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Miss-Taken Identities: The Comedy of Misrecognition in New Woman Short Stories

Identité et méprise : la comédie des erreurs dans les nouvelles de la Nouvelle Femme

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Résumés

English Français
This essay will illuminate a surprisingly common trope in British New Woman comic short stories from the late-1880s through the end of the nineteenth century—that is, the social misrecognition of women (almost always young women) by men. Often, this misidentification takes a class-based turn, with men of the upper classes assuming that the girls they encounter in socially ambiguous spaces belong to a class lower than their own and are, therefore, undeserving of the usual forms of respectful courtesy, or are even appropriate targets for sexual predation. These same men often display pre-existing prejudices against women who are smart, talented, and independent. In the course of the narratives that follow, the misidentified female protagonists offer comic correction, re-educating not only the erring men, but also the reader beyond the text. Such stories use the structure of a joke to reshape the understanding of both the diegetic masculine figures within the story and the extradiegetic audience and to advance the cause of the "New Woman" in general by representing this controversial social type as clever, wise, competent, appealing, and even *funny*. The essay focuses on a number of examples of this phenomenon, including stories by Mabel E. Wotton, Beatrice Harraden, Sarah Grand, and Ellen Thorneycroft Fowler.

Cet essai est consacré à un schéma récurrent dans les nouvelles comiques consacrées à la figure de la Nouvelle Femme entre la fin des années 1880 et la fin du siècle : un homme commet une erreur de jugement en essayant de cerner l'identité d'une femme, souvent jeune. Cette erreur a souvent des fondements sociaux : des hommes bourgeois ou des aristocrates présument que la femme qu'ils ont rencontrée dans un espace social ambigu est d'une classe sociale inférieure à la leur, ne mérite pas le respect, et peut même devenir un objet sexuel. Ces mêmes hommes trahissent des préjugés contre les femmes intelligentes, talentueuses et indépendantes. Dans la suite du récit, les femmes mal jugées se livrent à un châtiment comique, afin de rééduquer les hommes pleins de préjugés, mais aussi les lecteurs. Ces récits utilisent le motif de la farce pour remodeler la compréhension des

protagonistes masculins et du lectorat, ainsi que pour promouvoir la cause de la Nouvelle Femme en représentant ce type comme intelligente, sagace, compétente, attirante, et même… drôle. Cet essai analyse plusieurs exemples de cette structure, dans des nouvelles de Mabel E. Wotton, Beatrice Harraden, Sarah Grand et Ellen Thorneycroft Fowler.

Entrées d'index

Mots-clés : fiction victorienne, Nouvelle Femme, Humour, Wotton (Mabel E.), Harraden (Beatrice), Grand (Sarah), Fowler (Ellen Thorneycroft)
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Texte intégral

1 In his study of the general principles of comedy titled *Humour* (2019), Terry Eagleton, the British Marxist literary critic and playwright, wrestles at the outset with one of the most common assumptions found in writing on this subject—the notion that laughter derives from and reinforces a sense of superiority in those who are laughing. This, Eagleton decides, is not necessarily the case. Among the circumstances that call into question this supposed truism is one involving gender difference and social intercourse. Citing the theories of Hélène Cixous, he considers alternative possibilities, with 'women's laughter as a puncturing of male pretensions, and thus as a strike at superiority rather than a specimen of it' (Eagleton 40). In such a gendered and hierarchical framework, 'Comedy may be less an exercise in power than a contestation of it. It can be a field of symbolic struggle, not simply the sneering of the powerful' (Eagleton 40–41). What, then, is the purpose of such symbolic struggle? As Eagleton suggests, '[w]e think of humour as gratuitous and non-functional, but this is far from so. On the contrary, one of its most traditional functions has been social reform. If men and women cannot be scolded into virtue, they might always be satirised into it' (Eagleton 41).

2 For British women writers at the end of the nineteenth century, among their pressing concerns was how to bring present-day masculine figures—whether fictional men, who might serve as textual exemplars, or actual male readers, who might learn from these—to such a state of 'virtue'. As they and their female contemporaries were forced to live 'in a heterosexual economy that mandated marriage and punished resistance to it, no problem was more pressing than the absence of "New Men". This was as urgent a concern for them as the discomfiting presence of vocal and visible "New Women" was for literary men' (Stetz 2015, 107). The question, however, was by what means to effect such positive change diegetically, within a text, and by extension extradiegetically, in the reading audience that witnessed its occurrence. How could British women writers, regardless of whether they identified explicitly as New Women themselves, render the social environment safer and more welcoming for a new sort of woman, both in fiction and in life, with the hope of widening gender-specific liberties and promoting opportunities for all? What strategies were possible to re-educate and reshape a conservative masculine mindset without seeming—to use Eagleton's phrasing—to 'scold' and, therefore, to generate stubborn opposition in response?

