

# *Comic short fiction and its variety*

Book or Report Section

Accepted Version

Macdonald, K. (2016) *Comic short fiction and its variety*. In: Einhaus, A.-M. (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to the English Short Story*. Cambridge Companions to Literature. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, pp. 145-158. ISBN 9781107084179 Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/69008/>

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Publisher: Cambridge University Press

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## Chapter 11

### Comic short fiction and its variety

Kate Macdonald

Humour in fiction functions as the salt that enhances taste, and crosses the boundaries of form and genre. It works impalpably in solution, disseminating through characterisation, and as crystalline grains of joke, embedded in its medium. In short fiction, humour's protean quality has a stronger effect because it is less diluted. A humorous narrative voice will infuse an otherwise serious sequence of events with a comic perspective (John Buchan's "The Frying-Pan and the Fire", 1928). Comedy delivers social shame for public enjoyment ("Saki"'s "Tobermory", 1911), and can reveal hidden meaning at the end of the narrative (Kevin Barr's "Animal Needs", 2007). The pervasive but discreet quality of the comic in short fiction frequently disguises its workings, however, and makes it hard to identify as a convenient set of aesthetic characteristics.

We also cannot separate comic short stories from their medium. Short fiction is distinguished from the novel by its transmission in, historically, the magazine and the newspaper. The evolution of comic short stories through twentieth-century book history arrives in the age of the e-reader still linked closely to its medium, which offers digitised commute-length reading. The short story read in public becomes problematic when it causes involuntary laughter, since to smile or laugh out loud while reading is to lose control, and cease to inhabit a private space, by what Mary Beard calls "an uncontrollable force that contorts the civilized body and subverts the rational mind".<sup>1</sup>

### Towards theorising comic (short) fiction

Theoretical writing on comedy by its practitioners and critics is widespread, yet there are no major authors whose work is critically approved of because it is predominantly funny. Comic fiction is not academically respectable, unless produced by a major author who transcends genre and can lend their greatness to their humour: Charles Dickens and Rudyard Kipling are good examples of this phenomenon. The absence of critical attention may also be explained by comedy's status as a modal option for all genres of literature. It is not often considered as a form in itself, unlike tragedy. Critical analysis of comedy in the short story, rather than the novel, is rare. Isabel Ermida's *The Language of Comic Narratives: Humor Construction in Short Stories* (2008), although predominantly a linguistic study, contains chapters on the different markers and divisions within comedy and their application in the short story. It is the only full-length study available that covers fiction, its short form, and comedy.

Establishing a critical foundation for comic short stories is possible by thinking in terms of a Venn diagram, to identify overlapping zones of commonality. The overlap zone is small because critical literature seems only to be able to discuss one area at a time. An extensive recent study of the British short story ignores humour completely; another barely acknowledges that “Saki”, an author usually considered a byword for witty short fiction, wrote to make people laugh.<sup>2</sup> Glen Cavaliero describes Dornford Yates and P. G. Wodehouse in his *The Alchemy of Laughter* as comic novelists, not noticing that their comedy was predominantly expressed in short stories.

This chapter attempts to offer an introduction to British comic short fiction and some of its authors, from the late Victorian period to the present day. It offers some suggestions of general principles, themes and trends over time. Definitions of the cognates and synonyms for “comic short fiction” have changed during the period under discussion. Mark Twain – a powerful authority for British comic writers of his day – considered that “the humorous story

is American, the comic story is English, the witty story is French".<sup>3</sup> Since Twain's dictum predates the humour of Bernard MacLaverty (Northern Irish) and the wit of "Saki" (Anglo-Indian), this chapter feels free to extend the cultural field to embrace the in-joke, the parody, the pastiche, the satire, the tall story and their relations, since all these have been written, joyously, by "English" writers. It will assume that the presence in short fiction of anti-climax, bathos, black humour, buffoonery, deflation, escalating farce, flippancy, facetiousness, irony, practical jokes, puns, sarcasm and word games can be counted as evidence of the long reach and multiple forms of the comic short story.<sup>4</sup> This chapter will use Twain's lead to show that "comedy" and "short story" are together much more than the sum of these separate elements, in how they reinforce each other. As a caveat, readers should note that this chapter does not use the theories of laughter deriving from Freud or Bakhtin, since they do not address comedy in short fiction. Short fiction from Caribbean, South African, New Zealand, Australian, East African, Indian or other Anglophone cultures outside North America, the UK and Ireland is also not discussed, since this would require a thorough knowledge of these cultures, impossible for one brief chapter.

