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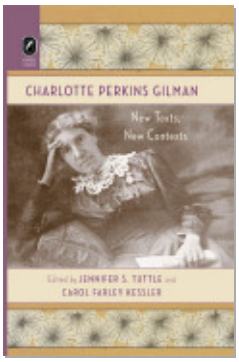

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11

Feminist Humor and Charlotte Perkins Gilman*

SHELLEY FISHER FISHKIN

The exchange was made famous on the cover of *Ms. Magazine* in November 1973. A male comic book character asks, "Do you know the women's movement has no sense of humor?" A woman replies, "No, but hum a few bars, and I'll fake it!"[1] More than three decades after that cartoon first appeared, the relationship between feminism and humor is still a contested one. The charge that feminists have no sense of humor still surfaces regularly in the media.[2] A recent article by Janet Bing in the journal *Women and Language* was titled, "Is Feminist Humor an Oxymoron?"[3] For Charlotte Perkins Gilman, it most definitely was not. On the contrary, feminist humor was essential to Gilman's goals as a writer, for she recognized its potential in her campaign to dismantle the absurdly arbitrary gender structures of the status quo. Popular and rather ubiquitous responses to the phrase "feminist humor" often envision humor that is anti-men, or insulting to men, much as popular constructions of feminism itself sometimes characterize it as a movement and vision that is anti-men. But Gilman preferred the term "humanism" to "feminism," since her larger goal was not the reversal of existing power relations but the demolition of them. She wanted to replace an untenable, inefficient, and arbitrary set of arrangements with ones that made more sense and that allowed both men and women to flourish.

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"Feminist Humor" is not the same as "women's humor," although the terms overlap. Much humor—including much of women's humor—serves to reinforce existing hierarchies and stereotypes. This brand of women's humor may well be cathartic, allowing women to let off steam about frustrations in their lives. But it does not necessarily motivate them to change the conditions that produce the frustrations. I share Mary Douglas's view that any joke is *potentially* subversive, but I believe that feminist humor is subversive by design. It takes as its premise the idea that an androcentric culture organized around an unexamined, naturalized gender hierarchy is an unjust, arbitrary, and inefficient form of social organization that needs to be laughed out of existence.[4] Not content with being merely cathartic, it is catalytic. Its goal is changing the world. Like a Trojan Horse, humor can get past defenses that block logical argument and didactic sermon. On some level, Gilman recognized that. A part of her writing self understood that once humor gets past those defenses, it can blast through the status quo with speed and staying power.

Gilman always wrote with a purpose. She used every form and genre with which she was familiar to achieve her ends. She produced journalism, sociology, short stories, poetry, literary criticism, psychology, advertising copy, utopian fiction, fables, autobiography, and even a murder mystery. Her goal was always the same: rearrange the social order in ways that allow all human beings—men, women, and children—to thrive. We've become more aware, in recent decades, of her blind spots and limitations—her racism, ethnocentrism, and xenophobia. She had a clear-sighted view of the challenges faced by middle-class white women and a limited understanding of the problems of just about everyone else. At the same time, however, as the obstacles that inspired her to write have shown themselves to be long-lived and challenging decades after her death, we've come to appreciate her fortitude and persistence in using these scattershot methods to try to demolish them. Gilman was known for being a witty and clever speaker.[5] Yet despite her reputation for skillfully parrying criticism with humor on the lecture platform, humor has not been a salient theme in Gilman criticism.[6] This essay explores Gilman's feminist humor in some preliminary ways by mapping three of its key tropes and by looking at how other feminist humorists—before and after Gilman—made use of similar strategies. This is just a first step in what I hope will be a productive journey that others will continue.

My underlying assumption is that the goal of Gilman's feminist humor—and that of other writers—is exposing what Mark Twain called, in another context, the "lie of silent assertion"—the silent assertion that there is nothing going on about which intelligent people need be concerned. "Nothing wrong

here," the lie of silent assertion proclaims. "Everything's just hunky-dory. The status quo's just fine. No need to rock the boat or cause a fuss. There isn't any problem." Twain came up with the concept of the "lie of silent assertion" to explain people's willingness to pretend that there's no problem with an extremely problematical status quo. Specifically, he coined it to explain the lack of an outcry over slavery in the antebellum world of his childhood and the lack of an outcry over anti-Semitism and imperialism in the late 1890s. He lays out this incredibly useful concept in his 1899 essay, "My First Lie and How I Got Out of It." For Gilman, the lie of silent assertion that needs demolition is the silent assertion that gender roles in our culture are natural, right, and just as they should be. She needs every tool in her writer's arsenal to blast it to pieces. Humor will prove to be one of the most effective. I'm not going to venture into that Bermuda Triangle of nomenclature that tries to distinguish among wit, satire, sarcasm, comedy, parody, etc. Instead I will focus on three strategies that I'll refer to as illumination, impersonation, and inversion. I'll look at how Gilman makes these strategies work for her, and how some other writers used them toward similar ends. I'll introduce each of these three strategies with an example of visual humor that evokes the literary strategy under discussion.

I. STRATEGY ONE: ILLUMINATION

Picture this scene: a sleep-deprived mother in curlers and bathrobe sits at a breakfast table trying to deal with the temper tantrum of her baby, who has just overturned his cereal bowl. As milk and cereal drip from his high chair, his two slightly older siblings fight with each other at the table. As she copes—just barely—with the escalating chaos in the kitchen, her husband, standing next to the table in a neat business suit, comments blandly, "Well, I've got to go to work, even if you don't."[7] This cartoon by Betty Swords illustrates a technique I'll refer to as "illumination." "Illumination" involves shining a light on women's lives, making the invisible visible, breaking through myths and lies that are accepted as truths, and giving voice to truths that are not usually articulated. One myth that needs to give way is the idea that housework is a breeze, women have it easy, and the home is a halcyon haven of peace. Another is the myth that women should aspire to be fashionable by society's standards and that dress is a proper and admirable obsession for women. Gilman saw the need to blast through these myths, and so did many of her sisters before and after. They all knew that humor could help.

