

“To Amuse Intelligently and Cleverly”: Carolyn Wells and Literary Parody

Margaret D. Stetz

In the Introduction to his 1984 volume, *The Faber Book of Parodies*, the British novelist and anthologist Simon Brett began by paying tribute to an American predecessor of eighty years earlier, saying, “In taking entertainment value as my guiding principle, I am following that excellent anthologist, Carolyn Wells, who wrote in 1904: ‘The main intent of the vast majority of parodies is simply to amuse; but to amuse intelligently and cleverly.’”¹ This acknowledgment of Wells not only as a collector of humor, but also as a theorist of it, was as welcome as it was rare. She had indeed been a groundbreaking thinker on the subject of comedy, who analyzed the functions and purposes of parody in her own Introduction to *A Parody Anthology*, issued by Scribner’s in 1904, while also defending it as “a true and legitimate branch of art.”² What Brett chose to ignore, however, was that Wells had been more than a mere assembler and critic of the works of others—that she had also been a widely published humorist, adept at many genres including parody, and that the anthology Brett cited had contained numerous examples of her own efforts.

M.D. Stetz (✉)
University of Delaware, Newark, USA

By producing parodies, Wells broke with turn-of-the-century literary expectations around the subject of gender. Her own “guiding principle,” which was indeed to “amuse intelligently and cleverly,” flew squarely in the face of assumptions about women’s writing as being chiefly sentimental—perhaps as sometimes capable of a superficial cleverness, but never as intelligent *per se*. Her literary parodies violated the norms of gender hierarchies, for they almost invariably imitated and exaggerated the flaws of high-status male authors and thus implicitly laid claim to a woman’s right to mock her masculine peers and antecedents. Moreover, many of these parodies in verse form were directed at the exemplars of British and European artistic movements held up by American critics as the *ne plus ultra* in sophistication. To recover Wells as a parodist now, therefore, is to reconsider the canon of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American women’s comic writing and to see it as participating self-consciously not only in social debates over the rearrangement of gender roles, but in cultural debates over the formation of taste.

Despite the scholarly interest in earlier American women’s comic writing that began in the 1980s and that brought to light the significance of nineteenth-century pioneers such as Frances Whitcher (1811–1852) and Marietta Holley (1836–1926), Carolyn Wells (1862–1942) remains a neglected and understudied figure. Today, it is easier to name the many places where her name ought to appear, but does not, than to locate discussions of her comic work in general or of her parodies in particular. Although she is, for instance, represented with an entry in Steven H. Gale’s *Encyclopedia of American Humorists* (1988), she is nonetheless absent from Kenneth Baker’s *Unauthorized Versions: Poems and Their Parodies* (1990) and from John Gross’s 1995 *The Oxford Book of Comic Verse* (which includes work by her American male contemporaries and associates, such as Gelett Burgess), as well as from Gross’s later *The Oxford Book of Parodies* (2010), where other Americans are again present as both subjects and authors of parody. Perhaps more surprising is her omission from *Russell Baker’s Book of American Humor* (1993), with its sections devoted specifically to “The Sex Problem” and to “Parody, Burlesque, Criticism, and Pain”—either of which might have offered an appropriate opportunity to reproduce her verse. Among the few modern collections to acknowledge her achievements at all is William Zaranka’s *The Brand-X Anthology of Poetry: A Parody Anthology* (1981), which uses two brief examples of her parodies—one of John Dryden and one of Dante Gabriel Rossetti.³

The unkindest cut, however, comes from a latter-day feminist scholar of humor studies, Regina Barreca. In her important 1996 anthology, *The Penguin Book of Women's Humor*, Barreca allows space for only one of Wells's poems, albeit a particularly biting one that exposes to ridicule long-accepted traditions in both gender and genre. “To a Milkmaid,” Wells's parody of pastoral conventions in verse, sends up lyrics that rhapsodize condescendingly over the “inevitable” figure of the rural girl of “eighteen summers,” with her “impossible milkpail” and “improbable bodice,” who is always on “the wrong side of the cow sitting.” The poem ends as it begins, with the sort of gaseous apostrophizing that usually comes from (male) pastoral poets:

I hail thee!

I hail thy vernality, and I rejoice in thy hackneyed ubiquitousness.

I hail the superiority of thy inferiorness, and

I lay at thy feet this garland of gratuitous

Hails!⁴

Wells's poem illustrates perfectly Barreca's intention, as expressed in her “Introduction,” to demonstrate that “women's humor often satirizes the social forces designed to keep women in ‘their places,’ a phrase that has become synonymous with keeping women quietly bound by cultural stereotypes,”⁵ even as the parody suggests why women readers and writers, in particular, should be impatient with the persistence of those stereotypes in literature and should wish to sweep them away by means of derisive laughter. It is, therefore, both disappointing and somewhat baffling to find Wells otherwise shut out of *The Penguin Book of Women's Humor*. At the same time, the Irish novelist Elizabeth Bowen (1899–1973), a writer by no means famous for producing comedy, is represented by *ten* selections from various works. Indeed, samples of Bowen's prose are allotted fully twenty pages in Barreca's anthology, while no further poem by Wells appears—although, unlike Wells's long-out-of-print books of comic verse (including the 1900 volume *Idle Idyls*, from which “To a Milkmaid” was drawn), novels by Bowen were readily available in the 1990s.

