



RESEARCHING WOMEN IN SILENT CINEMA

NEW FINDINGS AND PERSPECTIVES

EDITED BY MONICA DALL'ASTA, VICTORIA DUCKETT, LUCIA TRALLI

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ALMA MATER STUDIORUM
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Women and Screen Cultures is a series of experimental digital books aimed to promote research and knowledge on the contribution of women to the cultural history of screen media. Published by the Department of the Arts at the University of Bologna, it is issued under the conditions of both open publishing and blind peer review. It will host collections, monographs, translations of open source archive materials, illustrated volumes, transcripts of conferences, and more. Proposals are welcomed for both disciplinary and multi-disciplinary contributions in the fields of film history and theory, television and media studies, visual studies, photography and new media.



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Researching Women in Silent Cinema: New Findings and Perspectives

Edited by: Monica Dall'Asta, Victoria Duckett, Lucia Tralli

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Peer Review Statement

This publication has been edited through a blind peer review process. Papers from the Sixth Women and the Silent Screen Conference (University of Bologna, 2010), a biennial event sponsored by Women and Film History International, were read by the editors and then submitted to at least one anonymous reviewer. When the opinion of the first reader was entirely negative or asked for substantial revision, the essay was submitted to a second anonymous reviewer. In case of a second negative opinion the essay was rejected. When further changes were deemed necessary for publication, the editors worked extensively with the authors to meet the requests advanced by the reviewers.

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Kristen Anderson Wagner

Silent Comediennes and “The Tragedy of Being Funny”¹

ABSTRACT: Articles in fan magazines of the 1910s and 1920s with titles such as “Is it Tragic to Be Comic?” and “The Tragedy of Being Funny” often situated comediennes as victims—of their circumstances, their talents, or their looks—and films such as *Show People* and *Ella Cinders* to some degree supported the idea that being a funny woman was cause for pity as well as praise. Longstanding cultural stereotypes held that women could be either feminine or funny, and as a result female comics were frequently labeled as unsuccessful women as well as comedians. Despite the fact that many women had lucrative careers in film comedy, comediennes were frequently depicted in the popular press as uncomfortable with building their careers in comedy, uneasy about performing physical comedy, or afraid of looking ridiculous. Paradoxically, fan magazines and trade journals generally acknowledged, and even promoted, women’s humor, although traces of pervasive stereotypes about the incompatibility of comedy and femininity are evident in these discourses, and reflect broader concerns in American society about appropriate behavior for women. This paper traces some of these complex discourses and debates surrounding funny women that played out in the press and onscreen in the early twentieth century.

In 1934 Louise Fazenda, one of the most popular and acclaimed comediennes of the silent era, was asked by *Movie Classic* magazine to explain what it takes to become a comedian. Her response revealed a profound uneasiness toward comedy:

The making of a comedian—a woman comedian, at least—comes from hurt feelings. No woman on earth wants to be funny. No woman on earth wants to be laughed at. In fact, the last thing on earth any woman wants is to be considered funny. I believe that every comedienne is the child of an inner tragedy. I don’t know if all of the funny men are “clowns with aching hearts,” but I do know that all funny women are, if they’ll be honest about it. (Hall, “Have YOU Got the Makings of a COMEDIAN?” 30)

Fazenda’s feelings of pain and disappointment about performing comedy were well documented throughout her career, and her image as a reluctant comedienne became an important part of her off-screen persona. But Fazenda was not the only comedienne who was said to be ambivalent about her profession. Articles in fan magazines with titles such as “Is it Tragic to Be Comic?” (Hall) and “The Tragedy of Being Funny” (Talmadge) situated comediennes as victims—of their circumstances, their talents, and their looks—and films such as *The Extra Girl* (F. Richard Jones, 1923), *Ella Cinders* (Alfred E. Green, 1926), and *Show People* (King Vidor, 1928) to some degree supported the idea that being a funny woman was

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cause for pity as well as praise. This dynamic is perfectly illustrated in a *Motion Picture Classic* profile of Polly Moran:

Is it tragic to be comic? Would *you* like to be laughed at everywhere, all the time?
No matter what you might say or do? No matter how you might feel?
Mustn't there be moments when a comic would like to be taken seriously?
And especially if the comic in question is a woman. Like—well, like Polly Moran.

