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Gender and Humour: Reinventing the Genres of Laughter

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About

Gender forum is an online, peer reviewed academic journal dedicated to the discussion of gender issues. As an electronic journal, *gender forum* offers a free-of-charge platform for the discussion of gender-related topics in the fields of literary and cultural production, media and the arts as well as politics, the natural sciences, medicine, the law, religion and philosophy. Inaugurated by Prof. Dr. Beate Neumeier in 2002, the quarterly issues of the journal have focused on a multitude of questions from different theoretical perspectives of feminist criticism, queer theory, and masculinity studies. gender forum also includes reviews and occasionally interviews, fictional pieces and poetry with a gender studies angle.

Opinions expressed in articles published in *gender forum* are those of individual authors and not necessarily endorsed by the editors of gender forum.

Submissions

Target articles should conform to current MLA Style (8th edition) and should be between 5,000 and 8,000 words in length. Please make sure to number your paragraphs and include a bio-blurb and an abstract of roughly 300 words. Files should be sent as email attachments in Word format. Please send your manuscripts to gender-forum@uni-koeln.de.

We always welcome reviews on recent releases in Gender Studies! Submitted reviews should conform to current MLA Style (8th edition), have numbered paragraphs, and should be between 750 and 1,000 words in length. Please note that the reviewed releases ought to be no older than 24 months. In most cases, we are able to secure a review copy for contributors.

Article Publishing

The journal aims to provide rapid publication of research through a continuous publication model. All submissions are subject to peer review. Articles should not be under review by any other journal when submitted to *Gender forum.*

There are no submission or page charges, and no colour charges.

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Editorial

By Annette Keck, University of Munich, Germany and Ralph J. Poole, University of Salzburg, Austria

"To this day, you don't expect women to be funny." (Joan Rivers)

1 What happens when women laugh outright, seemingly out of control, making a spectacle of themselves? Ever since Freud claimed that it is woman being laughed at and man doing the laughing,On the tendentious joke in particular, i.e. the 'dirty' joke ("Zote"), Freud remarks: "Der tendenziöse Witz braucht im allgemeinen drei Personen, außer der, die den Witz macht, eine zweite, die zum Objekt der feindseligen oder sexuellen Aggression genommen wird, und eine dritte, an der sich die Absicht des Witzes, Lust zu erzeugen, erfüllt. […] Durch die zotige Rede des Ersten wird das Weib vor diesem Dritten entblößt, der nun als Zuhörer – durch die mühelose Befriedigung seiner eigenen Libido – bestochen wird" (114). See, however, Michael Billig, who in discussing this passage concedes: "Freud's argument is theoretically interesting for the way that he links male sexual joking with both sexual frustration and aggressive degradation. It is also rhetorically interesting: the section contains not a single example. Freud did not want smutty talk in his book" (162). laughter has entered contested gendered territory. What, indeed, happens when Medusa returns the male gaze and laughs herself as Hélène Cixous famously suggested making fun of the Freudian theory of woman's notorious lack? "You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing," claims Cixous (2048). But why, however, is it that whenever women (dare to) laugh, this laughter is considered breaking limits, rules and taboos? Does that mean, on the other hand, that male laughter necessarily remains within established boundaries of proper conduct and expected behaviour? What then happens when men become the objects rather than subjects of laughter, being ridiculed by women's humour? And above all we may ask whether humour *is* necessarily gendered, thus invariably reinforcing gender boundaries that otherwise have long been contested and overturned?

2 These were some of the questions we asked ourselves and which, accordingly, we sought the contributors of this special issue of *gender forum* to (re)consider. We as editors of this special issue of gender forum wish to take up Kathleen Rowe's notion of "genres of laughter" (8), who following Laura Mulvey regards such genres as forms of narrative and performance originally associated with the carnivalesque and to extend its range of meanings

and possibilities across genders and genres. We claim that women – though often forgotten or neglected – have indeed excelled as comediennes in theatrical and filmic comedies, in satirical prose and poetry, in music and art, as characters, writers, performers, and painters. And while it may be true that even for male humorists it is hard to claim accolade, as the editors of a classic anthology on American humour suggest, this is particularly true for female humorists: "[T]he world likes humor, but treats it patronizingly. It decorates its serious artists with laurels, and its wags with Brussels sprouts" (White and White xvii). Even feminist theory here has tended to be more interested in melodrama (i.e. in suffering and victimized women) than in comedy thus also neglecting victoriously laughing women.

