

# Fanny Brice and the “Schnooks” Strategy: Negotiating a Feminine Comic Persona on the Air



No one could claim that the career of Fanny Brice has been overlooked. Frequently in the news during her long career—more for her private than her professional life—she has been the subject of three biographies, numerous popular articles, and several major motion pictures.<sup>1</sup> The fact that most of these efforts have stirred controversy only seems to reflect the tempestuous and contradictory life of their heroine, whose career from ethnic burlesque to legitimate stage to radio spans more than thirty years and three dramatic marriage-and-divorce scenarios. Amidst the drama of Brice’s life, and the colorful anecdotes of her role in the lives of such showmen as Florenz Ziegfeld and Billy Rose, her most enduring contribution to popular entertainment—the comic character Baby Snooks, whom Brice herself always referred to as “Schnooks”—has received relatively little attention. Indeed Brice’s radio work generally, though itself occurring over a twenty-year period, is treated as a secondary derivative of her stage work that added little to her development as a comic artist and was far from glamorous. The spectacle of a forty-five-year-old woman dressed as a small child, with screwed-up face, whiny voice, and the famous cry of “Wah—ah—aaaah!” that ended many routines, has been taken as either comically trivial or below the dignity of the satiric and sexual stage comedienne on whom her biographers would like to concentrate.

But it can be argued that Brice’s impact on American broadcast culture was greater than broadcasting’s impact on Brice. She remains one of the few women to headline a major nighttime radio show as a single billing—her only rival

here is Kate Smith—in a system that preferred its female stars as secondary sidekicks (Mary Livingstone to Jack Benny, Portland Hoffa to Fred Allen), relatively humorless “straight women” to their partner’s comic lead (Molly in *Fibber McGee and Molly*), or as the recurring “dumb dora” of vaudeville mixed-pair comics (most famously, Gracie Allen). Within this carefully delimited containment of the disruptive potential of women’s humor, Brice stands out. In her early years on NBC in the *Chase and Sanborn Hour* (1933) and on the *Ziegfeld Follies of the Air* (CBS 1936) Brice’s was a woman’s voice speaking humorous and sometimes bawdy lines, directing attention both to her gender and to her ethnicity, defying bounds of taste and appropriate feminine behavior. As a consequence she often ran afoul of network censors and posed difficulties to sponsors.

The character of Baby Snooks, developed originally for radio in 1933, became the main staple of her act in the *Good News* and *Maxwell House Coffee Time* programs on NBC between 1937 and 1944 and eventually received top billing on *The Baby Snooks Show* (CBS 1944-1951). This essay will concentrate on the creation and development of the “Schnooks” character as a strategy for negotiating the restrictive conventions of radio on women’s laughter. Snooks, both de-sexualized and de-ethnicized, permitted Brice to make trenchant and hilarious commentary on a variety of social hypocrisies in a manner better suited to the hybrid setting of radio and, later, television—at once public and private, mindful of its high culture obligations but catering to the tastes of the mass public, based on a commercialism



“Genius for Satire.” Brice as Jewish evangelist *Soul Saving Sadie* (above) and the risqué countess *Dubinsky* (opposite) from the Ziegfeld Follies of 1934.

addressed to women but under masculine control. It also represents an important contribution to the development of the child-focused domestic situation comedy so central to early television, which would draw on the edgy innocence and inversion of hierarchies invented by Brice for *Baby Snooks*, sustained by a series of talented and influential radio writers and directors. Though in some ways the character of *Snooks* may represent Brice’s stepping back from the more outspoken and outrageous humor of her early career, for radio it provided an important articulation and extension

of the power of feminine comedy, in both its transgressive potential and its careful containment.<sup>2</sup>

**Mrs. Cohen at the Beach:  
Brice’s early radio career**

Besides the usual difficulties of researching radio—the non-existence of recordings from the early 1930s and before, the frequently changing schedules, guest appearances that are hard to document, and the fleeting, unrepeatability nature of the performance—one reason that Brice’s radio career has received relatively little attention from her biographers may be that by the time radio beckoned, most of Brice’s innovative stage work had already been accomplished. One biographer explicitly links Brice’s movement into radio with the two events that mark the official “death” of the vaudeville/burlesque circuit, both in 1932: the closing of the Palace theater in New York and the actual death of Florenz Ziegfeld, the legendary showman who had “discovered” Brice and urged her towards the “Jewish” dialect and persona that would make her famous.<sup>3</sup> Certainly by 1932 Brice had reached the pinnacle of her theatrical fame. Having appeared in numerous *Ziegfeld Follies* since

1910 and repeatedly headlining her own act on the prestigious Orpheum and RKO vaudeville circuits, Brice’s popularity had peaked with two Broadway vehicles produced by her soon-to-be ex-husband, Billy Rose: *Sweet and Low*, which ran from October 1930 through April 1931, and *Crazy Quilt*, which toured across the United States from May 1931 through April 1932.

Though Brice developed many comic personae and acts, she is best known (aside from the perennial “My Man”) for songs such as “Sadie Salome,” “Second Hand Rose,” “I’m An

Indian” and for routines such as “Mrs. Cohen at the Beach,” all of which drew from the vaudeville tradition of “Yiddish” dialect and humor. Though Fanny Borach (Brice’s original name) was of Jewish heritage, she had been born in Brooklyn and no more naturally spoke with the accent that characterized her act than did Bert Williams (a frequent *Follies* co-star) possess the artificially dark skin his stage performances mandated. Both blackface and dialect offered a kind of distancing of the artist from the material, a way of projecting social satire or unacceptable characteristics onto an “othered” group.<sup>4</sup> In Brice’s case, her function in the *Ziegfeld Follies* may have been to embody, under a “disguise” of ethnicity, the working-class elements of burlesque that Ziegfeld had so carefully excised from his elevated “celebration of the American girl.”<sup>5</sup> Thus ethnic and blackface performers took on exaggerated characteristics of the “abject” while often playing with the very distinctions and liminality that made such a performance necessary. This strategy also allowed real-life members of subordinated social groups an entree to the stage which they might otherwise not have had, providing that they played along with the impersonation. Brice was adept at negotiating the double-edged weapon of ethnic humor, at once taking possession of the “othered” characterization while simultaneously disavowing or disarming it, notably through the physical, almost slapstick quality of her performance.