What do you suppose it does feel like to have the whole world know you as a ridiculous individual who can make it split its sides, but never break its heart? (Hall, "Is It Tragic to Be Comic?" 48)

These discourses highlight some of the contradictions and complexities surrounding women's performance of comedy in silent films. Longstanding cultural stereotypes held that women could be either feminine or funny, but seldom both, and as a result female comics were frequently labeled as unsuccessful women as well as unsuccessful comedians. Despite the fact that a great many women had long and lucrative careers in film comedy, and comediennes were very popular with silent-era audiences, comediennes were frequently depicted in the popular press as uncomfortable with building their careers in comedy, uneasy about performing physical comedy, or afraid of looking ridiculous in public. This tension shows up in interviews and articles in which comediennes describe their uneasiness with comedy, relate their initial dismay at discovering their comic tendencies, and discuss their desire to "graduate" to drama or move away from "vulgar" slapstick. But rather than avoiding the genre altogether, comediennes negotiated a comic space for themselves in myriad ways. Some advocated a more refined, "feminine" comedy as an alternative to the rough-and-tumble slapstick that many felt was unsuitable for women, and some—acquiescing to prejudices against funny women—spoke of their desire to leave comedy for more respectable dramas. Other comediennes unapologetically embraced comedy, even lowbrow slapstick, to the delight of their fans and the consternation of their critics. At the same time, fan magazines and trade journals generally acknowledged, and even promoted, women's humor, although traces of pervasive stereotypes about the incompatibility of comedy and femininity are evident in these discourses. Most often, however, these stereotypes appear in these publications only to be disproved and dismissed, a shrewd strategy for trade journals trying to market their stars, and fan magazines whose largely female readership would likely be interested in stories of women breaking boundaries and defying expectations.

Are Women Funny?

Public debates about whether women have a sense of humor and the nature of women's

humor date to at least the nineteenth century and continue to the present day. Throughout the nineteenth century the “cult of domesticity,” as defined by Barbara Welter, reinforced the image of women as emotional, rather than intellectual beings, and as a result “womanly wit had difficulty maneuvering around the image of ideal womanhood—an image that denigrated woman’s intellect in favor of her emotional and intuitive nature” (Welter; Walker 27). Writers who debated the issue of female humor often used her perceived capacity for emotion, rather than intellect, as justification to deny her the aptitude for humor. Writing in 1842, a contributor to *Graham’s Magazine* claimed that “there is a body and substance to true wit, with a reflectiveness rarely found apart from a masculine intellect . . . The female character does not admit of it” (qtd. in Jenkins 526). French philosopher Henri Bergson, in his 1900 essay on comedy, declared that “laughter has no greater foe than emotion . . . [H]ighly emotional souls, in tune and unison with life, in whom every event would be sentimentally prolonged and re-echoed, would neither know nor understand laughter” (63). Given the popular conception at the time of women as “highly emotional souls,” it would follow that in Bergson’s view women are excluded from laughter.

The inherently aggressive nature of comedy was also thought to be diametrically opposed to the cultural ideal of femininity as defined at the turn of the twentieth century, with its emphasis on submissiveness, deference and passivity. For many critics and writers, humor was at odds with perceived notions of how proper middle- and upper-class women should behave. Comedians deliver *punch* lines and *kill* their audiences. They call attention to society’s idiosyncrasies and failings rather than quietly accepting the world as it is, and in so doing they often expose truths that would otherwise go unspoken. In vaudeville, the aggressive nature of comedy was apparent in the fact that comedians frequently addressed the audience directly, actively engaging and confronting spectators, while singers, dancers and other performers were more submissive, positioning themselves as recipients rather than bearers of the gaze. This dynamic can also be seen in Keystone comedies of the 1910s, as the comic actors (both male and female) engaged in violent knockabout routines and gags, while the bathing beauties (always female) stood quietly on the sidelines and observed, but seldom participated in, the chaos.

