

# Interwar Women's Comic Fiction



# Interwar Women's Comic Fiction:

*'Have Women a Sense  
of Humour?'*

Edited by

Nicola Darwood and Nick Turner

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For Gladys and Reginald Bailey, Bill Odell and Mary Onions:  
always laughing.

Evidently there are still many people going about with a conviction that women have no sense of humour, for it was reported in the *Evening Standard* that the question was last month debated in a London club and the voting was overwhelmingly in the negative.

(The Editor, *The Bookman*, March 1929, 312)

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Nicola Darwood and Nick Turner



# INTRODUCTION

NICK TURNER

This collection of essays situates comic writing by twentieth-century British women authors within their critical and literary contexts. The essays make a space for discussion of women writers who would not normally and have hitherto not been given such space because their writing is, as Stella Gibbons admits in her fake Preface to “Tony” in *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932) (Gibbons 1951, 8), “funny”. This book treats humour seriously, and considers it as a critical and performative mode of writing. The chapters investigate the power and eloquence of comic writing, by revealing its structures, mechanisms and functions within the particular paradigms that women authors have either been confined to, or have made their own: the domestic novel, the marriage plot, the comedy of manners, and the satire against patriarchal power. The book particularly focuses on women writers who, for a variety of reasons, might have been forgotten or overlooked in the twenty-first century.

The essays focus on a very specific period of time and literature: the 1930s and 1940s with (in the case of Ivy Compton-Burnett) a brief foray into the 1950s in Britain, and, in the case of Bradda Field, Canada. Kristin Bluemel has identified this period as crucial in the development of intermodernism, which “takes as its primary subject the fascinating, compelling and grossly neglected writing of the years of Depression and World War II” (Bluemel “Introduction: What is Intermodernism?” 2009, 1). In concert with the project to reassess the literary productiveness of intermodernist writers, these essays ask how such authors—Elizabeth von Arnim, Stella Benson, Ivy Compton-Burnett, Bradda Field, Stella Gibbons and Winifred Watson—function within the frame of modernism’s “other”.

The comic fiction published by women during this period is fascinating because it tends not to be overtly feminist, or consciously radical in advocating change. Sometimes conservative, these works have particular qualities of ambiguity and reticence that make them valuable as indicators of how contemporary readers regarded more “progressive” novels. They have great importance in their original reception as bestsellers, since their messages and the aesthetic pleasure that they offered were welcomed by

hundreds of thousands of readers. That these readers paid for these novels is also crucial: the economic dimension of literary-historical study reflects the power of the novels to deliver what their readers desired. This has been occluded by the focus of traditional literary scholarship, which often focused on authorial textual intention. These novels represent not the mass market, but the market made invisible by successive trends in twentieth-century scholarship that have segregated some texts as being more worthy of study and acceptance than others.

In the great social and cultural changes that swept across Britain in the wake of the First World War, women's roles in society became gradually more diverse and empowered, yet were not immediately matched by fiction that was feminist: however, many satires and comedies all married an apparent appeal to conventional values with subtle subversion through wit. The economy and politics of the 1930s and of the Second World War produced a cultural need for fiction that was both "escapist"—an implicit function of comic writing—or by contrast a reflection of national darkness and doubt.

In *Laughter and the Irresponsible Self*, James Wood situates V.S. Pritchett as a writer of the "dominant English comedy of his day—that of Waugh and the early Powell" (2004, 283). Evelyn Waugh, Anthony Powell and P.G. Wodehouse may all have been "dominant" English comic writers in the 1930s and 1940s, but the comedy of manners by male writers—the kind of fiction invoked by Wood, purveyed by Pritchett and Waugh, and drawing heavily on the influence of Dickens and the Edwardian novel—is only part of the story. As Sophie Blanch has argued (2013, 112), critics have wanted to see women's contributions to literary Modernism as serious, but "there is, however, an alternative history beginning to emerge which reveals the comic potential of a generation of women writers who deploy laughter, jokes, satire, comedy and humour to significant effect". Blanch's argument is the premise behind these essays: "despite scholarly insistence on the overarching seriousness of modernist literary production, there is much to suggest that women writers were interested in using comedy, of various sorts, to underscore their own social, sexual, and artistic differences" (2013, 114).

Critics, many of them feminist, have taken issue with the fact that women's comic writing, not just in the intermodernist era but more widely, has been neglected. Erica Brown cites Regina Barreca's observation in 1988 that the major studies of the role of comedy in British literature do not deal with women writers, and that "[t]wenty years later, this remains the case" (1988, 17). This continuing neglect has prompted these essays' investigations into the work of Elizabeth von Arnim, Stella Benson, Ivy Compton-Burnett,

Bradda Field, Stella Gibbons and Winifred Watson. Fiction can be an excellent indicator of the ideologies of its time, showing later generations what writers and their audiences thought about, for instance, class, gender and race.

Comic writers from this period deployed a richer range of comic forms than in earlier periods: domestic comedy, comedies of manners, satires, burlesques, black comedy, surreal comedy and parody are among the forms used, many of which are discussed in this book. Asking why so many forms were deployed, and the purposes comic writing in this period served, enhances our understanding of how such writing would have been received by its original readers. We also need to consider the other twentieth-century influences that allowed comic writing to evolve as it grappled with the new technologies and communications of modernity: for instance the aesthetics and visual effects in cinema film and sound; emerging conventions in radio programmes; and increased travel opportunities and expectations of how leisure could and should be spent.