3 Merely to reach this stage of plotting (both literally and figuratively), of course, required careful thought about reception. The late-nineteenth century publishing world in Britain was dominated by men. Few magazines that featured fiction for a mainstream readership (as opposed to fashion journalism, household hints, or literature for children) were edited by women. Even fewer publishing firms were run by them, for 'the world of print, which produced both books and periodicals and retained the semi-domestic rhetoric of the late-Victorian publishing firm as a "house"' continued to be unwelcoming to 'the full

integration of women' in the upper echelons of decision-making (Stetz 2007, 125). Anything that resembled overt 'scolding' risked being rejected at the outset, at the stage of manuscript submission, and never reaching its intended audience. Comedy was, therefore, one obvious answer to this dilemma, as a device to make the pedagogical function of fiction more attractive and thus to avoid arousing hostility at any point in the publication process.

4 In his 2018 meditation on satire as a genre, John T. Gilmore asks the rhetorical question, '[i]f satire is often a case of preaching to the converted, does it make a difference?' (Gilmore 184) Writings by and/or about the New Woman most certainly could not count, at any point in the 1880s and 1890s, on addressing an audience only of the already converted, nor could they afford to indulge in any of the harsher sorts of satire when making their case for a 'difference' in terms of fresher, more liberal, and less misogynistic ways of thinking about women's potential and achievements. Interestingly, the particular form of humour that appeared again and again in fiction associated with the New Woman by late-Victorian women writers involved the social comedy centred on the trope of misidentification. This was a classic and long accepted convention. It was familiar, for instance, to Victorian readers of Shakespeare—of which there were a great many at a time when, as Charles LaPorte notes, a Shakespearean cult that bordered on 'religious devotion' was sweeping across Britain (LaPorte 1)—and especially to both London and provincial theatregoers who had attended performances of plays such as *The Comedy of Errors* that turned on confusion of identities.

5 But frequent recourse to fictional incidents of misrecognition and mislabelling of women characters—of young and unmarried women characters, especially by the men who encounter them in liminal or socially ambiguous settings, such as on public transit, in hotels, or on holiday—was no mere accident. It reflected a larger context of social (and literary) anxiety regarding who precisely the so-called New Woman was and what her distinguishing characteristics might be, along with her aims and way of life. This was a matter of uncertainty beginning in the late 1880s, before the formal term 'New Woman' was officially or widely in circulation, which did not happen until 1894. After the firm of Chapman & Hall's release, in particular, of the bestselling novel *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) by 'Ralph Iron', the pseudonym of Olive Schreiner, commentators reported the emergence of a newly rebellious, independent, and self-actualized type of femininity in the social and literary landscapes alike. Almost immediately, the question became how to recognize this character, as well as how to react to her.

6 In a sense, identification has never stopped being an issue of concern, especially in the scholarly world. When Sally Ledger published her seminal 1997 study, *The New Woman*, she titled its opening chapter 'Who Was the New Woman?' More recently, Angelique Richardson's contribution to the 2016 edited volume *Late Victorian into Modern* was an essay similarly titled 'Who *Was* the "New Woman"?' with the italicized verb emphasizing this ongoing pursuit of a definitive, yet sometimes elusive, answer. As Ledger noted, 'The New Woman as a category was by no means stable' in the late-nineteenth century (Ledger 10), nor is it uncontested even now. Sigrid Anderson Cordell points, for instance, to how these questions about classification have had a negative impact on the posthumous reputations of particular late-Victorian women writers such as Mabel E. Wotton (1863–1927). In Cordell's opinion, 'That her work has hovered on the margins of the critical conversation about women's writing in the period is due, I would argue, to the fact that we have not known where to place her in that conversation—is she a New Woman, an aesthete, a conservative idealist, an experimentalist?' (25). At the same time, a scholar such as Carolyn Christensen Nelson includes Wotton among New Woman authors in her anthology, *A New Woman Reader: Fiction, Articles, and Drama of the 1890s* (2000).

7 One of the few assumptions about the New Woman of the 1880s and 1890s that was not subject to controversy had to do with class. Whether in texts or in life, the new type of womanhood was thought to be present only in the middle and upper classes. The reason for this was obvious. British working-class and also lower-middle-class women who relied on their own labour for an income, and thus whose survival depended on pleasing their employers, often were assumed to have few opportunities for self-assertion, for education about their possible rights, or for the exercise of social freedoms, despite the evidence of their political activism and organized participation in strikes. At the same time, women of the 'higher' and more prosperous classes were not expected to work for a living or, if they were compelled to do so, to express their desire for liberty through the pursuit either of an 'ungenteel' profession or of a career in any of the established modes of art, whether literary, visual, or musical.

8 The prevalence of this fixed set of assumptions gave a store of material to women comic writers of the period, who could introduce it in order to counter or overturn it, while showing readers the discomfiting of fictional characters (many of them men) who blindly adhered to it. Comedy is, after all, as Glen Cavaliero reminds us in *The Alchemy of Laughter*, often a form of ironic discourse—'the deliberate voicing of discrepancy between the apparent and the actual' (Cavaliero 28). Comic irony serves as the 'enemy' of 'easy assurances as to the status quo' and of 'creamy smugness', even as it becomes the ultimate 'wit's weapon against stupidity' (Cavaliero 28). In this case, it was a weapon against men who felt confident in their own ability correctly to categorize the women whom they met and then to judge and treat them accordingly. Their 'smugness' could be wiped off their faces by the laughter of women characters within the text and of readers beyond it, who were being invited to join in the fun.