Polonius's epigram, "brevity is the soul of wit", is usually understood as encouraging an intelligent person to be concise.<sup>5</sup> His words, contrasted with his character, also indicate that long-windedness and humour cannot co-exist: brevity is essential in the delivery of wit. Valerie Shaw notes that "the short story is an intrinsically witty genre", and that "being an essentially terse form, the short story can exploit the fundamental wittiness of making a character say a great deal about himself in a small number of words".<sup>6</sup> Clare Hanson observes that the comic short story carries a strong stylisation of form and "depends for much of its effect on the reader's familiarity with the code employed and on his ability to recognise departures from it".<sup>7</sup> This innate understanding of the rules, and the necessity of expressive

brevity both have their foundation in the techniques that Mark Twain described in 1897, whose markers of the comic short story are summarised below:

- To string incongruities and absurdities together in a wandering and sometimes purposeless way, innocently unaware that they are absurdities;
- The slurring of the point, ensuring that the point of the joke is half-hidden, as if the narrative voice does not realise its importance in the story;
- The dropping of the studied remark apparently without knowing it;
- The pause, to crank up suspense and anticipation;
- The narrative voice adopting a serious mask, concealing any sense that his story is funny, let alone outrageous.<sup>8</sup>

These show how humour can be produced in discursive prose that intends to entertain. They also show how the reader is expected to react to the narrative voice, which is essential, because the reader's assumed responses determine the mode of delivery. Twain's categories are also helpful as a way of identifying typologies of comic short story, and noticing twentieth-century adjustments to this *fin de siècle* model.

Some forty years later A. P. Herbert, the British journalist, humourist and Member of Parliament, gave names to the theoretical models of comic writing:

- the Relative Theory of Risibility: the need to know the circumstances, scene and audience before an event can be funny
- the Sub-Doctrine of Surprise: incongruity between words and actions, surroundings or character
- the Marginal Theory of Incongruity: something happening out of place.<sup>9</sup>

Isabel Ermida's linguistic approach equally enables her to formulate some definitions of how comedy works from a theorist's perspective. After considering the "conceptual satellites"<sup>10</sup> of laughter, wit and irony, she offers these theories to explain some characteristics of humour in short fiction, though not asserting that these constitute the only or total approach:

- Disparagement theory: this connects laughter with scorn, laughing at rather than with someone, and invokes the emotions of envy, hostility and superiority
- Release theory: this allows an escape from social inhibitions, producing pleasure in the liberation of the emotions against oppressive forces
- Incongruity theory: this produces laughter from surprise, deriving from the breaking of, or temporary freedom from, social rules.<sup>11</sup>

Twain, Herbert and Ermida all follow Aristotle and Kant in noting the central role of incongruity in comedy, showing the longevity of the reasons for human laughter. Ermida also draws on Quintilian's observation that laughter is close to derision, and pre-Freudian thought in identifying laughter as a release.<sup>12</sup> These rules and indicators can be summarised as one universal theory: that Anglophone comic short fiction ambushes the expectations of the auditor and reader, and breaks their anticipated pattern of behaviour, just as the Vorticists demanded in *Blast*.<sup>13</sup>

An example of this is black comedy, a mordant humour that challenges the boundaries of taste, and an important and common feature in British and Irish comic writing. M. Beth Meszaros, writing about disability humour, notes that this dark comedy

discovers humor in pain, suffering, and even terror. An edgy, disquieting mode, it has no truck at all with decorum or sentiment. Even to our cool, postmodern sensibility, it hovers just one short step this side of bad taste. It is discordant, subversive, impolite. Black comedy appropriates, as its own special province, subjects that are usually off-limits, subjects that it often dismantles with casual cruelty, flippancy, sometimes even brutality.

The differentiating effect of black comedy is that it does not produce “the restorative laughter of comedy”, since it continues to bite after the story has finished, leaving the reader a little shocked, but laughing despite the rules of good taste.<sup>14</sup> Kevin Barry’s “The Penguins” (2007), an airy report of the aftermath of an air-crash on pack ice, fills these criteria admirably. The reader laughs and is horrified, and instinctively responds by trying to reformulate the horror as admiration for the insouciant writing style, or the wit in the dialogue, rather than gaze at the central premise of the terror of not knowing who will die.

