

Genre Trouble:
Locating the Politics of Women's Humor
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Abstract

What difference does a joke make? In this paper, I undertake to answer that question with a particular focus on the genre of humor written by women. I begin with an exploration of a political theory reading of Aristophanes, an ancient Greek comedian who is foundational to the study of humor, to work through a reading that is text-centric. I then turn to a feminist analysis of women's humor more generally, an analysis that is primarily motivated by the gender of the author. Finally, I explore a series of texts by 20th century wit, Dorothy Parker, whose work allows me to synthesize and move beyond the previous readings. I conclude with my own argument about humor, one that suggests that the genre is deeply engaged with democratic citizenship. In working with a genre that offers no easy interpretive answers, I am able to come to a broader, more expansive understanding of politics.

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Introduction

Men seldom make passes
At girls who wear glasses.¹

So goes the entirety of Dorothy Parker's 1926 poem, "News Item." Dorothy Parker was a prominent "wit" in the beginning of the 20th century. She was active as a writer from the beginning of World War I though faded considerably during the Cold War even as she remained active until her death in 1967 (she was 73). Perhaps she was best known for her association with a group of friends known as the Algonquin Round Table, a group that met daily at the Algonquin hotel for extended lunches. Though a known socialite, she was also a writer in a wide variety of genres. She filled stories, poems, plays, movies, musicals, fashion editorials, advertisements, and critical reviews with her sharp tongue and quick wit. She attended, with F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, the parties that inspired *The Great Gatsby* and went briefly to Paris with Ernest Hemingway. She was a prominent part of the New York literary scene between the world wars though was not and is not herself often thought of as especially "literary." She lived a highly public life that was often described as highly glamorous, though biographers often note that her life was not entirely joyful. As will become increasingly important throughout this paper, Parker, though famous amongst the literary elite, was famous more for her image than her work.

These lines may be read as antiquated and quaint to today's reader, despite the familiarity of the rhyme or message. The title, which I read as dripping with sarcasm, suggests that the sentiment of the poem might not necessarily seem new or radical to readers in 1926 either. The message of the poem is, at least, incongruent with the "news" of the title. The purpose of the

¹ Published in the 1926 collection *Enough Rope* and reproduced in the expanded 1972 *The Portable Dorothy Parker* from Viking Press, 109. *Enough Rope* was also included in the original, 1944, edition of the book.

epigram is not necessarily to educate on a *new* standard of beauty, or even to introduce beauty standards as something novel. So what, then, is its purpose? Such a question informs the bulk of my inquiry: what does a joke or a clever, somewhat silly rhyme *do*? Further, how might such a thing be read, both popularly and academically? What, in other words, are the stakes--politically and socially--of writing and reading humor?² Do such stakes even exist? I argue and will argue that such stakes exist through the nature of the question and the interpretive trouble caused by the genre. Our readings and our understandings of humor are deeply evocative of ideologies and ways of understanding that transcend the text. In this paper, I am concerned with reading humor, particularly reading the theoretical framing of humor. The question, then, is how do we identify and discuss humor as socially and politically relevant?

In studying the discourse surrounding reading and writing humor, I came to a deeper understanding of the ways in which various signifiers of identity are inextricable from reading the politics of humor. First, humor inevitably brings up questions of class and especially the distinction between “high” and “low” art. Additionally, it leads to questions of how such a distinction works within an understanding of democracy. In ancient Athens, as I discuss in Chapter 1, humor was closely associated with the idea of democracy. As I have already noted, Parker is a figure that is not often included within academic or literary discourse, despite her strong connections to prominent contemporary literary figures. Comedy is often seen as “merely” a form of popular culture, thus rendering it simultaneously uninteresting and unimportant. However, I am more inclined to read humor as an alternative method of

² Within this thesis, I use the term “humor” as a kind of catchall category for the genre in part as part of a conversation with Nancy Walker, to be articulated in chapter 2, but also as it gestures toward the uneasy definability of the genre. Even my own case study, Dorothy Parker, encompasses a wide variety of what I would consider humor sub-genres: from book reviews to verbal quips as recorded by others, from her own satiric short stories to comical magazine editorials. Because of this wide variety, “humor” allows me to speak easily and with deliberate imprecision.

engagement with both “high” culture and the political structure: more egalitarian, certainly, but also conceptually more expansive. At the same time, however, there can be something decidedly aristocratic about humor. As I have touched on, Parker ran in elite circles. Though class antagonisms were often at the heart of her work, she was writing in part for elite audiences: the readerships of *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, and *The New Yorker* in the teens and twenties. At the same time, her work also enjoyed great commercial success. Ultimately, class is an issue and democratic sensibilities cannot be necessarily inferred from the genre. Still, though, humor--encompassing both Parker’s *New Yorker* pieces and Charlie Chaplin’s slapstick--seems to exist on a different cultural plane from the literary giants that Parker so often mocked. Even though humor can be intellectual, elite, and pretentious, it still has an edge of “merely entertainment” that seems to be speaking to a different set of aesthetic sensibilities.

Second, the genre allows for the asking significant questions concerning gender. Comedy is often a man-dominated field. Women are conspicuously absent from writer’s rooms even when they manage to make up half of the cast of a television series (which is itself a feat). “The Daily Show with Jon Stewart,” for example, has only two regular women correspondents and no women writers. Though much of Chapter 2 includes a turn away from the idea that there *must* be any inherent meaning attached to the woman humorist, it is imperative to note that she, the humorist, is in fact something of an anomaly. I took up this project out of a consciousness of that fact. Despite my reticence to allow sex or gender to play deterministic roles in interpreting and understanding humor, they are certainly factors.

To return to this chapter’s epigraph, feminist critic Rhonda S. Pettit suggests that the lines are an “instructional” poem even as she challenges the newness of the “news item”:

The fact that it is the men who “make passes” suggests that men are the active initiators in a relationship. If Parker, who wore glasses but took them off in the presence of men, wrote this poem out of personal experience, then not all of the rules regarding heterosexual dating had changed in the early twentieth century.³

I do not think it sufficient to claim that the verse merely articulates the lack of change in dating rituals in the early twentieth century. Parker is a constant critic of her contemporaries, the modernists. A December 1918 issue of *Vanity Fair* includes a piece in which she adopted a fragmented, free verse form in order to demonstrate her own ability. She claims, in this piece, to be unimpressed with many of her fellow poets.⁴ Parker was certainly skeptical of the “newness” of modernism but this skepticism need not be the only facet of the interpretation. Though she certainly features a seemingly-antiquated idea as being still relevant, more is at stake than this juxtaposition.

As this paper will demonstrate, much of Parker’s work moves beyond the surface and enters into a multidimensional criticism of her subject. Some of Parker’s best quips are those that beg to be explained, the jokes that have many layers of meaning beyond the pun and certainly beyond the obvious. And her subjects are everything and everyone; nothing and nobody is spared the trial by fire of her sharp tongue and ever-ready typewriter. There is an unfortunate lack of scholarship on Parker in general and this “News Item” in particular but existing literature on this poem is often one-dimensional. Pettit’s criticism, though valid, strikes me as incomplete. Parker was no stranger to instructions on etiquette, her work for Condé Nast suggests otherwise, and the poem seems just as plausible as a satire of an instructional book as it being itself instructional.

Alternatively, and perhaps more radically, the poem could be a tongue-in-cheek anti-how-to: how

³ Rhonda S. Pettit, *A Gendered Collision: Sentimentalism and Modernism in Dorothy Parker's Poetry and Fiction*, (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2000), 107.

⁴ Parker, 1918.

to *avoid* the men who make passes, rather than advancing the assumption that all single women everywhere must be in want of a husband. Though perhaps the pair of lines may be read as toss-away, they are hardly simple. Each new angle of approaching the poem gives rise to a new level of meaning.

My exploration is born in part out of the kind of work done in the above paragraph, as it is concerned with questions of meaning, but also out of questioning the efficacy and purpose of literature generally and of humor more specifically. By “efficacy,” I mean the *implications* of the work not, necessarily, whether or not the author was successful in achieving their intent although, certainly, there may be some overlap. I do not take as a given that what I call humor is always actually “funny,” just that it may be presented as such. I am not interested in implications of the text as they pertain to laughter, enjoyment, or personal satisfaction of the text. Certainly, I laughed throughout the duration of this project and found a great deal of enjoyment in Parker’s texts. I do not, however, believe that sharing Parker’s sense of humor is necessary to the understanding of my work. Instead, this paper acts as an exploration of the politics of literature: the implications of humor in how people organize themselves in groups. Specifically, I am exploring how such a function is articulated and theorized in identity-based terminology. Humor is a dynamic area for exploration. The genre can be the location of a great deal of dynamic energy pertaining to ideas about democracy and gender. It opens itself up necessarily to working with the distinction between “high art” and “low art” as well as unpacking the perceived (and also very real) masculinity of the genre itself.

As I work through different theoretical perspectives of the politics of humor, it is important to note how both politics and the genre itself may be informed by constructions of and

assumptions about masculinity. Readings of the identity of the woman humorist, the author, often point to a need to reconcile the gender of the author with the gender of the genre. A truly feminist reading, I argue, locates the politics of the text within that discrepancy. The space of cognitive dissonance exposed by complicated critical reasons is a dynamic space for understanding the interaction between the individual and the community, and for rendering that space problematic. As the genre is constructed as egalitarian and democratic as well as deeply connected to masculinity, it reveals linguistically the shaky foundations on which much has been built.

In order to understand the ways in which humor has been read as political, I will first look at how it has been done from feminist and political theoretical positions. I will then synthesize the two perspectives, picking out the strengths of both, as I work through my own readings of Dorothy Parker. She functions primarily as a case study in what does not quite work. As I have noted, she locates a peculiar position, embodying the tensions between the “elite” and the “democratic,” the masculine and the feminine. Despite a wealth of criticism and commentary contemporary to her work, she is a relatively unstudied figure today. My original intuitions conceptualized the comedian of the early-20th century, the World War years, as being predominantly and perhaps even exclusively concerned with the condition of war, or of Prohibition, or of the Great Depression--the turn of the century humorist had a great deal of important events on which to draw. Thinking of the wealth of political coverage on “The Daily Show,” “Saturday Night Live,” *The Onion* and even sitcoms such as “30 Rock,” is seemed plausible that humor might have always been politically involved. What emerged instead, as I will explore in Chapter 3, was a dearth of such coverage that suggested my own assumptions were problematically located within my own cultural context. The political moment, as much as

the social position of the author, speaks to the kind of political humor that was produced. That my initial guess proved “wrong” provided for some of the most interesting readings.

This thesis works within several theoretical and literary traditions. First, as I set up in my first two chapters, are the debates over how to read comedy: what is its focal point? The answers, in sum, are a debate on whether the authority is located within the content or the author. Second, as my thesis is intimately involved with a public figure who published in a wide variety of mediums for a wide variety of genres, I am working within a historical tradition of modernist print culture involving the interaction between text, author, reader, and context and theories about the role of publishing within society more generally as well as theoretical understandings of print as a dynamic, political space. Third, as I propose the necessity of looking at the author in order to understand the reception of the work, I am engaging with and synthesizing the arguments of debates over authorial intent and reader response as seen within the field of critical theory. As I engage with feminism and feminist analyses of humor, I work within debates about identity politics. These debates are relevant both for the questions of interpretations as well as in how my interpretations may function within an extra-textual space. Important to this paper will be pushing against gender essentialism how that works with and against a genre that may seem fairly rigid in terms of gender.

