Chapter 16

"Brought to You by Fem-Rage": Stand-up Comedy and the Politics of Gender

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> Culturally speaking, women have wept a great deal, but once the tears are shed, there will be endless laughter instead. Laughter that breaks out, overflows, a humor no one would expect to find in women—which is nonetheless their greatest strength because it's a humor that sees man much farther away than he has ever been seen.
>
> —Hélène Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?"

> It is not polite to laugh and point at the penile member.
>
> —Cynthia Heimel, *Sex Tips for Girls*

One of the cultural legacies of the 1980s is the resurgence of stand-up comedy as a popular genre, evidenced by the appearance of comedy clubs in virtually every American city, the prevalence of stand-up comedy programs on cable and broadcast television, and the number of stand-up comics who have made the transition to film acting or roles in television situation comedies. An important aspect of the phenomenon is the increased access women now have to the stand-up comedy stage.[1] Phyllis Diller recalls that when she entered the field in 1955, there were no other women comics.[2] Today there are a large number of well-known women comics, including several superstars of the genre (e.g., Lily Tomlin, Whoopi Goldberg, Joan Rivers). Estimates suggest that about 10 percent of professional American stand-up comics are female, as are 25 percent of aspiring comics.[3]

The issues I will discuss here relate to the particular circumstances confronted by female comics in a culture that traditionally has suppressed women's humor and denied to women even the right to

be funny. Traditional literary theories of humor and comedy, social prejudices against joke making as an aggressive and "unfeminine" behavior, and the processes by which cultural expression is disseminated in a patriarchal culture all create obstacles for the comic woman and the woman comic. A growing strain of feminist literary theory, on the other hand, suggests that humor and comedy may be valuable as empowering "feminist tools," especially when motivated by the anger women need to express at the social and cultural limitations they confront.[4] My objects here are to situate the woman comic culturally and to offer an analysis of a specific cultural text, Roseanne Barr's 1987 cable television special.

The mass-cultural context of stand-up comedy, which is disseminated today chiefly by broadcast and cable television, raises important issues as well. Chief among these is the traditional theoretical opposition of vanguard culture and mass culture, which sees mass culture as necessarily co-opted and only vanguard culture as possessing critical potential. As rock music critic Dave Marsh asserts, today "all culture is made in an industrial context," and therefore all cultural production is politically compromised, "if participating in the only world any of us has to live in represents a compromise."[5] In analyzing a mass-cultural phenomenon one must be alive to the potential for co-optation and recuperation that resides in mass culture, an issue I discuss here. My working assumption, however, is that mass-cultural status in and of itself does not vitiate a genre's or text's potential to do positive political work.

Women's Comedy in the Patriarchal Public Sphere

As the well-worn clichés about women (especially feminists) having no sense of humor attest, women have been excluded from the comic tradition, except as the objects of male humor.[6] Perhaps literary critic Reginald Blyth's 1959 definition of women as "the unlaughing at which men laugh" can stand as the epitome of this tradition (qtd. in Barreca, *Last Laughs*, 4). Humor in women's writing, for example, has often gone unrecognized as such by male critics or has been dismissed as trivial in comparison with the comic efforts of male writers.[7] Comedy writer Anne Beatts suggests that part of the reason for men's failure to acknowledge women's humor is that "there is a women's culture that men just don't know about. So when they say,

'Hey, that joke's not funny,' it's sometimes because they don't understand the vocabulary" (qtd. in Collier and Beckett, *Spare Ribs*, 24–25).

The issue goes beyond the specificity of cultural vocabularies, however, for humor is inextricably linked to social power and dominance. Unsurprisingly, social scientists have uncovered evidence that people generally laugh along with those they perceive as more powerful than themselves and tend not to make jokes at their expense, at least not in their presence.[8] Even women in positions of power are disinclined to make jokes with men present but will laugh at jokes made by men (Pollio and Edgerly, "Comedians," 225). Pollio and Edgerly summarize the social situation succinctly: "men talk and joke; women smile and laugh." They go on to note that

> women just do not attempt to be humorous in a mixed group setting and the reason seems to be that women are neither expected, nor trained, to joke in this culture. It seems reasonable to propose that attempting a witty remark is often an intrusive, disturbing and aggressive act, and within this culture, probably unacceptable for a female.

"Responsive behaviors" such as laughing and smiling, however, are perfectly socially acceptable for a woman in our culture (225).

Beatts's interpretation of these phenomena is that men are afraid of allowing women the access to power represented by humor (or of acknowledging that women in fact have such access) because a humorous woman threatens the central icon of the mythology that supports male dominance: "they unconsciously are afraid that the ultimate joke will be the size of their sexual apparatus."[9] Once women start making jokes, men fear, nothing will be exempt from female comic derision, no matter how sacred to patriarchy. Further evidence for the idea that a humorous woman is perceived as a threat to male sexual dominance is Mahadev Apte's observation that "in many cultures norms of modesty cause women who laugh freely and openly in public to be viewed as loose, sexually promiscuous, and lacking in self-discipline."[10] (At some point in their careers most female comics have experienced similar responses from the men in their audiences, who either treat them with hostility or assume that a female comic is presenting herself as sexually available.)

