

Repositioning Lorelei's *Education*

Mind, Body, and Sex(uality) in Anita Loos' *Gentleman Prefer Blondes*¹

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*"I mean I seem to be thinking practically all of the time."
Lorelei Lee ~ *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes**

Authors sometimes write novels they never intend to write. They say their books are about one thing, but they also seem to distinctly manifest some other thing. Such is the case with Anita Loos' immensely entertaining *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1925). On the one hand, Loos does exactly what she says she intended in her 1963 "The Biography of a Book"; she writes a book satirizing intelligence (xxxviii). On the other hand, however, through Loos' playful mockery of intelligence, she also writes a book queering allusions to the age-old argument of mind-body dualism, the apex of which becomes a mischievous squabble about sex.

On the cutting edge of culture with its American slang and iconic flapper image, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* pokes fun at the body – via sex – and the brain, linking the two in ways that both play on ancient arguments and modernize those arguments to amuse a contemporary audience.¹ While Loos notes in her "Biography" that her intention in writing *Blondes* was to mock the mind: to tease H.L. Mencken "one of the keenest minds of our era"

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because he had been “bewitched” by “the dumbest blonde of all” (1963, xxxviii), after reading *Blondes*, Mencken heralds Loos as “the first American writer to poke fun at sex” (qtd in Barreca 1998, xii).² Loos’ work, then, inadvertently conjoins the mind with sex (the body), tapping into the archaic binary of mind-body in the western world.³ Indeed, she taps into this tradition, but her mischief with the tradition intersects with her stated intentions resulting in modernizing but also queering the convention between the women and the men in the novel, and especially, I suggest, queering the relation of the two main characters Lorelei Lee and Dorothy Shaw.

Although most enduring critical interest in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* has been in its 1953 musical film adaptation, the hilariously *straight* 1925 novel has seen renewed critical attention in recent years. Unlike its cinematic counterpart, which has had over thirty years of solid vetting at this point, textual analysis of the novel is not nearly so accomplished as yet.⁴ Most literary criticism of *Blondes* remain highly heteronormative, but film criticism has already made inroads into unconventional readings of the film; therefore, it seems the *text* should be revisited in order to explore and expound on the unconventional, queer traces in Loos’s original work. Consequently, this critique will broaden the book’s corpus of analysis by focusing on an angle inspired by film scholars, but scarcely considered in literary criticism: Lorelei Lee’s and Dorothy Shaw’s queer connection.

Analysis of the novel remains highly heteronormative. For literary critics, there is nothing queer here. Consequently, to consider the queer in the text, we must look toward criticism initiated by the film. Film critics such as Jane Gaines, Chris Saayer, Alexander Doty, and Jill A. Mackey grant that a queer tension exists between Lorelei Lee and Dorothy Shaw, but this insight was first noted by Lucie Arbuthnot’s and Jane Seneca’s 1982 article “Pre-Text and Text in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*.”⁵ The visual nature of film appears to materialize more

tangibly this tension between the two main characters, Dorothy (Jane Russell) and Lorelei (Marilyn Monroe), in the 1953 musical production.⁶

In literary analysis, queer is not a criterion of critique; nor do many appraisals step outside an heteronormative vision when exploring the text. For example, ironically, the queer critic Alexander Doty while espousing a credible queer reading of the film bemoans the novel's incapacity for the same (2000, 133-4). Most critics question what the sex means in *Blondes*: is it or is it not empowering for the protagonist, is a question often asked, for example. However, most critics simply do not engage in discussion about the sex itself: Lori Landay, for instance, in *Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con Women*, goes so far as to call Lorelei a "consummate female female impersonator," but does not follow the queerer opportunities that may be exposed by such an impersonation (1998, 60). Instead, she focuses most closely on Lorelei's desire for autonomy and takes for granted the heterosexual aspects of the novel. Dale Bauer, whose entire book focuses on sex also suggests the typical heterosexual reading of *Blondes*: that Lorelei is being sexually *educated* in exchange for diamonds supplied by gentlemen such as Mr. Eisman, the Button King (2009, 138,158). Although she focuses on the sex power of the Lorelei character, the sex is obviously hetero-sex. The 2010 article "Any Chance to Be Unrefined" by Brooks E. Hefner has a similar treatment of the sex in *Blondes* (113). Again, the article focuses most specifically on other aspects of the novel, but conversation regarding the sex remains unquestionably heterosexual.

The critics, mentioned above do have one thing in common, which is that they do not feign to know how much sex is going on in *Blondes*. That much they leave open. Even Daniel Tracy's 2010 article concedes that Lorelei does not, in the end, sleep with "all" the men she

meets (128-29). But this concession comes after first having proposed that “Loos provides a relatively direct treatment” of Lorelei – the gold-digger – as a “prostitute” (128-29).

In her 1995 essay, Susan Hegeman actually does describe the abundant ambivalence literary critics hold toward the aggregate sex being had in the novel. She states that the text creates questions about “agency” and “intelligence” that raise questions about whether “Lorelei works at seduction or somehow simply, passively, embodies sexual attractiveness” (534). Yet, she is one of the few who contributes an unorthodox form of criticism about the novel by moving beyond simple heterosexual questioning. She suggests that Lorelei is, more than anything, “a strangely sexless sexual creature” (535). She is sexless and child-like, and works to remain so through a kind of de-sexualization of her persona (534-5), but she is also the center linking “commodity fetish with the sexual fetish” (541). As far as this criticism reaches in 1995 – imagining other possible interpretations of sex – it remains an anomaly in literary criticism; *Blondes* textual criticism then and since remains solidly heteronormative. Hegeman’s sole example and the inroads into alternative readings of the film mentioned earlier, then, makes thorough investigation of queer traces in Loos’ original work a more urgent task.

Recontextualizing the Dualism

Mind-body dualism spoken of in the introduction originates in antiquity, develops in Christianity and Cartesian philosophy, and culminates in societal thought in the 19th century (Ryle 2012, 266). The dualism became gendered early on: the body became a stand-in for woman, “material concerns and fleshly obsessions,” while the mind represented man, “the rational soul, the spirit” (Voaden 1999, 20-1). In the 19th century, physicians allude to this dualism as they employ their science to sustain the divide. Women, they suggest, are not

naturally built for thinking, and if they attempt to strenuously use their minds – like men – they will damage their bodies, their more appropriate instrument in the dualism.

This mentality is exemplified by the likes of the now notorious S. Weir Mitchell⁷ and Harvard medical school physician Edward Clarke. In Mitchell's *Wear and Tear* (1871), he suggests that the American woman is “physically unfit for her duties as woman” and is also “the least qualified” of “all civilized females” to “undertake those weightier tasks which tax so heavily the nervous system of man” (40). He suggests that “it were better not to educate girls at all between the ages of fourteen and eighteen” (40), over concern about intellectual exhaustion or “tear” as he calls it (4). Harvard medical school physician Edward Clarke, in his 1873 *Sex in Education: Or, a Fair Chance for Girls*, as noted by Dale Bauer in *Sex Expression and American Women Writers 1860-1940*, “suggested that women risk becoming ‘agenes’ – thoroughly sterile creatures – if forced to keep up intellectually, let alone compete, with men” (qtd in Bauer 2009, 23).

Now, by the 1920s much of this 19th century bias had transformed; however, the link between intellect and sex continued to be nurtured. For example in the 1927 legal case *Buck v. Bell*, the Supreme Court upheld the state's right to force sterilization on “mental defectives” (Buck), demonstrating that the state assumed an absolute connection between brain and sex/reproduction, this time arguing the extreme opposite of Weir and Clarke: *insufficient* intellectual occupation. And, in a major move regarding this connection, Sigmund Freud and Margaret Sanger flip the argument on its head, suggesting that it is sexual *restraint* that in fact harms the brain, not the other way round. Indeed, in his *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* Freud states, “the connection between sexual restraint and conditions of anxiety is no longer questioned” (1920, 350). And, Sanger quoting Dr. J. Rutger's *Rassenverbesserung*,⁸

in her *Woman and the New Race*, proposes that "too extended suppression of a desire gives rise to pathological disturbances" (1920, 104). Women especially are at risk of "deep [mental] disturbances" with "too long continued sexual abstinence" (104).

