

WOMEN IN INDIA INK: CONTROLLING THE PRODUCTION OF GENDER THROUGH
HUMOR IN MAINSTREAM COMIC STRIPS

By

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A MASTER'S THESIS PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2009

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To my Mom, who has always supported me

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to start by thanking my mother, Isabel, who never questioned the crazy decisions I made in my life but always pushed me to be everything I could be and never doubted me for a second. My father, David, who taught me that being an academic and being funny are not mutually exclusive, and that you're never too important to be self-deprecating. My sister, Cristina, who was the first person I tried to make laugh every day, you will always be my baby sister.

I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Connie Shehan and Dr. Charles Gattone, who saw the value in my research and never put me in a box. Dr. Paul Windschitl for giving me the opportunity to explore the world of social research when I was still wet behind the ears. Dr. C. Wesley Younts for turning me on to sociology and convincing me that I would be a good sociologist, even if it took me a while to listen. Christopher Weaver, for his selfless editing of my work and his many contributions to my scholastic growth.

Most importantly I would like to thank my wife, Jeannette, who got me to get my life on track and always knows how to keep me going. Thank you for all your love, support and understanding.

Without these people, none of this would be possible.

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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

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May 2009

Chair: Connie Shehan

Major: Sociology

This study seeks to understand the way women are used in mainstream humor and whether their portrayals seek to enforce or protest traditional notions of gendered behavior. By looking at the top six nationally syndicated comic strips over the period of one year, I was able to determine that women's roles in humor typically situated them in the position of "feed", or straight woman, to the male comic. Those who were subversive enough to participate in the humor usually played on the incongruity of the situation rather than subordinate other women or their male counterparts. Reoccurring themes in women's use of humor included the incongruity of little girl characters searching to achieve gender normativity; as well as the inability of single women characters to achieve heteronormative relationships. Women who were in the envious position of being married were often more likely to be shown as frustrated with the actions of their families and as a result, often verbalize their displeasure to their partners. Working women were given the most agency in creating humor and while at the mercy of their superiors they simultaneously possessed the ability to make light of the situation. And while most of these recurring female characters were shown often, their portrayals were largely one dimensional. The one group that was found to be produced with the greatest amount of variation was the non-recurring female characters who could function as both feed and comic. Overall, there was little

challenging of traditional gender roles and humor was largely situated in the male realm. I conclude that popular media producers need to create and develop characters that have greater depth and complexity, rather than relying on non-recurring characters to express the varied roles of women.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

The interactions of a society are fueled, in part, by an understanding and appreciation of social norms that are imbued in us at a young age. In contemporary society, the use of humor is a fairly common practice used to make social interactions less strenuous and more enjoyable. The ability to appreciate this humor is one of the simplest, yet greatest, pleasures one is afforded in life. However, the ability to create and participate in humor is a right reserved for those who are familiar with the norms and constructions that we recognize as a wider society. Many of the most popular normative ideologies are taken and used in the public sphere which in turn legitimizes them on an even larger scale.

Jurgen Habermas (1989) contends that in the early coffee houses, salons, and lodges of 18th century Europe the creation of the bourgeois public sphere allowed for the free expression and communication of ideas and norms which was previously defined by central power structures such as monarchies and dictatorships. This development of a non-governmental public sphere helped set the tone for public discourse on a wide range of topics as well as serving as the basis for the rise of mass media and consumer culture. It is within our new consumer driven public sphere that Habermas believes we as a society lost the ability to freely express ourselves and have a voice in the development of social norms.

However, I contend that, despite its great strides in lending a voice to the people, the early bourgeois public sphere was not the egalitarian birth of social thought that Habermas contends it was. This is especially true for minorities, such as women, who have been excluded from the conversation from the start. And while analyses of their exclusion have thoroughly noted its effects on politics, academia, and social reform, the development of humor is one that has gone under analyzed.

Within the loud, smoke filled rooms of these male dominated social halls, the rules of public decorum in regards to laughter were established early on (Burke, 1993). The endorsement of polite gentlemanly wit carried with it classist and patriarchal undertones that came to define what was considered acceptable to find humorous and what lowered individuals to a dishonorable level. The norms and definitions that were put in place at this time have survived to certain extent in modern society propelled onward by the development of mass media.

However, the second and third waves of feminist activism have put into question the role of women in popular culture. Their increased participation in the creation of all forms of media has helped them redefine their role. They have had to walk a thin line in this task as a gendered revolution cannot effectively happen at once. Instead, we find a definition of gendered humor that is being protested bit by bit, punch line by punch line. Sometimes these moves are effective, sometimes they are not, yet they continue to force us to conceive of gender as a fluid construct.

There is a substantial amount of work left to be done on the effect of the bourgeois public sphere defining the rules of humor in contemporary mass media. This paper seeks to understand the effects of the latter on the role of women in contemporary mainstream humor. This study identifies some of the gendered bases of humor that continue to exist in much the same form they existed in the 18th century. However, it also seeks to determine how gendered humor is being challenged and redefined every day.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to structure the research question, this study seeks to synthesize three separate of bodies of literature: gender, contemporary mass media, and humor. While each subject is well researched, little has been done to explore the intersection of all three in regards to the portrayal of women. What follows is a distilled discussion of each followed by a convergence of every piece to develop a structured understanding of the background of women in humorous contemporary media.

The Construction of Gender

Sociologists have largely come to see gender as a social institution that is constructed and performed by individuals on a daily basis. Patricia Yancey Martin (2004) has put forth the argument that gender is an enduring institution that persists across time and space. However, her definition makes an effort to suggest that while the institution's definitions have a tendency to constrain certain behaviors, they also have the ability to facilitate other behaviors and that the legitimized norms are executed by ordinary people who believe in the morality of their gender ideologies. She continues by saying that the institution of gender is constantly changing and redefining itself and cannot be separated from either macro or micro phenomena. With this in mind we can begin to grasp the ways in which humor in mass media make use of gender ideologies while simultaneously legitimizing them and pushing their boundaries.

This is important, according to Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987), because once an ideology is absorbed by an individual they make it a part of their routine gender accomplishment. They state that a person's gender display is largely dependent upon the context they find themselves in. However, Mead (1934) argued that in new or foreign social interactions we rely on our perception of a "generalized other" to guide our own behavior. Given that mass

media is so pervasive in today's society, it is my contention that children and those who find themselves in unfamiliar situations will rely on media icons as a significant and idealized part of their generalized other, especially in regards to gender.

One clear example is the use of Barbie in Michael Messner's 2000 study *Barbie Girls versus Sea Monsters: Children Constructing Gender*. While Barbie can certainly possess all the necessary accoutrements to play soccer (if purchased from the store), she is not regularly portrayed as a sports player; nor does her body structure make her the ideal athlete. Yet, for the little girls in Messner's study, Barbie serves as an ideal feminine gender construction and provides the boys the social cues to construct their gender in opposition to the displays of femininity. In this way children learn early on about gender production and seek out idealized role models in mainstream media.

The ability to do so becomes more difficult when role models are in short supply. Gender scholars have argued for years that there is a distinct difference in the way men and women are treated both in academia and the media. Judith Stacey and Barrie Thorne have argued at several points in time (1985, 1996) that fields such as sociology and literature have failed to critically study the role of women in defining social life. As a result, while there have been great strides in gender equality, the voice of women continues to be distorted and misrepresented in both academia and the media. Furthermore, the pervasiveness of a culture that emphasizes a hegemonic masculine ideal (Connell, 2005) ensures that patriarchal dominance is widespread in subtle and not so subtle ways. What we are left with is a society whose perception of gender is defined by hegemonic powers that urge us to conform to long-held patriarchal ideologies (Ridgeway & Shelley, 2004). By playing into these traditional gender definitions these ideologies attempt to maintain their ground as "objective truths".

The Effects of Contemporary Mass Media

Critical theorists such as Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno (2002) have argued that mass media has become a rationalized process that seeks to find the most profitable way of entertaining the masses. They refute the idea that media portrays an accurate picture of society, but rather state that media creates products that tame society into submission for capitalistic ends by using gender archetypes that are perceived as “objective truths”. Even protest is subject to co-optation according to Marcuse’s (Wolff, Moore & Marcuse, 1969) idea of “repressive tolerance” which states that a modern industrial society will tolerate an oppositional idea if it can be molded it into a means of making a profit.

However, Habermas (1984) takes a more nuanced approach to the production of contemporary mass media in his book *The Theory of Communicative Action*. While he acknowledges the centralized power hierarchy of the modern media conglomerates, he argues that these structures are subject a number of variables beyond their control. These include, but are not limited to: journalistic codes of integrity, misinterpretation of context, active defenses against manipulation, and even the foresight to predict “video pluralism” with the rise of new media. So while a hierarchy still exists, there is still potential for protest that would cause a restructuring in the use of gender. It is vital to note that Habermas does not place any value judgments on his definition of cultural protest and therefore it becomes difficult to determine the impact liberals and conservatives will have on the mass media and whose influence will be felt the strongest in the next set of cultural productions.

