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Margaret D. Stetz

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The “Transatlantic” and Late Nineteenth-Century American Women’s Humor

MARGARET D. STETZ

ABSTRACT: For many years, scholars wrongly characterized nineteenth-century American humor as having been an exclusively masculine preserve. When feminist historians corrected this error, they also introduced a new one, defining women’s humor writing in too narrow a fashion—that is, as limited to the vernacular mode. Some late nineteenth-century American women’s comic poetry and autobiographical fiction, however, also embraced a sophisticated voice that derived from and responded to British models. These works—by figures such as Ella Wheeler Wilcox, Frances Hodgson Burnett, Helen Gray Cone, and Carolyn Wells—positioned themselves as part of a transatlantic tradition of literary wit. Reviving and reconsidering these overlooked and unjustly neglected texts today will allow us to remap the landscape of American humor studies.

KEYWORDS: Transatlanticism; women’s humor; feminism and comedy; late nineteenth-century comic writing; Ella Wheeler Wilcox; Frances Hodgson Burnett; Helen Gray Cone; Carolyn Wells

The history of American humor is, as many would agree now, a more diverse matter than it was long recognized as being—dependent on a greater range of influences, reflective of a wider set of tastes and interests, and shaped by creative minds drawn from a broader number of communities. In general, critics today are less likely to insist that early comedy followed a predictable or narrow path; usually they are open instead to embracing, rather than ignoring or marginalizing, comic texts that alter our preconceptions about how (and at what) Americans of the past were laughing. There are, nonetheless, still limits to this project of expanding our critical understanding, and unexpected blind spots remain, particularly around such issues as gender and transatlantic literary

exchanges. When, for instance, scholars name those works that exemplify the voice, style, and subject matter of American literary comedy at the end of the nineteenth century, a poem such as the following never appears on the list:

We met at night in the season's hight [*sic*],
 'Mid revel and mirth and song.
 I looked in your eye with a mute, mute cry,
 As you elbowed your way through the throng.

Alone in that crowd of men who bowed,
 And flattered, and flirted around,
 Your quick thought guessed the woe in my breast,
 And you sprang to my side with a bound.

In a whisper as faint as a south wind's plaint,
 I murmured my need to you.
 "A sandwich!" I wailed, then your strong eye quailed,
 For oh! They were thin and few.

And about them hustled and pushed and tussled,
 A score of desperate men.
 But you drew your breath, and you hissed "Sdeath!"
 And then you turned back again.

"Ladye!" you cried with haughty pride,
 While your dark eye flashed on me,
 "If I risk my life in yon seething strife
 What shall my guerdon be?"

"May I hope for a line that shall be all mine,
 A song by the world unheard?
 From rivals detested, shall the sandwich be wrested,
 If thou wilt but say the word."

"If you reach that goal, I vow by my soul,
 (I spoke in a desperate tone)
 And I live till that time, I will write you a rhyme,
 A rhyme to be all your own."¹

So begins Ella Wheeler Wilcox's *The Song of the Sandwich*. Composed of fourteen rhymed quatrains and an envoi, and published in 1893 by the New York-based firm of George M. Allen with fanciful illustrations by Oliver Herford, this is a text very different from the sort of homespun, plain-speaking humorous narratives traditionally associated with the rise of American wit.

What should literary historians make of this mock-heroic comic verse written by a woman—and not just by any woman, but by the most notorious American woman poet of the nineteenth century? From the 1880s through the First World War, Ella Wheeler Wilcox (1850–1919) was, in the words of a recent critic, Angela Sorby, “quite possibly the most commercially successful and most ridiculed poet in the English-speaking world.”² Wilcox was known, however, not for humorous verse such as *The Song of the Sandwich*, but for wholly serious works that trafficked in everything from feverish eroticism to a plucky philosophy of self-help, to professions of belief in spiritualism and the occult. While reappraising Wilcox's sensational 1883 volume, *Poems of Passion*, Sorby could not resist quoting Virginia Woolf's review of Wilcox's 1918 autobiography: “There never was a more difficult book to review. . . . It would be easy to make fun of her; equally easy to condescend to her; but it is not at all easy to express what one does feel for her.”³

In fact, what Woolf did “feel for her” was perhaps not so complex or “difficult” to express, for it resembled what she felt toward many American women writers and readers alike. As Sophie Blanch put the matter in “Taking Comedy Seriously: American Literary Humor and the British Woman Writer,” Woolf's “attitude towards America and at least one half of its population” was “less than generous.” Like many of her English contemporaries, Woolf possessed, according to Blanch, a “transatlantic froideur,” and this chilliness toward those producing literature on the other side of the ocean led Woolf, in 1931, to write frankly of her distaste for “the plague of half wits from America.”⁴ Despite Woolf's uncharitably negative judgments, however, recovering a lost work such as *The Song of the Sandwich* shows Ella Wheeler Wilcox not to have been a “half wit” after all, but a wit.