Barbara W. Grossman notes this defusing effect in her discussion of Brice’s popular routine, “Mrs. Cohen at the Beach,” in which Brice plays a heavily-accented, somewhat vulgar and earthy mother of four, shepherding her children and husband through a day at the seaside:

Mrs. Cohen could have been an extremely unpleasant creation. Portrayed by anyone else, she would have been a

vicious caricature, fulfilling the period’s unflattering expectations of immigrant behavior and justifying its prejudicial assumptions. As Brice interpreted her, however, she emerged as a character much more innocuous in performance than on paper. Brice’s expressive delivery replaced harshness with humor and defused the piece’s underlying anti-Semitism ... Largely through the force of her own personality, Brice humanized the stereotype and rounded the caricature into a character.<sup>6</sup>

This reliance on physical performance and innuendo, often used to convey sexual meaning, was a characteristic of burlesque. Robert C. Allen points out that many burlesque routines lost their point on paper: “Because so much of burlesque’s sexual transgressiveness was visual rather than verbal, courtroom accounts of burlesque performances conveyed almost nothing of their suggestiveness.”<sup>7</sup> The humor and meaning resided in the “twist” the performers gave it, whether verbal or literal.

Impersonating head-injured ballet dancers (“Becky is Back in the Ballet”), Jewish evangelists (“Soul-Saving Sadie,” a take-off on Aimee Semple MacPherson), graceless fan dancers, or the hypersexual movie vamp (“I’m Bad”), Brice’s genius for physical satire both took the edge off her ethnic and sexual humor and marked out a performance



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space unique to Brice—and one unheard of for a female comedian. Often earthy and sometimes slightly bawdy, full of double entendres and subtle references, Brice’s combination of ethnic humor and physical satire earned her the highest acclaim from stage critics and audiences alike. Radio would be another matter, and another less risky device for permitting Brice’s comic persona to survive on the air would soon become necessary.

Brice first ventured onto the air on the *Philco Hour* in February 1930, having signed a contract for three shows, possibly to be continued if they proved successful. According to a report in the *New York Times*, the first show featured a “dialect radio version of Romeo and Juliet” along with several of Brice’s well-known songs.<sup>8</sup> On her next appearance, Brice performed another dialect skit, this time “Samson and Delilah.” According to Grossman, “The negative response to her performance led Philco not only to drop the idea of using her in a series, but even to cancel the third broadcast it had already announced.” Brice sued Erwin-Wasey, the producing agency, for breach of contract, winning \$1,000 in a settlement.<sup>9</sup>

After this disappointment Brice returned to the stage, and did not attempt radio again until 1933. But once more the ride was bumpy. *Variety* reports that Brice was considered and rejected by two major clients, Chesterfield and Chevrolet, due to the interference of her producer husband, Billy Rose, in auditions. Though the article should be read in the context of ad agency hype and competition in program production, it goes on to report that J. Walter Thompson took the situation in hand by banishing Rose from Brice’s third try, this time on the well-established *Fleischmann Yeast Hour*. The “click results” (*Variety*-ese for favorable reception) obtained on this performance induced the agency to introduce Brice on the *Royal Vagabonds* program in March 1933, sponsored by Standard Brands for Royal Gelatin. It featured songs and comedy routines from Brice’s stage act, accompanied by George Olsen’s orchestra, every Wednesday evening from 8:00 to 8:30 on the NBC Red network.<sup>10</sup> Though initial reviews were lukewarm—*Variety* blamed “the ineptitude of the adapting of the comedienne’s talents for the ether”—her act improved enough that the agency made the decision to feature her on the *Chase and*

*Sanborn Coffee Hour* variety program, sponsored by Standard Brands, from April 12 to September 27, 1933, Sunday nights at eight o’clock on NBC Red.

Though sponsor, agency and star were now happy, Brice very quickly ran afoul of NBC’s fledgling Continuity Acceptance policies. By May 24, trouble over “gag lines in Jewish” resulted in a memo from the production supervisor to John Royal, head of programming at NBC, complaining that an extra line had been slipped in, unapproved. By May 29, an entire page of deletions fills a memo from Bertha Brainard, head of commercial programming. NBC objected to humor it perceived as containing unwanted or tasteless innuendo, in ways that aren’t always immediately perceptible to today’s reading:

‘Trickled’ means to run slowly ...  
‘anecdote’ means a short tale ... The dog  
trickled down street with a can tied to his  
anecdote.

I wrote a play about fallen arches, flat feet  
and the seven-year-itch ... the producer  
told me to put everything I had into it.

But even seemingly innocuous lines could be  
troublesome. According to Brainard,

We questioned Fanny Brice’s reading of  
“Little Jack Horner” with verbal gestures  
which if read in a certain way might be  
very bad taste.<sup>11</sup>

And by June 14 the problem had, if anything,  
worsened. Brainard reported that deletions  
included the following gags:

MAN

I don’t speak such good English  
so I have to feel for my  
words.

FANNY

Well, they ain’t tattooed on  
me.

and

BRICE

Did he say you got appendisidess or appendeseatis? It's a big difference. If the pain is in the side it is appendesidess.