Taste is crucial in how comedy is received. Robert Bernard Martin notes that the emergence of a sense of humour as a desirable character trait “seems to have made its appearance in the nineteenth century” in Britain, since Leslie Stephen noted its existence in 1876 “as one of the cardinal virtues”.<sup>15</sup> Before this date, humour was suspect to Victorian taste (though not in the early, post-Regency years of the nineteenth century) since it denoted “the obscene, and the religious, and [was] a sign of insobriety and unseriousness”: laughter in or at fiction signified social impropriety, and was not approved of for “the innocent”, among whom we should also include the untaught, the uneducated, and those socially conditioned to be priggish.<sup>16</sup> This attitude to laughter made humour in nineteenth-century fiction problematic, and derives partly from the eighteenth-century Hobbesian theory of superiority, which “makes laughter condescending and aggressive”, an invitation to *schadenfreude*. Comedy’s incongruities may

also reflect an insecure society.<sup>17</sup> After the public embrace of musical comedy as joyous and respectable entertainment – epitomised by the Savoy Operas of Gilbert and Sullivan from the 1870s – the Victorians allowed themselves to read in the open pursuit of amusement.

### **Prestige and publishing environment**

Nineteenth-century comic short fiction is tied to its means of publication. There were many lightly comic stories in the fashionable annuals of the 1820s and 1830s, and magazines such as *Blackwood's Magazine* and the *New Monthly Magazine* were important disseminators of light or comic writing. But because Victorian comic short fiction was written to amuse, rather than to move and instruct, it had a low cultural value. In magazines it was a filler, in contrast to the “central commodity” of the long novel.<sup>18</sup> This sense of the short story deriving inferiority from its medium was compounded by the industrial production of late Victorian romance fiction magazines, or novelettes, which offered mass-produced and indistinguishable short fiction to an undiscriminating readership.<sup>19</sup> The longevity and wide circulation of mass-market fiction magazines, from the Victorian period to the Second World War, continued to withhold critical approval from comic short fiction, although individual authors were extolled.<sup>20</sup> Valerie Shaw observes that in the 1930s, “for cultural critics like Q. D. Leavis”, magazines and newspapers downgraded the reputation of the short fiction they carried because they were “mass market and populist, and thus by extension could not carry any literature of the kind of literary merit she and the Leavisites promoted”<sup>21</sup> The reader was also a problem for cultural judgements. The low literacy and limited income of the readers of cheap fiction periodicals would have connoted a lower-class readership for Victorian short fiction.

P. G. Wodehouse is an excellent example of a comic writer intimately connected to the magazine medium. He began his career writing comic short stories for the *Boys Own* market

from 1901, publishing most of them in a rival magazine, *The Captain*. He made his name as a comic writer from 1911, with his Reggie Pepper and Jeeves and Wooster stories, writing in New York where he was also working in musical theatre. His stories' success depended on the contrast between their British tone and humour and the North American settings. His work appeared concurrently in New York evening newspapers and British monthly fiction magazines, so the evolution of his success from his pre-war stories of Mike and Psmith, to becoming the British comic writer *par excellence* of the war years and the 1920s and 1930s, has a great deal to do with the early reception of his work as a foreigner. The easy duplication of markets for the comic short story also suggests an increasing homogeneity of national senses of humour after the war and through to the 1930s and 1940s.

Wodehouse's use of multiple platforms for the same story, routinely reissuing magazine stories as collected episodes in books, was dependent on multiple markets, in the USA and the UK. Between the wars, the fiction magazine market fractured into genre publication, and new humour magazines emerged. It was not uncommon for a Wodehouse story to be used as a lure to attract readers to the first issue, even if his stories never appeared there subsequently. Magazine historian Michael Ashley observes that "the *Happy Mag.* was one of the many humorous fiction magazines that flourished during the twenties and its success encouraged imitators such as *The Merry* and *The Jolly*".<sup>22</sup> The *Happy Mag.* (1922–40) launched Richmal Crompton's *Just William* stories; the short-lived *Jolly Mag.* (1927) carried a regular feature written and illustrated by the comic cartoonist H. M. Bateman; *The Merry Mag.*, (1924–30) like the *Happy*, used contributions from the music hall in its fiction, and published light romances laced with simple humour. This range, and the embrace of different forms for the publication of humour, indicates the whole-hearted acceptance of light reading in British leisure time. *Gaiety* (1921–27) advertised itself as a humour magazine, and carried four or five comic short stories in each issue, with contributors such as Stacy Aumonier and George

