

# “THE PERFECT WOMAN:” ANNETTE KELLERMAN AND THE SPECTACLE OF THE FEMALE FORM

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Early silent screen star, Annette Kellerman helped redefine gender norms in the United States by openly displaying her body as the feminine ideal of health and fitness. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, the Australian-born swimmer, vaudevillian, and film star achieved worldwide popularity for both her athletic prowess as a long-distance swimmer and her scandalous beach attire. She turned her notoriety into a successful entertainment career, first in vaudeville, then on screen in series of mermaid films. Kellerman also published books and delivered lectures that addressed the health and fitness of women.

Throughout the period of her greatest fame, Kellerman self-consciously addressed the gender-specific obstacles that confronted women athletes and performers, very often, addressing her female fans woman-to-woman. At the same time, she also demonstrated her desire to break down barriers by transgressing Victorian gender roles that insisted on the strict divide between the “separate spheres.” Like many other notable women of the period, she simply wanted the same opportunities as men to participate in sports and entertainment. While Kellerman did not openly describe herself as a feminist, her career illustrates what historian Nancy Cott has described as one of its paradoxes, namely that feminism “requires gender consciousness for its basis yet calls for the elimination of prescribed gender roles.”<sup>1</sup> Kellerman certainly was always aware and proud of her accomplishments as a woman, yet she consciously helped to create a “new woman” who challenged the bounds of Anglo-American Victorianism.

Despite her fame during the turn of the century, Kellerman has all but disappeared from most contemporary screen histories. As Jennifer Bean has pointed out, the absence of early women films stars, especially those actresses known for their physical daring represents a “curious lacuna” in film scholarship. Kellerman, one of the most athletic of early women screen actresses, starred in

a series of mermaid films beginning with *Siren of the Sea* (1911) and ending with her last film, *Venus of the South Seas* (1924), all of which capitalized on her widespread fame as a swimmer. Many film fans today only know her as the biographical subject of the Esther Williams’ film, *Million Dollar Mermaid* (1952). In 1949, Esther Williams had starred in a remake of *Neptune’s Daughter*, Kellerman’s best known role. One obvious reason for her absence in most histories is the lack of existing films for contemporary scholars and film enthusiasts. Unfortunately, Kellerman’s most popular films, the original *Neptune’s Daughter* (1914) and *A Daughter of the Gods* (1916), have not survived intact. However, according to Bean, what makes early women stars like Kellerman of interest to contemporary scholars, despite the obvious research issues, is the fact their “drawing power refuted market demographics and leveled the niceties of gender, age, class, and national appeal.”<sup>2</sup> The career of Kellerman provides a rich field for cultural historians interested in the reconfiguration of gender and class norms during the early twentieth century. Kellerman’s popularity certainly spanned an audience who saw her as a role model as a physically active modern woman and those who enjoyed the spectacle of the display of her barely clad body.

The meaning of Kellerman’s physicality was certainly in the eye of the beholder. Kellerman was certainly self-conscious about the display of her physical beauty. However, she was anything, but a passive vessel, presented solely for the male gaze. She promoted the display of her own body, thus endorsing a definition of female beauty that emphasized fitness and active pleasure, rather than slenderness and leisure. Historian Joan Jacobs Brumberg explicitly contrasts Kellerman and her healthy body culture to the growing emphasis on slenderness and dieting for women that she also traces to the early decades of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup>

For Kellerman, her lifelong pursuit of physical excellence begins as a child learning to swim in the clubs and beaches in her native Australia. While film historians do not have access to most of Kellerman's films, we do have biographical knowledge of her childhood and of her early successes as a swimmer and aquatic performer. Perhaps more than other screen performers, biography provides an essential insight into the film career of Kellerman, because her stardom depended less on her ability to act the part than for the part to fit her public persona. Her name was above the title of her best known features, so we must assume Kellerman and her athletic feats were, in Tom Gunning's phrase, "the spectacle of attraction."<sup>4</sup> What is more, early feature film producers such as Carl Laemmle and William Fox hoped to exploit her popularity by conflating her on-screen character with her off-screen achievements as a world class swimmer and adventurer in order to produce their studios' longer, more exotic productions.<sup>5</sup>