Modernism is often thought of as a movement in art and literature that does something different. It is oft-characterized by an attention to the “new,” as separate from the work of the 19th century, in both form and content. The modernist canon certainly took up and played with tradition--Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* situates her protagonist within four hundred years of literary history--but such play is often read as an articulation of newness. Dorothy Parker is by no means

a part of said “modernist canon” and I am by no means interested in making her a part of it: I think she is interesting more as an example of contemporary popular culture. As I have noted, Parker herself rejected this image. It is also more interesting to note the value on its own terms rather than attempting to render the work valuable by way of adding it to the canon. The latter method may only serve to rearticulate the binary (canon/not, valuable/not) that I would prefer to deconstruct. This, as will become clear in Chapter 2, is analogous to my position on whether or not we ought to consider humor as “serious.” As such, this work considers Parker and her circle *alongside* modernism rather than as necessarily directly *a part of* it, drawing comparisons only where relevant and where critical perspectives on modernism offer insight on the dominant culture more generally.

Publishing was profoundly important to modernism and to Parker’s circle as well--the method by which a text was published was, and arguably is still, as much a part of the text as the words on the page. Virginia Woolf had her own press with husband Leonard Woolf and published, in addition to her own work, T.S. Eliot and James Joyce; Gertrude Stein published her own work with the aide of partner Alice Toklas; Wyndham Lewis’ literary magazine “BLAST” included work by Mina Loy and Ezra Pound; and Dorothy Parker herself was one of the early and only backers of *The New Yorker*. *The New Yorker*’s prospectus declared, “*The New Yorker* will be the magazine which is not edited for the old lady in Dubuque. It will not be concerned in what she is thinking about . . . *The New Yorker* is a magazine avowedly published for a metropolitan audience.”⁵ Who was publishing and who was reading was a profoundly important modernist issues.

⁵ Dorothy Parker: *What Fresh Hell is This?*, Marion Meade, Villard Books, New York, 1988, 133. Meade goes on to note that Parker did not consider her early contributions to *The New Yorker* as of any significance, merely a way to get paid. Such a reading suggests the lows of publication, an antithesis to Woolf’s Hogarth Press.

Roland Barthes' essay, "The Death of the Author" is a framing piece in critical theory. He attempts, rather successfully, to upend a kind of criticism that is overly context- and author-driven. In that conventional criticism focuses any attention at all on the role or intent of the author in deducing interpretation, the criticism is attending too much to those facets. In doing violence to, killing, the author, Barthes means to turn fully away from that kind of criticism and to a reader-empowered criticism. "The author," he writes, "is a modern figure, a product of our society insofar as emerging from the Middle Ages with English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith of the Reformation, it discovered the prestige of the individual, of, as it is more nobly put, the 'human person.'"⁶ In his account, the prominence of interpretive theories that focus on the author is centered on capitalist, individualist ideology. His account marks an interest in the author function which is not itself necessary or bound by an inescapable or essential reality concerning the necessity of the function. Still, though, the thing exists, despite its flimsy foundations. As Barthes himself acknowledges, "The author still reigns in histories of literature, biographies of writers, interviews, magazines, as in the very consciousness of men of letters anxious to unite their person and their work through diaries and memoirs."⁷

Interpretive strategies are often about the author despite what ought to be: how Virginia Woolf's illness figures in her fiction, the extent to which James Joyce's Stephen Hero/Dedalus is autobiographical, or what Katherine Mansfield's journals reveal about her stories.⁸ Barthes' assertion, then, that the removal of the Author "utterly transforms the modern text" seems

⁶ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), 142-3.

⁷ Barthes, 143.

⁸ Interestingly, in a 1927 review, Parker wrote: "*Journal of Katherine Mansfield* is a beautiful book and an invaluable one, but it is her own book, and only her dark, sad eyes should have read its words. I closed it with a little murmur to her portrait on the cover. 'Please forgive me,' I said." As recorded in the expanded *Portable Dorothy Parker*, 452.

entirely reasonable.⁹ That a removal of something so prevalent in literary culture would dramatically transform said culture is not a stretch. The death of the Author, he argues, is the birth of the autonomous, authoritative reader that, at the time of the original publication of his 1967 essay, cannot yet be said to exist. It stands to reason, then, that any attempt to chronicle the role and import of literature in society and politics must acknowledge not the author, but the figuration of the author, as a valuable pieces of the text. The response to the author is, as it stands, an important aspect of interpreting interpretation, even if to do so is poststructuralist heresy.

Sondra Melzer writes that Parker's *Enough Rope* was, for a collection of poetry, a surprising and unusual commercial success. That success comes, at least in part, from the author's prominent public role: "But people bought it because the author was a media celebrity, and they seemed to appreciate it more for the voguish humor, rather than for the subtle details of the subtext, which touched upon the little, painful, and poignant struggles of women's life."¹⁰ Melzer articulates a subtext to Parker's text, a subtext which points to something more subtle. I agree with Melzer that a subtext exists to nearly all (if not all) of Parker's texts but I do not agree that it is always about the struggles of women's life, nor will I place emphasis on the times when that subtext is true. To briefly set aside her conception of that subtext, I want to look more closely at her point concerning Parker's celebrity. I will discuss further the role of Parker's public identity but it is important to note that the identity influenced the market for her literature, an opinion that is not uncommon in contemporary criticism of Parker.

⁹ Barthes, 145.

¹⁰ Sondra Melzer, *The Rhetoric of Rage: Women in Dorothy Parker*, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc, 1997), 1.

More adequate attention must, then, necessarily be given to the role and function of the author in order to more clearly understand the social and political situation of their work. This argument calls attention to the distinction between literary analysis, which focuses on the interpretation of the text, and my socio-political analysis, which focuses on the role and function of the text within society. In part because I cannot help it and in part because it works as a helpful example--a bridge between the theoretical exercises in the first chapters and my conclusions in the last--I will be playing with some literary analysis. But the point is to express the multiplicity of ways to mean. My argument is for an interpretive strategy that fully encompasses all angles of the text to be studied and, as such, involves the author, the reader, the context, and the text itself.

I will look at feminist theoretical perspectives. I take up one in particular which focuses primarily on the gender of the author. This theory asserts that the gender of the author is the thing that most asserts the political validity of the work. As I will explain, such a perspective is limited insofar as it renders the gender of the author as essential. Because the gender of the author necessarily means something about the politics of the work, it is essentializing and does not allow for the kind of nuance that I would prefer. Again, a bit of a mess is made in conventional readings, surrounding the author. Though humor is a genre that is deeply gendered and I believe that to be itself an interesting spot for feminist analysis, I am concerned primarily with readings which privilege the gender of the author above all else. My primary argument in Chapter 2 concerns a tendency of one type of argument to assume that the gender of the author stands before or preexists the text. Part of what criticism of Parker brings into focus is the ways in

which we, as readers, use the text to teach us how to read the author and vice versa. The two readings circle back against each other, endlessly producing and endlessly being produced.

This argument follows along a tradition of anti-identity politics theorists including, at the fore, Judith Butler. In her 1990 book, *Gender Trouble*, Butler questions the political efficacy of as well as the reductive nature involved in rendering the female subject synonymous with the woman subject and imposing uniform meaning on that simplified subject as well as in assuming the primacy of such subject. “Woman,” as a category of analysis, does not work. The problem, as Judith Butler states, is in how this framework of a simplified subject reifies the “hegemonic cultural discourse.” I interpret her phrase to refer to that engagement in such linguistic essentialism, the simplification of the woman subject to the female subject, reflects the dominant and prevailing cultural attitudes and discourse with respect to gender.

This is not to say that any and all gendered possibilities are open, but that the boundaries of analysis suggest the limits of a discursively conditioned experience. These limits are always set within the terms of a hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality. Constraint is thus built into what that language constitutes as the imaginable domain of gender.¹¹

To rephrase in hopefully slightly simpler language, using the dominant language and making the same assumptions with respect to that language will not upend the institution. By being able to understand the ways in which signifier and signified (language descriptor and object) cycle back into each other, it becomes possible to conceptualize “other configurations, not only of gender and bodies, *but of politics itself*.”¹²

¹¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), 12.

¹² Butler, 194, emphasis mine.

Finally, I am particularly interested in what is known as and I will refer to as the public/private distinction. It is an idea about politics and private life that can be traced back to Aristotle and is generally accepted as true. Martha Ackelsberg and Mary Shanley write of how,

Public and private have always been defined, and have taken on political meaning, in relationship to each other. Aristotle, for example, in defining the public (or political) arena as the realm where free and equal citizens engage in striving together toward the common good, distinguished it from the private domain, which, he argued, was characterized by relationships of inequality, dependence, and concern for meeting the necessities of life.¹³

This distinction, between public and private, personal and political, is a framing concept in feminist and political theory. Ackelsberg and Shanley continue on to describe how feminists have taken to task the essentialism of the divide. Further, feminists have noted how the public/private distinction masks the male dominion that extends into the private sphere, the space that is supposed to “belong” to the woman.¹⁴ As I work through the ways in which humor can itself be thought of as troubling the distinction--by drawing its source material from the transgressions of the divide, humor can be a mechanism by which the ideology can be explored. The public and private, separate spheres ideology manifests differently throughout my work but ultimately rests on an assumption of distinctness that is necessarily gendered: public, masculine; private, feminine.

This paper is divided into three types of work. The work of this paper is centered around the distinction between the public and the private and how humor often functions on the ways subjects can be “in place” or “out of place” within this dichotomy. In Chapter 1, I look at Greek

¹³ Martha A. Ackelsberg and Mary Lyndon Shanley, “Privacy, Publicity, and Power: A Feminist Rethinking of the Public-Private Distinction,” in *Revisioning the Political: Feminist Reconstructions of Traditional Concepts in Western Political Theory*, ed. Nancy J. Hirschmann and Christine Di Stefano. (Westview Press, 1996), 214.

¹⁴ Ackelsberg and Shanley, 217.

comedian Aristophanes through a standard political theory approach to reading texts. Such an approach is text-centric, with historical context and reader response adding additional interest but the bulk of the interpretive work is on the text itself. In Chapter 2, I turn to a feminist theoretical approach that is author-centric. Nancy Walker elaborates a theory that relates the politics of the work to the gender of the author. A woman, by virtue of being funny, is stepping “out of place” and behaving (inappropriately) politically. In Chapter 3, I bring in Dorothy Parker and do a series of “close” readings of her work within the context of their publications, the World Wars, and the fact of her larger than life public image. In allowing her text to shine through honestly, I am able to then read it as engaging with the public and private distinction in a way that is more focused on critiques of ideology. Parker’s humor is involved with and tied up in, among other things, systems of belief about masculinity and femininity. Her work can be read not simply as a critique of behavior--of something that draws its humor only on the misbehaviors of men and women--but as a critique of the system that mandates certain behaviors at all. Parker is her own choice subject, she brings “herself” into the comedy in a way that acknowledges her own locatedness within the very system that she is pointing to. In working through Parker and ideology, I can draw out an understanding of humor that is intimately involved in democracy, an understanding of humor that allows the genre to expand and push upon the very bounds of what we mean when we say “politics.”

1. The Play's the Thing: Aristophanes, Political Theory, and the Dynamic Text

I begin and will end with war. When political theorists discuss comedy, it is 5th century B.C.E. Greek comedian Aristophanes who gets the attention. His "Lysistrata" is a play about women, both Athenian and Spartan, who band together in a sex strike in order to end the Peloponnesian War. The goal is to force the end of the war, to force the men to negotiate peace. In order to achieve this goal, the titular character Lysistrata persuades the women of Greece to withhold sex from the men until the war is over. The women are ultimately successful. Via a series of madcap, sexually overt, and occasionally rude adventures, the war is brought to an end. Though there are many interpretations to this canonical text, I turn to a reading particularly familiar to me. In her reading, Arlene Saxonhouse uses a standard political theory, text-driven approach. In doing so, she draws out the themes of the public and the private that are central to my understanding of how humor functions. Other interpretations using a similar methodology do exist. However, as I am not after a critique of the interpretation but rather a critique of the methodology, this particular reading is viable because of its familiarity to me in addition to the ways that it is, in fact, standard.

