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Barreca, Regina R.

HATE AND HUMOR IN WOMEN'S WRITING: A DISCUSSION OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY AUTHORS

City University of New York PH.D. 1987

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Hate and Humor in Women's Writing: A Discussion of Twentieth - Century Authors.

by

Regina R. Barreca

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty
in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
The City University of New York.

1987

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Chair of Examining Committee

April 27, 1987
date

Executive Officer

Prof. Mary Ann Caws

Prof. Michael Timko

Prof. Gerhard Joseph

Supervisory Committee

The City University of New York

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Table of Contents

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Preface: Orienting Strategies.

> But I must confess I have never made any
> Observation of what I Apprehend to be true
> Humour in Women...Perhaps Passions are too
> powerful in that Sex to let Humour have its Course;
> or maybe by reason of their Natural Coldness,
> Humour cannot Exert itself to that extravagant
> Degree, which it does in the Male Sex.
>
> "Concerning Humor in Comedy," 1695

Congreve's belief that women lacked a sense of humor has been echoed continually through three-hundred years of literary criticism on British literature. The reasons Congreve supplies explaining why women cannot create "true humour" have also reappeared in a variety of configurations from the seventeenth through the twentieth century. A few critics, it is true, have experimentally added their own speculations on why humor and the creation of comedic works remains a gender-based, all-male pastime. They have not, however, challenged Congreve's claim: the belief that women cannot write comedy remains a basic tenet of literary criticism.

As recently as 1976, J.B. Priestley, while discussing Jane Austen in his extensive critical work English Humor, felt it important to mention that, although enjoyable, Austen "frequently attends to what any man feels are feminine small potatoes"(126). When speaking of Elizabeth Gaskell's Cranford, Priestley felt obliged to point out, to any unwary gentlemen that

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"the male reader knows what he is in for; many measures of indeed very small beer"(127).

The summary remark that might best serve to delineate traditional critical approaches to women and comedy was made by Reginald Blyth in 1970: "[t]he truth is...that women have not only no humor in themselves but are the chief cause of the extinction of it in others. Women are...the unlaughing at which men laugh"(14). Unfortunately this comment was not delivered as a joke. It does, however, indicate the manner in which humor in women's writings has been censored by most critics. Perhaps women's humor has not so much been ignored as it has been unrecognized.

The major studies dealing exclusively with the role of comedy in British literature do not deal with women writers. Meredith is, of course, the exception to the rule, but even his socially conscious and widely influential "An Essay on Comedy" does little to explore the role of women creating comedy. Rather, Meredith emphasizes women as figures presented in comedy, as more passive generators of the comic spirit (since comedy is seen as a spirit of general freedom) than their male counterparts:

> Women will see that where they have no social freedom, comedy is absent; where they are household drudges, the form of comedy is primitive...but where women are on the road to an

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> equal footing with men, in attainments and in liberty...pure comedy flourishes (60-61).

Ultimately, however, Meredith broadly sweeping exhortation of "good will towards all," while certainly welcome, does little to aid a discussion of women writers and comedy.

We must return to Priestley as the spokesman (sic) for the generally held view. He maintains, with enormous conviction, that the "sort of humor essentially feminine in nature" is that characterised by "soft laughter and smiles" which "soon dissolve into tears"(138). Priestley is to be applauded for putting forth a view so traditional, so conservative, so unenlightened, as to be of great help in determining why women's comedy has been surpressed: thinking that women should be there to laugh at men's jokes, not to make any of their own, (a concept which will be discussed in detail in later chapters), he suggests how women should respond to comedy:

> What my sex needs is an ample supply of first-rate women, who can look at us and listen to us not without sympathy but who are always prepared to laugh at us, knowing full well they have more sense than we have, so many thick-skinned pompous chaps (138).

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Women's proper role in relation to comedy is that of the receptor; if women are seen only in this light, is not surprising that they don't make too many jokes around Priestley and that they are "always prepared to laugh" around him. Faced with the prospect of women initiating humor, he is stern, dismissive and patronizing:

> The movement generally called 'women's lib' does not seem likely to produce more and better feminine humor. If it should succeed, what it will probably offer us is a number of women who have been turned into second-rate men (138).

There are a number of man-made generalizations, unhesitatingly gender-specific, concerning reasons why women and comedy keep little company. Without apology, critics like Martin Grotjahn, writing on comedy in the late 1950's, continued to reproduce and elaborate upon the reasons why there is no connection between women and comedy:

> There are no female clowns; the Red-hot Mama, the burlesque queen, and the comedienne have to be specially censored in order to conceal the return of the repressed longing for the mother in new disguise (273).

Traditional studies of comedy, such as Cazamian's The Development of English Humor, Smith's The Nature of Comedy, Schilling's The Comic Spirit, Rodway's English Comedy, as well as recent, comprehensive collections on

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comedy, such as the important volume edited by Robert Corrigan, entitled Comedy: Meaning and Form, or Veins of Humor,(Harvard English Studies3) ignore writings by women authors, making passing (if not parenthetical) reference to Jane Austen, implying that she was the sole female writer ever to employ any form of humor. Women writers have recognized that this sort of split in perceptions of comedy can cause a number of problems. George Eliot argued that "a difference of taste in jokes is a great strain on the affection".[1]

It is remarkable that there is no comprehensive study providing a critical and theoretical framework for a feminist discussion of comedy in women's literature. Women writers have traditionally used comedy to subvert existing conventional structures: recent feminist criticism has acknowledged the power of rage in writings by women, but has as yet left unexamined the crucial roles of comedy paired with anger as shaping forces and feminist tools. Why this silence on a matter which is a characteristic manifestation of women's writings?

The problematic nature of women and comedy is evidenced by the fact that even in the most comprehensive and landmark works of feminist criticism, including Gilbert and Gubar's The Madwoman in the Attic,

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Showalter's A Literature of Their Own , Toril Moi's Sexual/Textual Politics , Kaplan's Feminine Consciousness in the Modern British Novel, or Dinnerstein's The Mermaid and the Minotaur, for example, the role of comedy is rarely mentioned. Nor do collected essays, such as those appearing in The (M)Other Tongue, or Writing and Sexual Difference , offer a practical perspective on comedy. They do, however, offer general insights into the silencing of a number of forms of women's writing and their arguments can be applied successfully to the topic of women and comedy.

It is of the utmost importance to raise, not to sweep aside, questions concerning the appropriation of comedy by women writers. Feminist criticism has avoided discussion of comedy, perhaps in order to be accepted by conservative critics who found feminist theory comic in and of itself. What is needed at this point is an initial discussion of women, anger and comedy from which other discussions can spring.

Women authors have of course written comedies, but some of the most important aspects of these comedies have been virtually ignored by critics who do not perceive the wide range of emotions potentially raised by the texts. The male critics quoted earlier argue, I think, that women have no "true" sense of comedy, tacitly acknowledging that women may attempt

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comedy but that these attempts cannot be judged successful. There is no denial that women have tried to write comedy, but rather, simply, that women have not been able to do it nearly so well as men.

Regenia Gagnier quotes from a fascinating study testing the reactions of men and women to humorous stimuli under controlled circumstances. Under the findings of this study, men were found to be "objective" or "field independent" where women were found to be "subjective" or "field dependent" which means:

> that in public environments women look 'round to see who else is laughing and men immediately discern the absolute signification of...hard core humor per se.[2]

Gagnier's use of sociological research to illuminate literary criticism is useful in several ways, not the least of which is establishing some of the cultural determinants involved in this issue. For example, the sociologically/anthropologically-based collection Becoming Female: Perspectives on Development,[3] offers insight into the "clearly definable set of sex-role standards regarding humor which exists for males and females in our culture"(138). Placed within the context of literary criticism which, as we have seen, considers comedy a male-dominated (if not male-only) construct, Becoming Female and similar texts provide methods

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whereby feminist critics can locate new ground for a discussion of women and comedy. Paul McGhee's assertion, based on lengthy and wide-ranging studies of humor, that "most important...is the expectation that males should be initiators of humor, while females should be responders," states the openly revealed viewpoint that has informed so much previous literary criticism on women and comedy. Why do critics from Congreve to Priestley assert that women have no sense of the comic? Perhaps because you cannot see what you do not believe can exist. If women cannot write comedy, it stands to reason that they surely do not write comedy. McGhee's preliminary conclusions linking women's use of comedy with aggression and the refusal to accept sex-role stereotypes help to answer the question by suggesting that women must break out of their traditional patterns of behavior to initiate humor:

> It is proposed that the use of humor in interpersonal interaction serves as a means of gaining or maintaining dominance or control over the social situation. Because of the power associated with the successful use of humor, humor initiation has become associated with other traditionally masculine characteristics, such as aggressiveness, dominance, and assertiveness. For a female to develop into a clown or joker, then , she must violate the behavioral pattern normally reserved for women (183).

A study done by another team of sociologists concluded that: "...women are

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neither expected, nor trained, to joke in this culture ... it seems reasonable to propose that attempting a witty remark is often an intrusive, disturbing and aggressive act, and within this culture, probably unacceptable for a female"(McGhee 225).

It would appear from these studies that women who create comedy do so in order to intrude, disturb and disrupt; that comedy constructed by women is linked to aggression and to the need to break free of socially and culturally imposed restraints. If we agree with Theodor Adorno who argues in Minima Moralia that "femininity itself is already the effect of the whip"(96), then women's comedy also indicates the attempt to break free of the imposition of "femininity." This aggression and anger underlying comedic constructs (including works of literature) by women has been ignored almost completely. Yet, as I will illustrate, anger and comedy are present as interlocking forces in many writings by women.

What expectations are awakened by women's narrative strategies which cause them to be misread? When Priestley asserts that Austen writes about "feminine small potatoes," he is summing up a typical view of women's comedy: it appears to lack any significant content. Comedy written by women is perceived as trivial, silly and unworthy of serious attention. These reactions might appear understandable, given that women

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are writing outside the locus of power and authority; writing about women's activities appears to many critics to have less purpose than writing about men's activities. When writing comedy, where the unofficial nature of the world is explored (to paraphrase Bakhtin), women are damned to insignificance twice over. In this respect, comedy can be compared to gossip. Gossip, another unofficial version of the world, is of "special value as a resource for the oppressed or dispossessed," according to Patricia Spacks (Gossip 15). In women's comedy, as in women's gossip, the unimportant discuss the unofficial. How can one expect women to be regarded with care?

Women are dismissed by critics in much the same manner as Lady Middleton dismisses Elinor and Marianna in Austen's Sense and Sensibility (1811); Lady Middleton, representative of the old order is suspicious of the Dashwood sisters:

> because they were fond of reading, she fancied
> them satirical: perhaps without exactly knowing
> what it was to be satirical; but that did not signify.
> It was censure in common use, and easily given.[4]

One thing that has become most apparent during my research on women and comedy is the prevailing attitude that comedy written by women is gentle, subtle and reconciling. The number of histories of comedy which

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classify women's comedy in these terms confirms what I believe is central in the misreading of women's texts: the belief that women are incapable of producing the challenging, angry and subversive comedy that they in fact write. Aside from a few articles which raise the possibility for this uncommon interpretation, such as D.W. Harding's discussion of Jane Austen in terms of "Regulated Hatred," or Wilt's "The Laughter of Maidens, the Cackle of Matriarchs: Notes on the Collision between Comedy and Feminism," there exists the mostly unassailed conviction that those few women who write comedies write them only with a desire to provide mild entertainment.

Judith Wilt's trenchant argument is therefore immensely suggestive in underscoring the relationship between women's comedy and anger. There is, for women, a:

> boundary where comedy ceases to cheer and succor and becomes violent, destructive, murderous, will tumble over the edge of myth into madness (Wilt 174).

This is a reaction to the growing awareness that comedy is an ideological construct. Men and women, Wilt claims, have different uses for comic constructs:

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> Women are only just beginning to realise that male humour has various functions, but none of them is intended to please or benefit them. It can be a bonding device, assisting male solidarity (and excluding women). It can be a smoke-screen, set up to dissipate an aura of good humour (distracting and deceiving women). Finally, it can be a form of assault, a teasing attack (putting women in that mythical region, their place). In any event it is used to avoid, to impede, or to deride the possibility of free equal relationships between men and women (187).

Indeed, women do make use of humor and comedy in their writings, but often couple it with an incipient rage that may cloud the perception of the reader. The narrative strategies employed by women writers awaken certain types of reader expectations that do not conform to traditional views of comedy and so are often misread. It is my contention that comedy and anger are two fundamental mainstays of women's writing. Women writers' coupling of comedy and anger appears to be beyond the paradigmatic bounds set forth as acceptable when discussing comedy and when discussing feminism, making it appear to be subversive on several fronts. Employed by women, humor usually reveals the implicit presence of ideas and emotions which can be expressed only through a sort of covert language, masking the contradiction of public authority and disguising the

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radical potentials of the text.

It is significant, and indicative of much criticism, that Gilbert and Gubar do not choose to classify the uses of irony or comedy. While they argue convincingly that a general concept of rage underlies most women's writings, they do not confront the levels of meaning inherent in apparently conventional assertions. Gilbert and Gubar can be seen to equivocate when discussing humor in the works by writers they consider in The Madwoman in the Attic.[5]

This point raises other questions central to our critical understanding of both literature and feminist thought. Why are rage and anger more accessible to our theoretical vocabulary than comedy? For Gilbert and Gubar do offer excellent insights into the repressed aggression of women authors. Echoing Harding, they often discuss "the explosive anger behind the decorous surfaces of Austen's novels"(111). Austen, they continue:

> expresses her dissent under the cover of parodic strategies that had been legitimized by the most conservative writers of her time and that therefore were then [and remain now] radically ambiguous (120).

This is in contrast to traditional perceptions of women's comedy, once again

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summed up by Priestley, who indicates that "woman (should) assert her instinctive feeling for unity and harmony"(138), perhaps because he is frightened by the intuitive perception of what he can only name the negative: "feminine humour in general is not affectionate"(116), an assertion which constitutes one of the most telling understatements in literary criticism.

It is not, however, within the scope of this dissertation to give a thorough historical account of comedy and women writers in British literature, although I firmly believe my assertions would be upheld by a reading of the works of Behn, Burney and Austen. The compass of the present question is necessarily more narrow, and will be illustrated by three more recent writers, the scrutiny of whose work, however, should help to illuminate the central issues as they apply to all women writers.

If we look at the ways in which theoreticians have discussed comedy as a genre, we see that they are concerned with a number of central ideas all regarded as possible constituents in the proper definition of the term 'comedy': the relationship between comedy and functions or parts of the body; comedy as celebration of fertility and regeneration; comedy as the vulgar and exaggerated presentation of the familiar; comedy as catharsis of

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desire and frustration; comedy as social safety valve; comedy as carnival; comedy as unconscious, psychological reaction to personal and social instabilities; comedy as happy ending, joyous celebration, and re-establishment of order.

What then are the defining features of comedy in women's writings in relation to the discussion of comedy in general? I want to suggest that for female writers a different criterion for comedy should be established from the one traditionally applied to their male counterparts. It is my contention that women write comedies without "happy endings"; that despite the absence of such an ending, these works can indeed be classified as comedies; that they write comedies which destroy a social order, perhaps but not necessarily to establish a new and different order; that their comedies may contain very little joyous celebration; that they rarely use vulgar language to achieve comic effect; that they use comedy not as a safety valve but as an inflammatory device, seeking, ultimately, not to purge desire and frustration but to transform it into action.

A revised concept of comedy and women writers must be oriented toward values not usually associated with traditional views of humor in English literature. To claim otherwise, to suggest that such a normative polemic is

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somehow inappropriate would itself be indicative only of prejudice and an unwillingness to have the already defined ideology challenged. Certainly recent feminist criticism has accepted the challenge of providing new patterns and strategies to characterize women's narrative discourse. There is no reason comedy and humor should be excluded from this revisionist criticism. The interpretive applications for comedy written by women have been narrowed by the inherited critical structures which do not provide for the particularly insurgent strategies used by women writers. I must admit that, in making my arguments, I take courage from Annette Kolodny's imperative for feminist criticism:

> The feminist critic...is free to employ or refine whatever schools or methods suit her present purposes, and her readings thereby benefit from the sheer audacity of her infinite critical variety. Moreover, because feminist criticism essentially adds a vital new perspective to all that has gone before, rather than taking anything away, it enjoys at least the possibility of enhancing and enlarging our appreciation of what is comprised by any specific literary text (159).

I therefore, without apology, approach the idea of women, anger and comedy by making use of a number of critical perspectives. In fact, what appears to be revolutionary about the questions raised by women's comedy concerns the shifts in narrative that de-center the traditional

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ground for the discussion of humor. To explain further: without subverting the authority of her own writing by breaking down convention completely, the woman comic writer still often encodes a different set of subversive thematics than her male contemporaries. Her writing is characterised by the breaking of cultural and ideological frames and the play of transgressions across all boundaries. Her use of comedy is dislocating, anarchic and, paradoxically, unconventional. I say paradoxically because, of course, there is the constant problem of discussing works that must be grouped under a conventional heading such as "comedy" while simultaneously claiming that they subvert the elemental aspects of that convention. The discussion of women, comedy and aggression should proceed having established the following points:

a. In order to be read and for their comedy to be acknowledged as such, women writers have accepted the basic conventions associated with the genre. They have provided the signs which distinguish comedy from other literary forms in much the same way as they have used language that can be understood and have presented recognizable patterns establishing the works as fiction, novel, short story, et cetera, to the eyes of traditional critics.

b. Without stating it as such, the history of comedy has in fact been the history of male comedy. To consider and distinguish a tradition of female comedy must be regarded as a valid enterprise in light of this fact.

c. While providing the distinguishing signs of comedy, women writers still manage to undercut the conventions they employ by shifting the very framing devices used as definition. What can be regarded as a nominal happy ending might, for example, include a number of elements usually regarded as tragic. Or the refusal to provide a conventional happy ending

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might not in any way detract from the inclusion of the work as a comedy.

d. Women's comedies have often been misread because the anger underlying the humor has disturbed the conservative conventions of comedy. If comedy written by women is meant to include certain elements (reconciling gentility, soft admonitions for social lapses, sweet mirth) and if these elements are markedly absent, the work might be misread as non-comedic. This might occur despite the fact that the work contains aspects of fiction usually associated with "traditional" i.e. men's comedy: irony, aggression, subtle and complex language constructions, for example. If you're not looking for it you are probably not going to find it. It doesn't mean that it's not there.

e. Although a number of elements included in a discussion of women's comedy can be applied to the discussion of comedy written by men or considered in the light of a broader, apparently gender-free discussion of, for example, modernism, it does not necessarily follow that the creation of a critical discourse concerning the unique relationship between women and comedy is invalid.

f. In the same way that Gilbert and Gubar argue that we must take note of "not only a male and female modernisms, but masculinist and feminist modernisms"(Female Imaginition 2), so must we consider masculinist and feminist traditions of comedy.

There remains the additional complication that a figure of authority can say, with conviction, "that's not funny" to a subordinate who in turn is meant to alter his or her perception of the comic. Teachers say it to students who refuse to accept the solemnity of the classroom; parents say it to children who cannot hide their inability to accept their parents' viewpoint; older women say it to younger women in Jane Austen and George Eliot. And yet, when older people advise solemnity, we are on unsure footing in Austen and Eliot. Is their view of the world really so

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much more accurate? Emma and Gwendolyn Harleth must learn to curb their wit because they might damage someone's sensibilities and because they must learn that their humor just isn't funny. The voice of authority again: but there is no need to create such a ruling unless the possibility for transgression is imminent, unless there arises the immediate, unruly reaction which indicates that, yes, as a matter of fact, the situation is indeed quite funny. If we were not disposed to laugh at Causabon and his "low wick," would Eliot's narrator need to remind us that he isn't as much a figure of fun as we might think he is? The narrator does not intercede to remind us that other characters should not be a source of the comic; why the didactic reminder if not to answer an expected reaction? We should not really be able to make sense of such a phrase; surely something is or is not funny. But the very idea that laughter or a comic perspective can be regarded in such a basic way as threatening should alert us to the power available for women to use in comedy. That we speak of becoming 'hysterical' with laughter is itself a telling remark.

How do twentieth-century women writers of comedy differ from their male counterparts? Is not the refusal to supply a happy ending indicative of modern and indeed post-modern literary works in general, and not just of texts created by women? The question of women and modernism, as

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discussed by Gilbert and Gubar, Mary Ann Caws, Jane Marcus, Judy Little and a number of other feminist critics, is a complex one. Gilbert and Gubar, for example, argue that what appears to be the gender-neutral category of 'modernism' is in fact no more than a history of twentieth-century male writers (Female Imagination 9). The so-called black comedy associated with male writers of twentieth-century literature, while apparently rejecting the typical happy ending of conventional comedy nevertheless reaffirms what Little calls the "presumed ultimate importance of certain Western scripts" such as the universality of the male's quest for identity and the inevitable maleness of the hero in these texts ("Engendering Laughter" 17). Informing the male modernist comedy-of-despair is the presence of a number of "universals" or "givens" which ultimately reaffirm rather than undercut the existing cultural systems.

In twentieth-century comedies by women the very idea of the "universal" is challenged, confronted and, finally, shattered. Even the existentialist male writer will write from within the dominant discourse in terms of his gender. The most economically oppressed of male writers nevertheless writes from a position of privilege awarded to him by a culture that equates value with maleness in much the same way that an Anglo writer writes from a position of privilege in the Western world. These

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observations may cause discomfort to the existentialist, economically depressed Anglo male writer--or critic-- who regards his own oppression as unique. Yet even in the face of his discomfort, these observations remain valid.

It is not revolutionary to claim that comedy raises questions concerning authority. Indeed, this principle has been demonstrated in works from Juvenalian satire onwards. Comedy has often been linked to man's (sic) ability to transcend his oppression by laughing at his chains, linked to his satiric facility which enables him to suggest changes for his society, and related to his natural cycles of regeneration and renewal. It is of paramount importance to note that these linkings are well within the boundaries of the established literary and social laws, for all their trafficking with subversion. Renewal implies the continuation of established patterns: new figures in unalterable positions. Regeneration has the same attendant sense of change-without-change, sons replacing fathers, daughters replacing mothers but without any drama, so to speak. Once the younger figures can achieve their new and rightful positions in the power structure, the tensions are released and so we have comedy.
This is not the case in comedies written by women.

The woman writer forges a comedy that allows for complexity and depth

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without the generally oppressive didacticism so often found in the social satire of writers from Swift to Amis. The ending of comic works by women writers do not, ultimately, reproduce the expected hierarchies, or if they do there is often an attendant sense of dislocation even about the happiest ending. (See, for example, the ending of Mansfield Park -- (chapter 48). Austen as narrator refuses even to provide the story of the courtship between Edmund and Fanny, allowing the reader only to impose a subjective fantasy on the process. "...I entreat everybody to believe that exactly at the time when it was quite natural that it should be so...."(Chap 48); in this way the unprepared-for happy ending can occur. It must be seen that Austen refuses to provide the final satisfaction of a even remotely believable happy ending. At best we have Fanny married to a man for whom she is "of course only too good". Is this a happy ending?

For most critics, then, to read comedy by women writers is to misread, in more than the Bloomian sense of the word. Keeping in mind the earlier remarks quoted from prominent critics concerning women and comedy, it is instructive to see the ways in which feminist criticism discusses the notion of the misreading of women's writings in a more general manner. Women generally seem to be in much the same position as Gwendolyn Harleth, asking for our jokes to be understood by men who are unable to grasp our meanings and who, unable to understand, unrelentingly refuse to

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acknowledge that our comic intention even exists. The following scene is telling. When hoping that the musician Klesmer will laugh at her witticism, Gwendolyn taunts: "I am bold enough to require you to understand a joke?" He replies "One may understand jokes without liking them....I am in fact very sensible to wit and humor." Gwendolyn, with "wickedness of intention" replies: "I am glad you tell me that."[6] Klesmer is the unlaughing figure in this exchange, the paradigm of the man not sharing a woman's joke.

Taking Annette Kolodny's arguments from "A Map for Rereading," we see that her points apply to comedic writings with a vengeance. Kolodny writes that it is:

> ...gender-inflected interpretive strategies [which are] responsible for our mutual misreadings....[This allows us to] appreciate the variety of women's literary expression, enabling us to take it into serious account for perhaps the first time, rather than, as we do now, writing it off as caprice or exceptions, the irregularity in an otherwise regular design (259).

What follows in this dissertation is an attempt to explore some of the orienting strategies for women's comedic writing and to suggest instances in which these strategies are realised. In short, my hope is that this study may provide a new frame for the concept of women and comedy.

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Notes

[1] George Eliot, Daniel Deronda, 1876 bk2, chap 15.

It should also be noted that throughout this dissertation the term 'humor' is being used to indicate an aspect of comedy; 'joke' to indicate a specific incident of condensed humor; 'laughter' to indicate the obvious manifestation of pleasure. The definition of comedy per se, since it is the very subject of my argument, will be elaborated over the next two hundred pages.

[2] Regenia Gagnier, "The Limits of Humor and Hatred in Nineteenth-Century Women's Autobiography: A Cross-class Analysis." Paper delivered at MLA Convention, 1986 for a special session titled "Hate and Humor in Women's Writing" which I chaired. Other participants on the panel offered a variety of interesting and provocative arguments; these arguments will appear, along with a number of other articles, in a collection I am editing called Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy, published by Gordon and Breach, 1987.

[3] Paul McGhee, "The Role of Laughter and Humor in Growing Up Female." Becoming Female: Perspectives on Development. Ed. Claire B. Kopp. (New York: Plenum Press,1979) 138.

[4] Jane Austen, Sense and Sensibility, (1811) chap 36.

[5] See, for example, their discussion on Anne Finch and Charlotte Bronte.

[6] George Eliot, Daniel Deronda, (1876) quoted in Wilt, Judith. "The Laughter of Maidens, the Cackle of Matriarchs: Notes on the Collision." Women and Literature. ed. Janet Todd New York: Holmes and Meier, 1980. Wilt's article is one of the few excellent discussions of women and comedy; her ideas were a great source of inspiration for the arguments set forth in this dissertation.

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Chapter One: The Conventions of Comedy.

"Is the subject of jokes worth so much trouble?" It might be wise to open the discussion of comedy with the question Freud asked at the beginning of his study on jokes and their relation to the unconscious. Wise, too, to accept his ultimate answer: "There can, I think, be no doubt of it"(15). "Laughter and its forms represent...the least scrutinized sphere of the people's creation," claimed Bakhtin in his study on Rabelais (4). Certainly, as we have already established, this is also still true for the study of comedy and women.

Comedy has been classified into a number of fairly well-defined categories which have apparently dovetailed rather than clashed despite the considerable differences in their points of departure. The theories of comedy presented here exemplify the fact that comedy is not limited to one effect, and that the best we may hope for are tentative definitions. There is no common consensus on the definitions for comedy and humor; there is no clear, uniformly applicable argument concerning the nature of comedy.

The theories discussed here, representative of most of the important

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thought concerning the functions of comedy, are all compelling, convincing and accurate when applied to the specific categories of texts with which they deal. Freud's view of comedy as aggression/repression, for example, is certainly valuable and most impressive when considered in light of the socio-sexual one liners with which Freud seemed so enamored. And, inevitably, the various camps of comedy do join some perspectives. Freud shares with Hobbes the belief that comedy cements certain bonds between groups and individuals, that the function of comedy is to allow, in acceptable manner, for otherwise unacceptable reactions and responses. Bakhtin and Frye both argue that comedy reaffirms a social order by suggesting the possibility of change without actually subverting the standing hierarchies. These theories, the most notable among many, are worth examining in some detail in order to ascertain how available their interpretative strategies are when applied to women writers. They will be divided, for convenience, into the following categories for discussion: comedy as fertility/regeneration; disparagement theory; comedy as catharsis; incongruity theory; comedy as social bonding; comedy as conservative force; comedy as radical force; comedy and despair; comedy and anger.

a. Comedy as Fertility/Regeneration

This view of comedy as a ritualistic celebration of fertility and regeneration

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is perhaps the oldest and the most popular concept of the genre. Aristotle, for example, wrote that "Comedy originated with the leaders of the Phallic Songs, which survive to this day in many of our states."[1] Greek comedy was based on fertility rites and rituals concerning agriculture. According to one historian, "phallic processions designed to secure the success of crops and drive away malign influence" (Feibleman 25) became ritualized performances by members of society who were the token "actors" of the community. Obviously there were innumerable layers of meaning attached to these events, but it is particularly interesting to note both the public nature of the process as well as its emphasis on the continuation of the known cycle. The rituals were designed so that things could continue as before; they existed to prevent surprises, to redeem the community from disturbance. "Malign influence" was always the feature against which such exercises worked: its symbolic reign was over chaos, the abyss; its weapons were surprise, disruption; its effects were discontinuity, catastrophe. From its outset, then, comedy was associated with familiar patterns of closure and repetition of the known as well as with the warding off of chaos.

