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Escaping the Genre: Realizing the Satire of 18th Century Women Through the Humor of 20th Century Comedians

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Is women's satire that different from men's? According to statements that Gilbert Highet, a leading critic of satire in the 20th century, makes in the conclusion to his book *The Anatomy of Satire*, it must be. It must be so different that he does not even recognize it as satire. Highet writes that "Women in particular, with their kind hearts, are prone to make this criticism [that satire is disgusting and holds no pleasure for the reader]: very few of them have ever written, or even enjoyed, satire, although they have often been its victims" (235). But a significant amount of satire written by women existed in the 18th century so that any well-versed 18th century scholar would have at least run across it in his or her studies. And today women's satire still persists. Therefore, perhaps women's satire uses such different techniques from men's that a critic such as Highet, who has very strict rules for satire, would not recognize 18th century works by Lady Mary Chudleigh or Sarah Fyge Egerton, for example, as satires. By exploring women's humor as Regina Barreca presents it in *They Used to Call Me Snow White . . . But I Drifted: Women's Strategic Use of Humor*, we find specific characteristics of female humor that differ from male humor and see that 18th century female satirists use the techniques that Barreca sees 20th century female comedians using.

Wit and humor in women has always created controversy where men are concerned. Barreca states early in her book that "A woman's ability to use humor, especially if she can couple it with an ability to think quickly, can have a daunting effect on men" (15). And she later quotes an article by Julia Klein in which Klein talks about the risks female comics take. Klein says that

> 'Comedy is 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 ...' What will she lose? She'll lose the approval of her audience. She'll make people nervous, and nervous people don't laugh. (19)

The whole point of comedy is to teach through laughter, and therefore if you lose the laughter in your performance, then you lose the ability to teach your audience. Mary Leapor, in the 18th century, suggests almost this same thing in her poem *An Essay on Woman*. She talks about the woes of a witty woman: "The damsels view her with malignant eyes, / The men are vexed to find a nymph to wise: / And wisdom only serves to make her know / The keen sensation of superior woe" (29-32). Because it gets her into the most trouble, wit is a woman's worst attribute according to Leapor. And it also makes her unhappy: "Though nature armed us for the growing ill / With fraudful cunning and a headstrong will; / Yet, with ten thousand follies to her charge, / Unhappy woman's but a slave at large" (57-60). Women, therefore, are slaves not only to men, she says, but they also suffer slavery at the hands of their intelligence because they understand their inferior position and realize that they cannot easily escape it.

Wit needs to be defined before I go any further. The word wit during Leapor's time does not mean the same thing as it does today. In the 18th century, wit meant intelligence. Today wit refers more to a sense of humor. But women often use humor to mask intelligence. Therefore, even though the word has developed a somewhat different meaning over the centuries, the idea behind it remains the same—wit was not valued in women in the 18th century, and today wit often conceals a woman's wisdom so that she does not threaten men.

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Concealing wisdom behind humor often leads to a self-deprecating kind of humor in which the comedian makes fun of herself or others like her. Leapor uses the self-deprecating humor that Barreca associates with much female humor in *An Essay on Woman*. It seems that Leapor does not so much accuse men of creating women's secondary position, she more explains women's place in society and blames women for allowing it to persist. She mentions women's obsession with beauty, and then seems to laugh at these vain women because this beauty they pride fades quickly. And then what will these women have left?

> Her lip the strawberry, and her eyes more bright
> Than sparkling Venus in a frosty night;
> Pale lilies fade and, when the fair appears,
> Snow turns a negro and dissolves in teares (9-12).

While the undertone is that men have created this secondary position for women, the poem really criticizes women. Barreca writes that this self-deprecating humor is something of a defense mechanism used by groups low in the status structure. If you make a joke about yourself or your group before and better than anyone else does, then you have some control over your situation, and you make those people in powerful positions comfortable and your "pals" (25-26).

While this is something of a good strategy—the male patriarchy will think that women are not dissatisfied with their position in society and that they really do not want to change it, and thus men may let down their guard and inadvertently give women more freedom and power than they meant to—it can also go too far. After awhile, self-deprecating jokes are not funny to women anymore because they are the reality. And some women might argue, why should we bother with male feelings? Why should we want to let males feel comfortable in their high status position? They should feel uncomfortable and should be challenged in order to keep this superior position. Women such as Sarah Fyge Egerton and Lady Mary Chudleigh, both 18th century satirists, seem to prescribe more to this kind of thought. They do not seem concerned with keeping men comfortable or with concealing their dissatisfaction with the female position in society. They both blatantly accuse men of denying women "true" wit and thereby keeping them slaves. Egerton claims that women are actually smarter than men, and thus men deny them wit out of fear: "They're wise to keep us slaves, for well they know, / If we were loose, we soon should make them so" (13-14). And later she writes that "They fear we should excel their sluggish parts, / Should we attempt the sciences and arts; / Pretend they were designed for them alone, / So keep us fools to raise their own renown" (19-22). These are powerful words and straightforward statements. She does not worry about offending men. It seems more that she wants them to know that she understands her own wit and its power and that men better be careful because she will use her wit to gain a better position for women in society.