In many ways, the struggle for representation that Carolyn Wells's works faced in the late twentieth century—a time when both comedy in

general and feminist comedy in particular had become newly respectable as scholarly subjects and as the focus of editorial projects—mirrored the difficulties that their author had confronted originally, at the start of her career in the 1890s. She would quite rightly boast, in her memoir *The Rest of My Life* (1937), of both her prolific output and astonishing commercial success: in 1902, as she reports, “I published eight books,” and from “that time on my minimum output has been three or four books a year,” so that “altogether I have written one hundred and seventy books. That is, so far.”⁶ These titles would include numerous works for children, along with dozens of detective novels for adults. Her introduction to professional authorship, however, came through poetry—primarily comic verse—and through the expanding world of magazines at the end of the nineteenth century. She was one among many women who “recognized that the magazine market offered a flexible form of publishing, in which ideas could be refuted, debated, and modified,”⁷ as well as, in her case, played with humorously. Nonetheless, although the wide circulation of “commentaries on the wisdom (or folly) of women in journalism bore witness to their growing public presence,”⁸ Wells’s entry into the public sphere was not made easy by the gatekeepers who controlled access to it.

Wells’s *The Rest of My Life* records the persistence that it required to break into one of the most influential literary environments of the *fin de siècle*: the exclusive circles around “little” periodicals. These monthlies and quarterlies were not, as Kirsten MacLeod explains in *American Little Magazines of the 1890s: A Revolution in Print* (2013), associated with mass consumerism, but were instead targeted at an elite US coterie that wished to affiliate itself with the British and European avant-garde. Little magazines were literally just that—“small in format and number of pages,” as well as in circulation; they rarely contained advertising, distinguished themselves by being “attractively designed, in an Arts and Crafts or Aesthetic style,” were printed on “bamboo paper, even wall-paper,” and “featured woodcuts, wood engravings, and poster-style art, eschewing the new cheap half-tone illustrations that dominated the popular periodicals”; and in content they favored the sort of “Aestheticism, Decadence, Symbolism, and Art Nouveau” found in British models such as the Bodley Head’s quarterly, the *Yellow Book* (1894–1897).⁹

Among the most attention-getting of these little magazines was the San Francisco-based *Lark*, founded by Gelett Burgess (1866–1951) in 1895. Each monthly issue was described as having been created by *les*

jeunes, but the group responsible for its literary contents was composed of men, rather than of young people in general, who had “hatched their plans ... at their retreat at Camp Ha-Ha.”¹⁰ Unlike similar periodicals, which proclaimed allegiance to a serious artistic mission, the *Lark* declared itself to be precisely what its title suggested: a mere *jeu d’esprit* and a fanciful indulgence in wit for wit’s sake. As both editor and author, Burgess made his aesthetic and his intentions clear with the inclusion, in the inaugural number of May 1895, of his nonsense poem, “The Purple Cow” (“I never saw a purple cow,/ I never hope to see one”), which proved an unexpected source of lasting popularity for him and of notoriety for the *Lark*.

To this idiosyncratic publication—which was, in the words of David Weir, meant “mainly as a means of pulling off literary ... pranks”¹¹—Carolyn Wells found herself irresistibly drawn. She began a campaign of ardent letter-writing, determined to persuade Gelett Burgess to accept some of her own humorous verse, even after her first attempt met with an unequivocally negative response. The policy of his magazine, as he informed her, was non-negotiable: “‘Only the joy of life,’ he wrote me; ‘no advertisements, no satire, no criticism; no timeliness and no women contributors.’”¹² But Wells, who was “in the first flush of glee at having landed contributions in *Life*, *Puck*, and *Judge*”—all three of them mainstream magazines dedicated to satire and to so-called light entertainments, and with circulations much larger than that of the *Lark*—would not be turned away; Burgess’s unapologetic misogyny merely spurred her own stubborn persistence: “This should have been a blow, but to me, at that stage of the game, such a blow was as stimulating as the tickle of the whiplash to the eager horse” and, therefore, her correspondence with the editor of the *Lark* “continued to grow in volume and frequency” until she had achieved her objective of proving herself to him—or, at least, of wearing him down.¹³ Burgess eventually welcomed her as one of “les jeunes” and bestowed upon her the nickname “HRH, the Princess Perilla,” writing whimsically about this imaginary character in the *Lark*. He also published some of Wells’s humorous verse under her real name, thus announcing his own change of policy and of heart.