The Construction of Humor and Ridicule

For years the assumption has been that humor can lead to positive outcomes. Whether it manifests itself as a form of resistance (Hart, 2007; Merziger, 2007), a means for conflict

resolution, (Holmes, 2006; Sclavi, 2008) or even a method to cope with loss (Klein, 1989; Stevenson, 1993), the results are varied with little actual data. Books like *The Healing Power of Humour* (Klein, 1989) tout humor's ability to help withstand physical disorders declaring the humour is indeed the best medicine. Even in the context of an interpersonal relationship a sense of humor is highly regarded in friends, family, and intimate relationships.

Less popular are the studies that point to humor as a way to legitimize harmful behavior. This includes a range of behaviors such as sexual harassment (Angelone, Hirschman, Suniga, Arney & Armelie, 2005; Eyssel & Bohner, 2007), teasing (Lampert & Ervin-Tripp, 2006), group exclusion (Watts, 2007), proclivity towards rape (Viki, Thomae, Cullen & Fernandez, 2007), and the exploitation of tragedy (Zandberg, 2006) to name a few. Their existence forces us to reconsider the effects of using humor, however innocuous we may believe it to be.

This study focuses on the social theorists who study humor in the continuum that exists in everyday life. Michael Billig explores these theorists and their gradations in his 2005 book *Laughter and Ridicule* in which he discusses the three intellectual theories of humour and identifies them as (1) superiority theories, (2) incongruity theories, and (3) release theories. The least applicable of the three for this study, release theories, posit that laughter is the result of a biological reaction to pent up energy that needs to be released and therefore it can not be judged to have any conscious morality. This sort of reaction would be difficult to measure as the level at which one needs to release nervous tension varies from person to person and could not be measured through content analysis.

In contrast, superiority theories are rooted in a Marxist tradition of hierarchical reproduction in which those who are in power use ridicule and humiliation as a form of domination and as a means of maintaining the social order. Touted by ancient philosophers such

as Plato (1974) as an effective means of social control, humor has been used to establish superiority in a hierarchical relationship. However, Plato and others warn that excessive use of humor is inappropriate and therefore should be monitored and used only when it will benefit society. Thomas Hobbes (1999) wrote extensively on the immorality that resulted in making a person feel superior via cognitive comparison of one who was the butt of a joke. Even today, a large portion of the humor we find seeks to make a fool out of someone which some social theorists may argue makes us feel superior and degrades the subject of our mockery.

Incongruity theories on the other hand rely on the belief that human beings are rational creatures that process humor cognitively rather than emotionally. As a result incongruity theorists, such as John Locke (1964), identify both psychological and sociological themes within humor which rely on wit, or a play on ideas. This play on ideas seeks to pair two seemingly incongruous ideas and place them in close proximity causing the observer to be surprised to realize how similar they actually are. The classic example is the story of the man who asks his waitress to cut his cake into four pieces rather than eight because he is on a diet. We realize that by eating the entire cake he is violating the terms of his diet, which is incongruous; but by requesting that he be served four slices rather than eight, we see how he has cognitively arranged his thought process to make his actions seem rational. This point of view allows humor to be perceived as having the potential to be socially conscious and capable of inspiring social movements by stimulating thought about the incongruous nature of oppression.

Regardless of whether humor is deemed as superior or incongruous, it is important to note that its use can both enforce and protest social norms. The key is to understand who is using it and how they are using it.

The Intersection of Gender and Humor in the Media

The nature of mass media requires that humor be placed in context so that the audience, who isn't actually present, can find humor by using the appropriate ideologies. This often calls for the presence of a second person, or "feed", who feeds lines to the comic, or at minimum serve as a reactionary character. The feed cues the audience when to laugh but, unlike the laugh track, they also serves to act as the comedian's foil, by making the comic look funnier, or the comedian's stooge, by making themselves look worse. While the feed can serve as both a foil and a stooge, we can largely agree that they are not in control of the humor production.

Women have historically been discouraged from publicly taking part in the creation of humor. Greek comedies and Shakespearean plays were often produced using men in drag in place of women, the showing of teeth while smiling was considered unladylike, and laughing out loud was considered low class in the 18th century (Billig, 2005). Yet, despite their imposed exile, we have no shortage of female archetypes that comedians, playwrights, and authors have created and played off of for years: the shrewish mother-in-law, the harried housewife, the coquettish young girl, the misguided feminist, the strict schoolmarm, the list goes on and on. It is easy to see how the patriarchal nature of humor construction has shaped the role of women in comedy, and how easily our culture has legitimized those roles.

Rarely have we heard of classic American female humorist such as Frances Whitcher, Caroline Kirkland, or Kate Sanborn. These pioneering women had to face both the harsh critique of men and the emerging feminist movements of their times who questioned the validity of their expressions. The difficulties women endured to be taken seriously as comediennes, have been catalogued in anthologies such as *The Jokes on Us: Women in Comedy from Music Hall to the Present* (Banks & Swift, 1987), and *Performing Women Stand-ups, Strumpets and Itinerants*

(Oddey, 1999). They encountered repeated challenges to their ability to create humor on stage and screen where their producers would rather use them primarily as straight women and love interests rather than humorists in their own right.

What has evolved is a pantheon of male comedic geniuses who rely on a straight woman who serves as their feed: Ralph Kramden had Alice, Fred Flintstone had Wilma, Archie Bunker had Edith, Cliff Huxtable had Claire, etc. The previous list however is indicative of the need for a steady woman in the context of the family man comic. There is an equally long list of historical comedians who go through attractive, yet disposable, young starlets as they go from one movie to the next: Charlie Chaplin, Bob Hope, Woody Allen, Adam Sandler, etc. Both lists share the common trait of having men whose mass media productions would often pair them with women who were at the mercy of their comedic performances and often require them to become emotionally involved with their antagonist.

This shallow portrayal of women is an indicator of their status in our society as objects that observe and react but rarely participate. A study of gendered humor constructions gives credence to the argument that gender itself is a social construction. And via mass media, these legitimized social constructions have enjoyed a long run that has only begun to be challenged in recent decades by comediennes with increasing visibility. This leaves the current position of comediennes in popular culture up for debate, one which this study seeks to address through its analysis of mainstream comic strips.

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

Study Rationale

Humor is one of society's most subjective forms of interaction and can be difficult to operationalize and measure in any given interaction. By its very nature humor can be layered with meanings that change over time and are symbolically important to certain groups over other (Stokoe, 2008). Witty barbs can be traded back and forth continuously, building upon one another in an attempt to entertain but also degrade. In some instances people may not even be aware that they are listening to a joke even after the punch line is delivered, and some jokes are simply not funny to anyone but the creator and a small group of insiders.

On a larger scale, humor is used in part as a way to acknowledge common ideologies and beliefs about society as a whole. Those who share these ideologies take pleasure in recognizing the shared set of assumptions they have with the humorist. Some of those who do not share said assumptions will dismiss the joke for a variety of reasons: it does not reflect their social status, it may be perceived as infantile, or they may simply find it offensive. However, there are some who realign their attitudes to varying degrees in order to fit these ideologies and take part in this social interaction. This is not the case in every situation, but as the level of exposure intensify one may increasingly come to believe that the humor in the subject matter is a socially acceptable ideology and adopt it as his or her own.

Therefore, in order to study the use of gender in mass media humor, it was necessary to find a medium in which there is a large consensus that the material is meant to be humorous in nature. Likewise, there must be some discernable differentiation in gender between characters for the audience to identify with. Additionally, the interactions cannot be so multi-dimensional that it becomes too difficult to separate the importance of one punch line over another. With

these restrictions in mind, it became clear that the ideal form of humor to study was the comic strip.

Since their debut in the late 19th century, comic strips have been used to hold up a distorted mirror up to society's face in order to make the reader laugh and think at the same time. While they have evolved over the year, in modern times comic strips exist as a set of characters existing within a group of panels, or single panel, that build upon one another until the story comes to a humorous conclusion otherwise known as the punch line. They employ benign humor, tragicomedy, wit, and satire, but in the end they all converge to one gag that concludes the strip on the last panel. This makes them easy to decode because each person in strip exists to facilitate the telling of the joke, and their role in this context speaks volumes.

Early studies of comic strips have focused on the communicative behavior of comics and how they help "structure an individual's world" (Spiegelman, Terwilliger & Fearing, 1952) and how they can even be used to "substitute for intimate sociability" (Bogart, 1955). More recent studies of comic strips have spanned the gamut of topics from aging and health (Gower, 1995; Hanlon, Farnsworth & Murray, 1997; Spigel, 2001), to capitalism (Cohen, 2007; Gordon, 1998; Kasen, 1980), to family (LaRossa, Jaret, Gadgil, & Wynn, 2000; LaRossa, Jaret, Gadgil, & Wynn, 2001), to race (Glascock & Preston-Schreck, 2004; Mason, 2002; Pigeon, 1996; White & Fuentes, 1997), to religion (Lindsey & Heeren, 1992), and even sexuality (Padva, 2005). These studies have not only ignored the way in which gender intersects with their various topics, but they have failed in their attempt to discern how humor is derived.