Granted, these historical links between mind and body noted here are unstable and slack, shifting infinitesimally throughout time, and triggering inexact analogies as it shifts: they focus on intellect (too excessive or too meager) here, reproduction and/or sexual activity (too scarce or too abundant) there, but the link *persists*.

Freud's theory about this link, the association between restraint and psychological anxiety, is amusingly explored in *Blondes*, actually, when Loos sets up the humorous tête-à-tête between Lorelei Lee and "Dr. Froyd" (Loos 1925, 88). As noted in this short dialogue, Lorelei's abridged depiction of Freud's methods is comically simple. Lorelei explains Freud's theory (*The Interpretation of Dreams*, 1900) in three phrases: "So it seems that everybody seems to have a thing called inhibitions, which is when you want to do a thing and you do not do it. So then you dream about it instead" (88-9). But, Lorelei has neither dreams nor inhibitions, which suggests she is acting out all of her sexual fantasies and sleeping well at night. To this, Freud becomes "very very intreeged [*sic*]," because of this "girl who always seemed to do everything she wanted to do" (89). According to Lorelei, she becomes "quite a famous case" for the father of sex and the psyche (89). Indeed, Loos' particular brand of flapper exemplifies issues of the modern woman. She's hip to science (regardless of the actual depth of her knowledge). She ignores cultural constraints, and like many of her peers in the 1920s her interest in sex has nothing to do with reproduction.⁹ Indeed, I argue, it has barely anything to do with *sex* at all.¹⁰

Loos unleashes a protagonist who severs the relationship between intellect and sex by promoting indifference to both, rendering the causal connection that too much or little of the

former would affect poorly or improve the latter, or vice versa, moot. But, she does not stop there. Like contraception garnering women's attention at the time, Lorelei severs the relationship between sex and reproduction. The seemingly witless but certainly wily protagonist plays with and exploits heterosexual desire without consequences of heterosexual desire – pregnancy for example – because, frankly, no one ever seems to get far enough with her to promote its cause. Loos's protagonist adopts the old-fashioned medical proscription that women be spared rigorous intellectual exercise altogether, while paradoxically showing off her *brains*, indicating her modern leanings. She and the novel, then, as noted in the introduction, poke fun at intellect, as asserted by Loos, and at sex, as highlighted by Mencken.

Loos engages in what Bauer calls the “literary style” of “sex expression,” which, she suggests, materializes through American women of the Modern era challenging the “conventional notions of sexuality” through new types of heroines, “new themes for fiction,” and “new literary styles” (2009, 11-12). Bauer notes that Loos is one of the authors who not only writes in a new literary style, journal-cum-novel, but writes about a new kind of heroine: the “kept woman or mistress” (12). These new styles “come about” suggests Bauer, “in the rendering of new kinds of heroines” who have a “burgeoning self-consciousness about sexuality” (12). Bauer suggests further that these protagonists engage in both approved and unapproved sexual behaviors, and by virtue of their authors speak in “normative vocabulary to express the ‘unconscious’ desires” the authors “presumed women to possess and embody” at the time (11).

One way Loos participates in this styling of sexuality is through her play with conventional heteronormative metaphors clearly using the timeworn mind-body dualism, what Keyser proclaims as the “cultural expectation that [women's] intellect is limited by their femininity and physicality” (2010, 14). Although Loos notes candidly in the “Biography of a

Book” that she wants “Lorelei to be a symbol of the lowest possible mentality of our nation” (1963, xxxix), and her intent seems to be to tease women of scarce intellect who enjoy copious amounts of male attention, the effect of the novel rather turns the protagonist into an unwitting sage. Moving markedly away from the body (to be discussed later), she becomes the intellectual standard-bearer or ‘mind’ of the novel while the men come off as rather dimwitted things – “dupes” dubbed by Landay (1998, 56) – who never quite comprehend that they are *not* getting exactly what they want from Lorelei.

Stylizing Sex: Mind over Body

“Lorelei does have an interest in men,” notes Alexander Doty in the book *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon*, “but it is predicated on their having money/diamonds. Does Lorelei love or sexually desire these men, or does she get turned on by their money, and the cultural power it represents?” (2000, 135). It seems a reasonable question to ask after all, since literary critics of *Blondes* have either assumed Lorelei is “giving it away” (Barreca 1998, xv), or perhaps bartering “it” (as noted above), to and with those men. Regardless of the quantity of sex critics have assumed Lorelei has or has not had, literary criticism has always implied that that sex is heterosexual. This section will extricate how Lorelei actually separates heterosexual sex from her body by utilizing her mind, which will thereby allow a reexamination of her heterosexuality.

Through the gold-digger and the dumb blonde stereotypes Loos makes famous, Lorelei simultaneously disrupts the mind-body distinction that undermines women, and uses that disruption to stylize a sexuality detached *from* the body. The stereotypes of the gold-digger and the dumb blonde suggest two opposing personalities and modes of behavior that are more nuanced than the old virgin/whore dichotomy from which they sprang. Lisa Mendelman’s 2014

article “Sentimental Satire in Anita Loos’s *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*” echoes the paradoxical play of this dichotomy when she describes Lorelei as a sentimental heroine: “Lorelei’s position [...] reflects [...] the specific dynamics of contemporaneous femininity that alternately demands innocence and knowledge, agency and passivity, sincere feeling and ironic detachment (45).¹¹

In this dichotomy the gold-digger is a clever, even wily woman who will do nearly anything to obtain the material possessions she requires. The dumb blonde, however, can be seen as a woman who never quite understands the nuances of cultural communication, is mystified and/or surprised by “everyday life,” and often possesses her own rules of life and code of conduct (Perkins 1990, 47).¹² Because of the dumb blonde’s naïveté she is often preyed upon by sexually predatory males, although she is an erratic target because of the independence from conventions her naïveté affords. Sexuality is associated with both types of women, but in unpredictable ways that enable wiggle room for *Blonde*’s protagonist that the virgin/whore dichotomy does not.

The genius behind Lorelei, then, is that she is both sides of the dichotomy at once, the gold-digger *and* the dumb blonde; therefore, she is simultaneously clever and clueless, which has a destabilizing effect on the upkeep of a conventional heterosexual reading of the text. Indeed, as noted by Tessa Perkins in the *Women’s Companion to International Film*, the dumb blonde “has a subversive side” that can lay plain the “irrationality and/or hypocrisy of the social order” (1990, 47). In the case of *Blondes*, the social order is turned upside-down as Lorelei spins the boundaries of the mind/body dualism underlying Western cultures. Lorelei, who for all intents and purposes has been read as the epitome of the *body* in the novel, actually resists this reading by subtly (and humorously) brandishing her mind instead. As suggested by Susan Hegeman, it is the “uncertainty” about Lorelei’s sexual “agency, and her “actual intelligence, [that] hovers over

the text, producing the double entendres that make for much of its humor” (1995, 534). In the same vein, in *Playing Smart*, Catherine Keyser remarks that although “Loos’s deliberate misspellings poke fun at Lorelei’s lack of education [...] Lorelei triumphs in both discourse and plot” (2011, 66). Indeed, after Lorelei’s many adventures *she* comes off as the brains (the mind) that transcend(s) the mental abilities of the men around her, while those same men signify *materiality* (the body, ironically), in the form of jewelry, wealth, and entertainment.

A good example of Lorelei exercising mind over body is in Paris when she handles the father and son duo (Louie and Robber) who have been commissioned by Lady Francis Beekman to steal the diamond tiara. Because the men appraise bodies over minds, they assume Lorelei and Dorothy to be brainless and bumblingly attempt to outwit the two women. But, Lorelei finds out immediately what they are after because she “really do[es] not think a girl can trust one of them [‘French gentlemen’] around a corner” (Loos *Blondes* 1925, 63). She simply asks her waiter friend Leon what they have said and uses it to her advantage (63). By affecting carelessness with the tiara – playing the dumb blonde – Lorelei can more earnestly use her gold-digging skill to prolong the amount of time and compound the amount of money the French men must spend on entertainment and merchandise for the two women (64).