9 Unsurprisingly, these comic reversals, with their implicit social lessons both for the men in the texts and for the audiences outside of them, tended to appear more often in short stories than in novels. As Angelique Richardson explains, 'The New Woman of novels was regularly hemmed in, and often defeated, by social circumstances, perhaps inevitably as the traditions of Victorian realist fiction tended to suggest that social barriers were stronger than individual will. But short stories and non-realist modes offered a release from these strictures' (Richardson 158). There were, of course, exceptions to this pattern. 'In Dull Brown', a contribution to the January 1896 issue of the Bodley Head's *Yellow Book* magazine by Evelyn Sharp (1869–1955), who was a feminist and later a suffrage activist, stands out as a story that begins in a comic mode, but gradually darkens as it progresses toward a reversal of expectations.

10 As Julia Saccucci rightly notes, '"In Dull Brown" . . . looks at first glance like a silly little thing, an early version of a screwball comedy. Roughly half of it is a push-and-pull of banter between the two leads' (Saccucci 2). Those protagonists are Jean Moreen, who turns her livelihood teaching children, but who is also a serious visual artist in her few hours of leisure, and a man (whose name, as she later learns, is Tom Unwin), who initiates a conversation with her one morning as she rides to work on an omnibus. Although engaging in such a dialogue with a stranger to whom one has not been introduced is socially prohibited, Jean does so, because she recognizes that he is a member of her own class—i.e., a 'gentleman' (Sharp 183). She is also, however, aware that he has begun talking to her under the misapprehension that she must be of the class lower than his own, and thus someone with whom he feels free to amuse himself by speaking flirtatiously; as she tells herself, 'of course he thinks I am a little shop-girl' (Sharp 182). The third-person omniscient narrator confirms this supposition for the reader, along with Tom Unwin's growing uncertainty about how to place her, based on the discrepancy between her unfashionable dress and her clearly educated speech: 'He smiled and glanced at her with more interest. Her identity was beginning to puzzle him' (Sharp 183).

11 The course of the story proceeds through a series of meetings in public spaces between these two characters, some by chance and some by Tom's design, over a period of many weeks. While it looks as though we are watching a romantic comedy unfold—one that ought to move from social misidentification on the part of the man through his re-education, and then onwards toward love and marriage between this unconventional woman and a more conventional male figure, whose perspective has been widened by knowing her—that is not what occurs. What follows instead is, in Julia Saccucci's words, 'a scathing critique of the mould that women in the 1890s were expected to fit—both the incredibly small size of the cage made by the crushing lack of options, and the impossibility of sustaining a full life within it' (Saccucci 2).

12 Tom accepts an invitation to come to tea at Jean's home and immediately becomes enamoured of her sister, Nancy, who does not work or draw, and who embodies the most traditional ideal of the unambitious, domestic, and determinedly decorative woman. Rather than congratulating herself on losing a man who is not enlightened enough to appreciate the new sort of independent, multi-talented woman she represents, Jean is devastated: 'The burden of her own cleverness was almost too much for her, and she would have given worlds, just then, to have been as ordinary as Nancy—and as beautiful' (Sharp 198). 'In Dull Brown', which begins in the realm of humour, ends in neither a comic nor a feminist triumph, but in a painful reality check for both the heroine and the audience, as the man proves uneducable. Its plot counters the pattern described by George Meredith (1828–1909) in his *An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit*, where '[t]he Comic poet dares to show us men and women coming to . . . mutual likeness', for 'when they draw together in social life their minds grow liker; just as the philosopher discerns the similarity of boy and girl, until the girl is marched away to the nursery' (Meredith 15). By the conclusion, Jean and Tom have grown farther apart, with the former on the road toward modernity and the latter moving backwards toward a retrograde gender binary.

13 But Evelyn Sharp's short story is the outlier here. Far closer to the common Meredithian plot structure is Mabel E. Wotton's 'A Particularly Nice Girl', which appeared in *A Pretty Radical and Other Stories* (1890). It was the second work in this volume to use the comic trope of the misidentification of a young woman by a man who starts out in need of having his mind broadened and his assumptions about women challenged. The first one was the book's title story, which foregrounded the misguided thinking of a well-to-do gentleman, Will Charteris, who learns that the occupants of the flat above his are a young woman artist named Lettice Holt and an older woman who teaches music. He immediately leaps to the conclusion that the younger of the two must be an example of a political type he particularly abhors. Although he has yet to set eyes on her, he announces at the outset to a male companion, 'I don't like women who are radicals . . . a radical is, generally speaking, one who kicks against authority; and I take it that women who, like Miss Lettice Holt, can't get on with their home belongings, but prefer having rooms of their own, are radicals of the reddest dye' (Wotton 1–2). He cannot imagine that a woman who leaves home to pursue her own interests and livelihood is, in fact, someone not so different from himself.