This is not to say that the topic of gender in the comics has not gone unexplored. While comic strips have been studied by sociologists in the past (Brabant, 1976; Brabant & Mooney, 1986; Brabant & Mooney, 1997; Chavez, 1985; Glascock & Preston-Schreck, 2004; Saenger,

1955), previous studies have only sought to catalog appearance and location. They have failed to explore the power dynamics between characters and express humor as a function of ridicule and suppression. In doing so, they have ignored the context of the characters' appearances in favor of a quantitative approach. And while this study also hopes to understand the production of gender form a quantitative approach, it also seeks to critically understand some of the deeper qualitative aspects of the humor used.

Research Question

How do mainstream comic strips use humor to challenge or legitimize the traditional gender roles of women in society? In order to operationalize this research, I have delineated four detailed sub-questions that I believe, when asked sequentially, will facilitate a deeper understanding of the main research question. First, does a character analysis reveal a pattern of gender archetypes or gender pioneers in the recurring female characters? Second, what are the typical positions of these women in relation to the jokes that are regularly told? Third, what themes can we infer about these women based on their position and their character? And finally, what is the larger message the media is sending to the reader about women's roles in society and their ability to use, or be used by, humor?

Sample

Comic strips are provided to newspapers, magazines, and websites from a variety of syndicates that represent various cartoonists. These syndicates take the time to copyright and promote strips, as well as negotiate contracts on behalf of the artists. In the United States there exist six major syndication companies that provide the majority of the print comics in newspapers today: Creators Syndicate, King Features Syndicate, Universal Press Syndicate, Washington Post Writers Group, Tribune Media Services, and United Media. While it is important to note that these companies have varying degrees of influence over what artists to

represent and that some popular cartoonists do not use a syndication company, this will not be a factor.

Instead, for the purpose of this study, I chose to use strips that are syndicated by these companies to, at minimum, 1,500 outlets. By obtaining information from the various syndicate companies I have identified 8 strips that fit into this first criterion: *Beetle Bailey*, *Blondie*, *Dilbert*, *The Family Circus*, *For Better or For Worse*, *Garfield*, *Hagar*, and *Peanuts*. The second criterion required that each strip routinely provide new material so that the strips could be analyzed for current uses of gender in humor. Of these 8 strips, two are no longer printing original material (*For Better or For Worse* and *Peanuts*) and were consequently excluded from the study. However, strips with anthropomorphic animals were not excluded from the study because creators were always specific in noting the animals' gender which often came into play in the humor.

Table 3-1. List of Top Syndicated Comic Strips Arranged by Debut Year

| Title | Number of Outlets | Debut Year |
|---------------------------|-------------------|------------|
| Blondie | 2000 | 1930 |
| Beetle Bailey | 1800 | 1950 |
| Peanuts * | 2600 | 1950 |
| Family Circus | 1500 | 1960 |
| Hagar | 1900 | 1973 |
| Garfield | 2580 | 1978 |
| For Better of For Worse * | 2000 | 1979 |
| Dilbert | 2000 | 1989 |

Each of the strips was analyzed daily over a period of one year starting on January 1st of 2008 and continuing until December 31st of 2008. Because each strip was produced on a daily basis, during a leap year, this resulted in 366 observations for each strip and 2196 total observations.

Operationalization

Because of the fluid nature of humor and gender, an explanation must be given to understand how I have operationalized gender and humor in this study.

Character Analysis

Each character in a comic strip must have an easily identifiable role in the strip so that the reader is engaged in the joke over the character. In order to understand these roles, I qualitatively analyzed the apparent role of each reoccurring female character. I limited my analysis to female characters that appeared a minimum of five times throughout the year to ensure that some level of analysis was possible. This information was be supplemented by information obtain through published anthologies to determine the evolving nature of each character's role in the strip.

Position in the Joke

Interpreting the intended meaning of jokes and the role of each actor is a difficult and subjective task. Therefore, in order to study women's position in the joke, I have broken my analysis down into four parts: background, feed, superior, and incongruous. Each category describes the type and level of interaction the female character has in the joke.

The background category is fairly self-explanatory as it catalogs the number of times recurring characters appear, but fail to interact within the context of the joke. These women may appear in the fringes of the panels or in the center, however they do not interact with the joke teller and their status as background characters is primarily determined by the fact that their absence would not affect the joke's delivery.

The feed refers to two types of women that act as a straight woman: the stooge and the foil. The two types are often difficult to distinguish so for the purposes of this study they will be combined into one; however it is important to understand there is a distinction. The stooge refers to the female characters who are the butt of another character's joke. Their character is often

sacrificed for the good of the joke (See Figure 3-1 & 3-2). In contrast, the foil is simply present to make the joke funnier. Often, the character in charge of the joke will say things that are absurd or illogical; it is the foils job to react to these statements or simply feed the lines that will set off the other characters (See Figure 3-3 & 3-4).

Finally, there are two categories that attempt to examine the types of humor women use when they are given the task of making the joke themselves. The first role is that of the superior jokester; which makes use of the other characters as the stooges (See Figure 3-5). In these instances the woman has successfully mocked or defamed another character for the benefit of the viewer. This is contrasted by the incongruous female jokester who helps the reader find humor in the incongruity of the thoughts, actions, and situations the characters find themselves in (See Figure 3-6). In either case, the women were classified as active participants in the creation of the humor.

Once the level of participation was determined, strips were coded for recurring themes in feminine humor that synthesize the characters and their position in the joke. These results were then extrapolated to determine the current state of women in mainstream humor at the beginning of the 21st century.

Theoretical Orientation

The theoretical orientation of this study relies heavily on a symbolic interactionist perspective as defined by Blumer (1969). It is ideal, in this medium, to begin from a micro-level perspective before stepping backwards to find larger underlying themes. We know that only one author is speaking for each character and thus this perspective allows us to understand that each character's actions and dialogue are being shaped so ensure a certain message is taken away. Furthermore, because of the nature of comic strips, we understand that each aspect of the strip is

crucial to the goal of making the audience laugh; therefore the interpretation of meaning becomes narrower and easier to ascertain.

Using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), I will code reoccurring themes as they arise, periodically reformulating both themes and coding as unexpected variants arise. Given that the use of humor in gender construction can be used in a way that can be either social conscious or patriarchally dominating, it is important to be open to the possibility of finding either. In this way I hope to approach this study with fewer preconceived judgments of what I can expect to find.



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Figure 3-1. Stogie A



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Figure 3-2. Stogie B



"Look, Mommy! Here's how!"

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Figure 3-3. Foil A

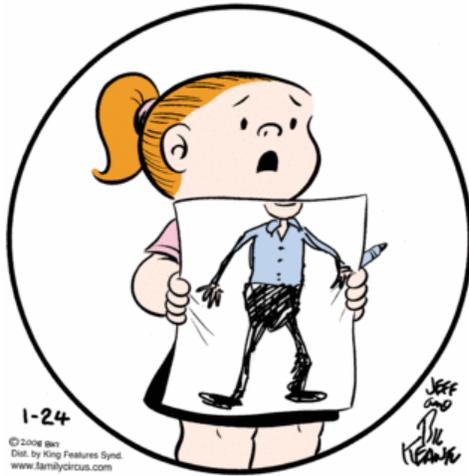


"Grandma, this chili you made isn't chilly at all."

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Figure 3-4. Foil B



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Figure 3-5. Superiority example



1-24

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**"I drew this picture of Daddy, but
he was taller than I thought."**

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Figure 3-6. Incongruity example

CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS

Appearances

The first step in understanding the role of women in humor is to determine the strength of their presence in each strip and compare them amongst themselves. This required that all 2196 observations be coded, first, for the appearance of women characters. Those that included women characters were then selected for in-depth analysis, yielding 906 observations. Once this was complete the remaining all-male comics were coded for mention of non-present female characters, resulting in an additional 100 observations. The total number of strips with female involvement was 1006 observations (See Table 4-1).

Table 4-1. The Appearance of Women of the Course over 1 Year in the Six Most Nationally Syndicated Comic Strips (N=2196)

| | Beetle Bailey | Blondie | Dilbert | Family Circus | Garfield | Hagar the Horrible | Total |
|-----------------|------------------|---------|---------|------------------|----------|-----------------------|-------|
| Women Shown | 102 | 215 | 151 | 237 | 51 | 166 | 906 |
| Women Mentioned | 7 | 8 | 5 | 12 | 44 | 24 | 100 |
| Final Total | 109 | 213 | 156 | 249 | 95 | 190 | 1006 |

As we can see in these initial observations (shown in Table 4-1), women are seen in less than half of the comic strips coded. The only strips to use women in half or more of the strips were identified as *Blondie* and *The Family Circus*.

In order to understand why such low representation was found, it is necessary to look at the nature of the characters themselves to understand how they are placed within the narrative back story of each strip. Each character was then separately coded and analyzed to determine her number of appearances as well as her location in the joke (See Table 4-2),

Character Analysis

Beetle Bailey

Over the course of the one year analysis, four recurring female characters helped define the type of humor used in the strip *Beetle Bailey*: Martha Halftrack, Miss Buxley, Private Blips, and Sergeant Louise Lugg. Of these characters, Martha Halftrack is the only one to be married leaving the other three attempting to snag a man with varying degrees of success, none even close to marriage. Martha Halftrack serves as a counterpart to General Halftrack's domineering personality and can be seen treating him with a similar amount of irreverence and domination as he treats his soldiers. However, she is never portrayed as anything but the General's wife and the humor she provides is always in relation to her husband's appearances and his authoritative position. Like the General, Martha Halftrack is older, yet physically she is a larger woman which is contrasted by her husband's frame in a manner reminiscent of Jack Sprat and his wife.