In "Men, Women, War, and Politics: Family and Polis in Aristophanes and Euripides," Saxonhouse offers an account of how a comedic text can serve as a means by which to push on the bounds of the public/private distinction. Aristophanes' "Lysistrata" serves, for Saxonhouse, as an example of a comedic text that is about the public/private distinction. She writes, "The

tensions [between public and private], though, are reconcilable only on the comic stage.”¹⁵ The comic stage, as removed from everyday life, represents an arena where the issue can be taken up and explored and, ultimately, reconciled. The comic stage, then, manifests as a unique venue for the topic; it need not be addressed in everyday life. The comedic play becomes a kind of fantasy environment. Of course, implicit in this reading is the idea that, due to the nature of the comic form, the world posited through Aristophanes’ play is not viewed as prescriptive. As I will show, the reading is ultimately conservative insofar as it suggests that the text exists to preserve the world as it is. Aristophanes’ text, in this reading, is not an activist text. It is clear that he is partaking in a kind of reimagining of politics and the public space but his genre renders him relatively innocuous. The very fictiveness, the very silliness, stands to prove that harmlessness.

Saxonhouse suggests that Aristophanes’ intent may be less dramatic-comedic and more political.¹⁶ However, despite what Aristophanes may or may not have intended to do with his work, its farcical nature allows him to make claims from a distance. These claims do not ultimately matter as she writes: “We cannot forget that this is a fantasy and a comedy, a dream of the impossible transformation of the public into the purely private and the good into the simplistic pursuit of sexual pleasure and wine.”¹⁷ The cordoning off of the play into the realm of “fantasy and comedy” allows for an understanding of the dynamics of Aristophanes’ play that do not threaten the ideological underpinnings of Athenian society. Of course, the public and private cannot intermingle, cannot overlap: in insisting that imagining that possibility is *mere imagination*, we cannot make the imagined into the real. This reading risks reducing the political,

¹⁵ Arlene Saxonhouse, "Men, Women, War, and Politics: Family and Polis in Aristophanes and Euripides," *Political Theory*, 8, no. 1 (1980): 65-81, 71.

¹⁶ Saxonhouse, 72.

¹⁷ Saxonhouse, 71.

the real world (as opposed to the fantastic), into a static, imaginationless world. Further, the text becomes mere play and rests on an assumption that I do not share that “play” is somehow inferior to and irreconcilable with the political. The play cannot, in this understanding, be of the world.

Aristophanes’ play *does* provide for a blurring of the distinctions and Saxonhouse reads it as doing as much. Women in the play act politically and even do so within the physical space of politics, as they enter the acropolis. They do not restrict themselves to the private sphere, the feminine space, where they ought to belong. Saxonhouse reads this movement as involuntary but happening nonetheless. “Women’s enthusiasm for political plotting is meager. Throughout this and all of Aristophanes’ comedies, women are primarily interested in sex and wine.”¹⁸ In Aristophanes’ plays, women are not merely relegated to the private realm, they express a preference for being there. The play expresses their willingness to step outside, but only if necessary.. It is a space that is compromised by the war, by the absence of men to pleasure. That they cannot serve their function as creators of a space of retreat is a tremendous loss and it is a role that they wish to reclaim. “In order to do this, though, they must organize politically, literally invade the public sphere by occupying the acropolis. Their difficulty in performing political tasks which demand heavy personal sacrifices provides for much of the comic interest of the play.”¹⁹ For the most part, the women themselves have no interest in politics for the sake of politics: their aim is to regain something private that has been taken away by the political act of war. War, in merely existing, causes a compromise of the women’s space. Interestingly, in Saxonhouse’s reading, it is not the out-of-placeness of war that provides the humor, it is the out-

¹⁸ Saxonhouse 68-9.

¹⁹ Saxonhouse, 69.

of-placeness of the women. The women are behaving in a way that is absurd and this absurdity cycles back onto itself. That absurdity structures the play--in being humorous, the play is not serious--and ensures that the play remains “play,” not politics.

The lines between spheres blur. As war bleeds into the lives of women, the women respond by stepping out into the world of politics. Saxonhouse writes,

The political world of the ancients was focused on war and thus on the sacrifice of what was private. The defense of the city which denies attention to the private and personal is nevertheless necessary to preserve the private and the personal. The emphasis in ancient Greece on man’s role in the public sphere leads in turn to the pursuit of fame and glory. With this orientation toward private glory, though, the reason for fighting in the first place, to preserve not only the city but also the family within, is often forgotten.²⁰

In wartime ancient Greece, the private is subsumed by the political. It is only when those who inhabit the private space, namely women, actively take charge of the political space (here both literally and metaphorically) that proper attention can be given to the private sphere. Presumably, the women step out of place in order to make their own space matter. The women of the “Lysistrata” act politically, step out of place, out of necessity. Such motivations rest on the premise that women have a legitimate ownership over the space that they leave to protect. It assumes that the war is an unusual, atypical force in the private sphere; that, when the war ends, the private sphere will be set right again and that the women will have proper reign. As Ackelsberg and Shanley note, cited in the introduction, such discrete bounds are themselves mythic; male dominion extends to the home as well. Still, this interpretation of the text makes clear that such assumptions do motivate the text: it is funny because Aristophanes blurs the

²⁰ Saxonhouse, 67.

distinctions, casting those assumptions into doubt. Even if it is only temporary and if only for the sake of comic effect.

The comedic push of the text comes from the gender of those acting politically. Because the women of the text are behaving in ways that are unexpected on the basis of their gender, the situation is therefore funny or humorous. The humor comes from the unexpectedness of the actions. All of the humor exists within this kind of alternative world created for Aristophanes' playful manipulation. The effect of reading the comedic text in an isolated fashion is somewhat flattening. By insisting that the play is absurd, mere fantasy or play, Aristophanes can not serve to threaten anything, let alone ideologies that prescribe gender roles or locations--he cannot even be said to making fun of them in any purposeful way. I find such an effect politically uninteresting, the text seems to lack stakes. Sartre's "*Arte pour l'arte*," art for its own sake, is fine--I am not at all interested in why a comedic text might be produced--but reading into Aristophanes' text a complete disconnect from the world does not allow for the ways in which a fantasy or a comedy *can* change the world, or at least the hearts and minds of those who read it. We must remember, surely, that Aristophanes' text is a comedy, but we must also remember that comedy did not and does not exist in a vacuum. Aristophanes' texts were fundamentally important to Athenian democracy and his plays remain fundamentally important to how we study said democracy.

In order to better understand the place of comedy in the democracy and to push against this political theory reading of Aristophanes, I turn briefly to the context of his plays. His work originally existed only on stage, it is only now that we read them as text. Peter Euben writes, "Theater was a communal time and place even when representative aspects of that community

were being subject to ridicule and critique.”²¹ Theater was a part of the community, not a separate thing that could be dissociated from political life. Further, Aristophanes himself was textually intertwined with other facets of Athenian life. He, as a figure, was conceptualized as greatly important to life beyond the comic stage. His work was thought to matter. In the following pages, I will look at how the author becomes, for the audience, a figure that matters. The author becomes a part of the story and a part of the text itself. Regardless of whether or not the portrayal of the author is accurate (for it very likely is not), the humorist is constructed around an idea of a person who has produced the humor. In looking at the responses to Aristophanes through Plato, I will show how a text-only reading does not do enough work to locate the significance of the genre more broadly.

Aristophanes’ textual interactions with Socrates, through his own play the *Clouds* but especially in Plato’s *Apology* and *The Symposium*, show that not only did Aristophanes write about prominent public figures such as Socrates but that he was a public figure himself. The public performance of his work suggests that he would be familiar to the Athenian public. The *Clouds* is a work that satirizes, to put it gently, the role of Socrates in Athenian society. Aristophanes portrays him as silly at best and corrupting at worst. More importantly, though, is the way that Plato--a philosopher, not a comedian or a writer of fantasy--himself decides to discuss Aristophanes. Plato writes Socrates as directly referencing Aristophanes’ *Clouds* in his apology, the speech that is meant to explain the actions that brought him to trial. This dialogue was written more than 20 years after the production of Aristophanes’ play, suggesting that Plato considered Aristophanes to be an important enough political figure. For Plato, Aristophanes’ play

²¹ J. Peter Euben, “Aristophanes in America,” chap. 5 in *Public Space and Democracy*, ed. Marcel Henaff and Tracy B. Strong (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 97.

held a not insignificant amount of weight in determining and shaping the public opinion of Socrates.

There is little rhetorical purpose in writing Socrates as making a reference that would seem unimportant, unfamiliar, or irrelevant to a jury of Athenian citizens. Regardless of the actual impact of the play, Plato's Socrates certainly saw it as important. In Plato's text, his Socrates expresses an understanding of Aristophanes' depiction as profoundly important. So important, in fact, that he must ask his audience to stop considering his work as fact, even so long after the original production of the play. Plato's text suggests that Aristophanes' is a name that would have been recognized by the average Athenian citizen sitting on the jury. He was considered, then, at least by some, to have had considerable sway in the day-to-day dealings of Athenian politics and in the life and death of Socrates. The text, the *Clouds*, probably did not cause or even indirectly lead to the execution of Socrates. What this moment in the *Apology* does speak to is the ways in which the text was on the minds of the citizens, the ways it could have been considered damning. Even if the play was mere play, it was not always seen as such.

Aristophanes features more prominently in the *Symposium*. In the *Symposium*, he is given a speaking role. Further, not only is he a speaker, Plato writes Aristophanes as an absurd, laughable, silly speaker, eventually silenced by his own body. When Aristophanes is prevented from speaking by a debilitating case of the hiccups, the philosopher is poking fun at the comedian. What "Aristophanes" ultimately says when his hiccups abate is not of primary importance for my purposes (though it is silly). I am interested in the fact that Plato first takes on Aristophanes as a figure again worthy of being brought into his dialogue but also that he is a figure who Plato *must* silence. The meaning behind that silencing could very well be that

“Aristophanes” is seen by Plato as a figure who is antithetical to Plato’s own viewpoints. And not only is “Aristophanes” silenced, he is made a laughingstock within the dialogue. In using the dialogue in order to laugh at Aristophanes, Plato is legitimizing the form by which Aristophanes is engaging in politics while simultaneously marking *him* as unworthy of that kind of participation. In other words, Plato is using Aristophanes’ tools against him. Aristophanes is made, through his own style, an object worthy of score, ridicule, and derision. Plato seemingly has no problem with humor as a genre, but it must be taken out of the hands of Aristophanes. Aristophanes, not his genre, is the problem. Two things are then happening in this comedic moment: first, Aristophanes is again shown as relevant for discussion and second, comedy is shown to be an appropriate vehicle by which to discuss (or silence) important philosophical issues. The play is not insignificant.

This is all to say that, though Aristophanes was a comedian who may or may not have had radical (or radically conservative) political implications, he was certainly seen by Plato as being philosophically relevant. Plato, to an extent, removes Aristophanes from the realm of the comic and brings him into something much more “serious,” particularly in the tragedy of the *Apology*. In order for Plato’s move of Aristophanes from the comic to the dialogic to work, Aristophanes would have to have held some significance to his readers, just as would have Socrates himself, Alcibiades, and Meletus.²² None of these characters in Plato’s plays are necessarily accurate portrayals of their real, lived personalities. However, they are clear signifiers of meaning whereby reading Plato’s accounts of them would have evoked a response in his readers. They are not, for the reader, wholly new characters constructed from the author’s

²² Alcibiades appears in the *Symposium*, Meletus in the *Apology*.

imagination nor are they necessarily biographically faithful. Plato's portrayals are not wholly biographical and they are not wholly fictional. Aristophanes was well known and seen as significant enough to have become a character in Plato's dialogues. He meant something; Plato could use "Aristophanes" as shorthand for a set of ideas that he meant to quickly dismantle. Not only was Aristophanes a worthy and legitimate figure to and for Plato, he was well known enough to publicly stand for something.