Despite the depth of popular sentiment that femininity and comedy were incompatible, the increasing numbers of women making a living as comediennes in the early twentieth century prompted some to allow that women could, perhaps, have a sense of humor. However, even those writers and critics who conceded women’s humor argued that women’s sensitive and emotional, rather than intellectual, nature meant that they were capable of understanding and appreciating only the most subtle, delicate humor (see Coquelin). And if women were more inclined toward gentle, subtle, and emotional comedy, it follows that “low” types of physical comedy, such as slapstick, were too coarse for women’s sensibilities. One writer claimed that when women are confronted with wit and humor “in the form of what is boisterous and broad and rough, she does not recognize them,” and another explained that

women's humor "is delicate, sympathetic, refined to the highest culture. True humor delights her, while buffoonery, if it be brutal, shocks her" (Coquelin 68; Burdette qtd. in Kibler 59). *Moving Picture World* echoed this sentiment, saying that "Slapstick comedy with man-made laughs, and broad masculine humor seldom please the woman patron. . . ." (Brown). These writers allow for women's appreciation of humor, as long as the humor is suitably ladylike.

The idea that slapstick and "low" comedy were inherently unfeminine was especially problematic for female comedians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as this type of comedy was becoming prominent on the stage, and later on the screen. "New Humor," a popular new type of comedy that reflected the energetic and chaotic modern world, was violent, anarchic and fast-paced, and served as the basis for slapstick and unruly performances on stage. Based in inversion and disorder, New Humor was a decidedly lowbrow break from earlier forms of comedy that tended to be slower-paced and more thoughtful. However, traditionally defined femininity did not allow for enjoyment of New Humor and low comedy, as women were supposed to be too sensitive, too refined, and too "ladylike" to enjoy comedy based on visceral humor and laughter based on shocks (Glenn 43). Still, many female comedians, including Eva Tanguay, Sophie Tucker, and Charlotte Greenwood made use of this type of low comedy in their vaudeville and burlesque performances. These performances served to contradict the popular notion that women were either uninterested in low comedy or incapable of performing it, and would inform the types of comedy performed by film comediennes in the 1910s and 1920s.

"I Had the Idea I Could Act"

Reflecting this longstanding cultural ambivalence toward women performing comedy, comediennes were sometimes described as feeling shock and anguish when they first discovered that they were funny, as if admitting the presence of a sense of humor was tantamount to admitting the absence of femininity. As one writer phrased it, "It took Charlotte Greenwood six years to learn that she was funny. It took another year to reconcile herself to the idea" ("Unidentified Clipping" ca. 1916). The idea that Greenwood would have to "reconcile herself" to a trait that was the key to her fame and fortune indicates the extent to which women could have internalized negative stereotypes about being funny. Rather than seeing a sense of humor as a positive trait, it's presented as something that a woman must reluctantly come to terms with. As such, certain press discourses argue that women only turn to comedy as a last resort, like Greenwood, who "didn't start out in life to become a comedienne. Few comediennes do" ("Unidentified Clipping"). Similarly, Louise Fazenda describes her early attempts at drama, and their disastrously comedic results:

When I started into pictures I had the idea I could act; you know what I mean, highbrow stuff and dramatic things, and romantic pictures. The director gave me several bits in straight

dramas but I always managed to ball things up. I was so awkward I was always falling over my feet or somebody else's feet, and once I ruined a whole scene by falling down a flight of stairs.

Things like that happened right along, until it got to be a joke that I'd mess up any "bit" that was given me and turn it into comedy—unconsciously. At last I was kindly but firmly told that I had missed my vocation, which might be comedy, but which assuredly was not drama. (Squier 4)

These stories about Greenwood and Fazenda share a common narrative of the comedienne's dismay over the discovery of her humor, and eventual reluctant acceptance.

This idea of comedienues as naturally, but reluctantly funny shows up in several films.



A portrait of Louise Fazenda.

