

Book Review

Sabrina Fuchs Abrams. 2024. *New York Women of Wit in the Twentieth Century*. Pennsylvania State University Press, 213 pp., ISBN: 9780271095714, US\$ 119.95.

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In *New York Women of Wit in the Twentieth Century*, Sabrina Fuchs Abrams presents a clear and thorough picture of the richness and diversity of New York cultural worlds in the early to mid-twentieth century – bohemian Greenwich Village; the Algonquin circle; the coteries surrounding various literary magazines; Harlem. “New York” in this book is really “Manhattan,” and “the twentieth century” is for the most part “between the world wars,” but the focus is justified both by the cultural importance of Fuchs Abrams’ subjects, and by the book’s discussion of the ways the different circles under discussion did and did not overlap and interact. Within this context, Fuchs Abrams examines the lives and work of six witty women writers: Edna St. Vincent Millay (focusing on the satirical prose Millay published under the name Nancy Boyd); Dorothy Parker; Tess Slesinger; Jessie Redmon Fauset; Dawn Powell; and Mary McCarthy. Throughout the book, Fuchs Abrams traces the ways these writers simultaneously perform and critique the gender roles available to them. She sees these women’s lives as a history of ambivalence – not necessarily because Millay, Parker, and the rest want to “have it all,” but because they embody the attractions and the failures of old and new models of womanhood.

Fuchs Abrams opens the book with an efficient overview of the dominant theories of humor, particularly women’s humor, and the distinction between Horatian and Juvenalian satire. The discussion of women’s humor and feminist humor theory is especially useful, examining the points of similarity and disagreement among major feminist theorists of humor like Nancy Walker, Joanne Gilbert, and Regina Barecca. Fuchs Abrams distinguishes among different forms of subversion women’s humor may enact, from overtly aggressive feminist political humor to a more indirect critical humor that nonetheless calls attention to gender inequity. The introduction closes with a discussion of the reception of women’s humor, using Christopher Hitchens as a particularly egregious stand-in for centuries of male dismissal of women’s ability to make and laugh at jokes. In the process, Fuchs Abrams describes some of the false dichotomies and oversimplifications that have affected both the production and the reception of women’s humor: the “pretty versus funny” binary, and the “essentialist split between male/female, mind/body, aggression/submission, active/passive” (28).

The first chapter discusses Edna St. Vincent Millay, concentrating on the satirical “potboiler” dialogues (32) Millay published in *Vanity Fair* under the name Nancy Boyd. Fuchs Abrams argues that Millay “embodies the spirit of the New Woman of Greenwich Village in the 1920s: she is a freethinker and free lover known at once for her sharp wit and sexual candor as well as her feminine youthful appeal” (29). Fuchs Abrams draws on a mix of biographical and textual evidence to argue that the Boyd satires represent “the conflicted identity of the New Woman” (35): they show us the New Woman’s freedom, but also the hollowness of some of her liberated experiences. The Millay chapter poses two problems that the subsequent chapters will return to. First, Millay makes it clear that the old gender roles are confining and stultifying, but also suggests that the new opportunities of the twentieth century – the lives made possible for women once they have access to birth control, higher education, and the vote – turn out to be unsatisfying, and even liberated women’s lives are still circumscribed by social expectations and male hostility. Fuchs Abrams shows us how Millay’s ironies highlight the discontents both of traditional femininity and of the freedoms of Greenwich Village bohemia. Second, however, as they map these alternatives, Millay and those who come after her must also navigate a tension between satire and sentiment, their ironies sometimes unrecognized by readers who expect traditionally uncritical romance plots or emotionalism.

A similar discontent pervades the work of Dorothy Parker, the subject of the second chapter. Fuchs Abrams concentrates on the ways Parker shows how women participate in the maintenance of limiting gender norms. For Fuchs Abrams, Parker’s female characters are stuck in a system that they know to be flawed (you can’t call your lover on the telephone, you can only go crazy waiting for him to call you) but never use their keen insights to evade or change the system (when the man who has repeatedly kicked you in the shins during a miserable waltz asks you for another dance, you say an enthusiastic yes). Fuchs Abrams situates this argument in a discussion of Parker’s own sense of femininity and formality – she always insisted on being addressed as “Mrs. Parker” – and of her outsider status as a half-Jewish woman in a mostly male and gentile circle. In a continuation of one of the book’s primary themes, Fuchs Abrams suggests that “Parker at once embodied and parodied the role of the New Woman” (55), playing up her femininity and making witticisms which are “a form of both social critique and self-deprecation” (56) while also displaying an unladylike “aggressive and often explicit side” (57).