C. Birmingham.<sup>23</sup> Comic short fiction writers in the *Sunny Mag.* (1925–33), the companion to the *Happy*, included C. C. Andrews, Phyllis Hambledon, Evadne Price's "Jane Turpin" stories about the female "Just William", May Edginton, Ursula Bloom (as Mary Essex) and Michael Kent. *Pan* (1919–24), formerly a Bohemian fiction magazine and a humour miscellany, began to print short stories rather than skits from the mid-1920s. It was one of the first fiction magazines to "genrefy" its content, after which only about 10% of its stories were categorised as "humour".<sup>24</sup>

Like their Victorian counterparts, Edwardian and Georgian readers no longer considered the humour in short fiction to be high quality when it was written "down" to overworked factory hands and office clerks. Edwin Pugh noted in 1908 that magazine editors advertised for new short stories to "provide them with comic relief from the dolours and squalors of the ordinary literary stock-pot", but that the Edwardian comic short story writer – with some important exceptions – was largely deficient in skill, originality and taste.<sup>25</sup> This sense of reducing standards in the pursuit of sales affected the cultural value of short stories as a medium. Endorsement by authors of serious merit might heighten the comic story's prestige, yet it was not uncommon for literary and now canonical writers to ignore or suppress their comic writing because of its association with a lack of maturity. Katherine Mansfield told her agent that she did not want *In a German Pension* (1911) reissued because it was "most inferior" and contained too much "youthful extravagance of expression and youthful disgust".<sup>26</sup> *In a German Pension* is a remarkable example of dark stories deploying the popular British trope of anti-German humour of the period. The narrative voice dwells on the vocal health and bodily complaints of the German boarding-house guests. The stories are exercises in the grotesque, where the humour depends on the reader sharing the narrator's sense of English superiority over German cultural values. Mansfield's vicious descriptions are curiously undercut by the characters' innocence of their appalling habits. Yet these stories are

relentlessly funny. Mansfield expertly paces the revelations and delicately dissects characters in free indirect speech, producing comic exposure by an apparently artless voicing of the thoughts of the foolish and the arrogant in their own words.

Critics, too, often denigrate the comic writing of an author better known for the weighty and lofty. Rudyard Kipling is probably the only major twentieth-century author whose comic short stories are valued as highly as his other fiction. Kipling had been publishing almost exclusively short fiction since the 1880s, beginning with comic tales of British Army rankers in India. In the Edwardian period he constructed highly wrought farcical short stories that target arrogance through the assumed superiority of the narrative voice, in bitter, ironic situations revelling in social disgrace. “The Village That Voted The Earth Was Flat” (written in 1914) is uproarious and cruel, a comedy of persecution and rule breaking. The distance between Kipling’s narrative voice and the reader gives the comic events authority, and makes them funnier, but the story ends with public humiliation. This is comic short fiction at its most punitive. In contrast, Arnold Bennett’s short stories are characteristic for their “gentle humour [...] a sophisticated incongruity between tone and subject”.<sup>27</sup> “His Worship the Goosedriver” (1905) shares the tone of his comic novel *The Card* (1911) in its blunt cheerfulness in the face of social anxieties, and shrewd appreciation of how to deal with human nature.

The 1890s had seen the rise of the British New Humour, serving the requirements of conservative, mainstream readers who preferred safer and more familiar fiction than the fashionable writing of *fin de siècle* decadence and aestheticism. John D. Cloy notes that the New Humour modernised the well-established heartiness of Muscular Christianity, producing “high-quality, pro-British, morally unobjectionable stories that appealed to the large segment of the English public who detested decadence in any form”.<sup>28</sup> Adding humour to earnest high Victorian moral codes “gave fresh perspective to a flagging literary form”.<sup>29</sup> Middle-class

humourists like Jerome K. Jerome, Barry Pain, and W. W. Jacobs were considered “wholesome” and thus respectable. They were also very widely read: “never had such a body of writing been within the reach of such a large group of consumers”.<sup>30</sup> Their short stories and novels made the lower classes human for the middle-class readers, and they showed lower-class readers how middle-class values could be accessible through a sense of humour.