Reading humor with the political theorist, with a text-centric methodology, lends insight into how the text works. In Saxonhouse's reading, the text is just a text and there is no space for it in the political world. The methodology allows for a figuration of the play that allows for it to be discussing politics but not to be engaging with politics. For my understanding, such a methodology raises more questions than it answers. How is the text read? How does it interact with the world outside the text? Why does the genre seem so political if it, in fact, is not? What do we do with the text after we have read it? What are the stakes of Saxonhouse's conservative model (is apoliticism of the text not, in fact, political)? I want, in the remaining chapters, to build on this model--to pull out the politics of the text itself--and to expand the category.

This analysis of Aristophanes in many ways "sets the stage" for the rest of the work. Aristophanes, as a comedian, brings up a wide variety of issues to return to again and again. First, Saxonhouse's reading offers one example of a way to conceptualize the public/private distinction. As I move forward, I work with shifting perspectives of the divide. The distinction between the public and the private manifests in a new way in the next chapter, where it steps outside the text itself and into the extra-textual space. Second, Aristophanes' work situates comedy in relation to democracy--even when his humor is read conservatively, and read as

conservative, it remains a way of being a part of political life. That his plays were a prominent part of Athenian public life is not insignificant and such a theme will become much more important in the remaining chapters.

2. Negotiating the Stakes of the Woman Writer: What Makes a Text “Feminist”?

Women are not funny. According to Nancy Walker in her book, *A Very Serious Thing: Women’s Humor and American Culture*, this assumption is instrumental in guiding and defining the way that U.S. society understands both humor and women. In her examination of why women humor writers are not a part of what is known as the tradition of “American humor,” she cites this very idea: “Women aren’t supposed to have a sense of humor.”²³ The assumption, that women lack a sense of humor, she argues, is the reason why there is no visible tradition of American women’s humor. Because women are not supposed to be funny, because they have no tradition on which to draw, they are confronted with a tremendous barrier to the comedic stage. This stage is here both physical and metaphorical, as Walker exclusively discusses the written text though, of course, women have not been entirely absent from stand-up and improvisational comedy.²⁴ Over the course of her book, Walker makes the compelling argument that bursting through that barrier is itself a signifier of the politics of the genre. By the simple and exclusive fact and act of being women and being funny, women humorists are engaging in a subversive, political, and ultimately *feminist* act that is profoundly important and, as her title suggests, a very serious thing.

Walker’s argument is two-fold: first, “we” have a cultural understanding of humor, what it looks like, what it does, and who does it. Second, the woman humorist undermines most if not

²³ Nancy Walker, *A Very Serious Thing: Women’s Humor and American Culture*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), ix.

²⁴ Taking just Saturday Night Live alone, Jane Curtin and Gilda Radner had become quite successful cast members prior to the 1988 publication of Walker’s book. Though 1988 was well before Tina Fey and Ellen DeGeneres were household names, the lack of attention to mediums outside of book and magazine remains unfortunate.

all of those understandings by breaking the first rule of working within the genre of humor: be a man. U.S. humor, she argues, is decidedly masculine and decidedly nationally defined. Walker writes, “That which scholars have over the years identified as traditional or typical American humor, written almost entirely by men, has the swagger of the small boy who, on the one hand, is proud of his youth and strength and, on the other, is calculatedly self-deprecating in the presence of cultures with longer traditions and greater sophistication.”²⁵ American humor is boisterous and confident. However, it must also negotiate two challenges: the history of cultural denigration of the genre and the difficulties in creating something that is wholly new and wholly American, not borrowed from Europe.²⁶ Here as with Aristophanes, the genre becomes a signifier of vulgarity (a trait Walker marks as endemic in American humor) and of a new nation. Humor, in this framing, is even a reaction against high culture and monarchy. It is democratizing in every sense of the word.

This is perhaps Walker’s most interesting point about the genre. Though her perspectives on both American and European humor are overly simplifying--cartoons in *The New Yorker*, for example, are rarely vulgar--it is an interesting strand of thought. Walker frames humor as intimately tied to national identity and I think that, on this count, she is very much correct. However, and I will pick this apart more fully later in the chapter and in the next, I think humor can be (though maybe not always is) a kind of democratic engagement, rather than a simple critique or reflection of the values of the political system. U.S. humor, in other words, is not a part of a democracy because it exists within a democracy, though that is surely true, but because it represents an alternative mechanism for participation. Walker thinks of humor as a genre about

²⁵ Walker, 39.

²⁶ Walker, 40-1.

posturing: when the humorist is political, it is from a critical perspective, a position of assumed authority: “But humor is different [from other genres]. The humorist is at odds with the publicly espoused values of the culture, overturning its sacred cows, pointing out the nakedness of not only the Emperor, but also the politician, the pious, and the pompous.”²⁷ She writes further, of humor theorists who “agree that the creation of humor requires the ability to ‘stand apart’ from the reality of one’s own existence and to view that existence with detachment and objectivity.”²⁸

The critical perspective is intimately tied to gender:

Even when the white male humorist adopts for his own purposes the stance of the outsider - the naive bumpkin who nonetheless sees the follies of the legislature, the “little man” bewildered by bureaucracy or technology - he writes with the authority of the insider, the person who is potentially in a position to change what he finds wrong, whether it is a law or the cut of a dinner jacket.²⁹

Male writers always have the luxury of both being able to stand above that which they are making fun of as well as simultaneously being a part of that culture. Because the male is the standard and is considered gender-neutral, the ways in which we view male humorists permeate our understanding of humor. In other words, the understanding of humor reflects the *male* understanding of humor.

Women, however, have a completely different relationship to culture and this relationship seeps into their critical position and their writing style. First, “Passivity and wit are diametrically opposed: the former requires acquiescence to rules and standards imposed by the dominant society, while the latter, with its associative values of intelligence, perception, and irreverence”

²⁷ Walker, 9.

²⁸ Walker, 23.

²⁹ Walker, 11.

plays with rules and standards rather than obeying them.³⁰ Because “woman” as a gender is constructed as passive, they cannot simultaneously be witty. In doing so, they are stepping outside of what it means to be woman, to be passive, and are engaging in a kind of subversive performance that is radically non-normative. And this non-normativity is tied to notions of feminism. Still, though, there is something deeply conservative about Walker’s argument. She writes,

One effect of the separatedness of women’s lives on their humor is that its subject matter has, quite naturally, been derived from the experiences of those lives. Instead of writing frontier tall tales and political satires, American women have tended to focus on more domestic issues: housework, children, community affairs, and - most important - relationships between women and men.³¹

Even when women step outside of the bounds of womanhood, by being witty rather than passive, they are bringing their experiences as women into the realm of the witty.

Here, again, we see the separate spheres ideology playing out but it looks very different from the previous chapter. In Walker’s argument, the woman humorist is stepping out of place by the very virtue of being a humorist. She, the woman humorist, is troubling the distinction because she is stepping out of her prescribed place and into the other, more dominant, public, and politically engaged, space. The public/private distinction manifests in terms of the author’s relationship to the text as the woman author is the point of trouble, not the women characters of their work (if any such characters exist). Even more than that, though, she is bringing with her into this new and forbidden space the stuff of her own position. In entering into this new sphere, she is not only breaking all of the rules of society, she is fundamentally altering the space, by making it more feminine. Thus, she is calling into question both the divide itself as well as the

³⁰ Walker, 26.

³¹ Walker, 29.

inherent masculinity of humor: women are behaving in a slightly more masculine way and are consequentially bringing a femininity to humor.

Walker's argument is certainly compelling: she allows the comedian, male or female, to be political in a way that Saxonhouse's reading in the previous chapter did not. Her understanding of the politics of women's humor makes sense of the very strange thing that a woman humorist is actually doing. Though I have said in response to Walker that women have not been absent from various comedic mediums, they have not and do not hold a monopoly over the genre. In fact, they do not even hold an equal share: successful women comedians *are* something of an anomaly. However, I have two primary critiques of Walker's theory. First, her theory is reductionist and essentialist: she makes too many generalizations about the women writing and is overly simplistic about the kind of politics produced. Second, as I have already begun to mention, the humorist need not stand either fully inside or outside of the political community: humor need not be a genre whereby the author asserts their superiority of the thing of which they are apart. Simply put, Walker's theory does not offer a sufficiently nuanced or subtle analysis of the genre.

Walker offers a deterministic model of politics. In asserting that the very fact of women stepping into the space of the humorous is political reduces politics to an idea that any woman, anywhere who is doing something even a little bit funny is "doing" politics. This model of politics, perhaps even of citizenship, demands no commitment or investment from the joke-teller. There seem to be no standards: so long as a woman is funny, she is political, subversive even. Flipping the script on Saxonhouse's tight containment to the stage, such a reading as Walker's moves *everything* off the stage and into the space of politics. The humor is political because it is

produced by a woman. It's politics is not produced by any quality inherent to the text itself or the context. Again, this approach represents a unilateral, one-sided way of viewing the genre. In focusing so intently on the gender of the author, and the assumptions being made about the author's gender, all else--text, context, and audience--falls away. As an example, Parker's pun on horticulture, "You may lead a horticulture, but you can't make her think" is political because she is a woman and has made me laugh. I do not even need to have heard or read the sentence in any detail in order to make that deduction.

I take as another example, Parker's perhaps most oft-quoted poem, "Résumé." This poem works as an example of a poem that demands some close reading before being pronounced political. Quoted in its entirety:

Razors pain you;
 Rivers are damp;
 Acids stain you;
 And drugs cause cramp.
 Guns aren't lawful;
 Nooses give;
 Gas smells awful;
 You might as well live.³²

This poem is often read in light of Parker's own suicide attempts, attempts that were well documented in society pages and therefore not actively hidden from Parker's audience. These interpretations rest on the assumption that the poem is saying something about Parker's own life and struggles to live. The focus on the title as a pun on "resume," an invocation to resume living.³³ Of course, such a reading is entirely impossible when one can pronounce the poem

³² Published in the 1926 collection *Enough Rope* and reproduced in the expanded 1972 *The Portable Dorothy Parker* from Viking Press, 99. *Enough Rope* was also included in the original, 1944, edition of the book.

³³ Marion Meade, *Dorothy Parker: What Fresh Hell Is This?*. New York: Villard Books, 1988. 161-162.

political, by virtue of the gender of its author (though, perhaps, the funniness of the poem is debatable).

Also missing is an analysis of Parker's strict adherence to highly conventional, metered structure with a faithful A-B-A-B-C-D-C-D rhyme scheme. It is a poem that juxtaposes the conventional style with the highly unconventional subject matter: if we focus exclusively on Parker as the thing out of place, we miss what she is doing in mismatching form with content. The form is upbeat, conventional; the content is dark, unconventional. Further, her style, perhaps quaint against T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," is a thing out of place in modernist literary culture. Finally the title, so carefully accented, is lost in refusing to read critically the poem itself. The accents insist that the poem is not only an invocation to resume life, though she is likely also punning on that as well. Her list of "qualifications" disrupts the ordinariness of a résumé and seems to want to draw attention to something sinister about the process, perhaps the society, that the title speaks to. Parker's poem is full of things that are out of place, that subvert expectations. If the only requirement for "counting" as political is the fact of the humor, this poem has already "counted" before I even began to read it.

