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Marriage Humour and its Social Functions, 1900-1939*

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Abstract

Using the jokes published in a popular, middle-class Canadian magazine, this article examines the depiction of marriage and of spousal relations in the early twentieth century. The humour concentrated particularly on the wife or prospective wife, playing an increasingly prescriptive role for both male and female behaviour within marriage. Marriage humour acted as a social control mechanism in response to the changing public and private status of women.

Marriage has long been the primary social institution structuring gender relations and behaviour. The public discussion of marriage and spousal relations can thus be viewed as addressing the issue of appropriate adult male-female relations and behaviour. When that behaviour alters (or is perceived to alter) over time, the public discussion of marriage can be used to examine the societal response to threatened change in the established norms. This paper examines popular humour concerning marriage over a thirty-year period in Canada with a view to revealing societal expectations regarding marriage and spousal relations. It argues that as pressures within marriage altered and as the public and private status of women rose in the early decades of the twentieth century, marriage humour operated as a social control mechanism, reasserting the traditional behavioural expectations and censuring "deviant" female activity.

The telling of jokes is not merely a simple form of pleasure. The literature on humour as "a socially patterned relationship" is rich and particularly rewarding. The relations among the elements involved in the humour—"the teller, the object and the listener—usually reflect the social structure, often reinforcing it...." (Neitz, 1980, p. 211). According to Sigmund Freud's classic analysis of humour, listeners get more pleasure from jokes that are purposeful; there are only two purposes that humour may serve—hostility (involving aggression, satire or defence) or obscenity (involving exposure). Freud linked these functions to repression, suggesting that the added pleasure received from tendentious humour comes from the satisfaction of the usually-repressed sexual and aggressive instincts. The satisfaction of these instincts through humour has social functions: for example, an aggressive joke allows an individual to make an 'enemy' inferior and thus to win a 'victory' over him; and humour can offer a means of criticizing persons

or institutions to which one is closely connected or even of criticizing oneself. In these respects, then, humour does not stand outside its social context. Instead the meaning of humour is dependent upon its social context (Neitz, 1980, pp. 212-214).

This relationship of humour to the broad social environment is important. Anthropologists have long recognized that the study of humour in a society will uncover central philosophical tenets, values, and beliefs in that social system (Hopen, 1977, p. 320). Jokes function to articulate and maintain those beliefs and the behaviour based on them. Humour 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 (Neitz, 1980, p. 216).[1] Jokes act as a release mechanism, a way in which both individuals and society as a whole can cope with the obvious weaknesses of ideals and beliefs; the humour recognizes but dismisses the undesirable realities, thus reinforcing the basic belief system (Levine, 1969, p. 9). Humour ridicules the reality and thereby buttresses the ideal. Social control is thus a prominent aspect of humour.

This has been found to be particularly true of humour in the public domain. In a 1951 analysis of the humour in published American anthologies of wit and humour, R.M. Stephenson (p. 574) found that the jokes there tended to minimize stratification differences and their effect on the social structure and to maximize the expression of broadly-based American values. Qualities that were contrary to generalized American values were ridiculed in the humour, receiving a balance of directed aggression. Stephenson concluded, with particular relevance to humour circulating in such a public vehicle as the *Canadian Magazine*, that "it is evident that jokes which have been included in anthologies and thus entered into the public domain function largely as control mechanisms."

Thus humour has both positive and negative purposes. It operates to articulate, communicate and maintain broadly-accepted values and behaviour patterns within a society. As well, humour acts as a relatively peaceful but negative force, censoring the socially deviant (Schutz, 1977, pp. 65-67).

All of this has some direct relevance to humour which deals with marriage as an institution and as a complex of human relationships. The institution of marriage exists on at least two different planes for males and for females: as an ideal or idealized state, and in real-life situations with a variety of weaknesses and strengths. The dichotomy between these two basic perceptions of marriage is a very real problem, producing tension, frustration and repression. Humour can be a useful technique for dealing with this. By pretending to be playful in their criticism, people manage to relieve themselves of frustrations and repressions. As one scholar suggests: "It is not only tragedy which provides catharsis for accumulated hostilities and anxieties and fears; humour offers much more catharsis, and much more frequently" (Feinberg, 1978, pp. 95-96). Family therapists point to the usefulness of humour as a means of breaking through "the 'everything is all right' facade that families feel they have to maintain", that is as a means of dealing with the dichotomy between the public and idealized image of marriage, on the one hand, and the personal reality of marriage on the other (Napier, 1978, p. 111).

Humour is a way of handling vulnerability. It has the potential of creating a sense of group identity among those who laugh. It projects a strong sense of threat from and hostility toward the person, idea or institution being laughed at. And, where the situation cannot be changed or the threat removed, jokes provide the only 'victory' attainable through a symbolic 'put-down.' In this way humour "about mothers-in-law, homosexuality and class are a way of apparently overcoming, but in reality accommodating to, the

threat and the vulnerability" (Mann, 1976, p. 240).

Other writers suggest that this process of accommodation really occurs because humour increases one's distance from the object of the joke. Humour thus provides a safe way of approaching dangerous or disruptive aspects of one's existence, offering a way of distancing one's self or one's own marriage from a perceived threat or problem (Davis, 1979, pp. 107-8). While divorce, for example, can thus be recognised as a generalized social phenomenon, a joke can place it at a distance from one's own marriage.