Beatts's analysis suggests that humor by women may be an effective weapon against male social dominance and phallocentrism. When assessing the political positioning of a performance genre, however, it is not enough simply to evaluate its content; one must also look at the ideology of performance itself.[11] The relationship between women and stand-up comedy as a performance genre is by no means unproblematic. For one thing there is a plausible argument to be made that stand-up comedy is an intrinsically male-centered form. Comic Marjorie Gross has observed, in the context of a discussion of the comic's authority over the audience, that "holding a microphone is like holding a penis," an analogy endorsed by male comedians (as qtd. in Collier and Beckett, *Spare Ribs,* 99).[12] When discussing the dynamic of their work both male and female comedians stress the importance of control over the audience, of mastery of the performance context, in which the phallic microphone plays a significant role. Stand-up comic Jerry Seinfeld summarizes the essential relationship between audience and comic succinctly: "To laugh is to be dominated" (as qtd. in Borns, *Comic Lives,* 20). David Marc goes so far as to propose that the dynamics of stand-up comedy may suggest "totalitarian imagery" or "may even conjure hallucinations of Mussolini working the crowd from a terrace," though he goes on to dismiss such a perception of stand-up comedy as "a bum rap."[13]

A performance genre that apparently depends on the dominance of the audience by the performer through phallic assertion does not seem a promising candidate as a medium for women's expression. Indeed, Lisa Merrill, in an essay on feminist humor, implies that conventional stand-up comedy is less appropriate as a vehicle for feminist concerns than the decentered, multicharacter performances of Lily Tomlin and Whoopi Goldberg.[14] Just as traditional stand-up comedy seems phallocentric from a formal perspective, historically, it has also assumed a heterosexual male audience and a performance presented for the enjoyment of the male gaze. As Merrill points out, "traditionally, women have been expected to identify with comedy which insults us" ("Feminist Humor," 274); such comedy radically disempowers the female spectator by obliging her to participate in her own objectification and victimization as the butt of the joke, if she is to participate at all.

One powerful recuperation of stand-up comedy as a feminist practice is represented by the work of Kate Clinton, the radical-

lesbian-feminist-humorist (who has contracted that designation to "fumorist"), who performs primarily for audiences of women and who began her performing career at women's coffeehouses and feminist writing conferences. As Cheryl Kader has suggested, "Clinton's humor implies a spectator who is neither male nor heterosexual"; by constructing her audience as lesbian she creates "a community of spectators . . . which liberates its occupants from uniformity to general norms, however temporarily."[15] Presumably, this construction of the audience as lesbian may also place the heterosexual male (and perhaps the heterosexual female) spectator in something like the uncomfortable position that the woman spectator has occupied relative to traditional stand-up comedy, though Kader interprets this kind of reversal more as a by-product of Clinton's performance practice than as its main point (see Kader, "Kate Clinton," 52).

This kind of practice is extremely valuable politically in that it "open[s] up a space for a restructured history and a reconceptualized subject" (Kader, "Kate Clinton," 42). That it also, however, "succeeds in producing a *separation* from the dominant culture" may be its weakness as much as its strength. Lauren Berlant describes such separating cultural practices as efforts to create a feminist public sphere, "a theatrical space in which women might see, experience, live, and rebel against their oppression *en masse,* freed from the oppressors' forbidding or disapproving gaze."[16] In Berlant's terms these efforts are limited by their inability to engage mainstream culture and perhaps exemplify what she describes as the "imaginary sphere of public-feminist intimacy, which relies on a patriarchal fantasy of woman's sameness to herself to produce an adversarial politics" ("Female Complaint," 240). Berlant sees greater value for feminism in a strategy of "engagement of the female culture industry with the patriarchal public sphere, the place where significant or momentous exchanges of power *are perceived* to take place" (240).

Significantly, Clinton herself has expressed interest in reaching a broader audience and has emerged from the coffeehouse circuit to play at comedy and music clubs and theaters and on television comedy shows. She acknowledges that this has meant "internalizing" her feminism.[17] Women comics who choose to remain within the conventional form and performance contexts of stand-up comedy are essentially appropriating a cultural form traditionally associated with, and still dominated by, male practitioners. Undoubtedly, they are

offering themselves to "the oppressors' forbidding or disapproving gaze" and run all the risks attendant on doing so. But those risks may be worth running if they give women greater access to the cultural arena and permit the female culture industry to engage the male public sphere, as Berlant argues they may.[18]

The analysis of stand-up comedy upon which the previous comments are based is in any case incomplete, for it considers only the image of the comic without taking the audience into account. Specifically, it does not fully address the comic's relation to the audience, the dependence and vulnerability that the comic's often aggressive stance and phallic microphone only partly mask (consider, for example, the comic's extreme vulnerability to hecklers). Comics' own perceptions of their audiences may offer evidence that a kind of empowering of female performers and spectators can take place within the context of conventional stand-up comedy. Beatts observes that, whereas a woman in an audience who is with a man tends to wait to see if he will laugh before she will, women in a social setting unaccompanied by men feel much freer to express themselves humorously and to respond to the humorous expression of other women (qtd. in Collier and Beckett, *Spare Ribs,* 26). As we have seen, her observation accords with social-scientific conclusions.

