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FUNNY WOMEN

A STUDY OF FEMALE COMEDIC PERSONAE

by

SUSAN N. HOROWITZ

A dissertation sumitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degreee of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York.

1987

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Abstract

FUNNY WOMEN

A STUDY OF FEMALE COMEDIC PERSONAE

by

SUSAN N. HOROWITZ

Adviser: Professor Vera Mowry Roberts

This study examines the comedic personalities of four leading comediennes from the 1950's to the present. Each comedienne represents a different popular genre, and each has achieved outstanding public acceptance. The comediennes are as follows: Lucille Ball (situation comedy), Phyllis Diller (stand-up comedy), Carol Burnett (sketch comedy), and Goldie Hawn (feature film comedy). While the chief focus of this study is on these four comediennes, their work is set in historical context by referring to other American comediennes from nineteenth century vaudeville to the present. Materials are drawn from books and articles about the comediennes; critical studies of comedy from the ancients to the moderns; plays, films, television shows, phonograph recordings, nightclub acts etc.; and personal interviews.

This study considers how the physical attributes, talents, tastes, backgrounds, and personalities of Ball, Diller, Burnett, and Hawn led to the creation of their particular comedic personae. It explores how the nature of each genre tends to promote certain types of comedic characters and why certain behaviors, jokes, dialogue, visual effects and vocalisms are funny. It examines these comedic personae in the light of the current sex-roles of women in society. And finally, it demonstrates that the success of a popular comedic personality depends on a balance of certain key power elements: comedic appeal, sex appeal, and overall competence. It shows that successful female comedic personalities exert sufficient power to attract, but not threaten audiences, and that the amount of power allowed to a female comedic performer reflects the power currently permitted to women in society. The stereotypes of the "dumb sexpot" or the "ugly wisecracker" are examined as attempts to objectify women and limit their power to either the sexual or the intellectual arenas. It demonstrates that as women achieve greater power, female comedic personalities are also apt to present themselves as both more powerful (combinining sex appeal and competence) and less stereotypically sexy or sexless. In essence, this study examines what makes successful female comedic personalities appealing and places them in the context of the sex-roles of women in society.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In this study, I propose to identify those factors that are chiefly responsible for the appeal of contemporary female comedic personalities. I will take as my subject a few paradigmatic examples of female comedic personae. These examples will be chosen from four major genres of popular contemporary comedy--the television situation comedy, the solo stand-up act, the sketch act, and the narrative comic film or play. The comediennes chosen have established their credentials as embodying those qualities necessary for popular success by the simple fact of their having established enduring careers as famous comedic female personalities. I intend to study their comedic personalities as aesthetic creations intended for public presentation and to examine the personal and professional lives of these women as they impact on their art.

The time period chosen for the study will be from the early 1950's to the present. I have chosen to focus on

this period for two reasons. First, the time period from the 1950's to the present is a major transitional one in American society, particularly in terms of the role of women. By looking at these comediennes from the vantage point of the mid-eighties, we can see their art as either a period piece, marked by the era in which it originated, or as changing with and reflecting the times. In the case of female comedic performers, it is particularly relevant to consider the image of woman they present in terms of the socio-economic status of women, the sex-role expectations placed on women, and the impact (if any) of the feminist movement.

Second, it was in the early 1950's that television first became a mass entertainment medium. Since then, it has become the single most influential purveyor of comedy and has often been instrumental in introducing comics to a wide audience. All the comediennes under consideration have had television exposure, whether as heroines of a situation comedy, as hosts of a comedy/variety show, as guest performers on talk and/or variety shows, or as the heroines of films that have been broadcast on television and/or reworked into the format of an episodic series.

It is my intention to consider contemporary comediennes whose careers have had magnitude and endurance. I am therefore choosing as my subjects four performers whose comic personae have continued to attract the public for over twenty years. Based on their continued

popular appeal, it seems fair to assume that they incorporate those elements that are essential to the successful comedic persona. We can therefore utilize these personae to examine the nature of those elements and how they work in tandem with each other in the comedic personality. By so doing, I intend to establish a method of analysis that will not only aid in understanding these particular comediennes, but may ultimately be applied to other comediennes and, (with some adjustments related to the differing sex role), male comics who are attempting to establish themselves in the field. The comediennes that will be considered in this study and the genres of comedy that each represents are as follows:

Lucille Ball (Situation Comedy)

Phyllis Diller (Stand-up Comedy)

Carol Burnett (Sketch Comedy)

Goldie Hawn (Narrative Film Comedy).

Lucille Ball had achieved moderate success as a film and radio actress when she went on the air in October 1951 as the heroine of I Love Lucy. The show became phenomenally popular and remained on the air until 1960, at which time Ball and Arnaz divorced and stopped performing together. Lucille Ball continued to star in her own series: The Lucy Show (1962-1968) and Here's Lucy (1968-1974). All of these programs have gone into re-runs which are still broadcast today. Ball has occasionally appeared in television specials and films, but her greatest

comedic achievement is her creation of the character "Lucy Ricardo" on I Love Lucy.

Phyllis Diller first performed as a stand-up comic in 1955. This led to appearances on Jack Paar's Tonight Show and The Ed Sullivan Show. Since then she has appeared in films, published books of humor, recorded comedy albums, and starred in plays both on and off-Broadway. Mainly, she has built a following as a solo stand-up comic in major supper clubs, where she has headlined for over thirty years. When Diller started, there were practically no successful female stand-up comics. Today, while still a minority within a male-dominated profession, the number of female comics is increasing dramatically, and Diller has provided a model for a female comedic style to emulate or react against.

Carol Burnett came to New York in the late 1950's and appeared in nightclubs and intermittently on television as a guest on The Gary Moore Show. She achieved her first major success as a comedic actress in 1959 when she starred off-Broadway in Once Upon a Mattress. She soon became a regular on The Gary Moore Show. In 1966 she became the first woman to host a comedy variety show. This program, The Carol Burnett Show, was broadcast for eleven years. It consisted of Burnett's appearing in comedic sketches and musical numbers with her regular company and an assortment of guest stars. Burnett has also starred in several films, both theatrical features

and movies made for television, and in both comedic and serious roles.

Goldie Hawn first came to national prominence on Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In, a comedy-variety program that was first broadcast in 1967. Shortly thereafter, she won an Academy Award for the Best Supporting Actress for her role in Cactus Flower. She went on to establish herself as star and producer of numerous films, mainly feminist comedies, the most famous of which is Private Benjamin (1980).

As may be seen from these capsule summaries of their careers, these four comediennes are distinguished by their enduring popular appeal. This study focuses on the onstage comedic personality, with supplemental biographical data on the performer herself as it impacts on the creation of the onstage comic persona. Although I will examine the personality and background of the individual comedic performers, my focus is on the functioning of the comedic personality, rather than using that personality to reveal the hidden psychology of the performer.

The comedic personality will be considered as the product of a number of key elements. These elements are: the personality and background of the comedienne; her comedic genre (ie. situation comedy, stand-up comedy, sketch comedy, or narrative comedy); her socio-cultural context; and the balance of what I call power elements in

the female comedic persona.

I suggest that in order to exert broad and enduring popular appeal, the female comedic personality must project sufficient power to attract an audience, but not so much as to threaten it. Put another way, the successful performer must project a kind of energy that magnetizes the audiences, but does not arouse fear, envy, or resentment.

I define power in the performing personality as the ability to move the audience to a pleasurable emotional response, in other words, to entertain. In the comedic personality, that response is at least in part comedic. The audience must laugh. The other components that constitute power in the performing personality are her sex appeal and the audience's perception of her competence. These three elements--comedic appeal, sex appeal, and personal competence--work together to create a balance of power. When the performer strikes the proper balance among the power elements of her personality, the audience will find her funny, appealing, fascinating, and non-threatening. In order to arrive at a more exact understanding of how these elements work, I will examine what constitutes comedic appeal, sex appeal, and competence in the female comedic personality.

In my study of comedic appeal, I will draw from the insights the comediennes provide into their own craft as well as suggesting some methodologies of my own. I will

also apply the work of well-known comic theoreticians from the ancients to the moderns, and I will include both aesthetic critics and psychologists who have done extensive work on comedy, beginning as far back as Plato and Aristotle, and coming forward to outstanding figures and studies in modern times.

In Philebus, Plato claimed that the ridiculous was based on an unfortunate lack of self-knowledge. The audience, he said, laughs at the self-delusions of the ineffectual--their ignorance of their own wealth, physical qualities, and spiritual qualities, especially wisdom.[1] The audience laughs at the comic figure out of its own envy and/or malice. In other words, laughter is the result of the comic's ignorance and unawareness coupled with the audience's feeling of superiority and spite. One may easily see the application of Plato's theory in the stock female comedic figure of the "dumb blonde." It is also apparent in the assumption of an amateurish or naive attitude that a comic may adopt in order to ingratiate herself with an audience.

Aristotle states that comedy is "an imitation indeed of bad characters, yet it does not imitate them according to every vice (but the ridiculous only); since the ridiculous is a portion of turpitude. For the ridiculous

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[1]Paul Lauter, ed., Theories of Comedy, Plato, Philebus, (New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday & Company, 1964) pp. 6,7.

is a certain error, and turpitude unattended with pain, and not destructive."[2] In other words, laughter is aroused by comedic figures who are inferior to the audience because of some defect. Furthermore, that defect is neither hurtful to the comedic figure nor wounding to anyone else. Aristotle's theory of the endearing defect can be easily proved by comediennes who utilize humorous self-deprecation. Their flaws are taken as painless and funny.

Plato described comedy as arising out of envy or malice--a mixture of mental pain and pleasure in the audience. Aristotle portrayed the ludicrous as a painless deformity in the comic figure. Neither attributed any beneficial social effect to comedy. (This oversight may have simply been due to the fact that their extant writings focus on the causes of laughter, not the social consequences of comic plays. Clearly the comedies of Aristophanes, for example, were at least partly intended as social satires, and it is possible that Plato and/or Aristotle considered the social effect of comedy in writings that have since been lost.)

In 1599 Ben Jonson made explicit the connection between comedy and the desire to instruct society. In

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[2]Barrett H. Clark, Revised by Henry Popkin, European Theories of Drama, Aristotle, The Poetic, Chapter V, (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1965), pp. 7,8.

his preface to Volpone, the dramatist proposed comedy as a social corrective in its criticism of the follies of mankind: "...it being the office of the comic poet to imitate justice and instruct to life...."[3] Later, Molière and Swift consciously used satire as a way of reflecting on the social foibles and hypocricies of seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe. In his preface to Tartuffe, Molière stated that, "The most beautiful passages in a serious moral are more frequently less powerful than those of a satire; and nothing admonishes the majority of the people better than the portrayal of their faults."[4]

The imparting of the function of social and aesthetic criticism to comedy is certainly evident in the satiric gibes of many humorous sketches which mock social mores or the potential silliness and pomposity of serious art forms. The satiric corrective is also part of the rapier wit of the stand-up comic. And lastly, situation comedy episodes often act as humorous parables, models of human foolishness and the trouble it causes the characters, so that the viewer comes away with a moral lesson along with the entertainment.

In the eighteeenth century in England, Oliver

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[3]Ibid., Ben Jonson, Dedication to Volpone, p. 81.

[4]Ibid., Jean Baptiste Poquelin Molière, "Preface to Tartuffe," p. 113.

Goldsmith referred back to Aristotle as citing the two traditionally separate subjects for comedy and tragedy, but notes that in his day, there was a mixing of genres. "Traditionally, tragedy displays the calamities of the great, and comedy excites laughter by ridiculously exhibiting the follies of the lower part of mankind. But now we have sentimental comedy--the virtues and distresses of all mankind are the subject."[5] The sentimental comedy to which Goldsmith refers is a precursor to the middle class situation comedies on television and to the "common touch" aspired to by comediennes whose own lives are far from common. In order to be successful, their woes and concerns must appear universal. Although their personal talents may be unusual and their tastes sophisticated, their public persona is likely to be one with which the mass audience can easily identify.

If Goldsmith and other early critics defined comedy according to its subject matter, Henri Bergson, a comedic theorist who wrote at the turn of the twentieth century, postulated a model for comedy based on an abstract notion of form, the ability of the mind to derive humor from a logical paradox. Bergson's famous summation of the mechanics of the comic is "something mechanical encrusted on the living." Bergson elaborates:

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[5]Ibid., Oliver Goldsmith, "An Essay on the Theatre: Or, a Comparison between Laughing and Sentimental Comedy," p. 192.

> In the first place, this view of the mechanical and the living dovetailed into each other makes us incline towards the vaguer image of some rigidity or other applied to the mobility of life, in an awkward attempt to follow its lines and counterfeit its suppleness....
>
> Our starting-point is again "something mechanical encrusted upon the living."' Where did the comic come from in this case? It came from the fact that the living body became rigid like a machine. Accordingly, it seemed to us that the living body ought to be the perfection of suppleness, the ever-alert activity of a principle always at work. But this activity would really belong to the soul rather than the body....
>
> The general law of the phenomena may be formulated as follows: "Any incident is comic that calls our attention to the physical in a person, when it is the moral side that is concerned...."
>
> We laugh every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing. The comic is that side of a person which reveals his likeness to a thing, that aspect of human events which, through its peculiar elasticity, conveys the impression of pure mechanism, of automatism, of movement without life. Consequently, it expresses an individual or collective imperfection which calls for an immediate corrective. The corrective is laughter, a social gesture that singles out and represses a special kind of absent-mindedness in men and in events...
>
> In laughter we always find an unavowed intention to humiliate, and consequently to correct our neighbor, if not in his will, at least in deed.[6]

It is interesting to note how Bergson accounts for the social corrective theory proposed by earlier critics such as Jonathan Swift and Molière. Whereas the earlier critics had posited moral norms of vice and virtue. Bergson suggests that by the simple fact of being rigid and unresponsive to the quintessentially flexible attribute of the human will or soul, the comic is

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[6]Henri Bergson, "Laughter," (1900), Fred Rothwell, tr., in Comedy, Wylie Sypher, ed. (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1956), pp. 474-477.

inherently defective and in need of correction. Bergson also proposes his own sort of superiority theory, related to that of the earlier Greek theorists. In the respect to which the comic personality is a mechanically responsive "thing," it is inferior to the audience, which has a truly human nature, ie. one affected by will.

In 1905, Sigmund Freud published his book on the comic entitled Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious. The following material is condensed from his chapters "Jokes and the Comic." and "The Purposes of Jokes."[7] In the interest of both brevity and clarity, I have taken the liberty of paraphrasing and condensing Freud's ideas.

In "Jokes and the Comic," Freud states that the comic effect arises from an overly large expenditure of physical effort coupled with what appears to be a too small expenditure of mental effort or ability. Freud's examples of physical disproportion are exaggerated movements and/or gestures. From physical movement, he extrapolates to include the comic appearance of exaggerated facial features and bodily shapes. These physical abnormalities are, by implication, regarded as the outcome of exaggerated or pointless movement. If,

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[7]Sigmund Freud, Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, Newly Translated from the German and edited by James Strachey, (New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1963).

according to Freud, comic physicality is exaggerated, comic mental processes are too small. Nonsense and stupidity are comic because they imply too small a mental expenditure.

Freud echoes earlier theories about the supposed inadequacy of the comic personality and asserts that the laughter of the audience reflects a pleasurable sense of its own superiority. In order for that sense of superiority to find its release in laughter, the audience must be in a cheerful mood and have an expectation of the comic. The superiority of which Freud speaks is that of the adult toward the child. The comic person is perceived as reducing himself to a child. There are certain standard comic devices which are closely related to typically childish behavior. Among these devices are: exaggeration, (including caricature); mimicry; degradation; and unmasking.

Exaggeration is connected to a child's lack of a sense of proportion. Moderation and restraint are late stages of development. A comic, like a child, often behaves in exaggerated ways, without subtlety or a sense of proper proportion.

A child likes to mimic adults. The child often does this incompletely, by exaggerating some effects and minimizing others. So too, does the comic mimic or caricature events and people.

Degradation is mostly based on embarrassment, in

which we rediscover the child's helplessness. The peremptory demands of bodily needs despite the supposed will of the comic personality corresponds to the child's own incomplete control over his bodily functions.

Freud's concept of unmasking is related to that of degradation. The child loves it when an adult reduces himself to the child's level. When the adult makes himself into a quasi-child, it affords a child relief from the usual condescension of adults. This relief, which gives the child pure pleasure, becomes in adults, a form of degradation and unmasking. The supposed adult is unmasked and revealed as only a child underneath.

The child is characterized by his exaggerated emotions. He experiences blissful expectation and total credulity--along with intense and sudden disappointments often for reasons that strike adults as trivial. The adult tends to moderate his emotions--to make them proportionate to cause. When the adult reacts with intense credulity or disappointment to trivial causes, he appears as a child and is therefore comedic.

In his chapter "The Purposes of Jokes," Freud discusses the comic as the manifestation of forbidden impulses that are sexual or aggressive, in a disguised and therefore palatable form. These urges are usually bottled up. When they are expressed in a comedic context, there is a feeling of pleasurable release--as when the truth slips out. Given the convention that

"it's all in fun," both comic and laughing audience avoid the punishment that caused the impulse to be bottled up in the first place.

Contemporary psychologists have expanded on Freud's views of humor as arising from a disguised impulse, a sense of play, and a childish viewpoint. Psychologists Seymore and Rhoda Fisher conducted a four-year study comparing forty-three professional stand-up comics and clowns with forty-one professional actors. The product of their investigations is a book Pretend the World is Funny and Forever, 1981. In their study, the Fishers found that unlike actors, the comics frequently came up with what the Fishers call "nice monster" responses to ink blots ("ugly, yet somehow endearing"; "evil looking--the evil is not very evil--a put on") Fisher states, "Comics are uncomfortable with their anger. The actors gave angry imagery very easily in the Rorschach, but the comics were restricted in their ability to give comic imagery, which is in contrast with the way they openly express anger in their humor. The comic is always saying things to people and at the same time saying, 'Don't take it seriously; it isn't so bad.'"[8]

I suggest that the Fishers' analysis of the comic personality carries over to the content of the joke

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[8]Susan Witty, "The Laugh Makers," Psychology Today, August 1983, p. 24.

itself. My only quarrel is with the statement that "the comics openly express anger in their humor." As Freud realized, the joke is funny precisely because it is not open anger, but rather disguised anger.

The necessity of reframing the latent hostility of the joke or comic activity into a play mode is discussed by Gregory Bateson in his monograph The Message--'This is Play' (1956). Bateson writes: "A play frame must be established around each episode for its humorous potential to be realized. It must be understood that this behavior is different from the behavior which it is meant to represent. In other words, a joke is not a factual report of an event."[9] In my examination of comediennes, I will suggest how they set up a play mode, so that their behavior and language are understood in a comedic context.

Freud's assertion that the comic represents the child in the body of an adult is corroborated by Harvey Mindess, director of the graduate psychology program at Antioch University in Venice, California. Mindess invited professional comedians to speak to his students during a humor course he conducted at the University of California-Los Angeles. At the seminar, he concluded

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[9]Anthony J. Chapman and Hugh C. Foot, Humor and Laughter: Theory, Research and Applications, William F Fry and Melanie Allen, "Humor as a Creative Experience: The Development of a Hollywood Humorist," (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1976), p. 249.

that "playfulness, or the ability to regress into a more childlike view of the world, is the crucial element in being genuinely funny."[10]

The notion that a child and an adult co-exist in the same person is paradoxical. And, taken within the play frame, this inherent contradiction is comic. In my study of comediennes, I will examine how adult comediennes create the impression that they are, in some comedic sense, children in disguise. I will also explore how the presumption of childishness affects the audience's perception of the comediennes' sex appeal and competence.

The notion of the comic as the momentary fusion of contradictory elements applies not only to the comic persona as a fusion of child and adult but also to the content of jokes, comic dialogue, and aspects of behavior and appearance that are taken as funny.

Arthur Koestler in his book The Act of Creation,(1964), expands on this hypothesis.

> The pattern underlying the comic is the perceiving of a situation or idea in two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference. The creative act of the humorist consists in bringing about a momentary fusion between two habitually incompatible matrices. Scientific discovery...can be described in very similar terms--as the permanent fusion of matrices of thought previously believed to be incompatible.[11]

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[10]Psychology Today, p. 25

[11]Arthur Koestler, "The Act of Creation," as quoted in Humor and Laughter: Theory, Research and Applications, p. 247.

In the above discussion of some of the major trends in comedy theory, I hope to have indicated some bases for assessing the comedic appeal of the personalities in question. Additionally, I intend to suggest other elements, such as the role of timing in the creation of comedic effects. I will also examine the role of exaggeration in terms of character, verbalisms, and situations. Taken in comparison to the norm, such exaggerations, offered in a playful spirit, are funny. As I suggested earlier, I believe that the total appeal of these personalities rests on a constellation that also includes sex appeal and perceived competence. I will now address these aspects of the comedic persona.

Sex appeal is, of course, very difficult to calibrate. Beauty is in the eye (or ear, or touch) of the beholder, and tastes vary. Furthermore, types of female beauty go in and out of fashion. What another age found deliciously voluptuous, our own might find fat. What our culture finds exquisitely slender, another culture might find insufficiently womanly. Conversely, What one culture considers feminine and well-rounded (and linked to fertility and abundance of food), our own might think of as overweight. The athletic, trim, muscular body that women strive for in health clubs and gyms, would be no mark of beauty where women of leisure were expected to be passive, physically weak, and inactive. Even within the same culture, different types are held to

be appealing. Thus, within a range of what is considered appealing at any one time, the popular media have always provided alternatives--the blonde, the brunette, the redhead, the voluptuous, the slender, the athletic, etc. And, of course, personalities exercise appeal beyond mere physiognomy.

If we take both individual and cultural variations into account, is it possible to decide whether a performer presents herself as sexually appealing? That is, does she have the power to create that particular response in an audience? I suggest that, however vague, we do have some cultural vocabulary--some general agreements about what is appealing. Female performers operate in this context--both by the roles they play, the reactions of other characters to them, and the way they present themselves--both verbally and non-verbally.

Sometimes the ostensible image of their appeal is at variance with their actual appeal. A comedienne, like any performer, is playing a role. Within limits of plausibility, it may be the role of a sexually attractive, repulsive, or neutral character. The comedienne may speak of herself as unappealing or excessively sexy, and this may be part of her comedy act. Meanwhile, her over-all appearance, her costumes, make-up, and coiffeur may corraborate or contradict what she says. So too, her behavior--her posture, gestures, and voice tone may reinforce or belie what she says about

herself. And, finally, other characters may treat the comedienne in a way that enhances the notion that she is sexy, repugnant, or neutral. Her appearance, behavior, and other characters' reactions to her may confirm what individual members of the audience sense about her or be at variance with it.

It is true that discussing the sex appeal of a performer does ultimately boil down to the personal taste of the observer. There is no way to be exact about something as ephemeral as sex appeal. However, assuming that there are some cultural norms, I intend to suggest some relevant factors in the way the comic personalities look, sound, behave, and are treated by other characters that go into creating their apparent "sexiness." Sex appeal is conventionally taken as antithetical to comedic appeal. An anonymous passage attributed to Moliere states: "There is nothing more contrary to the passionate feeling of amorous pleasure than the intellectual pleasure which ridicule affords."[12]

In this study, I shall explore the relationship between comedic appeal and sex appeal. Do they work inversely so that the funnier the comedienne, the less sexy she is? How then do we account for comediennes who are both funny and attractive? How do these two elements

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[12]Theories of Comedy, Anonymous (Moliere?), from "Letter on the Impostor (Tartuffe,)" p. 150.

work together? Do they ever reenforce each other to create an even more powerful impact? Are they kept separate so that they operate at different times? Is the sexiness allowed to be present as long as it is not directly alluded to? Is there an optimum level or type of attractiveness that helps a comedic performer? And are there types of attractiveness that preclude funniness?

I suggest that the interaction of comedic appeal and sex appeal is a subtle one--not one of simple inversion or compensation. In exploring some of the ways it operates in these preeminently successful comediennes, I intend to suggest a model for the interaction of comedic appeal and sex appeal that is both more complex and ultimately more valid than the stereotype of the woman who is funny because she is homely.

The last element in my constellation is that of competence. By competence, I mean the audience's perception of the ability of the comedic character to exert power in or control over her environment. There are many elements which create an impression of overall competence. Following are some suggested areas of competence to consider:

1. Intelligence
2. Education
3. Artistic talent
4. Physical size

5. Physical strength, coordination, speed, and endurance

6. Economic power

7. Social position

8. Interpersonal skills

9. Work:
(In the the area of work, as well as in some other areas of competence, there is a submodality to consider. Does the competence of the comedic personality fall into the stereotypically male or female spheres? For example, is there a difference in competence in domestic work vs. career work? Does the kind of work done by comedic personalities reflect the career expectations of women as a given time in our culture?)

10. Effective dramatic action
(By "effective dramatic action" I mean the ability of the character to effect change for her own benefit and possibly that of others. This is manifested in the situation comedy and sketch by whether the character appears measurably better off in the course of playing out the story line--both in terms of the overall plot and in terms of isolated incidents and behaviors. In the case of stand-up comedy, this is manifested in the act by how the comic characterizes herself. Is she effective or ineffective in the world? In her interaction with the audience, does she take control so as to determine the response?)

As I have suggested, the three elements of comedic appeal, sex appeal, and competence interact to create an overall impression of power. Superimposed on these elements is another factor: the issue of self-awareness and will. I suggest that the overt, perceived power that the audience attaches to the performer's comedic appeal, sex appeal, and/or competence varies according to whether the comic personality appears to function out of

self-awareness and will. When the comic behaves out of self-awareness and will, she will appear more powerful. When she acts without self-awareness or will, she appears less overtly powerful. Thus, if a comic does not seem to understand the funniness of her own remarks and behavior, she will appear less overtly powerful. If she succeeds brilliantly in achieving positive results for herself and others, but it is all by accident, she will also appear less powerful. Conversely, if she knows that she is funny and consciously directs her remarks toward that end, she will appear more powerful. And if she cleverly manipulates either her comic ability, her sexuality, or some form of personal competence to achieve her ends, she will appear more powerful.

I realize that Plato characterizes the comic character as having a lack of self-awareness. I suggest that while this may be true in some cases, (most probably in the type of comedy that he observed), there are other cases, such as that of the wit or "wisecracker," where the comic is highly aware. In fact, the comic challenges the audience to become as aware as she. The audience's pleasure consists of "getting the joke"--reaching the same level of awareness as the comic.

Because she is more self-aware, a clever wit is perceived as a more powerful person than a naif--although both may make remarks that are equally funny. Similarly, a conscious seductress is viewed as more powerful than a

toothsome innocent--although both women may indulge in the same sexual behavior. And, the willful bully is perceived as more powerful and threatening than the gentle giant who doesn't know her own strength--though both may wreak the same destruction.

To summarize the above material, I suggest that to maximize their audience appeal, comic personalities need to achieve an optimum degree of power so that they attract an audience, but do not threaten it. Therefore, they operate by balancing the elements of comedic appeal, sex appeal, and competence. Furthermore, to enhance or minimize the amount of power attached to each element, they operate in terms of varying degrees of self-awareness and will.

As must be evident by now, this study will concern itself with the appeal of the comedic persona as a function of power. In other words, I am setting up a power model as an aesthetic base. In so doing, I am extrapolating from the psychological studies which discuss power motivations for comics onto the audience's perception of their art.

Paul McGee, associate professor of human development at Texas Tech University, postulates that a drive for power motivates the comic urge. In his book, Humor: Its Origin and Development, 1981, he studied 446 Texas Tech students to test the relationship between assertiveness and humor in adults. He drew the following conclusion:

> It seems clear that the need to dominate is one of the basic precursors for heightened humor development. The person in a small group or at a party who is the initiator of humor is really in control of the social situation; he gives people things that they respond to, so he's pulling the strings.[13]

In other words, a key motivation of the comedienne is to exert her power on the group. By extension, I suggest that the audience's perception of the comedic personality is a function of the power she projects.

McGee is not discussing female comics as opposed to male comics, and in fact there is a great similarity in the operation of male and female comics. Clinical psychologist Waleed Samaleh did a study comparing 20 male and female stand-up comics with 20 artists. He concludes that: "The female stand-up comics had the same personality profile, aspirations, self-image, creative outlook, and ability as the men."[14]

There is of course, a glaring imbalance in the representation of men and women in the stand-up comic field. Samuel S. Janus in The American Journal of Psychoanalysis, 1981, accounts for this phenomenon as follows: "The fact that women in comedy account for at most 12 percent of the field, whereas in other areas of show business they represent at least 50 percent, attests

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[13]Paul McGee, Humor: Its Origin and Development, 1981, as quoted in Psychology Today, p. 27.

[14]Psychology Today, p. 28.

to their lack of credibility as power figures."[15]

There are other ways to account for this imbalance, besides that proposed by Dr. Janus. There is, for example, possible discrimination by club owners, booking agents, and potential male mentors--the established comics. Additionally, the lifestyle of a stand-up comic, comprised of late nights, frequent travel, interaction with nightclub audiences that are sometimes drunk and abusive, and one-night stand appearances may be especially stressful to women. Then too, traditional sex-role programming encourages women to laugh at men's jokes (in the same way women are trained to applaud other male achievements) rather than making jokes (or achieving) themselves. And that same programming encourages women to define their achievement by their ability to attract men. Thus, professions such as singing, dancing, and modelling have always had a high proportion of women since these skills enhance attractiveness.

This study will explore the relationship between comedic appeal, sex appeal, and power. I agree with the psychologists who postulate that being funny is an assertion of power. Sex appeal is another form of power, and when a woman is both sexually appealing and funny, she appears doubly powerful. In some contexts this double

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[15]Samuel S. Janus, "The Comic Personality, "The American Journal of Psychoanalysis, 1981, p. 52.

appeal may be construed as threatening. I suggest that comedic appeal enhances sex appeal when and to the degree that perceived power in a woman is considered attractive.

In response to Dr. Janus' statement that women are less credible than men as power figures, I would like to consider comediennes in the context of other professional women. Interestingly, just as women are establishing themselves as credible power figures in other fields (such as law, medicine, science, politics, etc.), increasing numbers of women are now becoming stand-up comics. Women are still a minority in these professions, particularly in their upper echelons, but their numbers are increasing. The sex-role of women in society has changed since the 1950's and is still changing. Much of this change, along with those aspects that have remained constant, has to do with power. It is for this reason, besides the personal motivations of individual comediennes, that I have chosen to use the power model as an aesthetic base for this study.

It has been said that comedy has no sex. And, in fact, many factors that create humor apply to both male and female comics. However, in the interests of this study, I will emphasize those aspects of their art that specifically apply to women, such as sex appeal, domesticity, and sex-role stereotypes about competence and overt expression of power. Drawing an extended comparison between male and female comics is beyond the

scope of this study. But I will indicate both those factors that are particularly applicable to women and those that cross over and apply to both sexes.

My research material will be derived from several sources: extensive personal interviews with the comediennes, observation of them in performance--whether live, on record, or on videotape, and supplemental research provided by books and articles about them. As I mentioned, I will be considering biographical material as it impacts on the creation of the comedic art.

On a personal note, I would like to add that we all must deal with issues of sex-role and power. It is the special task of the comic to handle these issues with charm and humor. By studying the art of these highly successful and popular comediennes, we may learn what it means to be female and funny--and something about ourselves.

CHAPTER II

LUCILLE BALL

The baby-blue, mascara-spiked eyes widen, the head tilts, the electric orange curls bob, and the wide, lipsticked mouth takes another sip of "Vitameatavegamin syrup." I Love Lucy is back on the air for its latest re-run. Eager to do the commercial that will launch her in show business, "Lucy" downs the nutritional syrup, unaware that the concoction contains twenty-four percent alcohol. But as she extols the virtues of the product, her eyelashes can barely bat their way past an inner fog, and her face slips into silly putty stupefaction. Innocent, childlike "Lucy" is thoroughly drunk--and very funny.

