Navigating the Narrative Space of Women: Gender and Sick Humour

By Rob Baum, Monash University, Australia

Abstract:
Women's "narrative space" - the authority granted women's stories - exists marginally, as the concept of female story continues to compete with the perceived monopoly of the "master text." "Sick humour," an approved method of publicly reducing subject to object, principally reconstructs its target, or "butt," through the mechanism of gender identification. Exploring the culture and popularity of "sick humour," I critique the means by which sick jokes-which can in some cases effect social change-define the public awareness of three ordinary American women: Christa McAuliffe, Cathleen Webb and Lorena Bobbitt. Assessing the narrative space of these women, whose private tragedies became sensational public domain, we experience how the humour surrounding and confining women replaces their specificity with the saleable and consumable images of other female bodies.

> *Mary*. Almost. Yes. Better. Ah. There. I've done it. See the invisible passage of an amiable woman. (Timberlake Wertenbaker, *The Grace of Mary Traverse*)
>
> "How many feminists does it take to change a lightbulb?" "That's not funny." (American folk humour)

1 When microwave ovens appeared on the market, they were accompanied by a rash of stories about women popping pet poodles like corn, old people with pacemakers winding-down and ditzy blondes mistaking the appliances for heat lamps, putting their heads in, and taking off layers of fat and makeup in a matter of seconds. Those kinds of heart-stopping fables are called "jokes."[1] The willingness of American consumers to associate microwaves with death was startling, particularly given the luridness of the images - skin burning, bones exploding - in short, what is known to be true of the crematoria of Europe not so long ago. That women and the aged were now running the ovens, rather than perishing in them, was especially ironic.

2 These visions of women operate upon women, defining them as the tools of technology they have no hope of commanding. Humour surrounds and confines those who tread outside the space given them; sick humour manipulates notions of gender and obscures the real subject while replacing it with saleable and consumable images (for instance, blondes and microwaves). Such narratives are created to disempower; by force of their acceptance they come to substitute for physical ground. Women's "narrative space," then, might be defined as the place or, in this case, authority granted women's stories (Michie 13), and is

[1] One of the most lucid commentaries on the equation of the comic principle continues to be found in Henri Bergson, *An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Shovell Henry Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: Macmillan Company, 1911).

relegated to the margins as the concept of female space competes with the monopoly of the "master text." Of course the microwave stories depend upon mythical women - actual women would violate the integrity of community legend - by which we know that in these tales female identity is founded on an absence perceived as a presence. But to the degree that such stories are entertained as truths, they become the narrative spaces women navigate.

3 In this article I shall discuss the ways women, utilised as public metaphors, become the objects of "sick humour" (like that which circulated about microwave ovens). My argument will: 1) assess the narrative space of three ordinary American women whose private tragedies became sensational public domain, namely, Christa McAuliffe, Lorena Bobbitt, and Cathleen Crowell Webb; 2) explain the workings of sick humour and its social and socialising potential; 3) show how the tragedy of yet another American woman, Mary Jo Kopechne, provides insight into the use of women as metaphor, deriving from a concept of the availability of female bodies; and finally, 4) theorise female sexuality as the true object of derisive public comment. So although I began with descriptive examples of sick humour, I will be establishing some groundwork on gender and women's spaces before analysing the grotesque, a category over which sick humour reigns.

Necessary narratives

4 We turn first to the representation of women in a space so other it is called "outer," Outer Space. In this joke, which I heard myself, the connection between the *Challenger* and microwave ovens is exact.

> Who's the first woman to cook in Outer Space?
> Christa McAuliffe.

In an article headed "Spaced Out," about the schoolteacher-turned-astronaut Christa McAuliffe (Penley 1993), Constance Penley records the kind of "sick jokes" which flourished in the wake of the ill-fated *Challenger* flight, questioning the attitudes behind the gallows humour. Penley reveals McAuliffe as a prize in the NASA quest for "female mediocrity" and a woman made for its technology. At the moment women were borne into space, they were also born into the famed exclusivity of the masculine and masculinized U.S. Space Program. To have women in outer space suggests that women *could* be in outer space; therefore it became necessary to define *how* they could be in outer space. NASA chose to vanquish the idea of gender equity that projecting a woman into space implied.

5 During her training, McAuliffe was reported derelict in her professed project (to keep a journal for primary school students). In the NASA compound she instead baked apple pies,

worked at needlepoint, and displayed wholesome feminine attributes, including being a woman who could not speak for herself. In fact, McAuliffe was deliberately silenced as a condition of her inclusion in the programme. For all her housewifery she was still a political embarrassment, a woman whose contribution to science (in the event of a successful trip) would have been empty, nothing more than the verification that non-astronauts - even *women* - could survive the rigours of space (a point the world's female astronauts had noticeably failed to win).[2] Under NASA's careful supervision, McAuliffe became a woman "out of control" (Penley 181), symbolised and even proved by her tragic end. Although McAuliffe clearly was not an astronaut - neither a professional scientist, physicist, space engineer, nor military-trained pilot, in short, not a man hand-picked and developed for the longest of flights - her name became cruelly synonymous with the *Challenger* tragedy. In fact, she was blamed for it: after McAuliffe's death, NASA's conclusion was that women *cannot survive in space*.