Kellerman's public persona rested on both her achievement as a swimmer and the highly romanticized view of her native Australia as a rugged frontier.<sup>6</sup> According to her most recent biographers, Kellerman, born in 1886, was raised in a cultured, bourgeois household in suburban Sydney. Her French-born mother, Alice Charbonnet, raised her four children in an environment of music and culture. She would later enroll young Annette in ballet class and dance would be a life-long pursuit. Despite the comfortable and nurturing atmosphere of the Kellerman household, young Annette had to overcome early physical adversity. At the age of two, she was diagnosed with rickets and wore iron leg braces until she was seven. Her doctor prescribed swimming and soon she excelled at what was gaining great popularity as the national sport of Australia. While latter press releases and legend maintained Annette learned to swim among the sharks of the Great Barrier Reef, she took lessons at a local swimming pool. Managed by her father Frederick, the teenage Annette swam competitively at meets held at a growing number of swim clubs in Sydney and Melbourne.<sup>7</sup> Her childhood experiences made her something of a saleswoman for the virtues of physical exercise, especially swimming, leading her to write three books: *Swimming for Health, Exercise and Pleasure* (U.K. 1906), *How to Swim* (1918), and *Physical Beauty: How to Keep It* (1918). Kellerman's ideas on physical fitness also appeared in dance and general women's magazines and even Bernarr Macfadden's popular *Physical Culture* magazine.<sup>8</sup>

Kellerman was at the forefront of changes that were occurring in international sports for both men and women athletes. When Kellerman began her swimming career, the line between amateur and professional athlete was not very clear and there were few internationally regulated venues for swimmers, especially women. When the first modern Olympics were held in Athens in 1896, only three men's swimming events were held. The first women's swimming Olympic meet was in 1912 (years after Kellerman began her swimming career), and was only a short

**ANNETTE  
KELLERMANN**

60 AND HER COMPANY OF ASSOCIATE PLAYERS 60  
INCLUDING SIXTY DANCING GIRLS

**"THE  
PERFECT  
WOMAN"**

MEASUREMENTS THAT ALMOST  
SURPASS BELIEF

	ANNETTE KELLERMANN	VENUS DEMILO	DIANA
	FT. IN.	FT. IN.	FT. IN.
HEIGHT	5.4	5.4	5.3
HEAD	21.3	21.3	19.
NECK	12.6	12.5	11.
CHEST	33.1	33.	33.
WAIST	26.2	26.	27.
HIPS	37.8	38.	37.
THIGH	22.2	22.5	24.
CALF	13.	13.2	13.
ANKLE	7.7	7.4	8.
UPPER ARM	12.	12.6	15.
FORE ARM	9.4	9.5	11.
WRIST	5.9	5.9	6.

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100 meter race.<sup>9</sup> Rather than internationally sanctioned amateur events, newspapers and swim clubs sponsored long distance swimming events in Europe and England often providing lucrative prize money. Kellerman, going by the nickname "Australian Mermaid," achieved renown by winning races held in the Seine and the Thames. She also wore what would become her trademark—a black, one-piece bathing suit. By 1905, she had made three unsuccessful attempts to swim the English Channel. However, her record of ten and a half hours in the water remained the women's record until Gertrude Ederle became the first woman to cross the Channel in 1921.<sup>10</sup>

