

# FROM KATE SANBORN TO FEMINIST PSYCHOLOGY: THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF WOMEN'S HUMOR, 1885–1985

Alice Sheppard  
*Eastern Oregon State College*

While current feminists are calling for a theoretical psychology of women, the present paper suggests that its foundation can be found in the writings of certain nineteenth-century women. Their conclusions, drawn from a different era and assuming contrasting social science paradigms, parallel and anticipate modern discoveries. This paper examines the work of Kate Sanborn (1839–1917), who edited an anthology of women's humor and crusaded for 20 years to alter the stereotype of women's humorlessness. It is suggested that her work adds to our knowledge of feminist history, as well as presaging current theoretical developments in the psychology of women.

This paper examines one aspect of American women's cognitive and social processes as shaped by historic social roles—women's sense of humor. Studying humor provides insights into historical consciousness and social attitudes, as it is an element of popular culture. It is also a trait whose significance has been recognized by contemporary psychologists as integral to a sense of well-being and as related to personality (McGhee & Goldstein, 1983; Ziv, 1984). Finally, the tradition and evolution of women's humor in America is surprisingly well-documented—although it is necessary to search for these resources.

## DISREGARD OF WOMEN'S HUMOR

The topic of women's humor has been virtually ignored by literary anthologists, social scientists, and the general public. By 1976, feminists themselves

Initial funding for this research was provided by the Oregon Committee for the Humanities in the form of a Summer Fellowship. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the meeting of the Association for Women in Psychology in Seattle, March 1983. Correspondence should be addressed to Alice Sheppard Klak, Department of Psychology, Eastern Oregon State College, LaGrande, OR, 97850.

tried to rectify the imbalanced emphasis on men's humor by producing *Titters: The First Collection of Humor by Women* (Stillman & Beatts, 1976). The book, a collection of parody, satire, and illustrations, included contributions by such notables as Erma Bombeck, Phyllis Diller, Phyllis McGinley, Gail Parent, and Gilda Radner—though it was not the “first,” as will be shown. *Titters* was followed a few years later by *Pulling Our Own Strings* (Kaufman & Blakely, 1980), a volume containing selections by Nora Ephron, Gloria Steinem, Flo Kennedy, Claire Bretécher and others, and organized around themes such as menstruation, motherhood, marriage, clowning, politics, and female roles. While Stillman & Beatts (1976) regarded their selections as “humor by women” rather than “women’s humor” (p. 4), Kaufman and Blakely (1980) sought a more direct rationale for their selections: “Feminist humor is based on the perception that societies have generally been organized as systems of oppression and exploitation, and that the largest (but not the only) oppressed group has been the female” (p. 13). Historic women humorists and wits were acknowledged in Kaufman’s introduction, although only a few examples of early women’s humor were reprinted. These were written by “Fanny Fern” (Sara Willis Parton, 1811–1872), Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902), and Alice Duer Miller (1874–1942).

Given the relative neglect of women’s humor in recent years, it may be surprising to learn of repeated efforts by women over the past century to praise women humorists and call attention to their significance. In 1885, Kate Sanborn published *The Wit of Women* to prove that American women were not devoid of humor. The book, approximately 200 pages long, was written in a casual, almost conversational style, and offered contents ranging from informal anecdotes to literary quotations, accompanied by a kind of intuitive psychological analysis. Kate Sanborn’s decision to publish her collection of women’s humor was prompted by an appeal for evidence of women’s humor published in the *Critic* in 1884 and by two well-reasoned responses to this appeal from writer Alice Rollins. Rollins’ first article, “Woman’s Sense of Humor” (1884a), used literary works to prove that women could indeed have a sense of humor. The second, “The Humor of Women” (1884b), elaborated the initial theme with the further claim that women not only possessed humor, but used a distinct and more intellectual form of humor than did men!

Kate Sanborn, herself already a published author, solicited contributions from women humorists, many of them personal acquaintances, to complete her anthology. In a letter to a writer in Concord, Massachusetts (probably Harriette W. Lothrop, “Margaret Sidney”), she explained:

I’m trying to compile a book on the Wit and Humor of American Women—a thing never attempted before. I think I might to have [sic] something from you. Will you kindly mail me some selections to choose from?<sup>1</sup>

By the years of the great Depression, women again collected their humor—this time in the form of a celebration. Artist-writer Martha Bruère teamed up with historian Mary Beard to edit *Laughing Their Way: Women's Humor in America* (1934). The book, nearly 300 pages, was organized by genre (verse, columns, skits, character studies, etc.) and, in addition to literary selections, was illustrated with women's humorous crafts, cartoons, and drawings. Bruère and Beard believed that women's humor was inherently different from men's, observing in their introduction:

In spite of differences of time and condition, women's humor always bears their proprietary brand. The sexes have their own directions for toleration. . . . And among women, the flowers of their humor are as varied as their lives. . . . Yet the angle of vision from which women see a lack of balance, wrong proportions, disharmonies, and incongruities in life is a thing of their world as it must be—a world always a little apart. (p. viii)

In light of these historical efforts, why do contemporary feminists believe themselves to lack a tradition of women's humor (e.g., Stillman & Beatts, 1976; Weisstein, 1973) or to be discovering women's humor for the very first time? Part of the answer lies in the nature of gender roles.

## GENDER ROLES AND HUMOR

Twentieth-century women constitute a minority in professional humor and comedy, where even Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers are perceived as anomalies in the field (Collier & Beckett, 1980). With the women's movement of the 1960s, new interest in women humorists arose, and their rarity began to be explained through the concept of gender roles. As Naomi Weisstein (1973) explained:

But being a funny, nasty clown doesn't go along with the definition of WOMAN that gets us our provider (beautiful, mysterious, she keeps her own counsel; a quiet stream beneath the blah, blah, blah); an independent, mocking humor is too active for the objectified role we were supposed to fill. Yes, we had an obligation to laugh endlessly at men's jokes, whether or not they were funny, insulting, crude, unpleasant, stupid. . . . (p. 6)

Paul McGhee (1979) emphasized socially derived roles in his survey on the development of female humor and showed the mechanisms that affected aspects of men's and women's humor differentially.

It is proposed here that a clearly definable set of sex-role standards regarding humor exists for males and females in our culture. Most important along these lines is the expectation that males should be initiators of humor, while females should be responders. . . . Because of the power associated with the successful use of humor, humor initiation has become associated with other traditionally

masculine characteristics, such as aggressiveness, dominance, and assertiveness. For a female to develop into a clown or joker, then, *she must violate the pattern normally reserved for women* [italics added]. (pp. 183–184)

We tend to accept the above analysis at face value as reflecting the insights of twentieth-century psychology. A century of research and theory have culminated in such views. But now consider an excerpt written in 1885 by Kate Sanborn, writer and lecturer, who never studied the social sciences.

[T]here is a reason for our [women's] apparent lack of humor, which it may seem ungracious to mention. Women do not find it politic to cultivate or express their wit. No man likes to have his story capped by a better and fresher from a lady's lips. What woman does not risk being called sarcastic and hateful if she throws back the merry dart or engages in a little sharp-shooting? No, no, it's dangerous—if not fatal. (pp. 205–206)

Sanborn speculated on the meaning of humor as a psychological trait and denied the inherent lack of humor in women. She insisted that such traits were molded by social practices and argued as follows:

It is affirmed that “women seldom repeat an anecdote.” That is well, and no proof of their lack of wit. The discipline of life would be largely increased if they did [sic] insist on being “reminded” constantly of anecdotes as familiar as the hand-organ repertoire of “Captain Jinks” and “Beautiful Spring.” Their sense of humor is too keen to allow them to aid these aged wanderers in their endless migrations. (pp. 15–16)

In short, women's sense of humor was superior to men's and transcended reliance on stale jokes or borrowed material. Sanborn judged spontaneity an important characteristic of women's joking, observing that it predominated in informal settings where shared amusement was the objective.

The wit of women is like the airy froth of champagne, or the witching iridescence of the soap-bubble, blown for a moment's sport. The sparkle, the life, the fascinating foam, the gay tints vanish with the occasion, because there is no listening Boswell with unfailing memory and capacious note-book to preserve them. Then, unlike men, women do not write out their impromptus before-hand and carefully hoard them for the publisher—and posterity! (p. 207)

## INTRAPSYCHIC ASPECTS OF GENDER

In a literary study of autobiography in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Estelle Jelinek (1980) found contrasting realities reflected in male and female consciousness. Reflecting women's experience of their own lives and roles in society, women's narratives appeared disconnected, fragmen-

tary, and irregular. In contrast, males' experiences of life events were unified and linear, yielding chronologically organized stories. There is a parallel between nineteenth-century male humorists' structured stories of adventure and their masculine life perspectives. Women, in contrast, eschewed the dramatic episode, developing a style whose main attributes were the portrayal of ludicrous women and parodies of female roles.