Gilman's poem "The Housewife," her story "Through This," her fable

"The Extinct Angel," and her article "Domestic Economy" all use humor to undo the myth that running a home is both a breeze and a joy and to illuminate the realities that the myth papers over or denies. In "The Housewife," for example, Gilman writes,

> Food and the serving of food—that is my daylong care;
> What and when we shall eat, what and how we shall wear;
> Smiling and cleaning of things—that is my task in the main—
> Soil them and clean them and soil them—soil them and clean them again. (9–12)[8]

The work of the housewife is not supposed to be the stuff of poetry—indeed, it's not supposed to have a light shone on it at all, and Gilman knows that. By including "smiling" on the list of the housewife's main tasks—incongruous, given that these tasks are nothing to smile about—Gilman is taking a jab at the ideology that says that married women are ecstatically happy all the time.[9] Gilman is illuminating the tedium of the housewife's life not only because she takes seriously the quotidian challenges of that world, but because she wants to abolish that world by professionalizing housework and giving women more options. She does this not because she has a simple idée fixe about how society ought to be organized but because of what all that tedious housework does to women's minds:

> My mind is trodden in circles, tiresome, narrow and hard.
> Useful, commonplace, private—simply a small back-yard;
> And I the Mother of Nations!—Blind their struggle and vain!—
> I cover the earth with my children—each with a housewife's brain. ("Housewife" 17–20)

In her determination to link "kitchen-mindedness" with the fate of the world, Gilman goes further than many of the domestic humorists of the 1950s who drew humor from delineating the dull world of the housewife to get a knowing, conspiratorial laugh from women readers. I'm thinking of a figure like Phyllis McGinley, who wrote, "Some lives are filled with sorrow and woe / And some with joys ethereal. / But the days may come and the weeks may go, / My life is filled with cereal" (1–4; qtd. in Walker 98). For McGinley, that closing rhyme is the last stop on the line; for Gilman it would be just the start of the journey.

Gilman's story "Through This" deconstructs the myth of a housewife's blissful and purpose-filled life by giving us the stream-of-consciousness inte-

rior monologue of a young wife and mother who has thoroughly bought into the myth but whose mediations (meditations?) on it are constantly interrupted by some new domestic chore or challenge:

> A new day.
>
> With the great sunrise great thoughts come.
>
> I rise with the world. I live, I can help. Here close at hand lie the sweet home duties through which my life shall touch the others! Through this man made happier and stronger by my living; through these rosy babies sleeping here in the growing light; through this small, sweet, well-ordered home, whose restful influence shall touch all comers; through me too, perhaps—there's the baker, I must get up, or this bright purpose fades. . . .
>
> John likes morning-glories on the breakfast table—scented flowers are better with lighter meals. All is ready—healthful, dainty, delicious. . . .
>
> Through this dear work, well done, I shall reach, I shall help—but I must get the dishes done and not dream. . . .
>
> Now to soak the tapioca. Now the beets on, they take so long. I'll bake the potatoes—they don't go in yet. Now babykins must have her bath and nap.
>
> A clean hour and a half before dinner. I can get those little nightgowns cut and basted. . . .
>
> . . . This is my work. Through this, in time—there's the bell again, and it waked the baby! (194–95)

The woman in this piece is constantly on the verge of articulating the great, grand purpose in which she participates by carrying out all these tasks, but the press of her "to do" list usually gets in the way before she can finish her thought.[10]

Gilman's amusing fable "An Extinct Angel" humorously tackles the myth of the "angel in the house" directly.

> There once was a species of angel inhabiting this planet, acting as "a universal solvent" to all the jarring, irreconcilable elements of human life. . . . [A]lmost every family had one. . . .
>
> It was the business of the angel to assuage, to soothe, to comfort, to delight. No matter how unruly were the passions of the owner, sometimes even to the extent of legally beating his angel with "a stick no thicker than his thumb," the angel was to have no passion whatever—unless self-sacrifice may be called a passion, and indeed it often amounted to one with her.
>
> The human creature went out to his daily toil and comforted himself as

he saw fit. He was apt to come home tired and cross, and in this exigency it was the business of the angel to wear a smile for his benefit—a soft, perennial, heavenly smile.

By an unfortunate limitation of humanity the angel was required, in addition to such celestial duties as smiling and soothing, to do kitchen service, cleaning, sewing, nursing, and other mundane tasks. But these things must be accomplished without the slightest diminution of the angelic virtues. . . .

The amount of physical labor of a severe and degrading sort required of one of these bright spirits, was amazing. . . .

Yes, it does seem strange to this enlightened age; but the fact was that the angels waited on the human creatures in every form of menial service, doing things as their natural duty which the human creature loathed and scorned.

It does seem irreconcilable, but they reconciled it. The angel was an angel and the work was the angel's work and what more do you want?

There is one thing about the subject which looks a bit suspicious: The angels—I say it under breath—were not very bright!

The human creatures did not like intelligent angels—intelligence seemed to dim their shine, somehow, and pale their virtues. It was harder to reconcile things where the angels had any sense. Therefore every possible care was taken to prevent the angels from learning anything of our gross human wisdom.

But little by little, owing to the unthought-of consequences of repeated intermarriage between the angel and the human being, the angel longed for, found and ate the fruit of the forbidden tree of knowledge.

And in that day she surely died.

The species is now extinct. . . . (163–65)

Here Gilman advances the notion that "the human being" was implicitly male, while the gender of the now-extinct "angel" was implicitly female—a move that rather playfully echoes arguments she makes in *Man-Made World*. Her readers would clearly recognize the angel as the familiar "angel in the house"—a Victorian ideal that, in Gilman's view, deserved to be killed. By imagining the creature as currently extinct, Gilman is crafting a whimsical piece of science fiction that comments rather acidly on what is still a very current state of affairs. And by making the "angel" "not very bright," Gilman makes sure that any reader who failed to question the appeal of that ideal will hesitate to identify with it after reading this sketch.