14 Later, a scene of comic misapprehension occurs when, at a social gathering, Will Charteris encounters an attractive and seemingly sympathetic young lady to whom he pours out a stream of complaints about independent women in general and insinuations about the character of his neighbour, Miss Holt, in particular. Only after he has finished this tirade does he learn that his elegant and good-looking auditor is Miss Holt herself. As a result of this misidentification, he suffers extreme social mortification, which then turns to self-criticism, and he is soon on the path toward conversion: 'Each of his own phrases sprang up in all its hideous nakedness to confront him; he had insulted a girl of whom he knew nothing but good, and whom personally he had found charming' (Wotton 9). Before long, after further meetings, 'he has fallen in love with the so-called "radical" and not only

revised his views, but has become a silent benefactor, helping both women in their careers' (Stetz 2016, 229). The lesson for the audience—especially the masculine one—beyond the text could not be plainer, and it is one taught through the use of comic irony. But as Jane Ogborn and Peter Buckroyd point out about irony, it demands that 'readers need to be able to read closely, to draw inferences from a text and to make deductions, and also to make connections between the text and their own experiences' (Ogborn and Buckroyd 16), even as the author, Mabel E. Wotton, presumably has made connections to her experiences as an 'advanced' professional in the arts, moving in a social landscape where she was as likely as the fictional Miss Holt to confront prejudices and unflattering views regarding her way of life.

15 Sigrid Anderson Cordell has described Mabel E. Wotton as a figure 'deeply involved in the cultural and social life of turn-of-the-century London' (24). Whereas 'A Pretty Radical' is set in the genteel social world of its masculine protagonist, as well as the sphere inhabited by women visual artists and musicians, Wotton's other comic tale involving mistaken identity from the same 1890 volume, 'A Particularly Nice Girl', uses as its backdrop an environment with which Wotton herself no doubt would have been even more familiar: the London-based business of professional authorship and publishing. Told in the first-person by a dramatized narrator—a young man who has just inherited from his late uncle the editorship of a weekly journal—this story begins in an omnibus headed toward Fleet Street, where the narrator is captivated by the sight of a fellow passenger: a pretty, albeit somewhat shabbily dressed, girl whose expression is, surprisingly, one of 'exceeding happiness' (Wotton 248). This leads to his speculation as to her identity: 'I wondered who she was and what she did to be capable of producing such content, for the girl did not look as if the world were treating her very well. She could not have been more than nineteen or so, and was evidently a worker, for she carried with her a roll of manuscript, and carried it, moreover, in a business-like, determined sort of way as if the precious document were her own' (Wotton 249). That last detail proves a disturbance and an irritant, for despite the pleasure he finds in looking at her, he has a seemingly unconquerable bias; as he tells the reader, 'Now, all my life, much as I had admired and reverenced women in general in their home capacity, I had had the finest contempt for their brain-power, and nourished quite a special detestation for writing-women' (Wotton 249).

16 Much to his shock and dismay, the young woman in question, whose name is Miss Charity Landor, not only alights at his stop, but walks into his own place of business, where he learns that she was secretary to his late uncle and expects to go on occupying the same position, supporting both herself and her disabled father. His initial response is hostile: 'I did not want a girl in my office, and I told her so. Furthermore, I explained my views of women's duties in general' (Wotton 252). Nevertheless, smitten as he is by her beauty and charm, he agrees to a one-month-long trial period, during which she proves not merely competent but indispensable, and he keeps her on.

17 As the narrator grows more comfortable in his role as editor of the paper, he also becomes more aware that its best feature—indeed, its 'only amusing column'—is one 'devoted to miscellaneous gossip and . . . signed "The Man About Town"', exhibiting a style both 'clever and easy' (Wotton 253). Acknowledging that he could do nothing comparable himself, the narrator confesses, 'I nourished a secret but profound admiration for my unknown contributor' (Wotton 253). Here Wotton adds a further comic twist. When the narrator expresses to his secretary his high opinion of the column's unknown author, her lack of answering enthusiasm serves for him merely as further proof of the 'envy of women' in general, as well as a sign of Charity Landor's mental inferiority in particular: 'I need not have feared this girl being too clever if she could not even appreciate my favourite "Man About Town,"' he smugly tells both himself and the reader (Wotton 253).

18 In his 2007 study, *Anonymity: A Secret History of English Literature*, John Mullan describes the Victorian era as the great age of anonymous and pseudonymous publication, so much so that, 'In the nineteenth century, guessing at the gender of an unknown author became part of the pleasure of reading' (Mullan 76). It never occurs to the narrator of this story, however, to doubt the gender of the 'Man' who writes the column. Only by accident is it revealed to him eventually that the unknown writer whom he has admired is none other than his secretary, Charity Landor.

