

'I hate Women. They get on my Nerves'* : Dorothy Parker's Poetry of Female Sympathy

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Abstract: In her poetry, Dorothy Parker uses parody as a literary device to detect and denounce gender inequalities and sexist prejudices in New York during the early twentieth century. Despite the pressures of popular magazine culture on women, and her amusing jabs at her own sex in presumed complicity with the prevailing patriarchal ideology, Parker laughs last because her parodic verses, intertwining humor and faultfinding, are not only intended to entertain her male readers, but also to build a virtual village of female sympathy within a hostile male New York. She encourages sisterly bonding and welcomes real women, who are misrepresented by compulsory feminine images of happy domesticity or deviant sexual availability. Her poems offer her secret female addressees weapons of survival to live beyond their submission to male authority and repressive stereotypes of femininity.

Keywords: Dorothy Parker; popular magazines; parody; sisterly bonding; poetry of the United States.

Summary: Introduction: Sisterhood and New York. Dorothy Parker: Female Empathy beyond Parody. Conclusion: The Poet's Coda.

Resumen: La poesía de Dorothy Parker emplea la parodia para detectar y denunciar prejuicios misóginos en Nueva York a principios del siglo XX. Pese a las presiones de las revistas femeninas sobre la mujer y las divertidas bromas contra su propio sexo en presunta complicidad con el patriarcado de esa época, Parker ríe la última porque sus versos paródicos, que engarzan comicidad con crítica social, no solo pretenden entretener a su lector masculino. De hecho, su poesía creó una comunidad virtual de solidaridad femenina dentro de esta urbe hostil dirigida a las mujeres de carne y hueso que no se sintieran identificadas con la iconografía, prescrita o proscrita, de felicidad doméstica o de alegre promiscuidad. Parker ofreció, a las secretas destinatarias de sus obras, armas de supervivencia para que se resistiesen a los clichés femeninos que negaban la diversidad de una población femenina americana aún sometida a la autoridad masculina.

Palabras clave: Dorothy Parker; revistas populares; parodia; solidaridad; poesía de Estados Unidos.

* These are both the first and last lines of Parker's acclaimed poem "Women: A Hate Song" (1916).

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Sumario: Introducción: Hermandad y Nueva York. Dorothy Parker: Solidaridad femenina más allá de la parodia. Conclusión: La coda poética.

INTRODUCTION: SISTERHOOD AND NEW YORK

Take heart, little sister, twilight is but the short bridge, and the moon stands at the end. If we can only get to her! Yet, if she sees us fainting, she will put out her yellow hands.—Emily Dickinson.

Throughout history, men have created communities, and eventually nations, through their exposure to public life in communal places for education, work, business, and leisure, where they socialize and interact with other men. In contrast, women have traditionally been confined to the private realms of domesticity and childrearing, with little choice for interpersonal relations beyond their families, and with neither control over their public images nor the opportunity for active participation in social activities. Although never married or with children, the poet Emily Dickinson is the perfect example of solitary female enclosure in the nineteenth century rendered into American letters. However, her life and works also illustrate the development of a subculture of sisterhood and emotional affiliation among women —relatives, neighbors, friends or schoolmates— with whom she shared poems, letters, flowers and fruits to express affection and kinship. Beyond any homoerotic exegesis, Dickinson’s horticultural labors and confessional writings build small, secret fellowships for close *confidantes* to help, entrust and console each other; societies which ordinary women also fostered during the nineteenth century to cope with male oppression. Elaine Showalter contends that the entire female sexual life-cycle (from puberty, menstruation, sexual initiation, pregnancy, childbirth to menopause) was a ritualized physical experience which had to be concealed from the public eye and, therefore, such life lessons created intense feelings of solidarity among women undergoing the same biological processes (2009: 12). In literary spheres, the masculine competitive ethos in men’s poetry strengthens revenge and dismisses communication, care, and satisfactory solutions for all the actors in a conflict, whereas women writers encourage “empathic communities” of collaboration and tolerant understanding of the other, not regarded as an obstacle, but as a positive value (Porter 2005: 11). Nevertheless, this intuitive female bonding of

intimacy and sisterhood against any confrontation and aggression initiated by men in life and art becomes more virtual, veiled or impracticable in later historical times.

During the early twentieth century, previously homogenous standards of silent, communal and domestic femininity, socially enshrined since the Victorian age, began to weaken, and early feminists voiced individual nonconformity, claiming gender equality, and what emerged was a new feminine archetype both in literature and in American streets. The so-called 'New Woman' consisted of middle-class women, feared and satirized by men, who vindicated their emotional, sexual, financial or professional emancipation from patriarchal institutions. Moreover, the fast-growing metropolis of this new century in the United States, defined by anonymity, hostility, and rivalry, exterminated local collectivities, including secret female societies, where more caring human relations had previously prevailed. New York, the urban jewel of this young, powerful nation, epitomized the hopes and desires of many Americans looking for wider horizons and better life opportunities, escaping poverty and stagnation in distant, rural communities across the vast country. Apart from this migratory movement and from still being the largest gateway of European immigrants to this prosperous nation, New York became the *Mecca* for intellectual and popular culture. Among its main assets contributing to national cohesion, this city boasted of a prominent magazine industry of great geographical expansionism, and born to be consumed, which incited consumerism, trendsetting and debates on women's private and public lives. In fact, the texts, advertisements, and images of some periodicals of New York were exclusively devoted to female readers, ravenously consuming indoctrinating knowledge about gender roles and expectations on women far beyond this metropolis. Moreover, these disposable publications were the perfect medium for female literature, still not categorized as serious enough by the artistic Establishment to be found in leather-bound books on library shelves. Ideologically, these acceptable writings had to propagate ideals of prescriptive femininity, but they could also be surreptitiously used by some female authors to undermine misogynist archetypes on womanhood, or to advocate for female bonding against a growing rivalry and competition among women. During the years of the First World War (1914–1918), and the legendary Roaring Twenties of jazz, fun, and frivolity, humor becomes the healing antidote to human failure and the horrors of bloodshed.

