BAD GIRL AT THE MIKE:
ROSEANNE, GENDER & STAND-UP COMEDY

A Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the degree Master of Arts in the
Graduate School of The Ohio State University
by
Laura Ann Sabino, B.A.

*****
The Ohio State University
1994

Master's Examination Committee:
Judith Mayne
Beth Sullivan

Approved by
Advisor
Center for Women's Studies
For Phyllis Diller, Joan Rivers, and Roseanne Barr:

three bad girls who grabbed the mike for all of us who follow
VITA

August 18, 1964 ......................... Born - Chicago, Illinois
1987 ................................. B.A., University of Colorado/Boulder
1992-Present ..................... Women's Studies/Graduate Teaching Associate,
                                The Ohio State University

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Women's Studies
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Stand-up comedy has been a prominent form of entertainment in the United States for over one hundred years. The 1980's, however, brought an unprecedented period of popularity and growth for this field. Suddenly, the audiences for stand-up comedy were larger than ever. This form of spectacle became a major force in contemporary U.S. society.

Women have always occupied a tenuous role in the field of stand-up comedy, an arena traditionally dominated by men (see Martin & Segrave or Unterbrink for a look at women's participation in the field of comedic performance in the United States). The role of the comic, when closely examined, seems perfectly consistent with masculinity and diametrically opposed to femininity (these concepts will be defined in a later section of this thesis). These dynamics make for an intriguing study of the relationships and tensions between gender and stand-up comedy. Furthermore, an understanding of this topic leads to a greater understanding of women's place in the larger society.
This project is an examination of women's place within stand-up comedy. Although women have always been a part of stand-up comedy, they have usually occupied a marginal role. Women's participation within the craft has fluctuated over the passage of time. Currently, women comprise 10% of professional comics and 25% of aspiring comics (Dolan and Unterbrink qtd in Auslander 315). While my goal is to raise issues that concern all (or most) women in stand-up comedy, I will ground my study in the work of one particular comic: Roseanne Barr/Arnold. I chose to focus on Roseanne for two reasons. First, Roseanne is one of the most influential female comics of this century. She, along with Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers, has a reputation for having furthered the form for women. Some may argue that it was the point in time, the changing status of women, or some other factor that enabled these comics to take on such importance. Either way, the careers of these women were especially significant for the larger arena of women in stand-up comedy.

Thus, I chose to focus on Roseanne since she has so impacted the field of stand-up comedy for other women. Consequently, there are many common threads between her stand-up career and the careers of other female comics. However, my other reason for choosing Roseanne is quite the opposite. Her

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1 Early in her career, Roseanne was known by her birth name: Barr. In 1990, after her second marriage, she adopted her new husband's name: Arnold. At the time of this writing, Roseanne's marital status is under negotiation. Therefore, in this document, I will refer to her simply as "Roseanne" without any surnames. This practice also underlies her monumental star status which ensures recognition even if only a first name is used.
comedic style with its abrasiveness and anti-male sentiment is quite different from most (although not all) female comics. Roseanne is somewhat unusual in the rules she breaks via her comic persona. This further complicates my work and forestalls the temptation to draw neat (and simplistic) conclusions.

The perspective of this project is from behind the microphone. Thus, while I will sometimes examine issues from the point of view of audience members, my primary interest is with the comics themselves. Furthermore, while the focus of most studies of stand-up comedy is on aural aspects of the acts (i.e. joke-telling) I will focus both on aural and visual aspects of the performances.

Literature Review:

Unfortunately, the topic of women in stand-up comedy has not attracted much interest among feminist scholars. There has been a significant amount of work, however, in the area of women and comedy in general (see Barreca, Martin & Segrave, Unterbrink, Mellencamp, Sochen, and Walker). These sources cover a span of the last fifteen years, and are written by academic feminists disproportionately housed in the departments of English and Theater. While these works are concerned with comedy, they rarely examine stand-up comedy per se, and instead focus on film, television, traditional theater, and humorous prose. Too often, the conclusions drawn by these theorists are simplistic and predictable. Popular topics include self-deprecatory humor and its negative consequences for women, and the use of humor as a subversive tool for feminists. Issues around
self-deprecatory humor will be discussed later in this work (under "Aural Signifiers"), but for now let's examine the issue of comedy as a subversive tool.

Feminist theorists of comedy repeatedly claim that women can use humor to subvert patriarchy (Martin & Segrave, Barreca, Walker). Unfortunately, most theorists do not go any further with this claim. Lizbeth Goodman, in her 1992 article, "Comic Subversions: Comedy as Strategy in Feminist Theatre" is the exception to this rule. Goodman attempts to explain why humor is subversive for feminists. She explains that comedy is subversive because it necessitates women going onto stages, taking on a "subject position," and telling truths about their lives. This is an important issue for women—a group that has often been denied the right to subjectivity. Female stand-up comics, as authors of their own texts and tellers of their own stories, are a sharp contrast to the long history of women as mere sex objects to be looked at.

This raises other questions about which specific acts or performers may be subversive. Is all comedy subversive simply because it is being performed by a woman? Does the place and time of a performance enter into the equation? What about the style of the performer and the content of the material? While I will not devote a great deal of time to the question of whether or not Roseanne's act has the power to overthrow the patriarchy, some of these issues will be addressed later in a discussion of Patricia Mellencamp's theories of comedy and containment.
The topic of women and comedy can be seen as part of a larger body of work written by feminists about popular culture. Film, television, soap opera, and romance novels are just some of the areas that are explored. In an attempt to locate the study of Roseanne's stand-up comedy among the larger field of popular culture, I will briefly review some of the connections between these two areas. I will begin with a discussion of Tania Modleski's and Janice Radway's work, since it has been so influential among feminist scholars of popular culture. Next, I will briefly draw connections between work on women's writing (by feminist literary critics) and my topic. Finally, I will move on to areas more closely linked with this study: Susan Horowitz's work on comedic speech and Kathleen Rowe's work on "unruly women."

Modleski

In March of 1994 Roseanne appeared in the popular soap opera General Hospital. Roseanne played a character not unlike her stand-up comic persona: aggressive, self-determined, pleasure-seeking. This was some time after the characters of Luke and Laura made appearances on the show Roseanne. Aside from these incidents, the common threads between stand-up comedy and soap opera are practically non-existent. In her landmark book, Loving With A Vengeance, Tania Modleski describes soap opera as a feminine form (87). This is a sharp contrast with what comics describe as a hyper-masculine form: stand-up comedy. Modleski goes on to explain that part of the appeal of soap operas is
that they offer continuity—something for the viewers to come back to—always "to be continued tomorrow" (88). Stand-up is the antithesis of that experience. Certainly one can return to see the same comic over and over, or one can replay the same comedy video. But the stand-up comedy act is very self-contained, and comedic material is usually funniest the first time you hear it. Comedy acts leave the viewer with a definite feeling of closure which is followed by the final, rousing applause. Modleski also explains that the viewer of soap opera "disperses" herself by identifying with so many characters simultaneously (33). Stand-up works in a contradictory fashion. The spectator has only one comic at a time to connect with, and the spotlight assists in zeroing in on that subject. Finally, although most soap opera buffs watch their shows in the solitude of their homes, stand-up comedy is often experienced with other spectators within the comedy club setting.

Despite these many differences, there is much in Modleski’s work which can be carried over to the study of stand-up comedy. Modleski writes of the tradition in "women’s novel’s" and soap operas in which men are shown to be obsessed with women: "Thus, women writers have always had their own way of ‘evening things up’ between men and women, even when they seemed most fervently to embrace their subordinate status" (16). Similarly, when comics such as Roseanne take the stage and proceed to ridicule men mercilessly, this is certainly an attempt to even up the score. Roseanne’s use of the lower-class housewife persona may be her way of simultaneously "embracing her subordinate status." In Modleski’s discussion of Gothic novels she notes that often there is a reversal of values in
which feminine aesthetics, activities, etc., are shown as superior to their masculine counterparts (17). Roseanne continues this tradition in her act by choosing to belittle masculine activities and tastes. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Modleski could have easily been referring to the tradition of female comics performing self-deprecatory humor when she wrote of literature, "self-abasement has too frequently been the female mode" (13).

Modleski stated her intention to show how "contemporary mass-produced narratives for women contain elements of protest and resistance underneath highly 'orthodox' plots" (25). This sounds a lot like the assertions of theorists of women's humor who claim that such humor is so often subversive (Goodman, Barreca, Walker). Modleski also quotes Richard Dyer from his work "Entertainment and Utopia" where he wrote that mass culture "offers the image of 'something better' to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don't provide" (177). Watching Roseanne perform stand-up comedy offers such a utopia. Roseanne breaks so many gender-rules in her act that female spectators are bound to feel a sense of release. She constructs a "play world" in which women are free to cross the lines of "proper feminine behavior."

Radway

On the cover of Roseanne's most recent autobiography, My Lives, she poses in the classic style of romance novels. This is not the only similarity between Roseanne and the issues raised in Janice Radway's Reading the
Romance. Radway argues that these novels have a therapeutic affect on women, allowing them a "release of tension" that is pleasurable. This can be compared to the cathartic affect of seeing Roseanne perform stand-up comedy. In her act, Roseanne breaks through traditional gender restraints in a way that many women would like to themselves. Female spectators identify with Roseanne, and so although they are not breaking any rules, they feel a release when she breaks them. Furthermore, laughter itself is a form of release, similar to the release provided by sex in romance novels.

Radway also describes romance reading as "an activity of mild protest and longing for reform" which is necessary in unsatisfying heterosexual marriages (213). Through this habit of reading romances the failure of the institution of marriage is "admitted and then partially reversed" (213). Roseanne clearly "admits," through the jokes in her act, that the heterosexual institution of marriage has failed. Much of the audience's response (laughter) is at least an acknowledgement of that fact. Roseanne's act is nothing if not a "protest and longing for reform." Radway goes further by describing romance reading as not only a cry for change, but actually a form of "complex intervention" in the lives of the readers (7). Stand-up comedy is also a form of intervention. It allows women not only to release steam while remaining relatively unchanged in their personal lives (as in romance reading), but also to go one step further. Roseanne's act does not encourage the female spectator to go back to her life unchanged. Rather, Roseanne serves as a role model, encouraging women to act out in a hundred different ways. Where
romance reading provides hope and a feeling of well-being (12), Roseanne’s act agitates, exhausts, and prompts into action.

