

"Whose Hair Is It, Anyway?" Bobbed Hair and the Rhetorical Fashioning of the Modern American Woman

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In 1930, at Florida State College for Women, then one of the largest women's colleges in the nation, Virginia Anderson was voted most "old fashioned girl." In the yearbook "Features" section, she stands demurely before a plantation-era Greek Revival mansion,¹ wearing an off-the-shoulder tiered white dress and choker necklace. Despite the intentional antebellum imagery of the photo, Anderson's hair is a thoroughly modern bob—as was that of most of her "featured" peers, including the campus' most stylish, most popular, most representative, most intellectual, most athletic, and, of course, "most modern girl" (Florida State College for Women n. pag.).² Indeed, a sampling of nearly any page in the yearbook reveals the cut to be not merely popular but standard (see Figure 1).

The first bob reportedly appeared on campus in 1919; by 1924, according to a campus poll, 69% of students had bobbed their hair, the "slowly dwindling long-haired" holdouts primarily citing a lack of "nerve" ("To Bob or Not to Bob" 2) rather than any moral objection. Recalling the "feminine decorum" of the school's more traditionally coiffed prewar students, dean of the college William G. Dodd later observed, "They would have been utterly astounded if someone had told them that a change would come, and soon, where a young woman could still be a lady and bob her hair and leave off most of her unmentionables" (Dodd n. pag.).

To Dodd's credit, he did believe a young woman could still be a lady, even shorn of locks and shed of the various undergarments integral to polite, turn-of-the-twentieth-century middle-class feminine dress. His opinion, however, was not universally shared. During the decade of the 1920s, millions of American women participated in what was widely reported as the "fad," "fashion," "craze," and even "epidemic" of bobbing their hair.³ The cut was the subject of intense national discourse, contemporaneous with and at times indistinguishable from the incursion of women into new professional and public spaces in the wake of World War I and suffrage. Indeed, the vociferous debates featured in news items and editorial pages suggest that both defenders and detractors understood the haircut was as much a declaration of women's liberation as of style, and a symbol, for better or worse, of the modern era and women's place in it. "Bobbed Hair is in line with freedom, efficiency, health and cleanliness," wrote one supporter in 1921 ("Bobbed Hair" 15). That same year,

Marshall Field in Chicago banned the bob from its sales floor, and, nationwide, business, educational, and religious leaders dismissed the haircut as evidence of immodesty, frivolity, vanity, libertinism, and moral decay. How did mere fashion become so fraught—and, for many, so fearsome?

In this article, I examine the rhetoric surrounding bobbed hair in the U.S. in the 1920s, drawing on popular press treatments in contemporary newspapers and magazines, including news items, opinion essays, beauty and advice columns, editorials, and letters to the editor. Not quite a social movement, but far more than a mere fashion or fad, the bob was an important rhetorical phenomenon worthy of scholarly study. In treating the bob as an object of inquiry, I respond to scholarship in rhetorical studies and feminist historiography that calls for attention to rhetorics of dress (Buchanan; Mattingly; Roberts; Suter), rhetorics of space (Enoch; Jack), and epideictic scenes of women's participation in public life in the often-neglected historical period between the first two waves of American feminism (George, Weiser, and Zepernick).

I argue that discourse over the bob reflected societal tensions generated by women's changing public roles and in particular women's incursions into new public and professional spaces. I begin by offering a brief reception history of the cut and discourse surrounding it. Drawing on the theoretical framework of Gerard Hauser's *Vernacular Voices*, I suggest that this discourse constituted a vernacular public sphere which coalesced into civil judgment about the cut, with lasting effects. I then identify three rhetorical commonplaces—nature/order, efficiency, and liberty—invoked in debates over the bob. Opponents saw it as an affront to the natural order of society; advocates saw it as appropriate to a new social order that valued efficiency and individual liberty. In both arguing for the bob and by wearing the bob, women challenged conventional gender norms and aligned themselves with emerging contemporary ones. The intense public debate over the bob thus not only exposes the extent to which women's bodies and behavior can be regulated by social norms but also suggests how those norms may be challenged and changed.

First Cut: The Bob in Popular Discourse

For such a well-known and important cultural event, the bob's origins in the U.S. are somewhat obscure.⁴ Some contemporary sources suggest the trend was sparked by dancer and film star Irene Castle, who in 1915 cut her hair before entering the hospital for an appendectomy, for the sake of convenience during recovery (Castle E2); others suggest it was inspired by women workers engaged in the war effort who found short hair convenient, or by women during the influenza epidemic cutting their hair for wigs as insurance against it falling out if they became ill. Others point to the influence of Greenwich Village bohemians and Bolsheviks. Once it caught on, however, it

spread rapidly; contemporary newspapers offer a few scattered news reports prior to 1920, then suddenly a deluge, with hundreds of headlines a year, these articles vividly documenting a national conversation about the cut and what it forecast for both women and American society at large.

From a contemporary perspective, the perceived radicalness of the cut can be somewhat difficult to fathom. Though we perhaps associate the bob today with its most mannered examples—the close-cropped look of Louise Brooks or Josephine Baker, for example—more common was a fuller, mid-length cut ending just below the earlobe that would be unremarkable today (see Figure 2).⁵ To better understand the attraction of the bob, it may be helpful to recall what came before. Before the advent of the bob, most American women wore their hair long—hair care and style guides of the period do not appear to even consider cutting as an option for adult women—and in a manner that required extensive maintenance in the form of elaborate washing procedures and daily fixing. Typical styles required women to wear their hair up, commonly piled atop the head in a pompadour and sometimes held in place with pads or extensions, or arranged around the sides of the head and coiled into braids or held in place with a knot at the back. Social conventions typically required African American women to straighten their hair as well through the use of combs or relaxing agents.⁶ Susan Brownmiller, for whom the bob represented “an anguished act of rebellion” (62), eloquently documents the lingering conventions of nineteenth-century hair care women sought to escape: “sticky pomades and greasy dressings [that] made long hair a hospitable nest for dirt, soot and head lice...particularly for the urban poor” and “boring, repetitive hours spent washing and drying and brushing and combing and dressing and braiding and pinning and winding and curling on damnable rags” (64). Of course, the ease or comfort of a style is no guarantee of its success. The reform dress of the mid-nineteenth century was never taken up widely outside of reform circles, and even women activists eventually abandoned it in favor of dress that more visibly signaled respectable femininity, aware of the need to “construc[t] a favorable image of the public woman” to their audiences (Mattingly, *Appropriate[ing] Dress* 109).

