

## **Breasts: The Women's Perspective on an American Obsession**

Carolyn Latteier

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### **Reviewed by Jean Feerick**

Carolyn Latteier's study of what she terms the "public institution" (111) of the breast is an original and noteworthy addition to the growing library of books treating the cultural construction of beauty, breasts, and female bodies. Her approach is original and invigorating largely because she brings to bear on her topic a remarkable variety of tools and approaches. Combining academic research with social commentary, case history, and historical analysis, Latteier has constructed a style and a voice that make her book accessible to a wide audience while also demonstrating a vigor of analysis which prevents her from drawing quick and easy answers to the timeworn and complex issue of how and why the breast has become the cultural fetish we know it to be today. Not limiting herself as the title suggests to America's obsession with breasts today, Latteier actually travels far and wide for answers to her many and varied questions, revisiting ancient myths and cultures, non-western customs, and various historical moments in western culture in her attempt to show the contingency and variability of the breast's deployment in various times and places. At least part of her reason for doing so is to shock many out of the complacent assumption that the breast is invested with transcendent meanings simply inherited from yesteryear, most notably, perhaps, the assumption that it has always and forever been an erotic object.

Not so, argues Latteier, in discussions organized into chapters analyzing discrete topics such as breast implants, breastfeeding, teenage identity crises, male fetishism, and mother-child bonding, among others. In fact, much of her research aims to show just how alien our own equation of breasts with eroticism is when compared with other times and cultures, and to emphasize the cultural "fallout" that such an obsession produces for both men and women alike. Turning first to the painful transition compressed into the teenage years, she demonstrates how our shared cultural obsession scars many for life, often inhibiting the development of a mature sexuality later in life. While here her primary focus is teenage girls and their subjection to various forms of abuse, a later chapter takes up the "perverse" effects on male sexuality that this "institution" breeds, not least the objectification of women and the substitution of the breast for fuller emotional growth and satisfaction. Here she takes a bit far, in this reviewer's estimation, the notion that breast eroticization derives from less than ideal experiences of mother-child nurture, acting as a substitute or fetish for what is in many cases the premature termination of nurture at the

mother's breast. But she is savvy enough to combine such a view with the realization that widespread commodification of the breast also shares responsibility for producing these desires through its own habit of objectifying the female body—that this obsession is not so much an individual pathology as a cultural phenomenon. At times, however, the author seems to long to recover what she calls our “animal beauty” (56), a sort of “pre-cultural” body not so thoroughly infused with social meanings. She betrays, for instance, an uneasiness with the “artificiality” of silicone breasts, as opposed to what she documents as their many physical dangers, despite her knowledge that modern bodies have become veritable containers for prostheses such as fillings, contact lenses, and hair coloring. But elsewhere I think she rightly intuits that such a condition is impossible, that the body arrives to us always-already marked and limited by cultural doctrine.

While drawing on a range of professional schools to substantiate her many points including psychology, sociology, anthropology, and medicine—Latteier also preserves a healthy and critical distance from these discourses, interrogating the assumptions operating beneath their professed objectivity and foregrounding their own ideological investments. Particularly witty moments include her refusal of Freud's notion of the fetish as a response to penis envy or castration anxiety as a “patriarchal con job” (102); her analysis of the implicit sexism operating in the theories of evolution experts who argue that the uniqueness of human breasts derive from the trickery of “primal prostitutes” (139) trying to ensnare their mates into providing for them; and her analysis of how medical practitioners have helped to perpetuate this cultural obsession through their own efforts to expand the category of “disease” to include small but healthy breasts, and then have attempted to define as “neurotic” those women who, in seeking implants, try to redress what medicine and culture alike tells them are anatomical deficiencies.

Her narrative does not, unfortunately, capture in any depth the “women's perspective” on breasts as emblems of death and dying rather than lifegiving and nurturance, as is clearly the case for many women experiencing or expecting to experience the horrors of breast cancer. Perhaps a chapter treating this perspective and analyzing our cultural belatedness in responding to this crisis could have been included to demonstrate yet another harmful side effect of our eroticization of the breast. Additionally, although Latteier is admirable in trying to redefine womanhood so as to accommodate the competing demands of nurture and career growth, providing snapshots of women who have made both work, there is very little revisioning here of fatherhood, as if our author had ultimately come to accept the notion that men and women are “naturally” and “essentially” afforded different social and cultural roles by virtue of their differing biology. As Latteier insists elsewhere (71-72), the predicament our culture finds itself in by virtue of its obsession with breasts is ultimately a burden we all must share. Women need not and should not be expected to bear it alone.