

Who Is Laughing Now?

The Role of Humour in the Social Construction of Gender

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ABSTRACT

The sociology of knowledge is employed as a synthesizing framework to organize application of conclusions, drawn from studies of humour in other contexts, to gender relations. Humour plays a significant but dual role in the accomplishment of gender as taken-for-granted reality. First of all, since humour generally affirms societal standards, its key function is ideological buttress of the patriarchal status quo. However, in addition to this conservative, social control function, there is a subversive, rebellious aspect of comedy which serves to challenge male hegemony.

RÉSUMÉ

L'auteure utilise la sociologie de la connaissance comme cadre synthétisant pour organiser l'application des relations de sexe aux conclusions tirées dans d'autres études sur l'humour qui, elles, examinaient d'autres contextes. L'humour joue un rôle important, voire même double, dans la réalisation du genre comme étant une réalité que l'on prend pour acquis. D'abord, puisque l'humour affirme généralement les normes sociétales, sa fonction principale est le renforcement idéologique du status quo patriarcal. Cependant, en plus de cette fonction conservatrice visant le contrôle social, il existe un aspect de comédie subversive et rebelle qui sert à mettre l'hégémonie mâle au défi.

Most sociology seems to be the "sour or dour" variety (Davis, 1979:107). Indeed, a sociologist once said that, "One of the funniest things about sociologists is that they are so afraid of being funny."¹ With one or two notable exceptions (Posner, 1975), feminist sociologists have paid little attention to humour. Nevertheless, there are persuasive arguments defending why sociologists in general, and gender relations specialists in particular, ought to take laughter, humour, and fun very seriously.

For one thing, humour is pervasive. "It may be that all societies have their share of killjoys and spoilsports and prigs, but most of their members seem to prize opportunities for play and laughter and to appreciate other individuals who make appropriate use of them" (Berlyne, 1969: 796). For another, contemporary society accords humour high value. A sense of humour is a prized trait. (For instance, Allport's 1961 study

reported that 94 percent of the respondents claimed their own sense of humour to be equal to or above average.) Comedies draw the large movie and television audiences. Finally, those who amuse us are rewarded handsomely. Bill Cosby reportedly makes \$57 million a year for making us laugh (*Time*, September 28, 1987).

Humour comes in many forms: memorized jokes, slapstick, parody, irony, satire, gallows humour, puns, riddles, slips of the tongue, spoonerisms, limericks, anecdotes, practical jokes and black humour. It is found in serendipitous witticisms of everyday talk; in joke cycles; in published cartoons and joke books; on tapes and records; in television sitcoms, advertising, plays, movies, and comedy clubs; on sweatshirts, lapel buttons, greeting cards, bumper stickers, graffiti, licence plates, and billboards.

Despite its ubiquity, the essence of humour — why something is funny — defies simple explanation (Davis and Farina, 1970). For example, was this supermarket tabloid headline the stuff of comedy or tragedy: "Mom Loses 41 Pounds on Dog Food Diet : She Eats the Stuff Right Out of the Can and Loves It"? (*Weekly World News*, December 1, 1987). Berger (1987:14) seems correct when he describes humour as "not so much a subject as an attitude, a stance, a 'sense' of things that we adopt, that colors the way we function in the universe." What strikes one as funny depends upon one's point of view, a consequence of factors that vary from the state of one's digestion to one's social moorings.

Written from a sociological perspective, this paper adopts Zijderveld's (1983:8) perspicacious definition of humour "as playing with institutionalized meanings." He goes on to point out that since "everything human is permeated by meaning ... the possibilities of playing with meaning are well-nigh inexhaustible" (p. 17). The present concern is with ideological meaning, the "intricate web of beliefs about reality and social life that is institutionalized as public knowledge and disseminated throughout society so effectively that it becomes taken-for-granted knowledge for all social groups" (Ritzer, 1988:315).

The thesis of this paper is that humour, a pervasive aspect of popular culture neglected by feminist sociologists, plays a significant role in the accomplishment of gender as taken-for-granted reality. Though it draws upon the analysis of humour in the sociology of popular culture, this paper is grounded theoretically in the sociology of knowledge, which is the branch of sociology concerned with the "social location of ideas" (Berger, 1963:110), the "relation between thought and society" (Coser, 1968:428). Feminist sociologists have found the sociology of knowledge a powerful approach to women's ideological domination and historical exclusion from the production of culture (Smith, 1987; Spender, 1985). The sociology of knowledge is employed in this paper as a synthesizing framework to embrace conclusions drawn from studies of humour in other contexts.

The Sociology of Knowledge

A consensus has emerged to define sex as the "biological dichotomy between females and males," and *gender* as that "which is recognized as feminine or

masculine by a social world" (Gould and Kern-Daniels, 1977). Social scientists have concluded that chromosomes, hormones, and reproductive physiology (what Monty Python referred to as "the nasty bits") are but minimally related to the cultural patterning and evaluation of male and female behaviour. Gender is a paradox — a fiction without inherent meaning yet immensely consequential for individuals and society. The key to this conundrum is gender's status as *social* fiction. A set of ideas becomes social fact when members of society agree that it is true and act as though it were true. Put another way, gender is a social construct which presents males as normal and more highly valued and females as deviant Other. Elaborate gender stereotypes that describe the nature of males and females rationalise the traditional gender division of labour between public and domestic spheres. Various institutions, including family, school, church and mass media, perpetuate ideology that presents the social constructs of gender as "natural" or "god-given." Two tenets of the sociology of knowledge are relevant here: the existential conditioning of thought, and the ruling ideas proposition (Mackie, 1987).

The Existential Conditioning of Thought

Thought is bound, in varying degree, to location within the social structure (Coser, 1968:430). In Marx's (1859/1913:11-12) words, "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but on the contrary their social existence determines their consciousness." In the context of gender, the expression of this tenet may be labelled "the two worlds metaphor." Smith (1974), for example, speaks of the "world of men" and the "world of women," and argues that different locations in the social structure are associated with particularized boundaries of experience and thought patterns. Similarly, Bernard (1981:3) claims that "most human beings live in single-sex worlds, women in a female world and men in a male world [which differ] both subjectively and objectively."