Like advocates of the reform dress, wearers of the bob were subject to intense public scrutiny and often critique. Yet the bob arrived at an opportune moment for widescale adoption. The first two decades of the twentieth century saw women entering public and professional life in force, trends exacerbated by World War I and the ratification of suffrage in 1920; at the time of the bob's ascent, women's gains, ever precarious, seemed to many now unstoppable. In adopting the cut, women were signaling their allegiance to this new social order and their confidence in its stability.



Figure 1: Typical hairstyles, Florida State College for Women, 1930. Chi Gamma fraternity, *Flastacowo* 1930. Courtesy of the Florida State University Libraries, Special Collections and Archives. For other examples online, see *Flastacowo* yearbooks at the Internet Archive or the Florida State University Digital Library.



Figure 2: Bobbed hairstyle common in 1920s Philadelphia. John Frank Keith, "Two Nicely Dressed Young Women Standing in Front of Brick Building." Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia. For other examples online, see the Library Company's John Frank Keith Collection.

As a subject of rhetorical study, the bob resists easy classification. Critics of fashion and consumer culture have suggested mass media creates desire, and certainly mass consumer culture, particularly the cinema, spread images of the bob. But contemporary news reports also suggest a fashion industry often flummoxed by the cut and desperately trying to catch up by offering new products to accommodate the trend—headbands, bobby pins, smaller hats—or unsuccessfully trying to halt it by repeatedly declaring the cut to be passé, even as it was becoming ever more popular.⁷ As a collective action, the bob did not constitute a social movement as the term is generally understood; there was no wide-scale, organized campaign on its behalf, and those who adopted the cut had a wide range of motives for doing so. Yet it was more than a mere fashion or fad, due to its pervasive spread, long persistence, and lasting impact, as well as the intense rhetorical discourse it generated.

I believe that the bob may be best understood through the lens of Gerard Hauser's conceptualization of the public sphere, which emphasizes its rhetorical, and often vernacular, nature: "a discursive space in which individuals and groups associate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgment about them" (61). For Hauser, publics and public spheres cannot be determined a priori; rather, they are "emergences" (14; see also 32-33), arising in response to mutually perceived exigencies and made manifest through vernacular discourse, "often the dialogues of everyday life" (65). When such vernacular exchanges "converge to form a prevailing view of preference and possibly of value," they constitute *civil judgments*, which, though not formalized procedurally, may have "palpable" constitutive force (74). Though Hauser is interested primarily in deliberative political rhetoric, vernacular public spheres may also encompass epideictic forms of rhetoric aimed at defining, shaping, or asserting a community's allegiance to a set of values, particularly in response to events that appear to destabilize those values.⁸ Through epideictic rhetoric, suggests Celeste Michelle Condit, a community may "rene[w] its conception of good and evil by explaining what it has previously held to be good and evil and by working through the relationships of those past values and beliefs with new situations" (291). The advent of the bob provided both defenders and detractors a kairotic new situation with which to reevaluate past values and beliefs regarding the proper roles of women in American society. In short, the bob constituted a communal exigence that generated a powerful call to rhetorical action. In the vernacular public sphere which organized itself about the cut, ordinary citizens as well as opinion shapers debated its merits and meanings, with its eventual acceptance rendering a civil judgment that resulted in a renorming and

expanding of the range of acceptable public looks for women, as well as behavior.

An important discursive act within this public sphere was the very act of getting the haircut itself. During the decade of intense discourse surrounding the bob, the cut always signified. Feminist scholars have long noted the ways in which women's bodies are marked. As such, women's presentations of themselves in public through their choice of dress, accessories, hairstyle, makeup, or speaking style are often read through their ostensible conformance to or departure from expected gender norms. Writes Deborah Tannen, "There is no unmarked woman. There is no woman's hair style that can be called 'standard,' that says nothing about her" (110). This markedness was especially pronounced during the bobbed hair era, when adopting the cut could cause a woman demonstrable social or economic harm. By bobbing their hair, millions of women who did not have access to channels of mass media dissemination as writers or speakers voted with their physical bodies for a new definition of feminine propriety. Indeed, the eventual acceptance of the bob may have been fostered less by a change in attitude of those wanting to restrict it but their acquiescence in the face of the sheer number of women who bobbed their hair, rendering restrictions against it in places of employment moot and pronouncements against its impropriety ineffectual.

The contemporary cultural significance accorded to the bob is evident in the wide range of opinion makers who contributed to the vernacular public sphere surrounding it. Prominent women from Charlotte Perkins Gilman to Dorothy Parker joined the conversation. Gilman, perhaps not surprisingly, was an early advocate, declaring in 1916, "It was not the Lord who gave men short hair...it was the scissors" ("*Fair Tresses*" ES14).⁹ Parker, certainly not surprisingly, mocked all parties, men and women, fans and foes. In a 1924 satirical essay in the popular magazine *Life*,¹⁰ she "reports" on one business owner who had two bob-wearing employees taken out and shot, while another declares, "A woman who will bob her hair will do anything.... I am all for the idea" (9). Doctors and other medical experts debated the bob's potential health effects, speculating on whether it would promote hair growth (through cutting) or loss (from tighter hats), harm the skin, or extend the lifespan. Business writers weighed in on the bob's effect on the health of various industries—in particular hat, hatpin, and hair- and beauty-product manufacturers—and the livelihoods of hairdressers and barbers, even considering the merits of a bobbed hair tax. Fashion writers and culture watchers as well monitored such reports for empirical evidence of the cut's permanence or passing. Religious leaders debated Paul's supposed injunction that women not cut their "crowning glory,"

and writers religious and secular debated the relative degree of sin and wantonness the cut represented. A number of articles looked to historical precedents for short-haired fashion, from ancient Egypt to Revolutionary France to late-nineteenth-century America, seeking to either dismiss the cut or the fuss about it.

