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ABSTRACT

Intended to highlight the work which exists on women's folk humor and to encourage its further exploration, this annotated bibliography has been selected to provide access to the key works dealing with the oral tradition in women's folk humor. The bibliography's 33 annotations range from 1968 through 1992 and are gathered under the headings of "Background Theory and Method," "Women and Folk Humor," and "Women and Joke Telling." Both books and articles are included. (NKA)

WOMEN AND FOLK HUMOR COMMUNICATION

An Annotated Bibliography

by

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The following bibliography has been selected to provide access to the key works dealing with women's oral folk humor. An increasing body of work on women's literary humor is emerging. Critical attention is also being paid to women comedians, comics, and cartoonists. However, to date, little work has been done on women's oral humor. This bibliography is intended to highlight that work which exists and to encourage the further exploration of women's oral folk humor.

BACKGROUND THEORY AND METHOD

The following works highlight selected key sources dealing with women and folklore, general works on women and humor, and general humor research.

Barreca, Regina. (1991). They used to call me Snow White. . .but I drifted: Women's strategic use of humor. New York: Penguin Books.

This readable book blends sociology, women's studies, and popular culture to provide an overview of some of the issues related to women's use and perception of humor. Topics examined within the text include gender appreciation differences, the social construction of women's relationship to humor, jokes as subversion, same gender versus mixed gender humor, humor as a power construct, and humor that challenges hegemonic devices. Over six dozen citations are included in the bibliography.

Bunkers, Suzanne L. (1985). Why are these women laughing? The power and politics of women's humor. Studies in American Humor [n.s.] 4(1,2): 82-93.

Based on women's literary humor, cartoons, music, and other forms of popular culture, the author re-examines the self-deprecatory assumptions about women's humor and concludes that feminist humor is an assertive rejection of oppression and female powerlessness. It rehumanizes, recivilizes, revitalizes, and confirms women's sense of power.

Douglas, Mary. (1968). The social control of cognition: Some factors in joke perception. Man [n.s.] 3(3): 361-376.

Although much of this article centers on joking behavior within other cultures, it also provides an anthropological foundation for understanding jokes as rites. Different types of joking rituals, the role of the joker, and joke patterns are described.

Dresner, Zita. (1988). Women's humor. In Lawrence E. Mintz (Ed.), Humor in America: A research guide to genres and topics. New York: Greenwood Press. 137-161.

While Dresner's focus is on women's humor in the literary tradition, she provides a useful analysis of the legal, economic, political, social, and cultural factors shaping women's lives and therefore, women's humor. Differences between female and male humor are examined. Dresner pays particular attention to irony and the expression of incongruity, the relationship between the humorist and her audience, and women's perspectives on social issues and their reaction to female stereotypes. A bibliographic survey and additional bibliographic sources are included.

Dundes, Alan. (1987). Cracking jokes: Studies of sick humor cycles and stereotypes. Berkeley, California: Ten Speed Press.

This collection of previously published papers is targeted to an audience of folklorists, anthropologists, and humorologists who are interested in an in-depth examination of jokes and joke cycles. Stereotypes within joke cycles are discussed throughout the text. The author relies heavily on a psychoanalytic theoretical approach. Jokes reveal sociocultural and psychological information about our culture.

Jordan, Rosan A. & DeCaro, F.A. (1986). Women and the study of folklore. Signs 11(3): 500-518.

This excellent review essay examines the status of women within folkloristics. The historically organized discussion is limited to folklore as "verbal art" (including tales, songs, riddles). The body of literature on women's folklore is articulated beneath the headings of 1.) image, sex roles, female folk figures; 2.) genres, differential use; 3.) women as folk performers and artists. The authors claim that issues related to women's folklore are connected to general feminist concerns. Over five dozen useful footnotes to additional references are included.

Kaufman, Gloria. (1980). Introduction. In Gloria Kaufman and Mary Kay Blakely (Eds.), Pulling our own strings: Feminist humor and satire. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press. 13-16.

The introduction to this collection attempts to define and characterize *feminist* humor, distinguishing it from *female* humor. Arguing that feminist humor is not the obverse of male humor, the author identifies nonacceptance of the status quo and hope for social revolution as key aspects of feminist humor.