"The Housewife," "Through This," and "An Extinct Angel" tackle the tedium of the work of the wife and mother and the mandatory smiles that

were required as part of the job (the smiles were proof that she didn't think that these dull and daunting tasks constituted "work"). Gilman's article titled "Domestic Economy" took a different tack, also using humor, to challenge the rationality of lumping so many tasks together in the home. Gilman writes,

> What is commonly called "housekeeping" really embraces [a] group of industries, arbitrarily connected by custom, but in their nature not only diverse, but grossly incompatible. . . .
>
> As separate businesses we can plainly see their incompatibility. No man advertises a "Restaurant and Laundry," or "Bakery and Bath-house"—the association of fresh food and soiled linen or unclean bodies would not be pleasant to our minds. Neither should we patronize a "Kindergarten and Carpet Cleaning Establishment" or "Primary School and Dressmaking Parlor." . . . In the care of the sick, for their sakes as well as other interests involved, we isolate them as far as possible; a hospital naturally striving for quiet and cleanliness.
>
> Yet we carry on all these contradictory trades in one building, and also live in it!
>
> Not only do we undertake to have all these labors performed in one house, but by one person.
>
> In full ninety per cent of our American homes there is but one acting functionary to perform these varied and totally dissimilar functions—to be cook, laundress, chambermaid, charwoman, seamstress, nurse and governess. (158–59)

The absurdity of these incongruous juxtapositions dramatizes the absurdly incongruous set of tasks that every housewife and mother is required to perform on a daily basis. (In Gilman's novel *What Diantha Did*, Diantha will put a price tag on these various services and present her stunned father with an invoice; his payment will bankroll the take-out catering service she creates.) Gilman's effort to break down housekeeping into its component parts looks ahead to the wages-for-housework movement of the 1970s (and the articles that periodically have surfaced in women's magazines ever since) that focused on housekeeping not as some divine calling, but as work—hard work, draining work, complicated and exhausting work.[11] I haven't yet found any evidence of Gilman's being aware of her great-aunt Catherine's student, Sarah Willis, once a star pupil at Beecher's academy in Hartford, who used humor to make the same point half a century earlier in her 1851 column "Aunt Hetty on Matrimony," and elsewhere. Sarah Willis, writing

under the pseudonym Fanny Fern and speaking in the persona of "Aunty Hetty," evokes the tasks required of a wife and mother with acerbic wit and humor that reels into flat exhaustion, culminating in the warning, "O, girls! Set your affections on cats, poodles, parrots or lap dogs; but let matrimony alone. It's the hardest way on earth of getting a living. You never know when your work is done" ("Aunt" 1961). It is a comment Mary Kay Blakeley would echo in 1980: "The job description of mother is clearly in need of revision. As it stands, the shifts are twenty-four hours, for a period of approximately 1,825 consecutive days. The benefits are in sore need of amendment: no vacations, no sick leave, no lunch hours, no breaks. Moreover, it is the only unpaid position I know of that can result in arrest if you fail to show up for work" (62). The same spirit animates the mid-century cartoon by Betty Swords with which this section begins.

While Blakeley focuses on the myth of motherhood as not being "work," Helen Rowland debunks the myth of housework not being "work" in a 1927 column titled "Man's Sweet Dream":

> To a man, the great mystery of life, is "what a woman does with her time, all day!"
>
> In his blithe philosophy, all she need do, is to press a button—and presto! The house starts running itself, and goes right on running. . . .
>
> . . . Clothes pick themselves up off the floor and hop gaily into the laundry hamper or back on to the closet hooks.
>
> Shoes whistle to each other, choose their partners and do a fox trot onto the shoerack.
>
> Dishes leave the table at a signal, plunge merrily into the dishpan, and then give themselves a hot shower and a rub-down before filing into places on the shelves. . . .
>
> The butcher psycho-analyzes the family and discovers its suppressed desires—and lo, the leg of lamb comes stalking up to the kitchen door all covered with mint sauce. . . .
>
> Washing machines never break down, . . . telephones never interrupt, . . . babies never cry—water runs up hill, the moon is made of green cheese—
>
> And *housekeeping* is one long day of rest!
>
> What *does* a woman do with her time all day? (254–55)

Or, as Erma Bombeck put it, "Housework is a treadmill from futility to oblivion with stop offs at tedium and counter productivity."[12] And we call her a humorist?! Yet comments on housework and motherhood like those

of Fanny Fern, Mary Kay Blakely, Helen Rowland, and Erma Bombeck are funny because they illuminate what is meant to remain dark: they voice what was supposed to be unsaid, replacing the ubiquitous myth of the housewife's domestic tranquility with the ubiquitous reality of tedious, sometimes mind-numbing, repetitive hard work.

Dress is another key area in which humor can help illuminate truths that social custom keeps hidden. Gilman would have appreciated Betsy Salkind's comment, "Men's clothes are so much more comfortable then women's. Take their shoes—they've got room for five toes—in each shoe" (qtd. in Kaufman 74). Gilman often challenged the assumption that being dressed fashionably by society's standards was a proper and admirable obsession for women. In *With Her in Ourland,* for example, Ellador asks Van whether women ever dressed more foolishly than they do now. Van thinks about how to respond as follows:

> I ran over in my mind some of the eccentricities of fashion in earlier periods and was about to say that it was possible when I chanced to look out the window. It was a hot day, most oppressively hot, with a fiercely glaring sun. A woman stood just across the street talking to a man. I picked up my opera glass and studied her for a moment. . . . She stood awkwardly in extremely high-heeled slippers, in which the sole of the foot leaned on a steep slant from heel to ball, and her toes, poor things, were driven into the narrow-pointed toe of the slipper by the whole sliding weight of the body above. . . .
>
> But what struck me the most was that she wore about her neck a dead fox or the whole outside of one.
>
> No, she was not a lunatic. No, that man was not her keeper. No, it was not a punishment, not an initiation penalty, not an election bet.
>
> That woman, of her own free will and at considerable expense, wore heavy furs in the hottest summer weather.
>
> I laid down the glass and turned to Ellador. "No, my dear," said I gloomily. "It is not possible that women ever could have been more idiotic in dress than that." (175–76)[13]

Van's description of the woman's dress underlines the fact that fashion can be a cruel taskmaster, inflicting gratuitous pain and discomfort; in Van's view, and Gilman's, no rational justification for inflicting such pain and discomfort on oneself could possibly exist. Or take Gilman's poem, "The Cripple":

> There are such things as feet, human feet,
> But these she does not use;

Firm and supple, white and sweet,
Softly graceful, lightly fleet,
For comfort, beauty, service meet—
These are feet, human feet,
These she doth with scorn refuse—
Preferring shoes.