Erica Brown, in *Comedy and the Feminine Middlebrow Novel* (2013), identifies the comedy of manners as an important form for women writers of the intermodernist era, an established form that depended on realism, relying on ironic observation of a recognizable social world. The comedy of manners underpins the work of many women novelists in the intermodernist period, such as Angela Thirkell, Nancy Mitford, E.M. Delafield, Barbara Pym, Elizabeth Taylor, Monica Dickens, E.H. Young, Elizabeth Jane Howard and Stella Gibbons. Of these, Pym is the most well-known today, her books all in print and societies devoted to her work thriving, particularly in the USA. Scholarship on Pym flowered in the 1980s after her work came back into print following nearly two decades of near invisibility. However, the image of Pym as "cosy", a purveyor of light, domestic women's writing that works to charm, still lingers; her presence within the academy and the canon is still marginal. Pym's writing is alive to the loneliness inherent within society, delineating with great artistic skill the nuance in new forms of social relations and identity for women post-1945. The qualities of Pym's work, humour, artistry and subtle criticism of the patriarchal system, while never being overtly political or radical, embody the concerns of many of the essays in this book.

Thirkell's novels, which run parallel in publishing time to the works in question in this book, are an often very funny depiction of village life in the era; her work has been recently republished by Vintage with jolly covers appealing to the current cultural nostalgia for 1930s popular art. Thirkell has wit and a great gift for satire, especially in her wartime novels such as *Northbridge Rectory* (1941), but the author's apparent snobbery and

conservative social attitudes can also make the novels unappealing for the modern reader. The “un-PC” qualities again embody problems appearing in the work of many comic writers of the period.

Delafield’s *Diary of a Provincial Lady* (1930) and its sequels have been in print since first publication. The cosiness of the title is misleading: the model is rather *Diary of a Nobody* in the domestic farce the novel contains. Delafield goes beyond Grossmith, however: the private mode of the diary allows anti-patriarchal sarcasm and anger, in a complex construction where social criticism is aired privately, fictionally, to a wide readership. Delafield, like Pym, is never a radical and never shows evidence of wanting to alter the status quo; this marks her out as characteristically intermodernist in her comedy.

Other well-known writers of the period operate both in similar ways and with variations. Mitford’s work presents a hierarchical, class-based world that is oppressive for young women and produces avoidable tragedy; Taylor’s multi-faceted work is infused by a modernist sensibility, and is currently receiving scholarly reappraisal, evidenced by a conference at Cambridge in 2013 that explored areas such as Taylor’s modernism – but not her comedy. Gibbons, in her post-*Cold Comfort Farm* novels such as *The Bachelor* (1944) and *Westwood* (1948), uses the realist comedy of manners to reject marriage as closure and deploy the immigrant to reform suburban Middle England. There is a deep ambiguity in the work of these writers: conservatism in form and content at a superficial level works against subversion in tropes and subtle, implicit messages.

Women writers of this period used comic modes to depict new communities that had not hitherto been seen in the comedy of manners. Stella Benson draws on her knowledge of China, and Rose Macaulay and Elizabeth von Arnim explore cultural exoticism as a cause and remedy for misery. Yet cosmopolitan comedy did not necessarily enhance the standing of women writers: Macaulay was notoriously labelled “witty” as a pejorative diminishment of her feminist activism.

Expansion in setting is paralleled by expansion in mode. Stevie Smith’s *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936) was influenced by the writing of Dorothy Parker and Gertrude Stein: the rapid tonal modulations in the voice of its narrator, Pompey Casmilus, achieve a very distinctive comedy. It is a work of modernism that is also comic, a rare example of the two modes working together. Similar innovations can be found in the work of Barbara Comyns, who used the grotesque to achieve black comedy and surrealism in novels that are often tragic; also noteworthy are Rachel Ferguson’s *The Brontës went to Woolworths* (1931) and Julia Strachey’s *Cheerful Weather for the Wedding* (1932). The eccentricity in style, character and scene in these

writers' work accommodates comedy's function of challenging the reader's expectations and comfort zones.

The satirical mode, identified by Will Smith in his discussion of Bradda Field in this volume, by its nature indicates comedy with a purpose, and this is strikingly apparent in Marghanita Laski's *Love on the Supertax* (1944), parodying Walter Greenwood's *Love on the Dole* (1932), in which Marxism rules Britain and the upper classes, struggling and impoverished, have to navigate a strange, servantless world of pubs, political meetings and margarine for tea, for which they must be grateful. This is comedy with a purpose, as was Rose Macaulay's *What Not* (1922), which anticipates the futuristic social management of *Brave New World*; Pamela Hansford Johnson's *The Unspeakable Skipton* (1956) is a much later satire on journalism.

