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From Martyrs to Mothers to Chick in Choos: The Medieval Female Body and American Women's Popular Literature

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FROM MARTYRS TO MOTHERS TO CHICK IN CHOOS:
THE MEDIEVAL FEMALE BODY AND AMERICAN
WOMEN'S POPULAR LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

From Martyrs to Mothers to Chicks in Choos: The Medieval Female Body
and American Women's Popular Literature

by

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Placing the generic conventions of medieval hagiography, Nina Baym's insights about nineteenth-century American sentimental fiction's overplot, and contemporary American women's popular literature into tension illuminates some important commonalities. First, biographers of the medieval virgin saints and authors of contemporary American women's popular literature deploy the same overplot that Baym identifies as characteristic of American women's nineteenth-century popular fiction. Second, in order to define feminine virtue and establish the virtue of their protagonists, nineteenth-century and post-millennial American women writers rework the contrastive tropes by which hagiographers establish their heroines' virtue. Third, struggles for ascendance in the domestic realm gesture toward its inherently political functions. Fourth, contemporary American women's popular literature presupposes and reproduces a medieval configuration of the female body as a site for narrative and political conflict and locates women's work in a hybrid domestic-work space. Finally, the literary reconfiguration of the workspace undoes the public-private distinction on which theories of democratic liberalism rely to construct male citizenship.

For my parents, Jacqueline and Ron
Whose patient love lit my way back from the dark places

Thank you for letting me dance my own dances

For Otie Mae, Dorothy, Jane, and Sonia,
Whose courage and strength inspire me still

Thank you for giving me safe places to dance.

For my friends, teachers, colleagues, and students,
Who have taught me more than any of us know

Thank you for dancing with me.

For Joel,
Without you, the world would not feel like home to me.

Thank you for giving me so many reasons to dance.

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CHAPTER ONE

CRITICAL FRAMES AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Situating Myself

When I was a child, my grandmother bought me a little book made of envelopes. Labeled chronologically to indicate the school grade it was intended for, each six-by-eight-inch envelope could hold memorabilia and ephemera from that school year. Although my mother continued for a time to put my report cards and ribbons from corsages in the envelopes, after my kindergarten year at All Saints Catholic School, I myself filled in the spaces designated on the outside of the envelopes for the names of special or new friends, teachers, favorite subjects, and desired life path. In kindergarten, I wanted to be a mommy. In first and second grades, I wanted to be a nun, like my teachers. In third grade, I wanted to be a teacher and spent much of my play time reading to dolls and teaching them the alphabet and the basics of mathematics. In fourth grade, though, Sister Alexia read saints' biographies aloud to us. That year, in the blank labeled "When I Grow Up," I wrote *Virgin Martyr*.

I'm not sure that I knew what *virgin* meant back then, but I understood what *martyr* meant, and I knew what virgin martyrs did: They refused to marry the men who found them beautiful and irresistible, the men in whom their beauty aroused a disgusting (but disturbingly fascinating to me) lust. They stood up to their fathers and the pagan men who abused them, and they retained their purity (whatever *that* was) in the face of tortures so vile that Sister Alexia skipped those parts. Like the Sisters of Mercy who taught me, the virgin martyrs married Christ and remained faithful to him. That summer, having earned an adult library card by reading one hundred books in four months, I

devoured English translations of saints' biographies. I read biographies of Polish and Russian saints, French and Italian saints, Irish and German saints, English and American¹ saints. I read accounts of the lives of male and female saints, transvestite saints, and reformed-prostitute saints. But the biographies of the medieval virgin saints captured me as none of the others did. Thrilling to the idea of retaining my faith in the face of tortures so depraved they had to be elided by my biographer, I longed for the same kinds of tests Saints Agnes, Lucy, and Bridget had transcended. I longed to be as worthy of Jesus' love as they had been. By the next school year, of course, my interests and my goals had changed, but those texts were my introduction to the kind of unruly, ambiguously defiant heroines I continue to find myself most attracted to as a reader, heroines who cannot "just go shopping or get [their] hair done like a normal girl" (Springer, *Killer* 202).

When I re-encountered the virgin saints' biographies during my undergraduate education, I grumbled, disappointed that we wouldn't be reading other English-language literature from the period. However, those hagiographical texts haunted my scholarly writing in graduate school and inspired papers and articles about literary forms and genres as seemingly unconnected as formulaic contemporary romance and the literature of the American Renaissance. Nonetheless continuing to focus primary research on American domestic humor, I planned to use my dissertation to explore the ways male and female authors constructed narrative personae in American domestic humor written between the World Wars.² Then, during my final class as a PhD student, I read Nina Baym's *Women's Fiction*. I was thunderstruck. The "overplot" Baym identified in U.S. women's domestic fiction written between 1820 and 1870 was virtually identical to one I'd identified virgin saints' biographies and Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* as sharing: A

“young girl” is separated from the social supports on which she had “rightly or wrongly” depended to sustain her throughout life and is faced with the necessity of winning her own way in the world. . . . The happy marriages with which most—though not all—of this fiction concludes are symbols of the successful accomplishment of the required task and successful resolution of the basic problems raised in the story, which is in most primitive terms the story of the formation and assertion of a feminine ego. (Baym, *Women’s Fiction* 11)

According to Baym’s taxonomy, heroines are either flawed or unflawed (36). Obstacles, perhaps including the need to earn a living, enable unflawed heroines to discover within themselves the “intelligence, will, resourcefulness, and courage sufficient to overcome them” (23). Flawed heroines must develop all or some of these qualities in order to overcome impediments to the formation of a coherent and intelligible adult female identity, which is, Baym says, their “real goal” (17). With the exception of the virgin saints, all of the heroines in this study are flawed. These flawed heroines all must learn that “some degree of self-control is a moral and practical necessity while total self-abnegation is suicidal” (36), and that they are “entirely responsible for overcoming” their tribulations, although that responsibility does not strip them of the right to seek assistance (17).³

Baym finds two basic “power situations” in the plot’s narrative set up (37). Either the heroine is not loved or valued,” and “those who should love and nurture her instead exploit or neglect her,” or those with “authority” over her “abuse” that authority (37). As a heroine struggles to overcome the hurdles in her path, she connects with a network of people “who support, and advise, and befriend her,” and “her final ‘domesticity’ is

defined as her relations with” those in that network (38). Her primary emotional support comes from the domestic circle she thus defines, especially her female friends or a man with whom she shares a platonic friendship (39). Power is absent from this sphere, and relations are based in rational friendship and love.

This study will begin by examining generically and historically disparate literatures written by U.S. women to see if they show evidence of Baym’s overplot. I chose to analyze U.S. women’s contemporary domestic humor and popular romance series, two modes of literature as authoritatively designated *women’s* and culturally associated with female readers/auditors as nineteenth-century sentimentalism is. Women’s domestic humor and popular romance series suffer from scholarly neglect, yet they are among the bestselling modes of popular literature in the United States.

My choices of literary texts still may seem somewhat capricious and temporally disconnected. Let me address the latter issue first. This study is not intended as an historical overview of the development of the overplot. To trace the overplot from the early medieval period through the twenty-first century would be a daunting task, one far beyond the scope of this text, although one certainly worthy of further study. Instead, rather than explore the depths of medieval or early modern conceptions of sexed and gendered bodies, I want to investigate the breadth of efficacy of a *particular* medieval conception of the female body in a twenty-first-century “postfeminist” culture. Of course, since multiple feminine identity possibilities were available to embodied medieval and early modern Christian women, constructions of femininity were not as monolithic as my discussion perhaps paints them. And again, research to fill in the temporal gaps is wanting.

My most immediate goal is to establish that there are significant plot and characterological similarities among texts separated by millennia. If I am correct, what might it mean for the binaries by which we classify literature—popular/canonical, for instance—that canonical and popular texts repeat the same plot? Secondly, by juxtaposing texts that explicitly announce their didactic intentions, as sacred biography and *Pamela* do, with texts widely believed to function only as mindless entertainment, such as contemporary popular romance series, I want to explore the possibility that popular literature does more than reflect and reinforce hegemonic sex/gender discursive and material practices. I suggest that it plays a role in encouraging the kind of self-discipline Foucault argues is an integral component of identity construction.⁴ I want to discover if these texts also offer opportunities for feminist subversion of hegemonic sex/gender. To this end, I explore the techniques and devices authors deploy to encourage readers to identify with or accept the values of narrative personae and heroines in two varieties of contemporary U.S. women’s humor. Humor seems a good fit because its success at engendering laughter requires that readers and narrative persona share beliefs and values. Simply put, I want to understand how narrative personae and first-person heroines try to ensure that readers “get it.” What values and beliefs do the texts assume readers and heroines share? If popular literature is didactic and makes both ethical and moral claims, what sort of claims are they? On whom do they make the claims they make? Can juxtaposing such contemporary popular literature provide a fruitful route for examining changing conceptions of the individual, identity, and sex/gender? Answers to these questions can perhaps add something to feminist debates about the potential of

women's humor for encouraging bonding among women and about what women's popular literary humor does for the women who produce and consume it.

In chapter one, I outline my methodology and methods. I argue for a feminist cultural realist frame and for supplementing the traditional methods of literary criticism with those of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis and the conclusions of ethnographic research into reading and writing practices. I briefly sketch scholarly attempts to define important terms, and propose working definitions. In chapter two, I identify the paradoxical female body in medieval hagiography's ritualized conventions of plot and characterization and trace it into Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*. By attending to the parallels between medieval virgin saints' biographies and *Pamela*, I tease out two threads. First, interpersonal power struggles take shape as battles over what Adrienne Rich calls the "right to name" ("When We Dead" 35).⁵ Second, interpersonal power struggles between men and women in the ostensibly apolitical domestic realm can figure for power struggles in the political realm and reveal the falseness of the political-domestic dichotomy.

Chapter three begins with a discussion of sentimental ethics and some of the scholarly literature on American women's humor. I then historically contextualize Erma Bombeck's *At Wit's End* and Shirley Jackson's two contributions to domestic humor, *Life among the Savages* and *Raising Demons*, and examine them for evidence of Baym's overplot and the contrastive trope which, I argue, narrators and narrative personae use to intelligibly identify themselves for readers. After considering how Jackson and Bombeck establish the "virtue" of their narrative personae through contrast, voice, and stance, I

consider the role of humor in constructing persona and these authors' legacies to the U.S. women's humor.

The literary subjects of chapter four are Janet Evanovich's *Stephanie Plum* series and Gemma Halliday's *Making It* series of contemporary comic romantic mysteries. Nora Ephron's "A Few Words about Breasts" informs the analysis in this chapter. I propose the "Signifying Breast" as a metonym for generically conventional character types whose presence in the text facilitates normalization of the heroine's performance of cisgendered,⁶ heteronormatively receptive female sexuality and the value systems her performance endorses for cooperative readers. This chapter includes a consideration of the implications of this literature's location of work in a hybrid domestic-business space. In doing so, these texts relocate the logical grounding of the sentimental moral sense from Shaftesbury's "maternal instinct" to heteronormative love.

That all of the authors treated in this text are white and heterosexual is in part due to generic conventions, in part to limits of time and space, and in part to my reading habits as a child, when I first encountered all of these "women" but two. Nor do I mean to suggest that my readings are the "correct" readings, or the only readings, or even that they are "preferred" readings. These are *my* readings, in a very important sense the products of the particularity of my reading practices and my history, my situatedness as a middle-aged, white, working-class, well-educated, able-bodied, cisgendered female in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century U.S. culture. Regrettably, the limits of language in general and the language of scholarly inquiry in particular, the habits of training, and the limits of my own intellect leave me unable to express myself

consistently in ways that adequately foreground the speculative and provisional nature of my claims. For my lapses, I beg my readers' indulgence and their pardon.

Engaging Feminism

Lillian Robinson notes that feminist criticism ought to be “criticism with a Cause” (Robinson 879). This text constitutes the kind of “revolutionary” feminist criticism that she calls for (879). Questions about the real-world concerns of situated embodied women motivate this study. It focuses on and takes seriously representations of white, working- and middle-class women,⁷ their literary production and consumption, and their interpretive practices with an eye toward contributing something to ongoing feminist conversations and activism grounded in a shared belief in the transformative power of popular literature and culture.

Our understandings of the social world and how subjects are related to it are implicated in the hypothesis around which research is designed and data are gathered and affect how researchers interpret results and data (Kuhn 52-70). Interpretations of the social world shape our perceptions of what ought to be done, what can be done, and the purpose of doing anything at all (35-42). Literary and cultural criticism can tie feminists' activists and intellectual lives together, for, since it is on the basis of our understanding of reality that we act, activism is, in effect, based in interpretive practices. Moreover, by revealing the contingency of what seems natural—popular romance's heteronormativity, for instance—and its impact on meaning-making practices in other contexts—seeing two men holding hands or kissing—interpretation can constitute transgressive revolutionary activity. Perhaps, as M. Scott Momaday says, we read to get a sense of who we are and what we are doing. Or maybe “[w]e read to change ourselves and others” (Howe 268).

Perhaps we read to confirm that we are like others, that we are “okay,” or that others feel as we do. Maybe we read to connect, to escape, or to play. In fact, American women read—and write—to do all of these things (Radway).

Every wave of American feminists has argued that cultural representations of gender can contribute to the devaluation of women’s lives and activities and profoundly affect women’s ability to define themselves and achieve socio-political equality with men (Polizzi 24-25). To be sure, in the mid-nineteenth century, first-wave feminists called on women to establish their own print media in order to counteract media ridicule and elisions of the emergence of the “New Woman” model as a gender-performative possibility for women (Carter and Steiner 1-2). Nearly one hundred years later, Betty Friedan’s 1963 publication of *The Feminine Mystique* re-opened public discussion and feminist criticism of print media’s naturalization and normalization of a private-sphere, consumerist femininity (2), in opposition to a public-sphere, productive masculinity. By the mid-1960s, second-wave American feminists had begun to systematically examine media representations of women and to critique the gender ideologies they saw those representations serving. Second-wave feminist research into and activism around mass media began “from the assumption that a change in media representation of women was necessary for the achievement of political change” (Bradley 161). Early second-wave engagements with media representations of gender, however, were themselves problematic. Feminists of color and lesbian feminists continued to take issue with the ways that Western, white, middle-class, college-educated, heterosexual feminists normalized their own lives as *women’s* experience.⁸

Questions about the social and political dimensions of popular culture and women's literature and their relationships to ideology and life now occupy feminist critics who, crossing disciplinary boundaries, incorporate methods from sociology, philosophy, communications, media studies, and anthropology. Feminist literary scholars grapple with issues like whether women's literature is related to the commodification of identity; the nature of the relationship between women's literature and the feminization of consumption; and, most prominently in regard to American women's popular literature, whether women's literature reflects, reinforces, or subverts gender stereotypes and norms. I hope to use this text to participate in an ongoing conversation with others who share my interest in these conflicts and lacunae, and I address some of these questions in detail.

Methodology and Methods

Because scholars often use the terms *method* and *methodology* interchangeably, I want to define how I use them. Gayle Letherby usefully distinguishes between them:

A method is a technique, a tool for doing research, for gathering evidence, for collecting data. . . . *Methodology* entails a perspective or framework. Thinking methodologically involves describing and analyzing the methods used, evaluating their value, detailing the dilemmas their usage causes and exploring the relationship between the methods that we use and how we use them, and the production and presentation of our data. (5)

Methodology: Feminist Cultural Realism

Feminist interventions have raised a number of questions about commonplaces of scholarly literary analysis. Recognizing that "every act of meaning-making . . .

contributes to the reproduction and maintenance of the social order, and also . . . [to] resisting and transforming that order” (Lazar 11), American feminists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Nina Baym, Elaine Showalter, and Annette Kolodny have long interrogated canonicity and the so-called objective aesthetic standards it presupposes. Feminist critiques of racialized, gendered, sexualized, and classed social and discursive relations and practices have revealed literary studies’ elision of the myriad ways readers, writers, texts, discourses, and discursive practices presuppose and (re)produce ideologies of race, gender, and sexuality. Paula L. Moya’s critique of poststructural feminism and Satya Mohanty’s work in epistemology have led me to adopt feminist cultural realism (FCR) as an epistemological frame that accommodates an understanding of sexuality, gender, race, and class as social constructs. According to this frame, objective reality exists independent of anyone’s perceptions of it; however, the knowledges that emerge out of the activity of embodied human beings within that reality are always already multiple, situated, and mediated by language. In other words, cultural realism begins from the premise that the natural world materially preexists cultural artifacts and systems, including embodied, already-situated human beings, but can only be “known” through language, itself a cultural construction. Because knowledge of nature, like knowledge of anything, presupposes language, the cultural is *epistemologically* prior to the natural even though the natural world is *ontologically* prior to the cultural.

However, the claim that the cultural is epistemologically prior to the natural entails neither a full-throttle descent into the postmodern maelstrom of relativity nor a positivist march toward authorial intentionality. Relativism is based in conflation of the epistemological and the ontological; the idea that we cannot directly know objects of

inquiry becomes the claim that the objects of inquiry do not exist, that since experience of reality is mediated by language, it is reducible to language. But the idea that what is mediated by language is reducible to language is obviously an error. The idea that the world is text (Derrida's dictum⁹ simplistically misunderstood) because human beings so often experience it as such is perhaps too often unquestioningly adopted as a first premise in literary criticism. A feminist cultural realist frame acknowledges—no, it demands—multiple interpretive possibilities for a single text because it begins with the situatedness of embodied readers and writers, including (but not limited to) the material conditions of literary production and consumption, generic and discursive conventions, and ideology's ubiquity.

Texts can look very different from different perspectives. The difference between reading *Moby Dick* at fourteen and at forty-two might make one feel as if one is reading an entirely different text, for instance. This difference, however, is not merely a function of gender, race, class, age, or any other identity marker, although these factors stand in dialectical relation to the myriad other factors out of which idiosyncratic readings of texts emerge. Acknowledging that texts, readers, writers, and reading and writing practices are always already situated forecloses pretensions to interpretive objectivity and certainty. As considerations of situatedness erode the foundation for such claims, multiple readings emerge as plausible interpretive possibilities. However, this does not mean that all interpretations emerge as *equally* plausible possibilities. More importantly, perhaps, it doesn't rule out the possibility of misinterpretation, either.

Before moving on, I must define how I use the word *emerge* and its variants.¹⁰ Simply put, *emergence* is the process by which a complex system becomes or seems to

become more than the sum of its parts. Grounded in systems physics, *emergence* denotes dynamic properties and processes that arise in highly complex systems, properties and processes that cannot be wholly or definitively explained by reference to the operation of any of the parts or to any known inter-reaction between or among parts. As Margolis convincingly demonstrates, “persons and selves, artworks, artifacts, texts, actions, institutions, societies, words, and sentences” (*Interpretation* 7) are “historied,” emergent entities without essences (Margolis *Historied; Selves*). On this view, interpretations can only emerge out of the activities of historicized and situated embodied interpreters and are thus themselves historied, ongoing processes.

Beginning from the argument that “(1) knowledge is inherently interpretive; (2) interpreting beliefs so that they count as knowledge is inherently legitimated; hence (3), neither the self nor knowledge can be satisfactorily ‘naturalized’” (*Interpretation* 253), Margolis’ vision of interpretation is entirely consistent with a feminist cultural realist methodology and, like FCR, acknowledges interpretive contingency while avoiding the pitfalls of ethical subjectivity and relativity. The activity of literary criticism is thus conceived as the historically and culturally emergent practices of situated, embodied human beings who can at best legitimate their interpretations by providing textual evidence and genealogizing their own interpretive processes and methods (Margolis, *Interpretation*).¹¹

Stuart Hall argues that four codes can be embedded in texts: dominant codes, professional codes, negotiated codes, and oppositional codes. Dominant codes accept hegemonic ideologies as their starting point and their dialectical relationship to professional codes facilitates the normalization of both (Hall 16). Professional codes such

as generic conventions mask the presence of hegemonic codes in texts by shifting attention to matters of textual quality and cultural value (16). The dialectical interaction of these two codes allows marked literatures to be deemed unworthy of serious study. A negotiated code accepts hegemony's big ideological "truths" but "operates with 'exceptions' to the rule" on a "restricted, situational level" (17). Examples of negotiated encoding include a public performance of authorship that positions the writer as "just a housewife," as the humor analyzed in chapter three does, and a moral system that prescribes monogamy but excuses specific transgressions, such as popular romance's negotiation of heroines' infidelity. Oppositional codes reject hegemonic discourses. Some of the ephemera coming out of the Occupy movement manifest oppositional codes. For example, one poster juxtaposes images of morbidly obese white children eating, and skeletal black children lying on the ground. The caption reads, "Capitalism Isn't Working."

Methods

My methods include the traditional methods of literary analysis, such as close reading, plot and character analysis, and considering the scholarly literature. Additionally, I attempt to discern and describe discursive patterns by placing into tension texts by different authors and texts from different literary periods, a common method among literary critics. Nevertheless, despite my commitment to the methods of literary studies, I cross disciplinary boundaries to make use of ethnographic research and empirical studies of the reading practices of situated readers to appropriate some of the methods of feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA), which itself is a set of interpretive practices and methods used by feminist scholars in linguistics and

pragmatics. These scholars have produced empirical studies that demonstrate that men and women are encouraged to perform power differently (Holmes), show some ways that women negotiate power in educational institutions (Remlinger), attempt to establish what comprises effective embodied speech in Western classrooms (Baxter 80-127), reveal some of the subtle forms that homophobia takes in newspapers that eschew openly discriminatory rhetoric (Gouveia), and deconstruct readings of gendered, raced, and aged female bodies in the context of academia (Ideta and Cooper; Middleton). The methods these scholars employ allow them to carefully attend to both manifest meaning and meaning possibilities implicit in discursive transactions and to tease out the “subtle and complex renderings of ideological assumptions and power relations” produced by embodied meaning-makers in discursive communities (Lazar 13). Their methods and the results of their empirical research on reading practices supplement the more traditional methods of literary analysis in this study.

In its approach to texts as “situated, emergent, and reflexive human phenomena” (Lindlof 22) and its challenge to the view of discourse and genre studies as sites of “neutral and objective inquiry” (Lazar 2), FCDA is philosophically consistent with a feminist cultural realist frame. Since FCDA seeks discursive patterns rather than causal explanations, it provides a nearly ideal toolkit for this project and can facilitate analytical attention to the communal and communitarian possibilities of language and discourse that is such an important part of American women’s popular literature.

Perhaps most usefully for this study, FCDA provides a vocabulary for critical consideration of what Lazar calls “marked inclusion” (19), the practice of including representations of those traditionally marginalized while discursively or

representationally marking them as Other, outside of the “mainstream” (19). This concept is crucial to understanding the relationships among marked and unmarked literatures—among *popular literature*, *women’s literature*, and just plain *literature*, for instance,—the role of market relations in constructing and maintaining false textual dichotomies such as *popular/canonical* and *masculine/feminine*, and the misunderstanding of these polarities as politically neutral, purely denotative categories of ontologically distinct kinds of literature. How can the perspectival multiplicity afforded by the feminist cultural realist frame help to answer these questions and the theoretical flexibility of interdisciplinary scholarship help to resolve the issues raised by feminist scholars? That perhaps depends on what one thinks literature and literary criticism ought to do—and on what one considers their limits.

Literature and Women’s Literature

Some of the most contentious debates in feminist literary scholarship turn on questions about what American women’s popular literature *does* and, even more basically, what it *is*. Of course, answers to these questions presuppose that some texts can be identified as *literature* and others as *not-literature*; some texts as *popular literature*, and others as, at the very least, *not-popular*; some texts as *women’s literature* and others as, well, you see the pattern. So. Can we define *literature*? Well, any number of literary scholars have tried. In the introduction to his own *Literary Theory*, Terry Eagleton considers and rejects a number of possible criteria that have been proposed for defining *literature*. First, Eagleton notes, attempts to define *literature* based on a distinction between imaginative (fiction) and factual (non-fiction) fail, “not least because the distinction itself is often a questionable one” (1) and because definitions of *imaginative*

and *factual* have evolved and changed over time. Formalist attempts to define literature by differentiating its supposedly characteristically self-conscious uses of language from everyday use fail for Eagleton as well because they presume an identifiable “normal” to which literary uses of language can be opposed (4), because any utterance can contain the kinds of ambiguities formalists define as characteristic of literary language (6), and because “[t]o think of literature as the formalists do is really to think of all literature as *poetry*” (5, emphasis in original). Nor do definitions based in the quality of the writing fare any better with Eagleton; after all, standards change, and if literature is good writing by definition, then the phrase *bad literature* could only denote a category mistake.

Finally declaring that “[t]here is no essence of literature whatsoever” (8), Eagleton advocates John M. Ellis’s conception of *literature* as a “*functional* rather than *ontological*” term that indicates “the role of a text . . . in a social context” (8, emphasis in original). On this conception, the term *literature*, like the term *weed*, indicates something about what situated, embodied human beings do rather than something about “some inherent quality or qualities displayed by certain kinds of writing” (8, emphasis in original). What is it that situated human beings do in relation to literature? We produce it, we consume it, and, most importantly here, we value it. On this definition, then, *literature* is “highly valued” writing. Of course, this definition of *literature* renders the literary field unstable because values themselves are situated cultural constructs: “Value is a transitive term: it means whatever is valued by certain people in specific situations, according to particular criteria, and in light of given purposes” (10).¹²

In fact, if one follows Ellis and Eagleton in defining literature functionally, to distinguish between *women’s literature* and *literature* implies that differently gendered

people value each of them and/or value different purposes for each. Gender is one of the ways in which embodied readers and writers are culturally identified and located. Gender is not innate to human beings. Gender is conventional just as language is conventional; in the same sense that language pre-exists individual human beings, gender is prior to them as well. Gender's potency as a normalizing¹³ ideology is rivaled in American society perhaps only by the disciplinary power of normalized sexuality. The important point here, though, is that whatever gender is, it is not a collection of characteristics or rhetorical devices that can be embedded in texts or that determine readers' or writers' tastes. The relationship between gender and interpretation is more complex than that.

Having laid out some of the directions attempts to define literatures have taken and some of the difficulties with them, I tentatively define *literature* as discursive conjunctures of emergent systems of conventional productive and consumptive practices. These conventional productive practices are enacted in and through dynamic, open systems of relationships among material texts, emergent culture(s) of representation, embodied meaning-making subjects, and other, perhaps indeterminable, emergent systems. Situated repetitions of conventional discursive and interpretive productive practices overdetermine the relationships among and within the systems. Understanding literature in this way allows for its treatment as fluid and contingent conjunctions of multiple meaning-making practices available to and engaged by situated subjects, rather than as an ontological entity with clearly defined boundaries.

Reading, Writing, and Gender

Whatever else the word *women's* denotes, when attached as a possessive to the word *literature* it certainly implies that gender affects who values the literature in

question, how people value it, and for what purposes they value it. And indeed, these are the lines along which the earliest feminist critiques of the canon and canonicity developed. Tillie Olsen's *Silences* and Nina Baym's "Melodramas of Beset Manhood" articulate this thread in American feminist literary criticism; feminist recoveries of lost texts and authors exemplify it in practice. However, this is at best a partial understanding of what gender-labeling of cultural artifacts actually does because it depends on an understanding of gender as a purely causal factor in interpretation.

The classification of some literature as *women's literature* is analogous to the classification of some films as *chick flicks*. We call some films *chick flicks* because their content focuses on relationships: emotional relationships between men and women, emotional relationships between female friends, emotional relationships between family members, intrapersonal relationships between women and themselves. Think *Steel Magnolias* or *Fried Green Tomatoes*. The protagonist(s) of chick flicks is usually female, although the protagonist might be an especially sensitive male or a male cast in a traditionally feminine role, for example, Dustin Hoffman in *Kramer vs. Kramer*. In contrast, films that we have come to call *dick flicks* usually involve vast quantities of action and violence. Unlike chick flicks, which center on interiority and on the private realm of relationships ostensibly devoid of political content, dick flicks are set in the public realm. Conventional plots include a solitary man's active attempts to define his place in the public realm on his own terms, a man's (or male-only group's) efforts to save loved ones (or the country, or the planet) from an external threat, or a man's (always successful) stab at avenging a wrong done to him or his family by an outside antagonist. Think *Die Hard* and *High Noon*. The dick flick's protagonist is almost always a heroic

male.¹⁴ Common wisdom tells us that these two different film genres have arisen because men and women as gendered human beings have different tastes in movies. However, the normalizing repetition of the very names *chick flicks* and *dick flicks* and the repetition of motifs, plots, and characterizations specific to each help to create the very gendered males and females to whose taste we suppose them to respond.¹⁵ Authoritative normalization of these category labels encourages subjects to self-regulate their gender performances and provides a vocabulary of gender that makes their performances intelligible to others. Cultural conceptions of the nature of gender and cultural valuations of gender are contained in the metonymic adjectives *chick* and *dick*.

