

homa's unique confluence of agricultural crisis, politicized dirt farmers, Marxism, and the social gospel. In Iowa, that period was the "golden age" of agriculture. Iowa's fledgling socialism, based in its mining camps and river towns, fell victim to the xenophobia and red baiting that destroyed the Socialist Party elsewhere. Like Oklahomans in the 1910s, Iowa farmers responded to agricultural depression in the 1920s and '30s in ways conditioned by Iowa history—working with Iowa farm groups and the Farm Bloc to seek remedies. Even in the 1930s, when some Iowa farmers joined a radical movement, it was a group of their own creation led by Iowan Milo Reno. As Bissett implicitly reminds us, every state has its own stories to tell.

*Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville*, by M. Alison Kibler. Gender and American Culture Series. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999. xiv, 283 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 cloth, \$16.95 paper.

Reviewer Laural Weintraub is affiliated with The New-York Historical Society. Her dissertation was "Fine Art and Popular Entertainment: The Emerging Dialogue between 'High' and 'Low' in American Art of the Early Twentieth Century" (City University of New York, 1996).

In her rousing introduction to *Rank Ladies*, M. Alison Kibler describes the appearance of French singing star Yvette Guilbert at B. F. Keith's vaudeville theater in Philadelphia on November 15, 1909. Guilbert, a sophisticated "artiste," was expected to enhance the respectability of the show. Unfortunately, the audience resisted her elevating influence and chose instead to honor a slapstick comedian with their greatest approbation. Kibler uses this example to illustrate the contest between taste factions in vaudeville—managers on the one hand who sought to elevate vaudeville in order to market it to women, and audiences who resisted their efforts—and also to introduce the element of gender into the interpretive mix.

In promotional materials, Keith consistently emphasized that the entertainment he offered in his theaters was suitable for respectable ladies. Kibler's study, which focuses exclusively on the Keith circuit, the most powerful chain of vaudeville theaters, is in part a correction of this public record. She relies extensively on managers' unpublished report books (in the Keith/Albee Collection at the University of Iowa Libraries) to support her assessment of the fluctuating variable of gender. While Keith's publicity emphasized the refinement of women in the audience, the report book record indicates, for example, that during the presentation of a boxing match "a lot of the women in the

audience . . . [got] into the spirit of the thing by yelling and cheering" (51). This display, however, is characterized as a "most unusual demonstration." By giving such weight to insiders' unpublished commentary, Kibler is able to provide an unusually nuanced picture of the internal dynamics of vaudeville.

Kibler's study looks at masculinity and femininity in symbolic terms, as it focuses on three different aspects of vaudeville: the audience, the careers of several female performers, and the labor movement. Four of the author's eight chapters are devoted to profiles of "ladies of rank" and "rank ladies," performers chosen to represent different constructions of femininity and masculinity (in feminine guise) presented on the vaudeville stage. Her subjects include the comedy team of Kate and May Elinore; Julia Arthur, an actress from the legitimate stage who made a foray into vaudeville as Hamlet; May Irwin and other women who performed in blackface; and Ruth Budd, an unusually athletic acrobat. She devotes another chapter to the women's auxiliary of the White Rats, a fraternal order of vaudeville performers established in 1900 and reborn as a union after its merger with the International Actors' Union in 1910.

Kibler's study is ambitious in that it attempts to address simultaneously a variety of issues related to women and vaudeville. As a result, the terms of the discussion are occasionally confusing, as when symbolic femininity is evoked in different contexts and without clear definition. The performers profiled, however, are well-chosen examples in that they not only represent larger aspects of vaudeville but also suggest the amazing fluidity of symbolic gender in vaudeville as a whole. Though beyond the scope of Kibler's study, a consideration of the symbolic feminine as represented by men playing women in vaudeville would help to flesh out the story that *Rank Ladies* begins to unfold.

*Better Baby Contests: The Scientific Quest for Perfect Childhood Health in the Early Twentieth Century*, by Annette K. Vance Dorey. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1999. 232 pp. Illustrations, notes, appendixes, index. \$38.50 cloth.

Reviewer Lynne Curry is assistant professor of history at Eastern Illinois University. She is the author of *Modern Mothers in the Heartland: Gender, Health, and Progress in Illinois, 1900-1930* (1999).

Annette K. Vance Dorey has compiled a good deal of primary source material on the early twentieth-century phenomenon of the better baby contest, an amalgam of social reform and popular entertainment in-

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