Women's comic writing in the intermodernist era moved across forms and settings, content and mode, and showed women's roles in society as uncertain: they were unanchored outsiders, rather than liberated. This can be seen for example in the protagonists of neglected comic novels of the period. In Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willowses* (1926) the protagonist is an unmarried woman of wit and intelligence who can only find a place in society by becoming a witch, in a novel that moves from social comedy to incipient magic realism. Likewise E.H. Young's *Miss Mole*, from the novel of that name (1930), rises above her suburban milieu but remains a comic outsider in a sombre novel whose framework is far from comic. The same blending of comedy and near-tragedy is present in two novels by Elizabeth von Arnim. In *Expiation* (1929) a widow is ostracized by her family and community when it comes to light that she has been having an affair for many years; the comic form, with its coincidences, misunderstandings and farce is appropriate for a novel asking serious questions about society's perception of women. Comedy, and an absurd tone, is a fitting expression of this. Similarly, in *Mr Skeffington* (1940), the woman as outsider—this time a divorcée, Frances Skeffington—is rich and apparently empowered, yet visibly ageing and in fear of her social worth. Having her heroine be mistaken for a prostitute in need of salvation produces highly entertaining comedy while making social points.

Historically, much academic discourse on comedy focused on satire and masculine structures of power. For many critics, the tradition of the comic novel in English has been seen to begin with Sterne and Smollett and continue via Dickens to Evelyn Waugh, Anthony Powell and Kingsley Amis, with Jane Austen treated, perhaps, as an honorary man in a predominantly masculine canon. Bakhtin's development of theoretical arguments about the carnivalesque, in *Rabelais and His World* (1968 and

onwards), also addresses a masculine tradition of comedy which does not consider women's writing. More recent studies have extended our understanding of comic fiction. For example, Glen Cavaliero's *The Alchemy of Laughter: Comedy in English Fiction* is wide-ranging and useful, and further approaches to the subject and period may be found in Lisa Colletta's *Dark Humor and Social Satire in the Modern British Novel* (2003), Jonathan Greenberg's *Modernism, Satire, and the Novel* (2011), Michael North's *Machine Age Comedy* (2009), Jerry Palmer's *Taking Humour Seriously* (1994), Susan Purdie's *Comedy: The Mastery of Discourse* (1993), J. B. Priestley's *English Humour* (1976), Andrew Stott's *Comedy* (2005), and Eric Weitz's *The Cambridge Introduction to Comedy* (2009).

There are also a number of books and essays which specifically focus on comic writing by women; the most important example of this, and a seminal text for scholarship on women writers of the period, is Nicola Humble's *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s* (2001), although it focuses on class and culture rather than writing, style and comedy. In turn, Humble's work was preceded by Clare Hanson's *Hysterical Fictions: The 'Woman's Novel' in the Twentieth Century* (2000), Gill Plain's *Women's Fiction of the Second World War: Gender, Power and Resistance* (1996), Alison Light's *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (1991), and Nicola Beaman's *A Very Great Profession: The Woman's Novel 1914-39* (1983), all of which addressed comic writing by women as part of the broad range of how women wrote fiction. Humble's work was followed by Marina MacKay and Lyndsey Stonebridge's *British Fiction After Modernism: The Novel at Mid-Century* (2007) and Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei's *Domestic Modernism, the Interwar Novel, and E.H. Young* (2006). All these texts are valuable studies of the "woman's novel", including its approach to comedy, in the intermodernist period.

The study of comedy by Western women writers saw its greatest development in the 1980s and 1990s in the work of American scholars. Regina Barreca's four works *Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy* (1988), *They Used to Call Me Snow White but I Drifted: Women's Strategic Use of Humor* (1991), *New Perspectives on Women and Comedy* (1992) and *Untamed and Unabashed: Essays on Women and Humor in British Literature* (1994) make the most extensive, theorised contribution to the subject. Judy Little's *Comedy and the Woman Writer: Woolf, Spark and Feminism* (1983) is also invaluable in a similar way, ending with a chapter on "feminist comedy". June Sochen's (ed.) *Women's Comic Visions* (1991), Frances Gray's *Women and Laughter* (1994), Judith Wilt's "The Laughter of Maidens, The Cackle of Matriarchs" (1980) are other very useful



examples, providing important discussions of comedy as a feminist device. Margaret Stetz's *British Women's Comic Fiction, 1890-1990: Not Drowning, But Laughing* (2001) similarly sees the feminist possibilities of a range of novels by women writers over the century. Two of the most recent works on comedy by women in the period are a useful accompaniment to this collection of essays: Sophie Blanch's "Women and Comedy" (2013), and Erica Brown's *Comedy and the Feminine Middlebrow Novel* (2013). Brown's work, focusing as it does on style rather than cultural conditions, parallels this collection most in terms of period and focus.

We are proud to see that the six essays in this collection cover a range of women writers of the intermodernist period, some of them well-known to scholars but having fallen out of print and out of fashion, some near-forgotten universally, and one whose work has remained a classic. This is Stella Gibbons's *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932), often cited on lists of great comic novels of the twentieth century, and never out of print since it was first published. Kristin Distel provides a fascinating new reading of the novel, seeing the book as a theatrical comedy that blurs genre in the manner of modernist texts. Distel considers traditional comic narrative, anti-heroines and how disorder can bring delight, and proves that *Cold Comfort Farm* is more than a very funny parody of the rural novels of Hardy, Lawrence and Mary Webb: it is a novel with a modernist project that reflects on how comedy operates.