Gender is a discourse in Michel Foucault's sense of being a "historically, socially, and institutionally specific" system of "statements, terms, categories, and beliefs" (Scott 256). But gender is something more. It is an overdetermined set of emergent performative practices. And, like other human practices, it includes muted or negated material. In a world in which gender is, however contingently, a binary construct, to be man is, in some sense, to be not-woman, and what is appropriate for "chicks" is not appropriate for "dicks." Thus, the appellations *chick flicks* and *dick flicks* inform embodied viewers which films are appropriate for them. Chick flicks encourage embodied females to identify with their heroines and valorize traditionally feminine characteristics and ways of interacting with others. Calling them *chick flicks* discourages males from too-publicly identifying themselves as fans; my husband, in fact, was reluctant to let me use him as an example of a man who has been moved by such films.

Chick flicks and dick flicks thus help to teach embodied males and females how to perform femininity and masculinity. Reading experiences and generic labels condition

(but do not determine) audience members' often-unconscious beliefs about whether or not they "ought" to be reading particular sorts of texts. Inscribing texts with labels denoting gender-appropriateness encourages the kind of self-regulation and gender performance that Michel Foucault and Judith Butler have respectively demonstrated so convincingly to be crucial to the construction of gendered human beings. What appears to be the cause of production is simultaneously the effect of interpretive practice. What appears to be characteristic is, instead, performance. The generic marking of some American literature as American *women's* literature parallels film's designation of generic gender-appropriateness.

Moreover, most of us buy books in bookstores or from Internet sites that helpfully tell us whether particular books are fiction or nonfiction, memoir or cookbook, detective novel or perennial classic, humor or tragedy. In fact, the nation's two largest bookselling chains, Borders and Barnes & Noble further break literature down. Both stores differentiate, for example, between *literature for boys* and *literature for girls* in their children's sections,¹⁶ between *classics* and *women's literature* in their literature sections, between plain old *humor* and *women's humor* in their humor sections. But culturally dominant authorization via such practices as categorization is not the only factor in normalizing some texts as appropriate for one gender and others for another.¹⁷

While there are many factors involved in normalizing textual gender-appropriateness, when it comes to literature, one of the most important factors seems to be the biological sex of the author. If it is true, as Foucault notes, that the name of the author can provoke a set of expectations in readers, that same name often signifies the author's sex, which is always defined as falling at either the male or female pole of the

culturally authorized binary. Studies by Cameron, Caughie, Linkin, and Murray show that readerly awareness of authorial sex may affect reading practices. When it comes to literature, the normalizing power of femininity and femaleness can construct the author as a women's humor writer, regardless of the subject matter, tone, or style of her work. Molly Ivins, for instance, takes the political public sphere as the topic of her humor, and she utilizes the devices and techniques of literary satire to do so. Still, Ann Safran Dalin includes one of Ivins's essays in *Life's a Stitch: The Best of Contemporary Women's Humor*, even though its content is not woman-specific or of special interest to women. It is, rather, about the traditionally masculine public realm: "I believe politics is the finest form of entertainment in the state of Texas: better than the zoo, better than the circus, rougher than football, and even more aesthetically satisfying than baseball. Becoming a fan of this arcane art form will yield a body endless joy—besides, they make you pay for it whether you pay attention or not (Ivins 124). Thus, although *women's humor* is most commonly defined as humor written by *and* for women, Ivins' sex seems to have been enough for her text to have been included in an anthology of women's humor. However, as feminist research into media consumption shows, interpretive practices tend to be more influenced by the social relations surrounding consumption than by textual content (Carter, Branston, and Allan 8), and "texts, contexts and readers . . . obtain their identity in interaction with one another" (Lehtonen 2).

People's non-literary reading practices and experiences inform how they read literary texts, what they read those texts for, their willingness to interact with particular texts, and their beliefs (sometimes unconscious) about whether or not they "ought" to be reading particular sorts of texts. Through repetition of their own reading experiences,

many of which take place outside of the institutional frame, readers establish their own reading practices as authoritative (Murray 10) and themselves as authoritative readers. Interpretive conventions encountered in our day-to-day lives “echo prior actions and *accumulate the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior and authoritative set of practices*” (Butler, *Excitable* 51, emphasis original). Because they are “reiteration[s] of a norm or a set of norms[,]” reading practices are performatives (Butler, *Bodies* qtd. in Murray n. 5). As performatives, reading practices construct the textual meanings we suppose them to discover and the gendered writers and readers they purport to reveal. By concealing their own and their constructs’ contingency and conventionality, by making both themselves and their products seem natural and normal—perhaps even inevitable—performative reading practices carry normalizing, prescriptive force. Writing practices’ reiterations of conventions ensure that the signs that will enable encultured readers to construct meaningful interpretations are there to be read.¹⁸

Readers with different reading styles will enter texts from different points in order to maximize the efficacy of their reading strategies. Ethnographic research into reading and writing practices has identified what are most often called “male” and “female” modes of reading and writing. “Female” reading and writing practices foreground engagement, cooperation, attention to detail, and attention to relationships both within and among texts. Objectivity/detachment, hierarchy, competition, and attention to rules characterize “male” modes of reading and writing. The modes have been named for the sex of the people who are most likely to use them and who use them most often in contemporary American society. “Female” readers try to cooperate with and understand texts; “male” readers are more likely to try to dominate texts by judging them and either

accepting or rejecting them (Linkin 3). These reading practices parallel the American construction of “normal” femininity and masculinity. However, anomalous data indicate both that there is no natural or necessary link between sex and gender and that there is no necessary connection between reading or writing practices and biological sex or gender identity. For example, Bleich notes that while there are “significant” sex-based reading/interpretive “patterns,” there are also “significant exceptions” to those patterns (qtd. in Caughie 321). His data show that while some men always read in the “male” mode, and most men usually do, some men never do. The same holds true for females and the “female” mode. Thus, reading practices do not clearly or consistently break down along sex-based lines. Yet many researchers continue to cast biological sex as an objective correlative for gender, as though all females are gendered feminine and all males are gendered masculine. Michel Foucault and Judith Butler have shown, albeit in different ways, the assumption that sex and gender are either naturally or necessarily connected is untenable,¹⁹ and research into reading practices bears this out.

One explanation offered for the sex-based anomalous reading patterns echoes Carol Gilligan’s hypothesis about ethical decision-making.²⁰ Thus, as Renee Edwards studied the effects of gender, gender roles, and gender-based values on the interpretation of messages, she found that men and women are, in general, oriented differently. Women tend to be “relationally oriented”; men tend to be “control oriented” (Edwards 55). This translates to a cluster of males at the hierarchy and dominance pole of reading practices and one of females at the cooperative pole, with members of both sexes occasionally employing either set of practices contingent upon task and context, some readers never deploying the “gender-appropriate” set of reading practices, and others nearly always

doing so. And, while both dominating and cooperative readers “read for power,” cooperative readers seek empowerment through “connection to a community” and dominating readers look for “competition within a hierarchy” (Linkin 2). Thus, cooperative readers tend to discuss the relationships they find in texts; dominating readers’ analyses focus on power. For example, in Holland’s study of gendered readings of *King Lear*, cooperative readers concentrate on Cordelia and Lear’s relationship, while dominating readers’ analyses center on Lear’s “helplessness and even sexual impotence in response to the death of Cordelia” (Holland 283). American gender ideology says that women are concerned with relationships, and cooperative readers see relationships as texts’ central concern. The same “common knowledge,” which arises out of the normalizing function of gender ideologies, says that men focus on competition and dominance, and dominating readers see power. Thus, while texts themselves may be genderless, the reading practices one employs can in effect gender them by mimicking authorized gendered ways of relating to the world and positing them as inherent to the text itself. Although researchers have been unable to identify a clear-cut “genderlect” or gendered writing style (Linkin 16), reading practices themselves can gender texts, for “texts, contexts and readers . . . obtain their identity in interaction with one another” (Lehtonen, 2000, 2).

Gender is one of the identity discourses, the schemata, the “organizing structures built up from prior experiences” that influence the activities of situated, embodied subjects as they engage meaning-making practices (Caughie 320). In “What Is an Author?” Michel Foucault points out an author’s name is, in part, a functional “means of classification” (1627). If an author’s style and usual subject matter is known, his or her

name arouses expectations in readers that can influence the reading practices they deploy. Even if an author is not well known, his or her name nearly always reveals his or her sex. The sex of the author creates its own set of readerly expectations, in much the same way that his or her name does. Sometimes readers feminize authors in order to dominate texts. When the sex of an author is not known, they use belittling descriptors associated with femininity to describe texts they believe to have been written by a woman twice as often as cooperative readers (Linkin 15), thus feminizing the text and the author simultaneously. Even when they know an author is male, dominating readers feminize him in order to control the text.²¹ And, when dominating readers encounter authors they know to be female and who confound their expectations of femininity, they may resist submitting to the text with “virulence” and rage (9), by “minimizing [the author’s] achievement” (10). Resistant cooperative readers, on the other hand, simply refuse to fully participate, by, for example, shifting attention from the author to his or her relationship to other authors or to the canon (10). In this way, cooperative readers maintain their relationship orientation while resisting relating to the text at hand.

The increasing number of texts by women authors introduced into the canon has revealed yet another interesting and significant aspect of reading practices: readers’ assignment of sex to authors according to the perceived gender of their texts. In one study, students were asked to identify the sexes of two poets on the basis of their poetry (Englebrecht, cited in Linkin, 15-16). Most correctly identified Galway Kinnell as a male after reading an excerpt from his “Little-Sleep’s-Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight,” and an excerpt from Sharon Olds’ “Looking at Them Asleep” enabled them to correctly identify her as female. In responding to questions about the features that characterized

Kinnell's poem as having been written by a male, students responded with the descriptors "choppy, distant, difficult, metaphorical, abstract, negative, intellectual, abrupt, cryptic, and technical" (15). The same students used the adjectives "accessible, emotional, tender and loving, intimate, flowing . . . direct, cute or sweet, soft, and nice" to identify the characteristic markers that inclined them to identify the poet as a woman (15). However, as we have seen, gender is not inherent to texts. How, then, can we understand the students' success in identifying the sex of the authors? By looking to the reading practices they deployed and the normalizing power of gender discourse.

The performativity of reading practices and the normalizing power of gender ideologies intersect in readers' interactions with texts, and readers assign masculinity or maleness to authors and texts they find difficult to connect with or control and femaleness or femininity to texts they perceive as fostering connection or providing multiple entry points. Holland's study indicates that both dominating and cooperative readings of *King Lear* assign "power to men and compliance to women" (284); even though reading practices can be differentiated according to how they *seek* power in relation to texts, both cooperative and dominating readers *assign* power in traditional, sex/gender-based ways: They designate as feminine texts that offer multiple points of entry and texts that they can easily connect with or control, and they may assign femininity or femaleness to the authors of such texts even when they know the author to be male. Certain texts can arouse little effort to dominate, sometimes because the dominating reader can find no way to order them hierarchically. Other texts may afford many readers no way to cooperate: the Tagalog and Baybayin passages in Barbara Jane Reyes's *Poeta en San Francisco* come to mind. The point is that readers and writers carry beliefs and practices

that affect how they engage the texts with which they interact and these beliefs and practices influence them as they move from genre to genre and from text to text—and from moment to moment within a single text.

The work of feminist critics and historians of literature reveals ways women writers have been silenced and reconstructed as palimpsests, their own words erased and others' words inscribed in their place. Women write of their experiences; their experiences are dismissed with the admonition that it is not the universal (read: *masculine*) experience with which good literature concerns itself. Of course, this presupposes a particular socially constructed public/private hierarchy that construes the public as intrinsically more valuable than the private, a valuation that American women critics and writers have tried to undermine from the beginning of American literature. In fact, feminist scholarship on nineteenth-century American sentimentalism indicates that ethical sentimentalism itself represents the efforts of situated, embodied American women's efforts to transform and increasingly materialistic, industrialized, and dehumanizing society by importing the values of the private realm into it wholesale. While few of them would have identified as feminist, some nineteenth-century women writers and readers valued this literature for its perceived ability to transform material social relations. Contemporary feminists may value it for the same reason.

NOTES

¹ In this text, I alternate between *U.S.* and its variants, and *American* and its variants. By this, I do not mean to indicate that I think these terms are equivalent. I understand that reference to the United States as *America* has a history of discursively normalizing U.S. domination in the hemisphere, but it also has a long tradition in literary studies, a tradition in which some of my readers have been immersed for long and productive careers. It is a vocabulary with which they are familiar, and more than one reader has mentioned that they found the use of *U.S.* “jarring” and “distracting.” On the other hand, the vocabulary of hemispheric studies is transforming the ways we talk about literature in the United States. I cannot ignore its illumination of the linguistic colonization implicit in using the word *America* to refer only to the United States. I alternate between the terms in an attempt to negotiate the subtleties and nuances of the discourses and practices that stand behind them.

² I use *persona* rather than *author* or *narrator* to connote a literary blending of author and character into a new identity performative. The persona is a sort of literary alter-ego or literary equivalent of the stand-up comic’s performative identity. It’s Mark Twain to Samuel Clemens. A more detailed discussion can be found later in this chapter.

³ While it may appear that martyrs, by definition, do not understand this at all, according to the world view they shared with their readers and biographers, they do in fact survive the death of their bodies and are rewarded for withstanding attacks and successfully asserting their identities as adult Christian women.

⁴ See the chapter, “The Panopticon,” in *Discipline and Punish*. Foucault argues that today Europeans and Americans are so conditioned to surveillance that they self-police their own identity performances.

⁵ Rich’s “radical critique of literature . . . take[s] the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and how we can begin to see and name—and therefore live—afresh” (“When We Dead” 35).

⁶ *Cisgendered* refers to an individual whose gender identity is congruent with his or her home culture’s normalized construction of the male/masculine-female/feminine binaries. This term is used to avoid discursively labeling transgendered people as deviant. In other words, if your body matches its culturally normalized gender identity, you are cisgendered (“Cisgender”).

⁷ That the limits of time and space preclude the inclusion of detailed discussions of other American women and their lives is one of the shortcomings of this text, and I address it in the conclusion to this introduction. Nor do I mean to depict the emergence of ideas, philosophies, ethical systems, discourses, ideologies, or anything else as orderly Hegelian marches toward perfection. Indeed, the processes and systems I sketch in this text are far more complicated than can ever be fully analyzed, let alone analyzed in a project of this type.

⁸ See, for example, B. Cameron; Combahee River Collective; Davis; Frye; hooks; Lorde; C. T. Mohanty; Moraga; and Rich.

⁹ “*Il n’y a pas de hors-texte*” (There isn’t any outside-text) (Derrida 158; my translation).

¹⁰ I first encountered the concept of *emergence* in the thought of Joseph Margolis, whose work in epistemology and aesthetics has deeply influenced how I think about texts, identity, and subjectivity.

¹¹ See chapters 5-7 for the detailed argument.

¹² Note that this is not the same as claiming that values are entirely subjective. It *is* to hold that values are culturally emergent in the same way that language is.

¹³ I use “normalizing” as I understand Foucault to use it, in the sense of encompassing both “normativity” (what one *ought* to do or be), and “normality” (what *normal people* do or are). See *Discipline and Punish*, especially chapter 3, part 3: “Panopticism” (195-228).

¹⁴ The dick flick’s protagonist is sometimes a heterosexual couple comprised of a masculinized but *really hot* female and an even more masculine male; occasionally a dick flick will have a female protagonist—think Angelina Jolie in *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*—but in such cases, the female must be . . . well, Angelina Jolie. Most often, the dick flick is a female-free zone, and all-male casts are not uncommon.

¹⁵ My thinking here is influenced by Michel Foucault's repressive and productive hypotheses.

¹⁶ Thanks to my colleague, Tiffany Wilgar Boyles, for reminding me of this.

¹⁷ I do not assert here that human gender (or sex) is limited to two binary possibilities. In fact, I do not believe they are. I do believe, however, that the dominant, authoritative gender discourses do construct both gender and sex as binaries, and it is that construction, therefore, that I want to examine here.

¹⁸ Unfortunately for writers of humor, neither performative reading practices nor performative writing practices can guarantee that readers construct the meaning the author intended.

¹⁹ In fact, most of their analyses assume that they are naturally and necessarily connected. Nor do they question the assumption that there are only two sexes. Anomalous reader reactions and reading practices might prove less vexing if we were to expand our notions of "sex" and "gender" to accommodate more than the two of each Euro-American culture sets as limits. See Foucault's three-volume *History of Sexuality* and Butler's *Gender Trouble* for more detailed discussions of this point.

²⁰ Although both males and females make ethical decisions based on the justice-based moral decision-making model *and* on the ethics of care model, if the two modes of decision-making are placed at the poles of a continuum, more males will gather in the justice end, and more females will group in the care end.

²¹ One student in Bleich's study said, for example, "I began to think that, whether cultural or biological, this silent element is the woman in Melville—either a real woman, or a part of himself he associates with women that he considers unavailable to himself" (Bleich, qtd. in Linkin 8).

CHAPTER TWO

MARTYRS: MEDIEVAL BODIES AND LITERARY LEGACIES

Medieval Christian interpretative practices emerged out of a dualist ontology that understood the world as comprised of two essentially different realms, heaven and earth (Heffernan 9). For medieval Christians, the spiritual, unchanging, perfect heavenly plane directed the material, ephemeral, imperfect earthly plane (10), and the things that populated the earthly realm imperfectly resembled those that comprised the heavenly. Out of this particular brand of dualism emerged an interpretive model in which physical signs were thought to directly point to spiritual truths, and interpretation was the process of correctly determining to which spiritual truth a particular sign pointed. In other words, interpretation was the task of deciphering Foucauldian resemblances (*Order*).

As the revealed word of God, the Bible served as the ultimate textual authority for early and medieval Christians. Genesis 3:16¹ portrays Eve's subordination to Adam as her divinely ordained punishment for bringing sin into the world by succumbing to the serpent's temptation. Women analogically resemble Eve, so Eve's punishment becomes a divinely ordained justification for women's subordination to men. By the fifth century CE, Augustine interprets Paul's first letter to the Corinthians² as meaning that a woman cannot instantiate the *imago Dei* except when considered together with her husband.³ Thus, obedience became "the mother of all virtues" for medieval Christian women, married or not (Augustine, *Of the Good of Marriage* 30). Virginity would, however, supplant it for unmarried women.

Although groups advocating adult celibacy attracted a great deal of interest in pre-Christian Greco-Roman and Semitic societies (Heffernan 234), the Christian glorification

of virginity developed out of early Christians' need to distinguish themselves as something other than "another example of heterodox Judaism" (239) and their belief that the *parousia* was imminent (235). Virginity signified a special kind of purity that allowed unmediated access to God. In some Christian cultures of late antiquity, virginity became the ideal for all men and women, and its paradigmatic force derived from "two great models for celibacy . . . Christ and Mary" (238). By the thirteenth century, chastity, understood as having only lawful sexual intercourse, was the ideal for all married people; virginity, defined as never having sexual intercourse, remained the ideal for unmarried women (238). In the thirteenth century, all women were expected to obey the men to whom their subordination was divinely ordained, and English vernacular texts represented virginity as the cardinal female virtue for unmarried Christian women (253). Virginity's importance to late medieval Christians resulted in part from its prevalence as a motif in saints' biographies, which were among the most popular texts in England during the Middle Ages and into the early modern period.⁴

While the Bible reinforced pre-Christian conceptions of the social necessity of male control of women,⁵ especially their bodies,⁶ medieval hagiography describes strong women, pious women, women who disobey their earthly male superiors and sacrifice their lives in order to remain free of "defilement or intercourse with a man" (Donovan 58).⁷ Hagiographical texts portray women who seem to behave *contra* medieval notions of women's divinely ordained obligation to obey men. Still, female virgin saints' biographies became part of the liturgy, were read aloud to congregations made up of both sexes and diverse social classes (8-9), and signified on multiple levels for their audiences. On a literal level, saints' biographies served as historical records of early Christianity for

medieval Christians, as accounts of God's revelation of his active divinity in the material world (Heffernan 97). Deciphering the spiritual meaning of these texts involved correctly ascertaining which textual elements signified which important spiritual truths. Repetition indicated significance, and eventually became ritualized as formulae.

Medieval biographers ritualize structure and form. For instance, early hagiographical texts are nearly all written as letters to individuals, congregations, or the inhabitants of convents. The epistolary structure was preserved as texts were gathered into vernacular collections to be read to the laity. To ensure that audiences understood the texts as they were intended to be understood, composers of saints' biographies wrote elaborate prefaces detailing their purposes and explicating the spiritual truths to which their texts pointed. These, too, were preserved when the texts were collected. Biographers ritualize characterization as well, and do little to differentiate the women one from the other. Physically, the heroines are all but interchangeable, all young and beautiful, but few are physically described beyond that. For example, Agnes is "beautiful in form" (Donovan 46); Eugenia is a "beautiful maiden" (71); Domnina's daughters are "in the freshness and bloom of life" (Eusebius 332). These women's physical beauty signifies on both the literal and analogical levels of interpretation available to the medieval English-languagelaity. On the literal level, the level on which these texts functioned as historical documents, the women actually *are* all young and beautiful. On the spiritual level, that same beauty points to the saints' purity; since physical beauty is an imperfect reflection of spiritual beauty, great physical beauty also signifies great spiritual beauty. But the saint's physical beauty is by definition embodied, and the female body signifies independently of its beauty. Because all female bodies materially resemble Eve's, all

female bodies are linked to Eve's temptation of Adam in the garden. All female bodies signify *tempter* on this interpretive model.⁸ Because to tempt another person is by definition to entice him or her toward something immoral, even sinful, that female bodies signify *tempter* implies that female bodies have the power to corrupt. The virgin saints are not excepted from the consequences of this analogical resemblance to Eve. Hence, even Euphrosyne's masculine disguise cannot relieve her of the burden of the corrupting female body; the temptation her body inflicts on the men around her points to the Christian spiritual "truth" that the female body tempts others to sins of lustfulness. Although they believe her to be a man, the monks with whom she is cloistered as Smaragdus are "sorely tempted by Smaragdus' fairness" and grow "disturbed with the abbot because he had brought such a beautiful man into the monastery" (Donovan 85). That they were tempted to sins of lustfulness by what they know to be a female body would have been troubling to the monks. However, given the even greater degree of sinfulness of homoerotic desire, they would have experienced their desire for Smaragdus as even more debased and sinful than desire for a woman's body.

Virgins' bodies are thus doubly inscribed; their physical beauty signifies spiritual purity, and simultaneously, their bodies are loci of corruption and temptation. This is the paradox of the doubly signifying female body. The contraries are coupled; medieval audiences did not have to decide between them because they were both simultaneously true. In an ontological and interpretive climate in which transparent signs correctly interpreted point only to one truth, the beautiful virgin is anomalous, since her body signifies contradictory spiritual truths. Early Christian writers seem to have solved the interpretive problem by positing virgins' bodies as special sorts of signs, signs capable of

simultaneously gesturing toward antithetical signifieds. The doubly signifying body is always the initial source of conflict in virgin saints' biographies. Even the pagan men who assault them acknowledge that their beauty is a function of inner purity, yet that same beauty incites the antagonist to action. For the composers of saints' biographies, "the truth (*res*) of a subject" "was . . . to be exemplified primarily . . . through the depiction of specific action in the life of the saint" (Heffernan 5). Thus, saints' biographers stressed "dramatized action over complex argument" (5), and narrative events ritualized as they occurred over and over again in different biographies. Ubiquitous events include an attack on the protagonist's virginity; the attacker's assistance by a wicked female; the female protagonist's defiance of the male antagonist, who carries earthly authority such that the woman should ordinarily obey him; an offering of riches by the male in return for the female's sexual acquiescence, which riches are, of course, refused; punishment for refusal; the protagonist's attempts to reason with her tormentor by pointing out that his self-interest clashes with his desire; surreptitious aid to the protagonist by a chaste male; the protagonist's choice to remain in places of torment even though the opportunity to escape arises; prayers for death; the protagonist's eventual reunification with the family from whom she has been estranged; and reward for virtue.

Writing Identity

By the late seventeenth century, empirical science had asserted itself as a replacement for theology as the foundation for understanding the world and humans' places in it. John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* replaced revelation with perception as the chief conduit of human knowledge of the material world, which

led to changes in the understanding of history and the practices of historiography and biography. Joseph M. Levine notes that “[m]edieval historiography worked largely by accretion, rarely ever by subtraction; a story once told gained authority by mere reiteration and the passage of time” (17).⁹ But “seventeenth-century historiography developed the techniques of source criticism and archaeology that prepared the path for the modern discipline” (ix). Eighteenth-century historians such as “Gibbon, Burckhardt, and Delehayé were,” Heffernan explains, “all chagrined at what they considered a lack of a concern for truth in medieval saints’ lives” (57).

New approaches to historiography and biography in the eighteenth century had helped to create, and had been in part created by, writers, readers, and audiences capable of making distinctions between history and fiction in ways that medieval audiences had not been (Levine; Gallagher). Richardson’s Pamela, a servant, is perfectly ordinary—except for her beauty and her fortitude in the face of Mr. B.’s various attempts on her virtue—and “the ordinariness” of Richardson’s realism would have indicated fictionality to eighteenth-century audiences (Gallagher 34). So, while eighteenth-century audiences would have expected verisimilitude from Pamela’s story, they would not have expected empirical truth because they would have recognized it as fiction and would not have confused it for biography. Nonetheless, as sacred biographers did, Richardson includes a preface to guide the reader toward the “correct” reading of his text, the one that will “inculcate *religion* and *morality* in so easy and agreeable a manner, as shall render them equally *delightful* and *profitable*” (Richardson, *Pamela* 31). And, like medieval virgin saints’ bodies did, Pamela’s body signifies both purity and corruption.

Richardson replicates the medieval understanding of woman's signification and bases the novel's pre-marital conflict on it, no matter how unconsciously or unintentionally. *Pamela's* pre-marital plot appropriates and adapts other conventions of medieval virgin saints' biographies as well: Mr. B. launches an assault on Pamela's virginity, aided by the wicked Mrs. Jewkes; Pamela defies Mr. B., whose status as Pamela's employer means that she has an obligation to obey him; Pamela refuses the riches Mr. B. offers in return for her sexual acquiescence and is punished for refusing; Pamela attempts to reason with Mr. B. by pointing out that his real self-interest clashes with his desire; the chaste Mr. Williams helps Pamela; Pamela prays for the release of death yet chooses to return to Mr. B. after she is safe; Pamela and her parents are reunited; and finally, Pamela's virtue is "rewarded" with marriage above her class.

Ethical Sentimentality

In the eighteenth century, Anthony Ashley-Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury's attempts to synthesize ethics and aesthetics were among the most influential ideas of his age and introduced an ethics of sentiment to British thought. Critical to the emergence of sentimentalism as a system of moral philosophy are Shaftesbury's attacks on what he sees as Hobbes' undermining of the possibility of real morality based in objective standards of goodness. Shaftesbury argues that the natural affection of parents for offspring means that human beings are naturally social. For him, it follows that society is not a war of all against all as Hobbes claims (*Characteristics* 287). Shaftesbury rejects the Hobbesian notion of society as an artificial construct designed to protect people and their property from one another and declares instead that society is humankind's natural

state. Thus, he locates the foundation of a human moral sense in individual affective response rather than in individual self-interest as had Hobbes (168).

Shaftesbury believes his distinction between goodness and the moral sense allows him to refute Hobbes. Proposing that what is good adds to the “existence or well-being” of the system of which it is a part, Shaftesbury distinguishes between goodness, an objective matter, and virtue, a specifically human aim. While goodness is available to all sentient animals that feel affection for their young, virtue is available only to those who reflect on their passions and desires and who also develop feelings about them. Shaftesbury calls the uniquely human capacity to reflect on and develop feelings about passions and desires “the Moral Sense” (179–80). This moral sense is not identical to the affective response by which it speaks to human beings, and it is an innate part of human nature. Moreover, since the moral sense is stimulated by feelings, only eliciting “contrary” feelings can transform it. As Shaftesbury says, the

[s]ense of right and wrong therefore being as natural to us as natural affection itself, and being a first Principle in our constitution and make, there is no speculative opinion, persuasion or belief which is capable immediately or directly to exclude or destroy it... [T]his affection being an original one of earliest rise in the soul or affectionate part, nothing beside contrary affection, by frequent check and control, can operate upon it, so as either to diminish it in part, or destroy it in the whole. (*Inquiry* I.3.1)

Shaftesbury sees an individual’s virtue in his or her attempts to create a life of moral beauty. However, since virtue is lost by indulging base feelings, one must continually

struggle to live in a morally beautiful way. Because he equates the moral sense, the “affectionate part,” with the soul, the feelings that stimulate the moral sense function in British sentimental literature much as the physical body did in sacred biography: as a sign of the beauty of a heroine’s soul, as a sign of her virtue.