Eventually, Lorelei informs them that she has been luring them with a counterfeit tiara, and suggests a remedy to the situation in which everyone benefits (Loos 1925, 71). This is a brilliant move in which Lorelei’s unassuming blonde persona re-emerges in order to assuage lingering anger the men may have otherwise held about being bested by her. Furthermore, her gold-digger persona restores goodwill between the two couples by not only demonstrating how the men can overcharge Mrs. Beekman for the paste tiara, but also how they can ensure payment of the inflated charge: “...and I told Robber if she seems to complane, to ask her, if she knew

that Sir. Francis Beekman sent me 10 pounds worth of orchids every day while we were in London. So that would make her so angry that she would be glad to pay almost anything to get the diamond tiara” (72). When the men hear her plan, they are amazed: “So then Robber looked at me and looked at me, and he reached over and kissed me on the forehead in a way that was really full of reverence” (72). Crucially, it is her *mind* that transcends the foil of her body. Her mind is literally “kissed” by Robber. This dumb blonde really can amaze those who underestimate her mental capacity.

But Lorelei has only begun to amuse and amaze. Stereotypes in hand, she exploits them to the best of her ability by stylizing sex in such a way as to disconnect it from her body. First, she avoids any feminine material reality that might culminate in body superseding mind. For example, she steers clear of prolonged (heterosexual) coupling that smacks of intimacy, which may lead to (heterosexual) marriage or potential procreation. She stays only long enough with one benefactor to gather as much material wealth as she deems possible. As soon as the patron is judged unnecessary for Lorelei’s purposes, he is let go. For example, in the novel’s initial pages, Lorelei has high expectations for the writer Mr. Lamson (Gerry), who seems to be a suitor of potential. The courtship is rather traditional: tea, a restaurant, a carriage ride, a museum (Loos *Blondes* 1925, 8, 11), and anything “riskay” is saved for the book she vaguely attempts to read while he is Boston, but in which she also loses interest: although it is “quite riskay” [...] the spots were not so close together and I never seem to like to always be hunting clear through a book for the spots” (13). Her “riskay” moment, crucially, is had at her home either alone or with her omnipresent maid Lulu, which is certainly a distancing of her body from heterosexual sex. Also, while her dumb blonde persona accepts Gerry’s proposal of marriage, she is fully aware that he is already married and must first divorce (11, 15), a useful obstacle to her being placed

into the matrimonial bed. But the final straw for Lorelei seems to be either one of two things, which alarms her gold-digging heart into action: One, that Gerry urges Lorelei away from materialism by disparaging both New York life and her foremost pecuniary interest (Mr. Eisman), and two, that Gerry offers his “uncle’s Masonic ring” as an engagement ring (15-16). It is after these two events that Lorelei realizes “Gerry talks to me for hour and hours,” that he in fact “never seems to get tired of talking and he does not seem to even want to go to shows or dance or do anything else but talk” (16-17).

Up to this point, Lorelei does not mind that Gerry “likes to talk quite a lot” as long as he “does not mind me going out with other gentlemen when they have something to give you mentally” (Loos *Blondes* 1925, 16). But, once Gerry attempts monogamy, seeks to curtail her association with Mr. Eisman and others, and exposes his more sedentary lifestyle, Lorelei takes action. With a letter declaring her impending nuptials, Lorelei summons Mr. Eisman post haste: “Well I finally wrote Mr. Eisman that I was going to get married and it seems that he is coming on at once as he would probably like to give me his advice” (16). Again, the dumb blonde suggests she is serious about the engagement, but the gold digger knows Mr. Eisman will release her from her engagement, and his desire for her release will ensure her the trip to Paris he only alludes to before this point (11).¹³ Once again, Lorelei’s commingling personae illuminate how her mind outwits other minds by way and in spite of her body.

Placing mind over body Lorelei remains detached from any one man until the final eighty lines of the book. Even in the end, although she does marry the tedious but very rich Henry Spoffard, she continues to spend most of her time discovering ways to avoid his company: “So I told [Dorothy] to come right over and we would plan my debut but we would keep it very, very quiet and give it tomorrow night, because if Henry heard I was making my debut he would come

up from Pennsylvania and he would practically spoil the party, because all Henry has to do to spoil a party is to arrive at it” (Loos *Blondes* 1925, 104). This evasion of intimate space and time with her many ‘gentlemen’ suggests Loos’ unwillingness to constrain Lorelei to the body. Lorelei does not “care” for these men in any sense, which is something that historically has connected women very physically to the body.¹⁴ Caring for other bodies marks the woman’s body, but since these bodies of men are only conduits for other *things*, there is nothing chaining Lorelei’s body to theirs.

Finally, sex is detached from even Lorelei’s body because Loos constructs her virtually body-less. The humor of the satirical novel creates only a vague visual of Lorelei’s body. Keyser, for example, has observed that Loos actually “undermines the potency of the gaze” in her narrative by “establishing the primacy of narrative voice” (1925, 65); therefore,

The reader is given few cues to envision Lorelei’s body through her first-person narration. Her loose and baggy syntax, malapropisms, euphemisms, and misspellings obscure both her body and the events she describes. (65-6)

Unlike in the film, there is no distinct way to see Lorelei’s body in *Blondes*; hence it is a challenge to envision her supposed sexual activity in any clear way. Even though the novel is published with illustrations, the drawings tend to conceal rather than reveal or exhibit Lorelei’s body. Aside from “A studio portrait of Lorelei and Dorothy” preceding the novel proper (Loos *Blondes* 1925, ii), and another with “The Germans stand[ing] in the lobby of the theatre...” (83), where there is mild cleavage in the sketches. Of the remaining thirty-one illustrations, Lorelei and Dorothy are seen only from the waist up and the focus of the drawings seem to be toward either facial expression to amplify comedic action of the text or to show contrasting emotion between characters; or the drawings emphasize extravagant clothing and modern styles such as

hats, scarves, luxurious coats, jewelry, and drop-waist dresses that slim and flatten the flapper's female bodies. The sketches do little to cultivate a deeper vision of Lorelei's body in the reader's mind, and as stated before, when the body is clearly defined in a text, one seems more easily able to visualize the body of the character and its connection to sex. In the case of this novel, its playful and humorous textual sport and concomitant illustrations blur the correlation between the two things.

Stylizing Sex: A Promise not a Prostitute

In the previous section, the emphasis on Lorelei's mind works to distance herself from sex and the body. In this section Lorelei's routines of gold-digger and dumb blonde further stylize *sex* by separating even the body *from* sex. Although Lorelei's body is seen by men as having sexual potential, Lorelei places sex in the cerebral sphere outside the body, as a perpetual promise: *a hoped for desire instead of a guaranteed material event*. This means that *sex* between these men is most often an ethereal expectation that may or may not, and I would suggest most often is not, satisfied in our traditionally physical idea of (hetero)sex. This transposition diminishes the conventional insinuations of Lorelei's evidential sex bartering. As observed by Hefner, the text's "continual displacement of any reference to sexuality is one of the novel's running jokes" (2010, 113). Hegeman also affirms that the text "prolongs the erasure of sex to such an extent that sex becomes its central preoccupation" (1995, 534). Thus, that which compels readers and critics to see sex everywhere paradoxically illuminates the fact that it is technically nowhere. It accentuates what Keyser suggests about Lorelei, which is her simple preference of "surface to depth" (2010, 64), and leaves us critics searching for the "riskay spots" just as Lorelei has in chapter one (Loos *Blondes* 1925, 13).