And, once again, mere words could not contain the threat that Brice's comic delivery offered:

Brice: (answering telephone) Hello Mrs. Greenberg—this is Mrs. Cohen—oy am I sick. I was in bed all day with three doctors and two nurses ... (We suggested this cut because of the possible double meaning Miss Brice might have given it.)<sup>12</sup>

Not only jokes that emphasized the sexual and physical could cause problems. A proposed “burlesque on Mickey and Minnie Mouse” was shot down before the July 5 show out of apparently well-placed fear of Disney disapproval.<sup>13</sup> And it is hard to discern the most offensive part of the lines cut from the May 31 program:

(Reading headlines) Hitler coming to America ...Ten thousand Hebrews leave for Palestine ...Woman of 80 has twins ... Sharkey blames Schmeling ... Mr. and Mrs. Clark announce the arrival of a daughter, their sixteenth child ... to be continued.<sup>14</sup>

A letter from an affiliate, WBEN Buffalo, written in 1939 sums up the feeling about Brice's pre-Snooks material on the air:

Two or three years ago we learned by experience that we had to be alert whenever Fanny Brice was scheduled as a guest performer on any network program. She had given one of her pet skits several times, in which her small boy was on the beach. There is in it a very unmistakable connotation of coarse and vulgar conduct ... I hope I will not be misunderstood when I urge the point that some of the broader types of vaudeville jokes certainly have no place on a radio program going into the home ...<sup>15</sup>

The line to which Mr. Kirchofer refers may well have been Fanny asking her son, “Well, why didn't you do it while you were in the water?”<sup>16</sup> Conflicts over the acceptability of lines such as these added to the strain between networks and their obstreperous producers—advertising agencies and sponsors—whose desire to build on established show-business success often violated networks' more sensitive public service obligations.<sup>17</sup> Audiences approved, however, despite the behind-the-scenes struggles, and the *Chase and Sanborn Hour* was rated among the top twenty-five programs on the air in *Variety's* spring poll.<sup>18</sup> And Baby Snooks made her first appearance on this show, though her precedents in other Brice characters, such as “Babykins” in *Corned Beef and Roses*, clearly contributed. According to Barbara Grossman, “The terrible toddler emerged on radio and was the first character Brice developed specifically for that medium.”<sup>19</sup>

However, in October 1933 Brice's contract with Standard Brands expired to allow her to go back on stage, and although she made guest appearances on several shows, she would not return to the air steadily until 1936. In the meantime, she would experience one of her greatest theatrical successes, the *Ziegfeld Follies of 1934*, which was produced by Ziegfeld's widow and comedienne and later radio star in her own right, Billie Burke. This show formally introduced the character of Baby Snooks on stage, in a skit written by David Freedman and performed with Eve Arden as Mother and Victor Morley as Daddy, which allowed Snooks to misinterpret the story of George Washington as justification for lying. Herbert Goldman assesses this development:

The Snooks sketch marked the first time Fanny's baby exhibited the precocious quality that marked Snooks' later career and gave the character its bite and truth. Snooks saw the fallibility and hypocrisy of adults—but, as a baby, lacked fear and the compassion needed to respect them.<sup>20</sup>

Or, as Brice herself explained:

I told my writers I wanted to do a baby. And they didn't know what I was talking

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about, what kind of a baby I wanted to do, and looked at me as though to say, ‘The old girl wants to be cute.’ And they always brushed it aside.

There was another reason why I thought the baby was good. You know the way they have to go over your script for censorship? I found out when I was doing Mrs. Cohen at the Beach. We’d be ready to rehearse, and they’d say: ‘You can’t do this, you can’t do that. This will offend, and that will not sound nice.’ And I knew this couldn’t happen with a baby. Because what can you write about a child that has to be censored?<sup>21</sup>

Further development of Snooks would occur for the *Ziegfeld Follies of 1936*, which opened in January of that year.

In the meantime Brice branched out with her first Snooks-based radio show, the *Ziegfeld Follies of the Air*, sponsored by the Colgate-Palmolive Company. From February 22 until June 6, 1936, this show ran on CBS Saturday nights from eight to nine o’clock, though Brice appeared on only ten of the shows.<sup>22</sup> Her co-stars were comics James Melton and Benny Fields, along with Patti Chapin. Brice’s participation was cut short when her stage show ended in May. After a much-needed rest, the show reopened as *The New Ziegfeld Follies of 1936-1937* and toured the country from September to May 1937 until it closed in Hershey, Pennsylvania. Aside from a brief return in 1940, this would be Brice’s last theatrical effort. Now, her attention turned more fully to radio and, consequently, to Baby Snooks almost exclusively. Brice was forty-six, Snooks five.

### The “Schnooks” Strategy

Brice—or at least her character, Baby Snooks—became a household name nationally on the *MGM/Maxwell House Coffee Good News of 1938* program, which produced continuous Good News for the delectation of the American public until 1940. This much-trumpeted and star-studded production marked the first open foray of a major film studio into sponsorship of a radio program (though studios had been involved in aspects of

radio production for years<sup>23</sup>). Although MGM would ultimately withdraw its support, it was a fittingly glamorous and high-profile setting in which Brice might shine. Airing on Thursday evenings from nine to ten o’clock on the NBC Red network, Benton and Bowles produced this high-budget variety show for General Foods, one of radio’s most prolific sponsors, and makers of Maxwell House Coffee. MGM was paid \$25,000 per week to contribute its stars and name, and although some purported to find the arrangement confusing—*Newsweek* worried in 1937 that radio audiences “couldn’t decide whether Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer was trying to sell Maxwell House, or if the coffeemakers were putting out Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer in airtight containers”<sup>24</sup>—it soon possessed a respectable Hooperrating (an early version of the Niensens) of 20.2. The hour-long program featured Robert Young as host for most of its run. A changing roster of MGM stars and creative personnel appeared to publicize their latest films and perform short skits and musical acts, but each program featured at least one skit by Brice as Snooks, with Hanley Stafford as Daddy, as well as a skit by comedian Frank Morgan. Meredith Wilson’s orchestra provided musical accompaniment.