Chudleigh too accuses men of the fact that "Wife and servant are the same, / But only differ in the name" (1-2). She mentions the woman's role in her servitude in a sad sort of way—look at this pathetic woman who can do nothing without the approval of her husband:

> Like mutes, she signs alone must make,
> And never any freedom take,
> But still be governed by a nod,
> And fear her husband as her god:
> Him still must serve, him still obey,
> And nothing act, and nothing say,
> But what her haughty lord thinks fit,
> Who, with the power, has all the wit. (13-20)

This poem uses the self-deprecating technique of humor a little more than Egerton's, but it still mainly blames men, not women, for the slavery of women. It is strong in its accusations of men and also suggests as Egerton's's poem does that men have the wit because they have the power, not because they are more intelligent. In other words, men are defining what is considered wit—what women are taught is not as highly valued as what men are taught.

Thus Egerton and Chudleigh are really taking a strong stand against men. They do not seem concerned at all with how men will feel about their works. But perhaps I am reading with too much of a 20th century attitude. Men of their time may not have even understood this wit that seems so straightforward and accusatory to me. Barreca even states that "Perhaps it is fortunate, therefore, that occasionally a woman's wit is too quick or too 'different' to be understood by a man" (15). Could men not really understand what these women were accusing them of? Perhaps not, or perhaps the men did not even recognize these poems as satire or want to acknowledge that women had enough wit to construct satires against the "superior sex." For example, Gilbert Highet, as mentioned earlier, insists that very few women "have ever written, or even enjoyed, satire, although they have often been its victims" (235). Obviously from the above examples, many women wrote and continue to write satire. But like many men, he probably does not want to look at these satires closely because that would require looking closely at himself as a part of the satirized group—the male patriarchy.

And it is conceivable that Highet does not really even recognize these women's satires as satire. Most of the satires we looked at in class by women abided by the humane humor rule that Emily Toth defines in her article "Female Wits" and attributes to female humor. This rule states that "we should not make fun of what people cannot change, such as social handicaps . . . or physical appearance" (cited in Barreca 13). Women take on the powerful, rather than the pitiful, and they, more often than men, criticize sacred institutions like marriage or authority figures such as bosses. This makes their humor more dangerous according to Barreca because it does not take authority seriously (14). Many of the satires of the 18th century use this tactic as well. Hetty Wright in *Wedlock. A Satire* takes on the institution of marriage. She calls it a "tyrant" (1), a "plague peculiar to mankind" (6), a "sure forerunner of despair" (16), a "monster whom the beasts defy" (22), and many other unsavory names. She addresses humankind in general, but I believe she is speaking to women in particular, when she writes, "That wretch, if such a wretch there be, / Who hopes for happiness from thee [wedlock], / May search successfully as well / For truth in whores and ease in hell" (27-30). In other words, do not try to find contentment in marriage. Wedlock only breeds more slavery for women. Wright is thus taking on the powerful institution of marriage that was created by men and serves to keep women in an inferior position in society. She does not attack a particular person, however, or dwell on those inhabiting a lower social position than herself. Thus she uses the humane humor rule about which Barreca and Toth write. While it is a very direct way of getting her point across, it is also very risky because she is challenging a sacred institution and not taking it seriously.

Another female writer from the 18th century who comments on powerful institutions that often breed inequality also uses the humane humor rule. Mary Collier in *The Woman's Labor. An Epistle to Mr. Stephen Duck: [The Washerwoman]* takes on class issues as well as female issues. Her satire is a response to a poem written by Stephen Duck about the hardships of the working class man. She shows that the working class woman has an even harder plight than the man because she not only works for her employer but she must take care of her husband as well. Collier, however, does not use accusatory words or an attacking tone in the satire. Her words and tone do not seem to fit the serious content of the poem. The overall message that Collier sends to her audience reflects the awful conditions of the washerwoman's life. But the words and phrases she chooses to use fool the audience for awhile into thinking that she is writing of something much less serious, a tactic that might allow her poem to circulate more easily even though it breaks the acceptible boundaries of women's writing. For example, at the beginning of the satire, Collier states that "When bright Orion glitters in the skies / In winter nights, then early we must rise" (1-2). These two lines say that the women get up in the middle of the night to go to work for the day, but Collier makes it sound romantic by mentioning Orion, a constellation and a classic story of love. She could have used a phrase like "only the dark sky greets us when we rise to start our day." This is much less romantic and does not conceal in any way that the women are rising before the sun to start working. While viewing the stars is romantic for lovers, there is nothing romantic about why working class women see the stars. Another phrase she uses early in the satire also serves to encourage this light tone, while it at the same time holds a serious message: "Our work appointed, we must rise and go, / While you on easy beds may lie and sleep, / Till light does through your chamber-windows peep" (4-6). These lines directly address Mr. Duck's poem. Women, she says, get up before men to do their work. Men do not get up until the sun rises. Instead of saying this, though, she uses a playful phrase—light "peeps" through the window. Once again she does not use an accusatory tone, but rather one that almost masks the meaning of her satire.