Among her works for the *Lark* was “From Vivette’s ‘Milkmaid,’” another comic assault upon pastoral forms and upon the figure, in particular, of the naïve and often-celebrated milkmaid, which to Wells, in her autodidactic study of the lyric tradition, proved a perpetual irritant. At the same time, Wells’s references in the poem to a *purple* cow signaled

that she had penetrated the elite masculine coterie around Burgess, where to be allowed to play imaginatively with his uniquely colored creation (one already both famous and infamous) constituted a badge of membership. Thus, her poem, which appeared in the October 1896 issue of the magazine, was both a literary parody, written in Chaucerian style, and a confirmation of Wells's surprising status as a woman insider at the *Lark*. In the mid-1890s, she was still based geographically in her hometown of Rahway, New Jersey, and moreover, she continued to earn her living in the very bourgeois occupation of librarian at the local public library; yet she had been able to convince the bohemian male San Franciscans who congregated around Gelett Burgess that she belonged among them, sending up poetic clichés and doing so while writing in pseudo-Middle English:

A Mayde ther was, semely and meke enow,
 She sate a-milken of a purpil Cowe:
 Rosy hire Cheke as in the Month of Maye
 And sikerly her merry Songe was gay
 As of the Larke uprist, washen in Dewe:
 Like Shene of Sterres sperkled hire Eyen two.¹⁴

Later in the poem, she extended the inside joke about the “Larke” (as both a bird and, of course, a magazine) by having a knight “of Corage trewe” address the milkmaid and declare, “Parde I vowe/Erewhiles I never sawe a purpil Cowe!”—thus toying even more directly with Burgess’s well-known contribution to his periodical’s first number.¹⁵ Her irreverent imitation of medieval language was, moreover, also a subtle hit at the worship of the Middle Ages that had spread, by way of the British socialist poet and designer William Morris (1834–1896), throughout the American versions of the Arts and Crafts and Aesthetic movements and had inspired the residents of Camp Ha-Ha.

A multiple layering of targets—with laughter, in this case, at the expense of pastoral conventions, as well as at the cultural sacred cows (whether purple or not) of the British Aesthetes, which had been taken up by artistic circles in the USA—would prove a hallmark of Wells’s practice in general as a parodist. In the Introduction to her *A Parody*

Anthology (1904), she would later attempt to draw a clear distinction between parody and such corrective forms of humor-writing as satire: “The defenders of parody have sometimes endeavored to prove that it has an instructive value, and that it has acted as a reforming influence against mannerisms and other glaring defects.” She went on to dismiss what she called “this ethical air-castle,” which is “shattered by facts, for what established writer ever changed his characteristic effects as a result of the parodies upon his works[?]”¹⁶ All that parody could expect to accomplish, she concluded, was the amusement of the reader, but such an “aim is quite high enough, and is in no way strengthened or improved by the bolstering up qualities of avowed virtuous influences.”¹⁷ When it came, nonetheless, to writing parodies of her own, Wells sometimes chose to break her own rules about the genre and to combine amusement with a critical commentary directed at larger cultural phenomena, beyond the immediate style or diction of the given text that she was imitating for comic effect. To do so moved her work across the boundaries of parody and into the equally well-guarded masculine preserve of literary satire.

One remarkably pointed example of this layering of targets occurred in her 1900 collection, *Idle Idyls*, which also featured illustrations by her British-born friend and fellow humorist, Oliver Herford, whose wit in both visual and verbal comic forms Wells dubbed “exquisite.”¹⁸ However, Herford did not supply an image to accompany her poem “The Vampire of the Hour,” perhaps because such a drawing was unnecessary. The poem’s title was followed by a parenthetical phrase “(WITH APOLOGIES TO MR. KIPLING AND MR. BURNE-JONES),”¹⁹ indicating the two works referenced: the 1897 poem “The Vampire” by Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936) and the identically titled 1897 painting by Philip Burne-Jones (1861–1926)—son of the British Pre-Raphaelite artist, Edward Burne-Jones (1833–1898)—that was reputed to have inspired Kipling to compose his work. Kipling’s unrelievedly misogynistic poem decried the devotion of a male “fool” to a cruel and heartless woman, whom the speaker reduced scornfully to “a rag and a bone and a hank of hair.”²⁰ Burne-Jones’s painting, which created a minor sensation when it was first exhibited at the New Gallery in London, depicted a woman—allegedly based on the painter’s lover, the West End theatrical star Mrs. Patrick Campbell (1865–1940)—crouched in a predatory attitude over the prostrate body of an unconscious man. It

was reproduced widely on both sides of the Atlantic; even in 1900, Wells and Herford could take for granted the ability of the readers of *Idle Idyls* to summon it up from memory.