But, like so many words, *virtue* may mean different things to differently situated readers and writers—and to differently situated characters. Corinne Harol cogently argues that because there is no reliable physical sign of it, virginity cannot be, with certainty, said to exist on a perception-based epistemology. Thus, empiricism’s inability to establish the existence of a particular virginity led to virtue’s stepping in as a figure for virginity.¹⁰ By the time Richardson writes *Pamela*, as Harol notes, *virtue* has acquired “such symbolic importance that it can serve as both tenor and vehicle in a number of symbolic systems” (141). The problem for characters is that often the “symbolic systems” they inhabit use *virtue* in different ways.

Before Pamela and Mr. B. marry, characters often comment on Pamela’s singular virtue in such a way that makes it clear that Richardson intends *virtue* to figure for *virginity*. In fact, Richardson all but substitutes the word *virtue* and its variants for *virginity* and its variants (Harol 137). For example, Mr. B. asks, “‘Why that word *virtuous*?’ . . . ‘Was there any reason to *suppose* her otherwise? Or has any body taken it into their heads to try her?’” (Richardson, *Pamela* 60, emphases original). The “to try her” in Mr. B.’s final question indicates that what he says concerns Pamela’s virginity, since it was a common euphemism for having sex with a virgin at the time. Pamela and her parents also use *virtue* and *virginity* synonymously, but Pamela herself does not always use the terms entirely interchangeably. Pleading with Mr. Williams, the chaste

male who assists her, Pamela declares, ““Were my *life* in question, instead of my *virtue*, I would not wish to involve any body in the least difficulty for so worthless a poor creature”” (197). Here, it is not so clear that “virtue” refers only to *virginity*, although it is equally clear that “virtue” encompasses *virginity* without being exhausted by it.

Pamela holds herself responsible for her own virtue. Mr. B. attempts to convince Pamela that if he rapes her, the guilt will be his: ““Who ever blamed Lucretia? The shame lay upon the ravisher only”” (Richardson, *Pamela* 63). Pamela does not accept his sophistry: ““May I . . . Lucretia like, justify myself by my death if I am used barbarously?”” (63). Pamela indicates her belief that she will bear some measure of blame if Mr. B. succeeds in raping her by her use of the word “justify.”¹¹ But readers understand that Pamela’s situation is unlike the Roman Lucretia’s or the virgin saints’ because they were repulsed by their would-be rapists. Pamela is attracted to Mr. B.: “I looked after him out of the window, and he was charmingly dressed: to be sure, he is a handsome, fine gentleman” (235). Perhaps more tellingly, of an incident when Mr. B. declares his love for her and takes her in his arms, Pamela writes, “O how my heart throbbed! and I began (for I did not know what I did) to say the Lord’s prayer . . . ‘*Lead me not into temptation; but deliver me from evil, O my good God!*’” (117). In choosing this part of the Lord’s Prayer to utter at this particular moment, Pamela admits she is tempted.

Medieval virgin saints such as Lucy, certain that they could experience no pleasure from the sexual and material enticements offered them by the pagans who desire them, had no real fear of corruption by temptation. As Lucy says, “The body cannot be dangerously defiled, if it does not please the mind” (Donovan 94).¹² Lucy is certain her

mind will not be pleased by rape, so she is confident she will not be corrupted by it. Pamela's concern, however, is with the quality of the feelings such an encounter would arouse in her. Pamela's "O my good God" may give voice to the warring feelings aroused by both her desire for Mr. B. and her desire to preserve her virginity. In psychoanalytic terms, the prayer-interrupting interjection might express a moment of cognitive dissonance arising from the recognition of bodily pleasure that the mind wants to reject but cannot.¹³ Pamela's certainty that kissing Mrs. Jewkes will not arouse desire in her as kissing Mr. B. did endorses heteronormativity. Pamela knows that the "unnaturalness" of such a proposal would arouse her disgust, and she is able find the voice kissing Mr. B. momentarily took from her: "Every now and then she [Mrs. Jewkes] would be staring in my face, in the chariot, and squeezing my hand, and saying, 'Why you are very pretty my silent dear!' And once she offered to kiss me. But I said, 'I don't like this sort of carriage, Mrs. Jewkes; it is not like two persons of one sex to each other'" (145).¹⁴ Just as medieval virgin saints did, Pamela's beauty provokes sexual assaults by members of both sexes who read it incorrectly.

This illuminates a noteworthy distinction between medieval and eighteenth-century heroines: The virgin saint is motivated by disgust, which engenders a turning away from that which disgusts her (Ngai 168), in this case, sex. This turning away in turn becomes a turning toward that which she desires: unmediated access to Christ, whose bride she is. Her ability to do this is an expression of her virtue. Pamela, however, need not succeed in retaining her virginity to live a life of moral beauty. That she struggles as she does is enough. Since only another feeling can diminish a feeling once aroused, Pamela tries in vain to rouse one to mitigate her desire: "[W]hat pity his heart is not so

good as his appearance! Why can't I hate him?" (235). However, if Pamela cannot hate Mr. B., she cannot leave him either. She both lives and works in Mr. B.'s home.

In keeping with the eighteenth century's shift to a wage-labor economy, Richardson first locates the basis for Mr. B.'s authority in his status as Pamela's employer, not in his sex. She is Mr. B.'s live-in servant. Mr. B. and Pamela have radically opposed visions of the paradigm that informs their employer-employee relationship. Like a sort of micro-level divine right employer-king, Mr. B. expects his employees to obey his every command without question. Pamela believes there are some commands she need not follow because he has not the right to issue them. For instance, after one particular episode of sexual assault Pamela berates Mr. B. He asks if she remembers to whom she is speaking, and Pamela responds, "'Yes, I do, sir, too well! Well may I forget that I am your servant, when you forget what belongs to a master'" (55). Pamela's response demonstrates her beliefs that Mr. B. has obligations to her as her master and that there are limits to his power. She claims the right to disobey when Mr. B. does not remember his duty to honor the relationship's boundaries. Pamela implies Mr. B.'s duty as an employer presupposes a correspondent right on her part.¹⁵ More than this, Pamela claims that her right to her virtue outweighs Mr. B.'s right to expect obedience.

Unlike the virgin saints, who know, with a certainty Descartes would envy, that God will not allow them to be raped, Pamela has no one upon whom she can so confidently rely to protect her virtue as the saints can on God.¹⁶ Although God is the agent of virgin saints' earthly salvation from rape, they sometimes receive assistance from chaste men,¹⁷ as does Pamela when the chaste Mr. Williams helps her to correspond with her parents. But Pamela knows that in the end, because she has no

wealth or trustworthy male protector, she alone is responsible for her virtue or for her life. She is vulnerable because she must earn a living. Nevertheless, she defies her employer because she values her virtue. In her defiance and resistance to Mr. B.'s attempts to name her *whore* lies Pamela's route to a coherent adult female identity.

The heroine's defiance of legitimate male authority deserves special attention since the obligation of particular females to obey particular males is so important in both early Christian and eighteenth-century texts of all sorts. In sacred biography, female defiance of earthly authority is always a function of fidelity to a higher authority.¹⁸ Virgin saints defy earthly political, religious, and/or familial male authority in order to obey God (who, it must be noted, is a male figure as well). But the divinely ordained injunction to comply with God's laws, even if one must defy earthly authority to do so, applies to all the faithful, regardless of anatomical sex.¹⁹ A secular version of this sexless model of subservience and authority carries over into *Pamela's* pre-marital conflict as a vehicle that allows *Pamela* to be read as a criticism of divine right theories of government.

Pamela endorses the liberal democratic model of government by "fiduciary trust" (Ebenstein and Ebenstein 384). Pamela's assertion of rights identifies her with the liberal democratic trustor/beneficiary, who has all of the rights in the wage-labor fiduciary trust, just as "the people" do in the public political trust (384). Pamela replaces the divine-right employer/king, whose position Mr. B. claims, with the liberal democratic employer/legislator, who, governing in trust, has only obligations and no rights (384). *Pamela* replaces medieval biographies' and divine right theories' spiritual subjects who had only obligations to an omnipotent deity or king with Pamela, a liberal democratic trustor with the right to revoke the trust if Mr. B. does not live up to his obligations.

Pamela thus implicitly criticizes the divine right king by the failure of his analogical representative—Mr. B., the employer-king of the wage-labor marketplace. In the end, this struggle over Pamela’s rights or lack thereof is a struggle to define both Pamela and Mr. B. If Mr. B. wins, he defines Pamela as a subject and himself as an absolute monarch. Pamela wins, however, and in doing so she defines herself as a rights-bearing trustor and Mr. B. as an obligation-bearing trustee. Analogous to the victory of Christianity over pagan political rule in sacred biography, Pamela’s “reward” is thus a metaphoric victory for the liberal democratic fiduciary trust over divine right monarchy.

Sentimental Domesticity and “Ingenuous Subjection”

As theorists such as Carol Pateman, Lauren Berlant, Elizabeth Maddox Dillon, and Helen Thompson have convincingly shown, liberal democratic citizenship emerges out of a foundation of “naturally” compliant wives and daughters. The democratic liberalism endorsed by Locke derives male conjugal authority from anatomical sex and the “natural,” love-based relations between men and women in an apolitical domestic sphere (qtd. in Thompson 4-5). Although a marriage is a contract on this view, the signatories do not remain equals after signing it with a performative “I do”; another performative, the celebrant’s “I now pronounce you . . .,” not only produces a marriage, it erases the new wife before the law, along with her right to divorce an abusive or absent husband. The material possibility of an abusive or absent husband does not vanish, however, and an ethics of sentiment provides an explanation of human nature that locates one antidote for such abuses in the sympathetic “moral sense.” Pamela enacts this ethics of sentiment in her pre-marital interactions with Mr. B. and makes his acceptance of that

ethic a precondition of marriage; his transformation from predator to loving husband is effected through the power of the sympathetic love endorsed by an ethics of sentiment.

Entrance into the marriage contract transforms the basis of Mr. B.'s authority from socio-economic class to anatomical sex. This transformation's supporting narrative is a thinly disguised version of antiquity's narrative of woman's divinely ordained, and hence natural, subservience. The only real difference between the medieval and the eighteenth-century versions of the myth is that the medieval casts God as the active cause of women's subservience, while the eighteenth-century rendering credits an essential, sex-specific human nature. This difference is really no difference, of course, because the essential sex-specific human nature comes from God. In other words, *Pamela*, like the liberalism it endorses, resorts to a divine right theory to justify "natural" male conjugal authority. Pamela poses a vexing problem for liberal notions of "naturally" authoritative husbands and "naturally" subservient wives because Pamela is not naturally subservient, and those of us who have been privy to her writing know it. That includes Mr. B.

Once their relationship moves from the public sphere to the domestic, the burden of ratifying Mr. B.'s conjugal authority falls to Pamela as his wife (Thompson 3-4). Marriage to Mr. B. marks Pamela's exit from the fiduciary, rights-conferring relations of the public realm into the "apolitical," nominally contractual domestic realm. Marriage both elevates Pamela's status and strengthens the social expectation she will freely obey Mr. B. It also transforms her from a liberal democratic trustor who has all of the rights in the relationship into a wife who has none, not even the right to divorce. At the same time, marriage makes Mr. B. over into a divine right husband-king; where he'd had only obligations and no rights once Pamela had established their pre-marital relationship as a

fiduciary trust, he now has nearly all of the rights and few obligations. Mary Astell expresses this idea in *Reflections on Marriage*, in which she argues liberal democratic marriage as it emerges in the seventeenth century legally entitles husband-citizens to act as domestic tyrants—a possibility she, of course, deplors.²⁰ According to Astell, although a husband may not kill his wife, he “may however do what is more grievous to a generous Mind, render Life miserable, for which [a wife] has no Redress” (qtd. in Thompson 5).

Even love cannot allow Pamela to easily negotiate the shift from being an employee with rights to being a wife with none, as her responses to the “rules” of marriage indicate (Thompson 80-81). For example, Pamela writes,

I must bear with him, even when I find him in the wrong.—*This may be a little hard, as the case may be circumstanced. . . .* If she would overcome, he says, It must be by sweetness and compliance.—*A hard lesson, I doubt, where one’s judgment is not convinced. . . . I am afraid this doctrine, if enforced, would tend to make an honest wife a hypocrite. . . .* The words COMMAND and OBEY, he says, shall be blotted out of his vocabulary.—*Very good! Most chearfully do I subscribe to this!* (Richardson, *Pamela* 468-469; emphasis in original)

Although Pamela attributes the rules she records to her husband, she herself transcribes and abridges them from a lengthy monologue of Mr. B.’s. In other words, through the process of transcription, Pamela asserts herself as an agent with the ability to usurp her husband’s rule-making role.²¹ Her responses to the rules as she has rewritten them reveal that she believes she still has rights. While the subjects of sacred biography

unquestioningly accept God's rules, they defy earthly authority. Just as the virgin saints do in their debates with the authority figures they defy, Pamela employs reason to convince her tormentor that he is acting contrary to his true interests (469). Despite these parallels, however, there are some not insignificant differences. The most important, of course, are that Pamela lives through the text and she marries. Pamela's marriage to Mr. B. is entirely consistent with the late medieval configuration of *chastity* as intercourse within lawful marriage. Moreover, Pamela's inability to obey male authority is as much a part of her God-given nature as, say, Agnes' Christianity is of hers.

Borrowing the phrase "ingenuous subjection" from Richard Allestree, Helen Thompson uses it to denote the spontaneous and unforced compliance, based on love, with which a wife ratifies a husband's conjugal power. While Pamela considers complying with her husband's rules, she finds that she cannot unquestioningly obey male authority. Before marriage, Pamela obeys Mr. B. insofar as she believes his requests are "naturally" grounded in the employer-employee relationship; she rejects his other commands and demands. After she is married, Pamela finds that "ingenuous subjection" to her husband-monarch's commands is not in her nature.

The virgin saints unquestioningly obey their mutual divine husband; some even speak quite erotically about the marriage bed they share with Jesus as they reveal their God-given essences to their tormentors. As they repudiate their bodies' signification of *corruption* in any of the many forms that have been inscribed on the female body over the millennia, these heroines, including Pamela, reveal identity by erasing what they are not. In logical terms, women signify A and ~A. If either interpretive possibility is erased, only the other remains. If the identity possibilities are *purity* and *corruption*, and the

possibility of *corruption* is refused, only *purity* remains. The virgin saints' purity consists in the obedience to their divine husband, Jesus, that underlies their insistence on maintaining their materially virginal state. According to this reading, obedience retains its status as the cardinal feminine virtue, which is consistent with medieval Christian orthodoxy.

However, when reading *Pamela*, we must not lose sight of the role the normalization of heteronormative sentiment in establishing both women's moral and legal obligations to obey men and cultural valuations of particular affective responses to those obligations. Thus while it seems that obedience remains the cardinal virtue for eighteenth-century married women, the liberal democratic wife's purity consists not only in obeying her husband, but also in a particular phenomenological experience of doing so—Thompson's "ingenuous subjection." By ingenuously complying, wives render invisible the arbitrariness of assigning such power to embodied males. A wife's "ingenuous subjection," moreover, has the power to modernize her husband by discouraging his capricious use of the force that marks the pre-modern exercise of conjugal authority. Even proto-feminist Aphra Behn suggests that a wife's efforts to comply spontaneously and voluntarily with her husband's wishes might have the positive effect of encouraging him to defer from "the show of arbitrary force that otherwise turns her into a grievous or servile object" (6).

Pamela must learn to construct the "ingenuous subject" she must become in order to ratify her husband's conjugal authority (Thompson 5). As she reconstitutes herself as an ingenuous subject, Pamela writes: "I am glad that I have fallen on this method of making a journal of all that passes in these first stages of my happiness; because it will

sink the impression still deeper; and I shall have recourse to my papers for my better regulation” (Richardson, *Pamela* 467). In relying on her “papers” for her “better regulation,” Pamela acknowledges the powerful role language plays in her attempts to reconstruct herself as an ingenuously compliant wife and reveals the contingency of women’s “natural” subservience to men.

The medieval construction of the female body as an always already doubled and paradoxical sign is one of the systems of material and discursive practices that enable Locke’s construction of wives simultaneously as property and objects of love for citizen-subjects. Eighteenth-century female bodies still simultaneously signify *purity* and *corruption*. Their purity is the rational, loving sympathy that grounds the human moral sense, and the corruption of that same sympathy into an excessive and false sensibility that can overcome reason and so threaten social order. The latter is the same excessive and false sensibility Mary Wollstonecraft excoriates in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Excessive sensibility has the potential to corrupt marriage and the power to transform marriage from the contractual and rational friendship Wollstonecraft envisions into the desperate pursuit of passion enacted by Eliza Haywood’s eponymous protagonist, Fantomina.

Pamela’s appropriation of hagiography’s ritualized plots legitimizes the medieval construction of virgins’ bodies as doubly signifying signs and brings that construction into the eighteenth century as the field of the text’s pre-marital conflict. The struggle between Pamela and Mr. B. over Pamela’s virtue is a battle over who will define whom as what. Both of the available definitions for Pamela—virgin and temptress—are pre-Enlightenment constructions. If Pamela succeeds in claiming rights, she defines herself

both as virgin and trustor and Mr. B. as a trustee. If Mr. B. emerges victorious, he defines Pamela as a temptress and himself as the absolute monarch to whom she is subject. Pamela's victory thus allows her to self-define as virgin and provides Richardson a vehicle to criticize divine right theories. In facilitating Richardson's critical objectives, however, the pre-marital novel leaves intact the Christian construction of women as naturally subservient by setting the conflict in the eighteenth century's version of the medieval field of power—the employer-employee relationship—where anatomical sex is not the basis for authority.²²

The logic of the post-marital *Pamela* unravels Richardson's pre-marital endorsement of democratic liberalism by laying bare some contradictions, including the paradoxically signifying female body on which the plot's main conflict depends. Since the liberal democratic trust presupposes "naturally" compliant wives who inhabit an apolitical domestic sphere, and since anatomical sex cannot ensure women's compliance, liberal democratic trust merely replicates monarchic rule in the domestic sphere while calling it "love." Richardson's reliance on early Christian constructions of women's doubly signifying bodies and natural subjection in the post-marital *Pamela* unravels his criticism of divine right and endorsement of the liberal democratic fiduciary trust offered in the pre-marital *Pamela*.

Conclusion: The Overplot

Medieval hagiography and *Pamela* anticipate the "overplot" Baym identifies in nineteenth-century women's sentimental literature (*Women's* 12). The young martyrs' faith leads to their loss of familial and social support; Pamela, a young girl, loses the parental financial support on which she had "rightly or wrongly" depended and is

therefore “faced with the necessity of earning her own way in the world” (11). Their “friendless” state leaves the heroines vulnerable to male licentiousness (35). According to the ideology of femininity endorsed by the virgin saints and Pamela, to assent to wealth’s promise of an easy life is prostitution (39). These characters embody Baym’s “unflawed heroines” (36), who discover within themselves the “intelligence, will, resourcefulness, and courage sufficient to overcome” the obstacles in their paths (38). The heroines themselves define their “final ‘domesticity’” (38), and their primary emotional support comes from the domestic circle they thus define (39). The martyrs’ self-defined domestic circle includes their divine husband, while Pamela’s includes Mr. B., her parents, and the estate’s tenants. Neither the martyrs’ marriages to the heavenly groom nor Pamela’s marriage to Mr. B. is represented as a “rescue” (39). Finally, all of these heroines attain their true goal of constructing a coherent adult female identity. Moreover, others accept it as their “true” identity. By steadfastly insisting that their bodies be read in only one way and resisting attempts to read them otherwise, the heroines successfully refuse the nominative power of their bodies’ analogical resemblance to Eve. Although the meaning of *virtue* shifts, as we have seen, in effect, each of these heroines names herself *Virtue*, and, in the end, others must acknowledge that as their true identity (23).

Historicizing the power relations between Pamela and Mr. B. illuminates them as simultaneously enacting both gender and class and provides one interpretive possibility whereby *Pamela* may be legitimately read as critiquing divine right theories of government. This reading also reveals the substitution of monarchy’s naturally subjected subject with democratic liberalism’s ingenuously subjected wife as a necessary, but not sufficient, enabling condition in the emergence of male liberal democratic citizenship.

Although Richardson may have intended virtue's "reward" to be marriage to Mr. B., when read through twenty-first-century eyes, the post-marital text reveals that marriage in eighteenth-century England may have been rewarding mainly for husbands—at least for husbands of a certain class.

For many of Richardson's readers, though, Pamela's marriage would have represented a victory for the sentimental values of the domestic realm over the dehumanizing values of the public. For the middle-class wife Pamela becomes, marriage may require a lifetime of negotiation, a lifetime of turning away from her desires, a lifetime of ingenuous subjection, but according to her lights, her virtue lies in this very struggle. As she performs her pre-marital identity in her interactions with Mr. B. and (dis)ingenuously subjects herself to her husband's will after marriage, Pamela demonstrates the power of sentimental ethics by proving that the arousal of sympathy can soften the heart of even the hardest employer. Mr. B.'s transformation marks the victory of eighteenth-century democratic liberalism over the medieval theocratic moment out of which the virgin saints' biographies emerged and a victory for the ethics of sentiment.²³

Like the hagiographers of the Middle Ages, Richardson relies on the paradoxical signification of the female body to motivate the plot's conflict. A difference in faith separates the heroines of hagiography from their families; economic circumstances separate Pamela from hers. In their places of torment, they are indeed "poor and friendless" children.²⁴ These unflawed heroines already know the right thing to do, and they stand steadfast in the face of terrific challenges to their "true" names. In the end, the saints and Pamela have the will to refuse their bodies' double signification and others

must recognize the names they claim. In all of these respects, medieval sacred biography and Richardson's *Pamela* anticipate the literature Baym examines in *Women's Fiction*.

NOTES

¹ “Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you” (Gen. 3.16). Anderson and Zinsser note that this biblical command to Eve “is repeated in every era and every European nation” (xvii).

² “[A] man . . . is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; for indeed man was not created for the woman's sake, but woman for the man's sake” (1Corinthians 11: 7-9).

³ [T]he woman together with her own husband is the image of God, so that that whole substance may be one image; but when she is referred separately to her quality of help-meet, which regards the woman herself alone, then she is not the image of God (*On the Holy Trinity* 12.7.10).

⁴ “These sacred tales survive in greater volume and variety than any other writing. If we consider that only a fraction of the lives that were written managed to survive the iconoclastic ravages of reformers, we can get some idea of the extraordinary currency of the genre in its own time” (Heffernan 13). The *South English Legendary*, for example, “survives in sixty-two manuscripts (a small percentage of the original number), outnumbered in extant Middle English texts only by the *Pricke of the Conscience*, the *Canterbury Tales*, and *Piers Plowman*, three compositions written a century later” (259).

⁵ In the texts of antiquity, a disobedient woman constitutes one of the greatest threats to order. For example, Eve and Pandora disobey their husbands, releasing sin, pestilence, and death upon the earth; when Aphrodite and Hera disobey Zeus, the destruction of Troy results.

⁶ In Athens, Solon's law allowed fathers to sell into slavery a daughter who had lost her virginity while forbidding them to sell any other children (Anderson and Zinsser 34). Roman law prescribed death by stoning for non-virgin daughters (34). Hebrew law called for the execution of an affianced daughter who had intercourse with a man other than her betrothed before the marriage (34). Under Germanic law, the man who attempted to seduce a warrior's daughter was fined, but the compensatory fine went to her father because the dishonor was his, not hers (35). In Roman and Hebrew literature, the “wanton” daughter symbolized cultural decline (34).

⁷ The lives of male virgin saints focus on the men's spiritual fidelity to the Judaeo-Christian god despite threats of execution if they do not renounce their faith. Biographers of female virgin saints depict their subjects intrepidly defending their virginity against physical and psychological assault by antagonists of both sexes (Donovan 14).

⁸ Although Genesis does not say that Eve *tempted* Adam, (it only says that he was with her and he, too, ate) this is the traditional Christian interpretation. According to this interpretation, Eve's sin leads to women's subordination to men. Adam's sin brings human death into the world.

⁹ Although it did not entirely change the ways in which biographers manipulated their subjects' lives to suit their own purposes. One only need look at the publication chronology in Samuel Johnson's biography of Richard Savage to see this.

¹⁰ Thus, *virtue* is also doubly signifies when it comes women. Sometimes it means *virginity*, and sometimes it means *virginity . . . and more*.

¹¹ For eighteenth-century Protestants, “justification” served as a synonym for “rectification” (Barnhart 560), and in his pamphlet, *Justification by Christ Alone* Richardson uses it thus.

¹² As Aquinas says, “So long as voluntariness remains in the ignorant person, the intention of sin remains in him: so in this respect, his sin is not accidental.” (Aquinas 2.1.75).

¹³ This interpretation would have been available to Richardson's readers, even though the vocabulary of psychoanalysis used to express it would not have been. Of course, the proliferation of anti-Pamela satire implies that at least some of Richardson's audience read this passage and others like it as expressions of pleasure over which the heroine draws a discreet veil. Juxtaposing Pamela's desire for Mr. B. with an ethics of sentimentalism shows that her desire for Mr. B and the base feelings it arouses in her are not the problem, anti-Pamelas notwithstanding. In the economy of sentiment, Pamela retains her virtue as long as she struggles to quash those base feelings rather than indulging them.

¹⁴ This episode calls to mind Eugenia's biography, in which Melantia becomes so enamored of Eugenia's beauty, that she “embraced that untainted maiden [Eugenia] and wanted to subject her to

shameful intercourse” (Donovan 71). And, there is Aphrodisia, who attempts to “pervert Agatha’s mind” by acting “alluringly” (38).

¹⁵ Indeed, Richardson’s eponymous heroine demonstrates a rights-based sense of autonomy throughout *Pamela*, which would have been unintelligible to medieval audiences.

¹⁶ Agnes, for example, tells Simpronius, “I reject your threats completely, because I know the power of my Lord. . . . nor will I ever be degraded by the pollution of strangers as a debased prostitute” (Donovan 49). When Simpronius has her stripped and dragged to a prostitute’s home, her hair miraculously grows long enough to hide her nakedness (49).

¹⁷ Eugenia relies on two eunuchs’ help in disguising herself as a man so she can enter a monastery (Donovan 69). St. Peter himself visits Agatha in prison to comfort her.

¹⁸ Even when a daughter defies her father, her faith-based wish not to marry a pagan grounds her defiance.

¹⁹ Most often, medieval antagonists are pagan lawmakers or enforcers: for example, Agatha, Agnes, and Lucy (Donovan), Domnina’s daughters (Eusebius), and Perpetua (Perpetua). The antagonists in Protestant martyrologies are Catholic, usually clergy (Challoner; Foxe).

²⁰ In his political philosophy, Shaftesbury says that totalitarianism decreases civility and increase the likelihood of violence, while liberty creates more “polite” citizens and peaceful and fosters peace. Notice the striking parallels between what Astell says and Shaftesbury’s ethics of sentiment.

²¹ Pamela unsurprisingly ignores the passage where Mr. B. declares that he cannot compromise, and her italicized responses to the rules she has constructed indicate that he will have to.

²² This is not to claim equality for men and women in the eighteenth-century wage market. Nor do I ignore the sex-specific ways in which employers and other employees were able to oppress women. These points are simply not relevant to my argument.

²³ By establishing that Pamela has rights, Richardson leaves open the possibility that at least some women enter into the marriage contract already possessing rights, a particularly vexing proposition for democratic liberalism.

²⁴ Pamela is fifteen, and the virgin saints are in their teens or preteens.

CHAPTER THREE

MOTHERS: DOMESTIC ANGELS AND HARRIED HOMEMAKERS

American Women's Literary Domestic Humor

At least since Anne Bradstreet's seventeenth-century imitation of Elizabethan and Augustan poetic techniques, North American women have appropriated humor's conventions for their writing.¹ Some of these women have been authoritatively designated *women's humorists* by marketers or editors of scholarly anthologies, for example.² Still, there are no widely agreed-upon criteria for identifying women's humor, although not for want of critical effort. In their influential article, "Women's Humor in America," for instance, Nancy A. Walker and Zita Dresner say that American women writers and humorists "have created a distinctive body of humor with common subjects and themes that set it apart from the male tradition of American humor" (172). According to Walker and Dresner, U.S. women's humor reflects a concern with the interpersonal relations of the domestic sphere because their lives have taken shape there. However, some of the texts they identify as examples of women's humor do not focus on either women's lives *qua* women's lives or domestic concerns at all.³ Moreover, men, too, create literary humor that explicitly takes domestic life as its subject.⁴ Clearly, then, subject matter alone cannot serve as the characteristic that distinguishes a tradition of women's humor from humor unmarked.⁵ Since men and women employ the same humorous techniques as they construct their texts, technical difference cannot distinguish women's humor from humor unmarked, either.⁶ Nor can the sex or gender of the humorist's persona, given that the personae cross sex/gender lines.⁷ Moreover, the same problematics that undermined efforts to distinguish among marked (*women's literature*,

for example) from unmarked (literature) literatures undermine attempts to distinguish among marked and unmarked humor.⁸ Attempts to differentiate humorous literary traditions by treating women's humor as an ontological entity with empirically verifiable characteristics are doomed to the same failure as efforts define *women's literature*.⁹

However, even though not all humor authoritatively designated *women's* takes culturally normalized domestic life as its primary subject, the subjects of this chapter do. Shirley Jackson's *Life among the Savages* and *Raising Demons* and Erma Bombeck's *At Wit's End* all purport to offer a first-person peek into the lives of an "ordinary" white, suburban, middle-class homemaker and mother. Each author tells her story through the voice of a humorous persona, a technique with a long tradition in U.S. humor. As I define it for the purposes of this study, then, American women's literary domestic humor is written by people who self-identify as women or whose names identify them as female to encultured readers. An adult female first-person narrator or narrative persona who claims to be sharing her own experience is the speaker, and the primary subjects are domestic roles, functions, and concerns culturally identified as feminine or female. It exhibits literary devices and techniques conventionally associated with humor. Finally, it has been in some way authoritatively designated *women's*.