*Good News*’s broadcast of December 30, 1937 represents a typical early program.<sup>25</sup> Hosted by Jimmy Stewart, the program opens with a monologue and introduction by that MGM star, followed by a Baby Snooks skit, this one centering on the tale of Daniel in the lion’s den. A song performed by Freda Starr, an MGM ingenue, follows, accompanied by Wilson’s orchestra, giving way to a specially-written short vignette acted by Jimmy Stewart and Myrna Loy. Another skit with Wallace Beery precedes the introduction of Cedric Gibbons, MGM’s art director, who discourses rather stiltedly with Stewart about his craft. Brice then returns, this time in a sketch entitled “Mr. and Mrs. Garfinkle,” about an immigrant Jewish couple who lose money betting on a horse race, in dialect. Lionel Barrymore rounds out the evening in a dramatic piece that closes the show. Early shows tended to emphasize the MGM connection in this way: on the April 14, 1938 program, Judy Garland sings a duet with Snooks (her famous, “Why? Because” song)

and Adrian, MGM's premiere costume designer, imparts some glamour to the event, along with, rather inexplicably, Bernarr Macfadden, who was the publisher of *True Romance* and *True Confessions* magazines, the infamous tabloid *New York Graphic*, and producer of several radio shows patterned after his print holdings.<sup>26</sup> For the momentous event of Lionel Barrymore's sixty-first birthday on April 27, 1939, Louis B. Mayer himself appears to host a tribute that includes such MGM luminaries as Norma Shearer, Robert Taylor, Mickey Rooney and Joan Crawford.<sup>27</sup> But throughout all this grandstanding, Baby Snooks, with Hanley Stafford as her constantly exasperated daddy, continued to tie together the performance with at least one humorous routine per evening.

This format continued until March 1940, at which time it changed to a half-hour program from 9 to 9:30 p.m. on Thursdays. Then, following MGM's withdrawal from the show, its title changed to *Maxwell House Coffee Time*, running from 8 to 8:30 p.m. on NBC, still under the sponsorship of General Foods and production of Benton and Bowles. Now Brice and Morgan split the half hour between them, without any of the MGM guests and promotional hoopla of the earlier series. Brice's Baby Snooks routine, which had varied in length and placement during the *Good News* years, developed a consistency of format which drew on the established "situation comedy" of shows such as *Burns and Allen*, *Fibber McGee and Molly*, and *The Aldrich Family*, this time with a child as the central focus in a somewhat dysfunctional, but still fairly wholesome, American family—a situation that would come to dominate early television.

The half-hour *Maxwell House Coffee Time* ran for four seasons. Then, in September 1944, Brice moved to CBS in *Toasties Time*, sponsored by General Foods, and attempted to introduce a new character, Irma Potts, described as "a trustful shopgirl with a protruding lower lip and a slight lisp" or elsewhere as "a forlorn and rather frustrated old maid."<sup>28</sup> The scene shifted to a small town, with Danny Thomas, in his first radio role, playing the postman and Hanley Stafford as the town druggist. Baby Snooks was still a character, but the main emphasis shifted to Irma. This new persona proved unsuccessful and lasted only for one season; by September 1945 Brice

had jettisoned Irma and returned in *The Baby Snooks Show* on CBS for Sanka Coffee, produced by Young and Rubicam. Sponsorship shifted to General Foods in September 1947, promoting Jell-O, until May 1948. Brice then went off the air for a year and a half, a hiatus attributed by some to "playing hard to get," but returned to NBC in November 1949 with a "revival" of her classic *Snooks* program, aired Tuesday nights at 8:30 and produced by Dancer-Fitzgerald-Sample for the Lewis-Howe company, makers of Tums.<sup>29</sup> Here she remained until her untimely death in May of 1951.

"Schnooks," as developed by Brice over the years, offered listeners a good-natured critique of adult hypocrisies, exploration of the pitfalls of the English language, and an inverted world seen through the eyes of a precociously resistant and troublesome child, whose deflation of some of the most respected traditions, concepts, and institutions of American culture provoked sympathetic laughter while remaining safely contained and corrected by her age and innocence. Hanley Stafford, though providing one of the main butts of Snooks's sly parodies, also represents a father devoted to his daughter, heavily involved in her upbringing (until the late 1940s, Snooks's mother remained a rarely present figure), and quick to come to Snooks's defense if she is criticized by others. In a 1939 skit, Daddy, upset by Snooks's terrible grades in school, decides to hire a tutor.<sup>30</sup> In the opening lines, Snooks parodies a common attribution of schooling for women:

DADDY

I'm hiring a private teacher to make you work.

SNOOKS

Waaahhh! ... I don't want no private teacher.

DADDY

Oh now listen, dear, it's for your own good. She'll make you a little lady.

SNOOKS

I don't wanna be a lady ... and I don't wanna go to school.

DADDY

(voice rising)

Well, what do you want to do!

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Brice as the precocious Baby Snooks on NBC Radio.

SNOOKS  
(smugly)  
I want to get married.

When the teacher arrives, speaking with a pretentious upper-class accent, Snooks refuses to be intimidated or to cooperate.

TEACHER  
Now come here and kiss me, little one.

SNOOKS  
What for? I ain't done nothin'.

DADDY  
Now kiss your teacher, Snooksie.

SNOOKS  
You kiss her, Daddy ...

TEACHER  
Come here.

SNOOKS  
Leave me alone.

TEACHER  
(threateningly)  
When I beckon like this, it means I want you to come.

SNOOKS  
When I stick out my tongue like this, it means I ain't comin'!

Finally the teacher, at the end of her patience, turns Snooks over her knee and spanks her.

TEACHER  
There! That'll impress it on your mind.

SNOOKS  
That ain't where my mind is!

This last line is a reworking of one that Brice attempted to use in 1933 on the Chase and Sanborn show:

FANNY  
Abe, why do you spank the boy like that?

ABE  
I spanked him to impress it on his mind.

FANNY  
Where do you think his mind is?<sup>31</sup>

That time, network continuity acceptance editors objected and deleted it immediately. Now, from the mouth of a child, it could be uttered over the air without repercussions. The “Schnooks” strategy was working.

In another skit, Snooks is hindering her father from getting dressed and going off to perform jury duty, for which he has been called. This skit allows Brice to parody gently one of the

authoritative institutions of society, as Daddy tries to explain what jury duty is.

