

PALGRAVE  
STUDIES IN  
COMEDY



# TRANSGRESSIVE HUMOR OF AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS

---

EDITED BY SABRINA FUCHS ABRAMS



# Palgrave Studies in Comedy

Series Editors

Roger Sabin

University of the Arts London

London, UK

Sharon Lockyer

Brunel University

London, UK

Comedy is part of the cultural landscape as never before, as older manifestations such as performance (stand-up, plays, etc.), film and TV have been joined by an online industry, pioneered by YouTube and social media. This innovative new book series will help define the emerging comedy studies field, offering fresh perspectives on the comedy studies phenomenon, and opening up new avenues for discussion. The focus is 'pop cultural', and will emphasize vaudeville, stand-up, variety, comedy film, TV sit-coms, and digital comedy. It will welcome studies of politics, history, aesthetics, production, distribution, and reception, as well as work that explores international perspectives and the digital realm. Above all it will be pioneering – there is no competition in the publishing world at this point in time.

More information about this series at  
<http://www.springer.com/series/14644>

Sabrina Fuchs Abrams  
Editor

Transgressive Humor  
of American Women  
Writers

palgrave  
macmillan

*Editor*

Sabrina Fuchs Abrams  
School for Graduate Studies  
SUNY Empire State College  
New York, NY, USA

Palgrave Studies in Comedy  
ISBN 978-3-319-56728-0      ISBN 978-3-319-56729-7 (eBook)  
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-56729-7

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017944597

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s) 2017

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use. The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, express or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Cover illustration: Getty Images/drante

Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature  
The registered company is Springer International Publishing AG  
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

*To my daughters, and all the women who find a voice through laughter*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book arose out of a special session on “Transgressive Humor of American Women Writers” that I organized at the Society for the Study of American Women Writers in November, 2015. Thanks to Rita Bode, the Conference Director, and Beth L. Lueck, the Associate Conference Director for organizing the conference, and to the original presenters, Regina Barreca and Diarmuid Hester, for contributing to such a lively and provocative panel. I am grateful to the Commissioning Editor at Palgrave Macmillan, Ryan Jenkins, for his interest in the project, and to his successor, Literature Editor, Allie Bochicchio, and her Editorial Assistant, Emily Janakiram, for their expert assistance in guiding me through the publication process. I am also indebted to the editors for the Palgrave Studies in Comedy series, Roger Sabin and Sharon Lockyer, for their interest in pursuing the project and their astute advice in shaping the collection. Thanks are also due to the production team at Springer Nature: Sridevi Purushothaman, Sneha Sivakumar, and Rachel Taenzler.

I would like to acknowledge Palczewski, Catherine H. Postcard Archive, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, Iowa, for their permission to reprint images for the essay on “Suffragist Humor in the Popular Press.” I am grateful to the cartoonist Roz Chast and to Bloomsbury Publishing for granting permission to reprint selected illustrations from Roz Chast, 2014, *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?*, and Roz Chast, 2006, *Theories of Everything*. This collection would not have been possible without the outstanding and varied contributions from essayists Margaret D. Stetz, Amanda T. Smith, Sean Zwagerman, Mary

Catherine Loving, Sonia Alvarez Wilson, Diarmuid Hester, Anne-Marie Evans, Linda A. Morris, Joanne Gilbert, and Rebecca Krefting. Thank you for your insights, your wit, and your inspiration in sharing the empowerment of female laughter with your readers.

Thanks to Dr. Nathan Gonyea, Dean of the School for Graduate Studies, State University of New York, Empire State College, for his support in enabling me to pursue this project and to Empire State College for its institutional support through faculty development funding. I am also grateful to the students in my Women and Humor graduate seminar for modeling a community of funny, fierce women. My deepest debt belongs to my family: my father, Dan Fuchs, a writer and wit; my mother, Cara, an elegant and incisive woman; my sister, Margot, a strong, insightful woman; my husband, Dave, an independent thinker; and our daughters, Natasha and Susannah, the next generation of smart, sassy women.

# CONTENTS

<b>No Joke: Transgressive Humor of American Women Writers</b> Sabrina Fuchs Abrams	1
<b>“To Amuse Intelligently and Cleverly”: Carolyn Wells and Literary Parody</b> Margaret D. Stetz	17
<b>From Headlines to Punchlines: Suffragist Humor in the Popular Press</b> Amanda T. Smith	37
<b>The Scholarly Transgressions of Constance Rourke</b> Sean Zwagerman	59
<b>Embattled Embodiment: The Sexual/Intellectual Politics of Humor in Mary McCarthy’s Writing</b> Sabrina Fuchs Abrams	81
<b>Humor as Clap Back in Lucille Clifton’s Poetry</b> Mary Catherine Loving	97