The experience of stand-up comedians suggests, however, that, while this situation may be normal (in the strict, statistical sense), it is not inevitable. Although Joan Rivers would probably not qualify as a feminist comedian in the minds of many, her observation on this subject is of interest. Rivers vigorously denies that there is any such thing as "women's humor," yet she does see a gender-inflected distinction among audiences. She refuses to perform for all-male audiences, not because she does not want to be objectified for the male gaze but because she feels that men alone do not understand her humor. "You need women to relate to because the men relate to you through the women they are with, and then they go forward" (qtd. in Collier and Beckett, *Spare Ribs,* 8). This description reverses the social norm, in which the woman looks to her male companion for cues. It is also the case that most women comedians specifically address the women in their audiences during some portions of their acts. For those moments the comedian creates a community with other women based on common experience (frequently of men) but not separate from the patriarchal public sphere. In the hands of the

most skilled practitioners this community becomes a strategic community, a moment at which a shared subjectivity that excludes men is created under our very noses, again placing the men in the audience in the position women have traditionally occupied as comedy spectators. These examples suggest that the articulation of the comedian's performance as a cultural text, which occurs through negotiations between comic and audience conditioned by the gender identities of both, can produce circumstances within the context of the performance that run counter to the social norm, circumstances in which women may find a sense of empowerment through a sense of shared subjectivity—or, by identifying with a performer who depends on their presence for the text she produces to have meaning or by being the authority on what is funny to men. Similarly, the female comic can engage the women in her audience in a way that empowers both them and herself, even directly under "the oppressors' forbidding or disapproving gaze."

One clear indication that women's comedy is perceived as genuinely dangerous within "the patriarchal public sphere" is that it is so often subject to strategies of patriarchal recuperation. Women comics face the greatest risk that the challenge they represent will be neutralized by the contexts in which they are presented when their work is disseminated beyond the realm of the club performance, a relatively privileged realm over which the comedian, male or female, has the greatest control. I would like to offer two examples here of recuperative strategies to which female comics are subjected in two different cultural realms deriving from the institution of television: the videocassette market and the network talk show.

The packaging and production of a videotape entitled *Women Tell the Dirtiest Jokes* (High Ridge Productions, 1985) offer instructive examples of how (male) producers attempt to recuperate provocative work by women and make it safe for the male gaze. The label on the front of the videocassette box is an illustration depicting several young, male sailors in the front row at a comedy club performance, blushing conspicuously at the utterances of a female comic onstage.[19] Because the point of view of the illustration is at stage level and from behind the performer, the comic herself is represented only as a pair of shapely legs in stockings. At one level this packaging seems designed to titillate the male viewer with a promise of raunchy women offered up to this gaze and, thus, to objectify the female performer.

At another level the title of the tape and the idea that what the woman is saying could make a sailor blush seem intended to suggest, in effect, that women have beaten men at their own game by telling jokes even dirtier than typical locker-room repartee. This transforms the woman from a threatening Other into just one of the guys; her humor, which could be seen as a challenge to male power, becomes the same as the humor men exchange among themselves. The image undermines women's autonomy in two ways—through straightforward objectification and by denaturing the woman into a foul-mouthed "man without a penis."[20]

This kind of contextualizing is not confined to the tape's packaging. The eight female comedians on the tape, all recorded before a live audience in a clublike setting, are introduced by a disembodied male voice informing us, barker-like, that we are about to see "eight lovely ladies." Another male voice takes over to introduce each of the acts, becoming an invisible and pervasive authority, defining each woman and categorizing her work. In some cases the implications of the categorizing are disturbing, as when the voice refers to LaWanda Page as "the black queen of comedy."

The last thing on the tape is a song written by the program's producer, which is played over the end credits. Entitled "Pain," it seems designed to assuage the male ego after the assaults it has sustained at the hands of female comedians:

> When you shake your hips, girl
> How it drives the boys insane;
> When you wet your pretty lips, girl
> The feeling spreads—I can't explain
> The pain . . .

The song refers to pain inflicted on a man by a woman, but it translates the pain of stinging satire into the pleasurable pain of seduction, reducing the woman from a subject attempting to carve out a piece of discursive space into a male-constructed object whose every move, even if unconsciously motivated, is to be seen as an attempt to attract the male's attention. The final implication, then, is that, even the female comics on the tape, some of whom are quite vigorous in their assault on male privilege, are really only engaging in seduction by unconventional means and need not be taken seriously. The curious

end result of this packaging and production is that, whereas many of the comics themselves specifically address the women in their audience in an attempt to stress the commonality of women's experiences with men, the producers seem to assume a male spectator and seem to want to protect him from that unfamiliar entity, the aggressively funny woman, by objectifying her.

Another means by which women comics are frequently threatened with recuperation is mediation by a male talk show host as "kindly father" on network television.[21] Although the comics have relative autonomy during their five minutes on "The Tonight Show" or "Latenight with David Letterman" (though they are always subject to network censorship), the host is in a position to contextualize the comic's performance. Not only does the host mediate between the performer and the home viewer through his introduction and the interview that often follows the comic's performance, but the program's apparatus further mediates the home viewers' response by positing the studio audience, manipulated by applause signs and other cued responses, as the "ideal audience" whose response the home viewer is implicitly asked to emulate.[22] The particular character of current hosts also works to neutralize the performances they present:

> The talk show host . . . is a figure of the ideal viewer. As we watch TV's images, so does he sit and look on at his parade of guests, evincing a boyish wryness . . . especially when he glances our way with a look that says, "Can you believe this?" He is a festive version of the anchorman, with an air of detached superiority that is enabled by his permanent youthfulness, and by his middle-American calm and plainness. Johnny Carson of Iowa, like his heir apparent, that supreme ironist, David Letterman of Indiana, always seems above the excesses of either coast, even as he brings them to us.[23]

Anything is grist for the mill in this parade of performances, none more challenging or meaningful than another. An example of how this effect can neutralize potentially challenging performances is that of Victoria Jackson's appearances on "The Tonight Show." Jackson's peculiar postfeminist performances, which have combined high school gymnastics with songs on subjects one does not expect to hear of on Carson (female anger, suicide) sung poorly in a little-girl voice,

are sui generis and difficult to fathom. Carson, however, successfully undermines any challenge Jackson may pose, first by introducing her paternalistically as an oddity he has discovered, then by eliciting mundane personal information from her during subsequent interviews. This trivialization has only been furthered by the "dizzy blonde" characters Jackson usually plays as part of the "Saturday Night Live" company and in films. The result is that Jackson, initially a fascinating, enigmatic performance artist, has become an eminently safe commodity.