Aspects of men's and women's social realities have been discussed by contemporary psychologists. For example, David Gutmann (1970) theorized that what males perceive as detached or bounded beyond themselves (Schachtel's [1959] allocentric mode), females treat as a source of connectedness, feeling, and conveying personal significance (the autocentric mode). Moreover, this approach reveals continuity between nineteenth-century social organization and associated literary styles, and the intrapsychic structures of males and females today. In the light of personalized perception, the whimsy and absurdity commonly found in women's humor may relate to differential use of symbolism or an enhanced entry into the fantasy realm (Groch, 1974).

## NINETEENTH-CENTURY WOMEN'S HUMOR

Although American history books and literary anthologies are generally silent on the topic of women's humor in the nineteenth century, popular women humorists existed, contributing to newspapers and magazines; writing short stories, children's books, and novels; and earning reputations as brilliant and witty conversationalists. In addition, the humor of nineteenth-century women contributes to our historical understanding, as documented by Linda Morris (1979).

If there were no other evidence to support the conclusion, this particular vernacular humor could take us a long way toward understanding that men and women in nineteenth-century America, especially in the literate classes, lived in adult worlds that consisted almost exclusively of other members of their own sex. (p. 275)

As for these major nineteenth-century women humorists, they ranged from mid-century columnist Ann Stephens, creator of Jonathan Slick, a country youth encountering the big, industrial city, to Marietta Holley, author of approximately 20 books written between 1872 and 1914 under the name of "Josiah Allen's Wife." Holley's immense popularity was attested to in contemporary periodicals (*The Lounger*, 1905; Wagnalls, 1903), and her work has been reintroduced to the modern reader (Curry, 1983). Preceding Holley's work by two decades was another pinnacle of women's humor, *The Widow Bedott Papers* (1856), written by Frances Mirium Berry Whitcher and published posthumously. Whitcher's persona, Priscilla ("Silly") Bedott, is a conniving, middle-aged woman, whose one goal in life is to remarry as

quickly as possible. Women's protagonists typically define themselves in relation to others: while Widow Bedott spends her time looking for a husband, Josiah Allen's Wife is constantly tied to hers. Samantha Allen has been married for fourteen years to Josiah, a balding widower of slight build. Samantha, a hefty 200-pounder, is a woman outspoken in her dedication to practical reason, moral values, and human rights. Yet she senses no conflict between her intense devotion to Josiah and her efforts on behalf of "wimmen's rites." Nor does she avoid a realistic assessment of her "pardner's" weaknesses.

I knew the size and strength of his mind, jest as well as if I had took it out of his head, and weighed it on the steelyards. It was *not* over and above large. . . . But he knows that my love for him towers up like a dromedary, and moves off through life as stately as she duz—the dromedary. Josiah was my choice out of a world full of men. I love Josiah Allen. (Holley, 1885, p. 107)

Returning to the early effort to laud women humorists, we shall now outline the career of Kate Sanborn (1839–1917). Sanborn, a seventh-generation New Englander, was reared in an atmosphere of Yankee wit and humor. She was a witty woman whose professional activities included public speaking, adult education, college teaching, and writing. Her midlife introduction to farming, published in *Adopting an Abandoned Farm* (K. Sanborn, 1891), has been considered a good representative of American humor and was influential in the late-century "back-to-the-land" movement (Hanscom, 1935). She also wrote a sequel, *Abandoning an Adopted Farm* (K. Sanborn, 1894).

In Kate Sanborn's humor anthology, we find one woman's effort to assemble a representative sample of women's humor for the 1880s. She selected brief anecdotes to illustrate a particular woman's propensity for wit and included several literary excerpts, one extending to 11 pages. To some extent, Sanborn's criteria for inclusion was a disadvantage to the modern reader; for example, she cited Frances Mirium Witcher of the *Widow Bedott Papers* (1856) as only "a familiar name," "popular," and conveying "good examples . . . of an amusing series of comicalities" and explained that Marietta Holley, by then the author of three books in her popular Samantha Allen series, "must be allowed only a brief quotation" (K. Sanborn, 1885, p. 69). Still other humorists were omitted because Sanborn felt that their work could not be excerpted without destroying the humor.

## BECOMING A NINETEENTH-CENTURY WOMAN HUMORIST

What about the women who managed to become humorists in the nineteenth century? Are there any common threads to their lives that would help us to understand the intricate relationships between personality, gender roles, and historical time? Most of the prominent women humorists were middle-

class and well-educated, came from established families in the Northeast, and additionally showed streaks of rebellion and mischief in their characters. Young Frances Mirium Whitcher enjoyed drawing caricatures of her friends, recalling

I can scarcely remember the time when the neighbors were not afraid that I would "make fun of them." For indulging in this propensity, I was scolded at home, and wept over and prayed with, by certain well-meaning old maids in the neighborhood; but all to no purpose. (Neal, 1856, pp. xiii–xiv)

Whitcher published anonymously and, sharing George Eliot's cohort, initially selected a masculine pseudonym, "Frank" (Stearns, 1936).

