FINAL REPORT

FACULTY DEVELOPMENT

SUSAN POZNAR

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RESTATEMENT OF PROFESSIONAL ENHANCEMENT OPPORTUNITY:

In 2007, I received a grant to cover travel expenses for presenting a paper at the "Joking Apart: Gender, Literature and Humour, 1850-present" conference at the University of Sussex, Centre for Modernist Studies, June 28-29, 2007. This grant supplemented departmental travel funds, which were inadequate for international travel.

SUMMARY OF EXPERIENCE:

I append the paper I presented, ""And They Went on Their Way Rejoicing': Stella Gibbons' and Muriel Spark's Comic Female Artists."

"AND THEY WENT ON THEIR WAY REJOICING": STELLA GIBBONS' AND MURIEL SPARK'S COMIC FEMALE ARTISTS

SUSAN POZNAR

Fiction treating female art rarely overflows with comedy: aspiring fictive female artists usually fulfill their promise only after struggle and loss, perhaps daunted by an androcentric tradition, or perhaps envisioning with difficulty an authentically female contribution to their field.

Thus, while teaching a recent seminar, I was startled to find not one, but two, twentieth-century English heroines whose creative careers are expansive and joyous: Stella Gibbons' *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932) and Muriel Spark's *Loitering With Intent* (1981). Despite their youth, Gibbons' Flora Poste and Sparks' Fleur Talbot, confident of their values and priorities, pursue aesthetic campaigns with tact, shrewdness, and flexibility. Simply by blithely downplaying potential gender limitations, they elude them. But is this circumvention of social constraints merely magical thinking?

Originally, I proposed that these heroines and their authors used wit both to allay misunderstanding of their work and to enable its achievement. Imagine my dismay when closer reading revealed that, despite their lively sense of the absurd, Fleur and Flora rarely laugh or joke! Does social pressure inhibit our heroines from freely expressing their humor? I realized that, in fact, both Fleur and Flora deliberately opt **not** to laugh aloud for reasons that I will expound. Gibbons and Spark, however, do provoke our laughter, both because of and despite the characters' reticence, and thus stress at once the power of women's laughter and the power women gain by refraining from laughter.

One caveat: Flora Poste is an artist in the loosest sense, unlike Fleur, who is engaged on a debut novel of spiritual blackmail. Like *The Tempest*'s Prospero, Flora is

an artist of the real, influencing her relatives' lives. Both are exhilarated by their achievements and, ultimately, Flora might justly echo Fleur's words, quoted from Benvenuto Cellini's autobiography: "I went on my way, rejoicing." (26, 74, 217)[i] But why should these joyful creators waive their laughter?

To begin with, laughter often promotes detachment or consolidates power. Consider characters that **do** laugh frequently in these novels. In *Cold Comfort* Seth and Amos Starkadder's derision attests, respectively, sexual and theocratic arrogance. Both Flora and Fleur have already attained such self-possession that their rare laughter is neither aggressive, nor propitiatory nor self-deprecatory -- beyond power-games, although both do exercise their power with panache. When Flora finishes "tidying up" the squalid Cold Comfort Farm, in fairy godmother style, she has finessed Elfine's marriage, weaned Judith from her incestuous obsession, channeled Seth's unbuttoned virility into Hollywood stardom, deflected Amos' hellfire zealotry, charmed away Aunt Ada's mania, and turned Cold Comfort into a rustic idyll reminiscent of post-Heathcliff Wuthering Heights. She has so cleaned, comforted, harmonized, inspired and civilized the farm that Starkadders no longer routinely hurl themselves or each other down wells.

However, Flora prevails, not through feminine passivity or self-sacrifice, but by assuming the usually masculine role of a dramatist who adroitly transmutes sadomasochistic melodrama into romantic comedy, and provides civilized outlets for the characters' transgressive desires. She edits the Starkadders' roles and scripts, and outmaneuvers the rigid blocking characters to provide festive epithalamions.