19 With this revelation of authorial identity, the narrator is 'now brought to an instant and shameful surrender of all my preconceived notions of woman's work' (Wotton 256). The impact, in fact, is a complete surrender on his part, not only to a new appreciation of women's talents and capabilities, but a surrender to love. In the brief epilogue that takes the audience up to the present moment, the narrator informs us that he and Charity are now married. Hers is not, however, a purely domestic life, for as the narrator affirms, writing and domesticity do not exist in opposition to one another: 'She is a tolerably well-known novelist at present, but she neither neglects her husband, nor leaves her children in rags' (Wotton 256). It is a happy ending to a comedy of misidentification that supports the advance of women in both office work and in the writing profession, while recalling the conclusion to the 1888 novel *The Romance of a Shop* by Wotton's contemporary, Amy Levy, where a woman character carries on successfully with her photography business even after marriage and motherhood. Although, at the time of publication, an unappreciative anonymous reviewer for the *Speaker* dismissed 'A Particularly Nice Girl' as 'silly', it stands up well as an inoffensive and effective piece of feminist propaganda in light-hearted form ('Feminine Fiction' 296).

20 The somewhat conservative impulse in Wotton's work, which draws the characters in both stories from *A Pretty Radical* toward heterosexual unions (even if the result is marriage of a non-traditional sort, allowing wives to pursue artistic careers), is less apparent in some other comedies of misrecognition of the period, such as 'A Bird on Its Journey' by Beatrice Harraden (1864–1936). Originally published under the title 'A Bird of Passage' in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in April 1894, Harraden chose to include it in her 1894 volume of short stories, *In Varying Moods*. Unlike many other short stories published by women authors in the 1890s, with comic plots that turned upon the misrecognition of a New Woman type by an individual male character, 'A Bird on Its Journey' shows an entire group of upper-class English people of both genders engaged in misidentification and in need of a correction of their social and political attitudes. In this way, Harraden deliberately and ambitiously engages in the re-education of women and men alike in her audience. At the same time, Harraden's story enters into contemporary debates over the issue of whether or not women were capable of genius in the arts, amid a cultural landscape where Cesare Lombroso's *Genio e Follia* (1864) was translated into English and issued in 1891 as *The Man of Genius*, making plain the popular association of extraordinary talent with only one gender. That she would have wished to address this question and to weigh in on the side of a feminist belief in women's capacity for genius is unsurprising, given her own history as a graduate of Bedford College, London, along with her future role as a suffrage leader in the Women's Social and Political Union (Cevasco 260).

21 'A Bird on Its Journey' takes place in a socially liminal space—not in a public omnibus, but rather in a hotel in Switzerland filled with British tourists. It is a location where strangers meet, and where there is no immediate expectation of formal introductions or of the presence of anyone to vouch for the identity of new arrivals. The residents feel, therefore, free to project onto any unknown Other their own familiar prejudices, which they have brought with them on holiday like ugly and inappropriate luggage carted from home. Three hotel guests in particular show themselves at the outset as badly in need of re-education about questions involving both women and class. One is a character known as

the Major, who is not only a blowhard, but a snob and a self-appointed expert in musicianship. The second is a middle-aged lady, Miss Blake, about whom we hear that there was 'nothing of the feminine', including her usual outfit of 'horse-cloth dress, her waistcoat and high collar, and her billy-cock hat', which were all 'of the masculine genus' (Harraden 140). Despite her own blurring of binary gender lines, sartorial and otherwise, she imposes on women as a whole the most exacting standards of conventional femininity, even as she looks down on all women of a class below her own. The third character in need of comic correction is Oswald Everard. He is a young gentleman who is entirely too pleased with himself and sure of his own charm, as well as secure in his assumptions about women as objects meant for his amusement, especially when those women belong to a lower social class.

22 The *instrument* (so to speak) of comic correction for all of these errant characters is a British girl who arrives at the hotel one afternoon for a brief stay, having hiked there unchaperoned. As she immediately goes to the piano in the parlour, finds it out of tune, and reaches into her bag to pull out a tuning-hammer, before tuning it herself, all the residents assume that she must be a piano tuner by occupation. As Miss Blake pronounces loftily on the matter, '"Really it is quite abominable how women thrust themselves into every profession," she remarked, in her masculine voice. "It is so unfeminine, so unseemly"' (Harraden 140). The young woman in question does not realize that she has been characterized as a piano tuner until she is deep in a conversation at cross-purposes with Oswald Everard. He delivers a tirade against piano tuners, who have interrupted his peace in the past, and then exclaims, 'And how, in the name of goodness, you should deliberately choose to be one of them, and should be so enthusiastic over your work, puzzles me beyond all words' (Harraden 146). Her reaction is immediate and unexpected: 'He stopped suddenly, for the little girl was convulsed with laughter. She laughed until the tears rolled down her cheeks; and then she dried her eyes and laughed again. "Excuse me," she said, "I can't help myself; it's so funny"' (Harraden 146). Just why this is so amusing to her will not be clear until later in the narrative, after she has (quite literally) *played* a joke of her own. David K. McGraw has reflected on the ethics of what are called practical jokes: 'Practical jokes are certainly morally dubious in that they often involve an action performed on a nonconsenting victim who might experience confusion, ridicule, or discomfort. On the other hand, practical jokes provide a variety of benefits, ranging from amusement to a psychological sense of bonding among a group' (McGraw 224). In this instance, however, the joke also has the benefit of being an aid to moral and social education.