Differences in productive, reproductive, and sexual activities contribute to gender differences in consciousness. Power and hierarchy are overriding concerns. Different work activities in the home and the labour force lead to men and women having distinctive consciousnesses (Armstrong and Armstrong, 1984:188). Moreover, Stanley and Wise (1983:146) claim that "women *do* experience reality differently, just by

having 'different' bodies, different physical experiences, to name no others" (emphasis in original).²

The Ruling-ideas Proposition

Not only are ideas socially located, but some ideas are more influential than others. As Marx and Engels (1947:39) wrote, "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas." Powerful people control the production and distribution of ideas, and they do so to buttress their own interests. When subordinate groups accept as valid and authoritative the ideology of the dominant group, they are engaging in false consciousness, that is, "thought that is alienated from the real social being of the thinker" (Berger and Luckmann, 1966:6).

So far as gender is concerned, feminine and masculine intellectual worlds are unequal in status. If mental production is the privilege of the "ruling class," and men dominate women, then the authoritative perspective, the ideas that matter, obviously originate from men. In Smith's (1974:7) words, "the world as it is constituted by men stands in authority over that of women." Similarly, Bernard (1981:11) says that, the male world is not only segregative and exclusionary vis-à-vis the female world but is even, in varying degrees, positively hostile to it." In other words, women are excluded from the "social circles" of people whose experiences count, whose interpretations of these experiences have integrity. "Men attend to and treat as significant what men say and have said" (Smith, 1979:137). Males, though they have only a partial, incomplete view of total "reality," are in a position to insist that their views are the real views and the only views (Spender, 1985:1-2). For that reason, females who have been raised in the shadow of the dominant male ideology often employ the masculine idiom to think about themselves and the world.

This paper contends that humour plays a significant part in the social construction of gender. Moreover, humour plays a dual role in this process. First of all, since humour generally affirms societal standards, its key function is ideological buttress of the patriarchal status quo. Such television writers as Norman Lear stress that the "key element in successful comedy is *reality*" (Brown and Bryant, 1983). Humour forms part of male ruling ideas, that is, most of the humour presented to both sexes is likely to have been designed originally for male consumption (Chapman and

Gadfield, 1976). As such, humour functions as one ideological device among many, which makes the differences in the rewards and opportunities available to males and females appear reasonable and natural rather than arbitrary and unjust (Jaggar and Rothenberg, 1984:5). Of course, not all men serve as agents of patriarchy in the same degree. The main beneficiaries of patriarchy are the white, affluent, heterosexual, well-educated males in capitalist-advanced countries (Carrigan et al., 1985). As Pleck (1981:241) emphasises, "patriarchy is a *dual* system, a system in which men oppress women, and in which men oppress themselves and each other" (emphasis in original). In sum, humour participates in the typification of males and females, the dissemination of stereotypes, the celebration of boys and men, and the devaluation of girls and women.

Second, in addition to humour's conservative, social control function, there is a subversive, rebellious aspect of comedy long recognised by social analysts (Freud, 1905/1960; Martineau, 1972; Obrdlik, 1942; Stephenson, 1951).³ Many people are aware of historical cases of political humour, such as the arrests of Berlin cabaret entertainers during the early years of the Nazi Germany regime for mimicry and wisecracks about Hitler (Emerson, 1969). In fact, there exist many words and phrases in the English language that suggest the significance of humour as a disillusionary force: "tease, kid, poke fun, wisecrack, play a joke, satirize, caricature, make fun of, parody, ridicule, laugh at, twit, gibe, heckle, taunt, and mock" (Levine, 1969:11-12). Zijderfeld (1983) points out that, since humour involves toying with institutionalized meanings, a measure of iconoclasm seems inevitable.

Humour carries an enigmatic quality: it is itself unrealistic and thereby able to demonstrate that reality as we know and live it could well be otherwise; that alternatives, as unreal and absurd as they may seem to be, are not unthinkable. Humour shares this with utopias, and it is up to the audience to decide, by a laughing response, whether a utopia is nothing but a joke. (Zijderfeld, 1983:58)

The women's movement has brought about the breakthrough of false consciousness and the emergence of gender-consciousness, as women began to be a gender-for-themselves. Through the feminist writings of de Beauvoir, Friedan, Millett, and others, women "became aware of the feminine mystique as a mystique which served to keep us in our places by invading our

own consciousness as our beliefs, our values, our sense of morality, fitness, and obligation" (Smith, 1979:136, emphasis in original). A feminist humour based on visions of change forms part of women's new gender consciousness:

Feminist humour is based on the perception that societies have generally been organized as systems of oppression and exploitation and that the largest (but not the only) oppressed group has been the female. It is also based on the conviction that such oppression is undesirable and unnecessary. (Kaufman, 1980:13)

Despite the fact that "rebellious constructions of the mind" (Berger, 1963:133) sometimes find humorous expression, sociologists nevertheless conclude that, on the whole, humour fails to serve a truly revolutionary force in society (Zijderveld, 1983:42).⁴ On the contrary, it tends "to be a force for conservation rather than change, a means by which existing beliefs are reinforced and by which the dominant patterns of the superordinate group are maintained" (Snell, 1986:71). When rebellion threatens the ruling sex, the challenge is met through jokes (in addition to other means). At the end of the nineteenth century, the advocate of women's suffrage had become a stock comic character (Walker, 1981:2). Again in the 1970s, the media trivialized women's movement adherents as a ludicrous bunch of bra-burners. When feminists proposed to change sexist language, the media laughed at "women's lib redhots" with "nutty pronouns." A columnist wrote, "Women are irrational, all women; when some women threaten to disembowel me unless I say 'personhole-cover,' I am surer even than I was that all women are irrational" (Martyna, 1980:484).

The sociology of knowledge also implies skepticism concerning the power of humour to effect social change. The sociology of knowledge emphasises the priority of material factors, of social structure, and the derived, secondary status of ideas. The impact of symbolic challenge, for example, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), should not be minimized. However, altering ideas alone is not enough; women's power position cannot be substantially improved without improvements in their material condition (Armstrong and Armstrong, 1984:204; Spender, 1985:6). Therefore, the ideological voice of the ruling sex is the public voice. Similarly, Negro humour during slavery provided accommodation to white society, a means of survival; black social satire had to await the

civil rights movement (Martineau, 1972:112). Although the voice of the subordinate sex occasionally breaks through into the public domain, its humour is usually confined to the "below stairs" women's world of kitchen, beauty parlor, typing pool, and limited-circulation feminist publications.

We now turn to a consideration of eight interrelated sociological generalizations concerning humour in popular culture. Using the sociology of knowledge as theoretical framework, we explore the applicability of these generalizations about humour in other contexts to the social construction of gender. The first six generalizations concern humour as force for conservatism in society, while the last two look at humour as iconoclastic power.