<b>Fidel and Gummy Bears?: Transgressive Humor in Contemporary Latina Fiction</b> Sonia Alvarez Wilson	115
<b>Humor, Gentrification, and the Conservation of Downtown New York in Lynne Tillman's <i>No Lease on Life</i></b> Diarmuid Hester	135
<b>Funny Women: Political Transgressions and Celebrity Autobiography</b> Anne-Marie Evans	155
<b>Roz Chast: From Whimsy to Transgression</b> Linda A. Morris	175
<b>"My Mom's a Cunt": New Bawds Ride the Fourth Wave</b> Joanne Gilbert	203
<b>Dueling Discourses: The Female Comic's Double Bind in the New Media Age</b> Rebecca Krefting	231
<b>Index</b>	251

## EDITOR AND CONTRIBUTORS

### About the Editor

**Sabrina Fuchs Abrams** is Associate Professor of English in the School for Graduate Studies at the State University of New York, Empire State College, USA. She is the author of *Mary McCarthy: Gender, Politics and the Postwar Intellectual* and editor of *Literature of New York*, in which her essay on “Dorothy Parker’s New York Satire” appears. She is currently working on a book, *The Politics of Humor: New York Women of Wit*, is founder and chair of the Mary McCarthy Society, and is Book Review Editor of *Studies in American Humor*.

### Contributors

**Anne-Marie Evans** is Senior Lecturer in American Literature and Subject Director for English Literature at York St John University, York, UK. Her main area of interest is early twentieth-century American Literature, and she is particularly interested in how models of consumerism are interrogated in women’s writing. She has published articles on the work of Edith Wharton, Ellen Glasgow, Mae West and Anita Loos, and has also edited two collections of essays on the contemporary American novel.

**Joanne Gilbert** is the Charles A. Dana Professor and Chair of Communication and New Media Studies at Alma College, Michigan, USA. She is the author of *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique*. Her work on the discourse of marginalized voices has appeared in *Women's Studies in Communication, Text and Performance Quarterly*, and in edited volumes such as *Women and Comedy: History, Theory, Practice* and *Fan Girls and the Media: Creating Characters, Consuming Culture*. Her performance background includes acting, directing, and performing professional stand-up comedy.

**Diarmuid Hester** holds a Ph.D. in English from the University of Sussex, Brighton, UK. His research focuses on twentieth and twenty-first-century American culture, especially the art and writing of Downtown New York. His work has appeared in places such as *Studies in the Literary Imagination, French Forum, Textual Practice*, and *The Los Angeles Review of Books*. He teaches at the University of Sussex's Center for American Studies.

**Rebecca Krefting** is Associate Professor in the American Studies Department at Skidmore College, New York, USA. Her research specializations are studies in humor and performance; identity and difference; media representations; visual and popular culture; and American subcultures. She is author of *All Joking Aside: American Humor and Its Discontents* and contributing author to several edited collections, including *Hysterical!: Women in American Comedy* and *Taking a Stand: American Stand-up Comedians as Public Intellectuals*.

**Mary Catherine Loving** was Associate Professor of English at New Jersey City University, New Jersey, USA and is currently Adjunct Professor of English at Paul Quinn College, Texas, USA. She has written a book, *Poets for Young Adults*, and articles on Phillis Wheatley, Audre Lorde, and Gloria Anzaldúa among others.

**Linda A. Morris** is Professor Emerita in the Department of English at the University of California, Davis, USA. She is the author of *Women's Humor in the Age of Gentility: The Life and Works of Frances Miriam Whitcher*; editor of *American Women Humorists: Critical Essays*; and author of *Gender Play in Mark Twain: Cross-Dressing and Transgression*. She has published a number of articles about nineteenth- and twentieth-century women's humor and about Mark Twain.

**Amanda T. Smith** is Associate Professor of English at Southwestern Oklahoma State University, Oklahoma, USA, and editor of *Westview*. She has published on British and transatlantic humor at the turn of the nineteenth century.

**Margaret D. Stetz** is Mae and Robert Carter Professor of Women's Studies and Professor of Humanities at the University of Delaware, USA. She is author of *British Women's Comic Fiction, 1890–1990: Not Drowning, But Laughing*; “The ‘Transatlantic’ and Late Nineteenth-Century American Women's Humor” in *Studies in American Humor* (2015); and numerous articles on Victorian British women writers and feminist theory.

**Sonia Alvarez Wilson** received her doctoral degree in post-1900 American Literature from University of North Carolina, Greensboro, USA, where she wrote on exile, immigration, and migration in US women's writing. Her research and teaching interests include Latina/o and multi-ethnic literatures. She currently teaches Latina/o literature and culture and composition at Catawba College in Salisbury, North Carolina, USA.

**Sean Zwagerman** is Associate Professor of English at Simon Fraser University, British Columbia, Canada. He is co-editor of *Women and Comedy: History, Theory, Practice* in which his essay, “A Cautionary Tale: Ann Coulter and the Failure of Humor,” appears. He is author of *Wit's End: Women's Humor as Rhetorical and Performative Strategy* and is interested in the intersections of rhetorical theory and speech-act theory, the rhetoric of humor, and public anxiety about plagiarism and literacy.