The above-mentioned similarities between viewing Roseanne’s stand-up act and reading romance novels are not meant to imply that these activities are essentially the same. On the contrary, where romance reading offers repetition and continuity, watching stand-up comedy is usually a singular event. Where readers identify with characters in romances via a narrative, identification with comics is weaker without that narrative structure. While romance novels transport readers into a different world, stand-up comics encourage spectators to stay in this world. Finally, where romances help the reader to make peace with their situations, Roseanne’s stand-up comedy agitates, problematizes, and leaves the female spectator wanting to change the world.

One particularly important aspect of both Radway’s and Modleski’s work is a result of their choice of subject. Romance novels and soap operas have long been cast aside as unimportant and unworthy of serious study. Scholars, feminist or not, did not want to be associated with these trivial forms of “women’s entertainment.” Through their work, Radway and Modleski connote that these works are important as are the pleasures the texts bring to readers/audiences. This philosophy of taking pleasure seriously can be used in the study of stand-up comedy—a medium which has also been trivialized, albeit for other reasons (Mintz 71).
Feminist Literary Critics

The work of feminist literary scholars may seem far removed from the study of gender and stand-up comedy, but there are some important connections to be made. These literary scholars often focus on the need for more female writers (see Barolini, Lorde, Woolf, Rich, Cixous, etc.). It is believed that due to internal and external conflicts most women have not "been authorized to be authors" (Barolini 4). Women, it is argued, need to write their own lives and tell their own stories. Several of these concepts could also be applied to women writing and performing comedy. While these scholars may have had in mind more "serious" writing such as theory, literature, and autobiography, the writing of comedy brings with it similar opportunities. Writing can easily be drawn into the subject of performing stand-up comedy because most contemporary stand-up comics write their own material. This is a dramatic departure from the pre-1960's comic who often bought material from others. This contemporary material has everything to do with 'writing a woman's life' since, again, most contemporary stand-up comedy is loosely autobiographical. Female stand-up comics are writing and performing their lives on stages and cable channels in great numbers every day. Simultaneously, they are bringing female audiences to their writings/performances/lives in large numbers.

In "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," Lorde states that women's composition of poetry is "not a luxury" but is "a vital necessity of our existence" (37). Lorde sees the act of women writing their lives into poetry as a subversive political tool. Again,
women writing and performing comedy can be seen in the same light. Feminist theorists who write about women and comedy frequently cite its subversive potential (Walker, Barreca, Martin and Segrave). As these female stand-up comics discover and use their comic voices they are creating space in which to rewrite their lives from their own point of view. Just as men have been the majority of writers of the printed word, men have dominated the comedically performed text. Just as women writing literature create possibilities for new vision, so do women comics open up space for all women. Roseanne, herself, speaks of the stand-up comedy experience and its implications for women:

It is a place, perhaps the only place where a woman can speak as a woman, as a stranger in a strange land, as part of a group that defined itself in its own view, and with its own words, in a manner that seemed to heal, instead of wound. It feels like combat against the literary bombardment, that came, almost without exception, from male authors...how we women stink, our fat removes our sexuality, how we are pushy and voracious and intrinsically evil and lost without souls, and conniving and castrating and overpowering, in need of control, and begging for degradation, and what excited me finally, was the thought of a woman, any woman, standing up and saying NO...a huge cosmic "NO" and the first time I went on stage, I felt myself say it, and I felt chilled and free and redeemed. (My Life 167-8)

Horowitz

In her dissertation, Funny Women: A Study of Female Comedic Personae, Susan Horowitz devised a model for understanding funny women in film, sketch comedy, situation comedies, and stand-up comedy. She states that in order to gain and maintain broad popular appeal, funny women must strike a balance
between attracting an audience and not threatening it. The performer does this by balancing three "power elements": 1) entertainment appeal, 2) sex appeal, and 3) audience perception of her competence.

The power to entertain needs little explanation. Female comedians, like their male counterparts, must be funny. This is complicated, however, by the different positions of men and women in our society. Because being funny is a way of exerting power, women who are funny in the public sphere need to be tempered in some way. This is where the other elements come in. Sex appeal can serve to make the woman more powerful and threatening--especially if the entertainer is aware of this power and shows that she knows how to use it (for example, Mae West). More often, sex appeal is used to make the woman more objectified and therefore less threatening. Similarly, a lack of competence as part of one's comic persona can help to make a funny woman less threatening. One only need ponder how often the "dumb blonde" image has worked to make funny women more acceptable via an excess of sexuality and a lack of competence (for example, Judy Holliday, Goldie Hawn, Marie Wilson).

Horowitz's model is worth mentioning because it is a valiant effort to unravel issues of gender, power, and comedy. However, Horowitz unnecessarily complicates matters. The first part of her equation, the power to entertain, really goes without saying. The second and third parts essentially have to do with the stereotypical feminine role in U.S. society. So Horowitz is saying is that women need to maintain some traditional sense of femininity in order to be acceptable and
funny without being threatening. This point is well-taken, but the use of her model as an intellectual construct does little to aid understanding. Horowitz goes on to provide excellent descriptions of and insights into the acts of Goldie Hawn, Phyllis Diller, Carol Burnett, and Lucille Ball.

Rowe

In *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* Kathleen Rowe draws upon feminist film theory to create a theory of female unruliness. Rowe claims that it is time to shift the focus away from melodrama (which she claims dominates the discourse of feminist film theory) and toward comedy (which she sees as largely ignored). She believes that such a shift allows for new possibilities for women. Rowe's study is one of the "semiotics of female unruliness" which involves the "woman on top" as she has descended from the carnivalesque (iv). This figure is the ultimate woman out of control; she does nothing in a small way. If you think this woman might "make a pig of herself," you are right. Indeed, Rowe spends an entire chapter on the tropes of unruliness as they apply to Miss Piggy of The Muppetts.

Perhaps Rowe did not know it, but Roseanne collects pig memorabilia, and on a recent television interview, her husband described their lovemaking as "pigging out" (*Oprah*, 2/14/94). Regardless, Rowe goes on to demonstrate that Roseanne is the ultimate unruly woman, possessing various degrees of the eight characteristics of unruliness:
1) creates disorder by dominating men; unwilling to confine herself to her proper place

2) body as excessive, copious, fat; unwilling to confine her appetites

3) speech is excessive in quantity, content, tone

4) a joke-maker or laughter

5) androgynous; draws attention to the social construction of gender

6) old

7) behavior as loose

8) associated with dirt, liminality (57).

I will be drawing further upon Rowe’s work later in this thesis.

Conclusion

The study of women in stand-up comedy has largely been ignored by feminist scholars. However, there is much that can be borrowed from the feminist studies of literature and popular culture. Also, scholars such as Horowitz and Rowe are bringing insights from film studies and communications to this area. Of the work that has been done on women and comedy, two areas have monopolized the discourse: 1) self-deprecatory humor and 2) humor as subversion. While I do not suggest ignoring these areas, I do encourage moving them from center-stage.
CHAPTER II
THE GENDER OF STAND-UP COMEDY

Introduction and Definition

Before entering a specific analysis of how gender issues play out in Roseanne's stand-up comedy, it is important to take a wider view of this craft and its relation to gender. This larger view is necessary so that we can understand the 'big picture' of which Roseanne is only one part. Towards that end, I will construct a definition of stand-up comedy as well as a description of the craft in twentieth-century America. Then I will offer definitions of the two main categories of gender: femininity and masculinity. Finally, I will draw upon the writings of comics and theorists of stand-up comedy in an attempt to characterize the craft. This chapter will conclude with a discussion of how all these factors interact.

Popular culture critic David Marc claims that "[t]he lack of a workable definition of stand-up comedy is a serious problem that undermines what little criticism of the art form has been written" (15). It is certainly true that this lack of a definition and the relative lack of criticism interact in defeating ways. Still, there are those few writers who have attempted to define stand-up comedy--among them are David Marc and Lawrence Mintz.
In 1985 Mintz called stand-up comedy "the oldest, most universal, basic and deeply significant form of humorous expression" (71). His definition of the professional form of joke-telling included "a single, standing performer behaving comically and/or saying funny things directly to an audience" (71). The flaw in Mintz's definition is that it is too inclusive. He leaves room for many types of comedic performance which most contemporary audiences would not consider forms of stand-up comedy (improvisation, story-telling, etc. [71]).

In 1989 Marc sharpened this definition by further stressing the "absolute directness of artist/audience communication" (15). According to Marc, that directness is the definitive feature of stand-up comedy. Further, he claims the primary element of stand-up is a freestanding comic monologue consisting of verbal and physical jokes tied together by either a common theme or a series of segues (15-16). This definition comes closer to what most people recognize as contemporary stand-up comedy. Now that we know what stand-up comedy is, let us take a brief look at its reputation and development in contemporary America.

**Stand-Up Comedy Today**

Stand-up comedy has long been regarded as the lowest of the forms of low culture. After all, without music, dancing, or costumes, stand-up comedy doesn't even look like a regular act. Furthermore, the form of stand-up comedy, a person standing on stage telling jokes, looks like something that anyone could do. It is easy for an audience member to conclude, then, that stand-up comedy is no big
deal, that anyone could get up there and make people laugh. This attitude contributes to stand-up comedy not getting the respect that other forms of entertainment have gotten. Stand-up comedy can also easily be perceived as too straightforward to be artistic. Where is the art? Where is the artifice? Hence, stand-up comedy has a reputation for being low-class, low-culture, vulgar (Marc 17; Mintz 71).

This low regard for the craft of stand-up comedy has been fairly consistent for the last hundred years. However, although stand-up is still not regarded as an art form, it is experiencing a period of great popularity. The 1980's brought a wave of intense growth for this form of entertainment. One way to chart this growth is to examine the places one can go to see stand-up comedy live. Outside of the large theaters which host a variety of shows and concerts, stand-up is most often seen in "comedy clubs." As the name implies, these clubs feature nothing but stand-up comedy. In 1963 there was one such club in the entire United States; in 1991 there were over 300 comedy clubs in this country (Borns 31, 40). These clubs appear across the country and are often part of a chain. Professional comics spend most of the year travelling from one club to the next in order to perform their acts.