Unlike "Lucy Ricardo," Lucille Ball was not particularly naive. By the time I Love Lucy went on the air in 1951, Ball had been in show business, playing mostly glamour roles, for twenty years and was over forty. She was born in Jamestown, New York on August 6, 1911. Her mother was a concert pianist, and her father,

who died when she was four, was a mining engineer. At the age of 15, Lucille went to New York, where she enrolled in the John Murray Anderson Dramatic School. She obtained chorus jobs with various Broadway productions, but the shows never went beyond the rehearsal stage. Because of the touring companies she had seen as a child in Jamestown, she originally wanted to be in vaudeville. But, by the time she arrived in New York City, the era of the great vaudeville stars was over. Or, as Ball notes, "Vaudeville was dead, but I didn't know it!"[1]

To pay the rent, she worked as a model and showgirl. Despite her statuesque figure, the work did not come easily to her.

> I wasn't trained, I couldn't sing, dance, or perform in any way. I was as untalented as they come. I couldn't even walk correctly. I was very shy--terrified of the girls around me and the people in the audience. I'd walk stiffly across the stage and they'd say, "Coudn't you walk more like a showgirl? You are a showgirl, you know." I had to learn everything.[2]

Broke, and surviving on a diet of coffee and the doughnuts she could steal off lunch counters, Ball

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[1]Lucille Ball, Personal Interview held at her home in New York, New York, April 14, 1984. I conducted one interview with Ms. Ball, and I make frequent use of quotations from it. This interview helped me to clarify other material I had gathered about the development of her comedic style. I shall use biographical material obtained from both this interview and other sources to show the relationship between her life and her art.

[2]Ibid.

collapsed of rheumatoid arthritis. She went home and rested for three years. When she recovered, she returned to New York, where she ran into a friend who knew an agent who needed showgirls for Roman Scandals, an Eddie Cantor picture. Producers were in the habit of doing line inspection of the showgirls. Ball, who wasn't quite as stacked as some of the others, stuffed her bodice with toilet paper--some of which was trailing out when the producer came by. Lucille Ball comments dryly:

> I may not have been as beautiful as some of the other showgirls, but he certainly noticed me. And I was in show biz! Everything on that set was interesting! I was learning how to act with the people--to become a part of the whole studio.
>
> There were spots where they needed a girl to scream or get chased by alligators. Some of the other girls were asked and they said, "Why? That's a nothing bit!" But I was tickled to death. It gave me a chance to work with Eddie Cantor and to work longer on a scene.
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> The director would say, "You need somebody to do what? Why don't we get that girl who ran through with the duck?" They knew I'd run, I'd scream, I'd fall--I'd do what I was asked to do. I never complained. I didn't care that they didn't even know my name because nobody knew who I was anyway. That's the way I thought from the beginning, which was a big help.[3]

Ball went on to play in Room Service with the Marx Brothers. After working with her, Groucho Marx noted: "She's an actress, not a comedienne. I've never known Lucille Ball to be funny without a script."[4] She also

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[3]Ibid.

[4]Bart Andrews, The Story of "I Love Lucy": Lucy & Ricky & Fred & Ethel, (New York: Fawcett Popular Library, 1976) p. 58.

appeared with The Three Stooges, Laurel and Hardy, and most major male comics. But she claims not to be consciously influenced by them, and was most taken with the glamorous female stars.

> I was interested in certain actresses' looks. I admired the way Rosalind Russell could be the career woman and look so uppity and deliver the lines so sharply. I admired Carole Lombard from the word go--every suit she wore, every time I saw her hair--I loved her. And she was a good friend of mine. But I didn't model myself around anyone. There wasn't that kind of personage around me--except Carole Lombard, and she was doing sophisticated comedy--so was everyone else. They weren't doing the crazy kind of domestic comedy that we did eventually.[5]

Ball herself, was mainly considered for dramatic, glamorous parts: hard-bitten models and showgirls.

> I had to start as a model because I looked like a model. And I had to start also as "the other woman" or "career girl" because I had a lousy voice. I have a deep, guttural voice that has no softnesss or romanticism. It's aggressive. I've always had it, no matter how I try to dolly it up.[6]

Ball scored some of her biggest successes in "tough girl" roles. In the Dorothy Arzner film Dance Girl Dance, she played a burlesque dancer; and in The Big Street, she played a vixenish nightclub singer who is crippled by a gangster. She was also occasionally cast as an ingenue--her role in Too Many Girls, the picture that brought Desi Arnaz out to Hollywood and occasioned

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[5]Lucille Ball, Personal Interview.

[6]Lucille Ball, Printed Record of seminar sponsored by the American Film Institute, Los Angeles, California, June 12, 1972.

their meeting. According to his autobiography, when Arnaz first saw her, she was still in costume from another movie and "She looked like a two-dollar whore who had been beaten by her pimp, with hair all over her face and a black eye."[7] When he saw her later, out of costume, wearing slacks and a sweater, Arnaz found her more attractive, and she responded to his ploy to teach her to rumba. "He had a snazzy line," says Ball tartly. "But we never did get around to dancing."[8] After each had shed a then current lover, they moved in together, married, and began the sequence of events (including one never-consummated divorce in 1944) that led to I Love Lucy.

Meanwhile, Ball's image was gradually taking form. She was becoming someone recognizable and likeable--a personality "type."

> When I was starting out, I made five, six pictures a year. I never knew what happened to them--sometimes I never even got invited to the preview. I played all kinds of small parts--no characters that anyone would recognize or care about. Then I got bigger parts. Finally, the biggest thrill I ever got--I'd been at RKO about four years and Mr. Piatzig called me into the office. He showed me the first three pages, and it said, "Lucille Ball type." It wasn't exactly what I did in Lucy, but it was a zany, domestic comedy, and it helped me years later. With the advent of television, besides being typed, you were in someone's living room every week.[9]

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[7]Desi Arnaz, A Book, (New York: Warner Books, 1976), p. 185.

[8]Lucille Ball, Personal Interview.

[9]Ibid.

By 1947 Lucille Ball was appearing in a radio show called My Favorite Husband, which was sponsored by CBS. Ball's co-star was Richard Denning, and she played Liz, a madcap wife married to Denning's George, a staid, midwestern banker. This early training in radio taught her to time the reading of her lines to laughs coming from the live audience. Later on, for much the same reason, I Love Lucy was filmed in front of a live audience. She also began to lay the foundations for comedic timing as the byproduct of ensemble acting. Even in the early days as a nameless Goldwyn Girl on the studio lot, she had wanted to learn to react--to act with the people. Now radio, with its emphasis on listening, helped her to translate it into aural terms.

> You cannot teach timing. But as close as I've come to it--is to listen. Now you're in a scene, and you are speaking, and I ostensibly will have the topper to the scene. My procedure is: you are speaking, I am listening. Then I react to what you've just said, and then, I act--I give you my line. In that process has been a timing. If I took the time to listen, react, and then act, the timing was there by itself. But if I had been sitting there, and I'm thinking about my last line and my topper, and I didn't listen or react--there went the timing. The first thing is to listen.[10]

In 1950 CBS informed Donald W. Sharpe, the Ball/Arnaz manager, that they wanted to transfer Lucy's radio show My Favorite Husband to television. Jell-O was willing to continue its sponsorship, but only if Ball and Denning were retained as the leads.

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[10]Lucille Ball, Personal Interview.

When Ball requested that Arnaz play her husband in the television version, the television officials refused. "We don't think viewers will accept Desi, a Latin with a thick Cuban accent, as the husband of a typical, red-headed American girl like Lucille Ball. Of course, we adore Lucy and want her to be in the show."[11]

Mrs. Arnaz, then thirty-eight, stood firm--no Desi, no show. This unusual display of marital devotion was probably prompted by her sense that her ten-year marriage, propped up by a Catholic wedding ceremony on June 19, 1949, was falling apart. While Ball was doing the radio show and fulfilling some film commitments, Arnaz was traveling around the country with his rumba band. Their sexual jealousy, fueled by Desi's reputation as a womanizer, led to long distance quarrelling.

Whatever their personal difficulties, Ball and Arnaz were financially secure, if not wealthy. By now, Lucille was doing moderately well with her motion picture and radio career, and Desi was netting over $100,000 a year as a bandleader. Not only was the medium of television relatively untested, the power brokers of that medium, namely the CBS executives, insisted that a Ball/Arnaz combination would flop with audiences. In reply, Lucille and Desi determined to do what Lucy had

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[11]Bart Andrews, Lucy & Ricky & Fred & Ethel: The Story of "I Love Lucy", (New York: Fawcett Popular Library, 1976), p. 192.

originally come to New York for--go into vaudeville. They formed Desilu Productions, named after their California ranchette, and began putting together an act. To coach them, Desi called on Pepito, the Spanish clown, who had headlined at the Hippodrome and had done command performances for European royalty. Pepito concocted some bits for Lucille and Desi and coached them in the skits. Arnaz rented a suite, and for two weeks they rehearsed. In the act, Lucy, in baggy pants and a frightwig, played an inept musician who is desperate to get into show business. Desi played bandleader/straightman, and they set out on a twelve-week vaudeville tour.

Their routines called for Ball to act like a seal, burping out notes on horns and waddling on her tummy across the stage. She also made use of a outsized, prop cello out of which she pulled a stool, a horn, a toilet plunger, gloves, flowers, and a violin bow. These vaudeville bits were so successful that they became highlights not only of the tour, but later of the pilot film for I Love Lucy. Ball credits her finesse in handling props to Buster Keaton, with whom she once shared an office at MGM.[12]

> I went on tour with my entire act in a cello case. He taught me never to let it out of my sight. Never to leave the train without it. Never to depend on its being there at the theatre. Never entrust it to a stagehand or anyone else, and rehearse with it every day![12]

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[12]Ibid. p. 123.

Madelyn Pugh and Bob Carroll, Jr., who were writing Ball's radio show with Jess Openheimer, also wrote a short sketch for the act. The writing team was to last through 180 half hours of I Love Lucy, plus twelve hours of The Lucy/Desi Comedy Hour, a number of The Lucy Show episodes, and many of the Here's Lucy shows. Ball gives full credit to her writers for the visual, slapstick comedy that became her trademark.

> It's all right there in the script. We had started out together in radio, and at first they didn't know what I could do physically, because in radio you stand and read. Later on, when we got to television, they were writing block comedy scenes for Vivian and me, and somebody said, "That's just like a Laurel and Hardy scene." And I said, "Yeaeaeaeah...!" That was after two years of working in television. I didn't even know that we were doing Laurel and Hardy.[13]

During their New York booking, Lucille became pregnant. The Arnazes canceled the last half of their tour and modified Lucille's onstage acrobatics, cutting out the bit where she wiggled on her stomach. The couple returned to California, but within two days Lucille was rushed to the hospital where she suffered a miscarriage--her second. It was a traumatic experience for the couple, who had tried for over ten years to have a child. Lucille flung herself into her work, finishing her commitment to My Favorite Husband while begging her

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[13]Lucille Ball, Personal Interview.

manager to find a television show to do with Desi. Then, in October, three months after the miscarriage, Lucille again found herself pregnant.

By December their agent had negotiated a deal with west coast CBS for a pilot film. However, William Paley, who ran the network from its corporate headquarters in New York, overrode the decision and agreed only to sell Desilu air time--if Ball and Arnaz would finance the pilot. Everyone advised the couple that they were committing career suicide by risking successful film, radio, and band commitments to take a chance on the untried medium of television.

> "It was then that I dreamed about Carole Lombard," recalls Ball. "She was wearing a very smart suit, and she said, 'Go on, honey. Give it a whirl!'"[14]

The network assumed that the Arnaz's would be moving to New York to start the show. Since most television watchers were on the East Coast, the sponsors naturally wanted the show to broadcast live from New York, while the rest of the country would see it rebroadcast in lower quality kinescope. Since Lucille was by now very pregnant, the Arnaz's wanted to remain at home in California. Thinking fast, Arnaz suggested that I Love Lucy be shot in California on 35mm film--producing a better quality print than available on kinescope--what

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14 Lucy & Ricky & Fred & Ethel, p. 14.

everyone beyond the range of live transmission saw when they watched television. Film, however, had two drawbacks: higher production costs and the problem of using a live audience on a film set.

CBS and Philip Morris finally agreed to contribute an extra two thousand dollars apiece--if Ball and Arnaz would take a salary cut. Arnaz agreed--asking for 100% ownership of the show in return. To his amazement, the network agreed. This decision, which set a model for the shooting of television programs, accounts for the availability of broadcast quality Lucy shows that are still seen daily by over two million viewers. It also made Ball and Arnaz multi-millionaires.

The technical problems of filming a situation comedy complete with live audience were more difficult. For this, Arnaz tracked down Karl Freund, the legendary German cinematographer. Freund was commonly regarded as a genius in the film industry. He had developed the exposure meter, first exploited the moving camera (utilizing dollies and cranes), and was credited with inventing the "process shot"--shooting live actors (often in a moving vehicle) in front of a transparent screen on which a background is projected.

The original pilot for the television show, based on the vaudeville act, featured lots of broad slapstick, props, and Desi's band, all woven loosely together around the premise that Lucy wants to get into show business.

When writers started submitting scripts for a series, they based the lead characters on Ball and Arnaz, portraying them as Hollywood types. Ball disagreed.

> After I'd read one or two, I said "No way! These people must not live in Hollywood. Everyone in the world thinks that everybody in Hollywood has two cars, a swimming pool, and no problems. We have to have economic problems. It has to be identifiable with middle America. If the washing machine breaks--it's a disaster. If I want a new dress, I have to scheme for it."[15]

The decision to place I Love Lucy in a drab apartment gave the show its "common touch." Like The Honeymooners, All in the Family, and Carol Burnett's "Eunice" episodes, the comic antics of the characters are grounded in everyday, middle-class reality. Since Lucy's schemes often tended toward the absurd and implausible, anchoring them in mundane, domestic life provided the show with audience identifiability. Instead of playing the Hollywood actress that she in fact was, Ball played an ordinary housewife whose dream of getting into show business is every housewife's dream of a more glamorous, adventurous life.

> Housewives all over the world could identify with those situations, and they would love to have carried them as far as I did and have as much fun with them. It was an exaggeration of things that happen in every household, especially where there's an economical cut-off, where you don't have money for everything and you've got to scheme to make ends meet.[16]

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[15]Lucille Ball, Personal Interview.

[16]Ibid.

Along with the setting, the name of the series also underwent some evolution. CBS did not want to give Arnaz star billing at all and proposed calling the show "The Lucille Ball Show" and, in smaller letters "co-starring Desi Arnaz." When Ball objected, the network offered "The Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz Show." But she again refused--her name came first. Finally, someone from the Biow Agency suggested "I Love Lucy," and Ball assented--the "I" would be referring to Desi. The "Lucy" part of the title also grew out of the couple's personal life. Desi recounts: "I started calling her 'Lucy' shortly after we met; I didn't like the name 'Lucille.' That name had been used by other men. 'Lucy' was mine alone. That's how, eventually, our television show was called 'I Love Lucy,' not 'I Love Lucille.'"[17]

The parts of Fred and Ethel Mertz were filled respectively by William Frawley, an old character actor, and Vivian Vance, who was recommended by Marc Daniels, the young director chosen to supervise the first season of I Love Lucy. Ball herself was set to begin shooting, having recently been delivered of her first child--Lucie Desiree--in July.

On September 3, 1951 the four principal actors got together for the first time to read the script entitled "Lucy Thinks Ricky is Trying to Do Away with Her" while

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[17] A Book, p. 175.

several dozen carpenters and electricians worked around them remodelling the building, installing the sets, and setting up Karl Freund's new lighting system. (Although this was the first segment shot, due to technical problems, the first episode to go out over the air was the second installment--"The Girls Want to Go to a Nightclub.")

On September 8, 1951, the audience filed in--and were immediately almost thrown out when an inspector from the board of health failed to discover a separate washroom for the ladies. Lucille casually offered her own dressing room, Desi's orchestra started playing, and the Cuban bandleader went out to warm up the audience. After all the starring players had been introduced and Lucille blew kisses to the audience, Daniels instructed the actors to take their places, and the first episode of I Love Lucy began.

A scant six months, or twenty-six episodes later, it became the first television program to be seen in ten million homes--out of a total of only fifteen million sets in operation at the time. By April, I Love Lucy was the top program in the nation and the first-ranking program in almost every major city. Since every television set was estimated to reach 2.9 viewers, the show was seen by 30,740,000 individuals, nearly a fifth of the nation's population.

In 1952 the National Academy of Television Arts and

Sciences gave Lucille Ball an Emmy for Best Comedienne and awarded Ball and Arnaz an Emmy for the Best Situation Comedy. Even a McCarthy-era accusation of being a Communist could not stick to America's favorite redheaded comedienne. Ball, who is apolitical ("I haven't voted in years") had registered as a Communist to please her socialist grandfather--and hadn't even voted in the election. When the true facts came out, the committee dismissed the case after five days of scandal.

The early days of I Love Lucy were blissful. Ball and Arnaz used to turn down invitations to parties because nothing could match the fun they were having daily on the set. But, gradually, the marriage came under greater, and finally, insupportable stress. I Love Lucy went off the prime time schedule in 1960--the same year as the Arnaz-Ball divorce. Three subsequent series followed starring Ball playing "Lucy" but minus "Ricky Ricardo": Desilu Playhouse 1957-60; The Lucy Show 1962-68; and Here's Lucy 1968-74. The later shows were well-crafted along the lines of I Love Lucy. In fact, the format of the original show was not only successful in itself, but it also established a model that was subsequently copied by numerous other sitcoms.

However, despite their longevity, the later Lucy programs never achieved the outstanding popularity of the original I Love Lucy. Therefore, I will base my analysis of the "Lucy" character on the way she appeared in the

original I Love Lucy format.

The basic situation of I Love Lucy is so well known as to form a kind of media folktale. Lucille Ball, the comedic center of the show, plays "Lucy Ricardo," a zany, red-headed housewife; Desi Arnaz, her real life husband, plays "Ricky Ricardo," Lucy's husband, a struggling Cuban bongo drummer and band leader at the Tropicana nightclub. "Fred and Ethel Mertz," the Ricardo's neighbors, landlords, and best friends, are played by William Frawley and Vivian Vance. Many of the plots turn on Lucy's madcap schemes to get into show business despite Ricky's objections. In these, as well as in other escapades, Lucy often joins forces with Ethel as ally and confidante.

Simplified to their essential, farcical outlines, the Ricardos are a prototype of the odd couple; she is the kook, he is the exasperated, pragmatic straightman. The Mertzes are parental, less attractive figures who provide confidants and allies as the Ricardo's enact their comedic battle of the sexes. (Vivian Vance was actually younger than Lucille Ball. It was written into her contract that she had to remain overweight and dress in frumpy clothes for the show--presumably to provide a less attractive foil for Lucy.)

The character of "Lucy" is, of course, crucial to the success of the show, and in this study I will consider those factors that are chiefly responsible for

her appeal. I shall consider the persona of "Lucy" as it derives from the appearance, personality, talent, and background of Lucille Ball; the genre of situation comedy; the sex-role of women in the 1950's; and the balance of the key power elements of comedic appeal, sex appeal, and competence.

As might be expected from an actress who made the transition from glamour girl to domestic comedienne, "Lucy's" appearance is a mix of domestic propriety, goofy exaggeration, and subliminal seduction. Thus, she wears conventional shirtwaists, suits, and capri pants--all cut to reveal her statuesque figure--at the same time that she mugs or tosses a head full of improbably orange curls.

"Lucy" is the "everywoman" of the 1950's--the respectable middle-class housewife, who was the usual heroine of the situation comedy. She is also clownlike and outrageous--her character in the vaudeville act that preceded I Love Lucy. Her sexiness, part of her showgirl background, also figured strongly in her vaudeville act. Ball regularly concluded the act by appearing onstage in a green split skirt with spangles and sequins. As a 1950 Variety review stated, "She pops the eyes out of the first row viewers with her hip-slinging activities to hyped beat of 'Cuban Pete.'"[18] "Lucy" never does

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[18] Lucy & Ricky & Fred & Ethel, p. 31.

anything quite that provocative, although she occasionally appears in costumes such as an off-the-shoulder Italian peasant blouse worn with a cinch belt that accents her curves. The other characters respond to this by ignoring everything but her "big feet."

Lucy's most striking physical feature is her red hair, which came out of her days as a Hollywood showgirl and contract player. Ball started out as a brunette, went blonde, and finally red in a desparate bid to stand out on the MGM lot. Red, the "hot" color, suggests excitement, sexual passion, and a temper--everything "hot-blooded." Red hair has adorned sexy, tempestuous, Hollywood glamour girls from Rita Hayworth to Ann-Margaret. Capitalizing on this connotation, the MGM publicity department released a story on the decision to dye Ball's then platinum hair: "The hair is blond but the soul, it is fire. We will dye the hair red."[19]

In an interview with Rolling Stone, Ball herself disclaims such high flown symbolism: "The story is ridiculous. Red was a happy color. It was good with my eyes, and it photographed well. It turned out to be a successful color. There's nothing more to it than that."[20]

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[19]Bart Andrews and Thomas J. Watson, Loving Lucy, (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1980), p. 121.

[20]Lynn Hirshberg, "I Love Lucy," Rolling Stone, June 23, 1983, p. 31.

Once Ball began making a name for herself as a comic performer, her unruly orange hair began to suggest less the hot-blooded vamp and more the circus clown. Her cap of red curls became an emblem of Lucy's spunky optimism and cartoonish capers. Lucy's big, red-lipsticked mouth carries the same double message. Like her upswept hairdo, it is a carryover from the film fashions of the forties, wnen Ball was a minor player, and stars like Joan Crawford were made up with an over-drawn, scarlet lip line. On Lucy, the glamour lips are, like the hairdo, slightly clownish--a big, red circus mouth that slides past its own sultriness into a dopey grin or a comedic, infantile howl.

Ball's big, blue, mascara-spiked eyes are another glamour plus. But again, Lucy exaggerates their effect for humor. She widens them into saucer-sized daffiness, careens her eyeballs in comic disbelief, goes bug-eyed with comic fear, or crosses her pupils to gain a better view of her own nose.

Eventually, her expressions and vocalisms became trademarks--and were written right into the scripts. The horrific "Spider Look" turns her face to jello. The "Light Bulb Look" pops her eyes into a thousand watts of astonishment. "The Credentials look"--sets her jaw sagging in comic outrage. "The "Gobloots Voice" turns a statuesque ex-showgirl into a quavering little girl lost. And who can forget her "Rickyyyyyy!"--that cross

between a yelp and a foghorn that signalled an oncoming tantrum.

Another factor in "Lucy's" appearance is her sheer size and strength. Besides being curvaceous, a showgirl must be tall and strong enough to wear elaborate costumes, including huge headpieces. Strength is also important in slapstick, and Ball can easily hold her own in rough-and-tumble physical comedy. In an episode set in Italy, "Lucy," who always wants to get into show business, is spotted by a film director. She fancies herself as the next Sophia Loren; he doesn't mention that he sees her as a typical American tourist. She visits the winery to soak up some local color to prepare herself for a role in a movie called Bitter Grapes. Mistaken for one of the workers, she is told to climb into a large, wooden wine vat with a real peasant. At first, she imitates the other woman's brisk efficiency in stomping the grapes. But utilitarian, adult behavior bores "Lucy," and she soon pulls her co-worker into a mock tarantella. When the other woman wants "Lucy" to actually work, the redheaded comedienne tries to leave. The peasant insists, and they become involved in a comic battle--smashing grapes in each other's face and wrestling in the bottom of the vat among the squashed grapes and wine.

Apparently, the "local color" was all too real--even for an actress who got her start ducking Eddie Cantor's

mud pies. "Those grapes were like stepping on eyeballs!" exclaims Ball. "And they got a real Italian peasant who didn't speak English, and she wouldn't let me up!"[21]

The sight of Ball in her off-the-shoulder peasant outfit winding up in a grape-wrestling bout is one of the classic comedy bits from I Love Lucy. Desi Arnaz, in his own autobiography, argues that such scenes are not only hilarious, but, in some indefinable way, sexy--like the comedy of Carole Lombard, Ball's favorite actress:

> Carole had a quality which is rare; you can count the women who have had it on the fingers of one hand. Carole, while doing the antics of a clown, disheveled, rain-soaked, disregarding how she looked even with mud all over her, could make you laugh, and yet at the same time, make you want to go to bed with her. Lucy has that same quality.[22]

Whatever sexiness existed was underplayed in the television series. If audiences responded to Ball's sexiness, it was as a kind of "feminine" sizzle over the whole farcical proceedings. What showed up again and again in the numerous letters and calls that flooded the show was a delight in the "Lucy/Ricky romance" and her consequent "femininity." As Ball remembers:

> Our audience were happy that I hadn't lost my femininity. That was because 'Ricky' and 'Lucy' were in love. They never got truly angry--only comedically angry. There was always a happy ending.[23]

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[21]Lucille Ball, Personal Interview.

[22]A Book, p. 128.

[23]Lucille Ball, Personal Interview.

To summarize, it seems clear that the main appeal of "Lucy" is as a comedic character--her funniness is supplemented by a general air of femininity and an unspoken undertone of sex appeal. The sex appeal is sufficiently toned down so as not to challenge the domestic coziness of the show and acts to supplement the impact of the comedic appeal. The "toning down" of the sex appeal of an actress who had, after all, made her mark as a tough glamour girl was accomplished in a number of ways. First, she is mainly costumed in modest, domestic outfits. Her clothes suggest the trim figure underneath, but never in a direct, overtly sexual way. (No matter how downplayed Ball's feminine attractions may have been in the script, it was clearly in the mind of the show's creators, as may be seen from the provision in Vivian Vance's contract requiring her to look less attractive than Ball.)

In fact, Lucy's "look" is characteristic of the female heroines on television situation comedies of the 1950's. "Margaret Anderson" of Father Knows Best, "Gracie" of The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show, and even "Miss Brooks," spinster schoolteacher of Our Miss Brooks, were all possessed of slim, sexy figures and clad in well-cut, though modest outfits that hinted at the sexuality underneath. "Lucy," like these other characters, was unaware of any real attraction she might exert (except, occasionally to her husband) and certainly

never aggressively used her sex appeal. The notion of "Lucy's" being sexually aggressive (not merely affectionate), even toward her husband, is treated comically. In one episode, "The Girls Want to Go to a Nightclub," "Lucy" and "Ethel" discover that their husbands have arranged blind dates for themselves. To deflect any chance of marital straying, "Lucy" convinces "Ethel" to dress up as hillbillies and show up as their husbands' dates. Outfitted as homely bumpkins, "Lucy" and "Ethel" make passes at their husbands and chase the dumbfounded men around the room. Once the husbands discover who they are, they in turn chase the wives. Now that there may be some real consequences to their sexual aggression, the women retreat.

Both by costume and behavior, "Lucy's" potential sex appeal is softened by her lack of self-awareness and conscious intent. If anything, the notion of conscious sexual aggressiveness is treated mockingly. "Lucy's" sex appeal is thus rendered tame and palatable to her mass, domestic audience. As Miss Ball states,

> I never got letters from fans saying that I was sexy. But they would write saying that they were glad that I hadn't lost my femininity.[24]

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[24]Lucille Ball, Personal Interview.

The notion of femininity or ladylike standards was an integral part of "Lucy's" persona--even in the midst of the wildest slapstick. Lucille Ball contrasts her own style with that of other physical comediennes.

> Some of them did outrageous things that were laughed at mostly by men. Martha Raye, especially, because she played a lot to the army boys. She'd do these crazy, kind of suggestive things, and do them with a flair that was funny and accepted. And Joan Davis was another kind of mugger. She did a lot of mugging and straddling--her legs were always like this." Ball sprawls open-legged on the elegant chair. "It wasn't always ladylike. But she had a flair of a different kind and vitality. I have no wish to mug or be too masculine. I can mug, I can scream, I can smoke a cigar. But I have to have a very strong story reason to do it. I can play an old, drunken bag lady, always swiggin' gin, and I have a ball. But I'm not gross.[25]

The sense that "Lucy" is essentially a lady mirrors the values of her audience. Her sweet domesticity (under the wild slapstick) is crucial in terms of the genre of the situation comedy. I Love Lucy was broadcast into people's living rooms once a week. Her audience consisted mainly of families, husbands, children, and, predominantly, women. It was the era of a low divorce rate and the idealization of the nuclear family. "Lucy's" brand of slapstick funniness coupled with domesticated sexiness answered the needs of the time.

A third factor in "Lucy's" balance of power is her general competence. There are several aspects to the

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[25] Ibid.

audience's perception of "Lucy's" competence. She is obviously limited in many areas of adult competence. Her education is limited. Though never discussed directly, "Lucy's" education seems to have stopped short of college, and like many housewives in her audience, she has no professional training.

"Lucy" is also artistically untalented. Despite Lucille Ball's remarkable achievements as a comedienne, "Lucy" supposedly has no particular talent for performing--neither comedy, nor singing, dancing, acting, playing any musical instrument, painting, writing, etc.. In fact, many episodes turn on the premise that "Lucy" is comedically inept when she tries to imitate the skills of her artistic betters--particularly when she tries to get into Ricky's show. As a tyro ballerina, she hangs upside down from the ballet barre. As a showgirl, her elaborate headdress slips over her eyes as she stumbles down the grand staircase.

Furthermore, as a middle-class housewife, she is economically dependent on Ricky's limited salary. Not only is her economic power limited, her social position, while respectable, conveys no special status based on her own abilities and achievements, aside from performing low-status domestic work. In judging this aspect of "Lucy's" power we should consider its impact in terms of the role expectations of the 1950's. A housewife of the 1980's not only has limited clout, she may even be

somewhat suspect in view of today's expectations for career achievement for women. In the 1950's, the cultural ideal promoted by mass media was for women, at least middle-class women, to be housewives and mothers. supported by their husbands. But even taking into account that "Lucy's" position as a housewife was part of the domestic ideal of the 1950's, it is still a position of sharply limited social and economic power.

"Lucy's" competence at work reflects the standards of the 1950's. She was understood to be an adequate homemaker and cook, and a loving and competent mother. In fact, no matter how zany her schemes, they never involved any risk to her television child. But when she steps out of the feminine, domestic sphere into the world of work, "Lucy" becomes ridiculously inept. When she attempts to appear as a spokesperson on a commercial for "Vitameatavegimen," she gets accidentally drunk. When she goes to an employment agency for a job, her interviewer discovers that she has no skills, except for making candy (a domestic activity) and sends her to a factory. At the factory, she makes a mess of everything she touches.

Her intelligence is also sharply limited in dealing with things on an adult, rational level. She is gullible and naive, believing both the best (that she is about to star in an Italian movie) and the worst (that Ricky is planning to do away with her) on minimal evidence. But

in contrast to her limitations as a rational, adult thinker, "Lucy's" ability to concoct and enact elaborate schemes is extraordinary. Her route to her goals is circuitous, imaginative, and fun. It often involves various costumes, disguises, assorted trickery, and sneaking into places where she doesn't belong. In short, "Lucy's" intelligence is sharply split. The audience accepts the premise that this dopey, dizzy housewife who cannot hold a job, can also come up with highly imaginative schemes that cleverly (once we accept her initial, illogically logical premise) manipulate others to reach her ends.

"Lucy's" schemes create the farcical mid-section that is at the core of each episode. Framing this funny, fantastical mid-section is a beginning and end set in the mundane reality of the "Ricardo's" middle-class existence. If we ask how effective "Lucy" is in terms of the dramatic action, we need to consider the answer in terms of both the reality aspects of her life and her comic handling of it. In most of the episodes, "Lucy's" schemes accomplish little toward changing her reality. She does not get hired at the candy factory. She does not get Ricky to take her to a nightclub. She does not get into show business, whether as an Italian movie star, a star of television commercials, or a ballet dancer. What sne does do is create an atmosphere of fun to surmount the day-to-day boredom of married life. She

also amuses and maintains the ultimately adoring interest of her husband. She manages, at least temporarily, to manipulate others to go along with her schemes and pay enormous attention to her. And finally she engages the audience and makes them laugh. In short, while "Lucy" remains ineffective in terms of measurable plot results, she is highly effective in effecting a positive emotional response in the other characters, particularly her husband, and in the audience. The theme of the show is summed up in its title--I Love Lucy.