For Woolf, who was addressing a British audience in the *Athenaeum* immediately after Wilcox's death in 1919, the main reason for objecting to Wilcox as a poet was not merely her artlessness; it was instead her evident disdain for artfulness. Based upon Wilcox's own statements about aesthetics in her autobiography, her “passion for writing,” as Woolf said with an air of wry disapproval, seemed “to have been a natural instinct—a gift handed down

mature from Heaven, and manifesting itself whenever it chose, without much control or direction from Mrs. Wilcox herself.”⁵ To the modernists of Bloomsbury, there was no greater crime than lack of “control” over one’s medium or of interest in exercising “direction.”

Yet the 1893 *Song of the Sandwich* reveals Wilcox—regardless of what later critics such as Woolf might have thought—as neither a naïve American sentimentalist nor a sensualist carried away by gusts of feeling, but rather as a self-conscious and deliberate creator of comedy, capable of working shrewdly in the genre of satire. Moreover, she did so in a distinctly British-inflected mode, using mock-chivalric discourse and engaging imaginatively with Alexander Pope’s 1714 mock epic, “The Rape of the Lock.” Surely this must change our view of Wilcox herself as an author and allow us to recuperate her as a humorist. But it should also introduce broader questions and perhaps encourage us to reconceive the map of late nineteenth-century American humor-writing in general, along with humor-writing of the period by women in particular.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the literary map of America was redrawn several times. First, it was reconfigured by male historians to highlight humor by men as a crucial element in the early cultural landscape—as a mode of writing that had helped to inaugurate a sense of Americanness in terms of subject, perspective, and voice. As Peter M. Briggs put the case in his 1987 essay, “English Satire and Connecticut Wit,” Americans had at first been “forced to laugh at their British brethren with borrowed laughter, at least in their fledgling literature”; the “business of establishing political independence from Britain was a relatively easy matter compared with the more subtle, ambivalent, and tortuous task of establishing some sort of imaginative independence.”⁶ American humorists allegedly accomplished this more significant cultural autonomy by developing an “oral and quasi-oral satiric humor that grew out of promotional literature and tall tales, and the literary impersonation of rustic earthiness and crackerbarrel wisdom,” that relied upon indigenous forms “less haunted by European literary precedents.” In Briggs’s anthropomorphic terms, “this new humor was a boisterous child, energetic, brash, familiar and plain-spoken, irreverent, insistently uninhibited—and, as we all know, that energetic native child eventually grew up to become Mark Twain.”⁷ Briggs’s description made it clear that for him, as for a number of historians of American humor who had preceded him and expressed similar judgments, that the “native child” who sprang

up in the nineteenth century was gendered as male. The consequence of such an assumption, as Emily Toth observed in her groundbreaking 1984 essay, "A Laughter of Their Own: Women's Humor in the United States," was the erasure of witty women. As a result, "no canon of women's humor in America" seemed to exist.⁸

From the late 1970s through the 1990s, feminist scholars turned their attention to building that canon. Among those undertaking this crucial work were humor researchers such as Zita Dresner, Linda A. Morris, June Sochen, Regina Barreca, and especially Nancy A. Walker.⁹ In her 1988 study, *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture*, Walker recognized that the "dominant tradition of American humor" from the nineteenth through the twentieth centuries had turned "upon the freedom of the male to enjoy, to joke, to criticize, to question," while a parallel American women's tradition had moved, on the contrary, along other lines.¹⁰ For Walker, the difference centered on women's determination both to articulate and to laugh at a way of life colored by the absence of freedom. Women's comedy, therefore, arose "from a different premise: the world" that women "inhabit is not of their making, and often not much to their liking."¹¹ As Walker concluded, "Embedded in the humorous writing of American women for more than 150 years is an exploration of powerlessness that constitutes a subversive protest against it."¹²

