“Roast Flapper”:

The Attack of the Popular Media on the New Woman of the 1920’s

Jackie Geary

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An advertisement of the 1920's, proclaiming the wonders of a particular beauty aid, offered the new women of the day the following reminder: "Being a woman means more today than ever before. She wants more and she gets more. But she has to put more into the job.[1]" This bit of wisdom offers much insight into the lot of the flapper, who invested untold hours in the binding of her breasts, the bobbing of her hair, and the slimming of her waist; the result was the simultaneous emulation of both her younger sister and the opposite sex. While both such figures are seemingly at odds with one another, either interpretation of the flapper's new look could be perceived as a threat to gendered spheres; many believed that masculinity, along with the power it entailed, was in grave danger. This view was reflected in the popular media, as male journalists, struggling with these new interpretations of womanhood, mocked the flapper and her convictions. Their attempt, be it conscious or unconscious, was to remove some of the flapper's newfound power, thus reasserting traditional gender roles.

A young student, looking back on previous generations from the vantage point of the 1920's, expressed her joy in the fact that she could "think and act, perceive and execute, reason and react in a thousand different ways that my grandmother and even my mother never could."[2] This was by no means an exaggeration; the woman of the early twentieth century had undergone quite a transformation during the period following the war, a transformation so complete she was hardly recognizable. Kenneth A. Yellis, in "Prosperity's Child: Some Thoughts on the Flapper," offers a comparison between the flapper and the Gibson girl of her mother's generation. These

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[1] Mary P. Ryan, *Womanhood in America (New* York: New Viewpoints, 1973,299.
[2] John C. Spurlock and Cynthia A. Magistro, New *and Improved (New* York: New York University Press, 1998), 21.

two icons were polar opposites in both thought and deed; Yellis describes the Gibson girl as "wifely," "modest," and "stable," while her post-WWI counterpart is "brazen," "single," and "capable of sin." He ultimately concludes that the Gibson girl, with her large bust, wide hips, concealed legs, and long hair, was the "utter antithesis" of the new woman of the 1920's.[3]

A mere glance at the flapper could have easily proven the above point. Having rid herself of any previously "feminine" curves, she chose to paint her face and chop both her hemline and her hair; such acts were not only seen as revolutionary, but as distinctly sexual. The sensuality of the Gibson girl's flowing locks had been confined to the privacy of her own home; pinned up during the course of the day, her hair was seen only at night, by the eyes of her husband. Bobbed hair, always down, could not be tamed in such a fashion. The flapper's hair was worn freely, and was thus attacked as a promiscuous affront to domesticity.[4] The clothing that accompanied such a hairstyle, considered equally appalling, did not help matters much. For starters, there wasn't much of it; the petticoat, along with the garter, waist, and corset, were tossed aside in favor of the short skirt and pair of sheer silk stockings -- both of which often showed quite a bit of the new woman's leg. Yet it was her face that was perhaps the most shocking of all; much of the general population directly associated cosmetics with prostitution.[5] Lipstick, rouge, and powder, combined with shortened skirts, bobbed hairdos, and "loose" morals, resulted in a complete upheaval of traditional notions of femininity.

Maintaining such a scandalous appearance was not an easy task. It not only necessitated keeping abreast of the latest fashions and hairstyles, but the self-infliction of physical harm.

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[3] Kenneth A. Yellis, "Prosperity's Child: Some Thoughts on the Flapper," *American Quarterly,* 21 (1969): 44.
[4] Paula Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful (New* York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 280.