This mix of pure athleticism and showmanship was the trademark of Kellerman's career in vaudeville and later on screen when she moved to the United States. While Kellerman should certainly be understood as a pioneer in breaking down gender barriers, her career is also instructive in the way class and gender barriers often reinforce each other. Though trained in classical ballet and music, Kellerman's best known performances were in the decidedly "low brow" realms of the popular stage and moving pictures. Her first appearance in the United States, like many of her later engagements, was at an amusement park, Chicago's White City Amusement Park in 1907. During the 1890s and 1900s nearly every American city had created a waterfront amusement that featured aquatic themed attractions and Kellerman proved to be one of the most popular. As historian David Nasaw has argued the amusement parks of the era catered to a large diverse audience

during a period when American workers had gained more leisure time. However, the proprietors of this new form of commercial public space, despite some of its decidedly low-brow attractions—wax museums, freak shows, etc.—attempted with mixed success to attract a middle-class audience by the means of restrictive admissions policies and by promoting more “wholesome” forms of entertainment.<sup>11</sup> Acts like Kellerman’s diving and swimming shows did offer a bit of sex appeal, but within the context of wholesome athleticism. Kellerman’s ability to challenge the confinement of Victorian gender norms on women could only have taken place in the context of the breakdown between “high and low culture” as the cultural signifiers of class difference. Kellerman was neither a burlesque star performing a striptease nor a classical ballet dancer, but her aquatic act provided elements of both.

Kellerman’s stardom as a popular stage performer occurred at the time when the commercial stage was attempting to appeal to a more genteel and wealthier middle-class audience. The advantages of anchoring the theater within the middle-class entertainment is two fold. Most obviously, middle-class audiences would be willing to pay a higher price ticket price, thus raising profit. Less obviously, attracting a “higher” clientele would also protect the stage from attempts at censorship from various church and civic groups concerned with the pernicious influence of the popular. According to Andrew L. Erdman, the new breed of stage entrepreneurs, like B.F. Keith and E.F. Albee, attempted to clean up burlesque by turning it into vaudeville.<sup>12</sup> The term vaudeville with its vague French folk origin was preferred by Keith and Albee to the older term burlesque with its lowbrow connotations. Albee and Keith hired Kellerman because she seemed the perfect performer for their new vision of the popular theater. There was a wholesomeness to her youthful energy and her athletic feats of daring performed on huge specially designed aquatics stage. Most importantly, her performances were considered suitable for women and their children, who by all accounts, made up much her audience. However, at the same time, she appeared on stage in tight, revealing bathing suits that appealed to the prurient interests of the older burlesque audiences. Albee even had mirrors placed on stage to afford his patrons better looks at Kellerman in her form fitting suit. Kellerman’s stardom represented a new “middle-brow” type of entertainment which is neither the high culture of classical dance, nor the low culture of the variety stage with its reliance on broad humor and sex.

This breakdown between high and low culture created a contradictory cultural space for the display of the female body. On the one hand, Kellerman’s open and innocent display of her body fit into traditional depictions of female virtue, while her tight fitting swimsuit was also considered by many as entirely too sexually provocative. As art historian T.J. Clark argues in his study of the cultural impact of Edouard Manet’s *Olympia* (1863) “sexual force and nakedness are most often not disentangled.”<sup>13</sup> Clark goes on to argue nakedness must be placed in the cultural

order of the symbolic, rather than the real as a means of containing sexual desire. In the United States, this containment often took on a contradictory blend of “prurience and Puritanism.” An example of this paradox is illustrated by the notoriety brought about by Kellerman’s arrest in 1908 on charges of indecent exposure. For Kellerman, her one-piece form fitting bathing suit liberated her from the constraints of the cumbersome dress deemed appropriate for women. The bathing suit, which she adopted from a male one-piece, made her a more efficient swimmer in the water and allowed for a “healthy” athleticism. However, on the beach she revealed so much skin she was arrested for indecent exposure during a swimming exhibition in Boston. Her arrest made national headlines as Kellerman simply wanted to demonstrate women’s ability and desire for physical activity. If the one-piece suit upset the purity reformers or elicited wolfish leers, the iconoclastic Kellerman seemed determined not to conform to Victorian norms. Kellerman, in interviews, in lectures, and in her own athletic pursuits, explicitly aligned herself with those fashion reformers critical of the restrictions of corseting and other “shaping” devices that limited the mobility and health of women.<sup>14</sup> In addition, she was not greeted with the same degree of controversy in Europe when she wore a similar suit two years earlier. Her arrest in Boston only increased her star power, and perhaps added a bit of continental sophistication to her public persona. Shortly after her arrest in Boston, the “Annette Kellerman” swimsuit became a fashion rage among young women.

