

# Jessica Hahn, Media Whore: Sex Scandals and Female Publicity

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□—While much writing has focused on historical associations between women and “the private,” and on women’s entry into “public” roles, very little consideration has been given to the gendered aspects of publicity itself. Drawing especially on media narration of Jessica Hahn—who became a media figure due to her role in the 1987 Jim Bakker sex scandal—the author demonstrates how fresh political rhetorics lend themselves to stale sexual roles and scripts, and some key ways in which publicity is gendered. Sex scandals, it is argued, are an especially useful spot to witness the interplay between female sexuality and female publicity, both of which are explicit narrative elements of sex scandals. After briefly recounting the history of the public character of sex scandal vixen/victim, with roots in virgin-or-whore roles reaching back into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the author points to the ways Jessica Hahn’s image both replays and departs from that earlier characterization. As two newer contemporary discourses of feminism and of celebrity meet up with the virgin-whore discourse, they become conjoined: bodily virginity and media innocence, the loose woman and the media whore, the good girl and the self-commodifier, map onto one another. The sex scandal icon serves to mark the limits, and the restricted terrain, of female publicity.

A COUPLE of years before she hosted pay-per-view’s lady-mud-wrestlers-and-heavy-metal program *Thunder and Mud*, and about a decade before she became a regular on *The Howard Stern Show*, and a good fifteen years before she made *Bikini Summer 2*, Jessica Hahn, whose 1980 Florida-hotel-room encounter with televangelist Jim Bakker set in motion a course of events that effectively brought down Bakker’s extravagant PTL empire in the late 1980s, suggested that, had he simply been a gentleman about the whole thing, Bakker might still be reigning. After all, according to Hahn, he stole

her virginity. Bakker and his preacher crony, John Wesley Fletcher,

took from me that first experience—that first time when you love somebody and it’s everything good. . . . They took from me the gift that God gave us—of sharing the ultimate act of love. They stole that from me. I will never in my life get that back. I will never in my life know what it’s like to make love for the first time to the man I love (“The Jessica Hahn Story, Part I,” 1987, p. 198).

In fact, she maintained, a little common courtesy and Bakker might have never gone down for drugging and raping her. “If the man had come back to my room ten minutes later with one lousy flower and said, ‘Jessica, I don’t know what happened. I’m sorry,’” she said in 1987, “I probably could have

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looked the other way" ("The Jessica Hahn Story, Part I," 1987, p. 183). The choice of venue for these statements was *Playboy* magazine, in which Hahn was appearing for a rumored \$1 million, some of which she promptly spent on the cosmetic enhancement of her breasts and other parts of her body. Her switch from "virgin" to "whore," where she has been pretty much parked since then, was already in full swing.

Jessica Hahn is the best summary we have of the sex-scandal icon: Good girl and her evil twin, trusting, naive ruined woman and calculating, sex-drenched golddigger, victim and vamp. Long before her, and long before Monica Lewinsky and her thong underwear became national joke fodder, sex scandals began to donate to American public culture some of the most conspicuous icons of female sexuality. While larger sex scandal narratives, in which powerful men are almost invariably the central characters, tend to be much more about institutional moralities than sexual ones (Fine, 1997; Gamson, 2000), their subsidiary, scandalizing female characters have remained quite thoroughly sexualized, and their sexuality has remained quite rigidly imagined as either virginal or whorish. Power-hungry temptress of powerful man (busty, licking her lips), chaste beauty ruined by powerful man (young, smooth skinned, eyes cast down but glancing up with hints of desire): It's like a 1950s central casting call for a soft-core production of *Samson and Delilah* set in the 1890s.

Indeed, contemporary sex scandals are shocking less for the sexual behaviors involved than for the ways they replay stock female roles that "enlightened" societies often claim to have outgrown. In the midst of remarkable change in gender structures and the

movement of feminist ideologies into the mainstream of American life, Jessica Hahn, Monica Lewinsky, and their colleagues have skitted along musty virgin-whore and victim-vamp axes that have gone almost nowhere for centuries. It is disturbing, and perhaps not a massive coincidence, that the sex scandal has come into its own as a narrative genre just as women have pushed out a degree of space to be in asexual public roles, and just as women have eked out some space to be sexual, and to talk about sexuality, without being stigmatized and penalized. As publicly available sexual scripts in general, and women's sexual roles in particular, have opened up and liberalized, the available roles for women in most sex scandal stories are as jarringly cramped and retro-camp as a comic book's.

On its own, while certainly appalling, the persistence of sexual objectification, sexual double standards, and a virgin-whore dichotomy is not surprising news. The axis of sexually "pure" or sexual "ruined," of virgin or whore, of loose woman or bad girl, has been, and continues to be, one of the central axes along which women's positioning in the public sphere has run (Dinnerstein, 1976). Nor is it particularly unexpected that as women have entered the public sphere on more self-determined terms and increased their power in the workplace, marketplace, and politics, there are many cultural events that emerge to re-mark women as male sexual property (Bordo, 1997).

More striking, however, is how effortlessly fresh political rhetorics and new cultural roles—most strikingly, feminism and celebrity—lend themselves to stale sexual roles and scripts. Women thrown into publicity, pursuing it, or both do so on peculiar terms, and those terms are not well under-

stood. While much writing has focused on the associations of women with "the private," and on the entry of women into "public" roles (Elshtain, 1981; Fraser, 1992; Rosaldo, 1974), very little consideration has been given to the gendered aspects of publicity. Such "gender asymmetries concerning privacy and publicity" (Fraser, 1998, p. 318) need to be more thoroughly confronted. A closer look at late twentieth-century sex scandals offers a modest clue, suggesting not just that women's sexuality, when publicized, is narrowly scripted, but also, more revealingly, that stories of women's *publicity* are often narrated by analogy to sexuality. The virgin/victim versus whore/seductress story, though in mutated, often feminism-indebted, form, serves as the blueprint for the story of women entering the public eye.