Kaufman, Gloria. (1991). Introduction: Humor and power. In Gloria Kaufman (Ed.), In stitches: A patchwork of feminist humor and satire. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press. viii-xii.

The introduction to this second anthology of feminist humor further refines Kaufman's earlier distinction between female and feminist humor. Rather than being an exercise of power, feminist humor is viewed as a source of empowerment and resistance. Kaufman notes that feminist humor relies more on wit than on joking, which tends to be non-participatory. Humor makes a valuable contribution to feminist theory by providing perspective, insight, and renewal.

Oring, Elliott. (1988). Folklore methodology and American humor research. In Lawrence E. Mintz (Ed.), Humor in America: A research guide to genres and topics. New York: Greenwood Press. 213-230.

While not focused specifically on women's folk humor, this essay provides useful background on the development of humor research within the changing context of American folkore. Particular attention is paid to collecting and indexing humorous folk expression, as well as to the importance of cultural, individual, and social contextualization. A bibliographic survey highlights key works on collecting, indexing, and contextualization.

Rubin, Rachel. (1982). The poultriarchy is falling. Keystone Folklore 1(1): 1-10.

Sociolinguistics (Dell Hymes) provides a grounding for this article which examines the creation of a humorous phrase (pun-retort) within a particular women's community. The creation of the word "poultriarchy" and the phrase "the poultriarchy is falling" are examined and deconstructed as forms of feminist word play and verbal humor. Patriarchal values are reversed, inverted, and made incongruous so they can be laughed at. Humor strengthens in-group cohesion for the women. The author suggests that this item of word play sums up "the whole philosophy of the women's movement."

Stillion, Judith M. and White, Hedy. (1987). Feminist humor: Who appreciates it and why? Psychology of Women Quarterly 11, 219-232.

This study focuses on reactions to explicitly feminist humor, mainly in the form of cartoons and slogans. Findings regarding sex differences in reactions to non-feminist humor are summarized. After describing three experiments, the authors conclude that gender and feminist sympathy both affect reactions to feminist humor.

Stoeltje, Beverly J. (1988). Introduction: Feminist revisions. Journal of Folklore Research 25(3): 141-153.

This introduction to a special issue of the journal offers an excellent orientation to some of the concerns relating to women and the study of folklore. The author sketches a brief history of the field of folklore, a discipline developed on principles of patriarchy, nationalism, and imperialism. She provides a clear rationale for the necessity of feminist study and critical evaluation of the field of folklore.

Walker, Nancy A. (1991). Toward solidarity: Women's humor and group identity. In June Sochen (Ed.), Women's comic visions. Detroit: Wayne State University Press. 57-81.

Arguing that women's humor has long been an effective instrument for creating a community of shared concerns regarding women's oppression, Walker explores the relationship between female socialization and women's humor. Using oral as well as written humorous expression, both self-deprecating/domestic humor and an invisible tradition of subversive in-group humor are discussed.

Walker, Nancy A. (1988). A very serious thing: Women's humor and American culture. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Although this book focuses explicitly on women's humorous writing, it provides a thoughtful analysis of the relationship between women's humor and cultural expectations/definitions of women. Particularly useful are chapters on the humor of the "minority" and on feminist humor, which includes some discussion of lesbian feminist humor. Walker argues that women's humor mirrors changes in womens lives, denies assumptions of women's inferiority, and provides a spirit of survival.

Weisstein, Naomi. (1973). Why we aren't laughing. . .any more. Ms. 2(5), 49-51; 88-90.

Refuting the charge that feminists have no sense of humor, Weisstein examines the traditional function of laughter as a way of maintaining inequality and oppression. After citing cultural obstacles to the development of women's humor, she discusses the politics of "fighting humor" as one necessary aspect of women's culture. A brief comparison of women's humor with that of other oppressed groups is included.

WOMEN AND FOLK HUMOR

The items cited in this section deal specifically with oral expressions of women's folk humor communication.

Crawford, Mary. (1992). Just kidding: Gender and conversational humor. In Regina Barreca (Ed.), New perspectives on women and comedy. Philadelphia: Gordon and Breach. 23-37.