# LIST OF FIGURES

## **From Headlines to Punchlines: Suffragist Humor in the Popular Press**

Fig. 1	Palczewski, Catherine H. Postcard Archive. University of Northern Iowa. Cedar Falls, IA	38
Fig. 2	Palczewski, Catherine H. Postcard Archive. University of Northern Iowa. Cedar Falls, IA	47
Fig. 3	“Tune In, Turn On, Tune Out,” Full Frontal with Samantha Bee, Turner Broadcasting System, Inc. 2016	51
Fig. 4	Palczewski, Catherine H. Postcard Archive. University of Northern Iowa. Cedar Falls, IA	52

## **Roz Chast: From Whimsy to Transgression**

Fig. 1	Bad mom cards	179
Fig. 2	True confessions	181
Fig. 3	Police log from suburbia heights	184
Fig. 4	For their own good	187
Fig. 5	Things	188
Fig. 6	A blast from Chast	191
Fig. 7	Where’s mom	192
Fig. 8	Assisted living	193
Fig. 9	Something you should know	194
Fig. 10	Gallant and Goofus	196
Fig. 11	DNR	198

# No Joke: Transgressive Humor of American Women Writers

*Sabrina Fuchs Abrams*

*Transgressive Humor of American Women Writers* is the first collection of essays to focus on the transgressive and transformative power of American female humorists. It takes as its premise that there is a distinct body of humor by women and American women writers in particular, and that this humor tends to be subversive in nature. By transgressive, I mean that these humorists challenge certain patriarchal norms and assumptions regarding gender roles and identity and women's place in society. Drawing on various theories of humor, from the so-called superiority theory to the incongruity theory to the relief theory, this book looks at how humor, as an expression of sublimated aggressive and sexual impulses, is often transgressive in nature, and thereby considered by some to be "unfeminine." The female humorists have had to mask their aggressive and often politically and socially subversive messages through the indirect form of laughter and the double-voiced use of irony in order to have their voices heard. By looking at the unique body of American women writers, one gains a particularly diverse and rich range of voices representing different racial, ethnic, gender, class, and regional identities from the nineteenth through to the twenty-first century. This collection

---

S. Fuchs Abrams (✉)  
School for Graduate Studies, SUNY Empire State College,  
New York, NY, USA

© The Author(s) 2017  
S. Fuchs Abrams (ed.), *Transgressive Humor of American Women Writers*,  
Palgrave Studies in Comedy, DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-56729-7\_1

construes the term “writers” loosely to include a range of genres and comedic forms including poetry, fiction, prose, autobiography, graphic memoir, comedic performance, and new media.

Theories of humor have traditionally identified the aggressive, intellectual, and sexual tendencies of humor to be largely “masculine” and thereby inaccessible to women. From eighteenth-century conduct manuals to Victorian ideals of the “cult of true womanhood,” women were bound by feminine ideals of “piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.” In “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860,” Barbara Welter describes how the image of ideal womanhood emphasized emotion over reason and intuition over rationality and intellect.<sup>1</sup> Women were seen to uphold the spiritual and moral foundations of the domestic sphere while men would become educated, go out in the world, and secure a financial future. Sexuality for women was in the interest of procreation not pleasure in perpetuation of the goals of motherhood and marriage. Virginia Woolf among others warned that women must “kill the angel in the house” in order to find themselves. Access to higher education (beginning in the nineteenth century) and an increasing role in the work force during World War I, as well as the advent of birth control, gave women the financial, intellectual, and sexual freedom that defied traditional gender roles.

This newfound freedom was seen as a threat to the existing patriarchal power structure. Gilbert and Gubar have noted that this demonized the figure of the independent woman, creating a split between the domestic “Angel” and the liberated “Monster.”<sup>2</sup> This defiant figure is identified with female empowerment, wit, and humor, which, according to H el ene Cixous, is falsely identified by men as a threatening, monstrous figure because they cannot see her for who she is. “You only have to look at the Medusa straight to see her. And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing.”<sup>3</sup> According to Greek myth, Medusa’s power is deadly because Perseus refuses to look at her directly; if he could really see her, he would find her to be beautiful, not monstrous. Likewise, if men (and women themselves) could see women in all their capacity and not through the distorted male gaze, they would not appear threatening and monstrous but beautiful and enlightened. Laughter can be seen as castrating and emasculating, a sign of intellectual and sexual potency. Laughter can be seen as a physical release, like a kind of orgasm, especially when originated by woman, as opposed to the “faked” laughter of a woman at a man’s joke of which she or some other subordinate person

is the butt. But it can also be seen as an assertion of female sexuality, knowledge, and, ultimately, power. The laughing Medusa, says feminist theorist Susan Rubin Suleiman, is a “trope for women’s autonomous subjectivity and for the necessary irreverence of women’s writing and rewriting.”<sup>4</sup> The relation of humor to knowledge (intellectual, physical, emotional) and of knowledge to power is at the root of the female claim to humor and the denial by some men of women’s humor.