Sex scandals are an especially useful spot to witness the interplay between female sexuality and female publicity, both of which are such explicit narrative elements (Castor, 1991; Cohen, 1996; Deem, 1999; Erni, 1998; Hogeland, 1999). The primary strategy employed here for investigating that interplay is narrative analysis—put simply, an interpretive retelling of the Jessica Hahn story. Hers is not the only story available, and not the only story from which is drawn, but it remains the most revealing and archetypal of the sex scandal genre. Before turning to Hahn's story, I briefly recount the history of the public character of sex scandal vixen/victim, which reaches back into the nineteenth century. Then, taking up the character of Jessica Hahn, I point to the ways in which she both replays and departs from that earlier characterization. (I am agnostic on the relationship between the public figure of Jessica Hahn, available only in mass-

mediated form, and the "real" person, presumably available in other forms; it is the former that is the relevant subject.) In particular, I note what happens in this tale as two newer contemporary discourses, of feminism and of celebrity, meet up with the virgin-whore discourse: how bodily virginity and media innocence, the loose woman and the media whore, the good girl and the self-commodifier, map onto one another. Buried in these disturbing, sometimes amusing, sex scandal tales are important lessons about how publicity is "gendered" and "sexualized."

### A Brief History of the Sex Scandal Vixen/Victim

The mold of sex scandal figurine inherited by late twentieth-century women like Jessica Hahn and Monica Lewinsky was pretty well cast a century before them. The quintessential nineteenth-century sex scandal, in which minister Henry Ward Beecher was accused of an adulterous affair with Elizabeth Tilton, the wife of his friend Theodore Tilton, played out, largely in press coverage of a six-month trial in 1874 and 1875, as a complicated conversation about religion and "free love," marriage and women's growing public roles, and the like. Even here, though, where the terms were religious ones—sin, adultery, God, the sanctity of marriage, and so on—and where the relationships in question were deeply intimate ones, Elizabeth Tilton was seen alternately as a saintly innocent or an untrustworthy, free-loving seductress. "She is the strangest combination I ever knew," Beecher told *The New York Times*, "You see her one time and you would think her a saint on earth; at another time she is a weak, irresponsible being and anything but a saint!"

(quoted in Fox, 1999, p. 40–41). As Richard Wightman Fox (1999) describes it, even as “Theodore and Henry spoke repeatedly at the trial of their limitless regard for Elizabeth,” each also “tried to save his reputation by divulging sadly that the saint was also disturbed. Her gifts were so pronounced that she was incompetent in such everyday human activities as truth-telling or the calm containment of passion. The saint, in the end, was a temptress” (pp. 112–3).

These hints of the saint-or-temptress character were already joined by hints that women receiving publicity and notoriety were *more* likely to be anything but saints. Indeed, the phrase “public woman” at the time “could mean either ‘public figure’ or ‘prostitute,’ and critics of militant women smirked at the slippage the phrase permitted” (Fox, 1999, p. 16). Reporters and others commented regularly on the indignity of women’s presence in the courtroom, and especially objected to Mrs. Tilton’s daily appearances. “A gross violation of good taste,” one reporter complained, for instance. “She has added to the probability of her unworthiness by this bold display” (quoted in Fox, 1999, p. 94; emphasis added).

What the Beecher-Tilton scandal began, the Presidential election of 1884 further sharpened. When the tabloid *Buffalo Evening News* first ran stories, for example, about Grover “the Good” Cleveland’s affair with Maria Halpin, he was the seducer, and she the “beautiful, virtuous and intelligent young lady” (quoted in Collins, 1998, p. 74). A widow working in a Buffalo dry-goods store, the story went, Halpin became pregnant by Cleveland, and wound up “broken-hearted, disgraced, and outcast, even while her seducer continues to revel in the realm of the

just, and pretend before the great American public that he is a model of virtue” (quoted in Collins, 1998, p. 74). Within the publicity battle between Cleveland’s supporters and those of opponent James Blaine, Halpin shuttled before readers’ eyes from virtuous widow to harlot. Both attackers and defenders of Cleveland’s character, in fact, relied on the assertion of Halpin’s loose sexuality. “Moral Monster Grover Cleveland’s True Character Laid Bare a Boon Companion to Buffalo Harlots,” boomed a *Cincinnati Penny Post* headline (quoted in Collins, 1998, p. 75). “We do not believe the American people will knowingly elect to the Presidency a coarse debauchee,” suggested the *New York Sun*, “who would bring harlots to Washington and hire lodging from them convenient to the White House” (quoted in Collins, 1998, p. 74). Boys will be boys, the Cleveland-supportive *New York World* countered. Cleveland was “sowing his wild oats when he met this woman,” the paper asserted. “She was a widow and not a good woman by any means” (quoted in Collins, 1998, p. 78).