Questioning the institution of marriage is difficult in public or in real spousal situations because the institution is so central. Poking fun at it or some element of it in a joke helps to deal with some of the institution's weaknesses, to inform the listener and reassure the teller as to some of the realities of marriage which are not otherwise easily discussed in public. This informational function, of course, relates to the general point of articulating and maintaining basic social values and behaviour (Neitz, 1980, p. 219).

In any case, it is agreed that humour can act as a means of coping with incongruity—in terms of the interests of this paper, the incongruity between the middle-class ideals and the reality of marriage. It follows that humour can reveal which social values and institutions are experiencing change or stress. In the words of one writer, "we can examine these humorous incongruities systematically to discover the social location of slippages between attributes which threaten a group enough for it to try to distance itself from them by laughing" (Davis, 1979, p. 108).

As a source for jokes circulating within Canadian society, the *Canadian Magazine* is useful. Published for some forty-six years, from 1893 to 1939, this journal was undoubtedly one of the most popular, middle-class, mass circulation periodicals in the entire Dominion in these years. In its emphasis on public-interest articles and short stories and in its seeming attempt to appeal to and to reflect basic Canadian values the *Canadian Magazine* reminds later readers of the U.S.-based *Saturday Evening Post* of the 1940s and 1950s, which (most obviously through Norman Rockwell) appealed to readers by reinforcing traditional values and coping with common concerns.

The *Canadian Magazine* changed in structure and format during its lifetime. Of interest for this paper is its treatment of humour. Beginning during 1906, as part of a more general section entitled "Idle Moments," jokes began to be published. By 1907 much of this humour was appearing in a separate section, "What Others Are Laughing At" (and later called "Twice-Told Tales").[2] During World War One, the number of published jokes declined drastically, ceasing altogether in 1919. Six years later a regular humour column reappeared, over the following five years variously entitled, "Humor, Old and New"[3], "Aunty Gloom: Her Own Column", and "What Others Are Laughing At"; as well, individual jokes were scattered through some issues, often as filler. Late in 1930 the jokes again ceased, only to appear under the heading "Fun" for one last period in 1938, the *Magazine*'s final full year of publication. The sources of the jokes were varied. Many were simply reprinted from other journals and newspapers, both Canadian and foreign, and often with credit. Some jokes may have been contributed by readers, for in 1926 contributions were solicited from the general public (e.g., Sept. 1926, p. 47). Whatever the source, this was humour which the editorial staff in Toronto felt was appropriate for circulation in Canadian society.

For purposes of tabulation, three periods were chosen: 1908-1914, 1925-1930 and 1938. As indicated above, these are largely dictated by the *Magazine* but also by a decision to ignore years

when only scattered jokes or cartoons appeared. Within the three periods, all humour was tabulated, whether it appeared in a column, a cartoon or as 'filler'. The results are reproduced in Tables One and Two.

Table One is quite straightforward. Marriage[4] figured, directly or indirectly, in a solid, but by no means overwhelming, proportion of the humour published. More important is the obvious increase in concern to discuss the institution. From the pre-World War One period to the end of the Great Depression there was a rise from 20 percent to just over 25 percent. And yet some observers might have expected a much more considerable increase. After all, the number of divorces in the country grew fairly steadily from 30 in 1908 to 2,226 in 1938; likewise, the divorce rate per 100,000 married females rose from 32 in 1921-1922 to 116 in 1940-1942 (*Canada Year Book 1956*, p. 230; Basavarajappa, 1978, p. 121). The discrepancy in the rate of change between divorces (as a reflection of problems within individual marriages) and humour (as a reflection of social awareness of problems within the institution of marriage) is striking. To the extent that it is fair to compare these two indices, they suggest an interesting hypothesis. This Table seems to support the proposal that the divorce rate was being artificially restricted by statute, public attitudes and other factors. Until changes were accepted (and in Canada they did not find legal expression until 1968), formal divorce in this country did not mirror the reality of marriage breakdown. As a consequence divorce statistics are very artificial as a representation of marital problems. The jokes studied here were subject to fewer direct controls and may better reflect the rate and degree of change in marital stress and problems.

Table One
Proportion of Humour Related to Marriage

Period	Number	About Marriage	% of Number
1908-1914	1197	239	20.0
1925-1930	784	195	24.9
1938	242	61	25.2

The first thing to be said about Table Two is the apparent negativism of the categories tabulated; there is a clear emphasis on problems, on conflict, on the perjorative. But aggression, it is worth remembering, can be seen as a basis for most, if not all, humour. Also, most jokes have victims. Since the interest here is what problems characterized marriage in the period, it is natural that the negative elements and the victims would receive special attention. But this particular perspective does not seem to strain the material. Many jokes clearly attacked marriage. Most did this by directing attention at individual elements within the institution, but a few expressed a broad, general assault. As in this example from 1928:

> "George," she asked, "if we were both young and single again, would you want me to be your wife?"
>
> "Now, my dear," he absent mindedly replied, "what's the use of trying to start a quarrel just as we have settled down to a quiet evening." (July, p. 39)

Or this joke in 1931, entitled "When Love Was Blind" and which focuses attention on love and marriage as irrational:

> Husband (fed up) - "By George, I must have been crazy to marry you!"
>
> Wife (placidly) - "You were, dearest — I remember you said so every day for months." (January, p. 32)

According to such jokes, males at least (as will be discussed later) were depicted as regretting their marriages which had developed into something

less than what the males had anticipated. This perception of marriage stands out in contrast with the reality of male attraction to marriage. Over the period examined here a consistent 86.0 to 86.5 percent of males in Canada had been married by age 50 (Basavarajappa, 1978, p. 24).