American Modernist writers, including female authors like Gertrude Stein (1874–1946) or Hilda Doolittle (1886–1961) returned to Europe as expatriates where they advocated for the avant-garde to freely and seriously produce their own highbrow literature, and to express their disenchantment with contemporary times. In contrast, an artist like Dorothy Parker (1893–1967) chose to remain at home to entertain and please the American masses with frivolity, light-heartedness and vernacular themes and characters in her poems and short-stories.

Stemming from her individual experience, taste for Broadway musicals and acute journalistic observation of groups in the ‘Big Apple,’ the literary production of Dorothy Parker portrays and at the same time mocks the contemporary models of femininity that circulated in her native New York’s fashionable periodicals, such as *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair* or *Lady’s Home Journal*, in which she used to publish her own works, much like Gertrude Stein or Amy Lowell had done. The city’s journals even turned Parker into a glamorous socialite and a casual celebrity of wisecracking, light verse, and trivial enjoyment, which have traditionally overshadowed her natural genius for social criticism and human caress from any academic appreciation. Rhonda S. Pettit explains that Parker’s poems about gender issues that connect with situations of a particular historical time (late teens, 1920s and 1930s) have led scholars to label her as “a period writer” and exclude her from the traditional canon of literature (2010: 49). A founding member of the Algonquin Round Table,¹ she was often accused of flirting with men, preferring male friends and company, as well as scaring other women to social death thanks to her sharp pen.² Divorced, childless and devoted to her professional career as a journalist, theater reviewer and writer, she was also the poet of broken dreams and promises. She was a jilted woman with a painful biography of unrequited love, depression, alcoholism and

¹ The Algonquin Round Table began in 1919. It was formed by intellectuals and journalists, including its ‘Guinevere,’ Dorothy Parker, and prominent men, such as Franklin Pierce Adams, Harpo Marx and Alexander H. Woollcott, who enjoyed meeting and lunching together at the Algonquin Hotel in Manhattan. They were the intellectual center of New York, or the new phenomenon of celebrity culture in the United States. It was also labeled as middlebrow because the members of this club were too cultivated to be part of popular culture and too light-hearted to enter the highbrow world of scholarship.

² Faye Hammill provides the example of the Californian writer and actress Anita Loos, who could not be a friend with her acquaintance, Dorothy Parker, because she was afraid of the brilliant mind and sharp tongue of this celebrity from New York (2007: 28).

suicide attempts, unreported to her legions of New Yorker fans. She reluctantly agrees to incarnate the happy-go-lucky girl that she had to exhibit in public, because this cliché image was what her loyal readers expected from her epigrammatic jokes and observations of daily life as a celebrity heroine made known by contemporary tabloids. In fact, she was forced to climb to a trapeze where she oscillated between the market pressures to strengthen the expectations of female conformity to patriarchal credos and her desire to indict oppressive gender roles, which jeopardized the assertion of her own artistry and identity.³ Openly questioning or denouncing social roles mandatorily assigned to American women would have been dangerously subversive for any author. Consequently, Parker had to turn to laughing at them and, presumably, endorsing the male authorial perspective of ridiculing her female compatriots and competing with other male writers for the greatest hilarity in her works. Nina Miller argues that “the discursive domination by a sweet-smelling, soft-eyed gamine with an amusingly sharp tongue” was a way for the patriarchal culture of her times to embrace the new modern world through “a relatively painless enactment of female supremacy” (2005: 116).

This article analyzes Dorothy Parker's lyrical assaults against unreal, unsympathetic archetypes of femininity, like angelic housewives or happy-go-lucky single girls depicted in women's magazines published in New York during the early twentieth century, although Parker publicly pretended to quench the thirst for fun of her male readers, who sought hilarious sexist prejudices in her verses. This essay also unveils the thin, subtle web of sisterly bonding and solidarity woven between Parker and her female compatriots, as the true addressees of her poems. This line of interpretation casts doubts upon the preference of scholars and readers alike to observe that women are merely the target of Parker's mockery, anger and hatred by confining themselves to superficial readings of her highly demanding and secretly sympathetic poetry. The main objective of this study is to demonstrate how the works of this female author challenge patriarchy and its major ally, the editorial industry, by using parody and self-parody as weapons to survive beyond misogynist feminine clichés, and to *save* real women, like Parker, from the social

³ It should not be overlooked that Dorothy Parker lived from her pen. Therefore, she had to rely on conceit and subtle criticism when throwing stones to the roofs of patriarchal institutions such as the powerful editorial industry from New York.

pressures of their times. A selection of poems, such as “The Flapper,” “Women: A Hate Song,” “Hymn of Hate: Wives,” “Folk Song,” “Symptom Recital,” “Triolets,” and “General Review of the Sex Situation,” are discussed with various analytical aims; first, to reveal Parker’s diagnosis of gender inequality beneath her humor; second, to show her sisterly caress on the American female population; and third, to prove the performative nature of gender in the early twentieth century, notably in “To Myrtilla, on Easter Day.”