Although this definition is couched in terms that seem to point to an ontologically distinct entity, the cultural realist frame insists that all of these properties are emergent, mutually intereffective and overdetermining systems with material and discursive histories. Through this frame, critical attention can shift at any time to any or all of the emergent systems of discursive practices that converge in interpretive experiences. Such systems include, but are not exhausted by, reading and writing practices; embodied

writers, readers, and publishers; and gender ideologies. These material and discursive systems participate in constructing embodied readers who will seek a book authoritatively designated *women's domestic humor*. Only by attending to all of the participants in reading transactions can we begin to understand how women's domestic humor works to deliver laughs, why such a diverse readership might interpret it so similarly, and whether the interpretive practices it rewards have any feminist subversive potential.

From Domestic Angel to Harried Homemaker

The role of women's magazines and other mass media in shaping U.S. conceptions of "virtuous" housewifery and motherhood cannot be exaggerated (Walker, *Shaping* 111). Nineteenth-century female domestic humorists most often published in periodicals whose titles hailed women as their intended readership, *Godey's Ladies Book* and its predecessor, *Ladies' Magazine*, for example.¹⁰ When these magazines' writers used the phrase *True Womanhood*, they took for granted that their audiences knew to what they referred (Welter 151, n.1). To successfully adopt this identity possibility was, as Barbara Welter notes, to instantiate "four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife—woman" (152).¹¹ However, in her most virtuous manifestations, the True Woman is a natural nurturer. As Welter says, she "naturally loved her children; to suggest otherwise was monstrous" (171). This discursive formation not only naturalizes female nurturing, its normative force constructs *mother* and *nurturing* as effectively synonymous with *good woman*. And, if a good woman nurtures "naturally," one who does not is a monster. Out of the conjuncture of True Womanhood, U.S. republicanism, industrial

capitalism, and Christianity emerges a new paradoxically signifying female body: the asexual Angel of the Hearth.¹²

The Angel is the instantiation of the maternal love that, according to the ethics of sentiment, grounds all human morality. Of course, discursive representations such as the Angel of the Hearth emerge out of material and discursive histories. In the period between the Civil War and World War I, the economy was in flux, shifting more decisively from agriculture to manufacturing, and the ideology of the housewife began to gain greater currency. By the end of World War I, American production was almost completely centralized and industrialized (DuBois and Dumenil 462). An image of femininity that “glamorized” the experience of “young, urban, prosperous white women dominated” in the “popular media” (522). The home had become a center of consumption rather than production (Walker, *Shaping* 54; Zukin 1-34). Ideologically, the feminine domestic space was “one of influence rather than power, of kindness and love rather than one of work, of educating children” and “maintaining cultural continuity in the home” (Camfield 15). Domestic and market values still opposed each other, although white middle-class mothers were forging new roles for themselves in “what historians have called ‘the affectionate family’” (DuBois and Dumenil 532). The maternal role in the domestic space was first and foremost to construct it as a “‘a haven in a heartless world’” (Camfield 15). Middle-class mothers remained at home and reared children, although this ideal was never really a possibility for vast numbers of working-class women.

The Depression may have extended the life of the geographically close extended family in the United States, but it could not be saved. With American domestic space almost wholly urbanized, the urban middle-class affectionate family shrank (DuBois and

Dumenil 523). Popular media images of “New Woman” as “Home Manager—Purchasing Agent—Art Director—Wife” re-visioned women’s domestic labor as “technological efficiency” (532). Magazines such as the *Ladies’ Home Journal* stressed “individual aspiration and self-development” and “openly acknowledged America’s distinct class system” in articles until December 1940 (Walker, *Shaping* 5), when it announced “America is proud to have no aristocracy” (qtd. in Walker, *Shaping* 5).

U.S. women moved into traditionally male/masculine manufacturing jobs during the 1940s at the behest of “business executives . . . government bureaucrats . . . and . . . mass media” (Dresner 94). After the war, the same forces that had promoted women’s entry into traditionally “male” occupations reversed themselves. Now they declared that for women to work in those occupations was “unfeminine” and “un-American” (94). As part of a campaign to move them back into the home, women were blamed for destroying society by undermining the American family by “leaving home to work in the first place” (94).¹³ By 1953, women’s magazines “insisted on a community of shared values that crossed economic lines: hard work, the centrality of family life, and aspirations for a better future” (Walker, *Shaping* 111). The phrase *Good Housekeeping Seal* had long since entered the American lexicon. Print media of all sorts were filled with advertisements and lifestyle advice (Walker, *Shaping* 105-112; Zukin 175-176). The white, suburban, middle-class ideal they touted was available at the local department store, and women functioned as “the household’s ‘general purchasing agents’” (Walker, *Shaping* 113).

After World War II, with the rise of the suburbs and the final shift from an agrarian to a manufacturing economy, came the dissolution of the geographically

contiguous extended family. By mid-century, the white, middle-class suburban nuclear family emerged as the normalized American domestic unit. White, middle-class U.S. women were largely isolated either in rural bedroom communities, as in Jackson's Harried Homemaker persona, or in discrete nuclear-family homes in the newly-created and often-barren suburbs, as is Bombeck's persona. The Harried Homemakers' physical segregation in the suburbs and the rural bedroom re-vision earlier heroines' separation from support networks on which they had "rightly or wrongly depended" (Baym, *Women's* 11). In effect, their physical segregation translates the heroine's isolation for mid-twentieth-century U.S. readers. It is the form of isolation assumed by white, middle-class mothers in the mid-twentieth-century United States.

Idealized motherhood in mid-twentieth-century United States culture simply re-vision the nineteenth-century angelic mother to accommodate a contemporary audience. Adrienne Rich paints the picture:

Motherhood calls to mind the home, and we like to believe that the home is a private place. Perhaps we imagine row upon row of backyards, behind suburban or tenement houses, in each of which children are being fed and sent off to school. Or we think of the house of our childhood, the woman who mothered us, or of ourselves. . . . When we think of motherhood, we are supposed to think of Renoir's blooming women with rosy children at their knees, Raphael's ecstatic madonnas [sic], some Jewish mother lighting the candles in a scrubbed kitchen on Shabbos, her braided loaf lying beneath a freshly ironed napkin. (*Of Woman* 274-275)

Notice, though, how these images elide the domestic practices that produce the food being fed to the children, the bread on the Shabbos table, the clean kitchen floor, the candles, and the ironed napkin. As Rich says, hegemonic images of motherhood elide the juridical power of

the laws which determine how we get to these places, the penalties imposed on those of us who have tried to live our lives according to a different plan, the art which depicts us in an unnatural serenity or resignation, the medical establishment which has robbed so many women of the act of giving birth, the experts—almost all male—who have told us how, as mothers, we should behave and feel. . . .the Marxist intellectuals arguing as to whether we produce “surplus value” in a day of washing clothes, cooking food, and caring for children, or the psychoanalysts who are certain that the work of motherhood suits us by nature. We do not think of the power stolen from us and the power withheld from us, in the name of the institution of motherhood. (275)

Hegemony collapses housewife-manager into mother-angel,¹⁴ and the normative and affective claims of motherhood re-vision women’s domestic practices as expressions of love. To fail at domestic practices is to fail to love one’s children and so to fail at motherhood. It is to be monstrous. The collapse of housewife-manager into angel-mother is a necessary yet insufficient contributory precondition of the emergence of the mid-twentieth-century American maternal body. Although this maternal body simultaneously signifies Manager and Angel, the Manager is invisible, her productive domestic practices erased by love’s ascendance as the source of clean clothes, freshly made beds, and hot

meals. June Cleaver emerges as the incarnation of Manager as Angel, fully grown, apron and pearls in place, like Athena erupting fully armored from Zeus' head.¹⁵ In the Cleaver household, dinners appear on the table, clothes are cleaned and pressed, and floors sparkle, all without the audience seeing any domestic work being done. June's hair is neat, and no residue of domestic labor sullies her freshly starched and spotless apron. With the ascendance of the Angel and the construction of the Manager as *femme couverte*, domestic labor, like the American working-class, disappears into the well of white, suburban, middle-class, heteronormative domesticity.

In order to successfully perform a coherent adult female identity that actually expresses who she is and that others acknowledge as hers, the Angel must make the Manager's work visible. The conflict that initiates action, then, emerges first as the struggle to make the Manager and her domestic labor wholly visible but not casting the Angel and her motivating love into darkness. Coherence of identity necessitates the illumination of both at the same time. When the discursive spotlight simultaneously illuminates Angel and Manager, the Harried Homemaker persona emerges. The Harried Homemaker's is the body out of which emerge the conflicts that hinder her self-naming. The Harried Homemaker who wishes to construct an autonomous and coherent adult female identity must make others see the value in her domestic practices even if hers fall short of the cultural ideal. Therefore, self-naming for Harried Homemakers requires that they re-vision maternal virtue. They must in effect redefine motherhood by casting away the veil of maternal love that conceals domestic labor. The Harried Homemaker must do all this without allowing her lack of fulfillment by domestic labor to conceal the love domestic labor expresses. However, as Jackson and Bombeck reveal, Angel and Manager

coexist in Harried Homemaker, but they do not exhaust her identity. If she wishes to be understood as anything more than “just” a mom or “just” a housewife or even “just” a homemaker, she also must open up the field of identity possibilities available to “good” mothers. In order to construct an intelligible adult female identity that expresses “who she really is” in ways that others can understand, she must also establish that maternity, as Rich says, is not permanent identity (*Of Woman* 23).

Ordinariness, Persona, and Cooperative Reading

For writers of humor, encouraging cooperative reading is critical. Humor is particularly vulnerable to uncooperative interpretation, for if it does not engender laughter, it has in some sense failed.¹⁶ The voice of an engaging humorous persona can encourage readers and auditors to cooperate with the humor. Indeed, as Mark Twain’s creator Samuel Clemens realized, in humor, persona can be everything. The Harried Homemaker personae through which Jackson and Bombeck speak are the white, suburban, middle-class literary descendants of Samantha Allen, Marietta Holley’s nineteenth-century female version of the American “crackerbox philosopher” type, the ordinary American.¹⁷ Just as Samantha Allen’s rough rural vernacular signifies her ordinariness as a nineteenth-century rural wife and mother, the Harried Homemakers’ vocabularies and voices signify their situatedness as “ordinary” middle-class women in mid-twentieth-century America.

The Harried Homemakers are nameless except insofar as readers attribute authors’ names to them.¹⁸ Insistence on the persona’s anonymity facilitates readers’ ability to universalize the persona’s experience and creates a space in which they can creatively imagine the persona’s experience as their own, in flavor if not in specific

detail. Thus, when Bombeck's persona reveals the "woman who is hidden," she is in some sense, articulating a very ordinary experience. The Woman Within, as I shall call her, coexists with Angel and Manager, and she has her own dreams, aspirations, fears, and desires (Bombeck 215). She is the woman who

sings duets with Barbra Streisand and pretends Robert Goulet is singing to her. Who hides out in the bathroom and experiments with her eyes. Who would wear a pair of hostess pajamas if everyone wouldn't fall down laughing. Who reads burlesque ads when she thinks no one is watching. Who would like to feed her kids early without feeling guilty. Who thinks about making ceramics, writing a play and earning a paycheck. (215-216)

Here is the final component of the Harried Homemakers' successful construction of a coherent adult female identity. The Woman Within is part of the "real" woman whose identity the Harried Homemaker must successfully perform. She must redefine maternal virtue so that it accommodates both her domestic practices *and* the desires, fears, aspirations, and dreams of the Woman Within. If the nineteenth-century heroine's goal is to construct an adult female identity while refusing society's equation of "female with permanent child" (Baym, *Women's* 17), the Harried Homemaker's is to refuse its equation of female with permanent mother. Harried Homemakers are willing to accept that only readers will see the woman inside. They certainly do not expect their families to.

The Harried Homemaker must encourage readers to deploy the cooperative reading practices out of which the Woman Within can emerge as a viable identity possibility. But, one might object, personae ask readers to accept them as ordinary women

while their creators publicly perform their identities as acclaimed writing professionals. This hazards the kind of cognitive dissonance that might incline readers to withhold the cooperative reading practices the author wants to elicit. Readers might resist or even reject a persona's attempts to self-identify as a housewife if they are repeatedly reminded that the persona must also find time to work in addition to her homemaking activities. That authors do not depict their personae writing encourages readers to elide their public status as extraordinary women. Still, some readers refused to cooperate. For instance, Bombeck reports some of the mail she received: "Other readers were not so enamored. 'Who do you fancy career girls think you are, sitting in a plush office telling us housewives what it's like?'" (221).¹⁹ Nevertheless, a great many readers were aware that both authors were something more than their narrative personae claimed to be and yet accepted the narrative personae they adopted. And, from Benjamin Franklin to Roseanne Barr, some of the most successful American humorists have constructed personae who adopt the stance of the ordinary person.²⁰ The continued success of personae who purport to be "just folks" indicates that this is an important component in eliciting cooperative interpretive practices from humor's readers and auditors.²¹

Performing Identity

Life Among the Savages and *Raising Demons* typify U.S. women's domestic humor in the mid-1950s, focusing as they do on events in Shirley Jackson's own Connecticut household. These texts, published in 1953 and 1957 respectively, in many ways enact a pre-second wave continuation of U.S. working- and middle-class women's humorous treatments of their domestic lives.²² To establish herself as ordinary, Jackson's *Harried Homemaker* uses a variety of literary and humorous techniques to hail readers as

enough like her to identify with her concerns. The first words of *Life among the Savages* establish the ordinariness of the domestic setting: “Our home is old, noisy, and full” (385). The compound sentence that follows tells readers what the occupants brought to the house and what the persona expects to take when they leave: “When we moved into the house we had two children and about five thousand books; I expect that when we finally overflow and move out again we will have perhaps twenty children and easily half a million books; we also own assorted beds and tables and chairs and rocking horses and lamps and doll dresses and ship models and paint brushes” (385). The ordinariness of her concerns and possessions can help readers who may be aware of her celebrity to accept her persona’s initial stance as “just a housewife.” Her “bewilderment” at having “fallen into” a “way of life” “inadvertently, as though we had fallen into a well and decided that since there was no way out we might as well stay there and set up a chair and a desk and a light of some kind” intimates that there is nothing special about the way her family has gotten where it is (385).

The Harried Homemaker immediately invites readers to identify with her by framing her desires as desires they share:

I cannot think of a preferable way of life, except one without children and without books, going on soundlessly in an apartment hotel where they do the cleaning for you and send up your meals and all you have to do is lie on the couch and—As I say, I cannot think of a preferable way of life, but then, I have had to make a good many compromises all told. (Jackson, *Life* 385-386)

Jackson's use of the second person creates a conspiratorial tone and welcomes readers as co-conspirators. The second-person functions on two levels here. First, in U.S. vernacular, especially in conversation, the use of *you* in this way can signify that the predicate is a universal experience that the interlocutors share. It hails readers as people who share the persona's concerns and desires. Readers who respond to invitation by acknowledging her desire as their own evince the kind of readerly engagement on which humor's success depends. That the desire she invites readers to share is for a kind of comfort that almost anyone would find attractive helps, of course. On the second level, though, the *you* opens up a space out of which can emerge some equivocation about the "they" to whom "you" are opposed. This negotiating reading echoes Judy Brady's iconic feminist satire, "Why I Want a Wife." It opens up the possibility that "they" are the family members for whom the pleasurable possibilities of idleness are realized by the domestic labor of the speaker.

With such remarks as "Mothers have their own seasonal occupations" (415), Jackson's persona makes visible the necessary connection between motherhood and housework. Multiple meanings of *occupation* operate here. On the most obvious level, "occupations" simply means *work*. The implicit *all* preceding "Mothers" universalizes a necessary connection between motherhood and the domestic activity she next describes, which is altering a child's overalls (415). In this way, Jackson's persona invites readers to recognize something universal in an ideologically invisible connection between motherhood and housework. Some readers can accept that invitation quite easily, perhaps in part because nearly every member of the American working- and middle-class adult

female reading public has had some experience with motherhood's dual requirements, even if only as a child or as a worker.²³

But there is another sense of *occupation* at play here. According to the *OED*, *occupation* also signifies the "action of taking or maintaining possession or control of a country, building, land, etc., esp. by (military) force; an instance of this; the period of such action; (also) the state of being subject to such action" ("Occupation"). So, what is going on in this scene? The Homemaker sits "quietly in the living room," alone, altering children's clothes. Her son, Laurie, enters with two friends. Her daughter, Jannie, follows; she in turn is followed by Toby, the dog (415). The vitality and chaos of the children and dog's entry disrupts the serenity of the maternal scene. The juxtaposition of children's energy and placidly sewing Homemaker interrogates the hegemonic ideal by complicating it with the active children and domestic labor representations elide.

The boys cannot be cheered up. They even reject an offer of ice cream. The Homemaker pretends she does not notice their gloom. Then, Jannie asks if her mother is mending Laurie's overalls for the first day of school. Her inquiry is followed by "a long silence" (416). The boys do not want to go back to school. What could be more ordinary in an American home at the close of summer? The Harried Homemaker veils her own feelings for just long enough to allow readers to think her response will be one of empathetic nostalgia. However, after telling the boys that she "used to *love* school," a "falsehood so patent that none of them felt it necessary to answer [. . .] even in courtesy," she begins to recommend diverting amusements (416). The children reject her suggestions. Instead, her son tells her, "[W]e're going to make a show. You're going to be the audience, and you got to go out to the kitchen while we get ready" (417). Laurie's use of the imperative

mood gestures toward the cultural normalization of good motherhood as ingenuous subjection to a child.

The Harried Homemaker next spends nearly four pages detailing the children's incoherent and chaotic performance, which results in dirty children and living room. This is followed by Laurie's offer to do a better show the next day. His proposal reminds everyone that the boys will not be there the next day to perform. Of this, Harried Homemaker says, "I thought briefly and comfortably of the quiet mornings, the long lovely afternoons, the early bedtimes. 'Well,' I said, with immense heartiness, 'it will be summer again before we all know it'" (420). Her relief is patent for cooperative readers, but it is short-lived. The next paragraph indicates that she is pregnant with a third child (420). Her body itself will be occupied for the next nine months, followed by unremitting subjection to an occupying child until that child, too, begins school.

For at least the next nine months, the persona's body is indelibly inscribed *Angel*. Jackson's Harried Homemaker understands very well that maternity can mean unrelieved subjection to children and circumscribe a woman's ability to make herself seen as anything other than Angel. Even when the persona directly claims the Woman Within as part of her identity, hegemony rejects her identity claim. Her exchange with a female desk clerk at the hospital where she goes to give birth exemplifies the discursive power of the maternal body to configure identity:

"Name?" the desk clerk said to me politely, her pencil poised.

"Name," I said vaguely. I remembered, and told her.

"Age?" she asked. 'Sex? Occupation?'

"Writer," I said.

“Housewife,” she said.

“Writer,” I said.

“I’ll just put down housewife,” she said. (426)

The bureaucratic exchange continues for a moment, and it seems that the Homemaker, who is in labor, has accepted the name hegemony’s functionary has assigned her. However, for some readers, her response when the clerk asks for her husband’s name and occupation might indicate resistance to being thus named:

“Husband’s name?” she said. “Address? Occupation?”

“Just put down housewife,” I said. (426)

On my reading, the subversive possibilities emerge out of the same incongruity as the humor. Jackson’s husband is also a writer. This fact affords an interpretive nuance that lends subversive energy to her response. The reasonable tone with which she resists her interlocutor encourages readers to follow her implicit chain of reasoning to its nonsensical conclusion. If to be a writer is to be a housewife, and her husband is a writer, then her husband is also a housewife. But in the gender economy of the 1950s U.S. white middle class, housewives are, by definition, female and husbands, male. The moment of recognition of incongruity in the image “male housewife” affords the possibility both laughter and subversion, for her embodied presence as mother, housewife, and writer gestures toward an incongruity between her material practices and an ideology that denies their existence.

U.S. women rely on a variety of somewhat sophisticated literary techniques to convey their feelings about its repetitiveness and monotony—and its rewards.²⁴ Jackson,

unsurprisingly perhaps given her stature as an author, uses conventional literary techniques such as listing to great effect for this purpose. Jackson's lists convey a sense of the unending repetitiveness of domestic labor. In order to avoid distorting Jackson's effect, I quote at length.

I went, one spring morning, to clean out one of those downstairs closets, which begin as very practical affairs, meant to be the resting place for wet boots and umbrellas, and end up as containers for ice skates and then hockey sticks and then tennis rackets and then, by the most logical of extensions, baseball gloves and football helmets and basketballs and riding boots and jackets left behind by visiting children. I had picked up a big cardboard carton at the grocery, and into it I put the baseball gloves and the football helmets and the riding boots and the tennis rackets and the basketball. I put the carton at the foot of the back stairs, so I would remember to take it up the next time I went, and I put clean newspaper on the floor of the closet and went and got all the wet boots from the corner of the kitchen and the spot inside the front door and the back seat of the car, and I lined the boots up in the closet and derived an enormous satisfaction from closing the closet door tight for the first time in months.

(Raising Demons 534)

Jackson, a highly skilled writer, almost certainly chose her punctuation carefully. This 195-word paragraph comprises three sentences broken only by six commas and two periods. Moreover, she abandons her very formal comma use early on in the first sentence. The droning quality of the sparsely punctuated list of possessions, the repetition

of the conjunction *and*, as well as the ordinariness of the objects and activity contribute to the scene's verisimilitude and convey housework's monotony and never-finished quality.

In this scene, readers are afforded a rare glimpse of Homemaker "satisfaction." But she does not derive satisfaction from the work itself; her satisfaction comes, as she says, "from closing the door tight for the first time in months." And, when the Homemaker gets the carton up the stairs, she realizes that there is no place else to put the things it contains, so she carries it back downstairs, takes the boots out of the closet, empties the carton back into the same closet, and "then the door would not close again" (535). That she is back where she started reflects domestic labor's unending repetitiveness and unceasing incompleteness. One can never close the door on domestic disorder, she seems to be saying.

By 1967, when Bombeck's collection was first published in book form, *The Feminine Mystique* had impacted white, middle-class U.S. women's willingness and ability to speak openly about the difficulty of trying meet social expectations and feeling isolated and ashamed. In short, women began publicly to admit that they did not find the dual roles of Angel and Manager fulfilling. Betty Friedan calls this the "problem that has no name" (15). The two-fold problem, of course, was white, middle-class women's dissatisfaction with lives that they found unfulfilling and their guilt and shame about wanting something more. That the Rolling Stones' recording of "Mother's Little Helper," a warning about the risks of the barbiturate Nembutal for housewives, went to number eight on the U.S. *Billboard* chart in 1966 says a great deal about how thoroughly permeated with discourse about the unnamed problem U.S. culture became in a very short time. The song depicts the problem as a great many people at the time understood it.

On this view, the problem is neither institutionalized motherhood nor normalized domestic practices. The *real* problem is feminine vanity. The rest is rationalization:

What a drag it is getting old . . .

Kids are different today, I hear ev'ry mother say.

Mother needs something today to calm her down.

And though she's not really ill, there's a little yellow pill,

She goes running for the shelter of a mother's little helper,

And it helps her on her way, gets her through her busy day. (Jagger and Richards)

About his inspiration for the lyrics, Jagger says, "It's about drug dependence, but in a sort of like spoofy way. As a songwriter, I didn't really think about addressing things like that. It was just everyday stuff that . . . I'd observe and write about" (Songfacts). Of course, according to Jagger and Richards, death is the "spoofy" end for a mother who is "not really ill" and yet uses tranquilizers "to calm her" anxieties about aging:

And if you take more of those,

You will get an overdose.

No more running for the shelter of a mother's little helper.

They just helped you on your way,

Through your busy dying day. (Jagger and Richards)

When Bombeck's persona speaks, she is not just speaking to readers. She is also speaking to Friedan and the Stones and to those who share their beliefs. She is speaking to all those Americans who belittle housewifery and housewives, including by neglect. And,

although she is careful to stress that she loves her family and her country, this Harried Housewife is fed up.

That Bombeck returned to public writing after the public emergence of U.S. feminism's second wave has much to do with her voice and her reception. Women who wrote American domestic humor after World Wars I and II showed readers the domestic practices that underwrote images of home as haven and mother as angel. They depict housework directly, and some even announce that they hate housework, for example Peg Bracken, author of 1960's *The I Hate to Cook Book*.²⁵ Resentment and frustration remain implicit, however, conveyed only by an occasional sarcastic remark or retort. After 1963, however, the Harried Homemaker's voice changes. Bombeck's Harried Homemaker's voice is not the slightly sardonic tone of a woman who sees that things are ridiculous but does not quite care to fix them that Bracken adopts. No longer does the Harried Homemaker enact a drag performance of James Thurber's "Little Man," as Jackson's often does. She has changed her attitude toward the things that bewilder her.

The Harried Homemaker of the 1950s and early 1960s shows us the domestic labor she performs, and, simultaneously, implicitly reveals the disingenuousness of her subjection to her children. Bombeck's Harried Homemaker does not so much show readers domestic labor as reveal what she thinks of and how she feels about its invisibility to those who benefit from it. In other words, while Jackson's persona devotes a good deal of narrative attention to depicting what she *does*, Bombeck's persona reveals her *thoughts* before, during, and after doing what she does. Gone is the veil of understatement, equivocation, and lexical ambiguity that hid the disingenuousness of her

subjection. The disingenuousness of this Harried Homemaker's subjection is patent from the outset. She says to herself,

A drudge. That's all I am. They'll all be sorry when I'm not around to run and fetch. . . .Lunches. Better pack the lunches. Listen to them bicker. What do they care what I pack?

Of course, none of these things would bother me if I had an understanding husband. . . .He doesn't have to throw himself across the washer during 'spin' to keep it from walking out of the utility room. He doesn't have to flirt with a hernia making bunk beds. He doesn't have to shuffle through encyclopedias before the school bus leaves to find out which United States president invented the folding chair. (Bombeck 14)

Her love-tempered frustration continues to resonate with readers. As one fan writes, "Why Erma Bombeck? Because of this—because she wrote about things that nobody else thought mattered, that everyone worried about in the back of their heads but no one articulated because it didn't seem important enough" (Astyck n.p.). In other words, Bombeck gives a voice to the "problem that has no name." Bombeck's Harried Homemaker clearly and directly expresses exasperation and frustration. The voice of Bombeck's Harried Homemaker is polyphonic and encompasses Angel, Manager, and Woman Within. Her voice emerges out of the "troubled" intersection of contending discourses about the roles of women in the public and domestic spheres; the value for society of women's creativity, experience, and labor; and the expression of identity through lifestyle performance.

The Contrastive Trope

The use of character contrast or foils to establish the heroine or persona's identity—for instance, the juxtaposition of Pamela with Mrs. Jewkes or Agatha with Aphrodisia—is what I call the *contrastive trope*. This trope places the heroine or persona in a “position of superiority” or inferiority relative to the foil (Camfield 158). The nineteenth-century use of this contrastive trope replicates the writing practices of medieval biographers and Richardson in that it establishes the heroine's virtue in part by contraposing her with women who either lack or possess the very qualities she tenaciously strives to manifest (Baym, *Women's* 35). As these conventional contrasts are, as Rich would say, re-visioned for a nineteenth-century U.S. female readership, they retain the didactic role of normalizing a cisgendered, heteronormative femininity.²⁶

Some scholars of humor and laughter hold that humorists put themselves in “a position of superiority” (Walker, *Very Serious* 12-19). Such “aggression” theories locate the source of laughter in the humorist or persona's confrontation by social forces with which s/he is at odds (Camfield 158). Although Walker, for instance, claims that women's humor generally does not function this way, it often does. Some of the authors she identifies as women's humorists in fact use humor “as the language of social aggression against outsiders” (158).²⁷ Still, because aggression theories of humor carefully consider the ways humor can emerge out of clashes of “opposites,” they provide a frame for examining how the contrastive trope participates in normalizing or valorizing particular character traits instead of others for situated, embodied readers. Successful use of the contrastive trope can participate in the normalization of the heroine's values, beliefs, and practices for cooperative readers. The contrastive trope is most often used in

one of two ways. First, the flawed heroine's virtue is normalized when her values, beliefs, and practices are finally congruent with the unflawed foil's. This is a forward-looking use of the trope and the narratives in which it predominates take the heroine's process of self-transformation as their central concerns.