23 At dinner, where all the British holiday-makers assemble, the talk turns to the subject of music, where the self-important Major, 'who was considered an authority on all subjects[,]' boasts of having attended a performance by Miss Thyra Flowerdew, an English pianist who is renowned for the superb quality of her musicianship. He goes on to assert that '"her personality is an unusual one: having once seen her, it would not be easy to forget her. I should recognise her anywhere"' (Harraden 154). On her final evening there, the young woman, whom Oswald Everard has found increasingly attractive, but continued to treat somewhat patronizingly, believing her to be a member of the lower middle classes in an undistinguished occupation, sits down at the piano herself: 'Her touch and feeling were exquisite; and her phrasing betrayed the true musician. The strains of music reached the dining-room, and one by one the guests came creeping in, moved by the music, and anxious to see the musician' (Harraden 163). At the conclusion of her impromptu concert, the moment of revelation arrives: '"There is only one person who can play like that," cried the Major, with sudden inspiration: "she is Miss Thyra Flowerdew." The little girl smiled. "That is my name," she said simply; and she slipped out of the room' (Harraden 166).

But Harraden does not leave that as the end of the story. There is a final scene the next morning with Oswald Everard, before Thyra Flowerdew goes on her way. In it, she makes

plain to him the lesson that she wished to teach through her joke, which involves a new view of class and the need to rid oneself of false assumptions about the superiority of one social status over another: '"I hope I have proved to you that the bellows-blower and the organist are sometimes identical," she answered' (Harraden 166). Calling her a 'little wild bird', he then tells her that she has instead given him a 'great idea', which is '*to tame you*' (Harraden 167; italics in original). Were this a work by Mabel E. Wotton, what follows might have been a love scene; yet that is not Harraden's interest. To his announcement, Thyra Flowerdew replies, '"Good-bye, . . . wild birds are not so easily tamed." Then she waved her hand over her head, and went on her way singing' (Harraden 167). The story's closing lines affirm the woman artist's right to liberty, autonomy, and even wildness—an image of femininity unchained (and adamantly undomesticated) that adhered closely, of course, to the popular conception of New Womanhood, even without any explicit reference to that phrase in the text.

25 The genre of the short story, as Kate Krueger asserts in *British Women Writers and the Short Story, 1850–1930*, afforded women authors a variety of potential advantages: it could 'serve feminist ends', offer 'a mechanism to redefine' women's 'roles and desires', and provide 'freedom from the novelistic sway of the marriage plot' (Krueger 3). Indeed, Beatrice Harraden was hardly the only writer of stories that turned on comic misrecognition and misidentification, but that were not aimed at bringing a New Woman-ish protagonist and a newly re-educated masculine figure together in a romantic union. Another such author was Sarah Grand (1854–1943) who, though far better known for her New Woman novels—especially the bestselling *The Heavenly Twins* (1893)—also published numerous works of short fiction. Among these was 'The Undefinable: A Fantasia', which appeared first in the *New Review* in September 1894, before being collected later in a 1908 volume, *Emotional Moments*.

26 As its subtitle 'A Fantasia' implied, this was a short story that combined a recognizable contemporary London social setting with non-realistic elements, including some drawn from Classical mythology, with the latter introducing the idea that a (female) Muse is essential to everyone, in order to inspire the creation of great art. The story's title, however, alluded to two different problems, in terms of the issue of definitions. One was the broader philosophical and aesthetic question of how to achieve the quality of genius in a creative work; the other was the puzzle posed by the identity of a young woman who comes unbidden to the studio of a male painter at a moment when he is at a crossroads in his career, and who offers her services in the guise of an artist's model. Although, as Ann Heilmann has noted in *New Woman Strategies*, 'in Grand's work the quintessential New Woman is an artist, more particularly a writer' (Heilmann 107), in this case the New Woman-ish figure is a mysterious character whose purpose is not to create anything herself, but instead to turn a prominent male artist away from his misguided pursuit of social success at the cost of settling for the second-rate in his work and losing his chance to attain true greatness.