Ordinary women actively participated in conversation about the bob as well, through letters to the editor and op/ed pieces responding to attacks, quoted comments in news pieces by journalists seeking public opinion, conversations with friends and family, the reading of news and fashion articles, localized public protests against the banning of the bob in schools and places of employment, the daily negotiation of private and public critique, and through the public and sometimes collective act of getting their hair bobbed themselves. Indeed, the public—and rhetorical nature—of women adopting the cut was a central part of this discourse. At the turn of the twentieth century, women's hair care was conducted at home and was "for most women a private and time-consuming task" (Stevenson, "Hairy Business" 139). Professional hairdressers typically "dressed" but did not cut hair, and those women who employed hairdressers typically had the dresser come to them. Women who early on wished to have their hair bobbed often had to enter the formerly exclusive gendered domain of men's barbershops, a bold move if not an outright social transgression, before barbers began catching up, either converting their shops to salons or actively soliciting women patrons.

A significant controversy arose over the propriety of bobbed hair for women in the professions. In those fields popularly coded as feminine, such as teaching and nursing, observers fretted over whether bobbed-haired women could be considered mature or moral enough to be trusted with their charges. From a contemporary standpoint, the objection to nurses seems curious given the apparent sanitary advantages of the cut, but a number of senior staff and supervisors saw it as an affront to the "dignity of the profession" ("Bans Bobbed-Hair Nurses" 3).¹¹ In fields where women were newly emergent, such as business, employers wondered whether bobbed-haired women could attend to their responsibilities with the same seriousness of purpose presumably inherent to men. As clerical work became increasingly feminized in the first decades of the twentieth century, the "display of the female body in the office" became a site of "contested terrain" (Strom 370), with women workers subject to both dress regulations and mixed signals regarding dress and deportment (371-72).

As the bob became increasingly public, it also became the subject of workplace bans. These bans affected not only established "women's professions" such as teaching and nursing but newly emergent sites of women's public visibility, such as the business office. At both ends of the spectrum,

employers made explicit their desire to reassert and enforce traditional visual signifiers of feminine propriety. Thus, in July 1921, the Aetna Life Insurance Company, a major employer of women, generated national headlines when its employment manager, Frank K. Daniels,¹² issued an edict against the bob: "I can tolerate the women who lay aside their corsets. That is comfort, but it is carrying comfort too far to bare one's self in bobbed hair" ("Blondity Tabu" 1). Elsewhere he was quoted as saying, "We want workers in our offices and not circus riders" ("Bobbed Hair Given the Bounce" 19). Daniels was no mere crank; a Hartford alderman (and at the time acting mayor) and an officer in the Aetna Life Club, he was a prominent local figure. Aetna was moreover a significant site of contest as it embodied the national changes in office culture as a result of the feminization of the clerical workforce. Aetna did not hire its first woman office worker until 1908 and as late as 1916 had only 150 women employees. Responding to the labor shortage created by World War I, the company began hiring women in large numbers; by 1922, 44% of workers at its home office in Hartford were women (Murolo 37-38). It is perhaps not surprising then that conservative managers such as Daniels were ill-equipped to deal with the social ramifications of these changes.

Aetna's ban was soon eclipsed when, in August 1921, the luxury department store Marshall Field in Chicago made national and international headlines when it banned the bob from its sales floor, reportedly dismissing those who refused to hide theirs under nets, and following this up with a further edict against the popular trends of rouge and rolled-down stockings ("Bobbed Hair Barred"; "Rouge, Low Stockings").¹³ While it might seem curious for a retail establishment to take a stand against an emerging fashion—Saks in New York was already offering smaller hats styled to fit bobbed heads—management may have felt that the haircut was not in keeping with the air of bourgeois respectability it sought to evoke.

Both the Aetna and Marshall Field actions generated wide news coverage as well as responses in the form of opinion essays, editorials, and letters to the editor, many of the latter from women themselves. In the wake of these actions, and perhaps emboldened by them, a number of hospitals, nursing schools, public school districts, and employment agencies also announced and enforced bans—or tried to. In the end, most of these efforts failed, in part because the bob was becoming so ubiquitous so quickly that enforcement was impossible. A few weeks after Daniels's decree, the *New York Times* reported that young women seeking employment at Aetna simply covered their bobs with a net until hired, "then let loose," their male managers "grinn[ing] at the joke played on Daniels" and "judg[ing] the new employees by their spelling and punctuation rather than by their coiffure" ("Bobbed Hair Gets" 4). After the initial Marshall Field decrees little more was heard from the company

on the matter, perhaps in part because of editorial ridicule or because the firm's competitors took the opportunity to declare their own sales floors bob friendly (Rice). Visiting Chicago in 1922, Gordon Selfridge, founder of London's Selfridge's and a former Marshall Field executive, could not help tweaking his old firm: "There is no objection to bobbed hair in London.... We believe in progress" ("They Let 'Em Flap" 6).