Miss Buxley and Private Blips primarily serve as administrative assistants. While Private Blips is a member of the armed forces, she is never seen participating in any military activities with the men. For some unstated reason, the strip's author makes a concerted effort to make Miss Buxley appear nearly every Wednesday in addition to occasional appearances on Sundays. Her appearances accounted for 64 of the 109 times (58.7%) women were shown or mentioned in this strip, with the remaining 45 times being divided among the other three recurring female characters, as well as non-recurring female characters. Furthermore, the names of both Miss Buxley and Private Blips appear to be thinly veiled references to their bust sizes and their regular juxtaposition allows the reader to contrast their various physical differences and easily identify the tension that arises when General Halftrack ogles Miss Buxley and not Private Blips. Yet, regardless of any superficial differences, they appear to be allies and are one of two pairs of

women in the entire sample (the other being Helga and Honi in *Hagar the Horrible*) that are regularly allowed to be a part in the active construction of their strip's humor.

Finally, Sergeant Louise Lugg is the would-be fiancée of Sergeant Snorkel, which coincidentally is the only capacity she serves in the strip. In the entire year the strip was analyzed she did not interact with any of the other female characters, and despite being in the armed forces, like Private Blips, she did not participate in any military maneuvers with the men or any women. Instead she serves as the foil for Sergeant Snorkel's punch lines or is shown to be pining for the day that he will finally propose to her and save her from a life of lonely spinsterhood. Like Martha Halftrack, Sergeant Lugg has a larger build; however, in her case her body type matches her partner's physique.

Blondie

Blondie is by no means a stranger to challenging socially dictated norms. After her introduction to readers in 1930, Blondie Boopadoop's marriage to Dagwood Bumstead in early 1933 struck a blow for exogamous inter-class marriages. Shortly after her marriage she gave birth to a son, Alexander, followed by a daughter, Cookie. And while the eponymous main character remains a regular in her own strip, the focus had decidedly shifted towards the antics of her husband Dagwood. Sixty years after her introduction Blondie finally got a job by starting a catering business with the neighbor, Tootsie Woodley. However, much like her home life, Blondie's work life consists of her reacting to the incongruous nature of the people that surround her. These mainly include her catering clients, who making impossible and irrational requests. Additionally, she is subjected to people who come in off the streets with no purpose but to elicit a response.

In addition to Blondie, there are two other recurring female characters. The first, Cookie Bumstead is the daughter of Blondie and Dagwood and has grown up on the strip since her

introduction 68 years ago, however she remains frozen as a teenager. Her primary concerns in life, as observed in this sample, tended to be getting money from her parents and finding a good boy to date. She bears a striking resemblance to her mother with slight alterations in hair and clothing styles. The second is Tootsie Woodley who, with her husband (Herb), comprises the Bumstead's neighbors and best friends. Tootsie exists as a mirror to Blondie, appearing to only differ in hair color, and thus understands the shenanigans that Blondie must put up with as a married woman. Aside from being Blondie's confidant and business partner, and Herb's wife, her role in the strip is minimal.

Dilbert

Alice is the only female engineer in a company dominated by men. However, despite her status as the only woman, she is not seen as a love interest for any of the male characters, which is unique but not unexpected as the strip revolves around the workplace. She is competent at her job but is frustrated by the irrationality of the system she works in which prides appearance over substance. As a result, she is prone to violent outbursts that are extremely effective against her male counterparts who cannot usually match her aggression. Her status in the strip is equal to, if not higher than, her male counterparts and therefore she is capable of making humorous comments and inferences.

Carol is the angry and bitter secretary of the Pointy-Haired Boss. Her character primarily seeks to antagonize anyone that comes into contact with her because she is extremely resentful of her position in life and in the company. While she has little power to have any effect on her environment, she uses what little power she does have to make the lives of others more difficult.

The Family Circus

The Family Circus's humor relies on the everyday incongruities of life seen through the eyes of a family with small children. Much of the humor lies on the children attempting to

anticipatorily socialize themselves. These results in a multitude of ways in which their views and actions do not quite match the things they are attempting to emulate. However, in order to play off of the incongruities effectively, the author relies on basic and strict archetypes in all of its characters including the female ones. Thelma, also known as “Thel” but most often known as “Mommy”, is the mother of four children who all appear to be under the age of 10. She appears to be a stay at home mother and hardly displays a personality but rather exists primarily to nurture and react to the events in her children’s lives.

Likewise, Grandma visits the home regularly and appears to take care of the children to some degree. She is a widow whose husband’s spirit visits regularly perpetuating a religious theme that is subtly pervasive throughout the strip. Her relationship with her deceased spouse is the only widow into her personal life and personality outside of the family that we are privy to.

Finally, Dolly is the only female child and represents the only female in the strip with any semblance of a personality. As the second oldest child she wields a nurturing authority over the two younger boys, Jeffy and PJ, but remains somewhat subordinate to the eldest son, Billy. She is often seen playing in a very gender appropriate manner and, like Billy, she attempts to assert her own, often erroneous and therefore humorous, explanations for circumstances she encounters.

Garfield

A year after its inception, Garfield introduced the eponymous cat and his owner, Jon Arbuckle, to local veterinarian Dr. Liz Wilson. For the next 28 years she appeared on and off as Jon’s unrequiting love interest whenever Garfield went to the vet. While they would occasionally go on dates, her attitude towards Jon was more professional than affectionate. However, in the summer of 2006, Liz and Jon begin to date and as a result she has become a regular recurring character. Her role is multilayered as she serves as an impediment to Garfield’s

interactions with Jon while simultaneously balancing Garfield's deadpan personas to those of Jon and the dog, Odie, which are less mature. She mostly bears witness to the hi-jinks of the men in the strip but is rarely the victim.

Arlene is Garfield's female love interest who appears intermittently in the strip. She seems to find Garfield simultaneously attractive and immature. While she most often allows Garfield to make a fool of himself, she also makes fun of him herself. Because she does not verbally communicate, her interactions are limited to Garfield who is the only recurring character who can hear her.

Hagar the Horrible

The female characters of *Hagar the Horrible* are perhaps the simplest and most associable with classic archetypes. Helga plays the disgruntled housewife who is constantly on Hagar's case to pick up after himself, come home from the tavern, take her out to dinner, and generally henpeck his every move. She is shown as a domestic maven who is appreciated primarily for her culinary skills. Physically she resembles her husband in weight and her manner of dress gives her the appearance of a bell. She is as strong as her husband occasionally shown as engaging him in physical confrontations.

Honi is the less than intelligent daughter of Hagar and Helga. She is physically attractive but her humor is derived from her inability to land herself a husband. By contrast, the neighborhood girl, Hernia, is perhaps the most consistently aggressive character in the strip. However, her bold nature is often in line with her desires to marry Hagar's young son, Hamlet. Hernia, like Dolly from *The Family Circus*, is portrayed as a little girl who has already accepted her gender norms and attempts to exercise them.

Women's Position in the Joke

Once character analyses were complete, it was important to distinguish the use of each character. Therefore, the appearance of each recurring character was coded to determine if, and how, they participated in the construction of the jokes (Table 4-2). Four separate categories were devised to characterize their appearances: feed, background, incongruous, and superior. The latter two categories refer to any joking interaction in which the woman provided the punch line of the humor. Superior humor came at the expense of another character while incongruous humor typically dealt with the incongruity of their surroundings or their own behavior at times. Background characters had no effect on the performance of the joke, and feeds served as foils and stooges.

The Primary Female Character

Each strip has a female character that is used predominately over the others, appearing approximately more than 40 times more frequently than any other female character. In half of the strips observed the choice is seemingly natural as the female character in question is married to or dating the main male character (Blondie from *Blondie*, Helga from *Hagar*, and Liz from *Garfield*). However, given the settings of *Dilbert* and *Beetle Bailey*, whose characters are Alice and Miss Buxley respectively, the primary female protagonist is seen in a work place setting which gives us a glimpse into the world of women's humor in the workforce. Finally, because so much of the humor in *The Family Circus* is derived from the good natured musings of the children, it is understandable that the primary female character is the second youngest girl Dolly. Consequently, the role of each of these female characters varies to a large extent, giving a varied look at the role of women in humor.