Marietta Holley, raised on a fifth-generation family farm in upstate New York, attended a nearby school but was also tutored at home in French and music. Her childhood verses and sketches were hidden "jealously from every eye," until she began publishing as "Jemyma" in the hometown paper (Willard & Livermore, 1893). She eventually turned to the name "Samantha" as symbolizing "absolute practicality" and as a contrast to the whimsical names (e.g., "Fanny Fern") then much in vogue with women writers (Wagnalls, 1903, p. 61).

Kate Sanborn, a staunch New Englander, was raised on the campus of Dartmouth College, where her much-adored father was a professor of classics. Both he and his wife (a niece of Daniel Webster) were determined to obtain a good education for their first-born, Kate. She was tutored in Greek, English literature, and elocution and was herself ready to teach by her late teens. As a child, she was "pert and audacious" (K. Sanborn, 1915, pp. 2–3). When once silenced for screaming from a burned finger, she told her father, "Put your fingers on that teapot—and don't kitikize" (p. 3). Told to go to bed at her regular seven o'clock bedtime, she retorted, "I'm going to sit up till eight tonight, and don't you 'spute" (p. 3). Her parents upheld strict standards of conduct, as is evident from her father's letter when Kate was visiting relatives.

I hope you will be so obedient that they can send home a good report for every day. Then you will remember, I hope, to be very respectful and never reply to anything they may say. Some little girls reply to their parents and dispute what is said to them. Such children become very disagreeable and nobody ever loves them. (Letter, 15 September, 1847)<sup>2</sup>

We have briefly surveyed some nineteenth-century women humorists and their family backgrounds. The most persistent question remaining, then, concerns why they were repeatedly overlooked by critics and historians. It becomes more remarkable in the face of Kate Sanborn's monomaniacal efforts to counteract attitudes of her day.

## EFFORTS TO RECOGNIZE WOMEN'S HUMOR

Did Kate Sanborn's arguments for and numerous examples of humor diminish the stereotype of women's humorlessness? Reviews of the *The Wit of Women* were scarce, and Sanborn (1915) later reflected, "If a masculine book reviewer ever alluded to the book, it was with a sneer. He generally left it without a word. . . ." (p. 164). The British *Saturday Review* ("Review of *The Wit of Women*," 1886) may be typical of the general negative reaction: "If anything could induce disbelief in the reality of feminine wit, it would be the facetious poetry by various American ladies which Miss Sanborn, with more patriotism than discretion, has seen fit to publish" (p. 126).

Despite such responses, Kate Sanborn did not abandon her humor crusade but continued writing and lecturing on humor into the next decade. Her public lecture "Are Women Witty?" (1898) expanded the major themes of the book and was highly entertaining.

At the turn of the century, none other than the *New York Times* instigated discussions on women's humor, with a focus on literary aspects. The *Saturday Review* section of the *Times* ("Women Among," 1900) printed the following, allegedly based on a true conversation:

Now, on the contrary, search the list of women writers from Mary E. Wilkins to Mrs. Aphra Behn, and *you will not find a single professedly woman humorous writer* [italics added]. Some of them may have sporadic flashes of fun, but they soon lapse into gravity or sentimentality . . . It may be that women are deprived of the humorous sense in the same manner that a person may be born without sight or hearing or speech. (p. 40)

The commentary concluded with an invitation for readers to aid in the quest for a "real woman humorous writer" and promised that replies would be published. The next week the readers' page contained the heading, "Kate Sanborn, One of Them, Makes a Defense" (K. Sanborn, 1900). She selected Marietta Holley as the strongest "professedly" humorous woman writer and presented an additional list of 82 "Real Women Humorous Writers." Other readers sent in their choices of women humorists, and several of them mentioned Sanborn. If the issue remained unresolved, it was not for lack of interest!