But Table Two in general does not offer many clear patterns. The proportion of jokes dealing only with emotional conflict or incompatibility is low, except in the middle period. In the late 1920s there was a frequent depiction of marital relations characterized by conflict and trouble. A 1925 joke bore the title "Trouble Ahead":

> "I shall love to share all your trials and troubles, Jack, darling."
>
> "But, Daphne, dear, I have none."
>
> "No, not now, darling; I mean when we're married."
> (March, p. 48)

This struck a strong enough cord that it was repeated four years later (July, 1929, p. 48). And these troubles were recognized as affecting all members of the family:

> "I am very careful; whenever I quarrel with my wife, I send the children for a walk."
>
> "Dear little things, one can see they get a lot of fresh air."
> (October, 1928, p. 48)

This expectation of conflict in male-female relations was so automatic that it applied even to brief acquaintanceships (September, 1937, p. 18). Canadians were not so naive or romantic as to think that tension was an unnatural characteristic of all human relationships. The jokes anticipated stress in gender relations at all levels of intimacy. It was simply that in marriage emotional conflict was more pronounced, and the humour was a way of coping with the incon-

Table Two
Humorous Elements[A] Within Marriage

	(N=239) 1908-1914		(N=195) 1925-1930		(N=61) 1938	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Economic Problems	48	20.1	19	9.7	18	29.5
Emotional Conflict (N.E.S.)	7	2.9	25	12.8	2	3.3
[B]Anti-Wife	95	39.8	79	40.5	32	52.5
Materialist/ Costly	32	13.4	16	8.2	11	18.0
Dominating	29	12.1	31	15.9	7	11.5
Loquascious	1	0.4	6	3.1	6	9.8
Incompetent	9	3.8	10	5.1	4	6.6
Stupid	13	5.4	12	6.2	7	11.5
Other[C]	15	6.3	7	3.6	1	1.6
[B]Anti-Husband	29	12.1	36	18.5	7	11.5
Patriarchal	2	0.8	0	0	0	0
Irresponsible	4	1.7	12	6.2	2	3.3
Stupid	13	5.4	9	4.6	3	4.9
Other[C]	11	4.6	15	7.7	2	3.3
[B]Sexuality	9	3.8	11	5.6	6	9.8
Wife's Philandering	0	0	1	0.5	1	1.6
Husband's Philandering	6	2.5	5	2.6	4	6.6
[B]Violence	3	1.3	6	3.1	1	1.6
Pro-Female Institution	22	9.2	12	6.2	4	6.6
Male Freedom Lost	4	1.7	2	1.0	1	1.6
Female Must Marry	13	5.4	9	4.6	2	3.3
In-laws	4	1.7	4	2.1	1	1.6
Incompatibility (N.E.S.)	5	2.1	2	1.0	0	0
Breakdown	9	3.8	10	5.1	1	1.6
Other[C]	57	23.9	23	13.3	6	9.8

[A] Many jokes had two or more humorous objects of themes all of which were recorded.
[B] Within this element, more detailed characteristics were tabulated, sometimes multiplely.
[C] Jokes not otherwise recorded.

gruity between that reality and the ideal of 'wedded bliss'. One explanation for the low proportion of such jokes is that this issue was deflected, being represented indirectly in other categories.

As well the proportion of jokes dealing with economic problems is surprising. That 1938 was higher than the other two periods is to be expected, given prevailing economic conditions. But why were the late 1920s so much lower than the first period? Perhaps Canadians experienced fewer economic problems than we think, but this certainly contrasts with E.T. May's (1980) findings that U.S. marriages in the 1920s were foundering on the shoals of consumerism. A majority of this humour expressed itself through the wife as victim and is discussed further below.

Jokes about in-laws were few, and the same can be said for violence. In the latter case, however, we do know that social workers, either volunteer or professional, reported a good deal of child abuse and wife abuse, especially among working-class families. The middle class, from which the new 'helping professions' drew their membership, found it inappropriate to joke about such 'vice'; there were clearly limits to humour beyond which 'good taste' prevented one from going.

Marriage breakdown (defined as some form of termination) is also low. Yet when it was discussed, there was a tendency to make the wife the victim of the joke and the husband the victim of the marriage, thus establishing considerable distance between the spouses:

> Magistrate: "You are charged with being a deserter — having left your wife. Are the facts as stated true?"
>
> Prisoner: "No, if you please your worship. I'm not a deserter. I'm a refugee."
> (July, 1926, p. 39)

This is a theme which appears in much of the humour. Even death could be depicted as an attractive form of relief:

> "What's ailing ye mon?" said a neighbor to Andy, who was looking unusually depressed.
>
> "McPherson's wife has died," Andy replied gloomily.
>
> "But she was no relation of yours, was she?" asked the other.
>
> "Oh, no," said Andy. "It's not that. It's just that I was thinking how everyone is having a change except me."
> (May, 1929, p. 52)

But again it was the husband seeking relief from marriage, not the wife.