Applying a feminist approach to humor research, Crawford uses content analysis, participant observation, and discourse analysis to analyze humor as an interactional event. Exploring humor preferences and practices in terms of gender, particularly as they relate to conversational goals of women and men, she concludes that women's humor enhances intimacy, while men's humor tends to be oriented towards self-presentation. While gender inequality is perpetuated in conversational humor, humor also has subversive potential for women.

Green, Rayna. (1977). Magnolias grow in dirt: The bawdy lore of Southern women. Southern Exposure 4(4), 29-33.

A lively exploration of the tellers, topics, genres and uses of southern women's bawdy lore. After suggesting why little bawdy lore from women has been collected, Green discusses the use of such material for entertainment, rebellion, and education, the latter particularly in terms of educating young girls about sex.

Koske, Mary Susan. (1988). Finnish and American adolescent fantasy and humor: An analysis of personal and social folklore in educational contexts. (Dissertation Publication no. AAC8824168). Indiana University. 603pp.

Adolescent personal folklore ("solitary communication") is compared to social folklore, focusing on the treatment of three themes: the adult world, individual and group differences, and sexuality. An analysis of both cultural and gender expressive differences in terms of the relationship between personal fantasy and social humor reveals that gender differences are more striking.

Mackie, Marlene. (1990). Who is laughing now?: The role of humour in the social construction of gender. Atlantis 15(2), 11-26.

Using a sociology of knowledge framework, Mackie analyzes the dual role that humor plays in the social construction of gender: it affirms patriarchal social standards but it also provides a subversive challenge to male hegemony. Traditional studies of humor have tended to ignore gender; feminist analyses have tended to ignore humor. The author suggests that feminists explore the visionary and subversive potential of humor. An extensive reference list is included.

Painter, Dorothy S. (1978). A communicative study of humor in a lesbian speech community: Becoming a member. (Dissertation Publication no. AAC7908194). The Ohio State University. 237pp.

This dissertation explores the ways in which lesbians use humor to constitute and reflexively interpret social reality. The study relies on ethnomethodology, especially focusing on conversations in the setting of a lesbian bar. Lesbian humor is a complex communication interaction shared by in-group members to normalize anti-lesbian stereotypes. For example, heterosexual assumptions about lesbians are viewed as naive and therefore humorous.

Sheppard, Alice. (1989). Continuity and change: The cultural context of women's humor. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Women's Studies Association [Towson, MD]. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED318652). 20pp.

Humor has been culturally defined as a male perogative, based on jealously guarded linguistic and symbolic codes. Both social scientists and feminists need to understand the factors excluding women from humor. Analyzing humor as it reflects social power provides a subtle yet revealing measure of the social status of cultural "subgroups."

Stanley, Julia P. and Robbins, Susan W. (1976). Lesbian humor. Women: A Journal of Liberation 5(1), 26-29.

The bonding function of lesbian humor is highlighted in this article. In addition to attempting to characterize lesbian humor, the authors explore the function of laughter as a source of celebration and subversion.

White, Cindy L. (1988). Liberating laughter: An inquiry into the nature, content, and functions of feminist humor. In Barbara Bate and Anita Taylor (Eds.), Women communicating: Studies of women's talk. New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation. 75-90.

After reviewing the literature on women's humor, White explores the values implicit in feminist humor, the self-definitional nature of feminist humor, and the function of humor in the creation of feminist culture. Based on a content analysis of logs kept by five self-identified feminists, the author identifies key underlying values and notes that differentiation, ridicule and reversal, and bonding are the most pervasive functions. The author suggests that the cathartic nature of humor may make it a more powerful source of culture production than other forms of communication.

WOMEN AND JOKE TELLING

The items cited below focus specifically on joke telling as one specialized area of women's oral folk communication.

Burns, Thomas A. and Burns, Inger H. (1975). Doing the wash: an expressive culture and personality study of a joke and its tellers. Norwood, PA: Norwood Editions.

This study elaborates some of the psychological motivations behind individual attraction to jokes as well as the functional significance a joke has for its tellers. Based on observations and personality assessments of eleven women and men who all tell the same "dirty" joke, the authors conclude that the significance and interpretation of the joke is related to the personality of the teller.

Delaney, Janice, Lupton, Mary Jane, and Toth, Emily. (1988). Red humor: The menstrual joke, in Janice Delaney, Mary Jane Lupton, and Emily Toth (Eds.), The curse: A cultural history of menstruation. Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press. 119-128.