I. Humour as means of negotiating tension

Joking is a frequently used means of negotiating the tensions and emotions that underlie the conventional order of everyday life. Following Freud, Davis (1979:108) argues that "humor allows us to distance ourselves from all the potential disorganizations of the social world." Implicit in this proposition is the view of humour as a safety-valve: emotions that might endanger the social order are "siphoned off" through indirect expression (Lyman, 1987:150).

Throughout the life cycle, the content of humour circulating among people of a given age signals changing tensions surrounding gender. Children under the age of five or six years old have yet to grasp the concept of gender constancy (Katz, 1979). For example, a little girl may talk about being a daddy when she grows up. Youngsters' unsophisticated views of gender are also reflected in the criteria they use to differentiate the sexes: clothing, hair length, or urinary posture are often cited in gender attribution. Children's humour reflects aspects of gender they find troubling. A nursery school teacher reported that the favorite joke of her three-year-old charges involved gender change:

Saying to a girl, "You're a boy," and to a boy, "You're a girl," represented the height of wit for these three-year-olds. It was a particularly good joke when the boy who had started it one day said to the teacher: "You're a boy." *Behind this joke lay the fantasy, the wish and the fear that one's sex*

could be changed. (Wolfenstein, 1968:268, emphasis added)

Beginning in the elementary school years, boys in our society face the problem of separating themselves from the authority of women. As a consequence, boys impose a machismo code on one another (Best, 1983). Be first. Be tough. Defy authority. Don't be a sissy or crybaby. Dirty jokes and fag jokes help males to keep their distance from females (Fine, 1986; Thorne and Luria, 1986). According to a national survey (Bibby and Posterski, 1985:84), homosexuals are the "number one target" of Canadian teenage humour. Male homophobia expressed in various ways, including the recent spate of AIDS jokes, serves as a system of social control as males of all ages are discouraged from being effeminate (like females), or sissies (like their sisters).

Male anxiety about female power continues in adulthood and finds clear demonstration in other kinds of masculine humour. Such writers as Woody Allen and Philip Roth depict the "phantasmagorical specter of the engulfing superbreast" (Brownmiller, 1984:44). The size and demeanour of cartoon wives seems to convey similar messages. The *New Yorker* wife asks, "Well, Hubert, did you have a nice day?" Her puny husband answers, "Yes dear. You told me to this morning. Remember?" The husband in a "Bizarro" cartoon complains to his spouse: "I gave up smoking, caffeine, desserts, sugar, and red meat. The least you can do is let me tarry at the gum counter." Vigorous cartoon men shrink when they marry and, in Kirschner's (1981:80) words, "project the imagery of a three-inch penis." A "B.C." comic strip character asks, "What is your idea of a 'narrow escape'?" The reply: "When the groom's beeper goes off in the middle of the wedding ceremony." Fun is poked at women in authority — wives, mothers, mothers-in-law. A New Year's Eve newspaper editorial offers humorous predictions for the future. Among them: "British PM Margaret Thatcher will undergo a sex-change operation. So will Michael Jackson. Nobody will notice." In short, "since humor increases distance, it is a safe way to approach the most dangerous, most disruptive aspects of existence" (Davis, 1979:107). The gender status quo is thereby protected and preserved.

II. Humour communicates attitudes

Ideological messages about who each sex is and how it should be dealt with are humorously conveyed.

Once again, a conservative function is carried out as jokes tell us that females and males are very different, that males are superior, and that men are in charge of the public realm and women of the domestic domain. Mediated forms of popular culture, typically in male hands, reinforce our cultural store of gender stereotypes. In addition, joking is a useful channel for sending gender-relevant messages in face-to-face communication. People are not held accountable for what they do in jest to the same degree as they would be for serious communication (Emerson, 1969). Because humour is playful, they can communicate the message and "then take it back if need be by saying 'it was only a joke'" (Kane et al., 1977:13).

Many scholars have commented on the anti-female bias in North American humour (Cantor, 1976; McGhee, 1979; Zimbardo and Meadow, 1974), a misogyny that reflects and reinforces women's inferior status in society. Believe it or not, joke books that depict women as stupid and deserving of routine battering are still to be found on library shelves:

"And now, Mrs. Sullivan," said lawyer Thomson, "Will you be kind enough to tell the jury whether your husband was in the habit of striking you with impunity?"
 "Wid what, sir?"
 "With impunity."
 "He was, sir, now and then; but he struck me oftener with his fist." (sic)

The following joke published in *Playboy* (July 1987:106) exemplifies humour somewhat more palatable today than battering "jokes." Nevertheless, neither social construct (the male as adulterous bully; the female as financially dependent sycophant) is particularly flattering:

The married couple was enjoying a dinner out when a statuesque blonde walked over to their table, exchanged warm greetings with the husband and walked off.
 "Who was that?" the wife demanded.
 "If you must know," he coolly replied, "that was my mistress."
 "Your *mistress*? I want a divorce!"
 "Are you sure you want to give up a big house in the suburbs, a Mercedes, furs, jewelry, and a vacation home in Mexico?"
 They continued dining in silence. Finally, the woman nudged her husband and said, "Isn't that Howard over there? Who is he with?"
 "That's his mistress," her husband replied.

"Oh," she said, taking a bite of dessert. "I think ours is cuter."

The cartoon, aptly referred to as "communication to the quick" (Harrison, 1981), illustrates how gender stereotypes become taken-for-granted reality through incessant repetition and reinforcement of other sources. (Unmarried) men are in charge. Women are decorative accessories or helpers. A content analysis of *Playboy* cartoons (Dines-Levy and Smith, 1988) found females to be more heavily caricatured than males. "The 'idealised' female character is young, dressed in a sexually provocative manner if not completely undressed, and possesses a body featuring large breasts, curvaceous hips, a protruding bottom, and long legs. Irrespective of setting — home, office, street — this female has one major function, that of sexual plaything" (p. 257).

Women as incessant talkers is another frequent cartoon theme. Mr. Dithers describes Mrs. Dithers as having a mouth big enough to catch a frisbee. A cactus in a "Herman" cartoon stuffs its stems into its "ears," while the husband asks his wife, "Have you been talking to that plant again?" The "Wizard of Id" turnkey says, "They found a three million-year-old female jawbone." Asks the prisoner, "How do they know it's female?" The answer: "It was still clacking."