Mabel Normand in *The Extra Girl*, Colleen Moore in *Ella Cinders* and Marion Davies in *Show People* each plays an aspiring actress hoping to make a name for herself in dramatic roles. In each case, the character is clearly better suited to comedy, and this fact gets in the way of her dramatic ambitions. The inherent irony of these films lies in the fact that while the characters long to play dramatic roles and stumble upon comedy inadvertently, the actresses themselves were celebrated comediennes who worked hard to develop their comic technique. And so the trait—humor—that stands in the way of the characters realizing their goals is the same trait on which the actresses built their careers.

In *The Extra Girl*, Sue Graham (Normand) sees Hollywood as an exciting escape from a small-town existence and a pre-arranged marriage to a man she doesn't love. Sue's predilection for drama is evidenced early in the film when she acts out melodramatic scenes involving sheiks and exaggerated swoons, but Normand's, and by extension Sue's, talent for comedy overshadows her attempts at drama. When Sue is given the opportunity to make a screen test for a drama, she is consistently, albeit unintentionally, funny. After stepping in gum she gets a brick stuck to her shoe, and then she sits on a workman's dirty glove, leaving a black handprint on her white bloomers. Entering the scene for another take she bends over, causing her hoop skirt to fly up and flashing her bloomers—complete with the handprint on her rear—to the assembled cast and crew, who howl with laughter. Sue's unintentionally comic performance is reminiscent of the press accounts of Louise Fazenda's beginnings in Hollywood; like Sue, her attempts to join the ranks of serious actors are thwarted by her irrepressibly comic personality. Unaware that she is the source of the comedy, Sue is nevertheless encouraged by the reaction to her screen test, gushing to her beau that “the director said I was just naturally funny.”

Like *The Extra Girl*, *Show People* centers on an aspiring dramatic actress—Peggy Pepper (Davies)—who is better suited for comedy. Peggy's first experience before the camera resembles Sue's, in that the comedy she creates is inadvertent. Although Peggy's first film is a slapstick comedy, she believes she's appearing in a drama, and even recites some lines from a stage melodrama for the director before he begins shooting. When she enters the scene, however, she's sprayed in the face with seltzer water; outraged, she responds by throwing anything within reach at the other actors. As everyone laughs at her bravura performance she begins to cry and runs off the set, and when her friend Billy follows her she sobs, “I came here to do drama. Why didn't you tell me it was this?” Billy gently helps Peggy reapply her makeup as he comforts her, reminding her that “all the stars have had to take it on the chin—Swanson, Daniels, Lloyd—all of them.” Peggy's sense of shame is palpable, and Billy's attempts to console her and prepare her for the next take are both tender and mildly unsettling, as he paints her face while reassuring her that “it'll be easy from now on,” and urging her to engage in a bodily activity that she finds both distasteful and humiliating. Despite her reservations, Peggy decides to “take it on the chin” and continue in comedy, eventually making a name for herself as a comedienne. However, when the chance comes to



Mabel Normand in *The Extra Girl* (F. Richard Jones, 1923).

leave comedy and move to drama she jumps at the opportunity. But while Peggy Pepper is uncertain about comedy, *Show People* is not. From the film's beginning it's clear that Peggy was meant for comedy, and, as with Sue Graham, even when she's engaged in "serious" drama she's funny. Furthermore, the film can be seen as a comment on Davies' own career, as she alternated comedies with historical dramas despite the fact that many critics thought she was a natural and very talented comedienne—the year *Show People* was released *Photoplay* called Davies "a superb comedienne," and *Variety* said that she "does some really great comedy work" (York; "Untitled" *Variety*, Apr. 1928). The film's happy ending doesn't just involve the romantic union between Peggy and Billy; it also involves Peggy abandoning her highbrow dramas and embracing her comic nature—"the *real* Peggy Pepper" that the studio head lamented was lost in her high-class pictures.

