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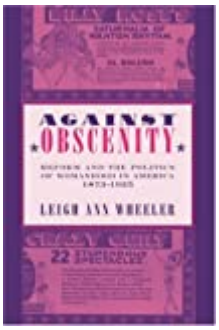

Leigh Ann Wheeler. *Against Obscenity: Reform and the Politics of Womanhood in America, 1873-1935.* Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004. xiii + 251 pp. $44.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-7802-2.

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Published on H-SHGAPE (December, 2006)

Contending with Indecency in the Early Twentieth Century

Historians have written so well about women's social reform activism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that it is possible, despite the efforts of J. Stanley Lemons, Nancy Cott, and others, to ignore or forget or minimize the fact that their work continued into the decades after suffrage was won. So it is good to see a book that shines a light on that period, and does so in the somewhat unlikely guise of a campaign against obscenity. Leigh Ann Wheeler has uncovered a fascinating chapter in the story of women's perennial attempts to protect children and vulnerable young women from the dangers of commercial vice. Her study considers several of these dangers, such as prostitution and burlesque shows, but focuses above all on the new medium of film. Long before Will Hays and the Hays Code tried to institute some measure of censorship from within the movie industry itself, activist women organized against salacious films, fearing their effects on impressionable youth. Once accustomed to films that played to their prurient impulses, young people, especially young men, would be ruined for healthy sexual lives as adults.

Wheeler's narrative centers on Minneapolis, and on the imposing figure of Catheryne Cooke Gilman, who moved to that city from the East with her settlement house director husband Robbins Gilman in 1915. Determined to combat obscenity in that city Gilman helped found the Women's Cooperative Alliance, under the banner of the common motherhood of women. "Motherhood is common to all women," she claimed. "It is our one common bond" (pp. 49-50). This view at once called on all women, regardless of race, class, or ethnicity, to combat vice, and at the same time justified women's sometimes contested concern with sexual material on the grounds of their right, as mothers, to protect children.

Gilman's energy must have been prodigious, as she rose to national prominence in the motion picture reform movement. Traveling frequently, giving speech after speech, she helped create the Federal Motion Picture Council to lobby for federal motion picture regulation. She was at pains to distinguish her views on regulation from censorship. Defining censorship as changes or deletions imposed on a work after production, but not as restraints imposed in the course of production, she insisted that censorship was undemocratic and in any case did

not work. What was needed was the input of concerned adults to make it clear to movie producers that decent Americans demanded decent films and would seek regulation, though not censorship, to get them.

If this book had an audible soundtrack, it would be the sound of organized womanhood shattering. It is one of the great strengths of this book that it demonstrates in detail the fallacy of assuming a single womanhood under which all women could rally. In Minneapolis, for example, it turned out that some women enjoyed burlesque shows, did not see them as a danger to youth, and resented efforts to shut them down. On the national level, women like Gilman, committed to holding the film industry's feet to the fire, battled with women like Alice Ames Winter, who believed that movie producers could be trusted to regulate themselves.

Additional complexities arose in what might once have seemed like a simple crusade when working-class men in Minneapolis protested that reform women were actually supported by wealthy business men who were underpaying their employees, and that shutting down places of amusement like burlesque theaters meant throwing men out of work. And the issue of censorship could not be put to rest, particularly when Gilman and the Women's Cooperative Alliance tried to walk the fine line between demonizing commercial exploitation of sexuality while putting out sexually explicit materials to provide young people with what they saw as much-needed education in wholesome sexuality. The American Civil Liberties Union simply refused to accept this distinction, arguing that the right of free speech was as real in commercial entertainment as it was in sex education. Time after time in Wheeler's story former allies turn into bitter enemies, and solid coalitions dissolve. In the end, she concludes, female moral reform foundered on the rocks of dissension and male organizations like the Catholic Legion of Decency crowded out the women.

One reservation that might be raised about this intriguing and deeply researched study is that, despite opening out on the national scene in the section on motion picture reform, it remains otherwise centered in Minneapolis. The reader may assume that similar stories could be told of other locations, like New York or San Francisco, but it is not possible to know whether this is the case, or whether Minneapolis was unusual in its anti-obscenity fervor. Certainly it seems to have generated perhaps the two most important female leaders in the movement. It would also have been interesting to learn whether similar campaigns were carried out to clean up magazines and books. Magazines like *True Confessions* often carried titillating fiction and were widely available.

There are lessons to be learned from this episode, but the author does not believe that a subsequent generation has learned them. She writes that her original inspiration for this topic was the feminist sex wars of the 1970s and 1980s, when women battled over pornography. The sight of women so vehemently and even viciously at odds with one another reminds us of what Catheryne Gilman failed to appreciate, that women come in all kinds of guises and that they have conflicting interests. It might also teach us, Wheeler suggests in evaluating Gilman's achievements, that rivalry is not treachery, that difference of opinion is not betrayal, and that women who challenge women are not traitors to women's cause.