A decade later, Madeline Pollard charged in court that the 47-year-old William Campbell Preston Breckinridge, a married, five-term congressman from a prominent Kentucky political family, had seduced her in 1884 when she was, as she put it, a “maiden of the age of 17 years” (quoted in Klotter, 1980, p. 230), fathered her two children over the subsequent years, and then reneged on a promise to marry her. Breckinridge, “the silver-tongued orator from Kentucky,” was a big promoter of chastity (“the foundation, the cornerstone of human society”) and of women’s sexual “purity” (which involves avoiding “useless hand-shaking, promiscuous kissing, needless

touches, and all exposures"), and wasted no time in painting a picture of Pollard as the other side of chaste (quoted in Klotter, 1980, pp. 229–230). She was "ambitious and had used him to gain prominence," Breckinridge testified, and even when he gave her money to get rid of her, she "clung like a parasite" (quoted in Klotter, 1980, p. 234).

She was hardly "unspoiled," his defense went, when he met her, hardly the young, innocent girl with the high-necked collar and the tight bun seen in the widely circulating picture. She liked sex, to begin with, "and had lured him [into sexual relations] as much as he lured her" (quoted in Klotter, 1980, p. 233). Memoranda from various people (much of it testimony deemed by the judge "too filthy and obscene" to introduce into court) supported this claim. One man wrote that "she schooled herself in that sin for the love of it, and . . . is now trying . . . to place herself on the open market"; another, a store owner in her hometown, claimed to know her to be "always fast and forward and improper in her behavior with young men," claiming that anyone who could pay could have her (quoted in Klotter, 1980, p. 233). "A self-acknowledged prostitute," his lawyers flatly argued (quoted in Klotter, 1980, p. 234). Pollard, as if to refute the charge, often arrived and left the courtroom in the company of a nun. For their part, Pollard's lawyers, playing up the notion that Breckinridge, as James Jones of the Hamilton College for Females in Lexington put it, was "an insult to every pure woman, a menace to every virgin," and a "wild beast in search of prey," emphasized her status as prey, her stolen innocence and her spoiled purity. "I stand here for womanhood," said her attorney in

his closing argument (quoted in Klotter, 1980).

The virgin-whore seesaw remained intact even as scandals began to shift location. For a complicated set of reasons—a "concentration of power among early twentieth-century elites" and a "professionalized, autonomous journalism hostile to the perceived excesses of popular democracy" among them—"revelations of moral turpitude among prominent public officials" largely disappeared from public culture during the first part of the twentieth century, and the center of sex-scandal gravity shifted to mass culture (Summers, 2000; see also Collins, 1998). Hollywood, of course, was seen as a place of loose morals, and was a popular and easy target for moral purity campaigns; moreover, for the growing professional gossip columnists, Hollywood was a gold mine. Charlie Chaplin, Errol Flynn, Mary Astor, Fatty Arbuckle, and other movie stars all faced scandalous revelations and often highly publicized courtroom dramas (Anger, 1975). It is here, in the budding Hollywood fame industry, that the narrative link between women's celebrity-seeking and sexual looseness solidified even further. If Hollywood scandals served as "dramatic [images] of a community—and society at large—gone wild" (Fine, 1997, p. 308), the female stars of the 1920s, 30s, and 40s, often projecting unapologetically risqué images (or, like Mary Astor, having them revealed in scandals), served as symbols of sexualized celebrity. Even more significantly, the images of women made famous through early Hollywood sex scandals typically swung from chaste victims of amoral men—innocent youngsters with stars in their eyes taken advantage of by lecherous actors and moguls—to wannabe starlets using sex to extract

publicity. A woman who enjoyed the limelight, these stories began to imply, was a woman who employed and enjoyed sex; women's celebrity pursuit itself, even when sex was not directly used to get there, was analogous to prostitution. The role of female "innocent," or victim of male sexual aggression, became less available the more a woman was shown to find pleasure in fame.

By the 1970s, in fact, when a series of congressional sex scandals reignited the sex scandal genre in politics, the scandalizing female characters, with their combination of unabashed sexuality and unabashed love of publicity, emerged quickly and firmly as quasi-prostitutes; their innocence, victimhood, or virtue only became part of the story long *after* the scandals themselves died. In reports about her jump into the Potomac with Congressman Wilbur Mills in 1974, for instance, Anabella Battistella was presented exclusively in her stage persona, Fanne Foxe, the "Argentine Firecracker." *Time* magazine described her as an "hysterical, curvaceous woman" and a "bosomy stripper" who performed at a

sleazy Washington nightclub shoehorned between a pornographic bookstore and a pornographic theater. On the club's windows are photos of scantily clad women in provocative poses and a sign promising AN EXTRAVAGANZA OF BEAUTIFUL, CURVACEOUS GIRLS. Inside, dancers shake to the heavy beat of music thundering from amplifiers, and strip to their G strings, as B-girls cadge \$2.75 drinks from male customers. ("Wilbur's Argentine Firecracker," 1974, p. 22)

That article, like most, was accompanied by a photo of Foxe at the Silver Slipper, big hair and big smile, in a little frilly stripper outfit, holding the edges of her see-through wrap as

though she's about to take it all off. The story, as told by pretty much everyone involved, including Battistella/Foxe herself, was of the affair of "the congressman and the stripper"—the title of Foxe's post-scandal book (Battistella, 1975).