Ivy Compton-Burnett was, in the intermodernist period, seen as one of Britain's leading writers, although her reputation has faded since her death. Julia Courtney's essay should, we hope, help bring scholarly attention back to this enthralling yet challenging writer. Discussing the different types of comedy that the writer uses, and the types of characters that use it, Courtney argues that the comic mode is a survival technique, and that the writer's exploration of domestic verbal brutality moves towards the excessive and the anarchic, matching the monstrousness of some of her creations.

Winifred Watson's *Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day* achieved commercial success after being republished by Persephone Books in 2000 and released as a film in 2008; however, until now it has received little critical attention. Aileen Behrendt fascinatingly shows the novel's indebtedness to Evelyn Waugh's writing and situates it alongside other literary comedy of the 1930s. She also reads this novel as a middlebrow comedy that celebrates (sometimes uncomfortable) middle-class values. Most importantly, the traditional marriage plot is read here as a narrative of homosocial desire.

Stella Benson has been sadly forgotten: once a fixture in booksellers' lists as a witty writer, and as a reviewer and critic, a number of her books are now out of print. Nicola Darwood highlights the wit of Benson's work

in her collection of stories *Hope Against Hope, and Other Stories* (1931) and her novel *Tobit Transplanted* (1931), showing how Benson subverts readers' expectations of humour, achieving social criticism through her presentation of gender, marriage, the body, the short story and dramatic irony.

Like Benson, the novels of Canadian writer Bradda Field are out of print and sadly forgotten, but Will Smith's essay on her prize-winning 1932 satire *Small Town* shows that this neglect is unjust. Identifying the novel as comic middlebrow, as Behrendt did for *Miss Pettigrew*, Smith shows that Canada as a nation plays an important role in the text and played an equally important one in its reception when it was published, and that the humour operates through malicious presentation of ugliness, working to subvert and unsettle its readers.

Nick Turner's coda on von Arnim's work, chosen deliberately for its middlebrow status, and its comedy that avoids the radical or feminist and exemplifies the wit and humour to be found in interwar, intermodernist fiction, draws together the themes of the book by investigating the role of the protagonist in *Father* (1931). Her position, and the author's ambivalent stance about female empowerment, sums up the complexities inherent in women's writing of the era.

During the intermodernist period, women were writing comic novels and stories of a very wide range and variety: comedies of manners, satires, fictional diaries, modern takes on the fairy tale, realism, modernism and blendings of the two. The novels and short stories discussed here may be seen as the very best of literature, for not only do they amuse and entertain us with their wit, but they conceal deeper, sometimes subversive messages beneath the humour. Above all, we hope that these essays will provoke future discussions about the important place women novelists have in the tradition of comic fiction.

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## CHAPTER ONE

# “SHE SEEMED FITTED FOR ANY STAGE”: PERFORMATIVE ASPECTS OF FLORA’S INTERVENTIONS IN GIBBON’S *COLD COMFORT FARM*

KRISTIN M. DISTEL

In Stella Gibbons’s novel *Cold Comfort Farm*, protagonist Flora Poste frequently treats her relatives as caricatures of “real” people, even as playthings with which she can amuse herself during her stay at their Sussex home. Her disapproval of the characters’ idiosyncrasies positions her as one who will bring both order and modernity to the Starkadder family, while simultaneously making the family socially acceptable. An endearing and enduringly popular novel published in 1932 and set “in the near future”, *Cold Comfort Farm* features an unforgettable cast of characters and a particularly lively protagonist.<sup>1</sup> Flora, orphaned at the age of nineteen, needs financial subsistence but is unwilling to find work; thus, she determines to move in with her estranged relatives—the inhabitants of Cold Comfort Farm. Because these relatives, the Starkadders, owe an unspoken debt to Flora’s father, they agree to take her into their household. What Flora finds is just what she, a curious and rather elitist young woman, hoped to encounter—a bevy of strange relatives whose flaws and arguments provide her with endless diversions. Her project becomes to “tidy up” their lives while also entertaining herself, all under the panoptic eye of Aunt Ada Doom, who infamously “saw something nasty in the woodshed” as a girl (171). Wendy Parkins argues that “the comic structure of *Cold Comfort Farm* minimises and contains the threat of an unstable modernity while offering a conservative reassurance that both change and continuity can be managed” (125). I will suggest that Flora is the means by which “change

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<sup>1</sup> Faye Hammill’s essay “*Cold Comfort Farm*, D. H. Lawrence, and English Literary Culture between the Wars” provides a detailed and useful overview of the novel’s popularity and publication history.

and continuity” are managed within the novel, and that her attempts at doing so mirror the role of a theatre director.