Another medium for stand-up comedy which flourished in the 80's is cable television. Cable provided programs featuring nothing but stand-up comedy, and then it provided all-stand-up channels. Suddenly the capacity for stand-up to be communicated through electronic media grew exponentially. Comics who
previously would have had to spend most of their careers waiting for that allimportant two-minute spot on Carson, could now get on cable in half the time. Eventually, the cable industry and comedy clubs worked together as the more popular clubs became "cable-ready." This meant that it took very little effort for a club to electronically transmit any act they were showcasing. Cable and the clubs both stimulated interest in the comics and probably benefitted each other greatly.

Another phenomenon that lead to the growth of stand-up comedy was brought about by the comics themselves. In 1979 a group of comics in Los Angeles went on strike against the comedy club owners (Borns 34). Before the strike, clubs did not pay the comics for performing. Although the clubs certainly made a profit, they rationalized this treatment by claiming that the clubs were in fact providing a service for the comics. The clubs were a place for comics to "work out," a term which refers to the continual refinement of one's act based on audience response. Therefore, comics should not expect to be paid. In fact, many comics were grateful for a place to showcase their acts. Working out is a necessary part of forming a successful act and career. Eventually, the comics hoped, they would get good enough to be booked in large theaters where people would come specifically to see them. In the meantime, though, comics had to get other employment in order to support themselves. Also, the percentage of comics that become popular enough to book a theater is quite small. In the interests of the remaining comics and in the interest of fairness, the comics went on strike. The comics won, and before long it became the norm to pay comics for their work.
This made supporting oneself as a non-big-name comic possible. Suddenly, being a comic wasn’t equated with dying of starvation.

Whichever way you look at it, the growth of stand-up comedy in the 1980’s has been truly remarkable. Such a dramatic rise in popularity leads one to question "why?" The material conditions previously discussed (cable, clubs, and the comics’ strike) certainly allowed this field to grow, but what brought about the demand for stand-up? What brought people out to comedy clubs instead of music clubs? What caused people to tune into comedy stations on their television dials? What is it about stand-up comedy that appealed to so many people in late-twentieth century United States?

The popularity of stand-up comedy is not really surprising when one examines the values of today’s society. Few would argue that this country was built on liberal ideals of individualism. This is the ethic that insists that anyone can achieve her/his dreams with the proper motivation and effort. The emphasis is on each person striving alone; other people are not part of a community, but instead are sources of competition. This is the legacy of the Marlboro Man: just a lone rider conquering the West. Now, cut to a stand-up comedy stage in a modern club. The comic crosses the vast open spaces of the stage, alone, ready to tame the unruly audience. The point here is not to create an elaborate argument equating modern stand-up comedy with the "wild west," but simply to point out that this genre of entertainment would easily appeal to those who subscribe to an ethic of individualism. Stand-up comedy is truly a glorification of individual expression
This idolatry of the individual explains why stand-up comedy would be appealing to people in this particular place, but what about the particularity of this time? What made the 1980’s ripe for stand-up comedy? One only needs to flip the dial over to MTV for an answer to this question. Although it is not so technologically-based, stand-up is appealing for many of the same reasons that MTV is, and so a comparison proves useful. If nothing else, MTV can be characterized as fast entertainment. Music, usually fast, is set to a series of very rapid images. This trend may have simply reflected what viewers were looking for, or perhaps it shaped what we now expect. Either way, this style has become something for modern image makers to contend with. MTV cut away the frills and gave viewers a bottom-line form of entertainment. If MTV was sex, it would be continual orgasms without any accompanying sensuality, tenderness, or foreplay.

Stand-up is the MTV of comedy. Stand-up comedy boils away all the character development, plot lines, and context of story-line comedy and leaves one with a bottom-line of jokes and laughs. A good stand-up act is like an evening of multiple orgasms, and gratification is never long delayed. This immediacy exists for the performer as well as the spectator. The audience members wait only seconds for humor, and the comics receive positive feedback for their work in moments. This is never more true than in the case of "dick jokes." This is a type of joke so vulgar or disgusting that audiences laugh out of sheer shock. These jokes have become much more common as mediocre comics are able to make
a living on the club circuit. Although the taste of these jokes is questionable, one thing is certain, they do get laughs.

Within the tradition of comedy, women have always had a troubled status. Since we can classify stand-up as an intensified version of comedy in general, it is not surprising that women's relationship with this art form is particularly problematic. Women's entry to comedy has been hindered by several roadblocks: the material conditions of the entertainment field as it began on a large scale in the mid-1800's, social mandates for feminine behavior, and social expectations for women's abilities to be funny. (For a detailed history of women's relationship with comedy in the United States see Martin and Segrave.) For these and other reasons women have always been in the minority of stand-up comics. Women comprise over half the population and yet they make up only a small minority of professional stand-up comics (Auslander 315). This absence is certainly not due to a lack of effort. Women have been performing stand-up comedy nearly since its inception (Charlie Case was the first male stand-up comic and Beatrice Herford was the first female stand-up comic, both in the 1880's. Martin and Segrave 29, 35). Yet, a hundred years later, women remain a fraction of the performers in this field. Why? The answer can be found in a close examination of stand-up comedy as a distinct art form.

Before turning to an examination of stand-up comedy, however, it is important to reflect on the meaning of gender. Since I am constructing an argument that stand-up comedy is, in all practicality, a "masculine form" what,
exactly, do I mean? What is masculinity? What is its proverbial lack: femininity? Although these concepts have long been considered polar opposites (hence the term "the opposite sex") it is not enough to define them so simply. Masculinity, or machismo, is certainly that which is not feminine, and vice versa. But negative definitions aside, what are these constructs?

Let us approach this task through the stage door. Imagine that a researcher approaches you with two lists. The first list contains the following adjectives: aggressive, authoritarian, confident, controlling, solitary, powerful, and loud. The second list reads: passive, compliant, self-effacing, powerless, and quiet. There is little doubt that most people would readily know which column is associated with masculinity and which with femininity. While there may also be general agreement that not all men possess all the masculine characteristics and vice versa, the overall concepts persist. The ultimate manifestation of masculinity lies in the first list, and femininity lies in the second. These definitions are so fundamental that they are reinforced by countless introductory texts in Women’s Studies. In Issues In Feminism, for example, feminist scholar Sheila Ruth defines these concepts as "complex set[s] of characteristics and behaviors...learned through the socialization experience" (14). She goes on to characterize femininity as passive, fragile, and nurturing. Presumably, masculinity would be described in opposite terms. Needless to say, these concepts, however identifiable, are specific to time and place, and are complicated by a number of factors including class, race, ethnicity and regionality. For the present, however, let us put aside
masculinity, femininity and all their complications, and turn to a detailed description of stand-up comedy. I think you will find these gender constructs will echo throughout the analysis of this art form.

Why a given joke or situation is funny has been the subject of the musings of many philosophers. The process of being funny for a living or funny on demand is still more mysterious. Although we may not yet understand how this works, one way of approaching this subject is through the comics themselves. These performers, after all, spend much time and energy trying to be funny. They rejoice in the applause when they succeed, and they suffer in the silence when they fail. Let us now examine some of the insights they offer on their craft while maintaining the vantage point of women in stand-up comedy.

After surveying the relevant literature I can confidently report that the most talked-about feature of stand-up comedy is its aggressiveness. This aspect of the performance is described as ranging from overtly hostile to more subtly self-confident. Where stand-up comedy "essentially" falls within that range probably must be judged on a case by case basis. This feature, however, must not be ignored, it is so intrinsic to stand-up comedy as a form.

One of the most insightful writers on stand-up comedy is Joan Rivers. Nobody has struggled harder to be a comic than Rivers, and that struggle provided her with the opportunity for insight into the craft. In her first autobiography, Enter Talking, Rivers mentions the commonly-held belief that comics are neurotic, bitter people who are lashing out as a way to deal with a cruel
world (23-4). Rivers agrees with this concept but writes that it does not go far enough. Rivers describes comedy as a means for revenge, as aggression and power (23-4). Along these lines, Rivers says "The only weapon more formidable than humor is a gun" (23-4). Rivers takes this image of danger even farther as she contrasts it with mandates of femininity: "A comic onstage must be in command, an authoritarian figure. Ladylike ways do not work for my audiences....They have to know I am like a lion tamer who says, 'If you come near me, I'll kill you'" (55).

In her second autobiography, Still Talking, Rivers has a more diluted view of the hostility involved in stand-up comedy. Rivers describes stand-up as a process of communicating total confidence to the audience (41). If the audience perceives the comic as confident in herself\(^2\), they will expect the jokes to be funny. They will be receptive to the act and feel free to laugh without continually judging each joke (41). Rivers explains that the comic must really feel this confidence in order to project it, to maintain the comic persona, and to keep one's timing (41). A comic's second-guessing of her material is disastrous (41).

David Marc, in his book Comic Visions..., writes brilliantly about stand-up comedy as a form. Marc speaks of the aspect of control in this medium and the way in which that kind of power is alluring to many spectators: "few spectacles in

\(^2\)Since I will be referring primarily to female comics in this paper I will use feminine pronouns in place of more generic forms. At times these pronouns will refer to women only, and at times they will refer to both women and men. Without exception, they will refer to women in some sense. My strategy is not simply one of convenience, but also an attempt to cement together ideas of femaleness and stand-up comedy--two arenas which have been and still are almost mutually exclusive.
modern show business are as compelling as the successful stand-up controlling the physical responses of a large group of people with the power of language" (13-4). Apparently, spectators are drawn in by the comic's wielding of a weapon almost as powerful as a gun. Marc also describes the stand-up comic as a "bravado personality" or "bigmouth who can spit in the eye of civilization with a bit of grace..." (13). This suggests a kind of voyeuristic pleasure being gained from watching a stand-up show.

The ways in which stand-up comedy has thus far been described, (hostile, aggressive, controlling, bravado), connote a power struggle. At this point it would be appropriate to question why this struggle is taking place. Veteran comic Richard Belzer asserts that in a successful act the comic must convince the audience members that she is in charge. At that point, Belzer claims, the spectators no longer have to be afraid for that comic should she bomb (more on bombing later). Once this is established, the spectators can relax and follow the comic's direction: "they can go with the act and take leaps of faith and imagination with the person" (qtd in Borns 275).