SNOOKS  
Where you goin', Daddy?  
DADDY  
I told you, I have to go to court.  
SNOOKS  
Why?  
DADDY  
I've been called for jury duty. I've got to appear in a suit.  
SNOOKS  
What kind of suit?  
DADDY  
I don't know, they didn't tell me. It could be any kind of a suit.  
SNOOKS  
You wanna wear my Mickey Mouse suit? ...  
DADDY  
... there's eleven men on juries and with the foreman makes it twelve.  
SNOOKS  
Eleven and four is twelve?  
DADDY  
No! Eleven and four is fifteen. But the foreman in this case happens to be just one man. Sometimes the jury has twelve jurymen, and they're all ladies.  
SNOOKS  
The four men too?

And once again, an opportunity arises for Snooks to make a kind of sexual innuendo that surely would have been blocked if spoken by a purportedly adult woman:

DADDY  
What did I just get done telling you?  
SNOOKS  
Eleven and four is twelve and all the men is ladies.  
DADDY  
I didn't say anything of the kind! If they were all ladies on the jury, what would I be doing there?

SNOOKS  
(slyly)  
I...I...I know ...

The next exchange in this skit interjects a note that, once again, it is hard to imagine being allowed in an exchange between anything other than a child and adult:

DADDY  
...Then the court is called to order, and the lawyers come in with their briefs.  
SNOOKS  
Is that all they wear?  
DADDY  
They don't wear their briefs, they hand them to the judge.  
SNOOKS  
Ain't he got any of his own?  
DADDY  
Why no, the only briefs he's got are those he gets from the lawyers ... Snooks, these are not the kind of briefs that people wear. These briefs are just paper.  
SNOOKS  
Mommy's got some ...  
DADDY  
(cutting her off)  
I don't care what Mommy's got! Now these papers contain the evidence in the case! That's how the lawyers present the bare facts.<sup>32</sup>

At other times, the English language itself—the very stuff of radio—received interrogation at Snooks's hands.

SNOOKS  
Daddy, what's in this barrel?  
DADDY  
Those are mixed nuts.  
SNOOKS  
I want a mixed nut.  
DADDY  
Well, take one.  
SNOOKS  
Is this a mixed nut, Daddy?  
DADDY  
No, that's a filbert.

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SNOOKS  
Is this a mixed nut?  
DADDY  
No, that’s a walnut.  
SNOOKS  
Well, which is the mixed nuts?  
GROCER  
The whole barrel is full of mixed nuts.  
SNOOKS  
Then why can’t I find one?  
GROCER  
(his voice rising)  
Because there’s no such thing as a mixed nut. The whole barrel is full of mixed nuts. But no single nut is a mixed nut!  
SNOOKS  
Do you feel all right, mister?

Or, again, as Daddy attempts to dictate to his secretary at home, and can’t persuade Snooks to go to bed, she questions him about a word in his letter.

SNOOKS  
What’s a shipment?  
DADDY  
It’s an order of goods.  
SNOOKS  
Does it come in a ship?  
DADDY  
No, a shipment doesn’t come in a ship. It comes in a car.  
SNOOKS  
A shipment comes in a car? ...  
Well, what comes in a ship?  
DADDY  
A cargo ... A shipment comes in a car and a cargo comes in a ship ...  
SNOOKS  
(after a pause)  
Oh.<sup>33</sup>

Another plot featured Snooks attempting to claim illness to stay home from school. When Daddy belittles her story, she gets him to admit that he is planning to call in sick at work so he can play golf. Snooks uses this as blackmail, threatening to call his boss.<sup>34</sup>

Throughout the almost fifteen-year development of the Snooks character, Brice is

able to play, week after week, an irreverent, questioning, unruly and, most importantly, central female character who continuously thwarts the intentions of society to contain her, most particularly the efforts of her father to keep her under control. Of course, Hanley Stafford’s Daddy figure is an unusual one in the world of radio, abnormally concerned with the care of his child and thus in many ways taking on feminine characteristics, which can then be deflated without much danger to everyday paternal authority. Another device helps to further contain the danger of feminine unruliness: the constant unflattering references to Daddy’s wife, Snooks’s mother, who is depicted along the lines of the traditional shrew and dumb dora. When Snooks is failing in school, Daddy remarks in an aside, “That’s what I get for marrying such a mental giant.” In the jury duty sketch, when Snooks claims she knows what Daddy would be doing with the ladies, he exclaims, “You’re getting more like your mother every day!” Yet week after week Snooks makes it clear that she is the one with the incisive and clear perception of events, and draws the listener into her inverted child’s eye view of adult pretensions.

### Sidekicks, Shrews, and Dumb Doras

To place Brice’s contributions to feminine radio comedy into perspective, it is useful to consider both her own precedents and those already established on radio by the time Snooks made her national impact. Brice herself, as we have seen, came from the tradition of burlesque comedy that, although adapted for the now middle-class vaudeville audience, still retained some of its earlier bawdy and sexual flavor. As late as 1930, in a review of the Fanny Brice/Billy Rose production *Corned Beef and Roses*, *Variety* noted that although the show opened strongly the second half “faded fast and had to depend on smut, of which there was plenty. In fact, it is generally agreed in Philly that ‘Corned Beef and Roses’ is the dirtiest show ever witnessed here.”<sup>35</sup> Though this characterization is a bit hard to believe, it reflects vaudeville’s cleaned-up image and refers back to an earlier more risqué burlesque tradition that was in the process of being repressed.<sup>36</sup> Also on the bill that night was George Jessel, whose

previous show-business background had dipped into the bawdier underside of stage entertainment. About his performance the scandalized *Variety* reviewer went on, “This wasn’t just off color; it was lower-class, stag-smoker stuff and many a blasé theatregoer was hard put to it to keep from blushing. Even Jessel was intensely embarrassed.” It was in this context that Brice introduced the character of “Babykins,” Snooks’s predecessor. Though the reviewer applauded this skit, he still characterized it as “dirty” and not able to redeem a show that all in all constituted “a black eye both for Broadway and for the theatre in general.” This type of material would clearly not be suitable for radio. Yet Brice’s next efforts on stage were criticized for playing too much towards the new medium. Her 1932 touring show *Fanny Brice* included a song number about “how various persons would handle a popular song on the radio,” which was panned as “an attempt on Miss Brice’s part to sell herself to radio via her stage showing, and if so, still inexcusable. Miss Brice is too great, and too important an artist to allow this sort of thing to happen.”<sup>37</sup>

