

most hearty and sincere commiseration. There are women who will not be married at all, and to some of these I will tender my congratulations." This was quite acerbic material for 1867.

Does it matter that these women mentioned above would be unknown to Constant Reader? Not particularly, as Twain says, "whenever I take up *Pride and Prejudice* I feel like a barkeeper entering the Kingdom of Heaven." In saying this Twain meant that after repeatedly trying to recognize the "high art" in Austen's novel acclaimed by respected critics he was ultimately left to trust his own taste. And following Twain's cue, so shall I. Clearly, while providing a detailed history of one gender Constant Reader does manage some rather startling omissions. As for his observation that women seem to lack a sense of humor because they are in contention with the whole world of male writers, why I can only surmise that Constant Reader is either making a wee witticism or has his head in a *sac en papier* and cannot see the joke for the gender. Why it can be just as easily argued that the reason particular women writers and poets possess such a well-developed sense of humor is *because* they must deal with the world of male writers — should one take all of Norman Mailer's prose seriously?

Now it is tempting to start listing women who employ humor in their writing (Fanny Fern, Frances Whitcher, Virginia Woolf), yet such cataloging would simply create yet another personalized list (Erica Jong, Anne Sexton, Maya Angelou) and I will try and resist such seductive canonizing (Gertrude Stein, Grace Paley, Elaine May). Instead I will restrict myself to a few comments in reaction to Constant Reader's pronouncements. While Constant Reader most distinctly does not find Edith Wharton funny, at times I do. Her short story "Roman Fever" is a triumph of female cattiness masquerading as feminine docility. As one reads through the layers of the story and reaches the sublime last line, "I had Barbara," this can only be read with a snort and shriek — or you didn't get the joke. I appreciate Constant Reader's enthusiasm for W.C. Fields and the Mack Sennett comedies, though it baffles me that Mac West doesn't rate a mention. After all, West and Fields

costarred and West cowrote "My Little Chickadee" with Fields. If I had to choose comics I'd pick a dimpled Mae West over a flaccid W.C. Fields any day. Finally our divergent tastes in humor do meet in your selection of Oscar Wilde. I agree entirely. Wilde is a riot (when I was a child my cousins and I would label anyone capable of rendering us incoherent with laughter "a riot" — Moms Mabley, Carol Burnett, Lily Tomlin). I have always found Wilde hilarious in a pointed, nasty kind of way. Only one other writer matches Wilde's sublime bitchiness and that would be Dorothy Parker, an Algonquin regular, who had this to say about Wilde:

If, with the literate, I am
Impelled to try an epigram,
I never seek to take the credit;
We all assume that Oscar said it.

But not always, Constant Reader; let's give the funny women their credit.

Laura Skandera-Trombley
Associate Professor

State University of New York at Potsdam

Dear Editor,

It is lamentable that in Harold Bloom's off-the-cuff attempt to define a "Canon of Western Humor" (*The Paris Review* #136), he is unable to think of any major women comic writers, with the notable exception of Jane Austen. More unfortunate still is his assumption that because he cannot think of any, they do not exist.

Bloom's inability to come up with women writers to add to his canon of humor (in spite of George Plimpton's efforts to get him to do so) points to larger problems in canon-formation, and specifically, in canonizing humorous texts. As Bloom him-

self admits, "definitions of humor have never worked," or as the great lexicographer Samuel Johnson put it when he attempted to define comedy in an installment of *The Rambler*, "definitions are hazardous." So much depends upon where one stands in relation to the humor, a point that Bloom implies when he says that "it's a question of perspectivism." Bloom's own touchstones of humor—for instance, the "epigraph" he provides from Oscar Wilde—would certainly not elicit universal laughter. In fact, the whole notion of a joke or humorous piece that would be universally funny is impossible to envision, given the wide variety of customs, mores, values and so forth that are contained within this planet as universe.

One might argue that "Western" narrows things down a bit, but it really only serves to obfuscate the central fact that canons are based upon assumptions that everyone in the West might not hold. Russians and Germans would, I am sure, take offense at Bloom's disregard for their nations' humor. However, in dismissing the humor of women, Bloom makes a cross-cultural assertion that is not only unwarranted, but stands within a fairly long and insidious tradition of viewing women as utterly humorless. Without claiming that the sense of humor in men and women is fundamentally different, I would like to assert that women's humor has been overlooked in canons of humor because of the perspectives of those who have decided what counts as humor.