Her fame on and off the vaudeville stage attracted the interest of movie producers. In 1909, she performed in a Vitagraph short in a pool built especially for her. However, Universal producer Carl Laemmle launched her feature career as the star of a seven-reel fairy tale, *Neptune’s Daughter*.<sup>15</sup> While we unfortunately don’t have an extant copy, film reviews give us some idea of the movie’s popular appeal. *Variety* declared *Neptune’s Daughter* “is healthy, clean, full of life and action, the life and action that come from athletics and outdoor science.” The review also added “that the exhibitor may quietly confide to his patrons they will see more of Annette in it than they ever hoped or expected to.”<sup>16</sup> While producers certainly exploited the prurient aspect of her appeal, they had to be careful not to cross the boundaries of genteel propriety that the industry hoped to maintain for their increasingly middle-class audiences. Producers seemed to cross the boundary when the National Board of Review in 1917 banned nudity in the movies citing the example of Kellerman in *A Daughter of the Gods* (1916).

Her film career extended her influence well beyond that of the vaudeville stage or the occasional headlines for her athletic feats. An Australian who became famous in Europe before embarking on a successful stage and screen career in the United States, Kellerman and her appeal were truly global. The image of Kellerman in her one-piece bathing suit hands extended to the sky became iconic around the world. Film historian Joanne Bernardi describes the cultural impact of Kellerman on early twentieth century

Japan. The main character in the 1920 Japanese film *Amateur Club* was depicted wearing a bathing suit modeled on Kellerman's from *Neptune's Daughter* (released in Japan in 1917). According to Bernardi, women in 1920 still wore traditional dress, the depiction of a Japanese woman in a swimsuit striking the familiar Kellerman diving "pose" certainly represented the coming of age of the modern "New Woman" in Japan. Bernardi also describes the plot of a popular Japanese novel from 1925 in which the main character, a "modern girl" brings her friend to see *Neptune's Daughter* and "begs her to imitate a pose taken by its star Annette Kellerman."<sup>17</sup>

Her appearance in *Neptune's Daughter* also seemed to have an immediate impact on one of the pioneers of film scholarship in the United States, Hugo Münsterberg. Münsterberg, a German born professor recruited by William James to chair Harvard's new department of psychology wrote one of the first book length studies on film theory published in the United States, *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (1916). In an article published in *The Cosmopolitan* a year earlier in 1915, Münsterberg explained his interest in the new medium of the moving picture:

I may confess frankly that I was one of those snobbish late-comers. Until a year ago I had never seen a real photoplay. Although I was always a passionate lover of the theater, I should have felt it as undignified for a Harvard Professor to attend a moving-picture show, just as I should not have gone to a vaudeville performance or to a museum of wax figures to a phonograph concert. Last year, while I was traveling a thousand miles from Boston, I and a friend risked seeing *Neptune's Daughter*, and my conversion was rapid. I recognized at once that here marvelous possibilities were open, and I began to explore with eagerness the world which was new to me.<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps we can credit Kellerman as the inspiration for Münsterberg's *The Photoplay*. Can we infer the physical beauty of Kellerman had something to do with the attraction of Münsterberg to *Neptune's Daughter* and later to the theme of film aesthetics? His description of his first movie certainly reads like a confession of a guilty pleasure. Why *Neptune's Daughter* and not one of the other feature films that began to appear in 1914? Perhaps, his choice was a coincidence or one of convenience. However, his book length study of the film concerns itself primarily with aesthetics. It seems plausible the physical beauty of Kellerman and perhaps even a glimpse of skin were his inspiration.

