oppression. He viewed his fictional character as a satire of a white man; it functioned as a mirror that compelled unsuspecting whites to peer into their weaknesses and insecurities. With the cakewalk, he resurrected a practice originally used by slaves to mock their masters' dance rituals, compelling unwitting white audiences to laugh uproariously at themselves and their outrageous behavior. His hit song "Nobody" captured not only the frustration of the tattered blackface clown who experiences

“hunger and cold feet” but also the alienation of exploited African-American people who “never got nothin’.” Its summation was a forceful statement of resistance. “Until I get something from somebody, some time,” Williams sang in his languid, half-spoken style, “I’ll never do nothin’ for nobody, no time.”²⁴

As writer Mel Watkins observes, Williams’s humor and subversion “depended on word play or lampooning usually solemn institutions.” This was one of his most enduring contributions to little Mae West. She claimed that even as a small child she was fascinated by language and its potential for multiple meanings. “I had acquired the manner of speaking that has become identified with me,” she maintained. “It came from my refusing to say certain words.” She remembered begging her mother to read out words until she found one that when pronounced assumed an “individual connotation.” Beginning with her exposure to Williams, Mae would borrow heavily from signification. By adulthood, she was well aware that she had adopted it, often explaining, “It isn’t what I do, but how I do it. It isn’t what I say, but how I say it, and how I look when I do and say it.”²⁵

Mae West’s connection with Bert Williams and signification was both deeply strong and personal. She maintained that somehow her father was introduced to Williams. (Perhaps it was through their common love of boxing; Williams was an avid fan.) One of her most treasured, and seemingly traumatic, childhood memories was the night her father arrived home and announced:

“Mae, I have a big surprise for you. Bert Williams is here. I’ve brought him home to have dinner with you.” I rushed in, looked at this man and screamed, “It’s not! It’s not!” I went up to my room and cried. . . . My mother told me my father wanted to go up to me, but Bert Williams stopped him. He said, “I’ll do it.” He stood outside my door and started to sing. Then I knew and came right out of my room and we all had dinner. Do you know why I didn’t recognize him? He was too light. He was a black man but he was too light, so on stage he wore blackface.

Like many others, Mae imagined Williams as she had seen him onstage. Even so, she attributed her outburst not to his unexpected appearance but rather to her fear that her father had deceived her. “I cried,” she explained, “because I couldn’t bear the thought that my father had lied to me.”²⁶

While this incident revealed Mae’s anxieties about her father, Williams’s presence also forced her to grapple with much larger issues—those of racism and identity. In interviews Mae, always attempting to project strength, admitted to crying only twice in her life, and this was one of those

times. It jolted her into a realization that the performer was quite different than he or she appeared onstage. In many ways, Williams compelled her to confront, at a tender age, the falsity of blackface. It was a traumatic awakening to the societal lies regarding race, which eventually resulted in a distrust of the racist image created by white society to ensure superiority, dominance, and predictability. Williams was not a buffoonish clown but rather, as Mae observed, "looked more like a businessman." She learned that appearances were illusions, obscuring other realities that could still be conveyed through language. After all, it was the sound of Bert Williams's voice that restored order to the West household and compelled Mae to leave her hiding place and accept reality.²⁷

Despite Mae's stunned reaction to the truth of blackface, she maintained that her parents held progressive racial attitudes. Certainly their willingness to entertain an African American in their home, even if it was the famous Bert Williams, indicated that they deviated from most white Americans. (Williams's own white co-stars often shunned him.) "I knew black people from the beginning," Mae would insist. "So I realized they weren't stereotypes, they were people like me, but darker." Although Mae's statement presumed whiteness as a baseline, it also awkwardly expressed identification with African Americans. Without a doubt, Mae believed she shared a marginalized status with them. "I thought white men had it their own way too long," she later remarked, "and should stop exploiting women and blacks and gays." Throughout her career, in her performances and in her interviews, she would act out an ambivalence over racial identity, pivoting between embracing and rejecting whiteness. Was Mae West passing? It is hard to determine. But it is clear that the character she would create, her fictionalized persona, certainly was.²⁸

While she may not have had any African-American genetic ties, the turn of the twentieth century provided the little Mae West with a wide sampling of African-American cultural forms. The most popular music of her youth was ragtime, rooted in the African musical tradition. The cakewalk became a craze throughout the nation. Other forms of black song and dance were also popular. This process of cultural appropriation and white society's struggle to cling to its fantasy of whiteness revealed that the racial identity of European Americans was never clear-cut. If anything, much of the mass culture of Mae West's youth, with its African-American ties, challenged racial fixedness. It was within this turmoil that Mae began her search for an identity and a voice.