Table 4-2. Listing of Individual Female Character Appearances and Their Level of Interactions

| Character | Appearances | Background | Feed | Superior | Incongruous |
|---------------------------|-------------|------------|------|----------|-------------|
| Beetle Bailey | | | | | |
| Ms. Buxley | 63 | 2 | 25 | 15 | 21 |
| Mrs. Halftrack | 22 | 1 | 11 | 6 | 4 |
| Private Blips | 25 | 2 | 14 | 3 | 6 |
| Lieutenant Lugg | 5 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 3 |
| Non-Recurring | 11 | 2 | 6 | 1 | 2 |
| Blondie | | | | | |
| Blondie | 187 | 8 | 130 | 24 | 25 |
| Cookie | 18 | 3 | 12 | 1 | 2 |
| Tootsie | 5 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 0 |
| Non-Recurring | 15 | 5 | 6 | 2 | 2 |
| Dilbert | | | | | |
| Alice | 83 | 35 | 23 | 15 | 10 |
| Carol | 23 | 3 | 4 | 9 | 7 |
| Tina | 8 | 0 | 4 | 1 | 3 |
| Non-Recurring | 36 | 6 | 15 | 11 | 4 |
| Family Circus | | | | | |
| Dolly | 182 | 32 | 37 | 3 | 110 |
| Mommy | 95 | 23 | 63 | 1 | 8 |
| Grandma | 29 | 3 | 22 | 0 | 4 |
| Non-Recurring | 8 | 3 | 5 | 0 | 0 |
| Garfield | | | | | |
| Liz | 42 | 3 | 34 | 3 | 2 |
| Arlene | 8 | 0 | 4 | 3 | 1 |
| Non-Recurring | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Hagar the Horrible | | | | | |
| Helga | 144 | 1 | 79 | 23 | 41 |
| Honi | 20 | 3 | 12 | 1 | 4 |
| Hernia | 10 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 7 |
| Non-Recurring | 26 | 4 | 18 | 1 | 3 |
| Totals | 1068 | 140 | 531 | 128 | 269 |

Passive and Active Interactions

Of the interactions women had with men, this excludes the appearances as background characters; they primarily found their role to be that of feed to the antics of other characters in the strip. These number were calculated first as a percent of their total interactions and then as a percent of the number of strips that year. The only notable exceptions to being primarily identified as a feed were the women in *Dilbert* and Dolly from *The Family Circus* (Table 4-3).

However, when compared to the number of strips produced in a year, no one comes close to being represented extensively in both categories even close to half the time with the exception of Dolly, Blondie, and Helga. However of those three, only Dolly engages in much joke creation.

Table 4-3. Types of Interactions Female Characters Have in the Construction of the Joke

| Character | Within Their Interactions | | In a Year | |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| | Feed | Total Joking | Feed | Total Joking |
| Beetle Bailey | | | | |
| Ms. Buxley (P) | 41% | 59% | 6.8% | 9.8% |
| Mrs. Halftrack | 52.4% | 47.6% | 3% | 2.7% |
| Private Blips | 60.9% | 39.1% | 3.8% | 2.5% |
| Lieutenant Lugg | 20% | 80% | 0.3% | 1.1% |
| Non-recurring | 66.6% | 33.3% | 1.6% | 0.8% |
| Blondie | | | | |
| Blondie (P) | 72.6% | 27.4% | 35.5% | 13.4% |
| Cookie | 80% | 20% | 3.3% | 0.8% |
| Tootsie | 100% | 0% | 1.4% | 0% |
| Non-recurring | 60% | 40% | 1.6% | 1.1% |
| Dilbert | | | | |
| Alice (P) | 47.9% | 52.1% | 6.3% | 6.8% |
| Carol | 20% | 80% | 1.1% | 4.4% |
| Tina | 50% | 50% | 1.1% | 1.1% |
| Non-recurring | 50% | 50% | 4.1% | 4.1% |
| Family Circus | | | | |
| Dolly (P) | 24.7% | 75.3% | 10.1% | 30.9% |
| Mommy | 87.5% | 12.5% | 17.2% | 2.5% |
| Grandma | 84.6% | 15.4% | 6% | 1.1% |
| Non-recurring | 100% | 0% | 1.4 | 0% |
| Garfield | | | | |
| Liz (P) | 87.2% | 12.8% | 9.3% | 1.4% |
| Arlene | 50% | 50% | 1.1% | 1.1% |
| Non-recurring | 50% | 50% | 0.3% | 0.3% |
| Hagar the Horrible | | | | |
| Helga (P) | 55.2% | 44.8% | 21.6% | 17.5% |
| Honi | 70.6% | 29.4% | 3.3% | 1.4% |
| Hernia | 0% | 100% | 0% | 2.7% |
| Non-recurring | 81.8% | 18.2% | 4.9% | 1.1% |
| Total | 57.2% | 42.7% | 24.2% | 18.1% |

Notes: P connotes the strip's primary female character

Furthermore, the joking interactions were also coded to see whether women created humor that relied on incongruity or superiority to the characters they interacted with (Table 4-4).

Again, the number of interaction was calculated first as a percent of their total interactions and then as a percent of the number of strips that year.

Table 4-4. Types of Female Joke Constructions

| Character | Within Their Interactions | | In a Year | |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|
| | Superior | Incongruous | Superior | Incongruous |
| Beetle Bailey | | | | |
| Ms. Buxley (P) | 24.6% | 34.4% | 4.1% | 5.7% |
| Mrs. Halftrack | 28.6% | 19% | 1.6% | 1.1% |
| Private Blips | 13% | 26.1% | 0.8% | 1.6% |
| Lieutenant Lugg | 20% | 60% | 0.3% | 0.8% |
| Non-recurring | 11.1% | 22.2% | 0.3% | 0.5% |
| Blondie | | | | |
| Blondie (P) | 13.4% | 14.0% | 6.6% | 6.8% |
| Cookie | 6.7% | 13.3% | 0.3% | 0.5% |
| Tootsie | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% |
| Non-recurring | 20% | 20% | 0.5% | 0.5% |
| Dilbert | | | | |
| Alice (P) | 31.3% | 20.8% | 4.1% | 2.7% |
| Carol | 45% | 35% | 2.5% | 1.9% |
| Tina | 12.5% | 37.5% | 0.3% | 0.8% |
| Non-recurring | 36.7% | 13.3% | 3% | 1.1% |
| Family Circus | | | | |
| Dolly (P) | 2.0% | 73.3% | 0.8% | 30.1% |
| Mommy | 1.4% | 11.1% | 0.3% | 2.2% |
| Grandma | 0.0% | 15.4% | 0% | 1.1% |
| Non-recurring | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% |
| Garfield | | | | |
| Liz (P) | 7.7% | 5.1% | 0.8% | 0.5% |
| Arlene | 37.5% | 12.5% | 0.8% | 0.3% |
| Non-recurring | 50% | 0% | 0.3% | 0% |
| Hagar the Horrible | | | | |
| Helga (P) | 16.1% | 28.7% | 6.3% | 11.2% |
| Honi | 5.9% | 23.5% | 0.3% | 1.1% |
| Hernia | 30% | 70% | 0.8% | 1.9% |
| Non-recurring | 4.5% | 13.6% | 0.3% | 0.8% |
| Total | 13.8% | 29% | 5.8% | 12.2% |

Notes: P connotes the strip's primary female character

As the table shows, the majority of humorous interactions used incongruous humor to make their point. In total women used incongruous humor 12.2% of the year and only used superiority humor only 5.8% of the year. It should be noted that the only time a character constructed the

humor in excess of 10% of the time is seen through Helga and Dolly (again a phenomenal outlier) who both primarily used incongruous humor. It is apparent that it is not common for women to make jokes at the expense of men, or anyone else.

Character Themes

Many of the jokes in each strip are replicated with slight variations. Through my analysis I have determined several reoccurring themes that cartoonist have used in creating their humor. Much of the humor coded in these strips focused on the relationships between men and women. Without exception, all relationships depicted were heterosexual relationships and the humor they enacted could be characterized as a battle of the sexes.

Desperately Seeking Normativity

The fact that some of the female characters were too young to participate in romantic relationships did not deter the creator from portraying them as pining for the day they could legitimately take up their role as a “true” female. Lynn Spigel (2001) notes that this is was a common ploy in the comic strips that emerged shortly after the World War II. By depicting children as consumers of gender norms, seemingly without any prompting, authors were able to suggest that these gender norms are inherent in every person at a young age, rather than being gained through a lifetime of socialization.

The most direct example of this desire for normative gender roles is found in Hernia from *Hagar the Horrible*. While she has not yet reached puberty, she has already found her suitor in Hagar’s reluctant son Hamlet (See Figure 4-1). Despite his insistence that they are too young to consider such arrangements, Hernia continues to persist that they will live a traditionally gender normative life as married adults. Her theatrics and the logic of her insistence are so over the top it is considered humorous but may be perceived as slightly unnatural. However, because her actions are heteronormative they are not too farfetched. It is here that we also begin to see the

themes of men being reluctant to marry a woman. These occur for a variety of reasons but the common theme seems to suggest that they do not want to lose any of their natural manhood by having to clean, go shopping, or start a family.

However, Dolly from *The Family Circus* is more subtle in her desire to be a normative female (See Figure 4-2 thru 4-4). Her author is skillful to state her desire to find her Prince Charming and husband in a manner that does not make her appear to be irrational but rather excited at the eventual prospect of being in a relationship like that of her parents. In this way Dolly can also make inferences about gender roles that can sometimes make us think about stereotypes but never goes far enough to challenge such ideologies.