The normalizing use of the trope aims to establish a flawed or unflawed heroine's values, beliefs, and practices as normal, average, or ordinary. This use of the trope can either juxtapose an unflawed heroine, say, Saint Agatha, with a clearly flawed female antagonist like Aphrodisia. Or, and this is more often the case in contemporary women's popular literature, a first-person heroine or persona contrasts her own values, beliefs, and practices against an exaggerated image of the ideal. For instance, Jackson's persona compares her family's values and beliefs with those of an overly genteel twentieth-century version of Betsey Bobbett, her daughter's teacher, Mrs. Skinner. Jackson's portrait of Mrs. Skinner re-visions the nineteenth-century anachronistically passive woman that Baym identifies as so often appearing as the sentimental heroine's foil (Baym, *Women's* 36). The incongruity of Mrs. Skinner's very old-fashioned notions of "womanliness" being repeated by a kindergarten-aged girl dissolves in readers' laughter at Mrs. Skinner's anachronistic womanhood and the values on which it is based.

The normalizing contrastive trope constructs the characters being compared as metonyms for the values, beliefs, and/or practices they manifest. The normalizing configuration of the contrastive trope can thus place the persona in a position of superiority, and Bombeck draws on this possibility to tap its subversive possibilities. She wants to normalize homemaking practices that Sarah Kemble Knight would have identified as slatternly, and, at the same time, to ridicule the ideal that popular media tout.

In other words, what Bombeck attempts to do with her unique voice and particularly inventive self-reflexive use of the contrastive trope is to get readers to agree to her hierarchy of domestic practices. Her mission here is nothing less than to overturn hegemony's equation of homemaking skill with good womanhood.

Bombeck's Harried Homemaker welcomes readers by invoking familiar images that call attention to the inadequacy of her homemaking practices: "The draperies are dirty (and will disintegrate if laundered), the arms of the sofa are coming through. There is Christmas tinsel growing out of the carpet. And some clown has written in the dust on the coffee table, YANKEE GO HOME" (Bombeck 10). For contemporaneous readers, the contrast between her domestic practices and normalized domestic practices would have been immediately apparent. Readers' recognition of incongruity between these two incompatible sets of domestic practices is one space out of which laughter can erupt. However, the Harried Homemaker needs to ensure that readers are laughing with her and not at her if she is to successfully perform her full identity.

Her next move is to place her husband and herself in the frame of the contrastive trope and compare their parenting practices: "[G]ood old Daddy would simply heave a flannel-wrapped bundle at me and say, 'Here's Mommy's little boy.' (Any mother with half a skull knows that when Daddy's little boy becomes Mommy's little boy, the kid is so wet he's treading water!)" (11). This passage exemplifies Bombeck's use of the ironic aside as part of her persona's identity performance. Bombeck's Harried Homemaker also immediately uses a universal modifier (in this case, *any*) to set up what follows as the universal experience of all mothers, and the universal experience of all mothers is the husband/father refusing one of the more unpleasant parenting tasks, and presuming that it

is natural, or at least normal, that he do so. This brief passage perfectly depicts the multiple subjection of the suburban wife and mother. Her husband's casual assumption of male privilege depends on the cultural construction of women as naturally more suited to the tasks of child-rearing, even when those chores require little more than hand-eye coordination. It is a performance of male domestic authority that seems perfectly normal and natural to him. What is more, this is something all husbands do, she says. When she accepts the child and changes the diaper, she subjects herself to both him and the ideological underpinnings that enable such casual assumption of male privilege. Her subjection, no matter how disingenuous, though, ratifies sentiment's discursive construction of maternal love as the foundation for human morality.

The parentheses setting off the aside typographically conjure the conspiratorial gesture of a hand cupped to the mouth to safely contain the words' extension. Moreover, the cupped hand keeps some people out even as it keeps words contained. Furthermore, the closing exclamation point brings an incredulous note to the aside. Her incredulity invites readers to laugh at men's parental ineptitude, and to recognize it as a self-interested move to avoid unpleasant tasks instead of as a response to women's "naturally" superior child-rearing skills. But there is even more going on here. In a 1998 interview with Elizabeth Farnsworth, Toni Morrison said, "All paradises, all utopias are designed by who is not there, by the people who are not allowed in." Bombeck's enclosure of women's knowledge about men admits women but excludes men except insofar as they are the objects of women's knowledge. If some media coerce cisgendered women to read as cisgendered men, as Judith Fetterly and Laura Mulvey have convincingly shown they do, Bombeck's *Homemaker* occasionally turns the tables by making men read themselves

through women's eyes. Her utopia, then, is one in which men must see themselves as women see them, and knowledge is constructed from women's experience. Jackson allows readers to see the disingenuousness of mothers' subjection to their children. Bombeck reveals the contingency of the "natural" foundation of male child-care ineptitude, and by exposing the contingency of normalized male parenting practices, she makes visible husbands' casual assumption of male privilege. Additionally, with her repetition of this motif, she brings to light the source of male privilege in the maternal female body's always already "ingenuous" subjection to her children.

That the Harried Homemaker's subjection to her children is disingenuous is clear in the brusque, "Everybody out!" with which she sends them out to play in the snow. Her terseness is a consequence of the children's refusal to "let" her awaken in her "own way," itself a ritualized morning reminder of the privilege her husband enjoys at her expense (Bombeck 10). Once the children are outside, the Harried Homemaker moves to the window and watches them for a moment. She muses to herself, "Look at 'em stumbling around the driveway like newborn field mice" (15). This is no sentimentally idyllic scene of fond maternal oversight. These are not the words of a domestic angel who is certain that her gentle guidance and example ensure that her children are on the right path. These are the words of a Harried Homemaker whose culture never tires of assuring her that "children and mothers are the 'causes' of each others' suffering" (Rich, *Of Woman* 23).

Continuing to cast about for the cause of her malaise, the Harried Homemaker continues, "It's the weather all right. No leaves on the trees. No flowers. No green grass. Just a big picture window with nothing to look at but . . . *a new bride moving into the*

cul-de-sac! Well, there goes the neighborhood” (15). The Harried Homemaker speaks directly to readers with the next sentence, addressing them with sarcasm and a vernacular second-person interrogative that transforms her interior monologue into gossip: “Would you look at her standing at her new husband’s elbow as he stencils their marvy new name on their marvy new garbage cans?” (15). The next sentence gives readers who remember her earlier description of her home an opportunity to compare the Harried Homemaker’s domestic practices with the new bride’s: “I suppose tomorrow she’ll be out waxing her driveway” (15). If readers do not take this utterance as serious speculation, and the Homemaker’s hyperbolic image almost ensures that they will not, then the image of a woman “waxing the driveway” may be read as ridiculing a domestic ideal that could give rise to such behavior. And, with the next sentence, she repudiates that ideal in favor of the real, thus establishing her common sense: “So, give her a few years and she’ll be like the rest of us sifting through the coffee grounds looking for the baby’s pacifier” (15-16). Since this comes shortly after she has told readers that she is unappreciated, though, perhaps the impossibility of the ideal is not all she criticizes here.

Typographically, this three-sentence passage encloses both the new bride and the speaking *I* with the “rest of us” whom she will “be like” in “a few years.” The speaker, the Harried Homemaker, is thus simultaneously located in the present, watching the new bride and her husband; in the past, when she was herself the new bride; and in the future, when the new bride will be like “us.” In a few years, the new bride *will* be a mother, and she *will* be looking for a pacifier. Although childless, in the suburbs she already inhabits the maternal body. This passage hints that the suburbs themselves represent a threat to the Harried Homemaker’s attempts to construct identity, and she repeats this motif

throughout the text. In the suburbs, all married female bodies are always already maternal, and maternity defines them for others. In the suburbs, the new bride's present is "our" past and her future is "our" present. But what of our future? Well, Bombeck says, we could end up like Aunt Lydia.

The final twist in this self-reflexive configuration of the contrastive trope is to imagine "our" future. Once again, the persona begins with the sad state of the domestic space, but then moves immediately to link her future with the past: "This place will have to be cleaned before they can condemn it. Wouldn't be at all surprised if I ended up like my Aunt Lydia" (17). That domestic disorder reminds her of Aunt Lydia links whatever happened to Aunt Lydia to a chaotic home. With what immediately follows, the Harried Homemaker begins by speaking about what she has been told, but quickly becomes more, shall we say, confident about why Aunt Lydia left home:

Funny, I haven't thought about her [Aunt Lydia] in years. Grandma always said she ran away with a vanilla salesman. Lay you odds she made her move right after the holidays. Her kids probably hid the Christmas Candy in the bedroom closet and the ants were coming out of the woodwork like a Hessian drill team. One child was going through the dirty clothes hamper trying to retrieve her "favorite" underwear to wear to school. (17).

Aunt Lydia functions as a contrastive projection that allows the Harried Homemaker to compare her past self (the bride) with her present self and her future self (Aunt Lydia). Her verb choices facilitate her identification with Aunt Lydia by conveying increasing levels of certainty about Aunt Lydia's motives. At first, she simply reports what she has

been told. With “I’ll lay you odds,” she indicates a greater degree of certainty than unsubstantiated family legend can provide. Her next verb choice shifts from the speculative, laying odds, to probability. The clause “the ants were coming,” marks her shift to declarative certainty, and with this shift, it becomes clear that she is no longer speaking only of Aunt Lydia. The next paragraph drops the “Aunt” from Lydia’s name, thus erasing her particularity and allowing her to stand in for any woman or all women named Lydia. In this paragraph the persona also shifts to the use of the simple past tense in the declarative mood to relate the story of the dog that “laughed out loud” before soiling the rug (18). In the next one-sentence paragraph, Lydia loses her name altogether and becomes “her”: “Uncle Wally probably pecked her on the cheek with all the affection of a sex-starved cobra said he wanted to talk to her about Christmas bills when he came home (18). With this shift to namelessness also comes a syntactic change that removes the woman from subject to direct object.

In the final paragraphs before the departure, when the now-nameless subject of the anecdote passes a mirror, the Harried Homemaker places her back into the syntactic subject position, and the narrative point of view shifts. Although until this point in her narrative the Homemaker reported on past events and possibility, she now reveals with declarative certainty the feelings and emotions that led to the departure, assuming the stance of a first-person narrator with at least limited omniscience:

She passed a mirror and noticed a permanent crease on her face where the brush roller had slipped. Her skirt felt tight. She sucked in her breath. Nothing moved. Her best friend called to tell her the sequin dress she bought for New Year’s Eve had been reduced to half price.

Speculating on her future she could see only a long winter in a house with four blaring transistor radios, a spastic washer, and the ultimate desperation of trying to converse with the tropical fish. (18)

That there were no transistor radios, electric washing machines when Aunt Lydia was part of the family, the sense that she speaks of herself and other women like her is strengthened. And, in “Aunt Lydia’s” home, domestic disorder is not the result of lax domestic practices, but instead, consequent upon the activities of others and the inevitable passage of time marked by a thickening waist and a loss of the sex appeal that can signify the Woman Within. What Bombeck has done with her complicated use of the contrastive trope is to present to readers a timeline of the stages of the life of the white, suburban, middle-class woman. But she does more than this in these few short pages. She *names* the “problem that has no name” (Friedan 15). The problem, as she names it, is not so much the child care as the isolation from other adults, not so much caretaking and doing housework as the lack of appreciation for their being done, and not so much womanly vanity as maternity’s colonization of the whole woman.

More than naming the problem, though, Bombeck claims it as part of her identity as both Angel and Manager and thus reunites them into a coherent whole. She performs the problem in the light of day, so to speak. Her performance is the contact zone in which Mother and Housewife can merge and out of which the Harried Homemaker persona emerges as a hybrid identity. Finally, love goes hand-in-hand with labor instead of masking it.

The important difference between the medieval saints and Pamela and these twentieth-century women is the material fact of motherhood. The Harried Homemakers

face the same problem Pamela and the saints do: They must control how others read their bodies in order to successfully perform an intelligible adult female identity. The paradox of the mid-twentieth-century maternal body differs from the problem of the virginal or chaste female body only insofar as it adds another layer of complexity to the persona's task. The virgins and Pamela seek only to reveal the real woman, the true person that they already are. They strive to resist misprision, and their success is dependent only on illuminating the correct reading of their bodies. There are only two interpretive possibilities: virtue and corruption. The Harried Homemaker, however, experiences multiplicity as an integral part of the identity she seeks to reveal. She must also, then, reconcile multiple, and often conflicting, dreams, desires, fears, and aspirations. She must, that is, construct a coherent self before she can perform it. Only then can others read or misread it. As Jackson and Bombeck write it, American women's literary domestic humor becomes a discursive performance of the process of the identity construction of an ordinary white, middle-class American woman. If the nineteenth-century heroine's goal is to construct an adult female identity while refusing society's equation of "female with permanent child" (Baym, *Women's* 17), the Harried Homemaker's is to refuse its equation of female with permanent mother *and* to accommodate the Woman Within. So, have they?

Conclusion: Cooperating, Negotiating, and Resisting

Incongruity theories of humor dominate in contemporary humor studies and posit that humor and laughter emerge out of the space between two seemingly opposite things that have enough in common to be meaningful when they are juxtaposed. This is why the contrastive trope can be so productive in humor. Characters are held in tension, and, if

they are sufficiently similar and at the same time sufficiently different, readers' recognition of a meaningful incongruity can elicit laughter. Unfortunately, focus on this frame to the exclusion of others thus far has led to little other than attempts to identify the particular juxtapositions out of which laughter elicited by U. S. women's domestic humor emerges. For instance, Walker says domestic humor's subversive potential emerges out of the incongruity between appearance and reality. She suggests that by writing "amusingly" about housework and child rearing, mocking their own lives, and inviting others to laugh at and share their frustration, Harried Homemakers "appear" to remain "subservient" (Walker, "Toward Solidarity" 60). From this subservient position, they can "openly advance . . . a feminist cause" (60). And of course, they can. But they do not often do so, at least until the 1980s. However, she continues, "The humor of American women has in fact functioned as a means of establishing and representing a community of shared concerns about oppression" (60). The problem here is that this view presupposes that the women who write and read—and laugh at—domestic humor experience their domestic roles as oppressive. But how then do we account for the tones of pleasure and pride that infuse the Housewives' descriptions of their fictionalized families' chaotic day-to-day lives? And how do we decide between and among competing claims to incongruity? For instance, does the success of domestic humor depend on its play with the incongruity between U.S. ideologies of homemaking and women's actual homemaking practices? Or does its success depend on or emerge out of an awareness of conflict among ideologies of femininity? To assume that answers to these questions or others like them will definitively identify "the" source of readers' laughter is to presuppose that all readers laugh at the same things for the same reasons and that the

tensions in the text are distinct and readily identifiable. These presuppositions are simply untenable given what we know about the variety and fluidity of interpretive practices.

Other feminist criticism of literary domestic humor is grounded in Freudian and post-Freudian psychology. These “relief” theories explain humor and laughter as the “the saving of emotional energy marshaled to confront suffering” that allows embodied human beings to “sublimate pain in laughter” (Camfield 154). The pleasure we feel in laughter on this view is the body’s relief at saving emotional energy it otherwise would have expended on confronting an unbeatable source of pain or rage.²⁸ And indeed, Bombeck gestures toward this personal affective experience when she says that she began writing domestic humor because, “I knew if I didn’t follow Faith’s advice and laugh a little at myself, then I would surely cry” (Bombeck 223). For Betty Friedan and Patricia Meyer Spacks, though, this “laugh or cry” attitude is omnipresent in domestic humor and encourages women to dispel in laughter their hopelessness, desperation, and unmet aspirations.²⁹ Spacks also holds that domestic humor perpetuates oppressive stereotypes of women by “preserving the image of feminine incompetence, siphoning off anger, suggesting that if it’s funny to be a bad housewife, there may be some dignity to being a good one” (qtd. in Dresner 95). For these critics, domestic humor is “profoundly conservative” (Walker “Toward” 62).

Domestic humor does not necessarily encourage women to “siphon off” unpleasant emotions rather than expressing them, however. Indeed, the Harried Homemakers express anger, that most un-Angelic of emotions. For instance, Jackson’s Homemaker becomes angry with another mother whose son, she has been told, attacked her son without provocation, and they verbally confront each other. When she and the

other mother learn the true circumstances surrounding the fight, they bond even more strongly than they had before their verbal altercation (*Life* 408-414). Instead of sublimating her anger, this Homemaker acts upon it, thus presenting readers with a model of a woman who acts on her anger without terrible consequences. And, it presents to isolated homemakers the existence of other women like them and the possibility of bonding with those women.

Nor do these texts necessarily perpetuate negative stereotypes about women. Alice Sheppard notes that the “woman driver” is among the most common stereotypical humorous images of women’s incompetence in U.S. culture (35). Yet when the children decide that the family needs a car in *Life among the Savages*, no one suggests that the nameless husband learn. Everyone takes it for granted that the Harried Homemaker will be the family driver. The husband merely settles the children’s argument over who will ride in the front seat next to his wife by saying, “*I am going to ride in front*” (447). And, when she is involved in an accident, her tenacious insistence that the other driver was at fault leads to the exposure of his scheme to defraud her insurance company (448). Not only is the Harried Homemaker a competent driver, she is sufficiently assertive to bring the truth to light even though her opponent is a practiced con man.

One stereotype that the texts do seem to reinforce, at least on a surface level, is that of woman as natural nurturer. The Harried Homemaker is able to manage the complexities of feeding and caring for the children, for instance, and her husband is not. So, when Jackson’s Harried Homemaker plans for a weekend trip to visit some college friends, it takes her three days to accomplish the multitudinous preparatory tasks. She has so much to do and organize, in fact, that it takes her three pages to list them all. She

leaves behind a detailed schedule of where the children need to be and when they need to be there, and instructions about how to heat the prepared meals she has left waiting in the refrigerator. Still, her husband cannot follow the directions and is unable to manage successfully without her. She returns home to a note telling her that they are at the hamburger stand having dinner—and that they had eaten there the night before as well (*Raising* 584-588).

For some readers, the Harried Housewives' careful attention to relationships among family members and their husbands' domestic ineptness confirms hegemony's assignment of sex/gender-specific characteristics. For these readers, the "fact" that women focus on relationships is an aesthetic expression of a "natural" female biological caretaking imperative. The text thus meets readers' expectations by reiterating prior reading experiences and confirming cultural ideologies that construct sex and gender as causal influences when it comes to human behavior, tastes, interests, and inclinations. On this level, the text is, as Spacks says, "profoundly conservative" (qtd. in Dresner 95). But these reiterations are not merely functions of a text. They also depend on particular convergences of situated, embodied readers; historied discursive systems and material practices; and fluid movement between and among idiosyncratically authorized interpretive practices. Readers who must negotiate clashes among or between ideologies might notice that this episode hints that women can leave some of the responsibility for child care and housework to their husbands. Disaster will not necessarily ensue. No one will starve, although it may be that no one will cook, either. This is an important transformation of a long-historied system of twentieth-century U.S. women's humor most important contributions of to women's efforts reveal the domestic labor behind maternal

love. Indeed, they show as Bombeck famously, or perhaps apocryphally, said, “No one ever died from sleeping in an unmade bed.”

Jackson’s and Bombeck’s personae discursively reunite domestic labor and maternal love, re-visioning both according to their own values in the process. As they do, they rename themselves Harried Homemakers. As Harried Homemakers, though, their self-naming is incomplete, for even redefining motherhood and domesticity and reconfiguring the relationship between them does not name the whole woman. They must still reveal the Woman Within, and, if her identity performance is successful others will recognize it as her true name, just as Quintian and Mr. B. accepted Agatha’s and Pamela’s, respectively. But whose acknowledgment do the Harried Homemakers seek? To whom do they want to reveal the Woman Within? Both personae acknowledge the futility of making their families see her, so their efforts cannot be aimed at making their families acknowledge her. The Woman Within does not even appear as an active character in the texts. However, that the performances take place through personae indicates that the authors do not seek to reveal their own identities. To be sure, persona, as Jackson and Bombeck use it, masks personal identity.

That they take such pains to construct the persona as an “ordinary” woman and paint their concerns as the concerns of “ordinary” women suggest that the endorsement they seek might be that of other “ordinary” women. And in fact, Bombeck’s final recursive turn leaves no doubt. Bombeck directly refers to herself as a writer only once in *At Wit’s End*, in its final section. First she tells us why she writes:

It goes back to the first time I saw authoress Faith Baldwin in a full-page magazine ad admonishing, “It’s a shame more women don’t take up writing.” I said aloud, “Ain’t it the truth, Faith.”

She looked directly at me and said, “If you’re a woman who wants to get more out of life, don’t bury your talents under a mountain of dishes. . . . Even though you are tied down to your home, you can still experience fulfillment.” (218)

The Harried Homemaker writes because she wants to find fulfillment. And she has. She responds, “Faith, you had me pegged, all right” (218). Next, she outlines the stereotypes she wants to displace by revealing the ordinary America housewife. Some of the stereotypes are popular culture images of women who look remarkably like the villainesses in nineteenth-century sentimental literature: the coquette, the social climber, the sex fiend. She wants to counter Madison Avenue’s construction of modern homemaking as little more than push-button work and authoritative discourses that hold mothers, but not fathers, accountable for children’s mental health.

Addressing readers again with the second person, Bombeck tells us who she writes for,

At first, I began writing for one woman. I visualized her as a moderately young woman, overkidded and underpatienceed with four years of college and chapped hands all year round. None of the popular images seemed to fit her. She never had a moment alone, yet she was lonely most of the time. She worried more about toilet training her fourteen-month-old

than Premier Chou Enlai. And the BOW (Big Outside World) was almost a fable to her.

After a while I began to visualize other women as I wrote. The woman with no children who made a career out of going to baby showers, the teenagers with wires coming out of their ears . . . the older woman who gagged every time someone called her a senior citizen, and the career girl who panicked when she saw the return of the dress with waistlines and belts. . . .

These women and many more make up this book. They represent a myriad of moods, situations, frustrations, and humor that make up a housewife. (220)

Bombeck writes for ordinary women. In the first paragraph, though, her shift to omniscience again suggests the situations and emotions are common enough experiences that women will understand them even if they have not had them themselves. This technique is, in fact, firmly grounded in the ethics of sentiment that gave rise to the Angel of the Hearth domestic humor rejects. It relies on what Michael Bell calls “the paradox of fictional compassion,” which is “that we are moved by painful events we know to be fictional, and have positive enjoyment in being so moved” (6). That Jackson’s and Bombeck’s texts resonate with “ordinary” women is evident in their continued popularity.

Moreover, the material fact of Jackson’s and Bombeck’s names on the covers of books, on bestseller lists, and in newspapers announces their identities as authors and public figures to American readers. Many of Jackson’s readers would have been aware

that she was already an acclaimed literary figure before the publication of *Life among the Savages*.³⁰ By the time Bombeck's *At Wit's End* was published in 1967, her twice-weekly column appeared in thirty-eight newspapers.³¹ Even those who were unaware of Jackson's prestige as a literary figure or Bombeck's acclaim as a syndicated columnist may have realized that even though the personae are never depicted actually writing, the authors produced texts. The texts themselves thus evince the fact that persona and author are not identical. That is, if the persona does not write and the author produces texts, their material practices are not identical, and so they cannot be the same people. Here is one bit of feminist power to be derived from domestic humor, then. Jackson and Bombeck and other women like them are in fact embodied women who publicly and simultaneously enact Harried Homemaker and the Woman Within. That women accepted their performances perhaps is reflected in the 1980s boom of small- and imprint-press domestic humor written by U. S. women. That readers continued to take the personae as reliable narrators is a tribute to both writing skill and the power of an "ordinary" persona.

Finally, Bombeck's last turn is crucial. In the book's final paragraph, she returns to "the original model—the one who was overkidded and underpatiented, with four years of college and chapped hands all year around. I knew that if I didn't follow Faith's advice and laugh a little at myself, then I would surely cry" (223). Bombeck turns back and reveals that she wrote the book for herself, to find some fulfillment in what was otherwise a loving but unsatisfying life. In other words, her writing was not an other-regarding action. She began writing for no reason other than it was important to her. For a white, middle-class, suburban homemaker to publicly and without shame "admit" being motivated by self-interest, take time from home and family to do something for herself,

and refuse to be exhausted as an individual was to risk censure for selfishness (223). The truly subversive power of domestic literature may just lie in its presentation of models of women who have successfully navigated the shoals of suburban domesticity and set sail on the sea of self-fulfillment. Their texts are the evidence that it can be successfully done by “ordinary” women. In various ways, both authors discursively demonstrate that it *is* possible to love your children and to love yourself at the same time. No less than the virgin saints, they each enact the identity they choose. In the end, readers acknowledge both, and they achieve their objective of making visible the Woman Within to the people to whom they set out to make see her.

NOTES

¹ As in, for example, her satire of men's attitudes toward women writers in "The Author to Her Book."

² Other discursive practices also participate in authoritative "naming." For instance, Barbara Johnson's *Living Somewhere between Estrogen and Death* is labeled, "For Women Only." Others designate gender-appropriateness in the title, for example, Tom Hobbes' *Jokes Men Won't Laugh At: For Her Eyes Only*, and *Jokes Women Won't Laugh At: For His Eyes Only*. Moreover, The Library of Congress' subject headings also authoritatively designate some humor as properly belonging to women, for instance. Erma Bombeck's *At Wit's End* is listed under only one subject heading in the Library of Congress' online catalog: *Housewives--Humor*. Most of Bombeck's other texts may be found under the subject heading *Women--Humor*, although a few may be found by searching the LOC subject terms *Conduct of Life--Humor*, *Life Skills--Humor*, and *Mother and Child--Humor*. Bookstores reproduce the Library of Congress' classification of the subjects of Bombeck's books, most often classifying them as women's humor. In contrast, the LOC subject classification of James Thurber's *My Life and Hard Times*, which also focuses on the home and family life, is *Humorists, American--20th century--Biography*. The subject of *Fatherhood*, one of Bill Cosby's three entries into the domestic humor market, is categorized as *Fathers--Anecdotes, facetiae, satire, etc.* Finally, the LOC elides categorizing Jack Douglas' 1971 *What Do You Hear from Walden Pond?* according to subject altogether. These classifications, no less than the designations *chick flicks* and *dick flicks* encourage readerly self-regulation by conveying to readers and consumers the normalizing force of authoritative discourse and material practice.

³ Mercy Otis Warren's eighteenth-century satiric poetry and drama, for instance, conveys anti-Tory propaganda and encourages both men and women to republicanism. Susanna Haswell Rowson's "lost play," *The Volunteers*, was a farcical treatment of the Pennsylvanian rebels of the 1795 Whiskey Insurrection (Vickers 213). Neither of these authors takes the domestic sphere or domestic relations as her primary subject matter. Additionally, Judith Sargent Murray's *The Traveller Returned* suggests that properly educated women have a legitimate role to play in the public political life of the emerging United States. In the late nineteenth century, Marietta Holley adopted the persona of Samantha Allen, "Josiah Allen's wife," in part to address the "Woman Question." Alice Duer Miller's 1915 collection of her *New York Tribune* columns, *Are Women People?*, ridicules some of the arguments against woman suffrage most commonly made in the first two decades of the twentieth century. None of these women confine their topics to the domestic realm, and nor do a host of others.

⁴ James Thurber, E. B. White, S. J. Perelman, Dave Barry, Bill Cosby, and Paul Reiser have all written humor that takes domestic life as its sole subject.

⁵ By *humor unmarked*, I mean *humor*. By *marked humor* or *marked literature*, I refer to such systems of discursive conventions as *women's humor*, *women's literature*, *African American humor*, *Native American humor*, and the like.

⁶ Both male and female humorists use a variety of humorous techniques, including pratfalls, slapstick, mistaken identity, drag performance, wordplay, puns, and hyperbole. Both men and women use stereotypes, incongruity, contrast, periodic sentences, peripeteia, digression, dialect, vernacular dialogue, parody, satire, irony, and well-timed pauses as they construct their humorous text.

⁷ Benjamin Franklin's *Silence Dogood*, for instance.

⁸ See the section "Literature and Women's Literature" in chapter one.

⁹ Perhaps unsurprisingly, having been written by a woman seems to be a necessary condition of designation of a text as women's humor. Molly Ivins' sex seems to have been enough for Ann Safran Dalin to include one of her essays about Texas politics in *Life's a Stitch: The Best of Contemporary Women's Humor*, for instance. Nonetheless, sex is insufficient as a distinguishing characteristic since American readers do not consider all humor written by women *women's humor*. Dorothy Parker's humorous texts are not widely considered women's humor, nor are Flannery O'Connor's, Alison Lurie's, Eudora Welty's or Grace Paley's. None of these humorists are considered writers of *women's humor* even though all of them at least occasionally address issues of particular concern to women. They may be women, but if you want

to find texts by these authors, do not look in the “Women’s Literature” section of the local big-box bookstore.