The resistance to women’s humor is rooted in various psychoanalytic and philosophical theories of humor. Whether one considers the more psychoanalytic theories of humor such as the “relief theory” of Freud and the superiority/disparagement theory of Bergson, or one turns to the more cognitive theory of incongruity, the traditional view of women as not having aggressive, sexual, or intellectual tendencies calls into question their ability to express or even understand humor. For Freud, “tendentious jokes,” or jokes with purpose, are like dreams, an outlet for hostile or obscene thoughts and feelings that are temporarily uninhibited and released through laughter. In keeping with the superiority/disparagement theory, these jokes are often used by those in positions of greater authority with the purpose of insulting or wounding those in subordinate positions, thereby reinforcing the status quo (note the many sexist and ethnic jokes used by Freud as illustrations). Beyond this, Freud also notes the potential subversive value of jokes in their capacity to invert the existing power structure by allowing for expression of otherwise forbidden hostility by those in subordinate positions against those in authority: “tendentious jokes are especially favored in order to make aggressiveness or criticism possible against persons in exalted positions who claim to exercise authority. The joke then represents a rebellion against that authority, a liberation from its pressure.”<sup>5</sup> Freud elaborates that through the masked form of humor, jokes can thereby be directed against people in authority, hallowed institutions, and the social conventions themselves that underlie such injustices: “the object of the joke’s attack may equally well be institutions, people in their capacity as vehicles of institutions, dogmas of morality or religion, views of life which enjoy so much respect that objections to them can only be made under the *mask of a joke* and indeed of a joke concealed by its façade,”<sup>6</sup> (my italics). This notion of humor as a masked form of social criticism or even rebellion by those in subordinate positions against injustices perpetuated by existing power structures is at the root of much of women’s humor. Henri Bergson sees laughter as a social corrective

used to mock eccentric or deviant behavior in the interest of preserving the status quo in his reputed study, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*.<sup>7</sup> The superiority-disparagement theory often has an aggressive component similar to that underlying the relief theory in that it often involves the intention to humiliate as a kind of “social ragging” in the interest of social conformity.

Unlike the relief theory and the superiority-disparagement theories of humor, which emphasize the sexual/aggressive tendencies and the social nature of humor, the “incongruity theory” of humor is less emotional and more cognitively based on the perceptual and verbal aspect of humor, in particular of irony and wit. Incongruity theory, which is considered the dominant theory of humor in philosophy and psychology today, is based on the “assumption that human experience works with learned patterns and expectations. When a thing violates our expectation or mental pattern, it is incongruous.”<sup>8</sup> The incongruity theory of humor, with its emphasis on the verbal presentation and cognitive perception of a double or ironic meaning (of a socially accepted and an underlying aggressive and subversive meaning), is central to an understanding of women’s humor. In “Toward a Feminist Poetics,” Elaine Showalter identifies the dual text found in much of women’s writing: “The feminist content of feminine art is typically oblique, displaced, ironic and subversive; one has to read it between the lines, in the missed possibilities of the text.”<sup>9</sup> Gilbert and Gubar further describe the necessity of women and other marginalized groups to use a double-voiced or “palimpsestic” discourse in order to mask the subversive intent of their words; such “works whose surface designs conceal or obscure deeper, less accessible (and less socially acceptable) levels of meaning. Thus these authors managed the difficult task of achieving true female literary authority by simultaneously conforming to and subverting patriarchal literary standards.”<sup>10</sup>

Such “double-voiced discourse,” says Judy Little, is common among comic writing by women, which “deconstructs or exposes the ideologies of authority and power, often by juxtaposing the male voice of solemn formality and the female voice of buoyant hysteria.”<sup>11</sup> This “carnivalization” of dialogue is traced by Little to Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of “heteroglossia” or the “dialogic” voice found in “the Menippea” (Menippean satire), which, according to Bakhtin, displays “dialogical parody.”<sup>12</sup> While Bakhtin sees the multivoiced discourse as expressing the spirit of “carnival” as a temporary state of transgression or challenge

to the status quo, Little suggests that women use this carnivalesque spirit to pose a more lasting challenge to the status quo through a masked, double-voiced discourse. This double meaning can take different forms: the voice of a narrator commenting on the actions of a character; the voice of one character over another; or the splitting voice within a single character commenting on his or her own thoughts or actions (think of the speaker in Dorothy Parker's "The Waltz" whose interior monologue expresses a more authentic, ironic, subversive meaning over the polite, socially prescribed external dialogue).<sup>13</sup>