In her book Comic Lives Betsy Borns takes this argument even farther. Borns focuses not on the audience's fears for the comic, but their own fears and anxieties. Borns describes a process in which audience members surrender emotional control to the comic with the understanding that the comic is powerful enough to handle those emotions. At the time when performers lose control "the audience senses it instantly and pulls inward, gradually at first, then sharply if the
comic's footing isn't regained" (19). Anyone who has been in an audience when a comic loses control would recognize this phenomenon. Borns goes on to say that this "response is one of self-preservation. To leave their unguarded anxieties in the hands of a comic who lacks complete control is annoying at best, frightening at worst" (19).

Thus far, this power struggle between the comic (who wants complete control) and the audience (who may or may not want to give up control) has been discussed with regards to aggressive means of negotiation. However, there is a school of thought that emphasizes a more subtle modus operandi. Jerry Seinfeld is an advocate of this position. Seinfeld agrees that taking control is a necessary part of being a comic, and that that process is one of domination. However, he points out that the taking of control must be done subtlety or the audience will fight every step of the way (qtd. in Borns 22). Seinfeld suggests that the way to do this is to make the audience like you, and then they will relax and follow your train of thought (qtd. in Borns 22). Clearly, Seinfeld makes this process work for him. However, comics come in many forms, and likability does not work for all comics at all times.

In whatever way comics wage the war of control, the odds are always the same: one to ??? The comic fights this battle alone, against crowds of various sizes. Stand-up comedy is an intensely solitary act. Again, Joan Rivers sums it up so eloquently:
You want to hear stupid? Major stupid? Stand-up comic. You walk onto a bare stage absolutely alone, no comfort, no help, no script or actors to support you, no lyrics and music to give you life—just yourself saying your own words out of your own head, telling each person, one on one, the weirdest corners of your psyche. And everybody is judging your personality, judging whether you are worth their money, whether you make them happy. When they do not laugh, that silence is a rejection of you personally, only you.... A thousand people in a room are saying, "You stink. You're nothing." (Enter 1)

Stand-up comedy is the epitome of the "I work alone" phenomenon. Today's stand-up comics (this was different as recently as thirty years ago) are totally responsible for their acts. They write and perform the material, they choreograph their movements, and they make all decisions of costume, props, etc.

As previously mentioned, contemporary stand-up comedy occurs in many forms. Network and cable television account for many people's exposure to this arena. But one of the most interesting aspects of stand-up is that it so often occurs as live entertainment. This is truly unusual in a society full of television, film and videos. The live aspect of any performance brings with it so many possibilities. David Marc sums it up: "Stand-up comedy continues to expose itself to human contact, and there is a heroic quality to this in the nuclear age (13). In Comic Lives Betsy Borns offers an even more interesting analogy. Borns claims that to say stand-up is live is to underestimate it, it is really "living--an organic, growing, developing monologue that is as reactive as it is active" (16). Borns is referring to the unfolding and developing that can only happen once, during a live performance, and can never really be relived via electronic media. Borns's reference to stand-up as a monologue, however, is short-sighted. As comic Jerry
Seinfeld reports:

Comedy is a dialogue, not a monologue—that's what makes an act click. The laughter becomes the audience's part, and the comedian responds; it's give and take. When the comic ad-libs or deals with a heckler, it gets explosive because it's like, "Hey, this is happening now! This isn't just some pre-planned act." So whatever lends itself to that feeling is what makes comedy work—that live feeling. That's why comics ask, "Where are you from?" It brings a present moment to the show. (qtd. in Borns 16)

Live stand-up comedy is one of the rarest forms of art: art that changes as it is being performed.

What about when things go wrong? A discussion of stand-up comedy would be incomplete without an examination of the act of bombing. There is nothing quite like watching a comic dying on stage. At those times the image of a lone cowboy taming the West dissolves. We see instead a lonely human being who had the nerve to stand upon a stage and present herself as funny. When it is clear to all that she is not, all connotations of power and control drift away; no one ever looked as vulnerable. David Marc elucidates: "because of the massive investment of ego by the comedian, few public spectacles are as pathetic as the stand-up laying an egg—straining with the very inflections of the voice for the unambiguous response of the laugh, while suffering the brutality of mass rejection." (13-4). The audience pulls back emotionally, and the comic is on her own. You can almost hear the comic sweat. This is the ultimate in public humiliation.
Conclusion

Stand-up comedy does have a gender, and it is a masculine one. Stand-up comedy is aggressive, controlling, solitary, confident, powerful and authoritarian. Perhaps stand-up comedy is this way because men have always dominated the field. Or perhaps stand-up comedy only works in this form, and it just so happens that it contains some of the same characteristics that have traditionally been assigned to men. Either way, after this determination, it is not surprising that women rarely imagine themselves as stand-up comics, rarely attempt to be comics, and rarely succeed as comics. For the women that do enter this field, it is indeed a difficult road to take. Next, we will examine the art of stand-up comedy and how women negotiate being in that arena. We will also follow the journey into that field of one woman: Roseanne.
CHAPTER III

VISUAL AND AURAL SIGNIFIERS

Introduction

When audience members approach Roseanne and say to her, "You're not very feminine," it really hurts her feelings. She defends herself with a characteristic sneer and a pithy reply: "Suck my dick!" (HBO 1987) This exchange is typical of Roseanne's early stand-up comedy which has been described as crude, aggressive, and anti-male. Roseanne's controversial material and performance style took the country by storm in the mid-late 1980's. I'll never forget watching her make her national debut on The Tonight Show. Afterwards I called a girlfriend and we both exclaimed, "Who was that?!" For two young, middle-class, white women, Roseanne's act was nothing less than revolutionary.

In the remainder of this thesis I will be examining precisely why that material was so earth-shattering, not only for me and my friend, but also for the millions of fans who made Roseanne an American phenomenon. In trying to answer the question of why her work was so compelling, several approaches could be used.

\[3\] In this paper I will be examining Roseanne's early stand-up work as chronicled in videos from 1986-1988. Her later work (for example, Roseanne Arnold: Live From Trump Castle) is a dramatic departure from her earlier style and so is not pertinent to my thesis.
My analysis will focus both on visual aspects of Roseanne’s act, (including set design, costuming, stage presence, choreography, and body presentation), and on aural aspects of her act (both content and style of what was said). The actual evidence for this paper will consist of three video tapes which chronicle Roseanne’s early work: Rodney Dangerfield: "It’s Not Easy Bein' Me", Roseanne Barr: The Roseanne Barr Show, and Comic Relief II.

The visual aspects of a stand-up comedy act are easy to overlook. For most people stand-up comedy is strictly an aural experience (except for those acts which include mugging and physical comedy.) The emphasis is on joke-telling and response (laughter and applause). It is as if the comic needn’t be present and could just as effectively transmit her act over a speaker-phone. Yet whether or not they are recognized, visual aspects of a stand-up performance can greatly add or detract from an act. The meaning and impact of these visual signifiers will be the first subject of this chapter.

Before examining these visual images, I would like to mention my positionality in regards to this material. Like so many Americans, I have seen stand-up comedy both live and on television. Viewing stand-up comedy from the vantage point of an audience member, therefore, is a perspective with which I am quite familiar. This perspective will certainly color my analysis. On the other hand, my academic background is in Women's Studies. I have read, and written, my share of feminist theory. I bring to my analysis critical perspectives of the feminist theorists who have written about Roseanne (Rowe), comedy (Barreca, Goodman),
and stand-up comedy performance (Rowe, Goodman, Klein). Like 99% of these theorists, however, I am not a professional stand-up comic. As thinkers outside that profession we remain observers of, not participants in, the craft. There is, however, a body of theory about stand-up coming from a more privileged point of view. (That point of view is "privileged" because it is held by those inside the industry.) This theory is being constructed by the comics themselves (Rivers, Barr, Collier & Beckett). Because they offer considerable insight into the art of stand-up comedy, I will draw heavily upon their work.

**Contexts**

The subject of this thesis is Roseanne’s early stand-up comedy. That early work is chronicled well in the three video tapes I have mentioned. It is also important, however, to look at the tapes as discrete entities within themselves. In stepping back from the actual stand-up performances in these tapes, the larger contexts of the videos provide great insight to the ways Roseanne was presented and perceived.

In *Comic Relief II*, Roseanne appears as one in a long line of male and female comics. Ironically, she is introduced by Arsenio Hall, a performer with whom Roseanne has had an ongoing hostile relationship (see *Live From Trump Castle*). At this point, however, their relationship appears friendly. Hall introduces Roseanne as "what would happen if Wolfman Jack and Erma Bombeck had a baby" (*Comic Relief II*). This reference points to her use of domestic humor. In
her latest book, Roseanne complains of an agent who continually tried to soften her act and "was always trying to steer me into the Erma Bombeck thing" (87). Hence the reference to Wolfman Jack—a hyper masculine allusion to Roseanne’s style. Hall also introduces Roseanne as "a mother who’s gone wrong" (Comic Relief II) which was probably a standard line she used in her introductions.

Dangerfield is a vehicle not only for Rodney Dangerfield’s humor, but also for a small group of male comics whom he showcases in a comedy club setting. This video is almost completely devoid of women except for Roseanne and several female extras. The first time Roseanne appears is in a wedding scene with Dangerfield. She also appears in a honeymoon scene and a scene that centers around her fictional pregnancy. Dangerfield’s and Roseanne’s characters in these bits play off each other: she as the battle-axe housewife and he as the victimized husband. Roseanne’s persona in these scenes is a distorted, stereotypical, negative version of her "domestic goddess" persona. Clearly, Roseanne is donning this persona as a springboard for Dangerfield.

Most of this video, however, takes place in a comedy club as various male comics perform. At the end of the tape, Dangerfield thanks each comic for his contribution. Then Dangerfield thanks Roseanne for playing his wife in several scenes. At that point the camera cuts to Roseanne who is now clearly in her usual comic persona (the spectator can recognize this by her style of dress). She accepts his thanks but counters: "Hey! How come I don’t get to get up there and tell no jokes?" The audience responds with applause and shouts of approval.
Rodney answers "Wait Roseanne. These guys told the jokes. You were just playing my wife in the other bits we did. That's all. Okay?" She responds, "Well, maybe I got some jokes I wanna tell." The audience roars and Rodney acquiesces. Roseanne takes the stage and does her act.