There are such things as shoes, human shoes,
Though scant and rare the proof;
Serviceable, soft and strong,
Pleasant, comely, wearing long,
Easy as a well known song—
These are shoes, human shoes.
But from these she holds aloof—
Prefers the hoof!

There are such things as hoofs, sub-human hoofs,
High-heeled sharp anomalies
Small and pinching, hard and black,
Shiny as a beetle's back,
Cloven, clattering on the track,
These are hoofs, sub-human hoofs,
She cares not for truth, nor ease—
Preferring these! (1–24)

Here Gilman uses humor to illuminate a truth that wasn't meant to be recognized: that when women are cast as ornaments, when their clothing is designed for its form rather than its function, the result is unnatural and unhealthy (which is the same conclusion Van reached in *With Her in Ourland*). She makes a similar move in "A Protest against Petticoats," in which a little girl plaintively asks,

Why must my dress be fine?
While brother goes
In knicks and hose,
Why are these ruffles mine? . . .

. . . . . .

His cap is easy on his head,
Alert and free his face—

Why must I wear
O'er eyes and hair
    This cauliflower of lace? (12–15, 21–25)

Elsewhere she ridicules women's dress as, if not unhealthy, simply having no reason to exist. In her poem "Her Hat Still with Us," for example, she writes,

So big, so black—so shapeless, so oppressive,
So heavy, overhanging and excessive,
Huge shadowy, bulk—a bier? a bush? no, worse
A cross between a haystack and a hearse. (1–4)

And Gilman goes after hats, shoes, *and* skirts in the poem "This Is a Lady's Hat," subtitled "A Trio of Triolets":

This is a lady's hat—
    To cover the seat of reason;
It may look like a rabbit or bat,
Yet this is a lady's hat;
May be ugly, ridiculous, that
    We never remark, 'twould be treason.
This is a lady's hat,
    To cover the seat of reason.

* * *

These are a lady's shoes,
    Ornaments, curved and bended,
But feet are given to use,
Not merely to show off shoes,
To stand, walk, run if we choose,
    For which these were never intended.
These are a lady's shoes.
Ornaments, curved and bended.

* * *

This is a lady's skirt,
    Which limits her locomotion;
Her shape is so smooth-begirt
As to occupy all the skirt,
Of being swift and alert

She has not the slightest notion;
This is a lady's skirt,
Which limits her locomotion. (1–24)

While in this poem Gilman shines a light on all the sacrifices women are required to make in their desire to dress fashionably, women are not the only ones whose choices in dress come in for ridicule. Gilman takes on the form-over-function idiocy when she encounters it in men, as well. She wrote in *The Forerunner,* for example, that "[o]ne modern necessity of gentleman's dress which rests on symbolism alone is starch. . . . Starch is not beautiful. To clothe a human figure, or any part of it, in a still glittering white substance, is in direct contradiction to the lines and action of the body. One might as well hang a dinner-plate across his chest, as the glaring frontlet so beloved of the masculine heart" (*Dress* 12). But although she occasionally shines a light on the silliness and hypocrisy of men's dress, women's dress is a much more frequent target. The issue of fashion and its function is central to one of my favorite Gilman stories, "If I Were a Man," where Molly Matthewson's discovery of the wonder of *pockets* comes as a revelation. Pockets are *still* a distant dream for women in 1991 when *In Stitches* comes out, and Cheris Kramare and Paula Treichler are quoted as saying, "Pocket Envy is women's unfulfilled yearning for practical clothes." At the international Gilman conference in 1997, I described the annual "pocket survey" I give my class when I teach "If I Were a Man." Male and female students counted the pockets in the clothing they were wearing and I then took a pocket census and came up with the average number of pockets for each gender. Men were always ahead. Well, more than ten years later, I'm still conducting the survey, and men still come out ahead. The gap has narrowed very slightly, but women's clothing still follows form while men's clothing follows function, and pockets in women's clothing remain for most of us, most of the time, a cruel chimera. One year after Gilman's "If I Were a Man" came out in *Physical Culture,* by the way, the inimitable Alice Duer Miller published a book titled *Are Women People? A Book of Rhymes for Suffrage Times* that included the witty piece called "Why We Oppose Pockets for Men."[14] At one of the earlier international Gilman conferences, I had the chance to chat with Gilman's great-granddaughter, who works as a clothing designer for a prominent ready-to-wear dress manufacturer. I asked her whether she put pockets in the dresses she designed. Yes, she sighed. She did. But her superiors usually made her take them out. No doubt this state of affairs would have inspired Gilman to write an irreverent, funny poem—for the absurdities of what women were expected to wear deserved to be laughed into oblivion.

II. STRATEGY TWO: IMPERSONATION

A comic strip by Nicole Hollander features a rather self-satisfied looking man sitting on a barstool at a bar in front of a fancy drink announcing his opinions. At the other end of the bar, as the third frame in the strip shows us, sits the redoubtable Sylvia, flipping through a magazine, half listening, looking bored. She lets him have his say—but after he finishes his second sentence (or thinks he has), she finishes it for him with a twist:

> [First frame] Man: "Equal rights for women is unnatural."
> [Second frame] Man: "What is natural . . . "
> [Third Frame] Man: "—is men wanting to protect women."
> Sylvia: "From earning too much money."[15]

The humor works in part because Hollander has allowed the man to sound just as he might have sounded. She knows her readers have heard men like him make comments like that often.