DOROTHY PARKER: FEMALE EMPATHY BEYOND PARODY

Parody is an intricate literary device, and although associated with Postmodernism, it boasts a consolidated tradition in American letters. Linda Hutcheon defines it as a form of imitation characterized by the ironic subversion or reversal of existing conventions, “not always at the expense of the parodied text,” so to say, a reproduction with critical distance which “marks difference rather than similarity” (2000: 6). Its willingness to play with society’s contradictions explains its double code: “it both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies” (1989: 101). Dorothy Parker was a middlebrow artist, halfway between the levity of popular culture, and democratic enough for the masses seeking amusement in poetry and the esoteric heights of experimental Modernism; thus, serious enough to problematize concerns of the current world. Intertwining humor and faultfinding, her poetry uses parody as a strategy to diagnose social malaise and gender inequalities in the first decades of twentieth-century New York, beneath its glittering patina of modernity, jazz and fun. Margaret Rose stresses the ambivalence of parody towards its preformed linguistic and artistic targets, “entailing a mixture of criticism and sympathy” (1993: 51). Nil Korkut also holds that the attitude of these apparently humorous rewritings ranges from denigration, mockery and ridicule, to respectful admiration (2009: 21), the latter aspect being the focus of this article. Often viewed as aesthetically worthless parasites of original texts, or ideological discourses, Parker’s poems that offer comic sketches of ideal or deviant womanhood reach an outstanding parodic sophistication with two purposes; first, to condemn the patriarchal enforcement of generic categories of femininity to the American female population; and second, to pay tribute to the casualties of such gender oppression: flesh-and-blood women like herself. Parker’s verses point to New York’s

magazines —where she worked and where she was often fired— because of the role of such mass publications as educators across the country. In fact, these periodicals manufactured and disseminated mandatory stereotypes to socially homogenize the female population into patterns of middle-class conformity.⁴ These clichés ranged from the resurrected Victorian ‘Angel in the House,’⁵ placed in an altar of domesticity, to the stigmatized ‘fallen’ bitch/witch prototype, or the novel, droll and (harmless?) subgroup of the flapper⁶ inside the category of ‘The New Woman.’ Paradoxically, Parker mercilessly attacks the latter character with whom her urban readers associated her, for example in the poem “The Flapper,” because these women were publicly ridiculed or scorned by society in her time:

She's not what Grandma used to be,—
 You might say, *au contraire*.
 Her girlish ways may make a stir,
 Her manners cause a scene,
 But there is no more harm in her
 Than in a submarine. (275)⁷

The author uses the metaphor of U-boats from the recent World War I to compare with the terror and suspicion that chic flappers may inspire as weapons of mass (male) destruction. This composition is actually a virulent attack against her own sex, in complicity with the male-dominated printing business of New York and the prevailing patriarchal ideology of her time, which demonized unconventional women. But the

⁴ Even her friends at the Algonquin Round Table defined Dorothy Parker according to traditional clichés of antithetical womanhood: from the angelic girl to the Machiavellian adult woman. Alexander H. Woollcott recalled her as “so odd a blend of Little Nell and Lady Macbeth” (qtd. in Hammill 2007: 29).

⁵ Term derived from Coventry Patmore's poem “The Angel in the House” (1854). It refers to the widely-accepted Victorian ideal of femininity perpetuated until modern times. It designated compulsory roles of domesticity to women, linked to their expected virtues of self-denial, unworldliness and obedience to the authority of their husbands, fathers, sons or brothers.

⁶ Associated with the Roaring Twenties in America, this was a female prototype for young girls, defined as slangy, flighty, cheerful and rebellious, with boyish features and socially deviant habits: *garçon* hairstyle, short skirts, smoking, drinking alcohol, promiscuity, dancing jazz and having fun all night long.

⁷ From now on, all references to the edition of Dorothy Parker's poems will be to the page number.

tendency of periodicals to flatten the feminine body and mind into frivolous stereotypes vexed the author, who decided to flatten this imaginary paradigm of narcissistic ambition herself (Keyser 2010: 52). The poem's coda: "Her golden rule is plain enough— / Just get them young and treat them rough" (276) may be a ventriloquist voice that verbalizes misogynist discourses to warn Parker's male public against the threat of such a seductive heartbreaker and fortune hunter. Nevertheless, it may also mock the very same cliché the magazine culture found attractive to scrutinize: a girl of nightly leisure. Moreover, it may detect how unrealistic and biologically unnatural this image is, compared to the common situation of single women, like the flappers, living alone in New York's urban jungle: emotional vulnerability and economic dependence on men. In fact, Suzanne Bunkers claims that Parker forces her readers to look beyond the surface of her sarcastic humor that delineates social types of femaleness: her "serious" disenchantment with the family and social functions imposed on women (1978: 169). This is, unquestionably, the case in "Women: A Hate Song,"⁸ where its author surreptitiously urges sophisticated readers to dig into deeper layers of female sympathy beneath the popularly-accepted façade of artistic malice, envy and disdain, which she exhibits to sketch fixed, one-dimensional categories of womanhood. Kathleen Helal argues that the apparent sexism in such poems and their judgmental statements, such as "I hate women. They get on my Nerves," (209) could guarantee Parker's literary success because, by impersonating a male author, she finds the useful rhetorical strategy of satire (2004: 79).⁹ In fact, looking like a cute girl, but writing like a man, allows her to be read by hordes of Americans and place her subtle criticism against gender prejudices if, at least, some of her fans could read between the lines, and see under the mask of popular comedy. Angela Weaver also detects that women's magazines heavily relied on female imagery as effective avenues to construct meaning (2010: 26). Tinged with dark humor during World War I, "Women: A Hate Song" is, in fact, a photo-book of New York with the female caricatures that Parker

⁸ Published in 1916 in *Vanity Fair*, this poem was a success. Consequently, she was later commissioned to write other 'Hate Songs' as sequels, but Dorothy Parker was fired in 1920 because of a theater criticism where she compared the actress Billie Burke, the wife of the influential impresario Florenz Ziegfeld, with a burlesque performer.

