Emma Wolf’s Short Stories in “The Smart Set.” AMS Studies in Modern Literature, No. 27. Edited by Barbara Cantalupo. New York: AMS Press, 2010

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Widely distributed through The Smart Set, a mass marketed monthly literary magazine often identified as a precursor to The New Yorker, Emma Wolf’s short stories enjoyed a wide readership in the years between 1902-1911. Barbara Cantalupo, a Professor of English at Penn State Lehigh Valley, has ably gathered ten of the eleven known published Wolf short stories and made them available with an insightful introduction and bibliography.

Emma Wolf (1865-1932) was an American-born Jewish writer who flourished in California and lived most of her adult life in the comfortable confines of the Pacific Heights section of San Francisco. Despite her a childhood polio, she attained a good education and began a writing career. Her greatest novel, “Other Things Being Equal” was published in 1892 with 3 more novels following in the next eight years. The short stories published in this volume are all from the early years of the twentieth century when Wolf was entering middle age. Their themes closely reflect those of her novels, albeit without a Jewish element. These are her “secular” works and focus on the issues facing women in the social sphere, romance, family ties, and the bonds of marriage. Two of her stories were featured in their issues of the magazine as the main story.

While published in a mainstream magazine, the topics nevertheless reveal the concerns of a “women’s literature,” often wavering between modeling the new attitudes for women or toward normative behaviors of the day. She explores the borders where social lines can be breached and the “integrity” of characters in their respective milieus questioned. Her stories are filled with women in different social situations, but most are from an educated class. She interplays themes about the “New Woman”, understood to be an independent
woman often employed outside the home or defying conventional norms for marriage. Her stories often contain intrigue, intricate plot and mystery with an ironic twist (a la Guy de Maupassant), as in “The Conflict.” She always bore in mind her audience who appreciated “cleverness,” (viii) but also enjoyed risqué topics surrounding power, divorce, abandonment, parentage, marriage for economic convenience, secret rendezvous, revenge, sensuality, or plots of conflict with inheritance, loyalty, children or purity. Nevertheless, the magazine and her stories all fall well within what must have been the acceptable limits of the “mainstream” upper class of which she was a part.

One of the chief characteristics of her writing is the use of dialogue. She opens “The End of the Story” and “The Conflict” with dialogue even though the reader does not know who is speaking. The omniscient narrator is never left out, but Wolf relies heavily on dialogue to create her characters’ inner lives as well as interactions. She also scatters her stories with literary allusion and reference to hook her readers with a comfort level of familiarity that brings them closer to the characters. Most of the stories center on women, but two, “Farquhar’s Masterpiece” and “Louis d’Or” focus primarily on the acts of men. Today, some of these stories will seem outdated and the romantic concerns overly dramatic, as in “A Study in Suggestion” where a young girl dies (for love?); or in “The Knot” where a happy ending relies heavily on a solicitous attitude by the heroine of an idea of purity as “the ideal of all honorable women.” (230) In “The Knot,” romance is ultimately trumped by traditional values and conventional notions of “real” womanly (and thus, wifely) love.

Despite many romantic themes, Wolf’s language is not usually overwrought with turn-of-the-century passionate exclamations, although this is a carefully chosen style element in “A Still Small Voice.” In this story, the protagonist wavers between her current husband and the one she loves with an internal dialogue, “Let me go, I say! Marriage is a tyranny.” (11). The writing in these stories is filled with some really well written passages in an
admittedly succinct style, but unfortunately, some places that would want editing to please a modern sensibility. Wolf pays very close attention to detail in order to convey a “realistic” picture of people, their mental states, and their reactions to the situations setup in the plots. The reader learns a great deal of the author’s observation of behaviors and norms for women of the day, possibly based on people she knew.

An example of her style of “realism in context” is in the first story, “A Study in Suggestion.” The premise is that a young girl is dying for an unknown reason, and sets up a confessional for her love interest, a “scientific, anti-sentimentico” who does not respond the way one hopes. For Wolf, as other good writers, timing is everything. Wolf grants her readers awareness and true perspective of what happens only at the end, using the details as a setup. She leaves no opportunity for painful irony or psychological pathos unturned, giving the reader full value for the story.

One theme explored by Emma Wolf in “The Courting of Drusilla West” is still widely popular in literature and movies today, and that is the marriage of convenience. Two people, especially one of them dead set against marriage, must make a contract for marriage without romantic intentions, but nevertheless fall in love by the end for an “all’s well that ends well.” In another story, Wolf muses on the need for progressive attitudes toward child rearing. In “The Father of her Children” she wonders whether any women who desire it can find men interested in kindness or truly progressive thinking toward children. Wolf gives a nod to her own answer, leaving the hero to dream her resolution, and through this, of taking control of her future self and children.

These stories deserve to have wider exposure. The reader will enjoy Wolf’s ten short stories: the excellence of writing; ingenuity of story telling; and time-stamped alternating views expressed about women who lived through changing traditions and societal roles, and on the cusp of a progressive feminism. These qualities dictate that Wolf’s short stories be considered for future anthologies and inserted into new canons of twentieth-
century American short stories as examples of a woman writer or as a western writer. For those reasons, this work of Cantalupo may prove foundational toward correcting the current error of omission.