The double voice of much of women's writing and of women's humor in particular is part of the modernist project, which often uses irony to pose a critical, subversive meaning beyond the literal or overt meaning. In her study *Irony's Edge*, Linda Hutcheon identifies what she terms the "transideological politics" of irony, questioning whether the use of irony is necessarily radical or subversive or if it can be seen as conservative in the literal sense of reinforcing the status quo. According to Hutcheon, "there is nothing *intrinsically* subversive about ironic skepticism or about any such self-questioning, 'internally dialogized' mode; there is no *necessary* relationship between irony and radical politics or even radical formal innovation. Irony has often been used to reinforce rather than to question established attitudes, as the history of satire illustrates so well."<sup>14</sup> The question about the subversive nature of ironic or parodic language is part of a larger debate about the feminist nature of women's humor, or whether women's use of a double-voiced language is subversive or a means of channeling anger and thereby reinforcing the social hierarchy. The "ambiguity" of irony is that it is at once elitist (in that to say one thing and mean another implies a certain privileged or shared knowledge) and subversive (in that it challenges the apparent meaning). A further "problem" of irony is that in the postmodern sense, how can one find a hidden or dual meaning if a primary or singular meaning and language itself is considered unstable?<sup>15</sup>

The performative aspect of women's language and gender identity itself is the subject of feminist theorist Judith Butler's notable work, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, in which she writes, "within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed ... There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; the identity is

performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results.”<sup>16</sup> The split between traditional gender roles of “masculine” and “feminine” and the dictates or pressures of “compulsory heterosexuality” are, in Butler’s view, socially constructed. The dichotomy between “masculine” and “feminine” identity and concomitant “masculine” and “feminine” language and behavior harks back to the outmoded, Victorian ideal of “true womanhood,” which even among twentieth-century women writers continued to create a double bind for outspoken women of wit. This split creates a double bind for women, says Regina Barreca, between the “Good Girl,” who doesn’t swear, tell jokes, or engage in sexual or aggressive behavior, and the “Bad Girl,” who does all of the above. “Learning to sound like a Good Girl, while half-concealing the text of the Bad Girl,” says Barreca, “has been the subject of a great deal of women’s humor.”<sup>17</sup> As evidenced by reviews of women writers such as Mary McCarthy, who was labeled as “our leading bitch intellectual” and the “dark lady of American letters,” while at the same time being dismissed for being a “trivial lady’s writer,” having a sharp wit and a sharp tongue to match was perceived as a threat to male writers and to the very foundation of female identity. Through humor and the double-voiced narrative of irony and satire, however, these women of wit were able to find a voice.

The question remains whether there is a distinctive body of humor by women, and if so, why has it been overlooked? Furthermore, is women’s humor transgressive in nature and does it tend to subvert or reinforce traditional gender roles? Nancy Walker identifies certain distinctive characteristics of what she terms “women’s humorous writing” that emphasize a more communal purpose and a deeper sense of empathy behind women’s humor that comes from being in a more subordinate position in society: “women tend to be *story* tellers rather than *joke* tellers. Humor functions for them more as a means of communication than as a means of self-presentation, a sharing of experience rather than a demonstration of cleverness ... women’s humorous expression is almost never purely comic or absurd ... it carries with it not the lighthearted feeling that is the privilege of the powerful, but instead a subtext of anguish and frustration.”<sup>18</sup> Conversely, traditional “male” humor would tend toward jokes and put-downs directed against those of perceived lower social standing as an expression of hostility and a demonstration of one’s own cleverness and an affirmation of one’s social superiority. Emily Toth

elaborates on this sense of difference in women's humor in identifying what she terms the "humane humor rule" in much of women's writing, namely, "the belief that a writer should not make fun of what people cannot change, such as social handicaps, race, sex, or physical appearance ... Rather, women humorists attack – or subvert – the deliberate choices people make: hypocrisies, affectations, mindless following of social expectations."<sup>19</sup> By contrast, "male" humor would be considered as a more aggressive attack on those of perceived inferiority due to innate differences such as race, gender, physical appearance, and so on.

Critics of women's humor have noted numerous reasons why women's humor has been overlooked and even resisted. The primary resistance to women's humor goes back to false assumptions about male/female identity and the belief that "feminine" ideals of submission, passivity and spirituality were seen as incompatible with the "masculine" expression of intellectual, sexual, and aggressive impulses associated with humor.<sup>20</sup> Women were not supposed to "get" jokes, and they were certainly not expected to tell jokes. Furthermore, humor was considered a "public" or performative function, usually requiring an audience, while women were traditionally constrained to the "private" spheres of home, church, or other gatherings of women. Walker notes that most nineteenth-century women's fiction tended to take place in such private or domestic spheres and to revolve around domestic subject matter. Thus if women were acknowledged to have a body of humor, it was dismissed (by predominantly male critics) as revolving around "trivial" domestic or "lady's" matters. In "Why We Aren't Laughing ... Any More," feminist Naomi Weisstein notes that women are no longer submitting to the nervous, acquiescent laughter when men tell jokes at their own expense; hence they are accused of not having a sense of humor. "So when we hear jokes against women and we are asked why we don't laugh at them," Weisstein defiantly retorts, "the answer is easy, simple, and short. Of course, we're not laughing, you asshole. Nobody laughs at the sight of their own blood."<sup>21</sup> Women have traditionally been put in the subordinate role of laughing at others' jokes (and not telling their own jokes) out of a kind of economic necessity. "Whenever men control women's political, economic, and personal lives," says Walker, "humor that makes men the target must be shared in secret."<sup>22</sup> In *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*, Kathleen Rowe makes a similar point that stand-up comediennes today still combat gender stereotypes of the

quiet, demure woman who doesn't swear or tell dirty jokes and that comediennes like Roseanne Barr and Kate Clinton are seen as defiant in their overt feminist agenda.<sup>23</sup>