What is missing in Walker's imagining is the nuance of the poem itself. My simple, truncated read of the poem uncovers a great deal that remains buried under Walker's rubric: the poem, and not just the author, becomes a complicated study in that which is out of place. It is necessary, then, that a more careful, nuanced reading of the politics of humor take the text itself into account. As in the previous chapter, with Saxonhouse's reading, this view of politics, though seemingly dynamic and hopeful, is actually quite static. Walker's formulation reduces politics to a flat, one-dimensional iteration that does not leave much room for actual politics--dynamic,

changing--to occur. Of course a woman writing in this genre is certainly doing something strange and out of place but that does not make it inherently political, at least not without turning to the text.

Further, Walker's view is deterministic insofar as it reduces both the author and the comedy into essential categories. We do not have interpretive room to read a multiplicity of motivations, if we are so inclined to do so, and readings of the text. Walker's theory first leaves no room for disengaged women humorists: by virtue of being a woman writing humorously, there is political engagement. The woman writer can become a figurehead for the movement without ever turning to their text. Walker's reading says too much about the woman writing the humor. Walker somewhat insists on making assumptions on the basis of gender: a method that is dangerous at best and antithetical to feminism at worst. Walker puts all women in the same social situation in the same way. She offers a chapter on "the humor of the 'minority,'" that attempts to fully deal with the multiplicity of meanings within the "singular" category of "woman." I do not believe that she fully succeeds in this endeavor. Women, she argues, are like an oppressed racial identity though it is more difficult to see because of their entanglement with men, the oppressor.³⁴

This argument is not unfamiliar but seems outdated, particularly as she seems to insist that gender is a vector of oppression, manifest in humor, that overrides all others. She writes, "Cultural prejudice against the witty woman thus cuts across racial and ethnic lines, affecting the black Zora Neale Hurston and the half-Jewish Dorothy Parker - not on the specific grounds of their blackness or Jewishness, but because humor violates ladylike behavior."³⁵ Though

³⁴ Walker, 137-8.

³⁵ Walker, 114.

comparisons with Hurston are troubling at best, as Parker's "Jewishness" manifests differently than Hurston's "blackness," this statement is reductive at best. Whether or not Hurston violates ladylike behavior via humor (and her choice of Hurston as an example seems strange given that she is certainly not known as a wit) cannot even be contemplated before the cultural irreconcilability of "ladylike" and "black" is dealt with. Hurston's "blackness" carries far more weight and makes her gender mean something entirely different.

By pulling in a woman of color as an example, Walker unwittingly sacrifices her own argument: whether or not Hurston is violating white, upperclass, heterosexual, etc standards of femininity (which seems to be the tied-to-the-home femininity that Walker is most interested in) is irrelevant because yes, she is. The subversion of the act is too dependent on that white, upperclass, heterosexual etc standard of femininity. A woman humorist can only be conceptualized as stepping out of place if we are very clear on what that place is meant to be in the first place. Walker's argument makes a great deal of problematic assumptions about that place that women leave through humor. Her argument rests entirely on a "woman humorist" that does not really exist in any meaningful way. Being a woman, in other words, is not a sufficient condition for radically modifying the category. Walker seems to want the signifier "woman" to do more work and be more applicable than it really should and is.

In addition, Walker implicitly makes certain assumptions about the responses of the audience, the people who are engaged and involved with the text. The woman humorist is subversive because she does something that she is not supposed to do. Allowing that to be true, the meaning of the action certainly depends upon the interpretation of others, at least to some extent. Without considering the response of others, at best we would be able to argue that the

subversive act produces radical changes within the individual, or a sense of an altered self. That may in fact be satisfactory but Walker wants the woman humorist to do more than that, to mean something in the world. Such a desire is evident in her continued rehashing of the collective American understanding of humor. But what if the reader goes to great lengths to reestablish the humorist as an ideal woman, unaffected by her stepping out of her place? Critic Mark Van Doren in 1934 does a great deal of mental gymnastics to have his cake and eat it too: he allows for Parker to be both a biting and incisive comedian *and* a good woman suggesting that, even in 1934, the gender transgression might not be impossible to explain away. On her wit, he writes, “It is neat and clear, and it is mordant; it is also--and this may be the reason for its popularity--sentimental. The terrible Mrs. Parker turns out to have a heart after all, a heart dripping with tender tears and very conscious of itself.”³⁶ Linguistically, he rescues her from her own gender transgression. Her sentimental, self-conscious heart allows her to become again something of an ideal woman and *that* is how he explains her popularity.

Maybe Parker is doing something radical, and I will argue in the next chapter that she is, but she has not stepped far enough outside of the bounds of where a woman ought to be that she cannot be put back again by a determined reviewer. The very fact of being a humorist does not seem to do enough damage to the idea of “woman” that it cannot be put back together again. She can even be returned to her idealized self without negating her talent, sharp tongue, and incisive wit. She can be both and, most importantly, *we as a reading public can love her for it*. Van Doren suggests that she is loved because she does both, not in spite of it. The problem of her behavior must be resolved against her gender but the category of “woman” is deeply embedded enough

³⁶ Mark Van Doren, “Dorothy Parker,” *The English Journal*, 23, no. 7 (1934): 536-7.

that it can take the cognitive dissonance that may be caused by the behavior. It must be protected, even if that protection does not make a great deal of analytical sense. Van Doren will go to great lengths to avoid seeing her as engaging in gender transgression perhaps because such transgression is far too dangerous to gender ideologies.

Finally, Walker does not seem to have a way for the woman humorist to be a part of the political community. The man humorist is both standing above that which he is critiquing while still being considered a part of society. The woman is an outsider. Part of what seems to me implicit in Walker's framing of the subversive quality of woman's humor, though she does not really draw it out, is that the humorist is asserting their belonging to the society that they are critiquing. A revision of Walker's theory would focus less on the subversive gender-bending that is occurring with the woman humorist but on the assertion of belonging, rather than standing above. I will cover this quite extensively in the next chapter, a chapter of readings of Parker's work, but as a brief example, I want to return to Parker's "News Item," quoted in the introduction and reproduced here: "Men seldom make passes / At girls who wear glasses."³⁷ In the introduction, I quoted Rhonda Pettit as noting that Parker herself wore glasses, a fact that puts her on the same page, so to speak, with the "girls" in her poem.³⁸ I want now to reread the poem as an ideological critique of what it means to be a man or a woman: men make passes, girl should not wear glasses (or girls should be beautiful). Additionally, men are men and women are "girls." "News Item" turns those ideas into something funny--Parker is making fun of a whole system of ideas about gender, dating, and beauty. But, interestingly, as a girl who wears glasses, she is a part of that script. I will take up, in chapter 3, examples that are more obviously

³⁷ *The Portable Dorothy Parker*, 109.

³⁸ Pettit, 107.

politically charged, more obviously about a community but even this example seems to show that Parker is saying not, “Aren’t they absurd?” but “Aren’t *we* absurd?” We are laughing together, not being laughed at.³⁹

Like with the political theory analysis in the previous chapter, this feminist analysis also does not seem to do enough work on its own. Both readings miss a great deal of interesting aspects of the politics of humor. If Saxonhouse’s reading focused too much on the text, this one does not focus enough on the text--or, rather, it does not focus on the text at all--and neither give sufficient attention to the context or reader response. Both readings draw out aspects of the politics of humor that prove fruitful; in one, the political play of public and private within the text and, in the other, the political play of public and private outside of the text. I mean in the following chapter to offer through a series of textual examples a more holistic approach to reading the politics of women’s humor. Ultimately, this interaction with Walker has provided additional clarity on the kind of reading that I wish to do: I want a reading that offers an expansive rather than a reductive politics, that pays attention to the text, and that accounts for the engagement and commitment of the author.

³⁹ This understanding may do some work to “save” Parker’s femininity, as discussed in the Van Doren example. It seems kinder, certainly. I think ultimately though that laughing together is not an exclusively feminine construction of humor. Kindness, anyway, ought not to be a quality reserved only for women.

3. “I take issue”: Dorothy Parker in Print

In October of 1927, Dorothy Parker wrote a review of Ernest Hemingway’s “latest” collection of stories, *Men Without Women*. (She dubbed it, “a truly magnificent work.”)⁴⁰ Toward the end of the review, she quotes Ford Madox Ford: “Hemingway writes like an angel.” She follows with, “I take issue (there is nothing better for that morning headache than taking a little issue.) Hemingway writes like a human being.”⁴¹ The statement “I take issue” in so many ways acts as the guiding sentiment behind the following reviews, editorials, and stories. Dorothy Parker, time and again, takes issue: be it with a play, a fellow audience member, a popular activity, or the hilarious predicament in which she has found herself. Parker is a study in disagreements and “helpful” corrections and amendments. In the following pieces, from *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, and *The New Yorker*, Parker takes jabs at politics, gendered people, and even the act of going to the theater. These jokes provide insight into a new, third, other way of conceptualizing the public/private distinction. The alternative that reading Parker’s texts offers is a politics of humor that is expansive, predicated on ideological critiques, and deeply committed.

About her own writing and the act of that writing, Dorothy Parker has little to say. About writing as a practice more generally and about the writing of her peers, she is much more generous in granting her thoughts. Some of Parker’s first print work at *Vanity Fair* during the first world war was in play and book reviewing.⁴² These reviews show her as a writer who is profoundly aware of the existence, role, and importance of the audience. Her play reviews for

⁴⁰ The Portable Dorothy Parker, 460.

⁴¹ Ibid, 461.

⁴² Marion Meade, *Dorothy Parker: what fresh hell is this?*, (New York: Villard Books, 1988), chap. 3.

Vanity Fair appear, more often than not, as case studies in the audience and the kind of interpretive work that she imagines happening in the heads of those seated around her. November 1918 marks the end of World War I--Germany and the Allies signed an armistice on November 11, 1918--and Parker is reviewing plays for *Vanity Fair*. Each month during the war, *Vanity Fair* devoted the first section of their magazine to news, stories, and images of and pertaining to the Allied efforts. The November 1918 issue is a wonderful moment in wartime print culture including such articles as, “The Boy Who Came Back” about the strangeness of soldiers returning from the front, “The Great Battle Against the Buns” which links the US Temperance Movement to war and nationalism, and “Sight-seeing at the Front” which is precisely what it appears to be.⁴³ Interspersed throughout the magazine are brutal pictures of the war, comic drawings of women’s roles during the war, and ads concerning what to buy the men on the front for Christmas.⁴⁴

Parker’s play reviews span three pages, interspersed with the coverage of the war. Her reviews begin alongside a photo coverage of four “versatile” stage actresses. They resume alongside ads for products that help achieve “the democratic freedom and comfort of the soft collar,” “Quality Clothes for Quality Americans” who wish to be as well-groomed as Canadians, and an ad for toothpaste that asks readers to return empty tubes to the Red Cross. And the piece concludes against an ad for Elizabeth Arden skin care products boasting the “Wise War-Time Philosophy” of ““When my husband is going through a trying period in business, that is the time I put my best foot forward, plan most carefully my dinners, don becoming frocks,’ said a clever

⁴³ *Vanity Fair*, November 1918, 35, 43, and 47.

⁴⁴ *Vanity Fair*, November 1918: my favorites include the two page spread of massacres on 36-7, 44-5, and the “Gifts for Men in Service/Gifts for Mere Man” spread on 74-5.

woman who is a bulwark of strength to her husband. ‘Nothing is more disheartening than evidences of carelessness. Any forced economy I strive to conceal from him.’” The war is splashed throughout the pages of the women’s magazine and appears all around Parker’s reviews. Though the reviews themselves seem to be set off from the texts that are more explicitly about the war by the pictures of the versatile stage actresses, the ads on the adjoining pages do not allow for the cultural reviews to be fully offset from the reality of the war.