27 Like other 1890s comic short stories involving mistaken identities, Sarah Grand's features a man who harbours socially conventional biases that are both misogynist and snobbishly class-based. It then goes further than some narratives, as it demonstrates his rapid re-education through the female protagonist's strategy of toying with him and playing jokes on him, until he is capable not only of appreciating her unconventionality and recognizing his own faults, but acknowledging her superior judgment and learning gratefully from her wisdom. A turning-point comes early, when she notices the painting that is in progress on an easel and reacts with dismissive humour: '"Pooh!" she said. "Do you call that a picture?" And then she looked up in my face and laughed' (Grand 268). He has already reacted badly to her irreverent attitude in general toward him, which she has displayed from the first, upon entering his studio. As he informs the reader, hers are 'the mocking eyes of that creature most abhorrent to the soul of man, a woman who claims to

rule and does not care to please; eyes out of which an imperious spirit shown independently, not looking up but meeting mine on the same level' (Grand 267). This is particularly offensive, because he takes her initially for a woman from a class below his own; yet he does not respond to her jibe either with anger or with a defence of his painting, for at some level, he knows well that his work has grown dull and is lacking something crucial. She has seen through its inadequacy, while his patrons in Society have not.

28 Eventually, the painter, who is also the dramatized first-person narrator, winds up putting himself wholly in her hands, even to the extent of letting her dress him up in a toga (as a nod to her own function as an immortal Muse). When she begins to model for him, he has 'a revelation': 'As I rapidly read each lineament for the purpose of fixing it on my paper, I asked myself involuntarily how I could possibly have supposed for a moment that this magnificent creature was unattractive' (Grand 277). Sketching her brings to mind for him an array of Classical deities. At the same time, however, he discerns in her appearance that 'a confidence of intellect; decision, intelligence, and force of fine feeling combined in her which brought her up to date' (Grand 278). She is thus the embodiment both of the oldest type of powerful woman and of the modern New Woman together, as she herself affirms: '"Yes," she repeated, as if in answer to my thoughts . . . "I *am* a woman with all the latest improvements. The creature the world wants. Nothing can now be done without me"' (Grand 278; italics in original). As she becomes his inspiration, he is filled with a fresh sense of purpose: 'to paint her so that man may feel her divinity and worship that!' (Grand 282) Having brought him to this understanding of what woman is and can be, and having led him simultaneously to rededicate himself to the attainment of the Ideal in his art, though especially in his representations of womanhood, she vanishes as suddenly as she came.

29 Nevertheless, she has left both painter and the extradiegetic masculine audience with an important lesson. In the words of the painter himself, in the modern world of the arts, 'nothing uncommonly great can be done without' her 'countenance', but men will not be able to represent her 'to perfection until' their own 'conceit' has been 'conquered' (Grand 287). The use of humour, lightness, and the comic puncturing of pretension that go on in this story demonstrate how this conceit can be conquered for the good of all. Obviously, not all the intended readers of this text would have been artists. Many, however, would have been, in Grand's view, men in need of just such re-education in their own rather different spheres of work and influence, as *modelled* by this masculine protagonist, as he ends up professionally and personally improved by learning to honour a superior woman who embodies both ancient and challenging 'New' versions of femininity.

30 Although a number of New Woman-themed stories written throughout the 1890s by women authors dealt in just such gentle correction, whether of the male characters within the text or, implicitly, of the audience beyond it, that reliance upon subtle and inoffensive methods was, by the end of the decade, beginning to fray. A new note of harsher satire starts to break through in works such as Ellen Thorneycroft Fowler's 'An Artistic Nemesis', which appeared in the *Pall Mall Magazine* in 1899. The date was significant, ushering in a period of increasing feminist activism over the next few years. At the start of the new century, New Woman figures in both literature and life would transform into militant suffragists, no longer merely hoping for wider opportunities, but angrily demanding political rights as British citizens and equal treatment as human beings, regardless of their gender and class.

31 When creating her own comedy of misidentification in 'An Artistic Nemesis', Ellen Thorneycroft Fowler (1860–1929) was reusing, but also reconceiving, material that she had employed in one of her novels—in this case, *A Double Thread,* which was also published in 1899. In that longer work of fiction, Elfrida Harland, the wealthy young woman protagonist, conceives the idea of impersonating her own late twin—a real girl, though one now dead, who had been cut out of her inheritance and rightful social position.

She does so to test a potential suitor. Forcing him to get to know her in the guise of her penniless double, who must work for a living, and making him fall in love with her 'poor' self will, she hopes, ensure that he really does care for her, rather than for her money. The goal of the masquerade, like the goal of Fowler's novel itself, is heterosexual matrimony and an ending that leads to a happy union. This is indeed what eventually comes about, though only after the woman has been punished for fooling an honourable man, whom she very nearly loses, and acknowledging that she was wrong to doubt him. The plot of *A Double Thread*, therefore, involves a different spin on the expected trajectory: the re-education of an erring woman, who must be made worthy of the man who has loved her devotedly in both of her incarnations.