Ella Cinders features another take on the trope of a woman whose natural humor stands in the way of her dramatic ambitions. In a retelling of the Cinderella tale, Ella (Moore) is abused



William Haines consoles Marion Davies in *Show People* (King Vidor, 1928).

by her stepmother and stepsisters and lives a life of drudgery. Ella enters her photo in a beauty contest hoping to escape her life by winning a trip to Hollywood and a movie contract, but unbeknownst to her the picture submitted by the photographer was taken at the moment a fly landed on her nose. Instead of the glamorous portrait Ella had hoped to submit, her contest photo instead features her scrunching up her face and looking cross-eyed at the fly. Despite this, she wins the contest—as the fire chief/judge tells her, “Beauty means nothin’. We firemen see the best-lookin’ wimmin at their worst. The movies needs newer and funnier faces.” She is initially hurt by the thought that people are laughing at her, but is reassured when her beau reminds her, “Not everyone can make people laugh, Ella. It’s a great thing—making people happy.” Although Ella worries that her outdated clothing and plain appearance would handicap her in the beauty contest, her natural humor—demonstrated earlier in the film when she’s seen clowning around to entertain children that she’s babysitting—is what sets her apart from the more conventionally attractive but humorless contestants and sends her to Hollywood. And while Ella eventually finds success in dramatic pictures, not comedies, Colleen Moore turns in an exceptional comedic performance in this and many other films, a fact that complicates the message of the film. Ella’s natural flair for comedy—whether intentional or not—leads to her success as a dramatic actress, a plot point that would seem to privilege drama over comedy within the diegesis. However, Colleen Moore’s extradiegetic commercial and artistic success as a comic actress provided a clear example for fans of a funny woman who preferred to make a career in comedies.

“A Stepping Stone to the Heavier Dramatic Roles”

Not surprisingly, given the prejudices against women performing comedy, many actresses who began their careers as comediennes were only too glad to “graduate” to drama. As it was for Sue Graham, Peggy Pepper, and Ella Cinders, comedy for some comediennes was seen as a sort of generic ghetto, a starting point that must be abandoned as soon as possible if one had any hopes of becoming a legitimate actress. Fay Tincher was quoted as saying, “Screen farce has never appealed to me. Comedy is, at best, a transitory entertainment that seldom lingers in a person’s mind after it is over. Drama is a different matter. Drama affects—for drama is life” (“Fay Tincher – An Ingenuish Vampire”). *The Morning Telegraph* let readers know that Bebe Daniels “accepted less money than she was getting with [Pathé] in order to get away from comedies and get into the serious side of picture making” (“Untitled,” *The Morning Telegraph*, Feb. 3, 1924). And a 1924 article on Dorothy Devore spelled out the strategy of many actresses who started in comedy, by describing her as “another of the young women film stars who is going to use her training in the comedy school as a stepping stone to the heavier dramatic roles in the silent drama” (“Comedienne Sighs For Other Worlds”). This disdain towards comedy certainly wasn’t limited to female comics, as comedy in general was seldom taken seriously, both literally and figuratively, whether it featured the work of men or

women. But when understood alongside the existing belief that most women were naturally more emotional and therefore suited to drama, and that drama was a more fitting genre for properly feminine women, one can see that the stakes for women performing comedy were higher than for men. The supposed incompatibility of femininity and humor, coupled with the general perception of comedy as lowbrow, led to the uncomfortable possibility of comediennes being regarded as lacking in both femininity and class. Along with reporting on comediennes' desires to leave comedy, the press often implicitly passed judgment on the genre through the language it used, referring to Constance Talmadge's pictures as "mere refined comedy" and Gale Henry as "just a comedienne," and describing dramatic films as "important pictures" and "more ambitious things," and a dramatic performer as "a real actress" ("Two Weeks"; "A Look at Mehitabel Lactea"; "Coiffure Note: Louise Fazenda Still Wears Those Old Pigtales"; "Unidentified Photo Caption"; Cheatham).