So, can humor in general, and humor by women in particular, be seen as inherently subversive or conservative? In following the Freudian relief theory, humor can be seen as an outlet for hostile impulses, thereby turning anger into acceptance. Such is the view held by feminist activist Betty Friedan, who faulted domestic humorists of the 1950s for using humor as a means of sublimating their dissatisfaction with traditional roles as wives and mothers. Domestic humorists like Phyllis McGinley, Jean Kerr, and Shirley Jackson, says Friedan, cause women to “dissipate in laughter their dreams and their sense of desperation.”<sup>24</sup> Humor, argues Joanne R. Gilbert in *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique*, undermines its own revolutionary potential and is “antithetical to action. First, it functions as an ‘anti-rhetoric,’ always negating its own potential power by being just a joke. More important, humor renders its audience passive. It disarms through amusing. Laughter is not generally a galvanizing force toward political action.”<sup>25</sup> As an aspect of the carnivalesque, humor allows for expression of subversive or forbidden impulses but ultimately returns to the existing social order. The paradox of humor, however, is that it allows for this disruptive impulse, this challenging of authority under the guise of social acceptance. So it is, one might say, safely subversive. Other critics of women's humor, like Regina Barreca, find a more overt feminist agenda behind women's humor, seeing a split between masculine humor as “deflective” allowing for the “oh-I-was-kidding disclaimer” and female humor “not as a safety valve but as an inflammatory device, seeking, ultimately, not to purge desire and frustration but to transform it into action.”<sup>26</sup>

In *Pulling Our Own Strings: Feminist Humor and Satire*, Gloria Kaufman makes a distinction between “female” humor and “feminist” humor. “The persistent attitude that underlies feminist humor,” says Kaufman, “is the attitude of social revolution—that is, we are ridiculing a social system that can, that must be changed. *Female* humor may ridicule a person or a system from an accepting point of view (‘that’s life’), while the *nonacceptance* of oppression characterizes feminist humor and satire.”<sup>27</sup> Feminist humorists tend toward more overt political action surrounding issues of, say, women's suffrage in the 1910s to 1920s or women's rights in the 1970s. The “Heterodoxy” was one such group of

women activists in New York's Greenwich Village from 1912 to 1940, including feminist humorists like Alice Duer Miller, whose *Are Women People? A Book of Rhymes for Suffrage Times* (1915) parodies anti-suffrage sentiment, or Florence Guy Seabury, whose *The Delicatessen Husband and Other Essays* (1925) explores the conflicts of the "New Woman" in her quest for equality, or Charlotte Perkins Gilman, whose female utopian novel, *Herland* (1915), is a feminist tract.

But not all women's humor needs to have a "feminist" agenda in order to be subversive. Nancy Walker makes the important qualification that, while not expressing an overt, revolutionary call for social change, so-called "female" humor can be quietly subversive by exposing the limitations of gender stereotypes, thereby fostering not revolution, but reform. There are two types of women's humor, says Walker: "One, operating subversively within the cultural system of subjugation, acknowledges a women's subordination while protesting it"; the other "explores the fundamental absurdity of that system and calls for different ways of conceptualized gender definition." So-called female humor "is not merely 'accepting' the status quo but is calling attention to gender inequality in ways designed to lead to its rejection." Thus, argues, Walker, many female humorists "have displayed a feminist consciousness that approaches the problem indirectly."<sup>28</sup>

*Transgressive Humor of American Women Writers* addresses the various ways in which American women writers use humor as a form of transgression, from the more overt feminist humor of comediennes like Amy Schumer and Whitney Cummings to the indirect use of irony and satire by such writers as Roz Chast and Mary McCarthy. In each case, the female humorist is challenging patriarchal assumptions regarding traditional gender roles in the interest of personal transformation or social reform through the socially acceptable form of laughter. The collection begins with a historical perspective through an examination of the neglected poetry of nineteenth-century humorist Carolyn Wells. In her essay, "'To Amuse Intelligently and Cleverly': Carolyn Wells and Literary Parody," Margaret D. Stetz focuses on Wells' use of literary parody to target her fellow writers, who were frequently male poets, and, especially, their representations of women. "That Wells did so with works by canonical male authors ranging from Milton and Shelley to contemporaries such as Swinburne and Kipling attests to her fearlessness in transgressing the boundaries for women, as she asserted her right to 'amuse intelligently and cleverly' by poking fun." Amanda T. Smith reframes