When parodying Kipling's popular attack on Woman as eternally indifferent to masculine suffering and as unworthy of men's self-sacrificial acts, Carolyn Wells began by flipping the gender of the object under scrutiny. No longer did the "hank of hair" represent a female victimizer, but instead a male celebrity—one allegedly undeserving of the worship that he received from other men, as well as from women, who constituted his adoring public. But the man in question was no generic figure, as Kipling's Vampire had been; instead, he bore the name of an actual person, with a very specific identity and transatlantic literary fame:

A FOOL there was, and he paid his fare

(Even as you and I)

To see Le Gallienne's hank of hair

(We said he was only a fake affair),

But the fool he called him a genius rare,

(Even as you and I!)²¹

The "Le Gallienne" in question here was none other than Richard Le Gallienne (1866–1947), the writer from Liverpool who, in emulation of his hero Oscar Wilde, had forged his reputation in the early 1890s as much through the self-conscious wearing of Aesthetic dress as through his dazzling criticism, prose fiction, and poetry. Most of all, he was known, thanks to countless photographs that circulated in the popular press on both sides of the Atlantic, for his delicate beauty, with a pale face encircled by clouds of wavy, dark hair. As Wilde had done in 1882 when embarking on an American lecture tour, Le Gallienne crossed the ocean repeatedly to earn money by delivering public talks, beginning with a series in the spring of 1895 in New York City (where it is likely that Carolyn Wells, who traveled frequently from her home in New Jersey to attend events there, heard him speak).

Wells's aim in "The Vampire of the Hour" was only incidentally to accomplish what she would later describe as the usual objective of the writer of parody: to imitate the "manner and matter" of the original work and its author by functioning as "a master of style, a student of language

... possessed of a power of mimicry with an instant appreciation of opportunities” and, in doing so, to entertain the reader.²² While it was true that, on one level, she was out to make fun both of Rudyard Kipling’s stylistic quirks and of his angry dismissal of women as ungrateful, unfeeling wretches, she also had a broader target than Kipling’s poem in her sights. The “American critical response” to British Aestheticism, which had, according to Jonathan Freedman “changed from suspicion to wary respect” in the early 1890s,²³ was in the process of shifting once again by the end of the decade, especially in the wake of Oscar Wilde’s conviction on the charge of gross indecency with men. As a figure not only affiliated with Wildean literary ideals, but as one positioned at the epicenter of the *Yellow Book* and its circle of Decadent creators, Richard Le Gallienne served for Carolyn Wells as the embodiment of all that was specious, fraudulent, and corrupt about the contemporary literary scene. Her attack on Le Gallienne’s popularity with American audiences continued:

Oh, the fads we make, and the freaks we take,

And the glories we all believe

Belong to the jaundiced degenerate,

Or the mystical mattoid at any rate,

With his handkerchief up his sleeve.

A critic there was, and he had his whack

(Even as you and I!)

He wrote of a wondrous symposiac,

(And it wasn’t the least like Le Gallienne’s clack),

But a critic must follow the beaten track,

(Even as you and I!)

Oh, the lies we write and the lies we cite

And the excellent things we say

About whatever may happen to be

The idol to which we bend the knee,

The fetish of the day.²⁴

That the supposedly “degenerate” Le Gallienne was described as “jaundiced” had little to do with any desire on Wells’s part to echo Kipling’s “The Vampire”; rather, it reflected her confidence that the audience would catch the reference to yellowness and understand it to be an allusion to the *Yellow Book*, which here stood for an absence of soundness, sanity, or true literary value. Coming just three years after her association with the bohemian men of the *Lark*, “The Vampire of the Hour” would have seemed, in 1900, a surprisingly conservative statement about the Aesthetic and Decadent “fetish of the day.” It acted, therefore, as a declaration of her literary independence, even from her friends at Camp Ha-Ha. Simultaneously, it displayed her increasing assurance as a writer of parodies, who felt able to overstep the ordinary boundaries of the genre and, at least occasionally, to use it as a vehicle for broader kinds of criticism, taking on what she saw as contemporary cultural fads. Wells ended her poem with a scathing assessment of Le Gallienne’s public performance and, even more, of the audiences who had flocked to hear it (of which, by invoking Kipling’s inclusive “you and I,” she numbered herself an equally guilty member):

And it isn’t the vice and it isn’t the price
 That causes our gloom profound;
 It’s coming to know that we all are fools,
 And we’re just as foolish as other fools
 Who follow the treadmill round.²⁵

With “The Vampire of the Hour,” Wells successfully redirected the unjust attack by Kipling (and by Philip Burne-Jones) upon women as *femmes fatales*, turning it instead into what she saw as a deserved critique of American gullibility, especially when it came to the reception of new British movements in literature and art.