The significance of comedy's origin is repeatedly underscored by modern critics. Northrup Frye, for example, continues to see comedy in terms of "the integration of society," and relates the social function of comedy to its earliest mythic forms:

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> The mythical comedy corresponding to the death of the Dionysiac god is Appollonian, the story of how a hero is accepted by a society of gods (43).

Such comedy, claims Frye, is about the acceptance of the hero into society; according to Frye's theories, this will transform into the Christian (or divine) comedy of salvation, which, it can be argued, continues to posit comedy as the acceptance of the son into the patriarchal hierarchies after he has permitted himself to be subjected to trials and torture, symbolic or otherwise.

Frye offers another category: domestic comedy. This is usually based on the Cinderella archetype, "the kind of thing that happens when Pamela's virtue is rewarded, the incorporation of an individual very like the reader into the society aspired to by both, a society ushered in with a happy rustle of bridal gowns and banknotes"(44). This seems to fall into line with Henry James' claim, quoted by Frank Kermode in The Sense of an Ending, that we follow a comic narration until it reaches the "distribution...of prizes, pensions, husbands, wives, babies, millions, appended paragraphs and cheerful remarks"(22). Such finales reveal the implicit presence of "phallic processions" insofar as they reaffirm the standing order, redistributing power only in the most superficial sense.

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As indicated by James' remark, the most firmly rooted comedic convention is that of the happy ending, a closure defined by Frye as that which causes the "normal response" of "this should be" on the part of the audience(167). He goes on to claim, rather unsatisfactorily, that this expectation is a 'moral response' on the part of this normal audience. Yet he also says that "it is not moral in the restricted sense, but social" (163), presumably making a distinction between Christian morality and some sort of social morality which has its own definitions of right and wrong. And what Frye's audience "normally" considers socially moral is the following:

> What normally happens is that a young man wants a young woman, that his desire is resisted by some opposition, usually paternal, and that near the end of the play some twist in the plot enables the hero to have his will...At the end of the play the device in the plot that brings hero and heroine together causes a new society to crystallize around the hero, and the moment when this crystallization occurs is the point of resolution in the action, the comic discovery, anagnorisis or cognitio (163).

The new society is always very much like the old, of course, except for the fact that the son-figure replaces the father-figure. Things continue more or less as they had although with less corruption, fewer scandals and the possibility for greater justice. There are no surprises. The "normal" reader can feel secure in the knowledge that things turn out the way he has

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planned, since he associates himself with the hero who will inevitably get his way despite all forces of opposition. It is not a minor point that Frye omits "heroine" from the end of this statement: "the device in the plot that brings hero and heroine together causes a new society to crystallize around the hero" (164). A normal happy ending means that the hero gets the girl as well as the power to create a new society. A happy ending for the heroine means she gets the boy.

In contrast to Frye's repeated emphasis on the "normal," Bakhtin sees comedy as permitting "abnormality," albeit within a confined situation. In his theory, comedy parodies the normal, creating a show of the world "turned inside out." In his landmark work on Rabelais, Bakhtin states that:

> [a]ll the symbols of the carnival idiom are filled with this pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities, We find here a characteristic logic, the peculiar logic of the "inside out" (a l'envers), of the "turnabout," of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings. A second life, a second world of folk culture is thus constructed; it is to a certain extent a parody of the extracarnival life, a "world inside out" (11).

Comedy and humor are, even for Bakhtin, essentially conservative forces because they ultimately reaffirm the standing order. They grant

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permission for those members of society who are outside the locus of power to participate in an inverted, comedic power structure that essentially points to their inability to gain access to power through any traditional or "genuine" (non-comedic) process. The butcher who becomes the priest during carnival can do so because he is no threat to the priest. The process can take place because everyone understands the operating norm from which carnival departs, and because there is a consensus (although it is-presumably-established by those in power and regulated by them) that this is comedy, not reality. "Reality" means that those who have power, keep it. Comedy, in these terms, means that those who do not have power can play at having it for a brief time as long as there is the full understanding that it is only a comedic construct, and that is it being "loaned" as it were, to the usurper through the benevolence of its rightful owner.

There is only a tacit acknowledgement that things could, in another world, be different from the way they are; there exists no threat to the social order, no permanent overturning of cultural and social conventions, no push towards revolution in any actual sense. There remains a strong element of regeneration/integration in these rituals, similar to the ones described by Frye:

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> We must stress, however, that the carnival is far distant from the negative and formal parody of modern times. Folk humor denies, but it revives and renews at the same time. Bare negation is completely alien to folk culture (11).

Comedy and humor permit the world to be seen as laughable but stable. The disjunctive aspects of the world underscored by carnival do not arrest the comic reconciliation and returns which signal the end of the feast. Reaffirmation rather than negation is the ultimate goal of comic ritual for Bakhtin as well as for Frye. It is important to mention, of course, that Bahktin's argument concerning the class-based dynamics of comedy provides a good deal more insight into the workings of power distribution in comedy than Frye ever attempts. At the basis of Frye's theory is, as Terry Eagleton has pointed out, a rigidly Christian polemic which cannot encompass extra-Christian aspects of literature (Literary Theory 93). Bakhtin, as we will see later on in the discussion on women and comedy, does offer unparalleled insights into the ideology of the comedic structure and its effects on the members of society outside the locus of power.

b. Disparagement Theory

According to historian James Feibleman, "a tendency to burlesque and caricature...is one of the earliest talents displayed by people in a rude state of society. An appreciation of, and sensitiveness to, ridicule, and a love of

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that which is humorous, are found even among savages, and enter largely into their relations with their fellow men. Primitive warriors amused themselves by turning their enemies and opponents into mockery...caricaturing them in words" (18). Feibleman asserts, furthermore, that:

> When the agricultural slaves were indulged with a day of relief from their labours, they spent it in unrestrained mirth. And when these same people began to erect permanent buildings, and to ornament them, the favorite subjects of their ornamentation were such as presented ludicrous ideas...In fact, art, itself, in its earliest forms, is caricature; for it is only by that exaggeration of features which belongs to caricature that unskilled draughtsmen could make themselves understood (18).

These ideas seem to follow Bahktin's line of argument in a tangential sense, linking art with relief from labour as well linking mirth with the inversion of accepted behavior. The concept of "exaggeration" is an important part of the disparagement theory, since much ridicule of the enemy depends upon selecting a particular quality to mock. Alongside of disparagement of the enemy is the didactic portrayal of a member within the boundaries of the society whose actions are in (usually unwitting) defiance of accepted norms. Plato's discussion of the topic, according to Scott Cutler Shershow, begins by assuming, with Aristotle, "that comedy portrays those actions that are 'unworthy' of a free citizen. The subject matter of comedy, once

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again, is below the moral norm that Plato expects from his readers, involving 'buffooneries' that one should 'blush to practice' in real life." (Republic 10.606c).[2]

Comedy, argues Aristotle, "aims at representing men as worse ... than in actual life," and is "an imitation of characters of a lower type" (Poetics 2.4; 5.1.).[3] The concept of comedy as disparagement of certain types of individuals, usually those of a lowly status, is parallel in antiquity and as popularly accepted as the theory of comedy as regeneration. Disparagement is seen as instinctive, rather than learned, behavior. This quite remarkable assertion appears in a number of works concerning the origins of comedy.

Plato and Aristotle's theories continued to have a formative impact on philosophers like Hobbes who, in the mid-seventeenth century, formulated what must be regarded as the definitive statement on comedy-as-disparagement. It is worth quoting Hobbes at some length because his theories have, in turn, influenced the leading comedy theories of the next three centuries. Hobbes writes:

> There is a passion that hath no name; but the sign of it is that distortion of the countenance which we call laughter, which is always joy: but what joy.... for men laugh at mischances and indecencies, wherein there lieth not wit nor jest at all.... Men laugh at the

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> infirmities of others, by comparison therewith their own abilities are set off and illustrated.... The passion of laughter proceedeth from the sudden imagination of our own odds and eminency: for what is else the recommending of ourselves to our own good opinion, by comparison with another man's infirmity or absurdity?...I may therefore conclude, that the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others.[4]

Laughter at the expense of other people translates into scorn and men are judged by whether or not they can avoid being the object of another's humor. In this way, humor becomes a bonding experience, creating a victim who is the object of amusement because he deviates in some way from the norm. When Regenia Gagnier quoted from Hobbes' Leviathan, she said that he wrote about comedy "with his customary generosity."[5] Gagnier's ironic comment is particularly appropriate in light of the following statements from The Leviathan:

> Sudden glory, is the passion which maketh those grimaces called Laughter; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves. And it is incident most to them that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves; who are forced to keep themselves in their own favour, by observing the imperfections of other men. And therefore much laughter at the defects of others, is a sign of pusillanimity. For of great minds, one of the proper works is to help and free others from scorn; and compare themselves only with the most able.[6]

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Bakhtin concludes that the attitude towards comedy in the seventeenth century was similar to one outlined by Hobbes. "The place of laughter in literature belongs only to the low genres," says Bakhtin of the period's ideological context for comedy. " Comedy [shows] the life of private individuals and the inferior social levels. Laughter is a light amusement or a form of salutary social punishment of corrupt and low persons". He elaborates further:

> Laughter...can refer only to individual and individually typical phenomena of social life. That which is important and essential cannot be comical. Neither can history and persons representing it - kings, generals, heroes - be shown in a comic aspect. The sphere of the comic is narrow and specific (private and social vices); the essential truth about the world and about man cannot be told in the language of laughter.... (67).

This "seventeenth-century view," as Bakhtin called it, did not expire with the seventeenth century. Many philosophers and critics maintain that a sense of superiority is essential for comedy and that all humor involves disparagement of others.

A.E. Dyson's fascinating study of satire attempts to distinguish between our enjoyment of the exaggerated action (echoing the exaggerations and caricatures emphasised in the earliest definitions of comedy), our feelings of superiority (as set out in The Leviathan) and our non-Hobbesian,

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twentieth-century "democratic" feelings that we must not, in fact, feel happy at the expense of others. He does so by initiating a discussion which borders on certain metaphysical aspects of Bakhtin's argument while making way for Freud, by saying that we laugh only because we know it's a joke and no one is really damaged:

> In real life, to put the distinction at its simplest, a man who slips on a banana skin and hurts himself is not funny; in art or in anecdote he is. Where, then, is the difference? The answer seems easy enough. If we are watching a play or hearing an anecdote, no one is really being hurt. We are freed from the obligation to feel appropriately, and exonerated from any duty to act; our response...is aesthetic. The moral drift of the episode might please us (the man's fall will very likely be led up to in a manner emphasising its incongruity; the theme of pride going before a fall will be there, together with the arbitrariness of the world we live in). We may enjoy, too, a pattern: the action of falling might be multiplied and exaggerated, as in those delightful films of the silent days, when not one but dozens of men would be likely to be falling about at once. The differences between art and life turn out to be much what Wilde said they were. On the one hand art adds significant form to events; on the other it removes them from the flux of reality to an abstract world of its own devising (143).

Such a theory, flattering though it may be, does not account for those like Feibleman who would write "The insane more often than not appear to us to be humorous."[7] This argument, like the ones before it, does little to explain the relative and shifting nature of comedy. It does little to account

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too for the truly aggressive nature of a great deal of comedy, the whole basis of which would seem to be to initiate disharmony and division. Using the same banana-peel paradigm, Nathan Scott, in his article entitled "The Bias of Comedy and the Narrow Escape into Faith" elaborates a slightly more convincing rationale for our reactions:

> The joy of comedy is a great joy, but it is a joy which can sometimes come only after a humiliation - the humiliation that the arrogant millionaire suffers when, as he walks down the street, with his mind concentrated on his dignity and importance, he slips on the banana peeling that he failed to notice and is thus reminded that he is, after all, only a man and is as much subject to the law of gravitation as is the rest of humankind (103).

Scott's belief that comedy resides in someone being brought low is an interesting one because it does confront the desire to see those in authority debased; it begins from a different set of assertions than earlier theories which posited that comedy concerns already de-based and lowly figures. Privileging a different inversion of the world than the one we saw offered by Bakhtin, it sees the comic effect as originating in the power-figure brought down rather than the powerless raised high.

Freud went further with a similar argument, forcing us to acknowledge that comedy is funny when it happens to other people. Directed at ourselves, we would not find distressing incidents amusing:

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> if we ourselves were in similar straits we should be conscious only of distressing feelings. It is probably only by keeping such feelings away from ourselves that we are able to enjoy pleasure from the difference arising out of a comparison between these changing cathexes (197).

Freud's argument is essentially different from Hobbes', however, in a number of ways despite surface similarities. Yet the similarities are significant and worth our attention. Freud deals with the notion of superiority when he writes in Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious that "a person appears comic to us if, in comparison with ourselves, he makes too great an expenditure on his bodily functions and too little on his mental ones; and it cannot be denied that in both these cases our laughter expresses a pleasurable sense of the superiority which we feel in relation to him"(195).

But Freud aiso argues that the impulse towards humor is governed by repressed aggression, not just the desire to assert superiority. Wit saves energy, Freud claims, by releasing repression of an aggressive thought. The enjoyment of humor depends on the release of tension. We do not, for example, have to feel sorry for the victim of our disparagement. Martin Grotjahn does a good job of summing- up part of this process described by Freud:

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> In humour, especially in Freud's favorite "gallows" humour, energy is saved from the repressing emotion: I do not need to pity the condemned criminal because he is strong, he can take it, he does not need my pity. He is stronger than his fate....(271).

In another influential discussion of laughter, Henri Bergson claims that the shock of taking another point of view causes "a momentary anesthesia of the heart."[8] In other words, Bergson seems to agree with Freud that comedy permits us to forgo our empathetic response in favor of the energy-saving release of laughter. We can laugh at the Other because we do not see ourselves in that position; it could not possibly happen to us. "In the case of aggressive purposes," writes Freud, comedy "employs the same method in order to turn the hearer, who was indifferent to begin with, into a co-hater or co-despiser, and creates for the enemy a host of opponents where at first there was only one"(133). Emotional distance from the object of ridicule seems an imperative for comedy's very existence.

c. Catharsis

Certain theorists have argued that comedy demands of its audience greater maturity and sophistication than tragedy because it requires the audience to separate itself from the subjects of the action. Through

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comedy, however, the audience is seen to undergo a form of ritualised catharsis, a purging of undesirable emotions and responses. This theory of the effect of comedy would seem to be argued by analogy from the catharsis theory of tragedy, as presented by Aristotle in the Poetics:

> The force of the human emotions in us, if entirely restrained, bestir themselves more vehemently; but if stirred into action gradually and within measure, they rejoice moderately and are satisfied; and, thus purified, they become obedient, and are checked without violence.[9]

Aristotle believed, as we saw earlier, that the rightful sphere of comedy was that of the ludicrous and the lowly. However, as John Crowe Ransome commented:

> this sense is analogous to pity and terror, in that it unfits a man for this duty: for there is implied in the citizen, if he goes about finding everything ridiculous, the belief that he is witnessing an irrational universe (189).

Many critics assume Aristotle concluded that comedy provides a cathartic experience in which potentially disabling emotions are harmlessly discharged in much the same manner as tragedy. In his article "The Bias of Comedy and the Narrow Escape into Faith," Nathan Scott proposes that the ultimate aim of catharsis through comedy is "a restoration of our confidence in the realm of finitude..."(107), which links the catharsis theory

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to the earlier theories of regeneration. The effect of catharsis allows the power structures to remain unchallenged. The belief that we might inhabit an irrational universe whereby power structure would be recognized as an elaborate system of ideological constructs rather than natural or cosmically ordained phenomena would, of course, undermine the perpetuation of the given system.

Exploring the idea of catharsis through comedy in his work Jokes and their Relationship to the Unconscious, Freud repeatedly emphasised the concept that jokes depend on the release of tension by the momentary breaking-down of inhibitions and other deeply-rooted psychological structures. Jokes must "bring forth something that is concealed or hidden," (13) since joke-work is similar to dream-work. Freud's argument was based on the principle that comedy depends upon an "ability to exploit something... which we could not, on account of obstacles in the way, bring forward openly or consciously." The joke "will evade restrictions and open sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible," (103) thus freeing up "impacted" emotions. As in dreams, jokes allow us access to hidden emotions and feeling through subtle intrusions into our unconscious mind:

> ...as we have learnt from the dream-work, the connecting paths which start out from words are in the unconscious treated in the same way

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> as connections between things. An unconscious cathexis offers far more favourable conditions for selecting the (humorous) expression (177).

The psychical energy which was used for cathexis is allowed free discharge (148) and the "lifting of the cathexis" is responsible for the feeling of pleasure, and, by extension, catharsis:

> cathectic energy used for the inhibition has now suddenly become superfluous and has been lifted, and is therefore now ready to be discharge by laughter (149).

Freud made it clear that the inhibitions briefly destroyed by humor are resurrected almost immediately, in much the same way as Bakhtin indicated that society reestablished its conventions as soon as the carnival was over. Catharsis allows for the continuance of structures despite their brief loss of control whether over the individual or the community.

Freud also argued that catharsis could not exist in a situation where the hearer of the joke was "required to make an expenditure of intellectual work" in order to understand the humor (150). Successful comedy depends on "sufficient psychical accord" between the initiator and the recipient of the joke, and that "laughing at the same jokes is evidence of a far-reaching psychical conformity"(151). This common psychical ground is necessary for

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the existence of comedy because comedy often functions through a series of omissions and "the allusions made in a joke must be obvious and the omissions easy to fill." As we have established, the awakening of conscious intellectual effort ruins the comedic effect and therefore it can be concluded that everything depends on a shared context or frame in which comedy can occur. "Every joke calls for a public of its own," wrote Freud (151).

Some people will not be able to share in certain comedic constructs because they are prohibited from doing so by their own inability to overcome inhibitions. Freud provides telling examples of such cases:

> A person who is responsive to smut will be unable to derive any pleasure from witty jokes of exposure; (subtle verbal) attacks will not be understood by people who are accustomed to give free play to their desire to insult...(151).

Such people, it can be assumed, may well deny that these experiences even contain any comedy since they cannot recognise it as such; they cannot perceive comedy when their own psychical inhibitions are in danger of being openly perceived or attacked.

Finally, Freud sees catharsis in relationship to the way language operates.

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In terms of childish pleasure humor again grants permission for play and for a retrieval of what has been long repressed by psychological and socially imposed inhibitions. Freud writes that "the thought which, with the intention of constructing a joke, plunges into the unconscious is merely seeking there for the ancient dwelling-place of its former play with words." He continues:

> Thought is put back for a moment to the stage of childhood so as once more to gain possession of the childish source of pleasure. [We are] led by jokes to a suspicion that the strange unconscious revision is nothing else than the infantile type of thought-activity. It is merely that it is not very easy for us to catch a glimpse in children of this infantile way of thinking, with its peculiarities that are retained in the unconscious of adults, because it is for the most part corrected, as it were, in statu nascendi (170).

Catharsis achieved through comedy puts us in touch with our earliest verbal constructs, free from inhibitions, upon which so much of our so-called adult comedy depends. George Santayana, in his article "The Comic Mask" supports Freud's assertions concerning the freeing of emotion through comedy. Like Aristotle and Freud, he sees comedy as cathartic. Objections to comedy, Santayana argues, "cut at the roots of all expression"(75), and so curtail perspective and prohibit a sense of well-being. We are told by the voices of authority, according to Santayana, to recognise only that which we should recognise:

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> we must not point...we must not laugh aloud; we must not only avoid attracting attention, but our attention must not be obviously attracted; it is silly to gaze, says the nursery-governess, and rude to stare (75).

d. Incongruity Theory

Kant sees humor as allied to the gratification provoked by laughter, echoing the catharsis theory. But he also provides insight into another perspective on comedy. Laughter is "an affection arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing."[10]

> Humour...means a talent for being able to put oneself at will into a certain frame of mind in which everything is estimated on lines that go quite off the beaten track (a topsy-turvy view of things) and yet on lines that follow certain principles....[11]

Schopenhauer argues along much the same lines when he establishes that humor arises from the fact that "in every suddenly appearing conflict between what is perceived and what is thought, what is perceived is always unquestionably right."[12] What we experience as reality must also hold sway against what we had been trained to expect because our perception, in Schopenhauer's theory, is:

> not subject to error at all, requires no confirmation from without, but answers for itself. Its conflict with what is thought springs ultimately from the fact that the latter, with its abstract conceptions, cannot get down to the infinite multifariousness and fine shades

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> of difference of the concrete....It must therefore be diverting to us to see this strict, untiring. troublesome governess, the reason, for once convicted of insufficiency. On this account then the mien or appearance of laughter is very closely related to that of joy.[13]

Henri Bergson's "Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic," appearing at the turn of the century, attributed comic effect to incongruity. Bergson outlined a number of ways incongruity provided comic release, including in his discussion the mechanization of life, repetition and inversion. It is interesting to note that Bergson's remarks, although they attempt to create universals for comedy, very much reflect his own time's anxieties about, for example, the growing mechanization and industrialization of life. This sort of specificity enters the most broadly based, metaphysical arguments. Bergson writes, for example, that we can understand comedy if we:

> Picture...certain characters in a certain situation; if you reverse the situation and invert the roles, you obtain a comic scene.... There is no necessity, however, for both the identical scenes to be played before us. We may be shown only one, provided the other is really in our minds....The plot of the villain who is the victim of his own villainy, or the cheat cheated, forms the stock-in-trade of a good many plays. We find this even in primitive farce.... In modern literature we meet with hundreds of variations on the theme of the robber robbed. In every case the root idea involves an inversion of roles, and a situation which recoils on the head of its author (94-96).

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This argument depends heavily on the assumption again of the "shared psychical forces" described by Freud in Jokes and...the Unconscious. To be able to laugh at what does not fit we must have a clearly delineated system of roles in order that we may know what does fit. If, to take a random example, we find the idea of women intellectuals as incongruous as, say, dogs that can walk on two legs, then the analogy creates comedy. We are putting together things that apparently do not fit, as a clown might wear an oversize pair of shoes. Bringing together catharsis and incongruity, B. Croce sums up his theory of the comic as follows:

> The comic has been defined as the displeasure arising from the perception of a deformity immediately followed by a greater pleasure arising from the relaxation of our psychical forces, which were strained in anticipation of a perception whose importance was foreseen.[14]

From this standpoint, comedic effects are related to surprise, but only to surprises of the mildest kind, surprises which serve ultimately to reinforce our views of a stable, rational universe. Comedy still serves to support the "Same" in terms of the familiar, the dominant and the apparently natural. Freud also sees the ability to produce humor as the ability to bind together a number of ideas which appear "alien to one another both in their internal content and in the nexus to which they belong"(11). Quoting Kuno Fischer, Freud formulates the argument that "in a large number of joking

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judgements differences rather than similarities are found"(11). Much of Freud's discussion is devoted to the ways in which language provides the possibility for play and humor through the creation of deliberate incongruities and misunderstandings. Humorous situations grow out of the contrast between what we expect an utterance to mean and what it actually means, implies Freud. In a comedic situation we sometimes grant words meanings "which, again, we nevertheless cannot grant them"(12). If this last point is developed further, writes Freud, then the contrast between "sense and nonsense" becomes significant. Comedy seems to arise from the dialectical interplay between sense and non-sense, between unjustly attributed logic and the realization that our beliefs were misinformed. These comments should be read in light of Freud's reference mentioned earlier of the connections between word-play and the earliest stages of language acquisition:

> What at one moment has seemed to us to have a meaning, we now see is completely meaningless. That is what, in this case, constitutes the comic process.... A remark seems to us to be a joke, if we attribute a significance to it that has psychological necessity and, as soon as we have done so, deny it again. Various things can be understood by this 'significance.' We

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> attach sense to a remark and know that logically it cannot have any. We discover truth in it, which nevertheless, according to the laws of experience or our general habits of thought, we cannot find in it. We grant it logical or practical consequences in excess of its true content, only to deny these consequences as soon as we have clearly recognized the nature of the remark. In every instance, the psychological process which the joking remark provokes in us, and on which the feeling of the comic rests, consists in the immediate transition, from this attaching of sense, from this discovering of truth, and from this granting of consequences to the consciousness or impression of relative nothingness"(12).

Freud's assertions serve to reaffirm the idea that there must be some form of agreement concerning the application of "sense" as opposed to non-sense, that comedy occurs when we misjudge the situation initially to discover the "real" truth later on. Humor is heightened by the collective misapprehension of meaning. The significance of a shared set of psychical constructs is repeatedly underscored throughout Jokes and...the Unconscious.

e. Comedy as Social Bonding

Obviously Freud was not alone in believing that a socially ordained set of beliefs must govern the production of comedy. Aristotle's discussion of comedy assumes a general consensus on ethical values, according to Scott Shershow (7), which allows for a subtlety in the comedic construct:

comic characters, for example, possess some recognized "defect" or

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"ugliness," though they are not "in the full sense of the word bad" (Poetics 5.1).

In The Anatomy of Criticism, Northrup Frye explains that "humor demands agreement that certain things... are conventionally funny." He goes on to supply a curious example of the way incongruity of elements provides for a comic response:

> All humor demands agreement that certain things, such as a picture of a wife beating her husband in a comic strip, are conventionally funny. To introduce a comic strip in which a husband beats his wife would distress the reader, because it would mean learning a new convention (225).

Freud's comment concerning the fact that those who are responsive to smut don't think jokes about exposure are funny seems applicable in this instance, if we are permitted to argue by analogy. A wife beating her husband seems funny because the act inverts the "normal" relationship whereby the husband beats his wife. The fundamental incongruity between women and control is what permits the comic response in this instance. The assumption underlying the example Frye supplies indicates that we all know "how things really are" in much the same way as we all knew, according to Frye, how to recognise "what is right" about a happy ending.

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Within this framework for comedy, a number of critics provide examples of the sorts of elements agreed upon by social consensus as appropriate targets for comedy. By aiming comedy at these targets, the social unit is strengthened through a bonding process that reaffirms the "givens" of the culture. Again, as with Frye's example, the illustrations offered by a number of critics are quite interesting in and of themselves. In one such instance, Feibleman makes the following point about so-called "absolute" targets for comedy:

> Comedy is...always aimed at the same targets throughout the life of a given culture....Thus we find recurrent jokes about the quarrelsome and interfering mother-in-law, the familiar wife... bad cooking, and so on (272).

So how do critics like Feibleman explain the use of "absolutes"? By making the following claims:

> We only say that objects of comedy are absolutely funny relative to a given frame of reference, or perspective, which men (sic) may, but do not have to, assume. It is not being in a certain subjective creative mood but in a certain perspective, which is neither created nor owned by any person or group of persons, which enables the subject to apprehend and to appreciate the comedy inherent in actual situations (194).

Although he attempts to grapple with the problems raised by the notion of

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"absolute" comedy, Feibleman does not relinquish the notions that there exists "comedy inherent in actual situations." These comments should remind us of the psychological/sociological studies which indicated that men were in touch with "hard-core" comedy, the "real" comedy that is a universal given.

Such a view seems to echo what Bakhtin describes as the Renaissance conception of laughter. The characteristic elements of this perspective include the belief that comedy is a manifestation of the essential forms of truth concerning the world as a whole, and that a unified view of history and mankind is available for use in comedy. "Certain essential aspects of the world are accessible only to laughter" from this perspective, according to Bakhtin (66). Henri Bergson argues, in contrast, that "it is only in its lower aspect, in light comedy and farce, that comedy is in striking contrast to reality: the higher it rises, the more it approximates to life; in fact, there are scenes in real life so closely bordering on high-class comedy that the stage might adapt them without changing a single word."[15] A.E. Dyson's broad generalization sums up the popular view of comedy as social-bonding: "laughter, though sometimes a scourge, can be relaxation or good fellowship, tonic or simple delight as well"(139).

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It is at this point where Bakhtin's views on comedy divide sharply from those of other philosophers and critics. For Bakhtin's arguments concerning Rabelais, however, problematize many of the generalizations presenting a unified view of comedy and its relation to society's universals. The very reason Rabelais was not accepted by the critical community was that he could not be absorbed into the universals presented by his society. Bakhtin believes that Rabelais' work has been ignored because "he cannot be approached along the wide beaten roads followed by bourgeois Europe's literary creation and ideology during the four hundred years separating him from us"(3). He explains that:

> Rabelais' images have a certain indestructable nonofficial nature. No dogma, no authoritarianism, no narrow-minded seriousness can coexist with Rabelaisian images; these images are opposed to all that is finished and polished, to all pomposity, to every ready-made solution in the sphere of thought and world outlook (3).

Bakhtin believes that Rabelais tapped into a wealth of folk humor which provided an alternative view of the world, complete with its own systems and conventions. To understand the carnival-world of folk humor requires "an essential reconstruction of our entire artistic and ideological perception, the renunciation of many deeply rooted demands of literary taste, and the revision of many concepts" (3). He refers to this as the "two-world condition" where a second world and a second life exist outside

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"officialdom," a completely different, non-official, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical world(6).

Scott Shershow aptly summarizes the interplay between comedy as both a challenge to and an affirmation of the prevailing order, using Bakhtin's phraseology to do so:

> Comedy says these are the conditions that prevail, but the saying raises a laugh that mocks those personified and prevailing conditions....Comedy is both fierce and forgiving: laughing the old vices out of countenance, but also preserving, against all odds, what one critic has aptly called "the people's unofficial truth"....The comic spirit locks us in familiar cages but at the same time holds out the promise of a threshold (27).