> What goes up and doesn't come down?
> (You know the answer.)

6 The lesson of female unfitness for the stars came as no surprise, given that the space industry is heavily vested in reinforcing in outer space the same structures of exclusion and gendering that operate on Earth. Fortunately, McAuliffe's death garnered sufficient national attention that NASA need not repeat its fateful experiment soon. In her article, Penley exposes NASA's condemnation, following the disaster, of the "Teacher in Space" project as ill-spent energy, chronicling NASA's generally hostile attitude towards women (including McAuliffe) in space. It seems clear that NASA unambiguously engineered McAuliffe's contribution and image in its program, clarifying a (perhaps) subordinate mission to colonise *inner* space. By "inner" space I refer to "domestic space," a place expressly for women, a space ensured by the complicity of the women who occupy it.

7 It is not, however, a place for "bad" women, and bad women are not mentioned in order to keep good women innocent of the taint of their fallen sisters. Females, born immoral, are prey to negative suggestion, a facet of their weaker minds (measurably smaller, according to the pseudo-science of eugenics); this can be seen in two interesting parallels to McAuliffe's tragedy: the stories of Cathleen Webb and Lorena Bobbitt. In "The Greatest Story (N)Ever Told: The Spectacle of Recantation" (Michie 1992), Helena Michie retells the story of a well-publicised rape charge, the even better-propagated recantation of that charge, and the sinister celebrity attending Cathleen Crowell Webb, a "born-again Christian housewife from rural New Hampshire" (10). The original story received little attention, ignored even in the pages

[2] Perhaps this is partly because of the "masculinate" stigma attached to Eastern bloc women: female astronauts came predominantly from Soviet countries.

of Webb's local newspaper, despite the conviction of her apprehended rapist.[3] Then, seven years after "rapist Dobson's" incarceration, Webb (having since converted to Evangelical Christianity) publicly renounced her own charges and confessed that she had made the whole thing up! Her retraction was picked up in newspapers and magazines, and Webb appeared on television with the accused man, now released. Webb's "rapist" became identified as the victim of female desire. The rape that recalled or repealed itself called all rape into question, justifying the fable that women cannot be raped because "all women want it." Webb was a laughing-stock. But ironically it was through the act of recantation that Webb's "good name" - destroyed by the "fact" of her rape - was restored.

8 Similarly, with one stroke Lorena Bobbitt became one of the most threatening women of the Twentieth Century, a household name synonymous with danger and repulsion. In the Biblical manner of an "eye for an eye," she one day cut off her husband's penis. Bobitt's act enraged and frightened men across the world, and she was stigmatised as a monster, a contemporary version of the Medusa. It was known that Bobbitt was regularly beaten and sexually assaulted by her husband John. But as he was her legal husband, the assaults occurred in the publicly sanctioned arena of the American marriage. Bobbitt failed to reconcile herself to the prevalence of violence, including sexual violence in marriagea legally contracted atmosphere for argument and abuse, where the male body has and continues to dominate.[4]

9 Intermingling issues and tissues of ownership (e.g., possession of the hymen and reproductive rights), the institution of marriage certifies women as silent partners in an

[3] In this case I use quotation marks to indicate a definition implied or in question. Like Michie in her article, I avoid examining "Dobson's" guilt, focusing on a more significant issue than finding proof of rape.

[4] Bobbitt's scenario metaphorically recalls Susan Glaspell's short play *Trifles*. In *Trifles*, a dutifully private and silent Mrs. Wright at last resolves her husband's violence by strangling him with a rope. Under his violent ministrations the bed had already become a stage; Mrs. Wright chose to ring the curtain down. "[A] strange death," the townspeople remarked; "who'd have thought it?" Yes, who'd have thought little Minnie Foster Wright capable of carrying out such a deed, after so many years of abuse and deprivation at her husband's hand? And who'd have thought Mrs. Bobbitt capable of amputating Mr. Bobbitt's cock? Many women must surely dream such moments of "truth," wherein they alter or repay male violence in pure gestures. Physical truncation, diminution and neutralisation together perform a complete and absolute gestus-asignature gesture, or gist. Trifles' never-seen character Mrs. Wright goes silently to jail, presumably to perish there for want of favourable evidence. She will never speak the truth of the murder because the men of the town will never speak the truth of her abuse by her husband. Susan Glaspell creates a powerful presence in the unseen character of Mrs. Wright. She also comments on the fact of female absence in marriage: Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, the two women "friends" who discover onstage the truly incriminating evidence of Minnie Wright's dead canary (clearly killed - by her husband), are equally invisible to their own husbands. I do not subscribe to the theory that lack of conclusive evidence, in this case Wright's tiny, quilt-squared canary coffin, guarantees her release. While the Missus Hale and Peters withhold evidence that would certainly result in Wright's death, I do not believe that Wright will eventually be let off. Glaspell reveals Truth to be a gendered issue, and male and female Justice as distinct operations. Although in the play male law appears to defeat female revenge, the ability of the townswomen (but not the men) to discern what really happened gives the women an authority to women as bearers of the truth.