As more a con or trickster (Barreca 1998, Landay 1998, Keyser 2010), than a prostitute, it is not surprising when Hegeman observes that although *Blondes* was a “racy offering in 1925,” it “is remarkably free of prurient detail: the book offers us nothing explicit to indicate that Lorelei offers sexual favors in return for her sponsors’ generosity” (1995, 534). Landay also comments on this neglect of sex: “Lorelei,” she asserts, “refuses to read the gentlemen’s sexual subtext”; she “keep[s] her consciousness on the most superficial of levels and her trickery on the level of getting the goods, not on the sexual level of the men’s desires” (1998, 57). In fact, states Hegeman, “the men are explicitly desexualized” in Lorelei’s world (1995, 540). Although for these men, perhaps, Lorelei’s “education suggests the promise of sex, [...] for Lorelei it as strongly promises jewelry” (540). With these critical observations, one must look more closely at how Lorelei’s promises function in the text. Parsing these questions will help us establish the economic give and take enacted by such promises.

The differences in the goals of participants can be seen in the sport that is played. The “gentlemen” in Lorelei’s world believe they are speculating in the futures market: creating “forward contracts in which two agents agree on the details of a transaction for delivery at a specified future date” (Newberry 1). They believe their money having changed hands in the form of gifts and other expenses assures them of the imminent delivery of their commodities (goods/services, and in this case, sex). But, according to critics Laurie Cella and Lori Landay, the men do not enter a clearly defined business arrangement, which would be closer to prostitution; they actually enter a sport, a “grand confidence game” (2004, 47), or a scheme of “trickery” respectively (1998, 58).

The *promise* of sex and sex itself are two different things, and Lorelei’s gentlemen friends, perhaps skilled in financial markets, anticipate that promise as amateurs in the scheme at

hand, ignorant of the fact that they are up against a professional. They do know they are investors, providing Lorelei with entertainment (Gerry), jewelry and travel (Piggy and Mr. Eisman), extreme wealth and status (Henry Spoffard), but they are never quite clear on their returns. Some think they get what they want in the end (Henry Spoffard), but most are left having invested quite a lot of money without having received any sexual remuneration for that investment.

It must be noted that this novel's publication is only a few years before the stock market crash of 1929, which reminds us that the behavior of investors was risky and reckless. In a stable market, these investors would act more responsibly; they may hedge against loss, buy insurance, short sell or at least diversify their portfolios. But, as we see in the text, Lorelei monopolizes their thoughts and certainly their wallets. Lorelei makes it clear she is under no obligation to play by the gentlemen's rules, spoken or unspoken, and any agreement between the two agents – the investor suitors, and the supposed merchant Lorelei – is decidedly unspoken; therefore, investor speculation fluctuates wildly. With the promise of a stunning return, Lorelei entices multiple investors from the stock exchange and its fixed rules into a private marketplace whose parameters remain fluid and in which rules fluctuate according to the proprietor's whims.

As the proprietor, Lorelei has the upper hand in such a marketplace. Unbeknownst to her investors the main rule is simply to defer, to promise. To remain in the scheme, Lorelei compels the men to invest by proffering entertainment, gifts, wealth, but her own material contribution is confined to a promise, a disbursement at a later date. The recipients of these promises, unfortunately, cannot ensure they will be executed, since a promise of sex remains murky, unarticulated, and could be assessed as conjured up only by the investors' minds themselves. Lorelei's personae come in handy yet again in this case. The dumb blonde both makes promises

and feigns ignorance about their innuendo as well as the rules of return while her more astute gold-digger calculates the duration each investor must be detained in the marketplace for maximum revenue.

For example, Sir Francis Beekman (Piggy) is drawn into the marketplace specifically for the diamond tiara; however, Lorelei promises to be “full of impulses” in order to achieve that goal (Loos *Blondes* 1925, 45). She also suggests that “even if his wife was in London,” she “could not help but admire him” and she and Piggy “could still be friends” (48). Lorelei’s “impulses” and “friendship” regarding Piggy are surely tinged with innuendo, but seem to actually function like perpetual promises that remain unfulfilled. While Piggy goes from a dozen orchids every day, to the gold picture frame (no platinum available), a near bracelet, and finally to the tiara (44-50), Lorelei distances her body from actual sex through the smoke and mirrors of flattery, suggestion, and promise, all which play mentally on the investor, but postpone the return on Piggy’s investment until Lorelei extricates Piggy from the marketplace, or more appropriately, Lorelei extricates herself. Just as the “impulses” that Lorelei insinuates may lead to a kiss after the dozen-orchid incident (43) her promise to Piggy that she “would always stay in London” comes to nothing, as within three days of procuring the tiara she and Dorothy are on a ship for Paris (49): “So Piggy does not know that we have gone but I sent him a letter and told him I would see him some time again some time” (49). Even in her desertion, Lorelei leaves open a forthcoming promise of some kind of sex to be fulfilled “some time”(49).

Lorelei’s brilliant foray into espionage displays her use of the promise to one patron in order to receive adequate monetary support from another. Major Falcon, a “really quite a delightful gentleman” and English governmental official who “spends quite a lot of money” during Lorelei’s and Dorothy’s maritime journey to London, has asked Lorelei to find out what

an American governmental official, Mr. Bartlett, is doing overseas (Loos *Blondes* 1925, 22). After looking “at the moon quite a lot” (29), “it seems that [Mr. Bartlett] really is madly in love” with Lorelei and she agrees to prematurely disembark in order to accompany him to Vienna only if he can explain why he cannot drop his plans for Vienna and instead follow her to London:

So he said it was business for the United States government at Washington and he could not tell anybody what it was. So then we looked at the moonlight quite a lot. So I told him I would go to Vienna if I really knew it was business and not some girl, because I could not see how business could be so important. So then he told me all about it. (31)

Mr. Bartlett discloses State’s secrets for a promise. A murky erotic promise bound up in Lorelei’s body even as she promises only to accompany Mr. Bartlett to Vienna. While Bartlett invests in the promise, Lorelei capitalizes on his secrets by handing them over to Major Falcon, procuring supplementary financial support in London for herself and Dorothy. Once again, when she knows her financial prospects are sufficient, she physically makes her escape. “So we sat up and saw the sun rise and I became quite stiff and told him I would have to go down to my room because, after all, the ship lands at France today and I said if I got off the boat at France to go to Vienna with him I would have to pack up” (Loos *Blondes* 1925, 31-32). But, immediately upon leaving him, Lorelei simply goes to sleep (32). The hazy and unspoken promise of sex is both made and broken within forty-eight hours (27-31).

Gus Eisman, Lorelei’s longtime financial supporter, is the perfect investor in Lorelei’s promise, although we cannot be sure that he is any closer to physical sex than any of the others. He is mostly absent; therefore keeps Lorelei from having to disengage from him geographically herself, as she does with most everyone else. He has learned well (been educated in) the language and habits of Lorelei, and behaved accordingly when he is present. When she says she

has “quite a headache” and “would see him the next day, perhaps” after having been presented with a “little [diamond] you could hardly see” for her birthday (Loos *Blondes* 1925, 7), Gus knows that to materialize the promise of her presence and what that presence promises, he must return with “a very very beautiful bracelet of square cut diamonds” which “quite cheer[s] [her] up” (8). Her insinuations of material desires are not lost on him, yet because of his infrequent proximity, her promises to him are more companionable. When he is in town she simply obliges his routine in which “nothing practically happens” and “most of the time we just sit and drink some champagne or have a bite to eat,” while biding time until he leaves again (74, 10). Unlike Gerry and Piggy, whose conversations bore Lorelei, as previously noted, Mr. Eisman “always has something quite interesting to talk about, as for instance the last time he was here he presented me with quite a beautiful emerald bracelet” (6).

When Lorelei finally terminates their friendship because of her marriage to Henry, she softens the blow by telling him that she will always acknowledge him and that he can tell his friends that “it was he, Gus Eisman himself, who educated [Lorelei] up to [her] station” (Loos *Blondes* 1925, 121). Her consolation implies the vagueness of her promises. Gus may assuage his disappointment by freely discoursing on every real or imagined promise deferred. Gus can save face with his male peers by implying any *promise* of sex from Lorelei *was* the sex itself. As far as Lorelei is concerned, she does not commit herself one way or another about whether or not we should think of their past association as a sexual one. She simply states: “...and I really do not care what [Eisman] says to his friends, because, after all, his friends are not in my set, and whatever he says to them will not get around in my circle” (121).