"Lucy's" lovability is crucial to the success of the program. Her aggression and manipulation of the other characters are confined to innocent, and often absurd goals. In our personal interview, Ball reacted strongly to any suggestion that "Lucy" was devious.

> If Lucy is manipulative, she is only childishly so. How she's going to tell Ricky she's going to pay back thirty-two dollars--not big murders like you see today on the soaps. Childlike is small matters and white lies. We got tons of letters from people saying they'd love to be able to manipulate their lives the way Lucy does![26]

Her goals may be harmless and silly, but "Lucy's" efforts to attain them are forceful. Her aggressive pursuit of her objectives establishes "Lucy" as a strong protagonist. In episode after episode, she provides strong motivation, with which the audience can identify,

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[26]Lucille Ball, Personal Interview.

and moves the action in interesting, amusing directions.

As a character, "Lucy" is a paradox. She is innocent yet aggressive, admirable yet foolish, and ordinary yet comedically exaggerated. To create this effect, "Lucy's" intellectual competence is split between the ordinary (in the realistic section of the plot); the childishly subnormal (her gullibility, emotionality, and impulsiveness); and the extraordinary (her creative ability to concoct elaborate schemes to further her ends). This split functions effectively in terms of the situation-comedy genre. Lucy's ordinary side establishes identification with the average housewife and grounds her character in reality. Her childishness is the motivation behind the actions in the plot. And her comic creativity drives the farcical main body of the episode. Because her creative intelligence is assumed to operate only in a restricted arena, she does not actually change her status in the course of any single episode. Her life can return to the status quo and the essentially unchanging situation which is crucial to the genre of the situation comedy. The situation comedy, while it derived some of its format from radio, vaudeville, and silent movies, really came of age with the advent of television comedy and particularly with the phenomenal success of I Love Lucy. Basically, a situation comedy consists of a twenty-six minute playlet in which characters get themselves into scrapes and out again. The characters

tend to be written in terms of broad, clear behaviors and dialogue. The audience quickly grasps who these characters are. Then, with no need to devote stage time to exploring murky, psychological depths, the bulk of the twenty-six minutes can be devoted to funny action and easily resolved problems.

Since the format is episodic, the audience tunes in to see the same characters in similar situations every week. Therefore, the characters must be basically lovable, no matter what their idiosyncrasies. Situation comedies attract mainly a family audience, with a bias toward female viewers.[27] The characters, therefore, tend to be domesticated and middle-class. The central character or at least co-star in situation comedies is often a woman. Thus, "Lucy," a broadly drawn, endearingly funny every-woman-as-housewife, is an ideal heroine for a 1950's situation comedy.

Besides being highly suitable to her genre, the character of "Lucy" succeeds because she successfully balances her three key elements of power: comedic appeal, sex appeal, and competence. As I have indicated, "Lucy's" sex appeal (which came out of a showgirl background) is muted by her appearance, behavior, and the way other characters react to her. Her looks and

[27]David Poltrak, Vice-President CBS Television, Personal Interview conducted in his office on May 19, 1985.

gestures are either exaggerated for comedic effect or softened into the model for a wholesome, affectionate wife and mother. Thus, she is understood to be both funny and cozily feminine.

"Lucy's" competence functions to supplement both her femininity and comedic appeal. She is domestically competent (a reasonable housekeeper and cook and a caring mother) and absurdly incompetent in the more "masculine" sphere of work outside the home. She embodies other "feminine" stereotypes, being gullible, highly excitable, childlike, manipulative, and scheming. As previously noted, these last two traits are potentially negative. Lucy remains lovable because her goals are trivial and her motives innocent.

In fact, "Lucy's" position as a powerless housewife who moves the plot through her comedic manipulations is a modern variation of a theatrical type--the scheming servant. The comedically clever slave dates back to Greek new comedy of Menander and was adapted for Roman comedy by playwrights such as Plautus and Terence. The comedia dell'arte was full of comedic servant characters--the zanni. Shakespeare and Molière also utilized the type, and the tradition continued in varying forms whereever the social structure supported a master/servant relationship. In contemporary American middle-class society, the domestic servant is the exception. His/her place has been taken by the

housewife. In the case of the housewife, as in that of the traditional slave or servant, her official status as a subordinate encourages her to gain her ends through indirect, manipulative means rather than direct confrontation. The result here, as in many of the earlier comedies, is a tangled, amusing plot.

"Lucy's" main area of competence is comedic--she instigates comic schemes and behaves humorously. To understand her comedic appeal, I will examine her character in the light of several theories of comedy proposed by classical and contemporary writers.

Considered in the context of the Platonic theory of comedy, it is clear that "Lucy's" naiveté, overestimation of her own talents, and ignorance of the effect she is having on others show a lack of self-knowledge and imply a kind of intellectual inferiority. However, any malicious superiority the audience may potentially feel toward her is transformed by the affectionate, romantic aspect of the show. Instead of looking at Lucy with contempt, her fans tend to view her with indulgent fondness.

The Aristotelian theory of the ridiculous as a kind of painless defect is exemplified both by Lucy's intellectual limitations and by her tendency get herself into inappropriate situations and then mess things up. It is important in this context that no one, including "Lucy," ever gets hurt. There is no real pain and no

real anger. What protects "Lucy" and the others is the air of affection that softens the edges of the show.

Considering the light-hearted I Love Lucy as a social satire or corrective (as proposed by the comedic theories of Ben Jonson and Moliere), seems a bit heavy-handed. Certainly, later situation comedies such as All in the Family are far more directly satirical and moralistic about a plethora of social ills. But even in its loose, fun-loving mode, the earlier situation comedy does show both "Lucy's" foolishness--and the foolishness of the husband-dominated marriage. In its own farcical fashion, I Love Lucy is part of a long Western tradition in drama and literature that posits an eternal battle of the sexes that resolves by having one or both members of the warring couple recognize the futility of rigid sex-role sterotypes and resolve their differences with an affectionate reconciliation.

The sentimental comedy discussed by Goldsmith in the eighteenth century is an early ancestor of a sentimental, middle-class, situation comedy such as I Love Lucy. As I noted earlier, Ball and Arnaz made a conscious decision to play middle-income people rather than a Hollywood couple. If "Ricky" as a bandleader was somewhat exotic, he was at least struggling to make a living; and "Lucy," for all her kookiness, is very much an average housewife.

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[28]Lucy & Ricky & Fred & Ethel, p. 162.

Her concerns are universal, and the audience can easily identify with her and enjoy the mixture of comedy and sentiment that make up the show.

Bergson's theory of comedy as the imposition of rigidity on the free human will is exemplified by the progress of each episode. Initially, "Lucy" seems to exert boundless free will in initiating her comic schemes. Later, she finds herself caught by the rigid requirement of reality. Thus, "Lucy" can freely connive her way into a candy factory, but the speed-up of the assembly line leaves her comically struggling to keep up with its mechanical pace. In another episode, "Lucy" imaginatively and flexibly treats a cheese as a baby in order to avoid paying an airline baggage charge. But when a fellow passenger sits next to her and starts treating the cheese as an infant, Lucy is compelled to make up ever more elaborate lies to follow the now externally imposed, rigid convention the cheese is human. The result is a comic tension between "Lucy's" free will and the unforeseen results of what she has herself initiated.

If we apply the Freudian theory of physical exaggeration and mental minimalization to "Lucy," we can understand the comedic potential of her large eyes and mouth and the exaggerated redness of her hair. Her mugging and slapstick also exaggerate what had been glamour attributes into comedic ones. "Lucy's"

nonsensical method of reasoning and gullibility comically minimize her mental capacities and suggest that she is childish, another aspect of the Freudian comic character.

"Lucy's" moods are intense and mercurial and her behavior is uninhibited and extreme--like that of a child. A child likes to imitate adults--often just missing the mark. So too, "Lucy" mimics the dress and stance of assorted grown-up workers from ballerinas to grape-stompers. But, like a child, she mimics only a few superficial details of their behavior and creates humor with her comic ineptitude. Her consequent "failure" leads to degradation in which we rediscover the child's helplessness. The child has incomplete control over his bodily functions, which often leads to embarrassment. So too, "Lucy's" comic schemes usually backfire, leaving her embarrassed and frequently physically messed up.

Related to degradation is another Freudian concept--that of unmasking. "Lucy" often dons costumes and disguises to carry out her comic schemes, and in the course of the program is unmasked. Freud interprets the pleasure of "unmasking" as the child's enjoyment at seeing the adult unmasking herself, reducing herself to the child's level, and thus affording relief from the usual condescension of adults. During the course of each episode, "Lucy," who looks like an adult, unmasks herself and shows herself as very childlike. I Love Lucy has always had enormous appeal for children. In fact, the

program is presently syndicated during children's viewing hours.[29]

The fact that the other characters (especially "Ricky") indulge "Lucy's" childish behavior accords adult viewers the fantasy that their own childish impulses will be indulged. When "Lucy" reacts to events with emotional spontaneity and without the burden of an adult realization of probable consequences, she gives the audience the pleasure of vicarious release at the same time that they feel superior to her.

Freud also discusses the comic as the pleasurable release of sexual and aggressive impulses in a disguised, and hence, palatable form. When "Lucy" is jealous and angry at "Ricky," she dresses as a hillbilly and pursues him with comic, sexual aggressiveness. Or, she might "accidentally" dump a plate of spaghetti over the head of a movie star who ignores her.

As Freud noted, suppressed sexual and aggressive impulses are often released in dreams. The comic mid-sections of I Love Lucy episodes operate very much like dream sequences. The beginning of each program is based on recognizable, everyday reality. Then, "Lucy" pulls us into exaggerated, dreamlike events--six foot loaves of bread pop out of ovens; chocolates race by with

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[29]David Poltrak, Vice-President CBS Television, Personal Interview.

supersonic speed; people wear absurd disguises and are not recognized. "Lucy's" outrageous schemes operate with the same absurd logic as dreams. She can treat a cheese as a baby and have everyone else believe her because they have entered into the conventions of a comedic dream. The usual probabilities simply do not apply. As in a dream or a child's fantasy, wishes and fears are exaggerated, treated as the literal truth, and acted out. The normal housewife may worry that her husband is hostile to her. "Lucy" imagines that "Ricky" is trying to murder her. Following the absurd premise is an absurd reaction--she fortifies herself with a garbage can lid.

At the end of each dream-farce, "Lucy wakes up." Then, no matter how outrageous her behavior, it has no consequences in the real world. She has only play-acted her childish fantasies, and "Daddy/Ricky" indulges and forgives her. It is tacitly understood that each has his and her own territory. "Ricky" is in charge of reality; "Lucy" is in charge of fantasy. The structure of each episode allows "Lucy" to be both a respectable and beloved housewife and mother (at the opening and closing sections that frame each episode) and an anarchistic, infantile clown (in the farcical, dreamlike mid-section).

The contemporary psychologists Seymore and Rhoda Fisher discuss comedy as the product of disguised anger, aggression that should not be taken wholly seriously.

Ball comments about the role of anger on I Love Lucy:

> No one on the show ever got really angry--only comedically angry. Once a guest star played real anger, and we had to stop him--it wasn't funny.[30]

Gregory Bateson, another contemporary psychologist, speaks about the necessity of reframing the latent hostility of the joke or comic activity into a play mode. I Love Lucy sets its playful mood in the opening credits, displayed in a cartoon heart with caricature drawings of the characters underscored by light-hearted music. The play mode is further established by the punched up, comic style of acting common to situation comedies. In fact, even without knowing the content of a show, after a few moments of watching I Love Lucy or some other situation comedy, the viewer can usually tell the genre by acting style alone.

Once that play frame is established, the audience is ready to accept Arthur Koestler's fusion of incompatible matrices. "Lucy" is both child and adult. She is both a middle-class housewife, with whom the audience can identify, and a kook who dresses as a penguin or hangs upside down from a ballet barre.

By applying the writings of comic theorists to the character of "Lucy," I hope to have indicated the source of her comedic appeal, the major ingredient in her success. Her sex appeal and competence, modified in the

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[30]Lucille Ball, Personal Interview.

ways I have suggested, act in synergy with her comedic appeal to create a highly appealing character.

It is impossible to devise a mathematical chart of checks and balances and come up with a formula for the appeal of a character such as "Lucy." But I hope I have identified the salient factors involved and shown how "Lucy," a highly successful female comedic persona, was created by the interaction of the personality, background and talents of Lucille Ball; by the nature of the situation comedy genre (and the talents of her writers and other staff who knew how to make best use of the the potential of that genre): by the sex-role assigned to women by middle-class American society in the 1950's; and by the interplay and balance of comedic appeal, sex appeal, and personal competence. As I proceed with this study, I intend to demonstrate the operation of these elements in other comedic personae, and, when appropriate, to compare and contrast them with "Lucy."

CHAPTER III

PHYLLIS DILLER

Phyllis Diller trots onto a nightclub stage dressed in a Mad Magazine version of an evening gown. Silver lamé is bunched into knee length ruffles, while the rest of the costume puffs out to imply a Humpty Dumpty body. Under her armpits, more lamé sags like a glitzy trash can liner and finishes in ruffles at the wrists. A blue satin bodice balloons skyward toward padded, pointy shoulders. Overall, Diller seems to be not so much dressed as upholstered into the semblance of a shiny, stuffed toy.

Accessorizing the costume are gloves, a cartoon-length cigarette holder, and a king-sized cigarette. "The cigarette is made of wood," says Diller. "I don't smoke."[1] Her coiffure is as artificial as the

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[1]Phyllis Diller, Personal Interview held in her suite at the Tropicana Hotel in Atlantic City, New Jersey, November 7, 1984. I conducted one interview with Ms. Diller, and I make frequent quotations from it. This interview was instrumental in supplying information about both Ms. Diller's life and her comedic technique.

cigarette, being comprised of a fright wig of platinum dynel. Years ago, Diller went to a scalp specialist because her hair was falling out. The specialist advised her to use a curry comb to stimulate hair growth. The treatment worked, but it made her hair stand up. One night, she went onstage that way, the audience roared, and she kept the hairdo--incorporating the style into its present electric shock style.

In this outlandish get up the comic's actual facial features are hardly noticeable. The nightclub crowd, who greets her appearance with raucous laughter, sees only an absurd harridan--not a gentle and (after several well-publicized episodes of plastic surgury) delicately pretty lady in her mid-sixties. This lady, with large blue eyes and pale pink lipstick, greets me in her hotel suite wearing a flattering, floor-length robe made of elegant squirrel skin. But as Miss Diller points out, "Elegance and beauty are not funny."

Nor did they--or the financial ease that paid for them--come easy. At the age of thirty-seven, Diller (born Phyllis Driver in 1917) was a housewife, the mother of five children, and the wife of a failed businessman. Prodded by her husband, Sherwood Diller, and equipped only with a sense of humor and the necessity of providing for her children, Diller set out to become a stand-up comic--a profession in which women were practically non-existent. Miss Diller notes dryly: "They had no idea

what I was. It was like--'Get a stick and kill it before it multiplies!'"[2]

However, after an initial struggle, Diller met with her first real success at San Francisco's Purple Onion in 1955, where she was booked for two weeks and stayed for eighty-nine. Since then, she has enjoyed an active career as a headliner for over a quarter of a century. She has starred in three television series, including The Pruitts of Southampton, and numerous specials. She has appeared in thirteen feature films and co-starred in three comedies with Bob Hope, whom she accompanied on his Christmas jaunts to Vietnam. She starred in numerous other plays, including Hello Dolly on Broadway. She has recorded several comedy albums and published four best selling comedy books--Phyllis Diller's Housekeeping Hints, Phyllis Diller's Marriage Manual, The Complete Mother, and, most recently, The Joys of Aging and How to Avoid Them. Originally trained as a classical musician, she has appeared as a piano soloist with 100 symphony orchestras playing Beethoven and Bach under the name Dame Illya Dillya.

First and foremost, she is a stand-up comic, playing large hotels such as Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas, the Waldorf Astoria in New York, and the Tropicana in Atlantic City. Her popularity and longevity as a

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[2]Ibid.

performer testify to both uncommon wit and perseverance. In an interview in The New York Post, she commented that she went on the old Jack Paar Tonight Show fifty times before anyone knew who she was. "When I was on ten times nobody knew my name. After twenty times they thought I was Florence Dillon. Thirty times I was that blonde with five kids. Rome was not built in a day! Ah-ha-ha-ha!"[3]

"That blond" is a decidedly oddball version of a housewife/mother. Diller has called her onstage character an "idiot" and a "harridan,"[4] and is bemused by the tendency of audiences to confuse her person with her act. In fact, the gentle, sensitive woman who greets me in her hotel suite seems to have little in common with the cartoon virago that has just kept a gambling hotel audience in an uproar. One of few things that linger off-stage is the laugh--a good-humored cackle that erupts into a full-out, infectious, unladylike guffaw. The laugh is a Diller original ("I've always had it")[5] and regularly punctuates our interview. She laughs easily, generously, as much at someone else's joke as at her own. But however spontaneous the origin of her humor, by the time the Diller comedy style reaches the stage, it is

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[3]Ibid.

[4]Ray Stevenson, "Inside Phyllis Diller," Redbook, August 1978.

[5]Phyllis Diller, Personal Interview.

carefully honed and polished. The result is a rapid-fire, meticulously timed series of one-liners--one topping another--coupled with an immediately identifiable comedic personality and appearance.

To arrive at an understanding of Diller's appeal as a stand-up performer, I will consider her comedic persona as it derives from Phyllis Diller's own appearance, personality, talents, and background; the genre of stand-up comedy; the sex role of women in the late 1950's and early 1960's (Diller is still performing, but her on-stage character, which she formed early in her professional career, has remained fairly constant); and the balance of the key power elements of comedic appeal, sex appeal, and competence, as affected by the apparent consciousness or will of Diller's stage character. (The more aware and goal-directed her behavior, the more powerful she appears. The less aware she seems and the more her behavior produces accidental or undesired results, the less powerful she seems.)

Let us begin with Diller's physical appearance. Her comedically exaggerated costumes, frightwig, and cigarette holder give her an immediate, visual comedic identity. She <u>looks</u> funny; and when she speaks and laughs, she <u>sounds</u> funny. She is an instantly identifiable comic type--a kind of cartoon witch. This simultaneous simplification and exaggeration of complex human attributes are the basis for cartoons, satirical

sketches, trademark characters, and certain types of star personalities. Thus, the on-stage Phyllis Diller has a great deal in common with the syndicated comic strip "Broomhilda the Witch." (Marilyn Monroe, whose real appearance and personality were molded into a "blonde bombshell" is another exaggerated type, whose image is presently being marketed--years after her death--as a trademark to sell everything from bathtowels to ashtrays.)

Diller's onstage appearance, like the content of her act, evolved gradually. In her early act, Diller did impressions--the Dean of Women in a jabot and pince-nez or Jeannette McDonald in a fluffy stole and flowered hat, and performed her comedy from the crook of a grand piano.

> In those days there were two shows, The Ed Sullivan Show and the The Jack Paar Tonight Show. I was a big hit on The Jack Paar Tonight Show, and that was for scale. Now you understand, I had a family to support. The Ed Sullivan Show was for a lot of money for the same thing--also it was prestigious. My goal was to get on The Ed Sullivan Show. My thought was: "When you see a comic on that show, he always works in front of a bare curtain."...I knew that I had to get rid of props....That's when I started becoming commercial. And I did get the Sullivan show.[6]

The visual carryover from the props in Diller's early act is her omnipresent cigarette holder and her theatrically ugly costumes. The costumes evolved gradually. Originally Diller used a great variety of props, which she abandoned for the sake of greater

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[6]Phyllis Diller, Personal Interview.

commercial appeal. But she was outfitted in normal, even chic clothes.

> I had a Balmain. It was the cocktail suit of the year--in Vogue and Bazaar. It had big flat buttons in front, and it was quite chic. And I said, "You can twist these knobs all night, and the picture doesn't get any better!"[7]

This kind of remark is, of course, an example of the kind of self-deprecation with which Diller is identified. The main source of her supposed inadequacy is her lack of sex appeal. Diller is not simply plain or sexually neutral. She is aggressively, comedically repellent--her sexual charms are totally and frankly inferior to those of any member of her audience.

Her present costume of ballooning lame and pointed, padded shoulders is the visual correlative of her verbal self-deprecation. The outfit is grotesque, unflattering, and funny. It sets Diller up as a unique, clownlike personality, emphasizes her skinny legs, and implies an oddly shaped torso. Even before she opens her mouth, she has set herself up as mocking the very notion of feminine attractiveness. No one need feel threatened by her sex appeal since she has reduced it both visually and verbally to absolute zero. It is unattractiveness raised to a level of surrealism--no woman in the real world dresses in a lamé version of the Queen of Clubs.

In the same way, Diller's verbal self-abuse is so

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[7]Ibid..

extreme that she remains at some emotional distance from its effect:

> The hair on the top of my head is so thin, the part is on the roof of my mouth.
>
> On my honeymoon I put on a peekaboo blouse. My husband peeked and booed.[8]

This distancing is heightened by her raucous laugh, which regularly punctuates her lines, assuring us that it's all in fun.

The artificiality of Diller's stand-up character is underscored by a seeming paradox. Diller herself has undergone major plastic surgery and several facelifts. As a result, she now has regular, pleasant features and looks quite attractive--as I noted during our interview. Diller's plastic surgury gave an enormous boost to her career. She was one of the first celebrities to speak frankly about face-lifts and benefited from the shock and curiosity value. She was also simply prettier--and that makes for a more attractive stage presence and photographs.

But her remodeled, pretty features in no way detract from her onstage "ugliness." Her supposed repulsiveness remains as an artificial comic premise that the audience is happy to accept. The fact that she works in the context of the nightclub stage under theatrical

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[8]Phyllis Diller, Nightclub Act performed at the Tropicana Hotel, November 1984.

lighting and at some distance from her audience no doubt helps the illusion. The more revealing close-ups of film and television are less amenable to this sort of artificial premise. But apparently when Diller appears in her stand-up act, outfitted in her fright wig and outrageous costumes, the audience is ready to believe that she has both undergone plastic surgery to improve her appearance and that she is irredeemably ugly. In fact, she regularly refers to the surgery in her act. To help her audience bridge the paradox, Diller emphasizes not her beautification, but her extreme need that led to the operations:

> I had to do something. I had so many wrinkles, I had to screw my hat on.[9]

In contrast to the stand taken against this kind of material by some younger female comics, Diller refuses to worry about whether her material could be construed as anti-feminist or demeaning to women:

> I care about my career and my work--whatever makes people laugh. I'm not trying to make any point. My feeling about life has nothing to do with my work onstage. I don't care if it's anti-feminist. I don't know what that means. I want to be funny and get as many laughs as possible, and I do it however I can without bad taste. The young girls are into women's lib and the ERA--I don't want a message onstage. I may offend them. I know I have offended some. But I can't let that affect my work.[10]

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[9]Ibid.

[10]Phyllis Diller, Personal Interview.

Self-deprecation is, of course, a time-honored tool for the stand-up comic--male and female. The original comics were court jesters, or "fools," who were given license to twit others because, by a convention, they were ridiculous and powerless. Today's successful stand-ups usually let us know, either verbally or behaviorally that they are, somehow, inadequate. One comic moans: "I don't get no respect" and gives forlorn examples of numerous shortcomings. Another shrugs or slumps, trembles, trips, or walks in a slow, uncertain shuffle. A comic might complain about her "fat" thighs or speak in a high, whispery voice. She may stutter, mispronounce words, or giggle nervously. She can dress in ill-fitting, or inappropriate clothes. If done correctly, the overall effect is pathetic--and lovable.

> I find it charming. It's not necessary, but it's a lot harder to do without self-deprecation. It endears you to the audience. It makes you seem--look, I'm not such hot stuff, I'm just one of you guys. I'm not perfect....If some of the girls did it, they would get further faster. It's a great way to say hello. The only way to learn comedy is in front of the audience--which is humiliating. When I started out, I didn't know how to say hello to an audience. And to this day,my hello relates to something I am wearing.[11]

Diller uses both her appearance and her verbal wit to establish herself as comedically unattractive. She actively denies herself the power of sex appeal and renders herself sexually ridiculous. Considered in the

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[11]Ibid.

light of Plato's theory, a great deal of Diller's comedic appeal is based on her supposed lack of awareness of how she looks. Although Diller speaks about her desperate attempt to be attractive, she dresses to uglify herself. Her ineffectualness as a stylish sex-object is comic.

A second aspect of power is competence. In keeping with Diller's persona as the negation of traditionally desirable feminine traits, she is not only inept as a sex object, she is hopeless as a housewife.

> Of course, I should never have gotten married to anybody. I hate housekeeping. I don't like to do it, and I just don't do it. Hell, we've got a ring around the tub you can set a drink on.
>
> The house is full of bugs. I wear a flea collar around both ankles. There isn't a person in our family that's got the guts to eat raisin toast.
>
> I just have trouble with my cooking. Damn it! Our vet told us that because of my cooking our cat has only two lives left.[12]

Diller's closest parallel as a female stand-up comic is Joan Rivers, both products of the 1950's, a period which stressed and exaggerated sex-role differences. It was the time of Marilyn Monroe (all bosom, blondeness, and baby-voice) and Margaret Anderson (the all-understanding wife and mother of Father Knows Best.) Women were expected to be sexually appealing and/or chastely domestic. By contrast, both Diller and Rivers emphasize their supposed lack of sex appeal and aggressive

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[12]Phyllis Diller, Nightclub Act.

ineptitude as housewives. Interestingly, in light of their failure at all other aspects of the female role, neither comic presents herself as an inadequate or hostile mother. The closest Diller gets is remarks about overdoing motherhood.

> We had far too many kids. At one time in our playpen it was standing room only. It looked like a bus stop for midgets.[13]

But despite a mild caveat of this kind, neither female comic displays any resentment, even comedically, toward particular children. Perhaps their circumspection in this area is due to the fact that audiences (including, among others, the comic's children) tend to identify the stand-up act with the performer. The confusion is almost inevitable--for one thing, the person and the on-stage character have the same name. The notion of being a "bad mother," even comically, may be untenable.

Like the stand-up act, an established situation comedy character also tends to be identified with the actress who plays the role. People think of "Lucy Ricardo" as Lucille Ball; and "Lucy," no matter how exasperatingly dizzy she acted in relation to Ricky, was always a loving, competent mother.

Sketch characters and dramatic roles, on the other hand, are clearly "acted." They have names, costumes, circumstances, and dialogue that will be dropped when the

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[13]Ibid.

role is over. Carol Burnett can play "Eunice" and "Miss Hannigan" as child-hating harridans. "Eunice" can call her unwanted sons "no-neck monsters," and no one wonders if Carol Burnett hates children.

But stand-up comics walk a thinner line between autobiography and fiction. Perhaps an abusing mother--even in jest--is just not funny. A mother is overwhelmingly powerful in relation to her helpless children. The child on the other hand is helpless--and potentially victimized. The child is innocent, and it is with the comedically victimized child that Diller comedically identifies.

> I was the world's ugliest baby. I have photos of my folks leaving the hospital with sacks over their heads.
>
> I was thirty years old. My mother was still trying to get an abortion!
>
> I asked my mother how to turn off the electric fan. She said, "Grab the blade!"[14]

The comic victim is a universal type. The English "jerk" roughly corresponds to the Spanish "bobo" and to the Yiddish "schnook" or "shlmazel." Many of Diller's jokes, such as the one about the electric fan, could be told by either a female or male comic. Rodney Dangerfield or Woody Allen also tell jokes from the point of view of the comedic victim, and this type of joke lends credence to the superiority theory of humor.

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[14]Ibid.

But, although Diller sets herself up as inferior, the audience is meant to understand (as Aristotle would suggest) that her defects are painless and her jibes harmless. Her "ugliness" and rejection by her husband and parents and her sarcastic comments about her cast of mythical characters are meant to arouse laughter, not pity; and her exaggerated comedic appearance hints that what she says is all in fun.

Diller's on-stage persona (the unattractive, budget-conscious housewife) provides her audience with a sense of both superiority and personal identification. This persona originally derived from Diller's own home situation. Diller was a middle-aged mother of five with a husband who was a failed businessman. Today, Diller is a Hollywood star. She lives in a twenty-two room mansion, cooks gourmet meals, dresses with taste and elegance, and has boyfriends. None of this surfaces in her act. The act is, as Diller puts it, "Frozen. Like Jack Benny never became generous. His premise was that he was stingy. I have my premise."[15]

The on-stage Diller is in the same boat--in fact a leakier one--than most of her audience. In much the same way, "Lucy and Ricky Ricardo" continued to cope with economic problems which had long ceased to trouble the rich and famous Ball and Arnaz.

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[15]Phillis Diller, Personal Interview.

The character of "Lucy" existed within the framework of the situation comedy, complete with sets, other characters, dialogue, action, and an episodic, comedic plot. Diller's character exists alone on a nightclub stage. She alone must create, by means of her words and gestures, an imaginary comedic world, with herself at the center. All stand-up comics do this to a certain extent, by gaining our compliance with their particular angle on reality. Diller does so by verbally creating a cast of fantasy characters that she has incorporated into her act.

Preeminant among those characters is "Fang," her onstage husband.

> You wouldn't believe how cheap this man is! We just had an anniversary. Dinner was going great until the tray fell off the car.
>
> Get ready for my gift. It's perfume--"Evening in Des Moines"--dollar ninety eight a quart! I used it to dry clean the dog.
>
> Course he is the stupidest man alive! There's no doubt about it. He went up to a thermostat. He said, "Seventy! My God! I've lost ninety pounds!"
>
> He hates work. One day he called in dead.
>
> It's close to the truth because of the way he boozes. He had an honorable mention in the obituary column eight times.
>
> When we went to bed together it's a case of the naked and the dead.[16]

Fang is a composite of the worst traits of husbands. He is cheap, stupid, lazy, drunk, and sexually

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[16]Phyllis Diller, Nightclub Act.

indifferent. Compared to Diller's marital situation, any woman in the audience has it good--and can imaginatively vent a little hostility besides. As for the men, "Fang" is easily to be taken as a cartoon exaggeration with little application to them.

In the light of the Fisher theory of comedy as disguised anger, it is interesting to note Diller's comment on her own use of anger:

> The first guy I ever worked for said, "Phyllis, you smile too much. You're too nice." What he meant was--more hostility. Give it a punch! But I had been working for so many years to get rid of all my hostility and anger and become a good person, that I couldn't take that as simply direction in an art form. I had been reading self-help books for years trying not to hate anybody. Now I understand. It's mock hostility. Now I get more and more and more hostile. It's an art form. But if it's real, forget it![17]

To disguise anger, the comic must set up what Bateson calls a play frame. In Diller's act, she establishes the play frame by her shiny, clownlike costume, her exaggerated remarks, and, in this particular case, by giving her stage husband the clearly fictional name "Fang."

The repellent wife has long been a stock in trade for male comics. Henny Youngman begs his audience to "Take my wife...please." Using "Fang" as a target, Diller simply reverses roles. Other female comics

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[17]Phyllis Diller, Personal Interview.

have also referred to their husbands onstage. But unlike Joan Rivers' Edgar and Totie Fields' Georgie, "Fang" is supposedly a pure fabrication. Diller vigorously denies any resemblance between "Fang" and her two real husbands--Sherwood Diller, to whom she remained married for twenty-six years, and Warde Donovan, whom she divorced in 1975 after nine years of marriage. Diller speaks kindly of both husbands. If there is any underlying anger, it is compartmentalized into the vituperation that she pours on Fang.

Diller also speaks of her real mother with affection: "My mother was the greatest influence on my life," says Diller. "She taught me Shakespeare, the Proverbs, Benjamin Franklin, and how to apply them to my life. I have molded my life on my mother--my humor, zest, positive outlook, energy, and ability to make fun of myself rather than bad-mouthing others."[18]

By contrast, the mother in Diller's stage act is a senile, doddering fool:

> Let me put it this way--she's around the bend. Oh my god! You look in her eyes and you know nobody's driving!
>
> She's perfectly happy. Sits in the kitchen--kills flies with a hammer. Listens to her records every day of her life. Doesn't play them. Just holds them up to her ear.[19]

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[18]Ibid.