⁹ Frank Crowninshield, *Vanity Fair*'s editor, so admired Parker's poem "Women: A Hate Song" that he decided to employ her after its composition (Helal 2004: 79).

abhorred or despised, notably idle bourgeois ladies, who were the object of patriarchal worship as angelic domestic creatures:

They are the worst.
Every moment is packed with Happiness.
They breathe deeply
And walk with large strides, eternally hurrying home
To see about dinner (...)
Oh, how I hate that kind of women. (207)

Their Trinitarian roles, as perfect homemakers, mothers, and wives, epitomize the generic iconography of femininity that dictated the ideal personality and behavior of the female population in America during the early twentieth century. In fact, there was a transitive relationship between such domestic virtues and the ontological definition of accepted womanhood, which implied an assault against the freedom and individuality of contemporary real women. Dorothy Parker's worst enemies are not only these misleading gender constructs emanating from the texts and visual advertisements of New York's magazines, which conveyed the ideological propaganda of female conformity, but also their fanatic consumers: "They are always confronting me with dresses,/ Saying, 'I made this myself.'/ They read Woman's pages and try out the recipes" (207). For Parker, they would be grouped together because they are not particular individuals with a specific identity of their own, but robotic commodities that gladly undertake the same domestic tasks to please their beloved husbands and spying neighbors, omnipresent and prescribing what the institution of the family should look like. However, the status of these women as a pre-existing community is the prerequisite for the effectiveness of Parker's parody of judgment and laughter. In the sequel poem "Hymn of Hate: Wives," she also mocks these women's ludicrous obsession to practice the lessons taught by their favorite magazines with thematic areas: "They love to browse in 'Thirty Pretty Ways to Cook Cauliflowers'/ Or 'Two Hundred Daring Stiches in Filet Crochet'" (330), because they enslave them within the sacred realms of their kitchens and sewing-rooms. This exaggerated, compulsive—though publicly lady-like—pattern of conduct unfolds the ingredient of humor

that is vital for the critical purpose of her parody.¹⁰ In both compositions, the author ridicules how these housekeepers blindly assimilate the brainwash of domesticity indoctrinated by the mass-media industry. She also proves how these women enthusiastically mimic exemplary role-models of proper and competent femininity, apparently offering them satisfactory feelings of public approval and integration. Angela Weaver argues that the self-realization of such housewives was not achieved through social, political and sexual changes, but through the consumerism promoted by these magazines that ensured the well-being of American communities, but not of the female self (2010: 32). Apart from ridiculing the women, Parker's sharp observation notices how much fun *outdoors* these women miss, because they only consecrate their lives to routine, material objects and absurd domestic activities *indoors*:

They are always making second-hand puddings,
Or seeing whether the blue vase doesn't look better on the piano
Than it did on the bookcase.
Oh, well,—
It keeps them out of the open air. (330)

In fact, Marion Meade defends that Dorothy Parker returns to these female types again and again in her works because “she feared becoming one of them” (1989: 32). Eventually she did not, but her poems recur to the same threatening images with comical or revengeful purposes. Returning to “Women: A Hate Song,” Parker reveals her acute aversion to these images of successful ladies, who often act like dehumanized social animals. They tend to adopt two acting roles performed during their favorite pastime of tormenting simpleton friends like herself. The first one is the involuntary flirt, or the martyr of her own sex-appeal, because she infatuates her friends' husbands against her own will. If her (un)faithfulness cannot be verified in these lines, her pretended bewilderment or candor maximize the parody and minimize the author's sympathy for them:

There are the ones who simply cannot Fathom
Why all the men are mad about them.

¹⁰ These magazines with impact on women's behavior detect the preoccupation of the US people with self-improvement and its translation into a large body of self-help books as a genuine American literary genre.

They say they've tried and tried.
They tell you about someone's husband;
What he said
And how he looked when he said it.
And then they sigh and ask,
'My dear, what is there about me?'
Don't you hate them? (208)

This last verse line is clear evidence that her target readers are not male New Yorkers who want to roar into laughter, but other women. These would not see themselves reflected in this social type that does not truly feel or suffer in life, because she simply plays the starlet in her own public artifice. Angela Weaver also finds that under polished images of advertisers in women's magazines lay unhappiness, resentment and struggle, because of the restrictive social categories on women imposed by popular culture (2010: 40). Secretly, Parker's addressees would rather identify with women like the poet, who endlessly listen the same vain soliloquy of such ladies from their social entourage, whose behavior imitates the magazines, but not the other way around. The second acting role of this victorious woman from the poem is the schoolmistress. Her benevolence and self-confidence drive her to generously instruct and chastise her listeners, because they are less enlightened than she is. Like Dorothy Parker, those unenlightened victims are still enrolled in a life-learning process, requiring the guidance and competence from an expert like that schoolmistress:

Then there are the Well-Informed ones.
They are pests.
They know everything on earth
And will tell you about it gladly
They feel it their mission to correct wrong impressions (...)
Oh, how they bore me. (208)