The contrasted attitude Münsterberg and Kellerman have toward the new medium of moving pictures also can be understood in both class and gender terms. In his description of his day at the movies, Münsterberg all but describes his experience as a cultural slumming. As Seth Coven has recently argued, bourgeois Victorians in England were often repulsed and attracted to the lives of the underclass, and that attraction often took a sexualized form.<sup>19</sup> In contrast, perhaps Münsterberg's erotic

interest in Kellerman was "de-sexualized" into aesthetic theory as a means of explaining the presence of an eminent Harvard University professor spending an afternoon watching a mermaid picture? His condescending attitude toward popular culture and the need to justify his interest is in marked difference to that of Kellerman. Despite her upper-class upbringing and her training in classical ballet, Kellerman embraces the new opportunities of popular culture with little fear. Her biographer even notes she was very popular among her fellow vaudevillians and never expressed any feeling of class snobbery. As cultural historian Kathy Peiss has argued, many working-class women at the turn of the century embraced new forms of commercial culture including the movies as a means of expressing greater autonomy. For Peiss, twentieth century popular culture created new heterosocial spaces that broke down both gender and class divisions.<sup>20</sup> Though born of the upper class, Kellerman flourished in the world of vaudeville and the movies where the traditional boundaries of class and gender were less strictly policed.

Part of the lacuna regarding early silent era woman may be due to latter efforts to fit the movies into traditional definitions of art and aesthetic that either minimized or ignored movement as an essential element in the medium. Laura Marcus argues Hugo Münsterberg's film aesthetics were influenced by an earlier scholar, Ethel Puffer. Puffer argued "the beauty of an object lies in its permanent possibility of creating the perfect moment. The experience of this moment, the union of stimulation and repose, constitute the unique aesthetic emotion."<sup>21</sup> However, appreciation of Kellerman's talents did not come in a moment of repose, but in the din of the amusement park, vaudeville stage, nickelodeon, or the beach. The de-contextualization of the spectacle of movement is the part of aestheticism that may be an explanation for the disappearance of the female action star. Kellerman's daring dives were experienced not in repose, but in active participation. The ohs and ahs of the audience as well as the immediate physical responses of fear and joy are forgotten by film theorist like Münsterberg in favor of the frozen and penetrating gaze of the close-up captured in a single moment.

A closer study of early pre-classical cinema provides us perhaps with an alternative history of the cinema in which actresses had more power to create their star personas than they would in the more mature Hollywood studio system. Laura Mulvey's groundbreaking article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) has dominated feminist film scholarship with its model of male spectatorship in classic Hollywood cinema.<sup>22</sup> She argues the entire apparatus of "classic Hollywood" has been organized around the male gaze and what she calls the "to-be-looked-at-ness" of the erotic spectacle of the female body. Implicit in Mulvey's schema is the passiveness of the female body. Control of women's bodies and the "fashioning" of their appearance are seen primarily, or indeed almost exclusively, as expressions of male power. Yet, Kellerman's career on screen and off challenges much of Mulvey's theory regarding classic cinema. It would be an overstatement to say Kellerman

or any other early pre-classical female film star had equal power with male producers like Carl Laemmle or William Fox. However, Kellerman was not a passive object for the manipulation of her male producers. She was able within limits to create a public persona and display her body for a male and female audience in a way that defies any simple model of objectification.

The haunting insight bequeathed to us by Karl Marx that "men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please" seems appropriate. In the context of Kellerman's career, we need to revise Marx's archaic language so as to include those women who did make history by creating their own film careers, and by redefining gender norms through the active display of their bodies, although they certainly did not do so entirely as they pleased.

## ENDNOTES

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