Bakhtin says of the "people's unofficial truth" that is one of the three most important aspects of comedy: the other two are universalism and freedom(90).

f. Comedy as Conservative Force/Comedy as Radical Force

The remarks by Shershow illustrate the dialectic between the integrative and disruptive aspects of comedy. As we have seen, comedy has long been regarded as a form of social cement, a bonding process that serves to

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reaffirm the insider/outsider division of power within a community. A number of comedy theories, most notably Bakhtin's, discuss the interplay between the official and non-official ideologies. Comedy seems to affirm the so-called social order, duplicating the standard hierarchies through, in part, the use of catharsis. Psychologically comedy translates into acceptance, not criticism. Yet comedy and criticism are not antithetical. Schopenhauer believes that comedy is linked to an "assertion of the will," for example, but in his argument the will apparently can go only so far in asserting itself against the status quo:

> It is true that comedy... must bring before our eyes suffering and adversity; but it presents it to us as passing, resolving itself into joy, in general mixed with success, victory, and hopes, which in the end preponderate....Thus it declares, in the result, that life as a whole is thoroughly good, and especially is always amusing.[16]

It is an obvious point that forms of comedy have been used to criticize as well as reaffirm social orders. Satire has been used as a weapon since The Clouds was first performed. However, satire is usually specific and didactic, breaking down social orders only to re-establish worthier ones in much the same way as Frye would suggest that the new hierarchy of the son-replacing-the-father ushers in a revived version of the traditional society. Like Frye, Nathan Scott's ultimately Christian and conservative

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view of comedy assumes that it "moves toward the actual: it asks us to be content with our human limitations and possibilities and to accept our life in this world without the sentimentality either of smugness or of cynicism"(113). Satire, however, employs words as weapons and often has as its subtext a call to action.

Satire might hint that anarchy and chaos wait at the borders of our rational, "normal" world, but it never embraces anarchy. The form of satire is itself so rigid that it belies the radical possibilities within reach. Often, as with much eighteenth-century British literature, satire is used by the most politically conservative factions against the loosening of social and cultural restrictions. Restraints are challenged by satire often only in order to indicate how necessary they actually are, not in order to sweep them away altogether.

"Satirists," writes Walter Sorrell in Facets of Comedy, are traditionally conservative [and] their writings...reflect the history of their times because their targets have been their contemporaries and the conditions in which they acted as they did" (129). Juvenalian satire attacks prevailing vices, according to the standard definition; its concern is with the immediate follies of local society.

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Dyson believes that most satirists sense enormous distance between actual human behavior and the ideal, and use exaggeration in pursuit of reform. "But the satirist who senses that the ideal is actually unobtainable," Dyson warns, "may find his very exaggeration taking on prophetic force" (200). In contrast, the Saturnalian view of comedy "pits the performance against the mirror - that is, comedy is seen as merely art, which thus makes no real challenge to life. Conversely, both the moral suspicion of comedy and the sense of comedy as triumphantly revolutionary share an ultimate belief that comic drama portrays and also shapes the world, that its utopian vision can bring pressure to bear on the prevailing ideology" (30).

The utopian vision provides access to the more radical possibilities for comedy. It provides a vehicle for initiating change through the "consecration of inventive freedom" which can liberate our perceptions from "conventions, established truths, cliches, all that is humdrum and universally accepted"(Bakhtin 34). Taken to its furthest point, such comedy offers us:

> the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things (Bakhtin 34).

Santayana sees the use of the comic mask as a way to make acceptable

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radical beliefs:

> In this world we must either institute conventional forms of expression or else pretend that we have nothing to express; the choice lies between a mask and a fig-leaf (76).

Comedy can attempt to transform society by stressing the dislocating, disjunctive aspects of humor at the expense of the integrative, harmonious ones. Instead of accepting the discharge of emotion through catharsis and reconciliation, radical comedy seeks to harness energies and tensions in order to undo ideological constructs. Radical comedy emphasizes the liminal nature of comedy, the borderline areas where comedy is closely linked to madness:

> Uncontrollable laughter, however, can be a sign of hysteria as well as a sign of intoxication or encephalitis or brain tumor. Inappropriate laughter is a significant sign of deterioration. It may herald the danger of an approaching psychosis (Grotjahn 275).

The complex, multi-dimensional relationship of comedy to madness is further elaborated by twentieth-century theorists who acknowledge the abyss skirted by comedy. Such critics are willing to explore the possibility of social and cultural destabilization through comedy. The surrealist theory of humor, precursor of so-called black-comedy, saw comedy as a way of

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fighting back against the repression of individualism and, by extension, creativity. Humor in this context is seen as a way to transcend:

> the trivial reality in which man is imprisoned by logic, reason, and subjective emotion, freeing him to achieve union with the objective metaphysical Absolute. Detached by humor from the determinism of the material world and from the culturally determined self, man's dark unconscious could express its metaphysical yearnings and intuitions in the form of untrammelled dream, fantasy, and non-sense (Weber 365).

Black comedy is the comedy of despair; it is the creation of humor without a deliberate wish for regeneration, integration, bonding or catharsis. It still operates, however, within the traditional prescribed conventions it seeks to ignore.

g. Comedy and Despair

As there is a dialectic between the integrative and disruptive aspects of comedy, so is there interplay between the despairing and the invigorating aspects of comedy.

Working in tandem with the idea of despair is the school of thought which posits the idea of progress through despair to an ultimate transcendence by way of comedy. Often theorists such as Christopher Fry and Nathan Scott

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are subjective in their view of comedy; this makes their ideas no less compelling. Christopher Fry sees this sort of comedy, for example, operating throughout the Book of Job, which is a:

> great reservoir of comedy. 'But there is a spirit in man....Fair weather cometh out of the north .... The Blessing of him that was ready to perish came upon me: And I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy' (17).

And Fry believes that there is an "angle of experience where the dark is distilled into light:...where our tragic fate finds itself with perfect pitch, and goes straight to the key which creation was composed in. And comedy senses and reaches out to this experience. It says, in effect, that, groaning as we may be, we move in the figure of a dance, and, so moving, we trace the outline of the mystery" (16). The quasi-religious metaphysic controlling Fry's argument becomes apparent, however, so that the transcendence of despair becomes attached to a belief in a great cosmic dance pattern rather than the phenomena of an arbitrarily ordered universe.

In contrast to the "transcendence" view of comedy is the school most closely associated with twentieth-century comedy: so-called black humor. The term "black humor" was coined in an attempt to fuse the elements of despair and non-sense in comedy, but for a number of reasons the category definition, as well as the title, is problematic. In his article "Toward a

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Definition of Black Humor," Max Schulz explains that "as a term black humor is vague. Although several attempts have been made to define black humor the results have been elusive and chimerical" (15). He comes closest to providing a definition when he claims that writers of black humor are successful "in their determined exploration of the permutability of urban existence and the paralysis of human indifference" (20).

Shulz's discussion resembles that put forth by Durrenmatt in Theaterprobleme, where Durrenmatt manages a perhaps more acceptable definition of the phenomenon. He sees that comedy, in the face of an irrational universe, must be courageous:

> A disorganized world in which there are no longer any established standards of guilt and personal responsibilities, in which we are powerless to resist the course of events bigger than ourselves, calls for comedy...not born of despair but of courage. [17]

The twentieth-century concept of comedy as reflective of a disjointed, inharmonious world does much to widen the definitions of what we perceive as comedic. Such modern broadening of definitions also interleaves with aspects of earlier theories that offered, but did not fully explore, the possibility that the most fundamental aspect of comedy is the one linking it to anger.

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h. Comedy and Anger

According to Wylie Sypher in Meanings of Comedy, Hobbes's theory of comedy can be rephrased in Darwinian form by supposing that a laugh is man's way of showing his fangs. "Man needs, like any animal, to show his fangs only when he is threatened," explains Sypher. "We laugh in self-defense and bare our teeth... to ease our aching sense... of danger"(25).

True or not, this concept linking comedy to anger certainly seems to the point. Anger and aggression, as indicated by the section on catharsis, are central to Freud's theory of humor. They are often the emotions one wishes to purge through comedy. Scott Cutler Shershow sums it up particularly well, seeing Freud's remarks in context of a range of theoretical discussions:

> Freud thus makes explicit a general point that is implicit in the whole history of comic theory: comedy is always something larger, deeper, and more complicated than it seems. The way in which we disguise the emotions expressed in jokes is as important as the emotions themselves. As everyone occasionally notices, a joke that too nakedly expresses hostility or aggression is not really very funny(4).

Highlighted by this last remark is the need to keep the anger and aggression of humor hidden; once it is brought out into the open both the comedy and the anger lose their power. A useful analogy might be to think

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of comedy as a form of magic: once the secret formulas are understood they are no longer effective. A witticism has at its core a hard kernel of aggression or hostility, "an insult-like shocking thought"; and laughter occurs when repressing energy is freed from its static function of keeping something forbidden under repression and away from consciousness.[18] Hidden anger, therefore, can be seen as a great impetus towards the creation of humor.

In addition, as we have seen from Hobbes onwards, comedy has been acknowledged as a weapon, one used equally by those who wish to conserve and those who wish to make changes. But it is a subtle weapon. It strips the enemy of power by making him contemptible, asserts Freud, by "depriving him of his claim to dignity and authority"(189). And although his "embitterment does not prevent his laughing"(221), the object of ridicule may not agree that the joke is funny.

Humor can threaten those in positions of power because of its multi-leveled, secretive and complex nature. In its most essential and effective form, Freud writes:

> The joke...represents a rebellion against that authority, a liberation from its pressure. The charm of caricatures lies in this same factor: we laugh at them even if they are unsuccessful simply because

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> we count rebellion against authority as a merit (105).

Rebellion is the hidden script of comedy from this perspective; anger and a bottom-line refusal to accept the "normal," universal givens of this world are the subtext energizing humor. Certain forms of comedy can invert the world not only briefly but permanently; can strip away the dignity and complacency of powerful figures only to refuse to hand them back these attributes when the allotted time for carnival is finished. Comedy can effectively channel anger and rebellion by first making them appear to be acceptable and temporary phenomena, no doubt to be purged by laughter; and then by harnessing the released energies, rather than dispersing them. The world turned upside down can prove that the world has no rightful position at all, and that we have created our own systems of balance based on nothing more than the continuation of what has gone before, that reason and nature are no more reasonable and natural than they are cosmically ordained: such comedy terrifies those who hold order dear. So it should:

> All that is ordinary, commonplace, belonging to everyday life, and recognized by all suddenly becomes meaningless, dubious and hostile. Our own world becomes an alien world. Something frightening is revealed in that which was habitual and secure (Bakhtin 39).

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Notes

[1] Aristotle, The Poetics, qtd. in Feibleman, James K. In Praise of Comedy. (New York: Horizon Press, 1939. 2nd ed.1970.) 25.

[2] Plato, The Republic, qtd. in Shershow, Scott Cutler. Laughing Matters (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986.) 95.

[3] Aristotle, The Poetics 2.4; 5.1. qtd. in Shershow 6.

[4] Hobbes, The Leviathan. qtd. in Feibleman 95.

[5] Regenia Gagnier, "The Limits of Humor and Hatred in Nineteenth Century Women's Autobiography: A Cross-class Analysis."

[6] Hobbes, The Leviathan. qtd. in Feibleman 98.

[7] Feibleman 220. As it can be seen, Feibleman's book is a great source of information on the traditional history of comedy, and includes many long excerpts from a number of authors. However, Feibleman's own editorial remarks are problematic.

[8] Henri Bergson, "Laughter. An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic." trans. C. Brereton and F. Rothwell. London, (1911) 24. rpt. in Laughter. Introduction by Wylie Sypher. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1956): 133.

[9] Aristotle, The Poetics. qtd. in Feibleman 86.

[10] Emmanuel Kant, qtd. in Feibleman 105.

[11] Emmanuel Kant, qtd. in Feibleman 105.

[12] Schopenhauer, qtd. in Feibleman 111.

[13] Schopenhauer, qtd. in Feibleman 111.

[14] B. Croce, qtd. in Feibleman 130.

[15] Henri Bergson, qtd. in Shershow 25.

[16] Schopenhauer, qtd. in Feibleman 112.

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[17] Friedrich Durrenmatt, Theaterprobleme. qtd. in Sorell, Walter. Facets of Comedy. (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1972) 267.

[18] Sigmund Freud, qtd. in Grotjahn, Martin. "Beyond Laughter: A Summing Up." Beyond Laughter. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1957) 270.

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Chapter Two: Comedy and Anger in Women's Writing.

a: Women and Comedy.

We must now provide a particular context for a discussion of women's comic writing. Although there have, of course, been women critically perceived as writers of comedy (even Dr. Johnson liked Evelina), women's comedy has often been appropriated by critics without due consideration for the ways in which it is gender-based. It is my argument that women do indeed understand a different kind of comedy to be at work in these writers, that their texts should not be seen as gently flavored lessons on how to be a lady, and that they are not simply writing didactic (albeit pleasantly didactic) treatments of courtship behavior; women's comedy has, for too long, been mis-placed as unimportant and mis-categorized by a narrow critical vision.

In what ways have theories of comedy refused to consider women's writings? As we have seen, women are considered "the unlaughing at which men laugh," the Other, the outsider at which the community of power can direct ridicule. Women are the traditional "given targets" of recurring jokes (see Feibleman's comments on so-called universal targets of comedy) and appear as interfering mothers-in-law, meddlesome wives,

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frigid virgins and bad cooks in comedy by men. They are the incongruous defining the congruous: the parts that don't fit which help to delineate even more clearly what does fit. Women have traditionally been considered objects of comedy because they are perceived as powerless; they are perceived as humorless because it is assumed that they simply refuse to get the joke.

But if we agree with Freud that "every joke calls for a public of its own" and successful comedy calls for "sufficient psychical accord" in order to be understood, then shouldn't the fact that women often seem "unlaughing" to men and yet appear perfectly able to respond to humor in certain situations force us to inquire whether women have a comedy of their own?

Is this a fair question? In A Literature of Their Own, Elaine Showalter provides what must be regarded as the fundamental basis from which such inquiries about women's writings across the board can proceed. As Showalter explains in her introduction:

> Many critics are beginning to agree that when we look at women writers collectively we can see an imaginative continuum, the recurrence of certain patterns, themes, problems, and images from generation to generation....It can , however, be argued that women themselves have constituted a subculture within the framework of a larger society, and have been unified by values,

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> conventions, experiences,and behaviors impinging on each individual. It is important to see the female literary tradition in these broad terms, in relation to the wider evolution of women's self-awareness and to the ways in which any minority group finds its direction of self-expression relative to a dominant society.... (11).

We proceed, taking strength from Showalter's arguments concerning the validity of examining writings by women in order to see what patterns emerge, (and remembering Kolodny's remarks quoted earlier concerning the availability of various critical approaches for feminist arguments). Women, of course, are not the only ones to divide literature into gender-categories. According to one critic, Normal Mailer is pleased to think that Joseph Heller's Catch 22 is a man's book, one which merely "puzzles" women.[1] Mary Ellman proposes in Thinking About Women that the long-time established "working rule" is simple. Basically, Ellman writes, with her characteristic humor: "there must always be two literatures like two public toilets, one for Men and one for Women" because authorities like Mailer have decided that "women cannot comprehend male books, men cannot tolerate female books" (32).

However facetious Ellman's comment may seem, her point is well-taken: it is fair to say that, historically, books by women have not received equitable critical attention because of the gender of the writer. Few

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contemporary critics would disagree with this statement. The justification for silencing women's writing, however, still appears valid to a number of critics: women's writing deals with the "trivial" aspects of life, according to these critics. Women's comic writing seems neither radical nor universal. It does not deal with war (except indirectly) or finance (except indirectly) or with the large ideological constructs underpinning our social and cultural worlds (except very indirectly) and so does not merit careful consideration. Once again to quote Ellman, a distaste for books before they are read is not uncommon, "as in Norman Mailer's unsolicited confession of not having been able to read Virginia Woolf, or in Anthony Burgess's inhibitory 'impression of high-waisted dresses and genteel parsonage flirtation' in Jane Austen's novels" (Ellman 35). It is interesting to note that Mailer and Burgess seem to pick the two women writers most often discussed in terms of comedy.

At the most, Ellman writes, women writers can hope for pity of the defect from male critics. It is difficult to deny the validity of her comment when she quotes from Louis Auchincloss' Pioneers and Caretakers to back up her point: Auchincloss writes that it is "difficult (for women novelists) to avoid the strident note, the shrill cry; it is hard to keep from becoming a crank" (4).

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How true are the assertions that women's comedic writing is at best mild and at worst trivial? If they are not true, then why do they still figure into the arguments of a number of critics?

There are many reasons why discussion of women writers has been so "inaccurate, fragmented, and partisan," according to Showalter:

> In addition to the fact that women's literary history has suffered from an extreme form of what John Gross calls "residual Great Traditionalism," which has reduced and condensed the extraordinary range and diversity of English women novelists to a tiny band of the "great," and derived all theories from them. In practice, the concept of greatness for women novelists often turns out to mean four or five writers... and even theoretical studies of "the woman novelist" turn out to be endless recyclings and recombinations of insights about 'indispensable Jane and George' (6).

Another answer may lie in the fact that much of women's comedy, like many of the larger meaningful aspects of women's writing--such as anger and rebellion--can only be viewed if one is prepared to deal with the covert narrative strategies employed by many women writers. This is where Gilbert and Gubar's "palimpsest" theory comes into play; the idea that there are hidden texts within texts in women's writing applies neatly to the writing of comedy. The hidden texts, the submerged texts, or the

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meta-texts of women's comedy often contain the key features.

For example, Patricia Spacks discusses the power of Lennox's The Female Quixote in terms of "energies more potent" than the text can acknowledge which nevertheless serve to govern the comic narrative."The fiction covertly undermines its ostensible endorsement of conventional expectations," writes Spacks, introducing several points which will be central to our discussion (135). The idea of covertly undermining conventional expectations underlies much comedic writing by women. Men might have regarded fiction as a form of repressive desublimation for women, explains Showalter, believing that novels were "a safe and suitable channel for energies that might otherwise have been turned to business, politics, religion, and revolutionary action" (84). Women writers, however, saw their role differently so that "while deferring to male knowledge and power, they subtly revise and undermine the world from which they are excluded."[2] Indeed, writing became quite a revolutionary act in and of itself. Women's writing can be seen as a method by which women could subvert while appearing to serve; all comedic writings by women can be seen as a special form of what might accurately be described as resistance writing.

Resistance writing can take many forms, including parody. Gilbert and

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Gubar discuss Austen's parodic strategies in The Madwoman in the Attic, and suggest that Austen's fiction did even more than point out the social follies of her day. They propose that Austen called into question the entire relationship of women to fiction, forcing her female readers to question the rules governing their own lives: women who were "living lives regulated by the rules provided by popular fiction," were shown by Austen characters just "how very bankrupt that fiction is"(115). Gilbert and Gubar argue that the point of Austen's fiction is:

> precisely to illustrate the dangerous delusiveness of fiction which seriously presents [romantic] heroines... as models of reality. While ridiculing ludicrous literary conventions, Austen also implies that romantic stories create absurd misconceptions. Such novelistic cliches as love at first sight, the primacy of passion over all other emotions and/or duties, the chivalric exploits of the hero, the vulnerable sensitivity of the heroine, the lovers' proclaimed indifference to financial considerations, and the cruel crudity of parents are all shown to be at best improbable; at worst they are shown to provide manipulative roles and hypocritical jargon which mask materialistic and libidinal egoism (115).

The arguments Gilbert and Gubar make throughout Madwoman in the Attic concern the subversive elements of women's texts which have been misread or silenced by traditional criticism. The subversion is often masked by comedy, comedy often being elemental for the subversion to

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take place. There is a seductive element in comedy, as Spacks has noted in a discussion of the emblematic eighteenth-century heroine:

> As the creature of fantasy gets fleshed out, she becomes attractive, not just dangerous; the novel preaches subversive doctrine in the guise of supporting moral platitudes (129).

The books classified by writers like George Eliot as "silly novels by lady novelists" may, in light of these remarks, have more power than originally acknowledged. Even as recently as 1974, Rosalind Miles wrote in The Fiction of Sex that "novel writing is compatible with the conventional requirement of women that they should keep their heads down. The almost complete absence of women humorists from the scene may support this hypothesis"(39). To invert Miles' hypothesis is perhaps more useful: "novel writing is compatible with the subversive elements of women's writings, and the presence of humor in much writing by women supports this perspective."

Miles' view that women kept their heads down and wrote humor-free prose is locked into a male-dominated critical discourse which did more than ignore women's comedy-- it attempted to destroy it. Take, for example, Feibleman's discussion of Gertrude Stein's Autobiography of Alice

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B. Toklas:

> Having nothing else to talk about, after years with gibberish, she talks about herself: her own life and her genius. And we long for the gibberish again, for that at least was self-contained. It is like looking inside a balloon after having for some time admired its shining surface, only to learn that there is nothing to it but surface. What a clever trick it was after all, and how amusing. For Miss Stein is a comedian and nothing else, and her words have a meaning only when she is talking nonsense (241).

It is pertinent to return to Regenia Gagnier's remarks on men's reactions to women's comedy after this discussion of Stein. Gagnier's argument seems to apply to this last critic's reactions. Basing her claims on the findings of sociologists and anthropologists, in addition to her study of literature, Gagnier asserts that:

> men fear women's humor for much the same reason that they fear women's sexual freedom--because they encourage women's aggression and promiscuity and thus disrupt the social order; that therefore they desire to control women's humor just as they desire to control women's sexuality--to wit, in the public domain; and finally, that women's humor among themselves may not be assimilable to any (traditional) categories....If for male theorists humor is functional, promoting group cohesion and (sic) inter-group conflict...only ser[ving] to reinforce the status quo, women's humor may do none of the above.[4]

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Significantly, Judy Little, author of one of the few existing studies of women and comedy in literature, claims that it is the very "lack of closure, this lack of resolution, [which] characterizes the feminist comedy.... " (187). It is the lack of closure and the possibilities for freedom in Stein's humor that worry critics like Feibleman. Little argues in her introduction that the comedy of women writers "differs from rounded-off comic fiction in which the hero is ultimately reintegrated into society. The comedy [written by women]...mocks the deepest possible norms" (1). In addition to Little, Wilt claims unabashedly that the woman writer "hesitates, laughing at the edge, withholding fertility, humility, community"(180)-- in other words, withholding every elemental aspect of comedy traditionally associated with women. Wilt claims, without apology, that:

> No comedy is so obsessive, so hysterical, yet so pervasive, adds feminism, as that allotted to women. Not even comedy about women is so pervasive as comedy...by women (177).

Perhaps the strongest argument for the importance of examining the complex relationship among women, comedy and subversion is initiated by Catharine Clement and Helene Cixous in The Newly Born Woman during their discussion of women's power to undo socio-cultural constructs.

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Clement's polemical statement "all laughter is allied with the monstrous" could act as a banner for women and comedy. The last thing Clement and Cixous see as necessary for comedy is closure:

> Laughter breaks up, breaks out, splashes over; Penthesileia could have laughed; instead, she killed and ate Achilles. It is the moment at which the woman crosses a dangerous line, the cultural demarcation beyond which she will find herself excluded (33).

In exploring laughter, women are exploring their own powers; they are refusing to accept social and cultural boundaries that mark the need or desire for closure as a "universal." Comedy is dangerous; humor is a weapon. Laughter is refusal and triumph. Is it any wonder, really, that the Stein critic is nervous? Feminist comedy, according to Little, will say "truly dangerous things obliquely" (which echoes Dickinson's "success in circuit lies") using complex liminal imagery (178). Women's comedy is "dangerous" because it refuses to accept the givens and because it refuses to stop at the point where comedy loses its integrative function. This comedy by women is about de-centering, dis-locating and de-stabilising the world. As Ellman puts it: "Laugh and choose evil" (216).

b: Women, Comedy and Anger

In Nancy Miller's preface to the papers from 'The Poetics of Gender"

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colloquium at Columbia University, she quotes Michael Riffaterre who proclaimed that it was the "most successful of all the colloquia. And next year's," Riffaterre announced "will be on anger." Miller believes that "he saw a natural order" between women and anger, "and he was right" (viii).

It is no longer news to feminist critics that women's writing is shot through with anger and aggression. As we have already seen, recent feminist criticism has drawn our "attention to the explosive anger behind the decorous surfaces of [women's] novels" (Gilbert and Gubar 111). What has only been suggested up until this point is the relationship between anger and comedy in writings by women. We once again return to Wilt's significant comments on the matter from her 1980 article:

> Comedy is an archetypal carrier of anger... the traditional protection against pain, up to a point. Matriarchal comedy [uses] wit against the flood of anger and pain (192).

As we have also discovered, much of women's dangerous comedy is hidden beneath apparently conventional surfaces. The most "dangerous" of characters, the most subversive, may be the "creature of fantasy fleshed out," as Spacks categorized her, or she may be, according the Showalter, "the 'pretty little girl' whose indoctrination in the female role has taught

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her secrecy and deceitfulness, almost as secondary sex characteristics. She is particularly dangerous because she looks so innocent" (165). Her comedy is certainly liable to be misread by those who cannot believe her capable of irony, satire or sarcasm. When such a character says she "was born to make a man a cup of tea," her words are likely to be taken literally, not ironically. Her subversion will pass unnoticed by those who cannot read her hidden text. This "duplicity" applies in another way to the repressed figures of the text, the women who act out their anger, who often seem to be quickly silenced but who still remain strong presences in the work. Gilbert and Gubar explain this point, using Austen as an example:

> instances of Austen's duplicity occur in her representation of a series of extremely powerful women each of whom acts out the rebellious anger so successfully repressed by the heroine and the author. Because they so rarely appear and so infrequently speak in their own voices, these furious females remain secret presences in the plots (169).

The writer herself in this instance seems to assume the role of the dangerous "pretty little girl" practiced at making herself acceptable no matter what she might actually do; the "furious female" is less acceptable, although in reality less dangerous.

The fixed idea of women as "the unlaughing at which men laugh" has been

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used as a weapon against both the "pretty little girls" and the "furious females" in order to negate whatever powers of humor they seem to possess. Judith Wilt's quote from Mary Daly's argument concerning the trope of the unlaughing woman:

> Mary Daly... offered an arresting metaphor for the mechano-smile which has routinized the always limited boundaries of comedy for women: "the cliche, 'she lacks a sense of humor' - applied by men to every threatening woman - is one basic 'electrode' embedded just deeply enough into the fearful foreground of women's psyches to be able to conduct female energy against the Self while remaining disguised." George Eliot...touched this same insight when she smiled, ruefully, at her heroine-comic Gwendolyn Harleth for the revealing speed with which she " would at once have marked herself off from any sort of theoretical or practically reforming women by satirizing them"(177).

"Comedy," cautions Wilt, " keeps turning against women... even in our own hands" (177). In this, comedy again resembles anger: it is often channelled through the only pathways not blocked by fear and authority, often mis-directed, especially in its earliest stages. Often it turns directly against the self as the simplest target. To allude to another George Eliot character, Maggie Tulliver:

> fits even of anger and hatred ... would flow out over her affections and conscience like a lava stream, and frighten her with a sense that it was not difficult for her to become a demon.[5]

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Maggie is afraid of becoming a demon, crossing over the "dangerous line, the cultural demarcation beyond which she will find herself excluded" described by Clement. The figure of the demon-madwoman is the symbol for every women writer in Gilbert and Gubar. She is the figure who "arises like a bad dream, bloody, envious, enraged, as if the very process of writing had itself liberated a madwoman, a crazy and angry woman, from a silence in which neither she nor her author can continue to acquiesce" (77). The alternative to the madwoman seems to be to the silent woman. Julia Kristeva associates women with "the repressed space .... called 'the semiotic' [that is] opposed to the symbolic." But even this space is considered "pre-Oedipal" and "in adult discourse" associated with "rhythm, prosody, non-sense, pun" and therefore linked to humor.[6] In a more recent article, "Approaching Abjection," Kristeva describes the position of the "outcast," the one who has gone beyond the boundary. And although Kristeva is not, in this work, discussing women exclusively, her comments are still applicable for our argument. Women can be seen in the role of:

> an outcast who... therefore wanders...desiring, belonging or refusing. Situationist in a sense, and not without laughing - since laughter is a way of placing or displacing abjection (130).

The association of women with the "repressed space" is further explored in The Newly Born Woman. Clement and Cixous explain that women have

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always been thought of as absence, hollowed-out, the abyss:

> Night to his day - that has forever been the fantasy. Black to his white. Shut out of his system's space, she is the repressed that ensures the system's functioning (67).