But Flora adapts as well as adopts the comic dramatist's approach. Bergson's theory of comedy demands that "inelastic" characters be chastened to ensure a smoothly

running social machine.[ii] However, the artist in Flora relishes the virtuosity with which the Starkadders chew up their scenery and she refuses to mock, abase, or reinvent them, for instance, when she translates Elfine's artsy affectations into more socially profitable mannerisms. Unlike Prospero, she redresses no personal wrongs, nor poses as an arbiter of justice. Her scenarios neither test nor persecute others for their own good, as she diplomatically diverts the most extravagant Starkadder energies into larger, distant theaters. If Amos and Seth are loosed on America, Judith on London, and Aunt Ada on Paris, and if Elfine's poetic tendencies will eventually tinge the Hawk-Monitor gene pool, then aberrancy is merely dispersed beyond the novel's margins and comedy foregoes Bergsonian corrections.

Commentators such as David McWhirter, Regina Barreca, and Judith Wilt query comedy's potential as a genre to renounce reaffirmations of the established order because, in McWhirter's words, comedy is "almost fatally overdetermined in its reinscription of fixed, traditional gender roles and hierarchies of power." (190) *Cold Comfort Farm*'s closing vision of blissful couples and a thriving, modernized farm under Reuben's benign patriarchal rule, seems to confirm such skepticism. However, for Flora, promoting cohesive community is **not** an end in itself, but only a modest stage-setting: " . . . unless everything is tidy and pleasant and comfortable all about one, people cannot even begin to enjoy life." (20) Moreover, Flora doesn't ultimately arouse her characters from Prospero's provisional artifice into a normative "reality," since she views both conventional and unconventional lifeways as artificial postures without intrinsic validity. Flora's reflections equally ironize Bloomsbury bohemianism and County mores.[iii] Her reluctance to condemn and regulate the aberrant springs from a recognition that no

"authentic" selfhood underlies tactical role-playing. Symptomatically, we never hear a private, unscripted speech by Aunt Ada, the Farm's matriarchal primum mobile. She does abjure her favorite lines – "There have always been Starkadders at Cold Comfort Farm" and "I saw something nasty in the woodshed" -- but in her new cosmopolitan incarnation we hear only one rehearsed speech while Gibbons coyly conceals her long-awaited revelations to Flora in sotto voce asides. The "real" Aunt Ada seems as mythical as the monster in the woodshed.[iv] Possibly, such skepticism about essential selfhood is especially particularly congenial to a female author decidedly aware of women's changing position in the interwar period. Not for nothing does Wendy Parkins[v] focus on *Cold Comfort Farm* in her study of enhanced female mobility during this time. Flora's creative power thus largely derives from her ability to penetrate and manipulate roles, including her own. At the outset of the novel, considering her options, she rejects the cliché personae on offer, mischievously electing the "career of a parasite." (17), and, in a larger sense, she implicitly interrogates the prerogatives of the traditional comic dramatist by limiting her salutary power over the Farm. More importantly, though, Flora foregoes mockery or correction because the role of moral arbiter is inimical to her.

Parkins states, with partial justice, that Gibbons is foregrounding a "discourse in which female agency simultaneously deploys and conceals middle-class authority" (88). But Flora's aesthetic distance, her abstention from moralizing, do undercut the conservative tendencies of comedy. Ultimately, she derails a long-planned marriage, loosens kinship ties, and breaks up the Starkadder nuclear family. And even as the bourgeois, domestic feminine triumphs, a more modern female power emerges. Instead of

condemning or mocking the servant Meriam's illicit sexuality, Flora imparts the latest contraceptive information to counteract the erotic lure of the infamous sukebind bloom.

Fleur Talbot equals Flora's unlaughing and personally disinterested relations with others. *Loitering* opens with non-confrontations in which Fleur follows her curiosity in pursuit of any insight that will nourish her art. When a policeman accosts her as she composes poetry in a cemetery, we may expect a collision between the misunderstood poetic temperament and sneering authority, to the satirical detriment of either, or both, in a morbid setting inevitably representing artistic despondency. Contrary to expectation, although Fleur is nearly unpublished, needs a job, and owes rent, her "morale is high." (9) As she chats with the nice policeman, the narrator disconcertingly shelves the sinister portents, and the scene of potential tribulation deflates amusingly into the offer of a sandwich.

