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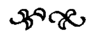

The public emphasis on sex and sexuality involved more than a new attitude toward pleasure; it signaled a new view of women. Publicly at least, many nineteenth-century Americans had been reluctant to suggest that women were sexual beings, creatures of appetite and desire. But by the 1910s, the Victorian stereotype of the asexual, self-denying woman had almost completely disappeared. The new sexual theory insisted that women and men alike were sensual beings who deserved gratification. "Passion," wrote the best-selling author Dr. Alice Stockham, in 1903, "belongs to the . . . healthy woman as much as to the healthy man."[41]

The new commercial amusements certainly shared that belief. Not surprisingly, they presented women as objects of male desire. Little Egypt's dances and Mack Sennett's movies put women on display. More strikingly, commercial amusements offered men as objects of female desire. Women flocked to gaze at and even touch the "Great Sandow" and other strongmen at World's Fairs and amusement parks. The acknowledgment of female sexuality, implicit in these displays, was explicit in the movies. Beginning in 1915, Theda Bara won enormous popularity as the "vamp," a female sexual vampire with "enough sex attraction to supply a town full of normally pleasing women." In one film after another, Bara captivated and destroyed helpless men. "Kiss me, my fool," she demanded in *A Fool There Was*. Bara's aggressive sexuality, deployed "with prodigal freedom" in such films as *The Serpent, The Vixen, Cleopatra, Salome,* and *When Men Desire,* inspired a host of exotic imitators, including Vilma Banky, Nita Naldi, and Lya de Putti.[42]

The sexual nature of women was also central to a new movement, known as feminism, that emerged in the 1910s. The feminists, like earlier female reformers, were generally white, well educated, Protestant, urban women. Concentrated in New York's Greenwich Village, the feminists included such writers and activists as Crystal Eastman, Henrietta Rodman, Ida Rauh, Neith Boyce, and Susan Glaspell. Youthful, energetic, and aggressive, the feminists quickly organized themselves and publicized their ideas. In 1912, twenty-five women founded Heterodoxy, an organization dedicated to the discussion of a broad range of women's topics. In 1914, Rodman formed a group called the Feminist Alliance. That year, too, Marie Jenney Howe, one of the leaders of Heterodoxy, staged two mass meetings at New York's

Cooper Union devoted to the topic "What Is Feminism?" Answers to that question emerged in the pages of the radical journal *The Masses*, edited by Crystal Eastman's brother, Max. And they appeared onstage in the productions of the Provincetown Players, a summer theatrical group on Cape Cod, Massachusetts. The company, which put on plays by Eugene O'Neill, also staged plays by Boyce and Glaspell.[43]

The feminists broke with earlier female reformers in their conception of women's sexual nature and, accordingly, in much else. "[M]y own generation of feminists . . . ," recalled writer Lillian Symes, "had . . . little in common with the flat-heeled, unpowdered, pioneer suffragette generation which preceded it by a decade or two. . . ." Insisting on women's capacity for pleasure, the feminists of the 1910s demanded what one of them called "sex rights on the part of women." Like earlier female activists, they wanted a single sexual standard for men and women—but one based on mutual sexual gratification, not renunciation and regulation. In short, the feminists sought the same opportunities and satisfactions as men had presumably long enjoyed.[44]

For some feminists, "sex rights on the part of women" meant, at least privately, the acceptance of homosexuality. There were a number of lesbians in Heterodoxy. Most feminists assumed, however, that "sex rights" meant primarily the freedom to pursue heterosexual pleasure. Birth control was inevitably a central feminist cause. It was "an elementary essential in all aspects of feminism," declared Crystal Eastman. "[W]e must all be followers of Margaret Sanger." A few feminists practiced "free love." Henrietta Rodman, for instance, lived openly with a series of men before she finally married in 1913. But the vast majority of feminists, like Rodman herself, did not reject marriage. Rather, they wanted to remake married life on a more exciting, satisfying basis. "I am trying for nothing so hard in my own personal life," said activist Mary Heaton Vorse, "as how not to be respectable when married."[45]