¹⁰ Jackson continued in this tradition; the stories that developed into *Life Among the Savages* and *Raising Demons* were originally published in *Women’s Home Companion*, *Charm*, *Woman’s Day*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Mademoiselle*. Bombeck’s texts first appeared in her syndicated newspaper column.

¹¹ With the exception of domesticity, the cardinal virtues of the True Woman are the same feminine virtues outlined by Tertullian, Augustine, and St. Paul for early Christian women. To be sure, the True Woman bears a remarkable resemblance to both the virgin saints and to Mary, Jesus’ virgin mother.

¹² Of course, this brief listing of discursive systems is not intended to be exhaustive. In the nineteenth-century United States, the presence of the angelic mother was understood to guarantee the moral health of the family, and, by extension, that of the republic as well (DuBois and Dumenil 233). Without her, as Welter says, “all is ashes” (152).

¹³ Given the differences in the material conditions of men’s and women’s lives, it is unsurprising that even when men and women write in the same genre and use the same comic devices, the effect and focus of their writing can be different. For example, there are no small children in Thurber’s domestic humor essays, whereas children figure prominently in Jackson’s and Bombeck’s texts. This difference is, of course, not unpredictable, given the different relationships in which men and women stood, both materially and ideologically, with regard to children in the early and middle parts of the twentieth century. Male writers of domestic humor, including Thurber, did not focus on children as characters, since they so rarely bore much responsibility for the day-to-day care of their own children.

¹⁴ For the purposes of this discussion, *Mother* and *love* refer to culturally and historically normalized systems of maternal affects and practices. *Housewife* and *labor* or *domestic labor* refers to culturally and historically normalized systems of homemaking practices.

¹⁵ Played by actress Barbara Billingsley, June Cleaver is the eponymous character’s mother on *Leave It to Beaver*, a domestic situation comedy that ran on ABC from 1958 until 1963.

¹⁶ This claim does not commit the Intentional Fallacy, for I make no claim that readers’ laughter coincides with authorial intention. Readers may, of course, miss humor authors hope they will find, and they may find humor where the author sees none.

¹⁷ The name of this type comes from Jennette Tandy’s 1925 *Crackerbox Philosophers in American Humor and Satire*. The crackerbox philosopher represents “the man of the people” whose common sense “suggests a national ideal” (ix).

¹⁸ As we shall see, even when Jackson’s persona is asked her name directly, she elides her response.

¹⁹ Some of the participants in the blogosphere’s “Mommy Wars” reiterate sentiments like this.

²⁰ Ben Franklin wrote as Silence Dogood and Poor Richard. Roseanne Barr’s *Domestic Goddess* and she share the same name.

²¹ Contemporary examples include Daniel Lawrence Whitney, whose persona “Larry the Cable Guy” joined Jeff Foxworthy, Bill Engvall, and Ron White on *Blue Collar Comedy Tour* from 2000 until 2006. Garrison Keillor’s persona, “The Man from Lake Wobegone” and Phyllis Diller’s self-deprecating housewife is another.

²² For a representative sample of American women’s domestic humor in the nineteenth century, see Marietta Holley’s *My Opinions and Betsey Bobbett’s* and Fanny Fern’s *Fern Leaves from Fanny’s Portfolio*. In the early twentieth century, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings’ 1926-1928 newspaper column, *Songs of a Housewife*, has been collected and edited in book form under the same title by Rodger L. Tarr. Cornelia Otis Skinner made three contributions to domestic humor in the 1940s, *Dithers and Jitters*, *Soap Behind the Ears*, and *Nuts in May*. Betty MacDonal’s *The Egg and I* was published in 1945.

²³ After all, most pink-collar jobs involve workplace versions of what Susan Maushart calls “wifework,” that is, the emotional and/or physical caretaking of men that ideologically belongs to all women naturally (10). This work can be normalized as women’s work in part because of the myth of the maternal instinct.

²⁴ Many of Jackson’s lists are lists of activities or are constructed so that they point to activities. Jackson often uses listing to convey a sense of the repetitiveness of domestic labor. For instance, we are told that, because the closets are so full that the doors will not close,

I went, one spring morning, to clean out one of those downstairs closets, which begin as very practical affairs, meant to be the resting place for wet boots and umbrellas, and end up as

containers for ice skates and then hockey sticks and then tennis rackets and then, by the most logical of extensions, baseball gloves and football helmets and basketballs and riding boots and jackets left behind by visiting children. I had picked up a big cardboard carton at the grocery, and into it I put the baseball gloves and the football helmets and the riding boots and the tennis rackets and the basketball. (*Raising Demons* 534)

The narrator puts the carton on the back stairs so that she will remember to take it up and put the things in it away. But, when she gets the carton up the stairs, she realizes that there is no place else to put the things it contains, so she carries it back downstairs, empties it back into the same closet, which she conveys by using the same list, and “then the door would not close again” (535).

²⁵ However, no matter how much Bracken hated to cook, the book is still a cookbook full of easily prepared meals and thus discursively participated in making domestic labor visible.

²⁶ Nineteenth-century texts announce their didactic intentions in a preface, just as medieval sacred biographies and *Pamela* do. For instance, Louisa May Alcott asserts her didactic goals in the preface to *An Old-Fashioned Girl*: “The ‘Old-Fashioned Girl’ is not intended as a perfect model, but as a possible improvement upon the Girl of the Period, and, . . . through her, render home what it should be,—a happy place, where parents and children, brothers and ^{sisters}, learn to love and know and help one another” (n.p.). The contrastive trope operates on several levels in Alcott’s text, and one juxtaposes Polly as the product of her upbringing by an angelic mother against Fanny, the product of mothering that “encouraged her feelings at the expense of her reason, gave her mind no objects worthy of its own powers, and accustomed her to the sense of her own trivial and superficial nature” (Baym, *Women’s* 28-29).

²⁷ Tabitha Tenney’s satirical novel, *Female Quixotism*, written in the same scathing satirical style as Voltaire’s *Candide*, indicts women who give in to the pleasures of sensibility at the expense of reason. In *A New Home—Who’ll Follow?* Caroline Kirkland pokes fun at urban overly-sentimental gentility while simultaneously undermining mass-cultural romanticizing of women’s lives on the frontier. Anna Cora Mowatt’s stage comedy *Fashion* and Ann Stephens’s *High Life in New York* both chide female social climbers. Fanny Fern, Marietta Holley, Dorothy Parker, Anita Loos, Flannery O’Connor—all of these women use humor to separate some women from others as part of the process of constructing performative identities for their female narrators, protagonists, and heroines

²⁸ Gregg Camfield admirably reveals other shortcomings with relief theories of humor in chapter six of *Necessary Madness: The Humor of Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*.

²⁹ See especially chapter two of *The Feminine Mystique* for Friedan’s criticism.

³⁰ *Time* magazine had published a cover-story profile of her shortly after the publication of *The Lottery: Or, The Adventures of James Harris* four years earlier, in 1949.

³¹ Not long after Erma Bombeck revived an old column under a new title, *At Wit’s End*, she was offered the opportunity to publish two columns per week in the *Dayton Journal-Herald*. Three weeks later, she signed a contract with a news syndicate, and by the end of 1966, her column appeared in thirty-eight newspapers twice each week. Within five years, her column appeared in approximately five hundred newspapers twice per week. The book *At Wit’s End*, first published in 1967, comprises a collection of her syndicated newspaper columns.

CHAPTER FOUR

CHICKS IN CHOOS: THE SIGNIFYING BREAST

In the nineteenth century, much of the U.S. reading public thought of romances as dangerous texts that encourage passive female readers to indulge their baser feelings. This thinking has antecedents at least as far back as early modern England, when and where women were forbidden to read anything other than religious texts for these very reasons.¹ Academic champions of high culture like Matthew Arnold, the New Critics, and Harold Bloom hold the value of fiction lies in its originality, so formulaic literature can have no value for them. They believe that readers' intellects are eroded by genre literature such as Janet Evanovich's Stephanie Plum novels and Gemma Halliday's *Making It* series. Even scholars who study contemporary women's romance seem anxious to establish that they do not read it for enjoyment, but rather, only as an object of scholarly inquiry.² Writers and publishers print generic designations like *novel* on book covers and elide the pejorative connotations of labels like *popular romance* and *chick lit*.³ Cultural representations of fans as female homemakers who live vicariously through the fantastic experiences of incredible characters persist, contrary to empirical data that refute the stereotype.

Matthew Arnold may not have been the first literary critic to oppose "the best that has been thought and known in the world" to popular culture (815), but his claim that reading formulaic popular fiction produced for a mass market caused social crisis stood basically unchallenged for nearly one hundred years. In the 1930s, the New Critics F. R. Leavis and Denys Thomson wrote *Culture and Environment*, in which they warned of the pernicious, civilization-eroding effects of mass and popular cultural artifacts from

newspapers to fiction. Q. D. Leavis called upon teachers to “educate taste” in her 1939 *Fiction and the Reading Public* (D. Johnson 7). However, the idea that the value of a particular text depends on the text’s instantiation of some universally agreed-upon standards of taste is subject to the same vulnerability that Eagleton identified in some definitions of *literature*: Tastes, like definitions, change. The Arnoldian and New Critical positions also raise the issue of who gets to set the standards. Indeed, feminists have argued convincingly that canonical texts have historically served to preserve the status quo: “[I]f art has a race, it is white; if it has a sex, it is male; if it has a class, it is the ruling one” (Robinson and Vogel 279).

Dwight Macdonald’s spirited attempts in the 1950s to refine ideas about the high culture/low culture binary reveals its contingency. First, Macdonald’s conception of mass culture’s consumers as “passive . . . their participation limited to the choice between buying and not buying” (2) is not tenable in an age of interactive literature, fan fiction, and fanons,⁴ (“Fanon”). His argument collapses without it. Macdonald’s conclusions also rely on his claim that the distinguishing characteristic of what we call *popular culture* “is that it is *solely and directly* an article for mass consumption, like chewing gum” (1, my emphasis). This claim, too, elides the roles of writers and readers in both production and consumption. More problematically, it confers upon *popular culture* an illusory ontological status. But of course, we have already seen the productive power of readers engaging authoritative reading practices. We understand reading as an embodied practice that produces meaning far in excess of the denotation of the words on the page or screen. Macdonald’s definition of mass culture as “imposed from above. . . . fabricated by technicians hired by businessmen” fares no better (2). Middle English romance, for

instance, one of the most widely consumed genres of the time, trickled down to the “common people” from the courts where it originated. Moreover, sacred biography actually fits Macdonald’s definition if one just substitutes the word *clerics* for *technicians* and *Church* for *businessmen*. That these texts enjoy canonicity now gestures toward the importance of situating the texts we analyze, for texts that were once what we would now identify as *mass* or *popular* literature in time can “achieve” canonicity, just as virgin saints’ biographies, once the most popular literature of their day, have.

Although medieval sacred biography is studied as part of the Western canon, it shares many of the textual features most often cited as evidence of popular literature’s power to undermine social order. Formulaic to the point of repeating passages verbatim, the sacred accounts of the lives of the medieval virgin saints present heroines and villains who are barely distinguishable from other heroines and villains. The stories are gory, filled with sexual violence and graphic bodily mutilation. Their prefatory passages indicate that most of the virgin saints’ biographers were in fact clerics composing at the behest of a superior with an eye toward providing models of ideal Christian femininity. The content, and often the tone, of fourteenth-century vernacular virgin martyrs’ biographies have more in common with Judith Krantz than Nathaniel Hawthorne. Hence, the genealogy of medieval virgin saints’ biographies as a canonical literary genre casts light on the contingency of the binary by which *canonical* and *popular* are opposed and on the importance of situating texts before formulating claims about their meaning.

Moreover, despite widespread disdain for popular romance, its overplot can claim roots deep in canonical Western literary tradition. Consider, for instance, Mikhail Bakhtin’s description of the plot of classical Greek romance: A male and female of

marriageable age experience a mutual, passionate attraction; encounter obstacles that threaten their union; overcome the obstacles to their union; and consummate their love. Bahktin's synopsis could as easily describe one of the latest romances to roll off Harlequin's, Dell's, or Silhouette's presses. In fact, if we identify Jesus or God as the romantic hero of the virgin saints' biographies, Bahktin might just as well have been summarizing the plot of the vernacular biographies of Saints Katherine and Cecelia! Thus the discursive practices out of which the overplot shared by sacred biography and nineteenth-century women's fiction emerges have shaped and been shaped by the conventions of romance and ancient rhetorical practices.

Contemporary comic mystery romance series such as Evanovich's Stephanie Plum series and Halliday's *Making It* series "re-vision" (Rich 33) shared formulaic plot motifs in a vocabulary that makes their heroines' struggles, failures, and successes intelligible to post-Enlightenment readers.⁵ Readers who have developed authoritative reading practices in women's popular romance, mystery, and humor can cooperate with this emergent genre because the conventions they are familiar with are reproduced in these texts. Readers of popular romance may perhaps feel most at home in this generic world, though, since its conventions overdetermine plot and characterization.

Still, comic romantic mystery series depart from other modes of popular genre literature in that each novel is part of a series, not just a discrete story, although each is that as well. Each book's conclusion must leave some distance between the hero and heroine so that the romantic overplot can repeat in the next book, yet the conventions of romance require the heroine and hero to reconcile and the domestic unit to be restored by the end of each book. Furthermore, each book must provide a narrative in which the

heroine successfully finds the “intelligence, will, resourcefulness, and courage” to surmount her “trials” and develop a fully adult female identity (Baym 22), but the series form requires there be something left for her to learn at the end of each book so that the heroine’s process of identity construction can begin again in the next book.

While the series form accommodates transformations occurring over the course of an entire story arc, neither popular romance nor mystery has developed in this way. However, the conventions of the mystery genre do provide a way to reconcile the seemingly antithetical aims of genre (romance, mystery) and form (book, series). The mystery narrative provides the closure required by the sentimental and romance formulae but foreclosed by the series form. The resolution of the mystery can either substitute for or supplement the domestic “reward” the romance heroine should receive at the end of her story. The mystery narrative also provides a generic vehicle through which obstacles may be put in the heroine’s path.

Many of the heroine’s tribulations emerge out of the mystery narrative. The physical torture of the virgin saint finds its contemporary analogues in violent attacks on the heroine or members of her domestic community by criminals.⁶ Moreover, as do the martyrs and Pamela, contemporary heroines face psychological as well as physical obstacles. Heroines are beset from all sides. Stephanie and Maddie grapple with economic exploitation, sexual infidelity, body image, sexually competitive women, selfish lovers, landlords, deadlines, and unreasonable bosses, all of which constitute threats to their physical and psychological well-being. They must overcome these obstacles and others if they are to achieve their dual goals of solving the puzzle and constructing a coherent adult female identity. Because these stories are narrated in the

first person, cooperative readers can follow along and experience the heroine's "trials and triumphs" as she herself does because the heroine shares her feelings and thoughts about her journey to adulthood as she narrates.

Twentieth- and twenty-first-century U.S. ideas about adulthood emerge out of innumerable emergent ideologies, material conditions, and social practices. Stephanie's and Maddie's ideas about adulthood combine post-*Feminine Mystique* liberal feminism and a twentieth-century version of Ralph Waldo Emerson's robustly virile self-reliance. According to this view, lacking children, fully adult females financially support themselves. The inability to support herself financially publicly identifies a young, childless woman as a "permanent child" (Baym, *Women's* 17). If her goal is to form a coherent *adult* female identity that can be understood by others, the heroine cannot return to the child-state of being financially supported by or living with others. In other words, if a single woman wants to be a fully independent adult, she needs a job, Stephanie and Maddie not excepted.

Despite their desire for stable and fulfilling domestic lives, however they define that, like nineteenth-century sentimental heroines, the heroines of contemporary romantic mystery series must work, and they identify themselves for readers in part by naming their work. Stephanie is a "Fugitive Apprehension Agent," and Maddie designs children's shoes. Tracking and apprehending criminals is Stephanie's job and Maddie's hobby, but each considers it an essential part of her identity. However, they face opposition from families and partners who wonder why they cannot "just go shopping or get [their] hair done like a normal girl" (Halliday, *Killer* 202). They cannot because they must not and will not be named by others.

Stephanie and Maddie understand constructing adult female identity, as last chapter's personae do, as naming themselves. The conventions of the genre make available several devices for self-naming in ways that will be intelligible to cooperative readers and other characters. Significantly, especially given the domestic goals of the genre, the two heroines address their lovers by family names. Morelli usually addresses Stephanie as "cupcake." Ranger calls her "babe." Richard calls Maddie "Pumpkin." Ramirez describes Maddie as "girly." His pet name for her is "Miss Girly Girl." Cooperative readers are unlikely to think anything more about the gender difference in forms of address because the heroine accepts them as terms of endearment without question.⁷ Cooperative readers, however, take another step. The relationship between masculinity and femininity in these novels is conventionally both complementary and dialectical for cooperative readers. She alone cannot name herself feminine; only masculine desire expressed as a response to her body can do that. If, as Virginia Woolf says, women characters in fiction written by men serve as vehicles to reveal male characters' "views" and "passions" to readers (1026), in contemporary romance written by women, male desire reflects femininity back to the heroine and to cooperative readers. So, then, if the heroine is to construct independent, self-named identity, she must herself limit what her body can signify for others. Narrators rely on other generically conventional devices for intelligibly and coherently identifying themselves for readers and other characters.

Heroines can name themselves for readers by naming culturally significant commodities. Stephanie does not just wear shoes, carry a gun, and love food. Stephanie wears Doc Martens, carries a Glock, and loves greasy fried chicken from Cluck-in-a-

Bucket and pizza from Pino's. Maddie wears five-hundred-dollar Manolos, would rather be wearing Jimmy Choos, and covets a Prada bag. She craves Quarter Pounders from McDonald's and other fat- and carbohydrate-rich foods, and she indulges in them whenever her friend Dana is not around to act as her conscience. Both heroines enjoy and desire sexual intimacy with men. Moreover, they are flattered by the attentions of men other than their "lawful" mates and find pleasure in viewing other men as sexual objects.⁸ This is an apparent reversal of the virgin saints' attitude toward physical comfort and pleasure. However, this discursive shift emerges in part out of the "dramatically heightened address to women as consumers" that has characterized U.S. popular culture since the nineteenth century (Tasker and Negra 8). The so-called sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s plays a part as well. Furthermore, in late industrial capitalist society, identity itself has in a sense become a commodity, as Jack Amariglio and Antonio Callari so forcefully demonstrate.

Buying Identity

Choosing and rejecting commodities have become essential mechanisms by which others can be invited to identify the particularity of individuals. Like any sign's gesture, a commodity's nod toward meaning is both dynamic and conventional. Naming commodities by brand in the context of identifying oneself as a specific individual presumes that there is some sort of conventional meaning attached to those commodities. The particular brands or styles named change concurrently with changes in patterns of cultural consumption; thus *Range Rover* now can confer the status upon owners that *BMW* and *Cadillac* once did, for instance. Of course, as emergent signs, brands and names have histories, and those histories must be interrogated as part of determining why

the heroine might some brands and items rather others as part of her invitation to readers and other characters to identify her as a certain sort of “person.” Cooperative readers answer her invitation affirmatively because the commodities themselves also simultaneously convey multiple culturally conventional meanings. The examples that follow should not be understood as the only, best, or most legitimate readings. Rather, they are offered as speculations about possible systems of cultural associations by which the attachment of specific meanings to particular commodities can be normalized for cooperative readers and whose normalization is simultaneously presupposed by the heroine’s invitation to recognize in them something meaningful about her identity.

Doc Martens were developed to be a comfortable version of British army boots, and since the early 1960s have been associated with working-class solidarity and youth (“History”). Repeated association with a commodity linked to the working class reinforces Stephanie’s claim to a working-class identity. The brand’s simultaneous association with youth culture lets readers know that she is relatively young and fashion-conscious, but that she is practical as well.⁹ The Glock has been one of favorite pistols of both law enforcement and criminals since 1989 (Timeline). It is deadly, accurate, and light. Like all guns, it signifies power. That it is a Glock indicates that she has some knowledge about guns and hints at competence, and indeed, Stephanie is an excellent shot. However, Stephanie also hates to carry a gun. She prefers her Taser or even hairspray. For cooperative readers, Stephanie’s suspicion of firearms affords a possibility of audience connection in a moment of doubled recognition. Stephanie invites the readers to recognize her as both a certain kind of person and to recognize themselves as either like or unlike that sort of person. That Stephanie always captures the felon she sets out to

get grants to those who see themselves in Stephanie a vision of success that conforms to their values. For those negotiating readers who do not share her attitude toward firearms, the slapstick moments that so often emerge out of her reluctance to carry a weapon can confirm their values. By leaving open the possibility that she might be even more effective were she to arm herself, the narrative can accommodate differently situated readers' efforts to identify something familiar in the heroine with which to connect.¹⁰

Cooperative readers might simply laugh at the slapstick and move on. Negotiating readers might notice the contradiction inherent in her simultaneous facility with firearms, her acknowledgment of their efficacy, and her reluctance to use them. For these readers, the humor of slapstick can mitigate their suspicion that bounty hunters who pursue felons actually take their guns along with them. That Stephanie ends up smelling like a dumpster because she did not is funny, and that deviation from the norm occasions embarrassment instead of death for the heroine distinguishes this genre from, say, police procedurals. Moreover, it can allow negotiating readers a momentary feeling of superiority tempered with sympathy that allows them to elide the contradiction. Resisting readers, however, might focus on the ways that Stephanie's reluctance to arm herself reiterates hegemony's construction of the feminine as inherently nurturing. They might, for instance, see Stephanie's refusal to carry her gun even when she knows she should as another example of a female character that softens her job-related performance of masculinity by performing traditional femininity even at risk to her own life. For instance, resisting readers of Ridley Scott's film, *Alien*, might find jarring Ripley's decision to leave the safety of the pod and risk facing the alien again in order to save a

cat. Stephanie's distaste for firearms might be interpreted as reworking this motif by resisting readers.

For cooperative readers, the heroines' passion for fast food can express a shared disinterest in domestic practices such as cleaning, shopping for groceries, and cooking, as well as the demands of juggling both work and personal lives. Heroines' indifferent cooking skills suggest that their identities do not encompass this particular feminine virtue. The absence of any detailed accounting of their own domestic efforts may also reflect their rejection of the traditionally feminine chores of domesticity. Nevertheless, these characteristics do not necessarily indicate a repudiation of domestic values. To be sure, their enjoyment of the products of others' domestic labor reveals the heroines as women who can recognize virtue in more than one possible feminine identity without having to manifest that identity's particular virtue themselves.

Once again, the heroines' expressed and implicit values enable them to invite diversely situated readers to adopt those values as their own, at least for the duration of the reading transaction. And, once again, they use contrast and humor to connect with audiences and encourage them to accept the invitation. For instance, Mrs. Plum often uses homemade dessert to lure her thirty-year-old daughter "home" for dinner. The care packages she sends home with Stephanie extend her maternal arm, and with it the blessings of domesticity, into Stephanie's otherwise barren apartment. That Stephanie sometimes uses the food to persuade men to help her indicates that she appreciates the efficacy of domestic skills in work life. But more importantly here, maternal use of food to entice recalcitrant children home is part of a national discourse about motherhood. Mrs. Plum's concerned support and sometimes tight-lipped, alcohol-assisted respect for

the boundaries her daughter sets stands, for example, in stark contrast to Marie Barone's intrusive meddling, but it is nonetheless part of the same humorous tradition.¹¹ The trope makes sense to readers because it is familiar culturally, and perhaps, personally.

Narrators also use stance and voice to construct identity and foster cooperative reading simultaneously. For instance, although Stephanie and Maddie rely in part on culturally meaningful commodities to construct identity, they position themselves differently toward branding in general and locate their identities in different sorts of brands, both of which are intimately tied to their identities as working adults. The brands Stephanie names designate work-related commodities. When she details her interactions with fashion, her portraits indicate indifference to brand but not to effect. However, she acknowledges that commodities say something about her and that she tries to control how others see her by controlling what commodities they associate with her: "[W]hat did it matter if people saw me driving a 1953 Buick? It was transportation, right? Sure. That's why I'd parked a quarter mile away in an underground garage" (Evanovich, *Two* 114).

Maddie, a shoe designer, describes shoes in detail and attaches a great deal of significance to them. Covetous commodity discourse like Maddie's is in fact as much one of the generic markers of *chick lit* as is a closing wedding or domestic pairing. That Maddie covets the brands she names lets some readers know that fashion is important to her and that she, like them, cannot afford all of the things she desires. Other readers can recognize in her the good taste to aspire to what they already own. They can also perhaps recognize themselves or someone they know in Maddie's willingness to overindulge a taste for fashion to the detriment of her budget.¹² In these and other ways the genre invites readers to see themselves in the heroine or to identify with her. Consistently and

repetitively linking self-indulgence uninfluenced by reason with negative consequences—weight gain and pregnancy, for instance—suggests a place for reason in authentically adult identity. The relationship between the successful use of literary humor and readerly connection is dialectical in that each on occasion facilitates the other, often in conjunction with other generically conventional meaning-making practices.

As we saw in the previous chapter, a self-deprecating voice can do much to engender the kind of audience good will on which humor relies to generate laughter. It is a commonplace of humor studies that U.S. women comics and humorists have relied on self-deprecation as part of their performances.¹³ The “Harried Housewives” use self-deprecation extensively, albeit equivocally. The voices of the two heroine-narrators also emerge out this tradition and have an affinity to the voices of Jackson’s and Bombeck’s personae.¹⁴ However, first-person narration complicates the task of establishing a heroine’s beauty. Contemporary readers might interpret as arrogance, conceit, or self-satisfaction straightforward first-person declarations of one’s own beauty. By softening their minimal self-description with self-deprecation, heroines manage to demonstrate that they are attractive without antagonizing readers. For example, Stephanie Plum notes that she is the “blue-eyed, fair-skinned product of a Hungarian-Italian union” (*Two* 1). At “125 pounds, five feet, seven inches,” she cannot reasonably be considered overweight (*Three* 2), yet she expresses concern about her tendency toward plumpness repeatedly throughout the series. Stephanie’s assessment of her overall appearance is that she is “[n]ot bad looking” when she has on makeup and has attended to her hair, but she doesn’t “think Sharon Stone would drive off a bridge in a jealous rage” at the sight of her looking her best (*Two* 51). Maddie Springer stands “5’ 1½” ” and attracts a not insignificant

amount of lustful interest from men, but she describes her friend Dana in much more flattering terms than she uses to describe herself. These self-deprecatory assessments imply that these heroines are heteronormatively desirable but not threatening to other women. The repetitive presentation of female bodies as meaningful identity markers simultaneously presupposes, enacts, and normalizes a discursive conception of female bodies as signs of identity, as signs of who women “really are.”

Cooperative readers understand the contemporary heroine in part because they learn in a number of ways who and what she is not and in part because they are familiar with the contrastive tropes by which the heroine is identified as an individual. Discourse about breasts is a contemporary, generically conventional manifestation of the contrastive trope. Its repetition establishes its significance. Heroines most often shed light on their own standards by explicitly or implicitly contrasting themselves with women who violate those standards. In other words, they show us who they are by comparing themselves to another female, usually a character, who is unlike them. The heroines’ comparisons of their own and other women’s breasts are one of the genre’s manifestations of the contrastive trope by which heroines’ identities and the values those identities presuppose and endorse can be made acceptable for diverse readers.

The Signifying Breast

In “A Few Words about Breasts,” first published in *Esquire* magazine in 1972, Norah Ephron chronicles her nearly lifelong obsession with breasts and breast size. She genealogizes her struggle with the feelings of “inadequacy” engendered by living as a small-breasted woman in late twentieth-century America (38). She articulates the fears at the bottom of many U.S. women’s obsession with breasts: “I knew that no one would

ever want to marry me. I had no breasts. I would never have breasts” (35). She fears that others consider her “less woman” and that no one will ever love her (38). She fears that small breasts make her unlovable. Ephron concludes by saying that large-breasted women who assure small-breasted women that it is “much worse” to be large-breasted than small-breasted “are full of shit” (38). Many U.S. women share Ephron’s feelings, and those feelings in common help to normalize the associations that make breast discourse meaningful for cooperative readers.¹⁵

In what follows, I propose twelve “Signifying Breasts” as metonyms for the generically conventional character types whose presence in the text facilitates for cooperative readers the normalization of the heroine’s sexuality and the value systems her identity performance presupposes, constructs, and ratifies.¹⁶ Not all of these types appear in every text, but they appear in enough—and in enough other media—that cooperative readers and fans will immediately recognize them. Indeed, like breast discourse in general, these female types are part of U.S. culture. The U.S. viewing populace sees them in soap operas, sitcoms, and films. It reads about them in magazines and on blogs. The “Signifying Breast” is particularly apt as a metaphor because breasts can stand in as an objective correlative for female bodies in contemporary U.S. representational culture, and because it reaches back to sacred biography, in which breast torture, mutilation, and amputation figure prominently.