Although the authors tend to approach menstrual jokes as expressions of male hostility towards women and their bodies, the chapter suggests ways that feminist uses of "red humor" can be a potential form of liberation for women.

Dundes, Alan. (1985). The J.A.P. and the J.A.M.. in American jokelore. Journal of American Folklore 98(390): 456-475.

This article compares and contrasts both the Jewish American Princess (J.A.P.) and Jewish American Mother (J.A.M.) joke cycles. These jokes are told primarily by Jewish men and women. A number of actual jokes are included for examination, especially jokes which illustrate the ways in which jokelore reinforces stereotypes and/or exhibits ambivalence toward the subject of the joke. The J.A.P. jokes reflect anti-feminist attitudes. The author calls for serious study of joke cycles and their cultural significance.

Johnson, A. Michael. (1991). Sex differences in the jokes college students tell. Psychological Reports 68: 851-854.

This brief psychologically-based report summarizes the findings of jokes solicited from college students (214 women and136 men). Gender influences humor preferences. Women more than men are drawn to nontendentious (i.e., silly, goofy) humor. On the other hand, "men were more likely to tell jokes which are simultaneously sexual and aggressive primarily targeting women or gay men." The author says that the findings suggest that college students (males?) are not especially tolerant to differences.

Johnson, Robbie Davis. (1973). Folklore and women: A social interactional analysis of the folklore of a Texas madam. Journal of American Folklore 86(341): 211-224.

This essay describes the use of extensive folklore performances of jokes, toasts, and rhymes by a Texas madam to exercise control in social situations. In the madam's sexual folklore "the male is the butt of the joke". She uses humor in order to manipulate and control her "girls" (employees) and her male customers. The article relies on Goffman"s theory. The meaning of the folklore event is derived from how the performer uses text and what she says about text.

Klages, Mary. (1992). What to do with Helen Keller jokes: A feminist act. In Regina Barreca (Ed.), New perspectives on women and comedy. Philadalphia: Gordon and Breach. 13-22.

This essay develops a feminist rereading (grounded in folklore) of Helen Keller jokes, and analyzes the implications of such sick humor cycles for the feminist academician. The author begins to explore why individuals participate in and laugh at verbal expressions which violate social taboos and are not funny. Telling these types of jokes "is a form of resistance to the moral lesson her life is supposed to teach" and represents Keller as a physical/sexual being.

Mitchell, Carol A. (1985). Some differences in male and female joke-telling. In Rosan A. Jordan and Susan J. Kalcik (Eds.), Women's folklore, women's culture. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 163-186.

This chapter summarizes several of the conclusions from the author's dissertation [see below]. The differences between female and male joke telling are highlighted, especially focusing on the importance of the gender of the audience.

Mitchell, Carol A. (1977). The sexual perspective in the appreciation and interpretation of jokes. Western Folklore 36 (4): 303-329.

This article discusses the analysis and interpretation of jokes by their tellers and audiences, especially concentrating on sexual differences in the degree of appreciation. Frequently, men and women who appreciate the same joke do so for very different reasons. Included are several excellent examples of jokes appreciated by women (i.e., related to women's experiences, menstruation, tensions about rape) and by men (i.e., male experiences, penis size, castration).

Mitchell, Carol A. (1976). The differences between male and female joke telling as exemplified in a college community. (Dissertation Publication no. AAC77019200). Indiana University. 785pp.

This dissertation points out significant differences in male and female joke telling. Males tend to tell jokes that are more aggressive, obscene, and competitive. For women, joking behavior is a way to develop intimacy. The study examines the way both genders learn to become joke tellers and the way they tell jokes.

Pearson, Judy C. (1982). What's the square root of 69?: Sex differences in sexual humor. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 244 307): 28pp.

The author explores "sex differences among tellers of sexually oriented jokes." One hundred forty-seven undergraduate students wrote and told jokes in same and mixed gender interactions. More jokes were told that were anti-male or biased against neither sex. More men than women told biased jokes.

This research began at a 1992 Summer Institute on "Telling Tales: Humanities Approaches to the Study of Folk Narrative," at University of Wisconsin Madison. Special thanks to the National Endowment for the Humanities.