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Female Subjects in Selected Dramatic Comedies by Canadian Women

by

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We accept this dissertation as conforming
to the required standard

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines five dramatic comedies by Canadian women and the female subject positions they provide. Through these analyses, it examines how constructions of female subjectivity are both constrained and enabled by comedic discourse.

The Introduction argues that traditional patterns and formalist conceptions of comedy have not made a place for female subjects and that, while feminist critics have begun to examine women's comedies and the female subjects they construct, those studies need to be complicated in order to make a space for the variety and complexity of female subject positions elicited by the plays under consideration. In dialogue with contemporary theories regarding gender performance, language, and subjectivity (with particular reference to theorists Judith Butler and Catherine Belsey), this study goes on to examine the entangled and indeterminate qualities of female subjects in a selection of Canadian women's comedies.

Chapter One discusses the didactic and hidden subject positions within Sarah Anne Curzon's *The Sweet Girl Graduate*, a nineteenth-century revision of the comedy of manners. Chapter Two discusses the gender anxiety inscribed in Erika Ritter's *Automatic Pilot*, a comedy about a female stand-up comic. Chapter Three considers the Jungian feminist conception of subjectivity dramatized in Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*. Chapter Four proposes that Margaret Hollingsworth's *The House that Jack Built* constructs a feminist and absurdist subject position. Chapter Five examines gender parody and play in Karen Hines' *Pochsy's Lips*, and argues that this *bouffon* performance piece conceives of female subjectivity as a playful and critical realm. Chapter analyses focus on variances in how these comedies represent and understand women's capacities to intervene in genre and gender formations, and in social and psychic realms, which in turn reflect their different conceptions of female subjectivity.

In conclusion, this study advocates the benefits of reading women's comedies not only in terms of patterns of genre or gender revisions, but also as destabilizing

forms of linguistic, psychic, and bodily performance. Its feminist appeal lies in the assertion that change is effected not only by overt alterations of comedic or social patterns, but also by the issue of multiple and potentially new subject positions, which are produced by different forms of comedic and comic practice.

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DEDICATION

For Aletheia and Reid – with whom I laugh in many ways.

Fears and Desires: An Introduction to Female Subjects of Comedy

Women's dramatic comedies have been gaining popularity and critical attention in Canada in recent years.¹ This is part of an international burgeoning of comic activity by women in various media which has been greeted enthusiastically by feminist critics who view such interventions as defying long held gender stereotypes and socio-cultural boundaries and by women who enjoy seeing themselves as subjects in and of comedy. I am a feminist woman who wonders about this celebratory heralding of "women's comedy." While I may laugh, I am just as likely to find myself unsettled or even distressed by how women depict women in comedy; while I can recognize textual transgressions of gender taboos, I sometimes end up thinking "Ho hum. Play it again, Samantha." But then sometimes, too, I am caught up in the excitement and see a realm of possibility for enacting, enlivening, and redefining conceptions of female subjecthood in the playful, imaginative, laughter-filled worlds of comic stages and pages. This dissertation is my attempt to account for this range of reaction by exploring both the constraints and the possibilities that attend female subjects in dramatic comedy.

My study discusses dramatic works by five Canadian women: Sarah Anne Curzon, Erika Ritter, Anne-Marie MacDonald, Margaret Hollingsworth, and Karen Hines. These plays represent revisions of, and innovations in, a range of comedic traditions (from comedy of manners to absurdism), they employ different comedic strategies and comic impulses (from Shakespearean parody to clownwork), and they derive from different temporal and social contexts (from nineteenth-century closet drama to Fringe festival performance). Importantly, this selection enables me to indicate some of the many differences in how Anglo-Canadian women practitioners conceive of and employ comedy; they virtually make their own argument for an expansive and flexible definition of what "women's comedy" might be. The purpose of this study, then, is not to chart the characteristics of "Canadian women's comedy," although it does recognize some common impulses within those comedic practices under consideration. For instance, each play foregrounds gender and related social issues and each constructs strong, complex female subject positions. And yet these comedies approach those issues and imagine female subjectivity in different ways, and never simply. Margaret

Hollingsworth and Karen Hines (whose plays feature in Chapters Four and Five) have said that their comedies reflect both their fears and their hopes and desires regarding the world they live in. Indeed, my analyses reflect how the plays in this study reveal apprehensions regarding the constraints of female subjectivity in social and cultural realms and/or reflect hopes and desires for more expansive and positive conceptions.

Previous feminist studies take the general view that, in women's hands, comedy is an inherently subversive and/or an optimistic medium. American critic Regina Barreca argues, for instance, that "without subverting the authority of her own writing by breaking down convention completely, the woman comic writer displays a different code of subversive thematics than her male counterparts. Her writing is characterised [sic] by the breaking of cultural and ideological frames. Her use of comedy is dislocating, anarchic and, paradoxically, unconventional" (*Last* 9-10). British critic Susan Carlson emphasizes the optimistic vision of women's comedy. For instance, while she acknowledges that some may despair, Carlson determines that most female-authored comedies construct a "positive vision": "In other words, the difference in women's comedy depends on optimism" (307). Like Barreca and Carlson, my study pays attention to the dislocating/subversive and affirmative/optimistic characteristics of these five female-authored comedies, although it pays special heed to how they may be subversive or optimistic in different ways and to how dislocating and affirmative impulses may sometimes be at odds. Further, my analyses emphasize equally, and perhaps more emphatically than those of other feminist critics, the anxious, worried tenor that exists also in women's comedies. I consider how female subject positions constructed in these works often appear divided, entangled, and difficult to decipher, how they may be just as likely to give rise to, or express, anxiety and ambivalence, as joy and self-assuredness. In order to appreciate these differences and complexities, my study incorporates recent theories on gender and subjectivity and investigates how different forms of comedic practice propose different kinds of subject positions for women and even different conceptions of subjectivity. It appreciates how female subjects of comedy (a category which includes variously character, authorial, and spectating subjects) are constrained by language, by genre conceptions, by physical and other gender codes and, conversely, how

those constraints enable them to express themselves in innovative ways and to strain against normative limitations.

The notion of conceiving of female subjects in comedy is relatively new. Until quite recently, critical discussions about comedy have focused on its male subjects and, not coincidentally, have been performed largely by male critics. As a result, the female subject of comedy has long been defined by exclusion and constraint. Only in the past decade have feminist scholars begun to document the masculine bias in critical works and to analyze how gender ideologies infiltrate comedic practices. June Sochen, for instance, introduces her collection of essays, *Women's Comic Visions* (1991), with the statement, "If the way women have been treated as givers and receivers of humor was not so sad and absurd, it would be funny. After all, can any reasonable person in the late twentieth century take Schopenhauer, Bergson, and Freud seriously...when they declared that women had no sense of humor?" (9). Regina Barreca introduces her critical anthology, *Last Laughs* (1988), in similar vein: "Congreve's statement that women lack a sense of humor echoes through three hundred years of criticism of British literature.... Generally speaking, commentators on comedy continue to treat the subject as a necessarily all-male pastime, rather like writing in the snow" (3). Sochen and Barreca note that women have long been excluded from the broad realm of literary and other forms of humour, which critics have constructed as a male domain. My own study is concerned specifically with women's uses of dramatic comedy, but it also considers how their formal and performance strategies arise from, or involve, different kinds of comic impulses and even different "senses" of humour.

This attempt to understand connections between comic impulses and formal strategies is by no means new. Northrop Frye, whose generic formulation of comedy is widely known and used, derived that definition as a way to explain the impulse of a certain kind of comedy. That is, in constructing comedy as a genre, he attempted to understand why plays use particular structural patterns and what social and psychological purposes such patterns serve. His consideration of one kind of comic impulse has, however, accrued a kind of "universal" meaning, particularly when it comes to defining dramatic comedy. Indeed, Frye's formulation (and the plays upon which it is based) provides a cogent example of the kind of gender blindness/bias that Sochen and Barreca

lament. Consider, for example, his influential description of comedy's characteristic movement from social confusion to "happy ending": "At the end of the play the device in the plot that brings hero and heroine together causes a new society to crystallize around the hero" (142).² Frye is correct to note that, in the tradition he discusses, the new order crystallizes around the male hero and that this occurs usually through a reinstatement of the heterosexual contract. However, he fails even briefly to consider the gender and sexual institutions upon which this generic structure, or comic impulse, rests. Frye would not think to ask, for instance, whether or how this new order constitutes a "happy ending" for the heroine. This conception of comedy suggests that, while women may function as character/plot devices, there is virtually no space for female characters to direct comedic action. Frye argues further that, because the central conflict of the genre usually pits son against father, "the comic dramatist as a rule writes for the younger men in his audience, and the older members of almost any society are apt to feel that comedy has something subversive about it" (142). The impulse of comedy, in Frye's conception, is social renewal which occurs within a patriarchal framework. If comedy's subversiveness does not address itself to older men, it most certainly does not extend to female, and especially feminist, spectators. The female spectating subject, like the heroine, has little or no place in the dynamics of classic comedy. Frye does not find this inequity curious, but rather accepts male subjects as the rightful agents to transmit and receive the "universal" meanings of the genre.

Frye's model is representative of a longstanding and still highly influential critical tradition that defines comedy in a manner that links formal structures to social dynamics, specifically the movement from temporary social misrule to optimistic renewal of a slightly modified social order. The formalist/humanist school conceives of comedy not as "funniness" but as "certain conventions of structure and content" (Shershow 5). Those critics tend to link conventional generic expectations to pre-existing social rituals, particularly those practised in the European middle ages and in aboriginal societies.³ In particular, humanist/formalist critics see a parallel between comedy's period of social misrule, or inversion, and "that of Saturnalia...those festivals of license and misrule that recur throughout the folklore of our culture and that...serve as a symbolic image and pattern in our comedies" (Shershow 16). Most critics in this school argue that comedy's

period of misrule, like Saturnalian festivity, is "double-dealing": while it troubles established social structures, it also functions as a social safety valve. For instance, Scott Shershow (following the work of Frye and C.L. Barber) argues that "In Saturnalian festivity, the human community both distorts and reaffirms the social facts of its life, allowing a temporary period of anarchy which serves as an ironic confirmation of law and order" (16). Like Saturnalian festivity, comedy's period of inversion often allows for a temporary subversion of gender, social, and class regulation: expressions of bisexuality, inversion of gender and class roles, relaxation of taboos against such behaviours as gluttony and promiscuity are common. This period of social disruption is both a reaction to, and dependent upon, the social rule that exists before and is reinstated after such performances. In this view, humour arises from the spectators' awareness that "rules" are being upset and from their awareness (and comfort) that this "misrule" occurs in a socially sanctioned form. Thus, while comedy appears subversive of social order, those effects are contained within social and structural safeguards. Critics in the humanist/formalist tradition identify a second kind of ritual performance which corresponds to comedy's characteristic "happy ending." Regenerative ceremonies such as marriages and feasts occur either literally or figuratively at comedy's end. Such rituals represent the renewal of social rule predicated on heterosexual, family, and community contracts and so reassure the audience that those regulatory social structures that have been upset during the period of inversion remain operative and valuable, and only slightly modified.

In her thoughtful study on women and British dramatic comedy, Susan Carlson shows why this supposedly "archetypal" (which she prefers to call "male-defined") comedic pattern/dynamic poses problems for female characters, writers, and spectators. She also cites numerous critics who argue that comedy has traditionally made a place for female subjects. Those critics note the visibility of women characters particularly in Renaissance comedy, and they hold an optimistic view of the genre's potential for women by equating female visibility with sympathy towards women (12-13). Many Shakespearean critics, for example, argue that female characters are active in comic plots, that gender restrictions are a popular subject in these comedies, and that those restrictions are relaxed during the middle, or inversion, period. Carlson argues compellingly that

female visibility and gender inversion are qualified by the traditional comic ending in which social, class, and gender orders are restored (usually through the invocation of marriage) so that "[w]omen are allowed their brilliance, freedom, and power in comedy only because the genre has built-in safeguards against such behavior" (17). While Shakespeare's women characters (originally portrayed by young men) may appear to be active and unruly, Carlson worries that the structural/social safeguards of comedic endings perform a conservative "backlash" function.

When it comes to male-authored comedy, Carlson accepts its classic formalist definition and shows how female unruliness is structurally contained. Because of this effect, she argues that female-authored comedies reflect a vested interest in resisting and revising male-defined structures and dynamics. When it comes to women's comedies, then, she looks for structural and other revisions that circumvent comedy's traditional constraints for its female subjects. Carlson's argument is compelling, although one could argue that it assumes a certain gender and genre determinism. I find it useful to bear in mind the potentially "double-dealing" social effects of comedy described by the humanist/formalist tradition not only when it comes to male but also to female-authored comedies. Gender unruliness can be socially duplicitous even in those women's comedies that clearly attempt to circumvent the socio-structural constraints represented by the happy ending. As Carlson admits (although in reference to male-authored comedy), the "revolutionary and the reactionary strains of inversion...are determined by context" (20). The same can be said about the revolutionary and reactionary strains of women's comedic revisions.

The cultural prevalence of humanist/formalist notions of comedy becomes evident when female dramatists (particularly Curzon and MacDonald in this study) and feminist critics (like Carlson and myself) attempt to revise comedic patterns and impulses in order to create more liberating subject positions for their female characters and spectators. Because of this, the investments and assumptions that underpin that seminal critical tradition need to be considered carefully. For example, the association of comedic structure with ritual patterns from aboriginal societies or early European social practices tends to celebrate and make universal pre-existing social and gender ideologies. Further, those practices have usually been observed and interpreted by Western males who further

entrench their own biases. Feminist critic Susan Purdie challenges the "objectivity," political neutrality, along with the patriarchal/colonial underpinnings of archetypal, or what she calls "mythical," versions of comedy. Further, Purdie suggests that the argument that comedy simply troubles to set things in order again acts as a self-fulfilling myth, which betrays a "deep pessimism about 'the human condition'" (164) and which discourages politicized awareness and critical openness. Equally importantly, I would add that the "safety valve" theory of comedy assumes that all subjects are equally susceptible to structural and social recontainment; it does not allow for contextual differences and the diversity of responses which may be released by different kinds of unruly comedic practice and by different spectators' subject positions. The humanist/formalist conception of archetypal comedy is underpinned by self-limiting notions of subjectivity, gender, and genre which simply do not accommodate the variety and complexity of women's comedic practices this study addresses.

In response to gender biases inscribed in the humanist/formalist tradition, feminist critics like Susan Carlson, Regina Barreca and others have begun to develop a counter-tradition on gender and comedy.⁴ Such criticism seeks first to document those comic interventions by women long ignored by male critics and, second, to theorize the ways in which women's uses of comedy differ from classic "male-defined" patterns. These works show that women have long been active in comedy as creators, performers, and spectators, but while women have been constructing themselves as subjects in/of comedy, those roles have been largely ignored by critics. They provide convincing reasons for this exclusion: women's comedy has been undervalued due to the longstanding cultural/gender bias which holds that women are not (or ought not to be) funny; women's comedy has not been recognized critically precisely because it does not correspond comfortably to "archetypal" pattern; and, correspondingly, women's comedy has been ignored because it is inherently subversive of the patriarchal underpinnings of the male-defined tradition. As a result of these factors, the female subject of comedy was suppressed until feminist critics began to reclaim and/or construct her.

What I call the feminist counter-tradition has, as Barreca puts it, "accepted the challenge of providing new patterns and strategies" to characterize women's uses of comedy and humour (*Last* 9). While this critical discourse is not monolithic (nor is it

extensive), it is characterized by some common strategies. First, these critics consider women's comedic interventions, especially structural revisions, as social interventions. In this, they subscribe to the formalist notion that comedy focuses on social subjects/situations and that its impulse is towards social change. Like formalists, they also see comedy as an inherently subversive and/or optimistic genre, although they tend to underplay its "safety valve" effects (by focusing on women's generic revisions). Indeed, they suggest that its social meanings are part of its appeal for women practitioners. Regina Barreca for instance, argues that "women who create comedy do so in order to intrude, disturb and disrupt; that comedy constructed by women is linked to aggression and to the need to break free of socially and culturally imposed restraints" (*Last 6*).⁵ While Barreca accepts a definition of comedy that equates structural with social movement, she argues that the meaning and investment of that definition shifts according to gender:

What then are the defining features of comedy in women's writings in relation to the discussion of comedy in general? That women write comedies without "happy endings"; that despite the absence of such an ending, these works can indeed be classified as comedies; that they write comedies which destroy a social order, perhaps but not necessarily to establish a new and different order... (*Last 8*)

So while Frye, for instance, envisions generational renewal as the optimistic impetus of comedy, Barreca envisions socio-cultural disruption and possible reconstruction. In Barreca's view, women writers of comedy are politicized or dislocated automatically through gender and, in the image of the oppositional feminist critic perhaps, are constructed as inherently intrusive, disruptive, and angry subjects.

Susan Carlson contends similarly that women's comedies reveal a desire for social reconstruction that challenges, rather than reinstates, patriarchal ideals and structures. To work towards this goal, she argues, women dramatists are continually revising the structural dynamics of traditional comedy. As already discussed, the first part of Carlson's study analyzes those structural gender safeguards in comedies by British male dramatists. She then locates the beginnings of a female counter-tradition in the plays of Aphra Behn. Carlson argues that women's comedic forms share certain structural characteristics: they tend to be episodic and thus resist a unifying throughline; they

exhibit structural resistance to closure and thus circumvent the reinstatement of gender hierarchy implicit in the traditional happy ending. "[T]he power of conventional comic inversion and ending," she argues, is "fractured by the women's concept of comedy as a texture that replaces linear plotting with juxtapositional, episodic, and metaphoric movements in narrative" (174). Carlson's study argues that, in order to create a space for an active, unruly conception of female subjectivity in comedy, certain structural constraints need to be overcome, and she provides numerous examples of how women practitioners in Britain have altered the "archetypal" or "male-defined" structural and social dynamics of the genre to that end. Carlson constructs the female writer of comedy as alternately angry and resistant (of patriarchal structures) and celebratory and optimistic (of women's experiences). Like Barreca, she champions their potential for expressing, even inciting, progressive social reform:

in the hands of contemporary writers, comedy is an exploration of women characters and of fundamental social change. Both are long-standing subjects of comedy. Yet women writers have endowed their comic women with a power that comedy has traditionally counteracted, and as a result the women superintend increased possibilities for change (4-5).

In tandem with structural changes, Carlson argues that women's comedies create ample roles for female characters and active roles for women performers, and they address themes of particular interest to women spectators. For example, she finds that explorations of female sexuality and women's communities, which are related integrally to explorations of female selfhood, are of primary importance in contemporary British women's comedy. "In general," she comments, "these plays chart the growing agency of their female characters and offer a broad endorsement of social change" (163). Carlson provides detailed analyses of plays that represent women as capable of performing and describing their own sexuality, individuality, and collectivity. Like Barreca and virtually all feminist critics on women and comedy, Carlson holds an optimistic ideological agenda and views women's comedy as a potentially powerful strategy for the subversion, or at the very least decentring, of patriarchal order.

Following formalists and feminists alike, my study acknowledges comedy as a genre that has long been read in terms of its social meanings, and so it considers carefully

associations between structural revisions and their social implications. I also read the publications and productions of these plays as forms of social intervention. Certainly, taken together, the comedies under consideration indicate the desire to address and revise comedic conventions and biases, to imagine alternative comedic structures, to dramatize issues of gender in social relations, and to construct strong subject positions for women. However, taken separately, they propose very different revising strategies, different impulses and desires, different views of gender in social relations, different forms of social intervention, different understandings of agency, different kinds of female subject positions and even notions of subjectivity. Indeed, those differences are as revealing – and as destabilizing – of gender and genre norms as their similarities.

In mapping out a literary and critical space for women's comedy, critics of the counter-tradition, critics like myself, need to negotiate between the desire to construct "women" and "women's comedy" as gender and genre categories, and the necessity to recognize the differences within, and instability of, those categories. This is the site where discussion of female subjectivity becomes crucial. Susan Carlson addresses this in the second half of her study, which brings a discussion of the formal and social meanings of women's comedy alongside a consideration of the importance and complications of female selfhood in those plays she analyzes. Here, Carlson is especially attentive to recognizing differences in women's uses of comedy and entanglements in how women construct themselves as subjects, at the same time as she asserts a notion of female comic community. She states, for instance, that "Just as psychoanalytic critics are now counseling for an understanding of the 'self' as a plurality of attitudes and not as a unity, these playwrights are making self-affirmation a necessarily shared and multidirectional process" (259). Actually, I would suggest that Carlson assumes a critical subject position which reads those playwrights (the writers' subject positions) in this "shared" and "multidirectional" manner. This allows her to construct a savvy "double vision," which at once asserts a gendered political position (on women playwrights' behalf) and acknowledges the complications and differences within and amongst those playwrights' visions of female selfhood.⁶

In asserting a place for female subjects in comedy, feminist critics in the counter-tradition call into question a conception of subjectivity that is linked with

humanist/formalist notions. As I have argued, classic comedy (as constructed by Frye and like-minded critics) assumes that literature is composed of "archetypal" structural patterns that respond to "universally" held human needs. This critical tradition is underwritten by what have come to be called "humanist" notions of the subject. Put simply, the term "subject" denotes an enabling construction of identity (the "I"), which allows humans to see themselves as distinct persons, capable of thought and action. Drama and criticism (like other discursive practices) produce numerous "subject positions" for writers, performers, readers, and spectators. The way in which persons conceive of themselves as subjects influences and is influenced by how they take up or take on those positions. Processes such as character identification, role-play, or critical engagement offer various means of interacting with dramatic works. A humanist view of the subject tends to see those processes as "natural" and "neutral." However, recent theories regarding subjectivity complicate that view. Catherine Belsey, for example, argues that our conceptions of ourselves as subjects are the product and the process of ideology and, further, that the goal of ideology (whether Marxist, humanist, or feminist) is to construct humans as subjects. Subject positions constructed in/by literature and performance are ideologically loaded, but not all subject positions are equally "conscious" of their status as ideological constructs. Belsey argues, for instance, that the subject of realist/humanist drama is "based on an empiricist-idealist interpretation of the world...[wherein] 'man' is the origin and source of meaning, of action, and of history.... Our concepts and our knowledge are held to be the product of experience..., and this experience is preceded and interpreted by the mind, reason or thought, the property of transcendent human nature whose essence is the attribute of each individual" (*Critical 7*). The humanist subject is conceived of as coherent, self-evident, and self-determining. As Belsey and others argue, humanism has historically thought of its ideal subjects as male, and therefore also asserts a patriarchal ideology. One of the problems with the humanist subject, from Belsey's feminist perspective, is that it rarely considers itself as a product and process of ideologies (patriarchal, capitalist, colonial etc.); therefore it tends to naturalize its ideological processes as "the way things are." As I have shown, for example, traditional humanist conceptions of comedy naturalize uncritically patriarchal assumptions about the subject of comedy.

Critics of the feminist counter-tradition, on the other hand, advocate that one consider carefully how sexual and other differences (such as ethnic or class contexts) complicate and expand how one conceives of comedy's subjects. In so doing, they assert a different political and ideological position from which to read women's comedies than that of humanism. One could argue, nonetheless, that because these critics suggest that men use and conceive of comedy in one way and women another, or rather other ways, they conceive of women as capable of self-knowledge and self-empowerment and as unified by gender and feminist politics.⁷ But do female writers of comedy represent themselves or their characters in this manner? While she maintains resolutely that contemporary British women's comedies share certain structural characteristics (especially a focus on comedy's transformative middle, and a resistance to its closure) and social meanings (especially a positive, optimistic vision of female agency), Carlson concedes finally that the plays she studies resist a singular, and singularly positive, conception of female subjectivity: "The portrait of the comic genre that emerges from my study of contemporary female playwrights is one of comedy as the location for multiple definitions of female self, sexuality, and relationship" (161). My own analyses suggest similarly that the women playwrights in this study construct very different conceptions of subjectivity which are reflected in the different subject positions those writers take up, those they construct for their characters, and those they offer spectators. But while Carlson maintains the position that explorations of selfhood equal evidence of the liberating potential of comedy for women, my own approach to subjectivity leads me to be somewhat more equivocal. Indeed, when I reflect upon the female subject positions that arise from the plays I have selected, I am continually faced with how difficult *they* are to pin down. The positions I perceive and inhabit are as often pessimistic as optimistic, as often fearful as desiring, as often ambivalent as emancipatory, as often divided as determined. Further, they by no means offer a coherent conception of subjectivity; some are constructed as coherent or self-evident, and others are duplicitous or indecipherable. Neither do those positions offer a coherent conception of female gender or of gender politics. While my study applies the term "feminist" to several plays, it acknowledges that the "feminist" subject positions I perceive and/or construct are neither uniform, nor do they propose a singular notion of either female or feminist

selfhood. That these works take up the subject of women, and construct women as subjects, and that they do so in such different manners is, to my mind, an important enactment of the potential for social reconstruction and alterable conceptions of gender. However, they also address and/or reveal ambivalence and trepidations regarding assumptions of female selfhood, and so suggest that those alterations are by no means assured. My own contribution to the feminist countertradition acknowledges both the desires and the fears that may at once enable and constrain female subjects of comedy; it does not attempt to establish a shared optimistic or other vision on the part of women playwrights, but rather emphasizes their very great differences at the same time as it considers what similar approaches and effects suggest about female subjectivity. In so doing, this study shifts the counter-tradition's previous focus on formalist-feminist definitions of "women's comedy" towards considerations of subjectivity and gender in relation to different comedic and comic practices.

Recent theories on gender and subjectivity help to account for the constraints as well as the possibilities I see attending female subjects of women's comedies and, correspondingly, help explain why those works are populated by so many equivocal subject positions. Judith Butler has written extensively on the potential and restrictions surrounding conceptions of female subjecthood. The complex theoretical terrain she has mapped draws from post-structuralism and Lacanian psychoanalysis in order to explore how gender intersects with language and formations of subjectivity. According to Butler, humans conceive of themselves as distinct subjects and as sexed beings concurrently, and this process is constituted through language. To become a subject means to become "conscious" through entry into language and its system of differences, including gendered differences. Butler states that "it is unclear that there can be an 'I' or 'we' who has not been submitted, subject to gender, where gendering is...the differentiating relations by which speaking subjects come into being. Subjected to gender, but subjectivated by gender, the 'I' neither precedes nor follows the process of gendering, but emerges only within and as the matrix of gender relations themselves" (*Bodies* 7). Recognizing oneself as a subject and as a gendered being are simultaneous and intertwined effects. In this view, gender enables as well as constrains the subject. It enables because it allows a person to act, to speak, to think, to play; it constrains because it predetermines how he or

she can or should do so. Gender is not simply something one discovers or performs according to will; nor is it a fixed state, exclusive of other psychological and material processes.

The entry into subjectivity, language, and gender also occasions simultaneously the constitution of an "unconscious" self. In this view, subjectivity is neither a static nor a fully comprehensible state, but an ongoing process. The unconscious troubles and obscures the individual's understanding and control of his/her subjectivity; at the same time an individual's continual experiences and experiments in the world (which are made comprehensible through language) allow her/him to experience a sense of selfhood and personal growth. According to this conception, subjecthood is neither neutral or natural; it is a residual, although inevitable, product of the entry into language, gender, ideology, and consciousness-unconsciousness. And, unlike the humanist conception of a free and self-determining subject, this subject's "identity" is contingent, non-coherent, not fully recognizable, and capable of agency only within certain constraints (such as the limits of language systems).

This conception of subjectivity complicates the optimistic oppositionality and the subversive disruptiveness ascribed to women's comedy. Because the subject comes to recognize him/herself through language and through gender, Butler argues that oppositional subjects implicate themselves as part of the system they appear to resist: "The paradox of subjectivization (*assugetissement*) is precisely that the subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by such norms. Although this constitutive constraint does not foreclose the possibility of agency, it does locate agency as a reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power" (Butler, *Bodies* 15). At the same time as women writers or critics attempt to revise gender norms in order to construct active female subject positions in comedy, they must needs acknowledge and, to some degree, re(in)state the power of those norms. At the same time as they present different performances of gender, those performances are not entirely free. Neither are they paralyzed. Butler reasons that the very need to perform gender over and over again reveals its instability; she argues that those repetitive performances of gender open up "gaps and fissures" which escape or exceed the norm so that gender norms cannot be wholly defined or fixed (*Bodies* 10). I

find Butler's theories useful, since they point to the need to consider carefully those elements of generic revision and performance that challenge or invert gender norms and to assess whether or how those elements might themselves normalize certain gender assumptions or, to use the formalist lexicon, perform a safety-valve function. Further, and more importantly, they advocate consideration of those elements that present troubling or, perhaps especially, playful contradictions and complexities about the gendered subject which may, in fact, be more socially subversive than more straightforward revisions.

This view of the relations between gender, genre, and subjectivity brings with it the need for a more flexible and expansive definition of comedy than that proposed by humanist/formalist conceptions. Playwright Margaret Hollingsworth once said to me, "I'm not sure what comedy is." After much study, I concur. The formalist definition of comedy as the emplotted movement from misrule to happy ending, from social upheaval to social reconstruction, seems unnecessarily limiting upon a survey of contemporary dramatic comedies. Certainly, the male humanist subject that transmits and receives the "universal" meanings of Frye's comedy paradigm does not correspond to those subject positions that populate the comedies in this study; nor do the implicitly angry and/or emancipatory female subjects described by feminist-formalist conceptions necessarily accommodate their complexities and differences. Many contemporary revisions of comedy reflect changing conceptions of subjectivity and how it intersects with gender. Correspondingly, my project of reconceiving female subject positions in relation to comedy means also reconceiving what comedy might be. While I maintain that it is useful to consider dramatic comedy as a historical genre, with certain characteristics (which I term "comedic") that undergo revision by female practitioners, it is also important to acknowledge plays that manipulate diverse "comic" strategies and impulses which exceed generic containment. In their discussions of women and "comic" literature and film, Kathleen Rowe and Susan Rubin Suleiman consider comedy not as a set of genre conventions but as form of psychic activity, unleashed through the dynamics of linguistic and performative playfulness. This non-formalist definition accommodates a performance such as Karen Hines' parodic-clown-solo-piece *Pochsy's Lips*, which I discuss in Chapter Five, and which does not adhere comfortably to familiar conceptions

of dramatic comedy. Rowe's and Suleiman's work is influenced by post-structuralist, psychoanalytic, and feminist ideas. Such understandings of comedy as a non-totalizing, multifaceted interaction between performer(s) and spectator-critic(s) (rather than a preconceived structural necessity) opens a space for female subjectivities somewhat different from those of oppositional generic revision.

Still, if the formal dynamics of classic comedy are exclusive of female subjects, are "comic" interactions necessarily less so? Historically the "comic," like the "comedic," has been a gendered realm, largely exclusive of women and predicated on gender bias. Feminist studies of women's comic activities and how they relate to psychological or subjective processes pay homage to Freud's seminal work in this area and must grapple with those gender ideologies inscribed in his and other psychoanalytic frameworks. An analysis of Freud's influential theories on wit and its relation to conscious and unconscious processes points to how gender dynamics infiltrate descriptions of the comic just as they have the comedic. For example, Kathleen Rowe describes Freud's definition of the joke: "The first man initiates the joke to release an aggressive impulse, originally sexual, toward the woman. He forces her to participate in the joke through her embarrassment...Through its cleverness, the joke veils and makes socially acceptable its underlying aggression. The joke does not exist until the laughter of the second man confirms it; the woman, as the joke's passive butt, thus enables the formation of a bond between the two men" (68). According to this conception, the joke is a homosocial exchange of power, which pretends to be heterosexual, and which is misogynistic in impulse. In general, I am wary of Freudian paradigms since, not unlike anthropological/formalist paradigms, they tend to universalize pre-existing oppositional gender roles and social dynamics. Still, as Rowe suggests, Freud's formulation does describe why so much laughter has traditionally been directed at women, why women have often felt alienated from comic activities, and why so many female comedians direct their jokes at themselves or other women. Chapter Two, my analysis of Erika Ritter's *Automatic Pilot*, certainly benefits from these ideas.

Freud also describes two related forms of wit, the "comic" and the "humorous" which, while they may certainly involve gender, do not assume specific gender roles or dynamics. Humour occurs when a pleasing aesthetic turn is substituted for a more

distressing emotion, such as anger or resentment. This exchange is often found in women's comedies, particularly those termed feminist. The comic, as Freud conceives it, is almost a reaction of, or to, social fatalism. A comic reaction arises when a person recognizes her/his dependence on external factors, particularly social structures. Not surprisingly, comic effects are commonly found in female authored comedies that seek to expose and challenge constraining social structures. A play like Margaret Hollingsworth's *The House that Jack Built*, the subject of Chapter Four, may not be easily recognizable as a classic comedy, but it is certainly comic in this sense. I do not intend to limit myself to Freud's specific terms and definitions, but I believe that his conceptions of comic activity are useful insofar as they describe a realm of comic impulses, devices, and emotions that are not necessarily dependent on generic, or formalist, conceptions of comedy. Importantly, discussions of comedy influenced by psychoanalytic theory take into account the dynamic relationship between conscious and unconscious processes, and how gender ideologies interact with those processes. They treat female characters not as a formal devices or authorial mouthpieces but rather as dynamic, puzzling representations of the workings of human subjectivity.

The sampling of perspectives about comedy and the comic I have outlined underscores an important point: how one conceives of comedy reflects how one conceives of subjectivity, and vice versa. My analyses point to the essential role that gender plays in comedic and comic practices, as well as in the subjective dynamics that such practices propose and represent. I find all of these perspectives useful in that they help illuminate different characteristics and conceptions of female subjectivity in comedy. For instance, I advocate the need to consider not only "surface" or conscious representations of gender, but also how hidden or unconscious representations complicate and destabilize conceptions of gender. I advocate the necessity to consider not only "conventions of structure and content" and how they are revised, but also the linguistic and performance techniques that unleash the comic in comedy.

In this study, I consider how five female-authored plays present different conceptions of female subjectivity, different subject positions, and how they represent different comic impulses and even notions of comedy. I will sometimes look at characters as subjects, sometimes writers; sometimes I will construct a subject position

for spectators. I want to state simply that these constructions are not intended to be authoritative; they are exploratory positions produced by my readings of playtext and performances, writer's interviews, theoretical and critical texts. Most importantly, I hope to show how these different subject positions interrelate with how gender is performed – repeated and destabilized -- differently in each play. Generally, my analyses take place on two levels. First, I consider those gender performances that are consciously and clearly articulated and/or actualized by the text and/or performance. I look at the ways in which these subject positions revise comedic conventions and how they challenge and/or reiterate gender norms. Second, I pay attention to those troubling and playful comic activities that occur in covert expressions, confusions, and excessive representations of gender that feature commonly in the women's dramatic comedies in this study. I look at the ways these activities complicate how one conceives of gender, comedy, and subjectivity. Together, these layers of analysis allow me to consider both the constraints and the possibilities that attend female subjects of comedy.

Chapter One discusses Sarah Anne Curzon's nineteenth-century closet drama, *The Sweet Girl Graduate*. I argue that the play constructs two kinds of subject positions for women, which I call the didactic and hidden subjects. This short script revises the comedy of manners form, substituting a woman's graduation for the conventional marriage ending, in order to argue for the expansion of women's educational opportunities. As such, it provides an early example of a Canadian woman playwright's desire to revise the structural safeguards of comedy that serve to recontain liberating female performance. The heroine of the story is, on the surface, a didactic oppositional mouthpiece who challenges gender biases in social institutions and, at the same time, applauds conventional feminine characteristics. The play assumes a certain shared understanding of gender and asserts common gender goals; at the same time textual contradictions unsettle or make dubious those goals and ideals. Through attention to those latter characteristics, I bring to the surface the hidden female subject in the play. *The Sweet Girl Graduate* is a closet drama, intended to be read rather than performed. The absence of performance haunts this play as a substructural critique of gender limitations. I pay close attention to the device of cross dressing, which is at once described in, and yet disallowed by, the play's textual form. A common characteristic of

classic comedy's period of inversion, the play employs cross-dressing both for didactic purpose and in a more covert manner in order to express the heroine's desire towards women and to undercut those very gender norms it simultaneously admires. Lesbian desire, the craving for performance, and the potential to unsettle gender certainties haunt this play and transgress the boundaries of nineteenth-century comedic conventionality.

My second chapter focuses on *Automatic Pilot*, a popular dramatic comedy produced almost a century after Curzon wrote her play. Erika Ritter's comedy about a female stand-up comedian is a casebook of gender ambivalence. Charlie, the aptly named "heroine," is riddled with conflicting ideals and feelings about her gender, and beset by numerous psychological problems. Both Ritter's play and her heroine's comedy routines exhibit self-deprecating gender anxiety. I employ psychoanalytic and feminist theories to illuminate why this dynamic is characteristic of many female comedic subjects. I argue further that while the play constructs a vital, intriguing female character in the first half, spectators are directed to identify with the male subject positions constructed in the play, particularly in the second half. As a result, the play constructs a split identification for its female spectators, which creates a kind of gender anxiety similar to that which Charlie experiences. Most problematically, from my feminist perspective, the play suggests that its "problem woman" protagonist is solely responsible for her own psychological anxiety. Chapter Two provides an analysis of two anxious subject positions: Charlie's and my own. It concludes with my response to Ritter's comedy of anxiety, a feminist resistant reading of *Automatic Pilot*.

My third chapter treats Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* which, as a celebrated and self-consciously feminist comedy, marks an important achievement in Canadian theatre. Previous critical analyses have focused on the play's parodic revision of Shakespearean material and ignored how this layer of comedic/comic activity interrelates with the play's evident Jungian archetypal framework. I argue that *Goodnight Desdemona* devises a feminist-Jungian subject position for its female protagonist and spectators. MacDonald plays with and revises Jungian ideals regarding gender archetypes and the process of individuation in order to conceive of a comedic pattern and impulse that allows for an active and transformative notion of female subjectivity. This feminist-archetypal vision asserts the potential for gender

transformation that occurs through the inter-negotiations of conscious and unconscious, personal and socio-cultural realms. Importantly, *Goodnight Desdemona* advocates and augments opportunities for active female performers, as well as active participation on the part of reading and spectating subjects. Some responses to and performances of the play ignore its iconoclastic feminist vision. Because MacDonald's revision parallels as it transforms classic comedic pattern, her feminist archetypal subject can be depoliticized and misrecognized solely as a conventional – if female -- humanist subject in a fairly harmless sort of comedy. I argue the need to appreciate the odd mixture of feminist and Jungian critiques that underpin the female subject position constructed in the play and to reanimate the play's unique comedic vision of a process of gender transformation that is at once psychic, cultural, and societal.

The following chapter, "A Feminist Absurd: Margaret Hollingsworth's *The House that Jack Built*," features a strange hybrid: the subject of absurdism meets the subject of feminism. While some female practitioners employ elements of dark comedy and absurdism in their works, this strategy has been seldom discussed or theorized by either male or female critics. Hollingsworth's play deploys numerous characteristics of absurdist drama to provide a vision of male and female characters caught in the normative systems of gender, capitalism, and heterosexual marriage. Jack wants his wife, Jenny, to be happy and attempts to make her so by following meticulously a cultural script for the married middle-class male: he builds her a house in the country. Jenny is caught in a world of structures -- both literal and abstract -- that control her and allow her no voice. Unable to articulate or account for her resistance to this cultural script, her unconscious repression takes an excessive form: bulimia, obsessive environmentalism, and nightmarish hysteria. She begins to speak in a kind of grotesque surrealistic world of images -- as does the play. This strange subterranean expression troubles the foundations of gender and power that threaten to contain the female subject. And yet the play ends as it began, with Jack and Jenny seated side by side, still isolated from one another. Jenny is pregnant. On the one hand, this ambivalent ending ironizes the regenerative closure of classic comedy, since it shows both male and female subjects recontained within a stultifying patriarchal script: *The House that Jack Built*. On the other hand, Jenny's ominous pregnancy suggests the potential for something...other... Hollingsworth's

absurdist vision points to the exclusion or incomprehension of gender and heterosexuality as controlling structures of meaning in the male absurdist tradition. The play creates a female -- and I would argue feminist -- subject position within the absurd.

Simultaneously, it proposes the need to complicate the notion of optimism that some critics see as a defining impetus of feminism and even feminist comedy, and to admit ambivalence as a potentially subversive characteristic within those realms.

Chapter Five introduces the parodic and playful female subject in Karen Hines' *Pochsy's Lips*. Feminist and postmodernist discussions of parodic subjects help elucidate the pleasures as well as the dangers, the possibilities as well as the restrictions of this form of gender and social critique. I argue that Hines' physical and linguistic parody, her own adaptation of the *bouffon* clowning tradition, provide an example of what Judith Butler terms "subversive bodily acts." Hines' performance draws attention to the gaps between the notions of sex and gender and between the bodies of persona and performer; gender parody and play exist in the gap and interplay of these unstable categories. This form of performance allows Hines to deploy her body as a creative and critical medium and shows that, while the female body is never entirely free, neither are its meanings and possibilities fully determined. Hines' *bouffon* performance is at once playful and parodic, appealing and scathing; this form of physical comedy imagines gender as a playful and innovative realm.

As these chapter outlines reveal, I draw on different conceptions and traditions of comedy, and follow different theoretical avenues, in order to describe variations of form, content, and impulse in these comedies and in order to make a space for different notions of female subjectivity. This approach allows me to describe those subject positions that consciously or clearly challenge and revise various gender and genre restrictions, those that appear more confined within those structures, and those subject positions that are less easy to pin down, but no less troubling. It allows me to show how the way women envision women in comedy is constrained by gender, and how those same constraints enable, perhaps make inevitable, strainings against the limits of representation. This in turn allows me to account for the full range of reactions -- from ambivalence to excitement, fear to hope -- I experience in response to these plays.

“Study of women and comedy is still rare,” states Susan Carlson (172). Since so little work in this area exists, my readers may wonder why I have elected to write exclusively about Canadian women’s comedies. First, as a spectator, reader, teacher, and advocate of Canadian drama, I believe that these works warrant the same careful literary and theoretical analysis that American and British comedies by women have begun to receive. Second, comedies by Canadian women appear sporadically (often in Fringe and women’s festivals rather than in large theatres or print) and often seem very different from one another. Indeed, I would argue that this lack of a central defining pattern might be viewed as a strength, at least for a feminist such as myself who advocates a proliferation of comedic strategies and impulses, of conceptions of female subjectivity, of difference. That said, my study should be read from within an Anglo-Canadian context. I have included no “Canadian” diasporic or aboriginal writers in this analysis. This is mainly because I am more familiar with the “values” and “complicities” that go along with being female in Anglo-Canadian culture, and so am more attentive to subtle differences within and between women’s comedies from that cultural context. Correspondingly, I do not want to obscure or collapse into this study the specific concerns and issues that comedies by women from other cultural contexts address. I leave that much-warranted analysis, and that criticism of my project, to another -- or to another day.

Before I move along, I want to respond briefly to my readers who, by now, are no doubt dying for a laugh. Inevitably, critics who write about comedy at some point admit that their analysis diminishes precisely whatever qualities they find attractive or revolutionary about comedy. Yes indeed. What's more, critic Susan Rubin Suleiman decries the tone of paralyzing seriousness that plagues feminist studies and theory generally. I stand earnest and accused. Like Suleiman, I would like to find a way of talking about serious gender issues and refusing to let them be taken completely seriously, of not allowing gender norms and their ensuing oppressions to become oppressive or normative. The playwrights in this study come closer than I'll ever get.

¹There appears to be much more public than critical interest in Canadian women's comedies at this point. Most academic attention has been directed at a small number of plays: MacDonald's *Goodnight Desdemona* has certainly received the most analysis (see Chapter Three). Other recent critical articles on Canadian women's comedy include: Wilson "Po-Co Jest: Reflections on Comedy and National Identity in English Canada," Hengen "Towards a Feminist Comedy" and "Unofficial Lives" and chapters by Hengen and Derksen in the anthology *Performing Gender and Comedy*.

²Frye's formulation of dramatic comedy derives primarily from the plot structure of Greek New Comedy: "What normally happens is that a young man wants a young woman, that his desire is resisted by some opposition, usually paternal, and that near the end of the play some twist in the plot enables the hero to have his will...the movement of comedy is usually from one kind of society to another." Frye argues that this formula "has become a basis for most comedy" (141).

³For discussions of the interrelationship between ritual and comedy see: Bakhtin *Rabelais and His World* and *The Dialogic Imagination*, Barber *Rise of the Common Player: Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*, Bristol "Carnival and the Institutions of Theater in Elizabethan England," Frye *Anatomy of Criticism*, Shershow *Laughing Matters*, Turner *From Ritual to Theatre and Process, Performance, and Pilgrimage*.

⁴In addition to those works by Sochen, Barreca, and Carlson referred to above, other full-length studies and collections that focus on women and comedy (not necessarily dramatic comedy), and which I would include in what I call the feminist counter-tradition, include: Banks and Swift *The Joke's on Us*, Barreca *New Perspectives on Women and Comedy* and *They Used to Call me Snow White but I Drifted: Women's Strategic Use of Humor*, Finney *Look Who's Laughing*, Hengen *Performing Gender and Comedy*, Kaufman and Blakely *Pulling Our Own Strings*, Little *Comedy and the Woman Writer*, and Walker *A Very Serious Thing*.

⁵Barreca's association of women's comedy with disruptive anger draws upon earlier studies by Judy Little and Judith Wilt.

⁶Consider for instance her fine analysis of Nell Dunn's *Steaming* (which dramatizes the relationships of six women who visit a London Turkish bath). Carlson uses this play in a discussion of the "complicated constructions of self and sexuality" (256) that characterize a number of comedies she discusses. She acknowledges that "While the play is undeniably comic, the sexuality tied to that comedy is at once corrosive *and* stabilizing" (259) and pays special attention to the menace that accompanies Dawn's "new attention to her body (and her 'self') in Act Two:

Dawn's sexual repression is arguably the saddest in the play, since her adolescent attraction to men is connected with rape and perhaps abuse. In part because of this past, her recovery of a self full of desires is troubling and tentative. In this play, sexuality is not a panacea for individual progress towards self-definition. It remains, however, a site for comic sharing and community. (259)

From my perspective the most exciting aspect of this analysis is Carlson's acknowledgement that Dawn's recognition of her selfhood is very complicated indeed. One could argue, however, that these entanglements become subsumed within Carlson's general affirmation that appreciation of female sexuality and community is characteristic of women's comedy. If I were to provide a reading of *Steaming* I would be tempted to take up Dawn's subject position and consider more fully how it complicates presumptions of female selfhood, agency, and even female comic community. Nonetheless, this is one example of how Carlson's examinations of selfhood do venture into comic territory of a less affirmative nature.

⁷Lizbeth Goodman's review addresses Carlson's application of the feminist label to those diverse works she studies: "In any discussion of the work of contemporary women, the labeling of work as 'feminist' is problematic. There are so many definitions of that term...." She goes on to wonder, "Whose feminism are we discussing? The academic's, the playwright's, the director's, the performer's, or the audience's, the reader's, or the critic's?" (169)

Chapter One

Divided Skirts/Divided Subjects: Sarah Anne Curzon's *The Sweet Girl Graduate*

Sarah Anne Curzon's 1882 comedy, *The Sweet Girl Graduate*, tells the story of Kate whose access to higher education has been denied due to her gender. In order to make her point that women are men's intellectual equals and deserve equal access to University degrees, Kate dresses as a man to attend classes. She graduates with high honours and, at the play's end, returns to female dress to deliver a speech encouraging both men and women to join the cause of gender reform in education. Through its argument, its use and revision of comedic conventions, the play constructs a strong "didactic" subject position, which enables author, heroine, and reader alike to become caught up in a feisty reformist enterprise with clearly stated aims. As such, the play can be read as a simple, straightforward dramatic tract with some noteworthy examples of gender and genre inversion. However, such a reading does not account for a number of elements: the tension between text and performance embedded in this "closet drama"; those moments that might be described as textual oddities; its sometimes contradictory and ambivalent approach to gender. In this chapter, I want to acknowledge the importance of those revisions and manipulations of comedy which allow Curzon to construct a pragmatic, didactic female subject position, but I want also to disclose another, hidden subject position that emerges from the text and that troubles gender/sexual identity in quite different, but equally interesting, fashion.

This chapter considers the complexities of how female subject positions in this nineteenth-century comedy are "fashioned." The discourse on costume and the motif of cross-dressing are essential in constructing the didactic subject's argument for an expansion of women's spheres of interest. But that cross-dressed female subject conveys more than a one-sided argument for women's rights; she imparts also a sense of ambivalence towards her female identity and an expression of desire towards other women. In other words, Kate's attitude towards the "ah -- divided skirt" (150) she elects to wear is...ah... divided. Put differently, despite its apparent straightforwardness, the subject positions in this text are complicated, layered, and not altogether transparent. This chapter also imagines the play's textuality as a kind of clothing, which at once

renders the female subject visible, acts as a kind of disguise for imagined female public performance, and advertises the absence of actual comedic performance available to nineteenth-century Canadian women.

Sarah Anne Curzon, in so many ways an unlikely author of comedy, herself occupies an intriguing position in Canadian history. An analysis of the manner in which historical texts describe her public life (the way they fashion her as a historical subject) raises questions as to how to interpret her literary work. Descriptions of Curzon's social character and reformist tactics suggest that she was virtually a paradigmatic nineteenth-century Canadian suffragist. Born and educated in England, she moved to Canada in her late twenties. After her husband's death, Curzon supported herself through journalism, combining this financial enterprise with her suffragist aspirations (Bacchi 26). She acted as coeditor and contributor to the "woman's page" of the *Canada Citizen*, a prohibitionist paper sympathetic to the suffrage movement, and furnished essays, fiction, and reviews to *The Week*, *Grip*, and *The Evangelical Churchman*. She also wrote articles advocating suffrage, women's education, and temperance for Canadian, as well as American, newspapers (Lady Edgar 3). Carol Lee Bacchi states that, in Canada, "Most male and female suffragists participated in a wide range of reform activities" (5). Curzon was exemplary in her attention to the causes of prohibition, health and educational reform, as well as women's rights. Curzon was also a founding member of the Toronto Women's Literary Society, which, as Bacchi comments, was "ostensibly a society for the development of women's intellectual interests," but actually "a front for suffrage activity" (26). The camouflaged political agenda of this literary club serves as a reminder that nineteenth-century women like Curzon were highly attentive to codes of social propriety and form, even in their reformist activities. The challenge for interpreters of Curzon's work is to consider the subversive -- both in the sense of covert and transgressive -- messages that operate alongside her observation of social and formal propriety. In other words, I advocate the need to look carefully here at historical/biographical evidence, later at literary/textual evidence, to theorize what lies hidden behind what appears evident.