Margaret Stetz has observed that New Women writers of the New Humour were similarly invested in ameliorating relations between the sexes. They favoured “a version of humor that recognised the inevitability of an ongoing relationship with the masculine objects of their laughter, as well as the need to reform and improve the character of that relationship”.<sup>31</sup>

In the First World War, British comic short fiction became grimly facetious, rather than frivolous or socially satirical. It is notable for its use of black humour in processing appalling experiences, and mediating their horror and emotional drain to the civilian readers at home.

Cyril McNeile, writing as “Sapper”, was possibly the most effective of these short story writers, but British trench journals of the period contain many outstanding anonymous examples of the same art, written by soldiers. The novelist Ian Hay (John Hay Beith) wrote episodes of army life from the Front for *Blackwood's Magazine* that were both comic and sentimental, later collected as *The First Hundred Thousand* (1915). These stories use a forced intimacy that makes the reader's emotions vulnerable to sudden attack by pathos. Dornford Yates also followed this fashion and developed “Sapper”'s facetiousness into a signature form of his own, in which he balanced the fashion for swooningly romantic episodes with witty banter between the sexes, and vituperative invective that followed Shakespearean models to balance and weigh his characters' rhetoric. Yates was a leading contributor of short stories and serialised novels to the *Windsor Magazine* for decades, and influenced a distinctive sector of the market. His stories' popularity encouraged Barry Pain, Hugh Walpole, E. F. Benson, A. M. Burrage, Hugh de Sélincourt, Hylton Cleaver, Richmal Crompton, Horace Annesley

Vachell and E. M. Delafield to write similarly light-hearted fiction, more or less comic, set in what Michael Ashley calls “formulaic chocolate-box village life in Britain in the twenties and thirties [...] the world the *Windsor* wished to project”.<sup>32</sup>

Following the Second World War, post-war austerity exacerbated existing conditions that needed to be laughed at or escaped from in fiction. The Irish writer Frank O’Connor produced hundreds of short stories of rural and small-town Irish Catholic life, and is revered as a comic writer, though those unfamiliar with these cultures may struggle to find humour in these bleak depictions of constrained lives. His affinity with the Irish clergyman produces his most deeply felt comic works, particularly “First Confession” (1951) and “My Oedipus Complex” (1952).

The Anglo-Indian novelist Lawrence Durrell, meanwhile, had a very well regarded career as an ex-patriate commentator on modern mores and post-war life, and was considered for the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1961 and 1962. He reissued his comic stories as collections in the 1970s, twenty years after their first magazine appearance in the late 1950s, when they were relatively unconsidered. The episodes in *Esprit de Corps: Sketches from Diplomatic Life* (1957) and its two sequels, for example, are told in the first person by Antrobus, a Foreign Office diplomat, recalling stories from his career to his unnamed former colleague. They are farcical and mildly smutty, describing catastrophic consequences for British diplomats in central Europe, with the humour resting on private understanding battling with a public inability to admit this without losing official status. “Frying the Flag” (1957) is probably his finest comic work, orchestrating a perfectly balanced crescendo of language jokes and puns based on inappropriately misplaced letters.

### **Farce, satire and parody**

Durrell's younger brother Gerald was also an accomplished author, and hardly published any short stories that were not funny in his long career as a writer, naturalist and zookeeper. His collection *Fillets of Plaice* (1971) – the title a deliberate parody of his brother's more serious collection of travel essays, *Spirit of Place* (1969) – is a particularly rich collection of comic short stories. "A Question of Promotion" and "A Transport of Terrapins" show Durrell's power as a farceur, creating chaos out of carefully positioned events and actions. The situation, and his mode of narration, were essential for his humour.

