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Book Review

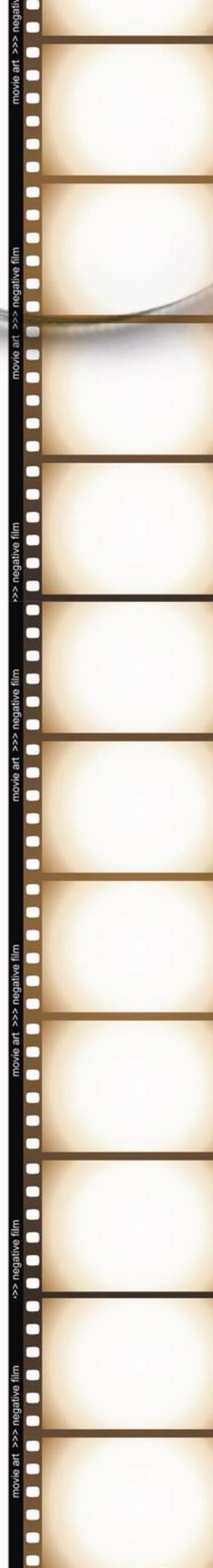
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Comic Venus: Women and Comedy in American Silent Film

Patrick Adamson

In the near-seven decades since James Agee famously declared Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, and Harry Langdon to be silent comedy's "Big Four," film scholars have worked to expand and nuance the pantheon, variously adding to the original quartet the likes of Laurel and Hardy, Roscoe Arbuckle, and Charley Chase. The contributions of comediennes in the same period remain, however, distinctly marginalized in most accounts of cinema's early decades. Some more recent scholarship has sought to rectify this – the works of Maggie Hennefeld, Linda Mizejewski, and Joanna Rapf being among the foremost examples. These important interventions have reclaimed their subjects both as agents in the emergence and growth of Hollywood and as potential feminist figures, disrupting patriarchal norms through slapstick antics and laughter. Nevertheless, on the subject of silent comediennes, a more general cultural amnesia continues to evidence itself; and it is primarily as an antidote to this wider neglect that Kristen Anderson Wagner introduces *Comic Venus: Women and Comedy in American Silent Film*.

Why, she asks early in the text, might this rereading of early film history be important today? Because comedy and power are vitally linked; the "pervasive denial and suppression of women's humor by both popular culture and academia is essentially a denial and suppression of women's social and cultural power" (p. 3). While the prominence of women in early Hollywood is now near-universally acknowledged, the enormous significance of pioneering comic figures such as Mabel Normand continues to be markedly absent from popular narratives of the era, seemingly having fallen victim to the self-aggrandizing – and often misogynistic – biographical palimpsest practiced by the likes of Chaplin. Regardless of initial popularity or subsequent influence, the history of funny women in the silent era remains one in need of recovery. In this valuable and much needed work of cultural history, Wagner sets out not only to reclaim a neglected

facet of the cinematic past, but to demonstrate the enormous cultural power and agency that came with being a Hollywood silent comedienne.

The first chapter of this study takes its title from a question posed by Harper's Bazaar in 1901: "Have women a sense of humor?" (p. 25). Indeed, many of the study's overarching concerns are established through the discursive framework provided by this debate – one which retains some popular relevance even in modern times. Pursued from the misogynistic musings of English Restoration playwright William Congreve to the present day rebuttals advanced by Amy Poehler and Tina Fey, it is in exploring this that Wagner first demonstrates the challenging and disruptive power of her silent-era subjects. Readings of the Marion Davies vehicle *Show People* (1928) – a self-reflexive Hollywood fiction of a "born" comic turned diva – and Normand's *The Extra Girl* (1923) are skillfully used to highlight a fundamental contradiction rife in historical discussions of female comedy: the notion that all women are inherently unfunny co-exists with an equally commonplace assertion that some women are "naturally" comic, typically those who eschew some aspect of established feminine norms, be it through physical appearance or behavior.

Wagner's second chapter provides the text's most concentrated examination of the connection between physical beauty, femininity, and comedic performance, between what women could or perhaps, in the eyes of their public, should express. Identified early here is a link between press evaluations of "prettiness" and the roles with which stars were associated: Davies, Dorothy Gish, and others who conformed to established ideals generally performed in light comedy; the divergent Marie Dressler, Gale Henry, and Charlotte Greenwood found favor in slapstick. But, rather than simply highlighting another manifestation of Hollywood's oft-noted preoccupation with female beauty, Wagner proposes that "imperfect" comic beauties, such as Colleen Moore and Louise Fazenda, embodied a particularly accessible sort of feminine aspiration. "Homely parts" played by the "vivacious and beautiful," including Davies' drudge-turn in *The Red Mill* (1924),

are likewise shown to complicate the commonplace contention that actresses resigned themselves to comedy only if insufficiently “photogenic” for drama (p. 107). Comic actresses embraced these non-normative appearances, offering audiences models of autonomous femininity in which attractiveness could be reclaimed as something performed rather than predetermined.

In her third chapter, Wagner examines how sexually expressive performers, most notably “The It Girl” Clara Bow, questioned and even aggressively tested social demands for demureness and passivity. Again, questions arise here about the comic registers in which women might hope to be heard: could they be both feminine and rambunctiously comedic? Read within a history of suggestive vaudeville and theatrical performance, flappers – most notably, Bow and Moore – and “virtuous vamps” – playful but fundamentally high-minded figures such as Constance Talmadge – emerge as idols of a more emancipated New Womanhood, their flirtations with illicit sexuality offering female filmgoers vicarious experience of alternative, often transgressive femininities. In silent cinema’s comic coterie, women like Bow could act upon their “baser” passions without the tragic consequences that typically befell their “dangerously” sexual melodramatic counterparts Theda Bara and Greta Garbo (p. 154). The eroticism embodied by comediennes candid about their sexuality could be a source of audience ardor and emancipatory imitation alike.

Wagner concludes by discussing her materials as manifestations of and reactions to modernity. Drawn in parallel with work by scholars including Ben Singer on the era’s death-defying serial queens, the anarchic activities of comediennes such as Polly Moran are interpreted as further embodiment of the emergent New Woman. Inspired by modern cultural change, they engaged with the public sphere in a manner far from Victorian: Bow displayed an inspirational – and imitable – affinity for the modern, a virility in the face of energy-sapping city life; Mary Pickford was a skilled businesswoman, paid according to her talent, and an influential public

figure; Normand was among the many who either directed their own films or ran a production company. Wagner closes this analysis with discussion of the period's several gender reversal comedies, through which she brings some of the study's foremost themes into concert. While these comedies served on one hand to defuse the hegemonic anxieties of the era by ridiculing female rule, on the other, they illuminated the hypocrisy of, and visualized alternatives to, the social conservatism to which they respond. As Wagner astutely observes, they render absurd the notion that "men would be forced to submit to the drudgery and indignity that women faced on a daily basis" (p. 229).

In the introduction to her study, Wagner undertakes to reform an errant film historiographical tradition – one rooted in centuries-old debates surrounding the politics of gender and laughter. To these ends, she combines rigorous close film analysis with extensive use of archival material. The result is a judicious and consistently thoughtful examination of her subjects' screen performances and intertextual comic personas, in which she documents not only the silent comediennes' enormous popularity but their prominence in contemporary discussions of gender class and identity. A timely contribution to a belatedly emergent area of scholarly interest, it draws needed focus onto a group of "barrier-breaking women [...] questioning, challenging, and redefining what it meant to be a woman in early twentieth century America" (p. 240).

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