Parker opens her review of “The New Plays” with a joke about how too many were released that week for critics to keep up with, they were forced to move too quickly from new play to new play. The reviews include her thoughts on a wide variety of topics, including the war, the people sitting around her, and the state of her own personal finances. This set of reviews is as much a commentary on the act and experience of going to see a play as it is a commentary on the plays themselves. Though she has praise and, more often, biting criticism for the actors and playwrights, much of her attention is offscreen, so to speak. About Frank Bacon’s play, “Lightnin’,” she writes: “From the moment I entered the Gaiety Theatre, it kept my mind off the war and my bills, and I’m deeply indebted to the author.”⁴⁵ In the first review to appear in the line-up, Parker has drawn attention to the perceived function of the theatre, calling attention to the false structure of the magazine itself which seems to cordon off the news and commentary on the war and national politics from play reviews. Within the space of the theatre, her mind is free from those other problems and that is a mark of the success of the author. To read this statement fully as a mark of the critical standpoint of Dorothy Parker would be a mistake. However, it is interesting in its articulation of the view of theatre as an escape from the war even as it serves to

⁴⁵ *Vanity Fair*, November 1918, 53.

introduce the topic within the space of the theatre reviews. As she asserts that such a line exists between national politics and play reviews, she blurs it. Even within the subtitle of the article itself, “The New Plays: The Attacks and Counter-Attacks of Our Autumn and Winter Dramas,” she achieves a similar blurring of distinctions. The “attacks and counter-attacks” of the title cannot but evoke war imagery and associations.

Her review of John Hobbles’ play “Daddies” brings such a blurring to the forefront as she criticizes the performance and scripting of the play with respect to “war orphans.” She does not find it to be particularly believable. The play itself brings up the topic of children who are left parentless because of the war. It is now, however, a convincing rendering of the reality of the situation: “The play is made timely and appealing by calling the children ‘war orphans,’ but somehow, that part of it didn’t grip me particularly.” She continues,

No one seemed to take the orphan business especially seriously, or to be very much worked up over it. The actors explained, vaguely, that the little dears had been left orphaned by the war, but they didn’t seem to take much stock in it themselves. Jeanne Eagels made a long appeal for war orphans, but, although she recited it very prettily, in her charmingly modulated voice, she didn’t take it much to heart—indeed, she was most impersonal about the whole thing. To me, “Daddies” was not particularly stirring as an appeal for the orphans of war; but, as propaganda for birth control, it was extraordinarily effective.⁴⁶

On one level, the play does not work as a political appeal. Despite her view of the play as unsuccessful in its attempts to provoke sympathy in the audience, she notes in her last words on the play, “Oh, there’s something I forgot to tell you about ‘Daddies.’ It’s a tremendous success.”⁴⁷ There is a kind of doubleness that exists in this particular review and that doubleness implies that her disdain for the commercial success of “Daddies” is not a mere difference of

⁴⁶ *Vanity Fair*, November 1918, 98.

⁴⁷ *Vanity Fair*, November 1918, 98.

personal opinion. Instead, this review points to a difference in expectations between Parker and the rest of the audience: for Parker, this play is insufficient as a commentary on war; for others, she seems to claim for them, the play is precisely enough. There is a sense about this review that, even though she is on the surface critiquing the play itself, it is the audience that is the source of the problem: there is something lacking about the theatre-goers that made this play such a commercial success. It is not an accident that she ends her review with a nod to its success and such a nod suggests a criticism that is as much about the audience as it is about the text itself.

The preceding review, of Oscar Wilde's "An Ideal Husband," is entirely a review of the audience. Looking more closely at this review allows me to further elaborate on my point above. Of course, Parker has some fault to find with the play itself but the bulk of the review is about those seated around her in the theatre. She begins with a preemptive criticism about those who would mistakenly refer to the play as "The Ideal Husband": "Over at the Comedy, which has been all done over in honor of the event, John Williams is producing Oscar Wilde's 'An Ideal Husband'—invariably spoken of as 'The Ideal Husband' by the same group of intellectuals who refer to 'The Doll's House'"⁴⁸ This quip allows her to position herself in opposition to at least a portion of the audience members. However, it is not those audience members that she is presumably writing to; it is to audience members that are "in" on the joke, that find those other people to be as silly as Parker does. She is simultaneously able to form a kind of alliance between reader and reviewer, if the reader is clever enough to be let into that circle: if the reader is clever enough to understand the joke.

⁴⁸ *Vanity Fair*, November 1918, 53.

After a sarcasm-laden description of her “happiness” with the play, she returns to and then spends the bulk of her review on the audience: “Somehow, no matter how well done an Oscar Wilde play may be, I always am far more absorbed in the audience than in the drama. There is something about them that never fails to enthrall me.”⁴⁹ This is her position for the remainder of the view and it is not a flattering portrayal of those around her; she harshly makes fun of the presumption and hypocrisy of certain theatre-goers: “‘Look at us,’ they seem to say. ‘We are the cognoscenti. We have come because we can appreciate this thing—we are not as you, poor bonehead, who are here because you couldn’t get tickets for the Winter Garden.’” And she continues,

‘Oh, the lines, the lines!’ they sigh, one to another, quite as if they were the first to discover that this Oscar Wilde is really a very promising young writer; and they use the word ‘scintillating’ as frequently and as proudly as if they had just coined it. Yet there is about their enjoyment a slightly strained quality, almost as if they were striving to do what should be expected of those of their intellect. It isn’t the sort of enjoyment that just sits back and listens; it is almost as if they felt they must be continually expressing their appreciation, to show that no epigrams get over their heads, to convince those about them of their cleverness and their impeccable taste in drama.⁵⁰

The theatre is an occasion, Parker implies, for certain people to prove their own intelligence. What is interesting about this articulation is its disguise as a review of a play. Rather than offering an account of the play, she is offering an account of theatre-goers, suggesting that their presence, behavior, and attitudes are the important and noteworthy aspects of the play itself.

She does this over and over in this set of play reviews. On Roland West and Carlyle Moore’s “The Unknown Purple,” she writes, “There was one thing that made “The Unknown

⁴⁹ *Vanity Fair*, November 1918, 53.

⁵⁰ *Vanity Fair*, November 1918, 98.

Purple” decidedly more difficult the night I was there—that was the audience.”⁵¹ The audience was, in her account, noisy, disruptive, and sick and made the entire experience of attending the play to be wholly unpleasant. About one of the war plays, which are “still with us,” she pokes fun at a soldier sitting behind her:

To me, the brightest spot of the evening was the soldier (he was sitting in the seat behind me) who, bursting with the importance of his newly-acquired Camp Upton French, condescendingly translated to his girl the occasional French words of the play. “You heard that guy saying ‘*toujours*’?” he said. “That means ‘to-day.’”⁵²

To point out the soldier in the audience is to at least slightly shift the designation of audience that had been articulated earlier in her reviews; it had previously been possible to assume that the audience was composed of civilians, who may not have direct personal experience with the front, making some sense of the commercial success of “Daddies.” The soldier here though is not a hero; he is virtually indistinguishable from the silly intellectuals who mistakenly refer to Oscar Wilde’s play as “The Ideal Husband.” They are spectators who assume a position of superiority when offering their views of the plays. What Parker does, in a way that fits very neatly with Nancy Walker’s sense of the humorist as herself assuming a sense of superiority, is knock them down from that assumed position. However, Parker is positioning herself as knowledgeable where other audience-members are not necessarily and, furthermore, forging an alliance with the readers that are “in” on her jokes, those who also know more than the pseudo-intellectuals who are the butt of her jokes. She is not only standing above, but also standing *with*.

Functionally, this attitude and this positioning works not only to forge an alliance with certain readers but also to critique, on some level, wartime theatre-goers. Taking again the

⁵¹ *Vanity Fair*, November 1918, 98.

⁵² *Vanity Fair*, November 1918, 100.

subtitle, “The Attacks and Counter-Attacks of Our Autumn and Winter Dramas,” the attacks are not exclusively on, about, or from the plays themselves though Parker is undoubtedly critical of them as well. In these reviews, through making the audience the subject of the review, she is deeply critical of the attitudes of those who are attending plays. There is a strong case to be made for reading these reviews as a kind of “attack” on the leisure culture of this particular wartime society. The magazine itself, through articles, gruesome images, and advertisements, makes forgetting the situation of the war an impossible task; however, this space in the magazine is clearly meant to be portioned off from the words and images of the war. Although the ads on the facing pages certainly reference the war, citizenship, and national identity, they are advertisements for cleaning and beauty products targeted to the upperclass housewife.

These reviews are located within a separate section of the magazine from “Of American and Allied Interest” or even from “The World Outdoors.” *Vanity Fair* has sectioned off “In and About the Theatre” as a separate space to attend to plays specifically. It appears to be entirely removed from the rest of the magazine. Of course, there is nothing terribly unusual about that move; what is unusual is Parker’s continued insistence on using her humor to bring the war into the space where it is not supposed to be. She is bringing the rest of the magazine, the war news, into what ought to be wholly separate. By focusing on the audience, she is achieving two things: blurring the lines between the categories of war and entertainment and criticizing what is happening in the space of entertainment, particularly as it relates to the war. She is humor, not so much to be *mean* to the audience per say, but to point out a kind of hypocrisy as it relates to their attitudes.

Parker's humor is often line-blurring and meant to speak to and connect directly with her audience. Her *Vogue* articles, primarily published during World War I, are often an exercise in blurring the definitions between the male and female spaces. She uses male mediums to sell products to women, she comments on women's place in the war effort, and handles the "threatening" figure of the newly working woman in such a way as to question the appeal of the traditional female heroine and her traditional roles and tasks. Her famous turn on Shakespeare's Polonius, "brevity is the soul of wit" to "brevity is the soul of lingerie" was copy for a lingerie advertisement.⁵³ Instead of being a direct hit on the domestic sphere or the lingerie itself, she seems to be commenting on the institution of *Vogue* and its readers, a thing that is predominantly feminine but itself still an institution. This example shows her humor as perhaps used as an attempt at negotiating the space between the binary; she is using male traditions to push against the bounds of women's spaces.

The juxtaposition of Shakespeare and women's underwear is startling in itself but the reward of the joke seems to be, as tends to be a pattern of Parker's, an especial payoff for those with sufficient literary knowledge to connect the line to Shakespeare. The joke is perhaps even better the more knowledge of *Hamlet* one possesses as Polonius is perhaps not the first Shakespearean character one would turn to for advice of any kind, including shopping advice. In a way, Parker is invading the woman-centric space of *Vogue* with a text that is at least gender neutral though arguably very masculine. More interestingly, however, she is asking her audience to meet her in the space of the joke. Much of her humor works best if the audience possesses the requisite literary and cultural knowledge to be in on the joke. The humorist is inviting the

⁵³ Meade, 35.

audience into a discursive relationship, a relationship that is based on the exchange of text and ideas, in such a way that is asking for a response. Parker's work demands to be interrogated.

A 1917 piece on knitting and the war effort, "Each thought a purl, each purl a prayer: Knitting has become the national sport; the woman who does not knit is regarded as a natural phenomenon" begs the question of how to read and respond to the humor-infused piece that is being used, at least in part, to sell knitting bags to *Vogue* readers. Presumably, the kind of wartime knitters that Parker would be specifically describing would be very recognizable to the readers of *Vogue*, presumably themselves women who have the leisure to knit, not as a form of employment or for their own families, but as a kind of hobby tied to the war effort, despite the fact that machines might do it better or more efficiently.⁵⁴ Parker situates herself within that circle of women with the use of the first person plural: "We knit all sorts and conditions of articles, for Coast Defence, for Home Defence, but most of all for self-defence. The woman who does not knit is just about as popular as if she were a German."⁵⁵ This articulation of why women knit gives voice to an assumed value with respect to knitting: it is viewed, not as a trifling waste of time, but as a valuable aspect to the war effort. Early, she sets up the supposition that women are expected to knit as a valuable contribution to the war; those who do not, will be viewed as a villain.