unequal business, and female sexuality as violable territory. More importantly, public opinion "legislates" mastery of female bodies by men, guaranteeing the public domain of female bodies: female anatomy is not private space. (The construction of the female body as a public site is obvious in countries where pornography is openly purveyed and female anatomy is overtly a boom industry for male voyeurism.) Treated as an outer space available for conquest and colonisation, the inner space of women is contestable. In Bobbitt's case, confusing the real manifestation of her own body with her feelings and desires, thinking them both private rather than public stages, the battered wife refused the geography thrust upon her. Her defense was symbolically and concretely aggressive, but as a counter-attack launched against an enemy weapon. Striving for a moral conclusion not compatible with modern jurisprudence, Bobbitt took out the opposition in the war on her body.

10 But like Webb's story of rape, Bobbitt's narrative is marred by the suspicion of lying: Bobbitt also recanted. That is not to say that she "took back" claims of being assaulted. But she told perhaps *too* much truth. Attempting to restore her goodness and grace, whether John's "manhood" or the fiction of feminine docility, Bobbitt publicly repented. Within hours of tossing the dislocated flesh from her car, Bobbitt reported and aided in pinpointing (pardon the analogy) the penis. She thus helped to relocate and remap her husband's body. But in so doing, Bobbitt placed herself on the map of media sensation as a woman who reacted rather than acted, one unwilling to stand (and fall) by her own desires, a woman who - in the moment of escape - replaces the key in the lock. Imagine Nora in Ibsen's *Doll House* poking her head back through that door, still ringing with its courageous slam.[5] Imagine Thelma and Louise, bent upon their final flight across the chasm of heterosexual relationships, leaping apart, hands unknitting, to end solitarily in the rubble below. Both these fictive endings drew - and continue to draw - sharp criticism from men and women. But the point of these stories is precisely in their *endings*, moments communicating strength, growth and personal emancipation, when self-denial is replaced with self-love, and tedium with freedom. If such endings, fictive as they are, impart a threat to American viewers, how much more so a real-life tale in which a woman is forced to a Biblical brand of vengeance, and retaliation takes the form of amputation?

11 Told by others, these narratives resist the idea of women acting for themselves. Women who do so are "out of control," w(r)enches in the works. They are also women whose sexuality is clearly mediated by male bodies. In both Webb's and Bobbitt's personal narratives, female sexuality and its availability are foregrounded. Their genitals become the

[5] Henrik Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* was commended by Norwegian women's societies for a perceived feminism - a platform Ibsen, however, refused.

locus of public controversy. Psychoanalytically, these tales are excellent examples of the Lacanian crisis of identity, as monstrously "lacking" women steal the phallus of "sleeping" men. Looked at with a feminist sensibility, these women are most disturbing because their narratives suggest that women cannot be trusted, either when they protect themselves or when they tell the truth. Their very bodies infer that female "truth" is tacitly false. Of course injudicious imprisonment cannot be condoned. But the ability of women to defend their bodies and their bodies' productions would be greatly improved, were the men our testimonies named to remain in prison. If rape becomes a joke women tell themselves, then women will lose the slim power, one could say, "drama," present after violation. Webb's recantation publicised what too many people (including educated ones) already believe to be true: that women cannot be raped, and that all women who "cry rape" are liars. Webb's story potentiates the ability of some males to oppress others (including other males) with the threat of rape, and increases female fears that we will not be believed if we tell our stories. Webb's recantation replaces us in a familiar position, "less a case of being in on the joke than being the butt of it" (Walton 245).