Impersonating the voice of the person who holds attitudes you want your reader to reject is a dependable staple in the satirist's bag of tricks. Mark Twain found it useful, for example, to impersonate the voice of a racist newspaper editorialist in two of his satires on the treatment of the Chinese in San Francisco, "What Have the Police Been Doing?" (1865) and "Disgraceful Persecution of a Boy" (1870). He impersonated the voice of southern gentlemen in favor of lynchings in his 1869 satire titled "Only a 'Nigger.'" And, of course, he crafted the voice of an ignorant and repulsive white racist when he created the character of Pap Finn in 1885.[16] Paul Laurence Dunbar, a contemporary of Twain's and Gilman's, deftly evoked the hypocrisy of a racist white politician in the speeches he gave the white lawyer in a story he published in 1900 called "One Man's Fortunes."[17] Impersonating the enemy has been a staple of feminist humor, as well, and a strategy that Gilman sometimes found useful. One example is a poem she published in *The Forerunner* in 1913 titled "The Head of the Board":

> Abraham Stern, of the New York Schools,
> Is not to be classed among knaves or fools
> But stands with the Wise, the Strong, the Good,
> In defense of Sacred Motherhood.
>
> Motherhood is so holy pure,
> That no true mother could endure

To rob her child of reverent care
By teaching others anywhere.

. . . . . .

As far as Abraham's arm can reach
Mothers shall not be allowed to teach,
Nor teachers to wed—as others should—
Oh Grand Defender of Motherhood!

Besides his duty to shield the mother,
This gallant champion holds another,
From being corrupted, debased, defiled,
Abraham's arm must save the child.

Guard it from that familiar sight
Which at home is sacred, noble, right—
Can children bear—without shame—who could?
The sight or knowledge of motherhood.

Honor to Abraham, standing fast,
Fond champion of our dying past,
And Pity—even now one hears
The Future's universal jeers. (1–8, 13–28)

What a useful strategy impersonating the enemy is to ridicule the arbitrary and hypocritical rationales that constrict women's options in society. Alice Duer Miller employed it in a similar way in a 1915 poem called "The Gallant Sex." The poem is preceded by an explanatory note that says, "A woman engineer has been dismissed by the Board of Education, under their new rule that women shall not attend high pressure boilers, although her work has been satisfactory and she holds a license to attend such boilers from the Police Department" (Miller, "Gallant" 206). The poem then reads as follows:

Lady, dangers lurk in boilers,
Risks I could not let you face.
Men were meant to be the toilers,
Home, you know, is women's place.
Have no home? Well, is that so?
Still, it's not my fault, you know.

> Charming lady, work no more:
> Fair you are and sweet as honey;
> Work might make your fingers sore;
> And, besides, I need the money.
> Prithee rest,—or starve or rob—
> Only let me have your job! (1–12)

Half a century before Gilman and Miller, however, Fanny Fern had published a triumph of parodic impersonation of a sexist male when she wrote the most misogynistic, obnoxiously prejudiced review of her own book that she could imagine:

> We imagine her, from her writings, to be a muscular, black-browed, grenadier-looking female, who would be more at home in a boxing gallery than in a parlor,—a vociferous, demonstrative, strong-minded horror,—a woman only by virtue of her dress. . . . When we take up a woman's book we expect to find gentleness, timidity, and that lovely reliance on the patronage of our sex which constitutes a woman's greatest charm. . . . How much more womanly to have allowed herself to be doubled up by adversity, and quietly laid away on the shelf of fate, than to have rolled up her sleeves, and gone to fisticuffs with it. (Fern, "Fresh" 290–91)

Perhaps she bet on the fact that she had just preemptively topped anything nasty a reviewer of this ilk might want to say about her, thereby stealing his thunder—and his material.

While impersonating male sexists has been a perennially fruitful project for feminists like Fern, Gilman, and Miller, Gilman dared to take impersonation to a different level by impersonating the voices of anti-feminist women. This approach is central to the effectiveness of "The Unnatural Mother." In this piece, the City Boarder is introduced to the eponymous, now-deceased "Unnatural Mother," Esther Greenwood, through the comments made about her by three older women of the village, "old Mis' Briggs," Susannah Jacobs, and Martha Ann Simmons, all of whom disapprove of her heartily, and by "the Youngest Briggs girl," Maria 'Melia. Old Mis' Briggs opines, "'No mother that was a mother would desert her own child for anything on earth!' . . . 'I should think,' piped little Martha Ann Simmons, the village dressmaker, 'that she might 'a saved her young one first and then tried what she could do for the town.' . . . 'She was an unnatural mother,' repeated Miss Jacobs harshly, 'as I said to begin with'" (Gilman, "Unnatural" 57). When she was growing up, Esther's widowed father let her roam the country without shoes,

dressed in comfortable clothes. Gilman writes, "'You should have seen the way he dressed that child!' pursued Miss Jacobs. 'It was a reproach to the town. Why, you couldn't tell at a distance whether it was a boy or a girl. And barefoot! He let that child go barefoot till she was so big I was actually mortified to see her.'" Gilman tells us that Esther's "wild, healthy childhood" had made her different "in her early womanhood from the meek, well-behaved damsels of the little place. She was well enough liked by those who knew her at all, and the children of the place adored her, but the worthy matrons shook their heads and prophesied no good of a girl who was 'queer'" (59). Maria Amelia sticks up for Esther only to incur her mother's fury:

> "I think she was a real nice girl," said Maria Amelia. . . . "She was so nice to us children. . . . She'd take us berrying and on all sorts of walks, and teach us new games and tell us things. I don't remember anyone that ever did us the good she did." Maria Amelia's thin chest heaved with emotion, and there were tears in her eyes; but her mother took her up somewhat sharply.
>
> "That sounds well I must say—right before your own mother that's toiled and slaved for you!" (60)

The old women of the town hate Esther because she preferred outdoor games with the children to running after beaux, because her father had "actually taught his daughter how babies come," because she never learned housekeeping—and most of all because she put the welfare of the entire town above her own life and that of her children when the dam burst and she had to make a choice between saving herself and her children or saving the entire town. Never mind that they owe their lives to her. Never mind that many of the children for whom they knitted endless lace booties and dressed in fancy clothes and kept confined indoors lie in the graveyard—*they* know how mothers ought to behave. Esther broke the rules. Here Gilman deftly gets inside the heads of a group of women who are blind to the reality that if Esther *had* been a "natural mother" by their lights, if she had internalized the rules by which *they* lived, none of them would be there to tell the tale. There is quiet, chilling humor in Gilman's capable ventriloquist performance.