Fleur's friend Dottie complains that Fleur's novel *Warrender Chase* provides the reader with no ethical cues, and, correspondingly, Fleur, like Flora, tends to defer judgment on people who fascinate her. Fleur remarks of her greedy landlord,

> And although I wanted to avoid him on my return to my lodging I knew very well I had something to gain from a confrontation, should it happen. In fact, I was aware of a *daemon* inside me that rejoiced in seeing people as they were, and not only that, but more than ever as they were, and more, and more. (10-11)

Fleur's "daemon" rejoices without mockery because for an artist postwar London is not a realm of scarcity, but a plenum of experience. Spark herself maintained in a 1999 interview that "My one aim, especially with *Loitering with Intent*, was to give pleasure . .

. and give experience. All artists should *give* experience and should show people how to *get* experience – to open windows and doors." (3) Fleur and Flora both know that wit may close windows by alienating or inhibiting others. Though Mr. Mybug's lewd misogyny repels Flora, she nevertheless hears out his theory of Branwell Bronte as unrecognized author of the Bronte novels, selflessly serving his embittered, alcoholic sisters. [vi] The reader's amusement is intensified by Flora's urbane demeanor. Like Fleur, Flora is willing to forego open laughter **at** people for the sake of observing them fully and collecting artistic material. Indeed, one of the first things we learn about her is that she intends to write a "novel as good as *Persuasion*" when she is "fifty-three or so" (20).[vii]

This, I believe, is the crux: Fleur and Flora withhold laughter when it would defeat their aims: as Miss de Vine says of Peter Wimsey (in *Gaudy Night*) they can subdue themselves to their own ends,[viii] and do so, as Harriet Vane observes of Wimsey, by compartmentalizing their lives.[ix] In temporary acts of self-discipline, motivated by their own pleasure, not by any sense of feminine duty, they subordinate their public image, private desires, and, yes, even their sense of humor, to their creative goals. They rarely laugh, not out of subservience, but to retain control over their own lives and work and keep the doors to experience open.

The reader, however, imagines their silent hilarity as a virtual laugh-track turned just too low to be audible, and laughs all the more. The reader who examines her own laughter realizes that both Spark and Gibbons ring ingenious changes on comic techniques that later critics will identify as characteristically feminist. *Cold Comfort*'s romantic comedy evokes, in attenuated form, the "world upside down" inversions, permanently transforming the social order, that Judy Little has analyzed in much feminist

comedy.[x] Wickedly, Gibbons inverts that inversion. If the four Starkadders' histrionic turmoil is the norm, then Flora's invocation of harmonious order is paradoxically liberating. Elfine's wedding, exemplifies the comforts of conformity: "There they were. Enjoying themselves. Having a nice time. And having it in an ordinary human manner. Not having it because they were raping someone, or beating somebody, or having religious mania, or being doomed to silence by a gloomy, earthly pride, or loving the soil with the fierce desire of a lecher, or anything of that sort." (217)

However, *Cold Comfort* invents other narrative strategies that simultaneously endorse order and excess, consistency and polyvocality. On the one hand, the narrative voice surpasses Flora's own tidiness. Word and reality correspond amazingly well in Flora's Sussex: the village "Howling" and the pub called "The Condemned Man" gratify Flora's sense of fitness: "Things seemed to go wrong in the country more easily . . . somehow, than they did in Town, and such a tendency must naturally reflect itself in nomenclature." (22)[xi] On the other hand, the novel specializes in wonderfully hyperbolic orgies of rhetoric, like this meld of D. H. Lawrence, Sigmund Freud and Mary Webb:

> From the stubborn interwoven strata of his [Adam's] subconscious, thought seeped upon into his dim conscious; not as an integral part of that consciousness,but more as an impalpable emanation, a crepuscular addition, from the unsleeping life in the restless trees and fields surrounding him. The country for miles, under the blanket of the dark which brought no peace,was in its annual tortured ferment of spring growth; worm jarred with worm and seed with seed. Frond leapt on root and hare on hare. Beetle and finch-fly were not spared. The trout-sperm

in the muddy hollow under Nettle Flitch Weir were agitated and well they might be. (45)