Brice’s efforts to adapt to radio met with just the opposite problem. Her debut for J. Walter Thompson/Standard Brands on the *Royal Vagabonds* program showed “every evidence of being badly adapted, if not totally unsuited, for mike purposes. Missing was the Brice skill at visual burlesque.”<sup>38</sup> Additionally, according to the reviewer, Brice had a tendency to play for the studio audience—probably with exactly the kind of physical humor and mugging so successful on stage—creating an unsatisfactory and confusing experience for the listeners at home. Brice herself acknowledged this in an interview:

But there is this danger to be considered, especially for an old trouper like myself ... The performer must remember that he is playing for a great unseen audience and not the few hundred people gathered to watch the show. The temptation to play to the visible audience by indulging in a funny grimace or gesture may annoy the radio listener, who is not in on the joke. The script keeps this tendency for by-play pretty well in check, but even at

that the comedian finds himself yielding to the temptation to extract another laugh by a silly bit of tom-foolery.<sup>39</sup>

Robert Landry gave her a similarly unfavorable review for the debut broadcast of *The Ziegfeld Follies of the Air*:

She was a comedienne without comedy. Her material left her fighting a losing battle ... Came up first with a string of wisecracks that lacked glitter and were unbecoming to a woman ... Still later did a satire that wasn’t satirical on a female platform demon discussing international affairs. Finally she sang “I’m an Indian” with most of the lines either brushed up for radio or shorn of most of their force when divorced from the mimicry that makes this performer stand out behind the footlights.<sup>40</sup>

Thus the very things that had made her a star—her roots in burlesque, her earthy ethnic humor, the physical parody that transcended the limits of female and ethnic stereotypes on stage and reached out directly to the audience, her status as a “speaking woman” itself—all of these could not be easily adapted to the non-visual, tightly controlled, conservative medium of radio.

Most of the acts featuring female comedians on the air in the early 1930s stemmed from a different, less dangerous vaudeville tradition: the male/female comedy team. Emerging from burlesque around the turn of the century, the male/female team re-introduced the “speaking woman” to the stage, after its much-criticized apotheosis in such scandalously sexualized spectacles as Lydia Thompson’s “British Blondes” in the late 1860s. According to Shirley Louise Staples, early mixed comedy teams focused on romantic dialogue and situations, often including a song number and featuring a happy ending.<sup>41</sup> By the teens many of these acts had incorporated elements of the ethnic comedy routine, based on bickering dialogue and comic insults, with couples berating each other in a series of put-downs. In response to this, by the late teens and early twenties a new type of humor arose, based on the childlike or “dumb



*Fanny Brice was one of the few radio comediennes who did not work as part of a “couple.”*

dora” character played by the female member of the team, with the male as straight man. Early practitioners of this tradition include Ben Ryan and Harriette Lee, whose act cast Lee as a tough Bowery child—thus combining ignorance, ethnicity and the figure of the child in one—and Arleen Bronson and Joe Laurie Jr. Taken to the comics by strips such as “Tillie the Toiler” and “Blondie” in the 1920s, it provided a familiar and comfortable transition to radio in such well-known acts as Burns and Allen, Fibber McGee and Molly, Jane and Goodman Ace in *Easy Aces*, and the teams of Fred Allen and Portland Hoffa, and Jack Benny and Mary Livingstone.

The most striking feature of this act is its concentration of the zany and satirical humor in the figure of the scatterbrained woman, controlled and contained by the male half of the team. Though this distribution of social authority could be tampered with or even reversed—McGee’s Irishness made him the humorous foil and Molly the level-headed one; Benny’s “fall guy” could be at once an object of fun even while he acted to

control Mary’s flights of fancy—it was extremely unusual on radio to hear a female comedian performing on her own, without the containing framework of the male/female structure. Solo male comedians were legion, but Brice remains one of the few women to receive top billing in her own right. Though Hanley Stafford’s “Daddy” certainly provided a similar function to the male in the duo, his role was always secondary to Snooks and indeed most of the humor devolved from her undermining of his authority. Not until the late 1940s would solo comediennes seize control of their acts, as former film stars such as Joan Davis, Lucille Ball, Eve Arden, Ann Sothern, Judy Canova and Marie Wilson debuted in their own comedy programs, many of which carried over into television.<sup>42</sup>

Fanny Brice had never worked as part of a couple, and her humor and persona stemmed from a burlesque tradition quite different from the male/female comedy endemic to radio. At once more highly sexual, more heavily ethnic, drawing on parody and satire rather than insult and “couple” jokes, her early comedic routines could not work within radio’s strict containment of female humor and marginalization of the “talking woman.” Brice’s creation of the Baby Snooks figure worked perfectly to negotiate the conflicting demands of her edgy, somewhat transgressive humor and the medium of radio. The “Schnooks” strategy consisted of an act of camouflage, taking the sensibilities and satire of a burlesque comedienne and hiding it behind a baby’s voice and an innocent demeanor. A child could provide the social skewering of the dumb dora figures while preserving the sexual innuendo, now safely distanced, of the burlesque. In this way it continued the strategy that Robert Allen attributes to the latter stages of burlesque, personified through performers such as Sophie Tucker, Mae West, and Eva Tanguay:

The final chapter that emerges from this history was that of tolerating “unruly” female performers so long as their transgressive power was channeled and defused through their construction as grotesque figures. Such figures were authorized to be transgressive because, by their fusing of incongruent cultural categories, they had been “disqualified” as objects of erotic desire.<sup>43</sup>

Nothing could be more safely disqualified than a child, and the spectacle of Brice in costume—widely circulated in publicity and films—as a fiftyish woman dressed in short skirt and hair bow, often in an indelicate and awkward position, with her face twisted in a grimace and an infantile voice, surely approached the grotesque. On radio, Brice at first attempted to preserve the adult Fanny on the air, with her edgy humor intact, only to meet with network discipline for her behavior “unbecoming to a woman.” Unbecoming to a woman, maybe, but not to a child. Released from the bonds of middle-class respectability enforced by the squeamish public service anxieties of the radio networks, outside the confines of the containment of the male/female team, it took a baby to get away with adult female humor.

