



Posing a Threat: Flappers, Chorus Girls, and Other Brazen Performers of the American 1920s

Angela J. Latham

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New definitions of American femininity were formed in the pivotal 1920s, an era that vastly expanded the "market" for sexually explicit displays by women. Angela J. Latham shows how quarrels over and censorship of women's performance -- particularly in the arenas of fashion and theater -- uniquely reveal the cultural idiosyncracies of the period and provide valuable clues to the developing iconicity of the female body in its more recent historical phases.

Through disguise, display, or judicious appropriation of both, performance became a crucial means by which women contested, affirmed, mitigated, and revolutionized norms of female self-presentation and self-stylization. Fashion was a hotly contested arena of bodily display. Latham surveys 1920s fashion trends and explores popular fashion rhetoric. Resistance to social mandates regarding women's fashion was nowhere more pronounced than in the matter of "bathing costumes." Latham critiques locally situated contests over swimwear, including those surrounding the first Miss America Pageant, and suggests how such performances sanctioned otherwise unacceptable self-presentations by women.

Looking at American theater, Latham summarizes major arguments about censorship and the ideological assumptions embedded within them. Although sexually provocative displays by women were often the focus of censorship efforts, "leg shows," including revues like the Zeigfeld Follies, were in their heyday. Latham situates the popularity of such performances that featured women's bodies within the larger context of censorship in the American theater at this time.

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