No other comic on this video takes the stage in such a problematized manner. This exchange is wonderful though, because it takes the audience through some of the issues faced by female comics. Cast in a confining role based on her gender, Roseanne must push her way past the men who are in control, who determine who can and cannot take the stage. Unlike so many women, Roseanne actually gets to perform. Even then, there is a distinct flavor of tokenism as Roseanne performs among so many men.

In her HBO video, Roseanne's stand-up act is contextualized on several different levels. She appears not in a comedy club but in a performance hall in front of a large audience. This act is interwoven with scenes both reflecting and parodying television, film, gender roles, and her real life. These scenes tell the viewer how to think about Roseanne at this stage in her career. The scenes of domestic drama link Roseanne with a genre that will bring her the greatest success of her career. Frequently, she "interweaves elements of historical truth about her own life and career with a fictional narrative..." (Rowe 134). This style will pervade her work through the mediums of television, film, stand-up, and autobiography. (For a more detailed explanation of context in the HBO video see Rowe.)
From Comedy Clubs to Living Rooms

Unlike movies, opera, musicals or dance, stand-up comedy has traditionally been quite drab visually. This point is best illustrated by the classic representation of stand-up comedy. Whenever stand-up comedy is shown in pictorial form (as in, for example, the covers of books about the craft or on advertisements for stand-up shows) the same image inevitably appears: a spotlight illuminating a brick wall and a microphone in a stand. This image is not an exaggeration of how stand-up most often appears. At times the brick wall is replaced by a plaster wall or dark curtain, but the theme of barrenness remains. This is understandable since the entire act has always rested with the comics themselves. It is the comic who is the focus of the act and all attention is to be directed at her.

Roseanne’s 1988 appearance on Comic Relief II complies quite well with this classic stage design. Roseanne appears on a large, raised, well-lit, theatrical stage. The size of the stage serves to emphasize its emptiness. In the background are several imitation brick walls as well as a wire fence that is almost transparent. Overall, Roseanne appears to be in the middle of nowhere, with a simple blue and brown backdrop. Her only props are a microphone and a stand. There is nothing to look at except Roseanne: all attention is on her.

In her 1986 appearance on Dangerfield, Roseanne comes even closer to the classic stand-up stage design. She is shown on a typical comedy club stage. The stage is small with a dark curtain behind it. A microphone and a stand are the only objects onstage. The room is filled with people sitting around small, round
tables; it is very dark except for the spotlight shining on Roseanne.

It is perfectly appropriate for Roseanne to appear in such traditional settings. After all, this setting is a fundamental part of the classic stand-up experience. Although there has been some movement away from the classic set design (more on that trend below) it is important to recognize the style that has shaped the image of stand-up comedy.

It is easy to minimize the importance of what one sees upon the stage. A play is just a play. Scenery is simply the representation of its real-world counterpart. An actress is simply a professional embodying a character. The temptations to make these readings increase tenfold when the show consists of stand-up comedy, a medium which encourages a literal interpretation (Marc 11).

According to performance theory, however, the very bodies, voices, gestures, props, and costumes that appear on stages take on very significant meanings. Simply because they are located upon a stage necessitates that they take on meanings beyond the literal. The stage itself gives all that appears upon it the power to become an "intentional sign" within a "sign system." (For a discussion of performance theory see Elam.)

Once inside this sign system, what meanings might one attach to the stand-up comedy stage? Certainly the play of darkness and light is worthy of some thought. As on the Dangerfield video, stand-up stages are generally darkened except for the solitary spotlight which shines on the central action. An obvious interpretation of this phenomenon is that the areas of relative light indicate
meanings of both importance and truth. The spectator is invited to seek out the
areas of light that serve also as the sources of knowledge. The vast emptiness of
the stage, also, serves the function of directing all attention toward the action within
the spot-light.

Further insight can be gained from considering what feminist film critics have
been saying about the cinema for the last twenty years. Just as there is pleasure
to be gained from gazing at a film, there are similar opportunities for pleasure in
a stand-up comedy show. The darkness of the room and the pin-pointing of the
spotlight may be seen as devises to concentrate the gaze on the performer. But
in this milieu the object of the gaze is most definitely looking back at the
spectators, and that is a critical difference. Certainly male spectators may try to
reduce female comics to their to-be-looked-at-ness, but many comics (such as
Roseanne) refuse that category.

The only universal props are the microphone and the mike stand. These
tower over the stage awaiting the manipulation of the forthcoming comic. Although
this instrument may not seem like much at first, there is a great deal of power
 accorded to those who play it well. The timid comic inevitably stands a foot behind
the stand, hands behind her back, leaning into the mouthpiece. This stance
implies that the mike has all the power and the performer is lurking back at a safe
distance. Compare this to the polished entertainer (such as Roseanne) who
grasps the mike, flings aside the mike stand, and proceeds from there. This comic
is not shy about seizing the source of power and making it her own. Roseanne
consistently manipulates the mike and stand with great finesse.

There are three ways in which the microphone and mike stand represent a source of power. First, these props are often the only ones appearing on the stand-up stage. The general lack of alternatives contributes a type of power by default. The comic may turn to these props, or to nothing at all. Further, comics virtually never appear without these props. For instance, a comic will simply not appear using a clip-on microphone. This points to the importance of these props within the stand-up comedy genre.

The second way these objects serve as sources of power is that they are the only physical objects "protecting" the comic from the (often) hostile audience. Granted, a microphone and stand can't stop many tomatoes and beer bottles, but the comfort they offer is more of a psychological one. A guidebook for beginning comics explains:

There are two basic ways to use the mike stand. Either let it hold the mike or don't. While this may seem trivial to you now, remember that the mike stand is the only thing standing between you and the audience. There is a certain unconscious message you give the crowd when you take the mike off that stand and place the stand behind you. You're taking away the only barrier between you and the audience. You are totally revealing yourself to the crowd. (Stobener and Edwards 50)

This act of self-exposure may at first seem like a form of relinquishing power to the audience. Yet it is this very type of bravado that is the source of so much of the comic's power. In this case, by taking away this sole barrier between spectacle and spectator, the comic is flaunting her daring and power.
The third way in which the microphone and stand symbolize power lies in their phallic resemblance. Besides the visual likeness to a penis the microphone possesses the power to make a performer heard, and that, in itself, is a source of strength. She who clasps this phallus is she who will be heard in this room. Of course, those who are not accustomed to this type of power may be surprised at the results: "Once I thought I was getting a little tough. I was really becoming the fire-breathing stand-up for a while there. Part of it was because I was holding the microphone too much. I put the mike back on the stand and I lost that toughness. It's funny--holding a microphone is like holding a penis." (Gross qtd. in Collier & Beckett 98-9)

The issues of set design that have been discussed thus far can be transferred to many other stand-up experiences. As previously mentioned, Roseanne's appearances on *Comic Relief II* and especially on *Dangerfield* reflect very traditional stand-up comedy presentations. On her HBO video, however, Roseanne performs stand-up in a much different setting. In this video, Roseanne performs on a large, well-lit stage elaborately designed to resemble a lower-class living room. A large backdrop contains cutouts for two windows and a doorway; the outline of the backdrop is in the shape of a house. The set consists of a couch, a chair, and various tables and lamps.

This elaborate stage design can be explained in two different ways. The most direct explanation is that producing one's own video allows for more complex sets than would appearing in a comedy club with many other comics with different
styles. It would simply be inconvenient, time-consuming, and expensive for clubs to accommodate the many comics that make their way through. This argument also pertains (although to a lesser extent) to the production of *Comic Relief II* and *Dangerfield* both of which were vehicles for a number of comics. Roseanne was simply a small cog in the big machinery of these productions. The HBO video, conversely, was specifically a vehicle for Roseanne’s comedy and style.

The above explanation, however, doesn’t address the choice of how to design Roseanne’s stage. Placing Roseanne in the quintessential American living room makes sense given her comic identity as "America’s domestic goddess" and her use of primarily "domestic humor." However, the significance of this set design goes further. The use of this setting keeps Roseanne positioned in the home, thus neutralizing the sting of her humor which critiques life within the home and family. Should Roseanne seem too out of control and undomesticated, the spectator needs only to take a step back to see that she is still contained safely within the home.

**Female Bodies Onstage**

In her HBO video, Roseanne uses the furniture and props at her disposal in the fantasy living room. In most stand-up experiences, however, no such accommodations are made. Due to this lack of resources, the set design, costuming, and props involved in a stand-up show are brought about by each individual comic. Furthermore, since the majority of comics do not carry elaborate
sets on the stage, these aspects of the performance are most often carried upon the very bodies of the comics themselves. Thus the comic’s body and its accouterments serve as the visual focus of such acts.

What types of bodies are audiences viewing on stand-up stages? Given the overwhelming dominance of men in this field, the viewer is probably gazing at a male body. Sheer numbers alone have created a situation wherein the norm is equated with a male subject. When instead, a woman’s body appears, it is immediately perceived as different from the norm. Women’s bodies, in this context, bear a mark of difference. (This, of course, is not particular to the arena of stand-up comedy. For many years feminist theorists have written of women and their bodies as marked or "other." [see de Beauvoir])

The most prominent figure on the stage, however, is certainly the body of the comic. In fact, when comics comment about their work, much significance is placed upon that solitary existence of the stage. It is partially that solitary existence that forces stand-up comics to develop a stage presence early on in their careers. With their bodies, their voices, their words, and their gestures, these performers must fill up a stage. The distinction between those artists who master this technique and those who do not is staggering.

As Roseanne progresses in her career, her skill at stage presence only increases. Whether pacing back and forth on a stage or remaining stationary, Roseanne appears to fully occupy the stage. This is not simply a function of her large body size, although that only helps her here. Stage presence is an attitude
that the comic holds and then projects to the audience. The attitude is one of belonging or owning the stage. Roseanne is truly at home onstage.

As mentioned earlier, a woman's body onstage is particularly marked with significance. "A very, very big fear is that the audience is going to be looking at your body instead of listening to what you say" (Stein qtd. in Martin and Segrave 314). Certainly such fears are well grounded in a society that frequently judges women solely on the merits of their bodies. Female stand-up comics, therefore, can rest assured that from the moment they step on the stage their bodies are under constant scrutiny. Women comics speak often of the harassment of male hecklers; such unwelcome comments are frequently aimed at these women's bodies. It is as if a covert war is being waged, with the women asserting that they are comics, and the hecklers insisting that they remain in their roles as women.