Masculine social constructions of women take other comedic forms besides the cartoon. For example, when Zimbardo and Meadow (1974), [described in Tarvis and Offir, 1977:21-22] analysed *Reader's Digest* jokes of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, six times as many antifemale as antimale jokes were found. Even in the late 1960s, the ratio had not changed. Typically, women were depicted as stupid or foolish. Bob Newhart's monologue of the driving instructor registers the same point. ("Mrs. Webb, you were backing out of your driveway? At 75 m.p.h.??" This woman driver was apparently so stupid she could not distinguish controls for ignition, lights and car heater.) Male producers and writers have also been responsible for most television portraits of women:

A great deal of the humor of America's most popular female television comedian, Carol Burnett, is based on bitter, cruel sketches in which an elderly crone makes fun of her husband's impotence, or in which mother-and-daughter set-tos result in mutual psychological mauling. Or, in the case of another famous comedian, Lucille Ball, it was about a daffy

woman forever becoming involved in idiotic situations. (Bernard, 1981:454)

To be fair, the mediated gender ideology has not been as black and white as the foregoing suggests. Dagwood Bumstead is hardly a Mensa candidate. (Says the grungy diner cook to Dagwood, "The St. Patrick's special is corned beef and cabbage." "That's exactly what we're having tonight," Dagwood replies. "How about cabbage and corned beef, then?" Dagwood cheerfully agrees "That sounds better.") Male-dominated TV has also brought us "Mary Tyler Moore" — perhaps the first female star of the small screen to be more interested in her career than men — as well as "Maude" and "Roseanne." However, the preponderance of mediated popular culture reinforces the existing gender arrangements.

III. In-jokes are related to social worlds

As noted in the introduction, the two-worlds metaphor labels the distinctiveness of male and female intellectual experience. For instance, Lindesmith et al. (1977:168) point out:

In jokes are always related to some social world — be it racial, sexual, ethnic, occupational, or recreational. Each social world has its particular stock jokes, humorous sayings, and fabled humorous stories about personages, social types, or important concerns in that world. (Emphasis in original)

As the "two-worlds" proposition predicts, research shows that, despite some shared enjoyment, women and men do tend to find different things funny. Males appreciate aggressive humour and sexual humour more than females do (Brodzinsky et al., 1981; Groch, 1974). The nonsensical, absurd humour of incongruity appeals more to women (Brodzinsky et al., 1981; Terry and Ertel, 1974). Women like slapstick comedy less, and anecdotal humour more than do men (Crawford, 1989:158).

For generations, women's jocular image of men has been hidden from men. The female world is an exercise class of middle-aged women kicking savagely to the "Hooked on Classics" version of Mendelssohn's "Wedding March." It is women sitting around the kitchen table, poking fun at men. Women's "inside view" depicts males as big babies, whose snuffle in the nose, or tickle in the throat sends them to bed for three

days. Epstein (1988:237) speaks of the worldwide cynicism of women's folklore "that men are often childlike and incompetent, that their egos need bolstering because they are unsure of themselves ... that they are vulnerable, weak reeds depending on a woman's strength in matters of emotion, and that they cannot cope with children, the home, and other aspects of life in the female domain." Male self-centeredness is another persistent theme. In words of that sensitive feminist, Phil Donahue (quoted in Steinem, 1983:182):

If you're in a social situation, and women are talking to each other, and one woman says, "I was hit by a car today," all the other women will say, "You're kidding! What happened? Where? Are you all right?" In the same situation with men, one male says "I was hit by a car today." I guarantee you that there will be another male in the group who will say, "Wait till I tell you what happened to me." (Emphasis in original)

According to Walker (1981:6):

The attitude toward men in much domestic humor is a curious mixture of "clinging vine" dependence ([1950s columnist Phyllis] McGinley's husband slaughters spiders where I daren't) and obvious condescension. They are terribly handy around the house but have very annoying habits. Margaret Halsey [a domestic humorist of the 1960s] says the top of her husband's dresser "always looks like a plate of scrambled eggs."

Some humour from the women's world gets into print. Likely, male gatekeepers judge it to be harmless but profitable material of little interest to anyone but women. The most obvious example is the traditional domestic humour of Jean Kerr and Erma Bombeck.⁵ Babies are so wet their diapers give off rainbows. Kids stuff Cracker Jacks up their noses. The working mother races "around the kitchen in a pair of bedroom slippers, trying to quick-thaw a chop under each armpit" (*Time*, July 2, 1984:36). See also Brown and O'Connor (1986).

Traditional women's humour manages to laugh at men without questioning male superiority, and to joke about female-male relations without challenging the gender status quo. The humour of the masculine world is humour with a decidedly different flavour. This distinction is nicely expressed by Crawford (1989:161): "Women's humor supports a goal of greater intimacy by being supportive and healing, while men's humor reinforces 'performance' goals of competition, the

establishment of hierarchical relationships, and self-aggrandizement."

Take salesman jokes. In "Briefcase" (run in the business section of many Canadian newspapers), a clergyman delivers a eulogy in the cartoon's background, while mourners shake a hand proffered from the coffin. The caption reads, "A family man, a community man, above all, a salesman." The humour of the male world also celebrates sexual prowess. Says Adam to Eve: "Better stand back. I don't know how long this thing gets." Competition is a constantly recurring theme. (Even "Adam," the cartoon couch-potato househusband, is forever competing in weight-loss contests and diaper-pinning competitions.) Masculine humour features the exchange of insults in bouts of one-upmanship. It treats women as objects of ridicule, of sexual utility, or indifference. The lesson that novelist John Mortimer learned from his father is that women do not matter very much. We know it is supposed to be funny because it is reprinted in Mordecai Richler's (1983) *The Best of Modern Humor*:

"Love affairs aren't much of a subject for drama really," he told me at an early age. "Consider this story of a lover, a husband and an unfaithful wife. The wife confesses all to her husband. He sends for her lover. They are closeted in the living-room together. The wife stands outside the door, trembling with fear. She strains her ears to discover what's going on in the room. Some terrible quarrel? A duel or fight to the death perhaps? At last she can stand the suspense no longer. She flings open the door and what does she see? Blood? Broken furniture? One of them stretched out on the carpet? Not at all. The two men are sitting by the fire drinking bottled ale and discussing the best method of pruning apple trees. Naturally, the woman's furious. She packs and leaves for her mother's."

Both this and the next related function of humour reflect and reinforce existing social constructions of gender. As such, they operate, for the most part, as mechanisms of social control.

IV. Humour strengthens ingroup / outgroup boundaries

Comedy deepens communal bonds through shared moments of laughter (Stebbins, 1979:95). Many of these shared moments that end up strengthening ingroup ties focus upon disparagement of outsiders (Zillman, 1983). *We share common attitudes. Their*

difference provokes *our* laughter. For example, an observational study of American adolescent girls during school lunch breaks concluded that jokes about male genitals served to communicate intimacy, solidarity, and female superiority. "Why is a chicken so ugly?" "Because it's got a pecker right between its eyes" (Sanford and Eder, 1984:237). Off-colour jokes have long been considered the male prerogative. As Asimov (1983) put it: "One touch of smut makes the whole male world kin."