The feminists' insistence on sexual satisfaction put them at odds with older female activists. Those pioneers tended to emphasize women's spiritual, rather than sexual, nature. As early as 1913, feminist Winifred Harper Cooley reported "a violent altercation going on continually . . . regarding this question." Younger and older women alike condemned "the injustices of the man-made world, which has for centuries branded the scarlet letter on the woman's breast, and let the man go scot-free." But that was the extent of

the agreement. "[T]he conservative women reformers think the solution is in hauling men up to the standard of virginal purity that has always been set for women," Cooley observed. "The other branch, claiming to have a broader knowledge of human nature, asserts that it is impossible and perhaps undesirable to expect asceticism from all men and women." Cooley thought that she and other feminists were simply "willing to face facts as they are." But older women activists, such as the suffragist Carrie Chapman Catt, believed the feminists were guilty of the "oversexualizing of women." And Charlotte Perkins Gilman warned that sexual freedom was an "indulgence" that could become the basis for women's further oppression in the future.[46]

The feminists also broke with the women's movement and with progressivism because they saw the world in individualist terms. Winifred Harper Cooley described women's plight as the denial of their individuality. Women are "seldom allowed self-expression as individuals," she lamented. "They are never referred to except in their relation to men. It is always 'the wife and mother,' 'the sweetheart and sister,' not simply 'the woman.'"[47]

The feminists insisted on their individuality. The members of Heterodoxy described themselves as "free-willed, self-willed women . . . the most unruly and individualistic females you ever fell among." And the feminists insisted that women should have all the rights of individuals. "Feminism," the Feminist Alliance declared at its first meeting in 1914, "is a movement, which demands the removal of all social, political, economic, and other discriminations which are based upon sex, and the award of all rights and duties in all fields on the basis of individual capacity alone." The novelist Rose Young, a member of Heterodoxy and a speaker at the first Cooper Union meeting, put it more simply. "To me," she said, "feminism means that woman . . . wants to be an individual."[48]

The pursuit of individualism had many consequences, some small and symbolic, some far more sweeping. To emphasize their individuality and independence, a number of married feminists used their maiden names, rather than take their husbands' surnames. More fundamentally, feminists rejected the implicit sexual settlement at the core of the women's movement and progressivism. Unlike Jane Addams and many other activist women of her generation, the feminists were unwilling to give up marriage and children in order to have careers outside the home. Neighbors and observers of

the Hull-House neighborhood had often thought of the childless, unmarried Addams as a self-denying saint or a nun. "Feminists are not nuns," Crystal Eastman maintained. "We want to love and to be loved, and most of us want children, one or two at least." But Eastman and the feminists still wanted careers as well. "[A] braver, grimmer, and more fanatical generation . . . behind us . . . had to make the famous choice between 'marriage and a career,'" Lillian Symes explained. "We were determined to have both, to try for everything life would offer of love, happiness, and freedom—just like men."[49]

That determination—to be "just like men," to have it all—considerably raised the stakes in the struggle between men and women. It was nothing new for middle-class women to demand a role outside the home. The feminists added little to the women's movement's call for access to the workplace and the voting booth. But they broke fresh ground by insisting on women's right to pleasure and satisfaction in all phases of life, from the most public to the most intimate. Symes, Eastman, Cooley, and the rest wanted nothing less than to recast the whole relationship between men and women. As a reporter concluded, the feminists required "a complete social revolution."[50]

Like Margaret Sanger's philosophy of "sex-expression," the related feminist vision of a new relationship between men and women was difficult to achieve. The vast majority of women did not have the money necessary for independence and equality. The new world of commercial amusements, however liberating otherwise, did not change that fact. In the 1910s, young working-class women could get away from home and parents at dance halls, vaudeville, and picture shows, but they still depended on men to pay for these pleasures. Unlike the male saloon patrons who treated one another, most of these women could not reciprocate financially with male dates. Instead, they found themselves pressed for sexual favors. In the sexualized realm of commercial amusements, a young woman had to be "game" and "lively"—just the sort of new exploitation that Charlotte Perkins Gilman feared.[51]