Throughout the early years of the century, the issue of women's humor re-emerged sporadically. In 1902, Burges Johnson introduced a two-part series on "The New Humor" with photographs of four humorists, three of whom were women (Carolyn Wells, Josephine Daskam, and Mrs. Atwood Martin). *Good Housekeeping* contained an article by Arthur Maurice (1910) in which he described the "new school" of American humor as "at least three-fifths feminine." *Woman's Home Companion* published an article by Jeannette Gilder (1912), "Women Writers as Humorists," which praised a number of women humorists: Mary Wilkins Freeman, George Eliot, Alice



Hegan Rice, Anne Warner, Mary Roberts Rinehart, Josephine Daskam, Carolyn Wells, Mary Heaton Vorse, and others. The creator of a successful stage comedy and co-editor of the *Critic*, Gilder had now taken a stand in the debate. Indeed, a careful reading of her Lounger column in first the *Critic* and later *Putnam's*, into which the *Critic* was subsequently absorbed, showed her to have praised women humorists over the years.<sup>3</sup>

## HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN WOMEN'S HUMOR

Kate Sanborn's campaign for the recognition of women's humor coincided with a major transition in American thought. In her memoirs some 15 years later, *Memories and Anecdotes* (1915), Sanborn exclaimed: "Now you can hardly find any one who denies that women possess both qualities [wit and humor], and it is generally acknowledged that not a few have the added gift of comedy" (p. 164).

The issue of women's humor was debated within the relatively short span of twenty years (roughly 1884–1904). Within this period two distinct phases can be discerned. The first phase consisted of greater attention to the question of women's humor, found referred to in newspapers and periodicals of the times. Theoretical reviews, however, could still overlook women humorists, as shown by an article, "American Literary Comedians" by Henry Lukens (1890), that discussed only men.

The second phase began as women humorists were acknowledged and given a place with men. For example, the ten-volume series, *The Wit and Humor of America* (Wilder, 1907), contained 31 women out of 206 humorists, about 15%. By the turn of the century, women's magazines published a great deal of comic poetry and humorous drawings by women. In the century's second decade, humor had changed to the point that the stock vaudeville character of a very large man in petticoats and a wig wearing a "Votes for Women" banner had actually disappeared. Beatrice Hale (1914) explained the significance of the change in public attitude: "The tone of public humour is infinitely higher than it used to be, for the reason that as women learn to value themselves more, they are more valued by men" (p. 117).

## AGENTS OF SOCIAL CHANGE

The existence of women's humor was most strongly acknowledged shortly after the turn of the century. Probably a number of factors were responsible for this rapid and effective change, and some of the important ones include: (1) education, (2) domestic science, (3) political activism, and (4) the increasing convergence between male and female social spheres. Each of these will be examined.

## Education

The latter half of the nineteenth century witnessed a rapid increase in educational opportunities for women and in the founding of women's colleges. Once the belief in the potentially harmful physical effects of education on women had been dispelled, the educational "woman question" could now focus on just *how* women should be educated. By 1881, the Association of Collegiate Women, later the American Association of University Women, was founded to promote lifetime learning for women (Frankfort, 1977). Artistic and literary studies, the more "feminine" aspects of a classical education, provided the skills for women to become comic artists and writers.

## Domestic science

The new science of home economics created professional interest in activities such as food preparation and home management, which were considered to be in the female domain. The magazine *Good Housekeeping* attested to new scientific and social benefits for women, elevating child and home to subjects for scientific inquiry. These offered a new focus for humor. For example, Josephine Daskam's *Memoirs of a Baby* (1904) was a satire on then-new child-rearing methods. The domestic humor formula has continued to this day in the work of columnist Erma Bombeck and cartoonist Lynn Johnston.

## Political activism

Dedication to the cause of woman suffrage was accelerated at the turn of the century and found representatives in the humor profession. It has been claimed that the humor of Marietta Holley did more for the women's cause than many more serious advocates (Blair, 1942). While collective political goals unified sympathies, cartoons were recognized as an effective instrument for change in the hands of early-century political cartoonists Nina Allender, Blanche Ames, and Lou Rogers (Sheppard, 1984).

## Converging social spheres

In the late nineteenth century, women's sphere was the home and men's the marketplace. Because of these occupational and social divisions, areas of interest were different. As Linda Morris (1979) revealed: "Thus, for both sexes, the final and decisive factor that distinguishes their humor from each other's is their preoccupation with the affairs, activities, and concerns of their own sex" (p. 275).

Works of women's humor in the nineteenth century were characterized by domestic settings and an orientation toward interpersonal relationships.

The contemporary blurring of these distinctions has altered the experience of both sexes and perhaps diminished the most characteristic features of "women's humor."

### WOMEN'S HISTORY AND FEMINIST THEORY

There is little in theories of women's humor that recognizes its own historical evolution. A comprehensive framework, moreover, would clarify the relationship between social change and humor. To what extent has women's humor actively brought about social change, or does it passively reflect society's inconsistencies and injustices? Given the contemporary humor of women and men, what gender differences still exist? Are the dimensions that underlie gender distinctions today similar to those in the nineteenth century? Has the magnitude of these differences been reduced? Many questions remain to be answered.