[19]Phyllis Diller, Nightclub Act.

Whatever lingering familial resentments Diller does or does not have, her stage relatives are clearly mythical. There may be a germ of truth in them, but by the time they appear in jokes, they are cartoons, blown up beyond any easy recognition.

One character that the comic does claim to have drawn--or at least caricatured--from life is an immaculate neighbor "Mrs. Clean." (Note that this name, like "Fang" is cartoonish and helps to establish the play frame.)

> I hate that broad! I call her 'Mrs. Clean.' I hate her guts! Today I sent her a get sick card.
>
> If there's anything at all to reincarnation, that bitch will come back as a Brillo pad.[20]

If Mrs. Clean is Diller's successful rival as a homemaker, Fang's mother usurps her very home--coming for a visit (uninvited by Diller) and wreaking destruction.

> We still have a souvenir from her last visit. A Persian throw rug. She sat on the cat.
>
> How can I describe her? Jello with a belt.
>
> She sat in our hammock and uprooted two trees.

And, in a paroxym of comedic rage:

> I'd like to slit open her girdle and watch her spread to death![21]

The fat mother-in-law works for Diller the way

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[20]Ibid.

[21]Ibid.

Elizabeth Taylor used to work for Joan Rivers. After establishing their own supposed lack of appeal, the comics pour their comic venom onto the real sexual pariah--a fat woman. Mother-in-law jokes have been around for thousands of years--usually told by men. Diller trades on that stock figure and zeroes in on her obesity. That kind of sexual cattiness is a cliche of bitchy female behavior. Taylor is noted for her success with men, and Diller's mother-in-law is more successful at getting the attention of the one man in Diller's life--her husband. By focusing on their fatness, Diller and Rivers symbolically demolish their rivals.

Fatness is also a sign of self-indulgence. Food-rich, fashion-thin America tempts the palate and torments those who give in. Cookbooks and dietbooks sit cheek by jowl on the bookstore shelf. Slick magazines feature four-color spreads of fudge cake--then flip over onto diagrams of sit-ups to flatten the abdominals. The comic, like other women in the audience, is tempted. But she cautions us against giving in--the wages of sin are fat. While we're struggling with our own temptations, we can have a good laugh at the chubbettes who don't even join the fight.

If Diller and Rivers play on female bitchiness in connection with a fat rival, they are equally catty about a pretty one. If fat women overindulge in food, pretty ones overindulge in sex. The real Diller is an only

child. Her onstage persona concocts a gorgeous, trampy sexpot of a sister.

> By the time she was eighteen she had sown enough wild oats to make a grain deal with Russia.
>
> She's been in more motel rooms than the Gideon Bible.
>
> She was the original meter maid--all you had to do was meet her--you had her made![22]

Diller's sister is like River's sexy girlfriend--Heidi Abramowitz. And both comics tell similar jokes about Bo Derek and other celebrity variations on the dumb, sexy, sister.

Diller herself plays the smart, ugly sister in her stand-up act and sometimes in the theatre. In Wonderful Town, the musical version of My Sister Eileen, Diller played "Ruth," the clever writer who can't get a man while her sister "Eileen" gets every man in sight. Diller's on-stage ugliness is, of course, exaggerated, but it may accurately reflect the feelings of rivalry of many perfectly normal-looking women. As Diller says, "It happens in families all the time, especially where there's two girls."[23]

The division of areas of competence between "Ruth" and "Eileen" is sharp and codified by role. Ruth is intelligent, educated, talented (as a writer), and

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[22]Phyllis Diller, Nightclub Act.

[23]Phyllis Diller, Personal Interview.

successful at work. She is, however, singularly inept at attracting and holding a man. In fact, one of the famous songs from Wonderful Town is "A Good Way to Lose a Man." In this song, "Ruth" regularly loses the affection of men by intimidating them with her competence. "Eileen," far less educated, intelligent, and talented, is stunningly pretty and attracts men by a kind of instinctive femininity that is beyond the grasp of her elder sister. Like "Ruth," Diller herself is an intelligent, educated, gifted writer. However, unlike "Ruth," she is socially poised, wealthy, and fashionable. While no beauty, she is certainly attractive and has had numerous boyfriends and two husbands. Why then, does she present herself in her act as a sexually repellent harridan and aggressively incompetent housewife, without taste, talent, education, or wealth?

Part of the reason may come from Diller's own personal psychology, which is beyond the scope of this study. But it seems safe to assume that Diller, who charted her career based on what was necessary for mass acceptance, early recognized the audience's need to feel superior to a comic figure, and particularly to the character presented by a female stand-up comic. More than in any other performing genre, the stand-up comic overtly dominates the audience by the sheer force of his/her personality. At the time of Phyllis Diller's entry into the profession in the mid-fifties, female

comics were practically non-existent. Diller had to wrestle with and overcome the apparent contradiction between wanting to be a feminine woman and becoming a stand-up comic, a profession that contradicts basic stereotypes about the nature of the female role.

> Comedy is aggressive. That's why men used to hate women comics. That's why there weren't any. They wouldn't let'em live! Women are not supposed to be bright--and there's no such thing as a dumb comic. Joan Rivers is Phi Beta Kappa. They're not supposed to do anything aggressive. They're supposed to stay in their place, take care of the kids, and not intrude in men's realms. I became aware of this because they'd say, "Ordinarily I don't like female comics, but..." They were trying to tell me I was okay--possibly because I think I never lose my femininity. I may be hostile and aggressive, but I am still feminine. It's a spiritual thing. They feel it. Some women lose their femininity when they start to do comedy. They copy male comics.[24]

To Diller, copying of male comics means using obscene language and graphic sexual descriptions--often tinged with hostility.

> Let's start talking about Richard Pryor, Eddie Murphy, Buddy Hackett. Their language would be totally unacceptable on a woman. That doesn't bother me a bit. I don't want to talk like that. When I hear a black male doing that, it doesn't offend me because I feel that's their native tongue. It's not my native tongue. it would be as if I tried to do my act in French.
>
> I've known a couple of male comics who onstage are talking about the female vagina, and they're looking for disease. Right now, it makes me ill to even talk about it. But a man gets by with it, gets paid big money. There are people who laugh their heads off at that. Can you picture me talking about the male organ?[25]

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[24]Phyllis Diller, Personal Interview.

[25]Ibid.

There are contemporary women comics who are sexually franker and more directly hostile than Diller. Even Joan Rivers, a slightly younger contemporary, has gone that route. Whether these women are copying male comics or simply reflecting a general societal trend toward unisexuality and coarseness, Diller came from an era and background that valued ladylike conversational refinement and restraint. As a comic, she speaks more truth than is permissable in polite society--but she does it indirectly.

Freud discusses the comic as the pleasurable release of forbidden sexual or aggressive impulses, in a disguised and therefore palatable form. I suggest that male humor, which is generally more overtly sexual and aggressive, reflects two factors. First, males are generally more aggressive by nature; and second, males are given more societal permission to act out their aggression and sexuality. (The uncertain mixture of nature and nurture makes it difficult to know what is, in fact, natural for each gender.) When women tell aggressively dirty jokes, particularly in mixed company, they are usurping what is conventionally a male role and implying that they are like men, a stance which Diller realizes can be disturbing.

Diller's own jokes are often based on sexual or aggressive impulses. In fact, her major subject matter is her comedic anger at her own failure to fit into the

role of the desirable female:

> You've heard of the Total Woman? Take a look at a fraction![26]

But while she may comedically bemoan the fact that she does not measure up as a woman, she never makes her audience uncomfortable by implying that she is "one of the boys." She deliberately remains an act for family audiences--clever, sometimes racy, but nonoffensive.

In his study of comedy, Freud also likens the comic figure to a child, and the audience's pleasurable feeling of superiority as that an adult feels toward a child. Diller's appearance is, in fact, childlike. Her outsized, shiny costume, and long cigarette holder (complete with wooden cigarette) make her look like a toy--or a child playing dress-up. Her raucous laugh and fright wig make her seem a cartoon witch, like "Broomhilda" of the Sunday comic strips. The whole effect is highly presentational theatre, deliberately artificial.

Unlike Rivers, Don Rickles, or "Pudgie," a female comic whose act consists of taking semi-realistic pot shots at the audience, Diller never gets that close. "I'm really a proscenium act." she says. "It's structured--like playing the piano."[27]

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[26]Phyllis Diller, Nightclub Act.

[27]Phillis Diller, Personal Interview.

The sense of technical virtuosity is felt by the audience, who cheer her best jokes with "Go Phyllis!" Early on in her career, Diller deliberately chose and worked for that mass approval.

> When I was first starting out, Stan Freeberg came backstage and told me, "If there's a line that you love, and you do it three times, and it doesn't make it, toss it." So now, if they don't get a line, no matter how much I adore it, it's out.[28]

The result of Diller's craftswomanlike attitude is a rapid-fire series of one-liners--one topping another.

> I get twelve laughs a minute because I edit to the bone. To play to ten thousand people, your act has to be structured for that kind of delivery.[29]

To arrive at that structure, Miss Diller writes most of her own material--about seventy percent these days. She acquires the rest from outside writers, selecting and editing jokes with a view to her on-stage persona.

> A comic is responsible for her own material. That's the basic difference between me and a comedienne or a comic actress. Plus, I work alone, where a comedienne or comic actress works ensemble, and usually the material is written for them--like a movie or a sitcom.[30]

To accumulate material for her stand-up act, Diller takes notes from life, sifting through daily experience for nuggets of potentially funny ideas and refining them into jokes.

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[28]Ibid.

[29]Ibid.

[30]Ibid.

> It's something you work on constantly. You don't sit down and write--at least I don't. Professional comedy writers sit down and write in a room with a typewriter. I mark down ideas, and they germinate. Sometimes I will get an idea that won't get into the show for five years. It might take that that long for the idea to really jell or to figure out how to use it in the act.[31]

Despite the immediate impact of her costume and frightwig, Diller's act is not primarily visual. She does no slapstick, little mugging, and conceives her routines mainly in terms of language.

> Every word is timed and choreographed. There are times when I use a grammatical error--of course, on purpose--and the joke word is the last word in the payoff. That last word preferably should end in an explosive consonant. For example, "He bought a zebra and named it 'spot!' She told me to stuff my bra with kleenex, I wish she woulda told me to take them outa the box!" These are the kinds of words you want at the end of your payoff.[32]

Diller's comedy style consists of a machine gun delivery of a series of jokes punctuated by her own raucous guffaw. She sets up the joke in a sentence or two, builds rhythmically, and climaxes in a staccato explosion of sound--the joke word.

Her emphasis on the aural aspect of comedy comes out of extensive musical training. She is a graduate of the Sherwood Music School in Chicago and plays concert piano and harpsichord. In the last few years, she has

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[31]Ibid.

[32]Ibid.

given up performing musically because her schedule can no longer accommodate the demands of daily practice or the logistical difficulties of making sure that every hotel room on the road is equipped with a grand piano. But early on in her career, her act was mostly music--playing and singing song parodies. She shifted to a spoken act because "talking gets you more laughs than singing. I got so I loved to hear the laughs, and I evolved."[33]

Even without the song parodies, Diller is acutely aware of the correlation between music and comedy. To get to her punchline--and the laugh--she creates a rhythmic build-up.

> I did a routine about sukiyaki, where I said, "They cook it on the floor, you eat it on the floor, I stepped in it." Comedy is listening--the ear, rhythm, and timing. Also, there is a list of real musicians who are comics that is incredible. We'll start with Victor Borge: piano; Phil Silvers: clarinet; Woody Allen: clarinet; Imogene Coca: trombone; Phyllis Diller: piano; Jimmy Durante: piano; Danny Kaye: conducting; Jerry Lewis: conducting; Sid Caesar was a concert saxophonist. He made his total living from saxophone, one of the best; Johnny Carson: drummer; Charley Kallis: drummer; Morey Amsterdam: cello (his father was first chair for the San Francisco symphony); Henny Youngman: violin. The list is endless! And even the ones who weren't musicians, I think coulda been or woulda been. Maybe when they were young they just didn't have the instrument. Bob Hope sings like an angel, dances...He was originally a hoofer.[34]

Like the performance of a virtuoso musician,

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[33]Ibid.

[34]Ibid.

comedic timing is ultimately individualistic and intuitive.

> It's knowing it, feeling it. Everyone has their own rhythm. Look at Joan Rivers: "Can we talk? Can we talk?" She's got her own rhythm. I have my rhythm.
>
> A working ensemble is different. Other people can get in your way. They can step on your laugh. They can step on your line. A comic is used to working alone, and he's totally in control of everything. Another actor doesn't feel that at all. A comic feels it, knows it. It is so precise! If you boggle a word, if you mess up one syllable--forget the laugh.[35]

Ideally, this precision of sound builds toward the punch line, which, like a hair trigger, sets off the laugh.

> The key word is the joke word. Preferably, it should be an explosive consonant and a one syllable word. You remember The Sunshine Boys, Neil Simon's play about two comics who work together? The whole thing was one guy hated the other guy who kept spitting on him because he had all these explosive words.[36]

The major influence on Diller's comedic style is Bob Hope--whose stand-up act is also built around precision firing of a series of gags. Hope first saw her when she was just starting out in small clubs. Her act was bombing, and on discovering that Hope was in the audience, she tried to sneak out the back way. He caught up with her and encouraged her to keep on trying. Today, a large oil painting of the male comic decorates her

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[35]Ibid.

[36]Ibid.

Hollywood mansion in the "Bob Hope Room." Diller credits Hope as being her inspiration and mentor: "We are extremely similar. Early in my career, when I would hear myself, I would hear the same cadence."[37]

While this is certainly true in the sense that both comics rely on carefully honed one-liners, Hope's cool, wise-guy style typically depends on snapping the punchline, then either waiting nonchalantly for the laugh or covering with filler words before speeding on to the next joke. The filler words mean nothing in themselves--Hope might conclude a joke by musing "And I wanna tell you..." He sets up the laugh so that it falls when he is apparently not even trying for it. In fact, he is "talking." By pretending to be indifferent, the comic does not seem to need the laughter of the audience. Instead, he dares them to come to him--to be as slick as he is in order to enjoy his jokes.

Diller's style, by contrast, is more punched-up. Where Hope plays it cool, she demands the laugh. She hits the joke home then stares at the audience, often jump-starting the laugh with her own raucous "Ah-ha-ha-ha!" Another difference between the two comics is their use of hand gestures. Hope usually stands with his arms at his sides and his hands either in his pockets

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[37]Ibid.

or clasped in front or behind him. Diller commands the audience by raising one arm. In an interview with James Robert Parish, she decribes her technique:

> The reason for my cigarette holder is to portray a certain type of woman, plus it gives me an excuse to hold up one hand. It is an attention getter. When you flag a train, you raise your hand. When you get attention from the teacher to leave the room, you raise your hand. Over the years I have found very descriptive uses for the cigarette holder. It projects and is continually used for hostility moves and punctuation marks. These gestures I use are natural for me.[38]

Diller relies less heavily than Hope on topical humor. His act, depending as it does on the latest headlines, requires a "platoon of writers"[39] to supply an up-to-date series of jokes. (The general form and type of ingredient that make up his jokes may remain the same and in line with his established character, but their specific content must be constantly freshened.) Diller sometimes brings in topical references, but the core of her act is her unattractiveness and dismal domestic life. Both Hope's headlines and Diller's domesticity are simply raw material. Each comic refines the material comedically, bending reality into absurd juxtapositions and exaggerations. Diller's comedy is at its best in her highly imaginative images--often coupled

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[38]James Robert Parish, reprint of his interview with Phyllis Diller, which took place during a seminar held at the American Film Institute, October 18, 1977.

[39]Phyllis Diller, Personal Interview.

with verbal confusion. "I used to work even more visually," says Diller. "My original material--which I wrote every word--was much more imaginative and less commercial."[40]

One of the funniest bits from Diller's early act is an extended story about a cheese. The story uses words to project a surreal film in the theatre of the mind. As her words create the images, her rasping voice and cackling laughter create a rhythmic soundtrack.

> A friend told me the longer you keep Romano cheese, the better it gets. So now, I kept it three years. And this thing turned mean. Now and then I'd open the refrigerator door and throw it some food. I'd have to walk it now and then. And then it grew this one leg. And it's got this ugly fuzz all over it. And the dogs won't run with it. The other day it raped a tulip![41]

Diller begins with a mundane domestic tip which sets up her housewife character. Her inept response--keeping the cheese for three years--fits in with Diller's alleged domestic incompetence. Though exaggerated, her response is borderline plausible. Next, she makes an imaginative leap--the cheese is alive and "turns mean." Diller attempts to cope by feeding and walking the cheese. The image of walking a cheese as if it were a dog is, of course, ludicrous. The more clearly the audience can visualize it, the funnier it is. She

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[40]Ibid.

[41]Phyllis Diller, Nightclub Act.

tops this image with an even more intense piece of fantasy--the cheese grows one leg and is covered with fuzz. Following the implications of her illogical premise, Diller now suggests that this fuzzy, one-legged cheese has become a type of dog that is so ugly that the other dogs won't run with it. She concludes with a non-sequitur--the rape of the tulip. As a final climax to the absurdity of the story, an outrageous act--rape--is attributed to a cheese and performed on a flower. (Note the explosive endings of "raped" and "tulip!" The joke would not be as funny if the cheese had, say, mugged a rose.)

The success of the cheese story depends on its being a verbal fantasy. Wild, improbable things are described--but Diller herself remains physically restrained. In her interview with James Robert Parish, she said, "I can't do physical slapstick. I wish I could. One of my main problems is when a writer has written in physical things for me to do that I find it impossible to carry off. I am physically delicate to the point of being fragile."[42]

Lucille Ball and Carol Burnett, by way of contrast, are highly physical comediennes. Their funniness does not lie in their descriptions but in their enactment of events. The actual presentation of events is by its

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[42]James Robert Parish, Interview.

nature, subject to certain realities--primarily the physical presence of the performer--and whatever realism is inherent in the sitcom or sketch situation.

One of the Lucy episodes also featured a somewhat surrealistic cheese. In this story, Lucy, in order to bring a cheese on a plane without paying for the extra weight, wraps the cheese in a blanket and treats it as a baby. When a fellow passenger with her own baby sits next to her, Lucy is forced to extend the pretense--giving the cheese baby bottle, burping it, and naming it "Cheddar-uh-Chester!" Left alone, Lucy of course, treats the object as a cheese, which leads the other woman to accuse her of child abuse. Finally, to get rid of the cheese/baby, Lucy cuts it into pieces and stuffs it into the horn section of Ricky's orchestra.[43]

Like Diller's material, the Lucy sketch begins from a plausible common situation--someone trying to save money on a baggage charge--and extrapolates into absurdity. Since the content of Lucy's fantasy is acted out in the context of a quasi-realistic situation comedy, she must play within the bounds of reality. Her cheese, for example, cannot grow a leg or rape a tulip. It can only be treated inappropriately. The humor comes from the tension between the realistic situation and Lucy's

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[43]"Return Home From Europe," I Love Lucy, #1050/153, May 14, 1956.

inappropriate, exaggerated behavior. But where Lucy's audience can easily see what is happening, Diller depends on her audience's willingness to collaborate with her fantastic visualization, expressed only in words.

To gain the mass acceptance she sought, Diller all but abandoned this sort of extended fantasy, which is imaginatively demanding of an audience. "It's not commercial," says the comic, "I would work to total silence in this (gambling hotel) room. You realize that it took me years to be able to work a room this size."[44]

Diller's early act was, in fact, quite cerebral, and her audience was limited. She sang parodied German lieder, operas, and progressive education.

> When I first started out, my main supporters were gay. These chic, small discovery clubs in the old days always had a gay bar. The next group I got, from television, was women. Then came men and children. My goal was to get everyone from three to a hundred and three. Now kids know me, and college students. I can work anything. When you have a goal in your head, it programs you. Things fall into place for what you want.[45]

What helped Diller reach her goal was a self-induced course in strenuous self-improvement. "Life," she says, "is a do-it-yourself kit."[46] At thirty-seven, she was poor, homely, disorganized, and lacking in self-confidence. Stand-up comedy, an outrageous career choice for a woman in the 1950's,

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[44]Phyllis Diller, Personal Interview.

[45]Ibid.

demands that the performer, without benefit of music, ensemble, or script, take charge of a room. It provides instant feedback--Diller's twelve laughs a minute. And it is, among other things, an exercise in conquering fear.

> I used to be afraid of everything. I was brought up on fear. I was the most shy child. On into my thirties I was afraid of everything. I shook, I was so afraid. Afraid of authority, afraid of bridges, afraid of airplanes. But that book The Magic of Believing just turned me around. I read it for two years, and as I read it, I absorbed it. It's a whole system of thought. It teaches you how to deal with everyday life in a psychic way. When I read the book, I was scattered--I was writing, I was painting, I had a job, I had all those kids. Then, I focused and decided, "I'm going to be a comic."[47]

Like any performer, Diller has used her own fears, feelings, life, and appearance as the raw material out of which to construct her act. Even from an early age, one source of insecurity must have been her looks. Diller ruefully remembers: "When I was twelve, I was teased a lot. One day, I took a long look in the mirror and said, "Honey, you're better settle for inner beauty. I still wish I'd had a choice."[48]

It is a truism that comics need the reassurance of laughter to compensate for insecure childhoods. (David Letterman, in a variation on this theme suggests that

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[46]Ibid..

[47]Ibid.

[48]Ibid..

sometimes comics got too much attention as children and are trying to recreate that paradisaical experience in adult life.) Diller herself remarks: "The fear of abandonment and actual abandonment have created comics."[49] It is generally known that many comics had troubled childhoods. But despite the insecurities that plagued her youth, right through her thirties, Diller now claims to be at peace: "I'm sixty-five and I don't need sleep. I'm very happy, and I'm never ill."[50]

Some critics have faulted Diller for the artificiality of her act, for the fact that she does not expose herself as personally vulnerable within it, and for the fact Diller does little experimentation and allows the act to remain essentially frozen (with accretions of a few topical references). None of this fazes Diller. She considers herself to be primarily a craftswoman and professional. She has discovered a format that works for her personally and has brought her the mass acceptance and wealth that have always been her goal. The highly structured, precision-crafted format of her act may in some sense echo the pattern of her life--the strong musical bent cultivated by disciplined piano practice, the pragmatism necessitated by providing for five children, the taste for performing despite a lack of personal glamour, the love of beauty and elegance

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[49]Ibid.

[50]Ibid.

that could only be applied artificially to oneself through an expensive wardrobe and plastic surgury, the need to vent hostility coupled with a strong taboo (encouraged by self-improvement books) against really hurting anyone, the wild visual imagination encapsuled in carefully choreographed joke rhythms; and the decision to play a preposterous character with inner conviction.

The character she has designed represents a highly workable balance of power in which her ostensible lack of sex appeal and competence (especially in traditionally female areas) is made into raw material for the high degree of comedic power she exerts. The audience's perception of her comedic power is intensified by the genre in which she appears. Not only is she funny, but she is a stand-up solo performer of her own material--mostly wisecracks which imply a high degree of awareness and a consciously willed desire to be funny. She captures the attention of the audience and singlehandedly dominates the proceedings. As a stand-up comic, Diller enters a traditionally male bastion of dominance, awareness, and aggression. Taking into account that she is a woman coming out of the 1950's, both her subject matter--traditional female concerns--and the manner in which she handles it--compensatory self-deprecation of her sexual appeal and competence--are natural consequences.

Over the course of time, Diller's approach to a

female comedic style has, in lesser hands, become formulaic and, for some, anti-feminist. The fact that she has established and maintained her success for over twenty-five years indicates her comedic creativity, an underlying attractiveness in her personality, and a high degree of perseverance and purpose.

"I'm a believer," says Miss Diller, gazing with sincerity past the theatrically long, fake eyelashes she wears in her act. "Anybody can rise above almost anything--if they believe strongly enough. And I am a believer."[51]

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[51]Ibid.

CHAPTER IV

CAROL BURNETT

Carol Burnett, outfitted in a nightie that looks as if it was repossessed from one of the larger clowns at some medieval circus, crawls into bed in a state of total exhaustion. Creeping backwards under the covers, she discovers that her foot is dangling twenty mattresses up in space--and she, the royal heroine of a musical version of "The Princess and the Pea" may be in for some foul play. Deciding to make the best of what is penetrating her befogged brain as an odd situation, she lies down. Then abruptly, she bellies upward--feeling a lump. She turns over--this time her rear end pops up--again the lump. She crawls around, poking out her tongue in childish concentration and slaps the mattress in brisk punishment. Then she flops down--only to be immediately jerked up again--feet waving in the air and displaying her scalloped bloomers. With a malevolent glare, she suffocates the lump with a pillow and curls up to sleep--until the lump twists her into a pretzel of

irritation. She sinks back against the headboard, where royal, silken tassels dangle before her crossed eyes.

"All right, lump," she squawks, "look out!" She bounds toward the offending spot, stamps furiously, jumps up and down, and finally falls down in exhaustion, hitting her head on the lump. She lets out a lengthy moan, grabs the tassel, and attempts to lash the lump into submission. At length, she falls to her knees and glares at us with madness in her eyes, baring her teeth like a wounded, but undefeated animal. ."All right," she declares, "we take it from the top."[1]

The above is an excerpt from the television version of Once Upon a Mattress, an off-Broadway musical play based on the famous fairy tale that in 1957 gave Burnett her first big break as a comedienne, singer, and star. Spotted in this part, she was asked to be a regular on The Gary Moore Show and, eventually, starred for eleven years on her own comedy/variety program. She went on to perform in films and television specials and to establish one of the highest Q (popularity ratings) of any female celebrity. Although her more recent work has included a range of dramatic roles, it was as a brilliant slapstick comedienne that she first endeared herself to audiences as both touchingly vulnerable and ecstatically outrageous.

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[1]Once Upon a Mattress, CBS Television, December 12, 1972.

Thirteen years later, Burnett looks far from outrageous as she strides briskly and punctually toward our luncheon date, hand outstretched in greeting and smiling warmly. Her hair is crisply cropped, her pants suit simple and elegant, her figure diet-slim. (Only the color of the outfit--sizzling magenta--hints at wilder qualities beneath the surface.) At 52 years of age, Burnett has settled into an easy, non-flamboyant attractiveness. She looks like neither a glamorous star nor the cartoon ugly she sometimes played in comic sketches. She looks, in fact, entirely normal--with a touch of class.

But then there's the mouth. Reasonable enough in polite conversation and over the scrambled eggs and liver that comprise her menu, that mouth has been known to slide into a rubber grin, segue into a Tarzan mating call and howl up falsetto screams of fury. She seems so average and yet so astounding that the broad mid-section of America who comprise most of her fans come to believe that if Carol Burnett can succeed, anyone can.

"I have a lot of people come up to me and say, 'I told my daughter, if <u>you</u> can do it, she can.'" Burnett says, chuckling. "It's a compliment and an insult at the same time." The actress shakes her head. "A lady came up to me once," Burnett's voice filters, flutelike, through an invisible mint julep, "and said, 'I just <u>love</u> ya. You're so common.'" She guffaws. "I've gotten

letters that say, 'Dear Carol, I know this sounds crazy, but I really admire you!'"[2]

Burnett's journey from commonness to stardom was a long and perilous one. Her personal history has been recounted in numerous magazine articles as well as her autobiography. What follows is a summary of the general facts. The actress was born in Texas. At the age of seven, she was taken to Los Angeles by her parents, who were in search of employment. Burnett's mother, who wanted to be a journalist, free-lanced for magazines and worked for a time in publicity at Twentieth-Century-Fox. The father, who had trouble holding down a steady job, drank from the time he was in high school. After Carol was born and the financial pressure on the family increased, her mother started drinking too. The lack of regular employment often landed the family on welfare, and the lack of money led to more drinking. This in turn led to domestic quarreling, which sometimes erupted into violence. Burnett learned early to dodge the confrontations between her alcoholic parents. She also learned to avoid her mother's fast and sometimes violent

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[2]Carol Burnett, Personal Interview held at the Polo Lounge in Los Angeles California, June 22, 1982. I conducted one interview with Ms. Burnett, and I make frequent use of quotations from it. This interview helped me to put into focus other investigations I had done concerning the development of her comedic style. I intend to use biographical data gathered from both this interview and other sources to show how her life became her art.

hands when she was on the bottle.

The Burnett parents were sporadically separated, and during one of their reconciliations, they had another daughter--Carol's sister Chrissie. By the time the parents were forty-six, and Carol was a young teenager, both her father and mother were dead.

Carol was mainly raised by her grandmother "Nanny." "She was a rock," says Burnett, "somebody sober who cared."[3] Nanny was a bit odd--her one room apartment was a clutter of peanut butter and jelly jars, old paper bags, and bits of cloth. More importantly, she was stable, sober, and devoted to Carol. Nanny lived in the same building near Hollywood Boulevard. As her own parents became less and less accessible, Carol moved in with her grandmother--sleeping on a Murphy bed that was permanently pulled down from the wall.

Nanny, a devout Christian Scientist, nevertheless managed to be a hypochondriac with eccentric methods of self-cure--including packing newspapers around her waist to hold her organs in. She made daily declarations to Carol of her imminent demise. But despite her self-dramatization as a frail invalid, Nanny was possessed of a robust survival instinct. By the time she died at the age of 82, she had discarded five husbands

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[3]Richard Meryman, "Carol Burnett's Own Story," McCall's, February 19, 1976, p. 165.

and was involved with a 40-year-old boyfriend. When she was over 80, she was apparently still attractive. She had a habit of "accidentally" letting her dress slip up over her knees at parties until someone complimented her on her legs. Then she pretended to be embarrassed and pulled the dress down.

Nanny was also an uninhibited low comic. She would take out her false teeth and pull her lower lip over her nose for the amusement of her grandchildren. She had a loud, uninhibited belch, which sent Carol and her sister into fits of giggles. Nanny's broad, physical humor eventually surfaced in Burnett's own comedy style. In fact, she modelled one character--the "Little Old Lady"--directly on Nanny.

> I approached it thinking of my grandmother. She used to run her tongue over her false teeth to make sure they'd stay in because they were store bought. She couldn't afford to go to a dentist and have her teeth fixed. Now some people might say, "You're making fun of old people." But I remember my grandmother doing it and it became a character point with me--it gave me something physical to do.[4]

Burnett eventually made her mark in a style comprised of offbeat vocalisms, facial mugging, and slapstick--often violent. Her taste for this kind of material may have come from growing up with Nanny's one-woman show--coupled with her experience as the daughter of alcholic parents who occasionally staged

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[4]Carol Burnett, Personal Interview.

violent fights. "I was always most comfortable doing physical comedy," says Burnett. "It's a great release--falling down, getting punched, hitting people back--all the screaming roles."[5]

Early in her career, Burnett's physical excesses had her labeled "The Mugger." As she told Ms. magazine: "When I started out, it was the era of mugging. I had a great feel for it, and it wasn't until about the sixth year of our show that I realized I could be funny without crossing my eyes. A growing sense of security made me stop mugging and putting down my looks."[6]

Making fun of peculiarities in one's appearance was standard fare for comics. Jimmy Durante made quips about his nose; Jack Benny was comedically vain about his toupee; and Joe E. Brown poked fun at his mouth. Comediennes like Phyllis Diller or Joan Rivers were apt to put down their lack of sexual attractiveness--mainly their "flat chests."

The fact that comediennes like Carol Burnett emphasized their supposed lack of sex appeal probably reflects women's general worry about their desirability as a function of their looks and the particular importance of beauty to the female performer. Female

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[5]Ibid.