The pseudo-pompous "And well they might be" neatly punctures and punctuates the narrator's pretensions, illustrating Jacqueline Ann Ariail's point that Gibbons' verbal extravagance not only parodies but effectively exploits the tradition of the rural novel.[xii] I would stress that the overall effect is **not** self-canceling. Such passages both mock and celebrate the author's ventriloquistic dexterity and mobility. Gibbons, like Flora, creates a dynamic in which comic tidiness only enhances the extravagant and perpetually shifting incongruity produces hilarious pleasure.[xiii]

Spark and Gibbons stimulate a highly self-conscious readerly laughter by variously indulging and thwarting any drive towards the mythic, exposing its gender investments. For Fleur "[t]he true novelist . . is a myth-maker" (139), but she and her author challenge myths about creativity; as Little notes, Spark often mocks imagery that represents "the mythic, spiritual, and cultural norm" that characters confront. (11) When Dottie insists that Sir Quentin's car crash, echoing that of Fleur's protagonist, somehow validates her novel, Fleur denies any prophetic power. (204-5) Fleur marvels at the Wildean symbiosis between her novel and Sir Quentin's "sadopuritanical" schemes, but will not climb onto the proffered pedestal.

Likewise, Spark refuses to glamorize or mythologize Fleur, despite the undeniable eruptions of the "suddenness of the sacred in the midst of the ordinary" (67) that Joan Leonard documents. Fleur retrospectively refuses to co-opt grandiose time-honored myths of the male artistic or culture hero.[xiv] Nonetheless, Spark subtly celebrates Fleur's art by withholding all background information that might enable us to explain it away,

and omitting any male muses, mentors, champions or romantic leads. Yet Fleur's life also comically rejects demeaning myths of feminine creativity presupposing, for instance, that public success must entail private loss or sacrifice. From first to last, Fleur is the happiest of the novel's characters and her work does not preclude other satisfactions. For Little, Spark's works exemplify the aforementioned feminist strategy of a "comic world stranded in the upside-down anti-order of liminality" (20). In fact, *Loitering* foists the "distorted quests" (Little 21) of unresolved liminality on minor characters whose upheavals and radical re-evaluations only enrich Fleur's art and stress how very "right-side-up" she remains during a liminal phase that never seriously threatens her autonomy, or challenges her refusal either to affirm or reject the status quo.[xv]

In somewhat different manner Gibbons celebrates yet demythologizes Flora's work by characterizing Cold Comfort Farm as a world of ultimately inconsequential and often unmotivated play where, however often people fall down wells, they never end up in hospital, and cows named Graceless lose their legs for no apparent reason. In fact, the narrator repeatedly sports with the mythic. Witness, for instance, the hyper-aesthetic Keatsian moment when the procession of Adam Lambsbreath and his cows are " . . . silhouetted against the blue sky and held as if in a frame by the open door . . . The liddle mop was slung around his neck. His head was lifted to the sinking sun, whose strong rays turned him to gold. He was singing the bawdy song he had learned for the wedding of George IV." (230) Gibbons' inclusive style uses that bawdy song and Adam's fetishized dishmop to mock mythic moments without dispelling their magical aura.

What do Gibbons and Spark gain by thus displacing laughter from heroines to readers, so that the former disarm opposition, while latter enjoys the luxury of criticism?