As the story continued, it was Foxe's attempts to *cash in* on the scandal and her relationship to the celebrity role that defined her. She "opened a comeback tour . . . with a reported \$3,000-a-week gig in Boston, billed this time as the Tidal Basin Bombshell" (more pictures of her in stripper's outfits) ("Wilbur in Nighttown," 1974, p. 22). (It is at this Boston gig that Mills, joining Battistella on-stage, sealed his downfall.) She

bombed disastrously in New York last week, in a dingy strip place on the seedy side of Times Square. . . . But she had a high-wage booking lined up outside Orlando, Fla., plus a new agent with large ideas about changing her name to something catchier—Foxy Fanne, maybe—and starring her in a full-scale revue with "a cast of twenties," mostly naked. ("Wilbur in Nighttown," 1974, p. 23)

By 1981, having played "a part in a movie made for cable television, played in an off-Broadway play, had another bit part in an undistinguished movie, earned about \$5,000 starring in a movie made in Argentina and put together a cabaret act that had limited success as a curiosity act," and posing nude for *Cheri*, she had regained her virtue by renouncing both publicity and free-wheeling sexuality—dropping out of the spotlight, getting "quietly married at a Congregational church in New Canaan, Conn.," becoming Anna Montgomery, and giving birth to a daughter (Maxa, 1981).

Two years later, when Elizabeth Ray detailed her sex life with Representa-

tive Wayne Hays, who had employed her as a committee clerk "in exchange for sex once or twice a week" ("Indecent Exposure on Capitol Hill," 1976, p. 15), it was difficult to distinguish between her use of sexuality in exchange for a job and in exchange for publicity, and nearly impossible to find any suggestion of either sexual innocence or victimhood. She was, as the newsweeklies presented her, "an emotionally flaky, sensually attractive woman" ("Indecent Exposure on Capitol Hill," 1976, p. 14), the "tattletale ex-mistress," the "torrid non-typist" (Mathews, 1976b, p. 18), "an amateur call girl on the public pad" (Mathews, 1976a, p. 26); "Few of the many men who had encountered Liz during her four years on Capitol Hill," *Time* reported, "knew of any talents beyond the bedroom" ("What Liz Ray Has Wrought," 1976). In accompanying photos she was lounging in her apartment, or lying on the floor with her hair spread around her, or holding a wine glass with her head thrown back, always in low-cut dresses. Ray herself did little to dispel the image of her as a prostitute, claiming that "I can't type, I can't file, I can't even answer the phone" (Mathews, 1976b, p. 26), and posing before the scandal in *Playboy*, which published her photos after the scandal broke, celebrating her as "a buxom blonde beauty from North Carolina who pursued masculine political power with the most traditional of a woman's skills" ("The Girls of Washington," 1976, p. 175).

If her arrangement with Hays marked her as a whore character, it was the fact that she was "not so publicity-shy," that she was showing "no qualms about exploiting the scandal" (Keerdoja, 1977), and instead "preened in a strange celebrity status" ("What

Liz Ray Has Wrought," 1976, p. 22), that seemed to lock it in. The signs, according to *Time*, were there long before the scandal hit. Showing up for official receptions "in flashy tight clothes that played up her bosom, she flung herself toward photographers, urging Hays to get her pictured with Congressmen of celebrities. A former Hays staffer says she liked to pose 'with lots of suggestion of mouth action'" ("Sex Scandal Shakes Up Washington," 1976, p. 10). Using her sexuality to get to Hays, and Hays to get to the media, she became a media whore. "Ray was enjoying her long-sought celebrity," *Time* wrote disparagingly, as

the whir of TV cameras and the pop of flashbulbs echoed in her tacky apartment. . . . She was not the second Marilyn Monroe that she had yearned to become, but at least she was guided and comforted by her agent, her psychiatrist, her lawyer, and her nurse. *She gave TV interviews with promiscuous delight.* ("Sex Scandal Shakes Up Washington," 1976, p. 10; emphasis added)

No mention was made, of course, of the voracious press, both "legitimate" and pornographic, offering money and fame in exchange for Ray's sexualized image.

Building on the public characters who preceded them, Foxe and Ray tightened the analogy of prostitution and female publicity, melding "promiscuous" pursuit of both powerful individual men and reporters—who represented a powerful male institutional force—grabbing a bit of power from each. They were drawn as fairly simple sexualized, pre-feminist stereotypes: loose women using feminine wiles to extract money from powerful public men, wannabe starlets using feminine wiles to extract attention from powerful public media. Over the last decades

of the twentieth century, the stories took on another, stranger twist, as pieces of feminist discourse—of sexual harassment and abuse, of women's control of their own bodies, of women's economic independence—began to be melded onto the sex scandal vixen. (When, twenty years later, Elizabeth Ray was profiled for a *Boston Herald* article, she adopted a position towards her former self that comes directly from feminism. She was, she suggested, not a gold-digging bimbo but a victim of sexual harassment. "Mine was the original sexual harassment case, long before Anita Hill or Paula Jones," Ray claimed [Johnson, 1997].) The merger of sex symbol and harassment victim, publicity seeker and media victim, naive young girl, loose woman, and take-charge feminist, found its most dramatic embodiment in Jessica Hahn.

### Jessica Hahn and the Media Rape/Seduction

As the story was first told, by her and by the national press, when she met Jim Bakker, Jessica Hahn was a humble 20-year-old Long Island woman who had eagerly cleaned toilets at the Full Gospel Tabernacle Church and who eventually became the church's secretary, where her devotion, according to *People* magazine, was total, and her job included "praying by phone with troubled souls" ("Baring Body and Soul," 1987, p. 32). She had only been on a couple of dates, and got her sex education from library books rather than back-seat fumbling or girl talk. Unlike the fast girls around her, she was proudly determined to "remain a virgin until marriage" ("Baring Body and Soul," 1987, p. 33). She may have been "stunning"—a repeated descriptor perhaps meant to imply that her virginity was not due to lack of oppor-

tunity—but the pre-Bakker Jessica Hahn was a full-on virgin if there ever was one ("Baring Body and Soul," 1987, p. 32). "I had maybe two dates before 1980," she told *Playboy* in November of 1987. "Back then, when I was 21, I mostly wore church gowns or the dresses I could afford on my church pay" ("The Jessica Hahn Story, Part I," 1987, p. 85).