the turn of the nineteenth-century suffragist humor of Marietta Holley, Alice Duer Miller, and Florence Guy Seabury in challenging the literary and political gender conventions of the day. Drawing on feminist humor theories, she posits the cultural and literary impact of suffragist humorists in the popular press, including such periodicals as *Peterson's Magazine*, *The New York Tribune*, *Harper's*, and *The Woman Voter*. Sean Zwagerman reexamines the “scholarly transgressions” in both content and rhetorical style of reputed humor critic, Constance Rourke, whose landmark study *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (1931) challenged the gendered assumptions of her male predecessors. Sabrina Fuchs Abrams exposes the sexual/intellectual politics of humor in Mary McCarthy's writing through an examination of the embattled embodiment of women of wit in such autobiographical fiction as *The Company She Keeps*. McCarthy's use of satire can be seen as an indirect form of social protest against traditional gender expectations in modern American society.

The next part of the collection looks at diverse perspectives of marginalized voices in American women's humor, as well as more contemporary perspectives. Mary Catherine Loving restores the neglected poetry of African American poet Lucille Sayles Clifton and her use of humor, irony, and history to admonish the male species, to assert the “transgressive black body,” and to celebrate a life against obstacles. In examining the humor of contemporary Latina fiction writers Sandra Cisneros, Judith Ortiz Cofer, and Cristina Garcia, Sonia Alvarez Wilson “explores the various ways Latina authors challenge cultural confines with wit, humor, and a pioneering spirit.” Through an exploration of the writing of American authors of Caribbean and Mexican origin, Alvarez Wilson “highlights their use of transgressive humor to resist and challenge cultural norms and stereotypes.” In “Humor, Gentrification, and the Conservation of Downtown New York in Lynne Tillman's *No Lease on Life*,” Diarmuid Hester subverts the representation of Lynne Tillman as a “transgressive writer” associated with New York's Lower East Side in the 1990s. He argues that she “seems to extend the transgressive strategy ... with jokes that are variously crude, racist, anti-Semitic, innocuous, and inane.” Thus she “ironically enshrines in prose a rapidly fading culture of Downtown New York in its irreverent spirit which, by the late 1990s, had given way to waves of gentrification.”

The remaining essays in the collection identify the transgressive nature of contemporary American female humorists in various media, from comedic performance to graphic memoir to new media. In “Funny Women: Political Transgressions and Celebrity Autobiography,” Anne-Marie Evans “explores the relationship between transgressive humor and popular feminism in the autobiographical writings of four contemporary American comedienne,” including Lena Dunham, Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, and Mindy Kaling. She argues that these autobiographies serve not only as a source of humor but also “primarily as a vehicle for social criticism.” Linda Morris looks at the movement “from whimsy to transgression” of *New Yorker* cartoonist Roz Chast, focusing on her 2014 graphic memoir *Can’t We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* which uses humor to cope with the illness and death of her parents. In “My Mom’s a Cunt’: New Bawds Ride the Fourth Wave,” Joanne Gilbert looks at the performance of marginality through the aligning of what she terms “bitch” and “bawd” personas with an intentional emphasis on difference and the rhetorical form of female comedienne Amy Schumer, Sarah Silverman, and Whitney Cummings. “The impact and implications of this particular comedic discourse,” says Gilbert, “are critical to discussions of gender, power, and fourth wave feminism.” In the final essay, “Duelling Discourses: The Female Comic’s Double Bind in the New Media Age,” Rebecca Krefting challenges what she terms the “Content is King” discourse that maintains that the internet levels the playing field in the comedy industry, and she shows how the “duelling discourses” of “virtual parity” and gender bias “lock women comics into a double bind.” Using ethnography, textual analysis of women’s comic performances, and feminist discourse analyses of popular media, Krefting interrogates “the ways those discourses circumscribe women’s professional success as comedians and the various ways female comics are challenging such discursive lies.”

Given the scope and originality of the collection, including a number of new perspectives by leading scholars in the field of American women’s humor, as well as current voices from emerging scholars, *Transgressive Humor of American Women Writers* is already anticipated to make an important contribution to the field of women’s humor. Women’s humor has been the subject of critical inquiry since the 1970s by such groundbreaking theorists as Nancy Walker (*A Very Serious Thing: Women’s Humor and American Culture*, 1988), Emily Toth (“A Laughter of Their Own: Women’s Humor in the United States,” 1984), and Regina Barreca (*They Used to Call Me Snow White*