"Here today, gone tomorrow" might serve as the epigraph for women's humorous writing, and it is appropriate that the witty and entertaining Restoration playwright Aphra Behn has been credited with the first usage of this phrase. Despite ample evidence of its existence, women's humor has until recently remained something of a well-kept secret. Even when women are acknowledged as humorous writers in their day, their works have typically dropped out of the canon because of the content of the humor, especially in cases where patriarchy is the butt of their jokes (a fruitful topic for humor and satire, as one might imagine). For political reasons, women have had to exercise caution in sharing their jokes. A woman who laughs at "the man" might find herself out on the street. The kitchen—

women's exclusive domain—was often the only safe place for laughter. When women's humor does emerge beyond the kitchen doors and into the realm of print culture, it is often masked or encoded so that it can pass as acceptable in that male-controlled field.

Because of the circumscribed nature of women's comic practices, the notion that women have no sense of humor has been hard to dispel. Since humor often takes advantage of people's insecurities, it is no wonder that patriarchal males would try to keep women in their place by denying them a sense of humor. At the same time, many men have empowered themselves by asserting the quality of their own wit and demanding that women acknowledge their mastery. Women might laugh together behind closed doors, but their sense of humor has usually been measured according to how well they laugh in public at men's jokes.

Anthologies of men's wit and humor have offered examples of the kind of stuff women were supposed to grin and bear. In these collections, women frequently appear as the butts of male jokes. One twentieth-century reference book on humor, *Esar's Comic Dictionary* (1943), includes under the entry on "women" the following note: "This word has not been cross-referenced because it occurs very often in this dictionary." And indeed it does. From A ("assault . . . Every woman likes to be taken with a grain of assault") to Z ("zeal . . . A woman cherishes the memory of her first love-affair with the same zeal with which a man forgets his"), Esar makes it clear why women weren't laughing very hard.

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conceptions of female character are largely responsible for creating the myth of women's humorlessness in England and America. Virginia Woolf's witty characterization of the Angel in the House describes the feminine ideal quite aptly: "She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was a chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught, she sat in it—in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to

sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all—I need not say it—she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty—her blushes, her great grace.” This feminine ideal (debunked successfully by Woolf’s sketch) excised, along with sexuality, a sense of humor from female nature so effectively that by the end of the nineteenth century a common refrain held that women have no sense of humor at all. Thus, a writer for the *Saturday Review* begins his article on “Feminine Humour” (1871) with a received witticism: “The humour of women, it is said, resembles the snakes in Iceland. In other words it does not exist.” This writer refers to ideal femininity in order to account for women’s alleged humorlessness: “Women are too good to be humorists.”

The idea that women have no sense of humor is one that a writer like Aphra Behn would not have had to combat. Playwrights such as Behn, Mary Pix and Susanna Centlivre found an audience for their comic talents in late seventeenth-century England. And in the eighteenth century, that great age of comedy, women novelists were flexing their comic muscles right along with the men. Charlotte Lennox’s *Female Quixote*, with its outrageously funny send-up of contemporary ideas about women and courtship, deserves a place next to *Tom Jones* and *Tristram Shandy* among the great eighteenth-century comic novels. Her Arabella, an avid romance reader who—like her Spanish predecessor takes the stories as literal truth—is both comical and sympathetic, and Lennox’s statement on satire still holds true: “When Actions are a Censure upon themselves, the Reciter will always be consider’d as a Satirist.” Frances Burney’s comic talents were highly regarded in her day and were almost certainly an inspiration to Charles Dickens; her Mr. Giles Arbe in *The Wanderer* is a near cousin of Dickens’s Mr. Dick. All of Burney’s novels are enlivened by humor and satire that stands up to the test of time. When Harold Bloom states, “It would be interesting if one could understand why it was that Miss Austen was able to be so piercingly funny,” he might do well to consider that she cut her novelistic teeth on writers like Lennox, Burney and Maria Edgeworth (of *Castle Rackrent* fame).

Collections of women’s humor—striving to implement a female canon of humor—fight against the prejudices of historians. Male authorities on comedy might valorize Mark Twain and forget that Marietta Holley rivaled him in public favor, but women’s anthologies tell the other side of the story. Given the cultural injunction against female humor and the widespread disbelief in its existence, the task of researching the subject required dedication and zeal. It should come as no surprise, then, that the earliest collectors of women’s humor tended to see themselves as missionaries out to convert a faithless audience. Two examples will serve to illustrate the work that such anthologies can do.