Their comments appear to follow in a pattern established by Simone de Beauvoir in The Second Sex where, as Juliet Mitchell summarizes:

> Woman is the supreme Other, against which Man defines himself as subject, not in reciprocity, which would mean that he in turn was object for the woman's subjecthood, but in an act of psychic oppression. Woman is the archetype of the oppressed consciousness: the second sex. Her biological characteristics have been exploited so that she has become the receptacle for the alienation all men must feel; she contains man's otherness, and in doing so is denied her own humanity.[7]

The feminine has been associated with the "not fully conscious, not fully assembled, the intemperate, incoherent...." according to Ellman, and it is interesting that even these definitions rely on the negation of ideas, the absence of certain behaviors. This bears on literary criticism in that, Ellman argues, "women's books by men will arrive punctually at the point of preoccupation, which is the fact of femininity. Books by women are treated as though they themselves were women, and criticism embarks...upon an intellectual measuring of busts and hips..."(29).

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At the very least, critics have often seen women reductively in terms of the "natural," elemental in a sense that implies an inability to rise to analytic or intellectual sophistication. Leslie Fiedler uses a emblematic image: the sculpture is male; the tree out of which the sculpture is carved is female.[8] Beauvoir has explored the implications of Fiedler's definition of women as a sort of intellectual missing link, the element connecting man to his origins in nature: "this dream incarnate is precisely woman; she is the wished-for intermediary...."[9] Beauvoir suggests that women are aligned with animals, who can only "repeat and maintain" in contrast to men who can "create and invent." All that is associated with "culture" is associated with men; all that is associated with "nature" is associated with women. Theodor Adorno, in his discussion of women in Minima Moralia, writes that:

> The feminine character, and the ideal of femininity on which it is modelled, are products of masculine society. The image of undistorted nature arises only in distortion, as its opposite. Where it claims to be humane, masculine society imperiously breeds in woman its own corrective, and shows itself through this limitation implacable the master. The feminine character is a negative imprint of domination (95).

Quoting from Sherry Ortner, Sandra Gilbert also discusses the women/nature association in her introduction to The Newly Born Woman. Drawing arguments from a number of sources, critical and anthropological,

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she discusses Ortner's argument that women's reproductive functions "identify them with the (animal) body" so that they are universally regarded as being "closer to nature than (are) men." Gilbert describes Ortner's point thus:

> The female role represents "something intermediate between culture and nature, lower on the scale of transcendence than man." Such a position "on the continuous periphery of culture's clearing," she explains, would "account easily for both the subversive feminine symbols (witches, evil eye, menstrual pollution, castrating mothers) and the feminine symbols of transcendence (mother goddesses, merciful dispensers of salvation...)" (xiii).

The phrase "on the continuous periphery of culture's clearing" is particularly compelling for the discussion of women's comedy, as we have seen. Women's comedy is marginal, liminal, concerned with and defined by its very exclusion from convention, by its aspects of refusal and its alliance with subversive feminine symbols. Women seem to be placed on the periphery of the symbolic order, connected most profoundly to the imaginary before the domination of the patriarchal language which controls and dispenses all unity and authority. The difference of women is viewed as a risk to culture. So it should be.

Mary Douglas writes that "each culture has its risks and its specific

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problems. It attributes a power to some image or another of the body, according to the situation of which the body is the mirror." This is crucial to the perceptions of and the place of women in the culture:" the things that defile are always wrong one way or another, they are not in their place or else they have crossed a line they never should have crossed and from this shift a danger for someone results."[10] Women can defile, spoil, and ruin because they derive power from their exclusion.

In fact, women and children are often perceived as dangerous because they are deviant and through their deviance might have established their own systems which operate in counter-point to culture. Freud makes a connection between witches sabbats (sic) and the games of children, seeing the ritualization of behavior in each as possibly threatening. "The secret gatherings with dances and other amusements are observed everyday in the streets where children play." Clement responds: "In the streets! What a peculiar passage from the most clandestine to the most public! In fact, neither the clandestine sabbat nor the children's games are public....There is play: what sorceresses and hysterics achieve is the updating and actualization of old childhood scenes....It is a scene of seduction. A terrifying, immense, and paternal character is the principal actor in it"(12). Showalter deals with the alliance of women's language with secret

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language, indicating that it is ancient, appearing frequently in folklore and myth where its secretive nature is its defining force.[11] Because woman is on the periphery, she has, as do children, the power of enormous possibility; because she cannot be contained she is dangerous.

The implication for comedy is clear. Not only do the ideas of the power of secrecy inform the concept, but the very essence of women's comedy is that it is drawn up from the marginal, the liminal, the boundary-world where the imaginary and the symbolic (in the Lacanian sense) meet. As the figure of absence, she is most powerful because she has the power of refusal, which seems until now to have been highly underrated. It perhaps seemed a shoddy gift, the gift of refusal and the right to exclusion, what is given as embarrassing compensation for "real" power. This seems to be at the root of women's comedy: the power of the peripheral and the power of secret refusal. Thus the force behind the "decorous surfaces" of women's comedy.

Comedy is characterized by its inversion of the so-called "natural" order; for women, who have come to signify origin and exclusion (to borrow terms from Clement) there is a connection between regression to origin and the periphery of cultural conventions. Women are at the center of the process of decentering:

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> The madmen's festival, the savages; wild celebrations, the children's parties: woman is the figure at the center to which the others refer, for she is, at the same time, both loss and cause, the ruin and the reason (24).

Comedy poses a danger to the symbolic order because it refuses to accept the conventions which propagate the language of the father, as we have seen. Women are not offered the possibility for full initiation into the symbolic order, but still maintain a level of power to affect the cultural codes because of their position in terms of "origin." "Societies do not succeed in offering everyone the same way of fitting into the symbolic order," explains Clement. "Those who are, if one may say so, between symbolic systems, in the interstices, offside, are the ones who are afflicted with a dangerous symbolic mobility" (7). The phrase "dangerous symbolic mobility" is significant for comedy by women. It echoes the earlier phrase "all laughter is allied with the monstrous" as well as reflecting Kristeva's assertion that women as the "semiotic" space is allied with pre-Oedipal discourse that does not accept the absolutes of language but rather plays with language, using non-sense and puns, as part of its refusal to embrace initiation into the symbolic order.

Women and words form a problematic alliance within the symbolic order. Levi-Strauss claims that two forms of exchange make up cultural law: the

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exchange of words and the exchange of women. This is problematic because:

> women are both sign and value, sign and producer of sign. We know this perfectly well: it happens that women talk, that they step out of their function as sign. This fact still safeguards culture even in this wonderful scientific version of the great Christian myth: woman is in a primitive state; she is the incarnation of origin. "In men's matrimonial dialogue, woman is not just what is being talked about; because even if women in general represent a certain category of signs, destined for a certain type of communication, each woman keeps a particular value, which comes from her talent before and after the marriage in holding her part in a duet. (Cixous and Clement 28).

Women are not meant to give utterance: when they do, they "step out of their function as sign." When they create comedy, they are stepping out of their "destined communication" and risking their position as responsive partner in the perpetual duet. They are also risking the maintenance of the system of exchange because they are shifting the ground beneath where the system rests. Should women remove themselves or "de-value" themselves in terms of exogamy, their system is in danger of collapse:

> Ultimately one might even think, as we know, that the woman must remain in childhood, in the original primitive state, to rescue human exchange from an imminent catastrophe owing to the progressive and inescapable entropy of language. Words have been able to circulate too much, to lose their information, to strip themselves of their sense. At least let women stay as they were in the beginning, talking little but

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> causing men's talk - stay as guardians, because of their mystery, of all language. Levi-Strauss calls what they are thus able to retain 'affective wealth,"fervor,"mystery,"which at the origin doubtlessly permeated the whole world of human communications' (Cixous and Clement 28).

The symbolic order is what allows for unification of perspectives through an apprehension of the so-called authority of language, that one meaning is eradicably attached to one word; the problem arises in this equation when the instability of language is brought to the forefront. This links logocentrism with phallocentrism, according to a number of writers: looking for the one, unchallenged point of the matter is common to both. Language "entropies" through use, heading towards what Clement has called an "apocalypse" of meaning, when the imaginary direct-equation will be shattered (28).

Women appear, from their position, to be able to make use of the shiftings of the system. The symbolic dimension, as Juliette Mitchell describes it, enables the subject/child to disentangle words from the snares and fascinations of the imaginary. The child's accession to language coincides with the advent of the Oedipus complex, according to Lacan, and through this process women can be defined "as excluded by the nature of things which is the nature of words."[12] The symbolic order--the "highest" order-

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is linked to the masculine and to language. To play with language, then, seems to mean playing with the authority of the symbolic/masculine view. Kristeva writes that "the descent into the foundation of the "symbolic edifice - consists in retracing the fragile frontiers of the speaking being, as close as possible to its dawning, of this bottomless 'origin'...."(138), which would indicate that there is a renewed exploration of the comedic in the exploration of play with language, of the use of non-sense and pun to underscore the lack of language's authority. The use of comedy in these terms also echoes what Freud described as the "strangest characteristic of unconscious (repressed) processes" which is their "entire disregard of reality-testing; they equate reality of thought with external actuality and wishes with their fulfillment - with the event"[13]

Which leads us to the figure of the hysteric, the paradigmatic rebel against reality-testing, a central figure for the discussion of women and comedy. The hysteric, the most marginal of marginal figures, is "caught in the contradiction between cultural restraint and sorcerous repression." With her hidden "little implicit smile" she experiences "hell and pleasure at the same time"(Cixous and Clement 34). The hysteric refuses to acknowledge what others construct as reality. She has seen the boundaries created in order to delineate the real from the imaginary (easy from her exceedingly

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liminal position), and she has concluded that they do not in fact exist. Smiling through heaven and hell at the same time, and experiencing them both as much of the same, she is emblematic of the way women have been misread, and, by implication, the ways in which women's comedy has been misread. When her pleasure is read as pain, there is bound to be misunderstanding. For women, there are a different set of endings, or non-endings, leading to pleasure. The pleasure of being the girl the boy got so that he can then go found a society around him is <u>not</u> her happy ending. Instead, from a woman's:

> own anarchic point of view, it is pleasure in breaking apart; but from the other's point of view, it is suffering, because to break apart is to aggress. The suffering is not originally hers: it is the other's which is returned to her, by projection (Cixous and Clement 34).

Smiling through an experience is different from undergoing catharsis: the experience remains potent, dangerous and enraging through the smile. The experience is put towards the impetus of destruction, not catharsis. It disables one from continuing as before, rather than enabling the continuation of the status quo. The pleasure derives not from the perpetuation of the familiar but from its destruction. This pleasure almost depends on surprises, disruptions, reversals, disunity and disharmony. The experience cannot be absorbed into the prefabricated cultural structures; it

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doubles on itself, not purged but strengthened.

No wonder women's comedy has gone unseen or misread; pain is projected onto her pleasure, unhappiness onto her joy. The refusal to supply closure has been misread as an inability to do so, as a failure of imagination and talent on the part of the writer ("In all the novels...there is not a single satisfactory union," complains one critic as his reason for disliking the entire oeuvre of one author). Women's comedic writings depend on the process, not on the endings. This sets even the work of twentieth-century women writers apart from their male counterparts: while male writers were exploring their disturbance at the breakdown of traditional structures, women writers were "expressing exuberance" at precisely the same phenomena.[14] The absence of a "normal" happy ending -- as defined by the traditional critics of comedy discussed earlier-- does not signal that the work is not a comedy. Far from it. As Cixous writes:

> there is a nonclosure that is not submission but confidence and comprehension; that is not an opportunity for destruction but for wonderful expansion (86).

What so often has appeared as submission is really refusal.

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c: Comedy Reconsidered

Why link hate to humor? For the following reasons: because in women's comedy the forces of anger and refusal replace the forces of integration and harmony; because for women's comedy, recognition and realization replace comfort and familiarity; because aggression is not purged, it is polished to a fine edge; because unity is broken by disjunction and calm is shattered by change; because women's comedy makes use of its "abjection," its outsider's position by valorizing the liminal; because women's comedy is "thrown next to the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It is there, very close, but unassimilable" to the male tradition (Kristeva 125).

In part, the tendency not to provide traditional closure is linked to an unwillingness to part with possibilities, as well as to a vision that permits a multiplicity of perspectives and does not view unification of these as desirable. The open-endedness of endings (even ones as apparently traditional as Mansfield Park) is a refusal to render-up what Cixous calls the "space-inbetween" and the "course that multiplies transformations by the thousands"(Cixous and Clement 86). Irigaray asserts that "Western discourse follows a male morphology, analogous in its linearity, unity and visible form to the phallus," and the non-closure of women's comedic texts are a rebellion against the imposition of this system.[15]

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As such, comedic narrative strategy is marked by the same "subterranean challenges" to truths that the writers appear on the surface to accept; it is "deceptively coded," if one is to use the phrase as employed by Carolyn Heilbrun and Catharine Stimpson. Comedy, like anger and with anger, is the pattern that emerges in the palimpsestic design used by female authors in "revising male genres"; Gilbert and Gubar have centered their argument in Madwoman in the Attic on the palimpsest, through which, they argue, women have used "male genres" to record their own dreams and their own stories:

> Women from Jane Austen and Mary Shelley to Emily Bronte and Emily Dickinson produced literary works that are in some sense palimpsestic, 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 (73).

When women write, and especially when they write comedy, they subvert the paradigms on which the cultural order is built, particularly the paradigm that permits women "to be spoken of, spoken through, but.. not [to] bespeak themselves"(Garner 24). In light of these "givens," women writers also "raise questions about priority and the stories by which it is maintained or conferred."[16] Cixous writes that, by definition, women

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writers are subversive:

> A feminine text cannot not be more than subversive: if it writes itself it is in volcanic heaving of the old "real" property crust. In ceaseless displacement. She must write herself because, when the time comes for her liberation, it is the invention of a new, insurgent writing that will allow her to put the breaks and indispensable changes into effect in her history (97).

According to Irigaray, by "subverting the referentiality of language" and by "constantly pushing against the limits of discourse," women produce different forms of writing from men; as we have seen, by doing the same, women produce comedy (Garner 23). Women's utterance is always subversive. It is necessarily so as a form of insurgence, as a break into the traditions of history dominated by men. Comedy redoubles the subversive nature of women's utterance, as discussed earlier. Comedy as a form of insurgence and disruption existed throughout women's writing. In Gilbert and Gubar's discussion of Austen's novels, for example, they argue that:

> For all her ladylike discretion...Austen is rigorous in her revolt against the conventions she inherited. But she expresses her dissent under the cover of parodic strategies that had been legitimized by the most conservative writers of her time and that therefore were then (and remain now) radically ambiguous. Informing her recurrent use of parody is her belief that the inherited literary structures

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> which are not directly degrading to her sex are patently irrelevant (119).

Apparent in much of the writing by women is the concept that whatever does not deal with women's lives is irrelevant. This remains another aspect historically misread by critics who believe that women's texts are by definition limited and trivial because they do not deal with the activities of men except insofar as they directly affect women.

For some critics, the fact that many women writers choose to write about the the so-called details of life (birth, death, marriage and sex) implies that women cannot master the universal (sports, politics and academics): "[m]ateriality is the favorite statement of feminine alliance with the concrete. It, in turn, implies masculine alliance with the abstract...." (Ellman 97). Schopenhauer, for example, believed that "[w]omen see what is immediately before them better than men can, because they never look at anything else." Ellman comments that the implication of Schopenhauer's statement is that "if a person does not see an object , it must follow that he sees something beyond or above the object" (97). "Instead of solving the question of women's oppression," comments Adorno, "male society has so extended its own principle that the victims are no longer able even to pose the question"(92).

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It is true that the relationship of women to language is a multi-faceted one. Women, as we have seen, often apparently refuse to accept the unified, codified system of single-word linked to single-meaning described by feminist critics as liking logocentricism with phallocentrism. Women seem to privilege the metaphoric aspect of language and their writing, especially their comedic writings, are concerned with the concept of metaphor as defining force. "[W]omen seem forced to live more intimately with the metaphors they have created," write Gilbert and Gubar(87). Mary Jacobus explores the question of metaphoric language in detail, using George Eliot's recognition of women's adoption of duplicity/multiplicity of language as a basis for her argument:

> Women, we learn, don't just talk, they double-talk, like language itself; that's just the trouble for boys like Tom:
>
> "I know what Latin is very well," said Maggie, confidently. "Latin's a language. There are Latin words in the Dictionary. There's bonus, a gift."
>
> "Now, you're just wrong there, Miss Maggie!" said Tom, secretly astonished. "You think you're very wise! But 'bonus' means 'good,' as it happens - bonus, bona, bonum."
>
> "Well, that's no reason why it shouldn't mean 'gift,'" said Maggie stoutly. "It may mean several things. Almost every word does."
>
> And if words may mean several things, general rules or maxims may prove less universal than they claim to be, and lose their authority.[17]

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Gilbert and Gubar make a similar claim when they discuss the use of language and double-talk in Emma where the multiplicity of language:

> implies a fallen world and the continual possibility, indeed the necessity, of self-division, duplicity, and double-talk. As the narrator of Emma explains, "Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised or a little mistaken". (111, chap.13.) (163).

Women and double-talk, the imposition of the duplicitous nature prescribed for women in order for them to preserve the paradigmatic systems of culture, nevertheless causes them further to acknowledge the non-closed, multi-dimensional aspects of the universe. When language loses its authority by being regarded as non-absolute, by analogy, the larger constructs of culture also lose their authority by being regarded as non-absolute. The whole notion of givens and universals is shifted when perceptions of language shift:

> If the role of father continues to parallel that of king, or president, or dictator, none of those elevated figures now possesses the enduring authority once implicit in them: the analog currently adumbrates precariousness (Spacks 260).

If the "complete truth" cannot be spoken -- or, for that matter, does not

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exist -- if everything appears in translation, as "a little disguised or a little mistaken" then a multiplicity of meanings is more than justifiable: it appears as the recognition of the power of language to form, and importantly, to un-form ideas. Language explodes with meaning and by doing so explodes the structures of the system from within. This process is in itself duplicitous in that it destroys and creates simultaneously, for writers like H.D. for whom "a word is a jewel in a jar, incense in a bowl, a pearl in a shell, a sort of mystic egg that can "hatch" multiple meanings."[18] Language also takes it upon itself for women writers to create the world; with no authority in an "otherly created" universe, without faith in a reality that reality-testing can verify, language returns to the boundary of the imaginary and the symbolic and appears as magical thinking, as creation itself. Words take on "lives of their own," according to Sydney Janet Kaplan. She continues to argue that for women writers "words have a sacred significance beyond what they symbolize. They are concrete; they are things...."(56).

In comedy by women writers multiplicity replaces unity; the stylistic reflections of this perspective are significant. Spacks, for example, discusses Mary McCarthy in terms of her imaginative vision in light of the author's perceptions of the "disorder" of so-called morality. Through Mc Carthy's use of:

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> multiple points of view, the varied fictional techniques of the novel provide stylistic equivalents for the multiple roles available to the heroine. Her inability to make any final commitment reflects her society's lack of clarity and testifies to her willingness and capacity to survive....Her open-eyed perception that her environment provides only temporary illusions of meaning. Interior insight confirms exterior disunity, the imagination promises nothing: except the heroine's faith, her only available faith, in her perceiving self.[19]

For women writers of comedy, as we have argued, recognition replaces resolution. Resolution of tensions, like unity or integration, should not be considered viable definitions of comedy for women writers because they are too reductive to deal with the non-closed nature of women's writings. As Ellman asserts, the woman writer cares less for what is resolved than for what is recognized in all its conceivable diversions into related or, for that matter, unrelated issues. Once rules are suspended, admirable and remarkable "exceptions are released," recognised and embraced (229). The realization that rules can be suspended, that absolutes are only powerful when allotted power, when a unified, linear progression is given over to the recognition of multiplicity and diversion, all "else" becomes possible. Words play off many meanings rather than embodying one in such a way as to underscore women's unique relationship to patriarchal language. The presentation of "realism" is less meaningful if the concept of the real is

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open to question. Once "objectivity" is seen as simply the "non-controversial aspect of things" the "facade made up of classified data," as Adorno argues (69), then the concept of realism loses its own authority, and subjectivity--play-- is given new significance. Although it would, of course, be incorrect to claim that male writers do not on occasion play with language in similiar fashions, it nevertheless remains true that such play is a consistent pattern in women's writings and typical of women's comedic texts. It is not a recent phenomenon:

> Austen was indisputably fascinated by double-talk, by conversations that imply the opposite of what they intend, narrative statements that can only confuse, and descriptions that are linguistically sound, but indecipherable or tautological.[20]

And of course the effects of these creations are comic, if one has the sensibility to recognize a humor that undermines reality and logic without appearing to do so.

Even the women writers who created so-called "realistic fictions" undermine the illusions of their fictional worlds, revealing them to be no more than "a blank page inscribed with a succession of arbitrary metaphoric substitutions," according to Jacobus. Jacobus demonstrates her

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assertion by quoting Eliot's significant statement declaring the power of absence, the notion of endlessly deferred meaning: "we can so seldom declare what a thing is, except by saying it is something else?" (47).

This statement is taken from The Mill on the Floss, and the passage for which it acts as the final statement is worth quoting in full because of its implications for the relationship between metaphor and the creation of meaning for women writers, especially in its implications for the discussion of women's perceptions of the arbitrary nature of so-called rational systems and the assertion that women "live more intimately" with metaphors:

> It is astonishing what a different result one gets by changing the metaphor! Once call the brain an intellectual stomach, and one's ingenious conception of the classics and geometry as ploughs and harrows seems to settle nothing. But then, it is open to some one else to follow great authorities and call the mind a sheet of white paper or a mirror, in which case one's knowledge of the digestive process becomes quite irrelevant. It was doubtless an ingenious idea to call the camel the ship of the desert, but it would hardly lead one far in training that useful beast. O Aristotle! if you had had the advantage of being "the freshest modern" instead of the greatest ancient, would you not have mingled your praise of metaphorical speech as a sign of high intelligence, with a lamentation that intelligence so rarely shows itself in speech without metaphor.... (Jacobus 47).

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Recognizing that metaphor makes up the "substance" of reality initiates a stylistic framing whereby the metaphor is played out so that it refers to its literal rather than its broader symbolic meaning. Women writers appear to be willing to challenge the implied distinction between the literal and the metaphorical more consistently and more radically than male writers, although it is of course true that male writers also explore metaphorical language. When the authority of language is challenged in this manner, the metaphor, and by implication the whole system of meaning based on metaphor, is shown to be unsafe. When Margaret Homans discusses George Eliot in this light, we are given even further insight into the undermining of realism and the importance of looking at the ways women subvert the accepted constructs of the "real":

> To repeat Wordsworth literally would in any case be a contradiction in terms. Eliot exploits this contradiction fully: to pay proper homage to Wordsworth would be to have him speak through her...but to do so is necessarily to get Wordsworth wrong and thus to fail to pay proper homage. The more literally Maggie repeats the texts authoritative for her, and the more literally Eliot has her live out what seem to be Wordsworthian notions...the closer she comes both to perfect femininity and to death. But the more literal the repetition, the more divergent from Wordsworth's aim....The literalizing that characterizes Maggie's adult feelings and actions...is paralleled by Eliot's general turn toward what she persuades us is realism. For Maggie, literalization leads to her death....(71).

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Eliot establishes her text "under cover of seeming to be a docile, feminine reader of her beloved Wordsworth" while actually subverting the accepted paradigms. For many female characters, to play out the metaphors controlling their lives leads to the destruction of the self. Gubar argues as much in "The Blank Page and the Issues of Female Creativity" regarding Lily's death in Wharton's The House of Mirth: "Lily seems to triumph at the end of The House of Mirth, for her death is the logical extension of her life. Having turned herself into an artistic object she now literally kills herself into art"(81). Her death is the ultimate debasing of the currency of metaphor, the way Wharton exposes the uncertain nature of the "absolutes" created by language. To conflate metaphor and narrative is a stylistic strategy which decenters and destabilizes the authority of symbolic discourse. It is employed by women writers continually and is especially recognizable and effective in comedy. It culminates in the radical writings of authors such as Gertrude Stein who uses the language of non-sense and pun for de-struction and de-stabilization. We should keep in mind the statements quoted earlier concerning the terrifying fear that Stein was all surface, all boundary existing against an absence: in contrast to Feibleman, Carolyn Simpson celebrates Stein's multiplicity and her refusal to close off her narrative. Stein's refusal is framed as triumph by Simpson, not as a mistake:

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> That tantalizing hovering of [Gertrude Stein's] language then intensifies our sense of destabilization and subversively warns us against accepting the certainty of any text. Covertly arming the guerrilla war against certainty is any lack of scaffolding that Stein might have nailed up around her constructions so that we might stand around and measure them. The effect is to dislodge expectations that we can manage the text; that we can gain interpretative mastery without pain. So doing, no matter how remotely, Stein dislodges our trust in the smoothness, regularity, and uniformity of our dominant discourses....(10).

Simpson's remarks indicate that a new reading which can encompass the dislodging of expectations, the disruption of regularity and the splintering of dominant discourse is in order that women's writing can avoid the mis-readings of critics who proclaim, with the history of critical thought behind them, that writings by women are of no use. The trap of such thought is difficult to avoid; it is like the accusations, discussed by Clement and Cixous, made against women considered witches. Under such accusations, the "perfect trap" was set since by laughing, or not laughing, crying, or not crying, being indifferent or not indifferent enough, a woman condemned herself(17). Theodor Adorno writes in Minima Moralia that once we 'recognize the ruling order and its proportions as sick...then it can see as healing cells only what appears, by that standards of that order, as itself sick, eccentric...mad...."(73). And, as Judith Wilt has shown, when we

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have to do with women comics, matriarchal comics, we have to do with witches(179). Since she inevitably faces condemnation, the woman writer of comedy decides to accept condemnation through laughter.

Comedy by women writers is a phenomenon of evasion, concealment, refusal and resistance; it is ineradicably tied to anger through its desire and willingness to dislodge the autocratic symbolic and cultural systems that attempt to impose an arbitrarily constructed series of absolutes upon women and their utterance. Comedy by women, with its redoubling use of anger and refusal, recognizes and reflects most clearly that, as is shown in The Newly Born Woman, philosophy itself is constructed on the premise of woman's abasement, that subordination of the feminine to the masculine order is a prerequisite element of philosophy, the part which permits the system to appear as a natural, rational condition. However, as Clement and Cixous write:

> It has become rather urgent to question this solidarity between logocentrism and phallocentrism - bringing to light the fate dealt to woman, her burial - to threaten the stability of the masculine structure that passed itself off as eternal-natural, by conjuring up from femininity the reflections and hypotheses that are necessarily ruinous for the stronghold still in possession of authority (65).

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Women writers of comedy can acknowledge through the very form of their expression that what has been presented as authority is not authoritative and can be undermined by pointing out the emperor's new clothes; they can and do write comedy that deflates the language of the symbolic order by structuring their discourse so that it both escapes and appears to submit to the rules of the dominant discourse. Women writers must evade the traps set for them by systems wherein:

> self-possession and authority are functions of the father and communicable only in terms of the father; ultimately all language is that of the father. The images of independence...all ultimately paralyzing, for they withdraw the power that they offer by means of the same language in which the offer is made (Scaldini 171).

One must not accept, therefore, the "images of independence" provided as bait in the trap, not accept the fallacy offering a new order to replace the old whereas, in fact, everything will continue as before; women's comedic writings offer entirely new constructs for the use and form of comedy. They explore the perimeters of discourse, exploiting their dual position as origin/outsider, only to show that the perimeters are falsely made, poorly constructed things after all, not worthy of attention. They mimic in order to show up the rules, assume roles in order to subvert them, "transform subordination into affirmation" of their own vision, and to:

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> start spoiling the game.... To play at mimesis is, then, for a woman, to try to rediscover the locus of her exploitation by discourse, without being simply reduced to it. It is to resubmit herself...to 'ideas' about her, elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but in order to 'manifest' by ludic repetition what was to remain hidden: the recovery of a possible operation of the feminine in language. It is also to 'unveil' the fact that if women mime so well it's because they cannot simply be reabsorbed in that function. They also remain elsewhere.[21]

Comedy is a way women writers can reflect the absurdity of the dominant ideology while undermining the very basis for its discourse. The creation of non-sense, puns, language play associated with eradicating the boundaries between the imaginary and symbolic reaffirms that women's use of language in comedy is different from men's: that women do not provide what men call happy endings at the ends of their comedic works. Most significantly, a discussion of women's comedy is necessary because, as Annette Kolodny has argued, "lacking familiarity with the woman's imaginative universe, that universe within which their acts are signs," men can neither read nor "comprehend the meanings of the women closest to them despite the apparent sharing of a common language." The author, Kolodny continues, must be able to:

> depend on a fund of shared recognitions and potential inference. For their intended impact to take hold in the reader's imagination, the author simply must... be able to call upon a shared context with her audience. When she cannot, or dare not,

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> she may revert to silence, to the imitation of male forms or... madness (256).