**Femininity Onstage**

Such bodies represent much more than simply the comic herself. Rather than standing in for other comics, however, these bodies more often signify other women. It is for this reason that issues around the loss of femininity become so critical. The supposed loss of gender identity does not concern just one woman, but in a profound way represents a crisis for ALL women:

Can a truly feminine woman stand alone with microphone and demand attention? Can a woman be blithe and ephemeral and utter provocation observations, gauged to bestir ovation? Will men not be intimidated by such attempts, laugh uneasily, and privately seek harbor in the company of those who are less challenging? (Tenuta qtd. in Schiffman 21)
In the above quotation, comic Judy Tenuta strikes at the heart of the central contradiction of women in stand-up comedy. She questions whether or not a "real" woman (read: traditionally feminine) can embody this very masculine art. In a society where women are supposed to be quietly in the background, leaving the spotlight to the boys, what does it mean when a woman grabs the microphone for herself and steps into the light? How will men (and women) respond to such a spectacle? Would they not be more comfortable retreating to the world of the status quo?

This question of femininity appears again and again in the literature on women in stand-up comedy. One female comic after another commented on the many instances when her femininity was called into question:

You know the kind of stuff we hear? I'll tell you. "Show me a funny woman and I'll show you a man." (Stein qtd. in Martin and Segrave 314)

Being a woman, right away you walk out to almost total rejection. Almost nobody wants you to be a female comic and they give you a lot of static just because of your sex....Men have this silly, witchy...attitude that a woman who is a comic has lost her femininity. (Diller qtd. in Martin and Segrave 342)

Probably the most difficult thing for a woman in comedy to do is keep a level of femininity while she's being funny. (Martin qtd. in Martin and Segrave 388)

But, as always, Roseanne says it best4: "[I]t's still dangerous to be a woman who

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4 In this quotation she is talking about the incident with the National Anthem, but I believe, and I think she would agree, that the issues are the same.
makes fun of men, or a woman who is funny...It's dangerous and frightening" (Rowe 100). Consequently, women in stand-up comedy have more to deal with than the general angst that male comics face. As if that constant fear wasn't enough, these women face the relentless attitude that they may be women or comics...but not both.

After reflecting upon our culture, it is not at all surprising that there seems to be a contradiction between being female and being a stand-up comic. On the contrary, given the strong cultural mandates for femininity and the strict punishments for those who deviate from them, it is more surprising that any woman dares to ever walk on a stage and tell jokes. It seems to be both the process of walking on a stage and the process of telling jokes that make women suspect. Much has already been written on the risks involved in women entering so public a realm as the stage. Women taking on the comic's role of social commentator and critic, however, has not yet been so adequately explored (Klein 122)

Self As Text

Popular culture critic David Marc created several theories on the power and popularity of stand-up comedy. Many of his theories stem from stand-up's lack of a narrative structure to distance performer from text and performance from spectator. This immediacy creates a unique viewing experience. Because the comic is directly addressing the audience the threads of real entertainer versus
comic persona are particularly difficult to unravel. The traits that a comic carries on her body, (body size, shape, color, etc.) therefore, become fair game for her monologue (18).

The average spectator, in other words, does not necessarily recognize that it is not the real Roseanne that she is viewing onstage, but a comic persona that Roseanne has created. This is applicable in all stand-up comedy, but it is particularly relevant in this case. Between real life, television sitcom, stand-up comedy, and tabloid stories, it is nearly impossible to tease out which Roseanne is speaking. Without this realization, the spectator has a distorted view of reality. Along with this view, however, comes the belief that the figure on the stage is as much a part of the performance as the script of a play would be. It is the foolish comic indeed, who doesn’t soon realize this and adjust her material accordingly. If perchance a given comic had not caught on to this though, it would not be long before the audience pointed it out.

Marc provides an example of Louie Anderson’s "quick use of the tensions of obesity--tensions that he cannot strip off like makeup after the show--to galvanize the audience's focus on him" (18). Certainly the same can be said of Roseanne’s use of fat-jokes. This ingenious maneuver is a traditional mantra among comics: "Do it to yourself before they do it to you!" (Rivers, Enter 259). This strategy also "demonstrates a powerful mastery over social convention by actively calling attention to his [sic] presumably deviant and deficient condition (Marc 18). Marc asserts that such bravado marks one as a "psychological daredevil" who is
"dangerously outside the boundaries of social control" (Marc 18).

One can easily imagine that such "tensions of obesity" might often arise for women comics, given the culture’s obsession with women’s body size. Also, particular tensions around breasts, genitals, and the proximity to which a woman matches the standards of beauty might arise. Roseanne makes ample use of these subjects. Overall, when the self is text, a female comic’s text is loaded with cultural baggage.

Many women in stand-up comedy have talked about the ways in which their bodies have become part of the performance. Elayne Boosler frequently confronts audience members yelling at her to "take it all off." Joan Rivers got one of her first bookings (at a strip-joint) as a result of a highly sexualized picture of herself (Enter 131). Marjorie Gross has stated that people frequently mention their surprise that a pretty woman is performing comedy (qtd. in Collier and Beckett 102). Roseanne said that early in her career the audience used to "hoot" at her for the first five minutes of her act. This manner of staying focused on a performer’s appearance serves to remind her that she is a woman: first, last, and always.

Comic Anne Beatts has hypothesized that male spectators are particularly concerned when attractive women are funny because they link it with sexuality (qtd. in Collier and Beckett 28). She describes that the male spectator’s ultimate fear when seeing a woman comic onstage, is that she will laugh at the small size of his penis. Other female comics have stated that they try not to appear too pretty, for fear of threatening the women in the audience; Phyllis Diller explains, "To
make it on stage, I had to make fun of myself first. I had to dress funny, I had to cover my figure—or I couldn't make any body jokes" (qtd. in Martin and Segrave 341).

While both of these theories are highly speculative, there does seem to be a link between cultural ideas of attractiveness for women and their permission to be seen as humorous. Women comics who fall outside the realm of the traditional femme fatale seem to be able to take certain liberties in comedy. Case in point: Roseanne. A significant amount of her material is very aggressive toward heterosexual males, and yet she is quite successful with this material. Often, female comics talk openly in interviews about the material they are forced to cut because it is perceived as too aggressive toward men. Roseanne, though, gets away with such material and much, much more. Perhaps Roseanne is exempt from these sanctions since she does not have the appearance of the stereotypically "attractive" woman.

The Clothes Make the Man

In her introduction to Fabrications, Jane Gaines writes of the false naturalness of costume in film: "costume delivers gender as self-evident or natural and then recedes as 'clothing,'..." (1). This is even more true in stand-up comedy where, unless the costuming is particularly outrageous, it is seen as simply clothing. Since comics are so often viewed as just being themselves (as opposed to playing characters) it is not surprising that they are not perceived as being
costumed. Yet it is important to remember that every aspect of a comic's performance is carefully planned—including the choice of attire. Depending on the comic persona involved, a given comic may appear in anything from average "street clothes" to elaborate theatrical costumes.

Many female comics go through a common pattern in costuming themselves. This pattern involves dressing in an ultra-feminine style early in their careers, and then changing to more masculine or gender-neutral clothing (Stein qtd. in Klein 122-4). Roseanne is no exception to this rule. In her second autobiography, Roseanne describes her early form of dress as provocative (57). She wore fishnet stockings, blouses that revealed lots of cleavage, and high heels (57). It is significant to note the context of these performances. At this point Roseanne was appearing in comedy clubs around Denver. Roseanne was also following in the steps of many beginning comics by emceeing at strip clubs.

By the time Roseanne appears on video, however, her costuming style has changed dramatically. At this point she seems to be dressing in order to conceal her female body. In all three videos Roseanne dons cocoon-like clothing which almost forms a wall between her body and the rest of the world. On one level, Roseanne may simply be following the advice so often given to fat women: wear plain clothing which gives the illusion of straight lines. On another level, she may have dropped her sex-symbol style in order to mesh with her comic persona of wife and mother. On yet another level she may be trying to integrate herself in a field which is masculine in form (Goodman 297).
From Sight to Sound: Aural Signifiers

Thus far, I have introduced the reader to visual aspects of Roseanne's stand-up performance. These variables of costume, body, context and set design contribute greatly to the experience of a stand-up act. The importance of these issues holds true not just for Roseanne, but also for other women in stand-up comedy. Now I would like to shift the focus from the visual to the aural. In the remainder of this section, I will concentrate on what Roseanne verbalizes in her stand-up comedy act and how she says it.

Before focusing in on Roseanne, however, it is again important to look at "the big picture." When speaking of the "aural aspects" of a stand-up comedy act, I am referring to what is spoken and heard. This is the all-important "material" of an act, and it is often mistaken for the totality of a performance. Included in this category is the choice of topics for humor. What will a given comic's jokes be about? Who will be the butt of the jokes? The delivery of the jokes, however, is every bit as important as their content. As the proverb goes: timing is everything. This aspect of comedy is often likened to music, and indeed, many comics have extensive musical backgrounds (Phyllis Diller plays the piano, Morey Amsterdam plays the cello, Johnny Carson plays the drums, etc.) Although Roseanne is not a musician, she did learn about timing through listening to music: "I...understood the jazz of words alone, that had a rhythm and a beat...that you could get lost in" (My Life 152).
A topic of great debate in the area of aural signifiers is the existence and value of "women's humor." Certainly, all humor is gendered: whether it is spoken by a man or a woman, and/or whether it is about a man or a woman. The very breaking of gender norms is the subject of most contemporary jokes (Goodman 298). Still, many female comics have taken it upon themselves to perform comedy chiefly about "women's experience." This comedy includes jokes about menstruation, pregnancy, motherhood, and a female perspective (usually also heterosexual) on dating, sex, and marriage. Other comics feel strongly that this type of humor should be avoided:

Too many women today still do certain routines just because they're women. What gets me about that kind of thinking is that it almost reinforces the antifeminist view. You need a basis to relate from, but I think women have plenty of other things going for them in humor besides talk about day-old rolls and how their cramps hurt. All that does is reinforce the image that women are confined to a small and limited role in humor. (Rand qtd. in Collier and Beckett 28)

Comic Suzanne Rand touches upon several important issues in the above quotation. Certainly there are certain topics that are particular to "the female experience," and women comics would do well to exploit those areas. This process is akin to the cultural feminists' creation of a women's culture. There is no reason comedy should not join music, art, and other forms of theater in this way. Of course, using these topics may open a comic up to being "ghettoized" as strictly a "women's comic." Yet this type of othering may happen regardless of one's material...simply on the basis of one's gender. Additionally, female comics should feel free to delve into topics not seen as belonging only to the female world.
Perhaps the comic most known for her controversial views on this subject is Joan Rivers. Rivers simultaneously asserts that humor is and is not gendered. She has gone as far as to say that if Hitler or her dog had several good minutes of material they could do stand-up comedy. Yet she consistently refuses to play to all-male audiences. Rivers says that men can only relate to her humor via the women they are with (qtd. in Martin and Segrave 353).