Finally, before turning more fully to these gender-related themes, it should be pointed out that there is a marked decline in the category "Other". This classification was used only if the jokes contained no elements about marriage which could be recorded in some other category. The steady and marked decline implies that over the years covered the tabulated elements came increasingly to dominate jokes about marriage.

In four other categories distinct gender differences were manifested through the humour. Sexuality was apparently not an area about which jokes could be freely circulated in a family magazine, but there was a steady increase in the proportion of jokes falling into this category. Throughout this period sexual fidelity was seen as essential to marriage; with one minor exception, adultery was the sole ground for divorce, though until 1925 wives in some provinces were required by law to prove an additional factor. As befitted the public stereotypes, the expression of sexuality outside marriage was regarded strongly as a problem of husbands, not wives. The con-

cern for female philandering was almost non-existent compared with such male activity. That male activity was perceived to change somewhat, or at least began to be confronted more directly in public. Compare, for example, a 1911 joke about flirting to a 1938 joke about multiple adultery:

> Two ladies, previously unacquainted, were conversing at a reception. After a few conventional remarks, the younger exclaimed:
>
> "I cannot think what has upset that tall, blond man over there. He was so attentive a little while ago, but he won't look at me now."
>
> "Perhaps," said the other, "he saw me come in. He's my husband."
> (September, 1911, p. 490)
>
> Mistress: "You know, I think my husband is having an affair with his typist."
>
> Maid: "Oh, I don't believe it! You're only saying that to make me jealous." (April, 1938, p. 59)

Here was one category in which the male as sexual animal was seen to be at fault, the married female as sexually passive (at least relatively). Interestingly the jokes do not display any direct sense that male philandering threatens the marriage, implying a continuing degree of accommodation (as had existed in law prior to 1925).

Linked with this was the emphasis that marriage was an institution especially for females—males needed more than just marriage to fulfill their needs, but for females marriage was all they ever wanted or needed. Marriage itself was a career for most women, a career which in this time period excluded any outside paid employment. Canadian magazines, Mary Vipond (1977, p. 119) has revealed, "left us no doubt that in their view every true woman chose marrige if she could. Short stories told again and again of independent young flappers [of the 1920s] who happily threw up their careers in order to settle down to marital bliss with the right man." Marriage humour supported this theme, emphasizing female dependence on marriage (and thus on males). A number of jokes depicted engagement and/or marriage as something at which females connived, that females spent long hours calculating how to engineer a proposal or a wedding. Females were portrayed going to absurd lengths to encourage a proposal (e.g., October, 1911, p. 587); widows were eager to remarry (e.g., July, 1929, p. 48); and the romantic pleasure of an engagement was distorted into something akin to female desperation (e.g., June, 1910, p. 191). And when the tables were turned and the male was depicted as seeking marriage, it was still the female who received the negative brunt of the jokes (thus salving the male ego):

> He - "But couldn't you learn to love me, Anna?"
>
> She - "I don't think I could."
>
> He (reaching for his hat) - "It is as I feared — you are too old to learn."
> (October, 1911, p. 588)

This joke was appealing enough that it was repeated several years later (July, 1926, p. 39). Again whole families were portrayed as affected by this perception of marriage as a female institution: fathers were sometimes pictured as happy to have anyone marry their daughters (e.g., January, 1931, p. 32), and a 1925 joke pointed to the implications of the phrase "giving the bride away" (February, 1925, p. 15).

If marriage was an institution seen as designed for and favouring females, an interesting group of jokes pointed to 'the other side of the coin' — it was unfavourable for males. Some humour concentrated on male loss of freedom. Men were 'trapped' into marriage or were 'caught' by

women (e.g., February, 1925, p. 15). Men were confined prior to the wedding in order to prevent escape (e.g., October, 1930, p. 52). Husbands lost their right or ability to various activities (e.g., September, 1912, p. 488). A 1916 joke went so far as to predict a nine o'clock curfew for married men (May, 1916, p. 82). Much of this humour was linked to fears of the dominant wife.

As well marriage was frequently depicted as a form of punishment for males. An apostate monk who had left the Roman Catholic Church and married was described as having "taken his punishment into his own hands." (November, 1912, p. 95). Similarly, when a man ran over a woman with his car and subsequently married her, it was lauded as an effective technique for stopping careless driving (November, 1928, p. 48). Naturally then, it was males who found married life miserable:

> "Pardon me," said the little man, "but are you quite sure it was a marriage license you gave me on the 10th March?"
>
> The clerk prepared to turn up particulars. "I believe so, sir," he said, "but why do you ask me?"
>
> "Well, I've led a dog's life ever since. That's all!"
> (October, 1928, p. 48)

Again the connection between this theme and the dominant wife is apparent, not only in this "little man's" predicament, but in the next joke as well:

> The thin man darted across the platform, gasping: "Will you hold the train a moment for my wife, conductor? She is coming now, and is just across the street."
>
> "Can't do it," snorted the conductor.
>
> "B-but, conductor, she's going away to stay six months!" cried the man. "If she doesn't go now, she may change her mind!"
>
> "I'll hold it," replied the conductor.