Margaret A. Lowe, in an article examining the strict dieting that emerged on the Smith College campus during the 1920's, argues that women seriously endangered their health in an attempt to emulate the pencil-thin flapper.[6] Thinness, however, unlike clothing, cosmetics, and cropped hair, did not create a sexual sensation; it was associated with a "boyish," masculine look. Why the contradiction? Mary Louise Roberts, in Civilization Without Sexes, posits that women went to such lengths not simply to imitate the latest fashion model or movie star, but in pursuit of the privilege a slim figure had to offer. Roberts argues that the flapper was empowered by the "mannish" clothing she wore, since she had come to equate such a fashion with the superior position of men.[7] Feminist Maria Verone goes so far as to suggest that this look "encouraged behaviors analogous to the visual image produced.“* Thus Roberts concludes that the flapper took on the image of her oppressor in an attempt to climb to his heights, going to such painful lengths to become, quite simply, more powerful.[9]

In accordance with this view, Ellie Laubner's Fashions of the Roaring; Twenties refers to the flapper's flat-chested look as "'garconne' or boyish," stating that such a look reflected a desire to "compete with men in many aspects of their lives.?“ Doreen Yarwood similarly states that flappers concealed "the attributes given to them by nature" in order to "emulate masculinity."[11] Like Roberts, Valerie Steele takes this line of thinking a step further, noting the

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[5] Ibid., 282-4.
[6] Margaret A. Lowe, "From Robust Appetites to Calorie Counting," *Journal of Women's History*, 7 (1995): 47.
[7] Roberts, 78.
[8] Roberts, 81.
[9] Roberts, 84.
[10] Ellie Laubner, *Fashions of the Roaring Twenties* (Atglen P.A.: Schiffer Publishing, 1996), 9.
[11] Doreen Yarwood, *Fashion in the Western World (New* York: Drama Book Publishers, 1992), 137.

view that the flapper's new fashions were only the "external manifestation" of more profound inner beliefs.‘*

An article entitled "Flapping Not Repented Of," which appeared in *The New York Times* on July 16, 1922, points to some such beliefs. The author, an ex-flapper saying "a word in her behalf," states that "a flapper is proud of her nerve ... she is shameless, selfless, and honest, but at the same time she considers these three attributes virtues." The flapper will, "if she wants you badly enough," openly "work for you with the same fresh and vigorous air that you would work to win her." A flapper "will never make you a hat band or knit you a necktie ...but she'll go skiing with you, or, if it happens to be summertime, swimming.“" Yet the flapper did not feel the need to confine herself to wholesome outdoor activities; her bold approach to courtship was known to continue well past the initial stages of flirting. She was notorious for her attendance at "petting parties" – gatherings at which the flapper proceeded to demonstrate to a young man just how interested she really was. Eleanor Rowland Wembridge, in a 1925 Survey piece entitled "Petting and the Campus," notes that it was not merely the fear of appearing "priggish" that prompted girls to pet, but the simple fact that they enjoyed it. One young woman commented that "it's terribly exciting. We get such a thrill ... I think it is natural, so why not do what is natural?" For another, this "want" was so strong that if she went only a few nights without a date she would almost "go crazy."[14] Decidedly masculine, such an attitude was quite a departure from Victorian notions of femininity and sexuality, to say the least.

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[12] Valerie Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism (New* York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 237.
[13] George E. Mowry, ed., The *Twenties: Fords, Flappers and Fanatics* (Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 174.
[14] Mowry, 176.

Although in agreement concerning the revolutionary nature of the flapper's new attitudes, many experts clash with respect to the spirit of her aforementioned physical appearance. Valerie Steele argues that the ideal was not boyish, as Roberts and Yarwood suggest, but *"youthful"* -- "girlish immaturity," she states, carried the day.[15] Alison Lurie similarly notes that women "did not look like men, but rather like children."[16] The openly sexual flapper who adopted masculinity was clearly a dangerous individual; she who resembled the female child would appear to be less threatening. She was not. A certain psychoanalyst, one who had recently been making a substantial impact on the American consciousness, perhaps best articulates this fact. Sigmund Freud, in "New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis," stated quite simply that "the little girl is a little man."[17] Similarly, in "Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex," he declared that the little girl's sexuality "has altogether a male character."" A wave of repression during puberty is needed for the girl to discard this "masculine sexuality" and "emerge" as a woman;" flappers, then, would apparently have failed to make such a transition.

