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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.
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 many female humor in An Essay on Woman. It seems that Leapor does not so much accuse men of creating women’s secondary position, she merely explains women’s place in society and blames men 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 lies fade and, when the fair appears,
Snow turns a negro and dissolves in tears (9-12).

While the undertone is that men have created this secondary position, the poem really criticizes women. Barreca writes that women such as Sarah Fyge Egerton and Lady Mary Collier in The Woman’s Labor. An Epistle take 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 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, 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 lines say that the women get up in the middle of the night to go to work for the day, while 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 peer” (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 does not sound as if the working class women value their work. The rich lady does not seem to be afraid 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 woman 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...
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