Study of late-nineteenth-century writings reveals a discrepancy between the existence of women's humor and its recognition by the literary world. For example, Marietta Holley, whose works were widely read, elicited reactions from critics such as the following.

It's up-hill work for a man to be funny through a book of ordinary size, but it is much more difficult when a woman undertakes the task in an extended way. "Samantha at Saratoga" is a peculiarly sad and depressing volume. . . . ("Review of *Samantha*," 1887, p. 14)

The number of copies sold, however, was a figure approaching the 500,000 for *Huckleberry Finn*, ranking it a "better seller" (Mott, 1947).

The main obstacle to recognizing women's humor lay in the construct "woman humorist," with its implicit gender bias. Kate Sanborn understood that society's attitudes did not reflect its behavior and pointed out the inconsistency. Concluding her discussion on Marietta Holley, Sanborn (1898) wrote as follows.

Men, I mean publishers, find that women's wit puts much money in their pockets. As they rattle the gold and caressingly count the bills from twentieth editions, do they still think of women as sad, crushed, sentimental, hero-adoring geese, who can't see the humorous side? (p. 324).

More surprising is the realization that vestiges of these stereotypes are still with us in the continued failure to acknowledge the tradition of women's humor. Because of the male-based standard, many professionals and scholars, both women and men, show an inability to perceive the tradition of women as humorists. Lois Rather (1971) explored the implications of editors and anthologists who were male. Nevertheless, she found Whitcher's work "less than uproarious" (p. 8) and settled for the conclusion, "If we come right

down to it, maybe women just aren't as funny" (p. 10). *The Feminization of American Culture* by Ann Douglas (1977) deals with the influence of women on the nineteenth century intellect. Yet Douglas fails to include any reference to humor, comedy, wit, or women's humor in the 22-page index, even though she actually discusses it in her presentation of Lyman Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Of Beecher's children, only she [Harriet] relished the vernacular as he did; she outdid her father in her shrewd instinct for comedy, and became *the only major feminine humorist* [emphasis added] nineteenth-century America produced. (p. 294)

To some extent it is possible for feminists to reconstruct the tradition of women's humor (Curry, 1976; Dresner, 1982; Morris, 1979; Sheppard, 1984; Walker, 1984) and to document contemporary trends (Neitz, 1980; Sheppard, 1985). Yet historical research is impeded by the fact that failing to recognize the significance of women humorists causes the exclusion of their papers and correspondence from libraries and archives. Kate Sanborn may be studied today not because historians recognized the value of the women's humor question but because she happened to be the daughter of an important academic family and *their* papers were retained. She also had an admiring younger brother who submitted a full-length, illustrated biography shortly after her death (E. Sanborn, 1918). Other humorists have not fared so well, with few remnants surviving from which to reconstruct their lives. In short, only certain types of social histories are researchable because the subject matter of history itself is remolded by social forces. For those excluded from the dominant culture, as women have been, continuity with the past is frequently disrupted or lost. Jean Baker Miller (1976) knew what this meant for a psychology of women: "Most records of these actions are not preserved by the dominant culture, making it difficult for the subordinate group to find a supporting tradition and history" (p. 11).

Much of our insight into this period comes from analyses of gender roles and their history. Kate Sanborn's analysis of humor in 1885 and those by psychologists of the 1970s emphasize differences in men's and women's humor. Each demonstrates how these can be viewed as derived from sex role expectations and the differential behaviors prescribed for each gender. What progress, then, has been achieved in our theories of women's humor over the past hundred years? It appears that popular beliefs about women and the stereotype of their humorlessness are changing faster than the conceptual tools offered by social scientists. Moreover, if the relevant history is not reviewed, there is constant danger of re-inventing old theories.

Identifying a social group as oppressed or for whom certain actions are disallowed does not constitute a sufficient psychological interpretation of the group's experience and perceptions. A feminist theory of psychology must move beyond mere role contrasts to an understanding of the social world as

perceived by women at a given historical time. Historic humor enables one to rediscover perceived incongruities and thus reconstruct a lost perspective. It constitutes a step in understanding the processes by which those perceptions are created and altered. Consider the framework proposed by Berger and Luckmann (1966) in *The Social Construction of Reality*.