Adrienne Rich claims that countless women have been psychologically trapped in prescriptive ideas of the normal, "trying to fit their mind, spirit and sexuality" into prescribed scripts because they cannot look beyond the parameters of the acceptable (1990: 221). Decades earlier, Parker's poetry denounces these same scenarios or texts of normalcy. She suggests that any form of sisterhood based on women publicly sharing the enforced stereotypes of docility and family bliss

from New York magazines is feigned or psychologically unsettling. Nina Miller also contends that the discursive space of Parker's works on the distinction between mass-femininity and individual real women of these publications does not offer any possible alliance between them (2005: 45). In contrast, Parker's lyrical corpus nurtures bonds of female sympathy founded upon the celebration of otherness, likeness in diversity, and the honest avowal of common occurrences of suffering, anxiety and defeat. These compositions would be destined to encourage those, like herself, who feel marginalized, excluded or misrepresented by American society, and its continued androcentric institutions during the 1910s and 1920s, because such women cannot recognize themselves in the official roles of domesticity and generic iconography of compulsory femininity. Her poems would make these real women aware that such prescribed archetypes of womanhood are not biologically natural, but culturally constructed by the agreement between patriarchy and the male-led New York's magazines. Parker's daily life situations and social intercourse with matter-of-fact descriptions, ear for dialogue, and vivid colloquialisms (even quotable), enhance the qualities of sincerity and verisimilitude intended by her poems. Moreover, the indisputable overdose of autobiography in her verses incites her compatriots to identify themselves with her own experiences towards congenial purposes of alleviating pain, healing scars, or contriving strategies of endurance to survive in the city. This alternative, virtual village for the forgotten, vanquished or fallen women of New York is, thus, apt to those who can read between the lines and see beyond the author's presumed cruel judgment of gender stereotypes fabricated by the patriarchal printing industry in the early twentieth century. The addressees of her poems should admit the harmful influence of magazine culture and its contribution to the status-quo of their sex in contemporary America, because it would subsume its female population to the needs of aggressive male communities. Not only that, but these periodicals would also be a source of suffering and frustration when real women felt that they could not meet the expectations of ideal femininity spread by these far-reaching publications. Parker's lyrical strategy of female sympathy could be, in fact, considered as the embryo of Adrienne Rich's so-called theory of 'lesbian continuum' beyond any homoerotic desire or sexual practices. This American scholar contends that out of hatred for men, "women turn to women" as allies, mentors or comforters in their struggle for survival, because in sisterhood and female companionship, women,

including writers, find an empowering “refuge from male abuses” (1990: 222–223).

Returning again to “Women: A Hate Song,” there is another social type that exasperates Parker, the “Wronged”: “They begin by saying they must suffer in silence./ No one will ever know—/ And then they go into details” (208). The verbosity of these acquaintances to provide the minute account of their miseries —probably provoked by their aloof husbands or suitors— restrains her, as well as her target female audience, to feel any compassion for such pretending martyrs. The author could even insinuate that any authentic confession of domestic ordeals or tragic love stories must be colored with shame and reserve. In addition, these should be disclosed within an intimate circle of sisters or close female friends, because the unassimilated nature of gender traumas only results in unintelligible linguistic revelations of vulnerability and pain, not in the profuse articulateness of these women’s artificial monologues. If sisterly bonding is here impracticable, the diagnosis sustained by the rest of the poem is that the consumers of magazines in America are eventually consumed by etiquette, dishonesty, hypocrisy or greed. In the same composition, Parker again abuses the joyous, unmarried flapper, because she is another illusionary image who advocates for an alternative way of (feigned?) happiness and (empty?) self-fulfillment:

They tell me to be, like them, always looking on the Bright side.
They ask me what they would do without their sense of humor?
I sometimes yearn to kill them.
Any jury would acquit me. (208–209)

These verse lines would also be Parker’s cautionary message for her female addressees. The flapper, as a model of contemporary femininity, should not be imitated only because she is new and antagonistic to the (not yet obsolete) paradigm of the ‘Angel in the House.’ In fact, Parker believes that this female archetype is as deceptive and is as much an unhealthy image for real fellow citizens, as domestic women. In any case, this subgroup of the ‘New Woman’ would be a mask for young girls, which hides the same true dramas in their lives: loneliness, helplessness and wretchedness in New York’s jungle. After dissecting the flapper, the poem ends how it began: “I hate women./ They get on my Nerves” (209). This repeated, oversimplified generalization, is a drollery which intentionally mitigates the intensity of the harsh criticism in her

parody. Angela Weaver detects that mass-circulation women's and mixed-gender periodicals strove to engage large readerships by presenting contradictory messages and images of femininity, which is why they included images of domestic housewives, without discarding feminists, intellectuals or flappers in their pages (2010: 27). This profitable commercial strategy leads Dorothy Parker to criticize married and single women alike, all of them objects of the rapacity of an industry designed to build prescribed and proscribed stereotypes of femininity. As a whole, the multifarious catalogue of wives and girls in "Women: A Hate Song," ridiculed for the sake of men's enjoyment, reflects the bitterness and anger of Parker, who could not directly attack the male hands behind popular culture as the source of her uneasiness. In turn, she constructively sends subliminal messages of sympathy to female victims like her: a disaggregated virtual village of women who experience similar situations in their lives. Furthermore, for a poet like her who embodies lightheartedness and frivolity for the masses, somber and tragic episodes are more suitable to define the reality of the American female population of her times. She vindicates any woman's right to feel sad or desperate, or to enjoy instants of imperfection, unlike the delusive image of eternal satisfaction shown off by unreal housewives and happy-go-lucky bachelorettes decorating New York magazines. In "General Review of the Sex Situation," the author universalizes her own biography with a sociological dimension, combined with down-to-earth observations and popular wisdom, in order to explore her disappointment, hopelessness and bitterness due to women's emotional investment in romantic relationships with selfish, heartless men. These gentlemen do not look for commitment, but only for casual amusement with easy female preys:

Woman wants monogamy;
Man delights in novelty.
Love is woman's moon and sun;
Man has other forms of fun.
Woman lives but in her lord;
Count to ten, and man is bored.
With this the gist and sum of it,
What earthly good can come of it? (82)

Nancy Walker believes that, in this poem, Parker depicts women as losers in the unequal battle of the sexes because of social structures,

rather than biological traits (1988: 31). Some imprecations of vulnerability are also sent to the male torment or of the female heart, as in "Triolets": "I send you my heart,/ Marking it 'Fragile—don't break it.'" (286). Other darts, such as in "Ballade of a Complete Flop," are thrown against the tyrant of her financial security: "Generous men pass me by—/ All that they give me is the air" (346). The blatant hopelessness and pessimism from these lyrical statements hinder any critical interpretation of the author's feminism towards female empowerment or emancipation.¹¹ Rather, they reflect her innocuous criticism of women's emotional fragility and their economic dependence on men, only to build communities of sisterly empathy, which could ensure the identification of her compatriots with her own plight, not to advocate for feminist resistance, nor to accept their acclimatization to a continuing male-dominated world. Despite Parker's rejection of domestic bliss and her own status as an independent professional who was employed by New York magazines, her poems do not seem to encourage women to detoxify themselves from their common addiction: men—not even during the interwar era in the United States, a historical period of sociopolitical changes that improved women's rights.¹² Survival is, thus, the ultimate message for Parker's addressees, neither the radical change of gender equality nor the utopia of female communities away from any patriarchal bondage, nor the conformity with fixed categories of traditional femininity. For that purpose, humor becomes her main antidote for endurance and coping with tragedy or trauma in her own life and writings. Not only therapeutically healing for the author, self-parody also turns into Parker's main lesson to teach her virtual female village, embarking all its secret members like her, on the same lifelong career of heterosexual love, as she states in "Chant for Dark Hours": "all your life you wait around for some damn man!" (41). Furthermore, women's unavoidable amatory vocation is regarded in "Symptom Recital" as a disease causing periodical physical and emotional wounds to them, but

¹¹ In a later interview, it is open to discussion whether Dorothy Parker confessed her feminist activism, or whether she simply recurred to her famous humor: "I'm a feminist, and God knows I'm loyal to my sex, and you must remember that from my very early days, when this city was scarcely safe from buffaloes, I was in the struggle for equal rights for women" (qtd. in Capron 1956: n. p.).

¹² As the culmination of women's suffrage movements, the nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States (1920) prohibited its citizens from being denied the right to vote on the basis of sex.

also the exciting anticipation of a prompt recovery. A new infatuation is, in fact, the sweet conclusion which the last verse line announces:

I am not sick, I am not well.
 My quondam dreams are shot to hell.
 My soul is crushed, my spirit sore;
 I do not like me anymore. (...)
 I shudder at the thought of men...
 I'm due to fall in love again. (77)

Less psychologically introspective, but more foolish, "Folk Song" narrates how a woman laughs at herself and her chosen *modus vivendi* of jumping from one lover to the next, which contributed to the characterization of Parker as a flapper by her readers. Moreover, the speaker of this poem enjoys, or does not learn from, her sentimental mistakes, although she lucidly identifies them:

Robin, he is strong and sure,
 Gallant, wise, and gay.
 Gavin's heart is calm and pure
 As the new-born day.
 Steady shine young Alan's eyes,
 Deep with honesty.
 Jack, he tells me naught but lies,—
 He's the lad for me (...)
 Jack, he's wondrously untrue,—
 He's my own dear love.
 Casper's hair is golden brown;
 Hal is straight and slim.
 Martin's richest in the town—
 Who'd say 'no' to him?
 Rafe's a fine young gentleman;
 Tom's with virtue blest.
 Jack, he broke my heart and ran,—
 I love him the best. (349)

With hilarious impertinence, the poem's speaker declares what seems to be inherent to her own nature and the probable choice in her life: she prefers Jack, a charlatan and a deceiver who made her suffer, but whom she loves more than any more honest, handsome or obliging suitors that she has ever met before, like Rafe, Tom, Robin or Gavin. The

innate magnetism of the bad guy in "Folk Song," as well as Parker's frivolity to mask heartbrokenness, are neutralized in other poems, where unrequited love and men's abandonment are dramatized in more bitter ways. To combat these frequent, harrowing episodes of forlornness in the lives of unclassified women like her, Parker often adopts the role of a big sister, or Adrienne Rich's ally from her so-called 'lesbian continuum.' In fact, the painful first-hand experiences and well-meant intentions of the author would be destined to comfort and guide the target of her verses: the less enlightened female addressees. In "Prologue to a Saga," the author urges naïf, younger girls to be cautious in sentimental relationships, to distrust the linguistic conventions of the male romantic discourse based on unconditional love, and to escape unbruised from men's lies:

Maidens, gather not the yew,
 Leave the glossy myrtle sleeping;
 Any lad was born untrue,
 Never a one is fit your weeping.
 Pretty dears, your tumult cease;
 Love's a fardel, burthening double.
 Clear your hearts, and have you peace—
 Gangway, girls: I'll show you trouble. (188)