That said, Curzon's political views appear to adhere to a conservative strand of suffrage reform. Bacchi notes that Curzon was attached to the Conservative political party and its ideology (44-5): "The Conservative suffragists represented a strain of

Canadian 'Tory Democracy' and unanimously endorsed the growth of state authority and responsibility" (44). This ideology is pronounced in Curzon's historical drama, *Laura Secord, The Heroine of 1812*, in which the author conjoins feminist goals to those of imperialist nationalism.¹ Like most Eastern Canadian suffragists, Curzon was a member of an Anglo, middle-class social elite, and she upheld those gender qualities valued by that milieu. As Bacchi comments, "They asked that women be allowed to vote in order to impress certain values upon society. Protestant morality, sobriety, and the family order, 'Women's Rights,' in their view of things meant the right to serve" (3).² Curzon's writing enterprises further support an impression of her conservatism. They are divided between Canadian historical themes (particularly Loyalist history) and conventional "feminine" subjects such as the joys of nature and family. Again, those literary subjects ally her with the prevalent conservative strand of nineteenth-century Canadian suffragism. Bacchi explains: "Because they belonged to a social group which considered the family the key to the progress of society and the race, they did not question the conventional allocation of sex roles. They wanted to strengthen the family, not to disrupt it further" (11). In articles, speeches, poems, and her long drama, "Laura Secord," Sarah Anne Curzon championed responsibility to State and family alongside the cause of women's reform. Lady Edgar's 1889 published eulogy also casts Curzon as a model moderate reformer:

For more than thirty-five years she has lived among us in Toronto, and by her pen and personal influences has done much for our intellectual and national life. Beneath a frail form and gentle bearing dwelt a brave spirit, and with many disadvantages of health and fortune she accomplished much. (Lady Edgar 3)

With conventional rhetoric, this eulogy describes Curzon as a woman (not unlike her own fictional heroines) negotiating carefully between traditional feminine and masculine traits (frailty and bravery) and private and public personae (personal influences and the pen). Historical texts (including Curzon's own) thus provide an image of Curzon as a woman with a strong sense of imperialist national, social, and family responsibility, who conveys very little of what one might term radicalism. That is, at least until we read her one and only recorded work of comedy, *The Sweet Girl Graduate*. This small comedy

complicates and troubles the otherwise unambiguous portrait of Curzon as a prototypical conservative Canadian suffragist.

Because Curzon's literary oeuvre upholds highbrow, "imperialist" literary standards, it seems odd that she would even consider employing a more lowbrow form, the comedy sketch, to promote such a serious, and often belittled, topic as educational reform for women. Curzon's notes to the play, reprinted in her collected writings, state: "This little comedy appeared in *Gripsack* for 1882, and was written at the request of the editor of *Grip*, who was, and is, in full sympathy with all efforts to secure the rights of women" (154). Curzon publicly credits J. W. Bengough (editor/caricaturist of *Grip*) with the play's conception. In doing so, she employs the strategy of eliciting male authority for an unusual gender enterprise (as I will show, this same strategy appears within the play itself). While dramatic satires often appeared in *Grip*, this form of expression seems an unusual choice for a woman of Curzon's time, class, and temperament.³ The social taboo regarding women and comedy was likely internalized by both men and women, and Curzon's "justification" for her enterprise is not surprising. Once allowing herself access to the form, however, she manipulates it with surprising liveliness. Both the content and revisions of convention contained in her comedy appear radical in comparison with her other works. For example, *The Sweet Girl Graduate* celebrates not State and family, but an independent young woman, and it challenges prevalent ideas about gender identities.

The Sweet Girl Graduate can appear a deceptively simple, even silly and awkward, comedy. It engages a variety of styles, in lively, parodic manner, in service of an overt political cause. As such, it has a certain agit-prop appeal. The playtext varies between mock erudition and lampoon, as it mimics and travesties Shakespearean verse, political rhetoric, and coarse journalistic satire. All those forms of discourse were used commonly to ridicule women's behaviours and aspirations; here Curzon demonstrates that women can be as clever and as silly as men and turns these strategies back against those who usually deploy them. The play also draws upon a medley of comedic traditions: comedy of manners, melodrama, farce, and high comedy.⁴ The comedy of manners (a term that refers originally to English Restoration comic drama) "revels in social behaviour peculiar to a given era and class" and treats humourously the class, profession, eccentricity, dress, and mannerisms of that particular social group (Little 15). *The Sweet*

Girl Graduate certainly treats the respectable Canadian middle-class in this manner. However, the exaggerated character types and hearty verbal humour of the play tend towards "farce" or "low comedy." Other times, its use of logic and obscure references appeal to a cultivated mind, which is invited to laugh at, and to right, the incongruities of human behavior. In this respect, the play comes closer to what George Meredith termed high comedy, which seeks to "awaken thoughtful laughter" (470). Curzon's comedic sketch thus draws on a number of comedic traditions and strategies – high and low, sophisticated and broad. The author relinquishes generic or aesthetic purity, employing whichever comedic style suits the didactic purpose of the scene, and altering structural conventions to accommodate her feisty female subject. Importantly, for instance, the heterosexual romance narrative, common to all those comedic forms she draws upon, is absent in *The Sweet Girl Graduate*. Curzon eschews that narrative/structural imperative and demonstrates that a female subject can direct, use, and revise comedy for other purpose.

Comedy appears to liberate its authorial subject to speak at once more directly -- and more subversively -- about gender restrictions than her "serious" writing allows. But while she takes risks (by writing a comedy, especially one with such clearly feminist-motivated subject matter and structural revisions), she does so within certain safeguards. *The Sweet Girl Graduate* is a "closet drama," not a comedy script designed for performance. Rather, it was intended for a specific readership (subscribers to *Grip*) familiar with the discourse of satirical playtexts and debates about women's rights. Its status as journalistic text, and its place of publication, allows its author a certain amount of "protection" in terms of propriety and convention. Ironically, this "textual protection" liberates her to write a provocative playtext which exceeds, in many ways, its textual constraints and yearns towards performance. Unlike many nineteenth-century closet dramas,⁵ *The Sweet Girl Graduate* is highly performative and employs a fairly sophisticated "theatrical" vocabulary, so that it is difficult not to "read" this play without envisioning it on stage.⁶ For instance, the discourses of costume and blocking, and the theatrical motif of cross-dressing, are essential to the heroine's argument and effect. So theatrical is this text that I see Curzon's use of "closet drama" as a masquerade of public performance. Textual propriety offers a kind of "cover," or disguise, which allows

Curzon to imagine, and assert the need for, women's public performance, without transgressing entirely the strictures against such an act.⁷ Indeed, the desire for performance -- and its absence -- haunts nearly every aspect of this closet drama. In other words, alongside the female subject position that emerges *within* textual constraints, another, female subject position emerges as a *product* of those constraints -- from what the text imagines but cannot enact. Ironically, this imagined female subject cannot literally become a visible, performing woman because of those very social strictures the "didactic" subject (so clearly constructed in the text) critiques.

If textuality both enables and constrains the female subject positions constructed in this text, the same must be said of gender. *The Sweet Girl Graduate* not only conveys an argument for women's equal access to higher education, it speculates about how certain notions of gender identity construct those barriers and, alternately, might be deployed to bring them down. In nineteenth-century texts, identity and gender were considered virtually synonymous. Gender identity was characterized as something natural, fixed, and preordained, the same way that a person's sense of selfhood was portrayed as given, coherent, and preordained. This conception of gender identity is prevalent in the doctrine and rhetoric of "separate spheres" which appears in everything from medical discourse to popular literature in the nineteenth century.⁸ The following citation from *The Christian Guardian* (1849) outlines the "proper" division of gender spheres:

There is an admirable partition of qualities between the sexes, which the Author of Being has distributed to each, with wisdom that challenges our unbounded admiration.

Man is strong -- woman is beautiful,
 Man is daring and confident -- woman is diffident and unassuming,
 Man is great in action -- woman in suffering,
 Man shines abroad -- woman at home,
 Man talks to convince -- woman to persuade and please,
 Man has a rugged heart -- woman a soft and tender one,
 Man prevents misery -- woman relieves it,

Man has science -- woman taste,
 Man has judgement -- woman sensibility,
 Man is a being of justice -- woman an angel of mercy. (quoted in Light and
 Prentice 222)

Although such pronouncements pretend to describe the natural essence of man and woman, they are better read as a prescription for gender behavior (a kind of Christian, patriarchal wish list) and not a reliable description of the actual behaviors of nineteenth-century women. The ideology of separate spheres assumed that a person's identity was inextricably linked to a hierarchical gender code, in which "man" was the privileged term. And that "natural" privilege was manifest in a range of social and cultural practices, including education.

The title of Curzon's play is an ironic reference to those critics who viewed education as a threat to this conception of gender identity. (Of course, the very fact that they recognized this "threat" suggests that the "essence" of femaleness was then, as it is now, anything but assured.) The condescending term, "Sweet Girl Graduate," is found in articles that argue against higher education for women, and may have been derived from a poem:

Prudes for proctors, dowagers for dean,
 And sweet girl graduates in their golden hair. (quoted in Cook and Mitchinson
 122)

This verse appears in an 1876 article, entitled "Sweet Girl Graduates," which argues that women should be allowed coeducational privileges only as long as "ladies' colleges" have not been built. The reasoning is as follows:

The education which should be imparted in a ladies' college is not the same as that which always will be the curriculum of a university. Their objects are not the same. The place woman fills in society, and the peculiarities of her nature, must determine what is the proper quality of her culture. The highest ideal of society is not that in which women become logic-chompers.... Their proper sphere of action is the domestic circle. (quoted in Cook and Mitchinson 123)

According to this text, female identity conforms to specific guidelines of sensibility and behaviour not suited to certain kinds of education or public life. Another satirical article

(written in 1884), entitled "'Sweet Girl Graduates' in England," asks "[w]hat will become of all the tatting and crewel-work heaven only knows" and worries that scholarly women will "sink into an old age of port-wine and prejudice, and end a childless life of learning in the arms of a college bed-maker" (8). In other words, the author fears that educated women would succumb to the negative effects of the "masculine world" and abandon the values of "women's culture." Satiric attacks like those above, which employ comedic gender inversion to challenge women's demands for equal rights, were common in the nineteenth century.⁹ In the hands of unsympathetic male writers, comedy was used to suggest, quite literally, that women's equality was a laughable concept. In *The Sweet Girl Graduate*, Curzon turns this comic strategy back against critics of women's education by reclaiming the condescending term "sweet girl graduate" and putting it in a positive light. This promotion of educational equality between men and women challenges the necessity and hierarchical composition of "proper spheres." Therefore, while the title of Curzon's play refers to a specific issue (the debate over women's higher education), it also brings into consideration broader questions regarding the meaning and value of gender.

The "sweet girl graduate" in Curzon's play, Kate, impels its argument and action. This character provides what I call a "didactic" subject position: she functions as an authorial "mouthpiece"; she solicits readers, as sympathetic intellectual equals, to take up her side of the argument. I alternately describe this subject position as "pragmatic," because the author deploys shifting strategies in order to construct Kate's argument and solicit the reader's sympathy. Kate's didactic subject position is clearly asserted in her initial speech, a response to a letter refusing her admission to University classes.

Refused! I knew it!
 The crass ingratitude of haughty man,
Vested in all the pride of place and power,
 Brooks not the aspirations of my sex,
 However just. (143, my emphasis)

From the onset, Kate's subject position is at once individual and collective. The play constructs Kate as a strong, singular character with whom the reader can identify or argue. Yet her sense of injustice and her aspirations are clearly representative and

politicized on behalf of a collective group ("my sex"). The playtext invites the reader to conceive of him/herself similarly, as both an individual capable of thinking and acting, and as a member of a common "sex." Female readers are invited to identify with Kate's position and to inhabit a space of oppositionality and active political empowerment. Male readers are invited, if not to identify with Kate's gender position, at least to recognize its merits.

Kate's opening monologue invokes a particular rhetoric of gender associated with fashion. She asserts, with a sly pun, that women are discriminated against by "*Vested*" men, not because they lack abilities or desires "but that, forsooth, we wear/*The Petticoat*" (143, my emphasis). Here, the play makes a symbolic equation between fashion and gender hierarchy. In similar manner, legal historian Constance Backhouse recognizes the symbolic equation between fashion, gender identity, and legal rights in nineteenth-century Canada:

I have chosen the title *Petticoats and Prejudice* because of the marked preoccupation over women's dress in the nineteenth century and because of the many ways in which the symbolic importance of female fashion found its way into legal files. Petticoats, whether the "cedar bark" variety attributed to Cree women by Henriette Forget, or the elegant undergarments worn by Alberta Abell beneath her "black velvet coat and satin dress," were the hallmark of femininity in the nineteenth century. To wear them was to encounter differential treatment and prejudice within the irrefutably male legal system. (7)

As Kate's speech infers, the petticoat marks her as female and, by extension, symbolizes women's lack of legal power and social mobility. The vest, the opposite. Initially, at least, Curzon uses the rhetoric of fashion in a political-symbolic manner, familiar to her original readership, and for clear didactic purpose -- to expose and challenge how gender categories contribute to legal and social inequities.

Kate's didactic subject position is also inscribed structurally early in the play. *The Sweet Girl Graduate* is in many ways a classic example of genre revision. In order to make its argument, it reminds the reader of those very comedic conventions that it revises or inverts. After the opening monologue, for instance, Mr. Bloggs (Kate's father) enters the scene. Bloggs (whose patronym caricatures an unsophisticated, dull, slogging

Canadian middle-class) acts as the "straightman" for his daughter. This dynamic inverts the conventional power/gender relationship in comedy (usually females act as "straightmen" to males). Further, by making the hero female, Curzon adopts for women the traditional meaning/effect typically the property of the male hero. To recall Northrop Frye's paradigm, comedy centres on a youthful male hero (who represents the new order) and his conflict with an older generation. Here, the generational conflict also operates (Kate represents a hoped-for new order) in tandem with gender conflict. The link between structure and message is evident; in the same way that Kate strives to extend women's spheres of activity by altering legal strictures against their educational privileges, Curzon increases opportunity for her female protagonist by revising the conventional structural dynamics of comedy.

Mr. Bloggs is at once representative of the older generation and Kate's dupe. When she complains about her exclusion from University, he is paternally affectionate but unsympathetic. He makes two arguments against her further education: that she knows "enough to wed" and that she would "turn the head of all the boys" (143-144) if admitted to classes. Mr. Bloggs represents the belief that women's education should prepare them for marriage and duties in the domestic sphere. He sees any mingling of sexes in educational quarters as a recipe for moral -- read sexual -- impropriety. As Kym Bird suggests, this position is based on the belief that "women's 'sexual nature' made them potential catalysts for sexual activity that would threaten the moral atmosphere of the university" (171). Ironically, Kate disregards his objections and even convinces him to pay her tuition, not through recourse to reason (as readers might expect), but through what Catherine Cleverdon terms "feminine persuasion."

If I obtain
 the honours hung so tantalizingly
 Before us by the University,
 Will you defray the cost, as hitherto
 You've done, like my own kind papa? *She kisses him.* (144)

Kate wields her daughterly affection strategically, and Curzon invests her use of feminine persuasion with a touch of parody. Comic response in this scene depends upon recognition of Kate's canny opportunism and of Mr. Bloggs' vulnerability. While Kate

appears to be all sweetness, she uses women's supposedly inherent capacity "to persuade and please" with calculated cleverness. (Recall the *Christian Guardian* poem cited earlier: "Man talks to convince – woman to persuade and please.") While Mr. Bloggs pretends to be crusty, he capitulates quickly to familial emotion. Kate's father makes a feeble, gruff attempt to cover up his capitulation when he agrees to finance her University classes: "I guess I'll have to: they won't send the bills to you" (144). On the one hand, this scene complicates the boundaries of separate spheres, by revealing how Kate employs "feminine persuasion" intelligently, to obtain access to more "legitimate" forms of power unreasonably withheld from her. On the other hand, it plays into gender preconceptions: Kate accepts that her father holds the purse-strings and does not hesitate to deploy her femininity when to her advantage. The play's attitude towards gender thus begins to accrue a pragmatic quality.

If Kate's father is representative of the older generation challenged in this comedy, her mother is even more so. Mrs. Bloggs' objections to Kate's University attendance are much more strenuous than those of her husband. The mother's entrance is accompanied by the first (of many) shifts from verse to prose in this play. My feeling is that, on the one hand, prose allows Curzon to articulate more clearly and completely Kate's arguments and, on the other, the shift to prose indicates her mother's lack of sophistication. Diction, then, is also deployed to support the protagonist's didactic cause. Mrs. Bloggs' arguments reiterate many common objections against women's education; simultaneously, her lack of sophisticated logic and speech emphasizes the need for such education. For instance, she asks her daughter: "What'll men think of you if you go sittin' down on the same benches at the colleges, and studyin' off of the same desk, and, like enough -- for there are girls bold enough for that -- out of the same books?" (144). Her platitudinous judgements are expressed in colloquial dialect and malapropisms: "And what must the professor think women are comin' to when they want to learn mathyphysics and metamatics" (144). This broad satire of the maternal, uneducated woman makes its own argument for the necessity of women's equal access to education.¹⁰

While the didactic aims of this comedy appear straightforward at this point, the manner in which Kate sets about achieving those aims is somewhat more slippery. In response to her mother, she provides an argument supporting women's education which is

a virtual carbon copy of policy statements put forth by late nineteenth-century women's advocates. And like those pronouncements, Kate's argument warrants a grain of salt:

Now, mamma, you know we have gone all over this before, and shall never agree, because I think that the better educated a woman is, the better she can fulfill her home duties, especially in the care and management of the health of her family, and the proper training of her sons and daughters as good citizens. (144)

Kate employs the "party-line" as a strategy to persuade and appease her mother (and readers sympathetic to Mrs. Bloggs' viewpoint). But it does not necessarily conform to her own reasons for furthering her education -- especially since she has earlier renounced her desire to marry (143). Recall also how Kate manages to get around her father's objections, and into his wallet, by strategically (and clichédly) deploying her daughterly appeal. Kate provides different justifications for continuing her education to her mother, her father and herself. And she deploys different strategies to achieve her aims.

The playtext encourages readers to endorse Kate's position by highlighting her logic (and implicitly flattering those readers who appreciate it) and by lampooning that of the old guard. In reference to Mrs. Bloggs' fear of the moral (read sexual) consequences of coeducation, Kate responds with a cogent counter-argument that exploits her mother's logical inconsistencies and double standards: "Well mamma, I think the real shame, as you call it, is that you, and other ladies, will allow your daughters to go about to picnics, parties...with any man who happens to ask them...and yet you see nothing but impropriety in my desire to attend college" (145). She asserts that she has a right to the same education as men, not the education of the "ladies' college" which "promise[s] to deliver lectures specially 'altered to suit the female capacity'" (145). Her arguments reject segregated education on the grounds that it supports the notion of women's mental inferiority and continues to restrict their sphere of activity.

Up to this point the play's didactic aim is clearly consolidated through the rhetorical and structural position Kate holds. At points, such as those "position statements" delivered to her parents, Kate seems to function as a straightforward authorial mouthpiece. And yet her subject position should not be read as entirely identical to her author's. For one thing, liberated within the comedy form (where unruliness is allowed, even expected), this feisty youthful heroine speaks her mind

precociously and directly; nowhere in any of Curzon's other extant writings does this kind of address appear. Further, there is a difference between the sort of appeal that the character may make to other characters (by behaving in keeping with, or contrary to, conventional gender roles), and the appeal that the author may make to her audience (through her manipulation of plot, character, dialogue and dramatic rhetoric). Thus far, for instance, Kate upsets gender conventions through her different appeals for parental support; Curzon upsets gender conventions by making Kate the outspoken hero, Mr. Bloggs the straightman, and Mrs. Bloggs the intellectual dupe (in most nineteenth-century women's writings, mothers are hallowed, not mocked) in the interest of engaging the reader's sympathies for Kate's intellectual ambition (an ambition which depends upon a different view of women's capacities). There is, nonetheless, one important similarity between the manners in which character and author manipulate gender rhetoric: both stress pragmatism rather than consistency. Curzon changes or uses whatever gender or comedic conventions necessary in order to enable her heroine's success; Kate shifts strategies with different characters in order to obtain her educational goals.

Pragmatism is the reason Kate gives for gender transgression of a more dangerous and palpable order. For, while she has secured the necessary funds from her father to attend classes, Kate is left with the problem of access. A new strategy is necessary. The second scene returns to verse form and finds Kate confiding in her cousin, Orphea:

Orphea: What will you do, dear?

Kate: A deed without a name!
 A deed will waken me at dead of night!
 A deed whose stony face will stare at me
 With vile grimace, and freeze my curdling blood!
 Will make me quake before the eye of day;
 Shrink from the sun, and welcome fearsome night!
 A deed will chase my trembling steps by ways
 Unknown, through lonely streets, into dark haunts! --
 Will make me tremble if a child observes
 Me close; and quake, if, in a public crowd,

One glances at me twice!
 A deed I'll blush for, yet I'll do't; and charge
 Its ugliness on those who forced me to't --
 In short, I'll wear the breeks.

Curzon employs highly melodramatic, pseudo-Shakespearean verse to paint a suspenseful portrait of the horrible deed Kate determines to undertake. She likens herself to some kind of preternatural creature, a Frankenstein monster or vampire perhaps, forced to "Shrink from the sun, and welcome fearsome night." This melodramatic tone simultaneously acknowledges and parodies the seriousness with which society views gender transgression. Certainly, by dressing and acting as a man, Kate contravenes the order of "natural" gender spheres and so risks being seen as "monstrous" and "unnatural." But so hyperbolic is this portrait that it invites readers to take a less harsh view. Her final quip, "In short, I'll wear the breeks," at once undercuts Kate's lofty self-image and the seriousness of her deed.

The author plays with different forms of diction -- from hyperbolic poesy to crude parody -- to invite readers to appreciate Kate's cleverness and support her cause. Here, for instance, Kate's verse becomes increasingly farcical as she goes on to lampoon the crude tone and style of language that she must adopt in order to pass as a male student:

I'll train my voice to mouth out short, thick words,
 As Bosh! Trash! Fudge! Rot! And I'll cultivate
 An Abernethian, self-assertive style (146)

Kate's verse exaggerates the pomposity of male discourse, and her mockery of men's behavior serves to emphasize the affectedness of masculine superiority. The play thus depicts how those in power adorn forms of discourse like fashions, while it deploys and alters those fashions in order to make its argument in favour of empowering women.

Similarly, other forms of fashion, such as hair and headwear, are sources of word play in this scene. Once again, Curzon uses the discourse of costume to show privilege as an affected state rather than a natural, immutable property of maleness. Kate determines to sacrifice the "wavy locks, that won my father's pride" (146), for the "whiskers" that will win her "The hood!" (147). When she accomplishes her goal of proving women's intellectual equality and winning them access to all educational

institutions, she determines to wear her shorn hair as a "crown." Kym Bird suggests that "Femininity, as represented by Kate's hair, is also a disguise or costume. Her hair is an effect to be shorn and shaped" (74). True, this playful rhetoric of hair portrays both femininity and masculinity as artificial and so mutable. Gender identity appears the result of access to certain forms of appearance and attendant institutional privileges (whiskers and hood) rather than an effect of innate sexual characteristics. And yet, as Bird notes, Kate's reluctant sacrifice of her tresses symbolizes at once "both feminist defiance and feminine self-sacrifice" (74). I want to look a bit more closely at Kate's reiterated appeals to feminine sacrifice, feminine fear and so forth, which operate in tandem -- and in seeming conflict -- with the play's parodic treatment of gender identity. Are those exaggerated appeals to the feminine another form of disguise, which make a lie of the notion of natural gender? Do they suggest a hesitation on the part of the author to undermine the only realm of power that women hold (that is, the feminine domestic realm)?¹¹ Or do they represent a more deeply ingrained gender ideology which the authorial subject, and the female subject position she constructs, cannot simply cast on or off at will?

Indeed, the play's attitude towards gender identity is less than straightforward. On the one hand, through playful manipulations of linguistic and what-would-be-theatrical discourses, *The Sweet Girl Graduate* shows how gender identities and hierarchies are constructed. It takes particular aim at those privileges enjoyed by males and argues that they are an effect of culture rather than an immutable right of nature. What, then, does the reader make of Kate's simultaneous celebration and deployment of feminine qualities? Her mockery of male behaviour, for instance, reinforces the reader's estimation of conventional feminine attributes, such as elegance and modesty. Her early descriptions of female clothing and manners present women as "lovely" and "mannish garb" as "dreadful" (146). Initially, the play seems to negotiate between the idea of gender as an effect of external appearance and custom, and sex as an internal program for subjectivity. And yet is such a division tenable, particularly given that Curzon endows Kate with the ability to manipulate both the rhetoric and behaviours of feminine and masculine spheres, and given that the author places Kate in what (especially in the nineteenth century) has traditionally been a male-, rather than female-defined, subject

position (that is, the active, independent, reasoning hero)? If not logically consistent, then, is that division better viewed as pragmatic?

The play offers what might be called a threshold position, poised on the brink of separate spheres, opposing that ideology of which it is nonetheless a product, deploying while undercutting its rhetoric, and so upholding while questioning the value and meaning of gender identity. While Kate's gender identity and approach to gender is certainly equivocal, the play presents another character who appears far less so, Kate's cousin Orphea. Initially at least, Orphea reads as a prototype of a conventional, middle-class feminine subject. She could be the romantic interest in any number of nineteenth-century comedies, to be played by the ingenue. That this play treats her so sympathetically exemplifies Curzon's unwillingness to upset conventional gender construction entirely. The name Orphea (in contrast to Bloggs for instance) suggests a kind of elevation of the "feminine." And while Orphea supports Kate's desire for access to education, she gives voice to typical feminine timidity and propriety: "Oh, Kate, it is an awful risk! (147).

In response to Orphea's apprehension (which is, notably, practical rather than ideological), Kate appeals to prior authority to justify her strategy:

Yet might I plead that men and women oft
Have done the same before; poor Joan of Arc;
Portia; and Rosalind. And I have heard
That once Achilles donned the woman's garb:
Then why not I the student's cap and gown?

Perhaps it is not only Kate, but also Curzon at this point, who feels the need to justify her intention by example, since this play may constitute "an awful risk" for a woman of Curzon's social position. Kate's speech points out that cross-dressing has both historical and literary precedents: the literary references provide prior authority for Curzon's comedic strategy; the historical references (particularly Joan of Arc) provide justification for Kate's daring act in service of a greater good.¹² In what seems a last-ditch appeal to male authority, she also includes an example of an unlikely male cross-dresser, Achilles, in her list, which comically deflates at once our heroine and the male authority figure she invokes.¹³ Kate's strategy here is like that of her author: she simultaneously subverts

gender norms and appeals both to male authority and feminine propriety to justify that transgression. Kate's (and Curzon's) justification is both comic and, I think, serious. Both authorial and character subject positions negotiate very tricky territory when it comes to their critique of the sex/gender system. That heedfulness need not be considered a fully conscious or carefully self-directed strategy on the part of the author, but it is a strategy nonetheless.

The Sweet Girl Graduate alternately collapses and assumes a distinction between sex and gender. Correspondingly, it alternately assumes a Victorian and humanist notion of the subject, whose sense of identity is coherent with sexual identity, and anticipates a post-structuralist notion of the subject, as a matrix of subject positions that do not correspond to a coherent or fully realizable sexual identity.¹⁴ According to the humanist conception of the subject, an individual's identity is conceived of as coherent, self-evident, and self-determining. In Victorian thought, that conception was tied to the idea of sex and gender as parallel and coherent, and sexual differentiation as binary, fixed, and pre-ordained by higher powers (god and nature intertwined). Kate's subject position does not fit comfortably into this framework, since the author shows her as at once embodying and able to embody characteristics attributed to both male and female spheres. The play's mockery of gender constructions disengages sex from gender identity in order to argue that gender arrangements (social, political, and personal) are performed, not innate. Alternately, its valorization of women and the feminine suggests that female sexual identity is a useful, and to some degree natural, category of being. I view the seemingly contradictory notions of gender identity presented in this play -- as both mutable and immutable, as a construction and as an essence, as something to fear and to celebrate -- as productive: the playtext alternately collapses and differentiates sex and gender as a means to construct a locus of power and agency for both authorial and character subjects. This contradictory stance is also strategic: by treating gender as an alterable social construction, the play shows how women can and might contest, and make progress in, the realm of male prerogative; by treating sex as valued essence, it reassures readers that this ingress does not substantially threaten the gender ideology upon which their society and sense of self is based. The play constructs a subject position that approaches the meaning and value of gender identity in a manner that is both pragmatic (it appeases

strategically the ideology it challenges) and didactic (it teaches how one might negotiate the sex/gender system in order to win women's rights).

Subject positions constructed in texts need not be viewed as fully conscious, intentional directives. They emerge as much from what an author cannot or does not say as from what she can and does. The pragmatic/didactic female subject position of this play emerges as much from inconsistencies and gaps already inherent in those gender ideologies its author attempts to revise, as it does from her reformist message. Further, while the author clearly intends to construct a politicized female subject, she also creates in its wake what might be called an unconscious or hidden subject position. The performing woman who haunts Curzon's literary drama is a case in point. But it is not the only case. Although *The Sweet Girl Graduate* highlights the practical and didactic impetus behind Kate's decision to dress as a male and attend University, it also describes effects and implications of that action which extend beyond the play's ostensible didactic aims. At first, Kate decries the necessity of cross-dressing, going so far as to compare her feminine sacrifice to that of Lady Godiva: "Like to Godiva fair,/ Whose heart, so true, forgot itself, to serve/Her suffering kind; I, too, must make/ My hair an offering to my sex; a protest strong/ 'Gainst man's oppression" (146). As Scene III begins, the character again describes her adoption of male disguise as a means to better women's rights (147). Of course, this didactic use of the cross-dressing motif is itself significant, since it politicizes what is commonly a romantic motif in comedy. But the very repetition of Kate's justification for her act signals what may be a conscious or an unconscious awareness that gender bending is transgressive on more than one level.

Once in male disguise, Kate describes reactions and experiences beyond the play's didactic agenda. A second story, that of homoerotic desire, begins to circulate alongside this feminist fable. The didactic female subject -- who cross-dresses for political cause -- becomes shadowed by another "hidden" female subject -- who responds to her cross-dressed body in more ambiguous fashion. In Scene Three, Kate "*Invests herself in the masculine apparel*" (147) and uses her disguise to play a trick on Orphea:

KATE: Come in, dear coz.

Attempts to kiss her, but receives a slap in the face.

ORPHEA: How dare you, sir! Oh! let me out.

KATE: *In natural voice.* Orphea, you goose! (147)

This scene of romantic ruse brings to mind many comedies of manners and farces which employ cross-dressing and which stage romantic pairings of same sex couples.

Commonly, those comedies contain a heterosexual scenario to which the same-sex scenario is subordinate. The female lovers' tryst is presented as an awkwardly humorous encounter from which the cross-dressed heroine must extricate herself, and/or a kind of "training" scenario in which the cross-dressed heroine teaches or learns how to love (consider Shakespeare's *As You Like It* or *Twelfth Night* as examples). In either case, both heroines eventually end up partnered correctly with a male. As Jacqueline Pearson puts it, "In comedy the transvestite will almost invariably settle down to a conventional marriage at the end of the play. In most serious drama she is likely to die, though in heroic tragedy she may be allowed to survive and marry" (101). While "The Sweet Girl Graduate" evokes the kind of trajectories of desire found in many cross-dress comedies that are tales of heterosexual romance, it contains no male love interest. Its expressions of passion are ultimately directed to, and by, female subjects, and so a different dynamic results. The female heroines are not objects of exchange or mediation in heterosexual relationships. Kate's desire -- both political and erotic -- is female directed.

Whether considering its erotic or political significations, the cross-dressed female subject can be read in a multitude of ways, and all readings are haunted by a certain ambivalence. Jean E. Howard comments: "As with any social practice, its meaning varied with the circumstances of its occurrence, with the particulars of the institutional or cultural sites of its enactment, and with the class position of the transgressor. As part of a stage action, for example, the ideological import of cross-dressing was mediated by all the conventions of dramatic narrative and Renaissance dramatic production" (418). In the case of *The Sweet Girl Graduate* the effect of cross-dressing is further mediated by the fact that it occurs in literary form, and in Victorian Canada. As such, we might expect the subversive effect of the practice to be weakened. But this is not necessarily the case, particularly when the cultural and social milieu of nineteenth-century Victorian Canada is taken into account.

I agree with Howard that it is important to analyze the contexts surrounding various manifestations of cross-dressing. She draws particular attention to the distinction

between the actual practice of cross-dressing, and the legal and social strictures against it, and the theatrical practice. She argues that the cross-dressed figure in the streets of Renaissance London posed a very real threat to the economic, social and class system of Renaissance England: "To transgress the codes of dress was to disrupt an official view of the social order in which one's identity was largely determined by one's station or degree -- and where that station was, in theory, providentially determined and immutable" (421). In opposition, she believes that Renaissance drama that employed the cross-dressing motif was more likely to recuperate or countervail this threat, by enclosing the cross-dressed heroine within a narrative structure in which her transgressive behavior is ultimately righted through heterosexual resolution. But does the same dynamic apply to the class/gender structure of Victorian Canada, or to Curzon's use of the cross-dressing motif within a comedic structure that eschews the heterosexual romance narrative?

As I have argued, the ideology of proper spheres was prevalent in Victorian colonial thought; that ideology manifested itself in legal terms also. For instance, historian Constance Backhouse has established that dress reform, specifically the introduction of "bloomers," came fairly late to Canada and met strenuous public and legal resistance here (310). The codes of gender dress appear to have been strongly guarded in Victorian Canada. Nonetheless, there is evidence that some women did attempt to pass as male. Kym Bird cites the case of Emma Stanton Mellish who, later in the same year that Curzon's play was published, applied to Trinity College as a man, was accepted and, when her gender was revealed, was denied admission (Bird does not make clear whether Mellish actually attended classes in male disguise) (168). According to Gary Kinsman, transvestite women had motives very similar to those evoked by *The Sweet Girl Graduate*: "In the nineteenth century there were many reports of passing or cross-dressing white women in Canada. They cross-dressed to gain access to the economic and social privileges enjoyed by men, and perhaps to establish intimate and erotic relationships with other women" (95).¹⁵ Unlike Howard's conclusions regarding Renaissance cross-dressing, Curzon's dramatic strategy seems to support, rather than counteract, the actual practice.

I find it surprising, and intriguing, that Sarah Anne Curzon -- that seeming model of the conservative Victorian suffragist -- not only chose to write comedy but to deploy

the motif of cross-dressing in a political and an erotic context radically different from those plays Kate earlier cites as precedents. How is it that given both the ideological and legal strictures against gender transgression of this kind in Victorian Canada, this seemingly upright woman was liberated (either consciously or unconsciously) to construct such a subversive subject? In answer, I want to return to the argument that Curzon's use of the cross-dressing motif is mediated by its textual form. "Closet drama," I believe, operates as a kind of protective covering, or disguise, that at once enables this transgressive literary subject and advertises those very real constraints that attended any actual performance of gender transgression. While the clothing of textuality diffuses the potentially subversive shock of having a cross-dressed actress appear on the nineteenth-century stage in a female-authored, political comedy, it also works as a protective disguise which allows Curzon a more radical dramatic strategy than would have been available to her in writing for the public stage.

This literary "clothing" also works to circumvent the voyeurism that attended the female cross-dressed body in Victorian drama. In her study of the Victorian stage, Tracy C. Davis states that "the point of women's cross-dressing was to please, not to deceive" (113). While male disguise may appear to offer female characters the potential for liberated movement and independent action, Davis argues that the male clothing covering the cross-dressed actress' body (tights and short tunics, for instance) actually served to further fetishize female anatomy and so continued to elicit the voyeuristic male gaze. Because Curzon's use of the cross-dressing motif occurs in literary discourse, rather than performance, this actual gaze is denied. Further, the fact that Kate's male disguise is that of the student's robe and cap, not tights and tunic, discourages even mental voyeurism. Not only does this comedy's literary protective covering deny the literal voyeuristic gaze directed at the female cross-dressed actress' body, so too does its political context. This didactic cross-dressed subject appeals to the logical mind, rather than the desiring eye -- at least, as we shall see, the male's desiring eye. *The Sweet Girl Graduate* subverts male voyeurism by displacing the male view of the female cross-dressed body with an account of a woman's own view.

The cross-dressed female subject of Curzon's comedy operates on several levels which do not entirely cohere. Kate adopts male disguise with an attitude of reluctant

feminine sacrifice, and assertive and conscious protest; that disguise offers her erotic, as well as educational opportunities. Her feelings about her gender and sexual identity, once in male disguise, are conflicted and ambiguous. Jacqueline Pearson's comments that "The transvestite motif...has an inbuilt ambiguity. The assumption of male disguises might allow either an extreme assertion of a woman's independence or an extreme demonstration of her dependence on men and the male order" (109). Or, as I would argue in reference to Curzon's play, it might maintain the contradiction. As I have shown, in addition to cross-dressing, this play includes many manifestations of gender inversion (structural revision, parody of male primacy, for example), to place "woman on top." In her study of ritual festivals of gender inversion, Natalie Davis argues that "play with women on top not only reconfirmed certain traditional ways of thinking about society, it also facilitated innovation in historical theory and in political behavior" (155). Davis, like Pearson, argues that gender/power inversion has the capacity to reinforce those very gender strictures it upsets. In Curzon's comedy, the transvestite motif functions to provide a strategic, and politically motivated, critique of gender restrictions and may indeed have "facilitated innovation in ... political behavior." Still, the necessity that Kate "don the dreadful clothes" to "cheat the Dons" (147), and her protestations of feminine reluctance, also demonstrate dependence on and adherence to the very gender hierarchy she opposes. Those protests are both pragmatic and parodic: on the one hand they construct a female subject who is highly attentive to the necessity of maintaining a certain gender image; on the other their very repetition and emphatic quality suggest that that decorous image is laughable and never fully enclosing.

Act Two, for instance, consists of one short scene in which Kate, now dressed in the "divided skirt," delivers a monologue in which she complains about her feminine fear in the face of gender transgression. She blames the society into which she is born for not training her to be "manly" and, as if to emphasize the point, portrays herself as an icon of feminine frailty:

Oh, Harberton,
 Hadst thou but taught the world
 The beauty of thy new divided skirt
 Ere I was born, this had not now been thus.

This blush, that burns my cheek, had long been past;
 These trembling limbs, that blench so from the light,
 Had gotten strength to bear me manfully...
 Away, weak tears!

I must be brave and show myself a man... (148)

In this speech, Curzon deploys a rhetoric which follows, as it satirizes, conventional gender division: Kate equates her female self with blushing cheeks, trembling limbs and weak tears; she equates her male appearance with strength, bravery, and action. Indeed, I am uncertain whether to take her ostentatious plea of feminine frailty in the face of gender transgression seriously or humorously -- or both.¹⁶

Kate's melodramatic poesy gives way to comic expostulation when she smells a cigar: "pah, the nasty things!" The play then injects a comic endorsement for temperance by having Kate assure herself that there must be male students who "will not plunge into/Those dreadful orgies that the *Globe* describes,/Of men half-tight with lager and old rye" (149). The marriage of temperance and suffrage argument was common to nineteenth-century Canadian women's activists, and it is not surprising to see it here. However, there is something larger at stake. In this scene, Kate describes what she sees as the more unsavory aspects of male student life and, in so doing, moves the didactic focus of the play's agenda slightly. No longer is it merely an issue of whether women are admitted to University; it is also an issue of those customs of male-dominated spheres of activity which deter women from entering. It is not only legal strictures, but more subtle types of discrimination which act as impediments to female participation. The play may be seen as advocating reform not only to laws but to social behavior. On the one hand, Curzon seems to suggest that the category of "student" should be gender neutral, and so available to both males and females.¹⁷ On the other hand, unwilling or unable to extricate herself from gender rhetoric and conventions, she upholds "feminine" values as an example to be followed. As such, Kate rejects what she defines as masculine social "vices," such as drinking, carousing, and smoking. Again, this shifting stance is evidence of the play's pragmatic subject position. Its valuation of feminine behaviour would appease those critics of women's education who worried that female students would "sink

into an old age of port-wine and prejudice, and end a childless life of learning in the arms of a college bed-maker."

Although I have just argued that the play's valuation of the feminine can be seen as a strategic, if somewhat contradictory, gender ploy (in service of its ostensible agenda for educational gender reform), it has other effects. *The Sweet Girl Graduate*, who dresses as a male and upholds her feminine identity, who does so with political intent, and who does so in a structure that evades (while it recalls) the heterosexual romance narrative of comedy, produces a homoerotic subtext. This hidden subject is an effect of the play's unusual, and carefully encoded, descriptions of Kate's response to her own cross-dressed body and to other women. Those descriptions reveal an alternately highly charged and ambivalent impression of what it means to be not only a woman, but a desiring woman.

Act Three features Orphea (who reminds me of the ingenue love interest in any number of comedies of manners) in Kate's bedroom, reading a letter from her cousin. On the one hand, Kate's letter, which announces her achievements as gold medalist, honour student, and social butterfly, is intended to augment her didactic position -- that is to demonstrate that a woman can achieve equally to a man.¹⁸ But Kate's letter offers something more -- a fascinating female view of the cross-dressed body:

I am not inclined to regret the step rendered necessary by my devotion to my sex, for use has made me quite at home in the -- ah -- divided skirt! How many lovely girls have I danced with through the rosy hours who will never more smile on me as they were wont to smile! How many flowers of rhetoric have been wasted on me by the irony of fate! How many *billets-doux*, so perfumed and pretty, lie in my desk addressed to my nether garment! (150)

In this letter, Kate is positioned as both the agent and the recipient of the gaze. At first, she appears to adopt a "masculine" voyeuristic position in the description of her "lovely" dance partners. However, she then displaces this position by situating herself as the recipient of the women's smiling, and desiring, gaze. Instead of the male voyeuristic stance directed at the female cross-dressed body (which Tracy C. Davis identifies as the paradigm in Victorian theatre), *The Sweet Girl Graduate* provides an account of a woman's own view of her cross-dressed body. This account is undeniably positive in its

appreciation of the liberties enjoyed by her "male" persona who wears the "ah -- divided skirt!" Still, while the "ah --" that precedes description of her male disguise could be read as a term of rapture, it can also be read as a sign of hesitation. The "divided skirt" would seem to refer to trousers, and Kate -- who commonly lapses into expressions of feminine decorum -- is unable to name her transgressive apparel outright. The "ah -- divided skirt" strikes me as a duplicitous joke, which invites the reader to appreciate at once Kate's rapture with her gender transgression and the necessity that she disguise that rapture in accordance with gender decorum. Like Kate's, the reader's subject position is also divided: directed to be attentive to the necessity of upholding gender propriety to justify gender reform and to assert women's collective interests; directed to view gender propriety as something less than serious and fixed. In other words, the text teaches the reader to read gender pragmatically.

Kate's rapture is not limited to the educational liberties that male dress affords her. Of particular interest is Kate's appreciation of the romantic, even sexual, opportunities cross-dressing permits: "How many lovely girls have I danced with through the rosy hours who will never more smile on me as they were wont to smile! How many flowers of rhetoric have been wasted on me by the irony of fate!" Kate's avowal of attraction to other women can be read as a veiled acknowledgment of homo-erotic desire. This desiring female subject position is "hidden" in layers of textual clothing. It is as much a product of what cannot be said or enacted, as what is said. The fact that this scene is scripted in a letter, a written discursive form, within a larger written discursive form (the closet drama), constructs another layer of distance or "veiling," possibly to protect its author from public scrutiny. *Within* this letter, Kate describes other letters -- "billets doux" to be more specific. In parallel, Kate's letter -- directed to the cousin she refers to as "My Dearest," "my dear," (149) "my love" (150) and signed by "Ever your own, 'KATE'" -- is itself a "billet doux." Orphea, who resembles the "lovely girls" whose company Kate has so greatly enjoyed and who have also smiled upon her, is the recipient of Kate's rapturous description of same-sex romantic experiences. In turn, Orphea, who reads the letter aloud (and so in a sense adopts Kate's voice) is provided with the opportunity to express her own desire. Thus, through structural recursion (the nesting of one writing within another writing) and discursive role-reversal between writer and

reader, as well as through displacement of the male gaze, this scene provides a complex expression of female, and lesbian, desire.

What draws my attention to the erotic subject position in this play is precisely that it is so carefully nested in layers of discourse. What makes it particularly transgressive is that it operates *alongside* a politically motivated representation of cross-dressing. There is nothing necessarily unusual, or immediately subversive, in Kate and Orphea's passionate friendship. As Lillian Faderman argues, such intimate relations between women have long literary/historical precedent:

These romantic friendships were love relationships in every sense except perhaps the genital, since women in centuries other than ours often internalized the view of females as having little sexual passion. Thus they might kiss, fondle each other, sleep together, utter expressions of overwhelming love and promises of eternal faithfulness, and yet see their passions as nothing more than effusions of the spirit. (16)

Faderman notes that "society appeared to condone [these passionate friendships] rather than to view them as disruptive of social structure" (16). However, a different attitude occurred when one of the women was transvestite:

As long as they appeared feminine, their sexual behavior would be viewed as an activity in which women indulged when men were unavailable or as an apprenticeship or appetite-whetter to heterosexual sex. But if one or both of the pair demanded masculine privileges, the illusion of lesbianism as *faute de mieux* behavior was destroyed. At the base it was not the sexual aspect of lesbianism as much as the attempted usurpation of male prerogative by women who behaved like men that many societies appeared to find disturbing. (17)

Given this context, the expression of lesbian desire in this play appears quite transgressive, first because it is made by a cross-dressed female, and secondly because that female is involved in a political campaign which seeks to usurp traditional male prerogative for herself and other women. The absence of a central male persona or heterosexual involvement means that this same-sex attraction stands on its own. It is not subordinate to another relationship. Again, the fact of female authorship is also important, for a different erotic effect occurs when such a scenario is constructed by and

for female subjects. The erotic dynamics of Kate's letter can be read as lesbian on two different levels: first, in the sense that "'Lesbian' describes a relationship in which two women's strongest emotions and affections are directed toward each other" (Faderman 17-18); and secondly, in the sense of lesbian desire as politically critical of male domination and the heterosexual imperative. This homoerotic subject position, conjoined to a political program which seeks to impart more power to women, is carefully nested, but nonetheless manifest.¹⁹

While it celebrates female-directed desire, Kate's letter also reveals an ambivalence regarding the gender trappings of the "feminine" sphere. As I have argued, *The Sweet Girl Graduate* is dominated by a shifting and often conflicted attitude, not only to the cross-dressed body (our heroine alternately resists and celebrates the practice), but also to what it means to be female. While earlier hesitant to don "dreadful" male apparel, Kate now finds herself loath to return to the garment of femininity: "Ah, my dear Orphea, what do I not sacrifice on the altar of my sex" (150). Kate must abandon her disguise and return to female form in order to make her point regarding the unfairness and arbitrariness of gender limitations and to secure future rights for women. That she does so reluctantly and emphatically signals an ongoing ambivalence regarding her own gender identity.

Interestingly, Kate's return to the female sphere is accompanied by a renewed attention to the discourse of costume. Again, the play draws attention to the importance of dress in the construction - and the containment -- of "femininity." The end of the letter describes the glamorous costume Orphea is to construct for Kate's "coming out": "You know my style, the latest out, which I find by the fashion books is Mignonette trimmed with Chinese Pheasant. Buttons up the back of the sleeves, with rubies and amethysts. Let the fichu be Eidelweiss; trim the fan and slippers with the same, and use dandelions and calla lilies for the bouquets. Not a button less than forty on the gloves" (150). Curzon carefully reconstructs Kate's female self with an excessive display of the "trappings" of gender (so many buttons!). On one level, her dress and bouquet evoke a bridal costume: Curzon thus manipulates cleverly the traditional comedic ending by replacing wedding with graduation (and by letting Kate have the party and the dress so many women desire). On another, this costume strikes me as parodically feminine. As

Kate sheds her "masculine" disguise, she assumes yet another disguise which is no more "natural" than her previous incarnation. Her letter also describes the equally ostentatious preparations for her graduation party. She has "engaged every boy in the public schools [to] bring back as many *maiden-hairs* as he can find. Ferns are my craze, as you know" (150, my emphasis). On the one hand, this passage signals Kate's return to the glories of "female culture." But, by virtue of its excessiveness, it draws attention to the constructedness of that culture. Further, this vision of excess could signify a critique of society women and their capricious fashions. Because of the ambivalence regarding "femininity" that permeates this play, it is difficult to fix a singular position. Kate's letter expresses both regret and acceptance that her return to female form will mean that she, like the wild "maiden-hairs" (a word which metonymically suggests the term "maidenheads"), will be imprisoned again like a hothouse flower.

Kate's letter stands as the most intriguing and complex passage in the play. Although light in tone, it does not seem particularly comic. A more complex expression of psychological processes occurs here, as the awkwardness of pseudo-Shakespearean verse gives way to an expression of interiority in private prose.²⁰ The letter heralds an evolution in Kate's characterization and the subject position she offers. Earlier, I argued that the play sets up a division between a notion of gender as a complex of appearance and custom which was alterable, and sex as an internal and seemingly immutable state of being. This division allows Kate to challenge gender hierarchy and custom through her transgressive behavior, while also assuring the audience that she maintains a properly "feminine" subjectivity. Kate's letter describes her return to the appearances and customs of "femininity," but it also signals the ways in which her foray into the male sphere of appearance and custom have altered her more fundamentally. While apparently returning to the refinements and confinements of conventional "femininity," the rest of the play reveals a female character with increased confidence and control over her destiny. No longer does Kate appeal to feminine frailty; she commands the rest of the play with a singular determination uncommon to both her gender and sex.

The final act heralds the return of the didactic female subject position as Kate reiterates arguments supporting women's equal access to higher education. Here, as in the first act, a male character acts as her "straightman." With broad dramatic irony,

Curzon has Mr. Biggs (whose name evokes a younger generation of "Bloggs"es) introduce the class valedictorian, Tom Christopher (Kate's bland alias), as the apogee of masculine achievement:

But I am sure, ladies and gentlemen, no one but himself ever accused our esteemed host of being womanish, and when we look upon the high standing he has achieved in our University, the honour he confers on his Alma Mater by his scholarly attainments and the gentlemanly character he has won among all sorts of students, I am sure, ladies and gentlemen, we should be doing great injustice to you all were we for one moment to admit that he could be other than he is, an honour to Toronto University, and a credit to his sex. (151)

Tom/Kate then takes the podium and, with her "masculine" authority, makes a partisan plea to his brother scholars for educational reform:

I would say sisters too, but that I fear
 My lady guests would think I did presume;
 But yet I know, and knowing it am proud,
 That most men here to-night would welcome all
 The sweet girl-graduates that would fill the list
 Did but the College Council set aside
 A foolish prejudice, and let them in.
 And now, I know a girl who long has worked
 To pass the exams, take the proud degree
 I hold to-day, and yet her petticoat
 Forbade. (151-2)

The crowd encourages Tom to present the young woman; he exits, and the stage is set for Kate's "coming out." In place of either marriage or the ritual of "the debut" (in which young women of marriageable age were presented to society), Curzon has Kate make her public debut as an educated and politicized woman.