Perhaps they are cheating, since we real women generally do not have the benefit of a narrator who reveals the amusement that our politic aims conceal. After all, women's laughter has long been, and is, perilous. Margaret Stetz has documented the risks attending female comedy in the 1890s[xvi], and a century later Regina Barreca instantiates contemporary women's continuing reluctance to laugh publicly.[xvii] Nevertheless, in her essay "The Desegregation of Art," Spark states that "the art and literature of sentiment and emotion . . . has to go . . . In its place I advocate the arts of satire and ridicule." (35) However, in *Curriculum Vitae*, Spark notes that she "picked up the craft of being polite while people were present and laughing later if there was anything to laugh about, or criticizing later if there was anything to deplore." (23) This raises, of course, that classic gender and genre issue: Can or should female comic vision avoid a cruelty often associated with "masculine" humor? Our novels say "yes" and "no." Inarguably, Gibbons and Spark ridicule myriad affectations and self-delusions. But both authors force the reader to discern these satiric targets. When Fleur is discussing her novel, her friend Solly says, "'Fuck the general reader . . . because in fact the general reader doesn't exist.'" The Lady Edwina, prone to mindlessly parroting others, screams, "'That's what I say . . . Just fuck the general reader.'" (76) If our heroines do not guide us with their own laughter or deploy obvious wit, then they do not mediate our laughter or its underlying judgments. We are **not** Lady Edwinas or "general readers," but free agents.

However, both novels register a more optimism beyond satire. Flora's Cold Comfort Farm and Fleur's London are charmed domains where female will and intelligence always triumph, joy is creative, not destructive, and, as Fleur declares, " . . . everything happens to an artist; time is always redeemed, nothing is lost, and wonders

never cease." (116) It seems that an enlarging and inclusive"wonder and joy" matter more to Fleur and Flora than wit. *Cold Comfort Farm* concludes with a beguiling, romantic pastoralism, while *Loitering with Intent* closes with a flourish of pure insouciance, as a successful Fleur kicks a football with perfect aim into a grinning child's hands. This moment of "chance grace" represents, for me, both writers' belief in a spirit of rejoicing readiness that subsumes wit because ridicule, however powerful, limits the ridiculer as well as the ridiculee.

ENDNOTES

[1] Significantly, Muriel Spark closes her autobiography, *Curriculum Vitae*, with these words. As various scholars note, *Loitering* is perhaps the most autobiographical of her fictions.

[2] " What life and society require of each of us is a constantly alert attention that discerns the outlines of the present situation, together with a certain elasticity of mind and body to enable us to adapt ourselves in consequence. . . . Laughter must be something of this kind, a sort of SOCIAL GESTURE. By the fear which it inspires, it restrains eccentricity, . . . This rigidity is the comic, and laughter is its corrective."

[3] Or is it the potting shed? or bicycle shed? Here we have a sliding signifier, if ever there was one!

[4] Parkins shows "that the female subject represents the disruptions and transitions between the city and the country – and between the different kinds of social relations and experience associated with each location – in ways that represent the nonsynchronicities of modernity and the instabilities of modern subjectivity." (77) She asserts that "The myth of modernization's limitless development, which is metonymically linked with an ontology of limitless self-development, is . . . played with in Gibbons' [novel], where women are positioned at the center of modernity." (81) In *Cold Comfort Farm*, the relationship between country and city is "one of mutual education and edification" (86), while its humor relies on sharp distinctions between the two and an awareness that representations of country in regional novels disregard changes "already historical by the 1930s." (87)

Because of this flexibility, *Cold Comfort Farm* is a notable exception to Lisa Colletta's assertion that "Like Waugh's *Vile Bodies*, the comedic works of many British novelists between the wars are haunted by a sense of anxiety and powerlessness, marked by

feelings of loss and uncertainty and shot through with the trauma of violence and the threat of further brutality." (1)

[5] Flora later observes that

> . . . it was not the habit of men of genius to refresh themselves from their labours by writing to old aunts; this task, indeed, usually fell to the sisters and wives of men of genius, and it struck Flora as far more likely that Charlotte, Anne, or Emily had all decided one morning that it really *was* Branwell's turn to write to Aunt Prunty, and had sat on his head in turn while he wrote the three letters, which were afterwards posted at prudently spaced intervals. (104)

6. Reggie Oliver tells us that "*Persuasion* evidently meant most to Stella of all Austen's books." (89)

[7] "That . . . is a man able to subdue himself to his own ends." (340)

[8] Little studies "imagery of revolt and inversion" that "is ordinarily not resolved" in fiction by Woolf, Spark and some other female writers. This comedy "implies, or perhaps even advocates, a permanently inverted world, a radical reordering of social structures, a real rather than temporary and merely playful redefinition of sex identity, a relentless mocking of truths otherwise taken to be self-evident or even sacred . . ." (2) Her striking thesis is that classic satirists attacks something established by "secondary socialization" in the name of a norm drawn from "primary socialization" (15) However, Woolf and Spark undercut those fundamental norms themselves.