For a couple of weeks in 1987 after the *Charlotte Observer* broke the Bakker-Hahn story, Jessica Hahn remained that ruined-innocent, good-girl character: weeping after a phone call to her parents in her apartment decorated with flowered wallpaper, spending her time "reading the Bible, watching television, listening to Elvis Presley tapes and fussing with her dog, Missy," her answering machine message still chirping a sunny "Have a great day!" (Rimer, 1987). She was, according to *People*, "demure and unprepossessing in a modest, rust-toned skirt and a blouse," offering abundant, "respectful references to the Almighty" ("Baring Body and Soul," 1987).

Or was it tight jeans and a mouth like a sewer? Even these early descriptions of Hahn swing between the dog-loving, Bible-reading, small-town virgin and her alter ego, the big-haired, gum-chomping, knowing tease. Along with her flowered wallpaper and dog Missy, reporters mention her shiny lipstick and Porsche sunglasses, her "boots, tight jeans and tight sweaters" (Rimer, 1987). Hahn's image of sexual naivete, like that of many women publicly claiming to have been sexually violated, was always also countered by the suggestion that she was asking for it. The seeds of the whore image were there not only because Hahn liked tight jeans, and not only because virgin and whore are two sides of a misogynist



coin, but also because money was always a part of the story, whether it was "blackmail," as Jim Bakker claimed, or "hush money," as his enemies and just about everyone else suggested. Since good girls, even if they do actually have sex, and even if they're forced to, don't get paid for it, Hahn was more likely to be a bad girl. After all, she had sex, and then she took money.

And so, after brief press time as a good girl, Hahn rapidly shape-shifted to a self-promoting sexual object. With all the cameras watching, it's as though Hahn reached behind her head and slowly peeled off the face of the virginal church secretary to reveal—gasp!—her evil, nymphomaniacal, come-and-get-it twin. "Take a good look and find out what I'm about," she is quoted telling *Newsweek*, suddenly sounding like she's calling out of some red-light-district window. A good look at the "Praygirl," the magazine snidely pointed out, reporting on her million-dollar deal with *Playboy*, will cost you four dollars ("Newsmakers," 1987, p. 96). No more Missy, no more Elvis, no more Almighty. She's selling it to you for four bucks, and to *Playboy* for two hundred and fifty thousand times that. "What has happened to Jessica Hahn?" asked the October 5<sup>th</sup>, 1987, cover of *People*.

No answers were really attempted there, though the two available ones are pretty plain: she was either a "ruined" virgin or a "loose" woman. She offered the first version, mostly in her two lengthy *Playboy* interviews, while Bakker and then a whole parade of others, mostly speaking from the pages of *Penthouse*, offered the second. What is especially striking is not so much the fact of the virgin-whore dispute as the role of publicity within it. The suspicion that she was Bakker's seductress

rather than his victim is pushed along by her willingness to take money, not just in exchange for sex, but in exchange for a sexualized image made available to the public, and her willingness to "cash in" the scandal-born publicity. Her own "adviser," Paul Roper, who negotiated her \$265,000 settlement with PTL years before, chastised her publicly for "walking around in skin-tight jeans in her backyard, saying cute little throw-away remarks to the press"—that is, for flirting with the media ("Tight Lips, Not Tight Jeans PTL Sex Scandal Woman Told," 1987). When *Penthouse* suggests that she is a fraud, the magazine argues not just that she has a sordid sexual history, but that she seduced the media for fame (just as she seduced Bakker for money). On the other hand, when *Playboy* presents Hahn, and she presents herself therein, it is not just her sexual innocence that was stolen but her media virginity; the "rape" is not just by Bakker and Fletcher, but by the media. Her claims to innocence and victimhood have as much to do with her victimization by the forces of publicity as with her victimization by Bakker. Her recovery, moreover, and her reclaiming of her own power and independence, is through publicity: drawing on liberal-feminist, independent-career-woman rhetoric, she takes control of her own celebrity, and in doing so reclaims her "womanhood."

### *Playboy's* Jessica Hahn: From Victim to Entrepreneur

In her own as-told-to-*Playboy* version of the story, Hahn was helpless not just in the 1980 hotel-room encounter, but in the 1987 media encounter. In the first case, according to *Playboy*, Hahn was an innocent under the influence of her pastor, Gene Profeta, who "mes-

merized young Jessica with a combination of fire, brimstone, money, and sex," and kept a "tight hold over her personal life"; in Florida, Jim Bakker, with the aid of wine and drugs and Hahn's "hero worship" of him, "forced himself on a bewildered girl, then left her to be ravished by Fletcher" ("Jessica: A New Life," 1988, p. 158). Both her virginity and her innocent hero worship are taken in a rape scene:

The guy is on top. He has managed to completely undress me. And he's sitting on my chest. And he's starting to put pillows beneath my back. He's really pushing himself—I mean, the guy was forcing himself. He put his penis in my mouth and I was just starting to cry. . . . My neck hurts, my throat hurts, my head feels like it's going to explode. But he's frustrated and determined, determined enough that within minutes he's inside me and he's on top and he's holding my arms. . . . I'm pushing him away, you know. Every time I did that, it seemed to bring him on more. And he was talking off the wall. . . . You have to understand, it wasn't like I ever did this. I had never slept with anybody. . . . I was crying and trying to tell this man that he destroyed my life. ("The Jessica Hahn Story, Part I," 1987, p. 180)