The reality of everyday life maintains itself by being embodied in routines, which is the essence of institutionalization. Beyond this, however, the reality of everyday life is ongoingly reaffirmed in the individual's interaction with others. Just as reality is originally internalized by a social process, so it is maintained in consciousness by social processes. (p. 149)

While sociologists and psychologists have acknowledged the social origins of our cognitive experience, they cling to the universalized, i.e., male, model. Carol Gilligan (1982) has argued that women's experiences are ignored "in part from the assumption that there is a single mode of social experience and interpretation" (p. 173). Berger and Luckmann's (1966) analysis shows the progression from daily routines and social interaction to social reality. Just as the social activities and patterns of interaction differ for males and females, so do the resulting realities.

In sum, the question of women's humor becomes not "why didn't women develop a humor tradition?" but "why has the humor which was created and appreciated by women been ignored?" We have seen that part of the answer lies in the social worlds of past generations, culminating in the exaggeration of separate spheres in the late nineteenth century. Men's and women's activities were distinct, were thought to reflect contrasting spiritual and instinctive characters, and resulted in contrasting cognitive constructions of their experience. Humor, an instrument of social correction and subversion, reinforced women's shared perceptions, strengthened social bonds, and itself facilitated social change. Masculine aspects of humor—violence, power, and adventure—were deemed inappropriate for the world of women, which was properly oriented toward social etiquette, true womanhood, and sentimentality (Walker, 1981). Women created their own humor, complying with social restrictions and revealing a unique perspective.

In the course of history, new activities for women brought changes in role definition. Yet, despite these transitions, substantial continuity in women's consciousness remains, such that feminists of today may read historical women's humor and feel that they have discovered their hidden roots. By studying the development of women's humor in America, we can trace everyday realities, social consciousness, and awareness of the forces that oppress women. Feminist theory must deal with women's psychological experience across differing times in history to discover the genesis of social cognitions. As George Eliot (1876/1967) knew too well, "A difference of taste in jokes is a great strain on the affections" (p. 201).

## NOTES

1. Material reprinted courtesy the Trustees of the Boston Public Library. Department of Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library.
2. By courtesy of Dartmouth College Library Archives.
3. Frank Mott (1938) identified Jeannette Gilder as the "Lounger" columnist, implying that she was the author of the *Critic's* commentary on women's humor. A contrary opinion is offered by Alfred Habegger (1982; personal communication, January 11, 1984), who believes that her brother, Joseph Gilder, was the Lounger.

## REFERENCES

- Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality*. New York: Doubleday/Anchor.
- Blair, W. (1942). *Horse sense in American humor*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bruère, M., & Beard, M. (Eds.). (1934). *Laughing their way: Women's humor in America*. New York: Macmillan.
- Collier, D., & Beckett, K. (1980). *Spare ribs: Women in the humor biz*. New York: St. Martin's.
- Curry, J. A. (1976). Women as subjects and writers of nineteenth-century American humor. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 36, 6681A. (University Microfilms No. 76-9379)
- Curry, J. A. (Ed.). (1983). *Samantha rastles the woman question*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Daskam, J. (1904). *The memoirs of a baby*. New York: Harper's.
- Douglas, A. (1977). *The feminization of American culture*. New York: Knopf.
- Dresner, Z. Z. (1982). Twentieth century American women humorists. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 43, 1970A. (University Microfilms No. 82-26451)
- Eliot, G. (1967). *Daniel Deronda*. New York: Penguin. (Original work published 1876)
- Frankfort, R. (1977). *Collegiate women: Domesticity and career in turn-of-the-century women*. New York: New York University Press.
- Gilder, J. (1912, May). Women writers as humorists. *Woman's Home Companion*, p. 22.
- Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Groch, A. (1974). Generality of response to humor and wit in cartoons, jokes, stories, and photographs. *Psychological Reports*, 35, 835-838.
- Gutmann, D. (1970). Female ego styles and generational conflict. In J. M. Bardwick, E. Douvan, M. S. Horner, & D. Gutmann, *Feminine personality and conflict* (pp. 77-96). Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Habegger, A. (1982). *Gender, fantasy and realism in American literature*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hale, B. F. (1914). *What women want: An interpretation of the feminist movement*. New York: Stokes.
- Hanscom, E. D. (1935). Sanborn, Katherine Abbott. In D. Malone (Ed.), *Dictionary of American biography* (Vol. 16, pp. 327-328). New York: Scribner's.
- Holley, M. (1885). *Sweet Cicely, or Josiah Allen as a politician*. New York: Funk & Wagnalls.
- Jelinek, E. C. (1980). Introduction: Women's autobiography and the male tradition. In E. C. Jelinek (Ed.), *Women's autobiography* (pp. 1-20). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Johnson, B. (1902). The new humor, *Critic*, 40, 331-338.
- Kaufman, G., & Blakely, M. K. (Eds.). (1980). *Pulling our own strings*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- The Lounger. (1884). *Critic*, 4, 138.
- The Lounger. (1905). *Critic*, 46, 6.
- Lukens, H. C. (1890, April). American literary comedians. *Harper's*, pp. 783-797.
- Maurice, A. (1910, January). Feminine humorists. *Good Housekeeping*, pp. 34-39.
- McGhee, P. E. (1979). The role of laughter and humor in growing up female. In C. B. Kopp (Ed.), *Becoming female* (pp. 183-206). New York: Plenum.