"The Comedy of Ideas"

The ambivalence that many comediennes felt towards performing comedy was not always evidenced by their high rate of defection to dramatic films. Many comediennes built their entire careers around comedy films, making few, if any, dramas. However, just as some saw comedy as a whole as a sort of generic ghetto, most perceived a hierarchy among different types of comedy, with light comedy viewed as far more respectable than slapstick. Women had a complicated relationship to slapstick—although physical comedy was considered lowbrow and at odds with proper feminine behavior, slapstick comediennes such as Louise Fazenda and Polly Moran were popular with audiences. Until the mid-1910s slapstick was by far the predominate mode of comedy found on-screen, but by the late 1910s longer film lengths and the growing reliance on intertitles for jokes allowed for more complicated plots, and comedy based more on situation than on gags and stunts. Both male and female comics continued to use physical comedy in their films throughout the 1920s, but by the late 1910s comediennes were increasingly vocal about their desire to leave slapstick for what was termed "comedy-drama."

Comediennes frequently referred to "refinement" and "dignity" when discussing their preference for comedy-drama over slapstick. Mabel Normand explained in 1916 that,

She wants to be a trifle more serious and dignified than they have allowed her to be in the Keystone comedies. She says comedy does not altogether consist of falling downstairs and throwing custard pies, and she believes that she can be just as funny in more dignified situations. ("They Will Not Remain in Comedy")

Dorothy Devore echoed this sentiment when she explained that "A starring comedienne cannot afford to be anything but a perfect lady," and "the kicking, punching and slapping

which an audience ‘eats up’ when a man is the purveyor or recipient just doesn’t go with a leading woman on the screen” (“The Big Four of Educational”). Both Normand and Devore position slapstick comedy as undignified and unladylike, recalling debates about whether physical comedy was appropriate for women and whether lowbrow humor had a place in refined cinema. This line of thinking represents a compromise of sorts for female comics. By denigrating slapstick as lowbrow and coarse and simultaneously praising comedy-drama as dignified and refined, comediennes could continue to perform comedy while retaining an acceptably feminine appearance. For comediennes wary about slapstick’s link to suspect femininity, light comedy and comedy-drama offered a more refined alternative.

While those comediennes who were closely linked to slapstick had a more difficult time leaving their old antics behind—Gale Henry sighed that she was “trying to get away from the pie-throwing type of picture . . . but it seems as if the comedy fan never tires of an artistic fall off a cliff, or a good free-for-all chase” (Webster)—others were able to easily transition to what Anita Loos called the “comedy of ideas,” and ultimately situation-based comedy-drama would become the dominant mode of comedy.

“Comedies, Always Comedies”

As writers, critics, social conservatives, and even some comediennes were debating the range and value of women’s humor, many female comics made it clear that they liked making comedies. Newspapers and fan magazines often described comediennes’ pleasure in performing comedy and in making people laugh, and paradoxically, even comediennes who reportedly wanted to abandon comedy in favor of drama were, at times, said to be delighted with comic work. While the most obvious reason for this contradiction has to do with the needs of press agents and studio publicity departments when promoting a new film—an actress’s relative love of comedy or drama would certainly rise or fall depending on the genre of her latest picture—it also reflects the broader societal ambivalence surrounding women and comedy. Very few, if any, comediennes were said to be entirely comfortable with comedy throughout their careers. Instead they were generally depicted as conflicted in some way, whether uneasy about performing physical comedy, uncomfortable with their character makeup and costumes, or afraid of looking ridiculous in public, none of which is surprising, given how controversial the discourses surrounding women’s humor were. If simply having a sense of humor raised doubts about a woman’s femininity, then actively engaging in comic performances could be seen as an affront to and unraveling of traditional gender roles. For the press, fans and comediennes to show a certain degree of ambivalence or unease about female comics, then, is understandable. At the same time, the fact that many comediennes embraced comedy can be read as an act of rebellion, however minor. Even if their stated love of comedy was followed up, on the release of their next dramatic film, by lengthy discussions of their preference for drama, and even if they were depicted as “clowns

with aching hearts” longing to have their dramatic talents discovered, when comediennes were said to enjoy performing comedy they were publicly declaring that women could be unapologetically funny, actively creating humor rather than being the passive butt of the joke.