Restrictions on bobbed-haired teachers also proved to be short-lived. In 1924, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that despite the widespread fear of a teacher shortage due to reported prejudice among many principals against bobbed hair on teachers, some 449 of 500 recent graduates of the state university had adopted the cut ("Bobbed Hair School Teacher" 5). While these numbers might perhaps be exaggerated, they signal the acceptance of the cut among younger professional women; an impromptu survey of delegates at the 1925 International Kindergarten Union (now the Association for Childhood Education International) convention found only one-fifth in bobbed hair but unanimous agreement on its professional propriety ("To Bob or Not, Is Quandary" 1).

Student nurses in particular played a prominent role in fighting for the bob, perhaps because they recognized the sanitary value of the cut in their work environment. In hospitals and nursing schools in a number of North American cities, petitions and protests, including walkouts and threatened walkouts, against the banning of bobbed hair resulted in orders being rescinded or revised and sanctions against those dismissed or disciplined being reversed. Such actions may have been on the mind of the Colorado school superintendent who queried the *American Journal of Nursing* in 1924, "Since 90 per cent of women, young and old, have their hair bobbed and if we continue to exclude them from our training schools, will we have sufficient number of students?" (H. J. 836). In 1926, in what might be taken as a sign of national capitulation, the *New York Times* reported that the Army's Quartermaster General's office was seeking to redesign its nurse's uniform hat to accommodate the new hairstyle, the old one being nearly impossible to pin to a bobbed head ("Army Nurses").¹⁴

Judging by contemporary college yearbook photos and news reports, by 1925, the bob in some form had become near-universal among school- and college-aged women, and it was becoming increasingly common among women in their 30s, 40s, and older. In 1921, Mary Garden, 47, star soprano and newly appointed director of the Chicago Opera, made national news when she returned from Europe with her hair bobbed. In 1928, actress Mary Pickford, 36, having previously declared that she would not cut her trademark long curls, famously did so, in part because she wanted more *mature* screen roles (Pickford; "Mary Pickford"). Former First Lady Grace Coolidge, born

in 1879, was reported to have bobbed her hair in 1931 and again in 1935. Contemporary reports suggest one reason for the uncertainty; she had long worn her hair "so perfectly marcelled" that the transition to a bob "would not readily be apparent" ("Mrs. Coolidge" N9).¹⁵

The bob was a phenomenon that extended across both race lines—it was debated in the black as well as the predominantly white press, though perhaps with less fervor in the former—and class lines, simultaneously seen as a marker of high fashion and low, being favored by movie stars, celebrities, and fashion icons, as well as by flappers, working women, and "bad girls." Perhaps because of its association with youthful license, older and more conservative women were initially hesitant to adopt the bob—a 1924 *Washington Post* article notes the paucity of short hair amongst leaders of the General Federation of Women's Clubs ("Women's Clubs' Heads" 2).¹⁶ Its association with women in the labor market may have also led to charges among more economically privileged women that the cut lacked a certain womanly dignity. "It is a boon to the young business woman who has but little time to give to her coiffure when she has had to make and breakfast to prepare before she must rush madly to store or office," wrote one Kentucky women's club officer in 1923, but is inappropriate for the older "society woman" ("Bobbed Hair Loses" 9). By decade's end, however, the same groups of women who might have earlier dismissed the bob as undignified were getting bobbed themselves. Writing in 1928, *Washington Post* beauty columnist Viola Paris observed that the only pressure toward longer hair might be from "younger girls...born into a world of short-haired women" seeking a way "for the younger generation to be distinguished from its mother" (10).

Meaning and Modernity

Why such intense and widespread debate? What did the bob signify? One feature of the discourse is invariable: the bob was universally taken as a sign of modernity, and, as such, it exposed fault lines in society's conceptions of proper roles for and behavior of women in a time of shifting social norms. In this section, I identify three rhetorical commonplaces, or *topoi*, invoked by participants in the bobbed hair debate: nature/order, efficiency, and liberty. Foes of the bob saw it as a threat to the natural order of society, a visible sign of the decline of traditional femininity and morality; advocates praised its efficiency and convenience as appropriate to the times and celebrated it as marker of individual liberty and freedom. Each of these commonplaces held substantial hegemonic force; that is, few were willing to question their value in the abstract. When engaging with their opponents, parties on both sides thus tended to argue from the stasis of definition, critics suggesting the cut represented a disruptive libertinism rather than liberty and supporters

challenging traditional notions of what constituted “natural” dress and behavior.

Nature/Order

Opponents of the bob frequently insisted that the cut was an assault on the natural order of society. These arguments rested both on traditional normative assumptions of women’s roles emerging out of nineteenth-century gender ideologies and on popular understandings of evolutionary theory that held that a key marker of civilization and evolution was differentiation of the sexes (see Hamlin; Newman). At the turn of the twentieth century, the American feminine ideal was perhaps best represented by the “Gibson Girl,” the creation of illustrator and editor Charles Dana Gibson. Though the Gibson Girl was meant to symbolize—and sell—the emerging “New Woman” of the 1890s, more public and progressive than her Victorian elder sister, her image also served to tame the potential threat entailed by changing gender norms by emphasizing traditional markers of (white, middle-class) femininity: an exaggerated hourglass figure, long hair, fashionable though respectable dress, and the practice of leisure rather than labor (see Patterson 27-49). Despite the highly constructed nature of her image, she was also meant to represent an unstudied, “natural” American beauty, ostensibly devoid of make up and wearing her hair, however painstakingly and elaborately coiffed, long and glorious as God and nature had intended it. The Gibson Girl was ultimately an evolutionary figure, not a revolutionary one, and she functioned as an object of near-universal desire for men and women alike.