Likewise, "The Lady's Reward" lectures a girl not to brood over her painful emotions: "never start/ Conversation toward your heart" (192). This advice would aim to console and soothe her after being hopelessly lovesick and defeated by another rival woman. However, the playful coda of this poem stresses the futility of her own encouragement, as a big sister or good friend, because she anticipates that the beloved man of this same girl will never come back to her:

(...) Never speak
 Of the tears that burn your cheek—
 She will never win him, whose
 Words had shown she feared to lose.
 Be you wise and never sad,
 You will get your lovely lad.
 Never serious be, nor true,
 And your wish will come to you—

And if that makes you happy, kid,
You'll be the first it ever did. (192)

With the knowing caress of sympathy, stanzas like this one intend to be realistic and open the eyes of her female addressees, rather than feeding their naive hopes or beliefs in prince charming from childish fairy-tales. Although Dorothy Parker apparently endorses a male position in many other poems, such compositions actually reflect how she often blames her presumed friends in life —real men— to be responsible for recurrent ordeals of their preys: the female population in the hostile New York. She accuses these gentlemen of establishing strict gender expectations of beauty and devaluing those who do not meet them. This is illustrated by the epigram “New Item,” where male specimens decline to date women who do not fit to the prototypes of attractiveness: “Men seldom make passes/ At girls who wear glasses” (71). According to Parker, it is not coincidental that someone who needs spectacles is someone who is regarded as intellectual and intelligent; or, at least, someone who can *see* the frequent cases of gender inequality. In addition, the author makes men responsible for the lack of tangible sympathy to be found within New York’s female population, because these women are not encouraged to build communities of sisterhood, or Rich’s strategies of ‘lesbian continuum’ beyond exegesis of homosexual desire. Instead, women are forced to recur to malice, infamy and competition against each other to achieve the only accessible goals in life: to win in the competitive race for husband hunting and, later, to fiercely protect their status of wifehood from potential intruders in wait: mistresses or flappers. In “Song (2),” Parker singles out a common rival girl: Cloë. She may be less talented, virtuous and beautiful than any of them (such as Doris, Martha, Winnie or Belinda), but thanks to her charming ruses and predatory inner nature, “she just gets the men” (321). Such a polyphonic carnival reinforces the bonds of understanding among women experiencing the same plight and signals victorious traitors, like Cloë, who eventually receives a severe chastisement in other poems. “Song (2)” is not the only example that dramatizes women-to-women relationships with angry, didactic purposes. In “To Myrtilla, on Easter Day,” the author describes the body in motion and public exposure of a graceful, glamorous lady on a holiday: “Her laugh’s delicious lilt,/ For sure she knows the power of/ Her Easter bonnet’s tilt” (291). Myrtilla causes men’s commotion and women’s envy, but as a bystander, Parker

prefers to spotlight the minute description of her rituals of beautification: Parisian cosmetics, fashionable clothes and lavish accessories, expensive jewels and intoxicating perfumes, not to mention her impeccable manners, grace and charming personality. Myrtilla incarnates the icon of female excellence venerated by the fetishist male-dominated culture and periodicals of the twentieth century. The cult of the female body, always struggling for self-improvement and transformation according to external regulations, is actually identified by Parker as a major site of social oppression on women. Similarly, Angela Weaver contends that the author used the fashion magazine *Vogue* to publish her works because it was the perfect venue to criticize how standards of beauty and conduct constrict women's choices and limit their means of self-expression (2010: 30).

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler explains that acts of gender, such as the way we walk, speak, or look after our physical appearance, are not necessarily genuine, but staged. In fact, these actions do not externalize an objective reality, but they are constructed cultural "fictions" agreed by a collectivity to be performed (1990: 140). This public control is particularly exerted over models of ideal female identity and behavior, like the theatrical artifice bitterly mocked by Parker in "Women: A Hate Song," or in "To Myrtilla, on Easter Day." These poems would exemplify Butler's "gender performativity". This concept is defined as "an identity tenuously constituted in time and instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts," such as mundane movements, bodily gestures or styles of various types that create the illusion of an "abiding gendered self" (Butler 1990: 140). The body would be, then, highly performative, because it is not a being, but a surface "whose permeability is politically regulated and a signifying practice within the cultural field of gender hierarchy" (139). Dorothy Parker and her silent, virtual village of female others, might not possess the physical attributes or acting skills of women, like Myrtilla. However, they are not willing to play in pageants of ideal womanhood to please any male audience or real men, because such performances would be unnatural for them or they would inhibit their own identity and freedom. This is, in fact, where their counterattack begins, because in the very same concept of Butler's gender performativity as publicly sanctioned and reified, the possibility of contesting is plausible in multifarious ways, like parody. In fact, Butler states that no parody is subversively disruptive against cultural hegemony if there are not performative repetitions to destabilize

presuppositions of gender identity and sexuality (139). Myrtila and her repeated rituals of beauty and seduction would be, then, *objects* in the hands of Parker, the *subject* who offers the consolation of bitchiness to the addressees of her secret sisterhood, instead of a feminist bravado towards an effective social reform. In line with her choice, the coda of “To Myrtila, on Easter Day” dramatizes a hypothetical feminicide: “I hope she breaks her neck!” (292), which finishes off her rage and scorn against such a rule of compulsory femininity, but does not mitigate the irrepressible laughter of her male readers who would applaud such a comic catfight. The same conclusion is also preferred in the poem “To a Lady”: “Who could be a-counting all the hearts they broke?/ Not a man you meet that doesn’t fall for you;/ Lady, pretty lady, how I hope you choke!” (317). Nevertheless, here the speaker does not seem to be a distant observer that randomly comes across Myrtila in the streets, but the victim of a first-hand account of traumatic unlovability: a girl repudiated by gentlemen as mere puppets, whose strings would be controlled by the expert hands of another tormentor for ordinary women in New York: the tantalizing *femme fatale*.