Or more directly, under the heading "Perfectly Tame":

> To say of a man that he will make a good husband is much the same sort of a compliment as to say of a horse that he is perfectly safe for a woman to drive.
> (September, 1916, p. 428)

The entire theme of marriage as an unfavourable institution for males was tied together in the comment that 'the land of the free and the home of the brave' referred to bachelors and married men (May, 1910, p. 96).

This perspective broadened into a sweeping attack against females as wives. Of all the categories of jokes tabulated, the strongest trend in both proportion and increase was here. In all three periods the percentage of jokes in this category was the highest, increasing from about 40 percent in the first two periods to over 50 percent in 1938.

A number of themes developed as part of this attack. Ugliness or at least unattractiveness was discussed only infrequently (e.g., November, 1936, p. 45), and there were similar jokes about husbands. Incompetence in all but three occasions dealt with the wife's inability as a housewife; usually this involved cooking, particularly a young bride burning the meals or ruining her husband's health (e.g., December, 1928, p. 52). Stupidity as a theme followed the statistical trend for the anti-wife theme, rising markedly in 1938. Other themes were more consistently strong.

The wife as a materialist, as a costly partner to her husband is a familiar theme. Throughout the years studied it was a frequent subject of

humour in the pages of the *Canadian Magazine*. It started with the wedding: 'girls' no longer married for better or worse; now it was for more or less (April, 1927, p. 46) and it carried on throughout married life. A wife would take advantage of her husband's good mood to get him into a shop (August, 1912, p. 391); a present to a wife could make her a pleasant companion, but only for a few days (January, 1931, p. 32); a husband's cheque stubs were sufficient proof to his wife of his love for her (August, 1929, p. 48). One way or another the husband was usually depicted as the martyr to his wife's materialism:

> Wife (showing huband expensive fur coat) - "One really can't help but feel sorry for the poor thing that was skinned for this."
>
> Husband - "I appreciate your sympathy." (March, 1921, p. 52)

This is apparent even to the extent of wishing a husband dead once he had named his wife as beneficiary of a $100,000 life-insurance policy (February, 1913, p. 400). As well, the wife's consumer impulses were portrayed as an important source of marital conflict:

> Husband - "Your extravagance is awful. When I die you'll probably have to beg."
>
> Wife - "Well, I should be better off than some poor women who never had any practice."
> (September, 1912, p. 487)

That patriarchal control of the family assets is here depicted as a major contributor to that conflict does not detract from the more basic theme. Society now viewed wives as the 'managers' of the 'household economy' and they had become the primary agents for the family in the consumer economy; marriage as a female career was underlined by the frequent metaphor of a 'business partnership' in which the husband managed the office and the wife the home (Vipond, 1977, p. 120). But in this new economic role there was concern that wives should handle their responsibilities as effectively as possible. The jokes manifesting concern about inappropriate economic behaviour simply complemented the rising desire to provide wives with professional expertise (as in 'household science', 'home economics') as homemakers.

This representation of female materialism combined with other topics to underline the concern for the potentially negative effect of wives within marriage. In one joke, for example, materialism was joined with marital conflict and the wife's foolishness:

> "Whatever induced you to marry me, anyway, if I'm so distasteful to you?" he asked fiercely.
>
> "I think it was the ads," she replied.
>
> "The what?"
>
> "The advertisements. The household bargains, you know. I thought it would be so lovely to go the the department stores and buy ice picks for only 9 cents and 25-cent egg-beaters marked down to 14, and so on. Of course I had no use for that stuff as long as I remained single."
> (January, 1930, p. 48)

These factors united to emphasize, once again, the more general theme of pronounced female dependence on the institution of marriage in order to meet her personal goals.

On the other hand when a male married for money or from economic motivations, the joke tended not to be negative (e.g., February, 1927, p. 35). Somehow this was acceptable among males. Such a male was acting in a rational, economic manner, something which women were not to do — at least in areas where it conflicted with a romantic view of marriage or with a sense that emotion more readily (and appropriately) influenced female decision-making.

The dominant wife was a theme just as powerful as female materialism. This too is a familiar depiction of wives and marriage: the wife as 'back-seat driver', the 'hen-pecked' husband, the nagging wife. The most interesting joke here is one that struck such a responsive note that it was repeated three times in just eight months, with only minor variations:

> Casey, the timid little henpecked plumber, rang the bell. Mr. and Mrs. Newleak came to the door together.
>
> As they stood in the vestibule, Mr. Newleak, who was very methodical, said, "I wish, before we go upstairs, to acquaint you with the trouble."
>
> Casey shyly dropped his eyes. "I'm pleased to meet you ma'am," he mumbled.
> (October, 1928, p. 48)

Here wives and their supremacy were equated with trouble. There was also a link to marital conflict — spousal quarrels were described in which all the husband did was listen (e.g., July, 1929, p. 52) — and to loquaciousness as a female technique for domination (e.g., March, 1939, p. 54). The male was mocked for allowing such female authority: the husband whose share of the couple's $1,000,000 was $1,000 (May, 1938, p. 50) or the man whose radio had three controls —his wife, his mother-in-law, and his daughter (November, 1929, p. 52). Husbands were implicitly lauded when they broke this control:

> A man in New Jersey murdered his wife because he was tired of her nagging. They had been married 50 years. He regrets his hasty action.
> (January, 1927, p. 47)

Not only does the sarcasm suggest that the husband was not hasty enough, but the joke serves as a warning to female 'nags'.