At the end of the nineteenth century, as Alice Sheppard has noted, “Masculine aspects of humor ... were deemed inappropriate for the world of women, which was properly oriented toward social etiquette, true womanhood, and sentimentality.”²⁶ Carolyn Wells, however, had no intention of letting herself be boxed in by such strictures. When she tried her hand at parody, she took as her models the most celebrated male practitioners, especially Bayard Taylor (1825–1878). His

major accomplishment in humor had come in the early 1870s, with a series called “Diversions of the Echo Club” that he published first in the *Atlantic Monthly* and then as a separate volume. In her Introduction to *A Parody Anthology*, Wells openly paid homage to Taylor, calling his parodies “among the best”: “Aside from their cleverness they are marked by good taste, fairness, justice, and a true poetic instinct.”²⁷ She also selected thirteen examples of his art to reprint in her 1904 collection.

After the turn of the twentieth century, Wells began a different sort of tribute to Taylor, as she inaugurated her own series of parodies organized around a given premise, written in the voices of an array of living and dead poets, and titled variously “Diversions of the Re-Echo Club” or just “The Re-Echo Club,” for journals ranging from *Harper’s Monthly Magazine*, to the *Lotus Magazine*, to the *Bookman*. She then assembled a number of these in book form as *The Re-Echo Club*, a volume published by Franklin Bigelow in 1913. This, however, did not end her attempts to emulate—or, in fact, to surpass—Bayard Taylor. In 1916, for the *Bookman*, she continued to issue further efforts inspired by Taylor, but tied to such contemporary works as the British music hall song “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary” (which had become a favorite of soldiers in the First World War), with comic versions of the lyrics as Swinburne, Stevenson, Browning, Rossetti, Wilde, Tennyson, Kipling, Poe, and others might have written them.²⁸ Here, the source of humor was fairly straightforward and monodirectional, focused on the poets themselves and achieved through burlesque—that is, through the application of high-flown language, based on exaggeration of each writer’s own recognizable stylistic peculiarities, to a low-status object. Thus, Robert Browning’s 1855 poem “Fra Lippo Lippi,” with its characteristic exclamations, colloquialisms, linguistic anachronisms, broken lines, and rhetorical questions, became in the hands of Carolyn Wells a dramatic monologue on the location of Tipperary and opened with the following:

Is Tipperary far? Egregious sir!
 That same justificative query might
 Be put to twenty clericates! Gadzooks!
 Far! *far!* Ods bodikins! ‘Tis far and far—
 A long, long way,—add a long way to
 that,—

And all too short the scanty span you
 splash!²⁹

If Wells's irreverent laughter at the expense of individual poems from the canon constituted a form of transgression, so too did her handling of the borrowed frame of each "Re-Echo Club" installment. In Bayard Taylor's original series from the 1870s, the members of the all-male Echo Club were a fictional set of types—called pseudonymously "The Ancient," "The Gannet," and so on—who gathered to exchange opinions about literature and to offer their critiques of various writers by creating parodies of their styles. But Carolyn Wells populated her "Re-Echo Club" instead with representations of the writers themselves, whom she brought back from the dead and subjected to the further indignity of diminutives of their names, as well as to dialogue that made them sound, in some cases, vain and pompous and in others none too swift of mind. Thus, her description of a meeting of the "Club" for the July 1917 issue of *Harper's Monthly Magazine* began,

The Re-Echo Club, at its semi-periodical meeting, mulled ale and the New Poetry.

'What is it, anyway?' asked Alf Tennyson, mildly curious.

'It says it aims at the concrete intensivity of life,' explained Bob Browning, 'which is, of course, what I've always done. But you can tell it always, by the fact that it won't use *'neath, o'er, or forsooth*. It says our stuff is "over-appareled," our apples too fruity.'

'Ah, I see,' mused Dan Rossetti; 'we must take off our fatty degeneration and sit in our veins, eh?'

'Yes, that's it. And the subjects must be concrete—that's the idea, concrete. No more sunset and evening star of Freedom on a mountain height, but stick to tomato-cans or a bent hairpin or a little dog who doesn't feel very well. And keep him concrete.'

'Sounds easy enough,' observed Ed Poe, 'once you get the trick of it. Bet I could do it. I'm the man who put the Poe in Poetry.'³⁰

As should be plain from this extract, however, the pantheon of nineteenth-century poets was only one of the targets of Wells's mockery;

“Bob” Browning and “Ed” Poe were, if anything, stalking horses for her more immediate concern—that is, the contemporary rage for the so-called “New Poetry” being issued by British and American modernists. Once again, multidirectional parody offered Wells a medium through which to register her disapproval of literary and cultural trends that offended her aesthetic sensibility, while enabling her to make her own contrarian statements about what did and did not deserve the title of “Art.” This was clear, for instance, in the set of verses from the 1917 “The Re-Echo Club” attributed to “Harry Longfellow,” which was at once a gentle poke at Longfellow’s 1838 “A Psalm of Life” (“Tell me not in mournful numbers ...”) and an unsparing send-up of Imagism, as practiced by modernists such as Ezra Pound, for its rejection of formal discipline and embrace of ugly or vulgar subject matter:

Tell me not in measured numbers
That this life is but a dream;
'Tis the Cosmic Urge
And surge,
And spirit splurge,
Vitally vibrant with symbolic art,
Freed from meticulous bonds of basic rigor,
A thaumaturgic intercalation
Expressed—ha—in elemental rhythms.
A stunning, swooning measure,
Like a cat eating carrots,
Carrots edged with fur!
Ha!
Isn't it gay?
Down go the carrots
Zigzagging down the cat's throat!
Flapping and swooping down the cat's throat!
Ah, this is life!

