



# **Sex Seen: The Emergence of Modern Sexuality in America**

*Sharon R. Ullman*

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## **Sex Seen: The Emergence of Modern Sexuality in America** Sharon R. Ullman

*Sex Seen* provides a complex and intriguing account of the changes that have taken place in the social construction of sexuality during the past century. Focusing on Sacramento, California, at the dawn of the twentieth century, Sharon Ullman juxtaposes early cinema, vaudeville performances, and popular newspapers and magazines with insights drawn from close interpretations of transcripts from Sacramento court cases. She demonstrates how attitudes that emerged in the popular discourse—ideas about gender roles, female desire, prostitution, divorce, and homosexuality—often found complex and contradictory expression in the courts. As judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, and juries all weighed in with differing opinions, the courtroom itself became a site of multiple discourses that attempted to make sense of a growing sexual chaos. In tracing the birth of modern sexuality, Ullman chronicles the dynamics of social change during a unique cultural moment and explains the shifts in the sexual ethos of turn-of-the-century America.

Instead of telling the familiar story of steadily increasing liberation of sexual urges, Ullman chronicles the complex confusions and negotiations of an increasingly public sexual discourse. She relates how laws against cross-dressing gained force at the same time that female impersonation became popular in vaudeville acts, how images of prostitutes were changed by the commercialization of the female body in advertising and film, and how visible expression of female desire was submerged in rape and divorce proceedings.

Ullman blends social history, textual analysis, and film and performance criticism to explain how sexuality and desire became an essential part of personal identity in this century. Her keen, accessible account of a community on the brink of the modern era offers a provocative interpretation of the seeds of our sexual present.

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