If the Gibson Girl represented natural evolution, the Flapper with her bobbed hair forecast disruption of the social order and even devolution: the *New York Times* in 1924 reported on one German social scientist who feared that as women increasingly took on formerly male tasks they would eventually grow beards themselves (“Bobbed Hair Brings Beards”). In disrupting gender expectations, bobbed-haired women were simultaneously cast as both unfeminine and licentious. At one extreme, the angular look and bobbed hair of the Flapper, combined with her ostensibly transgressive behavior—smoking, drinking, working—made it difficult for many observers to discern in her any normative secondary-sex characteristics at all. To the extent that she also engaged in expressions of sexuality—wearing make up, dancing, practicing “free love”—she was also read as aberrant. Throughout the 1920s, bobbed hair widely served as a metonym for social disruption. One reform school superintendent noted in 1924 that his new charges “invariably” had short hair (“All Bad Girls” 6). That same year, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that the bob had invaded women’s prisons, becoming the rage among notorious female murderers in San Quentin (“Bobbed Hair Fad Invades”).¹⁷ The decade, indeed,

saw a number of what were popularly termed "bobbed-hair bandits," leading one letter writer to the *Washington Post* to ask in 1927, "Once burglary, train robbing, bank robbery and holdups...were arts exercised exclusively by humans of the male gender.... Every female robber wears her hair bobbed. Is there something in bobbing the hair that drives these girls to crime?" (Estey 6; see also Duncombe and Mattson).

The desire for a return to an older social order was manifest in the various articles each year insisting that the bob was but a doomed, dying, or already dead fad. Such pieces were not just about women's hair, but behavior, the implication—and more often explicit declaration—being that the ostensible return to longer hair signaled "a return to the ways of femininity" ("Bobbed-Hair Fad Fading" 6) and a restoration of traditional gender norms. The crowning of a long-haired local beauty contest winner, Dorothy Hughes, in 1922, prompted one newspaper to declare "Miss New York Marks the End of Bobbed Hair." "Her long, beautiful curls turned the trick," said one contest judge, artist and illustrator Neysa McMein ("Miss New York" B5).¹⁸

Despite accusations that the cut violated natural norms for women by being either mannish or immodest or that it would devalue them in the marriage market, women seemed to have widely accepted the cut as feminine. "Bobbed hair," wrote journalist and screenwriter Adela Rogers St. Johns in 1924, "symbolizes the progress of woman in the twentieth century toward more freedom, more worth-while achievement, and more time devoted to what is under the skull instead of on top of it. But it doesn't mean that woman is less feminine" (36). Even female critics acknowledged that it suited young "girls" ("Bobbed Hair Loses" 9) or that it looked, if not beautiful, at least "smart" (Pickford 9)—that is, efficient and appropriate for the times. Women's adoption of the bob thus stands in contrast to that of the nineteenth-century reform dress, which women abandoned in the wake of popular press backlash that cast the outfit as ungainly or masculine (see Mattingly, *Appropriate[ing] Dress* 62-84). The toga of the elocutionists, meanwhile, had given women freedom in a delimited space to both literally move and speak with ease as well as mark their agency and even citizenship in a non-threatening manner, but it does not seem to have been widely adopted beyond their circle (Suter), perhaps because it would not have been seen as a functional or appropriate garment for the workplace or daily wear. Women adopting the bob did not see it as a threat to pure womanhood as critics charged, but representative of an updated version of femininity appropriate to the times, one based on liberation from outmoded cumbersome dress, outdated social practices, and even the male gaze. In short, the bob represented progress and thus, to its advocates, a *natural* evolution of the social order. "The bob came in," speculated the hairstylist Antoine, who had helped popularize the cut, "because of a profound need on

the part of women.... Long hair belonged to women moving gently around in carriages.... It had no place in the world of busy women who had to ignore the weather, who had to move fast" (98-99).¹⁹

Efficiency and Liberty

As Antoine suggests, the increased speed and busyness of the modern era figured heavily in discourse surrounding the bob. In the early twentieth century, "efficiency" was a buzzword in American culture. Inspired by the scientific and technological advances of the industrial era, a broad-based efficiency movement sought to employ scientific principles to improve education, business, manufacturing, government, and society. Contemporary cultural critics often associate these principles with the dehumanizing effects of Taylorism and Fordism, but they were widely shared across the political continuum, and invoked as often by Progressive-era reformers as by hard-headed captains of industry. Mass-market goods also promised Americans convenience and time savings in their daily lives.

In arguing for the bob, women advocates frequently lauded its efficiency and appropriateness to the new labor market, arguing that it saved working women valuable time and allowed them a degree of parity with men, whose hair could presumably be fixed without fuss each morning and thereafter require little maintenance during the working day. In contrast to traditional hairstyles, bobbed hair was widely described as cooler and more comfortable, more practical, "sensible and sanitary" ("Home Made Blondes" 15), and easier to keep "fresh and clean" (P. H. H. 9). Attending the 1921 National Education Association convention, Sarah Given, an assistant professor of physical education at Drake University, said, "Every girl and woman will wear her hair bobbed eventually....We've been following a foolish, bothersome custom long enough. Why should not women have the convenience of short, unbound hair, the same as men?" ("Bobbed Hair for School Mams" 6). Women also insisted it was the traditional long-haired woman who was the more frivolous and superficial, as she spent far more time on her appearance than did the modern woman with bobbed hair. Some critics did suggest that the bob required more maintenance and expense in the form of regular trips to the hairdresser and was thus less efficient, but they did not gain many adherents.

Male observers also had to concede ground where efficiency was evoked, even as they revealed their personal misgivings about the look. Wrote one editor, "It may not have the womanly charm of long hair, but in industries and in business girl workers are workers. They are judged by their efficiency and not by their charm, or are supposed to be, and generally it is through efficiency and not sex that they keep their positions." The writer appears to have had some concerns that this trend might lead to "the woman in overalls," but

ultimately defended the right of "girl workers to get rid of incumbrances [sic] and wear clothes suited to their work ("Says Bobbed Hair" 36).