12 Meanwhile, in the joking that arose over the amputation, it was not John Bobbitt's stitches the public consumed but Lorena Bobbitt's rupture. Conditioned to furnish the public with the best story to savour with breakfast, the media largely overlooked John as the butt of this joke except when it came to questions of ejaculation.[6] Instead we saw Bobbitt as she showed herself to us, retracing her steps that night to the place at which she flung her pound of flesh from the window. Bobbitt's repentance cum recantation so quickly followed upon her act it seemed an undoing. In her ingenuous resumption of innocence and purity there was necessarily an annulment as well, a dismissal of her own emancipation from the problem prick. Bobbitt's physical act was indeed mythic, a *gestus* as replete as Oedipus' gouging of his own eyes, Prometheus' torture on the rock[7], or Thyestes' meal of children. Such acts are "perfect" in their own way: perfectly chosen and perfectly repugnant, aesthetic economy. This irreducibility only made Bobbitt's recantation more odious and problematic, not because one could not empathise with her crime of passion but because it all ended so fast. It was a

[6] The initial question of how John did it - how he attracted women-became in this act the wonder of how he "does" it - how he has sex with a re-constructed penis: given the media attention to his plight, I suspect that John now has the best male organ that money can buy, a bionic marvel. John later made a more or less public "butt" - of himself by starring in a pornographic movie. That is, seeking to prove the wholeness of his masculinity, John chose a market notorious for its methods of graphic exploitation: in pornography the objectified body is never really whole but exists only because of and through the sexual organ, the camera's central focus. Thus John's desire to show the world his new penis backfired: instead John Bobbitt again showed the world that he is a penis, a man whose sole grounds for mastery over women lies in the violence of his sexual organ.

[7] The Olympian gods punish Prometheus for bringing fire to mankind by chaining him to a rock where swooping eagles routinely devour his liver.

postmodern drama, its moment - even its fame - cut in half.

13 And that was the Warholian prediction, after all. Rather than quarter-hours of "fame," Warhol might have called them moments of "identity." Identity seems more and more a reflection like light from an outside source, a quality of appearing rather than being. And for many men there is little more reflective of male desire and inscription than the female body with its mirrored breasts and "private parts" of female genital sub-terrain, symmetrically balanced (Irigaray 1985).[8] (On the body external, a canvas of duplications, singularity of a form is surprising.) If Bobbitt's blow was a semiotic response, the kind-for-kind answer to the language of male violence, then the operation performed in the surgical theatre that night was a recuperation of male dominance and potency. It was also an act of under-erasure, the denial of a scar. For behold, everything works: John Bobbitt is (as we have seen) up again and beating women. As the scarred implement was itself the original weapon employed to beat, to fell, one can enjoy Lorena Bobbitt's operative moment as suture, historically and poetically "right," poetic closure. Yet the weapon was unfortunately returned to its owner.

Dark reflections

14 How are the stories of a space-borne teacher and two "everyday housewives" related? On the surface these three women are worlds and words apart: McAuliffe wrenching in the gears of the American space industry; Webb reliving a personal trauma of rape and exposure; Bobbitt taking vengeance into her own hands. But we never actually encounter these women except through the narrative space of their chroniclers, through the *simulacra* of what is told about them. Each of these women is victim of the faceless, anonymous engine of public interest. The extraordinary celebrity of tragedy that grants these women a kind of unction "elevates" them from the pages of tabloids to the "high culture" of academic discourse. Each unknown was, prior to the event, distant from (and from the media's perspective, unworthy of) anything but the "mediocrity" Penley iterates in her article. We note a common thread of victimisation in NASA's use of McAuliffe as a public relations gimmick, John Bobbitt's continued abuse of his wife, and the ambiguous "rape" of Webb who (whether or not *originally* assaulted) was, following recantation, deployed as a media possession. The sensationalism of all three stories was immediately ground down for public television: the *Challenger* bursting mid-air before us in vile repetition; Phyllis George's request for "rapist" and "victim" to embrace; photographs of the Bobbitt home, car and knife. As I have said, narrative space can be personal space, even in the margins. But when told by others, the

[8] Note Luce Irigaray's argument that femininity is erased by binary configurations of the body.

stories of these women lose claim to the integrity and authenticity consistent with personal narrative. Once the narrative is possessed by another, particularly an hegemony like white Western masculinity's press organ, it is edited to fit the space provided. In the transition from private experience to public spectacle, the *image* of a particular woman may magnify, but the *woman* diminishes by comparison. Negative media recognition cuts her smaller, quieter, weaker, and morally remote, more fully gendered "female" - unprotected and unbelievable.