While remapping American humor, however, feminist critics and feminist anthologists of the late "Second Wave" period revived and acknowledged, in many cases, only those nineteenth-century women writers whose choice of language fit the existing paradigm established to describe the work of male writers, such as Mark Twain. Hence, the women humorists celebrated most often were those whose mode of discourse exhibited the so-called essential Americanness associated with "boisterous . . . energetic, brash, familiar and plain-spoken" usage of vernacular forms and often, too, with regional perspectives. Arguing for the importance of Frances Miriam Whitcher (1811–1862), for instance, Linda A. Morris emphasized Whitcher's pioneering "use of vernacular humor as a vehicle for social criticism," while Zita Dresner and Nancy Walker praised Marietta Holley (1836–1926) for creating a comic alter-ego that was outwardly "unsophisticated," even as it combined "commonsense practicality with the simple logic born of experience."¹³ These studies may have re-gendered the "energetic native child" of American humor as a girl, but the child was still represented as favoring a homespun voice and a rhetorical style focused on

debunking or deflation. At the same time, feminist researchers characterized many of these female wits as largely homogeneous in class and location. As Alice Shepphard declared in 1986, "most of the prominent women humorists were middle-class and well-educated, [and] came from established families in the Northeast."¹⁴ It would take the publication in 1998 of Daryl Cumber Dance's illuminating anthology of African American women's comedy, *Honey, Hush! An Anthology of African American Women's Humor*, to begin to chip away at this perception of a monolithic identity among nineteenth-century American women humorists, at least in racial terms.¹⁵

Lost amidst these recovery projects, however, were some literary contributions by women that were less identifiably "American" in their comic discourse, as well as some that were not as overtly feminist in their aims. Even today, the myth of a unified identity and purpose among nineteenth-century women comic writers does not die easily. As recently as 2011, Michael H. Epp, in "A Republic of Laughter: Marietta Holley and the Production of Women's Public Humour in the Late Nineteenth-Century United States," has continued to endorse earlier notions of a readily definable Americanness in nineteenth-century humor, asserting that there is something "specifically national in its subject matter, considering as it does the state of America and its people," and claiming, moreover, that "women's humour writing . . . almost always took up political issues explicitly, such as suffrage and labour."¹⁶

All such fixed ideas crumble, however, if we begin to look seriously at Ella Wheeler Wilcox's very funny poem, *The Song of the Sandwich*. First, it was the work not of someone from one of the "established families of the Northeast," but from a struggling farm family in Johnstown, Wisconsin.¹⁷ Its subject was neither suffrage nor labor movements, or indeed anything either controversial or topical. Its setting—a crowded evening party or "crush," as these gatherings were known in the nineteenth century—was by no means either exclusively or primarily American, for comparable social events were as likely to occur in London as in New York or in small towns in the Midwest, and to have the same gendered dynamics. The poem's function, too, was not ostensibly political or directed at reform, but instead purely literary: that is, it was focused on engagement with a mode—the mock heroic—chiefly associated with English wits of the Restoration and the eighteenth century, and identified with canonical poems such as "Mac Flecknoe" (1682) by John Dryden and Alexander Pope's "The Rape of the Lock."

With *The Song of the Sandwich*, Ella Wheeler Wilcox fulfilled her ambition to create a modern-day "The Rape of the Lock" on a much smaller scale—a

"Lock Lite," we might call it now—but also, by invoking Pope's masterpiece, to compete with it. What she offered readers in 1893 was, like Pope's original, a comic verse narrative ostensibly focused on contemporary manners, but ultimately about the power of poetry—especially, about the power of poetry to make immortal even trivial things (whether the pursuit of a lock of hair or a plate of refreshments). Set in the fashionable London sphere of eighteenth-century beaux and belles, who played out their furious conflicts with one another in drawing-rooms over games of cards and cups of tea, Pope's early eighteenth-century satire ridiculed the superficial social world while also describing it in detail. The chief targets of his poem were misguided aristocratic lovers: he laughed at the foibles of a well-born young maiden named Belinda, who responds with exaggerated outrage when a Baron tries to procure a piece of her hair as a token, and at the self-serving delusions of her masculine counterpart who, instead of attempting noble deeds with a sword, thinks himself brave for wielding a scissor to violate a lady's *coiffeur*. The climax to which Pope's mock epic built, however, was not the acquisition of the hair-trophy sought by a questing knight-figure, but the lock's disappearance from the earthly realm and then reappearance in the sky as a star—a triumphant ascent made possible solely by the genius of the poet, whose verses turn ephemeral matter into art and "consecrate" it "to fame."¹⁸ "The Rape of the Lock" treats the concerns of ordinary life as dross, waiting to be transmuted into gold by the gifted man who can invoke the Muse and sing a song about them. In *The Song of the Sandwich*, however, the one who wields the pen that grants immortality to mortal things is, quite pointedly, a woman poet.