3 When looking at the variety of representations of women in comic genres, 'woman' is often relegated to a single generic purpose: the butt of the joke (see Freud, once again). Writing about dramatic plays, Susan Carlson points towards these restrictions, which apply to other genres, such as romance novels, just as well: In the comic plays populated by women, two features proscribe what comedy's women can be: a basic inversion and a generally happy ending. To understand these two aspects of comic structure is to understand the limitations of comic women. Women are allowed their brilliance, freedom, and power only because the genre has built-in safeguards against such behavior. (17) Andrew Scott, thinking of Shakespeare's comedies but also of television sitcoms, similarly asserts that women's representation is limited to two purposes: "to provide an hysterical vision of a world-turned-upside-down, and to enable male order to be re-established through the subjugation of women in marriage" (76). Scott furthermore notes that it is the medium of the body "through which humanity's fascination with its instincts and animal nature is explored. The comic body is exaggeratedly physical, a distorted, disproportionate, profane, ill-disciplined, insatiate, and perverse organism" (83).

4 While Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, Laurel and Hardy, and Tom and Jerry are some of the many (male) examples that show, how physical comedy works by highlighting the fragile, yet indestructible corporeality of its actors, it is the grotesque female body – incarnated in figures such as *Das Kunstseidene Mädchen* or Bridget Jones (see Keck, Poole) – that is particularly sought out to be laughed at as failure to adhere to traditional standards of beauty and manners. Depicted as overtly sexual, inherently obscene, and invariably monstrous, the female body is linked to what Mikhail Bakhtin has called the "lower body stratum" (see *Rabelais and His World*) and Julia Kristeva defines as "abjection". John Limon sums up that abjection in stand-up comedy signifies "a psychic worrying of those aspects of oneself that one cannot be rid of, that seem, but are not quite, alienable – for example, blood,

urine, feces, nails, and the corpse" (4). Since, for Kristeva, abjection is about negotiating borders and ambiguity, it is in the end linked to the female body as that primal site of distinction between mother and child (see *Powers of Horror*), and the grotesque may be understood as – mostly gendered – embodiment of the abject. Moving between the real and the fantastic as well as the repulsive and the comic, the grotesque "is a form of exaggerated and ambivalent social commentary produced by the violent clash of opposites […] existing in a state of unresolved tension" (Scott 87). It is here that the link between gender, humour and genre reaches out beyond the text and into socio-political realities, as Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have shown in their reading of Bakhtin. Playing with notions of "top" and "bottom", they claim that comic forms invert "the relations of subject and object, agent and instrument, husband and wife, old and young, animal and human, master and slave" (56). Sanctioned power relationship may – if only temporarily – be subverted, leading to a dialectics of antagonism and dependency: [T]he 'top' attempts to reject and eliminate the 'bottom' for reasons of prestige and status, only to discover, not only that it is in some way frequently dependent upon that low-Other […] but also that the top *includes* that low symbolically, as a primarily eroticised constituent of its own fantasy life. (Stallybrass and White 7) The inversions produced by genres of laughter bring those hitherto marginalized to the centre, making them visible and thus reversing their exclusion from hegemonic power. With regard to the figure of the "unruly woman", Rowe insists that such a woman "too fat, too funny, too noisy, too old, too rebellious" (19) unsettles social hierarchies. Claiming "an alternative view of female subjectivity", Rowe calls for more work on "women as subjects of a laughter that expresses anger, resistance, solidarity, and joy" (5). The essays included in this double issue on "Gender and Humour" are theoretically inspired and historically grounded, looking into the silenced history of such 'funny women'. With varying approaches that at times reach across the gender divide to include camp, drag, and masquerade, the essays are, we noteworthy contributions counteracting the reluctance of feminist – and other – theory to engage in humour and comedy, we believe.

5 The first of two successive *gender forum* issues on gender and humour centres on historical and political perspectives of gender humour. In her essay on medieval biblical dramas, Lisa LeBlanc explores representations of Noah's wife as "shrew", i.e. as a rebellious, unruly woman. With this comic trope that leans towards slapstick humour (for example in her verbal *and* physical battles with Noah), this shrew is allowed to break conventional patterns of conjugal behaviour, and yet she is still worthy to be allowed onto the ark and thus saved from the flood. Michael Epp also looks at the power of female humour to challenge the

symbolic authority of patriarchy, here by choosing "the female Mark Twain", Marietta Holley, as exemplary case study. Holley not only enjoyed a huge popular success, as a literary humorist she also forged new ways of perceiving public humour. Epp shows that hers was a comic genre that included regional affairs as well as political notions at a time, when the American nation was in a process of a complex transformation.

6 Heather Graves and Natalia Pushkareva both focus on the politics of humour. Graves' essay proceeds from the suffragist movement in Manitoba, Canada, in the early twentieth century and the suffragists" dissatisfaction with (the lack of) the political action on behalf of women's voting rights. Turning to the stage and performing satirical burlesque shows that ridicule the leading politicians, these suffragists employed specific rhetorical strategies, Graves argues, to mobilize the public in favour of women's rights. Pushkareva looks at the presence of women particularly within post-Soviet academia analysing the mechanisms of misogyny and systemic discrimination of women in sciences. Comparing academic sexist humour to Russian folklore, this ethnological approach comes to an understanding of a deeply ingrained cultural practice of gender asymmetry that uses humour as strategy of devaluation.

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