15 These narratives command the subject's reduction to object, a process of "othering" that exposes women to a myriad of public assaults, among them becoming the target of sick humour. The comic butt of the sick joke is rendered inoffensively absent, confined to the sight of a female body no longer her own, manufactured by the social organ. The media's custom (readily discernible in advertisements, cinema and MTV) of biforcating women into parts rather than wholes (showing here a breast, a navel, a pouting mouth) figuratively reduces women to the features deemed most salient. Christa McAuliffe, already cinders, becomes a finger, a face - Lorena Bobbitt and Cathy Webb, objects of stories told about sexuality and power, become nether-parts. These tales are Cinderella fables, told of women catapulted to infamy not through any apparent design but by being in the wrong place at the right time. All three women travel from obscurity into the heat of public recognition, to find themselves pressed to accommodate the stereotype of public spectacle, lives laid open, bodies ready for appraisal. From the margins these women thrust into our view. As Michie relates:

> (S)pectacle translates the traditionally private into the public by amplifying and rendering visual the interiority of the body and its experiences. Narrative frames and contextualizes spectacle, giving it a meaning, an order, and a technology. Together, narrative and spectacle produce a story with pictures, embodied on the level of popular culture by glossy magazines and [...] on the level of "high" culture by academic and scientific discourses about the secrets of the body (12).

The difference between Webb's two confessions - and between the stories of Webb, McAuliffe and Bobbitt - produces a narrative space in which women can become public but only as spectacle, something other or less than they are, composites of copy, pictures and saucy tidbits jazzed up for the morning reader. The public eye opens and closes upon the image of woman, an image corruptible because already corrupted in its earliest narratives[9]; the eye sees an image it has itself generated (Mulvey 1975). Such femalehood is fictive: a quilt, a hybrid, built from clippings of whole women.

16 Reflectivity of the female body, its ability to hold and reproduce images, is a skill often said to be the essence of womanliness (when fecundity is considered our most precious

[9] The Biblical Eve is constructed as a knowing corrupter of men: not only does she eat from the forbidden tree, but she also wittingly offers the fruit to Adam.

gift), demonstrating our tendency to turn our surfaces to the advantage of others. Like moons, like Earth, women absorb light and shine it back, orbiting male suns. Having discovered that their bodies are *public* bodies, usable as park benches, it is no wonder that many women marry then cling to that declaration of privatisation, remaining in violent or loveless matches until the end. The promise of a "stardom" (however transient) like Webb's or Bobbitt's offers women an option beyond that of marital indenture or unclaimed baggage: the opportunity to create themselves as public objects of admiration. Such female spectacles are public sites like theme parks, fantastic lands to travel. Through television, tabloids, and talk circuits, women like Webb and Bobbitt become available to American families conditioned to invest gross amounts of time and money in the star precisely because of its brevity. McAuliffe most likely would have shared this fate. And consider the already established celebrity who upon dying arcs into final brightness with an ugly joke, one replacing her late memory with lurid invocations:

> What kind of wood doesn't float?
> *Natalie* Wood.

17 Already public thoroughfare, the bodies of women become, like those of pin-up calendar girls, famous for a year, a month, or perhaps only the time it takes to turn the page, heavenly bodies in the galaxy of public voyeurism, suspended before the public gaze.[10] The Christa McAuliffe created by NASA was a woman who, but for the *Challenger* flight, was destined for obscurity (and life). The outer space in which she was to have ventured did not differ from the inner space in which women already exist, delineated by stereotypes: women bake apple pies, nurture, are bad at mathematics, fail, lie. Penley calls such conceptions "Lucys" (Penley 184) - like Lucille Ball's television character, comic images of the female problem. These women seek refuge in the space that contemporary society conventionally affords women, a space outer in its own way: not the inside track where males historically rest but orbiting it, a space, despite its distance from the core, carefully founded (and funded). As the *Lucy* series regularly depicted, women are dependent upon - and opposite to - the substantial forms of their male counterparts, who have marketable skills, almost solely provide for their families, and must bail their wives out of trouble. Penley calls NASA's public response to McAuliffe's role in their narrative a "disavowal" (186). That is not far from recantation. In this regard McAuliffe is the equivalent of Bobbitt and Webb, women who enabled male institutions to engineer their public images and their bodies.

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[10] Compare Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982).

18 These three stories of women metaphorically tell us a tale of female space, the allowable space of "undistinguished" women in the public gaze. The real space into which McAuliffe might have flown demonstrates the danger all women pose to institutions like NASA, male bastions striving to maintain Western hierarchy and preserve the watchful eye of the master text. In this narrative women are - like one of the nightmare episodes on *I Love Lucy* - "Lucys in space," wacky and dismissible characters. Lucille Ball, mind you, controlled her own product; the last laugh was her own. As grotesque objects of public scorn, however, McAuliffe, Webb and Bobbitt were caught in the machinery.