Comedy that undoes, dislocates and refuses serves to displace the foundations of traditional theories of comedy. Hate and humor combined, as we have seen, are a significant part of the narrative strategy employed by women writers and in the following chapters we will see how these strategies are employed in the novels of Elizabeth Bowen, Muriel Spark and Fay Weldon. Obviously it is outside the scope of this dissertation to provide an extensive discussion of individual works by these authors; the argument made in the next three chapters deals with works by Bowen, Spark and Weldon as illustrative of the preceeding discussion of women and comedy. This is not to suggest that Elizabeth Bowen, Muriel Spark and Fay Weldon are the only major women writers of comedy in the twentieth-century; this is not the case. However, the works of these three writers, indisputably eclectic, critically acclaimed and spanning as they do the past sixty years of post-Woolf writing in Britain, do unquestionably provide a range of possibilities for seeing the way women's anger and humor are complexly encoded within culturally acceptable forms.

"Every joke," wrote Freud, "calls for a public of its own."

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Notes

[1] Mary Ellmann, Thinking About Women. (New York: Harcourt Brace and World Inc., 1968) 32.

[2] Lorna Sage, "The Case of the Active Victim," TLS 26 July, 1974, 803.

[3] Feibleman, In Praise of Comedy 241.

[4] Regenia Gagnier, "The Limits of Humor and Hatred in Nineteenth Century Women's Autobiography: A Cross-class Analysis."

[5] George Eliot, The Mill on the Floss, IV, chap 3.

[6] Julia Kristeva, "Oscillation between Power and Denial", trans. Marilyn A. August, New French Feminisms, 91. qtd. in Gilbert, Sandra and Susan Gubar. Sexual Linguistics: Gender, Language, Sexuality. New Literary History XVI #3. (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1983) 518.

[7] Mitchell, Juliet. Psychoanalysis and Feminism. (New York: Vintage Books, 1974) 306.

[8] qtd. in Ellmann 44.

[9] qtd. in Mitchell 160.

[10] Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger, quoted in Cixous, Helene and Clement, Catherine. The Newly Born Woman. Trans. Betsy Wing. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) 17.

[11] Elaine Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness", Writing and Sexual Difference. ed. Elizabeth Abel. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) 21.

[12] Gilbert and Gubar 536.

[13] Sigmund Freud, "Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning", 1911, SE XII, 225. qtd. in Mitchell 13.

[14] Gilbert and Gubar, "Introduction: The Female Imagination and The Modernist Aesthetic." Studies in Gender and Culture 1 (1986): 3. Gilbert and Gubar provide, in their introduction to this generally useful volume, a

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good discussion of the female modernist tradition. The other essays in the collection also provide a range of insight into the ways in which the texts produced by twentieth-century women writers--American, British and European-- differ from those of their male peers.

[15] Luce Irigaray, qtd. by Sandra Gilbert in introduction to The (M)other Tongue. eds. Garner, Shirley Nelson, Kahane, Claire and Sprengnether, Madelon, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press,1985) 23.

[16] Gilbert, introduction to The (M)other Tongue 24.

[17] Mary Jacobus, "The Question of Language: Men of Maxims and The Mill on the Floss." Writing and Sexual Difference 44.

[18] Gilbert and Gubar 530.

[19] Patricia Meyer Spacks, Ed. Contemporary Women Novelists. (Englewood, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1977) 91.

[20] Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979) 127.

In this case 'sound' seems to be the operative term; something literally 'sounds' fine but again the duplicitous nature of the apparently acceptable and decorous surface is highlighted. In the same way, of course, non-sense can so materially mimic 'sense' as to appear nearly indecipherable from it.

[21] Luce Irigaray, "Quand nos levres se parlent." In Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un. (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1977) 172. Quoted by Sandra Gilbert in her introduction to The Newly Born Woman.

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Elizabeth Bowen

> ...knocking away devices...moving beyond the known terms of reference, looks like - and I think is - the beginning of something new.[1]

Elizabeth Bowen's works span half a century. Writing from 1923 until 1968, Bowen is, as Victoria Glendinning argues, "what happened after Bloomsbury; she is the link that connects Virginia Woolf with Iris Murdoch and Muriel Spark" (xv). Although Bowen received enormous critical attention during her lifetime, much of it is condescending and patronizing at best and indicative of the ways in which women writers of comedy have been misread even in the twentieth-century. Inevitably, as we will see, any moderately successful women writer who exhibits even a remote facility for humor is compared to Jane Austen: "Bowen's...most apparent literary predecessor [is] Jane Austen," writes Frederick Karl in The Contemporary English Novel (107). "Miss Bowen knows what goes to make a modern girl, whether in 1930 or in 1960" (55).

The fact that a number of Bowen's works deal with "girls," adolescents or women in their early twenties, is an important element to consider in examining her narrative strategies. By making use of young women as the

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central characters in her fiction, Bowen heightens the effect of the woman-as-marginal member of the cultural order. Young women are even more peripheral than their older counterparts, as Spacks has documented thoroughly in The Adolescent Idea. Spacks remarks that, as we have seen, recent feminist criticism has unveiled ambivalent attitudes towards women, present in traditional critical discourse. She continues her argument by pointing out that young women "evoke a special perplexity" because of the uncertain nature of their position within the dominant order. "Lacking the wifehood that would assign her...measurable status by virtue of her association with a...man...[she] has none of her own," Spacks writes. On the other hand, she is dangerous to the dominant order because of her symbolic mobility since:

> she possesses certain strengths: at least some degree of attractiveness, energy, and physical self-awareness. A sexual being yet unpossessed, she wields a power independent of social position. But she may not allow herself to know this. How potent is such power, unacknowledged? (19).

By placing women at the center of all of her novels, Bowen becomes problematic for critics who cannot accept books about women's lives as important, especially when the focus of the narrative is a young woman. Her books have proven difficult for critics who, like Leon Edel, feel it necessary to apologise for woman-centered texts:

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> I had noted the extent to which some of the male members of my Princeton seminar had actually resented being maneuvered...into the mind of an adolescent girl.[2]

The Princeton undergraduates are unfortunately not alone in their resentment. Bowen is often "relegated by critics to the condescending category of the sensitive female novelist, pushed ... into the designation of the merely perceptive ...." according to James Gindin (30). Gindin is perhaps referring to Karl's comments summing up and dismissing Bowen with phrases such as "obviously, Miss Bowen is an intensely feminine novelist..." (109), which Karl then defines as someone who can "sensitively depict" a "kind of world," but a world which for the male reader "ultimately remains...too overly feminine and gossipy, in a final view, shadowy"(129).

In fact, Bowen does appear unapologetically concerned with a world depicted through the lives of women, the world which for Karl remains "shadowy" through his lack of vision. There is no such thing as "too overly feminine" for Bowen; such phrases do not figure in the creation of her texts. If Karl is unable to become interested in the world created by women, or perhaps frightened by the possibility of its existence, Bowen is equally unable or, perhaps more accurately, ultimately refuses to center her interest in the world of men:

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> "I do think men are pathetic, don't you? If only they were more interesting."
> "I should have said they were interesting."
> "You wouldn't if you'd had as many as I have," said Veronica gloomily."... I dare say I thought men were interesting when I was about seventeen. Now I can see they're all exactly the same" (The Hotel 126).

"[I]t had been her self not her sex that she had wished to assert," Bowen writes of one character, but this phrase serves well to illustrate Bowen's own position (Heat of the Day 9). Not overtly or didactically feminist, she nevertheless refuses to accept the judgment that a novel centered on a young woman must reflect poorly on the author's abilities, as critics such as Karl might claim: "by keeping [a] young girl at the center for the novel, the novelist has forsaken any possibility of enlarging the scope of vision through more demanding personalities"(110), or "the mark of the fully mature novelist is his ability to probe emotionally and mentally developed adults"(129). One may remember that Karl is not alone in making these narrow, reductive comments when remembering the criticism of Priestley, Blythe and others, about women writers in general.

These comments, illustrative of a number of concerns expressed by feminist critics and discussed earlier, indicate the system of universals operating in traditional criticism concerning women writers. It is a 'given'

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by these standards that in writing about women, Bowen has "forsaken any possibility" of making a worthwhile statement about the "larger world" and that she is not a "fully mature novelist" because by writing about women she by definition excludes "much that makes life exciting and significant" (Karl129). This reminds one of Ellman's assertion that women's novels are judged by their gender markings, that the extent to which they reflect the feminine is the extent to which they are unimportant. Historically, critics have made the equation "women-centered texts=insignificant texts." Bowen is a good example of a writer who seeks to undo the universally accepted nature of that equation through subverting conventions by making use of them.

Bowen's use of hate and humor becomes clear in the multi-dimensional nature of her texts. By placing the apparently powerless young woman at the center of her novels, Bowen heightens the effects of dislocation, oppression, unease and betrayal common to both writings about women as well as to many twentieth-century novels. Simultaneously, and with comedic effect, the central figure subtly undermines the world from which she is excluded. Like a combination of the sorceress and the child, the Bowen protagonist is all the more dangerous because of her apparent vacancy, her evident innocence and what appears to be her obvious

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submission.

What is most evident in all of Bowen's writing is her ability to apply formal methods to the chaotic experience, what one critic called her ability to "chart precisely a period of loss" (Lee 12). For absence and loss are at the center of Bowen's fictions. As Bowen writes in Friends and Relations:

> [Janet] stood powerless, looking through at her life, at, not regainable, her whole habit of mind. This, like a house long inhabited without feeling and vacated easily, bore in, revisited in its emptiness, and anguishing sense of her no-presence.... (131)

Through her "discovery of a lack," as she calls it in The Last September, Bowen recognizes the power of absence and of the peripheral position. Many of the stories "chart an ominous vacancy" (130) and the de-centeredness of her central characters are, in fact, her signature. As Graham Greene noted early on in Bowen's career, she "made capital out of the gap in the records."[3]

Aware of the "gaps in the record" of women's fiction, Bowen commented on the ways Austen's novels "locate, and never far from themselves, possible darkness, chaos; they feel the constant threat of the wrong - be this only a mean act, a callous or designing remark, a subtly deceiving proposition, a

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lie"(English Novelists 25). Such comments as she applies to Austen in fact reflect back with interest on her own work. Bowen mentions, for example, that Austen unashamedly presented the world with which she was familiar as a woman and "depicted and penetrated" it "not just as a world, it was the world," therefore by implication claiming equal authority for women's experience and men's. Her comment that "the world Austen creates remains a true world" emphasizes this point (English Novelists 25).

In contrast to Priestley's discussion of Elizabeth Gaskell in terms of measure of beer, Bowen writes that Gaskell "was keenly aware of the injustices done to her sex in the name of morality" (English Novelists 36), even as she comments on Gaskell's use of comedy, seeing the idea of comedy and outrage as in "counterpoise" (37).

Bowen's criticism concerning works by other women writers is also significant, if not in terms of comedy per se, then at least with regard to the larger issue of gender and writing. Of Wuthering Heights she proposes that "perhaps only a woman could have liberated her spirit so completely"(34) and Jane Eyre "gains force by being woman from beginning to end. Made in this voice, the plain, proud, unhesitating assertion of woman's feelings..."(34). Jane Eyre is the first book ever to

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declare that a woman "wants much more than love" in her life, and wonders whether this might not signal "the first feminist novel"(35). And Bowen, in one of her nicely worded dangerous statements, coyly considers the following point about women writers:

> At the time when male approval, coupled with money, gave woman the only status she had, it is remarkable that the only giant novels should have been written by spinster daughters of an obscure indigent clergyman (36).

Bowen sees Virginia Woolf's work in radical terms, as revising and rebelling against the conventions she was meant to inhabit. "[Woolf] chooses in fact unlikely matter to kindle,- but, once kindled, how high she makes it burn!" Bowen proclaims that Woolf "has put behind her, having no need of, devices that make all other stories work." She creates characters who appear "conventional and compliant" but who in reality have an "inner strangeness...in the manner in which they see and feel" (48).

Bowen reads in Woolf a characteristic of her own writing: an account of the "century's emotion" which she sees as "dislocated and stabbing"(Collected Impressions 46). "Very modern lighting heightened an unreality" is how she describes a party in To The North (19). In The Heat

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of the Day, perhaps her most widely acclaimed novel, Bowen shows the process whereby a woman comes to face the dislocating force of "l'horreur de mon neant." Bowen often describes by doubling the negative to make a positive, sometimes in humorous terms, sometimes in order simply to provoke and disrupt: typical instances of this appear in The Heat of the Day when she writes "there cannot be a moment in which nothing happens" (197) and "nothing was not possible" (105). Like modern lighting, such use of language serves to heighten the sense of unreality, of dislocation and, most importantly, of endless possibility.

In asserting that "nothing is not possible," Bowen is, like many other women writers, exploring the boundaries of possibility only to find that there are no boundaries. Her comedy often occurs during the recognition and ultimate realization of the loss of so-called reality's limitations. The following exchange from The Heat of the Day is indicative of this process:

> "Oh, but there will always be somewhere else...
> Everything can be shifted, lock, stock and barrel.
> After all, everything was brought here from
> someone else, with the intention of being moved
> again - like touring scenery from theatre to
> theatre. Reassemble it anywhere; you get the same
> illusion."
> "You'd say this was an illusion?"
> "What else but an illusion could have such power?"
> (133)

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Bowen, who was said to have "a genius for unreality"(Eva Trout 40), sees, as does one of her characters "what a fiction was common-sense"(Death of the Heart 315). Her surreptitious narrative strategies, the ones left unexplored by her more traditional, non-feminist critics, undermine common-sense, patriarchal authority and, as in the following catechism between two women, history:

> "But isn't much to be learned from the lessons of history, Connie?"
> "Also in my experience one thing you don't learn from is anything anyway set up to be a lesson; what you are to know you pick up as you go along" (Heat of the Day 172).

And, after all, Bowen writes, as if in response to the critics who claim she writes about too limited a world, "what people call life's larger experiences...are so very narrowing"(The Hotel 165).

Women especially live under only assumed boundaries; they understand the arbitrary construction of commonsense, history, reality. They realize that not only is everything possible, but this is so because "nothing is really unthinkable; really you do know that. But the more one thinks, the less there's any outside reality - at least, that's so with a woman...."(Heat of the Day 214). Women come, at various stages of their lives, to understand that only illusions can have real power, and that, conversely, power is itself an

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illusion. Women realize, as does Eva Trout of Bowen's last novel, that "there was no 'real life'; no life was more real than this. This she had long suspected. She now was certain"(Eva Trout 216). Women have "no scale"; they are therefore unlikely to accept some things as great and others as small. They are, by extension, unlikely to accept hierarchies where the great and small are put in so-called natural order. Rather, women chart their growth from the day they come to the understanding, to the inevitable "belief that nothing real ever happens"(House in Paris 191).

In Bowen's fictions it is, as she wrote in Collected Impressions, "the 'I' that is sought - and retrieved , at the cost of no little pain. And, the ghosts ... hostile or not, they rally, they fill the vacuum for the uncertain 'I'"(51). The "uncertain I" must find its way in a world where there is "no longer the safety of a prescribed world, of which the thousand-and-one rules could be learnt, in which one could steer one's way instructed and safe"(67). Reality itself must be created by women, who must "express ourselves into existence"(Gindin 38). As in our earlier discussions of women's writing and the blurring of distinctions between the imaginary and the symbolic, Bowen considers a world created in and by "magic. the Eden where fact and fiction were the same"(Collected Impressions 269).

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Unfortunately, when words are invested with meaning in the language of absolutes, faith comes down to the made-up formulas of "history" and "commonsense" which are passed off as truth, down "to a slogan, desperately re-worded to catch the eye"(Heat of the Day 100).

To acknowledge that "common sense" is neither is to risk misunderstanding and rejection, but that has always been the risk for women writers. "To write is always to rave a little," Bowen explains (Death of the Heart 7) and although she questions, in Eva Trout , whether "to what the mad have to say, who would ever listen?"(110) she nevertheless keeps "raving." We see clearly how apparent madness and writing are linked, as well as seeing the ways madness, writing and magic are linked for the figure of the hysteric, the witch, the matriarchal comic: Bowen puts herself into this context by seeing "magic" that "emanate[s] from words..."(Collected Impressions 101). The magic inherent in language cannot be fixed by a series of absolutes; to "fix" things through language is to attempt to put them into stasis and by implication to limit their possibilities. Bowen's women, especially the youngest of them, refuse to accept the closure, the fixing of meaning, the verdict of the partriarchal order. Lois in The Last September, for example, will not be caught in someone else's language trap:

> But when Mrs. Montmorency came to: "Lois is very - " she was afraid suddenly. She had a panic. She

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> didn't want to know what she was, she couldn't bear it: knowledge of this would stop, seal, finish one. Was she now to be clapped down under an adjective, to crawl round life-long inside some quality like a fly in a tumbler? (70)

"Elizabeth Bowen has surprisingly little difficulty in making an extreme relationship work at the level of the possible," writes Lee (73) This occurs in part through Bowen's use of comedic conventions which, even under traditional theory, allows for extreme behavior and reaction. But even in her comedy, there remains a sense of what Bowen called "resistance-fantasies" which are in themselves "frightening" (Collected Impressions 50). Something might, however, be both frightening and necessary; in fact, recognition of what is necessary is often terrifying and often resembles madness. Within the paradigmatic figure of extremes, the hysteric, there is still what Bowen might call "the sidelong glitter of reason, the uncanny hint of sanity"(Heat of the Day 214). We are presented with the sidelong glitter of understanding, the hint, a suggestion of the hidden subversion, the idea that success lies only in circuit as we had suspected. Bowen's texts often contain unparalleled subversions of conventional forms. Eva Trout, for example, has been seen as "a metaphor, represent[ing] a sense of life, large, awkward, always out of kilter, unable to find a form"(Gindin 32). Eva reflects the inappropriateness of boundaries which cannot in fact even encompass: "the world surrounding

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the sense of life is also puzzling and indefinable: on the one hand, it is full of minute and trivial forms, conventions; on the other hand, it's chaotic, unpredictable, and violent. Life still exists, but the world has no place for it" (Grindin 32). Eva is a giant, literally and figuratively, a physically large, overwhelming presence. She cannot be contained by forms which do not have a place for such a creature; she remains outside the realm of the expected, as do so many of Bowen's women in one manner or another. But their strength, ultimately, like Eva's, lies in the fact that they remain on the periphery of social and cultural structures, undermining these structures by their very presence. They are unassimilable.

Yet women remain the central figures of Bowen's comedy, never themselves the victims of disparagement, never actually the creators of vicious humor, but still the catalyst initiating recognition of the absurdity of the absolute. "For Bowen, assimilation is reduction, richness is chaos and violence"(Gindin 32). Non-closure, like Janet's "no-presence" or Eva's internal exile, is the supreme force to be reckoned with in Bowen and, finally, the most desirable entity available. Chaos, violence and anger are associated with the feminine position of "symbolic mobility" within the system; the feminine is the volatile, the possibly explosive, the figure of unannounced and unlimited power.

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Women's positions are indefinite within the dominant ideology. They therefore entrust themselves to chance, having learned that what appear as the "choices" for them are deceptive at worst and severely limited at best, hardly choices at all. The forces of chaos offer the preferred options. Bowen's character realise that they are:

> entrusted to one another by chance, not choice. Chance, and its agents time and place. Chance is better than choice; it is more lordly. In its carelessness it is more lordly (Little Girls 252).

Bowen explores "a rising tide of hallucination"(Collected Impressions 49) in her fictions, because the "small worlds-within-worlds of hallucination" are "in most cases, saving hallucination"(50). Hallucination is no more imaginative than the so-called stability of everyday common-sense reality, however, because "once a board gives, the raft begins breaking up. Were not awaited people killed in the streets every day?" (House in Paris 127) Everything that has been constructed can be de-constructed once it is fully recognized as a creation, not as a "given."

"Bowen recognizes that 'one simply cannot afford to be either closed or static, to be either is to be dead,'" writes Patrick McGhee, using Bowen's statement from her essay "The Next Book."[4] The drive towards non-closure has been mentioned by a number of Bowen's commentators, although none

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of them has linked this directly with a feminist approach to Bowen's novels:

> Miss Bowen leaves the novel open at the ended. She does see a possibility - not of resolution but of continuing productive tension (Glendinning 31).

The phrase "continuing productive tension" is significant for several reasons, as is the critic's realization that Bowen writes against resolution. Resolution and comfort are never goals for Bowen. One of her characters from To the North runs a travel agency that refuses to guarantee the clients a happy or comfortable journey. "We've got a slogan: 'move dangerously'"(20). This could act as an emblem for Bowen who "writes dangerously." Danger is inevitable in a world where for a woman "anywhere to go is too far"(Eva Trout 6) and movement is one of those frightening necessities. Says Emmeline of the travel agency in To The North:

> "But what everyone feels is that life, even travel, is losing its element of uncertainty; we try to supply that. We give clients their data: they have to use their own wits. 'Of course' - we always say to them - 'you may not enjoy yourselves" (21).

Relying on the fact that people will use their own wits when supplied with the data is what Bowen does very well in her fiction. What looks conventional is dangerous when it contains the unknown or, more

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accurately, when the truly unknown elements of the apparently familiar are brought to the forefront. Again, a number of critics have seen the refusal and rebellion in Bowen's work, claiming, quite accurately, that "Bowen is one of the few radical explorers in the recent novel. The part of her work that looks conservative really shows her recognition of change"(Glendinning 17). But change is, as Bowen writes in The Little Girls, rarely obviously "convulsive"; rather, "what is there is there; there comes to be something fictitious about what is not"(166).

Revolutionary change appears only as the most remote of possibilities. In The House in Paris, a young woman explains how she wishes "the revolution would come soon; I should like to start fresh while I am still young, with everything that I had to depend on gone." She continues to explain that those with position in society, counting herself among them, are "unfortunate" because:

> we have nothing ahead. I feel it's time something happened....I should like it to happen in spite of me....(82)

One critic writes of this character that "she wants a conflagration: it will mean change, at least....Lois's wish to be violently precipitated into her future is granted with a vengeance: it is as though her restlessness in part wills the end of the dominant ideology" (Lee 45).

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Revolutions of history are just what they are called, however: the system revolves, only to stay within the same configuration of patriarchal history which ensures continuation rather than actual change or destruction. Women must learn not to expect very much, then, from changes in the order from which real change is excluded: "People must hope so much when they tear streets up and fight at barricades," comments one of Bowen's older women, who goes on to explain that "but, whoever wins, the streets are laid again and the trams start running again. One hopes too much of destroying things. If revolutions do not fail, they fail you"(House in Paris 151). The boundaries remain in place in such situations; subversion takes place on a more subtle level. "Best of all, chaos guarantees freedom. So long as those bombs go off, men cannot dominate events. The wishes to make life drama and to avoid being confined by men coalesce,"(Glendinning 52). The point is a good one and worth repeating: women escaping from structures and limits are escaping from men. The two actions are inseparable.

What can precipitate change? Art, for example, has the potential to destroy. Bowen writes of E.M. Forster that "his art does not merely tilt at things, it undermines them surely. He uses an irony which is seldom gentle, and is in the long run deadly to what it attacks...."(Collected Impressions 124) The comments could be applied to her own work. Fortifications can be shown to

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be the false scenery described earlier by the character from The Heat of the Day. When walls literally tumble down, the ideas which constructed them are also shown to be flimsy:

> The violent destruction of solid things, the explosion of the illusion that prestige, power and permanence attach to bulk and weight, left all of us, equally, heady and disembodied. Walls went down....(Collected Impressions 48).

More dangerous perhaps for the traditional order than war and the destruction of literal walls is the recognition by women, silently, among themselves, that the walls are arbitrary. As Gagnier has noted, the possibility of sexual freedom for women is frightening because it implies the undermining of the system, particularly the system positioning woman as fixed sign. When Emmeline of To The North discovers her sexuality, agreeing to sleep with Markie who has persuaded her it would be a good idea, Markie is horribly depressed. He feels:

> oppressed since last night by sensations of having been overshot, of having, in some final soaring flight of her exaltation, been outdistanced: as though a bird whose heart one moment one could feel beating had escaped from between the hands. The passionless entirety of her surrender, the volition of her entire wish to be his had sent her a good way past him: involuntarily, the manner of her abandonment had avenged her innocence (147).

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"Avenging innocence" could be called another one of Bowen's most dangerous strategies. In this we find a close link between Bowen and recent feminist critics, especially in their discussion of the duplicity imposed on women who must learn to conceal their actions under apparent submission so they are inevitably mis-read. One of Bowen's most central and trenchant statements about the position of women as "innocents" occurs in The Death of the Heart. In its compelling and revealing argument concerning the impossibility of the severely limited access to language imposed on women, Bowen articulates arguments that echo through Gilbert and Gubar, Showalter, Clement and Cixous:

> Innocence so constantly finds itself in a false position that inwardly innocent people learn to be disingenuous. Finding no language in which to speak in their own terms, they resign themselves to being translated imperfectly. They exist alone; when they try to enter into relations they compromise falsifyingly -- through anxiety, through desire to impart and to feel warmth. The system of our affections is too corrupt for them. They are bound to blunder, then to be told they cheat. In love, the sweetness and violence they have to offer involves a thousand betrayals for the less innocent. Incurable strangers to the world, they never cease to exact a heroic happiness. Their singleness, their ruthlessness, their one continuous wish makes them bound to be cruel, and to suffer cruelty. The innocent are so few that two of them seldom meet -- when they do meet, their victims lie strewn all round (110).

Imposed disingenuousness is dangerous beyond words, as we see in a

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number of Bowen's texts. "Incurable strangers to the world" are bound to bring it down.

In Bowen we are, as she writes in To The North, in "the region of the immoderate, where we are more than ourselves. Here are no guarantees... Here figures cast unknown shadows; passion knows no crime, only its own movement; steel and the cord go with the kiss. Innocence walks with violence; violence is innocent, cold as fate; between the mistress' kiss and the blade's is a hair's breadth only, and no disparity... but who is to say that this is not so?"(193)

If we are clients who are unnerved by moving dangerously, or if we choose to misread our data or not use our wits, we deserve what we get. If we impose duplicity and disingenuousness, we end up with the most dangerous of figures. The innocent girl possesses enormous power (perhaps that's what put off the Princeton undergraduates?). Eva Trout is like her counterpart Portia from The Death of the Heart, one of the innocents who leaves her victims scattered about. Eva leaves "few lives unscathed. Or at least, unchanged," comments one of her more observant friends. He continues:

> You don't know a rather long poem called 'Pippa Passes'? No, I expect not. We were reared on Browning, owing to Mother. This girl only had to

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> pass by (though as a matter of fact, she did more than that, she sang away at some length under people's windows) to leave behind the most dynamic results. In a way you're a sort of Pippa - though in reverse(196).

"I suspect victims; they win in the long run," decides another character from Eva Trout (95). They win, perhaps, because they are misread, because their power is unacknowledged. Or perhaps it is because others do not consider the strength of refusal which appears like "the patient, abiding, encircling will of a monster"(95). Like the witch and the hysteric, Bowen's innocent sees her victim with "pity but without reproach"(Death of the Heart 111). Her innocence is the badly translated role prescribed by a system that cannot accommodate her in any other manner. In Bowen there is no "innocent" innocence in that there is no non-dangerous innocence. Even the apparent innocence of children is more a function of their exile from the world of power than a function of their age. "There is no limit to the terror strange children feel of each other, a terror life obscures but never ceases to justify. There is no end to the violations committed by children on children, quietly talking alone," says Bowen in The House in Paris(23). Children's games are indeed very much like the witch's sabbat as Freud argued if we are to believe Bowen. Describing a series of photographs of children, for example, Bowen shows them:

> engaged innocently in some act of destruction - depetalling daisies, puffing at dandelion clocks,

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> trampling primrose woods, rioting round in fragile feathered grown-up hats ... or knocking down apples from the bough (Heat of the Day 234).

Her fiction resembles the duplicity of the child and the innocent. It is a series of layers with its shocking, dislocating and rebellious aspects as carefully concealed beneath apparently acceptable, even decorous, surfaces as one might conceal a loaded weapon beneath chiffon. The following incident from The Little Girls is most illuminating, as a woman describes a moment from her childhood when she was trying to hide her secrets beneath an apparently safe surface only to discover that nowhere is safe:

> I happened to know there was that drawer full of I don't know how many pair of long, long gloves, folded up and beautifully put away... So then I lifted the gloves up, to stow my sugar mice underneath, and there was the pistol or revolver. That was how...I knew there was one (207).

The subversion beneath the convention: Bowen knows well how multiple levels of meaning operate. If what is seemingly ordained by nature is actually arbitrary, accidental, then the apparently accidental, innocent may be actually otherwise:

> A child knows what is fatal. The child at the back of the gun accident - is he always so ignorant? I simply point this thing, it goes off: sauve qui peut (House in Paris 221).

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If innocence is fatal, what are the implications for comedy? Part of its significance rests is refusing to submit to the pattern that is meant to appear, refusing, in other words, to rework the pattern of anger into convention. The pattern must remain revised, dislocating, different. A madwoman in The Heat of the Day, refuses to embroider her roses the way she is told, not only because "there is no more pink wool" but also because "there are purple roses. Nobody believes me," she explains patiently, "but I could lead you to the very place in the garden and show you the bush. There is only one; it's not my fault if there are no others in the world"(240).