In the next section, the more comedic section of her piece, she works through the reasons why this does not quite work, both for women and for the war. Of the women, she writes that they are preoccupied by this new pastime:

⁵⁴ Matkovic, VMP. "The Power of Fashion: the Influence of Knitting Design on the Development of Knitting Technology." *Textile*. 8. no. 2 (2010): 122-147.

⁵⁵ Parker, 1917 sic.

There is no conversation among women any more,—not even a patronizing remark about the weather or an intelligent appreciation of the latest scandal. They utter only such broken fragments of speech as “Do I purl or knit here?”, “Is four inches enough for a border?”, “How many stitches do you cast on for a helmet?”, “What do I do now?”⁵⁶

Already, she is beginning to show a glimmer of the idea that she will move to in a later piece, the idea that the war has fundamentally altered our understandings of femininity and how women ought to or even may be able to behave. There is an unmistakable note of sarcasm and exaggeration about such an assertion: clearly, women are not so consumed with their new activity that they lack the time to gossip. To make sense of such a comedic assertion, she goes on to discuss how the activity has not been particularly fruitful for those who are the intended recipients of the knitted gifts:

But all the knitted articles are, alas, not flawless. There are many knitters who seem to suffer under mistaken ideas of the minimum size of the men who enlist in the army or the navy. They make child’s size sweaters and socks, charming little trifles and beautifully made, but scarcely serviceable. Then when the garments are refused, they become exceedingly bitter. They make caustic remarks about the way the government is running this war, and feel generally that they have cast their purls before swine.

Some of the most unspeakable horrors of war are being manufactured right here at home. The sweaters and socks, the helmets and wristlets,—some of these are the true atrocities. Amateur knitters really ought to take a few elementary lessons in anatomy. There are socks that resemble sleeping-bags, there are helmets that are nothing but individual suffocations, there are sweaters that only require hooks at the end to form excellent hammocks. And as for the mufflers and wristlets that are wished on our sailors,—well, Heaven pity the men at sea!⁵⁷

Women produce items that are far too small for a soldier and, as a response to the refusal of the too-small garments, they critique the government for being unappreciative and, thus, poorly

⁵⁶ Ibid, sic.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

running the war. Further, the products of amateur knitters are, she claims, the worst catastrophes that befall men at sea. The absurdity of such a statement, for there is no way in which oversized socks rival the atrocities of war, casts doubt on the importance of the activity.

The overstated importance in the tone of the editorial suggests that the activity might, in fact, be somewhat silly. This is furthered by the claim that machines can, in fact, do a better job than knitting people can:

There is a good reason for all this knitting—it is the way that every woman can do her really worthy bit. There are those who say it is a colossal waste of time and speak tiresomely of machines to do the work, but they have not thought much about it. Let there be machines, by all means, to turn out knitted garments—but let women keep up their work, just the same. For it means that every moment that would otherwise be idle is turned to account for our army and navy.

Knitting, it seems, is structured as an invaluable activity not because it is actually necessary that women knit for the war effort. Machines, as she allows, can do the task much more efficiently and consistently well. Instead, knitting is considered invaluable because it gives women a sense of purpose and something to do with their time. This article calls attention to flaws in the war economy that sacrifice efficiency for the trouble of keeping women busy. This is not a situation that situates Parker as separate from such a society. As a knitter herself, and having already positioned herself within the context of the article with the use of “we” earlier, she is not offering simply a critique of women who knit. Rather, “Each thought a purl, each purl a prayer” serves more as a playful criticism of the importance given to the activity than by the activity itself.

There is something incredibly strange about using *Vogue* as a vehicle for a piece that critiques the function of women during the war. As I have mentioned, the piece was used in part to sell bags; as is unsurprising for *Vogue*, the article is interspersed with images of bags with a corresponding description and price. Parker is sure to mention the role that the bags play in the

lives of the women who knit and has accomplished this by the third sentence of the piece: “If one ventures out without her knitting-bag, she is regarded as practically nude.”⁵⁸ Though there is no reason to believe that the inclusion of this sentence would sell bags by itself, the juxtaposition with the images does make it read like advertising copy. Parker’s humor, though, subverts the genre: once again, the space of the women’s magazine becomes a site of talking about and critiquing national issues. Humor has transformed the space into a differently gendered venue: what has been cordoned off is, through humor, allowable to women readers.

In an 1919 piece for the same magazine, “Lovely Woman as the Honest Labouring Man: He who returns from the war may find that the only profession left him is that of a female impersonator” Parker plays on the idea that men, returning from the war only to find that their jobs have been taken by women. She shows both the absurdity of a certain conventional, idealized heroine as well as the lack of desirability traditionally afforded to tasks that are thought of as work to be done by women. The piece opens with the metaphoric death of a heroine: “Do you ever stop and wonder what has become of the old-fashioned girl, the heroine of the sweet clean love-story, which you could read aloud to your maiden aunt without having to skip a paragraph?”⁵⁹ The framing as a question is unnecessary. “Everyone” is aware of the changing attitudes and conventions of womanhood and femininity. The gothic heroine is gone. She continues, “Surely you remember her, the before-the-war heroine” and describes a simply (modestly) dressed but beautiful girl with a flower in her hair who would spend her day awaiting the hero’s return from the factory: “Then, she called it a day, and began all over again with her

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Parker, 1919.

famous and unfailing cheer.”⁶⁰ This girl, as a section-header “deceased heroines” implies, has effectively died for she no longer exists.

However, despite the header and the dramatics concerning the death of the heroine, Parker seems to struggle to really see the change as a problem and quickly retracts her strong words:

If the gifted authors who described her so tenderly would only sit down at their typewriters and bring her up to date, you would see how completely she has altered. Those little gingham and muslin frocks of hers--she has long ago packed them up and sent them to the Armenians. She no longer hangs around gates in the evening, waiting wistfully for the hero to come home. No--it's the hero who is waiting for her, these days. You see, she has taken his job in the factory.⁶¹

The heroine may have altered but it is not to her own detriment rather than to the personal dissatisfaction of the men who believe that they must now take on her role. This is not a piece which bemoans the loss of the heroine for its own sake. Though Parker offers some sympathy to the returning soldiers, it is because of the awful nature of the role that they are stepping in to fill. We must mourn the loss of the old heroine because of the fact that someone else must come along to fill her shoes. And also because of the ways in which such a negation of the traditional role inconveniences the women who need female domestic workers.

This point about inability to find help offers a clear satire, portraying a woman who “tearfully has offered a monthly wage equal to what a king’s ransom used to be when anybody cared anything about ransoming kings; she has hysterically promised to give away the children . . . if only the haughty lady will come to launder for her, or to cook for her.”⁶² Her

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

phrasing, offering a clear exaggeration of the misery that occurs when women abandon their traditional positions, pushes on the idea of the deep importance (and perhaps even of the existence of this type of a role). It does, however, help to understand the point of the satire:

In vain the weary householder tries advertising. Her plea from the heart is but one of thousands of similar pleas. It lies all unnoticed in the crowded help-wanted columns. No one pays the slightest attention to it; those women who might, in other and happier days, have been applicants are now too busy answering the great black advertisements for “500 experienced caulkers wanted, immediately.”⁶³

Of course, this is not happening. Parker is presenting a situation that is, frankly, absurd in order to point out the absurdity of such reactions in the eyes of the public. While simultaneously highlighting the absurdity of mourning the loss of a figure who never existed--who has supposedly been replaced one who still does not--she also points to the fact that women might, in fact, find confinement to the home and certain domestic tasks to be less preferable to men’s jobs. Men clearly find that to be a threat..

Her final line of the piece, “But until [women go back to their old vocations], it looks as if the only man’s profession that is safe from feminine invasion is that of female impersonator” suggests both the absurdity of women not behaving like women and that there is something unpleasant about that role that would make both men and women want to avoid it. Interestingly, I argue that the pieces written for and published in *Vogue* are the closest to what Walker urges for in a feminist reading. I also argue that it is the most constrained humor, in the most constrained space: Parker is not, in these pieces, engaging in the kind of dialogue-creation that I pointed to with the *Vanity Fair* piece. The pieces seem to do different things, even when they’re all printed in women’s magazine during wartime. The pieces that are, for me, most successful at offering a

⁶³ Ibid.

kind of political critique--that of the leisure culture of the war--are the pieces that sneak the critique into a seemingly-unrelated topic.

A 1928 story in *The New Yorker*, "The Garter," is a piece about a woman, named Dorothy Parker, who breaks her garter at a dinner party and, for this woman, this occurrence is the most horrific thing to have ever happened. The story is a comedic look at the inner monologue of a woman who has been put into an uncomfortable situation at a dinner party. "Thank God I was sitting down when the crash came. There's a commentary on existence for you. There's a glimpse of the depths to which a human being can sink. All I have to be thankful for in this world is that I was sitting down when my garter busted."⁶⁴ The exaggeration of the scene reflects, on one level, real angst as it pertains to an unexpectedly uncomfortable social situation but, on another level, reflects the silliness of such feelings. Parker ties the breaking of the garter to war: "What would Napoleon have done?"⁶⁵ She compares the garter to a broken heart. She substitutes the word "garter" for "God" in a hymn. She runs through *Great Expectations* and *Nicholas Nickleby* ("What am I having, anyway--An Evening with Dickens?"). Finally, she writes about how this state of being without a properly-intact-garter will reflect badly upon her work as a writer,

"Oh, have you met Dorothy Parker?," they will ask, "What's she like? Oh, she's terrible. God, she's poisonous. Sits in a corner and sulks all evening--never opens her yap. Dumbest woman you ever saw in you life. You know, they say she doesn't write a word of her stuff. They say she pays this poor little guy. . . ."⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Dorothy Parker, *Complete Stories*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 99.

⁶⁵ Parker, 99.

⁶⁶ Parker, 100-1.

As with the piece on knitting, this event has a far more prominent importance on her life than would otherwise be expected. That's where the humor comes in, the absurdity of the reaction to the situation.

What Parker seems to be pointing to with this piece is the absurdity and difficulties of the social space, perhaps particularly for women. She writes upon first discovering her broken garter that, "This couldn't have happened to me in the perfumed sanctity of my boudoir. Or even in the comparative privacy of the taxi. Oh, no. That would have been too good. It must wait until I'm cornered, like a frightened rat, in a room full of strangers."⁶⁷ The sharp wit and clever references of the piece ensure that this is not to be read as a critique on women themselves: the character of "Dorothy Parker" is not a fool--she can manage a series of literary and political references with ease--but the assumption of her femininity, as manifest through her garter, renders her less able to move with ease and confidence within the public sphere. The fact of her assumed femininity, as part of the social structure, is sufficient to uphold the weakened femininity itself.

She makes the bizarre move of making the piece about herself. Self-deprecating humor is not out of the ordinary for Parker, many of her targets, especially in her poetry and pieces for *The New Yorker*, are named as herself, given away as herself via context clues, or an otherwise nondescript "I." Not only does this undoubtedly shift audience expectations, as the speaking subject is not revealed to be Parker herself until a few paragraphs from the end of the story, but it involves further creation of Parker as a public subject. She is making herself into a worthy topic for this sort of piece. Here, the pieces of content, author, and audience begin to merge into a story that is difficult to call either wholly political or wholly feminist, though it seems to have at least

⁶⁷ Parker, 99.

some of the pieces as I argued for the feminist content of the piece, it could also be argued that the intent perfectly corresponds to such a reading.