"Efficiency," of course, could be a double-edged sword, suggesting women's capitulation to the urban labor market and unquestioning acceptance of its values. As labor historian Sharon Hartman Strom reminds us, divisions among women workers by class, age, and marital status "probably undermined the likelihood of devising cooperative strategies for attacking discrimination and exploitation," despite the sharing of a "common workplace culture" (369). Moreover, "sex discrimination, sexual stereotyping of jobs, and the cultural framing of men's and women's participation in the work force limited women's choices" (379).²⁰ At Aetna, for example, women were segregated into routinized clerical jobs—stenography, typing, filing, card-punching—and at the time of Daniels's decree were required to use a separate back entrance and elevators (Murolo 38). Later in the decade, Aetna hired a scientific management expert, Dr. Marion A. Bills, who instituted an experimental bonus system that pitted women workers against each other by rewarding the most "efficient" while gradually paring the least; while retained employees netted an average pay increase of 20%, personnel in affected departments were reduced by 39%. Managers of male-staffed departments, such as underwriting, resisted Bills's efforts, insisting their work was not routine (Murolo 43-44, 48). Under these circumstances, the victory of winning the right to wear bobbed hair to the office might ring somewhat hollow. Moreover, under the aegis of efficiency, women workers might be subject to bodily scrutiny that reinforced gender stereotypes as well as limited their ability to control the pace of their labor; thus one manufacturer who claimed to hire "only bobbed-haired stenographers" lauded them for their ability to quickly comb their hair at their desks and return to work while their long-haired counterparts wasted time in the dressing room conversing with their peers ("Flappers and Efficiency" 2).

Closely associated with the topos of efficiency was one of liberty, expressed as the freedom of autonomous individuals in a democracy to make life choices for themselves. Advocates of the bob proclaimed the right of women to bob their hair on the basis of "individual" or "personal" liberty, which women as well as men post-suffrage were presumed to share. Replying to a young woman whose fiancé threatened to break off their engagement if she persisted in bobbing her hair, *Washington Post* advice columnist Frances McDonald declared, "What a very un-American attitude. A wife's hair is part of her personal estate. She may administer it according to her fancy.... You are an American girl. Your hair and personal liberty are your own. Hold fast to your property rights in both" (14).

Though men's reactions to the bob were varied through the period—from supportive to tolerant to violently opposed—they typically appear as foils for

women's behavior, acting reactively to decisions women had already made for themselves. Women responded to accusations that the bob represented "typical" feminine obsessions with artifice and frivolity by asserting that the cut was honest and democratic and that it was men's obsession with something ostensibly so trivial as hair that was frivolous and antidemocratic. "I would suggest that men find some weightier problem...than worrying about our hair," wrote one defender. "Whose hair is it, anyway?" (H. A. C. 8). In defending personal choice, writers both male and female also pointed out the ridiculousness of various styles of men's hair, mustaches, and beards, as well as the fact that the wearing of them was, as we would put it today, almost entirely unmarked—a personal eccentricity to be tolerated, even celebrated, and not indicative of any moral or intellectual failing. "What has mere man to brag about concerning his own hair," asked one male editor. "He certainly bobs it, pompadours it, shaves it, dyes it, curls it, or wigs it, as he pleases. Does any employer fire him and give as the cause or reason, the manner in which his hair is cut?" ("Bobbed Hair Snarl" 14).

It is perhaps a testament to the changing times that men who abandoned or sued their wives for divorce for bobbing their hair or otherwise sought to legally enjoin them from doing so found little support in the courts, one judge declaring, "Surely a person capable of casting a ballot must be presumed capable of choosing a haircut" ("Wives Have Right" SM5). Even writers not entirely sympathetic to the bob—or "modern" women—tended to agree that a woman need not seek permission from a spouse, parent, or employer to bob her hair and that the choice was entirely a private matter. A 1922 *Washington Post* editorial, while dismissing working women as being in the marriage market, grounds its support for the bob in terms of individual and equal rights: "In an enlightened democracy the privileges allowed to one sex as to attire should be freely and gladly accorded to the other" ("An Attack" 6). Responding to the Marshall Field decree, John Fitzpatrick of the Chicago Federation of Labor said, "They're taking personal liberty away from the working girl.... If a girl wants to bob her hair or wear her skirts knee length, what's it of her boss' business. No man has that right of censorship.... The working girl must express her individuality in her own way" ("Labor Comes to Aid" 5). It is of course a somewhat narrow vision of liberty to define it in terms of personal self expression, which is perhaps why the bobbed hair cause never morphed into a broader or more organized social movement.²¹ Regardless, contemporary women largely saw the bob as a visible step in women's emancipation, in both practical and symbolic terms, and frequently invoked commonplace god terms such as freedom, liberty, and democracy in its support. "To my way of thinking," wrote Mary Garden in 1927, "long hair belongs to the age of general feminine helplessness. Bobbed hair belongs to the age of freedom, frankness, and progressiveness" (8).

Permanent Waves: The Bob and Its Aftermath

Writing in the *New York Times* in 1921, the anonymous "Ex-Bobbed One" asserted, "There is not a woman of the present generation who does not hail with relief any reform in dress which tends to greater comfort.... But as women veer toward common sense and comfort in their toilette the more they are made the subject of masculine attacks.... No matter how attractive a woman may look, the fact that her hair is short is damning in their eyes—she is either a short-haired fanatic or a silly young thing, and not until every woman's hair is shorn will they bow to the inevitable" (sec. 6, 6). Her words were prescient; so many women bobbed their hair that it became a standard; critics could complain, but ultimately could not stop it. The sheer number of college and working women adopting the style meant that nursing schools, school districts, and public and private employers could not regulate the bob—and subsequently other manifestations of contemporary dress (e.g., rouge, short skirts, colored hair)—even had they wanted to.