Anger is the bridge between the richness of chaos and the richness of comedy. As we have established, anger and comedy work together with special pointedness in women's writing. In part this occurs because of the focus of energy in anger which forms subversive utterance. Anger establishes its own authority which challenges the dominant system:"there is one kind of sublime officiousness, anger's or love's, that is overruling: pure anger crystallizes its object, the seducer becomes the abstract of appetite or the thief"(To the North 201).[5]

Anger, like cruelty, can viewed as "supremely disinterested as art" and ,

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like art, as having "its own purity, which could transcend anything and consecrate the nearest material to its uses"(Hotel150). Anger has a "terrible clarity" which shows that everything totters with a "sense of destruction," causing one to feel "the whole force of a doubt in that moment: had there ever been anything there?"(Hotel10). Anger, for Bowen, is infused through many experiences. Even "sorrow is anger, of a kind"(Eva Trout 281). She calls loss the "original savagery" and, as we have seen, loss is central to her work. (Eva Trout 281).

However, as one of Bowen's critics has noted: "restless anger...does not just eventuate into fretfulness"(Glendinning 31). Anger and hate are catastrophic, chaotic and therefore generative. They destroy limits and systems, allowing for growth. Anger can cause "the whole scene" to "crumble" and "at once one is in a fantastic universe. Its unseemliness and its glory are indescribable, really"(Death of the Heart 270). For Bowen, thinking itself is linked to anger, and anger to glorious, limitless possibility:

> ...to think may be to be angry, but remember, we can surmount the anger we feel. To find oneself like a young tree inside a tomb is to discover the power to crack the tomb and grow up to any height (House in Paris 202).

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Hermione Lee writes that "obviously, these tactics can be used for comedy," remarking that "there is a close relationship in all [Bowen's works] between violence and humour"(144). Humor is the mainstay of all of Bowen's fictions, doubling the effects of dislocation and loss rather than expelling them through catharsis or resignation.

While it is not within the scope of this dissertation to present the range and depth of Bowen's humor, it can be seen from even a brief overview of her works that comedy is subversion for Bowen, and that comedy is pervasive. We have the incredibly deft and ruthless summing up of characters, for example. We know, for instance, that Iseult Smith of Eva Trout had been "a D.H. Lawrence reader and a townswoman" so her husband was "lucky not to come out worse than he did"(16); that one of the three "witches" from The Little Girls carries with her "her transistor...'In Memoriam' bound in once-violet suede, and The Midwich Cuckoos"(47); that, according to Louie in The Heat of the Day, "she found all young men to be one way funny...no sooner were their lips unstuck from your own than they began to utter morality."

In the modern world of The Death of the Heart, we are to understand that "arts and crafts had succeeded Sturm und Drang," that young women like

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Lillian walk through London "with the rather fated expression you see in photographs of girls who have subsequently been murdered" and that a middle-aged adulterous husband, in confronting his understanding wife, "looks impressive, silly, intensely moral and as though he would like to denounce himself. [The wife] would never let him denounce himself, and this was rather like taking somebody's toys away"(14). We learn in The House in Paris that a child is "not yet ripe for direct sex-instruction, though my husband is working towards this through botany and mythology"(33) and that "English good-natured jokes seem...terrible; they are full of jokes about mortification-the dentist, social ambition, love"(113).

In To The North we see that, when asked why men seem terrified of "responsive women," it is because a responsive woman is "like a bear you have to keep throwing buns at"(36); that during church instruction for confirmation, a girl "had been offered, and had accepted, a very delicate book and still could not think of anything without blushing. So that now flowers made her blush, rabbits made her blush excessively; she could no longer eat an egg. Only minerals seemed to bear contemplation...."(40) and that a typically good outing in England consists of "having motored twenty-five miles" to end up "on a stump of the Roman villa, their feet in a pit"(58). In The Hotel we see that sensitive people "feels spikes

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everywhere and rush to impale" themselves(77), that a clergyman holds an idea of God as "an enormous and perpetually descending Finger and Thumb"(89) and that a woman can sometimes decide to appear "as inanimate and objective as a young girl in a story told by a man, incapable of a thought or feeling that was not attributed to her, with no personality of her own outside the...projections upon her"(199).

Bowen, as we see, explores "the joke or agony" (Heat of the Day 322) without seeing anything odd about the juxtaposition of these elements. When women recognize the uncertainty of what has been passed off as certain, the arbitrary nature of what has been passed off as rational and absolute, they begin "under this compulsion...to laugh too, though rebelliously, with bewilderment and uncertainty"(Heat of the Day 322). The rebellion, bewilderment and uncertainty remain beneath the most decorous of surfaces, however, because, as Bowen comments in The Heat of the Day, "to be abandoned you must be respectable"(165).

Bowen's comedy has often been contextualized by critics within the framework she herself created for the absurd in The Death of the Heart. The following passage indicates her fascination with and ability to work with the monstrous, the unassimilable:

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> ...each of us keeps, battened down inside himself, a sort of lunatic giant - impossible socially, but full-scale - and that it's the knockings and batterings we sometimes hear in each other that keep our intercourse from utter banality (333).

Bowen's "use of sharp comic detail" has often been noted (Lee 49); she certainly achieved recognition as a writer of comedy. A few critics, including Lee and Gindin, have categorized Bowen's work as "comedy of manners" with an "underlying pull of fatality" (Lee 49). This view of Bowen's novels, while true to a point, does not deal with the subversive aspects of her comedy. Such critics do not acknowledge the circuitous, hidden "resistance writing." They often ignore what Bowen called in one character "her opposite capacity" which is "that of releasing ideas, or speculation, into unbounded flight"(Eva Trout 57). They do not consider the way "she looks wildly sideways" (Collected Impressions 5), the way Bowen manipulates conventions even as she employs them incontrovertably.

In particular, critics from Karl to Kermode do not explore in detail Bowen's refusal to supply a 'normal' happy ending; in fact, the quotation from the critic who disliked a writer's work because "in all the novels...there is not a single satisfactory union" was applied to Bowen (Karl 128). Bowen does revise and redefine the concept of a happy ending. For the women Bowen creates in her works it seems "that while people were very happy,

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individual persons were surely damned"(Death of the Heart 61). Happiness is linked more closely to death than to marriage. Certainly, a happy ending is not equated with marriage. Marriage often provides "little more than the shell of a happy ending" (Collected Impressions 5).

Bowen's non-closure disturbs many critics, and for good reason. For example, Eva Trout is literally killed by the child behind the gun: her ward shoots her at a railway station as she is about to set out on a mock marriage. Eva's last words are "what is 'concatenation'?"(301) and this is telling. "Concatenation" refers to things linked together in a series or a chain; Bowen makes connections at the ends of her narratives without providing closure. One of the last lines of Eva Trout reads: "There is invariably more. Nothing is final, I suppose" (296). The pattern is similar in other novels: The Hotel ends with the refusal of a perfectly reasonable marriage and with the major characters finding their ways home separately. This is not to suggest that Bowen is alone in her refusal to supply the conventions of closure associated with the novelistic form; obviously a number of twentieth-century writers, male as well as female, leave their novels open-ended. It is nevertheless true that Bowen's writings are illustrative of the uniquely feminine modernist tradition which embraces the fragmentation of traditional structures in that she

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provides endings which are reflective of the pattern of refusal and rebellion particular to women's writing.

Often we are left with the "continuing tensions" described by Lee, with the central characters "wildly smiling" and "unserene" (House in Paris 42). Bowen, according to Lee, is adept at "making truth emerge from the comic context"(59). Bowen's comedy, she argues, is one "of reappearances and recognitions"(201) not of resolution or reconciliation It does not have the properties associated with traditional, or, in Frye's terms, "normal" comedy. Bowen's humor has been misread or misrecognised as "mild" because of its hidden and subversive nature.

We should note that men in Bowen's novels often have radically different concepts of comedy from women. Men voice the authoritative directive "that's not funny," discussed earlier as a paradigm of the oppressive nature of the dominant ideology. Men simply do not understand why women find certain things funny, and do not generally approve of women's humor. The relationship between Markie and Emmeline in To The North illustrates this point. When Emmeline laughs at the fact that Markie has to whistle down the dumbwaiter to tell his cook when to send up dinner,

> Markie, whose sense of humour was not agile, saw nothing funny about his domestic arrangements .

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> He was accustomed to lead laughter rather than be surprised by it (69).

In such expectation, Markie resembles Gwendolyn Harleth's musician friend and a number of other men in novels written by women. Even Mr. Darcy is not ready to laugh at himself at the end of Pride and Prejudice. Men in general do not recognise women's comedy as comedic. They are like Leopold in The House in Paris who cannot begin to understand foreign jokes in his comic magazine. He is uncertain, disturbed and disquieted by the "martian ideology" of comedy beyond his comprehension:

> The funny stories and pictures brought him to a full stop. His passionate lack of humour was native and untutored; no one had taught him that curates, chars, duchesses, spinsters are enough, in England, to make anyone smile. The magazine perplexed Leopold with its rigid symbolism, Martian ideology. A veil of foreign sentiment hung over every image, making it unclear (31).

Markie does not understand in precisely the same way as Leopold.

Bowen sees, as Wilt has noticed, that men's humor rarely means well for women and that women must create their own humor in contrast to the conventions of comedy. Women must see men's humor as the weapon of power it usually is: as Anna realizes of her friend the author in The Heat of the Day, his "smile [is] the smile of one who has the laugh"(310). Women

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have come to equate the serious acceptance of reality with absurdity:"...to be serious is absurd; it is useless...."(House in Paris 109) and therefore comedy offers one of the few possibilities for "useful" discourse.

Women must respond to the charge that they use comedy "wrongly," the perennial "that's not funny":

> "What you say is deadly. Must everything be funny?"
> "One's life is"(House in Paris 109).

They must face the accusation that they are humourless, "unlaughing":

> -- partly because his wit, from its very nature, blunted or splintered against a quality that he called her divine humourlessness, and that was in fact a profound irony (To the North 190).

And finally women must see, as does a character in Eva Trout, that although "it would have been fatal to laugh,"(187) laugh we must. Laughter and comedy remain the most keenly subversive, most potently dangerous and most necessary rebellions against the edifice of patriarchal ideology not only in Elizabeth Bowen's novels but also in the novels of such later writers as Muriel Spark.

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Notes

[1] Elizabeth Bowen, Preface to The Blaze of Noon, in Collected Impressions (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1950) 55.

[2] Leon Edel, qtd. in The Fiction of Sex. Miles, Rosalind. (London: Vision Press, 1974) 82.

[3] Graham Greene, "The Dark Backward: A Footnote", 1935, Collected Essays. (Bodley Head, 1969) 71-2. qtd. in Elizabeth Bowen: An Estimation. Lee, Hermione. (New York: Vision and Barnes and Noble, 1981) 237.

[4] Elizabeth Bowen, "Then and Now," New Statesman, (17 September, 1938), qtd. in Patterns of Reality: Elizabeth Bowen's Novels, Harriet Blodgett, (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1975.)

[5] Elizabeth Bowen, To the North, (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1950).

This passage contains an interesting parallel discussion of the dialectic between hate and desire to the one in Rene Girard's Deceit, Desire and the Novel: "The subject is torn between two opposite feelings toward his model - the most submissive reverence and the most intense malice. This is the passion we call hatred". (Trans. Yvonne Freccero. Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1965. 10).

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> It is known as a scrambler, because the connection is heavily jammed with jangling caterwauls to protect the conversation against eavesdropping; this harrowing noise all but prevents the speakers from hearing each other, but once the knack is mastered it is easy to hear the voice at the other end...(Hothouse 55).

Since she first started writing in the early 1950's, Muriel Spark has received enormous critical attention. Evelyn Waugh called her first book "highly exhilarating"(Spectator, 22/2/1951) and her later work "dazzling"(Spectator, 7/7/61). She has been called "the reasonable recorder of unreason" and likened, of course, to Jane Austen - "the Jane Austen of the surrealists," according to one critic (Hoyt 280).

Spark's work, like Bowen's, has a wide appeal and has spanned nearly forty years. David Lodge has called Spark "the most gifted and innovative British novelist of her generation, one of the very few who can claim to have extended and altered the possibilities of the form for other practitioners"(Lodge 1). Frank Kermode has said of Spark's novels that "some literate people dislike them, though not, so far as I know, for decent reasons."[1] The reasons some people dislike them may be more or less summed up by the following comments on Spark's works which appear in

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The Contemporary English Novel:

> [Spark's] novels...are so involved with the eccentric event and the odd personality that they have virtually no content. Miss Spark's novels are a sport, light to the point of froth. She can write about murder, betrayal, deception, and adultery as though these were the norms of a crazy-quilt society....(126).

Karl concludes by saying that she "lacks penetration." But, applying to Spark what another critic has concluded concerning Karl's remarks about Iris Murdoch: "Karl's misunderstanding...is so radical as to be helpful"(Kuehl 38). Peter Kemp has offered the following explanation for the perception of Spark's work by some critics--including but unfortunately not limited to Karl-- as "lightweight": "books so entertaining, it is felt, must be proportionately trivial"(8). Updike, not surprisingly, has difficulties with Spark, though he admires what he calls the "ominous...witchcraft" of her work:

> The undercurrents of destruction [and] madness... are allowed to run unspoken, welling up here and there, as they do in life, with an unexpectedness that would be comic if we could laugh.[2]

Updike may seem sympathetic, but he cannot laugh and this is perhaps the most illustrative of the remarks made by male critics concerning comedic works by women writers. Women's writing, they claim, would be

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comic if "we"(sic) could laugh. It is my argument that "we" are indeed laughing. "They," including Updike, are not.

As we have established, for women writers, including Spark, undercurrents of destruction and madness welling-up unexpectedly are more a definition of women's comedy than an argument against it. These unspoken currents act like the jumbled text put through on the scrambler: it is there but difficult to perceive without initiation. However, Spark's subversive comedy, like the submerged text, is 'easy to hear' "once the knack is mastered," in other words, once the dislocating, encoded aspects of comedy can be perceived within the more conventional comedic context.

Spark deals with what Kermode rather neatly termed "a radically noncontingent reality" (131), and these aspects of her work as the "surrealist Jane Austen" have been discussed with more attention than the parallel aspects of Bowen's apparently more conservative fiction. V.B. Richmond, for example, writes that Spark's fiction "mirrors the uncertainty, confusion, infidelity, and violence that are ordinary characteristics of contemporary society"(106). In contrast, Faith Pullin claims that Spark's severe editing of her text "encourages the reader to suspend his belief, not his disbelief"(76). Quoting from Loitering with

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Intent, Pullin contextualizes Spark's gift for unreality: "complete frankness is not a quality that favours art." Striking a similar note in her article "The Canonization of Muriel Spark," Sharon Thompson says that she counts "Catholics, feminists, misogynists, postmodernists, Fowlerites, and those with a simple taste for a wicked tongue among Spark's supporting factions"(Voice Literary Supplement 9). Spark does not seem to write for the "general reader" despite her wide audience. It may be instructive to take note of how two of her characters discuss this very issue in Loitering With Intent:

> 'Fuck the general reader,' Solly said, 'because in fact the general reader doesn't exist.'
> 'That's what I say,' Edwina yelled. 'Just fuck the general reader. No such person' (56).

Pullin makes an important point linking Spark's refusal to create so-called realist fictions for the "general reader" and her position as a woman writer. In "Autonomy and Fabulation in the Fiction of Muriel Spark," Pullin argues that the subtlety of Spark's work:

> is nowhere more evident than in the treatment of her women characters...Her women are initiators, actors, magicians whose 'real' nature, like that of life itself, can never be known. (91)

Judy Little provides what is the best feminist criticism of Spark in her book juxtaposing the works of Spark with those of Virginia Woolf. Little

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examines their use of comedy in terms very similar to those which we have established:

> When Spark and Woolf evaluate relationships between the sexes, and use such an ascetic norm to do so, their laughter is not content to tease follies and flail vices, or to urge a little common sense. Their laughter instead demands a radically 'new plot.' Woolf and Spark, from different directions, approach the four-thousand-year-old secular scripture and rip the temple curtain from top to bottom (178).

Little's recognition of the ways in which Spark seeks to destroy the "secular script" of patriarchal authority through comedy implies the use of aggression and anger as weapons of comedy. Peter Kemp has noted the way "multiple instances of malice and aggression crowd the narratives" of Spark (7), but even his use of the verb "crowd" indicates his inability to see the malice and aggression as the encoded forces that will "rip" through boundaries to allow for the limitlessness, the non-closure of Spark's comedy.

Kemp is not the only one to see Spark's anger. Sharon Thompson provides a provocative discussion of the effectiveness of Spark's undercurrent of rage as women's subversive discourse in her comments on The Driver's Seat, pointing out those very elements that seem to make Updike too nervous to laugh:

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> It takes an iron stomach to write a plot like that. I've read angrier rhetoric in fiction by women, but...no angrier plot. It's stunning - actually scandalizing. In comparison, Rhys's novels, which I love, snivel and Lessing's slop (Voice Literary Supplement 9).

Indeed, Spark's portrayal of anger and refusal characterizes her narratives from her first novel The Comforters through her most recent one The Only Problem. In The Girls of Slender Means, Spark explores the imposed disingenousness of women who, like many of Bowen's women, are dangerously ruthless while never forfeiting their role as ingenue. Spark explains at the beginning of the novel that, as the girls realize themselves to "varying degrees":

> Few people alive at the time were more delightful, more ingenious, more movingly lovely, and, as it might happen, more savage, than the girls of slender means (6).

Spark herself has defended literature of aggressive intent claiming that: "the only effective art of our particular time is the satirical, the harsh and witty, the ironic and derisive. Because we have come to a moment in history when we are surrounded on all sides and oppressed by the absurd"(Kemp 14). In keeping with our argument of women's comedy as re-doubling anger rather than expelling it, Kemp argues, "glycerine soothes, but acid galvanizes"(114).

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Even the most "innocent" figure in a Spark novel is capable of savagery: in The Comforters, one character notes that "everyone can do harm, whether they [sic] mean it or not"(128). In another echo of Bowen, often the most innocent figure in a Spark fiction is also the most savage, having been denied access to more acceptable forms of refusal or even participation within the dominant society. Like Bowen, Spark's characters, in particular her women characters, are marginal, peripheral, exiled from all acceptable systems of power. These marginal figures attempt to hide their anger under conventional behavior. They try to "say anything beside the point rather than what [one] might say, at such moments, pointedly" when they "have a sharp tongue" (Robinson 73). But often their anger emerges, like the clear message through the scrambler, for those willing to hear.

On the one hand, a number of Spark's heroines are believed by the members of their immediate community to be suicidal, depressed, mad, engaged in espionage, possessed or even, in one extreme instance, already dead, when in fact they are none of these things. On the other hand, a number of characters who in fact are murderous, insane, or even dead are not recognized as such. Spark does not shy away from extremes; she can be compared to the sensationalist novelists discussed by Showalter who inverted the stereotypes of traditional novels and parodied the

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conventions of their male contemporaries. Spark follows the same route, it can be argued, and her novels, like sensation novels, express:

> female anger, frustration, and sexual energy more directly than had been done previously....women escape from their families through illness, madness, divorce, flight, and ultimately murder. (Showalter 160)

As Kermode argues in "Sheerer Spark," the very plot of The Driver's Seat is an inversion of a conventional comedy. The narrative can be reduced to its essentials: girl meets boy, girl loses boy, girl finds boy. Happy ending? When that plot is carried out to its typical (what Frye would call its "normal") conclusion, however, the results are rape, murder and deviance. What is normal becomes corrupt in Spark's fiction. Lise, the main character "is looking for her type," Kermode summarizes, "seeking on her vacation a murderer as other girls might seek a lover. She finds him on the plane, loses him, and recovers him," but the confusion dis-locates comedy, dislodges it from any possibilities of stasis, comfort, reconciliation or social acceptability. Spark reshapes expectations in order to introduce the forces of chaos and non-closure, as well as her particular perfection: surprise.

Spark writes from what she calls the "nevertheless" principle, a principle which is based on the overturning of expectations. Spark writes:

> In fact I approve of the ceremonious accumulation

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> of weather forecasts and barometer-readings that pronounce for a fine day, before letting rip on the statement: 'Nevertheless, it's raining'. I find that much of my literary composition is based on the nevertheless idea (Kemp 7).

"There is more to be had from the world than a balancing of accounts," Spark writes in The Only Problem(44), underscoring her refusal to supply conventionally happy, tidy endings. Ruth Whittaker writes that Spark "has an impatience with mimesis since her real concern is with the inimitable"(168). Kemp argues that Spark keeps to "her own axiom that if fiction 'is not stranger than truth, it ought to be"(8). These comments point to the fact that, like Bowen, Spark systematically refuses to accept the "absolutes" encoded within man-made cultural systems. It is significant that in Robinson, the only female character keeps a journal even though she remarks that "through my journal I nearly came to my death"(7). January Marlow goes on to suggest why her writings are important even though she does not consider herself an objective recorder of "reality":

> ... though I know it to be distorted, never quite untrue, never entirely true, [my journal] interests me. I am as near the mark as myth is to history, the apocrypha to the canon(137).

January argues that writing "fetches before me the play of thought and action hidden amongst the recorded facts"(7), and it is what is hidden

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among recorded fact that Spark considers necessary to explore. The secret "play of thought and action" is for Spark, as it is for Bowen, the most important aspect of comedy.

Both Bowen and Spark draw heavily on the multiplicitous structures of mythology. Fleur Talbot of Loitering With Intent comments on the necessity of the mythological in literature and argues persuasively against the systematic application of convention and closure:

> Without a mythology, a novel is nothing. The true novelist, one who understands the work as a continuous poem, is a mythmaker, and the wonder of the art resides in the endless different ways of telling a story, and the methods are mythological by nature' (Pullin 83).

In a scene reminiscent of Bowen's rejection of history ("But isn't much to be learned from the lessons of history?""One thing you don't learn anything from is anything anyway set up to be a lesson; what you are to know you pick up as you go"), the heroine of The Abbess of Crewe explains that as far as she is concerned "history doesn't work.... We have entered the sphere, dear Sisters, of Mythology" (16). Perhaps this is because Spark links women with mythology and in doing so reaffirms the value of the illogical, irrational and disruptive. "And it is said the pagan mind runs strong in women at any time," writes January Marlow, the only

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woman to survive the plane crash in Robinson, "let alone on an island"(9). Robinson is Spark's most explicit exploration of women's link with mythology and sorcery. Hoyt writes in "The Surrealist Jane Austen" that Spark "understands that the artist traces his (sic) descent from the sorcerer"(Hoyt 130), and as we see from January's own perceptions, her writing is connected to the "whole period's" being "touched with a pre-ancestral quality, how there was an enchantment, a primitive blood-force which probably moved us all"(9). Particular characters, like Georgiana Hogg of The Comforters, can have "turbulent mythical dimensions"(154) and characters like Dougal Douglas from The Ballad of Peckham Rye are out-and-out inhabitants of the fabular dimension.

Spark's use of mythology embodies the insight of the Italian proverb of which Spark is fond: "if it isn't true, it's to the point"(Public Image 43). As in Bowen's works, Spark's fictions work towards unveiling the nature of truth as itself the deliberate construction of a "supreme fiction". Her narratives operate by:

> cutting through the barriers of overused language and situation a sense of reality true to experience, an imaginative extension of the world, a lie that shows us things as they are - a supreme fiction (Malkoff 3).

In another echo of Bowen, Spark concerns herself with the ways in which

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innocence, particularly the innocence imposed on women, is a danger to the symbolic, patriarchal order. David Lodge has written, for example, that "Miss Brodie was not a wicked woman, but a dangerously innocent one." He quotes from a scene in The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie where Sandy, one of Brodie's former pupils, now a nun in a convent speaks to a former friend: "'Oh, she was quite an innocent in her way' said Sandy [to Jenny], clutching the bars of her grille.'" Lodge argues that innocence is "dangerous and volatile because [it is] ignorant of real good and evil"("Uses & Abuses" 60).

One of the more dangerous ways innocence transfigures itself in Spark is through the creation of apparently material reality initiated by belief or thought; Spark's works are informed by the "transfiguration of the commonplace," a phrase taken from the title of Sandy Stranger's (or, as she becomes in the convent, Sister Helena of the Transfiguration) treatise on psychology. Spark emphasizes the ways language shapes and creates reality since there is no objective reality; she focuses on "... the ways fiction can body forth the shape of things unknown"(Kermode 397). An example of this transfiguration occurs in The Hothouse by the East River where Elsa and her husband Paul are dead and living in New York. Paul believes they exist because of Elsa's will:

> His heart thumps for help. "Help me! Help me!"
> cries his heart, battering the sides of the coffin.

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> 'The schizophrenic has imposed her will. Her delusion, her figment, her nothing-there, has come to pass'(14).

Spark's "her nothing-there," like Bowen's "her no-presence" highlights the use of absence, empty space, and the "hollows" of language and reality in women's writing. In The Driver's Seat, for instance, Lise's room is described in terms of absence: "the lines of the room are pure; space is used as a pattern in itself"(11). The same can be said of Spark's prose: space is a pattern in itself. Art is, in fact, linked to the nothing-there element of language, as one of Spark's characters explains in her short story "The Playhouse called Remarkable":

> And if ever you produce a decent poem or a story, it won't be on account of anything you've got in this world but of something remarkable which you haven't got (Collected Stories 103).

In perhaps her most elegant use of absence as pattern, Spark ends The Public Image with an image of space, but space which contains the infinite. The main focus of the book, Annabel, has been described by her vicious husband as all surface, an empty shell (in much the same terms, actually, as we saw Stein's prose described). But Spark revises the damning phrases of the husband with his limited vision to create a benediction of the limitlessness contained within Annabel and within all women:

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> She was pale as a shell...[and had a] sense weightlessly and perpetually within her, as an empty shell contains, by its very structure, the echo and harking image of former and former seas (192).

Absence, echo, space and the hollows of things supply meaning. In contrast, substance, the material manifestation of apparent reality, can be misleading and should not be trusted. In a brief essay on a fresco by Piero della Francesca, Spark comments that "today we know more about substance than ever before, but the more we know the more it is recognized that we know nothing."[3] Using an analogy that once again echoes Bowen's portrayal of reality as something like 'touring scenery' that can be packed up and moved elsewhere, Spark claims, in the third act of her play The Doctors of Philosophy, that "realism is very flimsy." The only difficulty for the characters, usually women, who realize the flimsy nature of reality, is convincing others, usually men, of what they have discovered. Elsa of Hothouse by the East River argues to her husband Paul that while he might seem to accept what she says, he will refuse to accept her truth. It becomes useless, according to Elsa, to attempt explanation: "[y]ou'll believe me, yes, but you won't believe that it really happened. What's the use of telling you?"(4) However, women who recognise the flimsy nature of reality learn, like Elsa, to use the power of their own beliefs to revise the pliable substance of reality.

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Everything created by language "involves a tangled mixture of damaging lies, flattering and plausible truths"(54). Kemp notes that in her study of John Masefield, Spark exclaims: "how sharp and lucid fantasy can be when it is deliberately intagliated on the surface of realism"(40). According to Kemp, Spark is writing not primarily as social chronicler but as "an artist, a changer of actuality into something else" (85). Things can be transfigured, as we have noted, through language.

Through a sort of language-transsubstantiation, the "real" can be created. In Robinson we learn that "the awful thing about... insinuations" is that "you never know, they might be true"(123) or that they actually might become true through sheer belief. For example, we learn in Hothouse that if "Paul could be induced to believe this man's somebody else, then he will become somebody else. It's a matter of persevering in a pretense"(38). The Comforters contains the most consistent playing out of the idea of the transsubstantiation of the apparent absolutes of reality, such as material existence. In a telling remark, Carolyn, the novel's protagonist explains to her fiance who believes in "objective existence" that things "might have another sort of existence and still be real"(70).

Spark's female characters initially spend a great deal of energy attempting, like Elsa, to convince those around them that what we perceive as real is no

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more substantial than the imaginary. These characters abandon the attempt after realizing that they are in fact in control of situations that they had originally perceived as outside of their sphere of influence. This is the pattern of comedy in Spark's novels: the gradual knowing of the absurdity of the absolute by male as well as female characters. Spark's central characters understand that so-called reality can be revised, reshaped and undermined by the power of the peripheral, powers more accessible to women than to men. Men and women, explains January of Robinson, can be "on the same island but in different worlds"(144). Women characters, like Carolyn of The Comforters, have a unique understanding of the mutliple layers forming apparent reality. Like Carolyn, they understand that "the voices are voices. Of course they are symbols. But they are also voices. There's the typewriter too -- that's a symbol, but it is a real typewriter. I hear it"(75).

It is not surprizing that Carolyn, who is writing a book on twentieth-century fiction entitled "Form in The Modern Novel" is "having difficulty with the chapter on realism"(62). Kermode comments that "[t]he relation of fiction and reality is uniquely reimagined" in Spark's novels, claiming that Spark requires the reader to undergo "a radical re-appraisal of this relation." Kermode argues that Spark accommodates "different versions of reality, including what some call mythical and some call absolute"(131).