[6]Susan Dworkin, "Carol Burnett--Getting On With It," Ms., September 1983, p. 43.

performers, even more than male, are often subject to comments about their sex appeal or lack thereof. When Burnett hosted her own television variety show, audience members would sometimes twit her about her figure, as illustrated by the following exchange:

> Once someone in my television audience asked what my measurements were. I said: "37-24-38--but not necessarily in that order." It got a big laugh, so for a long time after that I would do put down jokes on myself. I wanted to strike first so nobody else would. It's a self-protective measure.[7]

The humor of Burnett's remark is based on inappropriateness, comic misdirection, and a surprise twist at the end. She sets up a model of a standard beauty contest figure, applies it inappropriately to herself, and directs the audience to believe that she foolishly believes--or intends the audience to believe--that she fits that model. The numbers 37-24-38 are conventionally understood to imply a voluptuous figure. By announcing that the numbers are "not necessarily in that order," Burnett abstracts the numbers from their implied meaning and suggests changing their order--thus establishing a surprising new meaning.

Burnett's inappropriateness in comparing her figure with that of a Marilyn Monroe type relates to Arthur Koestler's concept of humor as "the fusion of incompatible

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[7]Carol Burnett, Personal Interview.

matrices"[8]. Her unrealistically elevated self-image (in this case, a 37-24-38 inch figure) relates to the Platonic theory of comedy as based on lack of self knowledge. It is unlikely that Burnett made a step-by-step analysis of the comic potential of her questioner's remark and then consciously decided to utilize the above comic devices. Instead, we can surmise that she created humor by tuning in to some unconscious, long-ingrained habit of mind and responded with dazzling speed. That ability to quickly externalize some unconscious thought pattern for the element of surprise and abruptness is at the core of comedy.

The remark also works particularly well because Burnett diffuses any potential tension inherent in the provocative nature of the man's question. The man in the audience publicly challenges Burnett's sexual attractiveness. Burnett responds by refusing to challenge directly any hostility implicit in the remark. Instead, she renders his latent hostility funny through comic exaggeration that she turns on herself. She emerges as the manipulator of the situation--while still retaining audience sympathy as a "nice girl" who is unfortunately not (as the expression goes) "well-endowed."

Burnett's self-denigration was typical of women's

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[8]Humor and Laughter: Theory, Research, and Applications, p. 247.

humor that was prevalent during the early years of her television show. Besides the general social expectations placed on comediennes, it is probable that Burnett's technique of diffusing hostility came of out a childhood where directly confronting her parents' sometimes violent tempers (especially under the influence of alcohol) would have been a poor survival tactic.

It is also likely that, as a child, Burnett learned the technique of the quick comic quip from her parents, who could also be highly amusing.

> My dad was like a Jimmy Stewart--very laid back funny. My mother and I had a lot of laughs together. She had a great sense of humor--caustic, biting, and not very diplomatic. She wasn't always right, but she let you know how she felt about something or somebody, and didn't back down because of what they were.[9]

Despite the laughs, some of that biting sense of humor left scars on her plain daughter

> My mother was a petite woman with Joan Crawford eyes. I grew to be five feet six, with buckteeth, stringy brown hair, and ninety pounds wringing wet. My mother was a beautiful woman, and she pretty well drummed it into me that I'd better not try to make it in the looks department. I think that when I went into comedy, I subconsciously decided to hit myself first before anyone else did. I'll put down my figure. I'll put down my face. I'll do the flat chested jokes. The kind of humor that was acceptable for a woman was being man-crazy and putting yourself down. I wanted to strike first so nobody else would. That was before the feminist movement took hold, and now, I would never do that.[10]

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[9]Carol Burnett, Personal Interview.

[10]Ibid.

What Carol's mother did encourage was a career in writing--her own original ambition--telling her daughter to "go out and make something of your life. No matter what you look like, you can always write."[11] For a time Carol was the editor of her high school paper. But even from an early age, she wanted to perform. When she was still a child, she would put on a pretend radio show for her neighbors. Opening the window, she would holler out an entire show featuring herself as both announcer and guest singer. Her greatest thrill came the day a neighbor yelled, "Turn that damn radio off!" Burnett smiles. "It was fantastic! I was always wanting to be heard, yet be invisible."[12]

The "singing spot" on her pretend radio show probably had its seeds in Carol's own early relationship with her clever mother.

> I loved it when I could get her to tell stories or sit in the kitchen and play her ukelele. She had a wonderful ear for music. She taught me all kinds of old songs. I'd sing and she'd do the harmony.[13]

Eventually, Burnett was to create variety shows on network television with musically accomplished co-stars such as Julie Andrews, Beverly Sills, Dolly Parton, and

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[11]Carol Burnett, Personal Interview.

[12]Richard Meryman, "Carol Burnett's Own Story," McCall's, February 19, 1976, p. 165.

[13]Ibid.

Placido Domingo.

Burnett's television specials with Andrews and Sills featured Carol as the less glamorous, less sophisticated, ostensibly less talented woman (much as she must have seen herself in relation to her beautiful mother). Burnett's co-stars were well-trained sopranos, and fit an idealized mode of ladylike femininity. Burnett herself played the part of the easily intimidated all-American girl--ordinary to the point of plainness. Burnett implies that, like most of her audience, she does not belong at Carnegie Hall or the Metropolitan Opera.

In the course of each television special, the mixture of comedy and music reveals a quasi-plot. Her co-stars intimidate Burnett early in the show. But by the end, they reveal their admiration for her straightforwardness and more down-to-earth talents. Buoyed up by this reassurance, Burnett sings some pop songs in a pleasant alto voice. After a certain amount of kidding around--particularly of the pretensions of "high art," Burnett and her co-stars wind up expressing their mutual affection and singing harmoniously as a team.

In the context of Burnett's relationship with her mother, it is pertinent to note the comments of the psychologists Seymore and Rhoda Fisher.

> We believe that some of the techniques comedians develop are an attempt to establish a reconciliation with the mother. They become very sensitive to moods and learn to kid in a way to protect her. We found that the comic uses humor to

protect and comfort people. And the person he is particularly trying to protect is his mother.[14]

In a broad sense, these television specials can be taken loosely as Burnett's reconciliation with a mother figure--her talented, feminine co-star. But in the specials, the star usually winds up comforting and reassuring Burnett after the latter indulges in a bout of comedic naughtiness. The move from farcical antagonism to comfort flavors the shows with humor and warmth.

Burnett's own weekly variety show offered the same mixture. The show usually consisted of farcical sketches interwoven with songs and concluded with Burnett's singing a touching ballad, creating what Oliver Goldsmith termed "sentimental comedy."

As noted in my chapter on Lucille Ball, the notion of sentimental comedy also applies to the situation comedy I Love Lucy with its middle-class characters and its mixture of farce and family romance. Phyllis Diller also maintains her stage character as a beleaguered housewife despite her own wealth and sophistication. In her television specials and her comedy variety show, Burnett portrayed herself as like the masses who tuned in to her program. The audience for popular entertainment often enjoy a contemporary variation of "sentimental

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[14]Seymore and Rhoda Fisher, Pretend the World is Funny and Forever, (New York: Random House, 1981), p. 52.

comedy." Performers such as Burnett, Ball, and Diller present themselves as funny versions of fundamentally average women.

That mixture of mockery and adulation with which Burnett treats opera and the concert stage also comes into play in her burlesques of famous film and glamour stars--always popular sketches on her variety show. When Burnett was a child, movies permeated her life. When Burnett was a toddler, her father briefly managed a movie house. Her mother was working and used the movies as an all-day babysitter. Later, as a pre-teenager, Carol escaped her home situation by going to eight movies a week. In the darkened movie theatre, she entered a fantasy world of beautiful actors, gorgeous clothes, and happy endings. Then she would come home and pretend to be the glamourous stars of the late 40's and early 1950's. Eventually, Burnett incorporated her childhood games into movie spoofs on her own television program.

> I've got the costumes, the wigs, and an orchestra. I've grown up and I'm still playing the same games. I've been Betty Grable, Joan Crawford, Bette Davis, Joan Fontaine. Somebody asked me once, 'Answer right away. How old do you feel?' I said, 'Eleven.' It popped right out. I don't think I ever grew beyond eleven. I guess that's when everything was being ground in.[15]

In this context, it is interesting to note the

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[15]Richard Meryman, "Carol Burnett's Own Story," McCall's, February 19, 1976, p. 167.

results of a study conducted by Harvey Mindess, director of the graduate psychology program at Antioch University. Mindess concluded that "the ability to regress into a more childlike view of the world is a crucial element in being genuinely funny."[16]

As a teenager, Carol never admitted her own performing ambitions--acting was for the beautiful people in the movies. When Burnett graduated from Hollywood High School, her mother encouraged her to go to journalism school. Burnett wanted the University of California at Los Angeles--which had a Theatre Arts program and no journalism major--and told her mother she was interested in the playwriting course. But her real ambitions lay elsewhere.

> My dream was the immediate acceptance that comes with performing--people looking at you and knowing who you are and appreciating you. Being loved![17]

It is a truism that performers in general crave love and acceptance. Clearly Burnett is no exception. The psychologist Dr. Samuel Janus commented, "Early in life, comedians stumble on humor as a way of making people like them, and later, as adults, use it to get

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[16]Harvey Mindess, "Study of the Comic Personality," American Journal of Psychoanalysis, October, 1973, p. 121.

[17]Richard Meryman, "Carol Burnett's Own Story," McCall's, February 19, 1976, p. 168.

attention."[18]

Whatever we may speculate about her motivation, Burnett did not have the forty-two dollar tuition fee necessary to enroll in the theatre program. She did, however, have an intense drive to perform and an intense imagination. Her imagination took the form of visualizing the arrival of the money from some unknown source. Every morning she would get up and look in her mailbox across the lobby of her apartment building. One morning the mailbox had a white envelope with her name on the outside. Inside was a fifty dollar bill--left by an anonymous donor.

The first semester at UCLA, Burnett had a small comedy role as a farm girl in a production of Oklahoma. When she said her line, everyone laughed. It was a magic moment. For the first time, Burnett forgot her looks and felt, finally, at home.

After that, Burnett appeared in other musical comedies produced at UCLA. She was in the chorus of South Pacific. Next, she performed "Adelaide's Lament" in Guys and Dolls. Her grandmother and mother, who remained sober, came. They were, apparently, amazed by her talent and the audience response. Carol decided on a career in musical comedy, and started visualizing New

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[18]Samuel Janus," The Psychology of Comedy," American Journal of Psychoanalysis, June, 1978, p. 89.

York. Again, she had no money, but at the party after her closing performance exam in Theatre Arts, a man offered to lend her and Don Saroyan, a fellow student, $1,000--if they would pay it back in five years and never reveal his name.

Once in New York, she did the usual assortment of odd jobs to survive. She also married Saroyan, a union that was to last four years. Finally, newly separated from Saroyan and after just missing out on Richard Rogers' Babes in Arms, she got a phone call. George Abbott was directing an off-Broadway show called Once Upon a Mattress and wanted her to audition. According to her own report, Burnett remembers riding on the subway to the theatre, feeling calmly certain that she would get the part. Back in California, she had visualized that her first break in the New York theatre would be in a play directed by George Abbott. True to her vision, she was hired to play the female lead.

Like many of the movie spoofs that were to become staples of her television show, Mattress was written as a burlesque on the excesses of glamorous femininity--in this case the notion of extreme, ladylike delicacy. Prince Dauntless, 36 years old, has never married, because his mother, the Queen, devises trick tests to defeat any eligible princesses--meanwhile pronouncing a law that until Dauntless weds, no one else can. To save the honor of his pregnant girlfriend, Sir Harry fetches

Princess Winifred (Burnett) from a far-off kingdom.

But instead of behaving with the ladylike reserve we usually expect from a fairytale princess, the hyper-athletic Winifred swims the moat in order to get to the prince and inadvertently knocks down half the court as she blasts out a ditty entitled "I'm Shy"--revealing her inner insecurity and need for love.

Dauntless is smitten, and to defeat the match, Mama decides to test Winifred for the one aristocratic quality she is sure she lacks--sensitivity. She places a pea beneath twenty mattresses and gives Winifred a sleeping draught. If Winifred sleeps, it will prove she is no true princess. Winifred, as enacted by Burnett, is a character that was to form an essential part of the Burnett persona. She is over-eager, tomboyish, (Winifred's nickname is "Fred"), hyper-energized (she dances the "Polish Panic"--devised by the Queen to tire her out--and while the court drops around her, cries "Let's do it again!"), good-natured, unpretentious, affectionate, insecure, loud, and plain.

In the play, Burnett uses gestures, including visual and vocal mugging, that she was to enlarge upon later. She is possessed of an outraged squawk, a coy squeal, and a throaty growl to indicate how her wedding night will leave her "thoroughly satisfied." She bats girlish eyelashes--a hairsbreadth away from tears--and without a pause for breath, shoves Dauntless aside with

truckdriver machismo to demonstrate her desire to lift weights to pass his mother's test. She puckers up for a good night smooch by shifting her lips horizontally toward Dauntless' mouth--then tenderly touches the kiss he plants on her cheek.

Burnett's emotional range gives the part of Winifred vulnerability under the farce--and lightens up our sense of her insecurity with humor. Part of that humor comes from a comic paradox: she looks like an adult, but she acts like a child. Children love to make funny faces and strange sounds. Burnett does too. She also mugs emotions that are extreme, transparently clear, and subject to sudden change--like those of a child. "Mugging" is an artificial style of acting, and the unrealness creates a comic distance. In the framework of comedy, childish personality traits become amusing. The full-out, intense, quicksilver emotions of a child mismatch the social expectations we have of adults. The comedienne who takes on these traits becomes ridiculous--and funny.

Burnett's childlike behavior accords with Freud's theory of the comic character as an adult becoming a child. Her inept, childlike mimicry is evident in her inept attempt to imitate the delicacy of a fairy tale princess. By playing the role of the heroine of a child's fairytale, Burnett is most obviously childlike. Her manner, which couples pre-adolescent ungainliness,

exaggerated emotionality, mugging, and mimicry further emphasizes the childlike aspect of her personality. Thus, both by role and by manner, Burnett comedically reduces herself to a child.

Burnett's mugging also creates shifts in voice and expression that are so exaggerated and rapid that they seem disengaged from the normal flow of emotion that creates human expression. The mugging suggests something mechanical--an act of will imposed on the emotions--and in that sense exemplifies the Bergsonian theory of comedy as the rigidification of human behavior. Mugging transforms normal facial and bodily expressions into something exaggerated beyond an expression of human emotions and therefore "thinglike." It is a testament to Burnett's skill and sensitivity, that underneath her mugging, we can still sense genuine feeling. Underneath the Bergsonian mechanization of gesture, we can still sense the woman.

In true fairy tale fashion, Burnett does eventually marry the Prince. (Persuaded by his desperately pregnant girlfriend, Sir Harry has planted a mace beneath her mattress.) In a role reversal, Dauntless takes on Winifred's strength and stands up to his domineering mother. And through his love, the tomboyish Princess Winifred is able at last to believe that she is an attractive woman. Combining forces, they will both live happily ever after.

The elements that worked so well for Burnett in Once Upon a Mattress were played out in various shadings in many of Burnett's other sketches and songs. In 1957, Burnett became a television regular on The Gary Moore Show and appeared on The Ed Sullivan Show singing "I Made a Fool of Myself over John Foster Dulles." With the same gusto that made her so eager for marriage that she swam a moat, she sings of her crush on Dulles with cross-eyed, comical conviction. Wearing a fairy tale crown, she bowls over Moore with good-natured lust, teasing him with "all smoke and no fire...?"[19]

Burnett's own romantic life was more satisfactory. Divorced from Saroyan, she met Joe Hamilton, the producer of The Gary Moore Show. Hamilton, the father of eight children, was separated from his wife. Despite gossip, Burnet and Hamilton were married in 1962--a union that was to produce Burnett's three daughters, and lasted until a divorce in 1982.

In 1966 Burnett was given her own show on CBS--an hour long comedy-variety special that was on the air until 1977. She opened The Carol Burnett Show by appearing as herself in a question/answer session with the audience. Following that came a series of comedy sketches and some songs. Burnett played a variety of characters, joined by her regular ensemble--Harvey

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[19]"The Gary Moore Show," CBS, June 12, 1957.

Corman, Vicki Lawrence, Tim Conway--and guest stars. This program was to form the core of Burnett's public image and comedic characterizations, and she was to use it as a springboard to other television specials and films.

Much of Burnett's comedy is characterized by tremendous energy, physicality, and a willingness to take "unladylike" risks. Swinging doors dump her into potted palms. Leg casts trip her onto trays of cocktails. Giraffe-limbed and rubber-faced, she lampoons Gloria Swanson in "Sunset Boulevard" as a screaming harridan. She tosses back a hyper-fluffed wig as Farrah Fawcett and coughs her way through Ali McGraw's death scene in Love Story like a commercial for Vicks Vaporub. As "Starlet O'Hara," she descends the staircase of a burned-out southern mansion in a dress she has whipped up out of some old velvet curtains. She has forgotten to take out the curtain rods, and they poke her shoulders out into linebacker proportions.

She also plays her own sexuality for laughs. When handsome guest star Lyle Wagoner touches her, she squeaks with glee and almost collapses. In a spoof on ancient Rome, she plays an empress outfitted like Theda Bara, who makes broad advances to a slave (Sid Caesar), who accidentally stabs her and then calls for an orgy.

In 1982, Burnett played "Miss Hannigan" in the film Annie. Miss Hannigan, the sex-starved mistress of the

orphanage that houses Annie, is close to the kind of character Burnett played on her television show. "What attracted me to Miss Hannigan was the chance to do something outrageous on film--to really cut loose the way I do in my TV sketches."[20]

Carol Sobieski, the screenwriter for the musical, comments: "Miss Hannigan is sexually very aggressive, which people can take better in comedy than straight drama."[21] Miss Hannigan's sexuality, like that of many of Burnett's sketch characters, is ultimately inept and a cause for humiliation. In one scene Hannigan/Burnett is in bed responding passionately to a man making love. The camera pulls back to show her kissing the radio broadcasting the man's voice, as the giggling orphans peep at her through the window. She screams hysterically "Get away!" ripping the shade as she pulls it down. Just before the humiliation of the moment can sink in, Burnett plays it for laughs by swigging gin from a flower vase.

'Hannigan's costume is the fashion equivalent of her failed, sleazy attempt at romance. Miss Hannigan lunges after the orphans slathered in ruffles, with snagged nylons and a crimson crepe skirt pulled tight across her hips and gathered under her belly in a baroque bouquet of

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[20]Carol Burnett, Personal Interview.

[21]Carol Sobieski, Personal Interview held on the film set of Annie, June 9, 1982.

draperies topped by a rosette.

> Something physical can give you a whole new attitude. Sometimes I had no idea what I was going to do with a character until I put the costume on. Then the voice developed, and then the psychology.[22]

The costume need not be as exaggerated as Miss Hannigan's ruffles or the hip hugging chains of a vamp/empress, but even when chic, it usually presaged some social humiliation. (As noted earlier, Freud made a strong correlation between comedy and humiliation.)

> We've done sketches where Harvey (Korman--a regular on Burnett's variety show) and I played a successful married couple, dressed to the nines. In sketch comedy, the better dressed you are when things happen to you, the funnier it is. What can be funny about having trouble sitting down in a pair of slacks in a restaurant? It's much funnier if you're very nicely dressed in a tight, beaded dress, where you can't really move or even cross your legs and you have no idea he was bringing you to this hamburger joint.[23]

Like glamour and sex-appeal, domesticity is another aspect of the stereotypically "feminine" woman. Here too, Burnett can be singularly inept. In one of her most outrageous sketches, she is beset by commercial household products. In one skit, Burnett comes in wearing a rumpled bathrobe ready to do battle with the household laundry. She carries the basket of dirty clothes over to the washing machine and opens the lid. A muscular male arm brandishing a popular brand of laundry detergent (a

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[22]Carol Burnett, Personal Interview.

[23]Ibid.

current television commercial) comes out of the washer. When Burnett tries to put the clothes in the machine, they are tossed out. Again she tries to stuff in the clothes--and again they are thrown out. Finally, she approaches the the machine and peers in suspiciously. The muscular arm comes out, makes a fist, and socks her in the jaw. She falls back on the floor and crouches there--a wounded, enraged, but cunning animal. She creeps up on the machine, stuffs the clothes in, and swiftly slams down the lid and locks it. As she is staring at the machine with satisfaction, it shudders, and begins to grow--up and up until it reaches the ceiling and smashes the plaster. Burnett trots over to a sink full of dishes and opens a window. Dozens of doves fly in, nesting on her hair and shoulders and filling the kitchen with a wild beating of wings and the prospect of insurmountable quantities of guano. Horrified, she beats them back. Then, shaken, Burnett opens the refrigerator. She emerges with a cracker and margerine--as someone shoves a huge crown on her head. She manages to tear the crown off and flings it aside--a look of profound disgust on her face. By now the washing machine has returned to its former size (amid the fallen plaster). She approaches it with all due caution and snatches out her clothes. She takes the damp clothes off-camera into the backyard. Moments later, the Ajax white knight gallops past the window. We hear a terrible

scream. Burnett staggers back into the kitchen--skewered by a lance. Then she dies.

To gauge the savageness of this skit, we need only look at the work of Burnett's closest predecessor, the slapstick comedy of Lucille Ball as "Lucy." Lucy was famous for getting herself into scrapes, often complete with ridiculous costumes. But no matter how outrageous the situation or her own behavior, Lucy always remained fundamentally innocent, childishly silly, and unharmed. If she made a sexual advance, it was only towards her husband Ricky and in the guise of affection. If she became more insistent, it was only when masquerading (along with Ethel) as a ridiculous hillbilly, in an attempt to win back her husband's attention. Hers was not the failed attempt at glamour by a fundamentally unglamourous woman (as is implied by much of Burnett's work, including her spoofs of movie stars). Lucy was always understood to be attractive and basically domestically competent and content. The birth of Little Ricky--the epitome of sentimental farce--presented Lucy as a joyous mother and housewife.

Burnett's skit, by way of contrast, is absurd theatre of cruelty, with herself as chief victim. It is comedy of the combat zone: Burnett vs. a malevolent universe. Her earlier pantomime scene from Once Upon a Mattress set up a similar situation when Burnett confronted a lump beneath her mattress. But in the fairy

tale, Burnett ultimately triumphed. The lump which had seemed to be her downfall was actually her savior. Her sexuality in Mattress is also more innocent than in her later sketches. In her romantic scenes with the Prince, both her behavior and her costumes are soft, modest, and feminine.

Unlike the musical comedy, the sketches in her own television show were specifically designed to exploit Burnett's comedic talent. Also, a difference in genre may predicate a difference in characterization. As the heroine of what is essentially a romantic farce, Carol must be possessed of a certain romanticism under her tomboyish antics. The Queen takes over the role of the funny villainess--a role that Carol was later to play successfully in many of her sketches.

The protagonist of a comedic film, play, or continuous sitcom is apt to be essentially likable and unharmed--as was Lucy. The audience usually identifies with and roots for the protagonist and tends to confuse the actress with her role. But in sketch comedy, the actress plays such a large variety of roles within a short space of time that the audience is less likely to confuse the actress with the role or identify with an ongoing heroine. As a sketch performer, Burnett therefore has the freedom to play everything from villain to victim to fool.

To succeed as a star personality, Burnett must

still establish herself as a likable protagonist. She accomplishes this by appearings as her good-natured self in her opening question/answer session with the audience. In contrast to the exaggerated, farcical, artificial nature of many of the sketches, the opening is left deliberately unrehearsed and "real." Burnett presents herself as amateurish--only a step removed from the average audience member.

> When we first started doing the question and answer session with audience, I was frightened. But we decided to take a chance and put it on the air. The questions were wonderful--some of them were so bad even our writers couldn't come up with them and people saw there was truth in it. We'd leave in some dumb answers on my part and times when I was stumped. I don't really look like I know what I'm doing up there.[24]

What audiences respond to when Carol appears as herself is a sense of her "niceness." She is like them--only funnier and nicer. It is therefore, all the more curious that the sketch character most closely identified with Burnett--her personal favorite and the one that comes nearest to reflecting the situation of the average housewife--is Eunice. Now, Eunice is many things--loud, mean-spirited, self-deluded, pathetic, and sometimes drunk. One thing she is not is nice.

Eunice was first developed as a character in a sketch created and performed by writers Dick Clair and

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[24]Carol Burnett, Personal Interview.

Jenna McMahon in the 1960's. Clair and McMahon went on talk shows with a routine about an actor who won an Academy Award and came home to visit his vituperative sister Eunice (played by McMahon) The family ignored him and talked about their dog. (When Merv Griffin played the actor, he picked up McMahon's baby and plaintively adlibbed "I just won the Academy Award.")

When Clair and McMahon revised the material as a sketch for Burnett, they made the brother a writer and added a mother. In one draft, Carol was the mother and Vicki Lawrence played Eunice. Finally, Lawrence was made the mother. McMahon says, "Vicki was astonishing in the role. It was as if she was possessed. She started doing it in her twenties and she never wore any make-up--just that wig and glasses."[25] "We wrote them as mid-Western characters," says Clair. "Jenna's mother is from Kansas City and we based Mama on her. We expected them to play it straight, but at the run-through, Carol picked up a fan and drawled 'Ooowee! Is it hot!' I thought it was a new character. But every other line was the same, and it was hilarious--and heartbreaking. We wrote Eunice as a thoughtless woman, but Carol put vulnerability into it."[26]

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[25]Jenna McMahon, Personal Interview held at her home in Hollywood, California, June 22, 1982

[26]Dick Clair, Personal Interview held at McMahon's home in Hollywood, California, June 22, 1982.

Clair and McMahon, of course, did most of the writing, but Burnett contributed special touches--often based on her own life.

> There's the time Mama gives Eunice the beer. This is after she's already called her names for drinking and told her to stop. I felt it was important to put that in because it happened with my grandmother and mother once. My mother had been on the wagon for a few weeks when my grandmother offered her a drink. It's a common thing in families when the alcoholic tries to quit, the other person finds they're left without a job.
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> I based Eunice on my mother, even though Eunice doesn't look like her. My mother was very beautiful, but she felt like a failure, and as she got older she tried to find solace in drinking--as Eunice starts to do. I remember my mother saying, "If only this or that hadn't happened, I could have been something." She made excuses like she couldn't leave me. It was the ultimate cop-out of giving up too soon. She was bright...Maybe things were stacked against her...I don't know.[27]

As Eunice, Burnett's body finds a slapstick equivalent for the the raging disappointment of her firey, talented, frustrated mother. The eyes pop with outrage. The voice pole-vaults the registers. The Adam's apple heaves as she gulps down yet another insult. Then there's the arm--flung upward on a tidal wave of determination--only to collapse half-way through as Eunice's body realizes, perhaps even before her mind, the futility of it all.

With the pathos of that defeated arm, Eunice's wardrobe reaches for tasteful femininity--and misses. Her skinny neck is accentuated by a bodice made of floral

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[27]Carol Burnett, Personal Interview.

chiffon; her mousy brown hair is lacquered into beauty parlor precision; she attends a funeral wearing a filmy black dress--and white shoes.

> I wanted to do Eunice with a Texas accent, but I really got into her when I saw what Bob Mackie(the costume designer made famous by The Carol Burnett Show, and, later, Cher) had me in--the wig that looked like she got a permanent every month, the old print dress, the taste in shoes.[28]

Her exaggerated gestures and wardrobe make Eunice a broadly comic sketch character. But when Burnett performed the role in a ninety-minute special called Eunice, the farce slippped into pathos and a moment of real truth about the hopelessness of Eunice's life. "We played it totally straight at one rehearsal," says Burnett, "The result was pure Tennessee Williams."[29]

Eunice is the most memorable and complex of the characters Burnett created as part of her eleven-year stint as host of her own comedy/variety show. In both writing and performance, Eunice and her husband Ed (Harvey Korman) and Mama (Vicki Lawrence) have a substance that extends beyond their origin as sketch characters. The "Eunice" sketches became a regular feature on the variety show, establishing a continuing relationship with the audience somewhat like that of a situation comedy. In fact, Vicki Lawrence, who played

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[28]Ibid.

[29]Ibid.

Mama, was later able to star in a spin-off version of the "Eunice" episodes called "Mama's Family."

Eunice and her family were able to evolve from farcical, sketch "types" to fully developed characters with serious dimensions. Burnett's other sketch characters did not evolve in the same way, but the most memorable episodes also reflect a depth of feeling that goes beyond mere amusement. That depth probably comes out of some core of Burnett's personality that she transmits to each role, no matter how superficially absurd.

Burnett's plays roles range from a dumb but buxom secretary to a wistful charlady to a sex-starved Roman empress. Since her roles are so varied, it is difficult to find a common denominator or theatrical "spine" that connects all of them. Clearly, there must be one, since a Burnett sketch character is not the same as, say, a sketch character performed by Lily Tomlin or Gilda Radner. In order to attempt to find some sort of consistency among Burnett's sketch roles, I would therefore like to review some of her outstanding characterizations and note other related sketch roles.

Foremost among Burnett's sketch roles is, of course, Eunice. Eunice's mixture of outrageous funniness, pathos, rage, fantasy, and desperately inept femininity are traits found in many of the comedienne's other roles such as her numerous spoofs on movie stars.

These include Gloria Swanson's aging silent movie star in Sunset Boulevard; Vivienne Leigh's vivacious Southern belle in Gone with the Wind; Ali Magraw's romantically doomed co-ed in Love Story; and the many heroines of the 1940's "women's pictures" as portrayed by Betty Grable, Joan Crawford, Bette Davis, Joan Fontaine, Rita Hayworth, etc.

What all these roles have in common is that they epitomize issues of femininity and glamour. Eunice partly defines herself by the same issues--as evidenced by her pearls, chiffons, and lacquered pincurls. But if Eunice is the common woman dreaming of being a star, these are the roles played by the stars themselves--the roles that provided a popular definition of femininity--for Eunice and other women.

Most of these roles were played by actresses renowned for their beauty. In the few cases where the actresses were not (or were no longer) stunning by Hollywood standards, they were usually highly attractive in their own, more individualistic way or possessed remnants of their former beauty. The movie plots in which they were embroiled often showed their fall from the glamourous ideal and set them in desperate competitition with ingenues. When Burnett plays the roles, she mocks not only the notion of glamour but also the possibility of herself ever possessing either glamour or femininity. From the moment she appears in costume,

the audience is aware that she does not look as beautiful as the original. We are given to understand that Burnett's own looks are somehow wrong for a woman. Hers is a comedically inept attempt at glamour, and the sketches often take on a kind of pathos and anger under the farce.

Even when Burnett plays a child star, she deals with the issues of ultra-femininity. One of her early sketches spoofs Shirley Temple, a diminutive darling of 1930's movies--and the role model for little girls when Burnett was a child. Burnett's version--"Shirley Dimple"--is a sticky-sweet little girl, outfitted in a confection of ribbons, ruffles, flounces, banana curls, and bloomers that look ridiculous on Burnett's 5'9", grown-up frame.

It is interesting to compare Burnett's "Shirley Dimple" with Lily Tomlin's "Edith Ann." Both are oversized, truculent little girls. But where "Dimple" satirizes the notion of cute little-girlishness, "Edith Ann" is more of an all-round kid, tomboyish, naive, and smart-alecky. In fact, "Dimple" is not particularly childlike at all except in her affected mannerisms. As played by Burnett, "Shirley Dimple" is actually an over-aged, bad-tempered, over-the-hill actress. In fact, "Shirley Dimple" is in many ways a younger, sillier version of the reclusive, ultimately mad has-been actress who stars in Sunset Boulevard.

The character of "Eunice" is also related to the notion of defeated fantasies of glamour. Like the actress characters, "Eunice" is forced to face her own aging and the compromise of her hopes and dreams. Eunice turns from such self-knowledge with comic outrage. Burnett notes that when she played "Eunice" without exaggerating for comic effect, "The result was pure Tennessee Williams."[30] Williams is famous for his portrayal of tragic Southern belles, the most famous being Blanche Dubois, the nymphomaniac descendant of plantation owners who drifts into mad fantasies of gentleman callers. Like Williams' plays, Burnett's sketches often deal with the heroine's defeated hopes for romance and glamour, but from a comic perspective.