By the end of the 1920s, the bob had become commonplace enough that discourse on it began to cease, almost abruptly as it began.²² By 1935, women were beginning to wear their hair longer again, though still "bobbed" from the point of view of the earliest part of the century, and by the end of World War II it seems that short anything—clothes or hair—had the ring of austerity, and long hair for women became standard once again. But the bob was no mere fashion or fad, quick to arrive, quick to disappear, relevant to only a small subculture. Throughout the 1920s, the intensity of discourse surrounding the bob meant that the haircut always signified, always generated what Roland Barthes termed a "second-order semiological system" (113), or connotative or mythical level of meaning. Indeed, the intensity of response suggests that some observers could literally not see beyond the second-order symbols the bob represented, could not see the actual woman behind the associations generated by the cut. Thus, no matter a woman's own motivation in getting a bob, from a fashion statement to a political one, and no matter the observer's attitude toward bobbed hair, the cut was invariably read as signaling allegiance to the modern era, with its ever more visible and varied roles for women. The vernacular public sphere that arose in response to the cut urges us to consider the means by which fashion, as Mary Louise Roberts suggests, may drive as well as reflect social change. Depicting the social significance of post-World War I fashion in France, in which the bob played a central role, Roberts argues that "fashion constituted a semi-autonomous political language that served as a maker as well as a marker of the modern woman.... [and] figured in a larger struggle for social and political power" ("Samson and Delilah" 665).

As scholars such as Roberts, Lindal Buchanan, Carol Mattingly, and Lisa Suter have demonstrated, dress and other forms of bodily display can serve

as a means of rhetorical delivery, as well as a manifestation of contemporary rhetorical commonplaces and constraints, signaling the limits and available means of persuasion. Buchanan depicts how antebellum women reformers made use of feminized spaces and feminine delivery styles to “interject their views into the public milieu” (105) and Mattingly how nineteenth-century women reformers used dress to signal rhetorical decorum and boost their ethos (*Appropriate[ing] Dress*; see also *Well-Tempered Women*). Suter memorably describes the togas of late-nineteenth-century women elocutionists as “arguments they wore,” signifying their claim to citizenship in a society that still denied them the franchise. Following these scholars, I suggest that women wearing the bob, too, were practicing rhetoric. In an era in which women’s excursions into public forums and the public sphere were still emergent and highly contested—and in which many women, working-class and otherwise, had little access to channels of political power or public literacy—wearing the bob allowed women a degree of rhetorical agency to form, if not a counter-public, a counter-narrative to and critique of prevailing norms of femininity. As Karen Stevenson observes, “neither the threat of dismissal nor disapproval...deterred women from cutting off their locks *en masse*.” Rejecting “the time-consuming bother of long hair in favor of the historically unprecedented ease and simplicity of short and largely unadorned hair,” women “transformed feminine style norms in the face of considerable social pressure” (“Hair Today” 229). The intense public debate over the bob thus not only exposes the extent to which women’s bodies and behavior can be regulated and disciplined by social norms but speaks as well to possible shifts in the habitus that can arise from challenges to these norms. The vernacular public sphere that arose in response to the bob and culminated in its acceptance was engendered by women not only *arguing* for the bob but *wearing* it.

Of course, it was not merely rhetoric that made the bob possible. To understand phenomena such as the bob, it is also important to attend to the material environments and conditions in which they occur. Jessica Enoch, for example, has asked scholars to consider the ways rhetorics of space—“what [a] space should be, what it should do, and what should go on inside it”—define, enable, and constrain a scene’s inhabitants (276), while Jordynn Jack has called for “feminist rhetoricians [to] pay more attention to gendered rhetorics of bodies, clothing, space, and time *together* in order to construct more thorough accounts of the rhetorical practices that sustain gender differences” (286; italics original). Responding to their framework, I suggest that the spread of the bob and the reaction to it was inextricably tied to women’s participation in the labor force; that is, their inhabiting of a new physical and subsequently discursive space at a time of widely felt social upheaval, particularly in the growing urban centers

where debate over the bob was most fervent. These women formed a ready audience and source of advocacy for the bob.

During the first three decades of the twentieth century, the population of the United States became increasingly urban, from 40% in 1900 to 56.2% in 1930 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census* 6), with a subsequent shift in the labor force. During this time, the percentage of the women's labor force working in white-collar professions rose from 17.8% to 44.2%, while those in farm work declined from 18.9% to 8.4% and manual and service work from 63.2% to 47.3% (U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Occupational Trends* 6).²³ Many of these new jobs for women—as teachers, nurses, clerks, secretaries, telephone operators, sales workers—were in urban areas and required either historically high degrees of literacy education or, at the very least, the ability to communicate effectively in spoken and written English (Blackwelder 63). These jobs also required greater attention to physical appearance than did the agricultural and manufacturing jobs they supplanted. Of particular significance to the bobbed hair movement is the increase in women as a percentage of clerical workers, from 4.7% in 1880 to 29.2% in 1900 to 45% in 1920 (DeVault 12), a trend that dramatically changed and to a large degree "feminized" office culture.

As more and more young, educated women entered urban public and professional spaces, they increasingly transformed the discourse inered in those spaces. I am not suggesting these public and quasi-public professional spaces necessarily became regendered or even more egalitarian. Indeed many women found these new professional spaces limiting or left them upon marriage. However, as more women occupied these spaces, they increasingly drew on contemporary rhetorical commonplaces to argue for personal and public freedoms within them. They insisted that the bob represented part of the natural evolutionary progress of women in society. They celebrated its efficiency and convenience as appropriate for the modern office and the modern era. They resisted the reading of their bodies as public and, like men, insisted on a private space within public domains, drawing on a commonplace rhetoric of individual rights. What a woman did with her hair, many women insisted, was a private concern, one ideally off limits to public debate, though of course argued, and ultimately accepted to a large degree, through public debate and public presentation. To borrow Lisa Suter's apt phrasing, the bob was an argument women wore—and, for a time, an argument they largely won.