Race was not the only contested element of the American identity confronted by young Mae West. She had to balance her mother's world of "tough" working-class girls who defied middle-class Victorian prudishness

with mass cultural forms that reinforced it. She remembered *Florodora* sextets—Broadway's singing Gibson Girls, the embodiment of whiteness and submissive femininity—being held up as role models for little girls to emulate in her youth.

Mae rejected this standard early. Much to her mother's delight, by age four she began imitating famous performers, and *Florodora* Girls never appeared in her repertoire. Rather, her impressions were of men—singer and dancer George M. Cohan and comedian Eddie Foy. Later Mae forcefully insisted that she did not seek to copy men but rather to mimic them; she was not striving to replicate maleness but to comment on it. At the same time, she also began imitating Bert Williams, an even more rebellious act. When impersonating him, she became a white female child pretending to be a black male signifying on and mocking white society. This was a critical step in the construction of her stage personality during a formative period of her development.

Overjoyed, Tillie encouraged Mae, believing that her daughter's energy and outrageous behavior could be redirected into performance. She hoped Mae would learn to rein in her temper by deflecting "it into channels where control would become automatic." When her vivacious little daughter reached five, Tillie arranged for her to entertain at a church social. Mae, by her own account, was the hit of the program. Immediately, Tillie booked Mae to sing, dance, and do impersonations at other local events. But Tillie's zeal produced more friction within the family. Jack protested Tillie's ambitions for Mae. Like Jacob Delker, he did not want his daughter onstage.²⁹

Despite her husband's opposition, Tillie continued to promote their daughter's talents. Mae recalled that at age seven her mother enrolled her in a dancing school. Mae claimed she was such a natural that the instructor soon entered her in an amateur contest at Brooklyn's Royal Theater.

Sponsored by vaudeville houses or theater companies, Saturday night amateur contests were common in this heyday of variety entertainment. Winners received as much as ten dollars, a welcome supplement to any working-class income. But these contests could also be brutal. Audiences booed, heckled, and egged greenhorn performers; those who really flopped got the hook. Mae remembered her mother as uncharacteristically nervous on the night of her debut. Jack had opposed Mae's participation, insisting that she was too young and would suffer stage fright. Indeed, Tillie had her hands full. Mae showed no fear but was in an extremely obstinate mood. When the emcee called out, "Baby May, Song and Dance," Mae, seeing the spotlight fixed on the other side of the stage, refused to budge. After another introduction, the spotlight began to swing to center stage. "When I saw it comin' for me," Mae recalled, "I ran out to meet it, not a bit scared."³⁰

Baby Mae epitomized Victorian innocence and sentimentality. Tillie had carefully assembled a costume of "a pink and green satin dress with gold spangles [and] a large white picture hat with pink buds and pink satin ribbons," accentuated by pink slippers and stockings. Mae recalled performing several popular songs (although the ones she later named were written when she was in her teens) and, after finishing with a dance, bowing to the applause. That night Mae took first place, winning a gold medal and ten dollars. Her father, who had sat smugly in the audience, was convinced. His daughter would perform again. He was going to take her himself.

Mae claimed that over the next year her parents entered her in numerous amateur contests. Soon it became a family affair. Tillie drilled her on her act, designed her costumes, and brokered bookings. On performance nights, Jack hauled Mae's suitcase to the theater and then took his place in the audience as Tillie prepared their daughter backstage. Mae's act consisted of impersonations, dances, and, eventually, a selection of double-entendre songs inflected with adult bawdiness. Her sister, Mildred, later credited the ribald nature of Mae's earliest performances to Tillie. "Even as a little girl," she remembered, "Mae's character songs were risqué."³¹

While the sight of a little child performing songs with sexual undertones may have been shocking, Tillie was borrowing from trends popular in variety entertainment of the period. Despite the prevailing rigid Victorian attitudes regarding sex, American mass culture became increasingly saturated with salacious references. In some circles, suggestive songs became the rage, and performers made their mark as double-entendre singers. Certainly no vaudevillian was more popular than singer, dancer, and comic Eva Tanguay. Billed as "the I Don't Care Girl," she emerged as one of the era's most famous stars just as Mae West first hit the amateur circuit.

Tanguay provided an alternative image to the *Florodora* sextet. Of French Canadian descent, Tanguay was short and curvy, hardly the classic American WASPish beauty. But, by her own admission, she knew how to manipulate male spectators and enact desirability. Not a trace of Victorian sentimentality or propriety could be found in her act. Her monologues and spicy songs were indelicate; she danced with electrified abandon. Although she vigorously battled censorship, she became known as "Vaudeville's Biggest Drawing Card" and at her peak earned \$3,500 a week.