Boundaries shored up by laughter obviously serve to exclude outsiders. A frequently heard reason for keeping females out of all-male environments is that women spoil men's fun. Sexual (and sexist) jokes and manly curses would be inhibited by female company. When women insist on intruding, men may retaliate with offensive humour. For instance, the presence of token women in the workplace sometimes produces exaggerated displays of jokes with sexual innuendo (Kanter, 1977). After observing blue-collar workplaces, Fine (1987) concludes that, to be accepted, women must become "one of the boys" and be willing to engage in coarse joking. According to him, comments such as these are commonplace in restaurant kitchens: "A male cook turns to his male co-worker, eating a banana, and announces: 'I saw my girlfriend sucking on something like that last night.' His co-worker grins" (p. 135).

Although the social science literature has little to say about women's methods for keeping out male intruders, boundary maintenance presumably works both ways. The *Los Angeles Times* reported Susan Littwin to be fed up with men invading aerobics classes (Grimes, 1989). She is "irritated by men who are out of step to the music, perspire too heavily and pin their locker keys to their shorts." She complains that their "movements are too big, too lumbering, too uncoordinated." Though Littwin says that she almost "got into a fistfight with a 'half-naked, middle-aged man who bumped into her during a workout,'" men's use of humour as boundary-maintenance tactic suggests that a more effective response would have been a chorus of female giggles.

V. Male humour has been communicated to both sexes

Good manners generally prescribe that ingroup humour be kept from outgroup ears. Disparaging ethnic

jokes are not usually related to members of target groups, for example. Women's humour satirizing men is usually enjoyed behind male backs. However, given the hegemonous nature of male humour, males have not hesitated to communicate to females humour disparaging females. In the past, at least, women purportedly found to be funny jokes deprecating females (Cantor, 1976). For example, the wife in the *Playboy* joke quoted earlier, characterised by false consciousness, shares her husband's view that the mistress is an object of commerce. Even today, some women continue to use men's eyes to look out at the world, and inward at themselves (Rowbotham, 1973:40).

Ursula Franklin, an engineering professor, relates this anecdote:

Engineering students at the University of Toronto, like those of other Canadian universities, put out a student newspaper called, the *Toike*. Like its brother publications, the *Toike* is essentially a filthy, sexist, and racist rag, often quite offensive. Ever since I have been a member of the Faculty, I have taken part in campaigns to eliminate the offensiveness of the *Toike*, if not the *Toike* altogether. The result of these campaigns has always been the same: as the protests mounted, the *Toike* tuned down, only to pop up again after a while.

During the most recent campaign, initiated largely by women's groups on the campus, we tried to involve women engineering students in our endeavours. Several of these students were officers of the Engineering Society, the student body responsible for the *Toike*. Our encounters with these women were revealing and actually quite sad. *They assured us that they were not offended at all by the sexist or racist jokes or cartoons; they thought many of them were really quite funny* and that, after all, "boys-will-be-boys." It was painful for me to see how most, though not all, of them were trying so hard to become part of the "tribe" that they were losing their own identity, their common sense and their judgement. (Franklin, 1984:85, emphasis added)⁶

When women whose consciousness has been raised no longer see eye to eye with men, males charge them with having absolutely no sense of humour (Walker, 1981). Masculine humour has played an influential role in normalizing traditional definitions of gender because, as part of male ruling ideas, people of both sexes have found it acceptable.

VI. Humour is a vehicle for communicating power and status

The spontaneous humour of face-to-face interaction frequently serves the conservative function of communicating and underlining the power and status distinctions among the participants. Hierarchical relations at work frequently coincide with gender stratification. Spradley and Mann (1975) note that the joking relationship between bartenders and waitresses [female servers] maintain status inequality. As "new girls" became more skillful at this joking behaviour, they learned to interpret as humour attempts to unhook their bras or remarks such as these:

When Denise first started working at Brady's, she found it unnerving and rather unpleasant to be called a "bitch" by the bartenders or have them make specific anatomical references. George would say to her, "Hey, be a sweet bitch and get me a couple of bottles of juice," or "Chesty, I need some ice here. Be a sweetie and get some for me." (Spradley and Mann, 1975:91)

Similarly, Coser (1960), who recorded instances of humour and laughter in mental hospital staff meetings over a three-month period, reported that most of the joking originated from high-status people such as the psychiatrists. Despite the fact that a sizeable number of women attended the meetings, including two female psychiatrists, 99 out of the 103 jokes recorded were made by males. The subtext of this *downward humour* of superiors in a hierarchical structure is social control:

People in power have a tendency to treat subordinates in a jovial and jocular manner. By this behaviour they try to exhibit a democratic attitude and to prevent the emergence of envy and resentment, but at the same time maintain their positions of power. Humour functions here as a kind of legitimating force, strengthening the authoritative quality of power. Legitimate power (or authority), as Max Weber taught, is power which convinces people, which people want to follow and obey. It is the ideal-typical opposite of brute force and naked violence through which power can also be achieved. Humour and laughter may embellish power with a human touch, take off its sharp edges, or mellow it. (Zijderveld, 1983:55)

If subordinates attempt to engage in *upward humour*, their behaviour gets defined "as insubordinate, as a potentially subversive activity" (Zijderveld, 1983:55). Through experience, underlings learn to

reserve their witticisms for lower echelon targets and to act as an appreciative audience for their superiors. Coser (1960) found that lower-status persons at the hospital staff meetings, such as nurses, often laughed harder. After all, laughter can be a form of ingratiation: the higher the status of the joketeller, the "more likely the same joke, story or pun is to evoke laughter from the audience" (Kane et al., 1977:16). Upward humour is usually restricted to specific occasions, such as the coffee break or the annual office party (Zijderveld, 1983:56). One such form of temporary licence is jocular identity exchanges. The male with a five-o'clock shadow, silly hat, and enormous falsies arouses great hilarity. Sawyer (1987) ponders the question of why male cross-dressing is funny and female cross-dressing occasions little responses, and concludes:

If our laughter comes easily, automatically, thoughtlessly — perhaps we could be a little bit ashamed of our assumptions: that the woman who dresses like a man is just being sensible, but the man who dresses like a woman is either insane, or he is intended to be comic, because there is no reason so compelling that a man in his right mind would willingly accept such a demotion in status! (Sawyer, 1987:14)

As one might expect, gender norms concerning jocular behaviour reflect the hierarchical patterns sociologists observed in other contexts. For instance, according to the cross-cultural research of Williams and West (1982:77), the gender stereotypes of university student samples from 19 of 25 countries consensually describe males as humorous, while the stereotype of females makes no mention of this trait. In our society, there exists a gender division of humour-related behaviour (Eakins and Eakins, 1978; Lakoff, 1975). A man with a good sense of humour is someone who tells good jokes. A woman with a good sense of humour is someone who laughs at men's jokes. (In the movie "Punchline," aspiring stand-up comic Sally Field needed lessons from Tom Hanks on how to be funny.) Women allegedly refrain from telling jokes, especially in the presence of men. The few who try supposedly do not do a good job: they fumble and repeat themselves, mix up the order of happenings and kill the punch line. They frequently lack the wit to laugh at jokes men find funny. Though most of these allegations are unproven, the behaviour pattern of male clown and female admirer begins to appear in the early elementary school years.