After Millay and Parker, Fuchs Abrams turns to less widely-known writers. The first of these is Tess Slesinger, who wrote for the *Menorah Journal*, a secular, leftist Jewish magazine dedicated to “Jewish humanism” (79). As with Millay and Parker, Fuchs Abrams traces Slesinger’s life and her outsider status in the intellectual circle of the journal, pointing once again to the “conflicted role of the New Woman” (85) and the “dual marginalization of the female artist/intellectual” who belongs neither in

the “predominantly male world of New York intellectuals” nor the “traditionally ‘female’ world of marriage and motherhood” (87). Fuchs Abrams discusses Slesinger’s 1934 novel *The Unpossessed* in detail, examining the novel’s theme of intellectual and biological infertility and abortion, and argues that the novel’s “melding of the personal and the political” distinctively “subverts conventional gender expectations of both the modernist novel of the 1920s and the socialist realist novels of the 1930s” (100).

This melding of the personal and political is also important for Jessie Redmon Fauset, a novelist, essayist, and literary editor of *The Crisis*. Fuchs Abrams concentrates on Fauset’s novel *Plum Bun* (1928), the story of two mixed-race sisters who move to New York – one to Harlem, the other downtown, where she passes for white. Fuchs Abrams is interested once again in the layers of irony in Fauset’s use of humor. She calls the laughter Fauset describes in her essay “The Gift of Laughter” (or that Langston Hughes discusses in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”) a “coping mechanism” (117), but that is an umbrella term for many possible emotional responses to trauma or injustice. As Fuchs Abrams points out, scholars like Bambi Haggins and Danielle Fuentes Morgan suggest that Black satire is, more specifically, “a means of survival, expressing sublimated anger but also building community”; she traces these multiple valences of humor through Fauset’s examination of the limited options available to Black women, particularly the New Negro Woman’s duty of respectability and racial betterment, and the (white) New Woman’s sexual liberation. Fuchs Abrams suggests that, somewhat like Parker, Fauset navigates the obstacles she faces as a Black woman writer in the 1920s by performing a fashionable, bourgeois femininity, even as she critiques the values that require this performance of her.

Laughter is a coping mechanism of a somewhat different kind for Dawn Powell, for whom, Fuchs Abrams argues, satire is “a means of releasing anger and coping with personal suffering and social injustice” (144). Fuchs Abrams situates Powell in the coterie surrounding the Lafayette Hotel café, which appears as the Café Julien in Powell’s novel *The Wicked Pavilion* (1954). Fuchs Abrams describes the ways Powell satirizes a series of stock figures in her fiction – the conventional bourgeois woman; conformist publishers; the “egotistical male rotter” (158). The chapter adds heft to the book in part by its analysis of (sometimes very funny) sections of Powell’s novels, and in part from its discussion of Powell’s intense, nostalgic love for New York City, which deepens the cultural context in which all the writers examined in this book worked. The city – for Powell, and perhaps for this book – is a little like laughter, in that it can be both isolating and unifying. Here, too, “Powell’s satiric vision, at once affectionate and cutting, reveals her ambivalent relation to the Greenwich Village café culture” (165).

Fuchs Abrams explores that dominant theme of ambivalence most thoroughly in the final chapter on Mary McCarthy, on whom she has already written one book, *Mary McCarthy: Gender, Politics, and the Postwar Intellectual* (2004). Fuchs Abrams argues that McCarthy satirizes the “failure of progressive ideals” and the “hypocrisy of the liberated woman’s assertion of free love” (178) in her fiction, including several short stories and her 1963 novel *The Group*. Fuchs Abrams shows the close correspondences between McCarthy’s fiction and her life; describes her sometimes hostile reception among male critics; and argues that for McCarthy, satire is “a means of asserting control over adverse circumstances, though at a self-admitted cost of a lack of feeling” (180).

The inequities the writers discussed in this book face are all the more frustrating because they are often produced in part by the writers’ own mixed allegiances. These women did not identify as feminists, and most “resist[...] the label of woman writer” (146). Their humor, for the most part, is very much about being stuck, and part of that stuckness seems to come from not just the world around them but from a resistance to other possibilities. Their humor identifies problems in traditional gender roles and the liberated sexuality of the New Woman, but there is not much hope in their laughter; you’re in trouble whether you have a husband in Greenwich, CT, or a lover in Greenwich Village. This is, of course, a common limitation of satire, which is often designed more to reveal the absurdity of its subject than to construct alternatives, but Fuchs Abrams’ account of these mid-century writers leaves me imagining a feminist *Gulliver’s Travels*, which satirically experiments with novel ways to experience gender. Evidently that would have to wait for the wave of feminist science fiction in the 1970s.

New York Women of Wit assembles a productive history of sometimes indirect social critique by New York women from the 1920s through the 1960s. The precise nature of that critique is sometimes a bit disguised, partly by the writers’ ironies, and occasionally by overly broad summary sentences: when Fuchs Abrams says that Fauset, for example, conveys “a moral message of racial, gender, and class inequity” (124), it would be helpful to say more clearly what that message actually is. But we can generally work out Fuchs Abrams’ answer by returning to the analysis leading up to the sentence. Overall, the book is valuable: its focus on ambivalence, rather than humor based simply on superiority or subversion, is a significant contribution to humor studies. Fuchs Abrams helps us understand the sources as well as the payoffs of the conflicted ironies of the six women she discusses and builds a larger picture of a New York world in which different literary circles work through problems of gender in related but not identical ways.