Obviously, the same kind of contextualizing can rob a male performer's work of its impact as well, but the fact that the figures of authority on all the major late-night talk shows that serve as launching points for national recognition are men (Carson, Letterman, Hall) confronts women performers with a set of issues their male counterparts do not have to negotiate in the same form. Betsy Borns discusses the fact that talk show hosts like Carson and Letterman prefer to give exposure to new comedians or those they can claim to have discovered. She uses the phrase "TV virginity" to describe the condition of comics before their initial talk show appearance (*Comic Lives,* 199). The implications of this phrase are particularly disturbing in the context of a discussion of female comics in that it implies that the talk show host as "kindly father" also figures as a seducer (or rapist?) whose paternalistic interest extends only to those he has deflowered.

Of necessity, this discussion of the positioning of women's comedy within the patriarchal public sphere must remain open-ended, for comedy's potential for empowering women is always accompanied by the potential for patriarchal recuperation; both can take place simultaneously, in fact. To assume, however, that because recuperative mechanisms are in place recuperation inevitably occurs would be to deny that the audience retains any capacity for independent action. The fact that a representation may appear to be highly compromised, in league with repressive cultural forces, does not determine how an audience will *use* that representation and, possibly, be empowered by it. Lawrence Grossberg argues for the value of the Gramscian concept of "articulation" as a way of understanding the relation between a cultural text and its audience, a concept that suggests that audiences are always actively constructing texts rather than simply "decoding" meanings that are present in them. "[The theory of articulation's] disdain for any assumed historical necessity and its em-

phasis on the reality of struggle direct the critic toward the complex and contradictory relations of power that intersect and organize an audience's relation to particular cultural texts" and challenges any assumption that the audience and the performer are simply putty in the hands of the hegemonic. "People are never merely passively subordinated, never totally manipulated, never entirely incorporated"; rather, they can often discover sites of empowerment within seemingly co-opted discourses by finding their own ways of using them.[24] Therefore, although the recuperative mechanisms I have discussed here may have the effect of domesticating women comics for male spectators, they may not succeed in inhibiting female spectators from being empowered by the comics' representations.

"Brought to You by Fem-Rage": The Angry Comedy of Roseanne Barr

In her introduction to the collection *Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy* Regina Barreca argues that "recent feminist criticism has acknowledged the power of rage in writings by women, but has as yet left unexamined the crucial roles of comedy paired with anger as shaping forces and feminist tools" (5). In the final portion of this essay I shall analyze the interplay of humor and anger in the work of Roseanne Barr and show how that work self-consciously responds to the cultural positioning of the woman comic, especially in relation to the images of women disseminated by television.

In her essay "Situation Comedy, Feminism, and Freud: Discourses of Gracie and Lucy" Patricia Mellencamp points out that women television comedians like Gracie Allen and Lucille Ball challenged male dominance by "unmak[ing] 'meaning' and overturn[ing] patriarchal assumptions" but that, finally, "neither escaped confinement and the tolerance of kindly fathers."[25] In Mellencamp's view the comic and narratological codes of the situation comedy inevitably confined and tamed the woman comedian, despite her challenge to the domestic containment of American women so characteristic of the 1950s and 1960s and her appropriation of typically "male" comic modes (e.g., Ball's skill in physical comedy).

I would like to apply some of the terms of Mellencamp's rich and complex analysis to the work of a current stand-up and television

comedian, Roseanne Barr. The particular work I will examine is "The Roseanne Barr Show," Barr's HBO television special of 1987 (not to be confused with her current network series, "Roseanne"). I shall argue that Barr's distinctive hybridization of the situation comedy and stand-up comedy genres and her explicit designation of anger as the source of her humor enable her to thematize, and thus to resist, recuperation in a way that Allen and Ball could not.

Barr's hybridization of genres is an important strategy of resistance, for stand-up comedy, Barr's original medium, does not place the woman comic at the same risk of recuperation and containment as the situation comedy (though I have already pointed out the risk of recuperation the woman comic runs in the cultural realm). For one thing stand-up comedy is not a narrative form; there is no "situation" to surround and contain the actions of the comic woman. Like so much postmodern performance, stand-up comedy is monologic—the comedian stands alone, unmediated by other characters; there is no George for every Gracie, no Ricky for every Lucy. In his book on the evolution of the situation comedy David Marc argues vigorously that, as "an art of the middle" designed to appeal to the widest possible segment of the television audience, situation comedy "rarely reaches the psychological or political extremes that have been commonplace" in stand-up comedy, which remains a realm of idiosyncratic expression (*Comic Visions,* 26).