While "Eunice's" fantasy life may have revolved around notions of Hollywood glamour, her daily life trapped her in a routine of drab domesticity. Many of Burnett's most famous sketches show her as the "common woman," the housewife and mother. But while the situations are ordinary, as played by Burnett, they are rife with humiliation, resentment, and often slapstick violence. Despite her intentions of spending an affectionate Christmas with her husband, she soon finds herself insulted. She returns tit for tat and winds up in an argument that culminates in a slapstick fight.

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[30]Ibid.

Another sketch is based on Burnett's real experience in raising a teen-age sister while married. She bribes a neighbor's son to take the sister on a walk so she can be alone with her husband, hoping for a romantic evening. But her husband ignores her to read the newspaper. The date turns out poorly (the sister carries her date over a mud puddle and drops him). When the sister retreats into the kitchen, Burnett bets her husband that her sister is crying her eyes out--he says that she is simply stuffing her face. The sister emerges from the kitchen with a huge sandwich, pushing open a swinging door to dump Burnett into a potted palm.

In an extended pantomime sketch, Burnett is assaulted by household products. In another sketch, her hopes for a warm, family Christmas are torpedoed when she and her husband become entangled in a minor disagreement that escalates into a vicious fight. If Lucille Ball plays the American housewife as an adorable clown, then Burnett plays her as an angry victim. Burnett points out the difference between her sensibility and that of Ball:

> Ball's comedy came out of an era that was all fun and nonsense. When I started on The Gary Moore Show, it was the same way--all slapstick and kooky--nothing biting. Then along came Mike Nichols and Elaine May, cerebral satirists who were also terrific comedy actors. I was in the middle of an evolving period of comedy. I hope I changed right along with it. Our comedy could be a little darker because of the times. Then along came Lily Tomlin who was even darker.[31]

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[31]Ibid.

Another motif that runs through Burnett's sketches is that of Burnett as the inept sexual aggressor. I have already noted her comedically clumsy pursuit of Gary Moore and Sid Caesar, and in a contemporary sketch set in a ski lodge, Burnett is again the aggressor. She plays an accident-prone husband-hunter who has gone skiing in hopes of meeting a man and winds up with a broken arm. Stuck in the ski lodge, she meets a man who broke his leg when she tripped him with her luggage. As she pursues him, she accidentally spills hot rum down his shirt, pierces his hand with a pen, and lands them both on the floor in a heap of new injuries.

The inept sexual pursuer is a traditional comic type played by both men and women. However, if a man is clumsy in his pursuit, he might still be considered endearing and ultimately succeed in his romantic ambitions. (A good contemporary example of this farcical type is a typical Woody Allen hero, particularly in the play and film Play It Again, Sam.) But when the female protagonist of a play, film, or sketch, acts as the pursuer, she is conventionally portrayed as unattractive, unfeminine, and ultimately unsuccessful. It is for this reason that "Lucy Ricardo" only pursues "Ricky" when disguised as a homely hillbilly. When Burnett pursues her various co-stars in these sketches, the audience is given to understand that she is again mocking the notion of her own femininity.

However, conventions of sex role behavior are not always the same as actual behavior or feelings. One of Burnett's charms as a performer has been her willingness to expose the infatuations, insecurities, and rejections that plague most women. For every woman who feels like the idealized object of desire, there are probably dozens who, like men, feel like awkward pursuers. Paradoxically, it is Burnett's lack of conventional "femininity" that makes her seem like the average woman. Her supposed lack of femininity leads to Burnett's "tomboyish" behavior. She is famous for her "Tarzan yell"--an ear-blasting version of macho call of the "King of the Apes." On one of her variety shows, she suddenly bursts into a deep-voiced rendition of a song sung by the male lead in Carousel: "I wonder what he'll think of me/ I guess he'll call me the 'old man.'"[32] On another show, Burnett performs a duet with the ladylike soprano Julie Andrews. Burnettt describes Andrews as a graceful lady. Andrews in turn sings about Burnett's down-to-earth appeal--"You're a little kid at a ball game waving his pennant in the breeze/ you're our boys overseas!" [33]

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[32]"My Boy Bill," Carousel, by Oscar Hammerstein II and Richard Rogers, vocal score published by Williamson Music, Inc., 1945.

[33]Julie and Carol at Carnegie Hall, CBS June 11, 1962.

If we draw a through-line through most of Burnett's sketches, we arrive at a particular stance that she takes toward the the conventional female sex role. According to the sketches, femininity is a glamourized image that is beyond Burnett's grasp. Burnett's characters, somehow, cannot get hold of what seems to be expected of them as women. Confronting their own failure with bruised defiance, they are alternatively desperate, angry, outrageous, tomboyish, angry--and funny.

The underlying premise of many of her sketches is that Carol Burnett is an essentially unfeminine, unbeautiful woman who does not fit the idealized image our society assigns to women. Her comedy is an outrageous comment on that image and on her failed attempt to fit herself into it.

The radical questioning of conventional roles was part of the entire social upheaval that characterized the late 1960's and 1970's. Burnett's comedy/variety did not reflect the social clashes of the time as directly as, say, the Norman Lear situation comedies of the 1970's, which took their subject matter from contemporary controversies. But Burnett's show, which began in 1966 and lasted through 1977, was also a product of its time, both because it was the first comedy/variety show to be hosted by a woman and because of its sensibility. As Burnett notes, I Love Lucy came out of the 1950's, the age of surface conformity. In keeping with its era, Lucy

projected an image of stable, happy domestic life spiced with innocent zaniness. (The serious conflicts of the Ball/Arnaz marriage, which ultimately culminated in their divorce, were never permitted to surface.) Burnett's own sketches, by way of contrast, were rife with conflict and anger between characters and with its star's outraged and outrageous stance toward her own role in society.

After her own comedy variety show closed, Burnett moved into films--often in dramatic roles. In these roles, she expressed a depth and complexity that had often only been hinted at in her broader sketch characters. She played Walter Matthau's wife in Pete 'n Tillie, a film about a troubled marriage; she followed this with serious roles in Robert Altman's Health and A Wedding; and she played a wife who demands emotional honesty, including anger, from her husband Alan Alda in The Four Seasons (a role that combined both drama and realistic domestic comedy). She starred in dramatic specials on television, playing an outraged mother determined to find out the real circumstances of her son's death in Friendly Fire; she portrayed a reformed alcoholic who founds a home for women in Beatrice; and, in Between Friends with Elizabeth Taylor, she played a newly divorced, fiftyish woman, who puts together a new life.

This last film, aired by HBO in 1983, began shooting a year earlier, soon after Burnett's divorce

from Joe Hamilton. Her three daughters are now on their own--including twenty-one year old Carrie, who as a teenager fought a highly publicized battle against drugs. The publicity around Carrie happened about the same time as Burnett's equally public battle against The National Enquirer. She sued the publication for libel when they stated that she had been drunk and disorderly in a Washington restaurant and won the case.

The libel must have been particularly painful in the light of Burnett's own family history. "I have wine with dinner," says Burnett, "but no hard liquor. I've read that alcoholism is hereditary, but fortunately, hard liquor makes me ill. I wish everyone was like that."[34]

Carol now speaks of her childhood situation with gentle humor, although as a child, she remembers being terribly angry at her parents, thinking, "If they loved me, they wouldn't do that."[35] She also seems at peace with her looks. A recent operation to correct her bite had the side effect of giving her more of a chin, about which she giggles: "I'm prettier now."[36]

As noted earlier, this study focuses on Burnett's personality, appearance, and background as it helped to

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[34]Carol Burnett, Interview with Barbara Walters, NBC, May 12, 1983.

[35]Ibid.

[36]Ibid.

create her comedic art. Other contributory factors are: the genre of of sketch comedy in which she established herself and the sex-role of women in our society. As in the case of the other comediennes, I have primarily defined their comedic character in terms of a balance of the three elements of power: sex appeal, comedic appeal, and competence.

In most of her sketches and in some of her film roles, Burnett plays a woman who is awkward and sexually unappealing. Her supposed lack of feminine graces is conveyed by unflattering costumes and coiffures, implied comparisons with more beautiful actresses, jokes she makes at her own expense, her role within the structure of the sketch, and particularly by that combination of facial distortions, awkward gestures, and strident vocalisms that fall into the category of "mugging." Burnett has called her comedic period the "era of mugging."[37] Burnett fit in particularly well with the societal/aesthetic tendencies of her era (which still persist today though to a lesser degree) because of her own personal background. As I noted in tracing her family history, she was the plain daughter of a beautiful, sharp-tongued, bitter mother. She was also subject to some physical abuse, which in comedic terms translates into slapstick.

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[37]Carol Burnett, Personal Interview.

The translation denies emotional affect, the Aristotelian notion of a painless defect. Burnett's talent for mugging, slapstick, and wit also probably derives from the comedic talents of her family--particularly her grandmother who was her main source of security and love. Burnett remembers her grandmother's gross physical humor (taking out her false teeth, belching, etc.) The actress also recalls her parents' quick-witted remarks. Given the general tendency among comics to utilize humor to cope with stress, and Burnett's natural ability, her parents' wittiness probably provided a model that she was later able to use professionally. She enhanced written sketch material with her own ideas (particularly as she grew more personally confident in her abilities). Her quick-wittedness coupled with her personal warmth added immeasurably to the success of her show as she engaged in spontaneous repartee with her studio audience.

Burnett's talent and achievement are extraordinary. She is an expressive (if not technically proficient) singer and dancer. She was the sole successful female host of a comedy-variety show. When she went on to play dramatic roles in films and television specials, she was able to portray a wide variety of characters with emotional depth. It is therefore interesting to note that the characters she portrayed in most of her sketch roles were ineffectual. When she greeted the audience as

"herself" at the beginning of each show, the personality that she presented was ostensibly amateurish, even awkward, occasionally confused in her answers, even at a loss for words.

I suggest that the reason for Burnett's supposed lack of competence has to do with the nature of comedy, the expectations placed on women, and the genre in which she was working. The comic figure--both male and female--has traditionally been inept. Theorists from Plato to Aristotle on down to Sigmund Freud have commented on the pleasure that the audience takes in feeling superior to the comic character. Burnett's "amateurishness" and occasionally childish appearance and gestures (particularly pronounced in the early part of her career) operate well within a general comedic tradition. Intensifying her role of comedic inferiority, is the expectation that women be dumber and weaker than men. This expectation was even more rampant in the pre-feminist era when Burnett began her performing career than it is today. As the first comedienne to host her own long-running successful show, Burnett was clearly extremely competent. (Earlier attempts by Martha Raye and Imogene Coca, among others, had not succeeded.) Burnett took charge of an entire show, spoke directly to her audience, and appeared as a wide variety of characters in the sketches. Like a stand-up comic such as Phyllis Diller, she was obviously in charge. To

soften her highly visible power position, Burnett often appeared unsure, amateurish, and overwhelmingly nice.

Competence for women has traditionally been restricted to the domestic arena. But like Diller's jokes, Burnett's sketches usually portray her as domestically inept, for example the extended pantomime in which she is at first abused by commercial household products. I suggest that the savageness of this skit, like several others that cruelly mock Burnett's efforts to be domestic or glamorous, come out of a strong and painful sense of the woman not fitting the approved feminine role. I suggest that a woman of Burnett's extreme intelligence and creativity might have found this type of humor a way of coping with a sense that neither her appearance and nor her family background provided a secure sense of self or femininity. As noted earlier in this chapter, as Burnett became more personally secure, she was less likely to resort to violent slapstick.

I would not like, however, to conclude this chapter by defining Burnett's comedy, even her early slapstick, as a species of neurosis. After all, art is essentially a translation of experience and imaginings into aesthetic form. Burnett's comedy is a creative, often brilliant metamorphosis of her own personal history into a universal communication. Carol Burnett's gift as a performer has been her ability to use the raw material of her own life to create both empathy and laughter.

CHAPTER V

GOLDIE HAWN

In the preceding chapters of this study, I have examined the female comedic personality as she appears in three major comedic genres: situation comedy (Lucille Ball), stand-up comedy (Phyllis Diller), and sketch comedy (Carol Burnett). There remains one final major genre of contemporary, popular comedy--the full-length play or feature film. In this form, the female comedic personality acts as the protagonist in an extended narrative. Her role may include some serious, dramatic moments, and her character may undergo development and even permanent change.

The performed narrative originated in the theatre. As is well-known, many films are based on stage plays. Even when individual films are not based on particular plays, they often incorporate theatrical conventions of plot, dialogue, character, etc.. Other features, particularly those related to camera movement, editing, and the use of motion in space, are, of course, unique to

film. Recognizing the differences as well as the similarities between stage and filmic comedic roles, I have chosen to concentrate on filmed comic roles.

My reasons for focusing on the female comedic personality as she appears on film are as follows. Although a stage actress may orginate a role on stage and even make it famous, the script remains separate from her performance and another actress may easily play the same role. A film role, by way of contrast, is much more closely identified with the performance of a particular actress, since the film, and not the screenplay, is considered to be the permanent record of the work. Therefore, to make a parallel case to the female comedic personality as she appears in situation comedy, stand-up comedy, and sketch comedy, it is more appropriate to choose the genre in which the performing personality of the actress is identified with the role. In this way, I can study the comedienne's appearance, gestures, vocalisms, etc., as I have done in the previous chapters, instead of restricting myself to what is written in the playscript.

My second reason for focusing on a film, rather than a stage personality is that this study concerns itself with those elements of the performing personality that create broad, popular appeal. It is therefore appropriate to study forms that, by their nature, are designed for mass audiences. While a play may be popular

(and, of course, "hit plays" are), the size of the audience for even the most popular play does not come near the sheer numbers who attend a popular film.[1]

Therefore, on the basis of the audience's identification of performance and role, my intention of studying performance as well as written character (as in the earlier chapters), and the mass appeal of the film genre, I will now concentrate on the female comedic personality as she appears in a succession of narrative films. My choice of comedienne who best exemplifies the female comedic protagonist on film is Goldie Hawn.

Goldie Hawn has been nationally known as a comedienne since she appeared on Laugh-In, Rowan and Martin's television comedy variety show, in the late 1960's. She moved from television to feature films and has starred in over twelve major motion pictures. Most of her film roles have been comedic, or at least, serio-comedic. She has parlayed her popular appeal and business shrewdness into a position in the film industry which allows her to originate and produce film projects which serve as her own vehicles and exemplify her ideas. Her film roles are, therefore, largely a reflection of her personality and growth as an actress and woman.

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[1]This inescapable truth has been sometimes regretted by those who feel that a given film has done injustice to the original stage play. The mass audience is unfortunately apt to judge the play by the derivative, inferior film.

Goldie Hawn was born in Takoma Park, Maryland, a suburb of Washington D.C., on November 21, 1945. Her father, Edward Rutledge Hawn, is a direct descendant of Edward Rutledge, the youngest signer of the Declaration of Independence. As Ms. Hawn puts it, "If my Presbyterian father hadn't married a Jew (the former Laura Speinhoff), I would have been qualified to end up as some horrible damned member of the DAR!"[2]

Edward Hawn was a musician and travelled frequently, performing all over the country as well as at Washington affairs and in Las Vegas. Goldie's mother had business as well as artistic ability and managed a dancing school. She also encouraged her daughter's performing talents. At the age of three, Goldie was enrolled in the Roberta Fera School of the Dance. She was soon taking lessons in voice, piano, and acting. When she was ten years old, she was dancing in the chorus of The Nutcracker Suite with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. (She earned her first professional fee for this performance--a check for $1.50, which she still keeps.)

> I had all the makings of a good ballerina, but at a very young age, I decided there was no money in it; it all seemed so limited in terms of time, income, and sacrifice. So I switched to jazz dancing, which I had a lot more fun doing and got paid better for.[3]

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[2]Rhoda Irwin, "Goldie," Rolling Stone, March 5, 1981, p. 21.

[3]Playboy Interview: "Goldie Hawn", Playboy, January 1985, p. 78.

By the time she was seventeen, she had her own school in Maryland: "Goldie's Dancing School," where she taught ballet, jazz, and tap. Her mother remembers:

> I admit that I introduced the idea and encouraged her. But she grew up in a music and dance environment and just responded to it positively. She was also very athletic; she swam on the school team and was a cheerleader in junior high school. If she had to choose, she would always go to dance class rather than go swimming.[4]

Goldie was also a late developer physically. In spite of her talents and achievements, she felt awkward and unattractive to the opposite sex.

> I was very, very flat-chested. I had absolutely no shape. It's a wonder that I don't have a horrible inferiority complex, because I was someone who sat in the corner at all the dances--and most everything else too. Even at spin the bottle I never had much luck! Once, in my early teens, I had a Halloween party and we played the game, and on my turns, the bottle never pointed to a soul! I'm telling you, I was a slow starter!
>
> I tried out for cheerleader in ninth grade and got it for one year, but even that didn't help.And then I fell in with a bad crowd--or tried to--and I'd hang out smoking cigarettes and would cut my homeroom to put on eye liner, but it was no use.
>
> I mean, sure, I wore falsies and all, but still you're made fun of, and some guy says, 'Hey, your mother know what you're wearing under there?' What it does to a girl who's trying her best to be attractive to the opposite sex is devastating. The first time I kissed anybody, I was sixteen and in this car with this guy I hardly knew, and ugh, it was a disappointment, too. In the middle of it, all I could think of was "God, what a bore. Is this what it's all about?"[5]

After graduating from high school, Goldie toured briefly in summer stock as part of the chorus in Kiss Me Kate. In 1964, she danced at the New York World's Fair as

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[4]Rolling Stone, p. 21.

[5]Ibid.

a can-can girl at the Texas pavilion. She continued to study dance and supported herself by working as a go-go dancer, travelling between New York, New Jersey, Anaheim, and Las Vegas. It was a grim, hard life. The pace was punishing, performing four sets a night, each a feverish hour and a half revue. Hawn often danced on top of tables and in cages to crowds that were frequently drunk and sexually abusive.

> I never worked topless, but I performed in some dives with drunken men whipping out their hoo-ha's.
>
> Bad experiences are not necessarily totally bad. Especially if you get over them. I learned from the bottom, looking around myself at the dregs of society, having both men and women relate to me purely as a sexual creature, coming on to me, propositioning me.[6]

During this period, she met and married (in 1968) Gus Trikonis, a dancer who had ambitions to be an actor and director, a marriage that was to last for four years. About this time, Hawn's career began its meteoric rise that was to result in national attention first on television and then in films. Hawn experienced her sudden success and public recognition as highly disorienting and threatening.

> I started to lose my sense of balance.... I was trying to hold on to who I was. It was the most frightening thing that ever happened to me. I was unable to walk into a public place without throwing up.[7]

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[6] Rolling Stone, p. 21.

[7] Playboy, p. 87.

The pressures eventually resulted in a nervous breakdown and seven years of psychoanalysis. But whatever her internal turmoil, Goldie's image as an adorable bubblehead was becoming a national trademark.

In 1967, Hawn was cast for an Andy Griffith special, and a William Morris agent named Art Simon saw her and signed her. He got her a 26-week contract for a new TV show called "Good Morning, World." When producer George Schlatter saw her, he thought she would be right for his new show--"Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In." He gave her three shows to prove herself. During one rehearsal, she blew her simple line three times straight. Mortified, she broke into a giggle.

> When I read the cue cards, I was so nervous I got mixed up and started to laugh, "Oh please, could you start over again, please?" There was George in his booth, watching me and saying, "Not on your life! Keep going, Goldie." And so my character grew out of that--an extension of my real reaction to my own frailties.[8]

To keep Goldie's mix-ups and resultant giggles spontaneous, the crew devised tricks to throw her off-balance.

> "Laugh-In" was a great training ground. We were an ensemble, and I'm comfortable with ensembles--it's what I grew up on. But as the years went on, it got harder. I had to be consistently one character. There was no room for anything else.[9]

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[8]Ibid.

[9]David Ansen with Janet Huck, "The Great Goldie Rush," Newsweek, January 12, 1981, p. 55.

The character that Hawn created on Laugh-In included elements of the go-go dancer she had been--but played with a dotty innocence reminiscent of Gracie Allen. Hawn appeared in a bikini--which showed off her dancer-slim body--and wore her hair in a short, pixyish style. Her body was covered with amusing slogans and pictures in the body-painting style that was popular with the "flower children" of the late 1960's. The body-painting both accented Goldie's semi-nudity and rendered it innocent. She was not simply a blonde in a bikini but a canvas for silly graffiti--a kind of walking toy. The shrieking giggles also betrayed a childlike confusion. Like a child undone by stage fright, she was reduced to giggling confusion by the need to perform. Her humor was created not by her conscious wit (as in the case of, say, Phyllis Diller or Joan Rivers), but by her charming incompetence.

Hawn's success on Laugh-In is also the product of fortuitous timing. In the 1950's, television's female comedy stars usually played housewives. Lucille Ball, Gracie Allen, Harriet Nelson (of Ozzie and Harriet), along with a host of others, were comedic versions of adult wives and mothers. Even a sketch comedienne such as Imogene Coca usually appeared on the Your Show of Shows as Sid Caesar's wife. In the 1970's Mary Tyler Moore played the first single career woman to star in a television situation comedy. Her "family," consisted of her

workmates and girlfriends. Today, in the 1980's we have The Golden Girls and Kate and Allie, adult women who share living quarters and must survive financially and emotionally without benefit of a live-in man. Even Bill Cosby's wife on The Bill Cosby Show works as a attorney.

In the late 1960's, the nuclear family, along with other traditional values, was in upheaval. The stable, patriarchial, traditional structures of both the family and society as a whole were being questioned. The counter-culture was permeating the mainstream with ideals of freedom, spontaneity, sensuality, anti-rational ecstasy (often induced by drugs), and rebellion against authority and the notion of a disciplined work ethic. The feminist movement had not yet solidified, and women as a group were not demanding to be taken seriously as independent adults. In fact, the whole notion of serious adulthood was under question. The adults (who had presumably brought the country the Vietnam war, racial discrimination, and sexual repression) were viewed as morally corrupt and not much fun. In their place, the under thirty-year-olds of the baby boom elevated their own "youth culture."

Laugh-In, a spectacular success at the time, domesticated the excesses of the counter-culture for the consumption of the home audience. The title of the show was a play on "Be-In," a kind of mass, hippie-type get-together. In keeping with the mood of the time,

Laugh-In moved along at a frenetic pace, slapping together irreverent skits, jokes, and sight gags, often edited with the blitzkrieg cutting of a television commercial. The cast members danced free-style to rock music. (Hawn, as may be imagined, was particularly good at this.) The overall mood was one of good-humored disorder, a kind of "free-form craziness."[10] If the jungles of Vietnam had left Americans holding a tiger by the tail, Laugh-In was a kind of cheery zoo, with Goldie Hawn as its kittenish mascot.

If the women of the 1950 television comedies had been childish housewives, and the women of 1970 and 1980 television [11] are adults (albeit with comedic flaws), Goldie Hawn as she appears in the 1968 Laugh-In is a goofy flower child. Her voice is high and squeaky. Her body is barely adolescent. Her eyes roll like big, blue marbles and pop open like jacks-in-the box. Embarrassed, she nibbles her lower lip with rabbit teeth and shrugs adorably. Friendly, she flutters her hand in the manner of a child taught to wave "bye-bye." Bewildered, she breaks into shrieking giggles. Other Laugh-In cast members may say funny things or play a variety of funny

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[10]Peter Kerr, "Situation Comedies Come to Grief, The New York Times, April 1, 1984.

[11]I am referring to the more advanced comedies. There are always the ususal sops to sexism such as the dumb blonde on Three's Company.

sketch characters. Goldie, giggling goofily, with her eponymously colored hair falling over her saucer-sized eyes, simply is funny. On Laugh-In, Goldie Hawn became an instantly recognizable trademark. She created her own version of the "dumb blonde." She misread lines, mispronounced words, even hit herself over the head with a an over-sized, foam mallet, grinning "sock it to me." Goldie was fun, sexy, but innocent--a confection of cuddly confusion. No wonder audiences took her to heart and she was able to move quickly from being a member of the Laugh-In ensemble to starring in her own television special (Pure Goldie (1971)) and into feature films.

Hawn's first major screen role was as Toni Simmons, Walter Matthau's sweet, suicidal mistress in the 1969 film Cactus Flower. The film was based on Abe Burrows' play of the same name.[12] (Hawn's role was originally played on stage by Brenda Vaccaro.) Hawn's role was not the lead, and Lucille Ball was offered the starring part--that of Stephanie Dixon, the spinster who eventually blooms into love like a "cactus flower." Ball shrewdly refused the part. Having seen Hawn on Laugh-In and calculated the effect of the blonde comedienne's personality on the audience (especially in tandem with Walter Matthau), the

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[12]Abe Burrows, Cactus Flower, based on a play by Pierre Barillet and Jean Pierre Credy, directed by Mr. Burrows, was first presented by David Merrick at the Royale Theatre, New York, New York, on December 8, 1965.

older comedienne surmised that "Goldie would walk away with the picture."[13]

As it turned out, Ball was quite right. Hawn's first major screen role resulted in an Academy Award for best supporting actress. Hawn's reaction to the award was ambivalent at best.

> I felt empty. I wanted to win for working hard. I like to sweat. That performance was just a drop in the bucket.[14]

In her subsequent films, Hawn was rarely challenged to create anything of depth. She generally starred in financially successful "fluff." These films (which became known as "Goldie Hawn pictures") were light comedies, with Goldie as a sweet, sexy, abused innocent who goes through a series of farcical misadventures, but with the help of the right man, lands on her feet. Hawn was castigated for playing a "nitwit" in films like There's a Girl in My Soup, $, The Girl From Petrovka, and Foul Play. She had some serious, touching moments in Butterflies Are Free, Shampoo, and Sugarland Express (Steven Spielberg's first feature film and a financial failure). But the Goldie Hawn persona, established in Laugh-In, was that of a dumb blonde. All her movie roles traded to some extent on that persona, and it became both her chief box office appeal--and artistic liability.

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[13]Lucille Ball, Personal Interview.

[14]Newsweek, p. 55.

Meanwhile, Hawn's own personal life confronted her with complex and troubling adult issues. Her marriage to Gus Trikonis ended in divorce in 1972. By then, Hawn was a major star, while Trikonis was still struggling to succeed as an actor/director. To end the marriage, Hawn paid Trikonis $75,000. In 1976, Hawn married Bill Hudson, of the singing, zany Hudson brothers, when she was eight months pregnant. She had two children by this marriage (delivered by Caesarian section). This union also ended in divorce (in 1981), and Hawn again had to pay out money as part of the divorce settlement. These experiences forced Hawn to confront issues of conventional male/female roles in terms of financial earning power, public recognition, and career success.

> I was very naive when I married Gus (Trikonis). I believed that we could put all the money in one pot. I was very cognizant of not relishing my achievements too much. I never wanted to come home and say "I won!" You hold it back. Because it is more important that I keep my man. Because that basically was what kept me happy. But after a while--look what happened with all the films. You can't keep that bottled up for long.[15]

In an interview with Playboy Hawn elaborated.

> Some men cannot deal with a woman as the breadwinner. Literature, fairy tales, everything we've ever heard has been about how the man has gone out and built the house and killed the cow and has done all that stuff to keep his family alive. That translates today as how much money he earns for his family. And when a gal comes along who gets more than he does, it's a problem for him. It's an imbalance of power.[16]

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[15]Ibid.

[16]Playboy, p. 89.

The break-up of Hawn's second marriage came about at the same time as her most successful film, the film that was to establish Hawn as an executive producer as well as a star, as a creator with a serious message (albeit couched in comic terms), and as a feminist. The film was to gross $100 million world-wide and spin off a successful television series. Even today, in its video cassette version, the film is highly popular. I am referring, of course, to Private Benjamin.[17]

Private Benjamin is conceived as a farce with a feminist message. The film opens with the wedding of Judy Benjamin (Goldie Hawn), a Philadelphia Jewish princess, who at twenty-nine has been trained to do nothing but marry and shop. Her father hands her over, along with a fat check, to her new husband, who uses her to provide sexual services on demand--first in the back seat of a limousine during the wedding reception and later on the bathroom floor of their honeymoon suite. During the latter act, he dies of a heart attack, while the camera discreetly cuts away to the wedding gifts.

On her own for the first time in her life, the weeping widow huddles by her princess phone seeking solace from a radio call-in talk-show host. Befuddled by the contemporary feminist film, An Unmarried Woman, she cannot

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[17]Private Benjamin, Warner Brothers, 1980, Written by Charles Shyer, Harvey Miller, and Nancy Meyers, and directed by Howard Zieff.

fathom a divorcee's (Jill Clayburg) decision to struggle for independence instead of running off with a successful male painter.

The call-in radio show also includes an army recruiting commercial. Judy envisions the infantry as a variation of Club Med, and a sweet-talking recruiter talks her into signing up. Expecting sunbathing and condominiums, she winds up doing push-ups in a barracks in Biloxi, Mississippi. When she looks up from her emery board to complain about the filth, her CO, Captain Lewis (Eileen Brennan), smiles with all the empathy of Snow White's stepmother offering an apple, and assigns her to scrub the latrines with her electric toothbrush.

Stuck in boot camp, Judy endures 6 A.M. reveille, the scorn of her co-recruits, and forced marches in the rain. Her sad, saucer eyes and quivering lower lip peep from under her dripping helmet like a betsy-wetsy doll. By the time her parents locate her, she is eager to be carted back to a life of matching drapes and slipcovers.

But as her father prepares to pack her up, he voices the contempt that was always in back of his previous indulgence. He plans to tell everyone that Judy has been in a mental hospital--to save himself the embarrassment of explaining that his daughter joined the army. When Judy protests, he snaps that she is "stupid!" Hurt and insulted, Judy suddenly questions the nature of their previous relationship and the values she was raised

on. She decides to stay in the army and grow up. In the next section of the film, she does just that. She learns to bounce quarters off her bed with a fetching swagger, builds up her muscles, and befriends her fellow recruits. Out on bivouac, Judy and company swap joints and bawdy stories. (Judy's account of her wedding night brings down the house.) By catching their sadistic CO in flagrante delicto with a fellow officer during a war game, she leads her team to victory and demonstrates that the army can make a first class private out of a princess.

Judy's triumph in the macho world of the military concludes the first two-thirds of Private Benjamin, and could conceivably end the film. However, either because the filmmakers needed to lengthen the story to fit the standard length of a feature film (about two hours) or because they wished to drive home the feminist aspects of the film, the plot continues. Judy, the barely emancipated Jewish Princess, meets a Jewish Prince--Armand, a French, Jewish gynecologist, who is handsome, wealthy, and sexy (providing her with her first orgasm). She maneuvers a transfer to Paris and takes up residence in his ancestral home (which resembles a fairy-tale castle). To please him, she dyes her hair an unsightly shade of red, quits the army, signs a pre-nuptial agreement relinquishing any claim on his property, and overlooks evidence that he has been sleeping with the maid. When he shows up late to their wedding

after spending the day with his mistress, Judy becomes distressed, and he prescribes a sedative. Confused, Judy marches down the aisle like a sacrificial non-virgin as her parents beam at her good fortune. But as the ceremony gets underway, Judy begins to see the man standing by her side at the altar as a series of composite images--Armand, her first husband, and her father. When it comes time to make her vows, she hesitates--her consciousness and gorge rising--as she murmurs "Not so fast." Irritated, Armand (unconsciously echoing her father) snaps that she is "stupid." Suddenly, everything falls into place and she slugs him--knocking him out cold. She wanders off from the wedding, heading down a wooded lane toward an uncertain, but feminist future.