Some of Parker’s poems demonstrate the prevalent (but unnamed) gender anger in the American female population, which will not be articulated before the so-called ‘Sexual Revolution’ and second-wave feminism during the 1960s and 1970s in Western countries.¹³ Back to the interwar period, fight and flight are the artistic strategies of our author to express her rage in her works, but always under the cosmetics of humor, and without overtly calling to the war of sexes. In “Frustration”, she imagines killing all those who make her suffer and feel vulnerable: men and women alike. Although her empowering desires of murder are verbalized from an *I* perspective, her tormentors could be identified as the same group that stigmatized her virtual village of potential female addressees:

If I had a shiny gun
I could have a world of fun
Speeding bullets through the brains
Of the folk who give me pains. (132)

¹³ In *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), the American feminist Betty Friedan studied the widespread feeling of unhappiness and personal malaise of women, from housewives to single girls, during the 1950s. Parker’s poetry can be, thus, regarded as the precursor of this sociological analysis.

Possibly mirroring true chapters of Parker's autobiography, some poems become even more confessional and deal with moral taboos, such as self-destruction. "Resumé" is the portfolio of suicidal methods that are flippantly discarded in the text, only to conclude: "You might as well live" (51), which paradoxically does not celebrate not being dead. If the use of a second-person voice distances Parker from her ideation of voluntary death to conceal her own drama, it also attaches her to other people of unspecified sex, to whom she ironically advises, as a big sister, not to kill themselves. Despite many poems of fight and flight, Parker mostly offers *carpe-diem* messages and recommends herself (and her female addressees) to have fun throughout their lives, even though there is not much hope for a better future or drastic reforms towards the desired light at the end of the tunnel: gender equality. As part of her strategy of woman's endurance, seasoned with gentle self-mockery, the speaker of "The Little Old Lady in Lavender Silk" is an older lady who recalls her past and does not seem to feel uneasy about her sad lifelong career devoted to love and flirting with men:

For contrition is hollow and wraithful,
And regret is no part of my plan,
And I think (if my memory's faithful)
There was nothing more fun than a man! (165).

CONCLUSION: THE POET'S CODA

Dorothy Parker's light verse has been widely criticized for exaggerating female traits and behaviors to absurdity and simplicity, but beyond its teasing and ridicule, it helped to transform the ways of thinking about gender in her times (Ivanov Craig 1998: 97–98). She gave birth to an intricate poetry, which uses parody to stimulate textual ambiguity, to conceal her authorial duplicity, and to nurture readings that transcend fault finding toward solidarity. In fact, this literary device enables her to orchestrate a compassionate tribute to the very target of her indictment: women. Beyond the epicenter of heterosexual love that dominates her works, she also devoted her wit to explore female relationships and interactions, from secret sisterhood and intimacy to public estrangement and enmity. She surreptitiously embraced the tradition of a female subculture in American letters with a very eccentric, personal approach for those female addressees

who are prompt to read between the lines. Her stanzas dismantle essentialist gender categories by drawing flat, derogatory and unflattering stereotypes of conventional femininity, from the deceptively angelic housewife to the dubiously mercenary flapper. However, her intention is not to attack her own sex, but to emphasize how such visual misrepresentations, and the performative dimension of gender, are socially constructed by self-serving patriarchal institutions to homogenize the female population, and to anesthetize their desires of freedom, self-realization and individuality. The true darts of Parker's verses, as presumably harmless jokes and wisecracks ridiculing women for the sake of men's fun, are actually thrown against the main agent of disseminating misogynist feminine stereotypes: the influential, male-led New York magazine industry for which she worked. Nevertheless, she also laughed at real women. These were her antagonists not only because they blindly followed the dictates of happy domesticity and submissiveness from these periodicals to reach social success, but also because they contributed to the marginalization of other women like herself, who refuse to accept such gender brainwash. Instead of throwing revolutionary missives of feminist insubordination to empower women, Parker's poetry cultivates alliances of togetherness, empathy and sorority, carrying the consolatory messages of a big sister or Rich's 'lesbian continuum.' She would support the survival of individuals belonging to the same virtual female village of misunderstood, misread and misrepresented American girls and women, living in urban jungles like New York. With that purpose, and distanced from her public aura of glamour and carefree joy, Parker's poems fictionalized and generalized her autobiographical career of amatory forsakenness and wretchedness to tie emotional bonds of empathy with her addressees. Her fellow female citizens would be encouraged to read beyond the gender prejudices in her verses, and to identify themselves with her psychologically painful life experiences. Parker would claim that women should fight to assert their individual identity and choices (even their rights to feel depressed, brokenhearted or angry) against the unrealistic clichés of happy femininity from New York magazines. However, her main weapon to fight against gender inequality without revolting the male masses, is parody (and self-parody). Despite the pressures of the magazine culture of her times, and the mockery of a timeless literary Establishment that minimizes her legacy, Dorothy Parker laughs last because her poems, encompassing conspiracy and acquiescence, illustrate an intelligent female venture to build virtual communities of sisterhood within the merciless big city, by enhancing diversity and demolishing misogynist

paradigms of compulsory womanhood during the early twentieth century in the United States.

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