It is not clear at this point whether parents and other socializing agents begin actively encouraging humor in boys and discouraging it in girls at this age, or whether each sex simply begins adopting the patterns of behavior they see in the adults around them. (McGhee, 1979:201)

Humour initiation appears to be associated with other traditionally masculine traits of aggressiveness and dominance (McGhee, 1979:187). Female attempts to be funny may elicit male disapproval, especially where female wit can be interpreted as subversion of male authority (Eakins and Eakins, 1978:77). According to Klein (1984:126), who interviewed several women comics:

Dealing with the audience ... requires some finesse. The women agree that stand-up comedy is, in itself, an aggressive act; making someone laugh means exerting control, even power. But a woman cannot come off as over aggressive or she will lose the audience.

For this reason, female stand-up comics (like members of minority ethnic groups) have traditionally adopted a self-deprecatory, DO UNTO YOURSELF BEFORE THEY DO UNTO YOU humour (Walker, 1981). As Levine (1976) suggested, female comics echo "the values of their social milieu in order to attract and keep a mass audience." The early Phyllis Diller joked that when she was a kid, her mother tied a pork chop around her neck so the dog would like her. Joan Rivers, who says, "I had a very hard time getting to where I am, and a lot of it was because I was a woman doing it ..." (Israel, 1984:111), seems to get away with being aggressive by directing most of her insults against women. ("Princess Anne resembles a horse. Marie Osmond makes Debbie Boone look like a slut. Elizabeth Taylor is a pig, with more chins than a Chinese phone book.")

Relatedly, "Charlie," the female stand-up comic in Erika Ritter's play *Automatic Pilot* (1980:40) remarks, "There are no glamorous lady comics. It doesn't work." The fact that the very successful Roseanne Barr weighs two hundred pounds may not be coincidental. As Ellmann (1968:74) argued, women's sexuality interferes with their authority claims ("soft body, soft mind"). Fat comics, who deviate from our society's stereotype of the beautiful woman, may, like older women, be trading *perceived* asexuality for power. Perhaps most important of all, most of the small but growing number

of female stand-up comics embrace an apolitical, intensely personal sort of humour (Klein, 1984).

The estimated three percent of working stand-up comics in Canada who are women deal with considerable hostility. Sherry O'Brien says, "Oh, [the male emcees] say in the introduction, "There aren't a lot of ladies in comedy, (pause) but there are a lot of sluts ... and here's one now!" (Scotton, 1989). Comedy clubs, like other major centres of communication, are owned and controlled by men.

VII. Feminist humour challenges male hegemony

The six generalizations concerning humour reviewed so far all specify humour as ideological prop for patriarchy. However, we acknowledge that notable changes in humour accompanied the second wave of the women's movement. No absolute distinction can be drawn between the traditional humour of the women's world and feminist humour, for one shades into the other, but the latter, like other examples of humour of rebellion "works as a de-ideologizing and disillusioning force" (Zijderveld, 1983:58). Poking fun at topdogs challenges false consciousness. It comforts the downtrodden with the conviction, often illusionary, that they possess moral independence and power that will eventually conquer the enemy (Öbrdlik, 1942; Zijderveld, 1983:48). The political anecdotes that circulated in Russia and Soviet satellites are famous. Take this joke which expressed Polish unhappiness in 1982:

A militiaman shoots a man dead in the street, a quarter of an hour before the start of the curfew. "Why on earth did you do that?" asks his horrified officer. "Curfew hasn't yet begun." "Maybe," says the militiaman, "but I know where he lives, and he never would have made it on time."

Several years later, Estonians were annoyed by hordes of Moscow citizens who came to Tallinn to buy the best consumer goods. A joke made the rounds claiming that "the state farms in Estonia are developing a super pig with wings so that the best cuts of bacon can fly directly to Moscow" (*Globe and Mail*, January 22, 1989). Laughter through tears conveys the idea that, as long as we can laugh, "the human spirit lives, and the way for real change remains open" (Vitaliev, 1990:A7). Nevertheless, we acknowledge that the humour of "the resilient underdog" (Datun, 1986) circulates with the tacit permission of the oppressor. The oppressor "who

allows such defiant humour and laughter is obviously still in full command of the situation. The moment he begins to curb such derision, he is losing his grip on power" (Zijderveld, 1983:49).

The resurgence of feminism, which began in the late 1960s, has meant that women's jocular voice is no longer confined "below stairs." In contrast to traditional women's humour, feminist humour is subversive humour, characterised by a revolutionary attitude of *nonacceptance* of the gender status quo (Kaufman, 1980:13). Unlike the traditional humour of the women's world which spoofs men's weaknesses while acknowledging their superiority, feminist humour lampoons social systems that can be, that must be changed.