Tillie joined growing legions of Tanguay admirers and became satisfied that she was the perfect role model for Mae. Tillie urged her daughter to closely study vaudeville's biggest headliner. According to Mae, her mother "was always talkin' to me about bein' an actress. Eva Tanguay was a big shot then. Everybody was crazy about her. Mother took me to see her again and again and told me I could be important like that. We went to all the shows

and we talked about nothin' but what I was going to be." Eventually Tillie became acquainted with the star. It appeared to be an unlikely pairing—the working-class stage mother and vaudeville's most celebrated diva. The two did have a connection, however: Tanguay knew Bert Williams and was romantically involved with his partner, George Walker.³²

Mae soon incorporated a Tanguay imitation into her act, her first and only impression of a woman. Ironically, Mae spent a fair share of her youthful innocence impersonating the "bad girl" of the American stage. Inspired by Tanguay and cheered on by her mother, Mae eventually came to understand the process of manipulating the audience's imagination and simulating desirability. The impact of this pint-sized performance with its sensual undercurrent was significant. Purposefully or not, Tillie exploited her daughter by playing with erotic allure. While Mae was too young to understand, it had a lasting effect. Eventually her performance would center on sexuality and seduction.

Mae boasted that her act won high acclaim and that she usually came in first at local talent contests. At the age of eight, she got her first big break with an appearance at the amateur show at Brooklyn's Gotham Theater. That evening, she claimed, her impersonations of Bert Williams and Eddie Foy netted first place. Seated in the audience was actor Hal Clarendon, a handsome leading man who often appeared with Brooklyn's most respected stock companies. According to Mae, he was so impressed by her performance, he rushed backstage to congratulate her parents and invite their little ingenue to join his troupe. "I accepted," she claimed, "even before Papa did it for me."³³

Later Clarendon confirmed he had discovered Mae West, but his account differed somewhat. In 1933, he told the *New York Daily News* that a "Judge Rosenthal," a friend of the West family, had strongly suggested he bring Mae into his theatrical ensemble. Although Clarendon could not exactly say who Judge Rosenthal was, he claimed that he "respected" Mae's connections and, as a result, agreed to take on the child. Curiously, when the *Daily News* reporter began poking around, it seemed no one could remember Judge Rosenthal, the figure so helpful in getting Mae West her first real acting job. Clarendon's admission that he had been coerced into accepting her and everyone's caginess regarding Rosenthal's identity suggest that he was an underworld figure, most likely the colorful racketeer Herman Rosenthal.

Just as the young Mae West made her professional debut, Herman Rosenthal was moving up the ranks of New York's criminal underworld after operating for several years as a racetrack bookie and a pimp. He enjoyed support and protection from the Bowery's most powerful leader, the Tammany Hall boss Big Tim Sullivan. In fact, Sullivan, who owned saloons and theaters as

well as dabbling in betting and prostitution, looked upon Rosenthal as a favored protégé.

For small-time gamblers, down-on-their-luck performers, minor gangsters, and aspiring boxers, Rosenthal became a folk hero. He was extremely generous, liberally sharing his money with friends and acquaintances. He also had close ties to Brooklyn; his mother lived there, and some even called it "Herman's Homeland." With his connections to the underworld and horse racing, Jack West had plenty of opportunity to become acquainted with the racketeer. It would have been characteristic of Rosenthal to open doors for Mae. He liked children and often assisted friends with his ties to theater people.

Many of those who benefited from Rosenthal's generous spirit were later reluctant to admit their association with him. In 1912, after publicly exposing ties between the police and crime bosses, Rosenthal was gunned down outside his favorite Manhattan restaurant. During his funeral, mourners filled the streets outside his residence, but, fearing retribution from both the police and gangs, no one was willing to serve as a pallbearer. Only family and a few close friends, including attorney Harold Spielberg, who would later represent Mae in legal battles, followed the casket to its Brooklyn resting place. Rosenthal's controversial reputation may explain why Clarendon and everyone else was so reluctant to specifically credit him.³⁴

Until this point in her life, Mae had enjoyed a fairly typical turn-of-the-twentieth-century childhood. She roller-skated, played with dolls, and attended public school. Although she had several playmates, she was closest to her cousins. When the family discovered that she was left-handed, they discouraged it, forcing her to practice penmanship with her right hand for hours on end. Mae pretended she was signing autographs.

The demands of the stock company drastically cut down on Mae's youthful diversions. Initially, Clarendon used her as a preshow or between-scenes filler act, allowing her to sing, dance, and perform impersonations. Within the first week, however, she had so infuriated him that he considered dismissing the well-connected little performer. "She was a terror all right," he confirmed. Clarendon demanded that he never be disturbed in his dressing room. Mae completely ignored his edict, constantly interrupting him. According to the actor, once, while he slept soundly, she slipped in and lacquered his face with greasepaint.