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Spark rarely deals in absolutes. Like other women writers, especially writers of comedy, she refers to the subjective nature of even the most superficially objective "givens". Very little indeed is universally perceived:

> There were other people's Edinburghs quite different from hers, and with which she held only the names of districts and streets and monuments in common. Similarly, there were other people's nineteen-thirties (Jean Brodie 50).

Spark's fictions depend on our perception and understanding of what she calls the "shifting ground" (Comforters 107) of reality. The "picture" or subjective reality replaces the "truth," or objective reality. For example, in Hothouse by the East River, someone wants "the picture, the whole picture and nothing but the picture"(17). Spark articulates through her novels the concept that the conventional pattern has no authority and must be understood to be the dominant fiction rather than the "truth." This leads, as we should expect, to the refusal to portray, even in the comedic context, a secure world. "Nowhere's safe," says a character in The Girls of Slender Means (155). The implications of non-closure, subversion and revision for comedic narrative are clear.

One critic, for example, castigates Spark for "her refusal to be committed, to solve her fictional situations, for her readiness to abandon all for a jest, for her random satire" (Stubbs 33), for precisely those elements which we now

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see are functional determinants of women's comedy. This particular piece of criticism echoes the line "must everything be funny?" from Bowen's House in Paris. In the same spirit that Bowen's character replies "one's life is," so does the critic recognize that Spark simply "reiterates that fiction is lies and untruth, remains ambivalent and equivocal" (Stubbs 33). Spark explores the peripheral boundaries of fiction and is unapologetic about refusing to supply conventional comedic closure. Spark links the forces of creation and chaos with her usual (and much discussed) economy of method in a number of novels. In Robinson, for example, a character explains that "if you choose the sort of life which has no conventional pattern you have to try to make an art of it, or it is a mess"(84). The overcoming of conventional patterns is of enormous importance in Spark's fictions. She actually views the writer-as-anarchist, as a subversive figure, armed against the dominant ideology with humor:

> There is a kind of truth in the popular idea of an anarchist as a wild man with a home-made bomb in his pocket. In modern times this bomb, fabricated in the back workshops of the imagination, can only take one effective form: Ridicule.(Girls of Slender Means 69)

Kemp quotes Spark on the subject of writing-as-subversion: "I would like to see," she writes, "a more deliberate cunning, a more derisive undermining of what is wrong, I would like to see less emotion and more

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intelligence in these efforts to impress our minds and hearts"(114). He also presents her views on fiction as undermining or at least forcing us to recognise the "ridiculous nature" of what is passed off as reality:

> 'We have come to a moment in history,' Mrs. Spark claims, 'when we are surrounded on all sides and oppressed by the absurd': and what this means for literature, she argues, is that ' the rhetoric of our times should persuade us to contemplate the ridiculous nature of the reality before us, and teach us to mock it.'(146).

It is worth considering in brief the manner in which Spark's subversion of realism has been dealt with critically. Spark often displays the destruction of boundaries between the "real" and the imaginary through events of great emotional violence by which she shifts our perspective and reveals what Malkoff has categorized as the "bizarre underpinnings of the superficially conventional"(3). Kemp agrees, noting the dialectical interplay between the apparently acceptable/conventional and the subversive/chaotic in Spark:

> Many of [Spark's] fiction's features are immediately recognizable: what makes its effect disorienting and, indeed, almost hallucinatory is that the pattern into which they would normally fall has been violently deranged(141).

Faith Pullin characterizes Spark's fiction in the very terms we have established for women's comedy when Pullin argues that "the nature of

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Muriel Spark's fiction is its duplicity; she specializes in the subverting of expectations. As she herself claims, in the well-known 'House of Fiction' interview, 'what I write is not true - it is a pack of lies'"(Pullin 71).Valerie Shaw agrees in her article on Spark entitled "Fun and Games with Life-stories." She proposes that "clearly a strong case to be made for [Spark's] work as being actually subversive of realism"(46). Vera Richmond calls Spark's central characters "shape shifters"(74). Caroline of The Comforters asks at one point "Is the world a lunatic asylum then? Are we all courteous maniacs discreetly making allowances for everyone else's derangement?"(196) and the answer, with a smile, from Spark is "yes."

Spark's comedy in fact rests on its being able to undermine the valid currency of the dominant ideology by "shifting the ground" of her narrative discourse. "Once you admit you can change the object" of a belief, she writes in The Girls of Slender Means, "you undermine the whole structure...."(23). Spark depends on the traditional systematic acceptance of convention, it is true, because otherwise she would be unable to subvert expectations as regularly as she does. This point has been noted by a number of critics, although few of them link the undermining of convention directly with comedy. Miles, for example, writes that "convention...has to be understood as the basis for nearly all of Muriel Spark's fiction; she assumes our familiarity with its precepts in order to be able to undercut

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and diminish them"(58), while Hoyt sees in Spark "an almost irresponsible impertinence towards everyday reality"(128). Alan Bold believes that Spark:

> confronts realistic detail with surrealistic tension, invests natural incidents with supernatural overtones. Her fiction is not contained by a rigid narrative framework; it unfolds in a visionary dimension (9).

Spark's uncanny ability to make the ordinary conversation take on a surrealistic quality has received much attention. The "visionary dimension" in her work can quickly accommodate the commonplace by illustrating the ways simple misreadings take place, the ways in which those uninitiated in language systems and thereby uninitiated in the language of authority attempt to find meaning. Lise of The Driver's Seat is probably Spark's most marginal figure in that she is on the very periphery of social acceptance. She has no friends, no family, no socially prescribed role except the one supplied through employment. She cannot recognize deviance when she meets it since she has little sense of the norm. In the following exchange, for example, Lise attempts to hide her marginality, not even aware of the marginal nature of the man's own discourse. She thinks he must be making sense because he is a man. Lise thinks she should understand him, and so, illustrating the most damaging sort of duplicity, she pretends that she does:

> "You know what Yin is?" he says.

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> She says, "Well, sort of" ..."but it's only a snack , isn't it?"
> "You understand what Yin is?"
> "Well, it's a kind of slang, isn't it. You say a thing's a bit too yin ..."; plainly she is groping.
> "Yin," says Bill, "is the opposite of Yang."(33)

Even the health-food addict appears more in control than Lise because he perceives himself as an authority; Lise, however, controls the actions of the narrative despite her inability to grasp yin and yang.

Judy Little provides one of the few arguments defining the comedy in Spark's narratives as gender-based. "In Spark's fiction possibility is assured," Little argues, "in effect, guaranteed-- by an absolute, eternal openness that judges and shocks any human effort at easy closure"(187). This, of course, supports the theory that women's comedy is itself characterized by the limitlessness of its endings, by the refusal to construct a conventional sense of finality at the end of the narrative. "Knots were not necessarily created to be untied," writes Spark, and continues: "[q]uestions were things that sufficed in their still beauty answering themselves"(Kemp 156).

But Spark does not only provide passive resistance to the narrative conventions which she refuses to employ; she sees in non-closure possibilities beyond those usually identified with the twentieth-century

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British novel. Returning to the figure of the writer as bomb-throwing anarchist, she writes that:

> Any system...which doesn't allow for the unexpected and the unwelcome is a rotten one....Things mount up inside one, and then one has to perpetrate an outrage (Robinson 162).

We must remind ourselves often that, as Spark writes at the end of Robinson, "all things are possible"(174). We must retain, she insists in The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie, "a sense of the hidden possibilities in all things"(119) and to be even "unnaturally exhilarated" like Caroline in The Comforters, "by a sense of adventure"(64).

Spark informs her readers about "a lot of subjects irrelevant to the authorised curriculum," as one character calls alternatives to the prevailing authority-system in The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie. Spark herself teaches the literary equivalent of the "rudiments of astrology but not the date of the Battle of Flodden" (10) by providing narratives that undercut the system while remaining within it, much as Brodie teaches astrology while the girls in her class hold up their history textbooks in case the headmistress should walk by the class. In a fashion similar to the one Brodie uses when she keeps a multiplication question on the board during math hour while she speaks to her girls about art, sex and how witch-hazel

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is better for the skin than soap and water, Spark provides a narrative "cover" for her subversive text. Sandy, Brodie's star pupil and ultimately her betrayer, learns to uncover the subtext of the most apparently innocent utterance under Miss Brodie's influence:

> Sandy, who had turned eleven, perceived that the tone of "morning" in good morning made the word seem purposely to rhyme with "scorning," so that these colleagues of Miss Brodie's might just as well have said, "I scorn you," instead of good morning (79).

And even as Miss Brodie encouraged her girls to recite, with feeling, "The Lady of Shalott," she also assured them that "the people perish" and bids Eunice to "come and do a somersault in order that we may have comic relief"(13). Comedy is the mainstay of Spark's fiction. In fact, Spark has described her reactions to the writing of full-length fiction after the poetry and criticism she had earlier attempted by saying that "that the novel enabled me to express the comic side of my mind and at the same time work out some serious theme"(Kemp 11).

In "Muriel Spark's Fingernails," Malcolm Bradbury discusses Spark primarily as a writer of comedy. He sees the precision and economy of Spark's comedy as shaped by a "tactic of indifference" which provides "poise" for her aesthetic manner. He writes of Spark's "splendid impudence"

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in creating a "decidedly strange view of the world and of human potential and the human condition"(138) but, like Hoyt, who see Spark's "uncomfortable and distinctive humor" as departure from the "humane world of the traditional, realist novel"(169), Bradbury perceives Spark as providing clever but not particularly revolutionary texts.

Kemp's framing of Spark's comedy provides, in addition to Little, the only viable way to accommodate the non-closure and consistent use of subversive humor throughout Spark's texts. Kemp quotes the response of one critic to The Girls of Slender Means: "I enjoyed it as a joke until it stopped being a joke." Kemp argues that:

> [t]o read Muriel Spark in this way is to mistake the varnish for the picture. Her books are never simply jokes, though they invariably contain them; they are not eccentric jeux d'esprit, ephemeral and whimsical. Comic, it has to be stressed in any approach to these novels, does not equate with trivial, any more than solemn does with valuable. It is a commonplace to describe certain works as deeply serious: the books of Mrs. Spark are deeply funny....(8).

The "deeply funny" nature of Spark's work draws on the power of the marginal and the magical that we have seen operating in a number of comedic works by women writers. In obvious parallel to Updike's reference to Spark's "ominous...witchcraft" which, as we noticed, prevented him from

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laughing, stand the figures of the hysteric and the sorceress urging laughter and abandon. Spark's comedy is tied in some way to the primitive ritual of exorcizing evil, a number of critics have claimed, but what might appear "evil" to Spark and other women writers might be the very thing appearing to others as the embodiment of good. Spark does not accept convention, she mocks the most strongly accepted norms. Like one of her own favorite writers, John Henry Newman, Spark could reply to critics who criticize her for being overly satirical that "what they think is exaggeration, I think truth."[4]

In response to the inevitable refrain of a man telling a woman "that's not funny," Spark offers the following exchange, reminiscent of Bowen's writing on the same topic:

> "I don't see what there is to laugh at," Paul tells her....
> "...it has it's funny side," she says(Hothouse133).

Lodge writes that "it is perfectly true that her imagination is fascinated by revenge, humiliation and ironic reversals, and that she looks upon pain and death with a dry, glittering eye" (169); nevertheless, he also sees Spark as primarily a writer of comedy. Her comedy is undeniably informed by her anger. She presents us with "something between a

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wedding and a funeral on a world scale"(Girls of Slender Means 16). Instead of leading us to reconciliation and regeneration, Spark's comedy, like that of other women writers, is directly towards recognition and realisation, even if this process marginalizes the characters even further from the dominant ideology. Richmond calls it "hilarity and rueful recognition"(79). Perhaps the process of moving further from the vortex of power, the pull of false "reality" as the most desirable choice should be couched not in "even" but in "especially."

"If it were only true that all's well that ends well," writes Spark at the beginning of one novel, "if only it were true"(Hothouse 3). Spark dislocates our expectations continually, rebelling against the cyclical nature of traditional comedy which reaffirms the standing order. "Spark uses laughter as a dynamic... weapon," asserts Hoyt.

Spark addresses the issues of language and creation through the reworking of "givens" or cliches such as the "all's well" and "I wish I were dead" syndrome. For example, in her story "The Go-Away Bird," a young woman who is unhappy in both her African and her English existences cries "God help me, life is unbearable" and is promptly shot dead. Words have enormous power, as we have seen, especially for someone like the

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inescapably self-reflective figure Spark creates during a brief aside in Robinson, "MURIEL THE MARVEL with her X-ray eyes" who can "read your very soul"(61). Like MURIEL who has "dozens of satisfied clients," Spark is concerned with her audience's reactions and has said she likes to "make them laugh and to keep it short"(Lodge 60).

Comedy is, of course, a defense as well as a weapon. Often intelligent women like Caroline Rose or Sandy Stranger resort to humor as the only way to make sense of an obviously ridiculous reality. For Sandy, "fear returned as soon as she had stopped laughing"(Jean Brodie 60).

There is another form of comedy for women, usually exhibited by minor characters in the novels but nevertheless acting in significant counterpoint to the more subtlety dangerous mocking of the protagonists. This form of comedy is the laugh of the hysteric, the "cackle" of Wilt's matriarchs. The non-participatory women in Spark provide the broadest sweeping away of convention. They can barely contain their laughter at the absurdity of the universe before them; one such figure from The Driver's Seat "gives out the high, hacking cough-like ancestral laughter of the streets, holding her breasts in her hands to spare them the shake-up"(14).

Spark's comedy forces the very issue of the "happy ending" that has so

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unnerved critics of her work and the works of so many women writers of comedy. In The Only Problem she considers the question outright, wondering if:

> ...Job would be satisfied with this plump reward, and doubted it. His tragedy was that of the happy ending(176).

"Make it a straight old-fashioned story, no modern mystifications," is the advice given to Caroline at the end of The Comforters as she sets out to begin her novel. "End with the death of the villain and the marriage of the heroine." Caroline laughs and replies, "Yes, it would end that way"(222). The Comforters itself ends with the marriage of an elderly couple, not the marriage of Caroline herself. A religious woman is drowned and Caroline can only manage to save herself by allowing the woman to go under so that she herself could survive. Hardly the "normal" happy ending. Yet the book finally ends with a framed "look of one who faces an altogether and irrational new experience; a look partly fearful, partly indignant, partly curious, but predominantly joyful"(74) and this emphasis on the play of emotions, rather than the unity of emotion, is characteristic of Spark and of women's comedy in general. Spark's comedy presents "a series of pictures, distinct, primitive, undisdainful, without hope, without pain, without any comment but the grin and laugh of a constitutional survivor"(Hothouse 58).

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Notes

[1] Frank Kermode, "The Prime of Miss Muriel Spark." New Statesman 27 September, 1963: 397.

[2] John Updike, "Between a Wedding and a Funeral." New Yorker Sept 14 1961: 192.

[3] Muriel Spark, "Spirit and Substance." Vanity Fair December 1984; 103.

[4] Newman, Apologia pro vita sua, ed. Martin J. Svagli, 296, quoted in Muriel Spark: An Odd Capacity for Vision. ed. Alan Bold, (New York: Vision and Barnes and Noble, 1984) 61.

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Fay Weldon

> She laughed and said she was taking up arms
> against God Himself. Lucifer had tried and failed,
> but he was male. She thought she might do better...
> (She-Devil 83)

With her characteristic employment of socialist, anthropological and overtly feminist devices, one would expect Fay Weldon to be perhaps the sole successful woman writer of comedy to be exempt from a comparison to Jane Austen. Weldon, whose thirteen novels have received wide critical acclaim in Great Britain and have been translated into eleven languages, has been writing for the past twenty years. Weldon is best known for what one critic calls her narrative "voodoo." Yet, in a 1985 New York Times review the following inevitable assessment occurred: "Fay Weldon, the gifted and prolific British novelist, has a clear debt to Austen; her own fiction reveals a dry wit and is devilishly incisive in its portraiture" (Wolitzer 9).

Like her predecessors Bowen and Spark, Weldon puts women at the center of her fictions, focuses on the peripheral, apparently powerless nature of women's position in the social/cultural structure and refuses to accept the universal or "givens" of the dominant ideology. Like Spark's character, who dismisses with a succinct "fuck the general reader" the need to appease an audience by supplying "universals," Weldon does not hesitate to confront

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accepted wisdom and abandon the "general reader." One character in The Life and Loves of a She-Devil illustrates the typical Weldon response when faced by a "universal truth":

> Sez you, as I heard my mother's mother say, on her deathbed, when promised eternal life by the attendant priest (She-Devil 11).

One way in which Weldon subverts conventional narrative structures is to juxtapose the sublime and the ridiculous. As Mark Caldwell argues, the mundane and the bizarre merge in Weldon:

> The deadpan nursery voice of her style accords exactly the same apparent value to housework and Aeschylean violence, propelling you into a new, terrible (and very funny) world where digital technology confronts the Bronze.[1]

Weldon combines technical proficiency with ruthless humor. As critic Melvyn Bragg claims, Weldon's comedy is "delivered with a light touch, the stiletto so elegantly pointed that the blood was spurting while the laugh was still in the throat."[2] Weldon's comedy contains a violence of language, although her novels contain no more violent action than say, Spark's works or those of Iris Murdoch, with whom Weldon is often compared. This violence of language occurs, interestingly enough, through Weldon's dead-pan delineation of the intricate patterns of human behavior. Within

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one paragraph, for example, we have a quiet but unnervingly exposed description of the emotional landscape of a street in Camden Town, while a summary remark revises and undermines a biblical, patriarchal truth simply by using it in such context. Weldon reworks the implication of Jesus' words, undercutting their authority even while employing them, so that they are played out literally in the following prosaic situation:

> Hope once got stuck halfway up the oak tree in the communal garden. She was trying to rescue a kitten. Hope wept: the kitten wailed: the fire engine arrived. Ivor the alcoholic fell hopelessly in love with Hope, for at least a month, and Ivor's wife baked bread furiously, in the hope that her proper domestic worth and value would become apparent to him - which indeed it always was, but what has love to do with just deserts? Those who don't deserve it receive it. Those who most need it seldom have it. To those who hath [sic], Jesus once observed , to the shock and dismay of all around, shall be given, and to those who hath not, even that small portion that they hath shall be taken away (President's Child 43).

In another echo of Bowen and Spark, and illustrative of the pattern we saw emerging in the works of women writers in general, Weldon sees fiction as "an exercise in the way meaning exists in the gaps between sentences."[3] As in Bowen's "no-presence" and Spark's "her nothing-there," Weldon sees the absences and the hollows of language as the space to be explored by women. Meaning, for women, must exist in the space outside the boundary of the language of the father and therefore must exist in the spaces,

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hollows and gaps. Still, the systematic conventions of language and narrative must be employed in order to present ideas and tell stories, even as they are recognized as repressive and therefore to be undermined by the hidden text of the woman writer of comedy. It is important to note that Bowen, Spark and Weldon came to these insights, reminiscent of Saussurian, Derridian and various post-modern theories of language and meaning, not as part of the male-dominated critical discourse on twentieth-century literature but through their experiences as women and as writers.

If Spark can be said to write from the "nevertheless" principle, Weldon relies on the "so far" principle, as in "their love is blessed, not cursed. So far"(Remember Me 4). In Weldon's world which is unapologetically "down among the women" nothing can be taken for granted; apparently secure and stable structures can collapse without warning. We "hover on the borders," Weldon writes in her first novel Down Among the Women, of an existence where "chaos is the norm, life a casual exception to death...where the body is something mysterious in all its workings which swells, bleeds and bursts at random...where men seduce, make pregnant, betray, desert: where laws are harsh and mysterious and where the woman goes helpless"(34). Weldon deals with the world of women and manages to turn, according to one critic "unpromising soap-opera situations into

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elemental melodramas. Feminist politics shape her novels but their innards are primitive - thralldom, flight, magical transformation."[4]

In Weldon's novel, the surface structure is smooth, moving the reader effortlessly between romance, fable and apparent social realism. Like Spark, Weldon values economy in writing, attempting to "get down rapidly and exactly, with precision" what she wishes to say (Novelists in Interview 320). In her ability to move between tenses and narrators, Weldon again reminds one of Spark in The Driver's Seat and Bowen in "Pink May." The use of the first-person narrator also underscores the fabular nature of many of her tales and allows her to tap into the apparently maternal and didactic when she is in effect adopting neither of these. Esther, the abandoned wife in The Fat Woman's Joke, spins her tale but, in concern for her audience, first warns them that her story:

> will not be pleasant. You will become upset and angry. It is a story of patterns but no endings, meanings but no answers, and jokes where it would be nice if no jokes were. You have never heard a tale quite like this before and that in itself you will find hard to endure. Are you sitting comfortably?(13).

The "so-far principle" of Weldon's comedy encourages the subversion of appearances; what seems to be fine, what appears to be a happy ending is

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only that up to a point or from a certain perspective. As is the case with a number of other women writers, Weldon does not feel obliged to compare "happy endings." "Books about happy, secure and stable people are not the kinds of books I write," Weldon asserts: "I would not know how to make such people interesting."[5] Esther in The Fat Woman's Joke unabashedly tells a neighbor: "let us continue with my story, because yours is very ordinary and I am not concerned with it"(26). It is far more useful to hear stories of patterns with no endings and questions with no answers because these at least do not lead to false conclusions or false ideologies that promise stability and security in a randomly ordered, arbitrarily structured universe.

The creation of false fictions, the creations of what in Frye's terms would be the cyclical comedy of integration, ultimate fulfillment ruled by the "normal" happy ending is seen by Weldon to be treacherous. Those who propagate such fictions are the enemy in Weldon. Mary Fisher of Life and Loves of a She-Devil is the ultimate enemy: the writer of romance novels. Fisher and her allies are especially dangerous, explains Weldon. Through their writing, which supports every aspect of the patriarchal fantasy concerning the subjugation of women, they encourage women to trust in safety when all there exists is danger:

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> Mary Fisher did a wicked thing: she set herself up in a high building on the edge of a high cliff and sent a new light beaming out into the darkness. The light was treacherous; it spoke of clear water and faith and life when in fact there were rocks and dark and storms out there, and even death, and mariners should not be lulled but must be warned (183).

Weldon also sets up narrators like Chloe of Female Friends and Maia of The President's Child. These narrators, resembling Esther in their forthrightness, suggest that we, for example "watch Praxis. Watch her carefully. Look, listen, learn. Then safely, as they say to children, cross over"(109). Another story-teller is Gemma in Little Sisters, who recounts the story of her youth to Elsa, the very young mistress of her friend:

> And Gemma proceeds with her tale. And although - like any tale told in retrospect - heightened in the telling, purified of pain, reduced to anecdote and entertainment (as a thin stock, boiled away, become a thick and tasty sauce), it comes to Elsa more like a burnt offering to the Gods of fortune and misfortune than as a solid meal for the nourishment of the self, she is none the less able to gain some fortification from it (60).

The thick and tasty sauce of a feminist mythology is standard fare for Weldon as it is for Bowen and Spark. Her reliance on what can be called the "fiction of apocalypse," to borrow Kermode's phrase, transfigures the everyday into mythological terms. To employ another of Kermode's

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concepts to women's writing, "people will live by that which was designed only to know by"(112). Weldon, however, uses what she calls the "tower-block" mythology, the sub-culture populated by poor women wherein a different, peripheral set of myths predominate, different from those held "up there" among the men: these are "nasty stories, but they are not true. Myths are not true. Myths simply answer a need. But what kind of need can it be, down here among the women?"(Down Among the Women 158).

What stories are accepted truths to be overturned down among the women? There is the standard male myth that views women as eternally punished by God for the fall. Weldon's heroine Praxis, in the book named after her, however, has trouble accepting the given premise espoused by her elder sister Hilda concerning the perpetual torment of women:

> 'Of course men can't know you when you're unclean,' said Hilda. 'It says so in the Bible. That's why it's called the curse. It's God's punishment.'
> 'For what?'
> 'Giving Adam the apple, I suppose.'
> 'He didn't have to eat it.'
> 'Yes he did. If someone offers you food, it's only manners to take it. Why are you always so argumentative?' (39).

Why indeed? In fact, many of Weldon's women have trouble arguing, especially on their own behalf. They have been taught to accept that

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everything that can be done for them is, of course, being done and by the proper authorities. The women have been conditioned by everything around them not to argue, not to fuss, but to remain exactly as they have been, to value, and ultimately to seek, only the "happy ending" provided by the way of marriage. Marjorie of Female Friends assigns the collective inability of three friends to act in their adult lives to state propaganda fed them during their childhood:

> 'I know what the matter is with you,' says Marjorie, as they wait for their coffee, 'and with me. It's the Stay Put poster. It has embedded itself in our minds.'
>
> '-If I hear news that the Germans have landed? I stay put. I say to myself 'our chaps will deal with that.' I do not say 'I must get out of here' whether at work or home, I just stay put' (81).

Weldon's novels make use of a mythology typically first encountered in the ordinary fairy-tale. Little Sisters is a combination of the fairy tales Rumplestiltskin, Mr. Fox and Rapunzel. Life and Loves of a She-Devil draws dramatically from the tale of the Little Mermaid which, according to narrator Ruth, is concerned with pain, transfiguration, desire and the creation of gaps:

> Hans Andersen's little mermaid wanted legs instead of a tail, so that she could be properly loved by her Prince. She was given legs, and by inference the gap where they join at the top, and after that every step she took was like stepping on

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> knives. Well, what did she expect? That was the penalty. And, like her, I welcome it. I don't complain (150).

Like her predecessors, and despite her superficial anger, Weldon camouflages her most dangerous utterances and suggests that women, in order to be most effective must move "yet gently, gently, sideways" and "rather step close behind, unseen, keeping pace, like a child playing Grandmother's footsteps"(Female Friends 202). The analogy to the children's game of grandmother's footsteps, with the added power of the multiple inferences of little girls literally following in their grandmother's footsteps as they grow older (yes, literally following them from the bedroom to the kitchen and back), is an appropriate one because the success of the player depends on moving while appearing to stand still, depends on subterfuge and deception. Weldon's characters are quite able players. Few events in her books have only one level of meaning; movement is continuous and must be detected through careful, constant observation.

Weldon's choice of the name "Praxis" for the main character in her most widely read novel is itself an indication of the multiplicity of meaning valued by Weldon:

> Praxis, in fact, was a Victorian girl's name. It's a term in Marxist philosophy for the moment that

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> theory is translated into action. It's the moment when the foreman suddenly throws down his hammer and says: All Right, we're going on strike. And it means culmination and changing-point, and in Victorian pornography it means orgasm. Now how do you get all these - how do you get them all working together, both the sexual aspects and the political aspects and the individual aspects to join up and in fact they joined up in Praxis.[6]

It is interesting to note that in a scholary discussion of fairy-tales, Hedwig Von Beit explores the multiplicity of meaning characteristic of the fairy-tale form itself. "A single being or thing can simultaneously be one thing as well as another and can change itself from one into the other," explains Von Beit, "both conditions are retained". As we have seen in the case of a number of women writers, women are taught to be duplicitous and enlarge on this teaching so that eventually a determined multiplicity is a characteristic of the female character. Women can change from one role to another but retain both conditions, can conceal aspects of their character if they believe they will not please, for example, or will not prove acceptable to a husband or father, boss or clergyman.

Yet many women retain all their roles, not prepared to shed one for another, but rather encompassing all simultaneously. The good mother and the bad mother, for example, exist simultaneously in one woman. So that we have Wanda of Down Among the Women who confuses those around

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her by singing two kinds of songs: a sweet lullaby ("Wanda sings, sweetly' Hush, my little one, sleep, fond vigil I keep, lie warm in thy nest, by moonbeams caressed") and a different sort of song ("Wanda is egged on. She sings again.'Ta-ra-ra boom de-ay, have you had yours today? I had mine yesterday, that's why I walk this way" 6).

Women are taught to mask their anger, their sexuality and their humor. That three-fold connection is not coincidental. These, as we have seen, are the most dangerous weapons against the structures of authority because women's exploration of their own uses for sex, hate and humor undermines the very premise of women's position in the dominant system. Women's chance to change their position within the system depends upon their recognition of their shared oppression. "If only," observes Gemma of Little Sisters, "we women could learn from one another." However, women are kept in peripheral positions because they cannot afford to exercise their own judgement: "it is expected of them, in the name of marriage, to pass no moral judgements, let alone take any positive action to disassociate themselves from behaviour which in any other man but a husband would appear monstrous. Mind you, they usually starve if they open their mouths - and the children too"(175). Women make themselves "a hundred times more stupid than you need be. Women do; they have to, if they are determined men shall be their masters; if they refuse to look both into the

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faces of men and into their own hearts"(22). Women are systematically trained to misread their own perceptions of the world and to ascribe power to any man, however feeble, dull or impotent. For example, twenty-one year old unwed mother Scarlet of Down Among the Women mistakes her response to aged Edwin:

> It is not desire that is stirred, it is her imagination; but how can she know this? She feels she loves him. When she thinks of him kissing her, she is simply enchanted(110).