Once again, the *promise* of sex with Lorelei seems to trump the actual sex; Lorelei’s mind clearly outwits and outmatches her suitors, and in the end the men’s minds may be the only

place in which these promises of sex are actually fulfilled. Hence, through her obliviousness and her clandestine cunning, Lorelei upturns the conventions of heterosexual relationships by compelling the men to focus sex foremost in *their* minds rather than *her* body, divorcing the body from becoming an equivalent *return* on investments. By merely *promising* to reward, Lorelei literally takes the *sex* out of heterosexuality.

The *Education* of Dorothy Shaw

As mentioned before, through the euphemism of *education* the novel plays on the idea of sexual education, suggesting Lorelei is being sexually *educated* by men in exchange for diamonds, jewelry, and other lavish gifts. Brooks E. Hefner, for example, affirms this idea, stating: “Critics have noted that Lorelei’s emphasis on brains and education suggests sexual metaphors”; therefore, the “gentlemen who profess a concern for her brains almost inevitably end up staying late into the night in Lorelei’s rooms ‘educating’ her” (2010, 113). However, as Loos’ story unfolds, it seems obvious that Lorelei is the *educator* rather than the other way round. For example, she states quite plainly that she wants to educate Piggy (Loos *Blondes* 1925, 41, 44). Additionally, however, Lorelei personally takes it upon herself to *educate* Dorothy, which for this critic generates a sense of sexual dissonance within a heteronormative reading of the novel.

It has been pointed out that Lorelei’s and Dorothy’s relationship is the central relationship in the book. As Regina Barreca notes in her 1998 introduction to the novel, Lorelei “retains complete autonomy over her own actions and continues her strong and central relationship with Dorothy, whose importance clearly eclipses devotion offered by any man” (xvii). This is exactly what this section investigates. For, although Lorelei may have a passion for diamonds, a passion for the men who supply them is an entirely separate matter. Contrary to

the text's sly innuendo and critics' presumed insinuations about Lorelei's 'education' by men, I suggest it is ambiguity about this (hetero)sexual 'education' that is the only *sure thing* in the text. The only concrete fact to hold onto about Lorelei is that indeed she has a singular focus on the acquisition of riches, or "acquisitive intelligence" as noted by Landay (1998, 58); alongside that, however, her only other distinct interest is Dorothy. Not only does she make a living for herself and Dorothy by securing financial patronage for both women's living expenses, travel and entertainment, but the entire book is rife with Lorelei's attempt to *educate* Dorothy herself. Dorothy's *education*, then, intriguingly echoes exactly the same innuendo critics have suggested of Lorelei's own *education* by wealthy admirers. For these reasons, I suggest that *sex* in the text is not only less discernible than previously presumed in literary criticism, but also that the euphemism is obligated to be construed as queer if already construed as heterosexual.

As noted before, assumptions that Lorelei is "giving it away" (Barreca 1998, xv), or indirectly prostituting herself (Tracy 2010, 129), is just as untrue as it is true. The innuendo of *education* that exists in the novel must be reevaluated because it not only refers to activities between Lorelei and the men she meets, but to the activities between Lorelei and her partner Dorothy. For, the only thing of importance for Lorelei other than acquiring wealth is *educating* Dorothy. Therefore, sexuality in *Blondes* criticism contingent upon the heterosexual insinuations of *education* must either be tempered, or the suggestion of other more queer forms of activity augmented, in order to explicate the euphemisms of the text.

Similar to the argument above regarding sex, Susan Hegeman suggests that the sexual intimations in the novel do not clearly represent Lorelei's actual sexual activity. According to Hegeman, Lorelei distances herself from "the (albeit euphemistic) sexual act of developing her brains," by not actually doing what the men who want to *educate* her ask her to do (1995, 539).

For example, the reader cannot tell if she has ever done any of the reading that has been suggested to her. In fact, Lorelei assumes her maid, Lulu, will either participate by proxy or assist her in some of her acts of *education* (the reading of novels mainly), which queers the metaphorical reading of Lorelei's heterosexual *education* (Loos *Blondes* 1925, 3, 13). If, in a heteronormative reading, *education* is often a euphemism for sex, Lorelei is not only shirking her duty to her benefactors, but freely including Lulu in "it."¹⁵ Another example of Lorelei distancing herself from euphemistic (hetero) sex is by experiencing most of her moments of *education* with her companion of choice, Dorothy. It is with Dorothy that Lorelei chooses men to financially foot-the-bill for the two women; it is with Dorothy that she goes to London to educate herself; it is with Dorothy where, in Paris, Lorelei feels she is truly *educated* and must in turn *educate* her friend (33, 52). It is with Dorothy that Lorelei throws an engagement party masked as a debutante ball in New York, while her fiancé is safely out of reach in Pennsylvania (104); and finally, it is with Dorothy that Lorelei enjoys a stay-at-home honeymoon (122).¹⁶ The list continues in which Lorelei's euphemistic sexual experiences are triangulated with her female companion and therefore diminishes or at least challenges the suggestion that all euphemistic sex is *real* (fictional) (hetero) sex.

Blondes is packed with sexual innuendo and allusion that remain simply innuendo and allusion. By the end of the novel, the reader has no more solid evidence that Lorelei Lee has had sex with any or all of these men than the evidence exactly to the contrary. Not to mention that the evidence of queerness between Lorelei and Dorothy is not only just as opaque, but perchance just as probable. Conceding that Lorelei and Dorothy's relationship holds the most significance in the novel, Arbuthnot and Seneca observe that "One of the most extraordinary and positive aspects of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*' depiction of the friendship between the two women is the

absence of competitiveness, envy, and pettiness” (1982, 120). “By making a nonsexual same-sex friendship the strongest relationship in [the] book,” argues Barreca, “Loos continues to break the rules and threaten the usual social order which would dictate that, for example, a married woman’s strongest sense of loyalty should be given to her husband rather than her best girlfriend” (1998, xvii).

It is interesting that Barreca states without equivocation the sexuality of the two women by naming theirs a “nonsexual” friendship; this is most notable because in her quote she refers to Arbuthnot’s and Seneca’s article in which they imply if not wholly erotic, at least a queer potential between Lorelei and Dorothy. So, while I agree with Barreca that the relationship between the two main characters of the text in and of itself violates patriarchal rules and threatens patriarchal social order, I would go further and assert that it just as importantly violates heteronormative rules and order by placing plausible queerness at the center of a highly heterosexualized work.

If one, without the necessity of evidence, assumes Lorelei is truly *giving it away* (Barreca 1998, xv) to the men in the novel, one must allow for the possibility that she is also *giving it to* Dorothy. When sexuality is relegated to the joke, the euphemism, the unspoken, the in-between-the-lines as it is in *Blondes*, there are risks of interpretational variations that stem from the tangible stuff of the text. And, the tangible stuff is this: the two are almost intrinsically together; they share vacations, rooms, money, men, and lifestyle. As noted by Barreca, Lorelei is the better con (1998, xvii), which means she acts as the effective head of the household; the one most able to secure financing in order to support the two on their various adventures. If critics assume that the novel’s commodity culture functions in such a way that money is used by men to

keep women, i.e. to secure women's sexual favors, then it seems Lorelei is certainly using money in much the same way in order to *keep* Dorothy.

It is around this point in American history that women are seeking each other out to make lives together. Between the late end of the century and the 1920s, women had begun making their own ways in the world. Especially after WWI women moved more earnestly and in bigger numbers toward economic independence. But, in this move, the “bachelor” and “wild” girl – and other categorized types struggling to fiscally survive in the city – also played on American gender anxiety (Behling 2001, 163). The kept woman or mistress was an emergent theme in American Literature (Bauer 2009, 12), as noted earlier, and Loos uses this theme in an ironically paradoxical way. One kept woman in a novel was probably sufficient at the time, but Loos creates two, and they have a problematically interdependent relationship. For, alongside her quest for riches in *Blondes*, Lorelei's foremost aim is to *educate* her less-refined friend. Beneath the joke of the attempted respectability *education* is meant to imply lurks the more sexually brazen insinuation of sex that has overpowered critics since Lorelei's creation.