Whee—ee!

Bumpti—ling—bing!

Bang!

Boo!³¹

With her “The Styx River Anthology” the previous year for the *Bookman’s* September 1916 number, Wells had engaged in a related form of parodic mash-up, in order to protest another development of the “New Poetry.” In this case, her literary *bête noire* was the deliberate eschewal of beauty in favor of an idiom based on unadorned, conversational speech patterns and contemporary American slang, which she found so unsatisfying in works such as Edgar Lee Masters’s *Spoon River Anthology* (1915). For the voices of the dead townfolk who, in Masters’s celebrated volume, narrate the outlines of their mundane lives and fates, Wells substituted a group of beyond-the-grave monologues by literary characters from the past—Shakespeare’s Ophelia, Poe’s Annabel Lee, the suicidal victim of Tennyson’s Lady Clara Vere de Vere, and so on. In each case, the source of humor lay not in any faults belonging to the earlier works themselves, but in the act of translating these classics into a modern vernacular that Wells considered antipathetic to dignity, mystery, or emotion. Thus, the previously silent subject of William Wordsworth’s “Lucy” poems, for instance, began her very unlyrical ballad by declaiming, flatly,

Yes, I am in my grave,

And you bet it makes a difference to

him!

For we were to be married,—at least, I

think we were,

And he’d made me promise to deed him

the house.

But I had to go and get appendicitis,

And they took me to the hospital.³²

Wells's most ambitious attempt, however, to weigh in through literary parody on avant-garde cultural developments had appeared three years earlier. Her 1913 collection, *The Re-Echo Club*, included an unusually lengthy installment devoted to the subject of Cubism, in which writers from Ben Jonson to Shelley offered their own brand of meditations on this new mode of visual art. The immediate occasion for this comic skewering was, of course, the International Exhibition of Modern Art, held in February through March 1913 at the Armory in New York City. This was a turning point in the history of art, renowned in particular for having showcased Marcel Duchamp's notorious 1912 painting, *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*, which became a lightning rod for both positive and negative judgments about abstractionism as a method. Even before her 1918 marriage to Hadwin Houghton brought her from Rahway, New Jersey, to live permanently in Manhattan, Wells was a frequent visitor to the city and a regular attendee at important events such as this; indeed, as she explained in *The Rest of My Life*, she had joined “the Town and Country Club, which was exclusively for women” in the 1890s specifically to maintain a room there, as “my social life was largely in New York.”³³ For her, the dehumanizing effects of the art displayed in the Armory represented the thin end of a wedge that would, she predicted, soon force its way into literature—or, as she had the fictional President of the Re-Echo Club put it, “Of course ... this movement will strike the poets next.”³⁴ The remainder of this installment of her series of parodies demonstrated humorously how the great poets of the past might have responded to the image on Duchamp's canvas.

In keeping with the emphasis on the dynamics of machinery that she sensed (and deplored) in modernism, Wells had a narrative voice provide a general introduction to the individual parodies, saying, “Then the Poets opened the aspiration valves, ignited the divine spark plugs, and whiz! went their motor-meters in a whirling, buzzing melody. Soon their Cubist emotions were splashed upon paper, and the Poets read with justifiable pride these symbolic results.”³⁵ Among the writers called upon to describe what he saw in Duchamp's work was “Ally” (Algernon Charles) Swinburne, the late-Victorian disciple of the Pre-Raphaelites and forerunner of Decadence. Wells used the recognizable meter and form of Swinburne's 1866 poem “Dolores” (“Cold eyelids that hide like a jewel ...”) as her weapon, employing it not merely to attack *Nude Descending*

a Staircase or the Cubist School, but to express in more general terms her dismay at the absence of grace or charm in the new art movements, even as they took Woman as their subject:

Square eyelids that hide like a jewel;
 Ten heads,—though I sometimes count more;
 Six mouths that are cubic and cruel;
 Of mixed arms and legs, twenty-four;
 Descending in Symbolic glories
 Of lissome triangles and squares;
 Oh, mystic and subtle Dolores,
 Our Lady of Stairs.

You descend like an army with banners,
 In a cyclone of wrecked parasols.
 You look like a mob with mad manners
 Or a roustering row of Dutch dolls.