Hahn's trajectory as a media figure is remarkably similar. She was, until the moment of the scandal's revelation, a complete publicity innocent, and an easy mark. She tells of her "first encounter," with a reporter from *Newsday* who "came over and got a photo of me in my boots and jeans—what I had been wearing around the house. I didn't know how I was supposed to look, what I was supposed to say" ("The Jessica Hahn Story, Part II," 1987, p. 204). As in the hotel room, Hahn is a captive, spending weeks "as a virtual prisoner" in her apartment ("Baring Body and Soul," 1987), badgered until she has no choice but to give it up. "I

didn't dare go anywhere," she says, describing what amounts to a media rape scene:

There were vans and trucks and sound booms everywhere. There were blankets on my lawn, chairs set up. There were—no kidding—120 newspeople milling around. There were photographers on top of the vans, focusing their cameras on my window. People perched on my car. The street was blocked. And I was scared to death—I didn't dare open my door. . . . I had my phone going endlessly, my dog going crazy, the little girl from downstairs bringing up messages every five minutes, microphones on the end of poles coming up to my window, bright lights all night long—and I ended up sitting in my living-room chair like this [clasps knees, rocks back and forth], saying, "My God, what can I do?" . . . Finally, when it got to be too much—the doorknobs were jiggling, people were throwing things at my window—I slipped out my front door. They weren't expecting me and there was this rush . . . and they knocked me over. I stood up and went back to my doorstep. I was wearing sunglasses, not just because I'd always worn them but because my eyes were a disaster from crying so much. . . . And that was the first time I talked to the press. ("The Jessica Hahn Story, Part II," 1987, p. 205)

She had never done this before. They held her captive. They tried, violently, to get a piece of her, forcing themselves on her. Every time she tried to push them away, it just seemed to bring them on more. She had no choice but to give in. They said crazy things. She was crying.

If the narratives of sexual and media victimhood run closely parallel, sex and publicity are further linked when Hahn fights back, deploying bits and pieces of feminist rhetoric. Borrowing a standard feminist critique of male-dominated media, she attacks media stereotypes of her as "a slut" and "a bimbo." She attacks the power of the

press, and "the control they have," especially the control exerted over her image. "I am not who I've been made out to be," she says. "I heard about one of the papers that had some stock photos of me. An editor there said to give them the sluttiest picture they could find of me . . . . It's all bait" ("The Jessica Hahn Story, Part I," 1987, pp. 82-83). Even more importantly, she even manages a feminist spin on her turn to *Playboy*, which she frames not as evidence of media whorishness, but as evidence that she is taking control back of her life, reclaiming her body and her image from those men who stole it from her, and embarking on a new career in which she is financially independent (a millionaire, in fact). "Jessica, on her own terms," the first *Playboy* pictorial was called. Posing allowed her to overcome her victim status, she says, and take control of her life: rather than men using her body, she was using it; rather than feeling ashamed of her female body, she was celebrating a woman's beauty and "feeling good about myself and my body again" ("Jessica, On Her Own Terms," 1987, p. 95). In fact, she says in her second cover layout, when the photographer was taking the pictures, "I thought, Jessica, you don't have to be ashamed ever again. You don't have to answer to any preacher, or any preacher's wife, or *anybody*" ("Jessica: A New Life," 1988, p. 161). People can laugh, but Hahn isn't living her life for others any more. She's a strong, independent, liberated woman, "not a robot," not "to be used and thrown out" ("Jessica, On Her Own Terms," 1987, p. 98), not "a little girl being influenced by all these big men that have all this power" ("The Jessica Hahn Story, Part II," 1987, p. 208). Her interviewers for the first *Playboy* story suggest maybe they should

run the interview without photos. "Relax, guys," she says. "I know what I'm doing."

I want this on the record. I fought a long time to feel like a woman and feel good about myself. And I'm almost there. And I don't see these pictures as being filthy. I see what *they* did as being filthy. . . . Everyone, every story, tried to sell off a new piece of me. So I'm dealing with it publicly. Head on. *Only I'm at the controls.* ("The Jessica Hahn Story, Part I," 1987, p. 198; emphasis added)

Now an independent, self-commodifying woman (career: celebrity), she turns the tables on her innocence-stealing attackers—both those men who sexually abused her and the media who pursued her—by taking control of her publicity.

That this new job as *Playboy* celebrity was the means through which Hahn "fought back" using liberal-feminist rhetoric is, of course, ironic. But it worked for Hahn in part because it allowed her to regain her "innocence" while also asserting "control." The first she did by framing her *Playboy* experience in girlish terms, and even more so by framing it in religious terms. "I have a plaque in my room here at the Playboy Mansion that reads JESSICA, TRUST ME. I HAVE EVERYTHING UNDER CONTROL. SIGNED, JESUS," she reports in her second *Playboy* cover story, "The New Jessica Hahn," which shows off the new nose, teeth, and breasts paid for by the first cover story, the year before. "There are birds, trees, flowers, beauty everywhere you look," she says of the Mansion, accompanied by photos of her lounging naked on gold satin sheets, and naked covered in flowers, here pensive and there head thrown back in a version of ecstasy, and finally spread over two pages wearing, at least on the

parts of her body that are not breasts or crotch, a black lace teddy and stockings with garters. "And it's *safe*." Safe from rapists. Safe from the angry followers who condemn her and threaten her life. Safe from media pursuers. Safe from televangelists preaching that sex is ugly, and having ugly sex. "I don't agree with all the preachers who say sex is dirty," she says beneath her breasts. "It may be the best thing God created. It's like a taste of heaven. *There's* something for the preachers to think about!" ("Jessica: A New Life," 1988, pp. 120, 122)