32 Freed from the necessity, however, of writing a romantic comedy that would be widely acceptable and saleable to a mass audience as a long novel, Fowler took a completely different tack in her short story, 'An Artistic Nemesis'. There, it is the man who merits and receives harsh, unrelenting punishment for his crimes not only against one individual woman, but against women in general—a group that he has judged to be all alike and undeserving of any loyalty or honourable conduct on his part. The villain in this story (and that is not too harsh a label for him) is George Carteret, a British painter on holiday. One of the other guests in this ambiguous social space, which recalls the setting of Beatrice Harraden's story, is a very pretty young woman named Matilda Dunn, who spends her time there writing. Carteret decides that she must be a poor journalist, earning her living with her pen, and also someone from a lower-middle-class background. Thus, she is just the sort of vulnerable, naïve girl with whom it would be fun to amuse himself by making her fall in love with him, knowing that he will suffer no ill consequences from this dalliance, because he has all the social power. His other desire is to exploit her as an unpaid artist's model—to persuade her to sit for his next work, in which hers will be the face of a Peri (or fairy), trying to win her way into Paradise, and to capture on canvas the look of adoration that he will inspire in her.

33 Everything works out precisely as he had planned. Soon, she appears to worship him. He tells her that he loves her, but that he cannot propose marriage until he has spoken to his father. Then, having finished the portrait for which she sat, uncompensated, he goes away, promising 'faithfully', giving his 'word of honour', that he will write to her in a few days, but with no intention of ever doing so (Fowler 182). All goes beautifully for him over the next year. His painting 'was hung on the line, and pronounced one of the best pictures of that year's [Royal] Academy', while, as the third-person omniscient narrator informs us, 'He had forgotten the girl's existence, save as the model of his Peri's face' (Fowler 183).

34 This could have been the ironic ending of a different sort of comedy—a rueful one about art, and about the callousness of the men who make it, for which there is no remedy. But Fowler has another angle to play in 'An Artistic Nemesis'. Now feeling pleased with himself, and hoping for the reward at last of social success, George Carteret attends a Society reception, where he is eager to meet Lady Maud Duncan: 'heiress of the wealthy Earl of Comleydale, and a celebrated beauty to boot, and one of the most brilliant novelists of the day into the bargain' (Fowler 183). To his immense chagrin, he finds that Lady Maud Duncan and 'Matilda Dunn' are one and the same. With relish and self-satisfaction, Lady Maud openly mocks him. Then she explains both how and why she has turned the tables on him: 'I thought what fun it would be to fool you to the top of your bent, and to use up all the idiotic things you might say as "copy" for the story I was then writing . . . . I warmed to my work and immensely enjoyed hearing you make an idiot of yourself. I have so often wondered what sort of silly things silly men say to girls whom they think silly. Now I know' (Fowler 183–84).

35 As he becomes increasingly 'damp with misery', she lets loose 'a peal of silvery laughter', saying, "'It is really horrid for you," she continued through her merriment; "I cannot deny that it is. For every one will recognise you when my novel comes out—which will be in a

week or two, from now . . . [and] the world will say that Mr. Carteret laid his heart at the feet of Lady Maud Duncan, and that she laughed at him. That is what the world will say, if I know anything of the world. And the world despises people who are laughed at, my dear Mr. Carteret"' (Fowler 184). At this moment, she is the very embodiment of what George Meredith had said about the 'heroines of Comedy': that they 'are like women of the world', who 'use their wits, and are not wandering vessels crying for a captain or a pilot' (Meredith 15).

36 Throughout this scenario, moreover, Lady Maud fulfils the requirements laid out by Karen C. Gindele for the successful 'joke-teller' in fiction: 'the joke-teller appears to have control; he or she appears to have the power of criticism of the object, of already grasping the joke itself, and commanding its linguistic and narrative presentation. The joker is supposed to remain in control of him or herself and should not laugh prematurely, if at all, keeping an air of polish and restraint' (Gindele 142). Lady Maud maintains this position until she has made plain, both to George Carteret and to any readers who have not yet grasped the extent of his crime, why he merits harsh punishment for having treated as disposable playthings any young women whom he mistakenly believes to belong to a class beneath his own. Lady Maud finishes her lesson with this dismissive pronouncement: 'Oh! it is really all too funny!' Then, as the narrator reports, 'the girl gave way to unrestrained laughter' (Fowler 185).

37 In this battle of wits between two genders, two artists, and two kinds of art—that of visual portraiture versus verbal satire—Ellen Thorneycroft Fowler stacks the deck in favour of the woman comic writer, a figure not unlike herself. In 'An Artistic Nemesis', she endorses the use of laughter as a kind of cauterizing fire to burn away what is rotten in end-of-the-century gendered social relations, via the comedy of misrecognition. While doing so, Fowler creates her own version of New Woman humour, even as she accomplishes what other British women authors of the 1890s, too, had hoped to achieve in their comic short stories—i.e., to offer readers what Anna Lise Frey would later define as a 'feminist approach to laughter', in which jokes 'guide us towards curiosity, provoke moments of insight and critical thought, and help us to build bridges between our communities and allies' (Frey 7). The writers of these comic short stories worked consciously and conscientiously to craft fictional images of victories over both large and small social injustices—victories that ended in laughter for the women characters and, they hoped, in amusement and instruction for the reading public. To aim at fulfilling such a politically and aesthetically ambitious end was a worthy purpose and certainly no *mistake*.

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