Though Wilcox's poem may at first appear to be merely another example of the phenomenon Nancy Walker had identified as defining American women's humor—that is, the "exploration of powerlessness" and the covert raising of a protest against this state—*The Song of the Sandwich* is in fact something quite different.¹⁹ In this poem, the man may have the physical capability that a woman lacks to fight for sandwiches, but it is the woman who has the greater power to sing the record of this otherwise forgettable deed and to turn it into art. She quite literally gets the last word:

So here and now, I keep my vow:

(Tho' the sandwich is no more)

I would rise from my hearse and write that verse,

If it were not written before.²⁰

At the end, there is no romantic clinch or lovemaking—no suggestion that these events exist to further the ends of a conventional marriage plot; there is only the making of the promised “verse,” by a woman alone.

In Wilcox’s poem, this pledge to place the duty of authorship above death itself is followed by a slyly funny and self-congratulatory “Envoi.” In it, the speaker (who is, of course, a poet herself) addresses a nameless figure, another “Poet,” acknowledging conspiratorially what “we know”: that “many men go, / Forth . . . With purpose as high, to do or die, / But they bring no sandwich back.”²¹ With these concluding lines, the quest for the sandwich takes on a new significance, as it becomes a metaphor for the successful act of composition. Like Pope, who exalts a lowly lock of hair and thus proves his prowess as a singer, the speaker of Wilcox’s poem distinguishes herself from the “many men” who are mere strivers, and who accomplish nothing. She sets out to achieve a specific result and does so; she comes back with her prize: her own version of a “sandwich” (that is, her poem).

Laughing at the expense of nineteenth-century British medievalism, with her fantasy about a party populated by knights fiercely contending for refreshments, while also entering seriously into conversation with the English satirical tradition of Dryden and Pope, Ella Wheeler Wilcox simultaneously celebrates her own identity as a woman poet and positions herself as a fully transatlantic woman humorist, using language that bears no marks of either American vernacular or regionalism. Amplifying this transatlantic effect for purchasers of the 1893 volume in which the poem appeared were its illustrations. For *The Song of the Sandwich*, the publishing firm of George Allen shrewdly employed Oliver Herford (1863–1935), an American artist born in England and greatly influenced by the visual style of the London-based magazine *Punch*. Known for pen-and-ink drawings that appealed to “sophisticated, educated audiences,” Herford gained fame for his “refined vein of nonsense, wit, and fantasy.”²² Herford’s work complemented the playful tone and comic hyperbole of Wilcox’s narrative in verse, as gentlemen wearing modern evening clothes on one page re-emerged on the next clad in full suits of armor, and the elusive sandwich morphed into a winged, dragon-like creature that could only be captured at sword’s point. Thanks to her publisher’s pairing of her work with Herford’s, Wilcox’s mock-epic poetry found its visual equivalent in mock-heroic images that echoed British periodical illustrations (fig. 1).

Figure 1

Although *The Song of the Sandwich* may have represented a rare foray into humor writing for Ella Wheeler Wilcox, it was hardly unique in its time as a work that self-consciously echoed, addressed, and paid tribute to British modes of comic writing, or that created paradigms of comic practice different from the vernacular or regional ones commonly associated with nineteenth-century satire by American women. Transatlanticism was indeed widespread at the fin de siècle. As Sigrid Anderson Cordell notes in *Fictions of Dissent: Reclaiming Authority in Transatlantic Women's Writing of the Late Nineteenth Century*, there was a "robust exchange of texts and ideas across the Atlantic during this period," even though the "traditional divisions between Victorian

and American studies" in academic criticism have allowed "this common thread" to go "largely unrecognized" until recently.²³ We can find, for example, further evidence among Wilcox's contemporaries of what Cordell calls "American voices in dialogue with the British" ones, especially on the topics of "art, artistry, and . . . the Woman Question," in another work published in the same year as *The Song of Sandwich*: the comic memoir of childhood, *The One I Knew the Best of All* (1893) by Frances Hodgson Burnett (1849–1924).²⁴