Although Clarendon was, as he described it, "furious," there was probably little he could do to get rid of the West child. After suffering with her for a while, he contended, "she got me down . . . I finally got to like her." Eventually, he even eased her into children's roles in the company's plays. By Mae's

account, her weekly salary climbed from eighteen to thirty dollars, an impressive sum that, if true, certainly must have helped the Wests. At best, working-class tradesmen earned between ten and sixteen dollars a week.³⁵

While it was a great opportunity, stock company work was grueling. Monday through Saturday, the troupe offered two shows a day, starting rehearsals at ten in the morning and finishing with the final curtain at eleven at night. Each week, the company offered a new play, so new lines had to be learned. In the summers, Clarendon took a troupe on tour, and Mae went along with an aunt to chaperone. Back home, when Clarendon could not use her, she played with other stock companies or, at her mother's insistence, attended rehearsals to study experienced actors and actresses. Mae was always eager to please her mother, but she remembered this time as "hard days of work and more work, when I practiced dancing and singing until my feet ached and my throat felt as though I had been massaged with a marlin spike."³⁶

As a result, Mae's schooling became sporadic. For a time, she had a private tutor, apparently a fellow who owed Jack money, very likely from a gambling debt. Overall, though, her formal education was limited. Although those who later knew her commented on her keen intelligence, book learning was never her strength. It did not hinder her much. Costume designer Edith Head, who later became a close friend, observed that Mae "may not have been literate, but she was utterly articulate."³⁷

Now young Mae West had little time for playmates or childhood amusements. She was almost totally immersed in the adult world. Her early years onstage forced her to grow up quickly. Mildred later remembered that her sister "never did care to play with other children; they seemed silly to her."³⁸

While her peers spent their days in school, Mae received her education from the stock company. "No actress ever had a better school," she maintained. Hal Clarendon cast her in a variety of roles ranging from Shakespearean classics to popular "blood and thunder" melodramas. All the plays influenced her, but she was most intrigued by melodrama. With plots pitting good against evil, this genre required distinctive acting techniques. Performers ranted their lines, underscoring their delivery with exaggerated body language. Dialogue was spartan, and players wrung the most from each word. Mae recalled that "we played it earnestly and swiftly, and we did what we could to learn our parts better and make our acting say more than the lines could." Although she was a hellion, Mae was a perceptive child and a prodigious mimic. Under Clarendon's guidance and by observing the troupe's other members, she began to refine what would become one of her most heralded talents, her ability to infuse complex meanings into her dialogue with carefully articulated gestures and intonations.

Playing with the stock company also carried its ironies. The little girl who surrendered her youth to the theater now spent most of it enacting childhood on the stage. In her first role, she starred as "Angel Child" in the temperance drama *Ten Nights in a Barroom* and pleaded with a fictional father to stop drinking. Mae also played Little Red Riding Hood, girls of the hardened urban slums, and Little Eva of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. On occasion, Clarendon used her in male roles; she played Little Lord Fauntleroy, Shakespearean boys, and *East Lynne's* Little Willie.³⁹

Although Mae developed a variety of characterizations, she usually played little girls cut from a similar mold. Melodrama's female children were pure and virtuous but also resourceful and determined. Triumphant over danger and adversity, they were often heroines who saved the family farm or, at least, tried to rescue their dissipated alcoholic fathers. On the one hand, their exaggerated moral virtue affirmed Victorian notions of womanhood. On the other, their superiority over male villains and evil forces allowed them to transcend traditional gender boundaries. Not surprisingly, many melodramas were written by female playwrights, and the genre's biggest fans were women, who could identify with the female protagonists. For Mae, it was an even more empowering experience. She was not just a spectator; as an actress she ascended directly into the story. She became part of a staged reality in which little girls both affirmed and rejected white Victorian womanhood.

Mae quickly learned important, yet paradoxical, lessons during these formative years. She claimed that early on she became aware that women could manipulate men—that women could exploit their subordinate status to gain power. "Ever since those days," she remarked on her years with the stock company, "I realized there was a difference between the sexes. I found that as a little girl I could get my way easier than could little boys."⁴⁰

Mae also discovered that while gender roles confined women to a rigidly subservient status, at the same time, identity could be flexible. As a child actress, she was encouraged to "be" different people and even change genders. Fundamentally, for Mae, identity became something that could be constructed and reconstructed to suit a time, place, or situation. Essentially, an actress made "passing" into a profession, always playing out a false identity. In some ways, the assumption of a variety of personas was liberating. But it also robbed Mae, at a critical period of emotional growth, of the chance to define her sense of self. No doubt, it masked, as well as accentuated, Mae's insecurities and deep wounds. If later it appeared that Mae West, the star, had no personal dimension, it was because in early childhood she was compelled to be everyone else but herself.

