

Modern Women on Trial: Sexual Transgression in the Age of the Flapper

Review Number:

1554

Publish date:

Thursday, 27 February, 2014

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ISBN:

9780719082634

Date of Publication:

2013

Price:

£70.00

Pages:

272pp.

Publisher:

Manchester University Press

Publisher url:

<http://www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk/cgi-bin/indexer?product=9780719082634>

Place of Publication:

Manchester

Reviewer:

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In London between 1918 and 1924, the social, economic, and – crucially – sexual freedoms of six young women became the conceptual battleground on which the outcomes of a series of high-profile criminal and civil trials for libel, murder, drug-taking, and divorce were determined. I say ‘conceptual’ because, as Lucy Bland persuasively demonstrates in her new book *Modern Women on Trial*, it was the exaggerated, eroticized, and sometimes entirely fabricated imaginings of these women’s apparently transgressive sexual behaviour rather than substantive evidence of their actions that dictated both their representation in the press and the manner in which they were examined and judged in the courtroom. Bland uses these trials to expose how young women’s agency in expressing or exploring their sexuality and choosing sexual partners was challenged by contemporary commentators, who viewed with growing consternation the ‘liberating’, emasculating effects of women’s wartime experiences employed in jobs left vacant by absent soldiers, and of their partial enfranchisement in 1918. She thereby highlights broader anxieties circulating in Britain during the early 1920s about the nature of modernity: centring on the potential for a greater number of relationships crossing traditional boundaries of class, race, and (in relation to allegations of lesbianism) gender; on the extent to which men’s social and political power rested on their increasingly tenuous monopoly of sexual knowledge, at a time when many young men had returned from the war emotionally and physically scarred and facing high unemployment that imperilled their role as breadwinner; and on the future of Britain’s perceived national and international strength in the face of these destabilizing factors.

Bland's writing certainly displays here the same elegant interweaving of narrative and analysis, as well as the flair for recognising a good dramatic story, that made her first single-authored book *Banishing the Beast: English Feminism and Sexual Morality 1885–1914* (1) so readable. The book is organised into five core chapters that are each orientated around a particular case/type of sexual transgression. The chapter titles alone give a flavour of the incredulity and sensationalism that greeted new insights into women's sexuality, and revelations both biological and psychological. For example, chapter one, entitled 'The case of the "Cult of the Clitoris": treachery, patriotism and English womanhood', deals with the 1918 libel trial in which the famous dancer of the exotic 'Vision of Salome', Maud Allan, sought unsuccessfully to refute her alleged lesbian relationships after admitting to understanding that the term 'Cult of the Clitoris' served as a euphemism for female homosexuality. More than this, her apparent knowledge of the anatomy of female genitalia and its functions was taken as further evidence of 'deviant' sexual practices, despite the recent popularity of Marie Stopes' middle-class marriage manual, *Married Love*, which explained in detail women's anatomy and propounded the importance of mutual sexual pleasure between couples (p. 26). Putting the case into the context of politicised fears over the nature of Allan's influential friendship with the Prime Minister's wife, Margaret Asquith, and suggestions that both women were German sympathisers, Bland nonetheless suggests that it was the spectacle of two women confidently using their sexuality and intelligence to achieve employment and status in the upper ranks of society that ultimately lost Allan the case. This is a theme that recurs in chapter three, examining the trial and execution of successful 28-year-old businesswoman Edith Thompson for the murder of her husband, in collusion with her 19-year-old lover Freddie Bywaters, in 1923; the case was subsequently considered a gross miscarriage of justice. Again, argues Bland, it was Thompson's independent material prosperity (manifested in court by her fashionable dress sense and by her using the opportunity to act as a mannequin for the hats she sold, consciously modelling a new one at each appearance), as well as her passionate affair with Bywaters in the face of a monotonous, childless marriage to a man widely considered her inferior in character and achievements (in sum, her 'modernity') that condemned her. With multiple witnesses attesting to the fact that Thompson played no physical part in the fatal stabbing of her husband, press and officials colluded to represent Thompson as the architect of the crime by her subversion of her class background, disregard for traditional wifely duty, seduction of Bywaters, and lively imagining of what her life could be if her husband died in letters to her lover.

In contrast, chapters two and four explore how the modern urban phenomena of nightclubs, cosmopolitanism, and interracial relationships were blamed for creating the cultural conditions that led young women to ruin. Thus the former chapter analyses how the inquests into the cocaine-related deaths of Billie Carleton (1918) and Freda Kempton (1922) were conducted, showing the emphasis placed respectively on Carleton and Kempton's association with members of the Chinese community in London's East and West Ends, and how this was informed by 'orientalised' characterisations of Chinese men as drug-dealing seducers of young white women in fiction, cinema, and the press. It is in this chapter that Bland introduces us to the contemporary trope of the 'butterfly woman' (p. 56); 'like the "flapper", of which she was a sub-species', the butterfly woman was viewed as 'flighty' and irresponsible, yet her culpability for her actions was viewed as lesser than that of the wilful flapper because it was attributed to her naïve enchantment with the city's dazzling night life and unwitting susceptibility to bad influences. Effectively offering young women a useful stereotype to appropriate, or appeal to, when seeking to excuse their sometimes criminal activities in court, the idea of the 'butterfly woman' also undermined claims that women were suitable subjects for the same rights of citizenship, education and employment opportunities as men, at a time when those under the age of 30 were not yet enfranchised. The two-pronged nature of this version of womanhood is exemplified in the acquittal of Frenchwoman Madame Fahmy for shooting to death her wealthy Egyptian husband in a London hotel in 1923, which Bland discusses in chapter four. Unlike the case of Edith Thompson, the trial of Madame Fahmy heard overwhelming evidence to the effect that she was guilty of the crime in every respect, but the defence managed successfully to cast her as a 'butterfly woman' forced to defend herself violently against the sexually-sadistic foreign man who had 'ensnared' her. Finally, chapter five returns to considering the alignment of greater sexual knowledge with the emergence of a 'dangerously' independent modern woman, demonstrating how this was challenged by the 1922 divorce case