But if this scene is directed by the didactic female subject, her hidden counterpart is not entirely absent. When Kate returns in elaborate female dress, which I have suggested is like a bridal costume, her cousin swoons. In tears, Orphea cries, "Oh, Kate! it struck me so to see you once again as you were wont to be; those nasty ugly pants

forever gone, and you a girl again" (152). Although Orphea cites extreme relief at seeing Kate back to her "natural" gender as the reason for her reaction, her swoon is also a romantic gesture. Given the trajectories of same sex desire present in the play, it is difficult to read her attraction to Kate's feminine persona as entirely without erotic implication. This erotic play is left unresolved through the rest of the Act. Curzon resists having either Orphea or Kate embroiled in a heterosexual romance; rather, their passionate friendship alongside Kate's romance with knowledge stand as the central romantic relationships of the play.

The play ends with a strong didactic message, which Curzon conveys with a mix of playful and erudite poetic diction (compare "the flinty heads of College Council" with "the feet of our Gamaliels" for example). Here Kate takes stage center and explains the reasons for her deception:

I am indeed a girl, though you have known
 Me hitherto as Thomas Christopher.
 Four years ago I passed the exams, for
 Us women, at your University.
 Once more I passed. But when again I would,
 I stumbled for the teaching that is chained --
 Like ancient scripture to the reading desk --
 Within your College walls. No word of mine
 Could move the flinty heads of College Council.
 Order and discipline forbade, they said,
 That women should sit side by side with men
 Within their walls. At church, or concert, or
 At theatre, or ball, no separation's made
 Of sexes. And so I, being a girl
 Of firm and independent mind, resolved
 To do as many a one beside has done
 For lesser Prize, and, as a man, sat at
 the feet of our Gamaliels until I got
 The learning that I love. (153)

Curzon has Kate reiterate the double standards of gender segregation and her right to educational privileges equal to those extended to male students. The play happily resolves with the male students' unanimous endorsement of Kate and her argument. This is an artificial and unlikely ending certainly, but it serves the play's didactic intent. As in Frye's paradigm of comedy, the outdated attitudes of the older generation are replaced by those of a new generation. But unlike his paradigm, that new generation does not entirely reiterate the patriarchal, heterosexist ideologies of the older one.

The "Sweet Girl Graduate," mocked as a monstrosity by critics of women's education, is presented ultimately as positive and nonthreatening.²¹ However, her subversive potential should not be underestimated. In his article "Playwrights in a Vacuum," Michael Tait criticizes *The Sweet Girl Graduate* for its "creator's inability to cut sufficiently free from the confines of gentility and public decorum" (17). In his cursory evaluation, Tait fails to appreciate either the pragmatic or hidden subject positions the play constructs. The appeal to male authority and validation of female culture at the end is a common strategy employed by nineteenth-century Canadian women's rights activists. The necessity of this strategy points precisely to the "confines of gentility and public decorum" within and around which early women activists had to maneuver. Furthermore, Kate's apparent return to the female fold does not entirely recuperate earlier gender transgressions, especially since she vows to continue political agitation. Although certainly genteel and "decorous," Kate gives the final speech of the play and does not abandon her active role as she calls for the support of her male comrades to lobby Parliament for women's rights:

Let us go
 In numbrous strength before the Parliament,
 And ask our rights in such a stirring sort,
 They shall be yielded. Then I shall know
 Your brotherly and pleasant words mean faith,
 And shall no more regret a daring act
 That else will fail of reason. (154)

The cross-dressed heroine's return to female dress and appeal to male authority do demonstrate a dependence on men and patriarchal order. However, the request for male

support proved to be a successful strategy for nineteenth-century women's activists, and so Curzon's use of this rhetorical stance should not be read simply as a capitulation. As historical commentators note, Canadian women won much by persuading, rather than alienating, men on behalf of their cause (Cleverdon 7-8, Bacchi 20).²²

In constructing an oppositional, didactic female subject position through the figure of Kate and through other comedic revisions, Curzon expresses outright the desire to challenge gender constraints and male-defined institutions of power. At the same time, the play's feminine decorum evokes her fear or inability to upset women's traditional roles entirely (indeed those roles provided nineteenth-century women with a sense of self and even a path for social intervention through their authority in the domestic sphere). Still, its sometimes duplicitous and covert approach to gender could be read as evidence that, on some level, Curzon was aware that her comedy's politics and erotics constituted an "awful risk." While the play's inconsistent approach to gender, which I find subversive and suggestive, might also be dismissed simply as the product of "bad writing" (a lack of mastery of the master's discourse) rather than authorial intent, those inconsistencies do allow multiple interpretations and suggest that, at the very least, nineteenth-century conceptions of gender were neither monolithic nor fully enclosing. My reading thus recognizes how the female subject positions(s) constructed by this play are both constrained and enabled by gender. *The Sweet Girl Graduate* teaches how a female subject might do battle *in* and *with* structures (like comedy) and ideologies (like separate spheres) that largely served male-defined social orders. While it might first appear that the didactic subject meets gender restrictions head on and with singular intent, closer reading suggest that that position is itself conflicted and inconsistent. The play's attitude towards gender identity changes pragmatically according to the necessity of argument. Curzon deploys gender rhetorics and comedic conventions in service of the cause of collective reform for women; but those rhetorics shift so often that the play's position regarding the existence and value of female identity remains open-ended. Further, in the wake of cross-dressed woman, the play embeds a female subject position that imagines the possibility of female, and lesbian, desire in tandem with gender-motivated political activism. The expressions of desire -- for performance, both political

and theatrical, and towards a female-based erotics outside the heterosexual frame of comedy -- unleashed by this play circulate to its very end and to this day.

¹ For a discussion of *Laura Secord* and the ideology of imperialist nationalism see my essay: "Out of the Closet: Dramatic Works by Sarah Anne Curzon Part One: Woman and Nationhood."

² Again, it is useful to caution that the conservative quality Bacchi attributes to the Canadian suffrage movement derives from analyses of public pronouncements. It is difficult to determine from those texts whether this conservatism was a manifestation of uniformly held and strongly formulated views, or a practical strategy. Similarly, it is difficult to ascertain how much Curzon adhered to the conservative views she asserts in many of her writings and how much she manipulated this ideological stance for other purposes.

³ For a list of other dramatic satires that appeared in *Grip*, see *Early Stages*, ed. Ann Saddlemyer 324-330. A number of these comic print-sketches are anonymous, and this invites speculation regarding the possibility of female authorship. This also underlines Curzon's daring in claiming authorship. Saddlemyer does note that some of these satiric pieces were produced on local stages (10), but there is no evidence that *The Sweet Girl Graduate* was ever produced.

⁴ All of these forms made their way to the nineteenth-century Ontario stage. Farces, like *Charley's Aunt*, were very popular (Saddlemyer 108-9), as were "high comedies" and comedies of manners represented by Moliere's and Shakespeare's comic repertoires (103-4), and melodramas such as *The Fool's Revenge* and *The Bells* (94).

⁵ Allardyce Nicoll characterizes the genre of "poetic drama," or "closet drama," as rife with "prevailing didacticism" and "patriotic orthodoxy." Generally, it adheres to a "Shakespearean plan" in verse form, diction, and action (208-9). While many Canadian "closet dramas" conform to this description (see Charles Mair's *Tecumseh* for example), Curzon's plays do not entirely share the "lack of stage sense" that Nicoll also attributes to "closet drama."

⁶ The play includes fairly extensive stage directions which indicate entrances and exits, set design (eg. "*A boarding-house dining room richly decorated with flowers and plants. Twenty gentlemen, among whom is Mr. Tom Christopher, each accompanying a lady, one of whom is Miss Blaggs. The cloth is drawn, and dessert is on the table*, 150), significant gestures (eg. "[Kate] looses down her abundant brown hair, and passes her hands through it caressingly, 146), and blocking notes (eg. "[Kate] goes to the window" (147), "She sits down on a box" (148), "[Orphea] Rushes excitedly forward and falls into hysterics on Miss Blaggs' neck. The company gather round in great surprise" (152)).

⁷ Curzon voiced this critique of restriction on women's access to public forum when she described her hesitancy to address the Wentworth Historical Society, a group that had just begun to admit women: "I was one of a sex that had never been recognized in its right place when found upon a platform, even the very modest platform of the essayist" (Wagner II: 141). Given this modest acknowledgement of the gender strictures regarding public performance, it is not surprising that Curzon did not consider her own plays as intended for theatrical performance. Her literary propriety may also have been influenced by the moral and sexual suspicions that attended women involved in theatre. For a discussion of Victorian attitudes towards women in the theatre see Tracy C. Davis, *Actresses As Working Women*.

⁸ For specific examples of such nineteenth-century discourse in Canada see: Light and Prentice *Pioneer and Gentlewomen of British North America 1713-1867*; Cook and Mitchinson *The Proper Sphere*; Mitchinson *The Nature of Their Bodies: Women and Their Doctors in Victorian Canada*.

⁹ Another Canadian comedy, *Culture!* (1888), also broaches the subject of women's education in this manner. Interestingly, the author of *Culture!* veils his/her identity threefold: by remaining anonymous, by alleging that the play is an adaptation from a foreign source, and by the disclaimer that "the author does not hold himself personally responsible for the opinions of Mr. Henry Harris" (although the author refers to "himself," it remains possible that the play was female-authored). This desire for anonymity gives an

indication of the controversial nature of the subject of women's education. It suggests that Curzon's acknowledgement of her authorship was itself a daring political act. *Culture!* follows conventional comedic form: it moves from a period of misrule in which the female heroine enters college, a masculine sphere of activity, and it resolves by having the woman return to the feminine sphere and endorse her place within the heterosexual structure of marriage. In comparison with this conservative, conventionally comedic attack on women's education, one gets a strong sense of activism in Curzon's comedy.

¹⁰The role of comic butt is not reserved exclusively for either gender: rather it is filled by anyone who does not agree with, or understand, the logic of Kate's reasoning. Curzon attempts to rally both men and women to Kate's side, and with a similar, although somewhat backhanded, gesture towards equality lampoons both male and female characters in service of her comical/logical argument.

¹¹Misao Dean argues that femininity in the nineteenth century was "its own kind of power, however limited, and that women grasped that power in order to construct themselves and to be constructed as authoritative" (10). Dean goes on to argue that nineteenth-century Canadian texts, by Catherine Parr Trail and Susanna Moodie for instance, used the discourse of feminine domesticity in order to authorize their narrators' desire to write: "by conforming to the 'rules' of femininity (as Susanna Moodie called them), women were enabled to use the limited authority which those rules granted" (34). Dean thus argues that the rhetoric of domestic femininity is not something that women simply adopted or discarded and, indeed, that such rhetoric enabled their self-constructions as writers. An argument could be made that Curzon's appeal to feminine "rules" enables her similarly.

¹²For useful studies of cross-dressing in Renaissance, Restoration, and Victorian drama see: Jean E. Howard "Crossdressing, The Theatre, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England"; Jacqueline Pearson *The Prostituted Muse*; Tracy C. Davis *Actresses as Working Women*; Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminism and Theatre*; and Laurence Senelick "The Evolution of the Male Impersonator on the Nineteenth-Century Popular Stage."

¹³This is not the first example of cross-dressing in Canadian drama. In Charles Mair's *Tecumseh*, the Indian maiden, Iena, dresses as a brave in order to join her Scottish-poet-soldier-lover in battle, where she sacrifices her life for him. Mair's use of cross-dressing is far more conventional than that of Curzon in that his serves romantic convention, whereas hers is politically motivated.

¹⁴Judith Butler argues that the distinction between gender and sex, which would accommodate the mandate of valued sexual differentiation and gender equality in this play, is ultimately untenable. Butler argues that to become subject, an "I," means that one must submit to the process of assuming a sex, and that act implicates the subject in a sphere of gender rhetorics (see my Introduction, and *Bodies* passim). While I agree with Butler that the distinction between sex and gender is problematic, I would argue that the discourses of sex and gender are both operant in Curzon's text. Butler's analysis helps to clarify the complexity of their interplay in *The Sweet Girl Graduate*: the gendered subject is never fully identical with her sex because that sex is also a construction mediated by practices which vary with place, time, and culture.

¹⁵Kinsman's statement is based on two accounts of cross-dressed women cited in Light and Prentice 214-16.

¹⁶Such confusion is understandable, given the nodes of inaccessibility in this passage. Who or what "Harberton" refers to, I have yet to discover. Whether "thy new divided skirt" is a reference to a new fashion of women's bloomers, whether it is a euphemism for men's pants, or whether it is meant to symbolize gender equality in some other manner, I cannot finally determine.

¹⁷Kim Byrd makes this point her central thesis: "The figure of the student in *The Sweet Girl Graduate* disengages sex from gender and exposes the relationship between them as socially constructed rather than natural. Within the discourse of equality, the student represents a place of liberation, a 'space of possibility' for women beyond gender" (169).

¹⁸ As my student, Kristine West-Sells, pointed out, few real women attending university (then or now) are able to achieve the intellectual honours Curzon bestows upon Kate. As such, she argued that Curzon presents women readers with an unrealistic role model and creates impractical expectations for women.

¹⁹ It looks forward to a construction of lesbianism that did not gain prevalence in Canada until the 1960s.

²⁰ The letter has long been considered a privileged form for the expression of interiority. Although I do not wish to assume naively that this form offers a direct, or transparent, depiction of selfhood, I believe that this discursive construction delves into female and feminist subjectivity in a manner unavailable in the rest of the play.

²¹ In light of the Shakespearean mimicry this play employs, Kate's name may remind readers of Katherina in *The Taming of the Shrew*. Certainly, she shares her energy and precocious quality. Thus, one could argue that the play also provides a resistant reading of Shakespeare's play by reclaiming "the shrew," putting her in positive light, and resisting the enclosure of marriage.

²² *The Sweet Girl Graduate* is set within the confines of middle-class society and it provides a fascinating document of the subversive strategies women employed to reform the strictures surrounding their behavior. In Ontario, the movement towards women's higher education (and suffrage) was promoted mainly by women who "revolted against the complacent, inactive, useless life of traditional middle-class wifedom and demanded an arena for action" (Bacchi 21-22). Ann Douglas argues that the passive role afforded to women, which she calls "feminine disestablishment" (44), resulted from industrialization of the same sort occurring in Ontario in the late nineteenth century. Women no longer had a productive place for their energies and so began working towards educational and social reform. Curzon played an important role in the Canadian movement:

she worked industriously by contributions to the daily press, and by discussions in the Women's Literary Club, in order to obtain for women the right to all college and university privileges in arts, science and medicine. She had the satisfaction of seeing her own daughter become a graduate of the University and assistant analyst in the School of Practical Science, Toronto. With her co-laborer, Dr. Emily Stowe, Curzon also assisted in founding the Women's Medical College....She was a strong advocate of Woman Suffrage, and with others she worked earnestly and with success in obtaining for married women more control of their own property, and in securing the measure of enfranchisement which women now enjoy in the Province of Ontario. (Lady Edgar 4)

This lengthy quotation suggests the effectiveness of Curzon's brand of persuasion in both political and literary spheres. It also reminds us that Curzon, and others like her, paved the way for the rights Canadian women have today. As Carol Lee Bacchi comments, those "who had intended that more advanced studies only develop a woman's mental discipline, fitting her better for her maternal duty, underestimated the effects of education. Many intelligent women, after attending college, became restless and sought more fulfilling work than the traditional domestic routine. Higher education began an irreversible process which led women to demand access to the world outside the home" (21). Indeed, at the play's end, the reader is left with an image of a female character who, like its author, continues in her activism and refuses to stay in the closet of the female domestic sphere.

Chapter Two

The Anxious Subject of Comedy: Erika Ritter's *Automatic Pilot*

Almost a century after Sarah Anne Curzon published her nineteenth-century comedic anomaly, *The Sweet Girl Graduate*, another Toronto-based playwright, Erika Ritter, became the first Canadian woman to achieve sustained mainstream success as a comedic playwright with *Automatic Pilot*. Ironically, perhaps, while Curzon's woman-centred vision is assertive and hopeful, Ritter's comedy, which focuses on a seemingly "liberated" 1970's woman, a stand-up comic named Charlie, is instilled with anxiety and self-abnegation. *Automatic Pilot* is important to this study for a number of reasons. Not only is it the first real stage success for a comedy by a Canadian woman, it makes a comic woman its central subject. The main plot, which dramatizes Charlie's personal and romantic entanglements, is interspersed with stand-up routines which show her entry into the comedy profession. This comedy about a comic woman, written by a woman known for her comedy (Ritter), has a self-reflexive quality, which provides insights into the uneasy relationship between women subjects and pre-existing, "male-defined" comedy forms and dynamics. The other central importance of this play to my study is its at best ambivalent, at worst inimical, portrayal of its female protagonist. While previous feminist studies have focused on women's comedy as an inherently subversive and/or optimistic medium which contests male authority, Ritter's comedy complicates that view. *Automatic Pilot* constructs an anxious, fraught subject position both for its central female character and for its readers/spectators; indeed, the play's particular type of humour hinges on this discomfiting position.

The shift from Curzon's feisty Kate to Ritter's reactive Charlie can be explained, at least partially, by changing conceptions of subjectivity which affected dramatic practice in the century separating these plays. Ritter's self-described "TV-style realistic theatre" (Zimmerman 136) relies upon certain dynamics established by early realist theatre. Elin Diamond argues that the shift from melodrama (and, I might add, didactic drama like that of Curzon) to realism created "the desire for a different performing body" ("Shudder" 157) which included a "diminished gestural range, the presentation of a

corporeal text riddled by gaps, feints, evasions" ("Shudder" 159). Although I have argued that gaps, feints, and evasions can be located in Curzon's text, on the surface the play constructs a didactic subject whose actions and words equal her intent. This type of seemingly transparent character construction gave way to a new type of characterization with the advent of realism -- the "problem woman." Diamond contends that early realist heroines were interiorized embodiments of turn of the century conceptions of hysteria; spectators inhabited the position of analysts in front of whom these women's case studies were presented/performed ("Shudder" 157-58). William Worthen argues more generally that realism is founded on the "undiscoverable interiority of character," which realist narratives nonetheless attempt to discover (81). The representative behaviours of nineteenth-century characters were thus supplanted by these new subjects of realism: characters who represent psychological enigmas.

While early realist dramas are notably serious, the dynamics and dramatic conventions associated with realism have made their way into some contemporary manifestations of comedy. A case in point is Ritter's *Automatic Pilot* which emplots its comedic protagonist as a "problem woman," and directs spectators to share in the process of diagnosing the psychological dynamics that make this funny lady "tick," at the same time as it asks them to laugh with and at her. This is the crux of Ritter's anxious, fraught female subject of comedy: while Charlie's humour can be seen as a transgressive, constructive activity, her compulsive need to make jokes both on and off-stage is presented simultaneously as a symptom of interiorized psychological and gender unease. Indeed, the type of humour she performs, in which she appears as both subject and object of comic derision, also appears symptomatic of such unease. The female comedic performer, who is the enigmatic focus of Ritter's text, can be seen as at once dynamic, transgressive and as antipathetic, afflicted. Indeed, as I will argue, the play presents these two "readings" of Charlie as mutually constitutive.

In *Automatic Pilot*, Ritter fashions as protagonist a female comic whose humour appears at once a symptom of, and a form of therapy for, her emotional difficulties. The audience first sees Charlie, whose day-job is soap opera writer, begin her moonlighting

career at a stand-up comedy club. This is her first time on stage at The Canada Goose, and she is nervous and wooden:

CHARLIE: (*to the audience*) I decided to try my luck as New Talent tonight, because at my age, it's an accomplishment to appear as new anything. This is my first time. You'd never know it, but I'm scared to death. I can't imagine why. What could be more natural than this, standing up in a room full of total strangers, attempting to give them the time of their lives? Actually, I'm accustomed to making a fool of myself. (373)

Charlie's routine exploits her initial insecurity with her new role and establishes her form of humour. She follows in the mold of early American female stand-up comics, like Phyllis Diller, who perform self-deprecatory comedy. Charlie is a comedic representation of the "problem woman"; her troubles and inadequacies as a person -- and, importantly, as a woman -- are both the subject and source of her humour.

The two acts of *Automatic Pilot* are framed by and interspersed with Charlie's stand-up routines. The main plot of the play features Charlie's "actual" day to day life, which provides the subject matter for her routines. Instead of complicating the "problem woman" persona of those routines, the "realistic" plot of the play supports it. After her inaugural performance, the scene shifts to Charlie's apartment where she works fruitlessly on her next routine, cigarette and drink in hand. Frustrated, she places a call to Alan, her estranged husband, who is having a relationship with another man. First she taunts Alan by "forgetting" his partner's name, then she solicits Alan's attention for herself: "I'm lonesome and I need to talk to you" (373). Their conversation fails to assuage her loneliness, but it does cure her writer's block. When the phone call ends, Charlie gives a "sardonic smile" and begins to ad lib a routine that ridicules gay men: "Jackie, Jimmy, what's the difference? I mean they've all got names basically suitable for embroidering on the front of a pair of coveralls, right? Names they swiped off the Mouseketeers" (375). Charlie's routine is reactive, insulting, and over-the-top. Whether one finds it funny or not, the scene clearly establishes Charlie as a character with emotional problems which are, it would appear, due to her sense of abandonment. Her comic impulse

functions as both a kind of psychological "feint" or "evasion," which deflects attention from the source of her pain, and a kind of therapeutic outlet, which diffuses it.¹

Ritter's play, unlike Curzon's woman-centred comedy, fashions comedy from the romantic and emotional entanglements of a sexually active, heterosexual woman. As the act progresses, Charlie exhibits emotional dependencies in her other relationships with men. Nick and Gene, the play's remaining characters, are brothers. In Scene Two, Charlie wakes up in Nick's bed in an alcohol-induced blur. Gene (the younger brother) is in the bedroom, and Charlie assumes that he has been her lover. Cases of mistaken identity are a stock device of comedy, but Ritter gives this convention a dark edge by revealing alcohol abuse as its source. It is particularly difficult to read Charlie's "mistake" as merely amusing from the perspective of an AIDS-aware culture.² Within the first few scenes, this comic heroine chain-smokes, swears, makes nasty wisecracks, drinks continuously and to excess, and shows evidence of promiscuity. Colleagues who saw the play in the early 1980s tell me that it was considered quite risqué, particularly because it showed a woman breaking taboos regarding language and other social codes. While I do not wish to underplay the fact that Charlie does enact transgressive behaviours which contravene longstanding attitudes regarding correct feminine conduct, I do want to point out that those behaviours are presented simultaneously as evidence of psychological unease.

This latter reading of Charlie is encouraged by numerous textual cues in the play. For instance, when Charlie attempts to explain her "mistake" she tells Nick "I wasn't drunk. I just have -- *gaps* sometimes" (376, my italics). Later, Nick tells his brother "She's cute, but she's nutty as a fruitcake. And she acts like she's mainlining Spanish Fly...That woman doesn't just *like* to screw. She needs it. Like a drug" (386). When Alan asks Charlie when she will "stop expecting other people to supply [her] with self-respect," Charlie turns his diagnosis into a telling joke:

CHARLIE: You make me sound like a backward nation. (*travelogue voice*)

"Here in Charlieland, the natives try to find enough self-esteem to power even one generator."

ALAN: That's not funny, babe.

CHARLIE: Neither is venereal disease. But you know, it's a sure fire laugh.
(385)

And it is. While the male characters take turns diagnosing Charlie's problems, she reacts by using such distressing subjects as the source of comedic material. While this activity can be seen as constructive, it is also a form of evasion. In this way, the play presents Charlie's problems and her comedy as mutually constitutive.

Although Charlie's character is not a model of emotional health, much of her attraction (to the male characters and presumably to spectators) lies precisely in her foibles. Through its particular brand of comedic realism, the play dramatizes some of the relationship conundrums and personal turmoils that urban babyboomers of this generation confronted.³ *Automatic Pilot* is a kind of hybrid of psychological realism, social comedy of manners, and stand-up comedy. While I argue that the desire to diagnose this funny lady's psychological makeup impels the plot, along the way Charlie's stand-up routines and the play's comic scenarios satirize the urban singles world in which she lives. And although the play does not foreground the interrelationships between the social and the psychological realms, such interrelationships can be made.

The comedy of manners element in *Automatic Pilot* focuses on the 70s decade, particularly its confusion over sexual relations and gender identities. From this perspective, Charlie reflects the gender role confusion of women newly "liberated" into the professional, independent life previously associated with male prerogative, and into changing sexual and social mores. Her name conjures images of "Charlie" perfume ads (popular in the 70s and 80s) -- the kind of advertisement in which a beautiful, successful woman, dressed in a suit and carrying a briefcase, strides purposefully through the city while male construction workers whistle. Charlie's subject position should, I think, be considered alongside such images of liberal feminism. According to Lorraine Code, liberal feminists "merely require men to move over within existing systems to make room for [them]" (38). This describes the manner in which Charlie's personal and professional life, and her style of comedy, seem to emulate pre-existing "male" models. Code argues that liberal feminism is an extension of liberal humanism: "contemporary liberal feminists argue for women's rights to enjoy the freedom and equality of opportunity

claimed by the autonomous liberal individual" (36). This ideology elucidates not only Charlie's "liberated" demeanor, but also the manner in which *Automatic Pilot* conceives of character more generally. Catherine Belsey argues that liberal humanist ideology underpins realist conceptions of character subjects. Liberal feminism, like liberal humanism, manifests itself in the notion of individualized characters who ought to be responsible for, and in control of, their actions and significations. The purposeful stride of the Charlie perfume ad model provides a gestural icon of this notion of self-possessed subjecthood. While Ritter's Charlie can be read as a representation of liberal feminist ideology, she is not a particularly positive or coherent icon. Instead of a self-aware, assertive model, Ritter conceives of the liberal feminist subject as a "problem woman," beset by gender and relationship confusions.⁴ As such, the play has a certain candor. However, in keeping with liberal ideologies, the play buries its consideration of how gender and social ideologies complicate the way subjects conceive of themselves. Instead, it presents Charlie as a seemingly autonomous character who is individually responsible for her success or failure to achieve personal fulfillment.

That said, the play's depiction of Charlie's confusions is part of what makes it so intriguing. For instance, as Act One progresses, Nick (a no-commitment, macho businessman type) "drops" Charlie apparently because he finds her too "needy," not only sexually but emotionally. He particularly objects to her attempts to domesticate their relationship by cleaning the fridge and making pancakes. Nick is equally uncomfortable with Charlie's adoption of "masculine" prerogatives (her sexual aggressiveness) and her exhibition of traditional "feminine" behaviours. Charlie thus appears caught between changing and conflicted gender codes. The result: anxiety and incomprehension. Charlie is utterly surprised by the breakup and misguidedly phones up her gay ex-husband seeking sympathy:

Yes, finished. As far as I knew, everything was going fine. Then today I get the kiss-off, and tonight these roses arrive. He sends roses and a note that Kahlil Gibran must have ghosted. "No regrets. No bitterness. No blame." What the hell does that *mean*? After all this, he buys me off with cryptic platitudes. And a

lunch. I knew there was going to be trouble when he asked me to lunch. Never, never go to lunch. (388)

The dating dynamics Charlie outlines, and with such enviable wit, have a familiar ring. Such topical dialogue situates Charlie's anxiety in the context of an era when the complications of so-called "sexual liberation" were becoming increasingly evident.

While the playtext initiates familiarity with Charlie and her gender role confusion, it also invites spectators to view her critically as a troubled woman, responsible for her own psychological disequilibrium. At first Charlie's conversation with Alan presents her as clever and insightful; later, it exposes her self-absorption and inflexibility:

Every time I -- (*pause*) Nick has nothing to do with this call. I told you, I love you. And you said that you -- (*pause, then angrily*) Wait and see? How the hell do you expect me to wait and see? You were a beautiful boy when I met you and now you're nothing but a -- goddamn -- faggot! (*pause*) I *can't* get past it. Can you get past it? Eight goddamn years, Alan. How the hell do I get that back? There's just nowhere to go from here. (*pause*) I don't *know* what I mean by that! (388)

Charlie slams down the phone and pulls its jack out of the wall. The next scene takes place two hours and bottles later. While Charlie's confusion has cause, her reactions suddenly appear unreasonable and extreme. This segment reflects what I see as two common dynamics in the playtext: 1) the play seems to invite social analysis, then displaces it with an emphasis on Charlie's individual pathology; 2) the play initiates identification with Charlie's "tell it like it is" humour and then makes this position extremely uncomfortable by emphasizing her troubled, reactive characteristics. The next and final scene of the first act sees Gene, the younger brother (and sensitive guy type), tell Charlie that he wants to pursue a committed relationship with her "in spite of [her] neuroses" (392) and lack of "any kind of decent opinion of [herself]" (391). Somehow such dubious "sweet-talk" wins Charlie over and we have comedy's traditional romantic happy ending -- except that this is only the end of Act One.

The first half of the play establishes Charlie's often distraught, continuously wise-cracking character as both a source of comic vitality and an enigma to be solved. While it

initially provides numerous scenes which invite identification with this witty, dynamic, fruitcake of a protagonist (I'd love to think up come-backs as quickly as Charlie), the second act constructs a more marked critical distance from which to view her. A colleague who saw the play in an early run related to me that she identified with Charlie and the play's depiction of being single in the late 70s particularly in the first act. In the second, however, she began to feel foolish for this initial, positive identification. I believe that this dynamic results because the second half of the play shifts focus away from Charlie and towards another character who offers a more comfortable, and authorized identificatory position.

Act Two focuses on Charlie's embroilments in domestic life with her new live-in partner, Gene. Whereas Act One features Charlie's stand-up comedy routines, Act Two features Gene's literary efforts. Gene becomes the most compelling voice of the play, and the reader/spectator is subtly coerced to adopt his perspective. Gene is a young writer who is fascinated with the human psyche; Charlie becomes his lover and case study. His analysis of her character is articulated prominently in the playtext, and Ritter herself acknowledges that she identifies particularly with his perspective:

I like his evolution in that play and his attitudes are reflective of my own attitudes.

I feel closer to him in a sense because he's the writer. I see Charlie as a performer and Gene as the analytical one. (Wallace/Zimmerman 282)

Ritter's comment validates the writerly, reflective subject position associated with Gene over that of the performative, reactive position Charlie offers. This authorized choice of identification is inscribed throughout the playtext and is not surprising. Charlie, the comic female performer, is riddled with displays of self-delusion, conflicted emotions, and unease. To identify with the female comic performer is to inhabit a fairly uncomfortable and uncommon position. Gene, the analytical writer, provides what seems a more coherent, recognizable, and comfortable subject position.

Gene's analysis of Charlie sees her as a defective woman, whom he would like to "fix." While the first act begins with Charlie's stand-up routine, the second begins with Gene's dictation of a segment of his novel, *Deathless Prose*, into a tape-recorder. Like Charlie, Gene draws on personal material (including his anxiety) for creative inspiration.

His thinly disguised autobiographical novel is a fictional assessment of a young man's relationship with an older, "damaged" woman. He dictates: "Anyway, the more they talked, the more often he caught himself wishing he'd inherited a prize somewhat more *intact*, emotionally speaking. Because almost from the first moment, a terrible suspicion had begun to form in him that, in the relationship game, you could actually be held accountable for debts run up long before you appeared on the scene. That he would be punished somehow, for having turned up too late" (392, my italics). This segment of Gene's prose reveals not only his proprietary perspective but also his perception that Charlie's selfhood has been previously damaged and is fundamentally unalterable. His apprehension certainly has support in the playtext (recall Charlie's reactive phone calls to Alan, for example). In this way, the play validates Gene's perspective and encourages spectators to assume the distance, the power, and the assumption of identity that underlies his analyst position.

Interestingly, both Gene and Charlie conform to some degree to the romantic stereotype of the writer who turns personal turmoil (often accompanied by behaviours like drinking and promiscuity) into art. The play appears to approve or make comfortable this role for Gene, but not Charlie. For Charlie, particularly, the codes of the artist collide with the codes for correct feminine behaviour. That said, the narrative does not draw attention to this gender code conflict but instead suggests that Charlie's artistic angst is another of her "faults." The connection between personal turmoil and creative inspiration is made clear in the beginning of the second act. Gene moves in, offers Charlie support and stability, and she stops drinking. But Charlie also stops performing and writing, while Gene thrives both creatively and domestically. Gene's creativity can function within and produce comfort, whereas Charlie's, it would appear, requires -- indeed manufactures -- discord.

The beginning of Act Two establishes their relationship as having reached, for Gene at least, a comfortable stability. But Charlie's contentment is less assured. In this exchange, Charlie and Gene discuss her writer's block and motivation for bringing Nick (Gene's brother/Charlie's ex-lover) into their social set:

- Charlie: I don't know what comes after, "Hi, everybody, and welcome to the Canada Goose."
- Gene: Charlie, what's the matter? I thought you were happy.
- Charlie: It's always hard to cope with the new and bizarre.
- Gene: Is that why you asked Nick to dinner? Out of nostalgia for the bad old days? (396)

Once again, Gene indicates to the reader Charlie's apparent need for discord. That discord arrives, along with Charlie's estranged husband who comes looking for his passport. Alan makes it clear to Charlie that he is pursuing a same-sex relationship with another man (they are about to go to Europe for a gay wedding and honeymoon). With finality, he puts an end to Charlie's hopes of reconciliation and rejects her emotional dependency:

- Alan: I'm not taking the blame any more for the tragedy of poor little Charlie, victim of the Evil Homosexual Conspiracy. There were a hundred things wrong with our marriage and if I'd stayed as straight as Charles Bronson, we'd have fallen apart anyway.
- Charlie: That's not true.
- Alan: It's true and you know it. But now you've got someone who loves you and so do I. So let's let go. Before we guilt each other to death. Let me go, Charlie. (398-99)

Charlie's response is to go out, get drunk, and sleep with another man, apparently returning to her previous pattern of self-abuse. Despite her actions, Gene still wants to maintain the relationship and forces Charlie to make the decision to end it. In so doing, he diagnoses her low self-esteem (not for the first time):

- Gene: ...So if you want to walk, fucking do it. But at least admit it's your own idea.
- Charlie: (*exploding*) How the hell can you want this? I'm screwed up and I drink too much and you're way too good for me.
- Gene: That's not the problem. You know what the problem is? The fact that I love you. You just can't deal with that. Because any club that

would have you as a member just isn't good enough to join. (400-401)

Like Alan, Gene also accuses Charlie of perpetuating a victim mentality: "this time you're calling the shots. It's not as easy as being the victim, is it?" (401) The scene leaves the spectator with an unflattering image of Charlie as the one with the problems and the blame for sabotaging her personal and romantic happiness, while Gene is the "knowing subject" who diagnoses her failings.

This play about a comic woman ends, unlike traditional comedy, with the dissolution of relationships. Ritter's comedic vision allows that the conventional romantic happy ending does not suit this contemporary female subject. Neither does it provide a recognizably promising alternative. The play's final vision of Charlie is ambivalent. It features her return to the stand-up stage, where she turns her failed relationship with Gene into another "bit." Actually, *Automatic Pilot* has two potential endings. The last scene of the original script begins with Charlie on stage at the Canada Goose, and ends with Gene dictating a segment of his novel into a tape recorder. Later versions cut Gene's final segment. Both versions of the finale provide a similar portrait of Charlie as an improved comic (she integrates her life material more smoothly and addresses the audience more familiarly, for instance), but not as a particularly happy, or emotionally intact, person. Consider this key segment of her final appearance on the comedy-club stage:

Hey ladies, there's a big vogue now in younger men. You noticed that? I don't know about you, but I don't want to go out to dinner with someone who has to ask the waiter to bring him the Child's Menu...But the real bitch about younger men is how goddamn earnest they are. One roll in the hay, and they're ready to move in - -provided you're willing to help them with their algebra. And when you say, "Hey, wait a minute, sonny -"

She falters on the name, breaks off for a moment, and then, almost to herself:

Sonny.

Long, baffled pause, then she plunges on, almost desperately.

No, no I prefer to stick to single guys my own age. Hey, has anybody SEEN any single straight guys lately? (402)

Charlie's final routine combines callous perceptiveness (particularly regarding Gene's presumptiveness) with vulnerability. The stage directions ask the actor to display "symptoms" of anxiety and sadness, which underlie her "almost desperate" need to keep making comedy.

Gene, who is given the play's final word in the original script, dictates a segment of his novel which includes this bitter-sweet assessment of Charlie's final appearance:

...he went down to the club where she performed and watched her unobtrusively from the back. And while he considered the things that she said to be specious and exaggerated, he did have to concede that she seemed happier up there, telling stories that featured her as the perpetual underdog, perpetually disappointed. (402)

Gene's analysis, softened now by a nostalgic tone, recalls the previous scene in which he accused Charlie of manufacturing her own failure and misery. He implies that her "underdog humour," like her victim mentality, is Charlie's choice and so provides a measure of happiness.

Jerry Wasserman's introduction to *Automatic Pilot* in his *Modern Canadian Plays* anthology endorses Gene's final analysis: "Ritter leaves the ending ambiguous, suggesting that rejecting [Gene] may be a trade-off necessary for Charlie to pursue her creative life in comedy. But Charlie's inability to accept the sanity and stability Gene offers her may be the ultimate measure of her failure" (352). Similarly, Erika Ritter makes this comment about her revision of the play's ending:

it gave the play a more decisive ending to end with her. And somehow the spectacle of her standing up there and saying all this stuff was sufficiently tragic that you didn't need Gene's commentary. (Wallace/Zimmerman 290)

Ritter views Charlie's return to the stand-up stage as tragic rather than positive. This suggests that, from the author's perspective at least, Charlie's return to comedy does not constitute a "happy ending," but rather is intended to provide a final insight into her failure to transcend her character "flaws" and to achieve personal fulfillment. Both Ritter

and Wasserman privilege a reading of Charlie's final appearance as evidence of individual failure.

Because the plot focuses on Charlie's quest for male companionship and male approval (within male-defined models for success), the fact that she achieves neither the conventional romantic happy ending, nor the liberal feminist happy ending of personal fulfillment and enlightenment, does suggest that Charlie "fails" somehow. The play's psychological realist diagnosis isolates the cause of that failure in Charlie's individual psyche: her self-victimization and inflexibility. In the second Act, a reader who wishes to construct herself as a "knowing subject" is impelled to accept an identificatory position that the play genders as male (significantly, all the male characters diagnose Charlie similarly). To adopt this subject position is to adopt the stance of the analyst who has a privileged insight into Charlie's puzzling, troubling behaviours.

Still, while identification with Gene's subject position is the more flattering option, the position Charlie offers is by far more dynamic and interesting -- at least to me. Despite the sanctions against her, I suspect that many -- particularly female -- readers or spectators continue to identify with this abrasive, reactive female protagonist (and to prefer her comedy routines to Gene's prose). While the play does not flatter that position, it does more than allow for it. The identificatory cues of *Automatic Pilot* permit one to identify at once with the analyst and the problem woman. This creates a split, or fraught, psychic state which may account partially for responses of ambivalence and anxiety the play provokes.

A more evident cause of my own anxious response is the manner in which the play's realist directives transpose its depiction of the psychic effects of changing, conflicted gender and social codes into the saga of an individual "problem woman" who fashions comedy from self-loathing. Erika Ritter acknowledges the potential for this feminist critique:

My women don't go over terrifically well with a lot of feminists. My contention in the plays is that their beleaguerment and their oppression is largely a product of their own mentality -- their attitude about themselves. In actual fact they are

independent and achieving people. It is not what people are doing to them; it's what they are doing to themselves. (Wallace/Zimmerman 286)

This quotation elucidates the dynamic in Ritter's work that directs criticism inwards to individual character psychology rather than outwards at the character's matrix of relationships or interface with the realm of social and gender considerations. Although Ritter's hybrid psychological realism and comedy of manners means that both individual and social realms are represented, the social is subsumed by the realist emphasis on individual character psychology. Ritter's female characters appear like islands of dysfunction. In *Automatic Pilot*, for example, there is no mention of Charlie's family (with the exception of her failed marriage) or female friends, so that the spectator is not encouraged to imagine the character's developmental history or her social implications.⁵ Charlie's problems are isolated and turned back on herself; she does not point a finger at the spectator's or critic's society.

Ritter defends her portrayal of such isolated female protagonists by citing their validity in terms of realism. In response to criticism that she does not portray women "positively," she states: "Drama is about the way people are, not the way they should be" (Milliken 36). Ritter's defense suggests adherence to realism and the assumption that drama can, transparently, show how people "are." In one sense, Ritter puts her finger on the impulse among many feminist critics to privilege forward-looking, female-centred comedy. Ritter's portrayal of a comic woman whose humour is both a symptom of and response to her sense of inadequacies as a woman and mate does not fit this mode. Still, much women's comedy is "like" Charlie's;⁶ thus Ritter's investigation of a comic woman's self-deprecatory humour should be acknowledged, not dismissed. From my viewpoint, it is not the question of whether Charlie is positive or not that determines whether this play is anti-feminist or even anti-female. I think that the play can be seen as both these things for at least two reasons. First, its realist strategies deflect consideration of social and gender ideologies and their effects on the psyche of this "problem woman"; instead, they suggest that her comic dis-ease is evidence of individual failings. Secondly, the play's soft-Freudian "case study" dynamics suggest that it provides a genuine portrait of the comic woman's psyche: that is, she is a woman who suffers at best from emotional and

gender disequilibrium, at worst from female self-loathing. As such, I worry that the play encourages a conservative and cautionary attitude towards not only this particular character, but towards comic women generally.

Responses to *Automatic Pilot* tend to take Ritter's portrayal of the psychological and gender dis-ease of its comic woman quite at face value. Reviews of her work are rife with terms such as "recognizable," "believable," "accurate," "reminiscent," and "credible" (Skene, Bolt, Dafoe, Conlogue). The fact that Erika Ritter, the playwright, is also a well-known humourist supports an almost autobiographical reading of the play (as does the fact that both Gene and Charlie are autobiographical writers). Indeed, many reviewers emphasize that Ritter is best known for her comic radio broadcasts and that she performed at a Toronto comedy club in order to gain insight into the world of her female protagonist. Ritter is often interviewed and quoted as a privileged interpreter of her work (I too include quotes from the author as evidence that Gene's perspective on Charlie is authorially privileged).

This reliance on the playwright's authority is a characteristic of classic realist drama. Catherine Belsey describes the way in which an unspoken, but nonetheless privileged, authorial voice guides a reader/spectator's interpretive process:

we know while we read or watch, the author is present as a shadowy authority and as source of the fiction, and the author's presence is substantiated by the name on the cover or the programme...The reader is invited to perceive and judge the 'truth' of the text, the coherent, non-contradictory interpretation of the world as it is perceived by an author whose autonomy is the source and evidence of the truth of the interpretation. ("Constructing" 52)

Because the reader understands the authorially inscribed meaning, s/he is constituted as a "knowing subject in a world of knowing subjects" (Belsey "Constructing" 52). While Belsey is critical of the coercive dynamics of realism, Annette Kuhn notes that the passive subject position it offers to the audience constitutes "one of the pleasures of classic realist cinema" (268). "Meaning seems to be there already in the film, the spectator's only task being to sit back and take it in." Realist theatre, like cinema, "draws the spectator in to the representation by constructing a credible and coherent cinematic [or

dramatic] world, which at the same time situates her or him as a passive consumer of meanings which seem to be already there in the text" (Kuhn 268). Ritter's comedic realism, particularly its multi-character scenes, copies many of the codes of realist film and t.v. to which spectators are accustomed, with the result that it is easily followed and consumed.⁷ Spectators are encouraged in this way to accept those meanings "which seem to be already there in the text" (Gene's analysis of Charlie, for example), and to accept the "credible and coherent" world the play depicts as "the way it is." The spectator who constructs him/herself according to the realist directives of the play would thus not trouble the way this world and those meanings are presented or constructed. But this is not the only subject position available to the spectator or critic of *Automatic Pilot*. As I have argued, the play offers not one, but at least two subject positions for its readers. In tandem with the authorized, male-identified, analyst position inscribed particularly in Act Two, spectators might also occupy Charlie's subject position, which is inscribed particularly in Act One and her stand-up comedy routines. That position complicates the realist enclosure of the play (with its construction of a coherent, comfortable subject position), and its depiction of the female comic as an isolated "problem woman."

Subject positions are as much effects of *how* things are said (a play's discursive and representational strategies) as they are of *what* is said. In addition to its psychological realist plot and Gene's writerly analyses, the play includes a series of Charlie's stand-up comedy routines. The representational strategies of those routines fashion for Charlie and for the spectator quite a different subject position. For one thing, in them Charlie is active rather than reactive. Instead of "shooting off at the mouth" as she does in multi-character scenes, her stand-up segments are crafted to focus on particular conundrums. In other words, while Charlie's stand-up persona is still abrasive and over-the-top, she appears more in control of that performance. The spectator also inhabits a different, less-distanced, relation to Charlie in these scenes. Charlie addresses the spectator directly and thus may forge a sense of community. However, while it might seem that Charlie's routines construct a more positive, inclusive female subject position, this is not necessarily the case. Charlie's stand-up persona can be seen as at once dynamic and afflicted, at once transgressive of gender boundaries and protective of them.

In the second part of this chapter, I will examine more closely the gender dynamics of Charlie's stand-up comedy segments. I will first discuss Cynthia Zimmerman's positive feminist recuperation of Charlie's perspective. I will then complicate this reading, using Freudian concepts to show how Charlie's style of comedy both expresses and produces gender anxiety.

In what is, I believe, the only positive feminist article on *Automatic Pilot*, Cynthia Zimmerman identifies Charlie (and with Charlie) as a kind of female role model, who rejects comedy's traditional "happy ending" in favour of comedic creativity. She notes that while most critics and spectators identify with Gene's final perception of Charlie, a different view is possible: "So Gene has the last word. It would seem he has achieved genuine understanding but, ironically, he has absolutely no idea why she was unable to function when she was living with him. On her own again, she can be creative again" (147). In contrast to the dominant reading, Zimmerman's resistant interpretation attempts to recuperate Charlie's perspective and put it in a positive light. She takes issue with those critics (like Wasserman) who castigate Charlie for rejecting the nice young man who promises her a stable romantic relationship, and instead imagines Charlie as a woman who attains strength and self-fulfillment through humour:

Charlie does not want a "wife" any more than Nick does. What she is missing is the kind of emotional support her actor husband had been able to supply...She does not stay with Gene, then, because she loves her career too much or because domestic bliss left her unable to write, but because, simply put, he is not right for her. She may be on "automatic pilot" but her instinct is serving her well. Finally she discovers her own strength. Her humour -- which is a kind of protection and a vulnerability as well -- is also a strength. (148)

Zimmerman thus challenges the "problem woman" stigma that haunts Charlie to the play's end, refutes the comedic convention that a female character can only find happiness through romantic stability, and affirms Charlie's comic creativity as a stronger personal option. Although it is true that the conventional happy ending does not suit this contemporary comedic heroine, Zimmerman's affirmative "take" on the play ignores

those textual cues which indicate, at the very least, an ambivalent portrayal of her final appearance.

Part of Zimmerman's recuperation focuses on an anecdote Charlie relates to Gene about a stand-up comic from L.A. After a disappointing show, the comic invites Charlie and some other comics back to his messy hotel room. At first, they just sit and watch t.v. while the comic listens to tapes of his material. But after a while he takes notice of his audience:

And gradually the headliner began to pay attention to the fact that we were there, and he started throwing out new lines he'd spun off from the stuff on the tape. And after every line, he'd stop and ask, "What about *that*. Could *that* be funny?" Some of it was funny and some of it wasn't but we told him it was dynamite and he wrote it down. I think that he was afraid that if he stopped, he'd die. You know, the way a shark has to keep moving or die? I think he was afraid that if he stopped, he'd be consumed by the garbage in the hotel room...(390)

Then Charlie muses, "maybe he actually *needed* that awfulness around him for incentive" (390). Gene later accuses Charlie of the same pathology: she needs her life to be a mess in order to create and act. Zimmerman reads the anecdote differently. "The 'mess' is not the point," she argues; it is the responsiveness and encouragement of the audience that form the real impetus for creation and vitality (148). She notes that playwright, critics, and spectators alike have tended to focus on the mess rather than the comic vitality and commitment associated with Charlie's characterization. Zimmerman's identification of/with Charlie's performative vitality points to the manner in which the play's stand-up routines forge a vital link between performer and spectator and seem to provide the female subject with a more dynamic, positive role than that which is allowed by the male-defined perspective inscribed in the playtext's multi-character scenes.

Zimmerman constructs for herself, and for Charlie, a positive, assertive subject position by refusing to identify with Gene and instead revealing the blind-spots and gender biases inscribed in his interpretation of Charlie. While I admire Zimmerman's politicized recuperation of Charlie, it leaves me unsatisfied. For one thing, this treatment maintains a problematic adherence to realism, since it attempts to account for -- and to

make coherent -- Charlie's behaviour through an analysis of individual character psychology, rather than through an examination of the different representational strategies that produce her "meanings." Because Charlie is so often read "realistically," the obvious needs to be stated: Charlie is a character produced through representational strategies, and not an autonomous individual whose "real" motivations and feelings can be understood. Further, as I have shown, the text clearly situates this character's humour alongside "symptoms" of anxiety and incomprehension. These effects should, I think, be seen in relation rather than in opposition. Indeed, Ritter has Charlie make the parallel between herself and the L.A. comic: "Maybe he actually *needed* the awfulness around him for incentive. Maybe he needed some place like that, that he *had* to be funny in or die...So, maybe this is no time for *me* to stop. Maybe I've got to keep going now, or die" (390). This comment describes precisely Charlie's behaviour in her final appearance on stage in the final Act. After she falters at her "pet name" for Gene, "Sonny," the play directions state that she "*plunges on, almost desperately*" (402). To the very end, the playtext portrays confusion and anxiety as the impetus of this female comic's survival humour.