Despite the performative freedoms offered by stand-up comedy, the few female stand-up comedians of the 1950s and 1960s tended to work within self-imposed restrictions that reflected the social stigma attached to aggressively funny women. The traditional female comic's chief strategy was to render herself apparently unthreatening to male dominance by making herself the object of her own comic derision in what is usually referred to as "self-deprecatory" comedy. The self-deprecatory mode is the mode of both Phyllis Diller, who entered comedy in the mid-1950s, and Joan Rivers, who entered the field in the early 1960s. Both women have created personae who make their own supposed unattractiveness (to men) and their failure as housewives the subjects of their humor. (Rivers's notoriety derives in large part from material in which she ridicules other women celebrities for not meeting the patriarchal standards of beauty and decorum her own persona also does not meet.) Clearly, whatever anger may be implicit in the self-deprecatory comedy of Diller and Rivers has

been turned inward onto the female subject herself, rather than outward onto the social conditions that made it necessary for Diller and Rivers to personify themselves in this way in order to have successful careers as comics. It seems to me that in "The Roseanne Barr Show" Barr offers an example of a woman's humor that is explicitly based in the kind of active anger Barreca sees as an empowering response.

Roseanne Barr belongs to the family tree that produced both Diller and Rivers; now that she has her own television series, comparison with Allen, Ball, and other domestic situation comedy performers becomes relevant as well. Like Diller's comic persona in particular, the Barr persona is once again that of a disgruntled housewife (or "domestic goddess," as Barr insists she wants to be called). But, whereas the personae of earlier comedians such as Diller and Rivers turn the anger and frustration of a life confined to domesticity in on themselves in self-deprecation, Barr's housewife persona speaks out petulantly against husbands, children, and the social expectations and limitations imposed on women. Whereas the Diller and Rivers personae make their own supposed physical unattractiveness a source of humor, Barr insists on her right to be overweight, making those who are not the objects of her humor. She protests that Californians are "rude to the fat," implies that slender people are necessarily bulimic, and compares "skinny moms" with "fat moms":

> What do you want when you're really depressed, you know, some skinny mom: "Well, why don't you jog around a while and that'll release adrenalin in your blood and you'll better cope with stress" or some fat mom: "Well, let's have pudding, Oreos, and marshmallows."

Her response to the idea that people overeat as a sexual sublimation is: "I think people just have sex because they can't afford good food." Her definitive word on the subject is: "If you're fat, just like *be* fat and shut up. And if you're thin—fuck you!"[26]

In a discussion of Louie Anderson, a young male comedian who also refers to his own overweight status in his act, Marc comments that "a modern American fat person demonstrates a powerful mastery over social convention by actively calling attention to his presumably deviant and deficient condition" (*Comic Visions,* 18). While it is true that Anderson highlights and underlines the fact that the

accepted lore about weight is precisely a matter of convention, and is thus empowered, his humor is essentially self-deprecatory. Barr takes the next step: she rejects self-deprecation, not just by drawing attention to social convention but also by insisting that she is *not* "deviant and deficient." And, of course, the question of body image in general and of weight in particular has special relevance to women in our culture. Whereas a fat *man* like Louie Anderson can still be accepted as jolly—a large elf, if not exactly Santa—a fat woman is not generally granted that latitude. As Carol Munter has pointed out, the body is a political arena for women: "As long as we [women] remain unempowered, we will need our conflicts to disappear through the loss of a pound of flesh because we have no access to other modes of action. . . . We're taught to shape our bodies and not the world."[27] Implicit in Barr's resounding "fuck you" to the thin world is a call to action, a refusal to turn her energies upon herself, her resentment literally broadcast as she chews gum or Cheetos directly into the microphone.

In addition to challenging the cultural standards of attractiveness reified in Diller's and Rivers's performances Barr aggressively points up in no uncertain terms the absurdity of men's obsession with our sexual apparatus and the symbolic authority we believe it confers upon us. In a routine on the behavior of men and women while traveling together she refers to men's chastising women for not being able to read maps. Apparently conceding that men are in fact the better map readers, she says, "They are good at that map-reading, aren't they? 'Cause only the male mind could conceive of one inch equalling a hundred miles." She goes on to describe the only other thing that men are better at than women: "peeing out a campfire." In a comic *reductio* of phallogocentrism, she enacts a man "writing [his] name in the snow," strutting and posturing proudly over his accomplishment.

It is worth observing that these subjects and strategies appear regularly in the work of other women comedians. In a routine included on the *Women Tell the Dirtiest Jokes* video Barbara Scott follows a very similar pattern by first criticizing men's concern with the size of their apparatus then apparently praising them for their "writing" ability. "Men—you give them an inch, and they'll add it to their own. Guys are neat, though, 'cause guys can do great things, like write their names in the snow. All I can do is dot 'i's and an occasional

colon, you know." She then demonstrates the writing of a colon by hopping. Here, of course, the woman seems to present herself as anatomically inferior to the man; her writing is only subsidiary to male writing, limited to dotting the 'i's made by men or providing their writings with punctuation. She contextualizes this part with the first line, however, poking fun at men's concern with the size of their apparatus. Her examination of the capacities of *her* apparatus thus becomes a parodic version of male behavior. The physical gesture of hopping underlines the ludicrousness of the whole enterprise of writing in the snow, much as Barr's strut deflates male pride in this pointless accomplishment so intimately bound up with men's identification with the penis.

Comedian Carol Leifer applies a similar comic strategy to a different topic. A staple of her stand-up act is a bit that begins with her saying, "What can I tell you about myself? I'm divorced, no children . . . well, none that I *know* about."[28] As she says these last words, she gives the audience a knowing wink and makes other stereotypically "male" gestures. Again, the anatomical comparison underlies the power of the joke, here in an attack against men's assumption that our anatomical differences somehow makes us less responsible than women for the production of children and the assumption that one's worth as a man is measured in potency, promiscuity, and the victimization of women.