The words and phrases Collier uses when writing about the clothes the women wash and about the woman for whom they work also lend the poem an ironic tone. She reports very clearly and with no real emotion about the fine fabrics that the lady owns. It almost sounds as if the working class women value their work. The rich lady tells them to be careful of her clothes because she has so few garments. While this is written in a completely serious tone, we know as the audience that Collier does not believe this. She is not an innocent who marvels at the rich woman's clothing, but she presents her poem in that way. She toys with her audience as Barreca says many women do in order to avoid confrontation and to gain social acceptance without totally subscribing to society's rules. For example, Regina Barreca mentions that female characters such as Marilyn Monroe's in *Some Like it Hot* and Lorelie in Anita Loos's

Gentlemen Prefer Blondes are "mistresses of innuendo." The words they speak seem innocent, and they may even speak these words in an innocent, naive tone. But the words can be construed as sexually suggestive. Sometimes the woman who speaks them does not even know she speaks suggestively, but sometimes a sly look from the woman tells the audience that she is not the naive innocent she is supposed to be (16-17). Women tend to conceal their wit and attitudes behind innocent statements that only the correct audience will find ironic. This protects women from offending men and the power structure, but it also allows them to rise above their subordinate position. Collier uses this double meaning tactic throughout her satire. The subversive irony she so expertly uses may cause a critic like Highet to overlook this literary work as a satire. He perhaps is not a member of the correct audience, and thus he does not share in the humor of the situation. He would therefore not define this as satire because he would not see the humor of it.

Highet tries to keep satire a male-dominated genre by defining it in male terms and according to male satires and also by blatantly stating that women cannot handle it. But obviously they can because not only did the aforementioned women create some very satiric works, but women such as Lady Mary Wortley Montague wrote satires in the 18th century that were even more harsh than many satires written by men. Take as an example Montague's *To the Imitator of the First Satire of the Second Book of Horace.* In this satire, she says awful things about Alexander Pope—she criticizes his character, his physical disabilities, and his writing. She writes in a much more Juvenalian style than Pope ever does, and she seems to enjoy herself while doing it. She does not apologize or make any comments that suggest that she feels guilty for "gazing on these foul scenes"; Highet explains the circumstances presented in Juvenalian satire as "foul scenes." Neither does Montague follow the humane humor rule that Toth has carved out for women. Montague criticizes Pope's physical appearance, referring to his humpbacked body as "That wretched little Carcass" (68). She also suggests that his pen is not his only impotent feature, he himself is impotent:

> Cool the Spectators stand; and all the while,
> Upon the angry little Monster smile.
> Thus 'tis with thee:—whilst impotently safe,
> You strike unwounding, we unhurt can laugh(73-6)

Her harsh statements reveal that just because she is a member of the female sex does not mean that she is automatically nice and sweet, attributes too often arbitrarily placed on women. It is a mistake to think of women as too weak to deal with or to dish out criticism.

While Toth's and Barreca's ideas of humane humor and of humor challenging powerful institutions find their way more often into female satire than into male satire, we should not try to define all female satire within this narrow framework. Montague's poem, for instance, would not fit because it does not challenge any institutions or refrain from personal attacks. So then, how do you define women's satire? Does it have any concrete rules? The one thing that I see in most satires by women is a need to satirize a bad situation in order to survive it. Barreca entitles one of the last sections of her book, "She Who Laughs, Lasts." In this section she suggests that if you can laugh at your situation, if you can find anything humorous in your situation, then you can survive it and change it: "If you can see, in the most obscured curve of your peripheral vision, the way the situation could be funny, you might just be able to save yourself" (32). Women in the 18th century held an even lower position in society than women of today do, and the female satirists of the time realized this inferior position. But rather than let this lack of social status overwhelm them and thus destroy any hope of changing their situation, they found an outlet. They used satire to bring their ideas into the open. Realizing the humor in a situation allows one "to view her situation with emotional distance and, therefore, with clarity" (32). With this clarity comes the realization that you can change your situation. Thus, the one thing that might define 18th century satire is the understanding that change is necessary, but until that comes, humor will help you survive.

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