Even to introduce the name of Burnett is to enter the fray of controversy over what constitutes "Americanness" and how to define national identity in literary terms. To her friend, the British "New Woman" novelist and journalist, Ella Hepworth Dixon (1857–1932), Frances Hodgson Burnett was indisputably "English in her . . . humour" and "had no transatlantic traits."²⁵ Burnett herself, however, saw the matter otherwise and declared publicly her "doubts as to whether I am an Englishwoman or an American."²⁶ Born in Manchester, she emigrated with her family to Tennessee as a teenager, married an American and lived for years in Washington, DC, but also returned for years at a time to England, though she eventually died in the United States. In the words of her recent biographer, Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina, "She spent her life as neither British nor American but reveled in straddling both countries' opportunities and attitudes."²⁷

Seven years after the phenomenal success of *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, Burnett published *The One I Knew the Best of All*—first as a serial in Scribner's magazine in the United States, then in book form on both sides of the Atlantic with illustrations by the same artist, Reginald Birch, with whom she had worked on *Fauntleroy*. Birch, like Oliver Herford, was born in Britain, but made his career as an artist in the United States. The volume contained Burnett's recollections of childhood, focusing on the growth of her own literary imagination, while doing so through the very Dickensian convention of referring to herself throughout as a separate character, here called "the Small Person," and of writing in the third-person. This strategy echoed directly one of the most famous and frequently reprinted episodes in Charles Dickens's 1861 volume, *The Uncommercial Traveller*. There, Dickens used to rueful comic effect the practice of dramatizing his young self as "the very queer small boy"—a descriptor repeated several times, throughout their conversation in chapter seven ("Travelling Abroad")—and of engaging in conversation with this younger self, who announces solemnly, "I am old (I am nine), and I read all sorts of books."²⁸

Burnett often acknowledged a debt to British humorists that began in her childhood, and she did so openly in the course of *The One I Knew the Best of All* while describing the mental growth of “the Small Person”: “She had discovered that *Punch* was a source of delight, and a person of the name of Charles Dickens had attracted her attention.”²⁹ Indeed, Burnett referred both to the humorists of *Punch* and to Dickens as the source of the Small Person’s “salvation,” for it was through their influence that she turned to the creation of comedy.³⁰ The importance of this special relationship in real life has been confirmed by Gerzina, who reports that Burnett’s “two adoring but even younger sisters admired her gift,” even in childhood, and took to “breathlessly calling her, as did the other girls in their school, ‘an auth’ress’ [sic] and a regular ‘Charles Dickens.’”³¹ Indeed, in adulthood, according to Burnett’s biographer, “the books of all her favorite novelists”—especially those by Dickens and W. M. Thackeray—continued to be “her lifeblood.”³² That transatlantic literary link was solidified visually by the first edition of Burnett’s 1893 memoir, where the front cover design by Reginald Birch, with its multiple images of characters and events from throughout the narrative, recalled the covers drawn by Hablot Knight Browne (“Phiz”) for the serial issue of Dickens’s novels in parts (fig. 2). Contemporary reviewers also saw connections between Burnett’s work and that of her mid-Victorian heroes on the other side of the Atlantic. In an 1881 article about Burnett for the New York-based magazine the *Critic*, R. H. Stoddard noted, “There is a quality in the work of Mrs. Burnett which reminds me of Dickens,” even as he likened her, too, to Thackeray.³³

What makes *The One I Knew the Best of All* so remarkable is that it is more than a humorous work; it is also a self-conscious meditation on the development of a specifically comic imagination in a young girl—a girl who begins life in England, but launches her fledgling career in Tennessee, and thus embodies transatlantic authorship. After several chapters in which, as might be expected, readers are invited to smile at the Small Person’s naïve misconceptions about the British social order that she inhabits and at her confusion when confronted with adults who find her errors funny, there comes an extraordinary episode. The little girl, who already has begun to write at the age of “nine or ten,” is inspired to invent the first stanza of a rather gloomy poem.³⁴ But after doing so, she experiences writer’s block, and “at last found herself giving it [the serious poem] up with something like a giggle, because it suddenly struck her as rather funny

that she was sitting there trying so hard to 'think of something sorrowful.' And it occurred to her that she would try to make it into something amusing."³⁵ What follows is not a scene of female "powerlessness" or an angry

Figure 2

protest against the obstacles to female achievement of the sort that Nancy Walker described as characteristic of the tradition of American women's comic writing.³⁶ Instead, Burnett gives her audience a picture of literary triumph, as the child deliberately crafts a comic poem that first makes her laugh aloud and then leaves her mother doing the same, in a scene of shared mirth uniting women across generations:

"Let me read it to you," said the Small Person. And she began. "It's called 'Alone,'" she said.