*Playboy*, as Hahn tells it, is not just her employer, but her sanctuary and her savior, sent by He who has everything under control. "I've spent a lot of time praying in the past year, wondering about God's plan for me," she says, "and I have finally decided just to trust in Him." In fact, at twenty-eight years old, *Playboy* reports, she was lying in bed, contemplating suicide. She spoke with God, asking for a miracle. "The next day, *Playboy* called," she says. "That was my miracle" ("Jessica: A New Life," 1988, p. 158). On the magazine cover, she wears diamondsque *Playboy* bunny earrings, a somewhat stunned look, and nothing else. As *Playboy* celebrity, then, Hahn becomes simultaneously sexual and innocent, simultaneously a traditional and a modern working woman. Sexualized publicity ruined her, and it saves her as well.

### ***Penthouse's* Jessica Hahn: Temptress, Prostitute, and Con Artist**

Over at *Playboy's* competitor, *Penthouse*, however, Hahn remained a prostitute, and not least because of her pursuit of media attention. The magazine works hard, first of all, to prove that Hahn was having sex early and

often, long before her time with Jim Bakker. She is said to have been caught fellating a pregnant friend's husband, Rocco, a "muscled Long Island electrician" ("When you get those big titties smacked in your face, what's a guy to do?"). She is said to have reveled in the news that the wife of Rev. Gene Profeta, her pastor and alleged lover, had been rushed to the hospital with heart trouble ("I hate the bitch. I hope she drops dead!") (Harris, 1988a, p. 172). She is said to have been "fond of preachers, but enjoyed taunting construction workers with her tight sweaters, too." She is said to have laughingly bragged about hard, wall-pounding sex with John Wesley Fletcher at the New York Hilton the February before her Florida Fletcher-Bakker gig. Her favorite book is said to be a different kind of Bible: *How to Be a Rich Man's Mistress* (Harris, 1988a, p. 172). She is said, that is, to be like a character out of some prime time soap: banging the preacher and her best friend's muscular husband, yelling campy lines about how she wishes that bitch would drop dead, reading self-help books for goldiggers.

Or like a character in one of those horny-housewife-blowing-the-paper-boy *Penthouse Forum* letters. In one *Penthouse* article, in fact, she is the horny neighbor in a bathrobe, a "temptress" and "a tease" who "wore tight jeans"—what is it about those tight jeans?—and "low-cut blouses," seducing her 14-year-old neighbor. After showing him various sexual positions with their clothes on, the boy reports, she "disappeared into the bathroom," emerging a few minutes later "in a burgundy bathrobe with nothing underneath, dark hair cascading down her back." She dimmed the lights, put on some soft rock music, spread a brown fur

blanket on the floor, and "gave me a blowjob," as a start (Harris, 1988b, p. 74). John's mother later tells of talking to Jessica, whom she alleges at the time was having an affair with "a married black singer," about sex. "I looked at my friend and thought, 'This woman must be a prostitute'" (Harris, 1988b, p. 75). Indeed, in *Penthouse's* other stories, Hahn is exactly that: way beyond horny neighbor, she's a garden variety brothel whore posing as a virginal victim. An article accompanying John's story reports that an informant, a madam in her seventies who passed a lie-detector test, claimed that Hahn worked for her for two weeks in 1979, the year before she met Bakker. "My Johns loved her," claimed the woman. "Said she was the best. . . . Knowing Jessica, I'd say she knew exactly what she was doing in that hotel room with Jim Bakker. She is nothing more than a whore" ("My Johns Said She Was the Best," 1988, p. 76).

This lying, sex-crazed, whore version of Hahn was, of course, roughly what Jim Bakker and his allies put forward, although more Delilah than *Debbie Does Dallas*. "I was wickedly manipulated by treacherous former friends and colleagues," Jim Bakker said in a statement issued from Palm Springs, where he and Tammy Faye were holed up as the scandal broke, "who victimized me with the aid of a female confederate" (Grove, 1987). The confederate, the Bakker team claimed, was a temptress who "knew all the tricks of the trade" (Martz, 1987). *Penthouse's* madam echoed that image, word for word. "She knew the tricks of the trade far beyond the bedroom," she says. "She knew the tricks of the trade and how to squeeze money and do everything else she did" (Sonnenschein, 1988, p. 170).

Bolstering this narrative, taking it beyond a he-said-she-said game, is the theme that Hahn had pulled a "media con," performing innocence and victimization to satisfy her publicity ambitions. Her "tale of plundered virginity," a *Penthouse* writer asserts, was "a stunning performance." Offended, it seems, by the audacity of a woman who only *pretends* to have had her virginity plundered, giving genuine virgin-plundering a bad name and brazenly stealing one of heterosexual porn's bread-and-butter fantasy stories, *Penthouse* charges her with having "suckered us all: a vixen masquerading as victim. Playing to the media's propensity to believe a self-styled damsel in distress, she *has parlayed her shtick of ravaged innocence into fun, fortune, and fame*. Donahue bought it, Koppel, Larry King. She made the cover of *People*" (Harris, 1988a, p. 50; emphasis added). Her pursuit of celebrity status, in fact, is used to bolster the veracity of the various sexual tales, providing both motive for lying and a demonstration of anything-for-money character. As a celebrity, moreover, she is subject to the suspicion that she is performing her public self for the sake of profit, and, given the power seen to accompany public attention, her claims to victimhood are easily discounted. Her role as a public figure, that is, is as much a marker of whoredom as the revelations of private behavior.

