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The Art of Scandal: Modernism, Libel Law, and the Roman a Clef (Modernist Literature and Culture)

Sean Latham

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The Art of Scandal advances a relatively simple claim with far-reaching consequences for modernist studies: writers and readers throughout the early twentieth century revived the long-despised codes and habits of the roman à clef as a key part of that larger assault on Victorian realism we now call modernism. In the process, this resurgent genre took on a life of its own, reconfiguring the intricate relationship between literature, celebrity, and the law.

Sean Latham summons cases of the novel's social notoriety-and the numerous legal scandals the form provoked-to articulate the material networks of reception and circulation through which modernism took shape, revealing a little explored popular history within its development. Producers as well as consumers used elements of the controversial roman à clef, a genre that challenges the idea of fiction as autonomous from the social and political world. In turn, this widespread practice provoked not only a generative aesthetic crisis, but also a gradually unfolding legal quandary that led Britain's highest courts to worry that fiction itself might be illegal. Modernism sat squarely, for a time, between literature and the law.

With skillful close readings aided by extensive archival research, Latham illuminates the world of backbiting, gossip, litigation, and sensationalism through chapters on Oscar Wilde's trial, Joyce's *Ulysses*, celebrity salons, and Parisian bohemia. Original, colorful, and perceptive, *The Art of Scandal* both salvages the reputation of the roman à clef form and traces its curious itinerary through the early twentieth century.

Seeking out the best new interdisciplinary work, this series explores the cultural bearings of literary modernism across multiple fields, geographies, symbolic forms, and media.

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