Even feminists, with the protection of middle-class codes of conduct and often with the security of their own income, found it difficult to recast their relations with men. Marriage inevitably raised the suspicion that a woman had given up her independence. When Mabel Dodge at last married Maurice Sterne, she bitterly disappointed a woman friend. "[Y]ou had the nerve

to live your own life openly and frankly—to take a lover if you wished, without hiding under the law," the friend said accusingly. "You have shown women they had the *right* to live as they chose to live and that they do not lose respect by assuming that right. But *now!* When I think of the *disappointment* in the whole woman's world today!"[52]

If other women's expectations were not enough of a burden, heterosexual feminists also had to deal with men. The feminists attracted a circle of male supporters—writers and activists eager to join in the redefinition of gender relations. Max Eastman, along with fellow writers Hutchins Hapgood and Floyd Dell, enthusiastically subscribed to feminist ideas and even produced some of the key feminist texts of the day. These male feminists saw women's liberation and equality not only as a matter of justice but also as a means of emancipating men themselves. When women no longer depended on them, Dell observed in 1914, men would be truly free. Along with such sympathetic writers as Sherwood Anderson and David Graham Phillips, Dell, Eastman, and Hapgood yearned for the "new woman," independent and exciting, who would galvanize their lives.[53]

Nevertheless, it was hard for these men, however willing, to abandon the acquired habits of masculine privilege. They were not eager to share cooking, cleaning, and the other chores of homemaking. To their surprise, they were not always so eager for the assertive feminist woman, successful at work and demanding in bed. "Most women simply frighten me," Anderson admitted privately in 1916. "I feel hunger within them. It is as though they wished to feed upon me." And male feminists found themselves jealous of women's freedom. Hutchins Hapgood, chronically unfaithful to his wife Neith Boyce, could not handle the prospect of her infidelity or, worse, her creation of a life apart from him. "[W]hether egotistically or not, I *want* all *essentially* that there is of Neith," he confided to a friend in 1909. Phillips wrote longingly about the ideal new woman in his best-selling novels, but he never married one. Instead, he lived in a Manhattan apartment with his sister, who patiently took care of his dress and diet. As Floyd Dell presciently observed in 1914, "Men want the sense of power more than they want the sense of freedom."[54]

Feminists were troubled to discover how much the new feminist man was like the old Victorian man. The celebration of sex and pleasure did not make Hutchins Hapgood's repeated affairs any less hurtful for Neith Boyce.

"[I]n a way I hate your interest in sex, because I suffered from it," she wrote him after first discovering his infidelities. "I assure you that I can never think of your physical passion for other women without pain—even though my reason doesn't find fault with you. . . . The whole thing is sad and terrible. . . ." Years later, Hapgood still insisted on the "healthy vigor and moral idealism" in the attempt to remake the relations between men and women. But, rather worn out by it all, he allowed, too, that feminism had become "a perverse philosophy."[55]

This "perverse philosophy" had a wide impact in the 1910s. "[I]t is no longer possible to ignore [feminism]," announced *Century* magazine in 1914. "I am in effect a feministe," declared Theda Bara (or her press agent). Embodying the feminist ideal, the new stereotype of the flapper girl—slim, fashionable, and fun-loving in her flapping galoshes—displaced the Gibson Girl as the middle-class standard of feminine beauty. Actually, there were few avowed feminists. But feminism commanded a great deal of attention, partly because it was shocking and different, and partly because it was so familiar, too. Radical as it was, feminism had deep roots in the broad cultural reconsideration of women. "The germ is in the blood of our women," *Century* observed. "The doctrine and its corollaries are on every tongue." The feminists had essentially elaborated the antiprogressive logic that was implicit in the changing view of women's nature. They had articulated the movie theaters' and amusement parks' tacit acknowledgment of female individuality and pleasure. *Century* understood that the handful of feminist activists were not the whole story. "Let us study the Revolt of the Women," the magazine suggested, "not in the souls of the volatile few, but of the earnest millions of wives and mothers and workers who are thinking silently in their homes." And, *Century* might have added, who were flocking happily to dance halls, amusement parks, and movie theaters.[56]