However, this persona could backfire. By 1949, the child had been configured in a new way in American society: the center of domestic life, inscribed in an increasingly enforced web of family hierarchies and the discourse of juvenile delinquency. Snooks hardly embodied the model child of the 1950s. Even *Variety* fretted, “Her unruliness poses a script problem, in that her wrongdoing can’t be condoned.”<sup>44</sup> A whole new type of listener controversy arose. As one letter put it:

We are trying to prevent children from being delinquents and the Baby Snooks program has a father telling a child that she must open a mail box to recover a letter and has him admit to the child that it is a criminal offense. He thinks nothing of having her tell lies for him! If it is smart for Baby Snooks to lie and do those things it is smart for little listeners to follow suit. Can’t we have more wholesome humor? You may be sure WNBC will not be tuned in on my radio at that time again.<sup>45</sup>

In January 1950 another listener was moved to send a telegram: “THIS EVENINGS BABY SNOOKS PROGRAM MARKS A NEW LOW IN BAD TASTE AND UNSUITABILITY FOR JUVENILE LISTENERS.”<sup>46</sup>

At NBC, Continuity Acceptance professed concern to the first writer: “While we have

received no similar listener reaction we do feel you have made a very constructive suggestion and you should know we intend to bring this to the attention of the writers and producer of the show.”<sup>47</sup> However, their true feelings are summed up in an interoffice memo: “Why don’t you write H. Murphy a letter in East Orange and in your own gummy fashion win him/her back to our network with words of appreciation and gratitude. If you feel so inclined you might further instruct him/her to go stick his/her head in a toilet seat.”<sup>48</sup>

Most likely of more concern was the show’s scheduling against that phenomenon of early television, the *Texaco Star Theater* starring Milton Berle, on NBC-TV. Whether any time-honored radio comedian could have held out against that competition had not been conclusively proven at the time of Fanny Brice’s sudden death from a cerebral hemorrhage on May 24, 1951.<sup>49</sup>

The obituaries remembered her both as star of stage and screen and as the creator of Baby Snooks. Having not quite made it to television—and it is doubtful whether the fifty-nine-year-old actress could have carried Snooks to TV without the grotesque overwhelming the humorous—Brice faded slowly from memory, her contributions to the development of broadcast program forms recalled in brief asides but never deeply assessed. However, her child-centered brand of situation comedy would soon become a staple of television. Programs such as *Leave It To Beaver*, *My Three Sons*, *Dennis the Menace* and *The Patty Duke Show* drew on the mischievous, troublemaking ways of the relatively innocent child to question adult authority and social norms, though never with the transgressive edge of Snooks.<sup>50</sup> And Snooks is the character with whom Brice spent more of her life and expended more of her comic energy, than any of her justly famous stage routines, despite what later semi-biographical works, like Barbra Streisand’s two films, choose to remember. She deserves a more prominent place in the history of American media culture than past accounts have permitted. The “Schnooks” strategy marks a significant moment in the movement of women’s humor from the private sphere to the public arena. Once heard, Baby Snooks speaks in a voice it is hard to forget.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The biographies are: Herbert G. Goldman, *Fanny Brice: The Original Funny Girl* (NY: Oxford, 1992); Barbara W. Grossman, *Funny Woman: The Life and Times of Fanny Brice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); and Norman Katkov, *The Fabulous Fanny* (NY: Knopf, 1953). The films include *My Man* (Warner Bros., 1928); *Be Yourself!* (United Artists, 1930); *The Great Ziegfeld* (MGM, 1936); *Everybody Sing* (MGM, 1938); and *Ziegfeld Follies* (MGM, 1946); in addition to smaller roles in *Night Club* (Paramount, 1929) and *Crime Without Passion* (Paramount, 1934). Besides these films in which she appeared, Brice has been the subject of *The Rose of Washington Square* (20th-Fox, 1938), an unauthorized version of Brice's life for which she sued and received damages from the studio, and the Barbra Streisand vehicles *Funny Girl* in 1968 (first a Broadway musical in 1964) and *Funny Lady* in 1975.

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Kathleen Rowe's excellent analysis of the "unruly woman" on television and in film, though she does not specifically mention Brice. Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Grossman, *Funny Woman*, 194.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of blackface, see David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991) and Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). For the appropriation of blackface and ethnic humor in radio see Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: Broadcasting and American Culture 1922 to 1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> See Robert C. Allen, *A Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 243-49.

<sup>6</sup> Grossman, *Funny Woman*, 172.

<sup>7</sup> Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 251.

<sup>8</sup> *New York Times*, "The Microphone Will Present," February 2, 1930.

<sup>9</sup> Grossman, *Funny Woman*, 185-86; 263, note 81. Grossman is the first chronicler of Brice to take note of these Philco performances.

<sup>10</sup> J. Walter Thompson, "Chase & Sanborn's Tender Leaf Tea—History of Radio Advertising—Year 1933," Box 19 Standard Brands—Chase and Sanborn Hour 1929-43, J. Walter Thompson Collection, John W. Hartman Center for Sales, Advertising and Marketing History, Duke University Library, Durham, NC.

<sup>11</sup> Memo from Bertha Brainard to G. F. McClelland, "Program Deletions," May 29, 1933, Box 16, Folder 36, National Broadcasting Company Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, WI (hereafter referred to as NBC).

<sup>12</sup> Memo from Bertha Brainard to G. F. McClelland, "Program Deletions," June 14, 1933, Box 16, Folder 36, NBC.

<sup>13</sup> Memo from Bertha Brainard to John F. Royal, "Chase and Sanborn's Tea," July 5, 1933, Box 16, Folder 36, NBC.

<sup>14</sup> Brainard, "Program Deletions," May 29, 1933.