Even if I were to reject one side of the play's conflicted identificatory cues (that is to reject Gene's authorized subject position), anxiety and conflict still surround Charlie's character and performance. In fact, by attempting to reclaim Charlie's development as an optimistic feminist fable, I believe that Zimmerman's reading not only reduces the ambivalence that makes this text so interesting but also de-politicizes this female comedic subject position by subduing its candor and disruptive effects. Unlike Zimmerman, I do not wish to underplay the "mess" or anxiety inherent in Charlie's characterization or to see it separate from her comedic vitality. Unlike the "male-position" of the play, I do not consider it a representation of individual failing. Rather, I diagnose the "messiness" of this female subject of comedy as an effect and an indication of the conflict between her gender and the play's representational strategies.

Thus far, I have alluded to three potential "patterns for success" that the play offers this female protagonist: the liberal feminist woman who finds success and fulfillment according to previously male-occupied realms of activity; the romantic artist

who sacrifices personal happiness and health for his art; the woman of conventional comedy who attains happiness through male approval and partnership. All of these patterns are largely "male-defined." When a female subject occupies even one of these "male-defined" positions, signs of displacement or anxiety often appear. When she seems to want to occupy *all* of them, symptoms of gender anxiety, confusion, and unease are virtually inevitable. From this perspective, Charlie's gender anxiety is not an "individual failing" but an inevitable effect of those incompatible, conflicting gender and representational codes that the play employs to constitute her.

Ritter's female protagonist is constituted through yet another representational mode, stand-up comedy. Those routines fashion what appears to be Charlie's internal gender unease into jokes. But does stand-up comedy offer a more welcoming subject position than those other "male-defined" representational patterns the play implicates? On the one hand, Charlie's commitment to stand-up comedy does appear a constructive activity; on the other, the dynamics of stand-up comedy serve to further re-entrench and produce gender anxiety. A major element that complicates Zimmerman's view of Charlie as an empowered subject is the kind of self-deprecatory, survival humour that characterizes her comedy routines. Charlie is not the only character in the play to make jokes at her own expense (Gene also does this), but she does so incessantly. As I have argued, the play presents her reactive joking behaviours as symptomatic of some kind of personality complex. From a Freudian standpoint, the self-deprecatory position Charlie adopts can be seen as an inevitable result of the gender dynamics of joking. "Generally speaking," Freud argues, "a tendentious joke calls for three people: in addition to the one who makes the joke, there must be a second who is taken as the object of the hostile or sexual aggressiveness, and a third in whom the joke's aim of producing pleasure is fulfilled" (100). Freud goes on to characterize the first and third parties as men, and the second (the object, or butt) as a woman. In response to Freud's analysis, Kathleen Rowe notes that traditionally jokes have been directed *at* women (or a less powerful group) *by* men (or a more powerful group). She argues that, due to this dynamic, "standup comedy -- highly dependent on the dynamics of joke making -- has, until the 1960s, been an unfriendly place for female performers," and that "[e]ven after the sixties, women who

succeeded as standup comedians tended...to occupy the 'male' position by directing their jokes at themselves in self-deprecating barbs, or at other women" (69).

Charlie's stand-up routines are exemplary of this dynamic. Act One, Scene Four of *Automatic Pilot* comprises one of her routines at the Canada Goose where "CHARLIE wears the now habitual uniform of her performance -- her glasses, jacket, scarf and brooch" (383). Like her name, Charlie's "uniform" evokes the desire to occupy a "male" position. With characteristic self-effacement and self-reference, she alludes to this in her routine: "You know, I have what people in showbusiness describe as a great RADIO face. Actually, it's not mine. It comes attached to the glasses. It's part of a disguise. See, when you look like Bo Derek; everybody mobs you. Okay, okay...so I don't look like Bo Derek. But I am a Ten. I'm what they call a Canadian Ten. Which means they don't even accept me at par in Buffalo" (383). Like the Groucho Marx inspired "instant disguise" (attached plastic glasses, nose, and moustache available at a Trick and Joke Store nearby), Charlie's uniform is intended to evoke a supposedly universal comic persona. Like the supposedly "neutral" universal liberal humanist subject, or the supposedly "neutral" gender position that liberal feminist women attempt to occupy, that persona -- that position -- is gendered male. Still, Charlie includes certain "feminine" touches (brooch and scarf) which maintain a symbolic link to her gender. As a comedian, Charlie's subject position is split between what Rowe calls the Freudian "male position" and "female position." Both subject and object of her comedic performance, she directs jokes and barbs at herself (she fails to live up to the Bo Derek image of the ultimate woman) and at other women (particularly those who approach that image). In order for a spectator to get the joke and its pleasure response, s/he would need to adopt the "male position" and share in its "hostile or sexual aggressiveness" towards the female "butt." From this perspective, Charlie's jokes -- like much conventional stand-up -- are distressingly anti-female.

Charlie's routine deals in conventional gender stereotypes (another common feature of stand-up comedy). Interestingly, while she mocks masculine susceptibility to the gender ideal of the frail female, those segments seem to me less critical (they are almost fond or protective of such clichéd masculine naiveté) than those directed towards

women themselves. Again, this indicates the ingrained male perspective of Charlie's subject position. As the routine continues, Charlie's jokes focus on the gap between herself and the ultimate woman:

Hey, you know, I always wanted to be one of those teensy little girls. You know the kind I mean? The kind of girl whose nickname is Bitsy?...That was always my goal in life. To be helpless. Helpless, sweet and quiet. Like Bitsy. Bitsy never has to talk. She's mastered one simple basic sentence -- 'How was your day, honey?' -- and the world's beating a path to her door. I meanwhile am lucky if a guy ventures up my walk to read my meter. See, men just don't come on to big, capable girls...I ask a guy if he wants to come to bed, and it sounds like a threat.
(384)

In this routine, Charlie fashions herself as a failed female -she is too big, too loud, too masculine -- a self-professed victim of gender ideals she simultaneously defies and upholds.⁸

In one sense, Charlie externalizes her interior gender insecurity in both the content and costume of her stand-up persona. In another sense, the necessity that she adopt a "male" subject position in order to make comedy, or see herself as attractive, can be seen as the cause rather than the effect of her "psychological" and gender unease. While the male-defined subject position of the play privileges the former interpretation, the latter is also implied. This is apparent at one particular point in the playtext. When Alan comments on her androgynous "uniform," Charlie says simply, "There are no glamorous lady comics. It doesn't work." Alan replies, "You dress like that because you think it's how you really look" (385). Charlie's comment cannily acknowledges the lack of "feminine" markers from the stand-up comedy stage;⁹ Alan's comment focuses on Charlie's feelings of "feminine inadequacy" which infiltrate her relationships. While the play invites Alan's psychological reading, Charlie's own comment is perhaps more telling. It challenges the psychological realist enclosure of the play and its impulse to diagnose the individual woman as the problem. It brings into focus what the play implies more generally about the "problems" that occur when female subjects attempt to occupy a place in "male-defined" patterns and dynamics.

Charlie's ingress into the world of stand-up comedy is an assertive activity; but in taking that position she is implicated in (and implicates female spectators in) pre-existing, hostile gender dynamics. Impressions of her vitality and discomfort, her strength and "messiness," are thus interrelated. This precarious position is not unfamiliar to female artists. At a panel on "Women's Theatre," playwright Judith Thompson presented a passage by poet Audre Lorde that concludes: "We both know/women who take up space/are called sloppy" (Peerbaye 22). Thompson comments further:

Making theatre is taking up space, and so I thought this poem felt appropriate, both to me as a person because I've always been accused of being sloppy, and as a theatre artist. I guess I've always felt that it's not a very lady-like thing to do...I started being unladylike at a very early age. My penmanship was always marked "sloppy" on every report card from Junior Kindergarten on... And I've only recently realized that in a way, it was my first act of sabotage. And that was my first act of theatre. (Peerbaye 22)

Women who take up space, who take up theatre -- especially comedy perhaps -- often represent themselves as sloppy or messy. They appear and feel unladylike because they disturb the unspoken directive that women should perform themselves as tidy, coherent, subjects who follow the directions for correct female behaviour and don't make a fuss. The trouble is that those directions are not, nor have they ever been, tidy. They are confusing, changeable, contradictory, impossible to fulfill, and often not terribly attractive. That is precisely what Charlie's subject position illuminates.

This interpretation is motivated by my feminist desire to intrude, to disrupt, the realist directives of the playtext and is inspired particularly by Charlie's "Bitsy" routine. That segment ends with a comic reference to the sanctions against large, messy, uncomfortable women like herself (like myself):

And when Bitsy goes shopping for clothes, the clerks always advise her to try the Petite section, right? I so much as try walking into the Petite section, and they throw a cordon around the entire department and get on their bullhorns -- (*imitating*) "Attention all staff. Large person attempting entry. Large person attempting entry." (384)

At this moment, Charlie recognizes and performs herself as an intruder, a disrupter. Her incursion into forbidden territory can be seen as a metaphor for her attempted entry into male-defined representational positions and the male-defined realm of comedy.

Similarly, it can be seen as a metaphor for her breach of various codes of feminine propriety throughout the play. The act of intrusion and the simultaneous reaction of anxiety seen in this "bit" characterize this particular female subject's comedic impulse.

The "Bitsy" routine cannily reveals Charlie's uneasy breach of gender codes. Importantly, however, her transgression is not directed towards male territory, but towards that of other women. As such, she continues to uphold both a "male" and "female" position and makes herself both the subject and object of comic derision. In my view, the play does not empathize with Charlie's disruptive, conflicted subject position or her ensuing gender anxiety. Instead, the impulse of the overall narrative is to clean up or enclose the untidy female by suggesting that her ailment is isolated to individual psychology, or the accident of physiology, and furthermore is self-inflicted. That Charlie is uncomfortable with her size, or her gender, is her "fault." To recall Ritter's own assessment: "My contention...is that [my female characters'] beleaguering and their oppression is largely a product of their own mentality" (Wallace/Zimmerman 286). This comment iterates an important dynamic in *Automatic Pilot*: it creates a female protagonist whose gender performance is unruly (it doesn't fit comedic rules for female subjects; it doesn't fit rules for male subjects either because she is female), and then deflects consideration of gender issues.

Phillip Auslander notes that this dynamic of transgression and concealment is a characteristic of non-feminist women's comedy. In particular, his analysis of Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers suggests why Charlie's kind of self-derisive humour is so common among women: "The traditional female comic's chief strategy was to render herself apparently unthreatening to male dominance by making herself the object of her own comic derision [and to focus on her personal failings and unattractiveness]. Whatever anger may be implicit in [this] self-deprecatory humour...has been turned inward onto the female comic herself, rather than outward onto the social conditions that made it necessary for them to personify themselves in this way in order to have successful careers

as comics" (326). This deprecation of self and other women is part of what I find distressing in Charlie's, and also Ritter's, humour. But Auslander's commentary suggests a reason why Charlie's personae -- as stand-up and as realist character -- are constructed in this fashion. It is a form of protection to deflect conscious consideration of this female invasion of male territory.

Ritter is not unaware of this dynamic in her work. Her provocatively titled 1990 essay, "I Only Laugh When It Hurts; That Can't Be Right," discusses what she calls the "arrested feminism" of her "underdog humour": "I notice...how often I fold in the comedic stretch, when it comes to using humour as a blunt object with which to beat the world into better shape" (221). Ritter suggests that political wariness and self-effacement are characteristic of her work and that of many women working in comedy: "The comic criticality is allowed to be there, so long as it's sugar-coated with liberal doses of self-deprecation, as a way of signalling the harmlessness of my actual intent" (221-2). She employs a comedic strategy of appeasement both in her own and in Charlie's humour. As Auslander suggests, many comic women seek to appease the disapproval of men who dominate the institutions within which they work. Ritter places her comic woman in a traditionally male-dominated institution (the comedy club), and her own play is the first comedy to gain success in another traditionally male-dominated arena (mainstream Canadian theatre). Neither Charlie's routines nor Ritter's play overtly threaten those structures.¹⁰ As Auslander (following Regina Barreca) notes, "humour and comedy may be valuable as empowering 'feminist tools,' especially when motivated by the anger women need to express at the social and cultural limitations they confront" (316). While such anger seems implicit in this play, ultimately it is directed inwardly, towards the female self and towards other women, and not towards social or cultural structures. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Ritter's comedy has been so readily accepted by male critics and artistic directors.

Auslander also argues that while women's humour is subject to "recuperative mechanisms," particularly when it is produced within "the patriarchal public sphere," those mechanisms "may not succeed in inhibiting female spectators from being empowered by the comic's representations" (325). Good point. Certainly, Cynthia

Zimmerman finds Charlie's return to the stand-up stage a sign of empowerment. Indeed, the gender ambivalence I perceive in Ritter's text and Charlie's stand-up routines enables my own feminist resistant reading. Despite Ritter's own contention that her "actual intent" is harm-less, gender conflict -- the fact that Charlie fits neither conventional feminine codes of behaviour nor those pre-existing male-defined codes of behaviour she emulates -- is reflected in her stand-up routines and in her "failure" to attain success according to previous ideals and comedic patterns. This distressed and distressing performance of gender anxiety is what makes her character particularly intriguing from my perspective. Instead of viewing Charlie as a "problem woman," according to the play's psychological realist directives, I view her as a "problem woman" because her discomfiting subject position reflects the "problems" of being female in male-defined comedic forms and dynamics.

For myself, this comedy of female anxiety invites a kind of distraught laughter. After all, it is not always pleasurable to admit anxiety and confusion about my gender, or the notion that I am inevitably implicated in those male-defined representational structures I purport to resist -- especially when I claim to be a feminist. The notion that Charlie's humour is predicated on the necessity of inhabiting both the subject and object position (both the "male" and "female" position of her "jokes") brings to light the difficulty women comedians (and critics!) have in their attempts to construct themselves as subjects. The female subject position Ritter constructs seems to support the view of psychoanalytical feminist writer, Luce Irigaray, who argues that "the feminine occurs only within models and laws devised by male subjects" (cited in de Lauretis *Practice* 5). My anxiety with the play is in some ways like my anxiety towards such theories that purport the improbability of women conceiving themselves as anything but fraught subjects.

Out of this anxiety arises the hope that women can at least perform themselves as subjects. Ritter's representation of female comic anxiety does evoke such a creative psychic state. Gender conflict and anxiety impels this comedy, and keeps its female subject performing to the play's very end. From this perspective, Charlie's subject position is performative, because she reacts rather than reflects, and because, unlike Gene, she does not assume that her identity can, or necessarily should, be made coherent

(where would she get material for jokes if it were?). Rather, Charlie's female subjectivity is "performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler, *Gender* 25). In other words, while the play's realist, analytical, male-defined position suggests that Charlie's jokes and other reactive behaviours are the result of her pre-existing, damaged identity, my resisting reading suggests how Charlie's performative position galvanizes those behaviours as a means of constituting self. Neither Gene's analysis nor the play's realist directives succeed in taming or "solving" the female comedian. As the play ends, nothing is really resolved. There is no marriage, no death -- just a female comic on stage making over-the-top jokes out of her confusions. This is the alternative ending the play provides its comic protagonist.

From my own perspective that ending is not entirely satisfying. While the play reflects the fact that societal and representational roles for women are changing, it is ambivalent at best about what those changes mean. Ritter's comedy of anxiety reveals that not all female-authored comedy is forward-looking. On the one hand, her construction of an anxious, fraught subject of comedy has a certain candor and vitality. On the other, that subject position strikes me as conservative and cautionary. My next chapter introduces a play that advertises unabashedly as its subject the relationship between gender, the individual psyche, and social change: Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Goodnight Desdemona, Good Morning Juliet*. Unlike Ritter's comedy of anxiety, MacDonald's play welcomes the feminist project and attempts to construct a female comedic subject position that encourages personal and social transformation.

¹ Ritter describes her female characters' "underdog humour" as a means of coping with, or blocking emotions: "these are characters who do not joke from motive of mirth. Instead, they use comedy as a way of fencing with their feelings, or of signalling that they are perfectly all right, and cannot be hurt" ("I Only Laugh" 222-3).

² *Automatic Pilot's* comedic realism ensues, in part, from its inclusion of topical social and sexual mores as subject matter. Ironically, those subjects and attitudes are what "dates" the play today, with the result that it is rarely performed. Cynthia Zimmerman gives this account of a 1991 college production: "the audience of college students felt that the work's homophobia, its anti-gay jokes, and its light-hearted treatment of sexual promiscuity did not suit their post-AIDS generation" (147).

³ Ritter's sit-com type of realism, which places its characters in an urban microcosm, is not the only form of comedic realism. Alan Ayckbourn's plays may also be considered examples of comedic realism, particularly because (unlike Ritter's play) their plots relate to the past and encompass the social and economic demands of family, profession, and so forth. Ritter's own form of comedic realism is more like that of American playwright Neil Simon (whose plays have been adapted for t.v. and film), whom William Worthen situates in the realistic tradition (82). Ritter even comments "I used to be called Canada's Neil Simon" (Zimmerman 136).

⁴ In a 1984 interview, Ritter emphasized the specificity of her female characters: "We are an interesting transitional generation -- the girls of the late 60's and early 70's. We have all the rhetoric of women's liberation but it's all skin deep and all the stuff that was formed in adolescence is still there no matter how much you gloss over the career success. I write about women who are high achievers in their careers but who beat up on themselves inside" (DiManno 1984).

⁵ As Paul Milliken puts it, Ritter's characters "are apartment people who inhabit a world of bosses, boyfriends, and landlords; and any links they may have to a traditional home are only tentatively maintained by long distance telephone" (33).

⁶ Much women's stand-up comedy employs the self-deprecatory mode. Cathy Davidson also notes that a similar form of "underdog humour," in which the "joke can be at the expense of the comedian," appears in works by other Canadian women writers, including Margaret Atwood and Margaret Laurence (50).

⁷ As mentioned earlier, Ritter calls her dramatic genre "TV-style realistic theatre" (Zimmerman 136). The play's title, *Automatic Pilot*, pays tribute to its stylistic congruity with television scripts. Certainly, its episodic style and fast-paced dialogue resembles those situation-comedies popularized in post 1960's American television. By mimicking television, Ritter's style appears widely accessible and recognizable -- if somewhat risqué for its time. But, like all forms of realism, Ritter's comedic variety is not an unmediated reflection of things as they are. It manipulates, gathers, and exaggerates material in order to provide a selective portrayal of "reality." In her article, "Real Women," Annette Kuhn analyzes realism in "New Woman's Cinema" (circa 1970's popular Hollywood films that feature female protagonists). Given the strong association between Ritter's dramatic style and popular media, Kuhn's analysis is particularly congenial:

The basic shared characteristic of all forms of cinematic realism is their tendency to transparency in representation: what is seen on the cinema screen appears to the spectator to be constructed in much the same way as its referent, the 'real world.' ... That is what makes realist films easy to watch and follow: they seem to duplicate spectators' everyday ways of experiencing the world. This realistic appearance is in fact brought about not by a duplication of 'real world' referents but by certain conventions of cinematic signification. All films are coded; it is simply that certain types of film are coded in such a way as actually to seem uncoded. (268)

Like "Real Woman's Cinema," *Automatic Pilot* is coded in such a way as to appear uncoded and thus "authentic." Realism is inscribed in the script and on the stage of *Automatic Pilot* through various techniques. Charlie's stand-up routines are perhaps the most daring of the play's realist manoeuvres. I say daring because the inclusion of another performative form has the potential to draw attention to the fictionality of the stage world and its codes. However, in *Automatic Pilot*, Charlie's direct audience address stand-up routines also have a kind of "documentary" effect. By interspersing dramatic scenes with stand-up routines, the play creates a kind of loop of realism, so that one performance form (and perspective on Charlie's character) actually validates the other. Stand-up routines reenact Charlie's personal embroilments in dramatic scenes; and dramatic scenes reinforce and provide material for the character's life as a stand-up comic. In addition to Charlie's stand-up routines, the play's use of tape recording also serves to bolster its "documentary" effect. Both Charlie and Gene use a tape recorder on stage, and this technical process evokes the promise of record – something that authenticates performance. Its other realist techniques are of a more common variety. The play invites either a multi-dimensional or a traditional box set, designed to signify familiar urban singles' apartments. It also calls for common, everyday properties: a bed, a coffee pot, a table, bottles of alcohol, and so forth. Blocking centres around the observations of common social behaviours such as drinking, smoking, cooking, talking on the telephone. The narrative progresses in linear chronology. Narrative conflicts are quite literal, taking the form of arguments, personality conflicts, and misunderstandings. Dialogue employs contemporary jargon and conversational rhythms. These are only some of the theatrical codes which make the play appear to be uncoded or "realistic."

⁸ Importantly, the Playwright's Canada Edition of *Automatic Pilot* includes alternative routines for the "petite" performer. Those routines castigate tall, buxom, model-types for getting all the men. On the one hand, these alternate routines are interesting because they show how gender ideals can be quite contradictory and arbitrary. On the other hand, they strengthen the play's implicit suggestion that women tend to view themselves as deficient no matter what they look like.

⁹ Robert Stebbins' study of stand-up comedy in Canada notes both the numerical disproportion and systemic prejudices that attend females entering the business. He suggests, like Charlie, that female comics must be attentive to their onstage appearance, given that wearing "feminine" clothing may "invite" unwanted attention and detract from their routines. For an interesting first-hand account of biases experienced by female stand-up comics see Laura Kightlinger's "Return the Favour."

¹⁰ Ritter's published response to Rita Fraticelli's report on "The Status of Women in Canadian Theatre" acknowledges that she works in theatrical institutions which are operated and defined primarily by men: "I have not assumed any responsibility for providing employment for other women as actresses or directors, and this may be to my discredit. Even though Rita Fraticelli's report found that women tend to employ and create work for other women, I have worked – almost without exception – with male directors. I have had my work produced only in theatres where the artistic director was a man" ("The Woman Playwright" 68-9).

Chapter Three

The Transforming Subject: The Jungian-Feminist Journey in Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*

Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet),¹ which Ann-Marie MacDonald describes as a “Jungian fairy tale” (Much 141), features a female protagonist, Constance Ledbelly, who makes a journey into her unconscious where she meets two female archetypes derived from Shakespeare, Desdemona and Juliet. As a result of their unruly interactions in Constance’s psyche, both she and those archetypes find themselves transformed and empowered. The plot of *Goodnight Desdemona* takes the form of a feminist reading of the process Jung called “individuation.” The play provides a model of psychic activities available to women which would allow them to challenge patriarchal images and ideologies that affect them unconsciously as well as consciously, and itself performs resistant readings of gender ideologies embedded in both Shakespearean and Jungian models. Thus, while *GDGJ* tells the story of one woman’s process of transformation, or journey towards individuation, it does not isolate this process within one character (after all, even those archetypal female characters, Desdemona and Juliet, become subjects in their own rights by the play’s end). *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* suggests that, since social and representational models determine how subjects conceive of themselves, the transformative play within a person’s psyche is the starting place for transformations of social and representational roles. Further, *GDGJ* does not just talk about change, it enacts it. The play affords its female actors/characters an unusual amount of linguistic and physical stage play and, as such, suggests how psychic alterations give rise to actual changes.

Commentators in the press and in academic spheres have underplayed or ignored the play’s Jungian vision. This seems strange given the prominence of Jungian terminology in the playtext, and the fact that both Ann-Marie MacDonald and the play’s original director, Banuta Rubess, stress its significance. Interpreters appreciate *GDGJ* as a feisty feminist revision of Shakespeare, but are hesitant to engage with the play’s

Jungian-feminist vision of the psyche or its displacement of traditional comedic structure with a new, although in some ways parallel, structure based on a feminist archetypal process. MacDonald argues that critics who have focused on the play as a new treatment of Shakespeare “missed the boat in terms of what the central issues were” (Much 141). She comments further: “I think the problem is that critics have a set of aesthetic criteria or touchstones, and woman playwrights, who are often challenging theatrical traditions, upset those criteria.... In 1989 critics come to the theatre prepared to see patriarchy challenged. ‘Fine,’ they say, ‘we can handle that. In fact, we are on your side.’ Then they say, ‘Well, what is *this*? What are you saying? Isn’t it a feminist play and if it’s a feminist play shouldn’t it be like *that*? And if it’s a new treatment of Shakespeare, why are you going on about Jung?” (Much 141). MacDonald’s comment raises two issues that I want to consider further: first, although *GDGJ* is clearly recognizable as a feminist play, it does not quite fit expected patterns; second, critics seem willing to see patriarchal values challenged on the “outside” (through a new treatment of Shakespeare perhaps), but are not comfortable with, or used to, seeing those values challenged on the “inside” – that is, in seeing the interrelations of patriarchy and subjectivity placed front stage centre.

“Isn’t it a feminist play and if it’s a feminist play shouldn’t it be like *that*?” *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* advertises itself as a feminist play. MacDonald states that “the entire situation [of *GDGJ*] is a feminist situation” (Much 134), and then adds “I am not specifically issue-oriented at this point” (134). Her comments remind me that feminist drama is still often thought of as issue-based and didactic, and not as comic. *GDGJ* is important to this study in part because it strongly associates feminist practice and comedy. As a female authored comedy, *GDGJ* is in some ways “textbook” and in some ways idiosyncratic. More than any other work in this study, *GDGJ* exhibits those characteristics of women’s comedy that Susan Carlson describes: it revises the archetypal structure of comedy to allow for more liberating female roles; it provides an optimistic and forward-looking vision of women; it offers ample and dynamic roles for female characters/actors; it focuses on female community and sexuality, and so forth. Instead of reading *GDGJ* as a paradigm of women’s or feminist comedy, however, I want to focus on the specific characteristics of its Jungian-

feminist vision and what they imply about the constraints and possibilities of female subjectivity. For instance, while *GDGJ* does suggest that women can assert themselves as subjects capable of revising comedic structures and deeply seated archetypes (which have traditionally constrained them), it does not presume a simply willed self-assertion. For one thing, the play suggests that this agency is as likely to be the result of a psychic prank as of a willed act; for another, it suggests that gender patterns and hierarchies are deeply embedded in archetypes within the unconscious and so are not always easy to budge; and finally it uses the Jungian model of reading and revising layers of the psyche as a pattern for how one might elicit not only personal but cultural and social changes. So, while it is useful to consider those revisionary elements that *GDGJ* has in common with many other women's comedies, the peculiarities of its Jungian-feminist vision also warrant careful attention.

“And if it's a new treatment of Shakespeare, why are you going on about Jung?” Most critics and spectators focus on *GDGJ*'s feminist parody of Shakespearean texts, but neglect to consider why, according to the playtext, the activities of parody, play, and rewriting occur in Constance's unconscious. I argue that *Goodnight Desdemona* illustrates how gender archetypes (which permeate Shakespearean and Jungian texts) affect women's self-conceptions, and how the playful unruliness of psychic interactions opens up the possibility of reshaping those archetypes and of imagining new configurations of gender. From this perspective, *GDGJ* is a comedy of and about female subjectivity. This is also where *GDGJ* differs from a play like *Automatic Pilot*. Ritter's play does suggest, to some degree, the effects of patriarchy on the psyche; but it locates those effects in the implied, or subtextual, interior of an isolated “realistic” character. *GDGJ*, however, eschews the interiority of realism and instead constructs a highly theatrical representation of the psyche in order to place the playful interactions between conscious and unconscious realms, outer and inner worlds, in full view. And, unlike *Automatic Pilot*, *Goodnight Desdemona* does point a finger at how male-defined cultural ideals affect the subject's self-conception and, further, suggests the possibility, means, and value of transforming those images. I am attracted to MacDonald's comedic vision

precisely because it makes the interrelations of gender and subjectivity its theme, to be realized materially in its *mise-en-scène*.

Banuta Rubess' introduction to the play consolidates the importance of Jungian concepts to MacDonald's script and its original production.² Rubess first gives a plot synopsis (no easy feat!), then states:

The real story happens in the zone of the unconscious mind. Constance stews in her office like base matter in an alchemical dish; she reaches the nigredo/nadir of her existence, and this allows her to reconsider her life, her self, as if in a dream. Desdemona and Juliet are archetypes of her own unconscious. (8)

Rubess continues (perhaps in anticipation of the skeptical reader), "But if we push the alchemical and Jungian concepts aside, the story still stands—perfectly—as a re-visioning of some of Shakespeare's best characters" (8). Clearly, Rubess' informed interpretation of the play privileges its Jungian context. Ann-Marie MacDonald also views Shakespearean parody as a secondary, although essentially connected, level of the play: "The Shakespeare is the backdrop, the running joke, the means by which the piece is recognizable" (Much 141). Several excellent critical articles have explored the significance of MacDonald's revision of Shakespeare (see Knowles, Hengen, Wilson, Dvorak, Fortier). However, the relation between Shakespearean matter and the play's vision of psychic transformation has not been fully considered. As Rubess suggests, Desdemona and Juliet are more than Shakespearean characters cleverly rewritten: they represent archetypes within the unconscious of the play's protagonist. Because Constance is a Shakespearean scholar, these female archetypes take their particular form. *GDGJ* illustrates how literary representations, especially those as prevalent as Shakespeare's, play a role in the construction and reproduction of deeply-seated gender images and patterns. Once Constance finds herself catapulted into the unruly realm of her unconscious, she is able to transform those male-defined archetypal women and, in so doing, attains a more expansive, and certainly a more active, conception of her gender and herself. From this view, the play is not about rewriting Shakespeare primarily, but about showing how a woman might intervene in the construction of her psyche and her

relations to the world by rewriting existing cultural representations and creating new ones.

GDGJ takes Jungian therapeutic process and turns it into a comic plot. This is not such an odd combination, given that the impetus of Jungian therapy, like comedy, is usually regarded as optimistic. Unlike Freud's notion of the subconscious (a field of repression and sexual-psychic trauma), Jung viewed the unconscious as a healthy, integral part of the human psyche. He advocated a life-long process he called "individuation," a kind of "reading" of the dynamic exchanges between layers of consciousness, which would lead a person towards "wholeness" or realization of the "Self." Jungian thought is rife with familiar liberal humanist terminology (unity, wholeness, self and so forth), but his view of the "Self" should not be equated simply with a conventional liberal humanist notion of identity. For Jung the "Self" is not a pre-existing, fully recognizable essence, but the *fulcrum* of interacting layers of consciousness, which are continually shifting in the effort to achieve psychic balance. To work towards a more comprehensive understanding of one's Self, Jung advocated paying attention to archetypes that appear in dreams, and in literary and artistic representations, and which (while always filtered through the conscious) give insight into unconscious levels of psychic activity. Constance's journey into Shakespearean realms dramatizes this process. Interestingly, while Jung (unlike Freud) did not include jokes and other kinds of humour as significant unconscious activities, MacDonald clearly does. Constance's journey into Shakespearean worlds, her Jungian individuation process, takes the form of a particularly unruly kind of comedy. As I will show, MacDonald's comic vision alters Jungian notions of archetypes and archetypal patterns so as to embrace more expansive notions of gender and sexuality than his conceptions allowed.

The first two events of *Goodnight Desdemona* establish its dual layers of Shakespearean and Jungian reference. The first event, *The Dumbshow*, consists of three mimed vignettes played simultaneously: Desdemona's and Juliet's death scenes and a scene in which the protagonist, Constance Ledbelly, throws her pen and an old manuscript into the garbage. Initially, the spectator/reader views these vignettes without

context and, while intriguing, their significance is likely perplexing. *GDGJ* is the kind of play that appeals to spectators' unconscious, as well as conscious, understandings. *The Dumbshow* establishes a connection between the death scenes of those fictional heroines and the "death" of Constance's previous self (which occurs later in the first act when Constance throws several personal icons into the wastebasket). Those "deaths" are the catalyst for their mutual rebirth through Constance's journey into unconscious realms.

In the next event (*The Prologue*), the Chorus enters Constance's university office and lights his cigarette. I read the Chorus as a fond parody of Jung: both clothe themselves in mystic language and vague, smoky imagery, and both are benevolent male figures. He addresses the audience in mock-Shakespearean verse comingled with Jungian terminology:

What's alchemy? The hoax of charlatans?

Or mystic quest for stuff of life itself:

eternal search for the Philosopher's Stone,

where mingling and unmingling opposites,

transforms base metal into precious gold.

Hence, scientific metaphor of self:

divide the mind's opposing archetypes

--if you possess the courage for the task--

invite them from the shadows to the light;

unite these lurking shards of broken glass

into a mirror that reflects one soul. (13)

The Chorus uses the metaphor of alchemy, the medieval scientific quest to turn everyday matter into gold, to describe the play's exploration of Self. Importantly, the Chorus invites "you," the reader or spectator, to embrace this project. The subject position the play proposes for the reader/spectator is like that which it constructs for Constance: s/he

is asked to undertake a courageous journey into unknown territory and to undergo some form of transformation. The Chorus' verse will appear quirky, perhaps irritatingly nebulous, to many readers/spectators and that is, I think, in keeping with the way the play stages the psyche as a realm that is tricky to decipher, where meanings are never black and white. That said, the verse will make more sense to those familiar with Jungian discourse. The Chorus directs the reader/spectator to consider both Constance's and his/her own interpretive activities in terms of a Jungian-type exploration of Self. Alchemy is Jung's central metaphor for the journey towards individuation.³ *The Prologue* predicts the optimistic conclusion of this process: "And in this merging of unconscious selves,/there lies the mystic 'marriage of true minds'" (14). With a canny reference to comedy's traditional pattern, and to Shakespeare's sonnet, the Chorus forecasts that this comedy too will end with a marriage – although one quite unlike the usual heterosexual pact.

Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet) strenuously supports the notion that comedy—particularly this sort of revision of comedy—can be a liberating activity for women. MacDonald engages spectators in the debate regarding the limitations and possibilities comedy offers female characters and spectators. In Act I, Scene i, Constance reads aloud from her doctoral thesis. She is a caricature of a repressed, academic woman: "mousy" (she munches on Velveeta cheese), untidy, forgetful, and obsessed with her work.⁴ The subject of women and comedy is the focus of her thesis: "Romeo and Juliet' and 'Othello': Seeds of Corruption and Comedy" (15). Constance's work posits that a three-hundred-year-old manuscript written in an arcane code, called the Gustav Manuscript (note that Gustav is Carl Jung's middle name), is evidence of the lost sources of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello*. She believes that the manuscript will prove that Shakespeare transformed his source plays (written by an unknown author) from comedies into tragedies by erasing the character of the Fool. She argues that Othello's and Romeo's downfalls are not so inevitable as to qualify those plays as tragedies: "The fact that they do not save themselves, tends to characterize them more as the unwitting victims of a disastrous practical joke—rather than the heroic instruments of an inexorable Fate" (15).⁵ Constance finds vestiges of comedy in Shakespeare's playtexts: "we cannot

help suspect that all might still so easily be set to rights” (18) and a happy ending ensue. Are these plays, she wonders, “comedy gone awry?” (21). She goes on to suggest that the “tragic mistakes” are footprints of a Fool that Shakespeare excised, and that this wise Fool—if reinstated—might turn these ersatz tragedies back to comedy. While the reinstatement of the Fool might save the male heroes from their fates, she is less optimistic about the heroines: “although a Fool might stem the blundering of Othello and Romeo, the question remains, would he prove a match...for Desdemona and Juliet?...Or are these excellent heroines fated to remain tragedies looking for a place to happen?” (21). Constance’s question seems to ask whether comedy inevitably offers a more optimistic end for its female characters. Constance’s thesis, like MacDonald’s play, contemplates the position of women in comedy. It is significant that MacDonald dedicates so many pages of her playtext to Constance’s articulation of her thesis. While Constance’s character is drawn as caricature, her thesis is not, and the play does not abbreviate her academic creativity.

In the psychic journey that ensues, Constance enacts her thesis (through her search for the missing author and fool) and revises those tragedies into comedies. Many critics, who seem to equate Constance’s thesis with the playwright’s, have credited MacDonald with that revision alone. Yet, importantly, revision also occurs in terms of comedic conventions and vision: *GDGJ* assumes that women can control plot-lines, and proposes a different kind of marriage ending; and instead of ending with a form of social renewal which means re-enclosure for its female heroines, it ends with a vision of women’s psychic and social liberation. So, while Desdemona and Juliet become more vital characters by being part of comedy rather than tragedy, the liberties granted them by MacDonald’s Jungian-feminist conception of comedy far exceed those offered by Shakespeare’s. Only by revising comedy itself are these “tragic heroines” able to meet a more optimistic fate and become transforming subjects in their own rights.

While MacDonald’s playtext gives latitude to Constance’s intellectual activity, Professor Night (Constance’s mentor and unrequited love interest) does not take her ideas so seriously. Stuffy, arrogant, and dishonest, Night functions like an academic version of

the vaudevillian scoundrel. Awed by his charms, Constance writes his reviews while he reaps academic glory (and a post at Oxford!).⁶ Night demeans Constance with endearments such as “my little titmouse” (22), “little mind” (24), and “old girl” (26). Clearly, our heroine is this man’s dupe. Night argues that the Gustav manuscript is probably a joke and not to be taken seriously (22) and that her thesis is innocuous “heresy” (23).⁷

Night’s abandonment of Constance (and her ideas) casts her into depression, which the stage directions describe with Jungian terminology: “[CONSTANCE *slowly pulls off her toque and drops it into the wastebasket. She is in shock. This is the nadir of her passage on this earth*]” (26). The “nadir,” translated from Jungian to dramatic terms, might be called a negative climax. To experience one’s “nadir” is to be suddenly confronted by all the disappointments and negative elements of one’s life. This results in the person’s consciousness becoming a kind of psychic stew, which Jung refers to as the “nigredo” (a term also taken from alchemy). In her depressed state, Constance begins to pitch personal icons into the wastebasket (recall *The Dumbshow*): her toque, “The bronze wings that my Brownie pack gave me...My appendix...The fountain pen I made from my parakeet, Laurel...”, and so on (27). This scene alludes comically to the witch’s brew of *Macbeth*, but it has yet another level of reference. MacDonald takes Jung’s concept of “nigredo” and transforms it literally into a stage prop: a wastebasket full of garbage. Bettina Knapp describes the significance of “nigredo” to Jung: “For the alchemist, this rejected stuff spelled *nigredo*..., charred and blackened primordial matter. Not necessarily negative, this rich, rotting material contains the very substance that gives birth to new elements [and] when investigated and palpated, can usher new and vaster visions to the world” (222). “Nigredo,” then, is the stuff out of which new visions are made possible. MacDonald transforms this serious Jungian image into a wastebasket full of tacky keepsakes. This shows first how the play takes Jung’s ideas about the psyche and integrates them into its comic *mise-en-scène*, and second how Jungian materials, like Shakespearean, undergo playful transformations.

Constance cannot bring herself to dispose of her pen (symbol of her creativity and labour), but goes to add the Gustav manuscript to her wastebasket concoction. Suddenly she is able to decipher its inscription:

‘You who possess the eyes to see
 this strange and wondrous alchemy,
 where words transform to vision’ry,
 where one plus two makes one, not three;
 open this book if you agree
 to be illusion’s refugee,
 and of return no guarantee—
 unless you find your true identity.

And discover who the Author be.’ (27-8)

The inscription combines Jungian alchemical metaphor with elements of an awkward childish riddle. Constance is befuddled by this strange verse when, with great theatrical “vision’ry” -- smoke, “‘*Warp*’ effects, sound of screeching wind and music” (28) -- she is pulled down into the wastebasket. MacDonald pulls out all kinds of theatrical stagewitchery and sight-gags to signify this entry into the unconscious. She reserves what might be termed the “corn” and “fakery” of theatre to represent that which is most difficult to express in coherent dramatic language. The unconscious is the realm of stageplay, theatrical magic, puns, gags, and burlesque. The Chorus’ head emerges from the smoking wastebasket and directs spectators to read what follows as an exploration of the unconscious and, once again, invites them to join the excursion: “Suspend your disbelief. Be foolish wise./For anything is possible, you’ll find,/within the zone of the unconscious mind” (28).

In Act II, Constance finds herself in an unconscious zone, which takes the shape of *Othello*. MacDonald’s theatrical view of the psyche makes the unconscious an unruly comic realm full of surprising possibilities. Constance immediately ignores the prime directive of non-interference, impulsively plucks Desdemona’s handkerchief out of Iago’s pocket, and thus alters the play’s tragic direction. Or, as she puts it, “I’ve turned

people've always made a fool of me
 without my even knowing. Gullible [...]
 O, what would Desdemona do to Claude,
 had she *the motive and the cue for passion*
that I have? She would drown all Queen's with
 blood,
 and cleave Claude Night's two typing fingers
 from his guilty hands. (49)

Constance's reflections about Desdemona lead her to reflect upon her own passivity and experiences of injustice. She integrates some of Desdemona's strength into herself and even engages in a bloody, and rather funny, revenge fantasy. Constance begins to conceive of herself as more active and creative than before. For instance, she realizes suddenly "I speak in blank verse like the characters:/ unrhymed iambical pentameter./ It seems to come quite nat'rally to me./ I feel so eloquent and ... [*making up the missing beats*] eloquent" (38). This realm of possibilities keeps Constance at the top of her tongue and her toes. When Iago disarms Desdemona in a sword-fight, Constance picks up the sword and almost kills him. She then confides aside, "Dear God, I could have murdered that poor man./ I saw a flash of red before my eyes./ I felt a rush of power through my veins./ I tasted iron blood inside my mouth./ I loved it!" (50). The unconscious realm, in MacDonald's comedic vision, is full of creative linguistic and physical play where women's roles are anything but static.

Certainly nothing is consistent or one-sided there. Desdemona, in so many ways a laudable archetype, also has her weaknesses. Iago easily persuades Desdemona to mistrust Constance's motives by invoking sexual rivalry and convinces her that Constance is a witch and seductress (two other common female archetypes). As a result, Desdemona begins to play out the tragic consequences Shakespeare designed for Othello. She attacks Constance, who recognizes that Desdemona is as gullible as herself and as distrustful of women as the Othello of Shakespearean text. Act II transforms a Shakespearean heroine from victim to aggressor. As Marta Dvorak comments, "rigid gender definitions are what MacDonald undermines in *Goodnight Desdemona*. By

representing Desdemona as Othello in skirts, she refuses to associate the isotopies male/female with those of activity/passivity and victor/victim” (131). But there is another layer of meaning at work here. Desdemona represents the warrior woman archetype within Constance’s unconscious. Act II allows Constance, and the audience, to view both the values and shortcomings of this female ideal. In this sense, Acts Two and Three of *GDGJ* are each a kind of Jungian therapy session -- or rather play group -- where archetypes that populate this heroine’s unconscious are brought to light, entertained, and integrated into her conscious personality where they may have constructive, rather than random and sometimes destructive, power. When Constance learns all she can from this archetype for the present -- and when she is threatened at sword point by Desdemona -- the Act ends. Constance disappears suddenly and lands in the realm of Act III, the world of *Romeo and Juliet*.

At this point, I want to outline more fully the play’s two levels of feminist revision and how they intertwine. The first, and most accessible, level is its manipulations of Shakespearean text and tradition. As Ann Wilson and Richard Paul Knowles suggest, Shakespeare is upheld as the model of literary value in British and British colonial cultures; *GDGJ* challenges the patriarchal and colonial underpinnings of that tradition through its audacious parody, rewriting, and doubting of Shakespeare.⁸ If nothing else, by casting Juliet and Desdemona, who are often read simply as passive, female victims, into active, plot-directing heroines, MacDonald draws attention to gender limitations in Shakespearean drama. Feminist critic Susan Carlson derives her model of comedy’s traditional structural values (and the gender biases thereof) largely from Shakespeare. But while she acknowledges his influence on literary patterns and standards, Carlson argues, and MacDonald shows, that those values are gendered and so not “universal.”⁹ This is just one way that the play challenges Shakespeare’s universal literary value.¹⁰ MacDonald’s sees her play as “mischievous by using Shakespeare as the source in the same way he used everyone else as a source” (Much 141). She changes plot-lines, alters Shakespearean dialogue, gives male-destined lines to female characters, and exploits his characterizations freely in order to put forth her own comedic vision. However, although I agree with Knowles, Wilson, and other critics that MacDonald does

not treat Shakespeare's status as fixed or unimpeachable, I would emphasize that she also appreciates the complexity of Shakespearean characterizations (which allow for multiple and resistant readings), the richness of theatrical imagery and language in Shakespearean plays, as well as their power as embedded cultural images.¹¹ *GDGJ* capitalizes on the veneration that occidental culture awards the Shakespearean tradition, while playfully, audaciously, backtalking against the Bard. This approach protects MacDonald's Shakespearean parody from some of the perils of that mode of comedic critique. As Linda Hutcheon has argued, even the most critical of parodic works renew and so, to some degree, reinstate the authority of their source. *GDGJ* does flatter as well as fault the Shakespearean tradition, but instead of denying that double effect, it capitalizes on it. Through its Jungian-feminist depiction of Constance's psychic journey, the play acknowledges outright the cultural power of those Shakespearean characters that operate as gender archetypes in terms of the cultural ("collective") imagination. Clearly, Constance finds personal value through her interactions with the male and especially female archetypal characters that populate Shakespearean works. However, and most significantly, the play assumes that those types are also available to criticism and transformation through the processes of writing, staging, reading, and watching theatre.

Academic critics who recognize the play's ideological critique of Shakespearean tradition have underplayed or ignored the other, interrelated layer of critique and comedic transformation found in MacDonald's revision of Jung. This may be due to several factors. Jungian psychology, which employs terminology more akin to new-age spirituality and medieval metaphysics than empirical science, can be off-putting because it slips out of familiar (and academic) signifying practices.¹² Also, the play's use of Jungian terminology does not carry the same linguistic energy as its flagrant quotation and alteration of Shakespearean lines and, therefore, it may seem a less vital avenue of study. Further, Jung's psychological concepts are not as well known as Shakespearean diction and plot-lines. Unlike Shakespeare, Jung is rarely taught in high school or university English departments, or featured in more popular forms like comic-books and movies. While vague notions of archetypes and the collective unconscious do have some popular cultural currency,¹³ many of the play's Jungian references may be new to

spectators and critics, so they may not be aware of the play's sometimes serious, sometimes comic manipulation of those materials. Still, the basic Jungian tenets that *GDGJ* adopts and adapts are explained by the Chorus and are, more importantly, manifest in the play's plot, characterizations, and *mise-en-scène*. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the desire to achieve individual wholeness that underlies Jungian thought seems more akin to liberal humanist ideology than the postmodern, postcolonial, and feminist ideologies that most contemporary academic critics, certainly those who are attracted to *GDGJ*, uphold. Those critics have tended to favor the playful deconstructive elements of the play's treatment of Shakespeare and to underplay the seemingly more serious, reconstructive impulse implicit in its Jungian framework. I would argue, however, that both deconstructive and reconstructive attitudes operate in the playtext, that these two impulses exist also in the Jungian-feminist conceptions that underpin the play and, further, that one impulse need not foreclose the other.

MacDonald's manipulation of Jungian concepts should not be viewed as any more innocent than her raids upon Shakespearean decorum. Given the weightiness with which Jung treats the subject of archetypes, for example, it is significant that MacDonald casts them as unruly comic characters. Just as she challenges the cultural authority and patriarchal underpinnings of the Shakespearean tradition, she challenges those of the Jungian: both traditions are available to, and in need of, feminist critique and revision. In particular, the play challenges gender assumptions that underpin the Jungian notion of universal archetypes. Here I want to underline an important intersection between the play's two layers of revision: by casting Shakespearean characters as archetypes, it reveals how literary representations construct and/or reproduce gender ideals, binary oppositions, and biases which populate the "collective" or, to use a term I would prefer, "cultural" unconscious; and by suggesting that it is possible to transform those characters—as well as our understanding of archetypes—MacDonald's play becomes not merely a spritely feminist parody of Shakespeare but a feminist model for destabilizing those cultural motifs that en-gender an individual's psyche.

MacDonald's feminist revision of Jungian concepts may not appear quite as amusing as her treatment of Shakespearean materials, but as an integral part of the shape and vision of *Goodnight Desdemona* it deserves careful attention. Jung saw the human psyche as three interrelating spheres: a conscious, an individual unconscious, and a collective unconscious. The conscious describes "the relation between the ego and the psychic contents" (Jung 212). The individual unconscious is filled with "forgotten" ideas or facts, minor repressions, and sense impressions that have lost intensity but still linger. But it is the collective unconscious that Jung called the "true basis of the individual psyche" (67). This is a myth-producing level of mind that consists of motifs and primordial images, which Jung calls "archetypes" (16), and which are not individual but common to all "man." Archetypes, he explains, "are not inborn ideas, but typical forms of behaviour which, once they become conscious, naturally present themselves *as ideas and images*, like everything else that becomes a content of consciousness" (16). An archetype is a *possibility*, not a specific image. As Jung puts it, "The archetype itself is empty and purely formal...*a possibility of representation* which is given a priori" (84, my italics). The archetype becomes filled out—with face, body, character—only when it reaches the conscious mind. It is at that stage, according to Jung's reasoning, that cultural conceptions come into play in the manifestation of archetypes. For instance, when he speaks of the shadow archetype (which represents a collection of wicked, anti-social tendencies), Jung states that "In the dreams of Europeans the shadow appears...usually as dark skinned, alien or primitive" (87). While the archetype of the shadow is itself merely a "possibility of representation," it becomes represented in a manner in which cultural and ethnic biases are obviously inscribed. It should be noted that this is my, not Jung's, analysis. His writings are uncritical, and seemingly unaware, of the ethno- and phallo-centric nature of those archetypes he describes.

The individual psyche consists of three major categories of archetype: the anima (the "feminine" inward face of a male persona), the animus (the "masculine" inward face of a female persona), and the shadow. Although Jung argues that these archetypes are not inherited ideas, it is evident by his very divisions that gender binaries do come into play.