To return to Parker's comments on Hemingway, he "write like a human being," as this type of an analysis might be mapped back onto Parker herself. Parker is grounded within her critique, rolling up her sleeves and engaging with her material. She does not, contrary to Walker's framing, stand outside or above. Her humbling move of putting herself in the role of the embarrassed party-goer negates that reading. Instead, she places herself next to the silly people in the theater (both physically and figuratively), as a fellow knitter, and in the midst of a party that is, from her perspective, quite disastrous. She is *in* it, she is involved. Her commitment is clear, the stakes are high. As she writes jokes that highlight gender ideology--that get to the very nature of what it means to "be" a man or a woman--she is herself participating in that system. In fact, through the very fact of making these jokes, she is declaring her belonging in the community that she addresses. Humor becomes, for Parker in these pieces, a kind of assertive "citizenship." Or an assertion of her belonging in the political community--it is a performance of active engagement and belonging. Though known for her pith, her quick wit, her humor is in fact deeply complicated and deeply political. The politics here are politics that center around ideology, she is reframing something very large. To turn to her final phrases on Hemingway, "His is, as any reader knows, a dangerous influence. The simple thing he does looks so easy to do. But look at the boys who do it."⁶⁸ This is what it means to write like a human being.

⁶⁸ The Portable Dorothy Parker, 461.

Conclusion: From Play to Politics, Locating the Politics of Humor

This paper has examined Arlene Saxonhouse's "Men, Women, War, And Politics: Family and Polis in Aristophanes and Euripedes," Nancy Walker's *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture*, and a sampling of Dorothy Parker's reviews, editorials, and stories in *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, and *The New Yorker*. In doing so, my goal has been to demonstrate and understand the ability of humor as a genre to exist in relation to the political. To return to a question from my introduction: what does a joke or a somewhat silly, clever rhyme *do*? And, in addition, how has it been theorized as "doing" and what are the strengths and weaknesses of these theories, both in terms of the analytical work of the theories themselves as well as the larger implications for the genre and the political? By looking at the politics of the genre, I sought to widen the boundaries of the political by re-imagining it as encompassing a non-physical space, the space between the text and the world. In addition, I was able to consider an empowered reader (and the relevance of the text and context) without doing violence to the author. What readers are, I hope, left with is a sense of the dynamic play between text and politics, a play that is both expansive and democratic.

In order to accomplish this goal I turned, in my first chapter, to Arlene Saxonhouse's analysis of Aristophanes' play, the *Lysistrata*. In this chapter, I looked at the strengths and weaknesses of an approach standard in political theory, one that stays close to the text itself. This approach revealed the themes of the public and the private within the text, the way that the humor of Aristophanes' text is at least in part based on women moving outside of the place where they are meant to be and getting involved in politics. It is a reading that is ultimately

conservative but raises questions of how humor might be involved with blurring distinctions and making unclear the boundaries that surround that which we think of as the “public” or the “political.” What was, however, for my purposes ultimately lacking in this reading was a sense of both the place of the play within Athenian democracy and the role of reader response in shaping the politics of the text. What Saxonhouse’s, in my view, somewhat static reading of the play misses is the way in which Aristophanes’ texts were integral to the Athenian democratic community. I read the text is unfortunately considered outside of the context of the democracy and, through this unfortunate lack of consideration, is perhaps misread as being too insignificant. Though we lack a wealth of criticism or public opinion on Aristophanes’ plays, my reading of Plato’s texts suggests that Aristophanes was not always considered as politically neutral as Saxonhouse’s reading may suggest. In opening up the idea that humor is both considered important and potentially democratic, I was able to turn away from a too-faithful close reading of the text.

If Saxonhouse looked too closely at the text, Nancy Walker did not look closely enough. In this way, Chapter 2 provided a compelling antithesis to the thesis of Chapter 1. Walker’s argument focused on the author and the culturally-inscribed meanings of the woman humorist in particular. Her argument added a new dimension to the analysis of the public/private divide because this time, the divide was extra-textual. Because femininity is inconsistent with being funny, the woman humorist is stepping out of her ascribed gender role and in doing so is engaging in an act sufficiently subversive to shake our conceptions of those roles entirely. Again I turned to outside criticism to get a sense of how this might not be entirely true, how the reader may go to great lengths to protect the meanings of the gender roles. Further, I brought in a text of

Dorothy Parker's in order to look at the stuff of the genre that is political outside of the gender of the author. There is a great deal of work being done in Parker's "Resume" that does not depend upon an acknowledgment of the author's gender. Finally, I returned to the questions posed in Chapter 1, of how the genre might be thought of as engaged with democracy, in order to think about where the author stands in relation to politics. In this framing, I begin to understand the author as potentially asserting, through use of the genre, their engagement and connection with the very community that they draw attention to in their work.

In Chapter 3, I turn finally to a series of readings of Dorothy Parker's texts in order to synthesize the work of the previous chapters. My reading of Parker accomplishes two goals, goals that were not explicitly a part of the works that I had been previously critiquing. First, my readings of Parker's texts show a kind of humorous criticism that is not found in Saxonhouse's text and is not quite achieved in Walker's, an ideological criticism of gender roles: what it means to be a man or a woman in a particular society. Second, my readings return to questions I had in both of the previous chapters: how does the genre exist in relationship to democracy and how does the author exist in relationship to democracy? Parker offers an example of a politics that is asserted through and enhanced by her medium. Humor, in these readings, works as a vibrant part of a healthy democratic community. In order to expand upon these points, because they are important, I will return briefly to the texts I looked at the previous chapter. I wish to do this in order to elaborate on them before turning to broader feminist, political implications of this paper.

First, Parker's humor critiques not just people (though she certainly does that too) but ideologies. Perhaps most telling is the story of "The Garter," where Parker writes for three pages on the anguish that she feels upon breaking her garter in a public place. She certainly deals with

the idea of being out of place. She writes that she would have been better off staying at home and longs for a place of privacy, out of the prying eyes of the party. However the humor comes as much from “Parker’s” anguish over the wardrobe malfunction, the fact that the fact of breaking a garter could be seen as such a disaster is the wit of the piece, as it does about whether or not Parker should be in public in the first place. Of course the piece never really calls her belonging in public into question; even as Parker never misses an opportunity to riff on that fact and on her own profession, it is much more about making fun of those who would suggest that she retreat from the space, from writing, than an agreement with those voices.

Clearly, this story is complicated. She takes up two sets of ideologies--the prescriptive and restrictive gender conventions that necessitate her attention to the garter in the first place and the people who would tell her to stop writing and socializing--and parrots them in order to dismantle the logic of the ideology. Parker’s humor is deconstruction in the truest sense of the word: the humor of the piece comes from displaying the illogic of a set of assumptions that we, her readers, may take for granted. After reading her piece, it is difficult to put the ideology back together again. Her humor is inextricably intertwined with logic and language. Humor is not a mere vehicle for an argument, though it does also seem to be an alternative to dismantling gender ideology piece-by-piece in essay form, but rather comes from the ideology itself. Her jokes often hinge on recognizing the illogic of cultural assumptions. “The Garter” looks suspiciously like drama if the reader is not forced to challenge those assumptions. The reader is asked to do the bulk of the analytical work.

Second, taking again “The Garter” as an example--though she does this also in her piece on knitting for *Vogue* and to a lesser extent a few of her reviews in *Vanity Fair*--she is often her

own favorite subject. Part of the joke of “The Garter” is the fact that it is not only told from the first-person but is directly named as being about “Dorothy Parker.” Parker is narrating her own first-person account of having a garter break at a party. This is not happening to someone else. This technique allows her, masterfully, to tell a joke at the expense of no one. It is not harsh, it is not mean. At worst, it is self-deprecating. This technique allows her to do the kind of work above without obscuring the ideology behind having a laugh at the expense of another woman. Parker is not showing us another woman, mortified by her own clothing, in order to laugh at this silly woman’s silly preoccupations. It is still a silly set of preoccupations and we must laugh at them in order to laugh at the world that has made those preoccupations necessary but Parker is not telling us that there is anything extraordinary about that woman.

She is writing about herself--accomplished author, independent and well-respected woman--rather than a trope of a woman who thinks only of her clothes. She does not give the reader the opportunity to imagine that the narrator might be correct in her assertion that she should have stayed at home, in the home, because we never really believe her: that’s not the obvious choice for Parker. By representing herself as the comedic figure, she is involving herself within the world of the assumptions that she is critiquing. Sitting in that situation, the kind of situation that any woman could find herself in according to this text, she has a response that we as readers find familiar. It is exaggerated and it is silly but she is letting herself fall prey to the assumptions that the story is dismantling. In letting the reader laugh at Parker, rather than only with her, she is not being didactic in her ideological critique. Rather, she is insisting that the reader reach the point with her, on our own. It is an assertion both that she is with us and that she

wants us to do our own work; she will not take us through the ideological dismantling point-by-point, she will only give us the tools to do that ourselves.

The politics in this piece is very rich. My reading of “The Garter” situates the story as a kind of alternative method of debate, that being one of the things that we most prize about democracy. I want to note here that much of the material I worked with in Chapter 3 predates the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920--Dorothy Parker could not vote, but she could assert her voice, make herself a part of the community through her play reviews (which might be better off being called “critiques of audiences”) and *Vogue* commentary. At a time when Parker was not a full citizen in a very fundamental way, her humor served as a declaration of her belonging. She declared herself a kind of reverse war journalist in her play reviews, writing about the people home, safely enjoying the theater. She declared her own (and other women’s) role in the war effort futile. Her piece on knitting seems to ask for more responsibility, more purpose to be granted to women who continue to do a job that is--through the improvements of the knitting machine--quickly being rendered unnecessary.

To read woman’s humor without attention to the richness of the text, without attention to the situation (and yes, even the gender construction) of the author, without attention to the context of war and peace or even the context of women’s suffrage, and without attention to what the reader must do in reading (both in making sense of the text itself and all of the stuff that exists outside of the text) obscures the dynamic relationship of the text to politics. In looking at the multidimensional nature of this troublesome and troubling genre, I have attempted to open up the category of politics. To return to a quote from Judith Butler, whose *Gender Trouble* guides this paper in more than just the pun on the title, “The radical instability of the category sets into

question the *foundational* restrictions on feminist political theorizing and opens up other configurations, not only of genders and bodies, but of politics itself.”⁶⁹ In troubling our assumptions about politics, writing and, yes, even gender, we can come to a broader understanding of each. Further, the very trouble of the genre--is it democratic, is it too masculine?--allows for politics to happen in the space of dealing with that binary.

Finally, I want to briefly bring this analysis to the present. Tina Fey’s 2011, semi-autobiographical *Bossypants* does a great deal of the same work that I pointed to in Parker. Not all women’s humor is anything and not all women’s humor is feminist or ideologically-driven but Fey’s book is self-consciously so. The cover of the book pastes her face atop the body of a male torso in a white button-down shirt and tie--the very model of the middle management boss. The joke is again in things out of place: Fey’s face out of place on the male body. But the juxtaposition asks that we question our assumptions about who should be on the cover of a book by that title. She continues the joke within the text:

Why is this book called *Bossypants*? One, because the name *Two and a Half Men* was already taken. And two, because ever since I became an executive producer of *30 Rock*, people have asked me, ‘Is it hard for you, being the boss?’ and ‘Is it uncomfortable for you to be the person in charge?’ You know, in the same way they say, ‘Gosh, Mr. Trump, is it awkward for you to be the boss of all these people?’⁷⁰

Perhaps Fey’s jokes are less subtle than Parker’s but they do a lot of the same work of assertive space-claiming. And Fey carries on the tradition of making herself into the joke. The location is different, this book is very much about the woman at work, but it continues the work of challenging assumptions. It takes the reader on a journey that is sometimes fraught with the

⁶⁹ Butler, 194.

⁷⁰ Tina Fey, *Bossypants*, (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2011), 5.

difficulty of challenged assumptions. Fey's humor, like Parker's before her, causes trouble in a deeply meaningful, deeply political way.

It's also a great deal of fun.

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