Freudian slaps

19 Let us look now at that machinery, examine the mechanism of sick humour[11] and the service it performs. Jokes are constituted of a host of incongruities, ruptures which in thought and language produce metaphor and humour, including the grotesque. In all the jokes cited here (and hereafter), the language of humour calls attention to itself in a terse, rhetorical performance. In most of these jokes two anonymous characters emerge and anonymously ask and answer a simple but "trick" question in the same voice, devoid of character differentiation. In order to provide the "proper" answer it is necessary to divest oneself of certain values and mores, to think in an improper (or "sick") way. The reward is the knowledge that one has mastered the trick by correctly discerning a popular social response, usually by uttering a sexist, racist or otherwise ignorant falsehood. Funny, right?[12]

20 Joking is a means to denying and reducing the power of others, as well as expanding and announcing the power of the joker. Patricia Mellencamp speaks of women as the butt of jokes (Penley 182), recalling Freud's paradigm of a teller, a listener and an absent person about whom the joke is told (Freud 1963). In the following sick joke, the "truth" of rape is divulged:

> An old woman enters a police station to report a rape. When the officer comes to the time of the rape, the old woman states, "Forty years ago." "No, he demands, "When did the rape occur?" "Forty years ago," the old woman insists. And it turns out that she really is reporting a forty-year old occurrence. The police officer puts aside the form and asks, "But if it happened forty years ago, why are you only reporting it now?" The old woman sighs and answers: "Nostalgia."

In the mind of the joke-teller, old women are sexually undesirable, reduced to remembering rape as sex, and coercion as interest. Female desire is contrasted with female utterance - that is, the truth of female perversion is weighed against the lie of female narrative. The belief that

[11] These are aspects which neither Penley nor the authors she cites discuss.
[12] See also Thomas Huang, "Hey - That Wasn't Funny!" Santa Barbara News-Press (23 April 1995) D1.

women are never actually raped becomes a part of public record, and rape is demystified, becoming a happy narrative deliberately recalled. Outer and inner space are both successfully navigated, as women's interiorities are offered to nameless others, first as objects of rape, then as objects of public record.

21 The inversion of space that occurs also through the perversion of language is the substance of the jokes told about the *Challenger*, jokes in which *Challenger* figures only minutely. The real subject - or object - is Christa McAuliffe: her unfitness for space, celebrity, and science itself.

> Last thing heard over the *Challenger* intercom: "Say, boys, what's this cute little button?"
> In jokes arising about *Challenger*, McAuliffe's spaces became strangely, tragically, mixed - and nixed.[13]

This economical joke features language undeniably intended to evoke gross feminine stupidity. In a single line McAuliffe is made wholly responsible for the tragedy: the button she notices causes the fatal lift-off. But undoubtedly the "button" McAuliffe pushes is related to public perception of women in space. The appearance of the button rather than the gravity of the situation attracts McAuliffe as the butt of the joke: it's little and cute; within the address "Say, boys," she identifies their plurality and greater knowledge, and her own gender difference and lack. That "cute little" button (as we know from the poems of Gertrude Stein) signifies female difference itself.

22 To facilitate our definition of sick jokes, including those about *Challenger*, rape and what my mother (not given to sick jokes) calls "bobbitting," regard a remark made on the radio: "If Ted Kennedy had been driving a Volkswagen, he'd be President." You may well recognise that line, a joke so old I was surprised to hear it exhumed for a show on "Unbelievable Traffic Stories" in the summer of 1994. The anonymous call-in motorist told an innocent tale about his own mother and a Volkswagen. Deejay "Matthew in the Morning" invoked the older "joke" about Cape Cod's Chappaquiddick.[14]

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[13] I cite two examples, as follows:1) McAuliffe's private thoughts were to be surrendered to the space mission for public fare. In comparison with the scientists performing experiments and prognoses in space, McAuliffe's justification for "taking up space" was to have been a journal of her travels, emulating the pioneers who drove their wagon trains across North America. The idea of journal entries remains consistent with the concept of women as silent participants whose offerings subsist in the personal and emotional realm, more or less passive responses reached only by the active encounter of reading. 2) The inner space of the shuttle, which might have penetrated as a closed inner capsule into outer space, was instead exploded, becoming outer space (nearly spacelessness) in the under or inner space of the Atlantic Ocean.

[14] Deejay Matthew Arnett was fired in September of 1994 from rock station KCQR 94.5 FM for "floating rumours over the air" that the station was to be sold. He had invited listeners to participate in "Nasty Rumors Tuesday" by telling all the ill rumours they'd lately heard. Three days after his (Tuesday) firing, the station was indeed sold, and twenty-seven of the thirty employees laid off. Read Andrew Rice, "KCQR Bites the Dust," The Independent (22 September 1994): 22.

23 Twenty-five years having elapsed since the fact and act of "Chappaquiddick," this remark still has the power to shock. It may have shocked me more at this hearing than at its first. Matthew's mo(u)rning joke recalls an advertisement taken out by *National Lampoon* after the (first) Ted Kennedy "incident." The full-page ad, which ran nationally in magazines and became immediately famous, depicted a Volkswagen beetle afloat with the caption:

> "If Ted Kennedy had been driving a Volkswagen, Mary Jo Kopechne would be alive today."

