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Catherine Keyser. *Playing Smart: New York Women Writers and Modern Magazine Culture.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011. 242 pp. $23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8135-5178-4.

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New York Women Writers and Magazine Culture

In *Playing Smart,* a study of popular women writers in the years between the world wars, Catherine Keyser makes an important contribution to feminist media studies. Her literary analysis reveals subtle but substantial cultural critiques in the light prose and fiction of five writers: Edna St. Vincent Millay, Dorothy Parker, Jessie Fauset, Dawn Powell, and Mary McCarthy. Keyser's stated objective was to "establish the power of literary humor as women writers used it to reflect on specific problems of modernity: the influence of the new mass media and magazine culture, the instability of gender roles and the use of normative stereotypes to ballast them, and the public embodiment of celebrity women" (pp. 6-7). She achieved this goal brilliantly in a book that is richly researched and enjoyable to read.

The five middlebrow magazine humorists (as Keyser describes her subjects) were dismissed as frivolous–one contemporary described Millay's work as "merely cute" (p. 38)—but read by many. The women's writing was popular and marketable, appearing in mass-circulation magazines such as *Vanity Fair*, the *New Yorker,* and *Harper's Bazaar*. In work that was far edgier than it has received credit for being, these women delved into issues of modern culture, including paradoxical gender prescriptions, mass marketing, and urban individualism. Directly and indirectly, they subverted dominant gender ideology and challenged modernist sensibilities under the cover of convention.

Chapter 1 explores the light prose written by Millay and published in *Vanity Fair* from 1921-23 under the pseudonym Nancy Boyd. Using a seductive and brash persona, Millay examined the existence of modern professional women. In private letters to friends, Millay poked fun at her character, which, Keyser argues, demonstrates her view of smart femininity as a costume even a serious poet could don for fun (and, not incidentally, for profit). Rather than reify the stereotype, Keyser argues, Millay's writing functioned as critique by highlighting the malleability of social roles in the modern era.

In chapter 2, Keyser moves on to Dorothy Parker, a presence at the famous Algonquin Round Table and a writer for the *New Yorker* and other magazines. Like Millay, Parker gained entrance to the marketplace by playing to feminine stereotypes. However, rather than perform to excess, Parker expressed world-weary exasperation at her inability to meet gendered standards. For example, in a 1928 story titled "The Garter," Parker described a party scene in which the narrator's garter snapped. She followed the hilarious thinking of the heroine as she imagined sitting in place for years rather than face the mortification of exposing herself. Parker's method of cultural critique was indirect: she appeared to uphold gendered standards while undermining them with her humorous testimony to the futility of trying to meet them.

In chapter 3, Keyser considers race in her notion of smartness, analyzing the novels of Jessie Fauset, the literary editor of *Crisis* magazine. Keyser acknowledges that African American women of the 1920s–30s could not afford to exhibit the "smart" humor available to white women. Indeed, as white writers of the period suggested that social mobility was possible if one assumed a posture of ironic detachment and spent his leisure time fashionably, black leaders counseled earnest, hard work as the

means to fight prejudice and gain economic freedom. Appropriately, Keyer's treatment of Fauset emphasizes significant issues related to black femininity addressed in Fauset's novels, such as the risks and rewards of "passing" in white culture, or the painful reality of gender bias within the black community.

In chapter 4, Keyser carries her analysis into the thirties and forties by examining the work of Dawn Powell, a novelist less well known but perhaps more fascinating than the book's other subjects. Powell was a Greenwich Village bohemian who complained bitterly about the corrosive impact of celebrity culture and especially women (including Dorothy Parker and Clare Boothe Luce) who enjoyed its rewards. Powell spun narratives that demonstrated the psychological costs of a media culture that valued personality over character and was critical of women who flaunted their femininity to achieve stardom.

In chapter 5, Keyser dives into the satirical novels of Mary McCarthy, a public intellectual who, like Powell, reinforced the division between the popular and the serious. She distanced herself from the likes of Millay and Parker, observing in her memoirs that she had been disappointed at Parker's "dumpy appearance" when they met (p. 143). This was an unusual comment from a writer who would later focus on the female body as a site of social and cultural anxiety. But then, no one was spared McCarthy's scrutiny. Her experience with the clubby environment of the leftist *Partisan Review* had led her to conclude cynicism was merely the intellectual's way of avoiding actual engagement. While Millay and Parker positioned gender as performance, it seemed McCarthy constructed all aspects of social identity as postures.

Keyser concludes that the writings of these five women "display double perspectives, ironic narration, theatrical tropes, and stereotyped characters to undercut the naturalness of the identities sold by the mass media, commodity culture, and normative gender ideals" (p. 10). Her nuanced analysis has given these women their due, demonstrating the techniques they used to challenge modern culture even as they profited from it.

The book's strength lies in its analysis, which serves to remind media scholars of the danger in dichotomizing content as light vs. serious (in the case of literary writing) or soft vs. hard (in the case of news). The interconnectedness of the author's evidence bolsters her arguments; however, this also makes some of the chapters difficult to read since many of the examples Keyser cites circle back on themselves. Media scholars who emphasize methodology might be frustrated by the book's lack of a clear project outline.

Despite these minor weaknesses, academics interested in feminist media studies will delight in Keyser's forceful analysis, which exposes the folly of contemporary and historical categorizations that tend to devalue women's writing. Keyser argues persuasively that if scholars looked deeper into women's humor, irony, and narratives, they might find power they did not initially recognize.

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