of Christabel Russell, vivacious wife of the second Lord Amphil, who had given birth to a son despite believing she was still a virgin. In this instance, the sexual ignorance of the couple at the heart of the scandal contributed to making the courtroom examination an exercise in explaining the mysteries of conception, forcing officials to exert censorship over press reportage of the case while confronted by the apparent innocence of a nightclub-frequenting woman who had capably overseen 2,000 munitions workers at Woolwich Arsenal during the war.

The book's subject-matter and set of analytical foci do feel slightly over-familiar. As Bland herself acknowledges throughout, several of the cases she studies here – particularly those of Billie Carleton and Freda Kempton, as well as Edith Thompson – have been the focus of works by historians including Marek Kohn and Matt Houlbrook, both of whom have drawn attention to the relationship between press coverage of the trials and the articulation of broader fears over young women's new attitudes, aspirations, and experiences following the Great War.⁽²⁾ An additional concluding section following the core five chapters entitled 'Afterlives', in which Bland charts the later lives of the women featured in the trials she examines (or, in the case of those who died such as Thompson, Carleton and Kempton, how they were remembered in subsequent decades), does not historicise their later 'lives' in any detail. One feels an opportunity may have been lost here to think about the cultural currency of the term 'flapper' in changing historical contexts. Similarly, although the idea of the 'butterfly woman' offers a fresh nuance to the existing scholarship on how women's agency was curtailed by the rise of a middle-class conservative discourse promoting domesticity over independence during the 1920s, this book offers no significant departure from previous accounts of the expectations placed on young women in this period highlighted by scholars such as Alison Light, Marcus Collins, or Susan Kingsley Kent.⁽³⁾

Indeed, Bland's claim in the introduction that *Modern Women on Trial* breaks new ground by foregrounding explicitly negative portrayals of 'modern' women in the interwar press alongside those viewed either as ambiguous or more positive is in many ways underdeveloped (p. 7). First, this is because Bland does not build upon studies like those by historians Judith Knelman and Elizabeth Carolyn Miller analysing how criminal or 'deviant' women were represented in the Victorian and Edwardian press, fiction and theatre, and on film.⁽⁴⁾ Miller's excellent work especially anticipates many, if not most, of the points Bland makes for the later period, albeit prior to the impact of the war. It would be fascinating to learn more about how press portrayals of young women's lives, and particularly their sexual behaviours, had evolved from those ideas circulating before the war. Second, it is disappointing to see that in a book which asserts the key role of more sophisticated newspaper photography in providing unprecedented visual illustration of the stereotypical versions of young women's behaviour generated by journalists, there is no attempt to analyse those press images that figure in the book beyond noting the clothes the women were photographed wearing. Bland's work therefore does not shed any new light on the visual culture of the inter-war press and the active relationship between text and image. Nor does it suggest how photography as a medium may have evolved in response to the need to capture new gendered forms of physical attitude and dress, as older types of staged photography gave way to the more relaxed interaction with the camera that marked its becoming a commonplace technology.

Modern Women on Trial provides an engaging and lucid survey of attitudes towards women and sexuality in 1920s Britain, and certainly draws upon extensive primary research in the form of press reports, trial transcripts, official papers, fiction, and memoirs. It is intriguing to note that several of the autobiographies that Bland refers to in chapter two for recollections of drug-taking, or its policing, were published during the 1950s, and it would have been interesting had these been used to analyse how cultural perspectives on 1920s night-club culture were altered by the lens of historical distance. However, methodologically the book does not seek to offer a new framework for understanding histories of sexuality, which again limits its claims to originality in contrast with recent books on the same era and field by Angus McLaren and Laura Doan, published in 2012 and 2013 respectively.⁽⁵⁾ *Modern Women on Trial* will therefore be a highly useful text for readers wishing to understand how the historiography on women's sexuality in interwar Britain has progressed during the last two decades, while serving to nuance, rather than dramatically revise, that scholarship.

Notes

1. Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: English Feminism and Sexual Morality 1885–1914* (London, 1995; 2nd edition, 2002)[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Marek Kohn, *Dope Girls: the Birth of the British Drug Underground* (London, 1992); Matt Houlbrook, 'A pin to see the peepshow: culture, fiction, and selfhood in Edith Thompson's letters, 1921–22,' *Past and Present*, 207, 1 (2010), 215–49.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature, and Conservatism between the Wars* (London, 1991); Susan Kingsley Kent, *Aftershocks: Politics and Trauma in Britain, 1918–1931* (Basingstoke, 2008); Marcus Collins, *Modern Love: An Intimate History of Men and Women in Britain, 1900–2000* (London, 2003).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Judith Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind: The Murderess and the English Press* (Toronto, 1998); Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, *Framed: the New Woman Criminal in British Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2008).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Angus McLaren, *Reproduction by Design: Sex, Robots, and Test-Tube Babies in Interwar Britain* (Chicago, IL, 2012); Laura Doan, *Disturbing Practices: History, Sexuality, and Women's Experience of Modern War* (Chicago, IL, 2013).[Back to \(5\)](#)

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[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/76903>