Mae trouped on as a stock company player until about 1905, when, at the age of twelve, she was forced into early retirement. She claimed that she had physically matured and was no longer able to carry off children's roles, but it is likely that the actions of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children contributed to halting her career. This watchdog group had successfully agitated for stricter child labor laws, especially targeting the "child slaves of the stage." The Society busily ended the careers of several noted child performers, including Buster Keaton, whose parents attempted to conceal him in some luggage during a raid. "I was to have my trouble with them," Mae confessed, "but I never hid in a trunk."⁴¹

Although Mae's career had stalled, Tillie remained confident that her daughter was destined for stardom. During this time, she arranged for Mae to attend Ned Wayburn's Studio of Stage Dancing in New York City. Wayburn was a former blackface performer who opened a free dance school where he not only offered instruction but also scouted acts for vaudeville. While Mae may have gained some tips from Wayburn, her apprenticeship produced little more. So she returned to performing at amateur nights, community events, and church socials, where she offered recitations, danced, sang, and did impersonations. Perfecting her Bert Williams routine, she added a rendition of "Nobody." "That was a big hit for me," she told an editor from the African-American magazine *Jet* in the 1970s.⁴²

Entering her mid-teens, Mae worked up a routine as a "coon shouter." A remnant of the minstrel stage, coon shouters were whites in blackface who performed rag-style tunes, with lyrics that often perpetuated degrading black stereotypes. In the early twentieth century, they were some of America's most successful stars. One of the most celebrated was Sophie Tucker, known as the "Last of the Red Hot Mamas." It is not surprising that Mae experimented with this popular entertainment genre. Since the early nineteenth century, blackface performance had had a successful history with white audiences. With its long track record, blackface may have seemed a promising vehicle to a hopeful like Mae West.

Blackface was a complicated white performance ritual that rested, as many have argued, on contradictory impulses. On one level, blackface functioned as an assertion of racism. With grotesque exaggeration, blackface performers enacted key components of racist ideology, reinforcing prejudicial notions that African Americans were simpleminded, foolish, often violent, and sometimes dangerously sexual. While it ultimately reflected white self-doubts and insecurities, it also reinforced racial hierarchy and white supremacy. Several scholars have contended that on another level, however, it occasionally challenged key elements of racialist ideology, particularly the

immutability of race. As literary critic Susan Gubar argues, in many instances blackface performers “test[ed] the boundaries between racially defined identities.” Within the space created by blackface, white performers often unleashed potent critiques of American society, its power structure, and sometimes even racism.⁴³

Mae West’s blackface performance, unlike that of other coon shouters, rested on a volatile foundation. Their inspiration came from white minstrels, but her adoption of blackface extended back to her early impersonations of Bert Williams. He continued to influence her performance strongly, so much so that his style remained apparent even many years later in Mae’s half-spoken manner of singing. But his presence went beyond her surface delivery and permeated the substance of her performance, providing the sustaining subtext for it. For Williams each performance was a battle, and from him Mae learned her most valuable lesson, that the performative was the political. Up until her death, Mae continued to praise him as a “fine artist” who challenged white society’s racist stereotypes.⁴⁴

In addition to borrowing from Williams, Mae incorporated a generous share of Eva Tanguay into her new act. By this point, Mae had thrown off the constraints of idealized melodramatic womanhood. In exchange, she increasingly assumed Tanguay’s technique of staging desirability while challenging restrictive Victorian expectations of women. Combining Tanguay’s powerful manipulation of the female illusion with Williams’s signified rebellion, Mae began formulating her stage persona as a coon shouter. Masked and paradoxical, it carried with it a reification of racism and sexism as well as a rejection of whiteness and male authority. Mae’s coon-shouting years were significant in her own evolution into a trickster, an important step in her transformation into a performer who strove not only to affirm and entertain but also to challenge and provoke through calculated wit.

These transitional years were difficult for the teenage Mae West. As a stock performer she had led a life apart from her peers for almost four years. Now she had to integrate into the working-class adolescent world. She briefly returned to public school but quit at age thirteen. Outside of her cousins and immediate family, she made few friends, having an especially hard time relating to girls her own age. Mae later claimed that Tillie had discouraged such friendships—they were not expedient. “Girls seemed a foolish investment of my time,” Mae remarked, insisting that she felt attention was better spent on boys. “I liked all the boys,” she bragged, “and kissed them all.”⁴⁵

Despite Mae’s boasting, she also expressed mixed feelings about sex. She maintained that she first learned about it at the age of nine by sneaking a peek at a medical book. Surprisingly, the woman who became the celebrated

"Queen of Sex" was, at first, repulsed. "After I had read it, I had a funny feeling about my parents," she confessed, "a particular feeling—disgust, you might say. It took me a long time to get over it."⁴⁶