The "Judy Benjamin" character is a variant of the dizzy blond Hawn played on Laugh-In--with the addition of a personal history, psychological depth (to the degree possible in a comedy), and sexual politics. She retains her trademark giggle, sweet sexiness, and confusion. But, while somewhat exaggerated, her character is now less cartoonlike and has human dimension and feelings. Her Laugh-In character may have been suitable for the brief sketches of a variety show, but to serve as the protagonist for a feature-length narrative, she needs more complexity. The sketch character Hawn presented on Laugh-In fit in with the zaniness of the show by being simply a figure of innocently sexy, goofy fun--a kind of

dumb blonde, Disney chipmunk. But in Private Benjamin, Hawn's sexiness is turned against her by exploitative males. Her "dumbness" is shown to be a pathetic denial of her own abilities and self-worth to gain approval from a male-dominated world that scornfully regards her as stupid. The humiliations of Laugh-In remained painless and farcical (being doused by water or hit over the head by styrofoam mallets). Furthermore, everyone in the cast was equally at the mercy of these elements. But as Judy Benjamin, Hawn is personally and uniquely subject to abuse of her feelings and sexuality by men. In short, Hawn's highly externalized, farcical sketch character is given inner motivations, a feminist context, and the potential for growth.

The cruelty of some of the humor in Private Benjamin, particularly in connection with the sexual abuse of her character was startling to those who had associated Hawn with frothy comedy. But Hawn herself was aware of the seamy side of show business--from the customers who had exhibited themselves and masturbated while she performed as a go-go dancer to producers who had tried to trick her onto a casting couch. She had also been through two difficult marriages--her first ending in a divorce in which she had to make a financial settlement of $75,000 and her second, which was in a rocky stage during the production of Private Benjamin, ended in divorce shortly after the picture's release. In fact, it was

Hawn who fought for the painful realism of some of the sex scenes--particularly the scene early in the movie where her first husband pressures her into having sex with him in the back seat of a car during their wedding reception.

> I wanted the scene in there because I wanted to demonstrate something about Judy's character--that basically she was someone who didn't have much self-esteem. She wasn't able to say, "No. I don't want to do this. I'm in my wedding gown. It's our wedding night. I'm embarrassed." What she valued most was having a man take care of her. She was prepared to be a doormat.
>
> There was no tenderness involved, so the scene showed his character and hers. She pleaded briefly, realized, "Okay, I have to do this," and then she went down out of the frame. The script was written for me. I have a clear vision of what I wanted.[18]

Director Howard Zieff noted that Hawn wished to take the graphic harshness of the scene even further.

> Goldie wanted to linger on that scene for a long time. And she wanted to let the audience see the back of her head in her husband's lap. I objected to that, and I guess I was afraid of the scene anyway, in that I didn't want the audience to squirm during it.[19]

It seems clear from the above comments that Hawn had a personal and feminist point to make, which made her director uneasy about audience response to a film that was to be billed as a comedy. Both the graphic sexuality and Judy's feelings of painful humiliation are antithetical to the comedic response, which, as the director must have

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[18]Rolling Stone, p. 20.

[19]Ibid., p. 20.

been aware, depends on a certain emotional distancing. But Private Benjamin is Hawn's most interesting and successful film precisely because it balances the serious and poignant with the comedic and presents a heroine who is both very funny and possesses an organic emotional core.

Some critics have dismissed Private Benjamin as a light, commercial comedy. However, I believe that the film is worth examining in some detail, particularly in the context of this study. As indicated at the beginning of this chapter, Hawn is one of the few contemporary actresses to have made a successful career (almost twenty years) as the comedic protagonist of major motion pictures. (Lily Tomlin, her fellow Laugh-In alumna, has been most successful in sketch comedy.) Private Benjamin established Hawn as a creative producer who initiated projects based around her own personality and ideas. The thematic premises, the basic plot structure, and the character portrayed by Hawn in Private Benjamin were to re-emerge in her later films. (These later films have generally been less successful, both financially and artistically, for reasons that will emerge later in this study.) And, apart from any critical judgement of its aesthetic value, Private Benjamin is a particularly appropriate film to explore the issues of this study, since it clearly exemplifies the interaction of comedic appeal, sex appeal, and personal competence.

In the beginning of Private Benjamin, Hawn plays a

pampered, upper middle-class young woman who has been raised to be ignorant of any skills save shopping. She blindly conforms to the expectations of her background and allows her father to marry her off to a man who uses her as a sexual maid. When her husband dies, she is so ignorant of the world that she enlists in the army expecting it to be a vacation spa and, denying all evidence to the contrary, behaves like a princess among the peasants.

Judy's naivete exemplifies the Platonic lack of self-knowledge. The result of her misapprehension is that she appears ridiculous. Her inappropriate behavior leads to her punishment--scrubbing toilets with her electric toothbrush, forced marches in the rain, push-ups, etc.. But none of this creates any real agony. Instead, she demonstrates what Aristotle considered a painless defect, Her humiliation is not hurtful, but rather, ludicrous.

This misfit-in-the-army section is the most purely funny part of the film. It comes out of the same genre of service comedy that brought forth such films as Never Wave at a WAC, a 1952 Rosalind Russell vehicle about a Washington hostess who winds up in the army, Operation Mad Ball, M*A*S*H, and Charlie Chaplin's Shoulder Arms. It makes use of the classic comedic plot structure of placing a protagonist in an environment that is opposite to her/his usual situation. The world of the Jewish American Princess and the world of the U.S. Army are humorously

incompatible. In forcing the two to mesh in the person of Private (formerly Princess) Judy Benjamin, the film exemplifies Arthur Koestler's theory of comedy as the fusion of incompatible matrices. Furthermore, instead of flexibly reacting to the true nature of her new situation, Judy is propelled by a kind of unthinking momentum to keep repeating the same behaviors to which she has been conditioned, thus enacting a Bergsonian rigidity in which her character functions more like a machine than a thinking human being.

Private Benjamin, the feature-length film, is a one-time, two-hour narrative that shows the growth of its protagonist through a variety of situations, some of which are serious. But when the film was developed into a situation comedy series of twenty-six-minute episodes for television, only the princess-in-the army section was used. Both the situation--the world of the army--and the incompatible nature of the protagonist--a pampered fool--became fixed. This constancy of situation and character is at the heart of situation comedy, which strings out a series of episodes that vary in the details of the plot but not in the relationship of characters to situation. For all their madcap escapades, neither the characters nor their situation fundamentally change.

Koestler's notion of the fusion of incompatible matrices can also be applied to the editing of the film. The juxtaposition of scenes implies relationship and,

often, causality. In order to create a relationship that seems comedically inappropriate, the scenes must be juxtaposed so that the audience understands them to imply comedic causality. I suggest that comedic causality occurs when the audience accepts the unexpected and illogical as right and logical because they are suddenly forced to see events in a comic frame. The element of abruptness and surprise is crucial to jokes and here, to comedic film editing. Events must be timed correctly to create the impression of sudden, comedic causality. Without that abruptness--that sudden fusion of matrices--the joke falls flat. Goldie Hawn speaks about comedic timing as a function of montage.

> Here's an example of how you can destroy or create a moment by timing. When I kissed Armand Assante under the street lamp in Private Benjamin, he was telling me about himself, and I was hesitant about being with him. When he finally said, "And I'm Jewish," they cut to my scream, to my orgasm. Now that is a funny cut. However, when it was first cut, it was not funny, because there was too much space between "I'm Jewish" and the orgasm. Those few millimeters of a second were the difference between whether it was funny or not. Because you've got "I'm Jewish. Beat. Beat. Beat. Arghh!" or "I'm Jewish. arghh!"--see, it has to come right on top of the line.[20]

Comedic timing is also crucial in the progression within scenes. Hawn, who was trained as a dancer, is very conscious of the importance of timing in building a comic effect within a scene.

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[20]Playboy, p. 91.

> Comedy is like music. I remember working with an actor who couldn't get the scene, couldn't get the timing. So I beat it out with my hands. It was like percussion, so he could understand the arch of the scene and the power it had to have. It's as if I hear the beats in my head.[21]

It is interesting to note the similarity between Hawn's remarks and those of Phyllis Diller, who also compared comedy to music and discussed the large number of comics who were musicians. As noted in a previous chapter, Diller herself was trained as a concert pianist, whereas Hawn studied dance. In both disciplines, the performer counts beats and either plays an instrument or moves in a specific time frame. As a consequence, both Diller and Hawn are strongly attuned to rhythms and can discuss their comedic technique in terms of precise timing.

The analytic consciousness Hawn brings to her comedic craft is surprising to anyone who identifies her with the dizzy, vague elements in the characters that she usually plays. Since Private Benjamin, the standard plot of a Goldie Hawn movie has been the increasing maturity and independence of the heroine. For reasons that will be discussed later in this chapter, her heroines begin as somewhat giddy, little-girlish, and certainly less competent than Goldie Hawn herself. While these characters (especially in film projects she produces and/or initiates) clearly reflect Hawn's concerns and

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[21]Ibid.

feelings, they are also distinct from her own, more mature personality and highly developed talents. Instead, they are comic creations, reflecting Freudian ideas about physical exaggeration and intellectual minimalization.

Hawn's comedic exaggerations consist of facial mugging--especially in the way she pops her eyes, or rolls them heavenward, grimaces shamefacedly, or grins exuberantly. She is also a prototype for comic confusion, timing her lines just a beat too late and then giggling. That giggle became her trademark, along with her high-pitched, childish voice and her squeaks of excited surprise. All these effects were very exaggerated in Laugh-In, where her character was highly farcical; they are toned down for her more realistic film roles. Some of them are simply inborn. Hawn has naturally large eyes and flexible, soft features, including a mouth that can appear both goofy and sensual. Her hair is also naturally blonde (though lightened), and she wears it in a shaggy coiffure that suggests both clownish dishevelment and a soft spontaneity.

Hawn's comedically exaggerated expressions and vocalisms contribute to an impression of childlike confusion, and she frequently chooses vehicles and co-stars that accentuate her air of youthful cuteness. At 116 pounds and 5'6", she is about average height and weight (for a small-framed woman). It is therefore interesting to note that she is generally perceived as a

tiny, dainty blonde--comedically small for the macho roles she essays. In Private Benjamin she is a soldier; in Swing Shift she is a worker in a World War II armaments factory; in Wildcats she is the coach of a ghetto football team. The perception of Hawn as exaggeratedly small is accomplished by not only by casting her in macho roles but also by casting her opposite much taller co-stars. One of the comedic moments in Private Benjamin occurs when the camera pans along a line of male paratroopers and must drop down to bring "tiny" Goldie into the frame. In Swing Shift, Hazel, her best girl friend and co-star is played by the tall Christine Lahti. And in Wildcats Hawn plays opposite an entire football team!

Children, of course, are usually short. They are also, typically, naive, spontaneous, and both intense and mercurial in their emotions. Goldie, who presents herself as small and cuddly with a messed-up mop of hair, looks like a kind of child-woman. Her emotional reactions are both heart-felt and subject to rapid change. She does not calculate and moderate her behavior. Instead, as Judy Benjamin, she sobs her heart out to a radio talk-show host, naively believes a commercial for the "good life" available in the army, and promptly signs up the next morning.

Much of Hawn's diminutive appearance (on screen), and cute mugging exemplifies Freud's theories of comedic characters as being physically exaggerated, foolish, and

childlike. Like children, Hawn's characters imitate adult behavior, as she attempts stereotypically macho roles (soldier, welder, football player) that emphasize her contrasting daintiness. At first, like a child, she is an inept mimic--providing the funniest sections of her films. Later she becomes competent--usually to the point of outdoing the men--and exemplifes the film's serious, feminist moral.

Hawn's early ineptness is somewhat degrading to her, and degradation is a motif in all her films. In Private Benjamin, she is sexually degraded by her husband. On a less painful, and funnier note, she is initiated in the army by being forced to execute push-ups in a silk dress and heels and march in the rain overburdened with army gear; she is dumped into the mud while wrestling; she cleans up the urine from her lover's dog who has messed his floor, and she wears a ludicrously unbecoming red wig because it makes her look like his mistress.

Her other films also include elements of degradation, often sexual. In Swing Shift, her factory foreman pats a sticker on her rear end when she walks away after attempting to stand up to him. When she fights with her female co-star Christine Lahti, she winds up in the gutter, skirt flying up over her exposed underwear. In Protocol, she plays a cocktail waitress forced to dress in a skimpy costume that makes her look like a bedraggled

chicken. When she attends an embassy party, she naively wears a cheap dress that makes her look trashy and over-exposed. In Wildcats, she is initially degraded by the ghetto football team she coaches. They expose themselves to her, scrawl obscene graffiti on her office walls, make crude sexual innuendos, and fart. Even her former husband insists on holding a conversation about their daughters' welfare with her while she is embarrassed about being naked in the bathtub.

The beginning of most of Hawn's films shows her naivety and degradation; later in the films, she unmasks and degrades the villains. In Private Benjamin Hawn plays a naively pretentious "Princess," who is stripped of her privileged notions--along with her designer wardrobe. After she has become "one-of-the-gang," it is her turn to unmask her military superiors as corrupt and pretentious; she takes her just revenge. (In one funny scene, she leads her fellow privates in a scheme to put blue dye in the shower head of their sadistic female captain.)

In her other films, Hawn also unmasks the opposition. In Protocol, she shows up her better-educated, highly trained superiors in the diplomatic corps as conniving, dishonest, and far from the authentic democratic tradition that she exemplifies. In Wildcats, she shows the supposedly macho, ghetto football team that they are really lazy, cowardly, and easily intimidated by her own combination of tough and tender

coaching. In Swing Shift, she unmasks the sexism of the male supervisors, demonstrates her own competence, and is made the "lead man" of her section. There is, however, no clear villain in Swing Shift to provide Hawn with the opportunity for comedic degradation and unmasking on a really personal level--one of the main reasons that this film is less farcical than the others.

In his chapter, "The Purpose of Jokes," Freud discusses comedy as the manifestation of forbidden impulses that are aggressive or sexual in a disguised and therefore palatable form. The aggressive impulses of Hawn's characters are manifest both covertly, usually with comedic effect, and overtly, in serious confrontation scenes. In Private Benjamin, her husband expires while pinning her to the bathroom floor in an excess of lust, living (or dying) out the covert wish of his put-upon bride. But when she directly confronts her second husband at the altar and socks him in the jaw, her aggression is overt, cleansing, and (except for some exaggeration of her strength) largely unfunny.

In her other films, Hawn demonstrates a similar pattern. In Protocol, Goldie is hired to work for the diplomatic corps under a witch-like lady executive in designer suits and a stylish coiffure. When this boss checks out the party Goldie is staging for a politically important Arab emir, she winds up with a black eye, messed up hair, and torn clothing. Hawn does not directly cause

her enemy's humiliation. But it does satisfy Hawn's (and the audience's) aggressive wishes, and it is funny. Later in the film, Hawn confronts her boss, exposing her to public humiliation in the press. This direct aggression is satisfyingly confrontational--but not funny.

Similarly, in Wildcats, when Hawn inadvertantly beats her male boss at raquetball, he winds up accidentally and farcically bouncing a hard ball into his own crotch. But when she later stands up to him and her chauvinistic husband, she comes across as feminist, heroic--and unfunny. As Freud pointed out, for the aggressive impulse to be funny, it needs to be disguised. In Hawn's films, that disguise is generally provided by making the humiliation of her enemies something that she accomplishes accidentally, without conscious will, through other agents apparently acting on their own impulses, or through her enemies' own ineptitude. She is directly aggressive only toward the end of her films in confrontation scenes that are largely unfunny.

Like her aggressive impulses, Hawn's sexuality is presented both overtly and covertly. Her overt sexuality usually comes across as pleasurable, tender, and sweet. When a harsher, more manipulative element is present, it is the fault of the male characters playing opposite her. More than any of the comediennes previously cited, Hawn's heroines are both overtly sexual and endearing. In fact, the success of Private Benjamin (which was repeated to a

lesser degree in her later films), is largely dependent on presenting a character who is clearly sexual, yet innocent and funny.

Hawn does have some moments that are simply romantic or sexual and may not be funny. But the comedic moments are accomplished by detaching the sexuality of Hawn's characters from her conscious will and awareness. In those moments, Hawn may appear as sexual to the audience and possibly to other characters, but we are to understand that this occurs without her conscious consent or knowledge. This covert sexuality is accepted as cute or funny, just as a nude or flirtatious child is accepted as charmingly innocent. Despite the almost graphic sex and feminist message in Private Benjamin, Hawn never comes across as strident or sexually demanding. Instead, she is usually pursued (or preyed upon) by men. She may arrange a transfer so she can follow Armand to Paris, but it is not with the intention of seducing him--he has already seduced her. And when she bends over to clean up after his dog, she is unconsciously pathetic, seductive, and funny. Hawn also looks cute and a bit provocative in her paratrooper's uniform. But unlike the femme fatale in a deep decolletage, she does not consciously seduce. In the uniform, she looks cutely sexy, a bit funny, and unaware that she is either.

Hawn's other films follow the same pattern. In Swing Shift, she is adorably and unconsciously provocative

and funny in her factory overalls. While her husband is away fighting, she is pursued by her foreman, a part-time musician, until she finally gives in. The film's insistence on keeping Hawn innocent though adulterous puts her character in a bind and weakens the film. The only action she really initiates is working in the factory (out of boredom)--not even her promotion to "leadman." Since she already has a perfectly acceptable husband and a lover who pursues her, the audience cannot root for her to overcome any serious difficulties, and we are left with a relatively inactive protagonist. Her prickly girlfriend Hazel (Chistine Lauti), who must work to support herself and is burdened with a non-committal boyfriend, is potentially a more contemporary and appealing heroine. But, probably because Hawn both starred in and produced the film, the story focuses on her, to its detriment.

The skimpy "chicken" costume that Hawn wears in Protocol, is degrading. It is also provocative and funny. The audience is made to understand that she has not chosen the costume and resents wearing it. By detaching her seductive appearance from her conscious will, Hawn remains innocent, sexy, and comedic. In this film, she partly seduces her male co-star, but her motivations are affectionate and friendly and far from being manipulative or callous. In fact, she is overcome by desire as much as he, and the result is endearing. Where the film falls down is not in their love scene, but

in the failure of Hawn's character to integrate the relationship with her own growth toward emotional and intellectual maturity.

Protocol is partly based on Garson Kanin's more successful play and film Born Yesterday, in which an uneducated gangster's mistress grows into self-respect and a defense of American democratic traditions through her association with an idealistic journalist who starts as her tutor and becomes her lover. She helps the journalist let go of his sexual and intellectual stuffiness. Out of this synergy, they defeat the forces of evil represented by the gangster. But in Protocol, Hawn's romantic fling is separate from her growth as a person. Her lover apparently waits on the sidelines of the plot and comes back to her only at the end of the movie when he quits his high level State Department job to manage her political campaign.

In Wildcats, Hawn's recent, highly farcical film, the audience is also meant to understand her character as both provocative and innocent. She coaches a football team by demonstrating positions that are easily given a double entendre, then slaps down a player who interprets them in a sexual way. She visits a ghetto tenement wearing a sweatshirt zipped open over an undershirt and no bra, neither expecting nor experiencing any problems. The camera shows only her tough-it-out reaction to the football team's exposing themselves to her in the locker

room. By contrast, we are treated to a long take of her naked in the bathtub before her ex-husband walks in and she demands a towel. All of this is meant to show her sweet, comedic innocence. However, I could not suspend my disbelief long enough to laugh at these scenes. I felt manipulated by Hawn's choice of costume (or lack thereof), behavior, and camera shots, and her so-called innocence seemed calculated, unreal, and unfunny.

In summary, Hawn's sexual impulses, like her aggressive impulses, are funny when they are detached from her conscious will. Considering her sex-appeal as an element of power in the personality structure of the comic figure, I suggest that sex appeal may add to the overall appeal of a comedic figure--under certain conditions. In Hawn's case, those conditions are that she remain innocent of any evil intention, and, for those moments that are both funny and sexy, her sexuality must seem inadvertent and occuring without her real knowledge or intention.

The third element of power in the comic persona is that of personal competence and/or strength. In the various plots of Hawn films, she is usually represented as starting out with little effective power in the world. In Private Benjamin, she may be pampered, but she is totally dependent on her husband and father. In the army, she is a private and subject to the whims of all higher officers. She is further weakened by ignorance, being unwilling to face how power affects her personal

relationships both in and out of the army. She is professionally incompetent, physically unathletic, weak, short, and inept at handling army politics. Her incompetence coupled with her delusions of grandeur provide much of the comedy of the army section of the film--and the premise of the situation comedy series based on the film. Later, she becomes physically athletic, strong, and acquires the social, military, and political skills that enable her to lead her own team to victory in war games and wangle a promotion and transfer to Paris. This new-found competence is less funny than her earlier ineptitude and retains some humor only because her success is preposterous and exaggerated. In the final section of the film, Hawn succumbs to the charms of her conniving, dream "prince" and for a while is rendered weak again. When she finally knocks him out cold at the altar, she again appears as overwhelmingly powerful--the feminist avenger of all women who have ever been duped by a deceiving male. The moment provides a satisfyingly melodramatic confrontation scene where good triumphs over evil. What humor exists is provided again by a fleeting sense of the preposterous.

Hawn's other films also follow a formula of the incompetent child woman who grows up--either by being made lead man at the factory (at a higher salary than that of her husband); by winning political office; or by leading a ghetto football team to victory. The problem confronting

all these films, which they solve with a greater or lesser degree of success, is that Goldie Hawn's primary talent and box office draw is as a comedienne. The more competent she becomes, the less funny is her character. If her new competence is rendered preposterous, it may be funny--but that destroys the feminist message of the film.

Another weakness in her character and therefore her films may be an unfortunate side-effect of her success. As Hawn has assumed more control as a star/producer, her films have turned into star vehicles. Swing Shift focused on Hawn's adorableness, whereas a more interesting film might have been possible if she had been willing to be less innocent or to allow Christine Lahti a larger role. Protocol was unbalanced mainly because her male lead and her relationship with him was short-changed. And Wildcats asks us to believe that only this dainty blonde can out-macho a football team of mainly black and Hispanic ghetto dwellers. Furthermore, while Hawn is presented as without prejudice, the film is, by implication, racist. The football team consists of insolent fools with borderline criminal tendencies. In fact, the only blacks with any brains are the school principal who fudges school records so that he can keep his dumb players on the team and a student who does term papers for hire while overeating himself into blimplike proportions.

Most ironically, this "feminist" film has some sexist overtones. Hawn is presented as separate from all

other women who might constitute competition for male attention. She has no significant female friends. She makes no attempt to interest female students in playing football. (That might sound silly, but then she herself has somehow become an expert coach so this must be a viable career for women.) And the locker room language, which is overwhelmingly sexist, is not only not reproved by Hawn, but taken up by her. (Finally accepted as one of the boys, she can yell at them with macho affection--"You pussies!")

My criticism of this film may seem a bit heavy-handed for a film that has been promoted as a comedy. But ever since Private Benjamin, Hawn has attempted to combine comedy with a serious message about how women need to free themselves from male domination and become independent, competent, and self-respecting. Hawn exemplifies this by playing a childish, despised heroine who, in a moment of truth, stands up for herself and discovers inner resources of courage and ability. This formula derives from the feminist movement of the 1970's and early 1980's. Other films from the same feminist genre include: An Unmarried Woman, Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore, and It's My Turn.

Hawn's films have also incorporated other messages. Protocol is partly about the true meaning of patriotism and American democratic traditions. Swing Shift, the least polemical and farcical, has the most

interesting character relationships and says something about friendship and loss of innocence. Wildcats combines the feminist message with something about self-esteem for minority groups.

But combining comedy with message drama is no easy task, and Hawn's films have increasingly seemed like the gluing together of mis-matched pieces--farce (often formulaic) and morality play. Her own portrayal of characters that are both childishly adorable and gutsily feminist has put her into a bind that leads to films that are both less funny and less serious than they could be. She remains a star--but not one who grows as an actress or producer. As she grows older, (she is now past 40), it will become less and less tenable to accept her childlike innocence.

Hawn may be trapped by the expectations of her fans into playing roles that she has personally outgrown--much as Mary Pickford was in her day. But even that may be a subject for her new films. Her oeuvre thus far may have been primarily an enactment and rejection of her cute, dopey character in Laugh-In, the numiliations of her early life as a go-go dancer (especially evident in the cocktail waitress scenes in Protocol), and her disappointments in her first two marriages (her heroines generally have to free themselves from the sexist demands of husbands). Perhaps it is now time to incorporate more mature themes from her life and art in order to produce work that is

innovative and utilizes Goldie Hawn's high level of intelligence, talent, and popular appeal.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

In order to explore key elements in the female comedic personality, I have taken as my subject four outstanding comediennes, each representing a major genre of contemporary popular comedy. Each comedienne has established herself as a prominent personality in her field, and her career has endured for at least twenty years. The continued popular appeal of each performer attests to her projecting a personality that is both funny and appealing to the sensibilities of her audience.

In this study I have discussed the female comedic personality as the interaction of several factors: the performer's personal background, appearance, talents, and tastes; the comedic genre in which her character is presented; and her cultural context, particularly as it pertains to the role of women in society. All of these factors work together to create a balance among the three power elements of the comedic persona--her comedic appeal, her sex appeal, and her impression of personal competence.

This triangle of power elements is further modified by the impression of awareness and conscious will (or lack thereof) possessed by the character.

The performers considered are: Lucille Ball (situation comedy); Phyllis Diller (stand-up comedy); Carol Burnett (sketch comedy); and Goldie Hawn (narrative film comedy). Each performer has played a variety of roles, but this study concerns itself primarily with a core performing personality that is instantly recognizable to the public. This performing personality is related to the real personality of the comedienne in much the same way that a pen-and-ink caricature is related to someone's actual physical appearance. In other words, certain subtleties and complexities of the woman are left out, while other aspects of her personality are exaggerated for comic effect. I have chosen to study the accomplishments of four comediennes whose ouevre can be considered in the context of the consistent, exaggerated personality that she has established as her trademark. The comedic personality of each comedienne is as follows:

Lucille Ball established herself as a major star by creating the situation comedy character "Lucy Ricardo." "Lucy" (still seen on television in numerous re-runs) is the housewife as lovable, childlike, and zany. Superficially domestic, she is actually highly imaginative and adventurous, inventing and enacting madcap schemes, mainly in an effort to gain a foothold in show business

and/or to trick her husband into giving her what she wants. The schemes always land Lucy in trouble. She is always forgiven by Ricky, but not before she engages in farcically funny antics, usually involving broad slapstick and ludicrous costumes.

Phyllis Diller is a stand-up comic, whose performing personality utilizes comedically exaggerated, unflattering costumes, a frightwig, and a cigarette holder complete with a long, fake cigarette. She is the housewife as screwball-harridan. According to her own self-description, she is devoid of both sex-appeal and domestic competence. Her act sets up a fantasy world inhabited by "Fang," her fictional husband; an obese, intrusive mother-in-law; a gorgeous, nymphomaniacal sister; and "Mrs. Clean," the perfect homemaker next door. As Diller tells it, all of these characters downgrade Diller's feminine competence and appeal either by their rejecting behavior, their nasty remarks, or simply by their own superiority. Diller comments on this sad state of affairs in the series of rapid-fire one-liners that make up her act.

Carol Burnett established herself as a major comedienne by hosting and performing in her own eleven-year comedy/variety show--CBS television's The Carol Burnett Show. Therefore, despite her success in musical comedy and film, this study has focused on her work as a sketch comedienne. Although a sketch performer,

by necessity, plays a wide variety of roles, there is usually a common thread in all the variations. In Burnett's case, the common denominator in most of her sketches is her persona as a plain, ordinary woman who unsuccessfully tries to ape the glamour and talents of more beautiful and/or feminine women. She is, as her fans insist, "common." When she appears as herself at the beginning and end of each show, she is good-natured, tomboyishly adolescent (especially in the early years of the show), and extremely congenial. But during the sketches, she is frequently mean, angry, pathetic, and funny. A great deal of Burnett's humor derives from her stance as an outraged victim in a malevolent universe, and as a homely woman in a world that demands glamour.

Goldie Hawn got her start as a sketch comedienne in Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In. However, she quickly moved into films, and it was here that she made her major success. Despite her occasional forays into more serious roles, Hawn became associated with fluffy comedies, in which she played a bubble-brained blonde with a trademark giggle, an air of innocence, and a flair for trouble. Taking her air-headed character as a jumping-off point, she produced and starred in Private Benjamin, a feminist farce about a materialistically spoiled, emotionally abused baby-doll who is shocked into finally growing up. The huge success of Private Benjamin spun off into a television series based on the film and gave rise to a

series of other films starring Ms. Hawn. These later films, although superficially varied, present Hawn as essentially the same character--the adorable, abused innocent who becomes liberated from male domination and grows up.

These comedic persona are fictional characters based loosely on the appearance, talents, personalities, and backgrounds of the comediennes who created them. Earlier in this study, I presented material on their lives in detail, so I will now briefly summarize key points.

Lucille Ball, tall, physically fit, and highly attractive, left high school at fifteen and began her career as a model and showgirl in the 1930's. She achieved some measure of success in "tough girl" roles, mainly in "B" movies, along with some minor parts in domestic comedies. By the late 1940's, she was married to Desi Arnaz, a travelling bandleader, and playing a funny housewife on the radio. In the early 1950's, Ball and Arnaz began I Love Lucy, the role that made Ball famous as "Lucy Ricardo," a screwball housewife.

Despite obvious differences between Lucille Ball, the successful actress/businesswoman and "Lucy Ricardo," the naive housewife, the character of the latter, created by her writers to showcase Ball's talents, partly mirrors her personality and background. Like "Lucy Ricardo," Ball was initially considered talentless and had to push her way into show business. "Lucy's" gullibility is partly

mirrored by Ball's ability as an actress to call on her own childlike sense of belief to enact "Lucy's" absurd situations. Despite the silliness of Lucy's schemes, her imaginative conniving partly reflects Ball's own determination and shrewdness. Lastly, the brazen sexiness that Ball had parlayed into an early career as a showgirl, is transmuted into the shapely figure that "Lucy" displays in her modest, but well-fitting shirtwaists and slacks and in the warm, often physical affection she shares with "Ricky."

Phyllis Diller began her career as a stand-up comedienne in 1955 at the age of thirty-seven. Her act consisted largely of a comedically exaggerated fantasy version of her own domestic tribulations as the mother of five children and the wife of an unsatisfying husband. Both Diller and Ball are known for their comedic timing, but the source of that timing is different for each. Originally trained as a classical musician, Diller based the form of her comedy on precise timing and carefully selected rhythms and sounds--particularly explosive consonants on the final word--the pay-off of the joke. Lucille Ball's timing derives from ensemble acting--a process of listening and reacting to her fellow actors.

Another difference between the two comediennes is in the physicality of their art, which reflects their different body types and professional backgrounds. Diller is a small, thin woman, fragile in appearance, whose

concert training required her to sit at a piano. Ball, tall and well-built, started out as a showgirl, a profession which demanded that she move across a stage displaying her body to best advantage. She managed to distinguish herself from the other showgirls by volunteering to take part in the slapstick antics of the comics who were starring in her early films. In contrast to Ball's slapstick, Diller moves very little during her on-stage performance. Her costumes are visually comic, but her own movements are limited to some minor pacing back and forth and punctuating dialogue with jabs of her cigarette holder. She never indulges in the kind of broad, physical comedy for which Ball is famous. Also, while Ball (the former showgirl) is always understood to be attractive, Diller, who was very homely as a young woman, bases much of her humor on her own supposed ugliness, despite several, well-publicized facelifts.

Like Diller, Carol Burnett was considered unattractive when young and had a difficult, unstable childhood. Burnett was born to parents who were good-looking, frequently unemployed, increasingly heavy drinkers, and sometimes abusive. She was largely raised by a her grandmother, an eccentric but loving woman with a "mugging" brand of humor. Tall, gangly, and plain, Burnett spent much of her childhood at the movies watching glamorous stars and imitating them in secret. These early influences show up in Burnett's comic art. Nicknamed "the

Mugger," Burnett was known for her funny faces, exaggerated gestures, and odd-ball vocalisms such as her "Tarzan yell." She metamorphosed her parents' physical abuse into a violent style of slapstick. Her plainness, especially when compared with her pretty mother and the glamorous Hollywood stars, was exaggerated for pathetic/comic effect in the character type that shows up in many of her sketches--the plain, awkward woman who ludicrously tries to ape the glamour, femininity, and beauty of her more appealing betters. She is both too inept to succeed and too sensitive to be wholly unaware of her failure. She is therefore humiliated, outraged, and, because of exaggeration and a certain emotional distance, funny.