Kate Sanborn, who put together the very first women’s humor collection in 1885, was inspired to undertake the task because of one man’s printed assertion that humor “is the rarest of qualities in woman.” As proof of women’s comic talents, *The Wit of Women* ranges from the late seventeenth century to her own time. Sanborn concludes her collection with a witty epigram of her own, a challenge to any who might now dare to deny her evidence:

If you pronounce this book not funny,
And wish you hadn’t spent your money.
There soon will be a general rumor
That you’re no judge of Wit or Humor.

By refusing to bow down to male standards, Sanborn encourages her female readers to value women’s jokes even when men say they’re not funny. She indicates that women in a sexist society can assert their independence by laughing together.

Martha Bensley Bruère and Mary Ritter Beard in the 1934 anthology *Laughing Their Way* pay tribute to Sanborn’s efforts and marvel at the change that seems to have taken place since their predecessor’s work. In their day, they claim, “No one today can pick up a newspaper, read a magazine, or work in a library without meeting face to face laughing women who peer through the printed pages.” Bruère and Beard assembled

a gallery of laughing women whose names may be unfamiliar to the late twentieth-century reader, but whose works continue to speak incisively to present-day circumstances. For example, the suffragette columnist Alice Duer Miller attacks patriarchal hypocrisy with a satirical angle that is both part of its period and relevant beyond it:

The New York State Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage is sending out leaflets to its members urging them to "tell every man you meet, your tailor, your postman, your grocer, as well as your *dinner partner*, that you are opposed to woman suffrage."

We hope that the 90,000 sewing machine operatives, the 40,000 saleswomen, the 32,000 laundry operatives, the 20,000 knitting and silk mill girls, the 17,000 women janitors and cleaners, the 12,000 cigar-makers, to say nothing of the 700,000 other women and girls in industry in New York State, will remember when they have drawn off their long gloves and tasted their oysters to tell their dinner partners that they are opposed to woman suffrage because they fear it might take women out of the home.

Like so many other early books that celebrate women's accomplishments, Bruère and Beard's collection makes us recognize how standard canons have typically overlooked women's works. Nineteenth-century writers like Marietta Holley (Samantha Allen), Frances Barry Hitcher (The Widow Bedott), and Sara Willis Parton (Fanny Fern)—once widely recognized comic talents—are now known only to a handful of dedicated readers.

Even women writers who have been included in the canon of Western literature—Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Virginia Woolf—don't receive credit for their well-developed senses of humor, irony and satire. If Bloom finds *Jane Eyre* to be an angry work, he might consider its satirical thrust and think about a figure like Mr. Brocklehurst, whose message of "consistency" is completely—and comically—undercut by his blatant

hypocrisy. Eliot's Mrs. Cadwallader and the bumbling Mr. Brooke are delightfully comic, and Mary Garth's witty tongue gives the lie to Bloom's claim that "there isn't a touch" of humor in Eliot. As for Woolf, *Orlando* is a rare example of a modernist comic novel, and even in a serious work, such as *A Room of One's Own*, wit and humor shine out on almost every page. To be sure, Woolf's humor walks a fine line between the tragic and the comic; however, to ignore her comic vision is to miss out on the human struggles that her works reflect.

To any examples I might offer, a critic might counter, "But that's not funny." I would respond to this critic with the words of the maligned George Eliot: "A difference of taste in jokes is a great strain on the affections." I am willing to concede that Bloom's "Canon of Western Humor" shoots straight in many cases, but his assessment of women writers is way off the mark, and I suggest that he widen his scope to include female comic talents. In addition to the writers I've mentioned, I would highly recommend as sources of British and American humor Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Elizabeth Gas-kell, Emily Dickinson, Dorothy Parker, Barbara Pym, Muriel Spark, Zora Neale Hurston, Wendy Wasserstein, Caryl Churchill, Jane Bowles, Maxine Hong Kingston and Faye Weldon. And this is only a preliminary list. Even if Mr. Bloom doesn't explode into laughter, he might at least learn to see the pic before it hits him in the face.

Audrey Bilger
Assistant Professor
Claremont McKenna College