Oh, Priestess of Cubical passion,
 Oh, Deification of Whim,
 You seem to walk down in the fashion
 That lame lobsters swim.³⁶

To Wells, the reduction of the female subject to an array of planes and angles as body parts was offensive on multiple levels, as was the arrogance of the masculine artist who proffered such a deliberately confused and impersonal jumble as his view of a woman. In writing this chapter of the “Re-Echo Club” and its doings, Wells created no fewer than eighteen separate parodies, all of them directed at making the point, again and again, that the new artistic idiom unveiled at the Armory Show of 1913 represented a loss, rather than a gain. She proved herself unable to imagine that the “isms” of modernity would ever lead to anything that could stand with the achievements of the past—or indeed that women artists, whether painters or poets, might choose to embrace them and to express their own consciousness through them. To Wells, the new fashions in art

seemed merely wrongheaded and, like many other conventions devised and deployed by men, more likely to subjugate and demean women than to offer them an escape from what, in “To a Milkmaid” (1900), she had called their traditional “inferiority.”

Satire, as Barry Sanders has suggested in *Sudden Glory: Laughter as Subversive History* (1995), “is really a restrained, polite brand of vituperation—criticism held under very careful check.”³⁷ In the hands of Carolyn Wells, so too was parody. While asserting, with an air of innocence, that the primary aim of this genre was merely to amuse, she refused, when writing it herself, to keep her critical impulses wholly in such careful check. In the late nineteenth century, moreover, when women humorists still struggled for a place at the table with their male peers—when, as Simon Dentith notes in *Parody* (2000), “it was the mark of a gentleman ... [and] a badge of accomplishment among certain groups of lawyers, journalists, and, naturally, literary people ... to write a parody,”³⁸—Wells not only pushed her way to the head of that table, but then used her position as a platform from which to broadcast her opinions about poetry, about culture in general, and about the status of women within the literary world. Hers was a bold voice, as well as a brilliantly funny one, and it should be lost no more.

NOTES

1. Simon Brett, “Introduction,” *The Faber Book of Parodies* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 17–18.
2. Carolyn Wells, “Introduction: Parody as a Fine Art” *A Parody Anthology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons), xxi.
3. See Steven H. Gale, ed., *Encyclopedia of American Humorists* (New York: Garland, 1988); Kenneth Baker, ed., *Unauthorized Versions: Poems and Their Parodies* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990); John Gross, ed., *The Oxford Book of Comic Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); John Gross, ed., *The Oxford Book of Parodies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Russell Baker, ed. *Russell Baker’s Book of American Humor* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993); William Zaranka, ed., *The Brand-X Anthology of Poetry: A Parody Anthology* (Cambridge, MA: Apple-Wood, 1981).
4. Carolyn Wells, “To a Milkmaid,” *The Penguin Book of Women’s Humor*, ed. by Regina Barreca (New York: Penguin, 1996), 592.
5. Regina Barreca, “Introduction,” *The Penguin Book of Women’s Humor*, ed. by Regina Barreca (New York: Penguin, 1996), 1–2.

6. Carolyn Wells, *The Rest of My Life* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1937), 171.
7. Beth Palmer, *Women's Authorship and Editorship in Victorian Culture: Sensational Strategies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 165.
8. Jean Marie Lutes. *Front-Page Girls: Women Journalists in American Culture and Fiction, 1880–1930* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 9.
9. Kirsten MacLeod, *American Little Magazines of the 1890s: A Revolution in Print* (Sunderland, UK: Bibelot Press, 2013), 5.
10. MacLeod, 75.
11. David Weir, *Decadent Culture in the United States: Art and Literature Against the American Grain, 1890–1926* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 131.
12. Wells, *The Rest of My Life*, 146.
13. Wells, *The Rest of My Life*, 146.
14. Carolyn Wells, "From Vivette's 'Milkmaid,'" *Lark*, 1 October 1896, n.p.
15. Wells, "From Vivette's 'Milkmaid,'" [n.p.].
16. Wells, "Introduction: Parody as a Fine Art," xxii.
17. Wells, "Introduction: Parody as a Fine Art," xxiii.
18. Wells, *The Rest of My Life*, 176.
19. Carolyn Wells, "The Vampire of the Hour," *Idle Idyls* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1900), 78.
20. Rudyard Kipling, "The Vampire," *The Works of Rudyard Kipling*, ed. by R. T. Jones (Ware, UK: Wordsworth, 1994), 220–221.
21. Wells, "The Vampire of the Hour," 78.
22. Wells, "Introduction: Parody as a Fine Art," xxvi–xxvii.
23. Jonathan Freedman. "An Aestheticism of Our Own: American Writers and the Aesthetic Movement," *In Pursuit of Beauty: Americans and the Aesthetic Movement* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1986), 391.
24. Wells, "The Vampire of the Hour," 78–79.
25. Wells, "The Vampire of the Hour," 79.
26. Alice Sheppard, "From Kate Sanborn to Feminist Psychology: The Social Context of Women's Humor, 1885–1985," *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 10 (June 1986), 167.
27. Wells, "Introduction: Parody as a Fine Art," xxvi.
28. See Carolyn Wells, "Divisions of the Re-Echo Club," *Bookman*, July 1916, 472–474.
29. Carolyn Wells, "By Mr. R. Browning," "Divisions of the Re-Echo Club," 473.
30. Carolyn Wells, "The Re-Echo Club," *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, July 1917, 297.