Gilman impersonates the voice of an anti-feminist woman once again in her poem "A Conservative," but with a lighter, more fanciful touch.

> The garden beds I wandered by
> One bright and cheerful morn,
> When I found a new-fledged butterfly,
> A-sitting on a thorn,

A black and crimson butterfly,
All doleful and forlorn.

I thought that life could have no sting
To infant butterflies,
So I gazed on this unhappy thing
With wonder and surprise,
While sadly with his waving wing
He wiped his weeping eyes.

Said I, "What can the matter be?
Why weepest thou so sore?
With garden fair and sunlight free
And flowers in goodly store:"—
But he only turned away from me
And burst into a roar.

Cried he, "My legs are thin and few
Where once I had a swarm!
Soft fuzzy fur—a joy to view—
Once kept my body warm,
Before these flapping wing-things grew,
To hamper and deform!"

At that outrageous bug I shot
The fury of mine eye;
Said I, in scorn all burning hot,
In rage and anger high,
"You ignominious idiot!
Those wings are made to fly!"

"I do not want to fly," said he,
"I only want to squirm!"
And he drooped his wings dejectedly,
But still his voice was firm:
"I do not want to be a fly!
I want to be a worm!"

O yesterday of unknown lack!

To-day of unknown bliss!
I left my fool in red and black,
The last I saw was this,—
The creature madly climbing back
Into his chrysalis. (1–42)

Did Gilman have anti-suffrage women in mind when she wrote this fanciful poem? A poem like this demonstrates Gilman's recognition that whimsical humor, just as much as dry sarcasm, had its role to play in the struggle.

III. STRATEGY THREE: INVERSION

The scene is unremarkable: a man and woman are speaking to one another at a suburban cocktail party. But it is the woman who addresses this question to the man: "and who were you before you were married?"[18] This cartoon by Martha Campbell employs the strategy that I'm calling "inversion." Inversion involves imagining how men would feel if they found themselves in women's bodies and clothes and roles, and how women would feel if they found themselves in men's bodies and clothes and roles. Gilman casts men in the position of women in her article "What Do Men Think of Women?" and in her discussion of the house-husband in *The Home,* and she gives a woman the chance to feel what it would be like to be in the position—and clothing—of a man in her story "If I Were a Man." In her article "What Do Men Think of Women?" in *The Forerunner,* Gilman asks,

> Suppose that women were the great bankers and financiers of Wall Street, ponderous creatures holding the financial fate of the nation in their hands (or trying to) and that the men of Wall Street were only a flood of chattering boy stenographers. . . . What would women think of men? . . . Or suppose that men wore costumes of such contemptible sort as to hamper them completely; shoes with deforming heels which would not allow them to stand or walk in comfort, much less run; trousers of such make that they could not take a free step and had to be helped about like cripples; hats which drowned face and head in irregular huge masses of velvet and feathers, robbing humanity of all dignity and intellect, . . . —what would women think of men then? Could a woman respect a man with his hat brim resting on his shoulders, his legs tied together, his body shaped this way and that from year to year according to his corsets—. . . ? (15–16)

In *The Home: Its Work and Its Influence*, Gilman continues to explore this strategy of inversion, writing, "Suppose we change the sex and consider for a while the status of a house-husband." The house-husband, totally devoted to his family,

> goes forth to the hunt, brave, subtle, fiercely ingenious; and, actuated by his ceaseless love for his family he performs wonders. He brings home the food—day after day—even sometimes enough for several days, though meat does not keep very long. . . . But try to point out to the house-husband what other things he could obtain for [his family], create for them, provide for them, if he learned to combine with other men, to exchange labour, to organize industry. See his virtuous horror!
>
> What! Give up his duty to his family! Let another man hunt for them! . . . He will not hear of it. . . . Strong in this conviction, the house-husband would remain intrenched [*sic*] in his home, serving his family with might and main, having no time, no strength, no brain capacity for understanding larger methods; and there he and his family would all be, immoveable in the Stone age.
>
> Never was any such idiot on earth as this hypothetical house-husband. (98–100).

Thus Gilman uses humorous gender inversion to argue that the requirement that women adhere to fashion in their dress interferes with their being respected and taken seriously as members of the human community; and she uses it to suggest that the opposition to women's joining forces with others to put food on their family's table and accomplish other household tasks with greater efficiency is absurd.

Gilman's story "If I Were a Man" allows Molly Matthewson to inhabit her husband's body and clothes for a day while keeping her own mind. The result is a revelation—not just about pockets, but about shoes, mobility, comfort, efficiency and a general sense of being at home in the world. Molly's surprise at all of these new sensations reminds readers in graphic, visceral ways of all that women lose by conforming to the social and cultural norms that confine them to unjustly narrow and constricted ways of life. All of these pieces are humorous, to varying degrees, and the humor stems from the inversion of gender roles (32–38). Once again, Fanny Fern tried this half a century before Gilman did in her column called "The Model Husband," which revealed a great deal of what was expected of the "model wife." In the late twentieth century, Judy Syfers reprises this strategy in her essay titled "I Want a Wife." And Alice Kahn, in "My Life as a Man," does a very similar

riff when she writes, "I can't make it in this man's world. Life would be so much easier if I had a wife" (133).

Writers from Alice Duer Miller to Mark Twain to Gloria Steinem have all explored the humorous strategy of imagining what it would be like if men were treated as women are. Miller demonstrates how it would sound if men were subjected to the same anti-suffrage arguments that women were in "Why We Oppose Votes for Men."