As the above illustrates, the flapper -- be she boyish or childish -- proved quite a threat. Roberts, in a compelling discussion of the post-war French male mindset, argues that this sexually ambiguous creature wreaked havoc on French society, resulting in everything from lawsuits against hairdressers to the dissolution of families.[20] Yet these often violent reactions to the new woman's attire and/or hairstyle were not, in Roberts' opinion, simply due to their

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[15] Steele, 239-40.
[16] Alison Lurie, *The Language of Clothes* (London: Butler and Tanner, 1992), 74.
[17] Sigmund Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1966), 118.
[18] Sigmund Freud, "Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex," in *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud,* ed. Dr. A. A. Brill (New York: Random House, 1938), 612.
[19] Freud, *The Complete. .., 217.*

“novelty:’ -- the fact that the look was such a drastic departure from that of the Gibson girl of years past. Something else propelled the obsession. The radical feminist Henriette Sauret is quoted as poking fun at the male journalists of the time, whom, though confronted with news items such as the end of the war and the “threat” of Bolshevism, still devoted “a good third of their daily remarks” to the flapper’s bobbed hair.[21]

Yellis offers insight into the driving force behind such an obsession. Citing women’s entrance into the worlds of both business and the comer saloon, he discusses the shock inherent in the shift from Victorian notions of womanhood to that of the smoking, drinking, sexually assertive flapper. According to Yellis, both her actions as well as her attire were “seen as a sexual assault, and it was obvious to the men that they were its objects."[22] A 1924 cartoon by Max Beerbohm, entitled “The Insurgence of Youth,”[23] serves to best illustrate the pressing nature of the threat; just one glance perfectly articulates the crisis of masculinity and its disastrous effect on men. The animated flapper, with her boyish torso, masculine body language and bobbed haircut, has forced her companion to squeeze effeminately onto the comer of the couch as she assumes the dominant role. Their dialogue indicates that she is not only in command physically, but intellectually as well -having the “nerve” to use whatever expletives she pleases.

Bruce Bliven’s interview with “Jane,” a nineteen-year-old flapper, appeared in *The New Republic* on September 9, 1925.[24] Bliven, like Beerbohm, also serves to articulate the nature of

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[20] Roberts, 63-4.
[21] Roberts, 65.
[22] Kenneth A. Yellis, “Prosperity’s Child: Some Thoughts on the Flapper,” *American Quarterly 21 (1969): 48.*
[23] Sharon Romm, *The Changing Face of Beauty* (St. Louis: Mosey Year Book, 1992).
[24] Bruce Bliven, “Flapper Jane,” n.d., <http://www.pandorasbox.com/jane.htm> (1 October 1999).

the flapper's threat; he does so, however, in quite a different manner. Bliven devotes nearly four-fifths of the piece – all but a single paragraph of his own commentary – not to Jane's thoughts, but to her appearance. He is apparently fascinated by the way in which she and her fellow new women *look,* rather than how they think and feel. This attitude manifests itself in a tone that is at best condescending, and at worst somewhat mocking. His sole question for her concerns her attire; it is Jane, at age 19, who volunteers information on more relevant topics, such as the new woman's perspective on the home, family, and her rights; after which Bliven promptly returns to the subject of feminine apparel. He closes the piece with a sort of chuckle in his literary voice – stating what women "intend" and what they are "highly resolved" to do, as if he and the fellow members of his gender are standing on the "sidelines" thoroughly amused, if not aroused.