A Good Man is Hard to Find

If a female character was no longer a minor, she was either portrayed as having a husband or seeking to date and marry a man. However, these men were never strangers to the reader as they were typically recurring characters themselves. Therefore, to ensure that the possibility of the joke continued to exist, the women were never allowed to succeed in their pursuits of the course of the year that was analyzed. This is common among mass media productions because it allows the strip, TV show, or movie series, to use the same running gag repeatedly with minor variations. This is not to say that all women are unsuccessful in love, but some of these moves come after a few decades, Liz and Jon from *Garfield*, and even after such a great passage of time some still fail to land their man, Ms. Buxley and Lieutenant Lugg from *Beetle Bailey* (See Figure 4-6 thru 4-11).

However, these men are often pursued despite prior acknowledgement that they are not of the highest caliber. The women are often the foils and stooges to their actions, and while they are constantly at the mercy of their male suitors, they do not rebel but rather act shocked and then adapt. The fact that they were seeking to enter into unions with these comic men signals

that if they were successful, we would most likely see them again in the future mimicking the roles of women in the next category.

The Harried and Henpecking Housewife

Marriage is simultaneously the goal and the curse of women in humor. Once women were married they were essentialized into the traditional stereotypes portrayed to be womanly (See Figure 4-12 thru 4-17). They were always capable and effective homemakers. They knew their way around the kitchen, and, in comparison to their husbands, were best suited for life taking care of children and a domicile. While they would mostly do the work in the home, they would occasionally request that their spouses participate which was often met with humorous consequences. However, this continuous henpecking would occasionally be referenced by the men as nagging. By doing this, the humor was derived from implying that the women were asking too much of their male partners and as such being an ineffective househusband should be considered normal. This would result in a woman who was overwhelmed by the amount of work that needed to be done with little challenge being made to the male's inability to work his own home despite being a master of the world outside.

However, despite rarely being portrayed outside of the home, these women were also portrayed as being extremely materialistic. Their ability to spend, or make requests for, money were often the subject of the humorous sight gags. Men carrying large quantities of items and referencing themselves as pack mules gave the impression that the requests of the women were beyond the scope of rational need. The reader is never privy to what these materials are ever used for as the characters routinely dress in the same clothing and backgrounds are not extensively drawn. All we are allowed to know is that the perpetuation of the belief that men make the money and women spend it is still well alive in the world of humorous mass media.

The Perils of the Working Woman

The one place that women were consistently seen creating their own humor and actively participating in the joke was the same place women have fought for years to enter: the workplace (See Figure 4-18 & 4-19). Both Alice from *Dilbert* and Miss Buxley and Private Blips are routinely seen as effective workers. However the thin line between working woman and surrogate mother was sometimes blurry, especially in the case of the older strip *Beetle Bailey*. Often the humor in the dialogue centered on interactions that place the women in the role of the harried housewife.

Once again, while at work women are seen as competent and useful, but at the mercy of their male counterparts. Recurring female characters were never placed in positions of power and therefore directly suffered from the stupidity of their superiors. However, their ability (and sometime inability) to cope with the strains of such activities allowed them the privilege of creating their own humor. And, had this study included an analysis of working men, there would have most likely been similar themes in the humor both men and women used in relating with their incompetent male bosses.

Non-Recurring Characters

Perhaps the most interesting finding of the entire study is the creators' use of non-recurring characters. The addition of non-recurring characters to a strip with a cast of recurring characters routinely signaled that their role provided an element that one of the main characters could not fulfill. This was important because it demonstrated that many of the characters existed as such strict archetypes that they could only serve a small number of roles and additional women were need.

While they were occasionally used as background characters, those women that interacted with recurring characters, or came into the scope of the joke, helped provide further insight into

the way mainstream comics have to construct gendered humor by using other people. These characters eventually developed into four distinct categories with elements that represented their role in the joke: (1) the absurdists, (2) the gatekeepers, (3) the lady friend, and (4) the objects of desire.

The absurdist's role was perhaps the least confined to gender stereotypes. In these instances a character is introduced that plays a role similar to that of the husband in the stooge housewife analysis. The humor in the joke occurs when their requests or statements are so absurd as to cause the recipient of the joke to recoil at the incongruity. Because the gender of the absurdist is rarely important they are free to act as original as is necessary for the joke because they will not be making a repeat appearance.

The gatekeepers exist in the joke as impediments to a recurring character's goal, whether they were material or an attempt to interact with someone of a high status. These female characters were most commonly represented as nurses, secretaries, and salesladies which are all considered pink collar professions that are lower in status than their traditionally masculine job counter parts (doctor, boss, manager). The humor in these situations is derived from the gatekeeper's actions which inevitably keep the recurring character from achieving their goal of meeting with their superior or being able to purchase the desired product (See Figure 20). This leads to the recurring character to reconcile their failure at the hands of these gatekeepers in a comedic fashion. Yet it is important to point out that while the gatekeepers do exert power as an intermediary between the main characters and the product/person, they have little other status beyond this simple role.

The lady friend in the strip typically served as the feed for the housewife (See Figure 4-21 thru 4-23). Because the humor is typically derived from a male partner, the female occasionally

needs someone to spark a conversation pertaining to the man. This is where the lady friend plays her crucial and unacknowledged role. Because there is no male friend counterpart for women, these situations seem to mirror the typical private sphere interactions women had with one another when being a housewife was still a traditional role. The lady friend is never given the power to create the joke, but rather suffers the same fate as women before her to be the feed.

Finally the objects of desire as non-recurring characters were perhaps the simplest and most prone to gender stereotypes. By their very nature of being portrayed by non-recurring characters, it would be signaled to any regular reader that these women were not going to be around and that their presence merely made them the stooges of their would-be male suitors. Within this category there were two further divisions: the temptress and the potential mate. The temptress rarely sought to use her femininity to actively attract men, but rather exists as an object of lust that is rarely attainable. Little interaction was had with the temptresses and in each occasion they seemed unaware of their role in the joke. They ranged from poster pinups and girls on the beach to bar patrons and unnamed passersby. Their one common thread is that they only serve to give the punch line context, take no active part in its construction, and appear either in the first panel or the last panel and rarely more than once.

Some of the situations involving the temptress also managed to incorporate the wife. Rather than acknowledge her husband's gaze in a constructive attempt to change his ways, the humor arose from her verbal, and occasionally physical, retaliation that would put him in his place. However, a deeper reading of the role of temptress reveals that both the temptress and the wife are at the mercy of the male gaze; the temptress unwittingly being pulled in to the situation forces the wife to react in an attempt to keep her husband's fleeting attention. This further legitimizes the cultural belief that women as the tamers of men whose instincts are viewed as

natural and irrepressible. This is further exemplified in *Hagar the Horrible* (See Figure 4-24 & 4-25) when the same situation and punch line (“Don’t pretend you didn’t notice her!”) were used within two months of one another, the first occurring on July 26th and the second on September 13th. The only significant difference was that the unnamed temptress was different in each opening panel. In doing this, the author seems to feel his audience either has a short attention span, or that regular readers will find humor in Hagar routinely subjecting his wife to his wandering eye.

An age component is also evident in that the temptresses are often young and of fertile age while the men are older and have been with their partners for as long as the strip has been in production. One of the more perplexing instances of this phenomenon is a selection from *Blondie* (See Figure 4-26) in which Dagwood recognizes the weekend weather girl on the street and describes her physical attractiveness in great detail to the dismay of his wife. What the more observant reader will notice is that, with the exception of hairstyle, the object of desire is almost identical to Dagwood’s wife Blondie. From the color and style of clothing and shoes, to the impossibly small waist and disproportionately large bosoms, there is little to distinguish the two women and yet Dagwood’s gaze is diverted to the temptress. There is no counterpart to the phenomenon of the temptress and as a result we must question why it is much rarer for a woman to objectify unfamiliar men at the expense of their husband than vice versa. The answer might lie in the latent belief that women should be expected to have their men leer and not consider it a challenge to their femininity; meanwhile, a cuckolded man is less humorous with such a challenge flying in the face of almost any masculine norm.

The second object of desire is the potential mate who takes the form of the date or potential date who will eventually become a mate. However, given their non-recurring status readers can

safely assume that the relationship will not last and that the potential mate's presence signals that the male recurring character will do something to end the relationship or be the unwitting pawn of the woman. This character was most commonly found in *Dilbert* to showcase the title character's inability to socialize properly with members of the opposite sex, or his naiveté for not recognizing the ways in which he was being targeted for manipulation. However, strips like *Blondie* use a different strategy by making mention of a non-recurring female character as a potential mate when men were in private conversations. The humor in these discussions was often found in the exchanging of ill suited advice on how to deal with members of the opposite sex. Again, an age component is evident in the dissemination of the advice as the conversation often occurs between an elder father figure and a younger son figure. Part of the humor also lies in either generation's inability to properly interact with potential romantic interests furthering the belief that men are completely baffled by the mysterious behavior of women and that attempts to understand them will fail humorously.

The simple fact that there is an extensive amount that can be written about non-recurring female characters speaks volumes to the way recurring female characters are used. While non-recurring characters are just as unlikely to take part in the construction of the joke, their ability to exist as more than one facet of a personality makes them a unique part of gendered humor that has greater implications that their brief appearances allude to.