1. Because man's place is in the armory.
2. Because no really manly man wants to settle any question other than by fighting about it.
3. Because if men should adopt peaceable methods women will no longer look up to them.
4. Because men will lose their charm if they step out of their natural sphere and interest themselves in other matters than feats of arms, uniform, and drums.
5. Because men are too emotional to vote. Their conduct at baseball games and political conventions shows this, while their innate tendency to appeal to force renders them peculiarly unfit for the task of government. (*Are* 50)

In a wild farce Mark Twain wrote in 1898 titled *Is He Dead? A Comedy in Three Acts*, circumstances require that France's greatest painter, Jean François Millet, pretend to be his widowed sister for two acts. In the process, the limitations that social customs place on women are seen in a new light—from dress that confines women's movement to social norms that discourage women from expressing eloquence or outrage. But for what is probably the most celebrated instance of comic gender reversal, we would turn to Gloria Steinem's brilliant critique of the arbitrariness of male power, the essay "If Men Could Menstruate," a topsy-turvy romp through the halls of power. Alas, only a tiny sample of her prose will have to suffice:

> Military men, right-wing politicians, and religious fundamentalists would cite menstruation ("men-struation") as proof that only men could serve in the Army ("you have to give blood to take blood"), [or] occupy political office ("can women be aggressive without that steadfast cycle governed by the planet Mars?"). . . . Of course, male intellectuals would offer the most moral and logical arguments. How could a woman master any discipline that demanded a sense of time, space, mathematics, or measurement, for instance, without that in-built gift for measuring the cycles of the moon and planets? . . . In the rarefied fields of philosophy and religion, could women

> compensate for missing the rhythm of the universe? Or for their lack of symbolic death-and-resurrection every month?

"In fact, if men could menstruate," Steinem concludes, "the power justifications could probably go on forever. If we let them" (25–26).

IV. CONCLUSION

To sum up, then, Gilman often used humor to dramatize the absurdities of "our androcentric world." Three strategies that she found useful—illumination, impersonation, and inversion—were all used by Fanny Fern before her, and by a host of feminist humorists who came after her. Humor appealed to these women because of its catalytic possibilities—its potential power to challenge familiar patterns of thought, to spark new insights and understandings. As Mark Twain once wrote, "Power, Money, Persuasion, Supplication, Persecution—these can lift at a colossal humbug—push it a little—weaken it a little, century by century; but only Laughter can blow it to rags and atoms at a blast. Against the assault of Laughter nothing can stand" ("Chronicle" 165).

But Gilman's feminist humor rarely produces the kind of laughter Twain has in mind. When it works, it makes us smile—or wince. Something else Twain said might help us understand why. "Humor must not professedly teach, and it must not professedly preach," he observed, "but it must do both if it would live forever" (*Mark Twain in Eruption* 202). Gilman was a teacher and preacher first. Her humor was always part of the lesson, part of the sermon. The preaching and teaching came more easily to her than the humor. But maybe all feminist humor by definition aims to teach and preach. Maybe rather than blowing "a colossal humbug" to "rags and atoms at a blast," feminist humor tries to wear it away more gradually, as the feminist stand-up comic Kate Clinton suggests:

> Consider feminist humor and consider the lichen. Growing low and slowly on enormous rocks, secreting tiny amounts of acid, year after year, eating into the rock. Making places for water to gather, to freeze and crack the rock a bit. Making soil, making way for grasses to grow. Making way for rosehips and sea oats, for aspen and cedar. It is the lichen which begins the splitting apart of the rocks, the changing of the shoreline, the shape of the earth. Feminist humor is serious, and it is about the changing of this world. (Clinton 147)

Gilman wanted to change the world one mind at a time. She was well aware of the huge social and political obstacles that blocked the road to change. But as her whimsical, self-mocking 1890 poem, "An Obstacle," shows us, she also appreciated the ways in which a change in human consciousness could rob those obstacles of their power:

I was climbing up a mountain path
With many things to do.
Important business of my own,
And other people's too.
When I ran against a Prejudice
That quite cut off the view.

My work was such as could not wait,
My path quite clearly showed,
My strength and time were limited,
I carried quite a load;
And there that hulking Prejudice
Sat all across the road.

So I spoke to him politely,
For he was huge and high,
And begged that he would move a bit
And let me travel by.
He smiled, but as for moving!—
He didn't even try.

And then I reasoned quietly
With that colossal mule:
My time was short—no other path
The mountain winds were cool
I argued like a Solomon;
He sat there like a fool.

Then I flew into a passion,
I danced and howled and swore.
I pelted and belabored him
Till I was stiff and sore.
He got as mad as I did
But he sat there as before.

. . . . . .

So I sat before him helpless,
    In an ecstasy of woe—
The mountain mists were rising fast
    The sun was sinking slow—
When a sudden inspiration came,
    As sudden winds do blow.

I took my hat, I took my stick,
    My load I settled fair,
I approached that awful incubus
    With an absent-minded air—
And I walked directly through him,
    As if he wasn't there. (1–30, 37–48)

I love that image of a huge, hulking Prejudice blocking her path, and Gilman speaking politely first, reasoning, then arguing, then flying into a passion, dancing, howling, swearing in fury, pelting and belaboring him—and then, in an inspiration, pushing ahead and finding that he had no staying power at all. I like this poem for reminding us that, for all the teaching and preaching, Gilman could also laugh at herself—at her fixed ideas of how to fix the world. Gilman wanted to change the world one mind at a time. But sometimes, this poem suggests, she suspected that the mind that needed changing might just be her own.

NOTES

1. Cover, *Ms. Magazine*, Nov. 1973. Perhaps the most succinct and useful explanation of women's alleged deficiency when it comes to a sense of humor is Lisa Merrill's comment that "women's so-called 'lack of humor' is, in fact, a refusal to comply with the *premise* of a joke" (273). Or, as feminist cartoonist Betty Swords put it, "Women don't make the jokes because they are the joke" (65).

2. See, for example, Mike Adams, "Why I Don't Take Feminists Seriously, Part II." Townhall.com, 25 Jan. 2006. Web. 10 July 2010. http://townhall.com/columnists/MikeAdams/2006/01/25/why_i_dont_take_feminists_seriously,_part_ii.

3. Bing argues against a definition of feminist humor that "frames males as oppressors and females as victims" in favor of one that "celebrates the values and perspectives of feminist women" (22).

4. Another way of describing this process is, to borrow Judy Little's phrase, "satirizing the norm." Carol Farley Kessler invokes Little in her essay on Gilman's light verse, writing, "The light tone of [Gilman's early] verse I take to be a strategic calculation to disarm. In keeping with the contemporary authors Judy Little has examined, Gilman too attacks through satire, sarcasm, or scorn the traditions that are considered basic to social functioning: she 'satirizes the norm'" (140).