The issue of "women's humor" is particularly interesting given that there is never talk of "men's humor." As so often happens, what is male is equated with what is human and normal. Because menstruation does not happen to men, menstrual humor is seen as "other" and its validity is questioned. Roseanne provides an excellent example of a comic who does "women's humor," and we shall examine some of those topics shortly.

The Joke

Feminist theorist Patricia Mellencamp wrote at some length about Roseanne's television show. Many of Mellencamp's ideas, however, can easily be translated to the study of women in stand-up comedy and to Roseanne's stand-up act. Mellencamp focuses on Freud's theory of the joke which involves a male joke-teller and a male and female listener. Predictably, the woman becomes the butt of the joke which is really an exchange between the men at her expense. Mellencamp refers to the joke as a "male preserve" which Roseanne "along with other standup women, cracked in the 1980s" ("Jokes" 335). Mellencamp also
predicts that jokes must work very differently when the tellers are female ("Jokes" 335). In those cases, she states, the "Freudian tables are turned," authority figures become the butt of the joke, and this becomes "a challenging inverse of the poles of domination and subordination" ("Jokes" 341). Once again we can see the argument being made: comedy as an act of subversion. Mellencamp calls this "no small gain for women and comedy, although it has been years in the making" ("Jokes" 342).

Self-Deprecatory Humor

Although women have participated in stand-up comedy only in very small numbers, they have still managed to develop some of their own traditions. One such tradition is the excessive use of self-depréccatory humor. This type of comedy is used by both male and female comics, but there is a vast difference in the degree to which it is used. In a study conducted in the mid-70's four female and four male comics were studied for their use of self-depréccatory humor (Levine qtd. in Martin & Segrave 21). The results showed that the female comics self-depréccated 63% of the time as opposed to 12% for the male comics. Unfortunately, this data is representative of male and female comics in general especially in the pre-1960's era.

The rampant use of self-disparaging remarks by female comics has caused great concern among feminist scholars. Some of these theorists argue that the use of self-depréccatory humor is evidence of both the comic's self-hatred and the
general public's misogyny. Their rationale is that such jokes reflect the comic's real attitudes of hatred toward themselves. When a female comic makes self-disparaging remarks, the theorists assume that she is communicating her true feelings about herself. Consequently, such a spectacle both reflects and reinforces such attitudes of misogyny and self-contempt in the onlookers. Too often, this assumption is a given according to the theorists. They neither explain nor offer any evidence to support their views. It is simply taken for granted that the reader will accept this perspective.

Such arguments appear again and again in this genre of literature. Granted, these ideas can seem so intuitively correct. A woman is on a stage, speaking directly to an audience, complaining about her body shape, her lack of intelligence, etc. Quite often the spectators assume that she is telling the truth. After all, she seems to be genuinely herself—not acting the part of a character in a play. So, we take what she says at face value. As we laugh, we demonstrate our agreement that she is the object of pity, scorn, and humor. We comply with the comic's self-contempt. Certainly then, we are accepting the cultural standards that uphold such values.

There is more to this scenario, however, than first meets the eye. First of all, the woman speaking to us from the stage is not a real person but a fictional character, a comic persona, developed by the comic. This distinction is by no means obvious to the spectators. Comics continually balance between autobiography and fiction. Consequently, it is very difficult to discern how much
of a given act is "real." Therefore, depending on whether or not we accept the comic persona as real and whether or not we agree with the statements being made and whether or not we laugh...determines to what degree we are (consciously or unconsciously) upholding cultural standards. Additionally, there is a distinction that must be recognized between laughing at a joke and agreeing with the premises behind it.

Whether or not self-deprecatory material is a particularly "bad" thing, it is certainly prevalent in the tradition of women in comedy. Roseanne thus distinguishes herself through her refusal to indulge in self-disparaging jokes. Although Roseanne occasionally indulges in this type of humor, her general avoidance of it within this tradition is quite remarkable (Auslander 328). This refusal to act as the butt of her own jokes is part of what Barbara Ehrenreich calls Roseanne's "most appealing feature--[she] is never a victim" (28). If we were to follow some of the same logic that argues against the use of self-disparaging remarks (see above) we would be able to interpret Roseanne's choices in a different light. Thus her refusal to ridicule herself can be viewed as a way of valuing women as well as traditionally female roles. This may be the "funny womaness" that Roseanne strove to bring to the public (My Life 197). Scholars have named this a "woman-centred [form of] entertainment" that brings female spectators out from behind the eight-ball and lets us in on the joke.
Comedy, especially stand-up comedy, often has as its driving force, anger. This is commonly recognized among comics and spectators alike. It is not uncommon for club patrons to want to sit in the back of the room in order to avoid the comic's rapier wit. Female comics, however, have traditionally re-directed this hostility: "[W]hatever anger may be implicit in the self-deprecatory comedy of Diller and Rivers has been turned inward onto the female subject herself" (Auslander 327). Roseanne's "comic discourse," however, "is of a kind not normally expected of women" (Mile 41). In this discourse she directs her anger not at herself or at other common targets (Diller's mother-in-law, Rivers's "trampy" friend, etc.), but outward at the structures which hinder women's lives (Mile 41). In this way she empowers women by encouraging them not to fight with other, equally powerless women, but to attack the oppressive structures that confine them. This is one of the ways that Roseanne's early comedy was especially political and empowering for women.

Anti-Male Humor

One of the directions in which Roseanne points her anger is at men. After years of male comics saying "Take my wife...please" in various forms, Roseanne turns the tables. Yet this is not just a simple reversal of the status quo. What makes this different is the different relative positions of men and women in our society. When men ridicule women in a patriarchal society it is a case of someone of a more powerful position making fun of someone in a less powerful position.
For women making fun of men, it is a case of a less powerful person ridiculing a more powerful person. In a sense, this is more in line with a type of comedy which is supposed to "take down sacred cows." Therefore, it could be assumed that this material would naturally be funnier than focusing on "the little guy." But at the same time, those people in positions of power may not want others laughing at them. This type of humor causes a dangerous kind of laughter--the kind that Cixous predicted would be women's "greatest strength because it's a humor that sees man much farther away than he has ever been seen" (qtd. in Auslander 315).

Feminist scholars have theorized that the suppression of women's comedy is due to a fear on the part of men (Beatts qtd. in Collier and Beckett 28). This fear (as previously mentioned), is that ultimately the joke will be on the size of the male sexual organ. If this is so, Roseanne is patriarchy's worst nightmare. Roseanne frequently ridicules male sexuality, sexual pride, and identification with their penises. Roseanne clearly calls men sexually incompetent when she states her explanation for men going to prostitutes: "If men knew how to do it, they wouldn't have to pay for it" (HBO). She also relays a story about her and her husband not having sex very often. A male comic might end this set-up with a joke about his wife's frigidity. Roseanne takes a different perspective: Mythical husband, "God, Roseanne, I cannot even remember the last time we had sex." Roseanne, "Well I can and that's why we ain't doin' it" (HBO).
Roseanne hits even closer to the male ego when she performs a bit about male impotence. She asks how many men in the audience are impotent and when no one raises his hand she responds, "Oh, can’t get your arms up either, huh?" She goes on to tell a humorous story about corrective surgery for male impotence. She even uses her arm as a stand-in for a penis while describing this surgery. Along these same lines, Roseanne dares to laugh at the small size of men’s penises as she tells the audience "We honeymooned up there at Isit, Connecticut at the beautiful Isit Inn" (HBO).

Roseanne also ridicules men’s identification with their penises outside of a sexual context. She describes one of the things that men do better than women, spelling their names in the snow with urine. Auslander calls this a "comic reductio of phallogocentrism" (328). Roseanne does one of her male impersonations as she struts away from this mythical scene. Again, according toAuslander, Roseanne’s "strut deflates male pride in this pointless accomplishment so intimately bound up with men’s identification with the penis" (329).

Suck My Dick!

A discussion of Roseanne’s material would be incomplete without commenting on her most famous joke. On her HBO special, Roseanne positions this joke as the final one in her act. This positioning implies an acknowledgement on her part as to the significance of this joke. Comics are notorious for not being able to leave the stage before the final, biggest laugh of the performance. The last
joke must evoke such a response.

After over an hour of actively critiquing the traditionally feminine role and aggressively bashing men, Roseanne shifts into her final set-up. Her voice becomes very low and quiet and her expression becomes serious and concerned. She plays with her hair in a stereotypically feminine way and turns her body sideways so as to appear less powerful. Then she steps back and forth several times in a fashion reminiscent of a little girl who is being coy. Roseanne's entire effect has changed from that of a powerful woman to that of a non-threatening child. She tells the audience that she is going to "share" something with them only because she "really likes" them and thinks they're "really cool." Her voice rises a bit and she faces front a bit more as she begins to relay the story. She says that, "A lot of people come up to me all the time and they really do say this to me and it really hurts my feelings, they say 'Roseanne, you're not very feminine.' They say that, can you even believe that? So I say [voice rises] SUCK MY DICK!" The audience roars and Roseanne leaves the stage.

