

From Diller to Schumer: The History of Gendered Political Comedy in the United States

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This summer I set out to explore the history of political comedy in the United States, specifically as practiced by female performers and comedians. To ground my study in historical context, I started with the originator of Old Comedy, Aristophanes. A prolific playwright in ancient Athens, Aristophanes is often credited as the “Father of Comedy,” and the strategies and style of his comedies are not so far removed from the political comedy we see on television today. For example, a staple of Old Comedy was the use of the self-ignorant man, who was powerful and fear inspiring in real life.¹ In his work we see real life figures such as Cleon and Lamachus parodied and “reduced to the role of weak, harmless, confused, and hence properly comedic figures.”² So, when we see modern day comedians like Tina Fey making a mockery of Sarah Palin, Kate McKinnon taking over for Amy Poehler as Saturday Night Live’s go to Hillary Clinton impressionist, or, more recently Anthony Atamanuik parodying President Trump on his Comedy Central series “The President Show,” we are witnessing present day performers engaging with a tradition established in 400 B.C. Now referred to as “punching up,” the comedic strategy of targeting the powerful instead of the powerless can also be traced back to Aristophanes, as he “avoids satirizing petty, private individuals, but, on the contrary, assails the great, like Cleon.”³

After establishing this historical framework, I began to focus on the history of female comedians in the United States, from early post-vaudevillian comedienne Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers and to modern day stand-ups such as Sarah Silverman and Amy Schumer. In addition to investigating female stand-up comics, I explored the history of TV stars [such as?] Carol Burnett, Mary Tyler Moore, and Bea Arthur. From this historical research, I constructed an interactive media timeline.

While researching this history I simultaneously explored the theories of “women’s humor” and “feminist humor.” Specifically, I focused on Joanne Gilbert’s theory of “performing marginality.” It is a common trope that it is the misfits in society who end up becoming comedians. Scholars such as Gilbert argue that it is this outsider status that fuels all comedic performances, and, in the case of women and other individuals excluded from the “power center of society” the performance of their marginality becomes a way of critiquing and deconstructing the power structures that marginalize them in the first place.⁴ This trend is clearly evident in many of the female comedians who have been performing in the United States for the past seventy years. From Joan Rivers’ self deprecation to Roseanne Barr’s sharp attacks on the opposite sex to Janeane Garofalo’s abstract and otherworldly critiques of the state at large, female comedians have always challenged the status quo, not only through the content of their material, but often simply in their engagement in a type of performance that has historically been categorized as male.

This preliminary investigation leads to the conclusion that comedy can be a particularly effective exercise in political power depending upon who is performing what, when, where, and importantly, to whom. With the understanding that comedy’s roots are in politics, and thus the performance of comedy is an inherently political act, when analyzing this work, or consuming comedy casually, it is important to consider who is laughing at what, at whose expense, and to what end. I will be pursuing further research questions raised by my summer project in my upcoming Theater Honors Project.

¹ Thomas Hubbard, *The Mask of Comedy* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1990), 4.

² Hubbard, *Mask*, 4.

³ M.S. Silk, *Aristophanes and the Definition of Comedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 47.

⁴ Joanne Gilbert, *Performing Marginality* (Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2004), xi.

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