On many occasions, Mae alleged that she had become sexually active early, wanting to experiment before puberty to avoid pregnancy, but she gave several different accounts of her first sexual encounter. In one, a young music teacher, who gave her lessons while she sat on his lap and he kissed her, initiated her on the front steps of her parents' home. In another, she claimed to have seduced a retired actor who was ignorant of her extreme youth. She also told of a schoolteacher who introduced her to sex when she was only thirteen. "He got me to stay after school. I helped to correct papers and things," she remembered. "I was too young to feel anything, you know. But I liked it because he was paying me attention. I always wanted attention."⁴⁷

It is possible that all of these early sexual encounters took place. Much of Mae's youth was spent among adults, and enacting sensuality made her a likely target for abuse. Despite her later insistence that she was the aggressor in these affairs, she also indicated that she felt exploited. She related her earliest sexual encounters dispassionately, with a curious detachment that would always mark her attitude toward intimacy. This ambivalence reflected the reality that Mae West's first exposure to sex was traumatic; she was a victim of what now would be recognized as child molestation. In each case, adult men used her for gratification. Her rationalization that her teacher's special attention was reasonable compensation was belied by her decision to quit school at exactly the same time. She did not really seem to covet the attention he offered.

Clearly, Mae West's earliest sexual experiences were emotionally damaging. Late in life, she discussed what she identified as her first sexual dream. She claimed it occurred sometime between the ages of ten and twelve. Although she insisted that she was not frightened by it, her account conveyed a nightmarish tone. In it, a "giant male bear" entered her bedroom, walking on his hind legs. "He came forward, toward me, and stepping up on the foot of the bed, he leaned his paws high on the wall against which my bed rested." He then proceeded to have sex with her. She often insisted that the dream was pleasurable, but to one female interviewer she confessed that it "worried me for a long time." Indeed, she revealed to a close associate that when she reached adulthood, she was plagued by such intense dreams about sex that she required sedatives so she could sleep.⁴⁸

Some have presumed that Jack West sexually abused Mae, but she always stridently maintained that her father had never even laid a hand on her. Regardless, by her teens, she had come to detest him. "I didn't want him to

touch me," she explained. "I didn't want to be in the same room with him." She attributed her reaction to Jack's pungent cigars, strict paternalism, and unpredictable temper — except in her autobiography, where she offered a curious assessment of her increasing animosity, lamenting that "Freud wasn't there to explain it to me." This odd aside is unclear but indicates that she vaguely linked her resentment to something sexual. It is possible that she may have been redirecting her anger at her father for failing to protect her from sexual exploitation. Still, while she continued to insist that Jack had never hurt her, she was definitely scared of him. She remembered fearfully hiding in her parents' bedroom, armed with an iron curtain rod, to avoid her father's wrath after he learned that she was staying out late with neighborhood boys. Jack's rage quickly passed, and apparently nothing came of this episode, but Mae's reaction implied that she was terrified of her father.⁴⁹

The West household was hardly a happy one. When Jack was home, which was seldom, the atmosphere was tense. According to Mae, Tillie kept the peace, coolly reasoning with him. To make matters worse, the family's income declined with her career's downturn. By 1909, the Wests had relocated to a brownstone that they shared with two other working-class families. In the preceding years, death had repeatedly visited both sides of the family, all still living in Brooklyn's impoverished sections. Jack's sisters Julia and Edith died of tuberculosis, leaving their young children to be raised by relatives. Tillie's mother, Christiana Delker, died in 1901 from diabetes. Jacob succumbed to hepatitis a year later. After suffering heart problems, the colorful John Edwin West passed away in 1906 at, by any account, an advanced age. Grandmother Mary Jane moved in with Jack and Tillie, where she wasted away, afflicted with kidney failure. She died in August 1909, just days after Mae's sixteenth birthday.⁵⁰

Tillie seemed determined that Mae would not be trapped in the dreary life of a working-class woman, destined to serve as wife and mother. She applied tremendous pressure on her daughter, insisting that Mae focus solely on her career. While Mae apparently had her share of teenage escapades, she remained a homebody, thoroughly tied to Tillie. Seemingly this was true even when Mae was in her twenties. After she reached stardom in the 1930s, journalists sought out former acquaintances for juicy tidbits on the young Mae West. All that one neighbor, who had lived near the Wests in the late 1910s and early 1920s, could say was, "It always seemed strange to me that such a vivacious and beautiful girl would prefer to stay home with her mother."⁵¹