Leifer and Barr end their acts on very similar notes. Leifer ends with a comment on birth control, noting that the pill has wrought havoc with her hormones: "I woke up with a beard—on my dick!" Barr ends with a rejoinder to people who accuse her of being unfeminine because of her aggressive comedy. Her response: "Suck my dick!" In both instances these last lines are the most overtly vulgar moments in the comedians' respective performances. At one level these remarks are simply what comedians refer to as "dick jokes," cheap shots whose primary impact derives exclusively from their shock value (Borns, *Comic Lives,* 14–15). In each case, however, the woman comedian turns the dick joke into something more challenging than a jarring instance of locker-room humor. Even though (perhaps because) Leifer's joke apparently posits the woman as the victim of a contraceptive technology invented by a man, which has, in a surreal twist, turned her into a man, the fact that it occurs at the end of her act is highly significant. Because of this placement, her remark

joins Barr's in constituting the comic woman's most overt challenge to phallocentrism. Anne Beatts posits the image of a man without a penis as the male recuperation of womanhood; Leifer and Barr insist that their status as comics makes them self-constructed women *with* penises. By claiming to possess a metaphoric penis each woman claims her right to the comic stage and challenges the cultural values that assert that women are not supposed to be aggressive and funny, are not supposed to have access to the power that humor represents.

The patriarchalist nightmare Beatts describes has come true: given access to the comic stage, women have indeed made men's sexual apparatus one of their ultimate jokes. They have also gone well beyond such mockery: by claiming to have a penis they are thematizing the inequity of a politics that equates possession of a penis with the symbolic authority of the phallus. This is indeed "humor that sees man much farther away than he has ever been seen" (Cixous), humor that altogether usurps traditional male prerogative.

The form of Barr's television special is as important as its content. By crossing generic boundaries Barr critiques the containment of the woman within the bounds of domesticity that Mellencamp sees in situation comedy and thus resists patriarchal recuperation by thematizing it. Indeed, "The Roseanne Barr Show" can almost be seen as a direct response to Mellencamp's perceptions of situation comedy women. Although the centerpiece of "The Roseanne Barr Show" is her stand-up act, she presents that act within a domestic context; her stand-up routine even takes place on a set decorated as a living room rather than the traditional bare stage. It is in this sense that "The Roseanne Barr Show" is a generic hybrid, combining elements of both stand-up and situation comedy. The Barr persona is in a sense the fulfillment of Lucy Ricardo's dreams: she is both a housewife and a professional entertainer. Although her professional status may be a sign of some sort of "progress" (from the 1950s to the 1980s? from broadcast to cable?), she remains subject to the same containing forces Lucy battled.

Far from dismissing the domestic containment implied by the treatment of the comic woman in traditional situation comedies, Barr represents and thematizes containment in her work by encasing her stand-up act in a sort of triple Pirandellian frame. The outmost frame involves scenes of Barr, the housewife, at home with her "real" family before and after her stand-up performance (her husband in these

scenes is played by Bill Pentland, Barr's husband at the time). The next frame presents Barr in a trailer home behind the theater with her fictional family, ostensibly the one she comments on in her act. The children of this family come onstage during her act, and Barr has to leave the stage to return to the trailer and keep the domestic front running smoothly. Her real family sits in the audience and watches the scenes involving her "stage" family. The third frame is the fiction that her stand-up act is a show sponsored by a product called "Fem-Rage." A male announcer asserts this fact and describes the product at the beginning and the end of Barr's act; a mock commercial for the product appears in between.

The stage family is the housewife's nightmare Barr comments on in her stand-up act: a slovenly husband in an undershirt who does nothing but drink, belch, and watch sports on television; children running amok through the trailer. The real family seems much more supportive, laughing while listening to Barr practice her jokes but also criticizing her relentlessly for her jokes, for the way they, the real family, are represented by the stage family, and so on. Barr overcomes one level of containment: as the show's creative force, she can shape the stage family any ways she likes. At the end of her performance she returns to the trailer to find her husband asleep and transforms him magically from a slob into a tuxedoed beau who literally sweeps her off her feet. Ironically, however, this happy ending only throws her into the arms of her real family, who are harping on her act and their place in it, as always. This family lives in a comfortable-looking house, not a trailer; the opening scene is scored with a doo-wop number by Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers, as if to evoke the "Donna Reed Show" and "Father Knows Best" era, and these family scenes appear to have been shot on the "Happy Days" set. Barr's neighborhood, however, is not the safe, middle-class haven that is the locale for most traditional domestic situation comedies but, rather, the postmodern suburb of slasher films: those monsters from the id, Freddy Krueger and Jason (of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Friday the Thirteenth* movie series, respectively) lurk immediately outside the door. The Barr persona, a woman with considerable power to shape her own reality, is nevertheless entrapped by domestic containment: her life is quite literally in danger except when she is confined in one or another version or representation of a domestic scene.