- McGhee, P. E., & Goldstein, J. H. (Eds.). (1983). *Handbook of humor research* (Vols. 1–2). New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Miller, J. B. (1976). *Toward a new psychology of women*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Morris, L. A. F. (1979). Women vernacular humorists in nineteenth-century America: Ann Stephens, Frances Whitcher, and Marietta Holley. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 40, 258A. (University Microfilms No. 79–14705)
- Mott, F. (1938). *A history of American magazines* (Vol. 3). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Mott, F. (1947). *Golden multitudes: The story of best sellers in the United States*. New York: Macmillan.
- Neal, A. B. (1856). Introductory. In F. M. Whitcher, *The Widow Bedott papers* (pp. ix–xix). New York: Derby.
- Neitz, M. J. (1980). Humor, hierarchy, and the changing status of women. *Psychiatry*, 43, 211–223.
- Rather, L. (1971). Were women funny? Some 19th century humorists. *American Book Collector*, 21, 5–10.
- Review of *The wit of women*. (1886, January 23). *Saturday Review of Literature, Science, and Art*, 61, p. 126.
- Review of *Samantha at Saratoga*. (1887, September 25). *New York Times*, p. 14.
- Rollins, A. W. (1884a). Woman's sense of humor. *Critic*, 4, 145–146.
- Rollins, A. W. (1884b). The humor of women. *Critic*, 4, 301–302.
- Sanborn, E. W. (1918). *Kate Sanborn*. Boston: McGrath Sherrill.
- Sanborn, K. (1885). *The wit of women*. New York: Funk & Wagnalls.
- Sanborn, K. (1891). *Adopting an abandoned farm*. New York: Appleton.
- Sanborn, K. (1894). *Abandoning an adopted farm*. New York: Appleton.
- Sanborn, K. (1898). Are women witty? In K. Sanborn, *My favorite lectures of long ago for friends who remember* (pp. 309–338). Boston: Case, Lockwood, & Brainard.
- Sanborn, K. (1900, January 27). Kate Sanborn, one of them, makes a defense. [Letter to the editor]. *New York Times Saturday Review*, p. 52.
- Sanborn, K. (1915). *Memories and anecdotes*. New York: Putnam.
- Schachtel, E. G. (1959). *Metamorphosis: On the development of affect, perception, attention and memory*. New York: Basic Books.
- Sheppard, A. (1984). There were ladies present! American women cartoonists and comic artists in the early twentieth century. *Journal of American Culture*, 7, 38–48.
- Sheppard, A. (1985). Funny women: Social change and audience response to female comedians. *Empirical Studies in the Arts*, 3, 179–195.
- Stearns, B. M. (1936). Whitcher, Frances Mirium Berry. In D. Malone (Ed.), *Dictionary of American biography* (Vol. 20, p. 82). New York: Scribner's.
- Stillman, D., & Beatts, A. (Eds.). (1976). *Titters: The first collection of humor by women*. New York: Collier.
- Wagnalls, M. (1903, November). A glimpse of Marietta Holley. *Ladies Home Journal*, p. 61.
- Walker, N. (1981). Wit, sentimentality, and the image of women in the nineteenth century. *American Studies*, 22, 5–22.
- Walker, N. (1984). *The tradition of women's humor in America*. Huntington Beach, CA: American Studies Publishing Co.
- Weinstein, N. (1973). Introduction. In E. Levine, *All she needs* (pp. 1–10). New York: Quadrangle.
- Whitcher, F. M. B. (1856). *The Widow Bedott papers*. New York: Derby.
- Wildor, M. P. (Ed.). (1907). *The wit and humor of America*, (vols. 1–10). New York: Funk & Wagnalls.
- Willard, F. E., & Livermore, M. A. (1893). Holley, Miss Marietta. In F. E. Willard & M. A. Livermore (Eds.), *A woman of the century* (p. 386). New York: Moulton.
- Women among humorists. (1900, January 20). *New York Times Saturday Review*, p. 40.
- Ziv, A. (1984). *Personality and sense of humor*. New York: Springer.