John Buchan applied farce to a Stevensonian plot in "A Lucid Interval" (1910), in which a vengeful cook adds an extra ingredient to the curry for a political dinner-party, bringing about a catastrophic change of politics in the grand old men and rising stars of the House of Commons. Buchan was willing to use humour maliciously to expose the arrogant and pompous, but there is a restraint in his writing that may also have restricted his use of the form. For the peerless satirist, such as Max Beerbohm, all human foibles should be available for ridicule. Glen Cavaliero calls Beerbohm's faux-autobiographical sketches "dizzily persuasive",<sup>33</sup> among which "Savonarola Brown" (1919) is a perfect literary and historical pastiche, whose influence can be seen in the sketch writing of Monty Python, fifty years later. Edmund Wilson admires Beerbohm's "talent for impersonation", noting in particular the short stories "Enoch Soames" and "Not That I Would Boast" as "the virtuoso pieces of a parodist".<sup>34</sup> Fellow satirist, erstwhile journalist and war correspondent "Saki" (Hector Hugh Munro) published his short stories in the first fifteen years of the twentieth century, and developed a unique line in satirical short fiction about amoral young men and the comedy of the comeuppance. His genius for social commentary through ironic deflation gave him a distinctive literary voice that was expressed almost wholly in black humour, with a porous line between horror and wit. He epitomises Aristotle's definition of wit as "educated insolence".<sup>35</sup>

While “Saki” and Beerbohm had been the main, if not the only, pre-war British satirists, satire became highly popular in British comic writing after the First World War, especially in its less aggressive form of parody. The detective fiction critic and satirist, Father Ronald A. Knox, was pessimistic about the relationship between satire and humour, writing in 1928 that “our habituation to humorous reading has inoculated our systems against the beneficent poison of satire”.<sup>36</sup> Valentine Cunningham suggests that every British author will use satire at one time or another, since it is a natural aspect of British humour to produce, often very unexpectedly, “an outburst of hot spleen against some just perceived abuse or occasion of offence”.<sup>37</sup>

Parodies are the most common examples of comic short fiction on the satirical continuum: burning up fast and brightly, in contrast to the slow deliberate smoulder of the satirical novel, which can be humourless in its pursuit of a lengthy savage rendition. E. F. Benson, for example, could parody perfectly in his celebrated Lucia novels, but his short fiction on the same theme is flat and comparatively unfunny. The fashion for short parodies in the 1930s had satirical intent, but a limited range. Rachel Ferguson’s *Celebrated Sequels* (1934) and Leonard Russell’s anthology *Parody Party* (1936) only parody other writers by pointing affectionately at weaknesses in their victims’ writing styles, not at anything more socially relevant. Evelyn Waugh’s short stories are in the same style as his novels: sardonic and bleakly facetious with an air of thoughtless anarchy that produces social chaos in place of order. His “Love in the Slump” (1932) and “On Guard” (1934) evoke upper-class heartlessness and idiocy in the 1930s with a very black wit.

Best known for their work in the fantasy and horror genres, Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman are contemporary multi-genre parodists who use comedy to satirise modern life and art,

through the fantastical in the everyday. An excellent example of Neil Gaiman's comic short fiction is "Forbidden Brides of the Faceless Slaves in the Secret House of the Night of Dread Desire" (2005), a parody of Gothic fiction that also critiques the denial of legitimacy to the unfashionable and unserious. Pratchett's comedy relies on the sustained unfolding of related jokes, and the puns and referential jokes in his novels occur less successfully in his shorter fiction, as if he needs to build up a head of creative steam before his intensely situational humour can emerge. "Turntables of the Night" (1989), in which an obsessive record collector encounters the one collector who will outdo him, relies on the reader's previous exposure to the main protagonist to fully appreciate the humour.

### **Women's comic short fiction**

Comic writing, particularly at the beginning of the twentieth century, is routinely dismissed if written by women. Talia Schaffer notes that

humor signalled the writer's light, charming point of view, which guaranteed that the work would not have serious political ideas or literary pretensions. The humor requirement was a way of demanding that women's literature be second-rate.<sup>38</sup>

Schaffer was describing the New Woman who dared to be witty, but her comments are echoed in E. M. Delafield's self-deprecating magazine columns that would become *Diary of a Provincial Lady* (1930).

In post-war Britain where gender roles were policed with vigour, women writers knew that laughing at society was more effective than railing at it. They pushed with renewed energy and purpose at the convention, noted above, that women may not laugh and also be taken seriously. Margaret Stetz writes that women writers of comedy have "created situations that

will make their readers laugh, while also demonstrating, through their fictional characters' conduct, that they know it is wrong (or, at least, considered so) for women to indulge in making jokes, or in showing that they find something funny".<sup>39</sup> As an example, the great British actor and comedian Joyce Grenfell is characteristic of the social and entertainment forces that enabled twentieth-century women writers to be funny as performers, but did not permit them to be wits. Grenfell's short monologues are celebrated as works of comic genius, but they are written for the stage, not as fiction.