The third frame, however, proposes a provocative response to that very entrapment. The announcer's references to Fem-Rage, which frame Barr's stand-up act, and the commercial for it within the act, contextualize her performance in a very specific way. The tag line for Fem-Rage is: "For that one time of the month you're allowed to be yourself." Because the announcer clearly speaks *for* Barr, he does not become the pervasive voice of male authority that dominates and domesticates the female comics in *Women Tell the Dirtiest Jokes*. That we *see* him at one point also tends to emphasize that he is a professional announcer in Barr's employ, not an ineffable, transcendent male presence. The commercial reveals that Fem-Rage is a product that gives women the strength to stand up to a male-dominated world. In the commercial Barr plays Doris, a timid nuclear power plant employee whose male boss refuses to listen to her when she tells him that he is causing a meltdown. Shoved aside, she takes solace with some female coworkers who encourage her to try Fem-Rage, telling her: "It's pure encapsulated estrogen which enhances the natural female hormone, and counteracts that learned feminine social response." Thus fortified, Doris returns to the control room, shoves her boss aside, and saves the world.

Barr's stand-up performance can easily be seen as an example of the literary/performance genre Lauren Berlant defines as "the female complaint," a genre "situated precisely in the space between a sexual politics that threatens structures of patriarchal authority and a sentimentality that confirms the inevitability of the speaker's powerlessness" ("Female Complaint," 243–44). Certainly, Barr seems to present herself as the type of woman Berlant identifies as the producer of the complaint, one "who wants to maintain her alignment with men to speak oppositionally but without fear for her position within the heterosexual economy" (243).

I would argue, however, that Barr's version of the complaint finally does not merely "confirm the inevitability of the speaker's powerlessness." Berlant notes that, "as a euphemism for menstruation, 'the female complaint' typifies the banality of female suffering," thus trivializing and dismissing it (243). Through her Fem-Rage commercial Barr undermines this trivialization, turning the female complaint—in both of Berlant's senses—quite literally into a source and sign of power: of comedic power in her stand-up act, of physical power in the mock commercial. Rage, she suggests, is the natural

state of women's being, at least in a world that attempts to contain women through the imposition of "that learned feminine social response." And she makes no mystery about the source of her comedy; as the announcer tells us, Barr's humor is quite literally "brought to you by Fem-Rage." Barr presents her persona as a situation comedy housewife who is self-consciously *aware* of the conventions that seek to contain her and *angry* about them. Her role as stand-up comic gives her a platform from which to express that anger. Although she does not escape the domestic constraints that fettered Gracie and Lucy, she resists them: she is not just silently subject to those constraints, as Gracie and Lucy finally turned out to be. Roseanne Barr's voice is that of what Judith Wilt describes as the matriarchal comic who has "given herself to love, marriage, family, community, a hostage to the fortunes of that myth,"[29] but with the difference that this time the matriarch is angry, and she wants us to know it.

NOTES

1. One provocative piece of show business lore is that many young female stand-up comics, including Judy Tenuta and Carrie Snow, got their start in a way that is a mirror image of the traditional avenue followed by male comedians of previous generations—by emceeing at male strip clubs.

2. As quoted by Denise Collier and Kathleen Beckett, *Spare Ribs: Women in the Humor Biz* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), 3. Further citations of this source will appear parenthetically in the text.

3. See Mary Anne Dolan, "Today's Women Comics—Knock-Down Funny, Knock-Down Serious," *Los Angeles Times,* 2 January 1989, sec. 2, 5; and Mary Unterbrink, *Funny Women: American Comediennes, 1860–1985* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1987), 197.

4. Regina Barreca, Introduction, *Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy,* ed. Regina Barreca (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1988), 5. Further citations of this source will appear parenthetically in the text.

5. Dave Marsh, "It's Like That: Rock & Roll on the Home Front," in *The First Rock & Roll Confidential Report,* ed. Dave Marsh (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 15.

6. An essentialist view of male humor, however, is no more acceptable than an essentialist view of female humor. It is important to note that men do not *necessarily* enjoy humor that reaffirms cultural and social dominance, such as racist or sexist humor. During a recent club visit I saw a black male comic berate his substantially (thought not exclusively) white male audience because it would not laugh at his crudely sexist jokes. His repeated rejoinder was: "What is it—fag night at the club?" A more important case in point is that of Arsenio Hall, a

comic and the host of a late-night television talk show, who has apologized for the poor judgment of a comic who had been on his program. The comic had done a tasteless "date rape" joke; Hall interrupted his own monologue the next night to apologize.

7. Barreca, *Last Laughs,* offers a variety of responses to these critical issues. In addition to the two essays from that collection that I cite specifically here, I found those by Reginia Gagnier, Judy Little, and Nancy Walker particularly illuminating.

8. Howard R. Pollio and John W. Edgerly, "Comedians and Comic Style," in *Humour and Laughter: Theory, Research and Applications,* ed. Antony J. Chapman and Hugh C. Foot (London: John Wiley and Sons, 1976), 221. Further citations of this source will appear parenthetically in the text.

9. Quoted in Collier and Beckett, *Spare Ribs,* 28. Beatts's hypothesis may have some empirical grounding. Melvin Helitzer reports:

> Research on sexual humor indicated that student joke tellers were more likely to select jokes with sexist content discriminating against males regardless of the gender of the performer or the audience. And the most common subjects were those which denigrated bodily parts and sexual performance. It is, therefore, hostility against male sexual inadequacy, more than sexism against women, that appears to be the dominant theme of most sexual humor. (*Comedy Techniques for Writers and Performers* [Athens, Ohio: Lawhead Press, 1984], 25)

Helitzer's finding is suspect because he does not specify the nature of the "research" that produced it. It also seems to be challenged, at least in part, by a study in which different versions of the same jokes were used: "Both males and females appreciated the joke versions in which a male dominated a female significantly more than those in which a female dominated a male" (Dolf Zillman and Joanne R. Cantor, "A Disposition Theory of Humour and Mirth," in Chapman and Foot, *Humour and Laughter,* 97). Nevertheless, Helitzer's finding certainly suggests that, if women's humor implicitly (or explicitly) attacks phallic authority, it aims for a vulnerable target.