Feminist humour and women's traditional humour share a predilection for absurd humour which "tends to erase the boundaries between the possible and the impossible..." (Zijderveld, 1983:13). In "Rape Fantasies" (Atwood, 1977:101), the protagonist complains that every magazine she opens has a column entitled "RAPE, TEN THINGS TO DO ABOUT IT, like it was ten new hairdos or something." Because a magazine insists that all women have rape fantasies, she dutifully contrives some to share with women in the lunch room:

"All right, let me tell you one," I said. "I'm walking down this dark street at night and this fellow comes up and grabs my arm. Now it so happens that I have a plastic lemon in my purse, you know how it always says you should carry a plastic lemon in your purse? I don't really do it, I tried it once but the darn thing leaked all over my chequebook, but in this fantasy I have one, and I say to him, "You're intending to rape me, right?" and he nods, so I open my purse to get the plastic lemon, and I can't find it! My purse is full of all this junk, Kleenex and cigarettes and my change purse and my lipstick and my driver's licence, you know the kind of stuff; so I ask him to hold out his hands, like this, and I pile all this junk into them and down at the bottom there's the plastic lemon, and I can't get the top off. So I hand it to him and he's very obliging, he twists the top off and hands it back to me, and I squirt him in the eye." I hope you don't think that's too vicious. Come to think of it, it is a bit mean, especially when he was so polite and all. (Atwood, 1977:105)

Feminist humour plays with, rather than passively accepts, stereotypical portraits of women, gender

stereotypes being one type of taken-for-granted, institutionalized meaning (Zijderveld, 1983). For instance, a collection of 250 feminist cartoons labelled *Pork Roasts* was assembled by Avis Lang Rosenberg, and first displayed at the University of British Columbia Fine Arts Gallery in 1981. A cartoon by Jules Feiffer roasts chauvinistic self-centredness. A young man and a young woman sit across a table, their drinks before them. In the first box, the man's balloon says, "Me." In the second box, he says "Me, Me, Me, Me, Me, Me, Me." The third box shows 35 "Me's" coming from the man's mouth. Throughout, the woman gives him her rapt attention. Finally she volunteers a tentative "I." He yawns.

The 1987 International Women's Conference at Dublin's Trinity College, included a well-patronized booth of cartoon postcards. The Roman Catholic Church was the butt of much feminist humour: A woman surrounded by howling youngsters sings: "I've got rhythm, I've got rhythm, I've got twelve kids, who could ask for anything more?" Another cartoon features a woman with baby carriage, standing at a bank teller's cage. "Fill this pram with money or I'll explode with premenstrual tension."

Contemporary feminist humour is didactic humour that "seeks to improve us by demonstrating — through devices of irony, of exaggeration, of sarcasm, and of wit — our human folly" (Kaufman, 1980:14). The cartoon in *New Woman* shows a couple in a cocktail lounge. The woman says "Melvin, I am self-supporting, articulate, and I have never spit up on you. So why do you call me 'baby'?" Despite the irony, most feminist humour appears not to belittle males to the same extent that traditional women's "backstairs" humour does. No longer based on the hidden premise that women are worth less than men, feminist humour also lacks the self-deprecating overtones of traditional women's humour. In short, "Feminists want to 'pick up' women, not 'put down' men" (Marlowe, 1989: 153).

Subversive gender humour reflects and augments challenges to the gender status quo from other sources. Bruce Feirstein's *Real Men Don't Eat Quiche* (1982) offers a send-up of macho man. ("Why did the Real Man cross the road? It's none of your goddamn business.") Several excellent comic strips mirror (and perhaps reinforce) societal changes. Cartoons have been labelled "communication to the quick, partly because of their availability, even to those who are not especially

literate or politically aware (Harrison, 1981:14). Husband Hi in Dick Browne's "Hi and Lois" says, "Since Lois has been working, we've been able to afford a lot of things we couldn't afford before — Food, clothing, shelter." Greg Howard's didactic "Sally Forth" exposes the stress women experience in juggling family and work responsibilities. (After daughter Hilary discovers her employed mother is working two fulltime jobs, she says, "I'm going to go lie down and rest up for adulthood.") Brian Basset's househusband "Adam" contradicts the folk understanding that nurturant parenting is linked to the XX chromosome. Cathy Guisewite (one of a handful of female cartoonists) draws "Cathy," a baby-boomer career woman caught between traditional and liberated attitudes towards women, men, babies, and work. In sum, distinctive feminist humour — subversive, didactic, visionary — has appeared in the public domain to challenge masculine ruling ideas.

VIII. Nonetheless, the preponderance of humour continues to be a social control mechanism in the service of traditional gender arrangements.

Feminist utopia has not arrived. Women's false consciousness has not evaporated. Our society does not yet accord men's and women's perspectives equal respect. Females cannot yet expect equal access to challenging work or fair return for their labour. As the discussion of humour's social significance in previous pages suggests, its social control consequences outweigh its subversive potential. In short, humour mirrors the current gender arrangements of our society.

To review, joking and laughter blunt discontent:

The absence of an official censorship which curbs political jokes is not necessarily a token of a society's democracy. The admittance or tolerance of politically critical humour may well be grounded in the awareness that humour is able to sublimate latent conflicts and thereby render them harmless. (Zijderveld, 1983:57)

As Esther Newton (1979:109) observes of homosexual camp humour, "It is clear to me now how camp undercuts rage and therefore rebellion by ridiculing serious and concentrated bitterness." At the same time, masculine humour draws a bead on feminist ideology; challenges to the male-dominated status quo get dismissed through jocular exaggeration. A *New Yorker* cartoon responded in this fashion to the feminist

critique of male inexpressiveness. Eight business-suited, briefcase-carrying businessmen cry in the street. One tearful man clutches the lamp post. Another sits on the curb, dabbing at his eyes with his handkerchief.

Empirical evidence buttresses the theoretical arguments adduced above concerning the efficacy of humour as social control mechanism. Systematic studies employing content analysis conclude that comic strips remain a vehicle for perpetuation of gender inequality. Chavez (1985) reports that women continue to be inferior and subordinate to men. Males are the main comic strip characters 85 percent of the time, and the minor characters 67 percent of the time. Men and women are shown in the labour force 48 percent and 4 percent of the time, respectively. Brabant and Mooney's (1986) conclude that although some changes in major activities have occurred, "change in the portrayal of males and females in the Sunday comics was minimal for the decade studied." Home and child care activities continue to reflect the traditional division of labour. Females are still portrayed as passive onlookers. Interestingly, female characters are less likely to read. Has anyone ever seen Blondie with a magazine, newspaper, or book? (Brabant and Mooney, 1986).

Finally, we note that outrageously savage unmediated sexist humour continues to circulate. "Under the mask of humor, our society allows infinite aggressions." (Legman, 1969, quoted in Posner, 1975:471). A list of 25 GOOD REASONS WHY BEER IS BETTER THAN WOMEN says, "A beer doesn't get jealous when you grab another beer," "After you have had a beer, the bottle is still worth five cents," ... and worse.