[9] Flora likewise anticipates three male Starkadder names by virtue of her acquaintance with the agricultural novels of Mary Webb and company in which " . . . highly sexed young men living on farms are always called Seth or Reuben . . . Her [Judith's] husband is almost certain to be called Amos . . ." (23)

[10] " . . . beneath Gibbons' humour lie attitudes and assumptions which place her without the tradition that she satirizes." (63) Ariail later points out, "Some of Hardy's nature descriptions are particularly vulnerable to satire, but while Gibbons exaggerates and mocks her predecessors, she also supports the premise that motivated them." (67) " . . . underneath lies a respect for the country's virtues – the same respect that inspired Eliot and Hardy and Lawrence." (70)

[11] Ariail observes that "Much of Gibbons' humor works not only by parody, but also by encompassing a wide range of attitudes at once, and spilling them all, contradictory or not, before the reader." (68)

[12] Both heroines, changing others, are themselves relatively unchanged. In such *kunstlerromane* as *The Counterfeiters* or *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the inner development of the male artist is central: the novels focus on mentoring and

independence, experimentation with artistic technique, separation from family and finding an authentic, individual voice, and grappling with social constraints and public opinion. But Flora and Fleur, at the outset of their respective novels, know themselves and society as well as they need to. There is no agon. Both are on their own, have a very modest competency, and have found the strategies that will propitiate public opinion while preserving independence. Neither author tracks their growth, their finding of mission, their mistakes and experiments. Both are embarked on their first large-scale creative project and neither has doubts or self-doubts.

Perhaps their ease is partly explained by their literacy and sophistication. Flora knows her literary forebears and plays with the clichés of the artistic career, as when she playfully defends her career as a parasite:

> "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. For the next thirty years or so I shall be collecting material for it. If anyone asks me what I work at, I shall say, 'Collecting material.' No one can object to that. Besides, I shall be." (20)

She is both mocking would-be artists and their rationalizations, and seriously defending her ambitions. Likewise, Fleur has enough experience of artists to avoid the vanities, competitiveness and pretentions of such as Leslie, her married lover, and to take the advice of the journalist Solly Mendelsohn. Neither is naïve or self-deluding. For both, their experiences at the Autobiographical Association and Cold Comfort Farm are a turning-point, but one that marks their first big success.

Both heroines know their limits and the limits of their powers. Flora does not try to out-argue Mr. Mybug's sexual biases, merely avoid and occasionally disconcert him. Fleur does not try to assert her novelistic superiority over Leslie, merely lets her work speak for itself. She does not see herself in competition with other writers, and is willing to help them even when they are hostile to her own writing.

[13] I have in mind the artist-heroes of Hesse, Mann, Joyce, Gide, etc.

[14] Here I take exception with some scholars' view that *Loitering* is a minor work. For instance, Little mainly treats it as "a kind of epilogue to Spark's opus so far," which is less subtle and complex than earlier work. (176-77) I would agree with Mickey Pearlman that this novel "is a central novel in the study of Spark's work." (156) But all these scholars are ignoring the most revolutionary aspect of this novel.

[15] Various proleptic moments only underline the reader's sense that Fleur wil remain secure and successful, unshaken in her progress.

[16] Stetz asserts that the "New Woman of the 1890s" avoided "no-holds-barred satire" not because of "unconscious feminine discomfort with aggression, but" as "a conscious rejection of such masculine posturing, both on moral and on practical grounds." (2) She adds later, "Instead, since comedy had first presented itself in a problematic form to them, used in targeting and humiliating women, they continued to see laughter in all its guises, from scathing mockery to mere wry smiles, as a problem requiring careful

scrutiny." (12) She points out the misogynist humor of Charles Dickens and George Gissing.

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