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Notes

- 1 Locals would have recognized it as the Grove, a local landmark and home of an antebellum governor.
- 2 Early Florida State College for Women *Flastacowo* yearbooks are available for browsing on the Internet Archive (archive.org). The 1930 “Features” section described above begins at <<https://archive.org/stream/flastacowo171930flor#page/n192/mode/2up>>.
- 3 In 1927, Gertrude B. Lane, editor of the *Woman's Home Companion*, estimated that 14 million American women had bobbed their hair; this would have represented roughly one-third of the approximately 43 million women aged 15 and older (“14,000,000 Bobbed Heads”; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census* 9). Any period estimates must be taken with caution, but contemporary reports and photographs suggest a majority of school- and college-aged women adopting the cut and widespread acceptance by women overall as the decade progressed. Bobbed hair also contributed to the rise of the modern beauty salon; from 1920 to 1930, a period during which the labor force increased 15.2%, the number of barbers, beauticians, and manicurists rose from 214,000 to 371,000, a 73.4% increase (U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics* 140, 144).
- 4 The bob was an international phenomenon as well, with reports on the cut ranging from Mexico to Europe to the Far East. In France (where its advent is commonly attributed to Coco Chanel), it served as a resonant symbol of post-war social disruption; see Mary Louise Roberts, “Samson and Delilah” and *Civilization without Sexes* (63-87); see also Steven Zdatny, *Fashion, Work, and Politics in Modern France* (53-77).
- 5 Some women took advantage of the cut to have their hair done in a permanent wave or marcel, which, though adding expense and maintenance, was thought to offer a softer, more feminine look.
- 6 Though the ethics of hair straightening was debated in the black press, African American women do not commonly appear to have felt free to eschew the practice (see Byrd and Tharps 25-49).
- 7 A 1923 *Los Angeles Times* headline captured this note of frustration, asking, “Bobbed Hair May Be Passé—But How Can You Stop the Craze?”

- 8 Recent conceptualizations of epideictic rhetoric have called attention to its reflective, argumentative, and constitutive purposes and considered genres beyond traditional forms of ceremonial display (see Bordelon; Condit; Ramsey; Sheard).
- 9 The women of Gilman's feminist utopia in the novel *Herland* notably wear their hair short and functional (59-60); for further treatment of Gilman's views, see Stevenson, "Hair Today."
- 10 *Life* (1886), edited during this period by Charles Dana Gibson, was a popular humor magazine akin to the early *New Yorker* (1925); it was purchased in 1936 by *Time* publisher Henry Luce, who sought the name for his about-to-launch photojournal (Baughman 90).
- 11 It may also have been felt that long hair could be more easily kept pinned up and out of the way and that bobbed hair was more unruly, thus necessitating the use of nets.
- 12 Daniels was sometimes erroneously reported as company president; news reports suggest Aetna employed from 3,000 to 6,000 women.
- 13 Contemporary reports vary as to how many women were actually fired or quit.
- 14 A 1925 millinery textbook suggested a three-inch difference in hat size circumference between a bobbed and unbobbed head (Loewen 11).
- 15 It appears that, as First Lady, propriety may have kept Coolidge from bobbing her hair, though by the time of her husband's inauguration she was favoring a tight, bob-like marcel, braided in the back, that reputedly inspired many women unable or unwilling to commit to bobbing their own hair. See the 1923 photo, "Grace Coolidge," available at the Library of Congress website: <<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2002712381/>>.
- 16 The writer suggests one possible reason why older leaders of the GFWC may have been reluctant to bob their hair: memory of how earlier women's rights activists Anna Elizabeth Dickinson and Anna Howard Shaw "were ridiculed because they cut their hair" (2). In her well-known autobiography, Shaw acknowledged the rhetorical challenges her short cut had presented in explaining her return to long hair: "I had learned that no woman in public life can afford to make herself conspicuous by any eccentricity of dress or appearance" lest she "injur[e] the cause she represents" (260).
- 17 Such reports might have inspired one of the cartoon illustrations that accompanied Parker's essay, a spiky buzzcut titled the "Sing Sing Sing" (9).

- 18 McMein, well established in New York bohemian circles, wore her own hair fashionably short. A successful commercial illustrator and portraitist, she is perhaps best known for her magazine covers for *McCall's* and other publications and for designing the first official image of Betty Crocker, used by General Mills from 1936-55. Hughes, who would have a brief career as an actress before marriage, would go on to place third in that year's Miss America contest; in reporting on the event, the *New York Times* noted that "not one of the four finalists had bobbed hair" ("Beauty Crown" 14).
- 19 The Polish-born Antoine [Antek Cierplikowski] gained fame first as a Parisian hairdresser and later as a stylist for a number of leading Hollywood actresses; he claimed to have invented the modern bob before World War I in cutting the hair of French stage actress Eve Lavallière for a part in which she was to play a teenager (Antoine 47-50).
- 20 Strom notes age-based tensions in the office between older women who wanted or needed to maintain permanent employment and younger women thought to be in the workforce only temporarily, amplified by a male-dominated environment that favored—and sexually objectified—beauty and youth (398-405).
- 21 Mary Louise Roberts speculates on the extent to which the bob in France offered actual liberation or an illusion of such, but acknowledges its symbolic import to wearers and observers.
- 22 Though the stock market crash likely contributed, headlines show their sharpest drop off from 1927 to 1928, suggesting that it was the ubiquity of the cut, rather than subsequent economic uncertainty, that displaced it from the news.
- 23 In 1900, there were 5,319,397 women in the labor force, with 948,731 engaged in white-collar work, 1,007,865 in farm work, and 3,362,801 in manual and service work; in 1930, there were 10,752,116 women in the labor force, with 4,756,263 in white-collar work, 907,789 in farm work, and 5,088,064 in manual and service work (U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Occupational Trends* 6). Figures have been approximated for comparison purposes (1).

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PQ= ProQuest; AHN=America's Historical Newspapers.

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