She began with the melancholy verse and did her best by it. Mamma looked a little mystified at first, but when the second verse began she smiled; at the third she laughed her pretty laugh; at the fourth she exclaimed "How funny!" at the fifth and sixth she laughed more and more, and by the time all the others were finished she was laughing quite uncontrollably. The Small Person was flushed with delight and was laughing too.³⁷

With the publication of both *The Song of the Sandwich* and Burnett's childhood memoir, the year 1893 proved a fruitful one for transatlantic comic poetry and prose. But Wilcox and Burnett, of course, were neither the first nor the last late nineteenth-century women writers in the United States to produce literary comedy that referred to British models or that engaged openly with British texts and authors, whether competitively or reverently. The New York-born poet Helen Gray Cone (1859–1934), for instance, had enjoyed a surprising success with "Narcissus in Camden: A Classical Dialogue of the Year 1882," which appeared in the *Century Magazine* in November 1882, before it was reprinted in Cone's own 1885 volume, *Oberon and Puck: Verses Grave and Gay*. This collection was later reissued by another publisher—perhaps not coincidentally—in that banner year for women humorists of 1893.

Cone's "Classical Dialogue" employed an ancient form associated with Greek satirists, such as Lucian, but also played outrageously with the characteristic poetic voices of two of her contemporaries, one American and one British (or, to be more precise, Anglo-Irish). In January 1882, near the start of his lecture tour across the United States, Oscar Wilde had made a widely publicized visit to the house of Walt Whitman, in Camden, New Jersey, to pay him homage. Cone's poem was a burlesque send-up in verse of that

meeting. In it, the Whitman figure, "Paumanokides," hails his guest with the following greeting:

Sit down, young man!
 I do not know you, but I love you with burning intensity,
 I am he that loves the young men, whosoever and where-
 soever they are or may be hereafter, or may have
 been any time in the past.
 Loves the eye-glassed literat, loves also and probably
 more the vendor of clams, raucous-throated, monot-
 onous-chanting,
 Loves the Elevated Railroad employee of Mannahatta,
 my city³⁸

The Oscar Wilde figure responds to this gaseous outpouring by using the verse forms and tropes (such as references to Whistlerian nocturnes) commonly associated with British Aestheticism. Here called "Narcissus," he demonstrates the appropriateness of that name, as he sings a hymn of praise not to his host, but to himself and to his appearance, detailing how he first discovered his own charms:

And while heaven's harmony in lake and gold
 Changed to a faint nocturne of silvern-gray,
 Like the rising sea-mists from my spirit rolled
 The grievous vapors of this Age of Clay,
 Beholding Beauty's re-arisen shrine,
 And the white glory of this precious loveliness of mine!³⁹

Cone's was truly a work of transatlantic humor, which relied on the reading public's knowledge of Oscar Wilde as the latest literary sensation from Britain. It was also a striking comic deflation of two prominent and internationally celebrated men by an unknown young woman, merely twenty-three years old at the time of this poem's publication. "Narcissus in Camden" embodied a cheeky assertion of power, rather than a plaint about female powerlessness of the sort that Nancy Walker later defined as endemic to nineteenth-century women's comic writing.

Helen Gray Cone's fame as a humorist was short-lived; that of her contemporary, Carolyn Wells (1862–1942), was long lasting. Wells wrote and

published prolifically over the course of five decades in a variety of genres, from children's fiction to detective stories, though she is best known today as the editor of several turn-of-the-century volumes of parodies. In her short autobiographical essay for Gelett Burgess's 1921 collection, *My Maiden Effort: Being the Personal Confessions of Well-Known American Authors*, Wells began by quoting a famous couplet from Pope's "An Essay on Criticism" (1711)—"True ease in writing comes from art, not chance, As those move easiest who have learned to dance"—and, like Ella Wheeler Wilcox before her, setting herself against Pope as a rival (if not superior) wit and sage: "Pope's couplet, like most draughts of the Pierian spring, contains about 2.75% of the real thing. For many move easily and gracefully who have never learned to dance, and much ease in writing is mere chance."⁴⁰ Her own opinion directly countered Pope's: "Notwithstanding Pope's dictum, writing is not an art, it is nature. It cannot be learned, it is inborn."⁴¹ Interestingly, she went on to cite, as a source of support, Oliver Herford, who had also been Wilcox's illustrator for *The Song of the Sandwich*: "Versifying may be achieved, but verse, as Oliver Herford has said, is a gift—a birthday gift."⁴²