As the woman doing the *keeping* Lorelei is very concerned about improving her partner's mind by means of efficiently controlling her partner's fiscal utilization of time. This efficiency, of course, is in order to benefit their partnership: “But Dorothy really does not care about her mind and I always scold her because she does nothing but waste her time by going around with gentlemen who do not have anything...” (Loos *Blondes* 1925, 19). In this instance we see Lorelei's logic of association: nurturing the mind is literally refining one's ability to procure wealth efficiently. Lorelei notes herself that “the thing that discourages gentlemen more than anything else is shopping” (112). This suggests that Lorelei understands very well the relationship between expenditure versus income and the anxieties produced if the former exceeds

the latter. She also understands that *time*, crucially, is inseparable from income. If time is “wasted” per se on unemployed men (42), then the balance of income and expense, in essence the household balance sheet, is jeopardized; therefore, Lorelei tries to instill this basic insight into her partner for the sake of increasing the household revenue. Again, although many critics assume the text refers to Lorelei’s *mind* euphemistically, half-jokingly camouflaging the substantial amount of heterosexual sex (*education* or *improving* of her mind) had by the petite blonde nymphomaniac, it is reasonable to temper that view in order to also account for Lorelei’s desire to, in turn, improve Dorothy’s *mind*.¹⁷

Somewhat surprisingly, Barreca notes above that Lorelei and Dorothy are not competitive (or envious or petty) with each other, an observation that is interesting in itself. These seem surprising characteristics, I suggest, only because general criticism of the novel presupposes the two women’s relationship to be “non-sexual” – which means heterosexual – and the general understanding of heterosexual women’s relationships are that they fight amongst themselves for the men around them. Therefore, Barreca finds it interesting that two heterosexual women can be free of envy, jealousy, and competition when men are involved. To further open possibilities in this text, it may be more productive to consider that the reason these sentiments are not issues between the two women is because of the presence of a queer or erotic tension that resists stereotypically heteronormative in-fighting. This is an especially productive line of thinking when one notes that Loos never illustrates Barreca’s brand of heterosexual competition in the text. Even in the argument between the partnership Lee-Shaw and Mrs. Beekman, there is nothing *heterosexual* about it. It revolves around the diamonds, not the man (Loos *Blondes* 1925, 57-59).

As composed as the couple is, however, Lorelei's and Dorothy's relationship is not entirely serene. While the women's relationships with men see nary a fight or dispute, the two of them quarrel quite often through their adventures. Not petty, envious or competitive, their arguments suggest a deeper and more intimate nature of relationship. The disputes between the two are almost as frequent as they are brief. They are sometimes facilitated by a clash between the more astute character of Dorothy and the entertainment she provides as the foil of her supposedly less clever partner. For example, at one point they have "quite a little quarrel" when Dorothy teases Lorelei for asking the "French veecount what was the name of the unknown soldier," and the vexed Lorelei explains that what she had meant to ask was "what was the name of his mother because it is always the mother of a dead soldier that I always seem to think about..." (Loos *Blondes* 1925, 55).

But there are more serious quarrels (yes, it is difficult to call anything serious in the novel) that seem to function as checks and balances between the two women to ensure their relationship with each other remains the topmost priority. Although they certainly allow and encourage each other in their extracurricular acquaintances with men, they also genially – but jealously – monitor the gravitas of each other's relationships to these men. *Jealous* in this context is used very specifically, for as stated above, the two woman are not envious of each other's conquests with men, but they seem quite protective of ensuring the sustainability of the one possession that is far more valuable even than their jewelry: their relationship. For example, Lorelei and Dorothy have "quite a little quarrel" after Dorothy insists on calling Mr. Eisman "Gus," because using his first name does not show proper "reverance [*sic*]" to a gentleman who "spends quite a lot of money educating a girl" (5).¹⁸ Although Lorelei blames Dorothy's "unrefined" manner for this error, the function of this reproach acts as a reminder to her partner

that Gus is sponsoring *both* of them in their European travels; therefore, curtailing her insults allows them both a continued nomadic life together.

At another moment they have “quite a little quarrel” because Dorothy says that Lorelei is becoming “too English” since meeting the Prince of Wales (Loos *Blondes* 1925, 44). In this scene, Lorelei has already danced with the Prince and Dorothy has just been asked to dance with him as well. Lorelei’s irritation is roused by Dorothy’s continuous use of American *slang* – handing her fan to Lorelei when the Prince invites her to dance, Dorothy says: “Hold this while I slip a new page into English history [sic]” – and she relays that irritation to Dorothy when her friend returns from the dance floor (43). At its roots, this irritation is centered in Lorelei’s apprehension at losing a prospective financial supporter as a consequence of Dorothy’s amateurish skills. But Dorothy, lest her material girl get carried away by the immense wealth of royalty, confers a cultural dig about ‘Englishness,’ persists in her use of slang, and overall implicitly reminds Lorelei of their alliance with each other through their American-ness.

Two other incidents in which the women *rein each other in*, per se, have to do with Lorelei teaching Dorothy to be more cerebral about her time with men. The first incident or quarrel functions as a private tutoring session where the more focused Lorelei reminds Dorothy of their particular purpose in travelling:

So Dorothy and I had quite a little quarrel because I told Dorothy that she was wasting quite a lot of time going with any gentleman who is out of a job but Dorothy is always getting to really like somebody and she will never learn how to act. I mean I always seem to think that when a girl really enjoys being with a gentleman, it puts her to quite a disadvantage and no real good can come of it. (Loos *Blondes* 1925, 42)

Lorelei's concerns are for the overall financial health of their unit, in which Lorelei means to continue to *educate* Dorothy. By making friends with lower classed men, especially without incomes, Dorothy takes time and resources away from them as a couple. Therefore, this quarrel acts as a disciplinary measure to remind Dorothy of her responsibility to their intimate liaison, and that simply enjoying oneself does nothing to help the unit's monetary progress.

After having ingeniously convinced Piggy to provide a daily assortment of orchids, the second incident or quarrel occurs. Lorelei is teased by Dorothy about her methods, although Dorothy does concede they are so brilliant as to be criminal. But, Lorelei pushes back by implying that engagement in her mode of persuasion is necessary because Dorothy insists on squandering her own time on an unprofitable liaison:

So Dorothy and I had quite a little quarrel after they went because Dorothy asked me which one of the Jesse James brothers was my father.¹⁹ But I told her I was not so unrefined that I would waste my time with any gentleman who was only a ballroom dancer when he had a job. So Dorothy said Gerald was a gentleman because he wrote her a note and it had a crest. So I told her to try and eat it. So then we had to get dressed.
(Loos *Blondes* 1925, 46)

This scene, the ephemeral quarreling and teasing on both sides, ending with Lorelei's very real assertion that Gerald's note would not put food on the table, encapsulates Lorelei's and Dorothy's fun-loving (fun and loving) relationship. It also demonstrates their devoted affiliation by emphasizing an argument about the most common anxiety for any couple: money. This illustrates yet again, the intimacy of their bond and their mutual and intertwined interests in each other. But there is one quarrel where Lorelei's right to Dorothy is clearest. It is when the two are leaving London and the unemployed ballroom dancer appears:

I mean we had quite a little quarrel because Gerald showed up at the station with a bangle for Dorothy so I told Dorothy she was well rid of such a person. So Dorothy had to come with me because Mr. Eisman is paying her expenses because he wants Dorothy to be my chaperone. (Loos *Blondes* 1925, 49)

When the pitiful bangle is offered to Dorothy, Lorelei disdainfully rejects it in her stead.²⁰

Remarkably, Lorelei is the only voice in this re-telling of the event; Dorothy has no droll comment or witty comeback. When it comes down to it, Dorothy's silence seems to concede that between the two things, Gerald – whom she is “madly in love with” – and Lorelei, she chooses the latter (49). Lorelei is both keeper and companion for Dorothy, the two are fused together; therefore, Dorothy would never choose a bangle – or its attending man – over her partner.