My essay argues that Flora’s interventions take on a theatrical element, with Flora serving as both director and audience of an elaborate play, and the inhabitants of the farm serving as unknowing actors in this production; given the nature of Gibbons’s novel, the play is, of course, a comedy. I will also suggest that Flora’s *Higher Common Sense* handbook and *Pensées of the Abbé Fausse-Maigre* routinely serve as a director’s handbook from which she directs these scenes. My analysis positions *Cold Comfort Farm* as a text that employs performative rhetoric while also fulfilling John Morreall’s criteria for theatrical comedic protagonists. I will argue that Morreall’s taxonomy for examining characters within a theatrical production or text can be productively mapped onto Gibbons’s novel and helps situate Flora as a comedic protagonist of both a play and a novel. Especially germane to my reading of *Cold Comfort Farm* and Flora Poste specifically are Morreall’s emphases on heroism/anti-heroism, conflict, suffering, and response.<sup>2</sup>

## The Novel as a Theatrical Text

In his 1999 book, *Comedy, Tragedy, and Religion*, John Morreall outlines four criteria for the classification of comedic characters, particularly protagonists, within dramatic works and other genres such as “storytelling, songs, essays, films, [and] monologues”; these categories are, as noted above, heroism/anti-heroism, conflict, suffering, and response (13). He further examines the ways in which these characters differ from tragic figures. In applying Morreall’s taxonomy to Gibbons’s novel, specifically to its protagonist, it becomes apparent that she meets each criterion for a comedic protagonist of a dramatic work. It is clear, of course, that Gibbons’s novel does not aspire to be a tragedy; it is, by all accounts, a comedy. Gibbons’s risible descriptions of the Starkadders’ foibles, from Adam’s “clettering dishes” with a twig to Meriam’s brood of illegitimate children (referred to as a “jazz-band ready-made” [72]), have ensconced the novel firmly in the territory of comedy since its initial publication.

What an application of Morreall’s work to Gibbons’s novel will accomplish, however, is to suggest that *Cold Comfort Farm* engages in the traditionally Modernist project of obscuring the lines between genres and, more specifically, of applying traditional elements of drama to the novel

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<sup>2</sup> Jerry Palmer’s 1994 book, *Taking Humour Seriously*, is a valuable resource for those interested in the history of comedy, especially in terms of its foundations in ancient Greece and classical literature.

form. Appropriating the tools and tone of one genre to suit the needs of another is, of course, a staple of Modernist art and literature. This technique is more overt and explicit in more obviously Modernist works such as Woolf's *Between the Acts*, the poetic voices of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* or Joyce's *Ulysses*, and in the voices of Eliot's speakers, which range from removed and journalistic to operatic, among myriad other texts.<sup>3</sup> In terms of *Cold Comfort Farm*, this commingling of genres—namely the comedic play and the novel—is subtler and largely thematic, rather than formal; nevertheless, it is a crucial element of the text. I suggest that this generic integration manifests itself most meaningfully in the character of Flora and her “direction” of the Starkadder family's affairs. In her role as the director of the play in which the family unknowingly performs, Flora appropriates the qualities of theatrical comedic protagonists within the confines of the novelistic form.

*Cold Comfort Farm* considers the constraints and possibilities of multiple genres as they pertain to Flora's goals for herself and for the Starkadders.<sup>4</sup> (It is worth noting that Gibbons, who was a poet, journalist, novelist, and critic, was herself a model of blending generic conventions [Hammill, “Literature” 153].) When referring to the direction of her own life and affairs, Flora largely confines her references to the genre of the novel. Faye Hammill persuasively argues of Flora's role and the book's blurring of generic boundaries: “Flora, then, functions as a novelist-within-the-novel, and also a reader-in-the-text, commenting on the story as it progresses and relating it to the patterns and conventions of the books she has read” (“Literature” 157). Indeed, Flora refers, for instance, to Jane Austen and mentions her own authorial ambitions. Flora notes in a conversation with her friend, Mrs. Smiling, “Well, when I am fifty-three or so I would like to write a novel as good as *Persuasion*, but with a modern setting, of course” and then notes of her upcoming stay at Cold Comfort Farm, “There is sure to be a lot of material I can collect for my novel” (19, 20). Flora repeatedly refers to novels and picks up her copy of *Mansfield*

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<sup>3</sup> I would refer readers to Bonnie Kime Scott's remarkably thorough anthology, *Gender in Modernism: New Geographies, Complex Intersections*, for a broad and useful sampling of Modernist genres and the blurring of generic boundaries. Kime Scott has curated excerpts of manifestoes, suffragist essays, medical pamphlets, poems, journalism, and many other genres, and considers the conventions these genres have in common.

<sup>4</sup> Of the generic conventions and literary structures under consideration in this novel, Jonathan Greenberg states, “Gibbons's primary target is a set of literary conventions rather than the lives of real farmers” (97).

*Park* when in need of a distraction; indeed, she even compares herself to Jane Austen (19).

By contrast, Flora's interventions in the Starkadders' lives are peppered with references to plays, the theatre, and acting in general. Flora's presence and the changes she makes within the Starkadder household result in Aunt Ada coming downstairs to confront the family about several relatives' plans to leave Cold Comfort Farm. While the family *mêlée* drags on, as Flora feels, interminably, Gibbons describes Flora as feeling "as though she were at one of Eugene O'Neill's plays; the kind that goes on for hours and hours and hours" (177). Situating the family's conflicts and behavior as a performative act—as a frustratingly lengthy play, more specifically—is paradigmatic of the way in which Flora interacts with the Starkadders as a family. For instance, she compares Amos's congregation to "an audience she had seen once—but only once—at a Sunday afternoon meeting of the Cinema Society" while silently noting and wholeheartedly admiring the theatricality of Amos's own religious performance as a minister (93). Indeed, even his church building itself is "immediately opposite [...] the spectacle of the Majestic Cinema" (95). Flora further sardonically refers to herself as "one of the Marx Brothers" (171).