... *But I Drifted: Women's Strategic Use of Humor*, 1991) and in the popular press as seen in the notorious *Vanity Fair* article, "Why Women Aren't Funny," by Christopher Hitchens (January, 2007) and the rebuttal "Who Says Women Aren't Funny?" by Alessandra Stanley (April, 2008) as well as the more recent *Atlantic* article, "Plight of the Funny Female," by Olga Khazan (November, 2015).<sup>29</sup> It is particularly relevant today, with the recent surge of female comedienues in the media and new media, including Tina Fey, Amy Schumer, Mindy Kaling, Whitney Cummings, Lena Dunham, Issa Rae, and Ali Wong. While there are earlier, almost canonical collections of essays on women's humor and humor in general,<sup>30</sup> most of these date back to the early 1990s or before and focus on what was then the emerging field of women's humor studies. More recent collections, like *Women and Comedy: History, Theory, Practice*<sup>31</sup> offer a more far-reaching overview of the history and theory of women's comedy internationally. This is the first contemporary collection to focus on the particularly rich and distinctive area of *American* women writers and the subversive nature of much of their humor. With the resurgence of female humorists in the media today, many of whom are overtly transgressive in their style and content, there is a renewed interest in the history of American women's humor, as well as a reexamination of the subversive, sublimated, and at times self-deprecatory nature of American female humorists. This book will find an audience in a broad readership as well as in academic circles for those interested in women's and gender studies, humor studies, urban studies, American literature and cultural studies, and media studies. Humor is hot, and American women of wit are especially hot right now. What are the assumptions behind such categories and why are they so important? Read this book and find out!

## NOTES

1. Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* vol. 18 no. 2 part 1 (Summer 1966): 151-174.
2. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, "Infection in the Sentence: The Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship" in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd edition (1979; rpt., New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 79.

3. Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* vol. 1 no. 1 (Summer 1976): 885.
4. Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 168.
5. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. 1905. Trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1960), 105.
6. *Ibid.*, 108–109.
7. Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, 1911, reprinted in *Comedy*, ed. Wylie Sypher (Garden City, New York: Double Day Anchor Books, 1956).
8. John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 10.
9. Elaine Showalter, "Toward a Feminist Poetics," in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985) quoted in Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man's Land*, 138.
10. Gilbert and Gubar, "Infection in the Sentence," 73.
11. Judy Little, "Humoring the Sentence: Women's Dialogic Comedy" in *Women's Comic Visions*, ed. June Sochen (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 20.
12. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 106–137.
13. See Paula A. Treichler, "Verbal Subversion in Dorothy Parker: 'Trapped Like a Trap in a Trap'" in *The Critical Waltz: Essays on the Work of Dorothy Parker*, ed. Rhonda S. Pettit (Madison and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2005).
14. Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 10.
15. Claire Colebrook, *Irony* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 18–19.
16. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990; repr., New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 34.
17. Regina Barreca, "*They Used to Call Me Snow White ... but I Drifted*": *Women's Strategic Use of Humor* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 16.
18. Nancy Walker, *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), xii.
19. Emily Toth, "Female Wits" *Massachusetts Review* (Winter 1987): 783.
20. June Sochen, ed. and intro., *Women's Comic Visions* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 11–12; Gail Finney, ed. and intro., *Look Who's Laughing: Studies in Humor and Gender*, Vol. 1 (New York: Routledge, 1994), 2.

21. Naomi Weisstein, "Why We Aren't Laughing ... Any More," *Ms.* 2.2 (Nov. 1973) 49–51 rpt. in *American Women Humorists*, 134.
22. Walker, "Toward Solidarity: Women's Humor and Group Identity" in *Women's Comic Visions*, edited by June Sochen (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 66.
23. Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).
24. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1963) qtd. in Walker "Toward Solidarity," 58.
25. Joanne R. Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 172.
26. Regina Barreca, *Untamed and Unabashed: Essays on Women and Humor in British Literature* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 18.
27. Gloria Kaufman, introduction to *Pulling Our Own Strings: Feminist Humor and Satire*, ed. Gloria Kaufman and Mary Kay Blakely (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1980), 13.
28. Nancy Walker, *A Very Serious Thing*, 145–147.
29. Nancy Walker, *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture*; Emily Toth, "A Laughter of Their Own: Women's Humor in the United States," in *Critical Essays on American Humor*, ed. William Bedford Clark and W. Craig Turner (Boston, G.K. Hall, 1984); Regina Barreca, *They Used to Call Me Snow White ... But I Drifted: Women's Strategic Use of Humor*; Christopher Hitchens, "Why Women Aren't Funny" *Vanity Fair*, January, 2007; Alessandra Stanley, "Who Says Women Aren't Funny?" *Vanity Fair*, April, 2008; Olga Khazan, "Plight of the Funny Female," *Atlantic*, November, 2015.
30. Linda Morris ed., *American Women Humorists: Critical Essays* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994); Sarah Blacher Cohen ed., *Comic Relief: Humor in Contemporary American Literature* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978); June Sochen ed., *Women's Comic Visions*, 1991; Regina Barreca, *Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy* (New York: Routledge, 1988); *Untamed and Unabashed: Essays on Women and Humor in British Literature* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994).
31. Peter Dickinson, Anne Higgins, Paul Matthew St. Pierre, Diana Solomon, Sean Zwagerman, eds., *Women and Comedy: History, Theory, Practice* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2014).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, 106–137.
- Barreca, Regina. "They Used to Call Me Snow White ... but I Drifted": *Women's Strategic Use of Humor*. New York: Penguin Books, 1992.