### Conclusion: Publicity, Sexuality, and Media Dependence

Jessica Hahn, and the sex-scandal vamp figure more generally, is obviously not the only available role for publicly visible women, or the most prominent one, and her sexualization is hardly surprising, given how she

came to public attention. But she certainly makes explicit some of the central dilemmas of female publicity. Jessica Hahn and her sex scandal sisters seem to serve as iconic reminders of the terms of women's publicity, even when sexuality is not the original claim to fame; as Lisa Maria Hogeland (1999) points out, "the nature of 'the antinomy between "women" and the "public"' is sexual" and "'public women' are sexual(ized) women" (p. 98). A public woman, still, does not easily escape the sad cultural inheritance of the virgin-whore dichotomy, especially as it often serves as the blueprint for women's relationship to publicity in general. The "ruined woman" status, for instance, has afforded a woman, and still affords her, some measure of power—as a victim, she commands sympathy and may even require protection or compensation—and this is the case whether it is a man or a camera who violates her. But that story always carries its own counterpoint, in the suggestion that a woman's embrace of either sexuality or publicity somehow goes to show that she was never an innocent victim, that innocence is merely a cover for sex- or celebrity-lust. Similarly, as Jessica Hahn inadvertently reminds us, confronting the dichotomy with a liberal-feminist-derived, woman-as-public-agent frame does not necessarily make much of a dent in the virgin-whore narrative. As long as women's publicity itself is narrated by analogy to sex—the virtuous woman protects her chastity from predatory media, the woman who seeks out media attention is a harlot—the independent woman, even when she is of the out-of-my-way-mister, I'm-my-own-commodity variety, is easily absorbed back into the role of prostitute.

This negotiation of a public role in which sexual relations with men and relations with media bleed into one another does not require a woman to take the role that's offered. In this regard, the path of Donna Rice, who became famous the same year as Jessica Hahn for her role in the Gary Hart sex scandal—she was photographed on Hart's lap on a boat called *Monkey Business*, and was seen leaving his Washington townhouse in the middle of the night—provides a telling mirror to Hahn's. Like Hahn, she was cast as a good girl gone bad: former Miss South Carolina whose ambitions in the celebrity industry of modeling and acting led her into "the pampered and permissive world of rock stars and millionaires" (Shapiro, 1987, p. 17) and a "high-rolling netherworld" (Sheehy, 1987, p. 132). Like Hahn, her role in the scandal was seen to be consonant with a more general use of her looks and sexuality for mobility; a widely circulated image of her, taken from a calendar for which she once posed, showed her with one breast exposed. "She figured the easiest way to come by celebrity," Gail Sheehy wrote in one profile, melding the various forms of prostitution, "was to use her looks to make the right connections. . . . The whole concept is to induce the most expensive fantasies, fulfill them, and then collect" (Sheehy, 1987, p. 132). Like Hahn, she is taken to task for "cashing in." Also like Hahn, Rice was portrayed as a victim of media abuse, sitting "inside her apartment, listening to the harsh beep of an uncradled phone" (Edsall, 1987, p. 1). But unlike Hahn, after a brief period of celebrity, and a cleansing visit to concerned mother-of-America Barbara Walters (Castor, 1991), Rice dropped out, and

emerged as Hahn's polar opposite: now Donna Rice Hughes, she is an anti-porn crusader, conservative Christian, and mother. She renounced the sexualized public role in which she was cast, which not incidentally meant renouncing a public role altogether, and when enough time had passed, returned as a crusader protecting "our children" from the "dangers" of publicly available sexual imagery—and in so doing became a "good girl" again. Like Hahn, she used the publicity system that had used her, reclaiming her stolen "womanhood" from it, and attacking her attackers; she simply came down on the other side of the dichotomy. While Hahn played on the "whore" side of the axis, using sexualized publicity as self-assertion, Rice renounced celebrity only to later reestablish herself on the "Madonna" side. While Hahn posed for *Playboy* covers, Donna Rice Hughes posed on the cover of *Today's Christian Woman* (Tucker, 1996). Sexuality—a regained sexual "purity," rather than an embrace of sexual self-commodification—remains the defining focus of her public character.

The intransigent Madonna-whore dichotomy embodied in sex scandal women, updated to the images of the media virgin and the media whore and the media career-woman, mark the terrain of female publicity with bright, flashing lights. Not all public women must enter that strict narrative, but all operate with those flashing lights in sight, in a media environment that, for

all the changes in gender relations it charts and pushes, serves up regular reminders that women in the public eye must demonstrate purity of motive, distance themselves from their bodies, or be slotted into roles in which sexuality is their defining public feature and their economic means.

It is no accident that Jessica Hahn's character was created largely in the pages of heterosexual male pornographic magazines—the only spot on the media map that allowed her some measure of control. In the end, Jessica Hahn's story is a tale about women's dependence on male-dominated media—about a media environment in which embracing *Playboy* seemed like, and in many ways really was, a very good option—and that story is as alive today as it was 25 years ago. If a woman is not seducing the media, her resistance to media pursuit is characterized as a "no" that means "yes." She may say she doesn't want it, but her subsequent behavior proves otherwise. She runs from one set of media attackers into the arms of protective media, who give her the publicity she claimed not to want. Her fighting against unwanted publicity is only a step on the path towards embracing publicity-granting media. Her independence is achieved through dependence. In the end, the story of Jessica Hahn, and the sex scandal icons who preceded her and came after her, is a story media institutions tell about their own power. □

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