31. Carolyn Wells, “The Re-Echo Club,” 298–299.
32. Carolyn Wells, “The Styx River Anthology,” *Bookman*, September 1916, 53.
33. Wells, *The Rest of My Life*, 126–127.
34. Carolyn Wells, *The Re-Echo Club* (New York: Franklin Bigelow, 1913), 41.
35. Wells, *The Re-Echo Club*, 42.
36. Wells, *The Re-Echo Club*, 42.
37. Barry Sanders, *Sudden Glory: Laughter as Subversive History* (Boston: Beacon, 1995), 235.
38. Simon Dentith, *Parody* (London: Routledge, 2000), 117.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baker, Kenneth, ed. *Unauthorized Versions: Poems and Their Parodies*. London: Faber and Faber, 1990.
- Baker, Russell, ed. *Russell Baker’s Book of American Humor*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1993.
- Barreca, Regina. “Introduction.” In *The Penguin Book of Women’s Humor*. Edited by Regina Barreca, 1–10. New York: Penguin, 1996.
- Brett, Simon. “Introduction.” In *The Faber Book of Parodies*. Edited by Simon Brett, 17–26. London: Faber and Faber, 1984.
- Dentith, Simon. *Parody*. London: Routledge, 2000.
- Freedman, Jonathan. “An Aestheticism of Our Own: American Writers and the Aesthetic Movement.” In *In Pursuit of Beauty: Americans and the Aesthetic Movement*. Edited by Metropolitan Museum of Art, 384–399. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1986.
- Gale, Steven H., ed. *Encyclopedia of American Humorists*. New York: Garland, 1988.
- Gross, John, ed. *The Oxford Book of Comic Verse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- . *The Oxford Book of Parodies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Kipling, Rudyard. “The Vampire.” *The Works of Rudyard Kipling*. Edited by R. T. Jones, 220–221. Ware, UK: Wordsworth, 1994.
- Lutes, Jean Marie. *Front-Page Girls: Women Journalists in American Culture and Fiction, 1880–1930*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006.
- MacLeod, Kirsten. *American Little Magazines of the 1890s: A Revolution in Print*. Sunderland, UK: Bibelot Press, 2013.
- Palmer, Beth. *Women’s Authorship and Editorship in Victorian Culture: Sensational Strategies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Sanders, Barry. *Sudden Glory: Laughter as Subversive History*. Boston: Beacon, 1995.

- Sheppard, Alice. "From Kate Sanborn to Feminist Psychology: The Social Context of Women's Humor, 1885–1985." *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 10 (June 1986): 155–169.
- Weir, David. *Decadent Culture in the United States: Art and Literature Against the American Grain, 1890–1926*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008.
- Wells, Carolyn. "Diversions of the Re-Echo Club." *Bookman* (July 1916): 472–474.
- . "From Vivette's 'Milkmaid,'" *Lark* (1 October 1896) [n.p.].
- . *Idle Idyls*. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1900.
- . "Introduction: Parody as a Fine Art." In *A Parody Anthology*. Edited by Carolyn Wells, xxi–xxx. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1904.
- . *The Re-Echo Club*. New York: Franklin Bigelow, 1913.
- . "The Re-Echo Club," *Harper's Monthly Magazine* (July 1917): 297–300.
- . *The Rest of My Life*. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1937.
- . "The Styx River Anthology," *Bookman* (September 1916): 53–57.
- . "To a Milkmaid." In *The Penguin Book of Women's Humor*. Edited by Regina Barreca, 592. New York: Penguin, 1996.
- Zaranka, William, ed. *The Brand-X Anthology of Poetry: A Parody Anthology*. Cambridge, MA: Apple-Wood, 1981.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Margaret D. Stetz is Mae and Robert Carter Professor of Women's Studies and Professor of Humanities at the University of Delaware, USA. She is author of *British Women's Comic Fiction, 1890–1990: Not Drowning, But Laughing*; "The 'Transatlantic' and Late Nineteenth-Century American Women's Humor" in *Studies in American Humor* (2015); and numerous articles on Victorian British women writers and feminist theory.



<http://www.springer.com/978-3-319-56728-0>

Transgressive Humor of American Women Writers

Fuchs Abrams, S. (Ed.)

2017, XV, 263 p. 16 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-56728-0