The Miraculous Breast

Saint Agatha of Sicily personifies the *Miraculous Breast*. As her biographer tells her story, the duke Quintian desires the virginal Agatha. When she refuses him, he sends her to a madam, Aphrodisia, and her nine prostitute daughters. Since they cannot corrupt

her with promises of earthly pleasure and riches, Aphrodisia returns Agatha to Quintian's court. Enraged by Agatha's insistence that she has "given [her] heart to the sweetest prince of all" whom she will "always cherish as [her] mate" (Winstead 29), Quintian has her breasts "twisted" off by first having "hooks" and "willow twists bound" to them (30). Agatha responds by calling him "Asshole" (30). After she is thrown back into prison, Saint Peter, disguised as an old man, comes to her cell and offers to heal her. She refuses until she learns that God has sent him. "As soon as he rubbed her wounds, they were healed," and her breasts grew back. When they learn of the miraculous restoration of Agatha's breasts, even Quintian's minions acknowledge that there is something special about her. Although Quintian eventually succeeds in killing her, she does not die until she is ready (31). When she dies, she is reunited with her divine mate.

Agatha's are the breasts of the defiant, fully adult female. *The Miraculous Breast* names herself. She is Virtue. After others recognize this as her real identity, she receives her heavenly reward and is reunited with her True Husband, the hero of the romance, Jesus Christ. The contrast between Agatha and Aphrodisia and her daughters helps to establish Agatha's purity.

Boobs

Boobs functions as comic relief, and emerges out of the same humorous traditions that gave America the humorous type Constance Rourke calls the "Yankee Jonathan" (88), and the common sense of Marietta Holley's Samantha Allen.¹⁷ While the Yankee was from the country and *Boobs* most often is a decidedly urban type, she is "sharp, uncouth, and witty" just as he is (Rourke 88). Her street smarts replace the Yankee's

common sense, and her sophistication is as counterfeit as her Via Spigas.¹⁸ *Boobs'* role as a wise fool allows her to speak moral truth to the heroine.

Boobs' breasts are not just large. They are enormous. They are unrestrained. They are usually visible. Stephanie's *Boobs* sidekick,¹⁹ Lula, is a chocolate brown, 250-pound former street prostitute with a penchant for wearing neon spandex two sizes too small with wigs to match. Stephanie's descriptions of Lula almost always include her breasts' size and degree of display: "Lula was wearing a halter top with a lot of boob hanging out. She rolled the cold can of beer across her chest. I figured it was a wasted effort. She'd need a keg to cool off a chest that size" (Evanovich, *One* 177).

This fat, black manifestation of the *Boobs* type has "an infinite ability to adapt to changing circumstances" (Walker, Introduction 83). However, *Boobs* is just as unruly as her breasts. She instantiates flamboyant appetite. Always ready for food and sex, for example, Lula drives a red Mustang and owns a variety of very large guns, at least one of which she has with her at all times. *Boobs* invites chaos because she allows her appetitive body to motivate her actions.

"I don't feel so good," Lula said. "It was that last doughnut. There was something wrong with it. It was one of them cream-filled, and I think they used old cream."

"You ate ten!"

"Yeah, and none of the others bothered me. I'm telling you, it was that last doughnut. I'd feel better if I could burp." (Evanovich, *Explosive* 190)

A few minutes after this exchange, Stephanie returns to the car to find Lula has eaten two slices of pizza to "settle my stomach" (192). When the pizza doesn't work, Lula reaches

into Stephanie's purse, and, mistaking a "love potion" for Pepto-Bismol, swills the entire bottle. When Stephanie tells her that it was a love potion, Lula falls in love with the first man she sees: the equally appetitive felon they have just apprehended who is so stupid he is almost incapable of coherent speech. He immediately steals Lula's car and Stephanie's gun and leaves them stranded, miles from home (209).

The heroine accepts *Boobs* as the voice of her conscience. For instance, Lula does not know that Stephanie fears she may be pregnant after her interlude with Ranger. Speaking about another matter, Lula says,

"Just think where we'd be if we didn't pay attention to consequences. Like, there's consequences if you don't got bullets in your gun. And there's consequences if you eat bad potato salad. And there's consequences if you don't take precautions with your sweetie pie."

I had a flash of panic recalling a small inadvertent lapse in my birth-control program in Hawaii.

"Are you okay?" Lula asked me. "You got real pale now, and you're sort of sweating."

"I was thinking about consequences."

"Yeah, they freak me out, too," Lula said. (Evanovich, *Explosive* 207-208)

Earlier, when Stephanie is considering her Hawaiian "lapse," she says, "[T]here was a voice, sounding a lot like Lula's, in the back of my head, telling me I'd been loosey-goosey with my morals in Hawaii, and that's what had messed up my juju" (Evanovich,

Explosive 136-137). That the heroine's conscience speaks to her in Lula's voice suggests that Stephanie recognizes and accepts *Boobs* as a moral adviser.

That Lula's is a fat black female body should be addressed, for her success as comic relief reveals the grounding of some of the book's humor in hegemonic ideologies of gender, race, class, and body size. Presenting a black character who dresses loudly and flamboyantly presupposes and reiterates racist U.S. stereotypes and hegemonic discourses about beauty and body size. *Sambo* characters who cause chaos for themselves and their white companions by emotionally, unthinkingly, or impulsively acting have long been a part of U.S. humor's engagement with race. While Lula lacks the subservience to her white companion characteristic of the *Sambo* type, Evanovich's characterization of Lula does gesture toward it, and most of the comic relief Lula provides as *Boobs* relies on her appetitive impulsiveness.

Another variant of the *Boobs* type is a male-centered female character with large breasts. She is the heroine's friend. This *Boobs* has an active and enviable sex life, and she never lacks for partners. She is not just conventionally pretty. She is gorgeous. For instance, Maddie describes her friend Dana as "a 5'7", 36 double D, strawberry blond aerobics instructor slash wanna-be actress with the kind of body that inspired rock songs" (Halliday, *Killer* 2). This *Boobs* is completely unselfconscious about her body, takes care of it, and enjoys the pleasures it affords her. She is quirky, sweet, funny, and a good friend to the heroine. However, she has one major flaw. She puts relationships with men before relationships with women. For instance, she can be unreliable, even when she and the heroine have plans. If an attractive opportunity for sex comes along, these characters will abandon their female friends and seize the day. The heroine is ambivalent about this

Boobs' sexual practices. She wants her friend to be happy, but she could never be so promiscuous herself. Sometimes her lack of inhibitions causes chaos. She, too, can function as the heroine's conscience, but her admonitions are generally about the heroine's terrible eating habits. This *Boobs* is more akin to Marilyn Monroe's onscreen persona than to the wicked women of hagiography and sentimental fiction.

Hooters

Hooters, however, is indeed descended from the wicked women of the literary past. Her U.S. literary foremothers include Katharine Brush's *Red-Headed Woman*, Lillian Andrews, and Dorothy Parker's Mrs. Martin.²⁰ Also male-centered, she usually provocatively displays her large breasts. *Hooters* is cynical in general, but can be especially cruel to other women. She is selfish and self-interested. Not terribly bright, she is nonetheless calculating and competitive with other women, especially the heroine. Joyce Barnhardt, Stephanie's nemesis since elementary school, enacts this type. She lies, cheats, and steals. She marries and divorces for money. This character does not limit her sexual consumption to single men, and she has no sense that there might be anything wrong with that. As she says to Stephanie, "“Okay, once in a while I steal a husband. I don't see what the big deal is. They all turn out to be losers anyway”" (Evanovich, *Eighteen* 179). One of the husbands she stole was Stephanie's.

Falsies

Her breasts may be silicone or saline, but whatever else they may be, they are not natural. As a type, *Falsies* reaches back to hagiographical and nineteenth-century depictions of lustful, materialistic women as a means of establishing the chastity and spirituality of the heroines, and she performs the same function here.

The crucial differences between *Falsies* and *Hooters* are that *Falsies* additionally transgresses by medically altering her body and she is dumb—at least on the outside. Her lack of intelligence may be as phony as the rest of her. She is very competitive with other women, and she uses her sexual appeal as a means to power and money. *Falsies*, like *Hooters*, uses her body to get men and is not terribly fussy if the men are already married or otherwise attached, as long as it helps her get ahead. This crosses the heroine's frontier of acceptable gender performance. While Maddie wears a push-up bra to supplement her cleavage on occasion, for instance, to function as *Bait*, she would never consider breast augmentation, and she considers acrylic nails, hair extensions, and tanning-booth color just as dishonest as she does surgical alteration (*Spying* 4).

For Maddie, accessorizing the body to draw attention to one or the other of the dual interpretive possibilities and to mask the other is acceptable. To eliminate the possibility of either reading through surgery, by having too many children, by growing old, or by wearing unacceptable clothing for one's body type is not. To do so for purely pecuniary reasons is no better than prostitution. Jasmine, Maddie's nemesis in the first three books of the four-book *Making It* series, enacts *Falsies*, and she finds her high culture sisters in Clare Boothe's *Sylvia* and Alcott's *Belle*.

Mommaries

There are at least three conventional *Mommaries* characters: *Moms*, *Office Moms*, and "*The Breeder*." These women provide three different possibilities for mothering, and three different stances relative to mothering.

Moms

In her textual incarnation as the heroine's mother, *Moms* functions as the contrastive woman "from an earlier time" (28 Baym).²¹ *Moms*' is the contemporary representation of an "anachronistic" maternal femininity (28). The heroine rejects this femininity for herself but respects it and depends on it as part of her support system nonetheless. Stephanie's and Maddie's mothers are both *Moms*, although their mothering styles differ. Maddie's mother is eccentric and flighty, and her enthusiastic appreciation for the pleasures of sex and the male body as a sexual object embarrass Maddie. That she represents a woman from an earlier time is reflected in her costume; all of her garments harken back to the styles of the 1980s. Nonetheless, she loves her daughter, has raised her well, and when Maddie needs her, she is there with emotional and material support, most often in the form of free pedicures at her second husband's Beverly Hills Salon.

Stephanie's *Moms* is a 1950s housewife. She serves dinner promptly at six, and it always includes homemade dessert. Her home is a model of home economy and as a domestic space stands in stark contrast to her daughter's barren apartment. As Stephanie describes Morelli's mother, though, she is the quintessential *Moms*:

Joseph Morelli's mother made my mother look like a second-rate housewife. My mother was no slouch, but by burg standards, Mrs. Morelli was a housewife of heroic proportions. God himself couldn't get windows cleaner, wash whiter, or make better ziti than Mrs. Morelli. She never missed mass, she sold Amway in her spare time, and she scared the bejeebers out of me with her piercing black eyes. . . . Joe's father could

have been bought for five bucks, but his father was dead. (Evanovich, *One* 38).

The domestic space belongs to *Moms*, and if her husband is present in the home, he is usually silent. More often, he is absent, as is Maddie's until he turns up as *Lola (Killer)*.
Office Mom

Office Mom handles the office equivalent of housework, organizes and arranges the space, makes the day-to-day decisions, dispenses advice and bandages, and handles the finances. In short, she does in the office what *Moms* does in the home. Vinnie, the owner of the company stays hidden behind the closed door of his office, leaving the front space to the women who comprise the office staff. Connie, who manages the bail bond company where Stephanie works, functions as an ethnic *Office Mom*. Short, curvy, and slightly mustached, Connie comes across as a tough broad. She does not trust men, but she has a heart of gold where other women are concerned.²² Sarcastic, lusty, and cynical, *Office Mom* stands up for her "daughters." If she were not so supportive of other women, she would be *Hooters*. As she is, she reiterates what Baym identifies as "the kind, strong-hearted widow who . . . finds time to mother the heroine" (*Women's* 39).

"The Breeder"

"The Breeder" is a baby-making machine. Her breasts are always engorged or being suckled by the latest addition to the family. Maddie's cousin takes this role in the Halliday novels, and Stephanie's sister fills the role in her narrative. *Mommaries* is always either pregnant or nursing, and she serves as a reminder of the loss of autonomy that comes with motherhood. She rarely plays any real part in the action, but her ghostly presence hovers over the heroine at family gatherings whether or not she is present.

Mothers tend to ask their heroine daughters when they are going to follow in *Mommaries'* footsteps and deliver a grandchild. Although they resent both the comparisons and the questions, *B-Cups* want children. Someday. Just not right now.

Teardrops

Teardrops emerges out of the same humorous traditions as the Wife of Bath and the droopy-breasted “Granny” character created by Robert “Buck” Brown for *Playboy* magazine. Hegemonic ideologies of age and sex interact and make ridiculous the image of an elderly female body announcing its sexual availability, seeking adventure, or breaking the law, all of which Stephanie’s Grandma Mazur does.²³ For cooperative readers, *Teardrops* functions as comic relief. However, *Teardrops* is not comically ridiculous because her openness to excitement and willingness to grab what she wants impress the heroine, who would not at all mind being like her when she is old. *B-Cup* can be closer to *Teardrops* than to her own mother.

Breasts Scorned

That the moral economy of the text views breast implants with suspicion is evident in the conclusion of *Spying in High Heels*, the first book of the series. Althea, a “meek frump,” turns out to be the murderer Maddie seeks (298). In order to subdue the crazed woman, Maddie stabs a stiletto heel into Althea’s implant and deflates it. Since Maddie is in fact a shoe designer, the stiletto’s deflation of the implant represents not just Maddie’s “triumph.” It also figures for the triumph of her evaluation of artificial femininity.

Although Althea has implants, she differs from *Falsies*, for she is completely unattractive, has only “loved” one man, and does not use her body for financial gain or

social advancement. She is the woman who changes herself to please a particular man. *Breasts Scorned* warns that the affective responses that animate the moral sense may deceive us. She is a warning. To love, *Breasts Scorned* tells readers, is dangerous for an unattractive woman, but to change oneself to please a man is even worse. Althea may be mad, but as she tells her story to Maddie, the concerns she expresses are similar to those Ephron expresses: ““You don’t think he would be interested in someone like me? You think he’s too good for me? Who would ever love dowdy little Althea?”” (300). It seems that the answer to *Breasts Scorned*’s question is the answer Ephron feared: No one.

Bosom Buddies

The incongruity of a male body in women’s clothing has a long history of provoking laughter in the U.S. public. Underlying this laughter is a profound anxiety about gender and power relations: Why would a male, a member of the dominant gender in a patriarchal society, willingly take on the signifiers of the subordinate, less powerful gender? Some of the humor in these novels emerges out of that tradition. For cooperative readers, these *Queer Bosoms* provide comic relief. Queer images in these novels are generally of male bodies, and there are at least two.²⁴

Marco, the receptionist at Maddie’s stepfather’s salon, is the *Making It* series *Girlfriend*, a flamboyantly effeminate gay man. *Girlfriend* is a contemporary manifestation of the “belle” contrastive type Baym identifies, a type that “lives for excitement and the admiration of the ballroom” (28). *Girlfriend* thinks he is all five of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*’s “savants.” Heroines emphasize his hyperfemininity as part of the process of normalizing their own. For instance:

Two *hours* later, Marco put the finishing touches on his club outfit of black leather pants and a form-fitting purple tank top, with three strands of silver chains around his neck. Capped off by a black beret. And I was pretty sure he was wearing more makeup than either Dana or me.

(Halliday, *Killer* 88, emphasis original).

Girlfriend's exaggerated effeminacy contrasts with both the heteronormative masculinity of the hero(es) and the heroine's normalized femininity.

The second *Bosom Buddy*, *Lola*, lives as a woman. For her, her body is not an announcement of sexual preference, but rather, an identity performative. *Lola's* male body thus gets inscribed with the same paradoxical quill as the female body. For instance, Maddie's father, *Lola*, also works as a drag performer, and as an aging woman working in entertainment, she knows her days are numbered. Indeed, this *Lola* finds herself in danger as a consequence of an ill-conceived get-rich quick scheme, and so the mystery storyline in *Killer in High Heels* emerges out of a *Queer Bosom* rather than a biologically female body. Likewise, the murders in Evanovich's *Four to Score* are occasioned by a misreading of a *Lure* as genuinely queer.

Bait

Bait is a false identity, a disguise. Any character may momentarily fill this role because it is only a role. *Bait* practices indicate that female characters, including the heroines, recognize the paradoxical possibilities of their bodies. In her attention to the meaning of costume, *Bait* acknowledges that her body may be read as either virtuous or wicked. Sometimes she attempts to erase one possibility by using accessories, clothing, and makeup to emphasize the other. This most often shapes up as dressing like "a whore"

in order to elicit information or assistance from a man while on a case. In this situation, the heroine always notes that she must augment her breasts to create cleavage.

Cross-dressing *Bait* such as Salvatore “Sally” Sweet find that the boundary between performance and performative are not very clear. Sally began cross-dressing as part of an onstage persona and wears a blend of men’s and women’s clothing offstage. Sally is not gay. When he and Stephanie meet, Sally says that cross dressing

“is a fucking statement. This is fucking politically correct. See, this is the ultimate sensitive man. This is taking my female shit out of the closet. And like I’m saying, here it is, you know?”

“Unh huh.”

“And besides, I’m making a shitload of money. I caught the wave on this one. This is the year of the fucking drag queen. We’re like a freaking fucking invasion.[. . .]Not only am I booked solid for every weekend for two years . . . I get money stuffed in my goddamn pants. I got money I don’t know what to do with.”

“So I guess you feel lucky to be gay.”

“Well, just between you and me, I’m not actually gay.”

“You’re a cross dresser.”

“Yeah. Something like that. I mean, I wouldn’t mind being sort of gay. Like, I guess I could dance with a guy, but I’m not doing any of that butt stuff.”

I nodded. I felt that way about men, too. (Evanovich, *Eighteen* 33)

Although Sally is not gay, his roommate is. When his roommate takes Sally's work-related gender-bending performance as a sexuality-constructing performative, like *Breasts Scorned*, he is driven to murderous madness by unrequited love.

As *Bait*, Sally's presence in the text accomplishes several things for cooperative readers. Sally's declaration that his drag performance is "taking my female shit out of the closet" gestures toward an incongruity between what men think it means to be a woman and women's lived experiences. The incongruity between Sally's false femininity and the heroine's deadpan expression of real femininity provides a space out of which laughter can emerge.

The Heroine: *B-Cup*

One of the first and most important ways heroines establish their ordinariness for cooperative readers is to mention the average size of their own "B-cup" breasts fairly early on in the text, usually using the humor of self-deprecation to do so. *B-Cup*'s repetitive expressions of breast-directed self-deprecation express concerns about breasts shared by many readers, and so facilitate both reader identification with the heroine and readers' formation of discursive communities such as fan clubs, reading groups, and online discussion boards. Establishing their own breasts as average is a necessary step in normalizing their own sexual practices and values, which can encourage the kind of connection with the heroine and other readers for which fans say they look (Radway). *B-Cup*'s average-sized breasts metonymically gesture toward the heteronormative female sexuality and cisgendered self-presentation simultaneously constructed and authorized by the heroine's narrative identity performance.

When readers cooperate with the text's value systems, *B-Cup*'s receptive heterosexuality is normalized in the social economy of the book. Thus, in the moral economy of the text, embodied sexual identity becomes a marker for virtue. Repeated representation of heterosexual desire as the animating sentiment as well as the sentiment that can be called upon to quash other feelings shifts the logical grounds for the operation of the sentimental moral from Shaftsbury's universal maternal instinct to heteronormative love. First-person narration permits heroines to describe the operation of their twenty-first-century version of the sentimental moral sense. *B-Cup* most directly confronts the bodily autonomy that frustrates her attempts to construct a coherent identity on the sexual field. For example, she may experience a powerful sexual response to a man who is not her primary partner. Or, her body may respond to her lover when her mind is angry with him. *B-Cup* expresses this experience as a mind-body disconnect. Stephanie, for instance, claims, "[T]he closest I've had to an out of body experience was when Joe Morelli took his mouth to me" (Evanovich, *One* 70). When she is sexually aroused, the heroine cannot summon the correct "sentiment" or enough command of her reason to quench completely her physical desire; nor can she immediately access her reason. This illustrates one persistent threat to this heroine's chance to construct a *coherent* adult female subjectivity. Her body and her mind do not consistently cohere. The heroine must be able to reconcile her body and her mind in order to construct a coherent adult identity that others understand to be an expression of her authentic self.²⁵

Sexual practices are, in post-millennial U.S. ideology, an indication of sexual identity (Foucault, *History* Vol.1). *B-Cup*'s sexual practices are heteronormatively receptive and monogamous. She rarely has sexual intercourse with anyone other than her

significant other (although his identity may change by the end of a book). When she does, she is riddled with guilt. For instance, Stephanie reflects about having had sex with Ranger while on business in Mexico:

If I asked Ranger for help, I'd end up naked. It had some appeal, but truth is, I was beginning to not like myself so much. The honest confusion of loving two men was giving way to something that felt a little like unhealthy self-indulgence. . . . Anyway, like it or not, I was presently caught in the throes of self-examination, and I was coming up short.
(Evanovich, *Explosive* 136-137)

Readers find out shortly after this introspective moment that Stephanie she had a birth-control lapse during this encounter and fears she might be pregnant by Ranger.

Repeatedly linking guilt and undesirable consequences to a specific sexual practice portrays that practice as in some way inappropriate or illicit. This motif is repeated in different forms through books and across series. That the practice crosses the heroine's normal boundaries sets up her boundaries as those virtuous women do not cross.

B-Cups, like their nineteenth-century counterparts, refuse to accept "the equation of female with permanent child" (17). Maddie has an epiphany when she realizes that she has feared that her mother's second wedding would mean a final end to her childhood:

"And I realized, as I stared at my mother's '80's blue eyeshadow and lipstained stained [sic] teeth,. . . I was afraid things were going to change. That I'd lose my Keds-with-floral-Muumuus Mom to Fernando's ultra-chic world" (Halliday, *Spying* 210).

Contemporary heroines, too, then, must make their own ways in the world. Their stories are also of women who, through their own "intelligence, will, resourcefulness, and

courage,” surmount the obstacles they encounter (22). Their reward is the “network of surrogate kin” that “gradually defines itself around the heroine, [and] makes hers the story, not only that of a self-made woman, but that of a self-made or surrogate family,” just as it is for both the virgin martyrs and the heroines of nineteenth-century sentimental literature (38). With the exception of the hero, *B-Cup*’s “self-made” family is composed almost entirely of other “Signifying Breasts.”

The Chest

Romance normalizes the heroine’s cisgendered, heteronormative sexual receptivity in part by the hero’s response to her. Heroes, or *Chests*, are not developed in any more detail than heroines, and they, too, are interchangeable. Joe Morelli, Stephanie Plum’s primary romantic partner, is a cop; so is Jack Ramirez, Maddie Springer’s love interest and eventual husband. Both Morelli and Ramirez have tattoos. Each has a thin knife scar bisecting an eyebrow. They both own homes. Both have strong ties to their ethnic and family communities. They are both family men who are not yet fathers. In a word, by the standards of sentimental domesticity, these *Chests* are highly desirable domestic partners. They are “solid, ethical, generous, frank, hard-working, energetic” men, who are also “admirer[s] and respecter[s] of women” (Baym 41). They like the heroines “as much or more” than they lust for them (41). However, the characterological conventions of popular romance require not just that *The Chest* be attractive; he must be perfect. He must be smart, he must be handsome, and he must above all be sexually irresistible to any sane woman—or perhaps, sexually irresistible enough to make a sane woman crazy.

As she tells the story of her early relationship with Morelli, two weeks after her mother's warning that the Morelli boys do "[t]errible things" to girls "when they get them alone," Stephanie agrees to play "a new game" with him in "his father's garage"(Evanovich, *One* 3). A "combination of terror and prurient curiosity that bordered on awe" led the six-year-old, skirt-wearing Stephanie to play the "tunnel" to Morelli's "choo choo" (4). The next time the virginal Stephanie encounters Morelli, they are ten years older. Morelli visits the bakery where she works after school and, she says, "bought a chocolate-chip cannoli, told me he'd joined the navy, and charmed the pants off me four minutes after closing, on the floor of Tasty Pastry, behind the case filled with chocolate éclairs" (5). When she next sees Morelli three years later, Stephanie deliberately runs him down with a Buick. As she stands over him to "assess the damage," Morelli looks up her skirt. Stephanie leaves him "sprawled on the pavement" and drives away. Morelli is Stephanie's *Chest*.^{That is not to say that there are no other} men in Stephanie's life. There are. Nevertheless, the opening pages of the first book materially make Morelli's importance to Stephanie clear.

Home Is Where the Heart Is

The organization of the first three paragraphs of *One for the Money* physically surrounds the domestic milieu, "the burg," with Morelli. Stephanie begins, "There are some men who enter a woman's life and screw it up forever. Joseph Morelli did this to me—not forever, but periodically" (Evanovich, *One* 3). These two sentences constitute the entire first paragraph, and they immediately set a wryly humorous vernacular tone, identify the hero, and hint at the heroine's ambivalence about him.

In the second paragraph, Stephanie describes “the burg,” the “blue collar” Trenton, New Jersey neighborhood where she and Morelli were born and still live. The last sentence of this paragraph informs readers that the burg is “an okay place to raise a family,” which leads immediately leads to, “When I was a kid I didn’t ordinarily play with Joseph Morelli” (3). The next three pages chronicle Stephanie and Morelli’s romantic and sexual history to the point when the story begins. By emphasizing the burg as a domestic space and physically surrounding it with an account of Morelli’s entry into and continuing presence in her life, she surrounds the domestic with a representative of the law, which visually suggests that the burg is a safe place to raise children because men like Morelli protect it, which further implies that he would be a good father. However, Stephanie ends this section by telling us that the last time she saw Morelli, she ran him over with a Buick. This indicates that, like Pamela’s, Stephanie’s “subjection” could never be anything but disingenuous.

For Stephanie, the burg “is not a space but a system of human relations,” as the syntax of the book’s first section demonstrates, and that system of human relations is home (49). In Stephanie’s and Maddie’s lives, work and home are not separate spaces. Maddie works from home and sends the shoes she designs to her employer. Stephanie spends more time with her coworkers than with anyone else. The presence of *Office Mother* in the office where she picks up her assignments, taken together with the silent “father” in his own space, transforms manager and owner of the work space into mother and father respectively.²⁶ Out of this transformation, the bond office emerges as a hybrid domestic-work space. This is not a space where “home values” have penetrated the world or where heroines can retreat until the world intrudes (Baym 48). In this domestic office,

only the relationships between and among the women are based in affection of any sort. On the rare occasions the owner-father issues an order, the women obey only because they need a paycheck, and the basis for the “ingenuous subjection” that ratifies male authority shifts from conjugal love to wages. The complaint females whose “ingenuous subjection” ratifies male domestic and political authority cannot be found in this space. They would not survive. All that are left are hungry *Boobs*, defiant *B-Cups*, and cynical *Office Mothers*, all of whose compliance is based on a need for wages rather than on love. Their “subjection” is also, then, just as disingenuous as Pamela’s.

Stephanie and Maddie are post-millennial versions of Baym’s “flawed” heroine who has become impoverished through no fault of her own (Baym 35). Like their nineteenth-century predecessors, contemporary heroines and their creators may not agree about “what is, and what is not, a flaw, but all agree that some sort of self-control is a moral and practical necessity while total self-abnegation is suicide” (36). Like nineteenth-century heroines, Stephanie and Maddie rescue themselves with support, advice, and assistance from friends, coworkers, luck, coincidence, and, yes, their male partners. Contemporary heroines continue to determine for themselves from whom they will accept support and under what conditions they will accept it. Thus, they can receive assistance when they need it and still maintain the self-reliant independence that is such a crucial part of U.S. ideologies of adulthood—and the heroines’ ideas about it as well. That their careers “marry” their domestic and work lives indicates that the heroines do not experience the concerns supposedly specific to each sphere as separate and that both are equally important to their identities. They have this in common with the virgin martyrs, Pamela, and the heroines of nineteenth-century U.S. literature.

If cooperative eighteenth-century readers could find in Pamela's "ordinariness" an indication of fictionality (Gallagher 34), cooperative readers in the twenty-first-century can find in *B-Cup*'s averageness a space for identification and connection. Cooperative readers can accept the heroine's values and beliefs as their own, at least for the duration of the reading transaction. Other readers, negotiating readers, will notice that their beliefs or value systems conflict in places with those endorsed by the text, for instance, the grounding of some of the humor in racist, sexist, or ageist ideologies. For resisting readers, however, aware of the mutually intereffective relationship between cultural representations of gender and the normalization of some gender-identity performative possibilities at the expense of foreclosing others plays an important role in normalizing the practices and values associated with that conception for all women. Thus, for resisting readers, the genre's normalization of a female subjectivity that remains disturbingly close to the hegemonic ideal can undermine efforts to connect with heroines and accept her value systems as their own. The revolutionary power of genre literature, then, may lie in the moments of cognitive dissonance out of which negotiating and globally contrary readings emerge.

NOTES

¹ My thanks to Dr. Evelyn Gajowski at UNLV for reminding me of this.

² For instance, in *Reading the Romance*, Janice Radway suggests that women's reasons for reading romance are complex, but in her introduction to the 1991 edition of her study, Radway makes clear that she sees romance readers as distinctly "other" women from whom she separates herself.