<sup>15</sup> Letter from A.H. Kirchofer to Lenox R. Lohr, June 14, 1939, Box 68, Folder 52, NBC.

<sup>16</sup> This is from the "Mrs. Cohen at the Beach" skit, first introduced by Brice in 1927 and later featured in the 1928 film *My Man*. One biographer, Herbert G. Goldman, points out that Gertrude Berg developed her highly successful radio show *The Rise of the Goldbergs* soon after this skit came out on film, and that at least one line—the famous "Yoo-hoo, Mrs. Bloo—oom"—came directly out of Brice's routine.

<sup>17</sup> For an extended discussion of this tension and its effects on network policy and programming, see Hilmes, *Radio Voices*.

<sup>18</sup> *Variety*, "Radio Savants up in Polls," May 6 1933.

<sup>19</sup> Grossman, *Funny Woman*, 197.

<sup>20</sup> Goldman, *Fanny Brice*, 157.

<sup>21</sup> Katkov, *Fabulous Fanny*, 245-46.

<sup>22</sup> Goldman, *Fanny Brice*, 277.

<sup>23</sup> See Michele Hilmes, *Hollywood and Broadcasting: Radio to Cable* (University of Illinois Press, 1990) for a full history of this relationship.

<sup>24</sup> *Newsweek*, November 15, 1937, 25.

<sup>25</sup> *Good News of 1937*, NBC, December 30, 1937, Recording #445, Society to Preserve and Encourage Radio Drama, Variety, and Comedy's Hollywood Archives Collection, Van Nuys, CA (hereafter referred to as SPERDVAC Hollywood Archives).

<sup>26</sup> *Good News of 1938*, NBC, April 14, 1938, Recording #451, SPERDVAC Hollywood Archives.

<sup>27</sup> *Good News of 1939*, NBC, April 27, 1939, Recording #487, SPERDVAC Hollywood Archives.

<sup>28</sup> *Variety*, "Fanny Brice Show," September 20 1944; *Newsweek*, "100% Irma," October 2, 1944, 56.

<sup>29</sup> *Variety*, "Baby Snooks," October 10, 1945; "Fanny Brice Show," November 16, 1949; "Fanny Brice Show," October 18, 1950.

<sup>30</sup> *Good News of 1939*, NBC, April 6, 1939, Recording #484, SPERDVAC Hollywood Archives.

<sup>31</sup> Memo from Bertha Brainard to George F. McClellan, "Program Deletions," June 6, 1933, Box 16, Folder 60, NBC.

<sup>32</sup> *Good News of 1939*, April 6, 1939.

<sup>33</sup> *Good News of 1940*, January 11, 1940, Recording #312, SPERDVAC Hollywood Archives.

<sup>34</sup> *The Baby Snooks Show*, 1944, #0557, University of Memphis Archives, Memphis, TN.

<sup>35</sup> *Variety*, "Out of Town Reviews: Corned Beef and Roses," October 22, 1930.

<sup>36</sup> Or, as Robert C. Allen points out, a process of bifurcation was going on. As mainstream burlesque was being elevated to middle-class status in such highly respected Broadway shows as the *Ziegfeld Follies*, in other venues the strip-tease became central to the definition of burlesque in the 1930s. While always socially suspect, the strip show became more widely popular in the Depression, to the point of semi-respectability, as in the fabled New York burlesque club Minsky's.

<sup>37</sup> *Variety* "Paramount, N.Y." December 6, 1932.

<sup>38</sup> *Variety*, "Royal Vagabonds," March 12, 1933.

<sup>39</sup> *New York Times*, "Mingling Laughs and Tears," May 21, 1933.

<sup>40</sup> Robert Landry, *Variety*, "Fanny Brice," March 4, 1936.

<sup>41</sup> Shirley Louise Staples, "From 'Barney's Courtship' to Burns and Allen: Male-Female Comedy Teams in American Vaudeville, 1865-1932," Ph. D. dissertation, Tufts University, 1981.

<sup>42</sup> Joan Davis starred in *Leave It To Joan*, on NBC, then CBS, from 1944 to 1949, then moved to television in *I Married Joan*, NBC 1952-55; Eve Arden played Mother to Baby Snooks until 1948, when she became *Our Miss Brooks* on CBS until 1956, the last four years simulcast on television as well; Lucille Ball appeared in *My Favorite Husband* on CBS beginning in 1948, then moved to TV in 1951; Marie Wilson was *My Friend Irma* on CBS from 1947 until 1955, the last two years simulcast; Ann Sothern starred as *Maisie*, CBS 1945-1952, moving to television in *Private Secretary* from 1953 until 1957; Judy Canova had her own comedy/variety show on CBS from 1943 until 1954. Her career faded after TV's arrival, but she appeared as a guest star on what may be the only all-female prime time comedy variety show in the history of television, the *Ina Ray Hutton Show*, on NBC from July to September in 1956.

<sup>43</sup> Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 282.

<sup>44</sup> *Variety*, "Fanny Brice Show," October 18, 1950.

<sup>45</sup> Letter from H. Murphy to NBC, n.d. (c. Nov. 1949), Box 151, Folder 5, NBC.

<sup>46</sup> Telegram from Mrs. G. W. Morgan to NBC, Jan. 10, 1950, Box 151, Folder 5, NBC.

<sup>47</sup> Letter from Carl Watson to Mrs. H. Murphy, November 25, 1949, Box 151, Folder 5, NBC.

<sup>48</sup> Memo from Don Honrath to Stockton Helffrich, November 21, 1949, Box 151, Folder 5, NBC.

<sup>49</sup> *New York Times* "Fanny Brice Dies at the Age of 59," May 30, 1951.

<sup>50</sup> Sara Dunne claims Lily Tomlin's Edith Ann, Whoopi Goldberg's nameless six-year-old, and Gilda Radner's Brownie Scout as the true inheritors of Snooks's legacy. Sara Dunne, "Women as Children in American Comedy: Baby Snooks' Daughters," *Journal of American History* 16 (Summer 1993): 31-35.