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Figure 4-1. Seeking normativity A

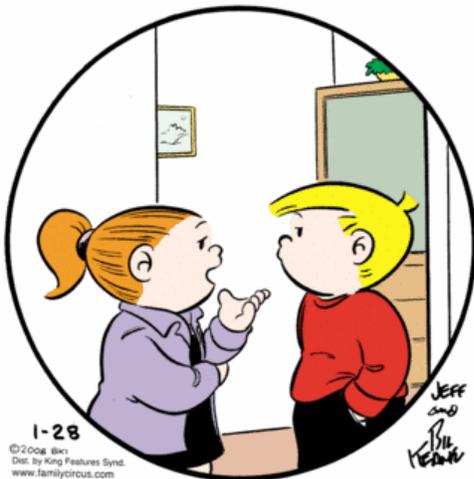


7-28

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“The only boys around are those friends of Billy’s and Jeffy’s!”

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Figure 4-2. Seeking normativity B



1-28

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“The Pink Panther is a girl. If he was a boy he’d be the Blue Panther.”

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Figure 4-3. Seeking normativity C



4-23

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JEFF
AND
BIL
KEANE

“Do you take this man to be your waffley wetted husband?”

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Figure 4-4. Seeking normativity D



9-23

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JEFF
AND
BIL
KEANE

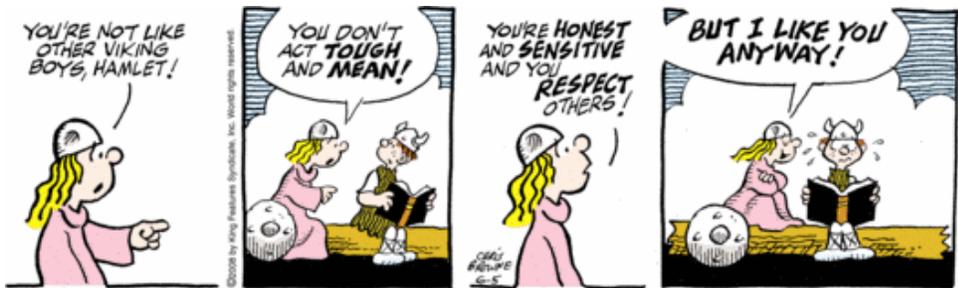
“... right now they're all ... well, you know, Mommy, like Prince Goofy!”

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Figure 4-5. Seeking normativity E

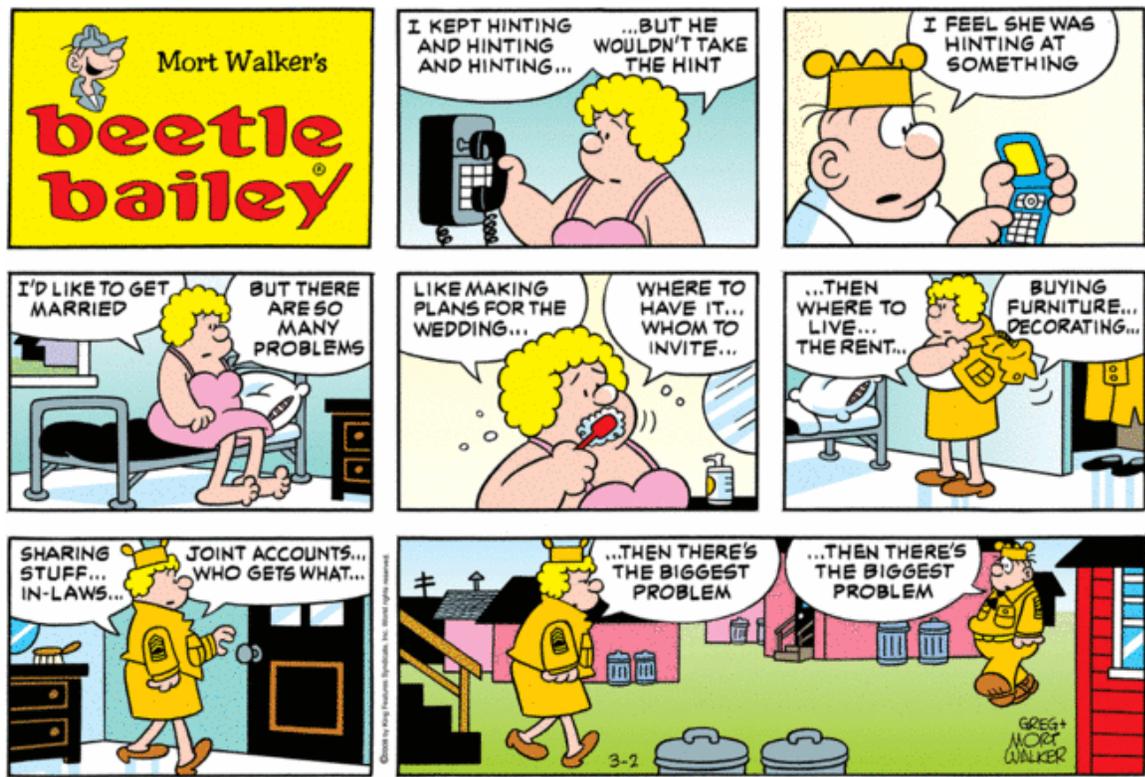


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Figure 4-6. A good man is hard to find A



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Figure 4-7. A good man is hard to find B



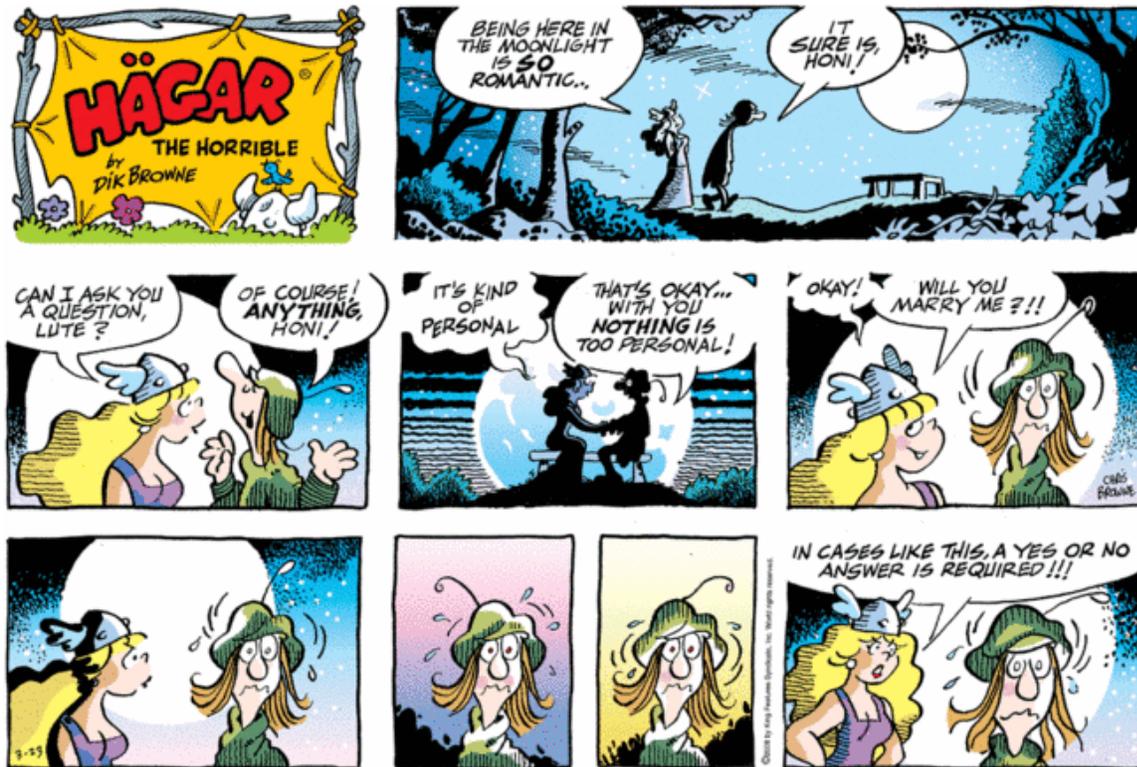
© King Features Syndicate
Figure 4-8. A good man is hard to find C



© King Features Syndicate
Figure 4-9. A good man is hard to find D



© King Features Syndicate
Figure 4-10. A good man is hard to find E



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Figure 4-11. A good man is hard to find F



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Figure 4-12. Housewife A



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Figure 4-13. Housewife B



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Figure 4-14. Housewife C



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Figure 4-15. Housewife D



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Figure 4-16. Housewife E



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Figure 4-17. Housewife F



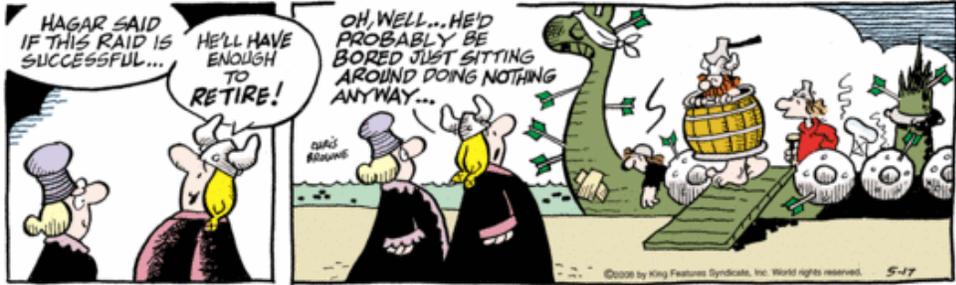
© King Features Syndicate
Figure 4-18. Working women A



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Figure 4-19. Working women B



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Figure 4-20. Gatekeepers



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Figure 4-21. Lady friends A

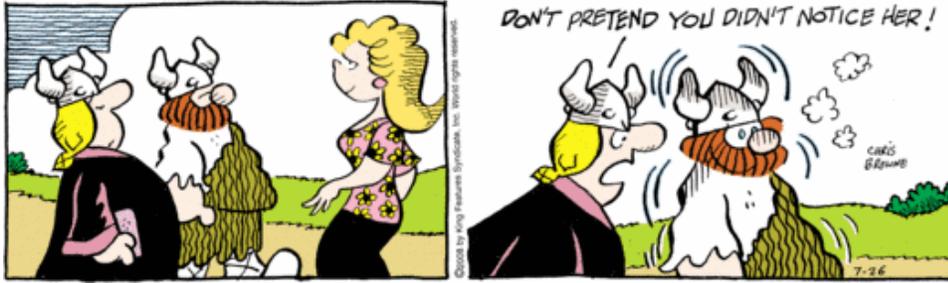


"...and I never get a busy signal."