The inference is that the VW, unlike the actual car driven by Kennedy (a 1967 Oldsmobile) is buoyant in water, a feature touted by its German engineers. Despite the off-colour nature of the Lampoon advertisement, VWs became a part of the scenario, shaping public reception of the New England incident. As the Volkswagen company was only then getting off the ground in North America, the advertisement may even have been a financial boost. It certainly located the Volkswagen in the American imagination.

24 Coincidentally, when Chappaquiddick became a household word[15] embroiled in "one of the biggest scandals of the decade" (Murphy B3), the space program was also in its ascendance. Former radio news director Ed Joyce recalls his arrival at the "party cottage" on the "small satellite island" where six married men and six unmarried women had met, among them Kennedy and Kopechne:

> I had my radio on. It was an incredible moment in history. Human footprints were being placed for the first time on the surface of the moon by Neil Armstrong and I could hear his voice as he was doing it! But as Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin searched the surface of the lunar landscape, I was preparing to search the trash cans at the cottage. It was hard to leave the car radio.... (B3)

Through the accident of timing, the two incidents become linked. Transformed by the voice of the media, radio became television, the capsule a car, both driven by men. Pilot into new waters: turn the channel. Kopechne's body foreshadowed McAuliffe's, Webb's and Bobbitt's, women locked in the machinery of politics and manifest destiny, geography and anatomy, women as soft surfaces beneath booted feet, wearing the ineradicable prints of the institution of male desire.

[15] Several years ago, when I took the ferry to Nantucket, I walked about the small island towns and discovered what the residents had learned years earlier: there is big money in tragedy. Residents of the area want to talk about it. The horrible death of Mary Jo Kopechne provided Chappaquiddick with its perquisite Warholian fame- as well as a means of avenging itself upon a local family eerily protected by wealth and distinction. Every tourist shop, no matter how small, carried a locally printed version of the scandal, while one bookstore specialised in the grisly subject.

Heavenly bodies

25 As Mellencamp found in her own survey (Penley 183), memory is not : although we may genuinely "remember" episodes because of random details (locale, name, time, etc.), those details may have nothing to do with the original event. Thus many people who "remember Chappaquiddick" incongruously equate the car driven by Kennedy with the Volkswagen, even after being reminded of the ad. So I learned shortly after Matthew of the Morning's Chappaquiddick reference, while conducting informal interviews about this and other "sick jokes" such as:

How many Jews can you get in a Volkswagen? Six million.

In a spatial variation of VW associations, the car becomes a phone booth in a 1950s prank to see how many (living) people can be wedged inside the car. More specifically, the automobile becomes a metaphor for a Nazi crematorium, womb filling in for tomb. Even without knowledge of the collegiate quandary - or this sick joke - Jews have good reason to associate the VW with death. *Volkswagen* means "people's car," and the idea of a small family vehicle that would run economically and efficiently for *das Volk* was the brainchild of Adolf Hitler.[16] That might also explain why the German company has increasingly turned in recent years from *Volkswagen* to the word *Fahrvergnügen* ("traveling pleasure") in its advertising. From its birth, the Volkswagen was intended to mobilise a population with no room for Jews.

26 The existence of such "Holocaust jokes" as that one, told me by a young man on the beach the summer I turned 14 (upon learning that I was Jewish), verbally re-enacts historical violence. Like the "good" sick joke that it is (economically-wrought, horribly witty), it shares in an absence - of Jewish bodies - which out-performs Jewish presence, invoking presence by virtue of sheer nothingness, sign, metaphor, the potency of illusion and allusion. Much as *Challenger* entombed its astronauts, the Volkswagen became a tomb for half the world's Jewish population, unseen victims of the *Shoah*. What makes this a sick "joke" is not risibility but the grotesqueness of its subject - genocide - plus a couple of incongruous associations, and a feminisation of the Other. Metaphorical associations work by eliding incongruencies in language and imagination - the site of metaphorical reception. The sick joke utilises deception, suturing truth, fiction, and phobic behaviour - misogyny, racism, homophobia, primitivism. But while the floating VW joke consciously refers to Ted Kennedy, seemingly spoofing his bid for high office, the image inaugurated by the joke is not of Kennedy but of the car, and therefore the unmarried woman in the car, abandoned by Kennedy. The same

[16] For a recent discussion of the Volkswagen challenge to Henry Ford, see König, Wolfgang, "Adolf Hitler vs. Henry Ford: the Volkswagen, the Role of America as a Model, and the Failure of a Nazi Consumer Society," *German Studies Review* 27/2 (May 2004): 249-268.

image drives the *National Lampoon* ad: the thought of a woman's hands at the latch, a woman's face at the windscreen, voluptuous torture of a pretty young woman in the agony of suffocation as she drowns.[17] The ad is, in short, a snuff joke. Mary Jo Kopechne's body becomes a secret body, the all-too fleshy relic of a would-be secret, an absence.