The theme of the dominant wife linked directly, of course, to the theme of marriage as a female institution. Marriage was not just *for* females; they dominated marriage and controlled their husbands. This fact and the apparent female ignorance of what they were doing was underlined in a 1914 joke, entitled "Grant Him Keen Sight":

> A frightfully henpecked man was summoned to the bedside of his dying spouse. For forty years she had made his life a burden.
>
> "I think I am dying, David," she said; "and before I leave you I want to know if I shall see you in a better land."
>
> "I think not, Nancy," he replied — "not if I see you first."
> (May, p. 109)

Marriage was made to represent a male sacrifice to females, but one such sacrifice in a lifetime was enough for any male.

The contrast between female dominance and patriarchy as themes emphasizes this gender-differentiated view of marriage. As a subject for jokes, male dominance within marriage was virtually nonexistent. It was not normative behaviour that was the butt of jokes, but rather deviant behaviour. As a subject for attack, jokes about husbands did not reflect common themes the way jokes about wives did. Husbands were depicted as irresponsible (e.g., staying out to all hours), stupid, or lacking an emotional commitment to their wives. But none of these themes was strong.

The concern about the weakening of female subservience was more directly voiced in a humorous article of August, 1926. Using wives as a foil under the title "Wives: Their Care and Management", Victor Murray sought to address the stresses and tensions of spousal relations. But his

perspective was very much gender-bound and affected by the female threat felt by men in early twentieth-century society.

What men needed, alleged Murray, was a convenient set of instructions, of the sort accompanying all modern appliances, so that wives could be dealt with effectively. With an electric toaster or "an iceless icebox", the 'purchaser' received not only an instruction booklet but a written guarantee of complete satisfaction. "One gets nothing, however, of this nature when acquiring a wife. Wives, like second-hand automobiles, are handed over 'as is' ...Wives are alas very much like automobiles, insofar that it is not the first cost that counts — it is the upkeep ." Having thus reduced females to the level of merchandise "acquired" by males, all in the name of humour, the author proceeded to trivialize marital tension and relationships: "...many a wife looks like a million dollars, acts like an angel for two or three days then suddenly starts shedding tears all over the place and stalling [as per the automobile metaphor] from morning to night... difficulties you never dreamed about."

What does the naive male do in such a situation? asked the author. Reversing the usual prescribed gender roles of passivity and aggression, Murray ironically emphasized male vulnerability. "The average bridegroom is a trusting, optimistic soul, otherwise he would not be a bridegroom." He expects the character of the pre-marital relationship to carry over into marriage, that he will continue to be the initiator of emotional contact, that "she will lean even more heavily on his mature opinions in the years to come." Instead, according to Murray, the wife soon begins to assert herself:

> The chief trouble in managing a wife is that most men do not start early enough. They wake up sooner or later after the wedding to discover that their wives are managing them, and then it is too late to reverse the situation without breaking up the home.

Women were trained from early youth to manage their own home, including the occupants; in her dreams every bride has her husband "all trained and housebroken long before he has even appeared in sight." For Murray, in his joking way, the modern woman was asserting herself and taking control of marriage; eventually she would control man. It was this basic fear which underlay much of the contemporary humour about marriage and wives.

For men the proffered solution lay in "prompt and uncompromising dictatorship from the very start." The only way to deal with wives was to be "stern and autocratic," since it was well known that women "adore masterful men." Husbands should adopt an aggressive stance, a menacing tone and actions in confronting their wives. Once done, Murray invited the husbands to let him know "what happens next."

At the same time Murray set forth a contradictory set of instructions for a young husband as to how "to avoid antagonizing his wife" (see Figure One). A parody on parts of the Ten Commandments, they were a humorous attempt to point to areas of potential marital conflict. Some such set of instructions, recommended the author, ought to be printed in red ink on the back of the marriage license and all prospective husbands ought to be required to read them.

Neither Murray's article nor the marriage jokes should be regarded simply as a trivializing of marital problems. The humour revealed areas of serious concern and of general agreement.

According to this public discussion of marriage and spousal relations over three decades, it seems safe to say that societal expectations regarding marital norms and behaviour were dominated by patriarchy. The husband ought to dominate the decision-making regarding the marriage and the spousal relationship. Wives were to be efficient and effective in carrying out those decisions. Marital conflict was recognized

but was expected to be limited. A sexual double standard continued. But while dominated by males, marriage was ironically seen as crucial for females. Yet this perhaps explains patriarchy. Since males had persuaded themselves that it was females who were dependent on marriage and on their husbands, this gave males some of the rationale necessary to sustain patriarchy.

Humour has been found not to have a serious impact on the process of attitudinal change (Markiewicz, 1974). However, the humorous disparagement of unacceptable ideas or behaviour reinforces traditional and acceptable ideas and behaviour (McGhee, 1979, pp. 22-240). Humour thus can be seen to play an active role in maintaining and potentially strengthening marital norms and values. One writer has found that the clarity of community norms and expectations is an essential factor in determining the family's 'vulnerability' to stress (McCubbin, 1979, p. 243). The jokes of the *Canadian Magazine*[5], it can be argued, helped to articulate those community standards for the individual families and thus assisted those families in accommodating the stresses of the first four decades of the twentieth century. In thus providing a mechanism for interaction between the family unit and the community at large, this humour assisted the individual family in managing stress (McCubbin, 1979, p. 244). The humour was within acceptable limits for both sexes and usefully addressed issues which were important.