³ The hardcover dust jacket of Evanovich's first Stephanie Plum book, *One for the Money*, identifies it as "A Novel Introducing Stephanie Plum" in bold all-caps immediately above the title. Subsequent paperbacks use all-caps placed below the title to announce that the book is "A Stephanie Plum Novel."

⁴ *Fanon* denotes the fictional universe created by fans to supplement the details provided by writers and authors ("Fanon").

⁵ The heroines I consider are single, white, heterosexual, and thirty or younger. Although there are several series with lesbian protagonists and others whose heroines are women of color, the scope of this project proscribes their inclusion here.

⁶ Although the virgin saint's antagonist is usually a legally sanctioned male authority figure and the romantic mystery's attackers are criminals, these villains are not so different when viewed from the heroines' perspectives. Pagans and criminals both operate outside the laws that the heroines of their respective genres recognize as legitimate.

⁷ Negotiating readers may notice the power disparity implicit in these naming practices, but they can accept them as culturally common forms of endearment and move on. Resisting readers are most likely to notice that the names the men use to address the women designate infants, femininity, and food and so to reject the text.

⁸ Significantly, both heroines' love interests are law enforcement officers.

⁹ Stephanie is thirty.

¹⁰ I want to emphasize that it is not my intention to claim that this is the only legitimate reading available to cooperative readers or to any other sort of readers, for that matter. I do, however, want to detail one possible system of cultural associations by which specific meanings' attachment to particular commodities is normalized for cooperative readers and whose normalization is simultaneously presupposed by the author's choice to use it so.

¹¹ The mother of the eponymous character on the CBS sitcom, *Everyone Loves Raymond*. Marie is played by Doris Roberts.

¹² In fact, in *chick lit*, this tendency may be the contemporary manifestation of Poe's "Imp of Perversity"!

¹³ Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers may best exemplify the self-deprecating female persona among U.S. women comics.

¹⁴ Significantly, the subject of much of Phyllis Diller's self-deprecatory humor was her own flat chest. My thanks to Joseph B. McCullough for reminding me of this.

¹⁵ I do not mean to say that writers or readers consciously think about breasts in this way. But I do think that the repetition of these tropes has normalized them so that have become part of the conventional language of the genre and are among the discourses out of which gender itself emerges.

¹⁶ I had not looked at Stillman and Beatts' *Titters* for some time when I wrote this section. When I revisited it, I realized that they had used vernacular synonyms for *breasts*—*Knockers*, *Melons*, *Jugs*, *Hooters*, *Bongos*, *Headlights*, and *Boobs*—as the titles of the book's sections. I now regard my taxonomy as an homage to their creativity.

¹⁷ The narrator of Marietta Holley's *My Opinions and Betsey Bobbet's* and a multitude of other books from 1872 until 1914. Holley was frequently compared to Twain.

¹⁸ Designer shoes.

¹⁹ Eventually, Lula also becomes a bounty hunter (Evanovich, *Eleven*).

²⁰ The woman who encourages Hazel Morse to allow men to support her in "Big Blond."

²¹ In more hardboiled incarnations, such as Sue Grafton's "alphabet" series, the heroine is an orphan, which was also the most "frequent" way nineteenth-century authors isolated the child-heroine (Baym 35).

²² Indeed, men's inherent untrustworthiness is a general theme in the novels.

²³ These discourses include the images of motherhood discussed in chapter three but are not exhausted by them.

²⁴ Maddie's sister Valerie's brief foray into lesbianism is not queer. She has some terrible experiences with men and decides to try to be a lesbian for a while (Evanovich, *Seven* 128). She enacts the *Bait* "Signifying Breast" type during this interlude, but she realizes she is not a lesbian as soon as she kisses another woman.

²⁵ This, as Michael Bell shows in *Sentimentalism, Ethics, and the Culture of Feeling*, is the contemporary expression of the sentimental moral sense. See especially chapters six and seven.

²⁶ Further complicating matters, Stephanie and Vinnie are cousins.

CONCLUSIONS:

READING THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

Do the texts treated in this study reiterate the overplot Baym identified? If the following questions can be answered affirmatively, then, yes, they do. Are the heroines all isolated and lacking social supports through no fault of their own? (Baym, *Women's* 11; 37). Do obstacles in their paths function as opportunities for them to reveal or develop the qualities of character of fully adult, fully female human beings that others cannot see or that they lack? (22-50). If so, do they surmount the barriers? What kind of assistance do they receive and from whom? (38). How do they define their domestic networks? (38) From whom do they derive their emotional support? (39). Are their identity performances successful? When they claim the names that identify who they really are, do others acknowledge those names as rightfully theirs? That is, do they “wrest . . . respect and recognition from a hostile or indifferent world”? (21). Are these texts all stories of a heroine's or persona's ““trials and triumph”? (22). Do their identity performances and triumphs problematize female submission? (xxxix)?

The heroines and personae are all isolated and lacking social support in some way. The saints' isolation stems from their unshared faith, Pamela's from her parents' straitened economic circumstances. The Harried Homemakers' isolation is psychic as well as physical and emerges out of discursive and material systems that are beyond their control. These systems include, but are not limited to, gender, race, and class. Stephanie had (wrongly) counted on her ex-husband for material support; Maddie lives surrounded by people not of her economic circumstances. Moreover, Stephanie and Maddie both live alone, and their sleuthing occasionally requires that they deceive those to whom they are

closest. All of the characters, then, experience emotional isolation and loneliness in addition to their physical separation from others.

The virgin saints and Pamela are “flawless heroines” and have no lessons to learn (Baym *Women’s* 17). The other characters all encounter “difficulties not of their own making” that provide them with opportunities to develop the qualities of character they lack (17). All encounter assistance from similar sources, and the people who help them become part of their self-defined domestic network. The virgins and Pamela receive aid from chaste men, kindly women, and God. The Homemakers’ assistance comes from the other women in their suburban communities and from readers who correspond with their creators. The circles from which Stephanie and Maddie’s draw aid not only encompass their families and friends, but their coworkers and the heroes as well. In the end, the heroines’ and personae’s “final ‘domesticity’ is defined as the relations with all these adults, rather than as child-bearing or child-rearing” (38). Like the sentimental heroines Baym considers, they understand that “although children may be necessary for a woman’s happiness, they are not necessary for her identity—and neither is a husband” (38). Their female friends are more important than men to the heroine’s and personae’s emotional lives (39).

The heroines of American women’s contemporary romantic mystery series are ambivalent about marriage; the Harried Homemakers, like the virgin saints, are already married. Nevertheless, all of these characters understand that “marriage cannot and should not be the goal toward which women direct themselves” (39). While Pamela positively desires marriage, her inability to ingenuously comply with her husband’s rules of conduct indicates her ambivalence about marriage as hegemony constructs it. Even

Maddie, who marries at the end of the *Making It* series, makes it clear that her identity as a sleuth is more important to her than marriage; when she must choose between planning her wedding and uncovering a murderer, she turns the wedding planner over to her friends Dana and Marco (Halliday, *Mayhem* 93).

By the time their tales are told each heroine or persona has achieved her goal and successfully performed an adult female identity of her own design in such a way that others accept it as the person she really is. Stephanie has been able to make other characters recognize her as an autonomous adult female as she has gained job skills and greater control over her emotions over the course of the series. The virgins, Pamela, the Harried Homemakers, and Maddie receive direct acknowledgement of the names they claim for themselves from other characters and/or readers. Acknowledgment of the identity as correctly expressing who the character is ratifies the identity she claims. (21). In the end, the “individual authors are distinguishable largely by the plot elements they select from the common repertory” of generic and formulaic convention and “by the varieties of setting and incident with which they embellish the basic tale” (12). The heroines’ and personae’s final triumphs problematize female submission by revealing the disingenuousness of the characters’ subjection.

However, there is another pattern here, one that Baym does not address, and it centers on the most intransigent obstacle to identity construction the characters face. These literatures also share a particular configuration of the female body, one that shapes it as a paradoxical sign that always already signifies both *A* and $\sim A$.¹ The virgins and Pamela’s bodies simultaneously signify *virtue* and *corruption*, but they insist as being recognized as what they already are—virtuous women. They succeed in naming

themselves when those who have been misreading them acknowledge their true identities. On a cooperative interpretation, the virgins and Pamela succeed in successfully performing identities that express who they “really are,” and they are rewarded with marriage to the groom of their choice. My reading of *Pamela* in chapter two negotiates between and among eighteenth- and twenty-first-century material and discursive systems of gender and class. This negotiating reading enables me to interrogate the normalization of marriage as a reward for a virtuous heroine. Hence, despite formal differences among them, sacred biography, *Pamela*, and American women’s domestic humor and popular comic mystery romance all participate in the same overplot that Baym attributes to nineteenth-century American women’s sentimental fiction.

However, there is another interpretive possibility available, one that interrogates the source of the names the virgin martyrs and Pamela claim. According to this interpretation, neither the saints nor Pamela succeed in constructing identity at all, for while others acknowledge the identities they claim, they themselves are not the authors of those identities. In other words, neither the saints nor Pamela names herself, for while they claim *Virtue* as their identities, men have constructed and imposed on women the female virtue they claim. The men who define the virtuous womanhoods these heroines perform have constructed their female bodies as the fields on which men fight political battles.² For example, if the interpretation of *Pamela* in chapter two is tenable, Richardson has inscribed the struggle between monarchy and liberal democracy on Pamela’s body, and Pamela has “chosen” his side and claimed its name as her own.

Here, my interpretation rejects hegemony’s construction of the terms of the conflict and reads the text against itself. Thus, my reading of sacred biography and

Pamela exemplifies what Judith Fetterley calls “resistant reading” (13) and Stuart Hall calls “oppositional” reading (34).

The struggle to construct identity is more complicated for Harried Homemakers and B-Cups. Hegemony has split the Harried Homemaker into Angel and Manager. For the persona, Angel and Manager are one, but others have defined the identities toward which these names point. Nor does the hybrid Harried Homemaker fully express her identity. To name herself, therefore, the Harried Homemaker must reconfigure her maternal body so that others can see that while hot meals, clean clothes, and the like may express maternal love, they also contain domestic labor. The identity she constructs must also incorporate the dreams, aspirations, desires, and fears of the Woman Within. To make her “authentic self” visible, she must join the three identity possibilities together into a coherent whole and make it intelligible to others. Furthermore, someone must acknowledge both identities—Harried Homemaker and Woman Within—as rightfully belonging to her and correctly expressing who she is. The Harried Homemaker’s problem is that the hegemonic female body always already paradoxically signifies some form of virtue and its opposite. Since hegemony has in effect sanctified the maternal female body, the Woman Within must gesture toward some female vice. The final barrier to the Harried Homemaker’s self-naming, therefore, is hegemony’s construction of the Woman Within as $\sim A$, that is, as *not-virtuous*, as selfishness incarnated (Bombeck 22). Thus, successful identity performance for domestic humorists’ narrative personae necessitates a re-visioning of the Woman Within as *Virtue*. In a surprisingly Brechtian move, the Harried Homemaker turns to the audience for ratification of her self-constructed identity. The personae’s turn from hegemony to their female readership for

identity endorsement enacts a truly feminist act of self-naming that refuses hegemony's "languages and images" as inadequate to express female identity (Rich, "When We Dead" 35). When cooperative readers accept the persona as a reliable narrator and the source of the narrative, they have endorsed her identity performance, and she has achieved her goal. More than that, though, she has gotten readers to agree to her reconfiguration of the maternal female body, at least for the duration of the reading transaction. Herein lays a truly subversive possibility.

I said in the introduction that people bring their non-literary meaning-making experiences to literary interpretation. But the converse is also true. People bring their literary meaning-making experiences with them to interpretive events in other contexts. Repeated encounters with challenges to hegemonic gender discourses can normalize *resistance* to hegemony's efforts to construct women according to its own emergent needs, just as repeated encounters with hegemonic discourses normalize and render them invisible. Hence, repeated images of women's refusal to accept the identities hegemony assigns them can normalize that resistance. And, repeated images of women's refusal to accept the identities that social critics and activists assign them can normalize *that* resistance, too.

Unfortunately, normalizing resistance can also facilitate hegemony's cooptation of the particular forms resistance takes. If a particular expression or form of resistance is repeatedly associated with female characters, it can seem to be seen as a "natural" feminine characteristic. For example, the heroines of comic mystery romance series repeatedly resist others' attempts to convince them to be like "normal girls" (Halliday, *Killer* 202). One way they resist being like "normal" girls is to sleuth. One way they do

not resist being like “normal” girls is to deviate from the minimal sexual standard of female serial monogamy without consequences. These characteristics—unconventional employment and serial monogamy—are hegemonic constructions of femininity within the textual world of the comic romance mystery series. Heroines and personae who do not conform to these generic standards risk rejection by readers.

Narrative personae and first-person heroines try to ensure that readers of American women’s literature read cooperatively enough either to agree to the heroine or persona’s beliefs and values or to elide those they do not share at least for the duration of the literary transaction. All of the literatures treated in this text can be read for their didactic claims. However, the degree of cooperation readers bring to a text influences, and perhaps in some cases, overdetermines, whether readers elide, negotiate, or resist the different normative claims texts make. Some readers, those who share the unstated values and beliefs that ground a character’s justifications for and explanations of her choices and actions, for instance, are unlikely to challenge those values and beliefs. The subjects of Janice Radway’s study, *Reading the Romance*, are such readers. Indeed, these women cite characters whose behavior transgresses the (serially) monogamous, heteronormative, cisgendered femininity generally endorsed in formulaic romance as the major reason they put a book down without finishing it (105). Their refusal of such texts expresses their reluctance to cooperate with representations of feminine resistance other than those conventionally authorized by the genre or mode. For them, other forms of resistance to hegemonic femininity—guilt-free non-monogamy, for example—are unnatural (88). For these readers, particular expressions of opposition constitute part of what it means to be a normal woman. Romance readers’ disdain for “deviant” rebellion brings to light

American women's popular literature's potential for complicity in limiting challenges to the sex/gender status quo. However, that potential for complicity is not always realized for all readers.

Some readers will experience cognitive dissonance consequent upon a clash between the values and beliefs that underlie their personal normative frame and those underlying the protagonist's. Such readers can accept, negotiate, or resist the values or beliefs that clash with their own.³ Globally contrary readings like Spacks' and Friedan's are based in an absence of shared values and beliefs and instantiate successful resistant reading. Nancy Walker's readings of American women's domestic humor and its critics discussed in chapter three resist globally contrary readings like Spacks' and Friedan's. Moreover, they simultaneously resist and reveal feminism's potential for constructing its own hegemonic representations of the virtuous Liberated Woman.⁴ For example, Walker resists hegemony's construction of normalized femininity by cooperating with the textual manifestations of the conventions of literary domestic humor. Walker's reading demonstrates the complexity and value of reading through practices that are fluid, contingent, overdetermined, and mutually intereffective. Her critique of the devaluation of domestic labor implicit in Spacks' and Friedan's criticism negotiates feminism's insights about the social and economic functions of women's unpaid domestic labor and humor's ability to draw attention to incongruities. Calling attention to incongruities between reality and representation is one of the most important tools upon which challenges to the *status quo* rely. Indeed, because literary humor and devices such as the contrastive trope seek to elicit readerly recognition of incongruity, they can be especially productive avenues for revolutionary interpretive practice.

Finally, some of my readings may invite a criticism commonly leveled at feminist interpretation—that it commits the presentist fallacy and anachronistically reads texts written before modern feminism. However, as we have seen, readers are situated and incapable of true objectivity, reading practices are situated and overdetermined, and denotation is historically contingent. Thus, contemporary American readers can no more inhabit a medieval mind than the Romantic Noble Savage can return to the pre-social state of nature after society emerges. Once texts are sufficiently removed from one’s own epistemological, discursive, and material frames, one can at best speculate about what they may have meant to their original audiences. Hence, there is always at least a trace of presentism in criticism that takes as its subject literatures produced before readers’ lifetimes. This suggests that most literary criticism in fact commits the “presentist fallacy,” which is then no fallacy at all. However, the impossibility of interpretive certainty does not mean that all speculations are equal. Like that of any other inductive claim, the strength of a speculative claim depends on the amount and quality of the supporting evidence. In part, chapter two represents an attempt to provide enough supporting evidence of sufficient quality to legitimate the frame I argue was available to Christian medieval writers, readers, and auditors.

There is value in listening to what the texts of the past say to us in the here and now, perhaps especially for social activists who are interested in literature’s revolutionary possibilities. As Adrienne Rich says, “Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for women more than a chapter in our cultural history: it is an act of survival” (“When We Dead” 35). Attending to what a literary text of another time or place says to us as contemporary

readers in our own vocabularies can reveal “how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and how we can begin to see and name—and therefore live—afresh” (35). Presentist readings can illuminate these things in ways that more traditionally cooperative readings might precisely, for cooperative readings offer fewer moments of cognitive dissonance out of subversive possibilities arise. My analyses of sacred biography and *Pamela* represent, I think, feminist readings with presentist nuances. The “anachronistic” feminism of my analytic frame permits me to place into tension texts produced across a span of almost two millennia and to discern in them some commonalities of plot, characterological convention, and hegemonic constructions of female virtue and vice. My “anachronistic” use of some of American feminism’s insights has illuminated contemporary American women’s popular literature’s resistance to and implication in constructing sex/gender and class as hegemonic systems of normalized discursive and material practices. If reading the texts of the past with the tools of the present can illuminate some of the discursive threads that bind together hegemonic ideologies of sex/gender and class, perhaps they can help us to creatively imagine ways to untie those Gordian knots oppression and create a socially just future.

NOTES

¹ *A* and *not-A*.

² My interpretation of *Pamela* operates on this level as well as others. One might interpret the virgin saints as representing nascent Christianity, a reasonable interpretation idea given the ubiquity of representations of the Church as the Bride of Christ. On this reading, the pagans who torment them might stand in for political forces that oppressed Christians *qua* Christians.

³ I do not mean to imply that decisions about how to approach a text are always the result of a conscious process, but neither do I mean to imply they never are.

⁴ Ti-Grace Atkinson's declaration that "[f]eminism is the theory; lesbianism is the practice," for instance (XX).

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Walker, Nancy A. *The Disobedient Writer: Women and Narrative Tradition*. Austin: U of Texas P, 1995. Print.

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Wolf, Naomi. *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women*. New York: Morrow, 1991. Print.

Zeisler, Andi. *Feminism and Pop Culture*. Seal Studies. Berkeley: Seal Press/ Perseus Book Group, 2008. Print.

Gina M. Sully

CURRICULUM VITAE

EDUCATION

2012 Ph.D. in English, with High Honors; University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Minor: Composition and Rhetoric

Dissertation: *From Martyrs to Mothers to Chicks in Choos: The Medieval Female Body and American Women's Popular Literature*

Committee Chair: Dr. Joseph McCullough, Distinguished Professor

Specializations: Composition Pedagogy, American Literature to 1900, American Humor, American Women's Literature, and Popular Literature

2012 Graduate Certificate in Women's Studies; University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Thesis: "Gender, Race, and Ads: Advertising Images in the UNLV *Rebel Yell*, 1960-2010"

Advisers: Dr. S. Charusheela, Dr. Lois R. Helmbold

2009 M.A. in English; University of Nevada, Las Vegas

2005 B.A. in English, *Summa cum laude*; University of Nevada, Las Vegas

2003 A.A. in English, with High Honors; College of Southern Nevada

2003 A.A. in General Studies, with High Honors; College of Southern Nevada

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT (UNLV Teaching and Learning Center)

Intensive Introduction to Teaching

Power Point Basics

Smartboard

Web Campus (Blackboard) Overview

Web Campus (Blackboard) Grading

Web Page Publishing

Pedagogically Sound Power Point

Course Management Systems Overview

Smart Internet Searching

Grading Methods

Grant Writing

Preventing Plagiarism

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

ENG 232: World Literature after 1650; Fall 2011, Spring 2012; University of Nevada, Las Vegas

F2F-Supplemental Web

ENG 206: Intermediate Composition; Fall 2011, University of Nevada, Las Vegas

F2F- Supplemental Web

ENG 101F: FYC Stretch, 2nd half; Spring 2009, University of Nevada, Las Vegas

F2F- Supplemental Web

ENG 101E: FYC Stretch, 1st half; Fall 2008, University of Nevada, Las Vegas

F2F- Supplemental Web

SELECTED AWARDS AND HONORS

UNLV Bennett Fellowship in English (\$50,000+); 2010-2012
UNLV Roger's Fellowship in English (\$75,000+); 2007-2010
UNLV Higher Achiever Grant (\$2,000); 2004-2005
Nevada Board of Regents' Outstanding Student Award (\$5,000); 2002-2003
Nevada's New Century Scholar (\$5,000); 2002-2003
All-Nevada Academic Team (\$2,500); 2002-2003
Finalist, All-USA Academic Team (\$1,500); 2002-2003
College of Southern Nevada Liberal Arts Outstanding Student of the Year (\$1,000); 2002-2003
College of Southern Nevada Liberal Arts Outstanding Student of the Year (\$1,000); 2001-2002

EMPLOYMENT

University of Nevada, Las Vegas: Graduate Assistant and Bennett Fellow in English; 8/2010-5/2012
Rethinking Marxism: Editorial Assistant; 6/2009-5/2010
University of Nevada, Las Vegas: Graduate Assistant and Rogers Fellow in English; 8/2007-8/2010
College of Southern Nevada Writing Center, Henderson Campus: Writing Assistant, 8/2002-5/2007
College of Southern Nevada Tutorial Services, Henderson Campus: Tutor, various subjects, 8/2002-8/2003
Lancaster Country Club, Lancaster, NY: Chief Operations Officer, 2/2000-9/2000
Rosalind's Catering, Buffalo, NY: General Manager, 1995-2000
Prior employment history available on request.

COMMITTEES

University of Nevada, Las Vegas English Department Graduate Program Review Committee, 2010-2011
College of Southern Nevada English 101 Book Committee, 2006-2007
College of Southern Nevada Writing across the Curriculum Committee, 2005-2007
College of Southern Nevada, Henderson Campus FYC Syllabus Committee, 2006
College of Southern Nevada, Henderson Campus Writing Center Grammar and Mechanics Workshop Committee 2003-2007
College of Southern Nevada Master Plan Committee, 2002-2003
Western Regional Student Representative, National Executive Board of Sigma Kappa Delta, 2002-2003

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

"Writing the Examined Life in a Developmental First-Year Writing Class" (in review)
"Troubling Gender in Douglass and Manzano: Slaveholding *Machas* and *Marianista* Slaves" (in review)
"Reading toward "Sion": Rebuilding Herbert's Temple" (in review)
"Omnibenevolence and Eternal Damnation"
Sophia: International Journal for Philosophy of Religion, Metaphysical Theology and Ethics;
Vol.44, Issue 2. Oct. 2005
"Just a Little Writer's Block"; *Vagus Nerve*, Fall 2005
"Ghazal for Joel"; *Vagus Nerve*, Spring 2005
"Why I Want To Be a Teacher (with Gratitude to Judy Syfers)"; *Vagus Nerve*, Spring 2005
"Setting as Symbol in 'Death by Landscape'"; *Hedera helix* Vol. 2
"My Name Is Gina"; *Hedera helix* Vol. 2
"Autonomy and Identity in Freeman, Faulkner, and Wright" ; *Westering* Vol. 1
"Winning Isn't Everything"; *Hedera helix* Vol. 1

EDITORIAL

Referee	<i>Popular Culture: The Journal of the American and Far West Popular Culture Association</i> ; 2010-present
Referee	<i>Rethinking Marxism</i> ; 2009-2010
Copy	<i>Epistemic Evil: A Third Problem of Evil</i> ; Joel Thomas Tierno; Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2008
Copy & Content	<i>A Psychiatric Diagnosis Primer: An Easy Guide to Identifying Psychiatric Illness</i> ; Gary Solomon; Boston: Pearson, 2006
Copy	<i>Descartes on God and Human Error</i> ; Dr. Joel Thomas Tierno; Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press International, 1997
Editor	<i>Westering: The Literary and Art Journal of the Community College of Southern Nevada</i> , 2002-2003

INVITED LECTURES/FORUMS/PANELS/Workshops

- “Omnibenevolence and Eternal Damnation”; Disproof Atheism Society, Boston University, upcoming December 2012
- Intensive Grammar Workshop; Clark County School District; upcoming August 2012
- “Personal Pedagogies”; Far West Popular Culture and American Culture Associations; March 2012, panelist
- “Informal Fallacies”; Philosophy 102 (Tierno), College of Southern Nevada, F2011
- “Everyday Political Activism and the Occupy Movement”; Sociology 101 (DeFazio), College of Southern Nevada, F2011
- “Troubling Gender in Douglass and Manzano: Slaveholding *Machas* and *Marianista* Slaves,” Graduate Circle Lecture Series, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Nov. 2010
- “Gender, Race, and Pornography”; 22nd Sociological Forum, College of Southern Nevada, Oct. 2008
- “American Literature and Feminism between the World Wars”; English 242 (Eliopoulos), College of Southern Nevada, 2008
- “Feminist Theory”; Lecture, Women’s Studies 101 (DeFazio), Philosophy 101 (Tierno); College of Southern Nevada, F2006, S2007, F2007, S2008
- “Writing Center Roundtable”; NCTE/TYCA West Conference; Nov. 2007, panelist
- “Gendered Images of American Freedom”; Cultural Studies 200 (Powell), University of Nevada, Las Vegas, S2007
- “Ecofeminism”; College of Southern Nevada 20th Sociological Forum, October 2006, panelist
- “Is Wal-Mart Good for America?”; College of Southern Nevada Philosophy Club Forum, 2005, Moderator;
- “Tecumseh’s Speech to the Sioux”; English 241 (Gallinger), College of Southern Nevada, F2005
- “American Satire: Why Judy Brady Wants a Wife”; English 100 (Gallinger), College of Southern Nevada, S2005
- “Women in Business: The Glass Ceiling”; Sociology 101 (DeFazio), College of Southern Nevada, S2005
- “Sexual Violence and Female Power”; Women’s Studies 101 (DeFazio), College of Southern Nevada, F2004
- “Women in Recovery”; Psychology 101 College of Southern Nevada (DeFazio), S2004

SELECTED CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS AND PANELS

- “From Martyrs to Mothers to Chicks in Choos: Tracing the Medieval Feminine in Contemporary American Women’s Fiction,” Far West Popular Culture and American Culture Associations Conference, 2011
- Panel Chair: “Valley Writers Writing Neo-Noir”; Far West Popular Culture and American Culture Associations; Short Story: “Punked,” 2010
- “Gender, Genre, and Consumption: The Constitution of Identities and the Interpellation of Subjects” New Marxian Times 6th International Conference, 2009

Panel Chair: “Juicy Lucy and Student Activism”; Far West Popular Culture and American Culture Associations; Paper: “Dehumanization and Discrimination Are Not the Same,” 2009
 “The Haunting: Bloom, Reyes, and Ghosts in the Poetic Field”; Midwest MLA, 2008
 Panel Chair, American Humor Panel; Far West Popular Culture and American Culture Associations
 Paper: “Pink Eye: Reading Humor through a Gendered Lens,” 2008
 “Slaves to Love: Captivity Motifs and Gendered Freedom in Popular Romance”; Far West Popular Culture and American Culture Associations Conference, 2007
 “Racism and the Consequences of Drug Prohibition in the United States,” co-authored with Dr. Joel Thomas Tierno; Far West Popular Culture and American Culture Associations, 2007
 “Racism and the Origins of Drug Prohibition in the United States,” co-authored with Dr. Joel Thomas Tierno; Far West Popular Culture and American Culture Associations, 2006
 “Feminine Identity in ‘He’ and ‘The Jilting of Granny Weatherall’”; Rocky Mountain Modern Languages Association, 2005
 “Just a Little Writer’s Block”; Sigma Tau Delta Convention, 2004
 “Autonomy and Identity in Freeman, Faulkner, and Wright”; Sigma Kappa Delta Convention, 2003
 “Writing Outstanding Student Papers”; College of Southern Nevada Western Regional Writing Conference, 2002

PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS & HONOR SOCIETIES

Modern Languages Association	Golden Key Honor Society
Far West Popular Culture Association	Public Relations Director, 2004-2005
National Women’s Studies Association	Phi Theta Kappa Alumni Association
National Council of Teachers of English	Regional Correspondence Secretary
American Humor Studies Association	2003-2006
Two-Year College Association	National Society of Collegiate Scholars
American Association of University Women	Phi Theta Kappa, Alpha Xi Beta chapter
Phi Kappa Phi International Honor Society	Vice President, 2002-2003
Sigma Tau Delta, Epsilon Rho chapter	Sigma Kappa Delta, Pi Alpha chapter
Vice President; 2003-2007	President 2003
	Secretary/Treasurer, 2002

VOLUNTEER WORK: Literacy Volunteers of America; CSN Philosophy Club

READING LANGUAGES: French, Spanish