This quotation gives a sense of how the divisions of anima/animus and their general characteristics are influenced by prevailing attitudes regarding gender:

As to the character of the anima, my experience confirms the rule that it is, by and large, *complementary* to the character of the persona...If the persona is intellectual, the anima will quite certainly be sentimental. The complementary character of the anima also affects sexual character...The more masculine his outer attitude is, the more his feminine traits are obliterated: instead, they appear in his unconscious. This explains why it is just those very virile men who are most subject to characteristic weaknesses; their attitude to the unconscious has a womanish weakness and impressionability...If therefore, we speak of the anima of a man, we must logically speak of the *animus* of a woman, if we are to give the soul of a woman its right name. Whereas logic and objectivity are usually the predominant features of a man's outer attitude...in the case of a woman it is feeling. But in the soul it is the other way round: inwardly it is the man who feels, and the woman who reflects. (102)

Whereas Jung says that the complementary nature of the anima affects sexual character, I would argue that pre-existing notions of gender affect his conceptions of anima versus animus. Jung states that the nature of a woman's soul, her animus, is different from that of a male soul; those differences hinge on the traditional gender binaries that equate maleness with strength and rationality and femaleness with weakness and feeling. Jung's anima/animus conception inverts those differences, allowing both male and female psyches to contain "complementary" characteristics of the other gender.¹⁴ However, the very necessity of dividing the human soul, and its archetypal manifestations, into two genders is an act necessitated by, and inscribed with, gender difference and bias. Therefore, Jung's archetypes are affected by cultural preconceptions long before they appear to the conscious mind. The possibility of representation itself is inscribed by gender.¹⁵

Jung's gender blindspots have been recognized recently by feminist archetypal theorists such as Estella Lauter and Carol Schreier Rupprecht. Ann-Marie MacDonald

makes this comment about her own approach to Jung: “I’ve read a lot of Jung, who makes me uncomfortable when he strays into sexist territory, but he was on the right track. He just happened to be a man living and writing in a patriarchal society, whose values he has absorbed. I’ve also read many feminist Jungian texts” (Much 142). Clearly, MacDonald reads Jung through a feminist lens. Jungian-feminist theorists like Lauter and Rupprecht recognize Jung’s predilection for gender dichotomies that confuse cultural stereotypes with universal conceptions of sex and soul. Further, they note that Jungian archetypes, which posit masculine against feminine characteristics, have become understood as unchanging and unchangeable, so that “Instead of being explanations of reality experienced by females, archetypes of the feminine had become categories to contain women” (7). Feminist archetypal theorists seek to revise the notion of archetype as collective, eternal “truth” so that it becomes “not an entity itself so much as *a process of valuing an image*” (11, my emphasis). They focus then on the transformative potential of exploring archetypes, which initiates a state of “never-ending play” or a “balancing act” without a predetermined end. This *process* is what constitutes psychic “wholeness” (20). Such feminist archetypal theorists acknowledge that Jung’s conception of the psyche is fundamentally flawed and biased, but they see value in his optimistic view of consciousness activities (unlike Freudians, for example, Jungians are interested in dreams as natural and creative rather than as evidence of neurosis), in Jung’s interest in the healthy development of adult persons (unlike Freud, Jung did not see human consciousness as “frozen” by childhood sexual trauma) and, importantly, in the manner in which archetypal theory/therapy takes seriously patterns of thought and images and considers how these “inner world” motifs interrelate with “outer world” activities.

Goodnight Desdemona’s vision is much closer to a feminist archetypal conception than a traditional Jungian one. For one thing, the play’s conception of gender is more fluid and less oppositional than Jung’s; for another, it certainly asserts the value of playing with, and thereby transforming, archetypal images of women. Both Desdemona and Juliet are archetypes within Constance’s unconscious. According to traditional Jungian thought, Desdemona might be interpreted as Constance’s unconscious male aspect (animus) and Juliet her female aspect (anima). But the playtext does not support

that kind of established division: Desdemona is not reflective; Juliet is not weak. These archetypes do not fit into neat gender patterns. Further, that a person might envision archetypes that manifest themselves as female only, and that those archetypes might supply the individual with all the necessary psychic elements for individuation, did not occur to Jung—but such is the case for Constance. In MacDonald's Jungian playworld, archetypes—as possibilities of representation within the psyche—do exhibit characteristics of gender. As Judith Butler, Teresa deLauretis and other theorists suggest, this is an inescapable condition of representation and the practices of writing, reading, or spectatorship (feminist or otherwise). But, at the same time, those archetypal characters exceed gender expectations and perform their genders in a way that suggests their fluidity and transformative potential.

Archetypes should not be understood simply as character types; they are implicated in fundamental motifs of psychic activity. Jung's concept of individuation is based on his reading of how archetypes operate in the rebirth quest, which he views as a fundamental archetypal pattern within the adult human psyche. Significantly, the relationship between the adult protagonist of *GDGJ* and the archetypes she meets during her rebirth quest is somewhat different than that which Jung describes. His notion of the individuation process derives from a pattern he found repeatedly in myths and stories:

In Jung's archetypal journey, the male hero crosses the threshold from the conscious to the unconscious world in an attempt to come to terms with his internal nature.... One of the figures he encounters is his "shadow," which represents a collection of antisocial tendencies, his opposite or wicked self, himself as self-hater and social rebel.... As the male hero moves from the realm of the personal unconscious down into the collective unconscious, the shadow changes sex, merging alarmingly with his buried feminine self. The shadow and the anima together form a powerful 'autonomous complex' which Jung calls the 'dual mother' or 'terrible mother.' The crux of the adventure is the hero's struggle with this powerful feminine component of himself; his goal is to absorb

her import, master her autonomous control over his impulses, and then return, a reborn psyche, to everyday life. (Pratt 103-4)

Importantly, Northrop Frye's descriptions of romance and comedy genres are informed by this Jungian pattern (according to Annis Pratt, Frye disregarded Jung's view of the psyche, but capitalized on his research): "Frye traces the comic genre back to the classical period and defines it as an essentially social form designed to purge the 'abnormal' or antisocial behaviors. As in the rebirth journey and the romance quest, the male heroes are restored at the end to membership in the cultural community" (Pratt 113). Jung's model of individuation as well as Frye's genre models are based on motifs found in patriarchal societies, derived from male-authored works and, not surprisingly, feature male heroes. As such, these archetypal journeys are not "universal" inevitabilities, but descriptions of motifs always already inscribed by cultural and gender assumptions.¹⁶ *GDGJ* revises (and inevitably to some degree reiterates) this traditional occidental comedic structure and its values. Certainly, MacDonald's self-described "Jungian fairy tale" emplots a rebirth quest (Constance journeys in the unconscious underworld, she absorbs the import of female archetypes, and returns to the social world). But this comedy differs from both Fryean and Jungian patterns in key ways. For one thing, of course, the hero is a female and the archetypes she meets are female as well. For another, her attitude towards those archetypes within is not primarily one of mastery or fear, but mainly of reciprocity and delight.

While Jung found that archetypal patterns were gender sensitive to some degree, he used the male-defined heroic pattern to describe the psychic journey of individuation, which he advocated for both males and females. Remember that he viewed the male persona as having an anima (the "feminine" inward face) and the female as having an animus (the "masculine" inward face) and argued that these outward and inward faces must find balance in order for the individual to achieve "wholeness." Now, while Jung's primary archetypal pattern features a male hero who confronts and integrates a feminized realm, this pattern operates differently in many myths and stories that feature female heroines. Another pattern emerges from literary and artistic representations conceived by

women usually, men occasionally. Jung, for example, viewed the Persephone/Kore myth as an important archetypal pattern within the female psyche.¹⁷ In that myth, Demeter goes to the underworld in order to retrieve her daughter, Persephone (or Kore), who has been abducted and raped by Pluto, god of the underworld. During her journey, Demeter is aided particularly not by male, but by other female “archetypes” (most notably the witch, Hecate), and through their cooperation her daughter, Persephone, is “reborn” to the outer (or social) world and reunited with her mother. As Annis Pratt comments, “Jung found this narrative so specifically feminine that he felt it held no import to the masculine personality” (105).

Some feminist writers/theorists have offered the Persephone/Kore myth as an archetypal pattern capable of subverting the masculine bias inscribed in definitions of romance and comedy. Certainly, this woman-centred rebirth pattern elucidates certain elements of the structure and impetus of MacDonald’s comedy. However, there is a danger in replacing one paradigm with another. If cultural gender assumptions occur in Jung’s primary archetypal pattern, are they not also inscribed in this counter-model? Naomi Goldenberg, for example, worries that the desire to “indulge in a rival search to find female archetypes, one which can support feminist conclusions” (quoted in Lauter and Rupprecht 9) will produce further restrictions on female experience. It is important to acknowledge how conceptions of archetypes and archetypal patterns are gendered, but Goldenberg suggests that the real work is to “examine the very idea of archetype in Jungian thought if sexism is ever to be confronted at its base” (quoted in Lauter and Rupprecht 9). Key to this feminist archetypal project is an understanding of archetypes and archetypal motifs not as essential or unchanging, not as property of a male versus female soul or isolated layer of consciousness, but as evidence of the complex negotiations between outer and inner worlds (patterns conscious and unconscious) and a desire to employ those archetypes in the process of transformation, both social and personal.

Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet) performs this very process. The plot of this comedy does assume archetypal form: it is Constance’s rebirth journey, or

process of individuation. While this journey has parallels with both the male-defined individuation pattern and the Persephone/Kore myth, it is not identical to either. During her quest, Constance meets female archetypes and is both aided and thwarted by them. Desdemona, for instance, empowers Constance in her relationships with Academe and Professor Night, but she also threatens to kill her out of jealousy. And, unlike the Persephone pattern, the play does not focus on the mother/daughter bond. Constance is aided primarily through her relationship with Juliet in Act III but, while Juliet is young, her attraction to Constance is anything but daughterly. Further, the male archetypes within Constance's psyche are neither uniformly wicked nor uniform (the male characters of Act III are particularly malleable). Through her relationships with various and changing configurations of woman, of man, of gender, and of sexuality, Constance is able to find the psychic elements necessary for her rebirth. This vision of archetypes ("masculine" and "feminine") with gender and sexuality in flux differs fundamentally from the bipolar conceptions of gender that underpin orthodox Jungian conceptions of subjectivity (as well as those generic patterns that derive from those conceptions of archetype). While MacDonald's comedic structure clearly intends to "liberate" its female characters, this structure is not necessarily restricted to, or descriptive of, the female soul or psyche. In this way, *GDGJ* proposes a comedic form based on a process of individuation which is feminist, but not essentialist. Put simply, Constance's individuation process is simply too wildly idiosyncratic to be taken as a pattern for all women to follow. To my mind, the play's comedic model does propose the value of considering and intervening in those gender archetypes and archetypal patterns that populate each individual's consciousness; what those archetypes look like and how one performs such interventions is an open-ended and creative matter. And, importantly, MacDonald's own emphasis on the comic, unruly nature of archetypes and archetypal patterns that populate the unconscious means that they never appear as entirely fixed or as serious encumbrances. So, while *GDGJ* employs Jungian motifs and concepts, it also plays with them and lightens them considerably. That in itself is a feminist act.

Archetypes within Constance's psyche have transformative lives of their own, which exceed the limitations of their source as well as her own mastery. Act III finds

Constance catapulted into *Romeo and Juliet*, where she immediately alters the text by scuttling the sword fight between members of the rival houses Montague and Capulet and explaining that the divided families have become united through the marriage of Romeo and Juliet. Constance is now in britches (her skirt is on the end of Desdemona's sword back in Act II) and is mistaken by Romeo and kin for a boy. She plays along with this gender confusion and joins their macho bantering. Immediately, Act III brings to the foreground conceptions of gender, sexuality, and their transformative possibilities.

Constance/Constantine's gender ambiguity allows for all kinds of sexual and gender unruliness. Romeo, traditionally an icon of heterosexual romance, finds himself attracted to Constantine: "*Did my heart love till now? Forswear it, nay! For I ne'er saw true beauty till this day!*" (54). Those lines that Shakespeare's Romeo dedicated to Juliet trace a different trajectory of desire in *Goodnight Desdemona*. MacDonald pushes to the surface the homoerotic ambiance of her source. For example, when the boys plan an outing "to Mistress Burnbottom's to put up/and to sheath our jocund tools of sport" (54), MacDonald makes the homosocial aspect of their lewd macho posturing blatant. Act III of *GDGJ* is a realm of gender and sexual unruliness. In Constance's unconscious, *Romeo and Juliet* becomes a theatrical representation of a libidinous free zone where lesbian lust, heterosexual, transsexual, and gay desire are all possible. While Constance attempts to be constant in her quest to find the Fool, Author, and his "foolscap" manuscript, she finds herself embroiled in inconstant and complicated vectors of sexual desire. Unlike Jung's, Constance's individuation journey does not assume fixed, binary, heterosexual conceptions of gender and desire.¹⁸

Ironically, the one place where desire does not operate is within Romeo and Juliet's marriage. Once Constance announces their marriage, the tragic plot becomes comedy. *GDGJ* takes audiences into post-nuptial territory, beyond where traditional comedies end, in order to challenge the inevitable "happy ending" comedy assumes of marriage. Without obstacles to their passion, these icons of heterosexual desire find themselves bickering about their pet turtle and addressing one another with tired endearments as they bid one another "Goodbye dear" (57). Susan Carlson comments that

in Shakespeare's comedies, "Marriage remains an ideal unblemished by example" (62).¹⁹ MacDonald remedies that situation and makes obvious the doubts that haunt comedy: does marriage necessarily mean a happy ending and, if so, for whom? By refusing traditional marriage its exalted position in its comedic structure, *GDGJ* opens the possibilities for other expressions of desire and other endings. Thus, for these characters, comic unruliness need not give way to social retrenchment.

The Juliet of Shakespearean tradition is an icon of feminine desirability—the woman for whom a young man would take his life. Juliet is often portrayed as virginal in looks (pale, pink-cheeked and -lipped, dressed in gauzy gowns) and in manner (protected, tender, honorable, and so forth). However, in Constance's psyche (as in Shakespeare's play), Juliet is more than this conventional image and more than a passive, beautiful victim. In *GDGJ*, Juliet is portrayed not as an image of female desirability within a heterosexual framework, but as an archetype of desire itself. She is bawdy not meek, inconstant not faithful, predatory not passive. Interestingly, according to archetypal scholars, this portrayal is in keeping with the "original" meaning of the word "virgin." "'To be virginal,' writes Nor Hall, 'does not mean to be chaste, but rather to be true to nature and instinct'" (quoted in Pratt 110). Virgin priestesses and goddesses retained the right to choose what to do with their bodies – whether to be celibate or sexually active (Pratt 110). MacDonald's characterization of Juliet strikes me as akin to this notion of the virgin archetype: she explores her sexual instincts fully, and chooses her sexual encounters freely. Here, for instance, Juliet confides her lack of desire for Romeo and her just plain horniness:

But touched and whetted
once before,
love's first keen edge grows dull with use and craves
another grinding. (59-60)

MacDonald's Juliet exudes both linguistic and physical energy and portrays female desire as an active force. In Constance's psyche, Juliet transforms from tragic victim to active

comic heroine, from image of feminine desirability to sexual (and sexually mutable) being in her own right.²⁰

Constance asks Juliet what she thinks about life, love, and aging (65), questions that Shakespeare's play has made her wonder about. Here again, Constance's scholarly curiosities or suspicions intersect with her unconscious activities. She treats Juliet like a serious, "realistic" character and not an object of plot, but soon learns that while Juliet is not a mere object of desire, neither is she a thoughtful, complex character. The archetypal Juliet of Constance's unconscious is all fun-loving sexual drive on one side, all death-wish on the other. Constance becomes an object of Juliet's desire (as well as Romeo's), and much comic unruliness results. Like Romeo, Juliet believes that Constance is a man and sets out to seduce him/her. When Constance tries to describe her quest for the Author/Fool, Juliet responds with a come-on worthy of Mae West: "I'd have thee penetrate my secret source" (54). When Constance attempts to deflect her advances, Juliet recognizes an attraction between Romeo and the stranger:

[*aside*] I now perceive the slant of Constantine's
desire.

He looks to match his stick to light his fire.

And since he savours a two-legg'ed pose,

I'll into Romeo's closet and steal hose! (66)

In order to attract Constantine, Juliet plays a britches role. Romeo, on the other hand, believes that Constantine is heterosexual, so he dresses in Juliet's clothes in hope of attracting him/her. Tybalt, meanwhile, sees Romeo kiss Constantine and decides that he/she is a "Hellenic deviant" (62). The irony is, of course, that a strong trajectory of desire, hilariously displayed through their macho posturing, exists between Tybalt and Romeo. Quick changes, mistaken sexualities, gender impersonations abound in this act. As Marta Dvorak puts it,

Couples form, mutate, invert, and dissolve before our eyes. Characters are deviant, bent, do not 'sail straight,' plunder both shirt and skirt, curse their own sex. The notions of masculine and feminine become ambivalent, obscure, the

borders blurred by the homosexual, the bisexual, the transvestite, the hermaphrodite, the androgyne. In turn, the boundaries between the proscribed and the permitted are likewise blurred. (132)

The play shows, quite literally, how sexuality is dressed in different clothing and given different names, but it suggests more strongly that all these slants of desire come down to a similar impulse. Thus, *GDGJ* presents an image of sexual desire as transformative and inclusive. It is only when it reaches the social that desire becomes differentiated into discriminatory categories.

In Act II, Constance comes to recognize and value her anger and boldness as a result of her association with Desdemona. In Act III, as a result of her relationship with Juliet, she recognizes how her sexuality and gender affect her actions, and admits her frustrated attraction to Claude Night. However, for Constance (unlike MacDonald's Juliet), sexual desire is not all-consuming. Knowledge of a different sort remains the object of Constance's desire. When Juliet suggests a mutual suicide to mark their amorous disappointments, she replies:

CONSTANCE Thanks. That's very sweet of you, Juliet.
 But not just now. I have to find the Author first; or else the
 Fool to lead me to the bard.

JULIET Author? Fool?

CONSTANCE And Self. It is my quest, and it means more to me than love
 or death. (71)

Juliet pretends to know their identity and promises to tell Constance for a kiss. They arrange a tryst at Juliet's balcony. To get there, Constance must first pass through the boneyard (another playful pseudo-Shakespearean landscape), where she meets the ghost.

The ghost represents those meddlesome, undecipherable messages of the unconscious, and is similar to the archetype Jung calls the "trickster." The answer to Constance's quest lies within his hackneyed vaudevillian jokes:

CONSTANCE A ghostly fool? A jester from the grave?

Are you --? You couldn't be. What play is this?

Could you be...Yorick?

GHOST Na-a-ay. You're it.

CONSTANCE You're it?

GHOST Alas poor fool, you know me well.

CONSTANCE I do?

Don't speak in riddles, tell me what you mean.

GHOST I mean you script a woman, and a fool

 it's not a man you seek, the Manuscript...

CONSTANCE Do you know something of the Manuscript?!

 Do you know who the Author is?

GHOST A lass.

CONSTANCE I know, 'alas, alas poor Yorick', so? (73-4)

Wonderfully, MacDonald represents the unconscious as a zone of theatrical and linguistic play of the most tacky sort. For instance, the "You're it/Yorick" pun also evokes the children's game "tag." Constance's unconscious is like a child who goads the person who is "it" with the chant "na, na, na, na—you can't get me!" What Constance can not "get" is the potential that her female self (which includes those female archetypes that populate her psyche) are able to provide all the meanings she needs. She keeps looking for a male author, in Jungian terms her animus, since that is the pattern she has come to expect. Gender patterns are ingrained even in Constance's unconscious (just as they are in Jung's "collective unconscious"), and she is unable to "get" the ghost's punchlines. Alas, she simply cannot conceive of an author and a fool, perhaps even a self, that is a lass.

Constance keeps her tryst and learns that Juliet's promised revelation is only a sexual ruse. When Constantine does not succumb to her charms, Juliet pledges to kill herself and Constance is forced to reveal her sex. Juliet, however, does not miss a beat and embraces the possibility of this "illicit" love: "O most forbidden love of all! [...]/Unsanctified desire, more tragic far/than any star-crossed love 'twixt boy and girl!"

(77). At first, Constance tries to deflect Juliet's new desire and claims awkwardly: "But I'm not—you know—I'm not ... a lesbian. At all. That's just a rumour. I've never been involved with a woman. Unless you count that one time in grade eight" (77). Here, MacDonald acknowledges humorously the sexual mistrust that attends academic women. Constance's refusal of her identity as a lesbian, "Unless you count that one time," gives way to renewed curiosity. Constance and Juliet engage in physical, as well as verbal, sexual play. But when Constance reaches into Juliet's shirt, she finds a piece of the manuscript which recalls her to her quest: "Get Desdemona and merge this trinity,/or never live to see another Birthdy" (sic, 78). The play pulls back from an extended display of Constance's and Juliet's sexual encounter, perhaps in an effort not to offend a heterogeneous audience (of course, the amount of physical, sexual play that does take place on stage would depend on the production). But it appears to me equally likely that MacDonald (herself publicly lesbian) is interested in depicting a realm of desires and so, while *GDGJ* includes several bawdy scenes that indicate different vectors of desire, it does not overemphasize any one form. In this play, queering the subject, the stage, and the text are matters of opening up possibilities of desire, rather than representing one particular slant.

Suddenly, Desdemona arrives in Verona. Her thirst for revenge outweighs her amazement at finding herself in another world. She attempts to smother Constance, who escapes by showing evidence of her innocence. Then, in order to thwart an angry Tybalt (who still believes Constance to be male and, moreover, Romeo's lover), Constance plays dead.²¹ Juliet finds her thus and determines to take her own life and so play out her tragic end. Eventually, misunderstandings resolve and characters unmask to reveal their "real" genders. But the play has put to question whether such as thing as a true, fixed gender or a fixed notion of sexuality exists (at least in the unconscious realm). Certainly, the sexual/gender combinations of *GDGJ* do not resolve into neat heterosexual pairings. Tybalt carries off Romeo ardently (82), and Juliet and Desdemona bicker possessively over Constance:

DESDEMONA Nay, come and kill.

JULIET Nay, stay and die. (84)

For both Desdemona and Juliet, death still figures as expected outcome. Despite Desdemona's assertiveness and Juliet's fun-loving sexuality, they remain dedicated to playing out the tragic patterns written for them by their male author. At this point, Constance begins to assert some control in relation to her unconscious archetypes. She says that she has had enough of their "tragic tunnel vision" (85) and accuses Desdemona of being as "gullible and violent" as Othello, and Juliet of having a deathwish. In response to their one-dimensional drives, she arrives at her own philosophy:

Life—real life—is a big mess. Thank goodness. And every answer spawns
another question; and every question blossoms with a hundred different answers;
and if you're lucky you'll always feel somewhat confused. Life Is --! ... Life is...

a harmony of polar opposites,
with gorgeous mixed-up places in between,
where inspiration steams up from a rich
Sargasso stew that's odd and flawed and full
of gems and worn-out boots and sunken ships -- (85)

Constance's poetic description of life could well describe the diverse contents of MacDonald's play, and the manner in which she mutates her literary and philosophical sources. More directly, it describes a Jungian notion of the psyche as a dynamic realm where oppositions might be harmonized, and where confusions, disharmonies, random happenings, and changeable elements remain integral and beautiful also. Constance's vision of life as fluid and capable of transformation challenges the fixity and single-mindedness of archetypal configurations of, and patterns for, women.

Constance is now close to arriving at a new conception of herself. She appears less the caricature of Act One and, while never realistically drawn, seems a more complex and dynamic type of character. She calls herself a "fool" for having believed that she might save Desdemona and Juliet from their tragic outlooks. This offhand recognition of her role as fool is the catalyst that allows her unconscious archetypes to revise their fates

from tragic to comic. In one sense, this is in keeping with the play's Jungian vision, since Jung views "accidents" as messages from the unconscious which, if heeded, might lead a person to awareness of elements affecting her/his psyche of which s/he had been previously unaware. In another sense, the notion that archetypes themselves might change and gain awareness challenges the orthodox Jungian notion of archetypes as fixed and universal. To Constance's surprise, Juliet and Desdemona appear to have minds of their own, capable of change and, importantly, this change has been made possible through their interrelationship within Constance's own psyche. Thus MacDonald moves these characterizations beyond the rigid program of archetypes and liberates them from their Jungian function as fixed property of the collective unconscious, or as fixed categories that contain essential notions of woman. As Marta Dvorak puts it, "A dialogue has been set up, and independent impetus engendered, and the audience is made to feel that even if Constance were to withdraw, Desdemona and Juliet...would continue to interact and to generate story" (133). They dub Constance a wise fool and swear allegiance to her new, expansive outlook on life.

This ending without end is the optimistic design that Constance wanted for these female characters: "I was right about your plays. They were comedies after all...I thought only a Wise fool could turn tragedy to comedy" (85-6). Alive and independent, not only are Desdemona and Juliet comic rather than tragic heroines, they have more liberty at the end of Constance's comedy than they would at the end of a Shakespearean comedy. Not only does Constance revise their individual stories, she revises the fate of the female subject in traditional comedy. But she has yet to recognize her own role in these revisions. The ghost, "Yorick/You're it," returns and Constance "gets" the joke finally: "That's me. I'm the Author" (86). She recognizes her role as author and wise Fool. At this point "*A golden hand*" presents Constance with a page of the Manuscript and she reads: "For those who have the eyes to see:/Take care - for what you see, just might be thee ... Where two plus one adds up to one, not three" (86). Constance looks to Juliet and Desdemona and acknowledges not only her role as their authors, but their roles as part of her Self. They respond "Happy Birthday Constance" and, with revelations complete,

Constance finds herself back in her office. This represents her return to the conscious and social realm.

Goodnight Desdemona ends with two rituals: Constance's, Juliet's, and Desdemona's individual "birthdays," and their "marriage" within Constance's psyche. MacDonald's revision of comedy's ending resists the enclosure that usually attends female characters in Shakespearean comedy. All three characters have a "birthday," which suggests they have just begun, as Dvorak put it, "to generate story." Or, put differently, they have just been born as female subjects, capable of thoughts and actions outside the containment of male scripts. They also have a "marriage" within Constance's psyche. This is not the socially sanctioned, heterosexual marriage of traditional comedy that ushers in another patriarchal order. It is a marriage of different conceptions of woman within a woman's psyche, which is, as the play teaches us, an everchangeable realm.

When Constance finds herself back in her office, she touches behind her ear and finds that her pen has turned to gold. The Chorus concludes:

The best of friends and foes exist within,
 where archetypal shadows come to light
 and doff their monster masks when we say 'boo'.
 Where mingling and unmingling opposites
 perform a wondrous feat of alchemy,
 and spins grey matter, into precious gold. (87)

To the end, the playtext employs Jungian alchemical metaphor to describe the transformations within Constance's psyche. In this passage, I would argue that the emphasis should be on the verbs "mingle," "unmingle," and "spin" rather than on the noun "gold." Why? The alchemy metaphor is, I think, somewhat deceptive, since it suggests that the individuation process is finite, and that it leads to a fixed state of Selfhood, in which the previous psychic stew becomes a lump of gold. This is not really

Jung's meaning, nor do I think it is MacDonald's. True, the desire to attain a more comprehensive and balanced sense of one's psychic life is the goal of Jungian therapy. But Jung's view of the psyche as a realm of everexchanging layers of consciousness and mediations between inner and outer worlds suggests that this goal is precarious and that the process of conceiving of one's identity is ongoing (indeed, Jung saw individuation as a life-long process). Perhaps for Jung, certainly for most Jungian-feminists, "gold" describes the value of this process rather than the end result.²² The Chorus describes the aim of Constance's quest early in the play: "and of return no guarantee -- / unless you find your true identity. / And discover who the Author be" (27-8). Constance's "true identity" is precisely that of an author capable of transforming meanings. She ends up not with a fixed, final notion of identity but with an active and creative one. This is the fairy-tale ending of the Jungian-feminist rebirth quest MacDonald emplots in *GDGJ*.

The reader/spectator is left to interpret Constance's return from her Arden-like dream world, and her psychic marriage/birthday, as optimistic. Interestingly, however, the play ends before the results of her journey are seen. Just as it is difficult not to wonder if marriages in Shakespearean comedies would be happy, it is difficult not to wonder whether Constance's personal transformation would get her the post in Oxford (or if she'd even want it)! Unlike Curzon's "The Sweet Girl Graduate," for example, *GDGJ* does not contain a scene in which its heroine appears fully reconstructed and politicized. Spectators might imagine, but do not see, how her inner world changes affect actions in the outer world, and are left to wonder what sort of new social order this form of rebirth odyssey would herald. While this might be seen as a flaw in MacDonald's comedic vision, I see several alternate readings. The lack of finale could be read as an indication that Constance's transformation would be ongoing, and/or that it is the reader's/spectator's opportunity to take up where Constance leaves off. Or perhaps the play itself is an indication of the kind of cultural action this form of psychic intervention yields.

While I privilege an open-ended reading of MacDonald's Jungian-feminist vision, I do want to address some of the potential limitations of its personal odyssey formula.

First of all, both Jung's and MacDonald's formulas can be read as highly individualistic – that is, they locate the potential for change within an individual (although, in the case of *GDGJ*, this reading would ignore the transformative subject positions offered female archetypes and readers/spectators alike). This is a common characteristic of the rebirth quest, which tends to reiterate liberal humanist values. With the exception of Richard Paul Knowles, literary critics have focused primarily on the deconstructive impetus of *GDGJ* and underplayed its reconstructive impulse. Those critics admire the play's decentering, postmodernist attributes and are thus reticent to admit that, despite all its interior unruliness, *Goodnight Desdemona* can be read as a humanist fable of personal recognition. Yet that is the case. For example, the programme to the 1991 Belfry production reduces Constance's gender and self transformations to this synopsis: "She meets and plays with the characters in both *Othello* and *Romeo & Juliet* and not only makes monumental discoveries about these plays, but learns a great deal about herself!" Here the play's plot is advertised as the familiar, liberal humanist quest for self-knowledge. Richard Paul Knowles makes a similar observation in his analysis of the play's reception: "Apparently what the playwright intended as an expansive feminist 'humanism,' challenging an audience that was constructed as heterogeneous..., became smothered by the embrace of a more traditional, patriarchal, and monolithic consumer humanism that denies difference" (279). The Jungian-feminist subject and psychic/social renewal formula of *GDGJ* have enough in common with the liberal humanist subject and the personal odyssey formula that the former innovations can be subsumed by the latter conventions. As Knowles suggests, *GDGJ* attempts to expand and revise humanist conceptions (for example, it conceives of a female character as author of her own meanings). This is both its strength and possibly its weakness. As Catherine Belsey writes, "Liberal humanism is not an unchanging, homogenous, unified essence, and the development, often contradictory, of the discourses and institutions which sustain it, deserves detailed analysis" (*Subject* 7). *GDGJ* attempts to envision a different kind of humanist subject, of a Jungian-feminist variety, whose gender, sexual, and other psychic characteristics are neither fully predetermined nor fixed. But one of the ways humanism sustains itself is by dissolving differences and subtle contradictions within its discourses

and institutions. Not only has *GDGJ* been reduced to a clever Shakespearean romp, it has also been reduced to a “consumer humanist” story of an individual who “finds herself.” While these reductive readings are understandable, given the manner in which the play follows as it revises conventional patterns, they neglect the crux of the play’s Jungian-feminist vision.

At the start of the chapter I commented that while critics have appreciated the playful sexual and gender transformations that occur in *GDGJ*, few have considered why they occur in the unconscious realm. I have argued that this is because the play is like a Jungian-feminist therapy session, in which unconscious archetypes are entertained, transformed, and reintegrated into consciousness. But this raises another potential problem or limitation. Richard Paul Knowles, for example, worries that a sense of “containment” is implied by the awakening from Jungian dream-vision formula (285). Put differently, does the play suggest that the potential for agency, or for more mutable conceptions of sexuality and gender, occur primarily within the field of the unconscious? Is this why the play ends before Constance returns to the conscious realm? My answers are, characteristically, well yes and no. Certainly I would argue that the Jungian philosophy that underpins MacDonald’s vision of comedy places focus on the unruly activities of the unconscious realm and how they have the potential to rewrite the conscious. Indeed, as I stated earlier, the manner in which MacDonald’s psychic allegory complicates the notion of agency is part of my attraction to the play and its Jungian elements. For instance, it suggests that gender archetypes and values are deeply embedded in the unconscious and thus not easily transcended, and that the potential for new readings of self and gender are as likely to result from unexpected psychic pranks as from full-blown intentions. The play thus proposes this kind of Jungian-feminist reading as a model for destabilizing and reconstructing how one conceives of one’s subjectivity, and does not suggest that unconscious and conscious activities are disassociated. While MacDonald’s Jungian-feminist vision locates the potential for transformation within an individual’s psyche, it does not separate those “inner world” experiences from “outer world” ones. For one thing, it suggests how cultural texts (like those of Shakespeare and Jung) affect how one conceives of oneself as a gendered subject. Further, while the

audience does not see how Constance's world changes, the play itself can be seen as a manifestation of how such inner world changes might transform actual social and cultural practices: a new kind of comedy takes the public stage. And, finally, the play attempts to construct a transformative subject position not just for its characters, but also for its readers/spectators. In other words, it suggests that the potential for future changes and alternate readings exists in the mutability and creativity of each person's conscious/unconscious, personal/social relations.

In the final movement of this chapter, I want to emphasize how this vision of individual subjectivity relates to social practices. Any reading that reduces *GDGJ* to a consumer humanist fable must ignore the crucial significance of transformation, participation, and play in its philosophical, theatrical, and textual worlds. Helene Keysaar argues that transformation is the basis of a feminist aesthetic in contemporary drama:

Drama has thus traditionally urged us to know ourselves better, to search our histories and to *reveal* to ourselves and others who we 'really' are. In feminist drama, however, the impetus is not towards self-recognition and revelation of a 'true' self but towards recognition of others and a concomitant transformation of the self and the world. (xiv)

While I do not embrace Keysaar's totalizing vision of a feminist aesthetic, her description elucidates certain dynamics of *Goodnight Desdemona*. In my reading, the impetus of this comedic vision, based on a Jungian-feminist reading of individuation, is not recognition or self-realization per se, but the value and the process of transformation. *GDGJ* offers a theatrical representation of the psyche as a realm where layers of consciousness, inner and outer worlds, are continually interacting, transforming, and rewriting themselves. MacDonald's Jungian fairy tale ending does have Constance find her "true identity" or "essence" as author and fool – as a creator, troubler, and subject of meanings. This is an "essence" of the most open-ended variety. Further, in the mutable theatrical world of *GDGJ*, gender and sexuality are not static possessions of self or society, but continually transforming potentials. As Keysaar puts it, "Drama that embraces transformation inspires and asserts the possibility for change; roles and role-playing, not hidden

essences, merit attention; we are what we do and what we become, and no one, neither woman or man, is restricted from becoming other” (xiv). Keysaar’s theory could well be a first hand account of the effect of role-play in *GDGJ*. This optimistic faith in the combination of activity and activism, at once psychic and social, describes my sense of MacDonald’s transformative feminist vision.

Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet) resists closure through its emphasis on the value and process of transformation. Importantly, it implicates the spectator’s or reader’s participation in this process and so attempts to construct him/her not as a “knowing” subject but as a “meaning-making and -unmaking” subject. Recall the beginning of the play, where the Chorus asks the reader to cast her/himself in Constance’s role, as the author and fool of his/her own text. The playtext thus suggests that the responsibility for future interpretive acts is at least partially the reader’s own. As Marta Dvorak puts it, “Is this not an invitation to us spectators...to assume our share of creativity, to use well our power of participation?” (133). Richard Paul Knowles comments further (in reference to the play’s reading of Shakespeare), “the audience recognizes that its interpretive role is inscribed within the play as a resisting one” (285). This resisting interpreter role extends beyond the play’s approach to Shakespeare. It asks readers to view themselves as activists and to appreciate their potential to intervene in how cultural meanings (which would include those contained in MacDonald’s play), conscious and unconscious, act upon their psyches. In this way, the play’s feminist archetypal vision is open-ended, since it plants in spectators’/readers’ minds the potential for their own resisting readings and transformative journeys. Indeed, my reading of the Jungian-feminist elements of *GDGJ* may be more radical than MacDonald’s own.

The interplay between psychic transformation and social activism is also made evident in the kinds of roles and activities *GDGJ* offers its female actors. MacDonald’s conception of Constance’s psyche necessitates an unusual amount of physical and linguistic play on the part of its women characters/actors and elicits a lot of laughter on the part of female spectators. *GDGJ*’s theatrical world upsets gender and dramatic

decorum in a direct and palpable manner by making women active in multiple realms. I agree entirely with Banuta Rubess's comment in her introduction to the playtext:

For myself, the greatest pleasure of the piece is its scope—in terms of content, in terms of theatricality, and ultimately, in terms of the place it gives women. The women of *Goodnight Desdemona* are always active, always pushing the piece forward, threatening, seducing, giving up, rallying, stabbing, kissing, embracing, thinking. (9)

Performance of *GDGJ* provides a physical, tangible experience that shatters, while it reminds me of, the passive roles that so often attend female subjects of and in comedy, be they characters, actors, authors, spectators, or readers. As such, the play reveals a connection between how one intervenes in those cultural patterns that populate one's psyche, and how one intervenes in the world.

Importantly, this activity is not restricted to female actors only. While *GDGJ* suggests that female characters have been short-changed in terms of characterization and motivations, and thus deserve further exploration and liberty in comedy and in theatre, it does not simply reverse gender bias. MacDonald's dramatic vision embraces collaboration and transformative play between generations (Shakespeare's and MacDonald's for instance) and genders. This concept is manifest in the play's role and cast configurations. Both male and female actors engage in cross-gender and cross-sexual role play. Further, as Banuta Rubess comments, "There is no one actor who plays merely the spectator or the stooge. Neither is there a star; even though Constance is definitely the lead character, all other parts are equally balanced and work together throughout every scene" (9). The play also invites cross-gender casting (in the original production, for instance, one male actor plays Othello, Tybalt, Professor Night, and Juliet's nurse; one female actor plays Desdemona, Ramona, Mercutio, and a male servant). MacDonald's vision of feminism includes an appreciation of gender, both for men and women, as informative of experience and as available to expansion and transformation.²³

Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet) presents the processes of gender critique and transformation as exciting, enjoyable, and optimistic activities. When asked about the significance of parody in her work, MacDonald comments, "It's almost like opening up a trunk that used to be full of instruments of torture and now everything has turned into toys. When you reclaim and transform ideas and methods that have been used against you as a woman, you become empowered. Subversion of this kind is healthy" (Much 142). *GDGJ* challenges gender biases implicit in both Shakespearean and Jungian frameworks, and does so in a manner that replaces passive, one-sided images of female characters with active, creative, fun-loving ones. The most significant impression that I have of the performance of *GDGJ* that I attended is the tremendous playfulness, enjoyment, and activity that connected spectators to performers. This playfulness is not mere innocent fun. Richard Knowles, for example, states that "In *Goodnight Desdemona*, the audacity of the play and its Shakespearean parodies function as disruptive play" (285). I would argue further that this disruptive play, and its political function, extends beyond the play's audacious treatment of Shakespeare, and is related integrally to its Jungian-feminist vision of psychic-social interplay. MacDonald's theatrical world refuses the separation between inner and outer worlds, unconscious and conscious layers of activity, so that the spectre of the unconscious – which she depicts as an unruly comic realm – always threatens to unsettle and rewrite the conscious. The playful interrelations of unconscious and conscious realms -- of sleights of tongue, belly laughs, and theoretical musings -- are the nexus of political and creative possibilities.

The psychic journey dramatized in *GDGJ* asserts the possibility of refuting gender biases and binaries ingrained in the archetypes and archetypal patterns that populate the psyche. Like Jung, MacDonald views literature as an important source of archetype, but unlike Jung she views archetypes as themselves capable and in need of transformation. MacDonald's own revision of comedic pattern, based on a reworking of Jungian archetypal pattern, suggests concurrently that it is necessary to revise conceptions of how inner (personal) and outer (social and literary) worlds interrelate. The play proposes that unconscious meanings are integral to conscious ones, that personal transformation is

integral to political change, and that only by revising deeply seated patterns and divisions within the psyche can social change—change that allows for greater liberty in configurations of gender and sexuality—take place. Further, *GDGJ* makes its own contribution to revising the archetypal landscape through the kinds of playful characterizations and portraits of desire it unleashes on both conscious and unconscious levels.

Goodnight Desdemona attempts to construct a Jungian-feminist subject position for its protagonist and its readers/spectators. In so doing, it provides a model of the kind of creative and interpretive activities which might allow both male and female subjects to intervene in the construction of their own subjectivities, thereby resisting subjection and creating new meanings. The play itself initiates and invites activity on multiple and interrelating levels: it revises traditional comedic structure by displacing the male heroic quest with a feminist archetypal interpretation of psychic activity and, correspondingly, challenges the fixed and biased gender principles that underlie Jungian psychology; it provides a parodic critique of gender roles in Shakespeare's plays and so intervenes in their cultural authority; it provides an active theatrical experience for actors and spectators; it provides a model of the transformative potentials of gender and sexuality; it acts as a catalyst to critical thought on women and comedy; it provides an optimistic vision of the transformative potentials of women's comedic creativity. This list of potential accomplishments is by no means exhaustive. *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* is an idiosyncratic and in some ways nebulous creation. The play itself invites an appeal to unconscious as well as conscious understandings. Because the play addresses a heterogeneous audience and operates on multiple levels, it is especially difficult to read or view it and say "Yorick!" Some meanings or effects will always escape, lie dormant, perhaps incite a pillow fight or another play.²⁴ Above all, MacDonald's Jungian-feminist vision of comedy invites readers, spectators, authors, and actors to conceive of themselves as transforming subjects.

¹ *GDGJ* was first produced in 1988 by Nightwood Theatre (a self-described feminist theatre company based in Toronto). The play has received multiple productions and has toured widely throughout Canada (see Knowles for a comprehensive production history). It received both the Governor General's Award for Drama and the Chalmers Award.

² MacDonald has a long and trusted association with Rubess. The two worked together initially in 1983 with The Anna Project, a feminist collective.

³ The alchemy metaphor appears throughout Jung's voluminous writings, including his books *Psychology and Alchemy* and *Alchemical Studies*.

⁴ Ann Wilson reasons "That Constance seems pathetic is precisely MacDonald's point: like Shakespeare's heroines, Constance's passion and verve are effaced by the social position of women" ("Critical" 3).

⁵ Literary critic Susan Snyder makes a similar argument in the chapter "Beyond Comedy: *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello*," in her study, *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies*. She argues that the first movement of *Romeo and Juliet* follows conventional expectations for romantic comedy, and that the play suddenly changes direction in the second movement, so that tragedy imposes itself upon the romantic couple. In *Othello*, Snyder finds "a brief but complete comic structure" which then develops into a tragedy, which exploits the "strain and paradox within the system of comic assumptions that informs the structure" (56).

⁶ Ann Wilson comments further on Night's political significance in colonial, as well as gender, terms: Within a Canadian context, MacDonald's representation of Claude Night as a tweedy Brit is not innocently comic, but serves as a reminder of Canada's history as a colony which Great Britain dominated culturally and exploited economically. The relationship between a Canadian woman and a British man sets into play a complex set of colonial relations which is further complicated by Constance's academic focus on the tragedies of Shakespeare, whose work is represented as the apex of British cultural achievement and consequently is central to humanist studies of English literature. ("Critical" 3)

⁷ Night's criticisms of Constance's thesis (that it is heretical, irreverent, unsupported, and even diffuse) could be leveled equally at MacDonald's play or many of Jung's writings. In fact, by drawing Night in such an unsympathetic manner, MacDonald effectively (although perhaps unwittingly) vilifies such reproach.

⁸ Reviews of *GDGJ* show that not all spectators acknowledge the play's ideological critique of the Shakespearean legacy. After a survey of clippings, I must agree with Richard Paul Knowles who notes that reviewers of post-Nightwood productions chose to focus on the play's surface manipulations of source matter, so that *GDGJ* "dwindled to saucy and irreverent parody of 'the Bard,' who survived with his patriarchal cultural authority intact"(279).

⁹ Many other feminist literary critics are also engaged in this enterprise. See Janet Adelman's *Suffocating Mothers: Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays*, for a thorough example.

¹⁰ Many literary critics address the cultural power of Shakespeare in an effort to resist and revise the implicit ideological biases of the Shakespearean tradition. See for example: *Reinventing Shakespeare* by Gary Taylor and *Performing Nostalgia: Shifting Shakespeare and the Contemporary Past* by Susan Bennett. For overviews of Canadian (postcolonial) critiques of the cultural power of the Shakespearean

tradition see also Denis Salter's "Acting Shakespeare in Postcolonial Space" as well as Knowles and Wilson on *GDGJ*.

¹¹ MacDonald comments in her interview with Rita Much: "I take something people identify with or revere, like Shakespeare, and say 'Excuse me, while I turn this upside down.' I would never lampoon something that I hated. It can only be something which fascinates me for some reason and if I'm fascinated by it then it means there is a deep attraction to it" (136).

¹² Critics of Jung are also frustrated by the vague and unscientific tone of much of his writing. Many scholars consider his ideas the terrain of spirituality rather than psychology, but Jung himself argued against such a separation (Wehr 29).

¹³ Joseph Campbell's popular television series, for example, assumes a traditional view of "universal" and gendered archetypal patterns in mythology which is indebted to Jung.

¹⁴ The fact that Jung allowed that each gender contained elements of the other is one of its attractions to many female and male Jungian therapists.

¹⁵ My analysis is indebted to the series of proposals made by Teresa de Lauretis in Chapter One of *Technologies of Gender*:

- 1) Gender is (a) representation.
- 2) The representation of gender *is* its construction.
 - A) The construction of gender is both the product and process of its representation.
 - B) The construction of gender is the product and the process of both representation and **self-representation**.

¹⁶ For example, both Frye and Jung describe the "mother" and her womb as foreign and frightening. While a woman may or may not have such feelings, her relationship to her body and to maternity is likely to imbue these subjects with a different emotional value. Annis V. Pratt states that "The sexism so noticeable in Frye's archetypal categories apparently derives from the Classical, Christian, and European literatures he surveys rather than from some *a priori* theoretical principle" (118) and notes that when it comes to analyzing Canadian literature and women's literature, Frye often has to alter those archetypal patterns, which do not describe such postcolonial and marginal perspectives.

¹⁷ See "The Psychological Aspects of Kore" in Jung's *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*.

¹⁸ Unlike Freud, Jung has little to say on the subject of gay or lesbian desire. This is likely due to his distrust of the over-emphasis on sexuality in psychoanalysis (Jung accused Freud of this, and the result was a falling-out between these two "fathers" of psychoanalysis). Demaris Wehr notes that Jung tended to spiritualize sexuality, including his own heterosexual affairs (70-1).

¹⁹ Carlson looks closely at the marriages that end *As You Like It* (probably Shakespeare's most progressive comedy for female characters). She concludes:

In each Renaissance comedy, the actions offer but a single portrait of the complex social terrain of marriage. The marriages at the end of *As You Like It* are both defiant of and acquiescent to contemporary practice. They are also firmly dependent on generic convention. And they offer a final example of the intractable limitations to women's power in Shakespearean comedy. (61)

²⁰ This queered Juliet is, I think, the play's most transgressive characterization. One of my strongest impressions of the 1991 Belfry Theatre Production of *Goodnight Desdemona* was the indiscriminate and acrobatic sexual energy of Juliet (played by Leslie-Anne Sanders). If one were to make a graph that charted sharp intakes of breath and character lines, I am certain that Juliet's role would form the apex for that production. Her unsettling of expected gender/sexual boundaries was quite palpable.

²¹ Tybalt has the sexual energy of Juliet. He masks his own homoerotic impulses with exaggerated homophobia and machismo. As a result, he spends much of the Act trying to chase down Constance in order to kill her. This telling scene takes place when he finds Constantine playing dead:

Lie thou there, inverted nature.
[*He starts to exit, pauses, then turns back*]
If curiosity doth stay my leave,
it's of an wholesome scientific kind -
to take the measure of his member. (82)

²² That said, Jungian thought is underpinned by monocentric Christian beliefs. For example, Jung suggests that the overriding guiding principle that leads towards the harmony of Self is "God." Feminist archetypal and post-Jungian theorists tend to focus on the endless transformative potential of his concept of the Self, and to avoid his Christian principles.

²³ This statement by MacDonald is, I think, particularly illuminating:

I'm a thinking, breathing individual, I am a political beast, I am a feminist creature. That goes without saying; it's woven into everything I do...being a feminist theatre artist doesn't mean I sacrifice aesthetics...I'm also a humorist and a humanist and I don't believe in cutting off anybody's anything... (Much 134)

²⁴ Banuta Rubess describes the catalyst of *Goodnight Desdemona*: "It began with a joke. On a tour of England in 1985 with *This Is For You, Anna*, Ann-Marie MacDonald crammed a pillow on my face and with great hilarity pronounced: 'Goodnight Desdemona!'" (7).

Chapter Four

A Feminist Absurd: Margaret Hollingsworth's *The House that Jack Built*

I once asked playwright Margaret Hollingsworth whom she considered to be an important female comic playwright in Canada. "Judith Thompson," she replied, "I find her very funny."¹ Thompson, whose dramas are known for their often grotesque depictions of "aberrant" behaviour and thought, is an unlikely candidate for a comedy award, to say the least. But Hollingsworth's comment is telling, since it implies a notion of "comedy" that is distinct from the optimistic social renewal formula of conventional comedy, and other than the playful, parodic mode of many women's revisions of comedy. Indeed, Hollingsworth's plays are somewhat similar to Thompson's, in that they tend to represent women with an eye to their repressed, sometimes brutal, sometimes victimized, selves.² In *The House that Jack Built*, one of Hollingsworth's best plays, which appears in the collection *Endangered Species*, the effects of gender become ludicrous and ominous, to the point of comic absurdity. The play features Jack and Jenny, a married couple who sit on-stage in rocking chairs through virtually the entire play. The rocking chairs, along with numerous other elements, provide an image of their entrapment in gender and marital roles. Over the course of the play, they relate separate versions of how they reached their current condition. Jack's story tells of his Herculean effort to make his wife happy by building her a home; Jenny's narrative exposes her attempts to gain autonomy within the confines of marriage, her resistance to the house, and her eventual containment in *The House that Jack Built*.

The House that Jack Built may appear an odd choice for a chapter about feminist comedy. Certainly, it does not share the emancipatory representation of gender that I find in *Goodnight Desdemona* or "*The Sweet Girl Graduate*." The social optimism that Susan Carlson and other critics find commonly in women's comedies is tempered -- if not lacking -- in Hollingsworth's comic vision. Still, this play clearly addresses the effects of gender on its characters; it provides a dramatic representation of gender as a restrictive code of behaviour that has negative psychological and social effects. While it contains an implicit tone of oppositionality, the play does not offer assured, hopeful solutions to those gender troubles. Yet a strain of comedy does run through the fraught vision and serious

concerns that inhabit *The House that Jack Built*. Hollingsworth's plays are, in her own words, "shot through with a dark, sometimes zany humour" (*Endangered Species* 8) which often arises alongside, and in response to, a strong sense of enclosure and hopelessness. This kind of painful comedy (often termed tragicomedy), which represents human suffering and ineffectuality in the face of an incomprehensible world, is most widely associated with the theatre of the absurd.³

The House that Jack Built incorporates both philosophical elements and theatrical practices from the absurdist tradition: its characters are isolated, unable to communicate, caught in patterns of domination and submission, and in pursuit of understanding that is inevitably deferred. But it approaches each of these themes with a focus on gender. Hollingsworth deploys absurdist tenets and practices in a manner that foregrounds gender concerns and points to the exclusion – or incomprehension -- of gender as a controlling framework of meaning in the absurdist tradition. I contend, therefore, that *The House that Jack Built* poses a feminist challenge to "the absurd" as an exclusively male-dominated and defined dramatic terrain. Conversely, my approach also signals how comic elements in Hollingsworth's play differ from an optimistic, emancipatory conception of feminist comedy. In the restrictive, repetitive gender structures of *The House that Jack Built*, such a hopeful vision is at best naive, at worse futile. Yet Hollingsworth's commitment to feminist practice as an "out-speaking" playwright and critic,⁴ as well as her insistent interrogation of gender issues in her dramatic oeuvre, situate her works within the realm of Canadian feminist theatre. Just as her work offers the potential of revising the absurd, it illuminates the necessity of revising or expanding notions of what constitutes feminist comedy.