27 Pointing out that the dead woman in the car is not visible in the VW picture, Richard Hoch argued, "That's a different thing from taking pleasure in her death."[18] The joke's intention is, however, an invitation to look behind those doors and visualise the unseen. Sunken in the language, submerged in the text and sub-text of American advertising, is a dead woman whose body is never seen again. To this day something mystifies us about that woman and that body because of the mysterious details of the incident, a curiosity that at once makes the accident/murder the more tragic, and the humour it spawns the more macabre. This may be true of *Challenger* jokes as well. In the absence of that which is seen - the bodies of women - that which is unseen (or obscene) speaks instead. Absence generates its own presence. The vehicles wherein these women perished perform as carapaces sloughed of identity. In similar fashion, the body of rape "victim" Webb, publicly divested of the crime, became absent of interest, a box devoid of its jewel, a truss without a wound. When the "rape" became unworthy of public sympathy, Webb stripped away the bandage, exposing the real site of disease. Metaphorically, hers was an "empty case."[19] From rape to recantation, the vehicle for Cathy Webb was Webb herself, body and soul. With her first story, her genitals were acknowledged as public territory, food for public thought. After her recantation, Webb was re-placed on the map of public consciousness, and her private realms "reopened" for viewing. In the inversion of inner space, the turning inside - out of her body as a text, the "hidden" narrative or secret - feminine sexuality itself - disappeared.

28 Now for a short test: which item does not belong among the following?

1. Kennedy's "Olds"
2. U.S.S. *Challenger*
3. Volkswagen bugs
4. Women's genitals

Need more time?

29 Spoken humour makes it possible to insult someone in a "positive" manner: to provide social correctives (basically notes or hints for social interaction), without recourse to physical violence. Ideally that is as far as joking goes: joking itself may have a restoring or neutralising

[17] Because of the nature of the death the possibility of suicide was considered.
[18] Private conversation, University of California (Santa Barbara, May 1994).
[19] Compare Freud on the image of the jewel case, which comes to replace woman in his studied fantasies.

effect. Yet we know that racist taunts often precede, even incite, racial beatings. The joke is an incomplete narrative that *may* release unwanted energies but *does* permit small truths to couple openly with large fears. We laugh to purge, to heal; our angelic bodies conceal gargoyle hearts. All humour is potentially monstrous.

30 Time's up. Each of the items listed above have in the sick jokes of recent re/telling become containers for mysterious objects, Pandora boxes (Mulvey 1992) of feminine sexuality read as evil, like the coffins of Nosferatu. Given the too *public* nature of the images, perhaps they are more like confessionals, structures mediating between the grotesquery of hidden desires and revealed sins, and the ordinariness of mundane human anatomy. Women are not universally chosen for sick humour unless (in Freud's theory) noticeably present or (in my theory) remarkably absent (and these options may not exhaust the alternatives.) It is not only those jokes we call "sick" which should be condemned for phobic typing. All jokes intended to humiliate (and most jokes do) carry this illness, a disease curable only at the Others' expense.

Absent women familiar

31 I do not claim that women, absent or not, are the butt of every joke, or that women are necessarily any more absent in jokes than in other types of narratives. I do offer a definition of gender with respect to humour, and specifically sick jokes, that explains the way these short stories direct the listener to deride an unseen or absent victim who has no recourse to rebuttal. Such jokes tempt us to ostracise an individual or group through language - a particularly manipulative choice of language - because they pretend to entertain rather than simply to punish, classify, minimise, primitivise and feminise the Other.

32 It is a sobering task to compare the space accorded women with the space women take for themselves. Contrasting the metaphors of public/private, outer/inner, and space/place, we cannot fail to rediscover the fixed nature of such geographies, and the tendency of humans to think in structural opposition (binaries). We also see the ways in which women's "narrative spaces" are constructed differently from men's, and why not only behaviour but also space itself must be gendered to enable female reduction. Webb, Bobbitt, McAuliffe (and Kopechne) are women whose narratives end as they began - in female anatomy, pandoric boxes, voluptuous bodies suspended in glass. Female space is predetermined as a corrupt and corruptible space. In the economy of Self the Other is expendable, an unruly space which must be tidied. Female anatomy is infinitely violable, a noisy space which must be silenced. The feminine Other serves as a necessary difference by which the Self judges itself whole;

woman is the mirror in which the masculine Self erects its gaze. Placed beside the unbroken history of master narratives, "female" methods of telling, seeing and becoming seem ruptures rather than narratives themselves, shards instead of whole vessels, jokes naming absent parties. It remains for us to alter them from unpleasant punchlines to declarations of a powerful presence.

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