These various references to theatricality and acting are reflected in the scenery of Flora's bedroom at Cold Comfort Farm. Upon first entering the room, she pays particular attention to the curtains, noting that they are "magnificent" and "of soiled but regal red brocade" (54). Flora's room, I suggest, acts as a mirror of the London stage, especially considering that the curtains of the stage are similar to the bedroom curtains to which Flora draws much attention. Gibbons writes, "In that entranced pause when the lights of the theatre fade, and upon the crimson of the yet unraised curtain the footlights throw upon their soft glow, Flora [...] was pleased with what she saw" (146). I suggest that when Flora opens her bedroom curtains, the dramatic production—her intervention into the family's life and her directing of their affairs—begins. The reference to the London theatre mirrors the attention Flora pays to the "stage" of her bedroom and the elaborate curtains, reinforcing the image of Flora as both an orchestrator and viewer of elaborate comedic scenes. Near the end of the novel, Aunt Ada Doom notes the theatrical nature of Flora's interventions and (indirectly) the comedic way in which Flora has resolved the family's problems. Aunt Ada remarks, "It sounds like the finale of the first act in a musical comedy" (223).

As Flora begins to orchestrate the family's strife into an amusing comedy, rather than a Victorian melodrama, she makes many directorial decisions. She carefully curates her cousin Elfine's costumes, for example,



and even determines when Elfine may or may not wear jewellery (151); she is, in short, Elfine's stylist and wardrobe supervisor. She has a hand in casting—both in assigning particular roles to the family members and servants, and, in keeping with a more technical definition of casting, assisting Hollywood director Mr. Neck in casting her cousin Seth in Mr. Neck's "talkies" (184). Further, when Flora learns of the existence of further Starkadder relations, she wonders how she will manage to cast them in the comedic play she is arranging.<sup>5</sup> Gibbons writes, "[s]he was exceedingly dismayed at the news that there was a whole horde of female Starkadders whom she had not seen. It really seemed as though her task would be too much for her" (133). This task, nominally, is to tidy up the household affairs. I will argue, however, that the more specific task Flora has set for herself is to influence the family's problems in a dramatic (that is, comedic) manner. That is, her intention is not only to entertain herself but also to bring order to Cold Comfort Farm in a way that is both artistically pleasing and emotionally rewarding.

## Heroism and Anti-Heroism

John Morreall argues that comedic protagonists frequently reject the traditionally heroic qualities one might observe in a tragic protagonist; instead, the comedic figure embraces and embodies the qualities of an antihero. Morreall writes: "[t]hroughout comedy, the emphasis is on human limitations rather than human greatness. Even when comic characters defeat an opponent, it is seldom through strength or courage, and often through cleverness, which in comedy always beats raw power" (*Comedy, Tragedy, and Religion* 14). Flora's personal limitations are initially apparent through her early conversations with her friend Mrs. Smiling, who chides Flora for her unwillingness to work or to attempt to provide for herself. Her reliance upon others whom she deems amusingly inferior to herself permeates the novel as a whole and, on a smaller scale, many of her interactions with characters such as Mr. "Mybug", Adam, the Starkadder servants and hired hands, and others. Indeed, the premise of her trip to Cold Comfort Farm is her desire to have others financially support her; though this reliance is in part a reflection of the limited employment opportunities for women,

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<sup>5</sup> During the wedding of Elfine and Richard Hawk-Monitor, Gibbons provides a long list of characters who appear at the dinner that follows the ceremony. This list, comparable to a *dramatis personae*, describes some characters as "minors", referring not to their age but to their relative unimportance in the play Flora has orchestrated (220).

Flora's dependence also demonstrates the way in which the novel shines a light not on her greatness but on her limitations—that is, her anti-heroism.

In terms of strength in the face of opposition, another hallmark of literary heroism, the bulk of the novel demonstrates a distinct lack of direct confrontation between Flora and any truly formidable adversary. Though one could argue that Flora demonstrates courage in confronting and defying many members of the Starkadder family, it is important to note that she does so while her primary opponent—Aunt Ada Doom—is physically absent. For this reason, Flora does not have to be particularly strong or courageous in her direction of the family's affairs and her undermining of Aunt Ada's mandates. Flora orchestrates Elfine's marriage, Seth's departure for Hollywood, and Amos's departure to take up a career as a travelling minister while her opponent remains shut within her room. Thus, Flora overcomes obstacles without encountering an antagonist's opposition (or much formidable opposition at all) until the novel approaches its denouement and Aunt Ada is expected to confront the family and Flora about their disobedience and desertion.