Although Lorelei tries to improve Dorothy's ability to make more efficient use of her time, i.e. she hopes for a two-income familial circle, for the most part Dorothy does not put these lessons into practice. From this inaction we can deduce that Dorothy is content in the relationship as it stands: Dorothy as the *kept* woman and Lorelei as the breadwinner. Likewise, when Lorelei explains to the reader that Dorothy must come with her because Mr. Eisman wants her to be Lorelei's chaperone, her words belie not only what it is that she wants herself, but the role of each woman in the relationship. It is obvious that Lorelei does *care* for Dorothy, something that we have not seen with any of the men discussed, as noted earlier, and if anyone acts as a chaperone, it is each of them for the other. Lorelei reminds the reader that she is their main source of income, and although she names Mr. Eisman as the reason that compels Dorothy to continue on to Paris, both parties seem content with this arrangement. We certainly never hear again from or about the likes of Gerald.

A final incident indicating Lorelei's care of Dorothy is when the money-wise Lorelei exhibits fiscal charity to Dorothy even over herself. Lorelei constructs a scheme that benefits her companion and in doing so expresses the generosity partners often gift each other. Granted, Lorelei benefits from the ploy as well, but Dorothy actually makes the money herself... finally putting into practice some of Lorelei's *education*. "So I really think it would be delightful if Dorothy could make some money for herself because it might make Dorothy get some ambitions" (Loos *Blondes 1925*, 69), Lorelei explains, and proceeds to clarify her plan to her partner: "So when I got through telling Dorothy what I thought up, Dorothy looked at me and looked at me and she really said she thought my brains were a miracle" (65).²¹ Not only does Lorelei's mind shine even in this moment with her much smarter friend, but her plan instructs her partner in the art form Lorelei has already mastered, and keeps the monetary gain in the proverbial family.

The plan is devised to handle the French father and son hired by Mrs. Beekman to steal the diamond tiara, as mentioned earlier. Dorothy informs Lorelei that each man has individually devised a plan to betray the other in order to claim the full monetary reward for himself. Knowing what the men have devised, Lorelei concocts a scheme that enables Dorothy to generate income by allowing both Louie and Robber individually to buy the tiara from Dorothy (Loos *Blondes 1925*, 69).²²

At the outset of the novel Lorelei is supposedly the object of derision – the gold-digging dumb blonde – but by the end, the reader finds her fantastically funny, a little silly, and rather ingenious. Even Dorothy, the person who by all accounts is exponentially smarter than Lorelei, enjoys tremendously their non-intellectual exchange. She especially enjoys watching her partner maneuver through the various and sundry situations in the book. It is she who witnesses the

ways in which Lorelei uses her unique mind over her body; it is she who is the eyewitness to Lorelei's detachment of heterosexual sex from the body. And finally, it is she who is either also involved in euphemistic *education* with Lorelei, or not. All we know in the end is that even as Lorelei is married, the moment where a theory for queerness in the novel is at its thinnest, Dorothy remains unperturbed. She knows that even Lorelei's marriage of convenience and status will not change the dynamic of the two women: "And everybody says my wedding was very, very beautiful. I mean even Dorothy said it was very beautiful, only Dorothy said she had to concentrate her mind on the massacre of the Armenians to keep herself from laughing right out loud in everybody's face" (Loos *Blondes* 1925, 121). Dorothy obviously does not become self-sufficient nor does she become more "reverant [*sic*]" (52); therefore, we can only assume she will continue to be *kept* by Lorelei.

A New Position

As a satirical piece, *Blondes'* shallowness restrains the depth of character one might find in a realist novel. In fact, as noted by Dustin H. Griffin, traditionally satire has been seen as "reductive [in] tone toward ridicule" and produces a "certain flattening of character toward caricature" (1994, 4); which is why Lisa Mendelman can describe the protagonist as "an indirect agent of unclear ambition, and [who] remain[s] utterly opaque when it comes to her emotional interiority" (2014, 46). Nevertheless, critics have traditionally – perhaps reflexively – ascribed a depth to Lorelei by way of assumptions and speculations about her sex(uality), the exact "body" and "events" Catherine Keyser finds so obscure in the novel, as mentioned earlier (2011, 66).

In other words, critics who might resist this study's new direction on the sex that is had and the sexuality portrayed in this novel already unconsciously rely on heteronormative paradigms in the first place to then assert heteronormative behaviors to a flat character in the

second. My question is why? Why only ascribe a stubborn heterosexuality? Why not another? If “[a]utobiography,” as Keyser points out, “provides Lorelei with comic revisionist agency; we can never know the ‘real story’” (2011, 66) about the sex in the novel or her sexuality. In the case of *Blondes*, satire can be seen in a more complicated light. Griffin notes that if satire “is not viewed simply as derisive reduction and rejection,” but instead we allow for its shifts in “inquiry and provocation, play and display” as well as note its “problematic open-ended[ness],” its “resistan[ce] to formal closure” we see that satire typically “complicates narrative fiction” (1994, 4-5). Therefore, it seems reasonable and fair to allow for a more capacious reading of Lorelei and her sex(uality) than we have hitherto tolerated.

In the end, this critique examines the novel through Loos’ stated subject, intelligence, as well as Mencken’s proclaimed subject, sex. It proposes a very unconventional reading of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, especially considering Lorelei, the sex she does or does not have, and the sex she may or may not desire. Lorelei’s intellectual achievements overshadow her sexual ones, which enables the stylization of sex as an intellectual endeavor, a *promise*, which is relocated *away* from the body. Furthermore, Lorelei’s and Dorothy’s principal motivations for fiscal shenanigans are to keep – or be kept by – each other, which implies that their relationship remains more crucial than most critics concede; by mutual consent Dorothy and Lorelei remain bound to each other. And finally, repositioning Lorelei less traditionally, especially expanding the potential of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*’ most notorious euphemism of *education* to incorporate Dorothy, we reexamine and challenge historical heteronormative readings of her and of the novel itself.

Notes

1. And amuse audiences it did! As noted in the Introduction of the 1998 edition of *Blondes*, the novel began as a serial publication in *Harper's Bazar* in 1925 (between March and August), after which it was published as a book by Liveright in November (Barreca x), and was "the surprise best-seller of 1925" (xi). According to Loos herself, a "'vanity' edition" of fifteen hundred copies was printed for Christmas of that year, and which has since become a collector's item ("Biography" 1963, xli). The first edition was "sold out on the day it reached the bookshops" (xli). The second edition consisted of sixty thousand copies and "was exhausted almost as quickly" (xli). Loos then explains that the book had run into "forty-five editions before the early demand had ceased" (xli).
2. H.L. Mencken was a good friend of Loos and a well-known editor. He co-founded and edited the magazine *The American Mercury* from 1924 to 1933.
3. In her book *Questioning Gender: A Sociological Exploration*, Robyn Ryle reminds us that the Cartesian duality of mind and body "is a belief, expressed in many different forms, in a split between the physical body and the nonmaterial entity we call mind (or spirit, soul, thought, etc.), where the mind is seen as superior in many ways to the inferior body" (266). "The mind," Ryle explains, "is associated with masculinity; it is rational, aspires to the best efforts of the self, is closer to god, and is working toward ultimate self-realization. The body is feminine and is the heavy drag on all the higher aspirations of the mind. [...] [T]he negativity associated with the body is also associated with women and femininity. Like the body, women came to represent 'distraction from knowledge, seduction away from God, capitulation to sexual desire, violence or aggression, failure of will, even death'" (Bordo qtd in Ryle 2012, 266).
4. Indeed, the "thirty years" of solid film criticism clock begins with Arbuthnot's and Seneca's germinal article "Pre-Text and Text in Gentlemen Prefer Blondes" (1982). As far as the text is concerned, however, in her article "Taking Blondes Seriously," Susan Hegeman asserts that the film has been "an important site for feminist scholarship" while there is "almost no recent criticism about the book on which the film was based" (1995, 525-26). At the time of her writing, 1995, she asserts that she can only count "one previous scholarly essay on the book" (1995, 526). Likewise, Faye Hammill notes feminist scholarship, that has "reinstated" many American authors "who were eliminated from the canon under the influence of the post-World War I hostility to women's writing," has been "slow" in extending that scholarship to Anita Loos' *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, which "continues to occupy a marginal position in the canon" (1995, 58). Contemporary criticism of the novel to this date, 2016, although expanding, has still to catch up with the work done in film.
5. The texts referred to are in the bibliography: Jane Gaines' "Women and Representation" (1984) and "White Privilege and Looking Relations" (1988); Chris Saayer's "The Hypothetical Lesbian Heroine" (1990); Alexander Doty's *Making Things Perfectly Queer* (1993) and "Flaming Classics" (2000); Jill A. Mackey's "Subtext and Countertext in *Muriel's Wedding*" (2001). To be clear, these texts do not all undertake the queer in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* as their central subject, but all build on or refer to the Arbuthnot and Seneca article for their own film critiques, thereby legitimizing such a reading.