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Figure 4-22. Lady friends B



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Figure 4-23. Lady friends C



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Figure 4-24. The temptress A



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Figure 4-25. The temptress B



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Figure 4-26. The temptress C

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

Social Implications

The larger social implications for the positioning of men and women in humor are important because as agents of mass media they simultaneously display and enforce gender relations. We can conclude that the top six syndicated comic strips continue to use women primarily as feeds who react to their surroundings rather than creating an identity. They do so by constructing them in traditional gender archetypes that are easily recognizable to anyone with a basic knowledge of our culture. While this is, in part, a result of the way comedy is constructed, it is also a result of a lack of challenging gender norms. Mass media producers seem to act slowly when it comes to adopting new ideas about identity construction. Therefore, each generation relies on the development of a new voice to speak for them. However, the ghosts of older generations linger in the production of classic strips that previous generations enjoy and current generations find pleasantly nostalgic; which results in a high degree of popularity. We must understand that the most effective challenge to gender norms will come as newer productions gain steam and become the voice of a generation. It is only then that older productions will feel comfortable including such themes into their own work.

Not only are these women portrayed using traditional gender stereotypes, but they are also largely viewed as one dimensional. They are wives or mothers, friends or coworkers, and are rarely portrayed as a combination of any that may not automatically be paired. Sadly, this portrayal mirrors the problems of women in the larger society. For so long the domain of women existed primarily in the private sphere leaving them in the home to take care of the domestic duties. Within the walls of the home women were expected to be domestic goddesses content

with caring for children and gossiping with other housewives. (Coontz, 2000; Hochschild, 1989; Spiegel, 2001)

And despite gaining ground in the workforce, women repeatedly feel compelled to choose between being a good mother and being a good employee. And while men can be good fathers and good providers, we seem to doubt the ability of women to accomplish this same task. Our culture also casts suspicion on men and women who are friends because we feel that heterosexual couples cannot be friends and that all women are always looking for their male friend to become romantic partners. Our wives and mothers are encouraged to abandon the overt displays of femininity they are encouraged to take up when they were younger because it is not proper for a wife and mother to be a sexual being to anyone except her husband behind closed doors. In society, as in humor, it seems difficult for us to conceptualize women as having clashing aspects of their personality when in reality we are all complex beings that do not fit into neat little boxes.

It is difficult to differentiate the direction of causality between gender construction and mass media, but it is safe to say it is not a one way relationship. However, there is one place where the most difference can be made, and that is at the level of media producer. The most skilled of these producers must learn to move away from these one dimensional portrayals of women and allow them to be characters in and of themselves. There is hope that if this is done, then society will begin to view all women as complex individuals worthy of their own consideration.

Limitations

It is obvious from my analysis that women and men do not exist independently of one another in the world of syndicated comic strips. This is underscored by the simple fact that

women were underrepresented in the total number of strips, 1006 out of 2196 (45.8%). The inclusion of an analysis of the roles of men in comic strip humor would help to provide context and points of comparison to the roles of women. However, given the magnitude of this current study, such an undertaking would have yielded more results than one thesis could effectively and concisely present. Further analysis is required of men's role in the construction of humor in order to develop a more rounded understanding of the mechanics of gender in humor.

What makes this sample so unique is that it inadvertently selected a group of strips that are all at least 30 years in age (with the exception of *Dilbert* which is now almost 20 years in age) with an average age of 46 years in syndication. Bill Watterson (1996), creator of *Calvin and Hobbes*, characterized some of the comics as "corpses being propped up and passed for living by new cartoonist who ought to be doing something on their own." For these relic strips the original cartoonist has often passed on or is no longer the primary writer and artist for the strip. The reason this constitutes a problem for the construction of gender is evident when one considers that the premises for most of these characters grew out of an entirely different historical period in which gender roles were more rigidly defined. The longevity of the strip may be attributed to the fact that the current artist may be relying on these classical perceptions of gender rather than creating a more contemporary perception of the world. Strips like *Beetle Bailey*, *Blondie*, *The Family Circus*, and *Hagar the Horrible* are all staples in many national papers but my analysis shows the women in the strips have changed very little in comparison to the shifts in our cultural perception of gender. And while this does raise some questions about whether other strips should have been considered, this study was attempting to ascertain the nature of a wide-ranging ideological construction which made this method of selection ideal. This sample does manage to double the time span of Brabant and Mooney's 1997 study, provide more than four times as

many observations as LaRossa et al. made in 2000 and 2001, and has more than ten times as many observations per strip when compared to Glascock and Preston-Schreck's 2004 study.

A future study might attempt to explore the nature of comics that are produced from a female artist's point of view, such as *Cathy* or *Stone Soup*. Furthermore, the nature of these older strips provided a skewed account of traditional family structures and hindered the exploration of women in new family structures, i.e., women who experience aging transitions, and minority women. This is not to say that all old strips are traditional, as seen with *Doonesbury*, or that all new strips are more thoughtful of women, but there appears to be a distinct difference in the construction of gendered humor as time has progressed.

Entire papers could be written about the intersectionality of the female experience yet those experiences are not among the top syndicated strips, as all main characters are white. There was almost a complete absence of representations of other races in the top six strips analyzed as well as a dearth of discussion about class and money. However, it is important to establish a baseline analysis of women in mainstream humor so that future studies may determine how newer forms of humor are using these archetypes, or protesting against them. So while an intersectional look is important, a different sample will most likely need to be procured.

Finally, the study of superiority and incongruity humor can be rather subject based on the reader's location. Because this is a single author paper the analysis was only done by one person. Future studies would benefit from multiple authors coding the same strips multiple times. In this way, multiple interpretations of the strips could be made that would cast the humor in a different light and observe new themes not captured by this paper.

Research Implications

Any form of media research has increasingly become outdated in an era of new media dominance. At the end of the first decade of this new century, newspapers find themselves in danger of becoming extinct with a progressively smaller pool of advertisers in both the paper and in the classifieds. The ever growing reality that the funny pages, as we have known them for almost a century, may become a thing of the past should be acknowledged. However, like any form of creative expression, I believe they will find a new home within this ever changing media landscape. Already we can point to the existence of several prominent comic strips that exist solely in cyberspace with no syndication company representing them. The only question is: will these older strips and their excessive use of archetypes be able to make the transition to a new media production economy?

Furthermore, I believe that the necessity of this research does not lie in simply reevaluating the use of humor or the production of gender in comic strips every 10 years as previous research has done (Brabant, 1967; Brabant & Mooney, 1986; Brabant and Mooney, 1997). Instead, it should serve as a baseline for the construction of gender through humor that can be used as the study of media evolves. Additionally, as the study of humor as a social construction continues to evolve as well, the study of simple constructions (such as those found in comic strips) will help future researchers to understand how more complex forms of humor work to effect the construction of gender as well as other social identities such as class, race, sexuality and many more.

This study has provided a snapshot in time of the construction women in humor in popular mainstream comics. Like the construction of any social identity and interaction, both gender and humor are ever changing constructions that rely of the constructions of the past while simultaneously forging their own characteristics. As the legitimacy of women participating in

mass media continues to grow we cannot continue to ignore the legitimacy of women in humor and the very real effects they have on the construction of gender norms in our larger society.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Daniel Fernandez-Baca was born in Mexico City, Mexico in 1981 to David and Isabel Fernandez-Baca. He moved to California at the tender age of one, and once more to Iowa at the age of 5. He attended the University of Iowa where he received his B.A. in 2003 with a double major in sociology and psychology. His experience after college included working as a research assistant on the NIH funded study PREDICT-HD, as well as stints in retail and construction. In 2006 he returned to school and is currently a graduate student at the University of Florida where he hopes to continue his doctoral work. His research interests include gender, family, and culture. He currently resides in Gainesville with his wife, Jeannette, their cat, Gandalf, and dog, Sophie.