The image of the “tragic comedienne”—the performer who longs to trade the indignities of comedy for the refinement of drama—was repeated in the press so often that it became a sort of stereotype. As such, the press was quick to draw attention to comediennes who contradicted that stereotype in claiming that they were happy with comedy. Colleen Moore’s reported preference for comedy over drama was said to be “reversing the familiar situation which has robbed the comedy concerns of so many of their leading luminaries” (“Untitled” *Photoplay Journal*, c. 1920). In explaining her affinity for comedy, Moore referenced the notion that women were inherently more emotional than men:

I would rather play comedy than anything else, even if it is more difficult. Practically all women are emotional. They can cry and pound the door and create a rumpus, but few can make people laugh. That is what I want to do. A genuine comedy scene must be studied and worked and felt. (“Colleen Moore Likes Comedy Best”)

Rather than acquiescing to her “feminine” emotions, Moore embraces the challenge that comedy supposedly presents, and in so doing she implicitly questions the need for women to abide by societal restrictions regarding what women can and can’t do.

This is reinforced by other comediennes who similarly expressed a preference for comedy over drama. At the conclusion of a 1920 interview with Gale Henry, a *Photoplay* writer “realized with amazement that the interview seemed to be nearing an end and Miss Henry hadn’t said a word about how she longed to make really big, serious pictures. . . . Gale Henry was content to stick to comedy” (Webster). Another writer noted that Constance Talmadge “refused to live up to the tradition that all motion picture actresses long to make massive productions of the classics,” and that she was, as she herself put it, “pretty satisfied with the parts I have” (“The Coming Film Comedy of Ideas”). Certainly these stories about comediennes who were satisfied with their line of work were complicated by the many stories of comediennes who couldn’t wait to leave the genre behind. Much of the discourse surrounding women who “graduated” to drama involved consideration of external factors—whether comediennes would be regarded by others as unrefined or unfeminine if they stayed in comedy or slapstick. When the press described women who were content to play comedy, however, they often wrote of their personal satisfaction with the genre, an approach that makes sense given the claims of many fan magazines that comedians, both male and female, were “born funny.” Comedy, in this viewpoint, was a logical and fulfilling mode of expression for people with an innate sense of humor, a view that perhaps seems obvious today, but which was at the time somewhat revolutionary given the very vocal critics who felt that women couldn’t and shouldn’t be funny. A declaration by Charlotte Greenwood, then, that

“I love my work because I love to hear my audiences laugh and I love to laugh myself” or by Constance Talmadge that the films she wants to make are “Comedies, always comedies” (“Unidentified Clipping”; Vogdes) confirms that women could unapologetically enjoy and engage in comedy, despite concerns about dignity or femininity. In fact, humor could be an effective way for women to face challenges and adversity. Fan magazines encouraged female fans to take their cues from comediennes and similarly see humor as a valuable asset. In a profile of Marie Dressler *Photoplay* told its readers, “If you get depressed because there are wrinkles just beginning to show around your eyes take a look at Marie. Sure, she has wrinkles. They got there from laughing,” and *Motion Picture Classic* assured fans that Polly Moran “is a woman who may find it, now and then, tragic to be comic, but who is wise enough to know that it is a good deal more comic to be tragic” (Albert; Hall, “Is It Tragic to Be Comic?” 93). By highlighting the fact that many comediennes enjoyed performing comedy and appreciated humor, fan magazines and comediennes themselves were contradicting pervasive sexist discourses about women and comedy, and showing fans that a sense of humor could be a welcome, and even admirable, quality.

Conclusion

Although many comediennes were said to be ambivalent about comedy, their ambivalence reflected broader concerns in American society about appropriate behavior for women. The fact that so many actresses chose to stay in comedy, despite any concerns they many have had about the genre, would have sent a strong message to fans that women didn’t have to restrict themselves to appropriate behavior as defined by others, or try to conform to an idealized and outmoded conception of femininity. By performing, enjoying, and succeeding in comedy, comediennes showed that women could safely step outside the confines of traditional femininity and find a new definition of femininity that suited their own individual proclivity and talents.

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