Perhaps the most useful way of looking at this humour in the public domain is that of Stephenson (1951). For him such jokes operated as a control mechanism.[6] This humour was organizing male and female behaviour within marriage. Wives were being informed as to what was tolerable behaviour and what was not; females were also being socialized and reinforced to think and to conduct themselves in certain ways. But at the same time husbands were encouraged to expect

Figure One

YOUR WIFE

—

Instructions for Husband

—

In order to avoid trouble,
follow these very
carefully

Remember your wedding day and keep it open. Do not come home this time next year with nothing more than a vacant look. Avoid barber shops where they insist upon using strong perfume, and if you have a blonde stenographer, be sure to put on overalls when giving her dictation.

Refrain from adverse comment on your wife's culinary achievements. Remember your Mother had to practice on someone as well. Buy a dog—preferably one with good teeth and an ingrowing appetite.

Keep wash-day in mind and do not choose it as the right time to bring home an unexpected guest in order to show him what a little peach your wife it. You may find your peach a trifle frosty.

Do not praise your neighbor's wife, nor his children, nor his home, nor his wife's taste in clothes, nor anything which might tend to indicate that your wife is not the best wife you have ever seen.

Never on any account argue with your wife. Think of a squirrel in one of those revolving cages—he runs all day but never gets anywhere. Neither will you.

If your wife fires the scrubwoman; takes back her new hat; changes her milkman; or quarrels with her dearest friend for no apparent cause, do not press for an adequate explanation. Do not always expect a reasonable motive for unreasonable acts. Remember, your wife is not a reasonable creature—she is a woman.

Source: *Canadian Magazine*, Aug., 1926, p. 13.

and accept some forms of behaviour, and to reject (or at least react against) others.

Women could be perceived to be playing an increasingly assertive role in society. They had achieved a symbolic equality with Canadian men by acquiring the franchise both federally and in most provinces; this was accompanied by well-publicized victories at the polls and in the courts (Cleverdon, 1974). Married women in the United States (the evidence for Canada is lacking, to date), especially middle-class wives, were becoming more active in the work force on behalf of their families. In order to maintain or expand family income and to assist in meeting the growing material consumer expectations of American families, wives were making an increasingly direct contribution to family revenues in the 1920s and 1930s (Wandersee, 1981, p.83). At the same time the familial authority of the male was being undermined when unemployment menaced his role as bread-winner and patriarch, especially during the 1930s. The husband's loss of self-respect and authority caused considerable stress within the family, as the wife assumed a greater role as provider and as authority figure (Komarovsky, 1940). Such developments obviously had the potential to be perceived as threatening to males in general and to their sense of their natural roles in society and in the family.

As well, there is some evidence that the institution of marriage was under considerable pressure. Elaine Tyler May (1980) suggests that in some sections of the United States (again, a comparable study for Canada is lacking) new demands placed what for some marriages were intolerable new strains. The romantic ideal, raised to new heights in the movie images of such stars as Rudolph Valentino and Mary Pickford, created unrealistic expectations of marriage; similarly the more public discussion and portrayal of sexuality and sensuality was leading young couples into greater sexual activity, earlier marriages and high anticipations regarding sexual fulfillment — all of which led to stress and tension among spouses. Perhaps most damaging to 1920s marriages, however, was what May calls "the pressure to provide." Consumerism, she argues, was developing unrealistic material expectations, especially among middle-class wives, which resulted in added pressure on husbands to expand their income and on spousal relations. Thus what Wandersee treats as a factor inducing changing familial roles, May views as a destructive force. But both agree as to the added pressure on the family and on marriage.

In Canada one manifestation of this pressure could be seen in the changing character of divorce. Prior to the early 1920s a majority of divorces in this country was granted on the petition of the husband, in contrast to most of the western world and in striking contrast to the United States (where for several decades wives' petitions had initiated approximately two-thirds of the formal marital dissolutions). But in 1924 this Canadian phenomenon ended, and females became the primary initiators of divorce procedure. By the late 1930s the number of successful wives' petitions had climbed to almost two-thirds of the annual total (Dominion Bureau of Statistics, 1933, p. 1; Dominion Bureau of Statistics, 1940, p. 1). Wives had taken control of the restricted divorce process in Canada and were demonstrably more assertive as to the sort of marriage and spousal behaviour they were willing to tolerate.

If Robert Griswold (1982, p. 30) is correct that a stable proportion of males and females requesting divorces suggests that male and female marital expectations are "remarkably constant", then the reverse would seem to be true for the 1920s and 1930s in Canada. The changing ratio of female divorce petitions implies that marital expectations, particularly for females, were altering. In the face of this, marriage humour served to moderate or temper the forces for change by mocking the new and lauding the old (and those associated with each).

Marriage humour can be viewed as a response to these new 'challenges' to husbands and to marriage. Certainly Murray's article on the care of wives reflects a fear of wives and sets out ways of 'managing' them. These jokes were both a way of coping with the troubling social pressures on marriages and a means of controlling female and male behaviour and expectations within a marriage. As the 'spheres' of male and female activity converged (or at least increasingly overlapped), the physical and psychological separation between the spheres of husbands and wives altered and diminished. Marital humour was a means of maintaining some of that psychological separation. As well the institution of marriage was portrayed as one especially favouring females, as one in which males sacrificed their personal interests; wives tended to dominate marriages and benefited disproportionately from them. The clear message here was that females would be well advised to maintain their attachment to the institution.