Even in this climactic scene, however, which shows the Starkadder family in crisis, Flora's speech and behavior indicate that she is nonplussed by the family's conflicts. Indeed, Gibbons notes, "There was no doubt that the fun was wearing a bit thin" for Flora; she even falls asleep while Aunt Ada berates and castigates the family (177). Flora personally orchestrated the conflicts and upheavals that brought about this enormous argument, but she feels no need to intervene or explain her behavior as a normative hero might; rather, she sees confrontation as both useless (which it might well be) and boring.

It is true that Flora shows strength of spirit and a willingness to confront her adversary when she ascends to Aunt Ada's room to discuss the changes she (Flora) has orchestrated and directed in the Starkadder household. However, for Flora the potential stakes of this confrontation are low; because she does not see Aunt Ada as bearing any true power over her as Ada might wield over the rest of the family, she is thus not in a position to harm Flora. Instead of demonstrating the great strength and courage that Morrell argues is so common for tragic dramatic figures, Flora simply wants to "tidy up" the family's affairs and amuse herself. As previously mentioned, she sees the Starkadders' various crises and foibles as being entertaining, despite the frustrations they often present. She also sees her interventions as a means by which to orchestrate an elaborate artistic production that will (ideally) provide emotional gratification. Gibbons writes of Flora's plot to match Elfine with local squire Richard Hawk-Monitor:

[a]nd the Starkadders themselves would be sure, when the engagement was announced, to kick up one hell of a shine. [...] But this was what Flora liked. She detested rows and scenes, but enjoyed quietly pitting her cool will against opposition. It amused her; and when she was defeated, she withdrew in good order and lost interest in the campaign. She had little or no sporting spirit. (129)

In considering confrontation as a form of amusement and lacking a "sporting spirit", Flora again demonstrates the qualities of anti-heroism, a fundamental trait of comedic theatrical protagonists. Despite this, it is true that most of the Starkadders and even Aunt Ada herself benefit significantly from Flora's presence; she does indeed ultimately save the family from Ada's dictatorial control, from their own ignorance, and, from being an embarrassment to her, as the social superior to all excepting Aunt Ada.

However, during Flora's stay, she also acts fundamentally as a surrogate for the power that Aunt Ada wields; Flora, as the "director" of the family's behavior and interactions, largely controls and ultimately helps determine their respective fates. Even so, the benefits that the family realizes from Flora's directorship are not, of course, the primary impetus behind Flora's actions. Rather, she hopes to gain the upper hand in the family's power struggles, and, primarily, to amuse herself. Jonathan Greenberg insightfully notes "the quasi-imperialist nature of Flora's tidying-up" and further argues:

Flora may not be exactly a conquistador, but she is more than once compared to Florence Nightingale (20, 163) and behaves very much like (take your pick) a tourist, a social worker, a missionary, or an anthropologist, all of whom, it should be noted, perform relatively similar work in the Foucauldian order of things. (95)

Near the end of the novel, when it becomes clear that Flora has won the battle of wits and that the family is better off thanks to her exertion of control, Reuben (also in true Foucauldian fashion) thanks Flora for her assistance: "'Twere a good day for Cold Comfort when first 'ee came here'" (211). Flora responds in a remarkably telling way: "My dear soul, don't name it. It's been the most enormous diversion to me" (221). In part, Flora's response reflects the social norm of refusing to accept credit for the assistance one has provided or to acknowledge inconvenience. However, her remark also underscores her eschewal of the role of a noble, selfless hero and repositions attention onto herself and her desire for entertainment and satisfaction.

It is also important to consider, especially in terms of the novel's Modernist project of blurring genre boundaries, that an additional purpose of Flora's machinations at Cold Comfort Farm is to gather material for a

novel that rivals *Persuasion*, which, as previously mentioned, she plans to write when she is around fifty-three years old. In describing this novel and her upcoming trip to Cold Comfort Farm, Flora says to Mrs. Smiling,

[i]t would be more amusing to go and stay with some of these dire relatives. Besides, there is sure to be a lot of material I can collect for my novel; and perhaps one of two of the relations will have messes or miseries in their domestic circle which I can clear up. (20)

It becomes clear, then, that Flora harbors self-centered motivations for visiting her relatives, at least initially. She wants to be a spectator in the comedy of their lives; for a character like Flora, though, who enjoys asserting her will over that of others, simply viewing the Starkadder “play” is insufficient. She must also dictate and direct the course of their lives.

I would further suggest that over the course of the novel’s events, Flora does not demonstrate significant character growth or notable maturation; this stagnation is in keeping with Morreall’s definition of comedic characters (14). Morreall writes of this moral inertia, “Unlike the tragic hero, who strives for something great, the comic protagonist is typically striving merely to get along and have a good time” (*Comedy, Tragedy, and Religion* 15). As a guiding principle, then, characters who figure largely in a comedic plot generally do not experience substantial personal growth. As opposed to a tragic hero or even the protagonist of a novel, particularly a bildungsroman, the comedic protagonist’s journey generally does not focus on becoming a better or more moralistic person through heroic feats or overcoming struggles. Rather, comedic protagonists of dramatic works generally maintain stasis, as does Flora.