Even beautiful, successful and worldly Mary Fisher in The Life and Loves of a She-Devil falls when she relies on her new lover's opinions of her writing. Bobbo, once only her accountant but now her lover, suggests that her wildly successful novels should be written with an eye towards the presentation of reality. Mary shows her manuscript in progress to Bobbo, "as any loving woman would her man, and he had even helped her with it. He'd wanted her heroes to be a little graver, a little less tall"(103). Not seeing that Bobbo wants all heroes to be created in his image, Mary Fisher listens, "corrects" her writing and thereby loses the power she once held in the world. How and why does this happen? Or, as Weldon asks, "why does it take so long? Why do we stay so stubbornly blind to our own condition, when our eyes are not only open, but frequently wet with grief and bewilderment?"(Praxis 229). The answer lies, in part, in women's enforced

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inaction, when "our passivity betrays us, whispering in our ears, oh, it isn't worth a fight! He will only lie on the far side of the bed!"(Praxis 229). It also lies in women's disparagement of their own sex, their identification with and desire to please the "father" as well as their inherited fear of independence:

> We betray each other. We manipulate, through sex: we fight each other for possession of the male - snap, catch, swallow, gone! Where's the next? We prefer the company of men to women. We will quite deliberately make our sisters jealous and wretched. We will have other women's children. And all in the pursuit of our self-esteem, and so as not to end up old and alone (Praxis 229).

Weldon exposes the myths that have helped keep women in their place; by understanding the social and economic basis for women's exclusion from the patriarchal structure, women can begin to undo the system by refusing to take their assigned roles. When a physical education teacher announces proudly that "female fidelity...is the cornerstone on which the family, the heredity principle, and the whole of capitalism rests,"(Down Among the Women 196), we hear echoes of Cixous and Clement, as well as echoes of Levi-Strauss. In fact, Levi-Strauss' concept of women as sign is converted into everyday language by Weldon when a character from The President's Child explains that "men... pass girls on, you know. They're forever doing each other favors. They like to share the good things of life, whilst making

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sure the less privileged don't get a look-in. They're the same sexually as they are financially. Capitalist to the core. They hand around the wives too..."(74).

Comedy can disrupt the system by providing a context for women's refusal to participate while still allowing them to remain within the confines of accepted discourse. When using comedy about women's infidelity to make a point about the refusal of women to accept their allotted position, Weldon gives evidence of a woman's power, through sexuality and through humor, to refuse. For example, the following anecdote from Down Among the Women suggests that we laugh at the figure of authority, not at the sexually active, socially marginal woman:

> Reminds me of the story of Royalty visiting the maternity hospital. Royalty inclines towards young mother. "What lovely red hair baby has, mother. Does he take after his father?" Answer: "Don't know, ma'am, he never took his hat off"(21)

Weldon implies that the moment women refuse to act as a currency of the dominant system is the point at which they realize the system has been constructed on a false basis all along. When women realize, as Elsa does in Little Sisters ,that for them, at least, sex is "not for procreation, it is for the sharing of privilege," they can abandon the rules and seek their own limitless pleasure and power. Elsa, in fact, realizes that sex, outside the

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rules laid down for women's morality, proves fortifying rather than depleting, proves exhilarating rather than shameful. It proves, in fact, comedic. Shame, perhaps, is the province of the male, since sex proves to be his "loss" under these terms:

> Hey, you over there! Man! Come to bed. Handsome, young, rich, powerful, or otherwise fortunate - is that you? Excellent? Come inside. Because what I know and perhaps you don't is that by some mysterious but certain process of osmosis I will thereupon draw something of these qualities into myself. Don't run away - I need you! I must have you. I must sap your good fortune, drawing it into myself through the walls of my vagina, gaining my pleasure through your loss. (Little Sisters 134)

This realization, Weldon suggests, is what has created the figure of the sorceress, the hysteric, the witch. Once the first rule is broken, as Bowen and Spark have illustrated, all rules crumble. For Weldon, "the first step...[t]he breaking of the first rule,"(She-Devil 54) is often the rejection of "discrimination": one learns to reject the false assembly of values. The second step is realizing that "when male power and prestige are at stake the lives and happiness of women and children are immaterial" (President's Child 163). This leads to the ultimate realization that the social, "civilized" world, which is supposedly created in order to protect the vulnerable, actually sets about systematically to destroy the powerless after those in authority have profited from them:

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> Let us now praise fallen women - those of them at any rate who did not choose to fall, but were pushed and never rose again. Let us praise, for example, truckloads of young Cairo girls, ferried in for the use of the the troops, crammed into catacombs beneath the desert floor. Lost to syphilis, death or drudgery. Those girls, other girls, scooped up from all the great cities of East and West, Cairo, Saigon, Berlin, Rome. Where are their memorials? Where are they remembered, prayed for, honoured? Didn't they do their bit?(Down Among the Women 185)

The most significant part of women's recognitions in these matters is to see that "reality" and "nature" are arguments used by men against women, used by men to enable themselves to keep the power they have asserted -- and, most importantly, that power and authority are constructs of language, not forces reflecting the inherent order of the universe. Language permits those in authority to do exactly as they please. Weldon writes in The President's Child that men "murder and kill with impunity: not so much in the belief of the rightness of their cause, or even telling themselves that ends could justify means, or in their own self-interest, but simply not realizing that murder was what they had done"(President's Child 62). This occurs, as Isabel says, because they have the authority in the system enabling them to change "language itself to suit their purposes. If... anyone had to go, she would not be killed, let alone murdered; she would be liquidated, wiped out, taken out, obliterated, dealt with ...."(President's Child 62).

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The marginal existence of women is written into the language, as feminist critics have pointed out. Monique Wittig, for example, writes that personal pronouns are "pathways and means of entrance into language", and that they mark gender through all language, "without justification of any kind, without questioning."(The Mark of Gender 65). Weldon confronts this idea in her fiction. "I know you have a low opinion of your own sex," says one woman in Praxis. "It is inevitable; our inferiority is written into the language: but you must be aware: you must know what's happening"(154). In Life and Loves of a She-Devil, Ruth indicates that it is not surprizing that women are not granted easy access to traditional authority given their exclusion from language: "we are powerless, and poor, and have no importance. We are not even included in everyone"(50).

If women subscribe to the conventional role assigned to them within the traditional system, they are stripped of their humanity. "Human beings rant and roister, fuck and feed, love and smother, shake their fists at the universe in thunder storms and defy a creator who is sure to get them with the next lightning bolt," writes Weldon in Female Friends. "These little English girls, with their soft, uncomplaining voices, and their docile hearts, whose worst crime has been a foul on the hockey pitch, are quite alien...."(130). Women have not been permitted to participate as human beings and so they are presented with the choices of being perpetually

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"alien" to the world of men while creating distance between themselves and other women. Or they can realize that, as Esther says to trouser-wearing Phyllis in The Fat Woman's Joke:

> Any woman who struggles to be accepted in a man's world makes herself ridiculous. It is a world of folly, fantasy and self-indulgence and it is not worth aspiring to. We must create our own world. I will lend you a skirt, Phyllis (83).

It is perhaps easy for Weldon to claim that "you could advance the view that all good writing is bound to be feminist ... it depends on how you're going to define feminist,"[7] since she claims that "it took me a very long time to believe that men were actually human beings. I believed the world was female, whereas men have always believed the world is male. It's unusual for women to suffer from my delusion."[8] As Weldon illustrates in her novels, however, the apparently "real" world of men pales in comparison to the world of women: "affairs of state...are child's play compared to the affairs of the home... of the intricacies of a marriage and the marriage bed" she writes in Remember Me (203). Inverting the traditional cliche, Weldon comments that she regards "men as, for the most part, decorative."[9]

Weldon, in fact, subverts another bastion of patriarchal ideology by linking men to "nature," whereas, as we have seen, the dominant ideology has

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always associated nature with women. But Weldon is using "nature" in a different sense, as Bowen and Spark used it and as recent feminist critics have used it: the view of the "natural" world as a language construct created to present an apparently rational universe with its own set of "given" structures, fiats with which women and other powerless groups could not argue. This is understandable since those in power wish to remain so by perpetuating those constructs which have enabled them to seize power:

> It is nature, they say, that makes us get married. Nature, they say, that makes us crave to have babies...It's nature that makes us love our children, clean our houses, gives us a thrill of pleasure when we please the home-coming male.Who is this Nature?...Nature does not know best, or if it does, it is on the man's side...when anyone says to you, this, that or the other is natural, then fight. Nature does not know best; for the birds, for the bees, for the cows; for men, perhaps. But your interests and Nature's do not coincide. Nature our Friend is an argument used, quite understandably, by men (Praxis 147).

Weldon's humorous framing of such "universals" as "Nature our Friend" is indicative of the way women's comedy borrows cliches only to undercut them, and her off-handed remark concerning the nature of oppression--"an argument used, quite understandably, by men"-- calls attention to her understanding of the social and cultural basis for the powerless position of women.

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If women's interests and "nature's" do not coincide, neither do women's interests and those attributed to "reality." "Reality", as well as the concept of the "universal" and "normal," are also arguments or constructs used by men. Like Bowen's and Spark's, Weldon's writings argue for the multiplicity of experience and against a drive for a unified vision. There is no one "real world," women realize, if they do not accept the absolute, codified systems of their culture. Praxis recognizes this, for example, when she argues that there are a number of "different" worlds, "each with its different ways and standards, its different framework of normality"(Praxis 190).

The world, it occurs to Weldon's characters at various points, appears to us as we are taught to see it and not how it somehow objectively "is." Where are women taught how to perceive the absolutes of the reality the dominant system would have them believe? From Mary Fisher, for one, who, as we know "writes a great deal about the nature of love. She tells lies"(She-Devil 1). If we regard aging barmaid Gwyneth of Female Friends, we see that she absorbs her platitudes from "dubious sources, magazines, preachers and sentimental drinkers," and that these so-called "truths" in fact "often flatly contradicting the truths of her own experience, are usually false and occasionally dangerous?"(45). And, of course, directly from the state:

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"There was much talk of 'the bond' down at the clinic and a good deal done to foster it. It was less taxing on welfare funds to have mothers looking after their own progeny than leaving the state to do it"(She-Devil 180). So much for nature and reality, for, as Weldon argues, again echoing Spark and Bowen;

> " The nature of reality is so totally absurd"[10]

Weldon points out that we often begin from a false point, when we begin by "supposing there's a world in which there's a right way to do things,"[11] as she has accused one interviewer of doing. Nothing is obvious, least of all traditionally given, "accepted" wisdom. When Ruth of Life and Loves of a She-Devil takes her whining, clinging children to the high tower where Mary Fisher lives with Ruth's adulterous husband in order to leave the children there ("the only place they'll have a chance to witness" the primal scene, she drily offers) she is confronted with a "given":

> "It is obvious that the children can't stay here.
> They must go home where they belong, with their mother."
> "Why is it obvious?" asked Ruth(72)

Just as there is no hard-core of reality, since truth, as Weldon describes it, is like an onion where you simply peel away layer after layer to find no central heart of the matter, there is also "no such thing as the essential

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self." So admits one of Ruth's many doctors when she asks about changing her physical self: "It is all inessential, and all liable to change and flux, and usually the better for it"(221).

When women recognize that there are no givens, no natural courses, no absolutes, but only constructs upheld by the forces of belief, they can begin to acknowledge the powers of subversion they have within them. Those who have been taught to trust reason, to believe that "the universe isn't magic" begin to see, as does Praxis, that even as they speak, they know they are wrong (Praxis 263). Women begin to sense the power of their own dangerous natures. In a number of novels, Weldon places the innocent at the center; we once again meet the women who are "sort of like Pippa Passes, only in reverse" we encountered in Bowen and Spark. "You certainly seem to be at the centre of events. A catalyst. Do you know what a catalyst is?" someone asks Praxis. "You're a very dangerous person," Marjorie tells Chloe in Female Friends, and explains that "people who stand about waiting for other people to fall to bits so they can pick up the pieces ought to be locked up. They encourage disintegration"(305).

Women who were in fact supposed to be setting a "good example" turn out to be dangerous for their daughters in teaching them to "understand and forgive" instead of teaching them to rage and laugh. Schools, religions, the

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"stay-put" posters of all sorts, encourage what cannot, in fact, be accepted:

> ... understand fur-coated women and children without shoes. Understand school - Jonah, Job and the nature of the Deity: understand Hitler and the Bank of England and the behaviour of Cinderella's sisters.... (Female Friends 53).

Women are meant, in the order as it stands, to understand and forgive, grit their teeth and endure, and finally be lead to the final agreement at death, where one is expected to "say your good-byes and go." But like Madeleine, the mad, abandoned first wife of Remember Me, when the "forces of nature" tell her to die peacefully after her car crashes, we must say, simply, no.

Or, like Ruth in Life and Loves, women must harness and redouble their refusal and anger until it becomes an unholy transfiguration. They must see, like Ruth and her predecessors the sorceress and the hysteric, that "if you want everything you must suffer everything"(162). Pain and ecstasy are intertwined inextricably because:

> [i]t is not easy thus to change the patterns of the past, to forgo the reassuring pleasures of servitude, to face the unknown. Don't think it doesn't hurt. The first sea animals crawling up onto dry land must have had an agonizing time: struggling for breath, burning in the primeval sun (Remember Me 246).

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As Bowen writes "anything could happen," and Spark writes "all things are possible," indicating the refusal to supply conventional, systematic closure as well as the valorization of the open-ended, unstructured universe, so Weldon writes, as if supplying the equation in its entirety: "if everything is inexplicable, anything might happen"(Praxis 19).

Weldon's anger is not hidden in the same ways that Bowen and Spark mask their rage. Rather, Weldon creates characters exactly like those marginal, powerful women described by Clement and Cixous in The Newly Born Woman when they write that the "attacks" on convention by the hysteric and the witch:

> revolt and shake up the public, the group, the men, the others to whom they are exhibited. The sorceress heals, against the Church's canon; she performs abortions, favors nonconjugal love, converts the unlivable space of a stifling Christianity. The hysteric unties familiar bonds, introduces disorder into the well-regulated unfolding of everyday life, gives rise to magic in ostensible reason (5).

"Art" for Weldon, "is invention and distillation mixed....it is fundamentally subversive."[12] Bowen and Spark saw that women were not permitted to have access to the edifices of power occupied by men. Weldon, too, sees that for women the possibilities for overturning the system lie not in

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so-called "revolutions," but in revising the entire concept of power and construction. "You could go to Israel and fight Arabs and really start something. Build a new country," suggests Elaine to Praxis, who replies "new countries are in your mind." Elaine, although she acknowledges Praxis' point, suggests that;

> "they have to be, if you're a woman....
> Personally, I'd rather carry a gun"(Praxis 171)

Women, as Clement and Cixous argue, "represent the eternal threat, the anticulture" to men (67). This is because women can challenge the structure of logic, reason and nature because they see that "there are other universes to inhabit" besides the one being offered to them (Down Among the Women 213). They refuse, in Weldon's works, to accept that "one comes to terms with this kind of thing in the end," and reply "I come to terms with nothing"(Fat Woman's Joke 10). Women, peripheral as they are, gain power from their liminal position, freeing themselves from the rules because they recognize that they are "beyond nature: they create themselves out of nothing"(She-Devil 133).

"Anger was better than misery,"(253) decides Praxis. It is this decision that links hate to humor in Weldon's novels. It is this recognition that makes comedy possible for the woman writer:

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> Hate obsesses and transforms me: it is my singular attribution. I have only recently discovered it. Better to hate than to grieve. I sing in praise of hate, and all its attendant energy (She-Devil 3).

Weldon's rage is expressed through the apparently conventional forms of the domestic novel, with subversive results. As one critic commented, Weldon "describes the modern all-electric kitchen with deadly accuracy, then invests it with occult resonance of a magic cave. Suburban dinners do of course get fixed, between bouts of hysteria and plate-throwing, but behind them you can hear the thunder and smell sulphur."[13] The following passage from Life and Loves of a She-Devil illustrates this union:

> I make puff pastry for the chicken vol-au-vents, and when I have finished circling out the dough with the brim of a wine-glass, making wafer rounds, I take the thin curved strips the cutter left behind and mold them into a shape much like the shape of Mary Fisher, and turn the oven high, high, and crisp the figure in it until such a stench fills the kitchen that even the fan cannot remove it. Good (She-Devil 10).

"Cooking badly is also being badly married," writes Clement. "Where sex is cooking is linked in part to the kitchen [sic]. There is a family, household, intimate stench hanging over it all -- to be more closely examined"(37). Weldon examines it in detail. Clement also notes that the hysteric weeps but the sorceress does not, and Weldon's Life and Loves of a She-Devil charts this transformation of hysteric to sorceress taking place in Ruth as

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if she were supplying an illustration for Clement's observation. "I ran upstairs, loving, weeping," explains Ruth as she transforms herself through anger. "I will run downstairs, unloving, not weeping"(She-Devil 24).

Like Bowen and Spark, Weldon also sees that to reduce the struggle of women to a fight between the sexes is to reduce it and unify it into the absurdity propagated by the dominant order. It is a more complex battle than that: "it is not a matter of male or female, after all; it never was: merely of power"(Praxis 241). It is the structures of power themselves that need subverting; men, deluded and decorative, are dangerous to women because they try to make them over into the image prepared by the system, try to make women into the sign that will permit the system to flourish.

One of the ways, as we have seen, women revise the constructed order is by refusing to accept the "normal" happy ending and by implication, refusing to accept what is offered as a reward for behaving within the rules. Yet happy endings in women's writing, as we have also seen, are the

triumphs of non-closure, multiplicity and limitlessness. Happy endings in women's writings often replace 'integration' and 'reaffirmation' with

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recognition and realization. As Weldon writes in Letters to Alice, happy endings do not mean "mere fortunate events" but a reassessment or reconciliation with the self, not with society, "even at death"(83).

But part of women's defiance, and one of Weldon's strongest comedic structures, is the refusal of women to accept finality, even the finality of death (or marriage, for that matter). Her novels often end with the dissolution of a marriage, with the defeat of reason, with the triumph of the female lucifer, with the abandonment of children or with the laying to rest of a ghost. Weldon systematically inverts the "normal" happy ending, so that we applaud, for example, Chloe's abandonment of her husband at the end of Female Friends. Chloe's happy ending depends on the fact that she has finally stopped understanding and forgiving:

> As for me, Chloe, I no longer wait to die. I put my house, Marjorie's house, in order, and not before time. The children help. Oliver says 'But you can't leave me with Francoise,' and I reply, I can, I can, and I do (311).

At the end of Praxis, we have an old woman with a broken toe, who laughs at delight in her own triumph. "Even here," says Praxis, "in this horrible room, hungry and in pain, helpless, abandoned by the world in general and the social worker in particular, I can feel joy, excitation and exhilaration. I

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changed the world a little: yes, I did. Tilted it, minutely, on its axis. I, Praxis Duveen"(50). Triumph at undoing the structures, undermining the system, is likened to a battle, "an exhilarating battle, don't think it wasn't. The sun shone brightly at the height of it, armour glinted, sparks flew"(Female Friends 309).

As Bowen writes that while humanity might be saved, individuals are surely damned, so Weldon writes what has remained unwritten in the "normal" happy ending: "[f]or days can be happy - whole futures cannot. This is what grandmama says. This moment now is all you have. These days, these nights, these moments one by one"(Female Friends 310). Therefore, she insists women--and men as well--must "treasure your moments of beauty, your glimpses of truth, your nights of love. They are all you have. Take family snaps, unashamed"(Remember Me 310). Madeleine, soon to die in a car crash on the A-1, buys heather from a poor woman, taking coins from the milk money: "'Never mind,' says Madeleine from her heart. 'Never mind. Good times will come again. Or at any rate, we had them once'"(18).

It is in Remember Me that Weldon's refrain "recognition, realization!," so very emblematic of women's comedy, occurs. What should women realize?

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For a start, they should not:

> discredit what your elder sister says. Much less your grandmama. Listen carefully now to what she says, and you may not end as tired and worn and sad as she. Be grateful for the softness of the cushion, while it's there, and hope that she who stuffed and sewed it does not grudge its pleasure to you. The sewing of it brought her a great deal of pain and very little reward (Female Friends 309).

A happy ending depends on process and does not signal stasis. It can concern, as in the case of Elsa in Little Sisters, the relationship between a woman and her mother. Elsa realizes that she "loves her, fears her, pities her, resents her, escapes her, joins her, loves her" mother and "is saved"(137). As for the traditional happy ending of boy gets girl and then forms a new society around himself: "'It is like a happy ending,' Scarlet complains...."(Down Among the Women 183). Weldon, like other women writers, has cause to complain about the traditional happy ending and the traditional place of women in conventional comedy.

Women in conventional comedy appear to be in a comparable position to the one in which Gemma finds herself in Little Sisters:

> Silence. The knife blade trembled at her throat.
> Mr. First sighed and put the knife down.
> A joke, after all.
> Of course. Employers always joke with typists(94).

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As Judith Wilt has noted, women have also been encouraged to turn humor against themselves in order to render neutral an experience which might otherwise cause them to act to the detriment of the system. Women in Weldon's novels do so at their own risk (usually high) and only for those periods in which they are going through what she calls a "stupid patch" of attempting to live "an agreeable fiction." Praxis, at her most self-denying, conventional stage:

> turned the meeting with the Women's Libbers into a joke, into a dinner-table story, and presently could stop trembling when she thought about it (237).

When Gwyneth in Female Friends uses the cliche "you have to laugh...[i]t's a funny old life," the third person narrator responds only with an ironic "Ha-ha"(47). Gwyneth is using the phrase as the system would have her use it, to continue justifying her own powerlessness.

It is when women begin to use comedy not to justify the ways of god/man but rather to expose the folly of such ways; it is when women's comedy is misread by convention, that it gains its real power. "'I was only joking,' she says. But of course she isn't," Weldon writes in Down Among the Women(88). In Weldon, it seems, there is no such thing as "only" joking.

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Comedy is part of the survival process for women; Praxis "wrote, she raged, grieved and laughed, she thought she nearly died; then, presently, she began to feel better"(280). Comedy and power are interlocked in Weldon's writing: the power of comedy to undo expectations and revise women's view of themselves in the system. The final line of Life and Loves of a She-Devil reads: "A comic turn, turned serious"(241).

Why is comedy so important? Because laughter is as obvious a manifestation of refusal as the bite or the kick. The whole system of society and culture may, in fact, be set up by men in order to keep "women occupied, and that's important. If they had a spare hour or two they might look at their husbands and laugh, mightn't they?"(Down Among the Women 54) And that laughter, Weldon implies, would bring the edifice down.

To laugh is to assert the self; it often entails laughing at the figure of authority. Most significantly, it is a divisive, not a unifying experience. Chloe's laughter at the end of Female Friends is the laugh not only of the Medusa, of Medea, and of Clytemnestra, but is also the laughter of the street described by Spark, and a reflection of the face of the woman "wildly smiling" in Bowen:

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> Chloe finds she is laughing, not hysterically, or miserably, but really quite lightly and merrily; and worse, not with Oliver, but at him, and in this she is, at last, in tune with the rest of the universe(259).

Seven pages later, Weldon, as if to double-check, asks: "is she laughing at him?" The answer is "yes, she is. Her victory is complete"(267) It is no small victory.

Weldon's comedy, like the comedy of other women writers, is characterized by its refusal to supply conventional comedic closure, by its emphasis on the non-absolute nature of the universe, by its recognition and discussion of the way 'nature' and 'reality' are constructs of language and by its linking of comedy to the forces of anger, refusal and rebellion against a patriarchal ideology that has traditionally repressed women's ability even to find the obvious audience for their own humor: themselves. And that is why, Weldon writes:

> I think, increasingly, any seminar on Women and Writing,or Women Writers. or the New Female Culture, or whatever is instantly booked up....we are not alone in the oddity of our beliefs. Our neighbour, whom we never thought would laugh when we laughed, actually does (Letters to Alice 74).

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Notes

[1] Mark Caldwell, "Fay Weldon's Microwave Voodoo", Village Voice, September 25, 1984: 52.

[2] "Melvyn Bragg meets the storytellers", Observer Sunday Magazine, October, 1984: 24.

[3] Marxism Today September 1986: 33.

[4] Caldwell 52.

[5] John Hoffenden, Novelists in Interview (London: Methuen,1985):320.

[6] Annelise Schonneman, Fay Weldon, Pamphlet (Danmarks Radio, 1983)14.

[7] Hoffenden 309.

[8] Fay Weldon, "Me and my shadows", On Gender and Writing Ed. Michelene Wander (London: Pandora Press 1983): 163.

[9] Personal Interview (27 April 1984.)

[10] Hoffenden 306.

[11] Hoffenden 309.

[12] Hoffenden 305.

[13] Caldwell 52.

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> One must be careful with words. Words turn probabilities into facts and by sheer force of definition translate tendencies into habits.
>
> Weldon, The Fat Woman's Joke

> I have inside me a laughter demon without which I would die.
>
> Spark, The Takeover

> It was a marvel that anything so dainty should be so strong.
>
> Bowen, Hand in Glove

Conclusion

Employed in behalf of women who have had an arbitrarily constructed and encoded "natural order" imposed upon them by the phallocentric, authoritarian systems of Western culture, comedy by women writers breaches the "wall of utterance, the wall of origin, the wall of ownership" Barthes claimed (45) as the problem of modern writing-- insofar as conventional modern writing takes issue with the notion of discourse against a "classic" language.

If women appear "unlaughing" at conventional, masculine humor, this may in part be because the directive to find something amusing is as inappropriate, even impossible, as the inverted directive not to find something funny. Charges of unlaughing and laughing inappropriately have been levelled at women, as we have seen, since women began to

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participate in the creation of literary works. These charges have also, been brought against the female audience, of course expected to laugh at humor often based on the degradation and debasement of their sex. "The admonition to be happy," writes Adorno, "voiced in concert by the scientifically epicurean sanatorium-director and the high-strung propaganda chiefs of the entertainment industry" (in addition, we might add, to the Priestleys and Mailers of the literature industry) "have about them the:

> fury of the father berating his children for not rushing joyously downstairs when he comes home irritable from his office. It is part of the mechanism of domination to forbid the recognition of the suffering it produces (62).

As we have seen, the women-have-no-sense-of-humor cliche is applied by men to every threatening women according to Mary Daly, and causes female energy to be directed "against the Self while remaining disguised."[1] Reflex action against this accusation-- women laughing at something they do not find funny, or at a joke directed against their own values-- can be characterized by Daly's phrase: "smiling at the boss" (Wilt177). Comedy by women, however, has as its encoded text what is most angering as well as what is most humorous.

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The function of women's comedy is to undo existing boundaries, not merely to test them. It affirms non-closure against the restrictions of convention and penetrates the hidden secrets of the dominant ideology: that the authority of nature, reality and other "givens" is a construct of culture, not created by the fiat of an orderly universe. As Judy Little claims, the woman writer of comedy "realizes that she progresses not from rhetorical illusion to transcendent truth, but from one rhetorical illusion to another" ("Engendering Laughter" 18). That the structures of comedic writings by women have generally been overlooked by critics can be attributed at least in part to an ideological "blind spot" where women and humor are concerned. Because comedy by women rejects many of the conventions associated with traditional, male-dominated comedy not by way of attack but by subtle subversion, women's comedies have been misread by critics who can only perceive comedy when it is firmly encased within inherited literary structures. Consequently, for example, the fact that a work ends with the dissolution of marriage and the abandonment of children does not invalidate its claim to be read as comedy. It is undoubtably the inability of the critical tradition to deal with comedy by women rather than the inability of women to produce comedy that accounts in great measure for the apparent absence of critical material on the subject.

The preliminary, not to say primitive, state of critical discourse concerning

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women and comedy in literature is no doubt a temporary one; already there is an indication that the subject is being taken up by a number of feminist critics. The presence of material from other fields, among them psychology, sociology, communication theory and performance theory, also reflects the growing awareness of the gap in our perception concerning the function of humor in the lives of women.

Although it has been acknowledged that women have written comedy (again, witness Johnson liking Eveiina), women's comedy has also been given only passing attention by traditional criticism. The vitriolic submerged text of rebellion in women's comedy has been overlooked because it does not fall within the framework of assumptions concerning appropriate spheres of women's literary efforts.

The finite, tightly closed-off limits of traditional comedy are erased by the decentering, dislocating thrust of women's writing. While assuming ostensible conventionality, women's comedy subtly undercuts the defining features of the genre it seems to embody in order to repudiate the patriarchal, repressive nature of those limitations. By calling the definitions into question, the compass of the question itself alters. We see depicted, finally, the ideological foundations embodied by and perpetuated by

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conventional comedy which often disregards or debases women's experience.

Although by no means exhaustive, this discussion of hate and humor, anger and comedy in women's writing is meant to suggest ways of perceiving those elements characteristic of women's writing which have long been ignored or misread by the critical tradition.

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Notes

[1] Qtd. in Wilt, Judith. "The Laughter of Maidens, the Cackle of Matriarchs: Notes on the Collision." Women and Literature. ed. Janet Todd New York: Holmes and Meier, 1980: 177.

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