Rather than a mechanism for controlling the changing role of women it is possible to see this humour as a reflection of women's lack of status in marriage and in society. But if this were so why did the proportion of negative humour directed against wives increase so markedly? Sexist humour remains with us well past 1939 certainly, but what is striking about the jokes of the first four decades of the twentieth century is both the amount of the humour aimed at wives and the extent and direction of statistical change. This is strongly suggestive of a casual relationship between the changing role of women in society and marriage on the one hand and a desire to control that change (and thus women/wives) on the other.

Males, of course, dominated the dissemination of this humour (Neitz, 1980, p. 219; Vipond, 1977, p. 117). It was clearly to their advantage to portray marriage and husbands and wives in such fashion. As the superordinate group, they were maintaining a hierarchy of status and reinforcing traditional values. Given the propensity to portray women negatively, these jokes probably appealed more to males than to females (La Fave, *et al*, 1973); but women are more likely than men to appreciate self-disparaging jokes (Neitz, 1980, p. 219), so the impact of such humour on females ought not to be discounted. There are several modern indicators that suggest much greater male satisfaction in marriage, than female (Bernard, 1972). Humour can be seen to operate as a control mechanism inducing female participation and female acceptance of marriage.

Marriage humour purveyed to male and female members of society and participants in marriage information regarding marriage and spousal behaviour. In these jokes males provided 'feed back' regarding developments within marriage and male-female relations. This feed back performed a number of important functions. In a period of social and economic disequilibrium, the humour aimed as a stabilizing influence. As well, there was a distancing of males and females in these jokes, and a distancing of males from marriage. An unconscious but purposeful separation of the sexes helped males to deal with increasingly assertive (and thus threatening) females by articulating and reinforcing stereotypic roles for both genders. As females increasingly entered (or were perceived to enter) the 'male' worlds of work outside the home and public affairs, humour such as that discussed here served to maintain a distance and differences between the sexes. Also, by distancing themselves from marriage, males exhibited fears of being controlled in marriage by their wives; husbands seemed subconsciously to be coping with their own considerable dependence on that institution by articulating the reverse myth. Indeed, as Jessie Bernard (1972, p. 16) points out, men have been complaining about marriage for centuries. "Men have cursed it, aimed barbed witticisms at it, denegrated it, bemoaned it — and never ceased to want and need it or to profit from it." In doing so in the early twentieth century, a particular view or image of marriage and

of male-female roles was publicly perpetuated, inhibiting and controlling change.

The norms articulated and supported in this humour were addressed just as much to males as to females. If wives ought to be passive, loving and submissive, husbands were surely being encouraged to assert themselves, to avoid any possibility of such labelling as 'hen-pecked', and to maintain control over their marriage. Men were instructed as to what type of behaviour to expect from their wives and what to accept.

Marriage humour played a complementary role to magazine fiction in this period. The short stories and articles which pervaded Canadian mass circulation magazines made clear the gender roles. Men were to work hard in their responsibilities as breadwinner and sole supporter of wife and family. Women, while they might join the labour force temporarily before marriage, were happiest and socially most useful in the home as wife and mother. As homemaker and as mother, she performed tasks that were increasingly subject to manipulation and guidance by 'experts' external to the home (Vipond, 1977; Strong-Boag, 1982). A bride's advice column in *Maclean's Magazine* in the 1920s, for example, addressed various problems of early married life: "Without exception it recommended that the job of the wife was to cater to her husband's every whim, however unreasonable" (Vipond, 1977, p. 123).

Marriage humour was thus just one of a number of mechanisms reinforcing a patriarchal view of spousal relations. In the face of rising pressures within marriage and in response to social and economic change, marriage and the family potentially offered an important sense of stability in a general environment of instability. When marriage too seemed threatened, the response was one of manipulation designed to prevent (or at least control) change. Wives, as the central figure in the home and the family, were viewed as the key participant to be manipulated. If traditional marriage could be preserved, if traditional gender relations could be maintained (or at least were so perceived), the general social and economic environment was much less threatening.

NOTES

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1. The same author points to some literature which discusses the less prominent tendency of humour acting as a force for social change.
2. In 1908-9, an additional section, "The Merry Muse", was published occasionally and was included in the tabulations made in this paper.
3. This column in 1925 was compiled by James L. Hughes, the noted Toronto educator.
4. Marriage, for the purpose of this analysis, includes those who are contemplating marriage (for example, jokes regarding proposal or engagement but excludes those who are simply dating).
5. It is manifestly impossible to examine the actual impact of this humour on the readers of the *Canadian Magazine*. Instead, one can only suggest, using some of the current literature in the field, what may have been the influence and role of these jokes.
6. Ruth Inglis (1938) came to the same conclusion in an examination of the fictional depiction of women. Studying the portrayal of heroines, particularly their occupational roles, in the romantic short stories of *Saturday Evening Post* from 1901 through 1935, she concluded (p. 532) that social control theory was substantiated to the extent that these stories encouraged "the preservation of the status quo as far as moral and social attitudes are concerned" (and thus discouraged change).

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