The House that Jack Built constructs what I call a feminist absurd subject position. This will appear an unlikely and dislocating combination of terms, given that usual conceptions of the subjects of absurdism and feminism are quite unlike, the former being a kind of apolitical non-subject and the latter implying an inherently political quest for subjecthood. However, the subject positions associated with absurdism and feminism are neither monolithic nor stable. Harold Pinter, an author initially associated with the metaphysical, apolitical tradition of absurdist theatre, has in recent years re-read his own plays from a consciously political standpoint and in so doing has redefined the

subject position from which they were written and are now read.⁵ My notion of the feminist absurd argues similarly that the seemingly apolitical subject of absurdism can be constructed and read from a political, socially engaged standpoint.

Indeed, there are actually two longstanding varieties of absurdist practice in theatre, which I will call the Western “metaphysical” and the Eastern-European “political” traditions. The term “absurdism” derives from Albert Camus’ *Mythe de Sisyphe* (1951), and critics quickly applied it to a number of playwrights who shared similar dramatic tactics and philosophies. Martin Esslin’s 1961 publication of *The Theatre of the Absurd* established the term, and the absurdist canon, in literary studies. Esslin views absurdism as a philosophical product of existentialism and an historical product of the devastation and dehumanization wrought by the Second World War (4-5). His conception derives primarily from the plays of Ionesco, Beckett, Genet, and Adamov which provide a “general vision of the human condition with images of isolation, meaninglessness, and the breakdown of language” (Carlson, Marvin 413). My reading of Esslin and like critics produces the following portrait of an absurdist subject. Western absurdist plays dramatize the modernist challenge to the notion of a centred subject who is in control of his universe and who can understand its meanings. The subject of absurdism is characterized by metaphysical anguish and a profound mistrust of those structures of meaning that society employs to buttress his sense of subjecthood. Through a variety of techniques (repetition of language and movement, theatrical images of enclosure and so forth) absurdist drama presents a vision of humans caught in arbitrary patterns of behaviour which affect but do not mean, and in seemingly random patterns of domination or submission. These characters are virtually non-subjects, given that their ability to act or speak meaningfully or autonomously is doubtful at best. Such plays construct for readers/spectators a subject position (a psychic/philosophical position from which they are most readily intelligible) characterized by co(s)mic angst at this lack of meaning and agency. The absurdist subject is a modernist construction. As Linda Hutcheon puts it, modernism is characterized by its focus on the “self seeking integration amid fragmentation” (*Politics* 108). While the absurdist subject lacks the assumption of autonomy that characterizes humanist individualism, his sense of lost wholeness and quest for refused meaning adheres, even clings, to humanist presumptions. Further, in

keeping with male-modernist-humanist notions, absurdist characters represent an abstract conception of “all man,” and their dilemmas represent the essence of the general human condition. As such, the subject of absurdism, as conceived by modernist playwrights and by critics like Esslin, is supposedly apolitical and universal.

From my feminist perspective it is anything but. Critical discourse on absurdism and the plays that make up its canon are marked by a lack of awareness of gender as a structure of meaning and, ironically, are further marked by male focus. As Regina Barreca (following Judy Little) notes, the male modernist comedy-of-despair presumes the fixity and centrality of the male hero (*Last* 9). For the most part, absurdist dramas treat the frustration of the male’s quest for identity and mourn his loss of agency. They employ a language and set of images of domination and submission which follow conventional male and female gender patterns. Often in those plays the loss of agency appears simultaneously as a loss of masculine virility.⁶ While Gay Cima allows that some plays conceived of as belonging to the absurdist canon, particularly those of Beckett, can be performed or read in such a manner as to foreground, rather than endorse, stereotypical views of gender roles and power relations, she concludes that gender is inscribed as a kind of “mystical” and “universal force” (216) in those plays. Male critics who have constructed the critical tradition on absurdism have either echoed this attitude unquestioningly or ignored the implications of gender representation entirely. Absurdism, at least in Esslin’s popular conception, would seem to be an uninviting theatrical tradition for feminist practitioners to engage in, not only due to its universalist male focus and its lack of awareness of gender as a controlling structure in language and meaning, but also because it laments the loss of subjecthood at a time when women are striving to represent themselves as subjects.⁷

There is, however, another absurdist tradition, or reading of absurdism, which is somewhat more amenable to feminist practice. Martin Esslin’s second edition of *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1969) acknowledges that absurdist theatre can, in certain contexts, be read as political theatre. He states, for instance, “When *Waiting for Godot* – a totally apolitical play in Britain and America – was first performed in Poland at the time of the thaw of 1956, the audience there immediately understood it as a portrayal of the frustration of life in [their] society” (272). Of course I would argue that when *Godot* was

performed to an all-male audience at San Quentin prison it was received within a charged political context also (after all, incarceration is more than a metaphor to inmates). Esslin, however, views the inmates' understanding of the play as evidence of the "common man" appeal (which crosses socio-economic and intellectual levels) of the absurdist philosophical vision. Nonetheless, Esslin's later edition, at least the section on Eastern European playwrights, acknowledges that absurdist theatre may comprise subversive political critique: "a theatre of such concretized images of psychological dilemmas and frustrations which transmuted moods into myths was extremely well suited to deal with the realities of life in Eastern Europe, with the added advantage that, concentrating on the essentials of the situation in a setting of myth and allegory, it had no need to be openly political or topical by referring to politics or social conditions as such" (272). In other words, absurdist plays may be read as political allegories and are effective precisely because their particular oppositional messages are "hidden" in notions of universality, and thus protected from censorship. The political subject of Eastern European absurdism is, like the metaphysical subject, still male-defined and focused (all the plays Esslin cites are written by men).⁸ He arises as an effect of post WWII Soviet entrenchment and policies of homogenization. His potential for subjecthood is foreclosed by political and social structures, and he gives voice to the angst of many Eastern Europeans regarding their lack of agency and individuality under Soviet dominated governments. The random effects of domination and submission to which he is subjected have, in this context, definite political implications. Political resonance exists also in those surreal elements that appear in the plays of Adamov, Mrozek, Rozewicz and other Eastern European absurdist. Lyrical, surreal, and darkly comical passages and theatrical effects give voice to a kind of subterranean protest that will not be repressed.

Those elements of surrealism and black comedy do not signify political protest overtly, but rather represent generalized protest to social and/or ideological constraints. Psychoanalytic theory, particularly Freud's notion of the "comic," helps elucidate those interior dynamics represented within absurdist worlds. According to Kathleen Rowe's reading of Freud, "comic" effects arise "from the recognition of human dependence on external factors, often social in nature" (68). Freud also states that "the comic arises from the uncovering of a mode of thought that is exclusively proper to the unconscious" (206).

Based on my reading of Freud and his examples, the comic mode includes expressions of repressed, unconscious modes of logic which seem at once truthful responses to impossible situations, bizarrely out-of-place, and implicitly threatening to authorized modes of behaviour or reasoning. The comic mode is prevalent in both Western and Eastern European absurdism (as it is in Hollingsworth's play), although its implicit social oppositionality has often gone unnoticed, particularly in the former tradition.

My notion of a feminist-absurdist subject position develops from and expands upon the metaphysical and political subjects of absurdism. This chapter will draw attention to those theatrical conventions and ideas that align Hollingsworth's play with absurdist traditions, and note particularly how her treatment of gender shifts their focus. For instance, in *The House that Jack Built* both male and female characters could be called absurd subjects, since both are caught in the controlling structures of gender and heterosexual/capitalist imperatives. The play's mise-en-scène, which includes the characters' movements and verbal exchanges, as well as set design, constructs a sense of their enclosure in systems of language and in personal and economic relationships which, while they might provide the illusion of meaning and agency, in fact control their potential meanings and actions. Both characters are caught in stultifying social scripts; however, the male character, Jack, adheres hopefully to them, while the female character, Jenny, reveals more angst and oppositionality towards them. When her attempts to assert independence and agency within their marriage are thwarted, her resistance takes an interiorized form. She begins to speak in a kind of surreal, symbolic language in which she associates herself with those species endangered by Jack's notion of progress. Like plays in the Eastern European mode, Hollingsworth's absurdist vision suggests that resistance to controlling structures is possible, even inevitable, but that such resistance often operates under the surface -- that is, subversively. Further, it offers no reassurance that such expressions of oppositionality will affect change. Instead, the play ends with a vision of Jack and Jenny's enclosure which holds out only a very tentative note of hope.

My interest in reading *The House that Jack Built* in relation to absurdism arises not only from such stylistic and thematic congruities. This approach allows me to probe the limitations and expand the concerns both of absurdism and of feminist comedy (as

they are usually conceived). In a panel at the 1988 International Women Playwrights Conference, Nataša Tanská made the comment:

We are regulated by external mechanisms...to the degree of absurdity. It's not surprising that absurd comedy has emerged as the adequate mirror of our times. Yet, it is still more the domain of men. Is this because it requires generalizations, whereas women tend to realistic detail? (98)

Tanská's comment suggests that some women playwrights are addressing their relation to the absurdist comedic tradition, which has long been conceived as a male domain. She wonders if the realistic focus of much women's comedy is "the adequate response to contemporary reality" (97-98) and argues that absurdist humour offers the modern woman "an ability of self-assessment from a distance," and the occasion "to see herself critically" (97): "It is here we have an opportunity to widen the range of seeing and understanding the world and its mechanisms, an opportunity for a more philosophical approach to the subject, for demonstrating a global view of life as it surrounds us" (98). I perceive this kind of self-critical and philosophical approach to issues of gender and subjectivity along with attention to those social and physical realities that feminism seeks to redress in Hollingsworth's adaptation of absurdism.

The House that Jack Built takes its name from a traditional nursery rhyme that employs a repetitive type of word play known as accumulation:⁹

- This is the house that Jack built.
2. This is the malt
That lay in the house that Jack built.
3. This is the rat,
That ate the malt,
That lay in the house that Jack built.
4. This is the cat,
That killed the rat,
That ate the malt,
That lay in the house that Jack built.

The rhyme continues, accumulating a dog, a cow with a crumpled horn, a maiden all forlorn, a man, a priest (who marries maiden and man), a cock, and a farmer. Like other

nursery rhymes of this type, the accumulative pattern assumes recognizable social patterns and hierarchies. These include the ascendancy of larger mammals (which culminates with the human male), the desirability of capitalist accumulation and consumption, and the inevitability of heterosexual marriage. Nursery rhymes teach a child to recognize itself as either a female or a male subject and to understand its place in those hierarchies accordingly. In the hierarchy of the title rhyme, which reiterates that of Western philosophy, woman is more than beast but less than man.

Still, there is a trouble-spot in the rhyme's comfortable wor(l)d order. Jack appears to represent its apex, since his name is repeated as the agent of the cumulative action. But Jack's action is silly, even ignorant: he leaves malt in the house for the "lesser" animals to find. In other words, while Jack appears to be the pivotal character, he is less than dependable, and certainly less than heroic. He is, in short, fallibly comic. This brief analysis draws attention to several thematic effects that also operate in Hollingsworth's play: the persistent reiteration of hierarchies through verbal and social patterns; the importance of unearthing those fallible and comic elements that may trouble such patterns; and, on a simpler level, the dubious reliability of even well-intentioned "Jacks."

The Jack of Hollingsworth's play does not question the social blueprint that provides his primary motivation, which is to build a house for his wife:

JACK ...So I built her a house. I mean, what more can a man do for his wife? You meet a girl. It's too soon. High school, but what can you do when she's the right one. Chew on your nails? Jerk yourself off? No. You buy her a ring, right? You buy her a ring, and then you marry her. You do it right. You work for her, and you just have to hope she doesn't get herself pregnant before you've got her a house. That's the way it is. I mean you tell me different, don't matter who you are. There's no other way when you come right down to it.

JENNY There's no other way. (11-12)

This quotation, like the title rhyme, adheres to an accumulative structure and logic. Jack follows socially prescribed directions for a middle-class performance of his gender: first you find a girl, then you get married, then you get her a house, then you have kids. The play takes this accumulative pattern, which poses as the key to personal success in North

American middle-class society and which Jack supposes is his rightful destiny, and then exposes both its dangers and its weaknesses. It does so in part by foregrounding the fallibility of Jack's assumptions. In this passage, his use of bravado, rhetorical question, and repetition comically exaggerates the uncertainty that lurks behind the certainty. Jenny's affirmation of Jack's speech suggests her complicity with this framework. Yet this robotic repetition can be read as at once comic and threatening. Jenny acts as a kind of "straight man" to Jack; her desire to deviate from his script seems at first ominously absent. Jack's use of rhetorical questions asks his audience to play "straight man" also, but that response is less assured. From the beginning, then, Hollingsworth establishes an atmosphere at once comic and foreboding, which alerts the reader/spectator to remain dubious and to question what s/he hears.

Jack's accumulative logic is called into question further by non-verbal elements in the play. The stage directions call for a series of backdrop slide projections that are interspersed, sometimes disruptively, throughout the narrative. The initial projection shows a fecund forest. As the story of Jack and Jenny's relationship progresses (or rather deteriorates), the slides focus more closely on the forest to show a few trees, then one, then a trunk, then a cross-section of the stump's rings. The movement of slides parallels the way that their relationship (its minutiae and flaws) comes closer into our view as if it is being presented for our dissection. This creates a kind of scenic irony, since the slides depict a process of deforestation that contrasts with the accumulative motion of Jack's plan. The more Jack tries to follow the "rules" for a happy marriage, the more we are able to see the flaws in this social blueprint -- the "cracks" in his foundation. The slides also emphasize the environmental destruction that accompanies Jack's accumulation. H. Porter Abbott notes that Samuel Beckett's plays "made considerable capital out of the trope of onwardness and in so doing thematized modernist's rejection of both linearity and the Victorian moral imperative" (79). *The House that Jack Built* also makes considerable capital out of the tropes of accumulation and onwardness through both language and visual metaphor. In particular, the slide images of deforestation call into question the positive benefits of Jack's capitalist patriarchal imperatives. But for myself, such less than reassuring images also call into question a different kind of onwardness --

the feminist belief in a better future for women. Certainly they provide a foreboding backdrop against which to view Jenny's equivocal struggle for liberation.

As the previous long quotation suggests, Jack is the more vocal of the two characters. Jenny struggles with the attempt to articulate herself throughout the play. Her "side" of the story is represented not only verbally, but also through non-verbal elements (such as patterns of silence), and disjunctive – even surreal -- forms of utterance. While Jack appears confident about the way things should be, Jenny alternately reiterates and thwarts those assumptions, to the point that Jack himself becomes less than certain of their inevitable success. So, while Jack attempts to uphold a linear narrative pattern, the play actually moves in a different pattern. That pattern might be described as a kind of rocking motion -- reiterative and resistant; accumulative and unravelling; attractive and repulsive; to and fro -- like two rocking chairs moving in different rhythms and going nowhere.

Indeed, Jack and Jenny sit on stage in rocking chairs for virtually the entire play. While the character notes state that they are only 24 years old, the rocking chairs provide an image of a prematurely aged couple ensconced in a middle-class hell. The chairs create the effect of repetitive motion with no progress, visibly and acoustically on stage.¹⁰ George Toles suggests that the settings of the short plays in *Endangered Species* allude to "Beckett's eternal waiting room, where one is condemned to speech and repetitive activity simply because one *cannot* leave" (62). In this play, the characters are entrapped in preconceived structures of marriage and gender. They rock, almost catatonically, moving backwards and forwards in time, reliving the progressive disintegration of their relationship. They direct their story to the audience (complete with the background slide projections), almost as if giving a lecture. Cynthia Schnebly suggests that "[o]ne of the ways plays in the Theater of the Absurd function is by making the audience feel they are overhearing everyday conversation and then exaggerating ordinary features of conversation until the audience is uncomfortable" (99-100). The direct audience address in Hollingsworth's play also creates an oddly artificial, sometimes strained, character/audience dynamic which, in a sense, parallels the awkward estrangement between Jack and Jenny. That strain is often what gives rise to a disquieting laughter. Instead of identification with the characters, the play invites the audience to examine

what they represent, and what their relationship represents, critically – although not dispassionately.

The two characters' narratives move together and away from each other at various points: sometimes Jack and Jenny appear to be telling the same story about the same relationship and at other times they appear to have completely divergent interpretations; sometimes they appear to be communicating with one another and other times to be talking as if the other person does not exist. The narrative is also made disjunctive through temporal shifts, as it moves alternately from present to nostalgic narration to flashback-type scenes (where they recreate the dialogue of past scenes as if they were present, all the while remaining in their rocking chairs). Sometimes these flashback dialogues are shared, and at other points only one character travels back into his or her own experience. This narrative disjunctiveness emphasizes the difficulty of achieving shared communication and, thus, mutual understanding.

The play continually highlights the two characters' inability or refusal to communicate. Consider, for example, this early flashback dialogue when Jack brings Jenny to see the piece of land he has purchased:

JENNY This is it?
 JACK What's wrong with it?
 JENNY It's wet.
 JACK Of course it's friggin wet what do you expect?
 JENNY It's a swamp. [...] What about a basement?
 JACK You want a basement?
 JENNY It's too wet for a basement.
 JACK You want a basement you'll get a basement.
 JENNY Don't all houses have basements?
 JACK If that's what you want, you'll have one. All you gotta do is just say what you want.
 JENNY I want to stay on Queen.
 JACK You just gotta say the word. Basement. (12-13)

This dialogue derives its comic effect through repetition and misunderstanding. Cynthia Schnebly notes that absurdist drama often employs repetitive patterns to signify failed

conversation. Instead of denoting interpersonal involvement (as repetition in conversation may do), absurdist manipulate repetitions so that "characters often seem only marginally aware of what is being said, and they repeat to clear away the obligation to reply or to evade substantive response" (99). In this dialogue, Jenny articulates her desire to remain in their city apartment; Jack's fixation on the word basement evades that desire and allows him to reconfirm his preconceived pattern of action. While the audience may find Jack's gullibility (as the proverbial dupe who buys swampland) and miscomprehension amusing, his fixation on the basement (dark, damp, dungeonlike) provides an image of ominous foreboding. This dialogue provides both a discursive and figurative impression of Jenny's imprisonment in Jack's design.

The house that Jack builds clearly represents a threat to Jenny. Through pieces of information interspersed throughout the play, we learn that Jenny enjoys the city, its distractions, her work and friends. The urban environment provides her with a sense of adult autonomy, whereas the country house surrounded by trees reminds Jenny of her insular childhood home in Kapuskasing. Very simply, then, the house appears to represent a way of life that she rejects in favor of one of her own making. Jenny's personal dislike of the house has wider gender significance. Hanna Scolnicov, following other feminist critics, argues that "[g]ender roles are spatially defined in relation to the inside and the outside of the house. Traditionally, it is woman who makes the house into a home, her home, while the world of commerce, war, travel, the world outside, is a man's world" (6). She further notes that the "house" can have either positive or negative gender associations. On the one hand, the house may be viewed as a space in which women can exercise their creativity and control; on the other hand, "especially in modern times, the problem is how to escape the restrictive space of her house" (8). In Hollingsworth's play, Jenny's relationship to the house corresponds clearly to the latter attitude.

The female/passive/inside versus male/active/outside binary opposition operates throughout the play, and it is this binary type of thinking that contributes to the characters' estrangement. Initially Jack, who drains the swamp, cuts down the trees and builds the house, is associated with the active outdoors. Ironically, his relationship to that environment is primarily destructive, as he obliterates the trees and animals that populate

the building site. While he associates himself with the building and the outside of the house, he expects Jenny to take care of the inside décor and consume domestic goods. He brings her decorating catalogues to look at and becomes violently frustrated that she hasn't "as much as picked out a shower curtain" (18). For Jack, the indoors/female and outdoor/male binary is assumed and accepted. For Jenny, it is a site of gender and power struggle.

Importantly, while Hollingsworth's play draws attention to the "house" as a gender and power charged environment, she does so primarily through words. While the rocking chairs connote the inside of the house, the stage directions call for no doors, no windows, no other realistic details of the house. Most absurdist plays tend towards such emptiness (bare stage, scarce props, plain costumes) which signifies a world emptied of meaning and fixed points of reference. As in those plays, the stage of *The House that Jack Built* is delimited in order to foreground conceptual spaces. But here it draws attention to the power of the "house" and its gender restrictions as a structure/product of language and thought as opposed to a realistic physical space. In this exchange, Jack heroically describes his struggle to build Jenny's house and Jenny makes an attempt to articulate her sense of resistance, not to the house itself, but to what it represents:

JACK Billy bet me I couldn't get the roof on by mid-July.

JENNY See I wanted -

JACK I won, then I got the dry-wallin started.

JENNY I wanted.

JACK Plaster dust everywhere - I guess I shoul'da had that under control right?

JENNY I wanted -- (*Drinks.*) I love him. It's not that, but I wanted... I wanted a house, it's not that.

JACK I shoul'da friggin had it under control right? (18)

Jenny can articulate neither her desire nor her fear, yet her apprehension is all the more evident through the pattern of her silences. It appears that it is not the physical house itself that threatens, but what it represents -- seclusion, possession, and passivity. In addition, the passage demonstrates Jack's proprietary belief that he must maintain power and control, not just over the plaster dust, but also over his wife. While Jenny's desires

appear to be in formation, Jack's belief that he must follow his gender program and assert control (and thwart Jenny's desires when they deviate from that program) is palpable. His ability to fulfill the masterful agenda for manhood he assumes, however, is frustrated throughout the play. Jack is as much a victim of gender structures as Jenny. While his resistance to his gender program is less, the promised success and fulfillment of manhood and the middle-class dream elude him.

In a world of uncertainties and missing points of reference, gender hierarchies remain largely unquestioned in both Western and Eastern European absurdist traditions. Hollingsworth's play takes as its subject those gendered patterns of domination and submission; it acknowledges the power of such hierarchies in language and in personal and economic relationships, but it also calls into question their necessity and desirability. So, while in dialogue with "classic" absurdism, *The House that Jack Built* deviates from its presumptions in significant fashion. Certainly, the play challenges the assumed primacy of the male hero in the comedy-of-despair. The male character -- our quintessential Jack -- thinks himself the hero of the play's action, but it is Jenny, the female character, who is the more provocative source of action -- albeit a seemingly futile resistance. Correspondingly, the play considers gender not as fixed state-of-being but as a powerful structure that, like language, has dangerous -- if dubious -- power. Hollingsworth combines an interest in the social with the psychological, the philosophical with everyday practice and, in so doing, interrelates feminist and absurdist practices and concerns.

The female protagonist in this comedy-of-despair is herself, however, anything but consciously feminist. Jenny is at once submissive, complicit, and resistant to those patriarchal power structures determining her life. At no point in the play does she envision leaving her marriage, although she describes her increasing dissatisfaction with its progression and her yearning for independence. Marriage is like Beckett's waiting room: she cannot see an exit or even imagine an outside, independent female life. Indeed, the marital structure appears to satisfy Jenny while the couple lives in the city. Still, Hollingsworth injects that early happiness with a strain of perversity when Jenny describes their daily routine:

JENNY [...]Then I cooked his supper. He always likes chicken on Saturday. Sometimes I fancy it up, but he'd rather have it plain roast with a can of corn and a baked potato. That's his favorite. I like it too. Sometimes of an evening we'd walk up to the Eaton Centre and look at the displays and maybe have an orange julius and sometimes we'd walk along Yonge and look in all the windows of the porn shops and go home by the park and watch the young girls on the job -- some of them look younger'n I was when I first met him.

JACK She was thirteen and a half the first time we done it. It wasn't my first time. I was fourteen.

JENNY He always got sexy after that. I really liked livin on Queen. (15-16)

Comic understatement animates this passage, as Jenny describes everything from their Saturday dinner to shared sexual voyeurism with matter-of-factness. While she does not analyze the implications of her narrative, the reader may. Jenny and Jack have been partnered -- at least sexually -- since they were virtually children, which leads me to ponder the effects of such early sexual experience. Jenny's account reveals that Jack has pedophilic fantasies and that she is contentedly complicit. After describing what could be termed Jack's "perverse" sexual interest in young girls, she concludes matter-of-factly with the punchline: "I really liked livin on Queen." The play seems to treat such controversial subjects as the effects of pornography, child sexuality, and child prostitution in a non-judgmental and non-didactic fashion, but its darkly comic tone certainly draws attention to them. While this segment does not pass judgment on the characters, it does provide an image of their psychological "basements" and the common "sins" that bind them to one another. Further, it explains their inability to imagine an alternative to life together. Since they have been mated virtually since childhood, their understandings of those adult roles they play are circumscribed by their lack of experience with other adults. In many ways, Jack and Jenny (whose very names evoke a nursery rhyme context) come across like two overgrown children still "playing house."

Once Jack starts his building project and begins to leave Jenny alone, she loses her contentment. At first Jenny's resistance to both her impending containment and her current sense of isolation is characteristically urban, middle-class, and feminine:

There was nothin to do weekends. He was up at six and out for seven Saturday morning. I'd go down the market for eight...When I'd looked around I had a couple of doughnuts and a coffee and I'd walk over to Queen West and watch all the punks on the sidewalk...Then I'd pick up a pizza and take it home, only it wasn't lunch time yet but what the hell I ate it anyways. Then I'd put this spoon down my throat. (14)

Initially Jenny expresses her resistance through forms of consumption (shopping, eating) and expulsion (bulimia), common forms of escape and protest for young middle-class women. She also develops other ways to counteract her boredom and isolation. She finds an interest in her new job at Canadian Tire (both work and the Canadian Tire store are conventionally male refuges) as well as in the female community of her co-workers. Here, then, we have the first instance of Jenny's transgression from her gender formula. At once she finds solidarity with other women (rather than her husband) and purpose in a traditionally masculine realm.

The play provides an account of Jenny's burgeoning independence and social network through both her and Jack's perspectives. Here, initial repetition gives way to two monologic divergences which emphasize their differences in view. This duologue reproduces a recognizable form of conversation. Each member of the couple appears to compete for the guest/spectator's attention, talking about one another as if s/he were not present. The result is a comic effect that is nonetheless fraught with tension:

JACK ... She went to work for Canadian Tire.

JENNY I went to work at Canadian Tire. They give thirty percent discounts to employees but you have to work Saturdays.

JACK It paid good. Thing is it paid in Canadian Tire money!

[Laughs.]

JENNY I really liked it -- see me and the other girls --

JACK She knew she'd have to give it up once we moved.

JENNY We were always horsin around on our lunch break. Me and the other girls.

JACK I went there once and watched her. She didn't see me. She was on the cash register and this other girl. It was like watchin a stranger or somethin. I never let it bother me. (17)

By now, the reader is familiar with Jack's characteristic self-delusion and can read his bravado with comic irony. His assertion "I never let it bother me" betrays his jealousy and need for domination. Jack's denial confirms that he is threatened by Jenny's economic independence (note, for instance, how his Canadian Tire money joke belittles Jenny's status as a wage-earner) and female community, and that he fears losing Jenny as that possession which defines his masculinity. And so he escalates the house-building project.

Like the play's title rhyme and slide backdrops, Jack's attitude implies a connection between marriage and capitalist structures. Margaret Hollingsworth was born in Sheffield, England, to working class parents (Zimmerman 101); her work exhibits a sensitivity to class issues that likely stems from her upbringing in that class-conscious milieu.¹¹ Because the recognition of marriage and family as economic structures is a mainstay of British socialist-feminist thought, I find it useful to consider this form of critique in relation to *The House that Jack Built*. Socialist-feminist critique opposes class stratification and oppression caused by capitalism and asserts the necessity of class struggle, but also opposes the gender blindness of traditional socialism. Socialist-feminist critics such as Shulamith Firestone argue that women have been subjected not only to the ruling economic class, but also to patriarchy, and that the relations of procreation are as much a base of oppression as the relations of production (Reinelt "Beyond" 151). From this perspective, the necessity of traditional gender roles, heterosexual love, and reproduction (the production of workers and consumers) are conceptions that serve capitalism. Capitalist ideology thus upholds gender identity, marriage, and family as necessary elements of an individual's self-fulfillment. Jack is an ideal capitalist subject, who assumes unquestioningly the value and equation of his roles as man, husband, labourer/wage-earner, and consumer. *The House that Jack Built* brings to the foreground the relations between capitalist consumerism, gender, and marital structures by having Jenny trouble this equation, first through her desire to step outside her traditional role as wife (who supports her labourer husband, who consumes domestic

goods, and whose own labour is unpaid), and second through her attention to the environmental destruction caused by Jack's need to build, or accumulate, in service of his marriage. The play's absurdist portrayal of gender and marriage is thus connected integrally to its portrayal of consumerism. All are structures of meaning that allow people to construct themselves as subjects (that seem to offer purpose, value, and the promise of autonomy in their lives), but that also subjugate them (that foreclose other purposes and values, and other configurations of gender, human and environmental relations). From this standpoint, Jack is as much a hapless victim of capitalist/gender ideologies as Jenny. The difference between their standpoints is, as Hollingsworth asserts, that "men are ... much more secure in their worlds, and in order to keep that security they use words as weapons, they intimidate by silence" ("Introduction" 7). Jack belittles Jenny's tentative attempts to construct a different role for herself through his jokes, and his dogged reiterations of the rightness of his motives and plan. He uses language as a means of control although, ironically, language also controls him (it determines what he thinks, how he behaves) and betrays him (it exposes his self-delusions and presumptions). Because Jack follows so closely the script for a middle-class performance of his gender, words come easily -- indeed too easily -- from that script to assert the value and necessity of his actions and beliefs. Whereas, when Jenny attempts to conceive a role outside that script for herself, words do not come so easily or coherently at all.

Jenny's voice of resistance and protest against repression becomes increasingly non-sensical and surreal, both verbally and non-verbally, once she describes the period after they move to the new house. She becomes obsessed with the "outside," particularly with those elements of the environment that Jack's enterprise threatens to destroy. At one point, as Jenny tries to articulate her unhappiness with their change of home, she reaches into her knitting bag and empties out an array of sponges. During the dialogue that follows she squeezes, rocks, and strokes the sponges (18). Initially, this action seems incongruous. The "surreal" logic¹² of Jenny's attachment to the sponges becomes clearer when she describes how she came to have them:

I was arrested for shoplifting from Shoppers Drug Mart. They asked me why I did it. I said I didn't know. We don't need that many sponges. They didn't charge

me so I didn't have to tell him. I paid for them so now they're mine. This was alive once. [*Tears the plastic wrap off one of the sponges with her teeth*]. (19)

Jenny is "irrationally" drawn to the sponges, which come from the deep ocean -- a common image of the female unconscious in women's writing. She treats them as if she is trying to set them free (by tearing off the plastic wrap) and as if they are still alive (stroking and rocking them like a child). The sponges are a fitting symbol of Jenny's repressed self that, while inarticulate and imperiled, is nonetheless alive. Her maternal actions suggest that this part of herself is newly born and thus all the more fragile and cherished. What initially appears incongruous and perhaps bizarrely comic, has its own surreal logic of resistance. Like the form of humour Freud calls "comic," these images and expressions signify repressed, unconscious modes of logic which are implicitly oppositional responses to legitimated modes of behaviour. As such, it is also significant that Jenny says, in her now halting, disjunctive voice, that she tried to shoplift the sponges. This could be seen as her attempt to circumvent the necessity of ownership, so pivotal to Jack's middle-class, accumulative logic -- a logic that extends to his proprietary attitude towards Jenny and her happiness. The line "I paid for them so now they're mine" draws attention to this and ominously signals Jenny's acquiescence to that equation she first intuitively tried to avoid.

The sponge episode introduces Jenny's increasing obsession with endangered species. To Jack's consternation, instead of focusing on the new house, Jenny becomes fixated on those elements of the environment destroyed in order to build it.

They drained the swamp. Endangered species include two varieties of orchid under our driveway. Mud puppies right where the double sink is -- they're dying out -- they use them for research. A Canada Goose nest under the garage. Geese mate for life. Treefrogs, Fowler's toads, lungless salamanders. Bullfrogs. We eat their legs. A frog. Does not. Drink up. The pond. In which he lives. (20)

This rich moment has several potential layers of meaning and effect. On the most basic level, Jenny questions the ethics and wisdom of destroying the environment one plans to live in. Moreover, this passage establishes her obsession with those species that, like her own sense of self, are threatened by the destruction that accompanies Jack's act of construction. Those creatures she names are mostly reptilian and, like the deep-sea

sponges, symbolize the "underbelly" of her consciousness. In this passage, it is as if that subterranean consciousness (so long and increasingly repressed) finds its correlative in the environment, and is able to touch the surface and find a language. That language is different from the everyday, repetitive, and "realistic" dialogue of most of the play. Its tone is urgent; its syntax fragmented; its pacing and sound patterns poetic.

This passage shares many discursive characteristics of *l'écriture féminine*, a form of writing that some theorists believe expresses uniquely female qualities, and which deploys a form of syntax and diction that generates its meanings between and beneath the surfaces of dominant, phallogocentric discourse. Sue-Ellen Case provides this description: "It can be elliptical rather than illustrative, fragmentary rather than whole, ambiguous rather than clear, and interrupted rather than complete" (129). Jenny's obsession with subterranean endangered species, and the syntax with which she is finally able to articulate herself, correspond to these qualities. In "The Laugh of the Medusa," perhaps the most effective illustration of *l'écriture féminine*, French feminist/psychoanalytic theorist Helene Cixous reclaims the subject position of the female hysteric in the figure of the laughing Medusa (who strikes me as the ultimate embodiment of Freud's comic). For the hysteric "all laughter is allied with the monstrous" and her laughter "keeps a wide gash bleeding in the man's breast" (*Newly Born* 33). The laughing Medusa wounds phallic logic and language, and constitutes an enabling myth of female self-expression. While Jenny does not laugh or exhibit herself outrageously, her actions and expressions could be called hysterical in so far as they are non-linear, disruptive, outward expressions of interior repressions which disturb the smooth functioning of the accumulative, patriarchal script that Jack follows unquestioningly. Jenny's rich, disjunctive speech suggests that her interest in those endangered species is more symbolic of her psychological state than literal. She speaks in short sentences, in short breaths, as if she is having difficulty getting the words out of her body. Like the sponges, those endangered species represent an inner self which begins to come to the surface, and her struggle to save them is thus also a struggle for self-projection and self-protection. Her speech and actions signify attempts to express herself outside of, or in resistance to, the patriarchal frame Jack erects and, as such, they constitute a form of gender protest. But unlike feminist theorists of *l'écriture féminine* (or unlike Ann-Marie MacDonald, who

portrays the unconscious as an unruly realm of political possibilities), Jenny does not appear in control or even aware of the nature of her opposition. Like other absurdist characters, Jenny is virtually a non-subject. Her voice of opposition and strange behaviours are unconscious, and seemingly inevitable, effects of the repressive structures in and to which she is subjected, rather than conscious underminings of them. The manner in which Hollingsworth depicts Jenny's resistance and attempts to express herself suggests that the construction of female subjectivity is at once difficult, endangered, and endangering. Unlike modernist absurdist plays, Hollingsworth's drama draws attention to the relations between psychological unease, isolation, and submission and the power dynamics of gender in language and in economic and marital frameworks.

On a different note, the focus on the outside environment in relation to internal conceptual structures gives Hollingsworth's absurdist vision its own national peculiarity. As Dorothy Parker comments, "In Hollingsworth's plays...it is our awareness of the vast empty space outside that gives her small rooms their ominous, and particularly Canadian character" (98). While I have alluded to Jack's house as like Beckett's waiting room, it is also like Northrope Frye's notion of the garrison mentality in Canadian literature. The inside connotes both the safety and the threat of willful imprisonment within known structures of meaning. The outside represents an unknown that menaces as it beckons. And yet, the outside functions not entirely as an abstract metaphor in this play. Its critique of capitalist accumulative mentality and ensuing environmental detriment can also be read on a more immediate political level. The play's slide backdrops of deforestation and other images of environmental destruction draw attention to the actual effects that ensue from a materialist mentality. As such, Hollingsworth's play can be read alongside political, business, and environmental debates which were particularly prevalent in Canada in the 1980s. Here, again, *The House that Jack Built* does not separate its consideration of abstract and ideological structures from deliberations of their tangible, and potentially alterable, effects. Another peculiarity of this play is its use of regional dialect. Typically, absurdist plays employ a kind of mundane, nondescript form of language which lends a "universal" tone (this is true of Eastern European as well as Western absurdist drama; the "universal" tone of the former protects it from censorship). While Jack's and Jenny's dialogue could often be called mundane, it nonetheless evokes a

particular socio-economic bracket and idiomatic flavour (Mud Puppies and Canadian Tire money are examples of such specific reference). Thus while Jack and Jenny, and their problems, can and I think should be read emblematically, they are not mere abstractions. Hollingsworth's feminist-absurdist vision asks the reader to consider the connections between what might appear abstract notions (gender, capitalism and so forth) and their very real personal and environmental costs.

Initially, a hopeful activism accompanies Jenny's increasing preoccupation with the environment. She joins a group of women concerned with saving the frogs in the disappearing swamps. Jack belittles this enterprise just as, funnily enough, he earlier belittled her job:

JENNY Save the swamps!

JACK It gave her something to do. Didn't bring no money in, but I didn't say nothin. She was on the phone for hours to this one and that one. Then I'd come home and there'd be all these women in rubber boots in our kitchen. I didn't say nothin. (20)

Jack's comical reference to "all these women in rubber boots" suggests that his anxiety stems, at least in part, from the blurring of the boundaries between indoors and out, between female and male realms of activity. More simply, he is threatened by Jenny's preoccupation with a world beyond him and, once again, by her association with other women. While Jack feels his hold on their world weaken, Jenny draws strength from her activity, her female community, and her commitment to issues of survival. On a personal-symbolic level, Jenny engages in a kind of (un)consciousness-raising activity. With the help of other women, she begins to identify a world outside her role in marriage and so begins to articulate (albeit indirectly) issues of repression and endurance that apply not only to the endangered amphibians but to herself. Still, while the audience/reader may perceive the significance of Jenny's activities, she herself does not appear fully aware of it.

Ironically, Jack perceives this connection on a somewhat more conscious level and views Jenny's activism as at once a threat and a source of guilt:

JENNY: They [frogs] often lose part of their tail to escape an enemy but a new one grows back.

JACK: Hey - what did the leper say to the prostitute? You can keep the tip! You can keep...

[*JACK laughs, looks at JENNY expectantly. No response.*]

You see? I mean, I'm the one who wouldn't go huntin, she's the one who used to tell me I was chicken. She was never interested in nature. [*Suddenly, violently, to JENNY.*] You coulda stopped me! (21)

In response to Jenny's identification with the frogs' resilience, Jack responds with a coarse joke. In a sense, this joke is his own form of protest -- an attempt to deflect the guilt and sense of failure that Jenny's unhappiness produces. Jack is distressed by the upset of what he has always considered the "natural order" of their relationship, of men and women, of progress. While he has attempted to follow that order to the letter, it does not yield the promised benefits. Neither he nor his marriage thrives.

Critic Jerry Wasserman views Jack's position in the play quite differently. While Wasserman generally admires the "semi-absurdist" craft of the *Endangered Species* collection, he argues that *The House that Jack Built* is anti-male:

The polemical feminism of [the] preface is awkwardly dramatized in the first play, 'The House that Jack Built,' in which a bullying husband commits every patriarchal sin in the book against his wife...Nothing of this man or his voice sound authentic... (68-69)

Wasserman's evaluation is understandable, if lacking in nuance. On one hand, the play invites a psychological reading of the characters, and on this front Jack is not fully or realistically developed. Still, there are moments when his optimistic machismo sounds very "authentic" indeed: for example those bragging descriptions of competitive house-building. But realistic authenticity is not really the crux of either his or Jenny's characterizations. By considering more closely how Hollingsworth deploys what Wasserman himself terms her "semi-absurdist" craft, Jack's characterization as representative patriarchal dupe becomes more understandable. Hollingsworth appears to be experimenting with an almost "clownlike" personification of gender positions in this play.¹³ While the metaphysical clown, caught in some meaningless co(s)mic game, is a familiar characterization in absurdist drama, Hollingsworth's conception is somewhat different. Jack's "voice" is an intentionally emblematic representation of social

conditioning taken to an almost absurdly literal level. In this way, the play clearly presents Jack as much as a victim of socializing gender structures as a victimizer. And, as with any clown or dupe, he stands to elicit laughter and mockery, as well as empathy. Through the course of the play Hollingsworth conveys the falsity and the danger of such emblematic gender roles for both characters. The difference is that Jack, because of his gender, assumes (both in the sense of taking and accepting) the dominant role. And, instead of acknowledging that the gender program he follows does not yield the promised rewards (happiness, admiration, etc.), he fixates on his betrayal by Jenny (and women in general). His joke about the prostitute and the leper, for example, is also a misogynist attack. Part of the play's irony is that while the reader/spectator may perceive an opportunity for new understanding and change, Jack doggedly refuses to see it (he is like a clown who "refuses" to see the bucket of water teetering over his head).¹⁴ Instead, he continually attempts to bolster the status quo. Still, I disagree with Wasserman's assertion that the play vilifies Jack specifically. While the linking constraints of capitalism, marriage, and gender affect male and female characters differently, they are both linked by their complicity with those systems, and both suffer from their effects.

Instead of change, *The House that Jack Built* ends with a kind of "survival of the fittest" contest for preservation of the gender status quo. On the one hand, the play suggests that the survival instincts of women are more subtly and subversively developed because (like those of the amphibians perhaps) they have been essential for so long. The ending suggests that these subversive strategies are necessary because, ultimately, men continue to exercise control over women. When Jack perceives a threat to the survival of his identity, he reacts with denial and, when that denial is no longer possible, with violence. The violence within this play is psychological rather than physical, and while it is initiated by Jack it is expressed primarily through Jenny.¹⁵

The vectors of power that operate at the climax of this play are not easy to follow. Prior to the climax, Jenny appears to be gaining a sense of selfhood and agency through her links with other women and the environment. Initially, her work to save the frogs appears a success:

JACK [...] It was the next spring. The next spring they came back.

[*JENNY suddenly becomes alert.*]

They were in the basement. Just a few of them at first. Cute little green ones.

JENNY Oh look Jack!

JACK Then they moved into the kitchen.

JENNY I told you they'd keep coming back! (22)

However, the abundant reappearance of the frogs actually inverts the power dynamic. Jack is correct when he notes earlier that Jenny does not particularly care for nature. Jenny is, deep inside, gendered conventionally and dislikes the messy outdoors (she did want to stay in the city after all). There is of course a complex equation between the notion of woman (and women's bodies) and nature in Western philosophy: man/culture objectifies woman-as-nature and woman-as-nature becomes the object of his fear and domination. Because they live within patriarchal culture, women are socialized to fear and even loathe nature (and their bodies). For a while, the natural world – particularly the frogs – represent for Jenny an abstract cause and an unconscious metaphor for survival and hope. But this does not nullify her gender(ed) fear. With the actual reappearance of the frogs, Jack gets an opportunity to use this contradiction against Jenny's newfound sense of power:

JENNY I told you they'd keep coming back!

JACK The living room. They sat down to meals with us.

[JENNY draws her feet up, scared.]

[Opening his eyes, and getting into it.] She went up to Kap for a visit and when she came back I told her they were in all the cupboards, in the sink... when you sat on the toilet...

JENNY Where? Where? (22)

JACK I told her they were in the bedroom. They were jumpin and crawlin all over Meryl Streep's face. They were in the friggin bed. *[Jumps to his feet.]* The whole friggin house is overrun! The whole street!

[JENNY screams.]

Like a slimey green rug, heavin under your feet -- and when you walk on it you feel it squelch...you feel it under your feet, and then you're up to your knees in it and then it's up to your chin.

They're on your shoulders, in your ears... they're takin over!

It's frogs. Your friggin frogs! (22)

This passage moves from past narrative to present nightmarish discourse, from Jenny's autonomy to her fear, from Jack's passive guilt to his reassertion of control. At this point in the play the characters leave their rocking chairs to enact the scene as if it is occurring in the present. Because their actions thus far have been so restricted and repetitive, this sudden movement provides a sense of immediacy. Jack's voice becomes inventive and dynamic as he "gets into" his nightmarish description of the frogs' return. Critics are understandably confused by the truthfulness of his account of events. Jerry Wasserman calls this scene "surreal" (69), but goes on to take Jack's speech quite literally when he states that "a plague of frogs wreaks nature's revenge" (69). Oddly, he does not wonder why Jenny -- not Jack -- should be the victim of this reprisal. Rita Much's interpretation is more subtle, but it also takes Jack's narrative at face value: "the dream home is invaded by hordes of slimy, croaking frogs: Hollingsworth's hilarious inversion of fairy tales about princesses and amphibians" (xvi). Neither critic questions the credibility of Jack's narrative. Certainly, the play gives ample precedent of Jack's dubious reliability and his capacity to manipulate reality to suit preconceived needs. When he sees Jenny bridle at his description of frogs sitting down to dinner, the stage directions state that he opens his eyes "getting into" his story, which becomes increasingly exaggerated and suspect. The play also states that after Jenny returns from her trip, Jack "told" her that the frogs were in the toilet, the cupboards, the sink. To which Jenny responds "Where? Where?" Jack takes a portion of reality and exaggerates it so that it becomes a surreal nightmare that has the desired effect on his wife. His description of slimy frogs up to the chin is a fantasy that perfectly articulates the fears within Jenny of allowing her repressed anger into their safely gendered world. Contrary to Wasserman's analysis, it is Jack, not the frogs, who wreaks revenge. To expand upon Much's analysis, Jack's inversion of the fairy tale turns Jenny against her saving frogs so that he can be, once again, her "prince." Jack's discourse, as he wrests power from Jenny, conveys a release of his anger, ugliness, and even repressed violence. And while his psychological assault may appear spontaneous, it is also calculatedly cruel.

In response to Jack's phantasmic invasion, Jenny verbalizes her own repressed, and now re-directed, anger: "Do somethi-i-i-i-ng! I hate them! Kill them! Kill them!

Kill them! Kill them! Kill them! Ki-i-i-i-ill!" (22). It is as if Jack's description of the frog infestation articulates all of Jenny's subterranean fear and fury. By making palpable this unconscious level of reality, Jack usurps the image of Jenny's hope (the frogs) and provokes her to destroy her own avenue for self-expression and survival. My reading of the surrealistic frog invasion as a calculated discursive assault by Jack is not intended to deny its effect on both characters. Once Jenny finishes screaming, the stage directions read, "*JENNY and JACK shrink back to either side of the stage and stand, transfixed*" (22). Jack also responds to the incursion as if it were real. The frog invasion represents a terrifying -- even violent -- psychological reality available to both characters, and which is a product of their shared repressions and fear. In my reading, this is what causes them to shrink back and away from one another in terror and fascination.

The lights go down, leaving only the slide of "*A cross section of a tree trunk, showing the rings*" (22). In addition to signaling the final dissection of the couple's relationship, this slide provides an image of irreparable separateness and destruction. This is the forest all tattered and torn, this is the man and the maiden forlorn, that live in the house that Jack built. When the lights come back up, Jack and Jenny are back in their chairs, rocking almost catatonically. It would appear that from their shared nightmare they experience a kind of catharsis and, as a result, the tensions and power struggles between them dissipate -- or at least become dormant for a while.

The final scene of the play presents a troubling, fraught image of the couple's fate: [*..Lights come up to reveal JACK and JENNY back in their chairs. JENNY is very pregnant.*]

JACK I decided against a lawn. I put down gravel and cedar chips. The weeds got through so I kept a bunch of weedkiller in the garage. It's not hard to control them if you get the right stuff. [*Picks up binoculars.*] You can't go on livin in the past. You gotta look forward. Right? [*Hands binoculars to JENNY.*] You ever look at the sky Jenny? You ever look at the stars? Really look I mean. Really look. (23)

This scene presents an ironic variation of the traditional happy ending. Comedies often end with a celebratory social ritual (such as a marriage or a christening) which is supposed to celebrate a new social order but which, ironically, usually reestablishes a

restrictive gender status quo. Certainly Jenny's pregnancy falls within the realm of what society usually considers a happy event. And, just as certainly, the final static, silent image of Jenny suggests her recontainment in the oppressive gender system represented by their middle-class marriage. This does not seem a happy ending for Jenny, certainly. Jack's accumulative pattern -- marriage, house, now kids -- is right on track at the play's end. After all, "You gotta look forward. Right?" Once again, Hollingsworth employs repetition to make readers doubt the necessity or desirability of Jack's forward-looking vision. Further, Jenny's pregnant silence, like the doubts lurking behind Jack's certainty, leaves the potential for further disruption ominously present.¹⁶

While Jenny does not speak, her pregnancy presents both a troubling and hopeful image to end the play. Jack offers an update on his house-building project. He has put down a non-organic lawn (gravel and cedar chips), but the weeds begin to come through, so he uses poison to control them. Always the buyer of swampland, Jack gives no thought to the potential side-effects of herbicides on his pregnant wife. With very dark comedy, indeed, Hollingsworth leaves the reader/spectator with an image of the potential deformity (at once symbolic and actual) that haunts their marriage. Neither have Jack's fears dissipated entirely. Weeds are nuisances that threaten his image of the perfect home, just as Jenny's troubling thoughts are blights that once threatened Jack's progress. Like weeds, these must be stopped from growing through again. Jack comments: "It's not hard to control them if you get the right stuff" (23). It does seem possible that he has attained the right poison to control Jenny's subversive impulses. That poison is his knowledge of her fears and his ability to manifest them through language.