There is cold comfort in the fact that vicious sexist humour, like deprecatory ethnic jokes (Apte, 1987), is being driven from the public domain, into *sub rosa* transmission among intimates.⁷ Several Canadian events demonstrate growing intolerance toward sexist jokes, at least those told in public. Male students at Queen's University, who responded to an anti-rape campaign slogan "No means no" with slogans of their own ("No means harder"), were informed that rape jokes are not funny (Coutts, 1989). Sexist jokes were interdicted in the aftermath of the December 1989 massacre of women at the Université de Montréal. Columnist Suzanne Swarun (*Calgary Herald*, December 10, 1989:C2) wrote, "It's men who must realize that every time they tell a sexist joke, they're helping to create a

climate where some madman can kill the women they've degraded." When International Trade Minister John Crosbie said during a speech at a fundraising dinner that MP Sheila Copps, a federal Liberal Party leadership candidate, reminded him of a line from a song, "Pass me the tequila, Sheila, Lie down and love me again," public opinion refused to accept his remark as a joke. A letter to the editor recommended that Mr. Crosbie should "make his jokes with the jobs in the backroom of whatever private club still enjoys laughing at the expense of women."⁸ The optimist is cheered by the prospect of sexist humour being banished from the public forum. However, the pessimist is convinced that anti-female humour will thrive underground until structural alterations render the sexes equal.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has explored the role of humour in the social construction of gender. The feminist literature has not had much to say about humour while the sociology of humour has paid surprisingly little attention to gender. A sociology of knowledge framework has been employed to organize applications to gender relations of generalizations about humour in other contexts. Following Zijderveld (1983), humour was defined as playing with institutionalized meanings.

We have argued that humour performs a dual role in the social construction of gender. On the one hand, it functions as ideological buttress of the patriarchal status quo. On the other, humour plays a subversive part in undermining ideology. Emphasis was placed on humour's conservative function as vehicle of male hegemony. That is, humour is a form, among many, of cultural symbolism that reinforces traditional views about the sexes. The social order is still in the hands of males who make the rules. Feminist humour seems to offer no more potent challenge to male rule-making prerogatives than do the rude jokes children make behind their teacher's backs. Cultural politics alone is not enough. As Armstrong and Armstrong (1984:204) argue, "equality between the sexes requires radical alterations in *both the structures and ideas* that perpetuate the division of labour by sex" (emphasis added).

Nevertheless, contemporary feminist humour is a consequential aspect of popular culture. For one thing, its iconoclasm provides a measure of comfort to women. In the words of Joan Rivers (Israel, 1984:110),

"Anything you can laugh at becomes that much easier to bear." Relatedly, this comedic challenge to received notions enhances the cohesion of the women's movement (Hiller, 1983). Most important of all, humour as criticism of the social structure offers evidence, in a form that appeals to many people, that social arrangements might be otherwise. Possibly, sociologist Peter Berger (1963:130) is correct when he argues that, "The images of kings topple before their thrones do ... Nonrecognition and counterdefinition of social norms are always potentially revolutionary."

NOTES

This paper is a revised version of a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Pacific Sociological Association, Reno, Nevada, April 1989.

1. *The Handbook of Sociology* (Smelser, 1988) contains no reference to humour. Cameron (1963), in Zijderveld (1983:4). Sociology's relative neglect of humour and laughter in comparison with other disciplines such as psychology and anthropology has provoked some comment from other sociologists. Gusfield and Michaelowicz (1984:418), for example, argue that, though the study of popular culture is an exception, sociology has emphasised the view of modern life "as being dominated by a secular, matter-of-fact, rational culture and social organization in which human responses are governed by attention to means and ends." Nevertheless, a sizeable number of sociologists, especially those of the symbolic interactionist persuasion (Davis, 1979; Lindesmith et al., 1977) acknowledge the relevance of humour studies to the discipline's twin theoretical problems: explaining social order and social change.
2. The two-worlds metaphor is a heuristic device. However, it is one which makes truth claims. For instance, is it true that female-male differences in thought override class, age, ethnic, and regional social locations?
3. Freud (1905/1960) wrote, "In every epoch of history those who have had something to say but could not say it without peril have eagerly assumed a fool's cap. The audience at whom their forbidden speech was aimed tolerated it more easily if they could at the same time laugh and flatter themselves with the reflection that the unwelcome words were clearly nonsensical."
4. Social-psychological-level analysis leads to contradictory predictions concerning the potential of subversive humour to foment rebellion (Rosenberg, 1986:179). On the one hand, seeing humour as catharsis leads to the expectation that dissidents will "blow off steam" harmlessly and continue to conform to social norms. On the other, the social learning line of argument suggests that through humorous expression of taboo ideas, people become accustomed to and comfortable with these deviant ideas. Rosenberg (1986:180) goes on to say that this reminds him of the "First Law of Sociology. Some do, some don't. Elegant, perhaps even accurate, but not very enlightening."
5. In an interview with *Time* magazine, Erma Bombeck acknowledged the gulf between her own brand of domestic humour and early feminism. "One evening, Bombeck recalls, she drove into town with some other women to hear a lecture

- by Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminine Mystique*. 'She started talking about yellow wax buildup and all that, and all of us started laughing.' Friedan shook her finger and scolded them; these were supposed to be demeaning concerns, not funny ones. Bombeck remembers thinking, 'God, lady, you can't make it better tonight. What more do you want from us?' Bombeck's feeling was that 'first we had to laugh; the crying had to come later.' She still has not entirely forgiven Friedan and other militant feminists. 'These women threw a war for themselves and didn't invite any of us. That was very wrong of them.' (*Time*, July 2, 1984:42)
6. In 1990, in the wake of the horrifying massacre of female engineering students at the Université de Montréal, the antics and jokes of engineering students (for example, at the University of Alberta) have been severely criticized.
 7. As a result of public pressure, British Columbia Premier William Vander Zalm apologized to the Jewish community for "any perception that my remarks were offensive" in connection with what he described as "a light-hearted story about a Jewish person" related to a Social Credit Party convention (*The Globe and Mail*, October 31, 1989:A5).
 8. Quotation taken from a letter to the editor, written by Judith Rebeck (*The Globe and Mail*, March 5, 1990:A6).

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Plath

she broke into
 a vast literature of noises
 of smiling hooks, red tulips, bee boxes
 to express her situation
 to write her many suicide notes
 penning a lullaby of treacheries:
 daily life, love, marriage,
 childbirth, housework, hospital —
 hinting at the tightness
 in a tidy, shipshape world

nothing could breathe
 unless tiny protestations of
 insanity spilled out of the woodwork
 ran down windows in rivulets
 unless small refulgencies
 of world upside-down
 bulged and revelled in fierce colours
 distorting beautifully in the watery beads

her words, her glintingly perfect poems
 like those wild new worlds in round water
 capsize our orderly little minds
 flood and rearrange imagination
 whirling us into the vortex
 of our forgotten selves

Cornelia C. Hornosty
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