Women writers drawn to comedy found that the way to be accepted and published was to be self-effacing. The novelist Barbara Pym created a superbly balanced barely-there comic style that was nonetheless devastating in its ridicule of the arrogant and overbearing. Margaret Stetz describes her as a writer of "situations where [the heroine] must be subjected to the hilariously inappropriate behaviour of those with greater social privilege and advantages, yet feel 'unable to laugh'".<sup>40</sup> Suppression of the protagonist's amusement is a necessary part of Pym's approach, to show how powerful the social forces must be that will not let a woman laugh when she wants to. Her short story "Goodbye Balkan Capital" (1940s) is a story of the comic rivalry between sisters, undercut with sly understatement to show the minute detail of the things that women laugh at.

A growing body of work in the 1970s and 1980s by British women writing comic short stories reflected feminist politics and critiques of capitalism. This humour was as deeply felt as black humour can be, using the reader's recognition that these stories produce catharsis, in showing that previously hidden subjects were no longer considered shameful. Gloria Kaufman describes the new feminist comedy that "clarifies vision with the satiric intent of inspiring change".<sup>41</sup> Fay Weldon's story "Polaris" (1978) is a bleak exposure of the ridiculousness of life as a navy wife on a submarine base, in which exasperation at life's disappointments

produces a constant unwilling laughter. Her feminist politics work within her fiction to raise awareness of oppression and ludicrous patriarchy that clearly demands change, resisting an undercurrent of hopelessness. Penelope Lively's dark humour in "A Long Night at Abu Simbel" (1984) derives from the chaos produced when a holiday courier abandons her tiresome charges in Egypt, producing social disintegration. In her Oxford satire "Presents of fish and game" (1978) she retells Jane Austen's masterly reduction of an inheritance from *Sense and Sensibility*, in which exhausted and ambitious academics manipulate university business management, producing the wry laughter of recognition and despair.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, feminist comic writing embraced the horror of middle-class desperation. Helen Simpson's stories in *Four Bare Legs in a Bed* (1990), and *Hey Yeah Right Get A Life* (2000) expose the wasted lives of young middle-class professionals trapped on maternity leave. Her humour is delivered through intricate narrative patterns and storytelling that court gasps of unexpected laughter from recognition as well as horror. Her "Burns and the Bankers" (2000) is a clear-eyed condemnation of all that is ridiculous about professional Scotsmen. Ali Smith's "The Child" (2001) is written with an Everywoman narrative voice that reinforces its situation comedy. A demon child appears in her supermarket shopping trolley and no-one will believe that he is not hers, so the reader's horrified recognition of the grotesqueness of the mother who rejects a child whom no-one would ever want is enhanced by the comedy of exasperation. Jackie Kay's "Bread Bin" (2012) is a retelling of the traditional tale of sexual conquests from a lesbian perspective, producing humour by manipulating the reader's expectations from the jaunty first-person narration.

As this chapter has shown, the varieties of comic short stories in the British Anglophone tradition are innumerable. The strength and effectiveness of comic short fiction comes from its precision under the limitation of length. Thus we see that the medium dictates the form,

and the form brings forth the economy of wit, a mutual reinforcement of all the short story's elements. Although the strategies employed and topics explored vary widely, British comic short fiction at its best challenges the rules and confounds the reader's assumptions with comedy that shocks, and humour that cannot be anticipated.

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome. On Joking, Tickling and Cracking Up* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 214), 40.

<sup>2</sup> David Malcolm, *The British and Irish Short Story Handbook* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012); Emma Liggins, Andrew Mauder and Ruth Robbins (eds.), *The British Short Story* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Mark Twain, "How To Tell A Story", *How To Tell A Story and Other Essays* (1897; New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> See Frank Muir (ed.), *The Oxford Book of Humorous Prose: From William Caxton to P. G. Wodehouse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) for excellent and detailed discussions of these terms.

<sup>5</sup> *Hamlet*, Act II, Scene 2, line 91.

<sup>6</sup> Valerie Shaw, *The Short Story: A Critical Introduction* (London; New York: Longman, 1983), pp. 11, 115.