## Conflict

The second criterion by which Morreall suggests that a character becomes a comedic protagonist of a dramatic work is the environment in which that character finds herself and the conflicts that threaten her environment. Morreall writes of this comedic protagonist’s surroundings, “[e]ven more than the tragic world, the comic world is a hodgepodge of unsynchronized systems” (*Comedy, Tragedy, and Religion* 15). Disorder is, of course, the hallmark of the Starkadder family and of Cold Comfort Farm more generally; upon Flora’s arrival especially, the household is nothing if not “a hodgepodge of unsynchronized systems” (15). Gibbons’s rendering of disorder is quite complex, though, as she borrows from both tragic and comic dramatic forms in describing the chaos at Cold Comfort Farm.

Morreall also notes that protagonists of comedic plays generally embrace this disorder and feel at home amid chaos. He writes, "In the tragic vision there is a craving for order. This shows in tragedy's need for closure. Processes, once begun, have to be completed. [...] Comedy, by contrast, is based on enjoying incongruity and so presents disorder as something we can live with, and even take delight in" (*Comedy, Tragedy, and Religion* 23). Based on this definition, Flora's character reflects both tragic and comedic characteristics. In Flora's own estimation of herself, it would seem that she aligns neatly with Morreall's criteria for tragic protagonists. She indeed enjoys tidying up the family's lives and insists on a sense of order in their household. She even couches her lessons to Meriam, the hired girl and unwed mother of four children, about the value of contraception in terms of order and neatness: "Nature is all very well in her place, but she must not be allowed to make things *untidy*. Now remember, Meriam—no more sukebind and summer evenings without some preparations beforehand" (70, emphasis added). Flora proceeds to criticize Mrs. Beetle's (admittedly hypothetical) plan to develop Meriam's children into jazz musicians and to turn a profit from their performances as "a little *callous*, [but] it was at least *organized*" (72, emphasis in the original). While occurring within a comical situation, Flora's insistence on order hearkens back to Morreall's criteria for tragic protagonists of dramatic works.

To classify Flora as aligning with tragedy over comedy in regards to conflict, however, would be to overlook the complex and often contradictory nature of her feelings toward conflict. Flora indeed has a remarkably high tolerance for disorder—so long as said disorder provides amusement. This is particularly true of her direction of the family members' respective calamities and problems, which the novel tellingly describes as "plots":

She was mixed up in a good many plots. Only a person with a candid mind, who is usually bored by intrigues, can appreciate the full fun of an intrigue when they begin to manage one for the first time. If there are several intrigues and there is a certain danger of their getting mixed up and spoiling each other, *the enjoyment is even keener*. Of course, some of the plots were going better than others. (109, emphasis added)

In this passage, it becomes clear that Flora's aforementioned insistence upon order is superseded by her desire to carry out complex machinations that challenge and please her. Indeed, the greater the complexities and disorder of the plots, the greater is her "enjoyment" of them—and the greater is her emotional gratification at having achieved the tasks she has set out to accomplish.

As Flora takes control—that is, directorship—over an increasing number of problems within the Starkadder household, the respective plots begin to overlap with one another and threaten to create more problems than initially existed within the family. In Flora’s act of “casting” Elfine as a beautiful, marriageable, and even privileged woman, for example, she pulls at several tenuous threads at Cold Comfort Farm: primarily, she (quite rightfully) ends the forced betrothal of Elfine to the brutish and prurient Urk. However, arranging Elfine’s marriage to Richard Hawk-Monitor also necessitates that Elfine will leave Cold Comfort Farm—a realization of Aunt Ada’s greatest fear. These “plots” intertwine with one another and with additional “intrigues” Flora is orchestrating within the household, thus creating a potentially fraught situation. This disorder only contributes to Flora’s happiness and amusement, for, as revealed in the preceding passage, Flora quite enjoys the chaotic nature of the plots she orchestrates. Thus, as it pertains to conflict and disorder, it appears that the character of Flora embodies both tragic and comedic characteristics—another instance of the blurring of genre boundaries within the novel.

## Suffering

Morreall writes of suffering and the comedic protagonist, “[i]n comedy conflict leads to suffering, but not to death, as often happens in tragedy. In comedy, the protagonist usually figures a way out of the conflict, and the suffering ends” (*Comedy, Tragedy, and Religion* 15). Though Gibbons’s novel is consistently humorous and at times outrageously funny, many characters do indeed suffer. Aunt Ada, an aged woman, has closed herself off in her room for almost seventy years after seeing “something nasty in the woodshed” as a child (171). Judith Starkadder mourns Seth’s absence as if he had died following his departure for Hollywood and a life of stardom. Elfine feels trapped and threatened by Urk’s insistence that he will marry her despite her objections. Reuben, at least initially, agonizes under the belief that Flora intends to claim Cold Comfort Farm—the property he is set to inherit—as her own. Nearly every family member, as well as several of the hired workers, and even the farm animals, labours under various burdens of fear and suffering. That Gibbons’s novel is a comedy does not exclude the characters from pangs of grief and pain.

I suggest that Flora mediates and at least attempts to alleviate the family’s suffering primarily through the use of the two books to which she regularly refers: *The Higher Common Sense* and *The Pensées of the Abbé Fausse-Maigre*. As previously mentioned, these texts can be interpreted as a director’s handbook that Flora uses when orchestrating the family’s