Despite these ominous undertones, Jenny's pregnancy can also be viewed more hopefully. She holds a new life within her body, which Jack cannot entirely control (although he may poison it). Further, this scene recalls an earlier vision of Jenny rocking the sponges as if they were children, thereby suggesting that something precious, if unformed, remains inside her waiting to be born. Thus, Jenny's pregnancy can be viewed as a tentative expression of hopefulness for future evolution. Something similar may be said of Jack. On the one hand, both characters are recontained in solid, conventional gender roles. Jenny is silent, passive, and dominated by her female body. Jack is vocal, active, and looks out to the abstract world -- the stars. While they remain together in the

agreed upon social unit of marriage, clearly Jack and Jenny are more estranged than ever. On the other hand, if we can view Jenny's pregnancy as offering a glimmer of hope, we can view Jack's star-gazing that way also. Certainly Jack continues to ignore his wife's own desires and realities, but his desire to communicate something to her about the stars suggests a yearning on his part for some form of shared understanding. The problem is that Jack is still trying to control where and how Jenny looks. He is unwilling to share her view. Tellingly Jack does not comment on his wife's pregnancy. Instead he looks to the stars. Because of those gender divided roles they follow, Jack and Jenny each look and reach out in different directions. In this way, the ending of *The House that Jack Built* remains fraught.

This difference in vision is also emblematic of the somewhat uneasy alliance between feminism and absurdism that runs through this chapter. Jack's subject position and his abstract vision recall the metaphysical focus of the Western absurdist tradition, whereas Jenny's subject position, and her pregnancy, raise the importance of the social and physical realities that feminism seeks to redress. Thus, through attention to gender, Hollingsworth reanimates and extends the concerns of absurdism. To recall Nataša Tanská's assessment, the absurdist theatre tradition has long been conceived of as a male domain characterized by an abstract, apolitical vision. And yet she proposes that women can benefit from the kind of self-critical, philosophical humour that mode allows. Hollingsworth's dramatic vision plays among and between what might be categorized as abstract and real, absurdist and feminist concerns. Certainly the play deviates from the Western metaphysical absurdist tradition on several fronts. Its characters are at once emblematic of social conditioning taken to an absurd degree and semi-realistic characters whose psychological processes are available to interpretation. *The House that Jack Built* allows spectators to see the operation of those abstract structures and ideologies that control human behaviour as having very real, and even mundane, personal costs. While, like other Western absurdist comedies, the play constructs a sense of the individual's ineffectuality in the face of those structures, it constructs for its spectators a somewhat different position. It invites them to recognize how those structures affect: to distrust their "rightness," and to perceive the necessity, even inevitability, of opposition to them. This is not a social-isolationist position at all. As such, Hollingsworth's absurdist subject

has more in common with that of Eastern European playwrights who construct implicitly oppositional subject positions that “hide” behind universal, abstract cover and who employ surreal elements to signal the potential, even unavailability, of subversive resistance. Hollingsworth’s play differs from that latter tradition in that its critique is more open, more specific, and certainly more gender conscious.

My conception of a feminist-absurd subject position means that both absurdism and feminism undergo reconsideration. In her study of Maria Irene Fornes (which is, I believe, the only extended critical discussion of absurdism and women playwrights), Toby Silverman Zinman contends that feminism and absurdism cannot coexist because feminism necessarily exhibits a commitment to promoting social change which assumes a degree of agency that is anathema to absurdist philosophy. Contrary to the Beckettian “nothing to do” premise, she argues, “the new feminist theatre...obviously believes that there is much to be done” (205). While they may employ absurdist techniques and address issues of miscommunication, mistrust of language and other structures of meaning, she argues that feminist comedies refuse the pessimistic, abstract philosophies that define absurdism (Zinman considers only the Western tradition). By and large, she argues, women playwrights are interested in finding the means of asserting themselves as subjects, rather than dismantling the very notion of an assertive subject who can act and create her own meanings. Indeed, some critics, such as Susan Carlson, do suggest that optimism characterizes not only feminist comedies, but female-authored comedies generally. Other critics, like Gloria Kaufman, argue that feminist comedy contains an explicit, and sometimes implicit, didactic and revolutionary purpose: “The persistent attitude that underlies feminist humor is the attitude of social revolution – that is, we are ridiculing a social system that can be, that must be changed” (13). Absurdism, as Zinman conceives it, is non-didactic. Because of a distrust in the promises of rationalism and rational discourse, absurdist plays refuse didactic messages and methods.

Zinman's description of absurdism follows, rather than challenges, its critical ancestry, which is that of Western male modernism. As a result, it is not surprising that virtually no female-authored works fit her definition. Her conceptions of feminist and absurdist practices both appear to my mind unnecessarily monolithic. In order to reanimate the concept of absurdism -- whether for feminist or other critical intents -- it is

useful to look at the ideological underpinnings of the modernist-absurdist tradition and to consider how they intersect with, and may be enriched by, contemporary ideologies and practices. This can be done only by paying close attention to particular manifestations of absurdist practice. Indeed, *The House that Jack Built* can be read as a critique of modernist notions that underpin the absurdist tradition. As I have argued, the play's techniques and vision clearly situate it within the realm of absurdist practice but, immediately, its focus on gender, and on characters/situations at once abstract and specific, complicates that position. In particular, the play calls into question the primacy of the male hero in this comedy of despair. While it portrays Jack as having a "stronger" sense of selfhood and agency (he is sure that he knows what's right for himself and for Jenny), it also suggests that his assumptions are not autonomous or inevitable but are rather the effects of capitalist and heterosexual ideologies which he unthinkingly endorses (and which endorse him). Whereas both Western and Eastern European modes of absurdism seem to mourn the "universal" loss of agency and meaning, Hollingsworth's questions the power and presumptions that underlie different assumptions of agency. It indicates, for example, that both male and female characters are subjected by and subjected to gender (through the construction of themselves as subjects in linguistic, economic, social, and sexual relations). It also indicates that, while Jack's maleness may be a construct, it is a powerful one with detrimental effects. *The House that Jack Built* performs what could be called both a feminist and a postmodernist critique of modernist conceptions that underpin absurdism. That is, it places the "modernist search for order in the face of moral and social chaos" in dialogue with the "postmodern urge to trouble, to question, to make problematic and provisional any such desire for order or truth through the powers of the human imagination" (Hutcheon, *Canadian* 2). *The House that Jack Built* engages in the "paradoxes of postmodernism...those contradictory acts of establishing and then undercutting prevailing values and conventions in order to provoke a questioning, a challenging of 'what goes without saying' in our culture" (Hutcheon, *Canadian* 3). Along with Hutcheon, I view this kind of interrogative literature as political, because it invites readers/spectators to consider assumptions and vectors of power that seem to "go without saying" in literature and in life.

From this perspective, the play's use of repetition can be read not in traditional modernist fashion as an indication of the emptiness of words or lack of direction, but as an indication of the power of words to shape the subject and also as an indication that this power is not total. Judith Butler argues that the necessity of repeating gender, of performing it over and over again, indicates first that gender is an effect of reiterated ideological norms (and so not "natural") and second that gender is not totalizing (because the potential for difference haunts each repetition). *The House that Jack Built*, which repeats the story of how Jack and Jill ended up rocking endlessly in their chairs, employs repetition both to show how the characters are enclosed in external structures of meaning and also how they indicate or enact moments of subversive resistance. For instance, Jack's need to reiterate and justify his plans makes the reader doubt the necessity and rightness of his goals. Jenny's surreal comic expressions trouble the expected patterns of word and thought and so suggest that resistance to control is as inevitable as it is perhaps futile. Indeed, Hollingsworth invests this play with a sense of the importance of language. Words can be used as weapons that wound women particularly (Jack's frog fantasy). Words can be used by women to wound phallogentric logic and power (Jenny's surreal environmentalist speech). Words can also denote the attempt, as well as the refusal, to forge communication and change (Jack's final plea to Jenny to look at the stars).

I would argue also that each repetition of absurdist practice, like each female-authored or feminist comedy, can be read with an eye to difference rather than coherence, which means that those practices, and the subject positions they construct, are always available to redefinition. But why redefine? What is to be gained by reading *The House that Jack Built* from a feminist-absurdist (now postmodernist) subject position? This term is provocative first, as I have argued, because it challenges the usual exclusion of gender from absurdist conceptions. Second, the designation "feminist-absurd" suggests that feminism itself can be portrayed or read as an absurdist proposition. In other words, a playwright or critic may be disillusioned with, or mistrustful of, aspects of feminist ideology and still wish to write about the effects of gender, with a view to both understanding and change. So, while my analysis of *The House that Jack Built* offers the

potential of re-considering conceptions of absurdism, it also offers the opportunity to reconsider what might constitute feminist comedy.

There is a problem with the manner in which Cynthia Zinman views feminist ideology as pre- or over-determined by revolutionary optimism and agency. This assumption does not mirror the multiplicity and self-questioning characteristic of much contemporary feminist discourse and practice. For example, Deborah Silverton Rosenfelt refers to a tendency in recent fiction which she terms "postfeminist" or "post-modernist feminist" (I prefer the latter term). She employs this term "to connote not the death of feminism but its uneven incorporation and revision inside the social and cultural texts of a more conservative era. The term, read analogously to terms like *postmodernist* or *postrevolutionary*, acknowledges the existence of a world and a discourse that have been fundamentally altered by feminism" (269). In comparison to feminist texts, she argues, post-modernist feminist texts "retain an awareness of male domination in gendered relationships," however they are "less clear about what can be done" (270). Those texts mark a return to the theme of heterosexual love, and are "more aware of limits than transgressive of traditional boundaries" (270). Another quality she identifies, which relates to the ending of Hollingsworth's play, is a predilection for ambiguity. And while such ambiguity might indicate a retreat from the visionary, if naively optimistic, politics of some early feminist texts, Rosenfelt argues that these works "may nevertheless through their very contradictions help in reformulating a more honest and inclusive feminism" (270). She allies this more "honest" vision with the postmodernist attack on any "unifying, totalizing" system, including the "feminist myth" of "a progress toward liberation surely attainable within the immediate future" (287). Post-modern feminist texts represent "multiple stories, multiple narratives" which account for "the complexity of women's experience, gendered relations, and relations of dominance in general in the modern world" (287). To my mind, whether one employs the terms common to fiction (postfeminist or post-modern feminist) or, as I have done, "feminist absurd," Hollingsworth's *The House that Jack Built* engages in precisely this form of feminist (self)interrogation. The term "feminist absurd" is more suited to Hollingsworth's play because it acknowledges its dramatic lineage and techniques and, because it forges a dialogue between the distrust of unifying systems of meaning that underpins early

absurdism, Hollingsworth's contemporary attention to gender and related ideologies as systems of coherence, and her unwillingness to support a unifying or totalizing vision of feminism itself.

This latter attitude is apparent in Hollingsworth's "Introduction" to *Endangered Species*, where she addresses the imagined feminist reader who is critical of her presentation of women:

Many of the women in these plays may well be viewed as victims, and I am sure that this will not sit well with those who feel we should be presenting positive images of women on stage. I can only answer by saying, as many other writers have said, I call it as I see it, change cannot come without understanding and understanding can't happen without elucidation. (8)

The subject position from which Hollingsworth writes, and hopes her plays will be read, is feminist in that it hopes for change through understanding and elucidation. Like Ritter's *Automatic Pilot*, *The House that Jack Built* could be called a comedy of female anxiety. But the subject position Hollingsworth constructs for her readers/spectators is significantly different from Ritter's. Even though she recognizes that her vision is bleak, she asserts that there is a degree of faith in the process of stimulating consciousness and in addressing the complexities and complicities that make change difficult. This is also unlike Jenny's position, for instance, in that it is both aware and politically motivated. While Hollingsworth appears to share a "feminist" agenda for social and personal change, her work deviates from the assumption that an optimistic representation of female subjects is a necessary or even "realistic" tactic. Similarly, in an interview, Hollingsworth states "I think that any thinking woman has to call herself a feminist. I think any thinking man, any thinking person has to. What worries me is the connotations of the word" (Dyck). Both these comments reflect a mistrust or disillusionment with certain presumptions (such as gender exclusivity) she perceives in feminist practice. Indeed, Deborah Silverton Rosenfelt is only one of many feminist critics who is wary of the potentially totalizing effects of feminism as well as the fact that feminism is itself an ideology riddled with contradictions.¹⁷ Hollingsworth makes no effort to smooth those troublespots over, but allows the cracks in feminist systems of meaning to open up and reveal themselves. For instance, *The House that Jack Built* situates the female body, or

femaleness, as at once a site of resistance and a site of women's containment. The moment when Jenny's femaleness is most manifest, when she is pregnant, is also the moment when she is most silent and socially scripted according to Jack's plan. Further, the entire *Endangered Species* collection recognizes that many women continue to choose to remain in heterosexual relationships, despite the economic and power imbalances that, as feminism has taught, almost inevitably arise from that social/personal framework. And the collection refuses to focus exclusively on the negative dimensions of just one part of that gender/power equation.¹⁸ Hollingsworth does not shy away from the complexity of gender relationships, the negative aspects of both female and male power matrixes, or from the notion that women are often complicit in their victimization. She does not present an easily remediable vision of either social relations or individual self-determination. Because this comic vision complies with neither the hopeful or playful focus of so many women's comedies, nor the "universal," abstract male-defined focus of Western absurdist comedies, it is perhaps not surprising that Hollingsworth remains a self-avowed "marginal" playwright. In her panel presentation at the 1988 International Women Playwrights' Conference she made a comment which emphasized the importance of comedy and which brought the personal into connection with the political in a manner that can, I think, only be called "feminist": "So why do I feel frustrated that I am not understood? Perhaps because our humour is at the heart of us. It is the way we share, the way we open up channels of communicating our dreams and our worst fears" (100).

And so, as *The House that Jack Built* ends, Hollingsworth leaves us with a vision of Jack's abstract star-gazing and Jenny's physical state of expectancy, communicating both dreams and fears, the desire for something beyond and the reality of enclosure. Although there is a glimmer of hope in this final vision, even that reveals divergent gender experiences and even philosophies. In absurdist fashion, the play presents these characters as isolated and confused pawns who fruitlessly resist and reiterate those structures of meaning to which they willingly or unwillingly, knowingly or unknowingly, submit. Over the course of *The House that Jack Built*, Jenny and Jack repeat the story of their attempts at communication and inevitable miscommunications, attempts at autonomy and inevitable power skirmishes (which act as correctives to autonomous acts), attempts to find meaning and ultimate refusals of meaning, attempts at action and final

lapses into inaction. The play's feminist-absurdist subject position does not present a positive, optimistic vision of the possibility of gender equality, or of self-knowledge and self-determination within heterosexual and patriarchal structures, but it does create consciousness of those structures and elicits an appreciation of oppositional possibilities. While it suggests that power relations between men and women continue to be unequal, with men invested in maintaining that status quo, the potential for women's resistance and resilience (like Jenny's) continues to exist in subversive or, to use Freud's term, comic expressions. In *The House that Jack Built* the absurd joins feminism in a fraught marriage in which the potential for change threatens to be born.

¹ Personal Interview, September 1995.

² In the article “Collaborators,” Hollingsworth muses about the similarity and difference between her work and Thompson’s: “All our worst fears are in her [Thompson’s] plays, not understated, but overstated – shouted, repeated, hammered home, almost to the point of absurdity...I’m dealing largely in the unspoken rather than the spoken” (17).

³ Charles Lyon notes that the appearance of absurdism led to two strands of critical reassessment of comedy: one “focused on the existential project of seeing the self in relationship to an absurd world, another positioned comedy within the ideas of comic structure articulated earlier by the Cambridge Anthropologists... [and] foregrounded the comic function of displaying and overcoming the threat of death” (99-100). Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* became “the signal text for making tragicomedy the quintessential modern form” (100).

⁴ For examples of her activism as feminist and playwright see Dykk, Conlogue, also Hollingsworth in “Collaborators,” and *International Women Playwrights*.

⁵ See Benedict Nightingale’s article “Harold Pinter/Politics.”

⁶ Michelene Wandor provides this reading of Beckett’s *Godot*:

There are no women in the play although associations with women occasionally appear in the form of some of the sexual references. The absence of women frees the men into a semi-pornographic homo-eroticism. ... Through the stream of consciousness and surrealism, emerge some of the themes already discussed: male association and a quest for meaning in today’s world. But the terrain is featureless, the meanings controlled by an invisible authority which leave the men locked in symbolic relationships which they cannot control. The modern state, it seems, produces a parody of marriage instead of male bonding, and reduces men from sexually potent beings to sinister beings who can only ring the changes on semi-pornographic power relations. (30)

⁷ Nancy K. Miller, for instance, takes issue with the dispersal of identity associated with both modernist and postmodernist treatments of subjectivity: “Because women have not had the same historical relation of identity to origin, institution, production, that men have had, women have not, I think, (collectively) felt burdened by too much Self, Ego, Cogito, etc.” (quoted in Hutcheon, *Politics* 39).

⁸ A specific example of what I mean by a male-defined subject position might be useful here. Consider these stage directions from Rozewicz’s “The Witnesses” (which features two characters named Man and Woman): “WOMAN turns to face the window and even leans over as if she has just seen something. Her back is turned towards us. It is not just a specific shape, but a stylistic one as well. This turning back not only affects the spectator’s perception, it is also a kind of archetype, an embodiment of an idea slumbering in men’s subconscious” (22). I would argue that the spectator’s subject position is clearly male: WOMAN is eroticized by the stage directions; her stance is an archetype of *men’s* subconscious.

⁹ *The House that Jack Built* first appeared in 1755 in an English book of rhymes collected by John Newbery. Interestingly, the edition I consulted includes this note: “Peter Opie points out that it is one of the most parodied of all rhymes, and many printed versions exist, some political, and one concerning the theatre riots at Covent Garden, London, in 1809 when John Kemble ‘the manager full of scorn...raised the price to the people forlorn.’” Hollingsworth’s play could be numbered in the list of political parodies of the rhyme, albeit an implicit, subtle form of feminist parody.

¹⁰ A rocking chair is used similarly in Samuel Beckett’s *Rockabye*.

¹¹ This is perhaps most evident in the play *Ever Loving*, which features three war brides who emigrate to Canada, and which reflects how class and ethnic backgrounds affect their gender identities and conceptions of marriage.

¹² I employ the term “surreal” to describe a theatrical effect which provides a visible and/or acoustic image of, and appeals to, what surrealists call the “deep mind” (the realm of dreams and hallucinations). The association between surrealism and absurdism (in tactics and in historical development) has been widely noted: see Esslin and Ruby Cohn’s introduction to *Around the Absurd*.

¹³ Another play in the *Endangered Species* collection, “Poppycock,” derives from Hollingsworth’s participation as a writer-in-residence at the Theatre Resource Centre, where she studied clowning techniques with Richard Pochinko (see Chapter Five).

¹⁴ Hollingsworth makes this assessment in the introduction to her collection: “Jack...could grow, but only if his wife Jenny were to show the way. He is caught in a web of expectations, he is a man and he must perform as men are supposed to perform” (7-8).

¹⁵ The Notes to *The House that Jack Built* state that the play is “designed to be presented with *It’s Only Hot For Two Months in Kapuskasing* (10), another short play in the collection. In that play, the violence that results from gender friction is verbal, psychological, and physical. In contrast to *The House that Jack Built* the male character in “Kapuskasing” dominates through silence. In similarity, it is the female characters who ultimately enact the violence submerged in their heterosexual relationships.

¹⁶ Dorothy Parker makes this comment on the note of ambiguity that ends Hollingsworth’s *War Babies*: “A seemingly happy resolution is riddled with ominous portent in what Hollingsworth called ‘that double thing that I do,’ a technique in keeping with the surrealistic vision which finds disorder in the recesses of the human sensibility and has no confidence in the ultimate triumph of good” (111).

¹⁷ Teresa deLauretis, for instance, argues that the subject of feminism, as she constructs it, is both inside and outside the ideology of gender, and conscious of that double pull (*Technologies* 10).

¹⁸ Although loath to use the term feminist, Cynthia Zinman locates a similar attitude in the plays of Maria Irene Fornes. Zinman contends that “Fornes theatrically demonstrates that it is naïve and profitless to assume that the complex enmity inherent in such [heterosexual gender] relations is remediable” (209).

Chapter Five

The Playful Subject: Gender Parody in Karen Hines' *Pochsy's Lips*¹

I began this study with an analysis of Sarah Anne Curzon's *The Sweet Girl Graduate*, a closet drama which, I argued, is haunted by the absence of female performance; I conclude with this chapter on Karen Hines' *Pochsy's Lips*, a play that not only employs a novel style of physical comedy, but uses that style to highlight gender performativity. The desire to reveal and subvert the limitations of gender codings, and the ways in which they are manifest bodily, is a major concern of feminist performance and theory. According to Judith Butler's early influential article, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," gender is an historically and socially constituted code of behavior and a "corporeal field of cultural play" (282). Butler's description of gender as both corporeal and cultural *play* is intriguing and resonates particularly in relation to a work like *Pochsy's Lips* which derives its comic effect from physical, as well as verbal, parody and play. The term suggests that while gender is something that performs or plays us (that determines the field of our actions and experiences) it is also something that we can play *with*. In other words, rather than accepting the gendered body as a fixed entity, as physical and cultural destiny, Butler's phrase proposes that a certain amount of "play," of mutability, is possible in how a person perceives and performs his/her gender. To go a step further, gender is also something that can be fun to play with, and the playfulness of *Pochsy's Lips* can be seen as both a critical and a liberating activity.

Pochsy's Lips is filled with corporeal and cultural play. In creating this solo performance piece, Karen Hines adapts the *bouffon* clowning style as a means of exploring the effects of social control on human subjects and their environment. Not surprisingly, gender programming is featured as a primary means of social control. "Pochsy," Hines' frail, ultrafeminine *bouffon* persona, is a hyperbolic, parodic representation of the youthful female body as configured by popular commercial culture, the means of social control. However, this persona is enacted by the exuberant, skilled, athletic body of its creator/performer. In the same way that gender and the physically sexed body are intertwined – neither one before the other; neither category reducible to the other -- the *bouffon* style draws attention to the separation as well as the

interrelationship between the bodies of persona and performer. It is in the gap and the interplay between these entities that gender parody and play occurs. I view Hines' *bouffon* performance as politically and physically subversive: first, because it endeavors to make audience members aware that gender is a means of psychic and physical control; and second, because it provides a model of the kind of performative playfulness that can expand gender possibilities.



Pochsy's Lips is undoubtedly a comic performance piece, although it doesn't fit neatly within the generic conventions of dramatic comedy. In conceiving this work, Hines made a conscious effort to use a narrative structure to tell the story of her *bouffon* persona, Pochsy. As a result, the piece moves beyond the limitations of the short vignette structure of most clownwork (and comic revues) and overcomes the simplification of idea and characterization that that structure often entails. Conversely, its emphasis on physical performance (characteristic of clowning and feminist performance art) means that spectators become involved as much in the "story" of the performance itself, especially the meanings unleashed by the persona/performer's body, as in its narrative. *Pochsy's Lips* fulfills Susan Rubin Suleiman's wish that "women's play be humorous and

narrative, as well as inventive” (168). It follows a day in Pochsy’s life and is interspersed with songs and dance, prayers, and fantasies. This diary-vignette structure disrupts the linear drive of more conventional comedies and brings into play several different modes of address and performance genres. While not a conventional comedy by any means, the heterosexual narrative of romantic comedy casts an omnipresent shadow over Pochsy’s story, as she yearns for a traditional happy ending throughout her songs and reveries, all the while moving towards a tragic end. In a sense, then, *Pochsy’s Lips* parodies and plays with the formal and gendered characteristics of dramatic comedy, at once acknowledging and resisting their limitations.

Pochsy’s Lips corresponds far more closely to the conception of comedy outlined by critics such as Kathleen Rowe and Suleiman, who view comedy as a form of unruly psychic activity which is discharged through the dynamics of linguistic and physical playfulness. Comic activities and responses, in this view, result from dislocations, contradictions, and pluralities of meaning that issue from physical and linguistic play within performances and texts. Those critics cite uses of parody and mimicry, exaggeration and excess, fantastical elements, hybridity, and heterogeneous collage as common techniques that elicit this form of comedy (Rowe 5-6, Suleiman 139, 164 and *passim*). Both argue that such unruly comedy is characteristic of the women’s texts and performances they study and that the psychic dynamics within those works disclose a “subversive intent” (to use Suleiman’s term). Not only does *Pochsy’s Lips* make liberal use of the techniques Rowe and Suleiman discuss (especially textual and physical parody, exaggeration, fantastical elements, collage), it also exhibits a “subversive intent” through their use. *Pochsy’s Lips* is a comedy according to this general conception. It is also a particular and novel form of performance that derives from and transforms a number of different comic and theatrical traditions (which I will consider more closely throughout this chapter).

Karen Hines cites the physical style and parodic politics of *bouffon*, which she studied with French *bouffon* Philippe Gaulier, as the most significant influence in Pochsy’s generation. Gaulier derives the term “*bouffon*” from the middle ages and applies it to physically deformed persons who were exiled from society: “Bouffons are the hunchbacks, the lepers, the syphilitics, everything humanity has rejected ... In the

grotesqueness of the bouffon is the truth about humanity" (quoted in Playwright's Note to *Pochsy's Lips*).² According to Gaulier, medieval *bouffons* were allowed to return to the villages during special festivals to perform a religious pageant in which they would parody, in a sweet and pandering manner, the religious and secular elite: "The animating reality of these performances was the fact that the buffons loved to hate their audience and tried, whenever possible, to insult them while avoiding being beaten" (quoted in Cashman 27). While I have been unable to verify Gaulier's historical source or accuracy, his description of the *bouffon* corresponds to other documented clowning traditions.³ In what remains the most complete history of foolery, Enid Welsford describes a type of clown/fool she terms the "parasite," who appears in records spanning from Ancient Greece to the European Middle Ages and Renaissance. The "parasite" is a "deformed" person who attaches him/herself to a court. "Parasitical fools" would entertain by mimicking and mocking their social betters, while attempting to deflect the physical blows that would come were they to get too close to their satiric mark. Welsford states that this parasitical fool "causes amusement...by mental deficiencies or physical deformities which deprive him both of rights and responsibilities and put him in the paradoxical position of virtual outlawry combined with utter dependence on the support of the social group to which he belongs" (55). Gaulier's *bouffon* corresponds to this tradition. To use Victor Turner's vocabulary, *bouffons*, like other parasitical fools, play a "liminal/liminoid" social role. It is their position *in* society to act as social outsiders, to represent the dangerous, anarchical forces that -- for the duration of the performance at least -- threaten to upset normative physical and social standards.⁴ The *bouffon's* role, then, is both prescriptive and subversive: subversive because the *bouffon* reveals, reviles and temporarily upsets social authority; and prescriptive, since this role is only possible because such social hierarchy exists and because the *bouffon* inhabits its lowest rung. *Bouffons* are inherently -- or ontologically -- parodic beings who both use and abuse the socio-cultural system responsible for their eminence and their exile.

The parodic role of *bouffons* is embodied in the duplicitous appeal of their performance. According to Gaulier, *bouffons* developed a particular form of physical parody to counteract the dangers inherent in their marginal status. Performers would offset their deformity by creating personae that were as visually pleasing as possible.

This would allow them to flatter and enchant the audience, while at the same time ridiculing their social standards and authority. Gaulier developed criteria for *bouffon* performance: "A buffon play works on three levels. First, the buffon is performing a play for the audience and is as entertaining as possible. Second, and more importantly to the Buffon [sic], he or she is ridiculing or satirizing the audience, and third, he is enjoying the effect of discomfiting the audience, although if he feels he has gone too far he will apologize profusely to avoid retaliation" (quoted in Cashman 27).⁵ The *bouffon*'s split posture, of pandering and mocking, suggests that a marked, critical disjunction is embodied in his/her performance. The flattering persona plays against the mocking persona, so that both subject positions are being performed or represented at once. This stance is in some ways akin to the "alienation effect" of Brechtian performance, in which an actor "alienates" rather than impersonates his/her character, so that an audience is encouraged to form opinions about the character's, and the actor's, actions. Both character and actor are performing "roles" that may invite a spectator's critique and/or that may draw critical attention to the spectator's response. As Elin Diamond has argued, "Feminist practice that seeks to expose or mock the strictures of gender usually uses some version of the Brechtian A-effect" ("Brechtian" 84) because it allows more than one representation of gender to be played, seen, and considered concurrently. While I do not wish to collapse the differences between Gaulier's and Hines', or Brecht's and Diamond's conceptions, these theories help explain why Hines' adaptation of *bouffon*, which apposes the female actor's and character's roles -- and bodies -- in critical fashion, is valuable in terms of feminist performance.

Karen Hines is not, of course, a "real" *bouffon*: she is not deformed, not exiled, not relegated to servitude. She finds in this image of disabled, disenfranchised subjects an enabling political myth and performance style, which she uses to address such issues as deformity, exile, and servitude in contemporary culture. Hines adapted both the political intent and stylistics of *bouffon* in developing *Pochsy's Lips*.⁶

Bouffon has played a huge part in determining the physicality of Pochsy. It is very political and socially conscious when you break it down, but as a style it is as simple as pretty feet -- the *bouffon* always had to have pretty feet -- move prettily, entertain the audience, keep them visually entranced. And if you can accomplish

that, you will be able then to accomplish your task of hurling the slings and arrows. It's almost like a decoy.

The performing subject, then, is a kind of decoy: at once a source of pleasure and critique. The spectator's subject position is also duplicitous and complicitous, as s/he becomes a kind of knowing dupe of the *bouffon's* performance.



Pochsy arrives on stage wrapped in gauze, attached to an I.V. unit, and greets the audience with this portentous message: "WE LIVE IN A SCARY TIME. ... We are constantly bombarded by ominous information regarding ever-accelerating environmental poisoning, a continuing apocalyptic threat and uncontrollable disease. All indicators point to the distinct possibility that we are a species bent on self-extinction. No one is safe. And there is no escape." Then "*Music swells. Pochsy sings./ Everything's falling apart,/ But everyone's falling in love*" (38). Between verses of her song, she "*strips out of gauze, revealing pink baby-doll pajamas.*" The opening segment combines the serious with the frivolous, predictions of doom with tidings of love. *Pochsy's Lips* derives laughter from such incongruities (at once linguistic, thematic, and

physical) and then, through the figure of the *bouffon*, questions their incongruity. Pochsy is both serious and frivolous, her preoccupation with love is a destructive illusion, and her prettiness is part of her illness.

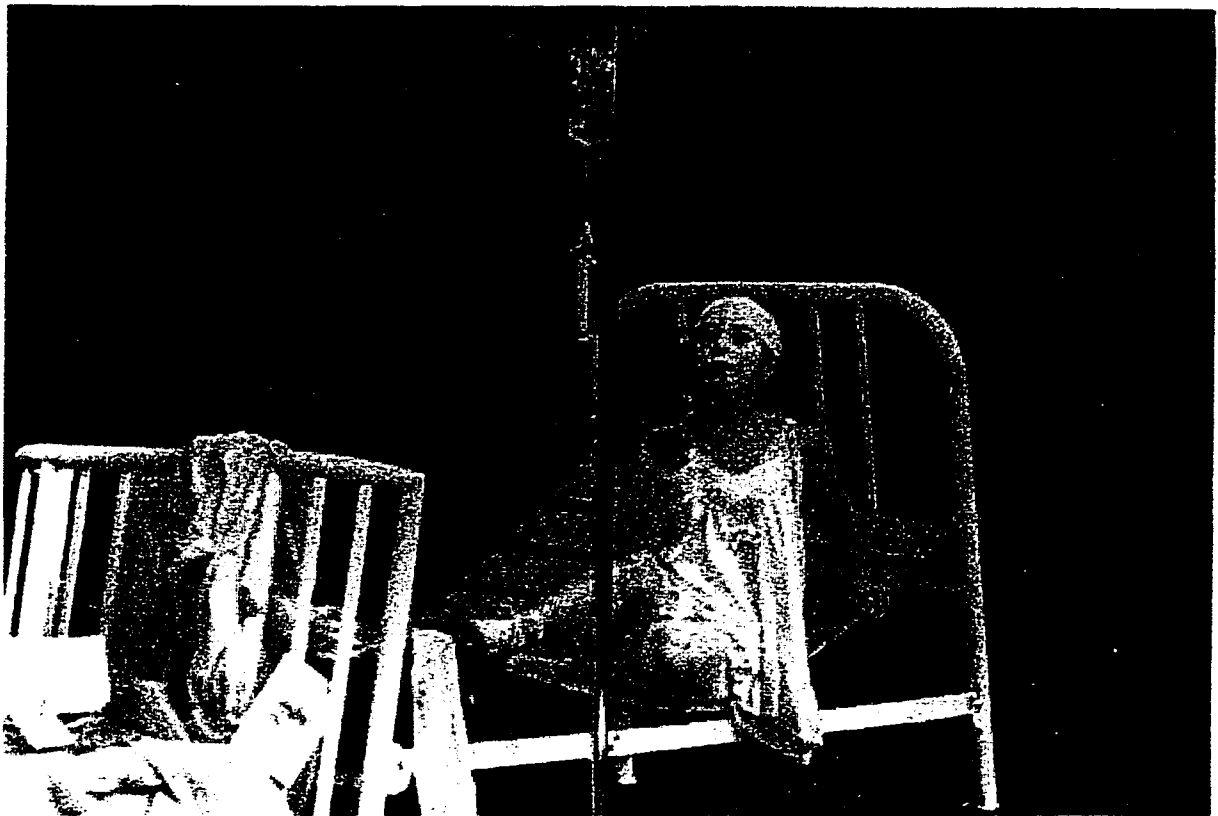
Hines uses the appealing qualities of *bouffon* strategically to create a parodic representation of the ultrafeminine youthful female. To a large degree, Pochsy appears the quintessentially feminine "Little Cutie-Pie" (46) she aspires to be. In addition to her pink babydoll pyjamas, her costume includes lacy pink leggings and socks, and soft white running shoes that draw attention to her petite, "pretty feet." However, her physical prettiness is juxtaposed with several markers of illness such as the bandage entwining her head and dark smudges under her eyes. Further, Pochsy's exaggerated and stylized feminine frailty is contrasted by Hines' controlled, skilled and muscular body in performance. She comments on the significance of this strategy:

I am very conscious of the fact that I am female and on stage and that my body is exposed, and so I always try to make sure that there is strength behind the fragility and frailty, that there is an attack behind the invitation.

Hines asserts that a "subversive intent" underlies her gender parody. She also acknowledges cannily that the female body is always met with a cultural code of gender assumptions, so that, when a performer plays an ultrafeminine or ultrafrail female persona, even with evident parodic aim, she risks reaffirming those assumptions. Critics such as Rosi Bradotti similarly challenge the notion that parody is necessarily a subversive strategy: "The practice of successive poses or masquerades per se has no automatic subversive effect; as Judith Butler lucidly warns us, the force of the parodic mode consists precisely in striving to avoid flat repetitions, which bring about political stagnation" (6). Hines avoids static repetition by drawing attention to the skilled control and strength of her own body. In this way, the body of persona and performer are put in critical dialogue with each other, and so resist flat, fixed gender encoding.

In *Pochsy's Lips* there is always an attack behind the invitation to recognize the female body as it is configured through cultural codes of femininity. Hines employs a vocabulary of poses that serve to draw the spectator's critical attention to cultural gender patterns of movement and gesture. In work with her movement coach, she began to mimic images of women from magazine advertisements, film and television. Often

during the piece, she will hold one of these gestures for an extra moment, in such a way that her musculature reveals the skilled, constructed effort behind the usually fleeting image. Of course, it could be argued that this exhibition of a muscular, agile physique simply presents another commercially enticing female image -- that of the aerobicized female body. While that is a risk, Hines' willingness to develop and use her body for a purpose -- to use it as a critical and playful tool -- seems to me more evident and important. In the context of this play, she employs physical dexterity for a purpose that, while it requires being looked at (and yes even admired), is other than being looked at. Hines' physicality seems to me a testimony to her craft and a mark of active self-direction.



As Pochsy places herself in various "pinup" poses, Hines will often subtly distort those seductive movements so as to draw attention to, and undercut, their expected effect. Mark Pizzato, for example, describes Pochsy "gesturing romantically with an I.V. embedded arm" (142). At another point, when Pochsy lies on her bed and runs her hand seductively, and seemingly abstractedly, up her legs, she suddenly widens and distends

her fingers so that they become like claws on her body, thus displacing the original erotic movement with disturbing physical commentary. Thus, in the parodic interplay between persona and performer, gender non-sequiturs arise and the female body becomes a site of contention rather than a comfortable "given."

Hines employs her *bouffon* persona, Pochsy, to enact a form of gender parody that is at once critical and playful. According to Judith Butler's conception, gender parody is the imitation of gender which calls into question the notion of an original, fixed, or primary gender or even sexual identity: "[t]he notion of gender parody defended here does not assume that there is an original which such parodic identities imitate. Indeed, the parody is of the very notion of an original...gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin...In this sense, laughter emerges in the realization that all along the original was derived" (*Gender* 138-9). Butler contests the opposition of gender as cultural construct and sex as a priori physical destiny. She argues that the processes by which the subject comes to recognize him or herself hinge on recognition/repetition of sexual difference, which bodies forth in gendered behaviours. The subject comes to recognize and manifest its sex (an impelled, not voluntary process) through processes she terms alternately repetition, reiteration, and citation. That the subject must continually be reiterated or cited as a certain sex, and that the subject then repeats that sexing process him or herself, reveals "sex" to be at once a normative imperative (impelled by compulsory heterosexuality) and an unstable ontological state. Further, that the subject then bodies forth his/her "sex" through gender behaviours, which shift with temporal, cultural, ethnic, and other factors, reveals that sex and gender are intertwined (neither one before the other), but that they are not reducible one to the other. The gender parody I identify in Hines' *bouffon* performance is similar to Butler's conception in that it mimics, to a hyperbolic degree, the social behaviours and the commercial imperatives by which the subject en-genders himself or herself. Further, and more importantly according to Butler's definition, because the physical gender codes of performer and persona do not cohere, the play destabilizes the notion of a fixed or "true" female body. At the same time, it does not deny the power, and even the potential, of how gender informs and conforms women's conceptions of themselves and/through their bodies.

I should acknowledge that Butler's notion of gender parody derives from analysis of queer drag performances and is dedicated to exposing and undermining the regulatory practices of gender and sex within a heterosexist social and cultural economy. The impetus of *Pochsy's Lips* is somewhat different, as it seeks to destabilize limited perceptions of gender and to cause an awareness of ways women and men are manipulated and restricted by gender constructions/instructions that serve commercial interests. It performs this critique and offers a strategy for troubling this economy through its unsettling parodic playfulness. Importantly, Hines' gender play is not only critical but celebratory. Pochsy loves the frills she surrounds herself with. She "squeals" with delight as she reads a self-authored Get-Well card:

'Pillows,
Fluffy clouds,
Cotton candy,
Towels just out of the dryer'

It says that!

'Thought you could use some soft, comforting words' (41).

Pochsy's love of such inane Hallmark frippery is a folly to laugh at and to recognize as dangerous, but her wholehearted embrace of hyperbolic femininity -- "It says that!" -- is also a vital quality of her persona. In this way, the play critiques femininity but does not denigrate those qualities traditionally termed feminine. When I asked Hines about her definition of feminism and how it shows in her performance, she said she intended "To not have gender differences as limiting, or limited period. There is a certain amount of fun to be had -- I mean it's fun to get up there and wear pink baby dolls -- I feel like such an idiot and it's so much fun -- so I also think that there's a lot to celebrate there. I know that it's difficult to have a sense of humour about gender because there are some very serious problems, but it's never meant to make light of it, ever. I'm trying to give everything its full weight but at the same time I want to have a sense of humour about it." Hines' desire to maintain a duplicitous approach to gender, which includes serious critique and playfulness, attack and invitation, is similar to that expressed by feminist

critic Susan Rubin Suleiman, who advocates a combination of humour and parody in women's work that is both "pleasure-producing and rebellious" (168). In dialogue with other play theorists, Suleiman suggests that playfulness connotes a willingness to engage in an exploration and transgression of the boundaries of subjectivity at the same time as it asserts a form of creative agency (179-180). This aptly describes the parodic playfulness that circulates in *Pochsy's Lips*, and this activity offers several simultaneous effects: it resists a stabilized conception of gender; it suggests a willingness to imagine/invent new forms of gender activity; it allows enjoyment of existing manifestations of gender; and it flouts the negativity often attached to feminine gender characteristics.

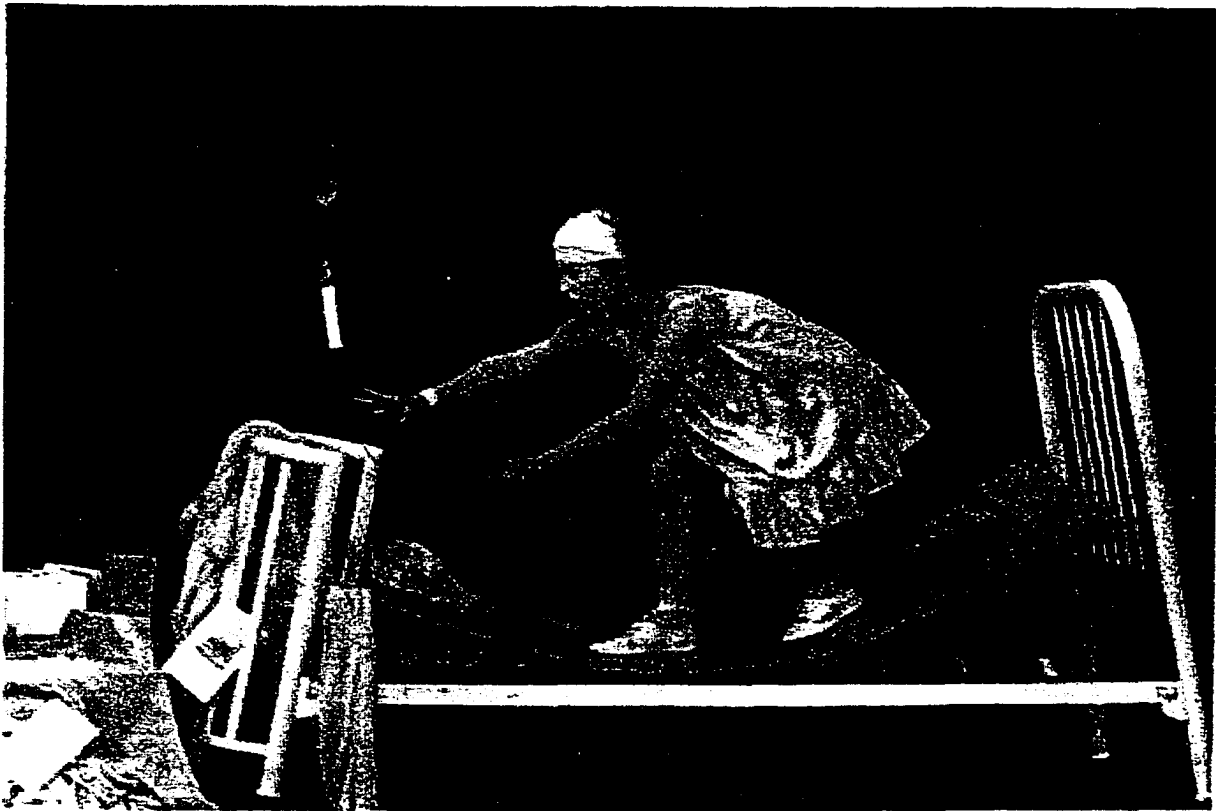
This approach suggests a conception of subjectivity as a realm of contradictory, but nonetheless powerful, gender imperatives and as a realm of gender experiment. As someone who parents a thirteen-year-old girl, I am often made aware of the complex interrelationship between gender experiment, gender "sell," and the construction of individuality. Last year, I dropped A. off at a sleep-over. When we arrived outside the house, her three girlfriends rushed out onto the patio dressed in lacy pink nighties (just like Pochsy's!) and proceeded to lip-sync a popular song. They jumped around and giggled with what I saw as a combination of pride, power, embarrassment, and self-mockery. This lived experiment/performance seemed to me similar to the kind of celebratory/critical gender parody that Hines enacts in *Pochsy's Lips*. This year, A. is going to her grade seven graduation and has asked us to buy her a long black dress (like the one her favorite female film star wore in a *People* magazine layout) and to take her to the Eaton's cosmetic counter to get "made up" for the event. I am not so enthused about this year's gender experiment. Certainly both incidents are examples of young malleable persons defining their individuality in terms offered by a highly commercial, heterosexual culture. And yet there seem to me key differences. The sleep-over experiment struck me as spontaneous, playful, and communal. They were claiming their identities by "being" girls, "acting like" girls certainly, but also by "playing with" those gender trappings (the pink nighties either they bought or, more likely, were bought for them). The Eaton's makeover is at once a planned and hallowed event, not to be mocked or analyzed (at least not by us parents). While "lots of the girls in the class are doing it," it is a way of marking individuality and a coming of age through knowing compliance with

commercial culture. I use these two anecdotes to suggest that gender experiments, which are at once forms of gender citation and play, go on continually, in different contexts, and never entirely “freely.” Similarly, *Pochsy’s Lips* provides a playful critique of the contradictory, omnipresent gender instructions found in commercial culture, but “Pochsy’s” individuality (or novelty) is also a product of those gender instructions. Hines’ performance cannot escape such contradictions. Nor can A. Nor do I.

Linda Hutcheon argues that this kind of complicitous critique is a defining characteristic of postmodernism generally, and feminist postmodern parody particularly. I situate *Pochsy’s Lips* amidst “the paradox of art forms that want to (or feel they have to) speak to a culture from inside it, that believe this to be the only way to reach that culture and make it question its values and its self-constructing representations” (*Politics* 13). As Hutcheon argues, postmodern practice is situated “within both economic capitalism and cultural humanism” (13) at the same time as its critique decentres those ideologies: “If...postmodernism is identified with a ‘decentring’ of this particular notion of the individual, then both humanist and capitalist notions of selfhood or subjectivity will necessarily be called into question” (13-14). Through Pochsy, Hines ironizes the construction of individuality as an effect of consumer gender ploys. Through parody of both past and present images of women, *Pochsy’s Lips* also contests the notion of a unitary, ahistorical, female subject. But such critique is not “outside” the ideologies of consumerism, individualism, and gender. As Hutcheon notes, when feminist artists engage in this kind of postmodern gender critique they come out of the bargain “hardly innocent or uncompromised” (14).

Pochsy’s Lips takes place entirely on a sparse stage that evokes a hospital room. For the most part, Pochsy is attached to an I.V. unit, which becomes an uncomfortable, awkward appendage as she poses seductively on her asymmetrical, shaky hospital bed. The slatted bedframe and base, as well as the I.V., provide an atmosphere of imprisonment and, always paradoxically, create an apparatus that showcases Hines’ gymnastic skill. Such scenic metaphors serve to associate Pochsy’s feminine frailty with physical constraint and distortion, Hines’ use of them with other possibilities. Among other images, *Pochsy’s Lips* evokes that of the sick woman familiar in Victorian literature, but it does so in the same manner as it draws on those hyperbolic commercial

images of the youthful female -- with parodic intent -- and juxtaposed to the healthy body of the performer.⁷ If Pochsy is sick it is not because she is a woman and hence "naturally" frail, but because she has somehow "ingested" such cultural images -- an entire and contradictory barrage of them -- and they have contaminated her body. For instance, like someone who wants to live in a soap-opera, Pochsy gloats because she is going to be seen by a specialist and brags about the number of tests she's had. While she aspires to having a healthy glow in her cheeks, she also cultivates her pallor as a marker of feminine distinctiveness. In this manner, Hines suggests that Pochsy's search for feminine beauty is an integral part of her internal sickness.



Hines' adaptation of the *bouffon's* characteristic deformity is one of Pochsy's most novel traits. Unlike the traditional *bouffon*, Pochsy is not disfigured in an immediately apparent fashion. Rather, she aspires to represent the apogee of feminine beauty. She is, as I have suggested, never quite successful: twirling her curly hair draws attention to the bandage on her head; applying white face makeup highlights the dark patches beneath her eyes. Pochsy is a sick woman, and the physical markers of her illness are subtle but persistent. Rather than creating a *bouffon* with an obvious physical disability (hunchback

or dwarf characters are common types), Hines gives hers an internal illness. She makes this comment on the adaptation: "What I use with Pochsy is not somebody who is disfigured in an obvious way -- she's got at all times at least a low grade illness going on...Also there's an internal illness which is her own mind, her own psyche and soul and how her own inner works have been contaminated or poisoned -- and that is the kind of *bouffon* Pochsy is." Pochsy's name gives further clue to the nature of her deformity; not only does it suggest the "pox," it is also an anagram of "psycho," and so suggests physical, sexual and psychological disease or dis-ease.

Pochsy's malady denotes social and environmental ills that afflict body and mind interconnectedly. A former employee of Mercury Packers, she describes her jobskills: "if you spill the mercury, and it falls on the floor and bursts into all those shiny, sparkly little bubbles...the best way to pick it up is to go like... *She licks her finger, and mimes picking up a mercury ball with it. ...that*" (40). Pochsy's doctor diagnoses mercury poisoning as the cause of her illness; however, her ailment resists such simple analysis. Hines refers to Pochsy's sickness as "societal poisoning," but Pochsy herself attributes it to a parasitic squid that lives inside her body and whose tentacles continually threaten to emerge from her throat and gag her. She relates her theory to the audience, while country and western music plays in the background, and occasionally breaks into the chorus:

THERE'S A SQUID WHERE MY HEART USED TO BE.

I keep trying to tell them, but they don't believe me. But you see, because it is a squid -- and conscious -- it is able, when it wants to, to pull up its tentacles and to form itself into the shape of a heart. Which is why it doesn't show up on the X-rays. And because it is a squid -- and conscious -- it is able to pump my blood.

Which is why it doesn't show up on the monitors. But...because it is a squid, it then pumps algae through my veins...which is why I'm not feeling well. (41)

Pochsy's explanation is at once hilarious and horrific, crazy and rather well-reasoned. The squid inside is an amorphous, troubling referent which provides an image of physical and psychic distortion and serves as a constant reminder of the dis-ease that inhabits and inhibits her body. Pochsy's illness is both abstract and environmental, so that the play evokes at once the dangers of actual poisons in the environment and other environmental -- in the sense of social and psychic -- poisons.



Images of decay provide an ironic backdrop to Pochsy's attempts to fulfil the beauty myth. The play is laden with images of environmental poisoning:
 Mmmmm, water. Every cell in your body needs it, and it helps
 contribute to a healthy, glowing complexion.

She pours a glass of dark, murky water.

I drink at least eight to ten glasses a day. (43)

While she continually spouts the rhetoric of nature and health, Pochsy is both a victim of, and accomplice to, environmental destruction. The play shows Pochsy enmeshed in layers of objectification and victimization. She is objectified not only as a woman, by gender stereotyping, but also as a disposable human worker by the corporate system (Mercury Packers), which in turn objectifies nature in order to consume (read deplete) it in the name of corporate profit.