5. In her autobiography, as Kessler reminds us, Gilman noted, "Audiences are always better pleased with a smart retort, some joke or epigram, than with any amount of reasoning. In the discussion after a Forum lecture in Boston, an address on some aspect of the Woman Question, a man in the gallery, who evidently took exception to a dull rose fillet I wore in my hair, demanded to know how women could expect to equal men 'so long as they took so much time fixing up their hair and putting ribbons in it?' There was some commotion, cries of 'Put him out!' but I grinned up at him cheerfully and replied, 'I do not think it has been yet established whether it takes a woman longer to do her hair than it does a man to shave.' This was not an answer at all, but it seemed to please every one but the inquirer" (Gilman, *Living* 328; qtd. in Kessler 133). For a useful discussion of the complexity of women's humor, see Walker, particularly chapter 5, "Feminist Humor" 139–67; and June Sochen, ed., *Women's Comic Visions* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1991). See also the introductions accompanying the three leading anthologies of feminist humor, Deanne Stillman and Anne Beatts, eds., *Titters: The First Collection of Humor by Women* (New York: Collier, 1978); Kaufman and Blakeley; and Kaufman. See also Regina Barreca, *They Used to Call Me Snow White . . . But I Drifted: Women's Strategic Use of Humor* (New York: Viking, 1991) and Merrill. For an illuminating comparative examination of humor focused on domesticity by women and by men, see Gregg Camfield, *Necessary Madness: The Humor of Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

6. The one exception to the trend of ignoring Gilman's use of humor is Carol Farley Kessler's essay, "Brittle Jars and Bitter Jangles," which originally appeared in *Regionalism and the Female Imagination* 4 (1979): 35–43 and was reprinted ten years later in Sheryl L. Meyering, ed., *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: The Woman and Her Work* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1989). Kessler focuses on light verse from *In This Our World* (1895), noting that it is "often not funny at all, but rather satiric, sarcastic, even sardonic" (133).

7. Betty Swords cartoon (Kaufman and Blakeley 123). For more on Swords's achievements as a feminist cartoonist, see Swords ("Why") and Nancy A. Walker, "Talking Back to the Culture: Contemporary Women's Comic Art," *New Directions in American Humor,* ed. David E. E. Sloane (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998), 103–17.

8. This poem was originally published in *The Forerunner* 1 (Sept. 1910): 18 and then *Suffrage Songs and Verses* (New York: Charlton, 1911: 8–9). For more on the tradition of women humorists' focus on the housewife, see Zita Z. Dressner, "Domestic Comic Writers," *Women's Comic Visions,* ed. June Sochen (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 93–114.

9. This is the same move that Fanny Fern made fifty years earlier in her column

"The Tear of a Wife," which closes like this:

> what have you got to cry for? A-i-n-t y-o-u m-a-r-r-i-e-d? Isn't that the summum bonum,—the height of feminine ambition? You can't get beyond that! It is the jumping off place! You've arriv!—got to the end of your journey! Stage puts up there! You have nothing to do but retire on your laurels, and spend the rest of your life endeavoring to be thankful that you are Mrs. John Smith! "Smile!" you simpleton! ("Tear" 1964)

10. That "to do" list resonates, as well, with Gilman's poem "The Mother's Charge," in which a dying mother bombards her daughter with instructions for life that include such bits of wisdom as, " . . . don't iron sitting down— / Wash your potatoes when the fat is brown—" and such random rules for living as, "Monday, unless it rains—it always pays / To get fall sewing done on the right days" (9–12). Carol Farley Kessler suggests that the "grim humor" of this piece, in which the mother's mind comes across as hopelessly muddled, mixing "immediate directives—'the starch is out,' 'we need more flour,'"—with general housekeeping tips regarding washing, ironing, cleaning, and gardening," resembles that of E. M. Broner in *Her Mothers* (1975; rpt. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985). See Kessler 137–38 and Broner.

11. For a lucid discussion of Gilman's criticisms of the home and suggestions for constructive change, see Dolores Hayden, "Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Her Influence." Section V (chapters 9–12) of Hayden's *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981): 181–309. See also Polly Wynn Allen, *Building Domestic Liberty: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Architectural Feminism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

12. This comment by Bombeck has been quoted over 300 times on the Internet, but the original source is unclear. See, for example: http://www.sccs.swarthmore.edu/users/01/kyla/quotations/b.html.

13. Quoted by Hill and Deegan in their introduction to Gilman, *The Dress of Women* xxii–xxiii.

14. Miller wrote, "1. BECAUSE pockets are not a natural right. / . . . 5. Because it would make dissension between husband and wife as to whose pockets were to be filled. / 6. Because it would destroy a man's chivalry toward woman, if he did not have to carry all her things in his pockets" (*Are* 44).

15. See Nicole Hollander. For more on Hollander's achievements as a feminist humorist, see Patricia Williams Alley, "Hokinson and Hollander: Female Cartoonists and American Culture," *Women's Comic Visions,* ed. June Sochen (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1991): 115–38.

16. See Mark Twain, "What Have the Police Been Doing?" *Territorial Enterprise,* 1866. *Mark Twain: Collected Tales, Sketches, Speeches, and Essays,* vol. 1, 1852–1890, ed. Louis J. Budd (New York: Library of America, 1992): 196–98; "Disgraceful Persecution of a Boy," *Galaxy,* 1870. Budd, vol. 1. 379–82; and "Only a 'Nigger,'" *The Buffalo Express,* 1869, *Mark Twain at the Buffalo Express,* ed. Joseph B. McCullough and Janice McIntire-Strasburg (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1999): 22–23.

17. See Paul Laurence Dunbar, "One Man's Fortunes," 1900. *Sport of the Gods and Other Essential Writings by Paul Laurence Dunbar,* ed. Shelley Fisher Fishkin and David

Bradley (New York: Random House/Modern Library, 2005): 165–80.

18. Martha Campbell cartoon (Kaufman and Blakeley 76).

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