6. The 1953 film production owes a debt to the musical adaptation of 1949 starring Carol Channing and Yvonne Adair. Songs such as “Bye Bye Baby,” “A Little Girl from Little Rock,” and “Diamonds are a Girl’s Best Friend” from 1949 were also used in the film. Incidentally, this author has come across no studies regarding a queer subtext in the 1949 stage version. I imagine there are at least two very good reasons for this: the first reason seems to be that the theater of the time did not allow the sustained visual close-up of both women in a frame; therefore the distance between audience and actor disallow the lingering glances and loving looks we witness between the women in the 1953 film. Another reason could be that Lorelei and Dorothy do not sing alone *together* in the Broadway play, which is a specific occupation that I believe accentuates Arbuthnot’s and Seneca’s queer reading (121-22). Of the considerable number of songs sung in the Broadway musical, Lorelei and Dorothy sing only one together (“Homesick Blues”), and that piece is shared with four other characters. In comparison, in the pre-title sequence of the 1953 film, Lorelei and Dorothy sing “Two Little Girls from Little Rock,” (remarkably the 1949 song “A Little Girl from Little Rock” was modified in order to add Dorothy to the number); “Bye Bye Baby;” “When Love Goes Wrong” (a beautifully sensual song with its own queer suggestions that cannot be explored here); and finally an interesting doubling of the women as they sing “Diamonds are a Girl’s Best Friend” separately, but in which Dorothy mimes Lorelei’s prior performance (again, these are scenes rife with queerness, but unable to be explored at this time).

7. This is the doctor, of course, whom Charlotte Perkins Gilman names in her short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892), and whose “rest cure” was the motivation for the short story in the first place.

8. Johannes Rutgers, *Rassenverbesserung. Malthusianismus und Neumalthusianismus*. (1911). A full citation is in the bibliography.

9. In the 1920s young women had a burgeoning understanding of contraception; however, my argument will assert that contraception is *not* the only thing that separates sex from reproduction for Lorelei. For the purposes of this article, her distance from “gentlemen” partners seems closer to abstinence by means of the promise of sex rather than sex itself, to be discussed later.

10. *Sex* here explicitly refers to the heteronormative sexuality that has been assumed about this character since its publication.

11. The newer dichotomy of gold-digger/dumb blonde could be described as near-opposition rather than exact opposition like the ancient virgin/whore double-bind for women. While the older version is obsessed with sexuality (none on the one hand and a lot on the other, but also both simultaneously), the newer version revolves around not just sexuality, but mentality as well. The gold-digger is allowed sexuality because she is smart, the dumb blonde because she does not know any better. Therefore, this amalgam of sexuality and smarts – or lack thereof – seems to give women in these categories opportunity for more movement and acceptability in society. (See Perkins “Blondes,” and “Stereotypes” in *The Women’s Companion to International Film*, 1990). A full citation is in the bibliography.

12. In her entry “Blondes” in the *Women’s Companion to International Film*, Tessa Perkins makes the following assertions: “Dumb Blondes are defined by their combination of overt, ‘natural’ sexuality (of which they may or may not be aware) with a profound ignorance and innocence manifest in an inability to understand even the most elementary facts of everyday life. It is this lack of understanding of what is ‘obvious’ to ordinary people that is the basis of dumb blonde humor. However, dumb blonde humor can also contain elements of ‘native wit,’ which stems from naivety and functions to show up the irrationality and/or the hypocrisy of the social

order. To this extent the dumb blonde stereotype has a subversive side which is sometimes overlooked...” (1990, 47).

13. To clarify, Mr. Eisman made a statement about his summer journey and Lorelei is determined it will also be an invitation: “But before Mr. Eisman went to Chicago he told me that he is going to Paris this summer on professional business and I think he intends to present me with a trip to Paris...” (10-11).

14. One important way in which women are chained to “the body” is through their almost exclusive jobs of nurturing and caring for other bodies from infancy through childcare to young adulthood, and finally through old age.

15. In her article, Hegeman dismisses this scene as one that readers can read *straight*. In other words, the “education” being had here is not euphemistic: “Lorelei’s arrangement with her maid manages to take the work (her own, at least) out of ‘education,’ thereby once again distancing herself from the (albeit euphemistically) sexual act of developing her brains” (1995, 539). But, what if we do not decide to read this moment of “education” *straight*? What might it mean to the sexual subtext?

16. Lorelei’s decision to cancel the traditional honeymoon undermines the novel’s heterosexual convictions. Dorothy continues as a prominent fixture in the wedded afterlife of Lorelei, although indeed, Mr. Montrose is also named as a reason for staying home (Loos *Blondes* 1925, 122).

17. To be clear, no critic to my knowledge has actually named Lorelei a “nymphomaniac”; that is my doing. I use the term because it illustrates the absurdity of placing heterosexual sex on the same plane as money and jewels for Lorelei. Although the book exudes sexual innuendo, it does not specify who actually makes sexual transactions. I assert that we limit the sexual innuendo and euphemisms if we contain them solely in heterosexual territory.

18. Lorelei explains that she won’t call Mr. Eisman anything but “Daddy” (Loos *Blondes* 1925, 5), which Susan Hegeman suggests connotes Lorelei’s childish ways with older men (giving them nicknames like ‘Piggy’ and ‘Coocoo’) “diminishes the overt signs of a mature sexuality and ameliorates the potential conflict between the demands of companionship and sex by reminding her male companions of that one moment in which companionate – and possibly also erotic – relationships with women were least problematic: childhood” (535). The particular nickname of ‘Daddy,’ suggests Hegeman, “should serve to remind Gus that Lorelei is both harmless and dependent on him in a way that refers directly to traditional patriarchal roles” (535-36).

19. Of course the Jesse James brothers allusion refers to the infamous, thieving brothers from the Old West.

20. Lorelei not only rejects the bangle, but as far as she is concerned the bangle itself is a stand-in for Gerald, i.e.; Lorelei rejects both person and thing because of their lack of value (Loos *Blondes* 1925, 49).

21. Granted Dorothy equivocates the compliment in the sentence immediately following: “I mean she said my brains reminded her of a radio because you listen to it for days and days and you get discouradged and just when you are getting ready to smash it, something comes out that is a masterpiece” (Loos *Blondes* 1925, 65).

22. As a reminder of Lorelei’s brilliant master plan, I give this excerpt from the text: “So tomorrow morning Dorothy is going to take the diamond tiara and she is going to tell Louie that she stole it and she is going to sell it to Louie. But she will make him hand over the money first and then, just as she is going to hand over the diamond tiara, I am going to walk in on them and

say, “Oh there is my diamond tiara. I have been looking for it everywhere.” So then I will get it back. So then she will tell him that she might just as well keep the 1000 franks because she will steal it for him again in the afternoon. So in the afternoon she is going to sell it to Robber...”(69).

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