Throughout her early life, Mae had little time to spare. She devoted herself to studying other performers and attending theater and vaudeville. But she would also remember that by mid-adolescence she had become aware of

her position within the larger world. "When I was about 14-15, I resented that men could have sex, do anything they wanted, run around. . . . I resented being held down," she explained. "A woman couldn't pick the man she wanted. Then she was talked into a guy by her family, maybe for money or something else. If she went after a man she was marked a bum, a tramp." She would become increasingly determined to use her performance to challenge society's hypocritical attitudes toward sex and male privilege.⁵²

Despite her growing resentment of gender inequalities, Mae claimed that her interest in boys intensified. Tillie attempted to control even this aspect of her life, urging Mae to experiment but avoid commitment. Tillie knew that romance led to marriage and babies, a death blow to a woman's theatrical career, but she also had to confront Mae's budding curiosity about the opposite sex. "Mother preferred that I divide my attention among several boys," Mae recalled. "She encouraged it." And Mae was not the type of girl to say no, especially to her mother.⁵³

The Way She Does It

Miss West can't sing a bit but she can dance like George Co-han, and personality just permeates the air every minute she is on stage. In other words, it isn't what Miss West does, but the way she does it that assures her a brilliant career on the stage.

—*New York Morning Telegraph*, October 11, 1913

Around 1909, Mae West finally got a chance to return to the professional stage. Her break came when William Hogan, small-time vaudevillian and friend of the family, invited her to join his act. He needed a partner to play his girlfriend in a Huckleberry Finn routine. It was not a particularly original or creative act; for years, vaudeville bits based on rural, Twain-like characters had been common. With it, Mae found herself in a position similar to her experience in stock companies, playing a Becky Thatcher-type character—a white male fantasy of white femininity. Not surprisingly, the act soon underwent revision, and Huckleberry Finn was discarded in exchange for a Bowery skit. Another popular format, Bowery skits centered on the antics of a Bowery boy and his “tough girl” counterpart. Now Mae’s character would become a poor but spunky, assertive, and optimistic street-smart urbanite. In other words, this was no Becky Thatcher.

With Mae’s willful and independent streak, it is likely that she exerted considerable influence over the act’s new direction. The urban setting was familiar to her; she had been nurtured in it. Although performing furnished an escape, every night she returned home to the reality of her working-class Brooklyn roots. She told of one early beau, among many others, whose gang affiliation resulted in bloody warfare in front of her parents’ home. (Her father eagerly plunged in.) The stage offered Mae an opportunity to reenvision the old neighborhood and her position within it. It became an idealized

world in which she eventually would assume complete control. Later she confessed, "I've never been more secure than when I'm on stage."¹

While Hogan and West were eventually successful enough to secure a manager, they failed to break into the big time. Vaudeville was a precarious profession. Work was sporadic; performers were often laid off for months at a time. Reportedly, during downtime, Mae continued to hone her skills in another venue—burlesque. One Brooklynite remembered seeing the teenage Mae West performing a fan dance, her body covered with powder. "The fan was big and red and she shook her bare body behind it. . . . When she shook herself the powder would fly all over the stage, down onto us in the front rows," he remembered. "We loved that."²

Generally, burlesque was considered the place for performers and acts too declass   for polite middle- and upper-class society. Its audiences were predominantly working-class men. Traditionally, shows featured women in tights and revealing costumes performing musical numbers interspersed with jokes and skits by ribald male comedians. Most female burlesquers specialized in the cooch, a grinding, European-inspired belly dance. Early on, Mae became an adept coocher. While burlesque represented the ultimate in commodified and exploited female sexuality, it probably provided the West family with a more steady income than Mae's engagements with Hogan in lower-tier vaudeville.³

Sometime in 1909 or 1910, Hogan and West played the Canarsie Music Hall, where they shared the bill with Frank Wallace, a nineteen-year-old song-and-dance man. A resident of Queens and son of Lithuanian immigrants, Wallace had changed his name from Szatkus. Thin and modest looking, he was nonetheless a crowd pleaser; his snappy dancing and ragtime singing wowed audiences. Wallace claimed that "one day after my performance a swell-looking woman with a German accent came around back stage and said she had a daughter who was a comer. She had seen my act, she said, and thought I could help her kid." While Wallace was no vaudeville headliner, he appeared to have a promising future. According to him, Tillie suggested that he team up with Mae, which he did, he claimed, after some coaxing. But he also later confessed that he had earlier spotted Mae at an amateur competition and was impressed by her unique coon shouting. Mae always claimed that *he* had begged her to be his partner.⁴

Frank and Mae began rehearsing in the basement of the Wests' rented brownstone. He was soon captivated by Mae. She was hardworking and talented as well as attractive, with a petite figure and thick, dark, curly hair. In a few short weeks, they put together a sleek act borrowing liberally from black music and dance. They opened with Mae's ragtime rendition of

"Lovin' Honey Man" and followed with a song-and-dance number called "I Love It." Occasionally, she performed "When My Marie Sings Chidee Bidee Bee" in Italian dialect, and Wallace offered specialty dances. With Wallace's connections, the duo secured bookings on the Fox Circuit. They must have enjoyed some success, for in the summer of 1910 the census reported that she had been fully employed the past year.