This routine became a signature joke for Roseanne--one by which she was identified (as was her "riding vacuum cleaner" joke: "The day I worry about cleaning my house is the day Sears comes out with a riding vacuum cleaner" [HBO]). It is referred to in most scholarly articles about Roseanne. The importance of this joke goes beyond its ability to provoke laughter. Theorist Sian Mile points to this joke as a signifier of Roseanne's "attempt to un-become her assigned gender identity" (39). This argument posits that within stand-up comedy--
a hyper-masculine domain--women are so out of place that in essence once they cross that line, they are men; thus Roseanne should possess a penis. Mile says that this joke makes obvious the performative nature of masculinity and femininity which are not based "in the physical body" (39). Drawing upon the work of Judith Butler, Mile explains that Roseanne can, and does, "act as though she has a "dick," and performs the masculine gender even if she doesn't have the "'correct' bodily parts" (39). Thus Roseanne "reconstructs" what it means to be female in a masculine world "and leaves us with the possibility of a new configuration--a woman with a phallus (figurative or otherwise)" (40). Thus Roseanne refuses to be limited by her gendered body or the cultural restraints that follow. Similarly, Philip Auslander's analysis of the joke states that Roseanne is asserting her status as a comic and has made herself into a woman with a penis (330). Once in possession of this "metaphoric penis" she can have greater claim to the comic stage. Access to that penis equates "access to the power that humor represents" (330). At the same time, Roseanne is holding the entire system up for scrutiny (330).

Two Jews Walk into a Bar...

In her autobiographies, Roseanne writes at some length about being Jewish. She states that she was four years old when she first made a connection between Jewish ethnicity and stand-up comedy (My Life 147). She thought at that time that comedy was a "Jewish thing . . . something that Jews really owned and
knew about and did better than almost anyone else" (My Life 147-8). It was also a place "where Jews are not threatening to non-Jews" which must have been a comforting thought to a Jewish girl growing up in Salt Lake City (My Life 148).

Given all these connections, it is surprising that Roseanne includes very little material about Jewishness in her act. It is not surprising, though, that of the humor she does include, the butt of the joke is rarely a Jew, and most often a gentile. She speaks of her (first) gentile husband poorly imitating a Jewish wedding rite: "he crushed a beer can under his heel" (HBO). She also speaks of the Jewish community in Salt Lake City being so small that they had to sublease space out of a Photomat booth to use as a synagog (HBO). These jokes are rebellious in their own way. They are a far cry from the history of anti-Semitic jokes and the genre of "jap" (Jewish American princess) jokes.

The Unruly Sound

The "unruly" aspects of Roseanne's persona are made very evident by the aural aspects of her act. As Kathleen Rowe describes in her dissertation on female unruliness, one of the eight identifiable characteristics of the "unruly woman" is that she laughs. And does she ever?! Roseanne laughs loudly and generously throughout her act. Her moments of laughter and smiling are contrasted with the deadpan delivery she uses in her set-ups. Roseanne ricochets between these emotions and the audience is left dizzy from the ride. During the stand-up segment of her HBO video, as Roseanne first enters the stage, her first utterance
is laughter. She goes on to laugh between jokes, at jokes, and during jokes. She
laughs and shrugs her shoulders quite often. She also laughs at the audience.
Even taken apart from her jokes, her laughter itself is funny: ":[Roseanne] laughs
at her own jokes--laughs with us--and so makes herself funny" (Mile 43). Laughter
seems to flow freely from her, and this makes her more likeable to the audience.
This laughter also balances the hostility that is the driving force behind many of her
jokes. Her laughter reminds the audience that this is all in fun. No one needs to
be threatened by the content of her humor once they hear her good-natured
laughter.

On the other hand, there may be reason to be wary of Roseanne's laugh.
It is not the self-effacing giggle of a woman who can be ignored: "Hers is an
iconoclastic laugh which 'isn't submissive' and 'isn't deferential' and, therefore,
'isn't ladylike'" (Mile 40 with qts. from Walker 76). Her laughter has been described
as "[t]he female laugh...made material" and as something that "cannot be ignored"
(Mile 44). This may be the powerful, female laughter that Cixous describes in "The
Laugh of the Medusa," and if it is it offers many possibilities for women.

In between all that laughter, Roseanne speaks in her distinctive style. Her
tone is nasal and whining; it is the tone of a woman who is complaining, and it
puts the audience's teeth on edge. This tone is also a reminder of the "shrill"
voices of the stereotypical feminists (Rowe 119). Kathleen Rowe writes about her
speech as "excessive in quantity, content and tone" (104). She also writes of
Roseanne's language as "loose" and "sloppy" in its grammar and enunciation, and
"excessive" in its tone and volume (117).

Patricia Mellencamp writes that jokes are a form of "auditory pleasure" ("Jokes" 342). But when speaking of Roseanne she writes "[t]he joke is Roseanne's ultimate weapon, a verbal assault which includes her intonation and grammar" ("Jokes" 341). She calls Roseanne’s voice "rebellious" and claims that through it Roseanne breaks "the vocal conventions of femininity" ("Jokes" 344). But Mellencamp also recognizes how Roseanne makes audiences like her, and how that interacts with this "verbal assault": "Roseanne's insinuating intonations, her slow nasality, delivery, and caustic timing, is assertive, coupled with an openness and sweet directness that catch auditors off guard" ("Jokes" 344). Once again it would seem Roseanne goes back and forth between being abrasive and being likeable. Perhaps that roller coaster of emotions is part of the pleasure that audiences experience during her act.
CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

This thesis has been an examination of several different phenomena. At times, we have focused on the relatively unexamined art of stand-up comedy. At other times, we have teased out gender from that craft and observed the relationship of the two. Finally, we have examined in specific ways how gender and stand-up comedy combine in the early work of Roseanne. After examining both visual signifiers (context, sets, the body, costuming, etc.) and aural signifiers (the content of what was said and the style in which it was said) no easy conclusions can be drawn. As in so many other areas, gender does seem to make a difference in stand-up comedy. It interacts with that craft in ways that are difficult to unravel. Furthermore, it is unclear, after focusing exclusively on Roseanne, how much of these findings are transferrable to other women in stand-up comedy. What is clear is that we need to continue to ask these questions. Stand-up comedy needs to be examined and critiqued much more than it has been thus far. Furthermore, we need to take the sexism out of stand-up comedy by recognizing and prioritizing the role women have played in this art form. Finally, we must examine one by one the contributions of and complications caused by individual female comics. The study of Roseanne's early stand-up comedy should
not be the end, but only the beginning. As far as this study is concerned, however, there are some final issues which need to be discussed in relation to Roseanne.

How DOES She Do It?!

In her first autobiography, *My Life As A Woman*, Roseanne offers some explanations as to why she was able to, quite literally, go where no other woman had gone before. Roseanne ridicules some of the theories about how to succeed as a comic. She writes that she invented a new type of comedy: “funny womanness” (197). This humor expresses the ways of thinking unique to women. This is, however, more of a description than an explanation. After years of sexist humor, why should the public accept humor that actively critiques sexism? Roseanne is one of the most aggressive women on the stand-up stage. Why do audiences not only sit for it, but love it? While so many other female comics are pressured into softening all the edges out of their acts, why does Roseanne get away with presenting the undiluted version?

Early in her career, Roseanne portrayed herself (and her comic persona), as both political and feminist. (The media colluded in this portrayal.) She called herself “the goddess of retribution” and frequently turned the tables on men.

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5 In this thesis I have often referred to Roseanne’s uniqueness. While the totality of her act is distinct to her, I do not mean to imply that the various parts are without precedence. Roseanne does not exist in a vacuum, and she owes a great deal to the many funny women who came before her.
through her humor. Feminists were quick to claim her as their own, and she became a role model for many women who do not call themselves "feminists." Now, with the advantage of hindsight, I question, how subversive was Roseanne?

Patricia Mellencamp, in her article "Situation Comedy, Feminism, and Freud..." examines how situation comedy works to "contain" women and how successful it is at doing so. More specifically, she analyzes the discourses of Gracie Allen and Lucille Ball as they appeared in their most popular television comedies (The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show, and I Love Lucy). Her quandary is one of disturbance verses containment. This same discussion can be transferred to the study of Roseanne's early stand-up comedy as we have examined it thus far. My leaning through most of this paper has been towards viewing Roseanne as subversive through her resistance of patriarchy. Roseanne bashes men throughout her act--taking down the sacred cows of patriarchal structure. Her voice and laugh are loud and "unruly." Her body and her appetites are out of the patriarchal control. Further, Roseanne dares to claim subjectivity in her act and authorship of her persona and her material.

Conversely, as mentioned earlier in this paper Roseanne's set serves to contain her within the home. And despite her in-your-face comedy and her large and aggressive body presentation, Roseanne has situated herself within a very innocuous persona: a lower-class housewife. Roseanne traces her choice of persona to remembering that her mother and the neighborhood women used to read books about how to become the perfect spouse--a domestic goddess.
Roseanne strategically used this image as a vehicle for her radical opinions about women, home and family. She calls this strategy: "the most perfect scam of all times" (*My Life* 173). She writes: "I figured out that I could say everything that I wanted to say by being a housewife" (*My Life* 172). Roseanne also figured out that her chances of getting accepted by mass audiences would actually be better if she made her act more and more outrageous (*My Life* 179). Thus she has created a type of caricature of the happy homemaker.

If the theorists are right, and the situation of women laughing at the male penis is the source of an enormous amount of male angst, then how does Roseanne get away with it? Janet Lee, in a discussion of Roseanne's television comedy, offers an explanation: "Roseanne, despite her jovial 'male-bashing' is overwhelmingly heterosexual and all feminist messages are made more acceptable by this explicit framing" (96). Accordingly, although Roseanne may be an "uppity woman," she is not too uppity as to totally reject men and heterosexuality ("Jokes" 340). In fact, Roseanne's placement within the realms of marriage and parenthood may allow her to express her "deviant" views. This can serve to perpetuate such structures in that some steam is released (catharsis), within, rather than outside of these institutions. Deviance is tolerated, steam is released, and everything goes on as usual.

The issue of Roseanne's containment or ability to disturb is not a simple one. There are no easy conclusions to be drawn and no way to definitively know the answer. The truth probably lies somewhere in the middle of these poles. More
importantly, the larger issue of whether or not any female stand-up comic has the
power to truly disrupt the patriarchy is impossible to even approach at this point.
Much more work on women in stand-up comedy needs to be done before we can
answer these questions.
WORKS CITED


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