At the turn of the twentieth century, Herford had collaborated with Wells on a number of projects, with the former providing images and the latter supplying humorous poetry. Among these was *Idle Idyls* (1900), which the New Jersey-born Wells dedicated to the British-born Herford, calling him "Guide, Philosopher, & Friend."⁴³ Perhaps not coincidentally, a vein of literary humor directed at British targets and employing a pseudo-British voice ran throughout the poems in this volume. Among these was "Sonnet on the Sonnet on the Sonnet," which made its comic assault on the preciousity and insularity of poets whose work focused on form alone. In stating her case against them, Wells used language meant to echo (and to mock) those who wrote in anachronistic English modes: "Why is the sonnet on the sonnet writ? / Forsooth, he deems that he a boon confers / Who paints the lily or pure gold refines." ⁴⁴ Elsewhere in *Idle Idyls*, Wells relied on her American audience to be familiar with recent British verse—specifically, Rudyard Kipling's "The Vampire" (1897)—in order to appreciate her parody of it in "The Vampire of the Hour."

But the clearest attack on the tired, anachronistic conventions of English verse came in Wells's comic poem "To a Poet. By Spring," which introduced a gendered dimension, too, as the female personification of the season protested against repeated invocations of her presence by male authors. Wells included a list of the names of important English writers,

such as “Will Shakspeare” [sic], “Mr. Milton,” “Chaucer and Spenser,” and “Bob Herrick,” who had all “hailed” Spring enough to render any further mentions unnecessary.⁴⁵ Oliver Herford, in turn, provided an illustration in which Spring was approached, with bowed heads or on bended knee, by a caricatured roster of the Greats. It was up to the American readers of the volume to recognize the figures depicted, match them up with Wells’s list of British poets, and get the joke (fig. 3). This humor required literary knowledge that ranged beyond American shores.

Thus, in Ella Wheeler Wilcox and Frances Hodgson Burnett we find not an isolated or eccentric comic practice, but one gesturing outward, toward the works of other turn-of-the-century women in the United States, who were also looking across the ocean as they laughed. Yet neither Wilcox nor Burnett was represented in Nancy Walker and Zita Dresner’s important 1988 anthology, *Redressing the Balance: American Women’s Literary Humor from Colonial Times to the 1980s*. In the years since its publication, neither writer has entered the canon of nineteenth-century American women’s humor and, with Wilcox and Burnett’s eschewal of the accepted signs of Americanness, and with their embrace instead of British comic modes and models, neither

Figure 3

seems poised to do so. But if we were to broaden our critical expectations regarding the language in which the comic impulse manifested itself in late nineteenth-century writing, we might find there is room in the canon for both a *Small Person* and for a *Sandwich*. And with that sandwich serving as the thin end of the wedge, we might even begin to open a new space for a specifically *transatlantic* women's humor.

NOTES

1. Ella W. Wilcox, *The Song of the Sandwich* (New York: George M. Allen, 1893), n.p.
2. Angela Sorby, "The Milwaukee School of Fleshly Poetry: Ella Wheeler Wilcox's Poems of Passion and Popular Aestheticism," *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers* 26, no. 1 (2009): 69–91; 69.
3. Qtd. in Sorby, "The Milwaukee School," 69.
4. Sophie Blanch, "Taking Comedy Seriously: American Literary Humor and the British Woman Writer," *Studies in American Humor* 3, no. 15 (2007): 5–17; 3.
5. Virginia Woolf, "Wilcoxiana," in *Books and Portraits: Some Further Selections from the Literary and Biographical Writings of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Mary Lyon (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), 144–48; 146.
6. Peter M. Briggs, "English Satire and Connecticut Wit," in *American Humor*, ed. Arthur Power Dudden (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 3–23; 17.
7. Briggs, "English Satire," 22–23.
8. Emily Toth, "A Laughter of Their Own: Women's Humor in the United States," in *American Women Humorists: Critical Essays*, ed. Linda A. Morris (New York: Garland, 1994), 85–107; 102.
9. Among the many works from the late "Second Wave" feminist period of literary recuperation, dedicated either wholly or in part to writing American women back into the history of nineteenth-century American humor (and thus into the larger story of American culture in the nineteenth century), were Nancy Walker and Zita Dresner, eds., *Redressing the Balance: American Women's Literary Humor from Colonial Times to the 1980s* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1988); Nancy A. Walker, *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988); Regina Barreca, ed., *Last Laughs: Perspectives on Woman and Comedy* (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1988); Linda A. F. Morris, *Women Vernacular Humorists in Nineteenth-Century America: Ann Stephens, Frances Whitcher, and Marietta Holley* (New York: Garland, 1990); June Sochen, ed., *Women's Comic Visions* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991); Linda A. Morris, ed., *American Women Humorists: Critical Essays* (New York: Garland, 1994); Regina Barreca, ed., *The Penguin Book of Women's Humor* (New York: Penguin, 1996); Nancy A. Walker, ed., *What's So Funny? Humor in American Culture*

(Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1998); Daryl Cumber Dance, ed. *Honey, Hush! An Anthology of African American Women's Humor* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998).

10. Walker, *A Very Serious Thing*, 44.
11. Walker, *A Very Serious Thing*, 36.
12. Walker, *A Very Serious Thing*, 10; Linda A Morris, "Frances Miriam Whitcher: Social Satire in the Age of Gentility," in her *American Women Humorists*, 221.
13. Walker and Dresner, "Introduction," in *Redressing the Balance*, xxviii.
14. Alice Sheppard, "From Kate Sanborn to Feminist Psychology: The Social Context of Women's Humor, 1885–1985," in *American Women Humorists*, 109–130; 117.
15. Dance, *Honey, Hush!*
16. Michael H. Epp, "A Republic of Laughter: Marietta Holley and the Production of Women's Public Humour in the Late Nineteenth-Century United States," *Gender Forum* 33 (2011): n.p. <http://www.genderforum.org/issues/gender-and-humour/a-republic-of-laughter/>.
17. Sorby, "The Milwaukee School," 80.
18. Alexander Pope, "The Rape of the Lock," in *Alexander Pope: Selected Poetry*, ed. Pat Rogers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 32–53; 53.
19. Walker, *A Very Serious Thing*, 10.
20. Wilcox, *The Song of the Sandwich*, n.p.
21. Wilcox, *The Song of the Sandwich*, n.p.
22. Wendy W. Reaves, *Celebrity Caricature in America* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1998), 45.
23. Sigrid A. Cordell, *Fictions of Dissent: Reclaiming Authority in Transatlantic Women's Writing of the Late Nineteenth Century* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2010), 2.
24. Cordell, *Fictions of Dissent*, 3.
25. Ella H. Dixon, "Frances Hodgson Burnett," in *As I Knew Them: Sketches of People I Have Met on the Way* (London: Hutchinson, 1930), 95–99; 95.
26. Gretchen H. Gerzina, *Frances Hodgson Burnett: The Unexpected Life of the Author of The Secret Garden* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 185.
27. Gerzina, *Francis Hodgson Burnett*, xiii.
28. Charles Dickens, "Chapter VII: Travelling Abroad," in *The Uncommercial Traveller* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1861), 89–106; 90.
29. F. H. Burnett, *The One I Knew the Best of All* (London: Frederick Warne, 1893), 174.
30. Burnett, *The One I Knew*, 178.
31. Gerzina, *Francis Hodgson Burnett*, 23.
32. Gerzina, *Francis Hodgson Burnett*, 27.
33. R. H. Stoddard, "Frances Hodgson Burnett," *Critic* 1, no. 25 (1881): 346–47; 346.
34. Burnett, *The One I Knew*, 174.
35. Burnett, *The One I Knew*, 179.
36. Walker, *A Very Serious Thing*, 10.
37. Burnett, *The One I Knew*, 181.

38. Helen G. Cone, "Narcissus in Camden: A Classical Dialogue of the Year 1882," *Oberon and Puck: Verses Grave and Gay* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1893), 110–17; 110–11.
39. Cone, "Narcissus in Camden," 114–15.
40. Carolyn Wells, "Carolyn Wells," in *My Maiden Effort: Being the Personal Confessions of Well-Known American Authors*, ed. Gelett Burgess (Garden City: Doubleday, 1921), 255–57; 255.
41. Wells, "Carolyn Wells," 255.
42. Wells, "Carolyn Wells," 256.
43. Carolyn Wells, *Idle Idyls* (New York: Dodd and Mead, 1900), 56.
44. Wells, *Idle Idyls*, 25.
45. Wells, *Idle Idyls*.