In early 1911, Wallace and West landed parts in *A Florida Enchantment*, a road show on the Columbia Burlesque Circuit. While it was not the big time, Columbia was the most powerful and prestigious of the burlesque circuits. Hoping to broaden its audience, it had incorporated Broadway-style touring musicals, like *A Florida Enchantment*, staged along with the risqué comedy acts and hip-grinding Gayety Girls. Columbia's efforts at respectability were met with criticism from the more legitimate sectors of the industry. Show business's most esteemed publication, *Variety*, admonished Columbia and other burlesque circuits for drifting from "the burlesque idea," warning them to stick to "girls in tights and comedians who prefer to make burlesque fun rather than a name for themselves." In show business, burlesque was third-rate, its performers appropriately consigned to anonymity.⁵

Still, the more elaborate burlesque road shows were popular with audiences not only for their daring content but precisely because they applied the "burlesque idea" to stage traditions. Through the musical theater format, these burlesque productions poked fun at society's most sacred institutions, using comedy as a backhanded commentary on American values and class divisions. While these productions were far from revolutionary, they did serve both as a reflection of and a channel for the discontent of laboring classes and the poor—an important training ground for the maturing Mae West.

A Florida Enchantment embodied such a subversive spirit. It focused on the travails of Meyerwurst, a German "woman hater" who is seduced by a "little French adventuress" played by West. It not only lampooned high society with two aristocratic characters named Lord Bonehead and Cheathem but also mocked entertainment industry elite with a burlesque chorus spoof of the era's most famous stars, including the theater's queen of high drama, Ethel Barrymore. In addition to pursuing Meyerwurst and Cheathem, Mae delivered the song "Tiger Love," backed by the burlesque chorus. Wallace, who played a Jewish character, Young Goldburg, also had a number. During the show's olio, Wallace and West reprised their vaudeville act, receiving praise as "clever" and for their "coon shouting." One reviewer reported that they "score[d] heavily with a novel dance," and another noted that Mae made "several changes down to full tights with good effect."⁶

Enchantment's road tour took Wallace and West into the heart of the Midwest, well beyond Tillie's protective supervision. Tillie had continued to attempt to direct both Mae's personal and professional lives, cautioning her away from romance. "My mother never approved of a single boy friend I had," Mae later told a reporter. "Whenever I showed up with one who wanted to take me to the altar, my mother didn't like him and when I saw that, somehow or other I soured on him, too." While Tillie must have been proud of her daughter's favorable reviews, she would undoubtedly have been alarmed to know that, once on the road, Wallace proposed marriage. Mae claimed that she turned him down repeatedly and continued affairs with other cast members, members of the crew, men she met in hotels, and male fans from the audience. "Marriage was the furthest thing in my plans," she recalled.⁷

By the time the tour reached Milwaukee in early April 1911, West's attitude had changed. She contended that Etta Wood, an older cast member who coincidentally played Mother Goldberg, took her aside, insisting that her promiscuity would only get her into "trouble." "Sooner or later something's going to happen to you," Wood reportedly warned. "Marry Wallace and be respectable." Mae claimed that Wood's advice forced her to think hard. She concluded that she "could get married and still see other guys." Then if she got pregnant, she would "have somebody to blame it on."⁸

So on the morning of April 11, 1911, Mae West and Frank Wallace were married by a justice of the peace in Milwaukee. Only seventeen, she lied on her marriage license and stated that she was eighteen, Wisconsin's legal age for marriage. She also claimed that her mother was French, stereotypically a more "exotic" legacy than her Germanic roots. Immediately after the ceremony, she made Wallace swear not to tell her parents and to keep the marriage secret once they returned to New York. He claimed the troupe's manager gave them the night off for a honeymoon, but Mae remembered that she spent it alone in her room in a noisy hotel. She later vehemently insisted that they had never lived together as man and wife.

In light of her steadfast devotion to her mother, who would have been horrified to learn that Mae had taken wedding vows, her marriage to Wallace seems uncharacteristic. As her mother knew, marriage could severely jeopardize Mae's aspirations. Married couples struggled in show business, and matrimony often terminated the career of one or both partners. Throughout his life, Wallace insisted that West had married him out of love, but she always characterized it as a marriage of convenience. Years later her attitude toward matrimony was apparent. "I don't suppose you believe in marriage," queried a suitor in her 1933 film *I'm No Angel*. "Only as a last resort," Mae replied.