A piece which appeared as early as September 1, 1919 in the Daily *Express* was possessed of quite a similar tone. It is, oddly enough, a recipe. Entitled "Roast Flappers," it is as follows:

> I love a daintily dressed flapper. There's no better company at dinner. I love her more if she is tender and wild . . . If you can and do roast them, there's a sauce: flappers love to be discreetly sauced ... Slowly half bake your dicky bird in pan with plenty of butter, to prevent the poor dear from becoming dry ... Put it into a not too fast -- nice flappers do not like anything too fast -- oven for about three quarters of an hour.[25]

Mary Roberts, in an examination of media representations of the flapper in post-war France, comments that "above all," commentary such as the above was meant to "be funny."[26] This may well be true; the dynamics, however, are unfortunately not all that simple. In poking fun at the

[25] Billie Melman, *Women and the Popular Imagination in the Twenties (New* York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 29.
[26] Roberts, 70.

flapper, both of the above journalists can be likened to the neighborhood bully; they weaken their target in the process. As evidenced by the crisis at hand, this result was no doubt desirable. Tones such as those employed above were clearly destructive, chipping away at the respect the new woman had been fighting so hard to gain.

A return to the psychological serves to shed further light on both the motivation for such an attitude and it's ultimate effects. As illustrated earlier, the flapper was, in many respects, childlike. Wilhelm Stekel, in Patterns of Psychosexual Infantilism, describes infantile individuals as being – without exception – "passive sexual partners" who are "frigid and limp" during intercourse, "as though they were paralyzed." Stekel also notes that the infantile, like a baby "in the arms of a nurse," ultimately wants protection and thrives off a feeling of "inferiority."[27] Such an individual would seem the antithesis of the flapper; as illustrated above, the new woman was more in command of the sexual than ever before. The flapper, then, was a contradiction in terms; though "infantile," her sexuality was by no means repressed. Such a fact was problematic not only on its face, with respect to a break with popular notions of femininity, but on a deeper level. Freud's analysis of the infantile and her effects on the male is as follows:

> The reinforcements of the sexual inhibitions produced in the woman by the repression of puberty produces a stimulus in the libido of the man and forces him to increase his activities. With the height of the libido there occurs a rise in the overestimation of the sexual object, which attains its full force only in that woman who hesitates and denies her sexuality.[28]

[27] Wilhelm Stekel, *Patterns of Psychosexual Infantilism (New* York: Limelight Publishing, 1952), 86.
[28] Sigmund Freud, "Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex," in *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud,* ed. Dr. A. A. Brill (New York: Random House, 1938), 613.

In other words, the “normal” infantile, if properly frigid, increases the virility of the opposite sex – the more the female represses sexual desire, the more aggressively masculine her partner. In a time of crisis concerning gender roles, such as that the flapper’s very being had brought about, the desire for such an effect is all the more heightened.

To ridicule is an attempt to disempower a target; an object of ridicule cannot dominate, sexually or otherwise. Following the Freudian analysis, if masculinity increases as female sexuality decreases, only by mocking the flapper can the above authors reclaim the libido she displaced. The decidedly sexual tone of both “Flapper Jane” and “Roast Flappers” attest to the success of this approach. Making fun of the flapper thus returns both sexes to their previous states: the male to the role of the masculine aggressor, and the ridiculed flapper to the weakened position once occupied by the passive, modest Gibson girl.

The flapper of the 1920's, through the employment of the masculine, entered the realm of the verbal, physical, and sexual – domains previously occupied solely by men. Many such men, as evidenced by “He” and “She” in Max Beerbohm’s “The Insurgence of Youth,” felt seriously threatened by such an affront to traditional gender roles. Mocked by the masculine voice of the media, the flapper, once dominant, is disempowered to such an extent that she is hardly recognizable – stripped of her “masculine” qualities, she ceases to be quite so dangerous; she becomes, rather, a tool with which to assert male virility. Male fears, relayed through the media, were thus teasingly expressed, and the gender crisis brought about by the flapper was somewhat relieved.

Develop further - relating more fully to Bliven, Beerbohm + "Roast Flappers"

Jackie - Your essay gets better + better. All that I miss here is a fuller wrapping up of your very interesting resolution of the boyish/sexualized girl debate. Your use of Freud is excellent, as is your analysis of humor's meaning. Great job. [illegible]

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