<sup>7</sup> Clare Hanson, *Short Stories and Short Fictions, 1880–1980* (London: Macmillan, 1985), p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> Twain, "How To Tell A Story", p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> A. P. Herbert, "The Monkey and the Bishop", *General Cargo* (1939; London: House of Stratus, 2001), pp. 33–37, 34–35.

<sup>10</sup> Isabel Ermida, *The Language of Comic Narratives: Humor Construction in Short Stories* (Berlin; New York: de Gruyter, 2008), p. 6.

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<sup>11</sup> Ermida, *The Language of Comic Narratives*, pp. 15–30.

<sup>12</sup> Aristotle *Rhetoric*, 3.11; Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement* (1790), trans J C Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), 199; Quintilian *De Oratore* 2.236; see also Beard, *Laughter*, ch. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Beard, *Laughter*, pp. 30.

<sup>14</sup> M. Beth Meszaros, “Enlightened by Our Afflictions: Portrayals of Disability in the Comic Theatre of Beth Henley and Martin McDonagh”, *Disability Studies Quarterly* 23:3–4 (Summer 2003), n.p. <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/433/610> [Last accessed 27 November 2014].

<sup>15</sup> Robert Bernard Martin, *The Triumph of Wit: A Study of Victorian Comic Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> Martin, *The Triumph of Wit*, pp. 9–10.

<sup>17</sup> Martin, *The Triumph of Wit*, pp. 19.

<sup>18</sup> Harold Orel, *The Victorian Short Story: Development and Triumph of a Literary Genre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> Kate Macdonald and Marysa Demoor, “Borrowing and supplementing: The industrial production of ‘complete story’ novelettes and their supplements, 1865–1900”, *Publishing History*, 63 (2008), pp. 67–95.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Edwin Pugh’s extravagant praise of W. W. Jacobs in his “The decay of the short story”, *The Fortnightly Review*, 52.537 (October 1908), pp. 631–42.

<sup>21</sup> Shaw, *The Short Story*, p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Ashley, *The Age of the Storytellers: British Popular Fiction Magazines, 1880–1950* (London: British Library and Oak Knoll Press, 2006), p. 87.

<sup>23</sup> Ashley, *The Age of the Storytellers*, p. 252.

<sup>24</sup> Ashley, *The Age of the Storytellers*, pp. 87, 100, 123, 156–8.

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<sup>25</sup> Pugh, “The decay of the short story”, p. 640.

<sup>26</sup> Claire Tomalin, *Katherine Mansfield: A Secret Life* (London: Penguin, 2012), p. 208.

<sup>27</sup> Liggins et al, *The British Short Story*, pp. 124, 125.

<sup>28</sup> John D. Cloy, *Muscular Mirth: Barry Pain and the New Humor* (University of Victoria, 2003), p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> Cloy, *Muscular Mirth*, p. 9.

<sup>30</sup> Cloy, *Muscular Mirth*, p. 10.

<sup>31</sup> Margaret D. Stetz, *British Women’s Comic Fiction, 1890–1990: Not Drowning, But Laughing* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), p. 11.

<sup>32</sup> Ashley, *The Age of the Storytellers*, p. 228.

<sup>33</sup> Glen Cavaliero, *The Alchemy of Laughter: Comedy in English Fiction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), p. 50.

<sup>34</sup> Edmund Wilson, “An Analysis of Max Beerbohm”, *The Surprise of Excellence: Modern Essays on Max Beerbohm*, ed. J. G. Riewald (Hamden, CO: Archon Books, 1974), pp. 38–46, 42.

<sup>35</sup> Aristotle *Rhetoric*, 2.12.

<sup>36</sup> Ronald A. Knox, *Essays in Satire* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1928), p. 42.

<sup>37</sup> Valentine Cunningham, “Twentieth-Century Fictional Satire”, *A Companion to Satire Ancient and Modern*, ed. Ruben Quintero (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 400–33, pp. 402–3.

<sup>38</sup> Talia Schaffer, *Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late Victorian England* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2000), p. 8.

<sup>39</sup> Stetz, *British Women’s Comic Fiction*, p. ix.

<sup>40</sup> Stetz, *British Women’s Comic Fiction*, p. x.

<sup>41</sup> Cited in Stetz, *British Women’s Comic Fiction*, p. xi.