10. Mahadev L. Apte, *Humor and Laughter: An Anthropological Approach* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), 75.

11. See Herbert Blau, "Ideology and Performance," *Theatre Journal* 35, no. 4 (1983): 441–60.

12. For the male endorsement, see Betsy Borns, *Comic Lives: Inside the World of American Stand-up Comedy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 21. Further citations of this source will appear parenthetically in the text.

13. David Marc, *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 17. Further citations of this source will appear parenthetically in the text.

14. Lisa Merrill, "Feminist Humor: Rebellious and Self-Affirming," in Barreca, *Last Laughs,* 275–78. Further citations of this source will appear parenthetically in the text.

15. Cheryl Kader, "Kate Clinton: The Production and Reception of Feminist

Humor," *Sexual Politics and Popular Culture,* ed. Diane Raymond (Bowling Green, Ohio: Popular Press, 1990), 46, 48. Further citations of this source will appear parenthetically in the text.

16. Lauren Berlant, "The Female Complaint," *Socialtext,* nos. 19–20 (1988): 238. Further citations of this source will appear parenthetically in the text.

17. See Russ DeVault, "A Working 'Fumorist': Comic Kate Clinton Brings Feminism to Her Humor," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution Weekend,* 24 September 1988, 25.

18. In January of 1991 an ad appeared in an Atlanta newspaper for a "Girl's Night Out" at a local comedy club, scheduled for Super Bowl Sunday. This was a "for women only" event featuring a woman comic, Jenny Jones, who now hosts a syndicated television talk show. The ad also mentioned a competition: "Tell us in 25 words or less 'Why You Need a Girl's Night Out'" to win free admission to the club. This ad would seem to represent a co-opted version of the "feminist public sphere" Berlant mentions: both the phrase *girl's night out* and the scheduling of the event for Super Bowl Sunday suggest the degree to which it is inscribed within patriarchal culture. At the same time it is possible to see such an event as one that might attract women who do not necessarily identify themselves as feminists in a way that a woman's coffeehouse might not. The significance of the event depends finally on what sort of discourse Jenny Jones engages her audience in.

19. *Women Tell the Dirtiest Jokes* (videotape), prod. Stephen L. Singer; dir. Greg Grosz, High Ridge Productions, 1985.

20. Anne Beatts, qtd. in Collier and Beckett, *Spare Ribs,* 27.

21. I have borrowed the expression "kindly father" from Patricia Mellencamp, who uses it to designate male characters in television situation comedies who keep their "zany" female counterparts in check (e.g., Ricky Ricardo and George Burns). I return to Mellencamp's argument later in the present essay.

22. Robert C. Allen, "Reader-oriented Criticism and Television," in *Channels of Discourse: Television and Contemporary Criticism,* ed. Robert C. Allen (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 94. In moving from a discussion of the possibilities for female empowerment inherent in the comic-audience dynamic to a discussion of the dangers of recuperation inherent in cultural media, I have also moved from the context of "live" performance to that of mediated performance. It would not be valid to conclude, however, that live performance necessarily offers more of a foothold for critical practice and empowerment than mediated performance. It is true that the comic-audience dynamic that informs club performance does not occur when the same performance appears on television, with the studio audience serving as a surrogate for the home viewers and cueing the latter's responses. Nevertheless, as John Fiske points out throughout his *Television Culture* (London and New York: Methuen, 1987), television audiences exercise considerable discretion in how they use and interact with the texts offered to them; the fact of mediation does not in itself determine the "meaning" of the mediated text.

23. Mark Crispin Miller, "Deride and Conquer," in *Watching Television,* ed. Todd Gitlin (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 218–19.

24. Lawrence Grossberg, "Putting the Pop Back into Postmodernism," in *Universal Abandon? The Politics of Postmodernism*, ed. Andrew Ross (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 169–70.

25. Patricia Mellencamp, "Situation Comedy, Feminism, and Freud: Discourses of Gracie and Lucy," in *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 90.

26. "The Roseanne Barr Show" (videotape); prod. and dir. Rocco Urbisci; written by Roseanne Barr, Bill Pentland, Rocco Urbisci, HBO Video (Comedy Club), 1987. Much has changed since I first formulated these ideas in 1988. Roseanne Barr (now called Roseanne Arnold—I choose to continue to refer to her by the name that appears in the title of the show I discuss) has become an advocate of weight-loss and cosmetic surgery. Following several years of highly negative publicity concerning her divorce, her rowdy relationship with current husband Tom Arnold, her controversial rendition of the national anthem at a baseball game, and her alleged intractability as the star of the highest-rated television show in the country, she seems to be undertaking a specific effort to rehabilitate her public image. In so doing she has sacrificed much of the edge that originally gave her stand-up comedy its pith and power.

27. Carol Munter, "Fat and the Fantasy of Perfection," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 228–29.

28. Carol Leifer, stand-up comedy performance at the Punch Line Comedy Club, Sandy Springs, Ga., 1989.

29. Judith Wilt, "The Laughter of Maidens, the Cackle of Matriarchs: Notes on the Collision between Comedy and Feminism," in *Gender and Literary Voice*, ed. Janet Todd (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1980), 176.