Like Diller, Burnett incorporated her supposed lack of physical attractiveness into her comedic persona. And like Ball, her comedy includes strong slapstick elements. But Burnett's comedy is angrier and more sexual than that of the others. I suggest that a key reason for Burnett's darker, more intense comedic tone is her childhood experience of physical abuse and frequent, bitter comparisons to her own pretty, rejecting mother. In lighter moments, Burnett's mother played the ukelele and often sang duets with her daughter, who later starred in musical comedies and sang on her comedy/variety shows. Like Burnett's mother, her co-stars were more glamorous and musically gifted than herself, but in a revisionist

version of her own childhood, she eventually wins their admiration.

The musical component of comedy is exemplified by the backgrounds of all four comediennes. Diller was a classical pianist and harpsichordist; Ball's mother was a concert pianist; Burnett's mother played the ukelele and sang duets with her; and Hawn's parents were both musical. Born to a father who performed with a band and a mother who ran a dancing school, Hawn studied voice, piano, dance, and acting, and first earned her living as a go-go dancer. Later, Hawn described comedic timing--both within a scene and in montage--as what happens in a framework of precise beats (much as a dancer conceives movement).

Hawn's background as a dancer shaped her comedic persona in another way. As a go-go dancer performing in sleazy clubs, she was often exposed to men who were drunk and sexually abusive. Her private life was also troubled. By the time she produced Private Benjamin, she had lived through two failed marriages to men who were less successful than herself and who finally obtained substantial financial settlements to end the marriages. The character of the abused innocent, the sweet, sexy, and sexually victimized woman was to surface in several of her films. And in all the films she produced, her film "husbands" are initially dominating, but later revealed as weaker than herself, and usually despicable.

Unlike Diller and Burnett, but like Ball, Hawn usually plays an attractive woman, and her background as a go-go dancer, parallels Ball's background as a showgirl. But Hawn's sex appeal is more overt than that of "Lucy." Some of that difference may be accounted for the fact that they are very different physical types. Hawn is small, blonde, and provocatively cute, with a high-pitched voice and a girlish giggle. Ball was statuesque and voluptuous, with a deep voice and a manner that was sufficiently aggressive to have cast her as a "tough-girl" in B movies. Hawn's film roles often call for her to assume suggestive poses and wear scanty costumes or, as occurs in the bathtub scene in Wildcats!, nothing at all. What allows Hawn to retain her innocence is the small, cuddly nature of her appeal--both in terms of her size and her high squeaky voice and giggle. It's hard to imagine "Lucy" displaying herself in a way that is overtly provocative. "Lucy's" height and deep voice would tend to make her sexiness more formidable, and early in her career Ball was typecast as "the other woman." But Hawn's kittenish appeal is more playful and less threatening.

The fact that Hawn's characters are more overtly sexual than "Lucy Ricardo" is also a reflection of changing social mores. No matter what Ball did in her private life, both her public image and that of "Lucy" conformed to the standards of feminine respectability in the 1950's. But Hawn became famous in the sexually frank

era of the late 1960's, and both her personal arrangements (she is currently living with a long-term lover) and the characters she plays reflect a contemporary permissiveness. (By the way, within the contemporary context, Hawn's personal life and screen roles are relatively conservative--it is simply that the "good girls" now do more freely and frankly what only "bad women" used to do.)

Some of the difference between the presentation of "Lucy" and the Hawn characters is also related to their differing genres--television situation comedy ("Lucy") versus feature film (Hawn's characters). The purpose of a "sitcom" is to entertain a broad audience who will thereby tune in and provide a market for the products of the sponsor. "Lucy," as the heroine of a television situation comedy which comes into the family area of people's homes, is expected to be basically respectable and to accord with family values, not sexually provocative or addicted to any vices. (Interestingly, although "Lucy" is childlike and naive--a spiked medication intoxicates her without her recognizing the taste or effect of alcohol--she does smoke cigarettes. The smoking is probably due to three factors: Ball herself was a heavy smoker; smoking in the 1950's was no longer socially taboo for women and not yet widely viewed as injurious to health; and I Love Lucy was sponsored by the Philip Morris Tobacco Company.) "Lucy Ricardo" as the protagonist of a situation comedy, returns

to her viewers' home every week, becomes a kind of video friend, and is unlikely to do anything really shocking.

Genre also influences the nature of the character presented by Phyllis Diller, who operates as a nightclub headliner. The nightclub context encourages the use of more racy material and the assumption of a more rebellious stance toward societal mores than is permissable on a domestic family medium such as television. In fact, some stand-up comics, acting in the tradition of Lenny Bruce, have used the nightclub as a forum to present highly controversial material. Although Diller's act is very clean and family-oriented, for a nightclub act, it still includes material that is more risque than anything "Lucy" is likely to do or say.

A nightclub comic must immediately take charge of an audience who have paid to be entertained, and who usually include a fair proportion of drunks, potential hecklers, and loud talkers who may ignore the performer and distract their neighbors. To control and amuse such an audience, the comic must quickly create a distinctive, compelling, and funny personality. Diller establishes her character through her cartoonish appearance and some rapid one-liners. The nightclub comic's need to command the audience must be balanced with a need not to appear offensively authoritarian. The audience must ultimately like her. This is not so easy to achieve. What Diller says is often comically hostile, and she must say it while

dominating a nightclub audience through the sheer force of her personality. She must therefore make sure not to present herself as too threatening a personality. Her purpose, after all, is to entertain--to please, and not, at least overtly, to subjugate others to her will. Moreover, as a woman who in the 1950's broke into a heavily male-dominated field, Diller had to work in a context of femininity defined as submissiveness. Diller handled (and handles) the contradiction by self-deprecating humor. For the duration of the act, her audience accepts the premise that the star they see performing before them, who is clearly commanding and successful, is also some sort of ridiculous incompetent.

Genre also influences the nature of the sketch character. Like the stand-up comic and the situation comedy heroine, the sketch artist must establish her character quickly. The ideal sketch character is simple and easily defined, ready to move into a situation that will rapidly establish and resolve itself. Carol Burnett became adept at this sort of character in the sketches that were the core of her television comedy-variety show. In fact, the difference between the farcical simplicity of a sketch character and the kind of character that can hold interest through a full-length form is shown by her portrayal of "Eunice," Burnett's most popular sketch character. When "Eunice" was made the protagonist of a ninety-minute play, her character took on a complexity and

pathos not evident in the sketch version.

Like Carol Burnett, Goldie Hawn first became known as a sketch comedienne and then moved into feature films. Films are not a domestic medium, and, unless specifically designed for that purpose, they are not expected to provide family entertainment. In fact, the typical audience for a commercial Hollywood feature film is late adolescent and early adult. Films are less subject (at least in theory) to restraints on subject matter and ideas than television programming. In fact, like a nightclub act, films are expected to provide what cannot be seen on television. This can apply to both intellectual content and/or prurient interest. An "X" rating may be a commercial handicap, but so is a "G" rating for anything but children's films. Some titillation is usually required to recoup the considerable financial investment of a Hollywood feature. Although, unlike television programs, films do not have to please sponsors or be tame enough to enter the family living room, the need to justify the initial investment often sharply limits the subject matter and ideas in commercial films to appeal to a mass "youth market." Ironically, television, which has more censorship, has a broader audience base and sometimes tackles more varied and risky subject matter (excepting the graphic depiction of sex and violence) than do commercial feature films.

Goldie Hawn has established herself as a star in

the medium of film and her character is partly the result of the nature of that medium. Because a feature film is usually about two hours in length, Hawn has enough time to create characters of some emotional complexity, who can acquire self-knowledge, change, and grow. And in fact, the basic plot of a Goldie Hawn movie is the story of a childlike, dependent, traditional woman who realizes the truth of her own oppression, discovers her own powers, and throws off the shackles of whoever is dominating her in a triumph of self-assertion. Her plots often capsulize the feminist awakening of the late 1960's and 1970's. The relative freedom from censorship enoyed by feature films allows Hawn to show material that is fairly explicit in terms of sexual behavior, nudity, and language. This is particularly effective because of her image as a "nice," if provocative girl. However, I suggest that the financial considerations of Hollywood filmmaking and perhaps her own vanity has led her to limit the type of character she portrays and the types of plots and situations in which she appears to a format that has proved commercially successful.

Although for the purposes of analysis, these four comediennes have been singled out from their predecessors and contemporaries, they do operate in a tradition, and it is useful to consider them in their historic and contemporary contexts before addressing the question of the uniqueness of their comic personae. In this study I

have not discussed vaudeville, the concert stage, and radio comedy, both because none of the four comediennes under consideration achieved their main success in those arenas and because by the 1950's these avenues had been largely overtaken by television, film, and nightclubs. It is true, however, that vaudeville stars sometimes crossed over into radio, television, film, and nightclubs; and vaudeville conventions influenced the comedic styles of more recent media. For instance, Marie Dressler was a famous comedienne who played vaudeville and made a second career in film when she was in her sixties. Dressler's style of physical, knockabout slapstick presaged the comedy of Judy Canova, Martha Raye, Joan Davis, Lucille Ball, and Carol Burnett. (In fact, to sell the concept of I Love Lucy and prove that Ball/Arnaz were acceptable to the American public as a married couple, they took a vaudevillian-type musical comedy act on the road.)

There were female monologuists such as Beatrice Hereford on the vaudeville stage around the turn of the century. Hereford performed well into the 1930's and influenced Ruth Draper, who gave one-person concerts in which she played various characters through the 1950's, at which time she made several sound recordings of her most popular characters. These recordings profoundly influenced Lily Tomlin, who in turn served as a model for Whoopi Goldberg. Both Tomlin and Goldberg have performed in solo concert both on the Broadway stage and

on television, portraying a wide variety of original characters ranging from the funny to the pathetic and often suggesting a serious, social moral. (Their solo work also led them into starring roles in film comedies and dramas.)

Even the occasional female stand-up comic was part of early vaudeville. Belle Barth began a vaudeville career in the late 1920's and continued on in nightclubs in the 1930's using a format of short jokes and songs, mostly of sexually explicit material. Jean Carroll performed comedy monolouges in the 1930's and did comedy dance routines with her husband. The couple later did a great deal of radio work and in the 1950's attempted an unsuccessful television sitcom in which many of the plots inovolved Carroll's trying to trick her husband into doing what she wanted. Carroll's career is interesting because in many ways it parallels that of Lucille Ball, who also did domestic comedy on the radio, took a comedy/dance act on the road, and attempted (in her case with resounding success) television situation comedy. Vaudeville also gave rise to the first major black woman comic--Jackie "Moms" Mabley. Mabley, who began playing a maternal character when she was in her early twenties, was the first woman comic to appear at the Apollo theatre (in 1939). Her humor was raunchy, and her recordings, the first of which sold over 1,000,000 copies in 1960, were popular at stag parties. Mabley's success ultimately

paved the way for the contemporary black comedienne, Whoopi Goldberg.

Most of the successful comics from vaudeville appeared on radio in the 1930's and 40's and transferred established characters to the new medium. The "dumb broad" as a comedic stereotype had been well-established in vaudeville. On radio, she could not, of course, be seen, so her stupidity was shown by having her mangle the English language and speak illogically. The verbally confused woman was not, of course, orginal with radio or vaudeville. In 1775, Richard Sheridan in his play The Rivals created Mrs. Malaprop (derived from the French "mal a propos"--inappropriate) who humorously mixed up phrases and pronunciations. Mrs. Malaprop set a standard for a type that was played to the hilt on the radio by such "dumb Dora's" as Jane Ace and Gracie Allen.

Gertrude Berg, (who, like Allen, went on to a successful career in early television), was also linguistically confused, but she was permitted a more intelligent image as an all-knowing, Jewish mother. Interestingly, both Berg and Mabley, who were strongly ethnically typed, obtained acceptance not as pretty sex-objects, but as maternal figures. It was only later that ethnic women such as Diana Ross and Barbra Streisand were cast in romantic roles--and they first achieved acceptance by singing. Today's greater acceptance of diverse types is shown by the success of performers who

present themselves as attractive, funny, and ethnic, for example Marilyn Sokol (Jewish), Liz Torres (Puerto Rican), or Danitra Vance (Black).

Joan Rivers, who made the "Jewish American Princess" the basis of her comic character, presents a more negative stereotype. She calls herself an "angry victim" and bases her act on a mixture of self-deprecation and attack. She plays a vulgar, gossipy woman who denigrates her own sex-appeal (while dressing in designer clothes and jewels) and calls other women "tramps" and "bitches." Rivers got her big break on the Johnny Carson show in 1965, ten years after Diller started. Much as Hawn is more overtly physically sexy than Ball, Rivers' act is more overtly verbally sexy than Diller's and reflects the greater sexual frankness of the 1960's. Diller, like Ball, plays a fantastic, somewhat artificial character. Rivers, like Hawn, is more realistic and bold. And whereas Diller was influenced by the wiscracking but gentlemanly Bob Hope, Rivers's modeled herself on the style of the outrageous Lenny Bruce, whose comedy railed against the sexual, political, and religious hypocrisies of the 1950's. Rivers (unlike Bruce) avoids politics and religion. Her skewering of celebrities takes its style from Lenny Bruce, but its content from Hedda Hopper.

The self-deprecation that Rivers or Diller incorporate in their acts is intended to win audience acceptance and compensate for their barbs against others

Self-deprecation has also been used by male comics--Woody Allen and Rodney Dangerfield are exemplars of this type of humor--but not to the extent used by women. An experiment reported by psychologist Joan Levine concluded that:

> Females indulge in self-deprecatory humor to a greater extent than do males....the data showed that women deprecated themselves 63 percent of the time; males railed against their own individual shortcomings in a total of 12 percent of their cuts. The men may make more jibes against their gender, but not at their own expense....Unless more research reveals a different etiology for the genesis of self-deprecatory humor, it can be surmised that comediennes are echoing the values of their social milieu in order to attract and keep a mass audience.[1]

I suggest that the prevalence of self-deprecation in women's humor stems from a discomfort with women's presenting themselves as power figures at the same time that they are taking a powerful stance--that of making people laugh. This discomfort may be felt by the audience and/or by the comediennes themselves. The notion of comedy as a form of power has been discussed by the psychologist Samuel Janus, who writes:

> Humor, effectively used, is a most potent source of power; it is especially needed and adopted by those who have no other "recognizable" form of power. Minority groups have long seized upon comedy as the expression of their will and power. The ability ot make a person laugh with them, not at them, is a vital one.[2]

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[1]Joan B. Levine, "The Feminine Routine," Journal of Communication, 26(3):173-175, Summer 1976.

[2]Samuel Janus, "Humor, Sex, and Power in American Society," American Journal of Psychoanalysis, 41 (2): 161-167, Summer 1981.

Lily Tomlin, commenting on why female comics sometimes encountered difficulties because of their gender, noted:

> Funny is probably threatening, 'cause for people to laugh...it's submissive. When people laugh, they're vulnerable.[3]

The traditional resistance to women as comics probably relates to a discomfort with women as power figures. In a 1901 issue of Harper's Bazaar, Constant Coquelin, conceded that a woman may have a sense of humor, but duty compelled her to conceal it:

> For woman does not try to be funny. She leaves that to man.[4]

As I have suggested, one of the ways that comediennes have attempted to get around a societal (and often internalized) expectation that they be relatively powerless and unfunny is by the extensive use of self-deprecating humor. That deprecation can be expressed in self-downing comments or indirectly by the characters they play. Therefore, the type of characters associated with female comics have traditionally been either pretty and dumb (high sex appeal/low competence) or ugly and smart (low sex appeal/high competence). The pretty/dumb stereotype spawned many of the characters played by Billie Holliday, Carol Channing, Marie Wilson, Marilyn Monroe,

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[3]Nick Kazan, "Lily Tomlin Takes Her Chances," Village Voice, 20:88, Feb. 24, 1975.

[4]Constant Coquelin, "Have Women a Sense of Humor?" Harper's Bazaar, 36:597-98, July 1902.

and Goldie Hawn. The ugly/smart stereotype gave rise to wisecrackers such as Phyllis Diller, Joan Rivers, and Totie Fields. When a clever female character was fairly attractive, she was also apt to be an unsuccessful manchaser such as "Miss Brooks," the spinsterish schoolteacher played by Eve Arden on the popular television series. Another example of the type is "Ruth," the older sibling of My Sister Eileen, (later musicalized as Wonderful Town), as mentioned above (pp.86-87).

An unattractive female character was apt to fare even worse in her pursuit of men. If she were sexually aware and aggressive, she was apt to be inept and humiliated in romantic attempts. Thus, we have the type of the noisy, homely, mancrazy female comic as played by Judy Canova, Joan Davis, and, in her early sketches, Carol Burnett. Even Lucille Ball plays with the man-chaser modality of female humor, but distances it from "Lucy" with a country bumpkin costume and uglifying make-up. In the episode in which "Lucy" plays "Ricky's" amorous date, Ball adopts the character of the awkward, man-chasing, hillbilly established by Judy Canova.

Not only was aggression usually considered "unfeminine," so was mugging and physical slapstick. Those comediennes who excelled at this type of humor--Nancy Walker, Martha Raye, Imogene Coca, Carol Burnett, and Gilda Radner--found themselves caught in a contradiction between their natural inclinations and

talents and society's (and often their own) conception of the proper woman's role. Martha Raye, whom journalists characterized as "rubber mouthed," once sued a magazine to restrain it from publishing a photograph comparing her to a chimpanzee. Raye commented:

> I'm a clown...not a comedienne...It is hard for a woman to get laughs in a fast-fire situation and remain feminine.[5]

The notion that there is a contradiction between agrressiveness, awareness, physicality, intelligence, and funniness on the one hand, and femininity, especially sexually appealing femininity, on the other, has certainly created self-consciousness and insecurity on the part of some comediennes. It has resulted in self-deprecating humor and negative character types. And it has limited the full range of what audiences will accept from comediennes or what some comediennes are willing to play.

One way to avoid the whole issue of any conflict between being both feminine and funny is to deny adult femininity. Thus, we have the enormous popularity of child characters played by adult comediennes. (The popularity of these characters may also relate to women's greater freedom to express the playful, childlike elements of their personalities, a freedom that has been denied men in society's insistance on their presenting a controlling,

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[5]Linda Martin and Kerry Segrave, Women in Comedy, (Secaucus, New Jersey: Citadel Press, 1986) p. 245.

parental role vis-a-vis women.)

In nineteenth century vaudeville, comedienne Lotta Crabtree amassed a fortune as an entertainer, playing child parts until the end of her career at age 45. Fanny Brice introduced a baby routine into her vaudeville act in 1912 and developed the character as "Baby Snooks," the hit of the 1934 Zeigfield Follies and a 1936 radio broadcast of the show. She played the child until her death in 1951. Lily Tomlin began playing "Edith Ann," a snotty but lovable five-year-old on Laugh-In, sued the program for the rights to her character, and later released recordings featuring Edith Ann. Gilda Radner orginated "Judy Miller," a hyperactive six-year-old in a brownie uniform, on Saturday Night Live. After a scene in which she and Larraine Newman played two little girls in party dresses, the actresses asked, "When will they let us grow up?"[6]

Even when comediennes do not play characters who are literally children, childlike elements of their personalities are frequently prominent, as in the case of "Lucy" and the roles played by Goldie Hawn. In 1976, Carol Burnett spoke about playing the same games she had played as a child and said, "I think I never grew beyond eleven."[7] Phyllis Diller's stage costumes, fright wig,

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[6]Ibid. p.385.

[7]Harvey Mindess, "Study of the Comic Personality," American Journal of Psychoanalysis, October, 1973, p. 121.

and fake cigarette are like a child's Halloween outfit. Even Joan Rivers, who dresses in designer gowns, assumes a highly aggressive, cynical stance toward society, and demands that her audience "Grow up!", uses childish gestures (finger-down-the-throat to indicate how something disgusts her, arms-straight-out-hands-clapping to indicate approval). And comediennes such as Bette Midler and Martha Raye, who have been known for sexual outrageousness, including plenty of references to their "tits," do it with a kind of "ain't-I-cute?" childish exhibitionism.

When we move from the direct portrayal of child characters to the adult comedic persona with childish personalities and behavior, we get into the much broader area of the comedic personality. I agree with Freud that the comedic personality is to some extent based on an adult's acting like a child. Or, as was said about Gilda Radner, being "very much in touch with her child self."[8] It is true that this adult/child dichotomy creates a tension that produces humor in both male and female comedic characters, and male comics such as Jerry Lewis do play "the kid." But female comics have a particular propensity for playing both child characters and overtly childish adults. Consider, for example, Phyllis Diller's shiny costumes vs. Bob Hope's business suits, or

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[8]Women in Comedy p. 383.

Joan Rivers' finger-down-the-throat vs. Johnny Carson's straightening his tie. Is there any male performer who has the cute sexiness of a Goldie Hawn? Has any male sitcom star built a career on playing the childish pranks of "Lucy"? How many male comics play a "Baby Snooks," an "Edith Ann," or a "Judy Miller"?

I suggest that the greater likelihood on the part of female comics to play child characters or childish personalities is due to several factors. First, the relative powerlessness of children mirrors the traditional powerlessness of women vis-a-vis men in society and reassures audiences that men that are in control. Second, the emotional freedom accorded children (who can cry, act silly, show fear, etc.) has been extended to women in a way that has been traditionally denied to men--particularly in the Northern European/American WASP culture. Third, by portraying a child character, the female comic can sidestep issues of adult female aggression and sexuality that sometimes create discomfort in audiences, and perhaps in the comedienne herself. This discomfort has resulted in the stereotypically pretty/dumb or ugly/smart female roles and in the character of the awkward, unsuccessful man-chaser.

There is, however, the occasional comedienne who is different. She is apt to be and to play a strong individual--and a successful man-chaser--a smart, sexually aware, attractive, aggressive woman who pursues men and

pleasure without desperation. This type of independent, sensual woman is rare among comedic persona. But there are models, and among them are Mae West and Sophie Tucker.

Tucker, who was famous for sentimental and bawdy songs flavored with salty asides, began performing in vaudeville and concerts around the turn of the century and continued through the 1950's. For most of her career, Tucker was neither young nor svelte. She accurately noted that she was a "big, fat mama" and flaunted her sexual appetites, singing: "You Gotta See Your Mama E'vry Night." Her songs and remarks are full of earthy, sisterly advice. She did not play the irresistible, cold-hearted femme fatale, but rather the warm-hearted, shrewd "voice of experience" who has been through various faithless men, but was still enjoying life and advising other women to do the same.

Mae West, who began in vaudeville in 1914, wrote her own starring vehicle Diamond Lil for the Broadway stage in the 1920's. She transferred her basic character--a swaggering, diamond-sporting, tongue-in-cheek sex goddess--to her comedy films in the 1930's, wrote her own bon mots, and became the highest paid entertainer in the country. West was forty when she made her first movie, with a matronly figure that was fully covered in period costumes from the Gay Nineties. Although not as fat as Tucker, her sexuality was also primarily verbal and based on innuendo--not direct physical display. Like

Tucker, her relations with other female characters were sisterly and helpful (unless crossed by snobbish, so-called "respectable" women), and her attitude toward most men was that they were a source of pleasure, but not particularly trustworthy or admirable.

In the case of both Tucker and West, their sexuality and aggressiveness was tempered by their age and matronly appearance (Moms Mabley, whose act was even more bawdy, played an even less sexy, motherly role); by their friendly attitude toward other women; by their enjoyment of men; by the way they suggested more than they showed; and primarily by the fact that the whole thing was done in a playful, comic spirit.

Much of the appeal of Tucker and West was based on their daring, amusing suggestiveness in an era in which women were expected to behave like ladies, at least in public. In today's franker, more permissive times, the public expression of sexuality and aggression is more blatant. Thus, we now have female comics such as a Sandra Bernhard, who verbally combines graphic seductiveness with barely masked sadism, or Robin Tyler, an overtly hostile lesbian comic. Even Bette Midler, a sweeter personality, is more verbally and certainly visually outrageous than Tucker or West.

But despite the boldness of a Bernhard, Tyler, and Midler, most comediennes today are less likely than their male counterparts to use obscene language or sexually

crude references. When and if they do, they are likely to find themselves rebuked. Joan Rivers, for example, is sometimes vulgar, angry, and aggressive. But she is no more so than Buddy Hackett or Richard Pryor. Yet it is she, and not they, who is censured.

This difference brings us to the consideration of the idea of feminine or masculine comedy. Is there such a thing as feminine humor? Is there any contradiction between being feminine and funny and/or are feminine women funny only in certain ways? Or is comedy a purely neutral phenomenon written and enacted by people who just happen to be male or female? Joan Rivers comments:

> I don't like funny women. I come out of that generation where a woman should be beautiful and sexy and a wonderful flower attached to a man, even though my whole life has been the antithesis of this. To this day, you don't expect a woman to be funny. We're a threat. I don't like funny women. I don't think I'm funny. I think I'm witty. Onstage I complain for every woman in America....I don't like to see a woman telling dirty jokes. People say I'm dirty and I always stare at them. My areas are just very "women's" kinds of areas. I have a routine now, which my husband hates, that for Christmas he gave me a box of Rely tampons. I think that's very funny. It's such a woman's joke.[9]

Rivers statement seems to make clear that she has ambivalent feelings about her own funniness--that her own temperament, talent, and drive have put her in conflict

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[9]Ibid. p. 352.

with her idea of how a woman should behave. Her obsessional harping on her own and other women's looks reflects a preoccupation with sexual attractiveness as a major facet of the woman's role. She even tries to excuse her own funniness by calling herself "witty," and her "dirtiness" by calling her material a "women's kind of area."

It is true that wit is a traditional feminine attribute. Many of the heroines of commedia dell'arte, Shakespearian plays, Restoration comedies, and Shavian dramas are witty--along with being feminine and attractive. But what Rivers and some other female comics do clearly goes beyond feminine wit. There is a kind of crudeness in the handling of material, even "women's material" and an aggression in their style that does not conform with notions of femininity.

Other comediennes have a style of comedy that accords more with our ideas of what is feminine. Lorne Michaels, producer of Saturday Night Live commented on the "female esthetic" in Lily Tomlin's comedy as contrasted with that of men:

> Male comedy is punchy, broad, aggressive; it assaults you. Men shy away from the "moment" and go for the joke.[10]

Tomlin's performing style may reflect not only a general female esthetic, but also her particular personality and

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[10]Ibid. p.368.

her background as an actress creating characters, rather than a stand-up comic creating jokes. Tomlin, who has taken a strong stand for feminism and publicly hinted at her own gayness, is scarcely a traditionally feminine woman. It is ironic that Rivers, who subscribes to more traditionally feminine values (including materialistic ones such as marriage to a rich man), should in her own act follow the traditionally masculine model of aggressive, punchy jokes. But apart from the particular paradox of Tomlin and Rivers, it is true that in terms of general notions of feminine and masculine styles, the latter is apt to be more aggressive and the former, softer.

Since women create comedy in a matrix of societal expectations about femininity, the strong need for approval that usually drives a performer, and perhaps a gender-based biological predisposition, those women who are broadly funny, aggressive, physical, and homely (ie. not conventionally feminine) are often faced with a conflict. The successful ones wrestle with the conflict and come up with ways of working that create audience acceptance and leave them relatively psychologically intact. Fanny Brice commented:

> If you're a comic, you have to be nice. And the audience has to like you. You have to have a softness about you, because if you do comedy and you are harsh, there is something offensive about it.[11]

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[11]Ibid. p. 111.

While some male comics may also find it advisable to be "nice," I suggest that this is primarily a female concern and shapes a softer style of comedy. Male comics do not find their masculinity questioned. But female comics who are adept at slapstick or verbal barbs do. Gilda Radner, for example, who was labeled "not primarily feminine," realized that she sometimes threatened men, and resolved, "I'll be funny instead of feminine."[12]

The genre of comedy that necessitates direct control of an audience and overt cleverness is stand-up comedy. Not so coincidentally, this genre has traditionally been an almost exclusively male preserve. In tandem with the feminist movement, one of the phenomena of the late 1960's through the 1980's has been the explosion of female stand-up comics. Elayne Boosler, Marilyn Sokol, Carol Siskind, Sandra Bernhard, Rosanne Barr, Lotus Weinstock, Ellen DeGeneris, Rita Rudner, Rhett Butler, Rosie O'Donnell, Marsha Warfield, Angela Scott, etc. have built a following in the clubs and occasionally on television, particularly the late night David Letterman Show and The Tonight Show.

But despite their growing numbers, women still form only a small minority among among stand-up comics. There is still widespread resistance to female comics from some

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[12]Ibid. p. 385.

club owners, agents, managers, and audience hecklers. In a Rolling Stone interview, Carson admitted that few female guest comics were asked back on his show and explained:

> It's because of the old role models that are assigned. A woman is feminine. A woman is not abrasive, a woman is not a hustler....I think it's much tougher on women. You don't see many of them around. And the ones that try, sometimes are a little aggressive for my taste. I'll take it from a guy, but from women, sometimes it doesn't fit too well.[13]

Perhaps because of the difficulties of the lifestyle--the late hours, the loneliness of life on the road; perhaps because of the audience and industry resistance a comedienne may encounter; or perhaps because of her own internalized conflicts around the issues of femininity and funniness, far fewer women than men set out to be comics. Many comediennes such as Joan Rivers, Ann Meara, Goldie Hawn, or Elaine Boosler set out to be actresses, singers, or dancers and wound up in comedy by default. Many combine comedy with other talents and do a mixed act. Male comics rarely sing, but the tradition of female performers' combining singing and occasionally dancing with comedy goes back to vaudeville and has been continued by Sophie Tucker, Sandra Bernhard, Bette Midler, Marilyn Sokol, etc. But no matter what route they take, or whether or not they combine comedy with other talents, the number of comediennes is increasing. And it is doing

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[13]Ibid., p. 313.

so in a society that has been profoundly affected by the sexual revolution of the 1960's, the feminist movement, and the phenomenal rise of women as independent wage earners. What then is likely to be the direction of female comedy? Some characteristics of contemporary female humor are already obvious. In the first place, many of today's comediennes refuse to utilize the self-deprecatory material that has formed the cornerstone of traditional women's humor. Others, who still indulge in verbal self-abuse or resort to the old sex-role stereotypes (such as the "dumb blonde") do so somewhat defensively or with a new twist on the material, since today's general awareness of the feminist point of view challenges at least the unthinking assumption of female inferiority. Also, since the permissiveness instigated in the 1960's, women's humor, like that of men, has become more crude, and the anger more open. Some social commentators have suggested that with the growing public panic over AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, we may be entering an era of sexual caution, and romance and monogamy may be making a comeback. If this is true, it will be interesting to note how this affects humor--whether that too, will become more careful, and rely more on innuendo than bold display.

The crudity and aggressiveness of some of today's female comics seem to have to do with their taking on male prerogatives of style--just as women in the work force

have entered formerly male preserves in terms of profession. However, most female comics have retained a softer, more traditionally feminine style in their humor. The future of women's humor is uncertain, just as is the future of sex roles in general. Perhaps, if Reagan/Rambo machoism expands, sex roles will become more codified and differentiated; female comics will restrict themselves to fat thigh/tampon jokes; and the number of female comics will decrease.

However, what I think is more likely to happen is that women will retreat neither from comedy nor from a full role in society. The economic necessities of supporting a family and the divorce rate dictate that women will continue to enter the work force in growing numbers and expand beyond the "pink collar" ghetto of low-paid, women's work. As economic roles become less differentiated, sex roles will also become less dependent on an inequitable balance of power. Women will be neither helpless, passive sex-objects in the old model of femininity nor will they be imitators of a male-based macho role. Instead, one hopes that some new consciousness will emerge, in which the content and style of female humor will reflect the total reality of women's lives--both those aspects that are gender related and those that are not--and that this humor will speak to the sensiblities of all human beings.

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