Pochsy's Lips shares several similar concerns with Hollingsworth's *The House that Jack Built* and, like that play, could be called tragi-comedy. But while Hollingsworth places more emphasis on "tragic" inevitability, Hines accentuates comic potentiality far more strongly. Both plays associate capitalism/consumerism with the construction of gender roles through the heterosexual imperative and underscore how consumerism is detrimental both to women and to the environment. Both plays also complicate the traditional relationship between woman and nature. On the one hand, *Pochsy's Lips* suggests a connection between the illness that afflicts both Pochsy and the environment; on the other, it refuses to idealize the conventional nature/woman association. Pochsy's monologue draws attention to how sentimentalizing the environment may be another means of passive exploitation. With her usual flourish of cliché, Pochsy tells us the story/fantasy of her visit to a friend's cabin "deep in the rocky, spiky northern wilderness" where, "After a couple days, I could feel all the yucky city stuff just kind of dripping off of me" (43). After she tells her friend to "fuck right off" for asking her to help with the lunch dishes, Pochsy takes off on a snowmobile which, after it runs out of gas, she leaves to rust. So much for the sweet-natured natural woman. She then spies a "cluster of deer" and watches them as they cross precariously over the ice to an island, after which she finds herself "spiralling into an unspeakable despair" because she realizes that the deer are doomed to end up slaughtered at the side of the new highway. She goes on: "I was just about to bash my head out on the rocks, when I heard from behind me a little rustling..." A little deer arrives and puts its hoof in one of her hands. Another presence appears on her other side and "I realized that I was holding the hand of a Native Canadian Indian!" Woman, deer, and Indian form a "psychic triangle," and Pochsy announces: "I had never felt so connected to the earth as a whole in my whole life. And I really did feel that everything was going to be okay./ But then something occurred to me. I realized that something was a little bit funny. The deer should not have come so close. He should not be so bold" (44). She looks at the deer and there is a "little bit of foam" at the corner of its mouth. She looks at the Indian and there is a little bit of foam on his mouth too. Pochsy then rises from her reverie and, after she wipes a trace of foam from her own mouth, composes a prayer to God in which she tells him "to take a good hard look at [him]self" (44). This episode at once undercuts the idealization of

women and native peoples as "creatures" closest to nature, and maintains the connection between environmental damage wrought by human commercial "instinct" and the social and environmental "illnesses" that affect them. Like the squid, the "little bit of foam" is a disturbing, surreal image of environmental-social-psychic dis-ease of which Pochsy is at once victim and cause. Certainly, Pochsy idealizes nature while at the same time she plays havoc through her own throwaway mentality. This scene displaces the clichéd women/nature connection in order to draw attention to women as consumers who are therefore responsible for their part in environmental problems. While Pochsy directs God to take a hard look at himself, thereby jettisoning her own complicity, that complicity has nevertheless been exposed. Indeed, like Hollingsworth's Jenny and Ritter's Charlie, much of Pochsy's dis-ease is portrayed as self-inflicted (brought about by her willing subscription to cultural imperatives). However, Hines' *bouffon* performance style inscribes an essential element of criticality also in Pochsy. While it is possible to recognize how Charlie's character is shaped by damaging or conflicted gender ideals in *Automatic Pilot*, neither play nor persona directly challenge those ideals. While *The House that Jack Built* shows more clearly that Jenny's subscription to marital roles has negative psychological effects, it suggests that her potential and desire to challenge those roles (consciously at least) is virtually non-existent. However, because Hines' critical perspective is *part of* Pochsy's persona (and the language, makeup, and movements which constitute that persona), this form of comic performance challenges more directly not only cultural imperatives, but the necessity of complicity with them.

Pochsy remains blithely faithful to consumer ideology, and seemingly oblivious to its contradictions. Not so the spectator. Pochsy's illness makes the audience wary of her beauty prescription; coughs and convulsions undercut her faith in the cosmetic cure offered by consumer society. From her hospital bed she shares her beauty ideology with the audience while applying blush to rosy her whiteface:

You know, I think it's very important, even when you're not feeling well, to look your very best! You never know who might pop in, and well...it seems *I'm* going to be seeing a specialist. And besides,

When you're looking good,
 You feel good.
 And when you feel good,
 You look gre-e-eat!

And great is how I want to look, 'cuz when I like what I see...I
 enjoy being me.

*Pochsy pulls blush out of make-up case, and applies it to her
 cheeks.*

Starts off as a powder, but goes on so smooth and creamy...it
 makes you seem lit from within.

Is that about right?

Oh, I know, what's right, right? I mean it's so individual. (40)

The juxtaposition of the ideologies of individualism and consumerism create both a comic and critical contradiction that the audience might read, but Pochsy does not. Through such irony, Hines' performance makes spectators aware of the normative cultural and gender codes through which men and women also formulate their own, supposedly individual, identities.

Gender parody interweaves through non-verbal and verbal layers of performance. Pochsy's dialogue continuously reveals how language infiltrates and further engenders the body and its desires. Her speech is laden with commercial slogans; her fantasies are a disjointed collage of popular culture narratives and images, none of which provides her with any wisdom. Consider, for instance, this dream sequence:

I'm on the hood of a car. A car filled with happy, healthy teenagers wearing bustiers. They are drinking brightly coloured soft drinks, and I can hear them chanting, through the foam in their mouths, "Pochsy, just do it ... just do it ...".

And so I stand up on the hood of the car ... But they continue to chant, "Pochsy, just do it...". And so I say, "DO WHAT?".

But the car swerves, and I'm on the side of the road. I'm at a fork in the road ... and I realize that I don't want fifteen minutes of fame ... I want a career. I need a family that's a team. (45)

Pochsy's monologue exposes the myriad promises of self-fulfillment in contemporary culture, from self-help books and women's magazines to television commercials. As one critic notes, much of Hines' parody addresses the "North American cult of youth:" "Her antique poses, as erotic/dying object of theatrical desire, suggested, with black comic dexterity, the anorexia, bulimia, and teen suicides inspired today by waif supermodels and meteoric film stars" (Pizzato 144). Gender parody is extended also to male spectators. Pochsy's fanstasy men have hairless backs and arms that tend to spread to "look bigger than they actually are." The play does not suggest that commercial gender directives are exclusive to women or that women are sole dupes of their manipulations. Rather it draws attention to how men are similarly manipulated to accept commercial images that define their masculine selfhood in relation to how they view women. Hines states that "a lot of Pochsy's physicality is definitely feminine, but these are poses that men are aware of [because they are] poses that are designed for them." By exaggerating those seductive poses, Hines' performance style also works to draw attention to gendered practices of spectatorship.

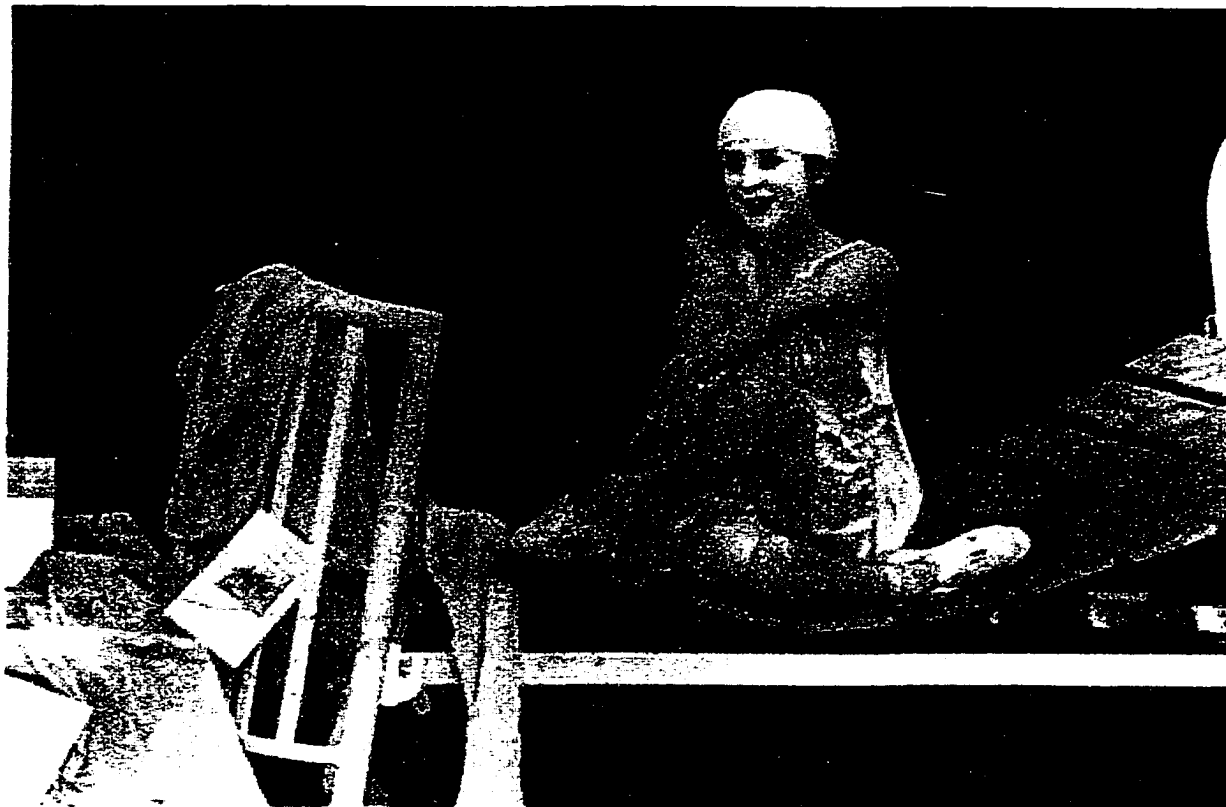
Pochsy adores being looked at and seems to expect the objectification of her body. Thus, the play draws attention to the male gaze that often fetishizes the female body in film and theatrical representation. That "male" gaze determines not only how spectators, male and female, are conditioned to view other female bodies, but also how women come to view themselves. In this sequence, television and film motifs permeate Pochsy's fantasy about a small town doctor (represented by the I.V. unit), who will save her from her illness:

A gust of wind will come up and blow my long curly hair across my face. I will try to brush it away, but I won't be able to get it all. There'll be a little wisp left. But the small Nebraska town doctor will come up from behind me and place an

arm around me from behind, so that his forearm spreads and looks bigger than it actually is. I will turn my face towards him, and he will brush that wisp away. And as our lips draw near, the shirt will fall from his hairless back. And as our lips part, the floral print dress will fall from my back, which is also hairless. And when our lips meet, when we kiss, the squid will be washed away. (42)

Even in her fantasies, Pochsy visualizes herself as if through the lens of a film camera. However, the parodic element of the narrative, and the fact that Hines delivers it while looking at the audience, may serve to make spectators aware of the way in which a gendered gaze is configured by the apparatus of cultural representation. The use of parody as well as direct verbal and visual address creates a critical wedge between persona and performer, so that while Pochsy represents the "to-be-looked-at-ness" which, according to Laura Mulvey, is the position of woman in conventional narrative, Hines' theatrical performance denotes rather "looking-at-being-looked-at-ness" (Diamond, "Brechtian" 89). The latter term derives from Elin Diamond's feminist reworking of several key Brechtian theoretical precepts (A-effect, the 'not,but,' historicization, and *Gestus*) in relation to feminist film/theatre theory. Diamond proposes that feminist performance might resist the fetishization of the female body on stage through the use of Brechtian technique: "In its conventional iconicity, theatre laminates body to character, but the body in historicization stands visibly and palpably separate from the 'role' of the actor as well as the role of the character; it is always insufficient and open" ("Brechtian" 89). Diamond proposes the possibility of feminist *Gestus*, a moment in a play (usually evoked through a gesture or pose) which sets up a "triangular structure" that draws attention to the separation and interrelationship between the performer, the role she plays, and the female spectator. This allows women to look at the difference and instability within the term "woman" while also sharing that term and resisting a male-defined gaze. Although Diamond does not discuss the comic effect that such moments sometimes provide (even in Brecht's plays themselves), she discovers in Brecht an insufficiently recognized comic-critical potential. *Pochsy's Lips* is full of what Diamond would call feminist *Gestus*. While Pochsy sees herself through, and invites, the male gaze, Hines' performance resists it. She does this by using her body, in a playful, skilled, and self-directed manner, to draw attention to the very structures of representation through which

Pochsy has come to construct and view her female self. This does not mean that Hines' performance necessarily escapes those scopic desires, but it does I think complicate them.⁸



The relation between Pochsy, the persona, and Karen Hines, her creator-performer, is different from the traditional character/actor relationship and this may also affect spectating practices. While other actors might play Pochsy, Hines both *plays* Pochsy and *is* Pochsy. The interrelationship -- like the critical wedge -- between these entities is palpable on stage, and this is one of the qualities that makes Hines' performance so engaging. Shannon Hengen perceived an autobiographical connection and asked Hines about it: "Yes, *Pochsy's Lips* is my story, but I'm perfectly healthy. I have never worked with mercury, and there is no sea creature in my chest. *Pochsy's Lips* is my life story, yes, but it has everything to do with my fears, despair, and hope as I look out at the world in which we live, and virtually nothing to do with the specifics of my existence within it" (quoted in Hengen "Unofficial" 62). I apprehend a connectedness -- as well as the distinction -- between persona and performer, Pochsy and Hines, which is not simply or only autobiographical. The link between persona/performer is an aspect of

bouffon, and it is also related to another tradition of clowning, taught by Richard Pochinko, which Hines studied.⁹ Pochinko's method "encourages the performer to develop a 'personal' clown -- a clown born from the 'celebration of the extremities and the normalcy of the self'" (quoted in Hengen "Unofficial" 63). Through Pochsy, Hines is, to some degree, playing herself. "Because it's personal," she told me, "I'm better equipped to mimic women rather than men." Unlike the traditional or mythical *bouffon* who is mocking the powerful "other," Hines is in some ways mocking a version of herself, "prettified" according to the ideals of commercialized femininity. Hines' comment to Hengen signifies another parallel: unlike the traditional *bouffon*, Pochsy's deformity or illness is interiorized in her psyche and body; Hines states that Pochsy embodies her own psychic fears and hopes. Because Hines situates herself (along with Pochsy, the audience, and culture at large) as comic target of her performance, her critique may be more readily accepted by audience members. Importantly, however, the "personal" aspects of Pochsy are politicized through *bouffon* and through Hines' intellectual and social beliefs. She comments that "In much other clowning, without the *bouffon* it is very personal, comes from the person. And I suppose that you could say the same about everything that I do -- because in everything I choose to mimic, my politics are evident."¹⁰ Through her adaptations of clowning and *bouffon*, then, Hines politicizes her body in a manner that shows "that bodies construct and in turn are constructed by an interior, a psychical and a signifying view-point, a consciousness or perspective" (Grosz 8). "Pochsy's" body is constructed by an interior viewpoint that is both very different from, and in some ways connected to, the body that performs her: that is, Pochsy delights in consumerist cultural ideals, which Hines' both recognizes in herself (through her creation of Pochsy) and criticizes through her parodic mode of physical performance.

Hines' commitment to her persona and political vision is manifest through "extra-performance," or production factors, as well as during performance. She devised the play in collaboration with director Sandra Balcovske, and produced it herself for the Fringe Festival circuit. Fringe performances tend to attract a younger and wider audience (in terms of economic and cultural base) than conventional theatre venues, and *Pochsy's Lips* is clearly directed to such a "popular" arena. To rephrase Linda Hutcheon, this signals a desire to speak to a culture from within it and to draw attention to its values and self-

constructing representations (*Politics* 13). Fringe performers receive the entire box-office proceeds of their performances, which means that they can be either a very risky or lucrative enterprises, depending on the promotional capacities and dedication of participant-performers. The decision to premiere *Pochsy's Lips* at the Fringe suggests a commitment to reaching a certain audience, a desire to exert control in terms of production, promotion, and economic responsibility, a dedication to personal artistic control, and an avowal of self-confidence. In her Playwright's Note to the published script, Hines makes this comment on the significance of this kind of self-produced solo work: "In creating *Pochsy's Lips* I became one of a growing breed of writers who perform their own plays. or [sic] performers who write their own shows. Whatever. Why we are compelled not only to bare our souls as writers, but also to be physically present while that baring occurs, probably has something to do with the fact that the double-duty risk involved goes hand in hand with a kind of freedom and control that is impossible to attain when one is doing only one of those jobs" (37). This kind of risk-taking and liberation, as well as the desire to assert control over her production, are evidence of Hines' belief in the potential for female performers to promote themselves in both creative and practical theatrical matters. Such "extra-performative" elements are yet another means by which Hines undercuts the assumption of feminine frailty that Pochsy manifests during performance.

Hines' theatrical style draws from a variety of performance traditions, some more familiar than others, and in each case activates these in a politicized, gendered framework. Pochsy's gestures and makeup evoke mime, as well as whiteface clown conventions. At the same time, they challenge the aesthetic neutrality of these codes. In *Movement and Meaning*, Anya Peterson Royce asks why the majority of mimes are male. She receives the stock response that the female body is less neutral and lacks necessary endurance and strength (74). The attempt to establish a neutral, asexual body (which assumes the liberal humanist supposition of male universality) is a common precept in traditional clown and mime training but one that Hines' performance clearly refuses. Fred Siegel muses about why many women clowns strive to be non-gender specific: "One way for women to get into the male-dominated clown business is to pass as a man" (185). Richard Pochinko's progressive approach to clowning may also have inspired Hines to

address territory, such as the politics of gender, usually absent from the "universalist" tendencies of much clownwork. For instance, Cheryl Cashman comments that Pochinko "widened the scope of what was thought to be the allowable subject-matter for clowning (sexuality, for example)" (24). Rather than aspiring to a neutral -- read male -- body, Hines reveals the body as always already inscribed by culture and, more specifically, by gender. On the other hand, the gestural flexibility of mime and clowning offers the potential to expand the female performer's physical vocabulary beyond the limited range afforded by more "realistic" acting styles. Certainly, the strength and skill demanded by Hines' performance style undercut the gender bias evident in the equation of physical strength with maleness. Her contemporary adaptation of various clown and mime traditions suggests the possibility of expanding gender codings through different styles of bodily performance.



Instead of assuming a universal, physical neutrality, Hines deploys the techniques of mime, clown, and *bouffon* to create a persona that is socially and culturally specific: "I tried to make [Pochsy] a microcosm of North American culture. I should qualify that. She is white North American culture...she is heterosexual white North American

culture...She is the overpowering element of society." In her attempt to embody this North American feminine norm, Pochsy subscribes to conventional romantic paradigms: she makes herself pretty and vulnerable and waits for a man to save her. In one sense, Pochsy is a victim of the promises extended to women by contemporary cultural narratives, like those of romance and comedy. However, her illness, in its disturbing squid-induced form, troubles both her and her audience's belief in this cultural prescription:

Sometimes, when I'm lying in bed, I can feel it moving.
 Sometimes, late at night, I can feel one of its tentacles
 creeping up my throa -- *She gags*...And I have to swallow to keep
 it down. But I don't know how much longer I can keep on
 swallowing and I'm a little bit afraid that one of these
 nights...when I'm dreaming...the squid will make its way up to my
 brain. And right about now, I can't afford to lose control. (41)

Pochsy submits to, and simultaneously resists, the societal illness that threatens to overwhelm and quell her; she is at once its victim, host, and antidote. Hines refuses to allow her female persona to inhabit only the position of passive victim. Pochsy's disturbing store of images, incessant desire to communicate, and brutally honest and iconoclastic assessments of the society she shares with her audience all serve as resistant tactics.

Up to this point I have focused largely on the appealing strategies and sweet characteristics of Hines' *bouffon*. But an important aspect of Pochsy's troubling of social gender control, including the image of woman as passive victim, arises from the dark, impudent undercurrent in her characterization. While Pochsy tries to please by being sweet, she continually undercuts this appeal with some bitingly nasty words and deeds. As Shannon Hengen comments, Pochsy is "at times unlikeable" ("Unofficial" 63). This socially unacceptable, threatening aspect is a necessary quality of any *bouffon*, and it allows Hines to counteract the more clichéd feminine qualities of Pochsy as well as to venture into some darker -- and equally amusing -- avenues of female unruliness. Hines comments that "I don't want to be up there and have some guy say -- wow, she's real cute. I mean they can say she's cute, but I wouldn't want to get near her with a ten foot pole."

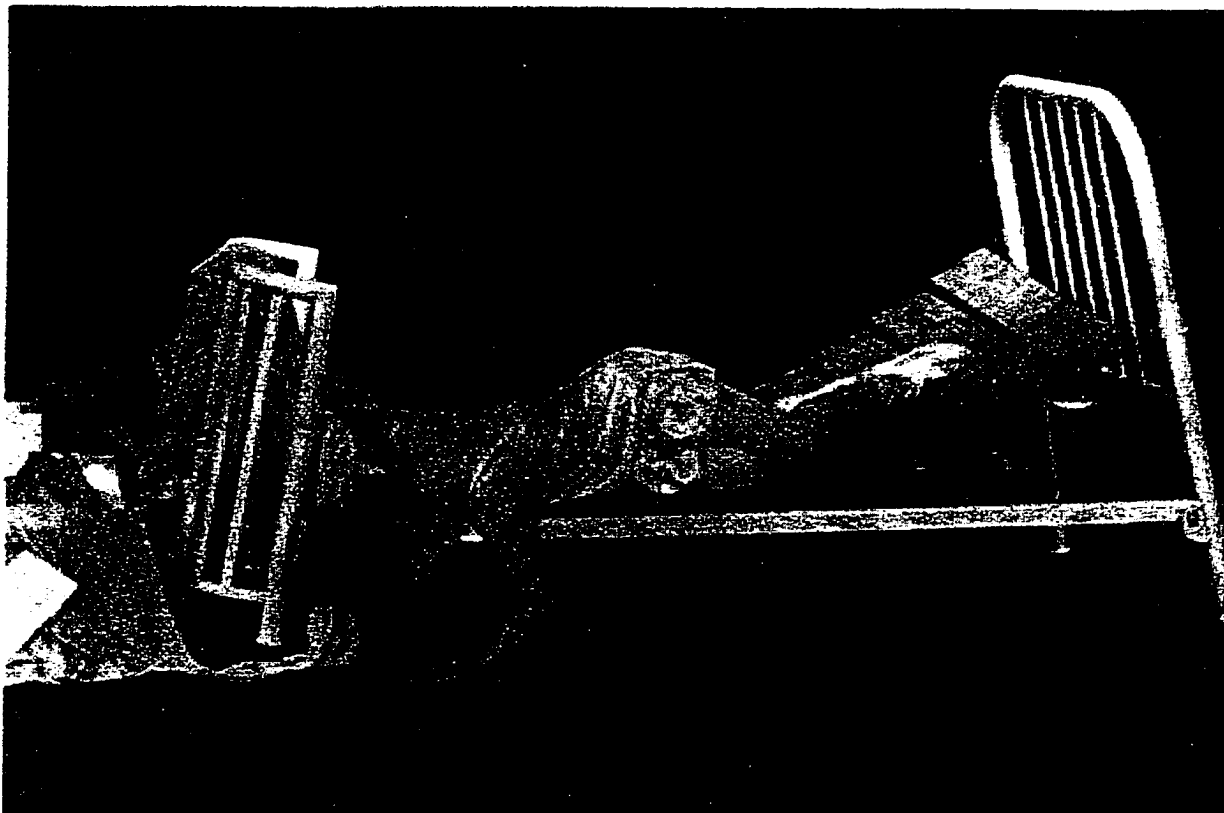
Hines seems to enjoy playing the "darker side" of Pochsy, including her extreme narcissism and jealousy, as much as the lighter side. When her fantasy-boyfriend calls, Pochsy tells him bluntly she's found someone else (her fantasy doctor boyfriend) and answers "No, I don't want to be friends...No, I already have plenty of friends" (39). When her sister calls to share the news of her engagement, Pochsy tells her that she was adopted. Here again we see the duplicitous approach of the *bouffon*: while Pochsy strives to abide by the code of femininity, she tramples feminine decorum. Pochsy's unruliness and threatening qualities are another means of conveying cultural and gender critique.



Often these more cyanide moments are accompanied by a keen perceptiveness which she, ironically, remains quite unaware of:

When I grow sick of the small Nebraska town doctor..as I will...when it becomes apparent that he never actually washed away the squid -- he simply anaesthetized it temporarily -- I will pack all my floral print dresses into my soft-sided luggage, and I will wheel them out into the hallway. (44)

Romance, beauty, and consumer promises are all anaesthetics that attempt to dull awareness and exert social control over mind and body. Pochsy at once names, resists, and continues to subscribe to these regulatory ideologies.



While Pochsy yearns for a romantic happy ending where she meets a hairless-backed doctor who washes away the squid inside, the narrative denies her this supposedly optimistic fate. Indeed, the audience comes to suspect that Pochsy's hope for salvation is another commercial product and that such escapist fictions play a role in her dis-ease. As the play ends, Pochsy is still avowing her belief in the promise of love even as she observes that her own fate and that of her generation is hopeless:

Pochsy speaks.

We live at a time when imagining a meaningful future is irrational and unrealistic. The choice of a new generation!

Pochsy sings.

I hope that you're all falling in love.

Pochsy blows the audience a kiss, and wipes the foam from her mouth. She arranges her baby-dolls nicely and collapses. (46)

Pochsy's cyanide-sweet farewell contains a mocking hope and a despair that leaves me wanting to imagine a more optimistic future. This finale also succeeds in parodying the conventional fate of the female in major literary patterns: tragedy, comedy, and romance. Must a woman either die or be saved by a man; are these the only choices available? When Hines arises from Pochsy's soap-operatic death pose to take a bow, another possibility -- surely a more optimistic one -- takes place. The female actor/creator takes credit for her work with a smile on her face.

Hines' feminist *bouffon* performance refuses either/or logic and opts instead for both/and.¹¹ The pleasure of play and parodic critique are extended to performer and spectator alike. *Bouffon* performance insists that the audience should be pleased at the same time as it is mocked, that the performer should enjoy him/herself at the same time as s/he puts forth a critical point of view. The play thus constructs a duplicitous and duplicitous subject position for performer/persona and spectator alike. The both/and logic of this mode allows a number of (what are sometimes conceived of as) opposed political and aesthetic ideas and motivations to operate simultaneously. It allows for a form of feminist humour that is both oppositional and inclusive, angry and pleasure-producing, intelligent and just plain fun. This both/and dynamic also describes aptly the duplicitous appeal of the *bouffon* herself. As Shannon Hengen notes, Pochsy is most often described by critics in oxymoronic terms: she is "innocence doomed," filled with "bitter hope," full of "charm and vitriol," a "malevolent pixie" ("Unofficial" 62). Pochsy, as performed by Hines, embodies qualities of both sides of those binary oppositions that are conventionally employed to separate maleness from femaleness: she is both naive/knowing, fragile/strong, vulnerable/capable and so forth, but she is also excessive of such binary definition.¹² Hines' feminist conception of the *bouffon*, which maintains a critical interplay between persona and performer, allows her to perform both terms while refusing to settle on either, and thus to embody a destabilized female subject position.

Hines' adaptation of the political and stylistic elements of *bouffon* has much to offer as a feminist performance strategy. It allows for a critique of gender limitations at the same time as it proposes that there is certain amount of playfulness, creativity, and celebration in how women might perform their gender. Feminist critic Janelle Reinelt draws upon Judith Butler's call for "the proliferation and variation of corporeal styles" as a "concrete and accessible way of politicizing personal life" (quoted in "Feminist" 55) and advocates the "possible *discovery* of novelty through gestic experiment" in feminist theatre (55). Hines' adaptation of *bouffon* is an example of this kind of gestic experiment. "Novelty on a historical scale" Reinelt argues "emerges when in a specific historical moment, a confluence of events and forces converge which makes radical change possible...On a micro-scale, something similar happens when a multiplicity of searches and struggles with and against social practices in one area, in this case theatrical representation, result in a convulsion of the entire field" ("Feminist" 55). Novelty, in this view, is not the work of one person (the autonomous modernist subject-genius) but the result of a field of experiment. *Pochsy's Lips* is part of a realm of contemporary comedic performances which suggest the possibility of configuring gender differently, certainly of performing it differently on the comedy stage. Through her duplicitous poses, Hines is able to capture a both/and *Gestus* which undercuts the stability of gender and how it attaches itself to the body. Hines' adaptation of *bouffon* performance creates a critical wedge between persona and performer so that her body may at once convey invitation and attack, frailty and strength, vulnerability and control, joyfulness and critique. Gestic experiment and the potential for comedic novelty occurs in that unstabilized juncture between the body and its duplicitous, even multiplicitous, performance(s). Such forms of physical comedy offer tremendous potential both for exposing the role gender plays in subject formations (at once psychic and physical) and for expanding the limits of those formations.

Whenever I return to *Pochsy's Lips* (especially when I recall the performances I attended), I feel a sense of excitement about the playfulness with which it addresses gender and configurations of self -- which makes me think that my patio girls may be onto something. Of course there are differences between gender experiment/play at home and on stage (as there are differences between each instance, each context of home

and stage play), the latter being generally a more knowing and formal kind of play, neither being entirely innocent or “free.” Still, the proliferation of play both on and off stage is something I view hopefully. Susan Rubin Suleiman comments: "Playing, as Freud and Winnicott (among others) have shown us, is the activity through which the human subject most freely and inventively constitutes herself or himself. To play is to affirm an 'I,' an autonomous subjectivity that exercises control over a world of possibilities; at the same time, and contrarily, it is in playing that the 'I' can experience itself in its most fluid and boundaryless state" (179). Playing is, I think, an important activity for those interested in exploring gender possibilities, since it allows the assumption of an assertive subject position while also destabilizing the subject and the means by which she configures, and is configured by, gender and sexuality. By combining gender parody with play, *Pochsy's Lips* demonstrates that it is possible to assert a female subject position and, at the same time, suggests how that position might be configured, or played, differently and differently again.



¹ *Pochsy's Lips* was first performed in 1992 at Fringe Theatre Festivals in Orlando, Montreal, Saskatoon, Edmonton, Vancouver, and Victoria and has subsequently been performed in theatres in Toronto, New York, and Minnesota. Her notes to the published version credit the plays' director, Sandra Balcovske, as co-deviser.

² Gaulier's, like Hines', conception of the *bouffon* corresponds in many ways to the comic tradition Bakhtin calls the "carnavalesque." Kathleen Rowe's conception of comedy is also indebted to Bakhtin. She gives this cogent synopsis:

According to Bakhtin, the carnivalesque is the social and literary tradition which, more than any other, expresses the dynamic nature of language and the relativity of power in all aspects of social life. As the purest expression of popular culture, it contests the institutions and structures of authority through inversion, mockery, and other forms of travesty. Carnavalesque practices retain the critical and cultural tools of the dominant classes but in order to degrade and mock the forms of high culture. (32)

Bakhtin developed his notion of the carnivalesque from popular festivals and rites in medieval and early modern Europe. Contemporary critics associate it with popular culture (Rowe uses the examples of parades, parties, weddings, as well as popular t.v. shows) and festival and street theatre. As a Fringe Festival performance, *Pochsy's Lips* fits the contemporary carnivalesque bill, although its mocking critique is directed primarily at popular commercial culture (of which it is a part) rather than "high" literature. More importantly, Gaulier's and Hines' conceptions of *bouffon* clowning derive from the same kind of ritual as Bakhtin's carnivalesque and, as such, have similar qualities, particularly their use of parody as a form of duplicitous political critique, and their exploration of internal and external "grotesques."

³ Historical surveys of clowning and mime use the terms "bouffon" or "buffon" (likely the anglicized version) interchangeably with the term "clown" or "fool," so that the term appears to be less specific than Gaulier suggests. To add confusion, descriptions of Gaulier's techniques/mythos use the spellings "bouffon" and "buffon" interchangeably.

⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin also conceives of carnivalesque humour as socially duplicitous: "a basic 'ambivalence' defines the nature of carnival humor and rebellion, making carnival at once revolutionary and reactionary" (Carlson 18, paraphrasing Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 12). Bakhtin's theories are often discussed alongside Victor Turner's conceptions of liminal/liminoid phenomena which, like Bakhtin, he locates particularly in popular and ritualized genres of theatre "including puppetry and shadow theatre, dance drama, and professional story-telling" (*Ritual* 11). Susan Carlson provides this synopsis of Turner's theory: "Turner uses 'liminal' to describe ritual movement of inversion-induced release that do not threaten the cultural order and that are ultimately reinforcements of the status quo. He uses 'liminoid' to label moments of release during which the inversions that occur may actually threaten the system" (20).

⁵ Gaulier's *bouffon* technique/mythos has influenced a number of other Canadian performers, including Mump and Smoot (whom Karen Hines has directed), Theatre Columbus, Sue Morrison, and David Craig. Each of these bouffon-influenced performers adapts the technique in a different manner.

⁶ Personal Interview. May 1994. All comments attributed to Hines (both in and outside quotation) are from this interview unless otherwise specified.

⁷ At a conference where I presented an earlier version of this paper some women worried about the play's association of victimization and illness with woman, and saw any such correlation, no matter how parodic, as one too many. My feeling is that, since the frail/sick woman image has a long history as western cultural currency, it is a prime target for comic subversion.

⁸ Lisa Tickner makes this comment about feminist self-representations (of the more "pornographic" variety):

The depiction of women by women (sometimes themselves) in this quasi-sexist manner as a political statement grows potentially more powerful as it approaches actual exploitation but then,

within an ace of it, collapses into ambiguity and confusion. The more attractive the women, the higher the risk, since the more closely they approach conventional stereotypes in the first place. (quoted in Hutcheon, *Politics* 158)

Karen Hines is a beautiful woman and, as such, is likely to draw sexual attention. Indeed, as I have argued, Pochsy invites that gaze at the same time as Hines' performance draws critical attention to it. Also, an important aspect of Hines' "beauty" (at least to my mind/eye) is her visible skillfulness (with her body, with makeup and costume) which I associate with her political commitment. Might not this destabilize the notion of "beauty" somewhat? Indeed, I find it significant that Hines does not "uglify" Pochsy beyond the necessity of her message.

⁹ Richard Pochinko [1946-1989] was co-founder of the Theatre Resource Centre in Ontario, which teaches a variety of clowning techniques, including bouffon, and produces clown-based theatre. Pochinko's technique developed from studies with Jacques Lecoq, Jerzy Grotowski, and aboriginal clown teacher Jonsmith.

¹⁰ Elsewhere Hines describes Pochsy as a "personal bouffon" (Hengen "Unofficial" 63).

¹¹ My conception of the "both/and" vision (as well as the term itself) derives from Rachel Blau DuPlessis's essay "For The Etruscans."

¹² My reading of the "both/and" in *Pochsy's Lips* is also informed by Elizabeth Grosz' approach to reading the body:

The body is neither – while also being both – the private or the public, self or other, natural or cultural, psychological or social, instinctive or learned, genetically or environmentally determined. In the face of social constructionism, the body's tangibility, its matter, its (quasi) nature may be invoked; but in opposition to essentialism, biologism, and naturalism, it is the body as cultural product that must be stressed. This indeterminable position enables it to be used as a particularly powerful strategy to upset the frameworks by which these binary pairs are considered. In dissolving oppositional categories we cannot simply ignore them, vowing never to speak in their terms again. This is neither historically possible nor even desirable insofar as these categories must be engaged with in order to be superseded. But new terms and different conceptual frameworks must also be devised to be able to talk of the body outside or in excess of binary pairs. (23-24)

Conclusion

This study's emphasis on female subjects of comedy is itself somewhat novel. Previous critics, both formalist and feminist, have tended to emphasize the social meanings represented in comedic practices and patterns.¹ Formalist critics have identified comedy as a genre in which social hierarchies are temporarily upset and then renewed with only slight modification. Feminist critics have tended to view women's comedies in terms of their alterations of traditional comedic patterns and dynamics, and have argued that those shifts represent challenges to dominant hierarchies which resist comedy's renewal mechanism. Both traditions, then, stress the social meanings and utility of comedy. My study keeps social concerns in the foreground but considers them from a different slant, by focusing on the interrelations of gender and comedy through the notion of the subject. It challenges the conception of subjectivity implicit in previous emphases on comedy's social plot and impetus. That focus, I argue, supposes that comedic discourse constructs subjects who can act or mean consistently and who have evident potential to effect social renewal or change. By bringing to the foreground issues of gender, language, and subjectivity, my study complicates this view of the subject and, indeed, conceptions of comedy based on it. It expands into a less clearly defined notion of subjectivity to suggest that, because subject positions are products of the slippery operations of discourse, and of conflicted gender ideologies inscribed within discourse, they often exceed their apparent meanings. While a character subject like Curzon's Kate, for example, is impelled by a transparent revisionist goal, the discourse through which she is constituted gives rise to contradictions and plays of meaning that complicate the play's seemingly singular agenda and also gives rise to alternate, and less coherent, subject positions from which the play can be read. My analyses thus trace notions of subjectivity more indeterminate than those generally recognized by critics in both formalist and feminist discussions of comedy.

While the feminist utility of this emphasis on different conceptions of female subjectivity produced by women's comedies may not be grasped readily, it does exist. I suggest simply that social change is not reducible only to overt alterations of social

or cultural patterns. Change is effected by the production of different, and potentially new, subject positions that issue from contests and plays of meaning (which themselves derive from the creation and reception of different comedic and comic practices). To clarify, I want to return to the two general conceptions of subjectivity my analyses have mapped, in order to discuss the social implications of each. Generally speaking, the first understanding of subjectivity arises from revisions of comedic conventions, while the second results from linguistic and performative playfulness, displacements, and incongruities. These two conceptions are neither mutually exclusive nor monolithic: indeed, as my analyses show, both may appear in (or be produced by) the same play, and will be produced differently in each play. The first notion is reflected in those female subject positions that are clearly articulated by texts and performances and that often, although not always, appear to oppose those gender biases inscribed in social and comedic practices. This kind of subject position arises when Curzon replaces comedy's marital ending with her heroine's graduation, when Ritter places a female stand-up comic as central character, when MacDonald revises gender roles and patterns of Shakespearean tragedy and comedy, when Hollingsworth makes the absurdist anti-hero female, or when Hines uses Pochsy to parody feminine frailty, for example. Such positions denote revisions of comedic conventions and challenges to gender norms. These oppositional subjects are, nonetheless, enabled by pre-existing gender and genre constraints; that is, their alterity results from an understanding of their relation to pre-existent patterns. This reiterative effect is inevitable, and so not undesirable in and of itself. Female subjects of comedy are, like any other, inevitably constrained as well as enabled by gender norms, including those inscribed in language and generic expectations. The question arises, nonetheless, as to what degree oppositional subjects unsettle dominant structures and to what degree their subversive effect may be reduced by the safety valve effects of comedy. As Victor Turner and other critics caution, because the emplotted unruliness associated with comedy (whether recuperated by the traditional happy ending or not) is socially and culturally sanctioned, and is displayed within certain institutional and ideological bounds, it may function as a means of "letting off steam," of allowing temporary transgressions that do not necessarily upset social and

cultural orders. Further, because comedy is traditionally considered less weighty than, say, tragedy, critics or spectators may take lightly comedic critique and alterations (recall Knowles' account of the reception of *Goodnight Desdemona*, for example). Thus, while subject positions produced by gender inversions and generic anti-structures may be allowed on the comedy stage, it is useful to wonder how far their effects extend beyond it. Do they produce new ways in which to act, to think, to speak? Perhaps, and perhaps not. On the one hand, to paraphrase Turner, such anti-structures may function as an auxiliary function of the larger structure (*From Ritual* 52). On the other, to paraphrase Brian Sutton-Smith, anti-structures may represent a latent system of potential alternatives which are the source of new culture (Turner, *From Ritual* 52). Comedies that feature female subjects and revise generic norms do so differently and their effects are not equally easy to dismiss. They do, I think, propose a field of potential alternatives, although within that field there exist alternatives I would not necessarily want to embrace. I have argued, for example, that while *Automatic Pilot* alters certain generic and gender expectations, its representational strategies also reiterate gender biases and boundaries, so that the fate of its comic heroine operates as a cautionary warning to or about women who dare to be funny. I contend, therefore, that alterations of gender and genre norms occur and operate differently, so that the recuperative and subversive effects of each play will depend on many contextual elements (such as the institutions within which they are performed), as well as on the subject positions taken up by authors, directors, spectators, or critics.

Critics who consider the feminist counter-tradition in comedy have focused largely on what appear to be subversive and/or oppositional subjects and have advocated the value of assertions of female identity in women's comedic revisions. Again, I agree that challenges to gender and genre boundaries deserve careful attention and that such interventions may play a part in offering alternative social and cultural meanings and expectations. I wonder, however, whether the notion of subjectivity produced by oppositional revisions, and clearly mapped out by feminist critics, may also limit conceptions of gender and genre and even "self." What concerns me here is that, because these subject positions may be easily read,

described, and accounted for in the name of gender difference and collectivity, they may also be easily isolated, dismissed, or – even more importantly – their potential meanings confined. (After all, even the most confidently feminist anti-structure studied here, MacDonald's *Goodnight Desdemona*, has been readily depoliticized and made to accord with those humanist paradigms it seeks to revise.) Conceptions of subjectivity based on collective, oppositional notions of gender and genre may underestimate comedy as a contested realm of discourse. That is, such conceptions may undervalue the plurality of how different women conceive of comedy, of subjectivity, of gender. They may also underestimate the problematic qualities or gender limitations that particular subject positions pose. In short, I am concerned that reducing the differences and complexities of female subject positions produced by women's comedies threatens to arrest the play of their meanings and so also to limit the potential for different contextual readings and the creation of new subject positions.

Such trepidations underlie my focus on a second general conception of subjectivity and comedy. The plays considered in this study destabilize the notion of comedy as a recognizable set of conventions to be followed and/or revised. Their comic effects and impulses are produced by different forms of linguistic (and sometimes physical) assertions and dislocations of meaning, which reveal how subjects are shaped and tripped up by the signifying practices that constitute them. As such, they reflect the tricky psychic operations of subjectivity as much as social designs. A more fluid, less easily definable, conception of subjectivity results from the inconsistencies and covert meanings inscribed in Curzon's *Sweet Girl Graduate*, the split subject positions constructed in Ritter's *Automatic Pilot*, the depiction of unconscious processes that threaten to unsettle conscious meanings in *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, the evocations of surreal resistance in Hollingsworth's *The House that Jack Built*, and the physical and linguistic dislocations that constitute Hines' *bouffon*, for example. Conceptions of female subjectivity in these plays reflect confusions, ambivalence, and anxiety, as well as joy and playfulness. They certainly trouble any assumption of cohesive female identity or feminist intent within the field of women's comedies. Of course gender inflects

these works, but gender is itself presented as a contested – both constraining and enabling – aspect of subjectivity and language. Because their conceptions of female subjectivity seem to me so different, I have favoured individualized approaches to these works and have focused largely on the slippery and idiosyncratic qualities of their linguistic and theatrical significations. Victor Turner argues that “liminoid” representations – that is, cultural alternatives that do not function merely as adjuncts of dominant structures – are “more characteristically individual products though they often have collective or ‘mass’ effects”: “*Liminoid phenomena* tend to be more idiosyncratic, quirky, to be generated by specific individuals and in particular groups... Their symbols are closer to the personal-psychological than to the ‘objective-social’ typological pole” (*From Ritual* 54). Turner’s proposition suggests the value of conceiving of women’s comedies in terms of their personal, local, and subjective meanings, rather than accounting for them in terms of larger social and cultural gender patterns. Indeed, I want to suggest that those conceptions of subjectivity and comic impulses that are less easy to understand, to pin down, perhaps even to celebrate, may be more likely to elude the social safety valve of comedy, because they resist definition.

The variety and complexity of subject positions constructed in even this small sampling from a wide realm of comedic and comic practices reflect the fact that “comedy” is a contested realm, with certain gender and genre meanings that constrain formations of female subject positions (for writers, characters, spectators, and critics), and with certain discursive and performative characteristics that enable multiple, destabilizing formations. As Catherine Belsey suggests:

A specific discourse is always embattled, forever defending the limits of what is admissible, legitimate or intelligible, attempting to arrest the play of meaning as it slides towards plurality. Alternative discourses propose alternative knowledges, alternative meanings. For these reasons, signifying practice is also the location of resistances. Since meaning is plural, to be able to speak is to be able to take part in the contest for meaning which issues in the production of new subject-positions, new determinations of what it is possible to be. (*Subject* 10)

All of the plays in this study can be read as alternative discourses. Even *Automatic Pilot*, a play that seems to want to deny its alterity, produces a kind of gender anxiety that not only points to the gender biases and contradictions implicated in its representational strategies but also enables my own feminist resistant reading. Whether intentionally or not, these comedies take part in the contest for meaning. They give rise to the production of new determinations, and also reflect and/or produce limitations, of what it is possible to be.

It is here that I locate the feminist appeal of my focus on gender and comedy through the notion of the subject. As Belsey suggests, the construction of subject positions in fiction should be viewed not merely as reflections but as *part of* material and representational struggles taking place in social formations (*Subject 6*). Again, those subject positions produced by women's comedies are not entirely free, since they are made possible by, and are held tensely within, the constraints of discourse and ideology. However, as she proposes, signifying processes are never static and their meanings (and the subject positions they produce) are neither assured, fixed, nor uniformly understood. This is why I sense that the more difficult to understand, more conflicted and entangled, more playful and troubling, conceptions of subjectivity may offer more potential for the production of new subject positions than the more seemingly assertive or traceable conceptions. Or perhaps both have their value: the former due to their indeterminate and embattled qualities; the latter due to their accessibility and potential to stabilize meaning long enough to assert the necessity of change or the possibility of a specific alteration. This issue is, I think, best left productively unresolved.

My assertion of the value of destabilizing and recognizing different conceptions of subjectivity leads me to consider how certain notions of gender and subjectivity that underlie this study might also be complicated and expanded. Throughout I have made reference to, and have asserted, conceptions of male subjects and male-defined patterns of comedy. In order to map out a space for female subjects, I have risked constructing notions of gender and genre that are more confining than they need be, or than might be supported by close textual analyses. I propose, therefore, that a study of male-authored comedies and critical accounts

would likely give rise to more plural meanings and subject positions than this study has allowed. Certainly, in Canada, plays by authors such as George F. Walker, Morris Panych, or Tomson Highway propose different conceptions of male and female subjectivity, and also of comedy. The inclusion of Highway in this brief list also raises the important point that different social and ethnic contexts will give rise to different conceptions of gender and genre. This study's focus on Anglo-Canadian female authors thus limits the field of subject positions it constructs. Further, I note with curiosity that the works I consider have another -- potentially limiting and enabling -- quality: they almost entirely portray female characters who are single and childless.² In part, such unencumbered subjects may reflect a resistance to the heterosexual imperative of traditional comedy; yet they establish a notion of individuality that, one might argue, reiterates a conventionally masculine conception of subjectivity. (Only Hollingsworth's comedy, and briefly at that, addresses the complications of maternity and family in the construction of female subjectivity.) Here, then, are other fields of complication to be mined by future studies.

The crucial value of my own study is, I believe, its recognition that women's comedies give rise to multiple conceptions of female subjectivity and produce different understandings of how female subjects mean and how the meanings they produce affect others. Indeed, they have affected how I conceive of myself as a subject not only in my academic work, but also outside it. Sometimes I will address readers or friends as a didactic subject, who speaks on behalf of women in order to advocate specific social changes. Sometimes I recognize in myself an anxious subject, who shies away from, or worries about, my potential to intervene in the world about me; or who is implicated in, and even complicit with, the construction of repressive gender meanings. Sometimes, too, I see in myself a transformative subject whose unconscious or covert thoughts want to trouble meanings sanctioned by "Academe." Othertimes, I view my own feminist beliefs as absurd, particularly when I am overwhelmed by the social and ideological frameworks that constrain my potential to act and speak. And yes, too, I sometimes see in myself a playful subject, who mimics and plays about with different conceptions of gender -- sometimes joyfully, sometimes critically, sometimes both/and. In other words, I see a realm of

different, sometimes contradictory impulses, not only in these plays but also in my critical approaches to them. Other potentials and meanings exist also in this study, some of which I may be aware of and able to use and some of which will at once define me, escape me, and trip me up. But, then again, as this study has taught me, pratfalls and missed meanings have their own potentials.

This study thus advocates the benefits of reading women's comedies not only in terms of patterns of genre or gender revision but also as destabilizing forms of linguistic, psychic, and bodily performance. The realm of comedy, which seems to me increasingly resistant to definition, offers various means of representing both the constraints and possibilities that attend conceptions of female subjectivity. Alternative forms of comedic and comic practice give rise to different potential subject positions: some will be disallowed but remain latent, others will be revealed and embraced with each production or reading. As such, the comedies in this study create a space, or rather spaces, for a variety of female subject positions. The meanings that arise within those spaces may allow one to imagine new formations of subjectivity. And those formations may in turn expand -- or constrain -- the social, cultural, and personal spaces about them. As such, the discourse of comedy offers its creators and critics an embattled realm of change.

¹ Critics of dramatic tragedy have paid more heed to particular subject positions and what they reflect about a person's ability or inability to act – to influence his "fate." I say "his" because the subject of tragedy, like that of comedy, has traditionally been conceived of as male. The subject of tragedy is a heroic, noble, and coherent individual; the tragic situation calls into question his capacity for change or action in the face of a recalcitrant or indecipherable world. Indeed, the genre of tragedy is defined largely by this subject position. But comedy also constructs subject positions for its characters, writers, readers, and critics – that is, positions that enable them to speak or act or read, and which reflect their understandings of their worlds (both psychic and social) and their capacities and/or incapacities to intervene in, or comprehend, their "fates." Subjects of comedy strike me as more various, less coherent and easily defined, than those of tragedy. This may be, in part, why comedy seems such a vital, expansive form of literary and theatrical activity today.

² Susan Rubin Suleiman makes the point that the laughing mother is virtually never represented in fiction and proposes the crucial importance of imagining the mother as playful subject:

To imagine the mother playing is to recognize her most fully as a subject – as autonomous and free, yet (or for that reason?) able to take the risk of "infinite expansion" that goes with creativity. ... Jessica Benjamin has argued that if the mother were really recognized in our culture as an independent subject, with desires of her own, this recognition would revolutionize not only the psychoanalytic paradigms of "normal" childhood development (which have always been based on the child's need to be recognized by the mother, not on the idea of *mutual* recognition), but the actual lives of children as they develop into adults. Could it be that it would change the way we in the West think about the constitution of human subjectivity? ... In fact, I will be content with a more modest vision; of boys (later to be men) who actually enjoy seeing their mother move instead of sitting motionless ... of girls (later to be women) who learn that they do not have to grow up to be motionless mothers. (179-80)

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