

The Difference Gender Makes to Humour and Comedy in Contemporary British Culture.

The purpose of this essay is to look at the difference gender makes to humour and comedy in contemporary British culture. It will do this by firstly looking at the history of women's humour. It will then explore the production of humour and comedy, and then the consumption of humour and comedy with gender differences. Humour is a universal human characteristic which all cultures possess. In the British society it is important to have humour, it is seen as a demonstration of health and well being. Gindele states of humour: 'even laughter is a sign: it can signify pleasure, "detached" amusement, and anxiety'. (1994, p159). Humour is a way of relieving tension.

Theorists such as Wagg (1998), say that all clowns were male in the 1940's, for example Charlie Chaplin and Max Miller.

Even a cursory glance through the archives of popular British comedy between the 1930's and the advent of 'alternative comedy' in the 1980's reveals both a numerical lack of roles for female comics and that the available roles fulfil a relatively narrow range of comic stereotypes. (Porter, 1998, p.65).

According to Alice Sheppard (1995), women rarely ranked among important comedians. It was in the 19th century that some female writers became humorists, but it was more problematic for female comics. Porter says there is a lack of early documentation of comic performers, she argues that this is because there were fewer female comics or they were written out of history. She also says that early women comics have occupied clearly defined roles, used only as comic objects. Those who

made it to the stage operated in fixed stereotypes, for example, Barbara Windsor was a tartly, giggly blonde, others were mother-in-laws and housewives, Phyllis Diller originally had a frazzled housewife appearance on stage. Joan Davis was the 'funny person', she was clumsy and showed constant self-rebuke, but when a female tries to imitate the male 'funny-person' by wearing baggy clothes, she is classed as 'fat'. According to Porter it was inappropriate for women to perform 'risqué' humour that expressed sexual desire because her sexuality was only seen to be a direct function of his. McGhee (1979) found that people in higher professions initiate jokes more than those in lower professions and so supporting his theory that joke tellers have more social power than others do. He states that until more recently women have occupied lower status roles than men have, with the Feminist movement improving their status.

The production of humour and comedy ridicules others. Women have always had an aversion to ridicule. This means that there is a big distinction between male and female joke-tellers. McGhee says that the 'single main difference in humour is whether the joke teller is male or female.'(1979, p.201). He says that the male is more often the joke-teller whilst the female is usually in the position to react. Practical jokes and ritual insults are all part of humour and are very masculine, the clown or trickster is always male. Theorists such as McGhee (1979) and Sheppard (1985) say that joke telling is very masculine. McGhee argues that for a female to tell a joke she must violate the cultural expectations that females should not aggressively dominate – mixed sex social interactions. This supports their theory that women only 'clown' about in front of other women. In a single sex group women lose their inhibitions and can tell jokes. Alice Sheppard found that 'women's humour is not identical to men's because their social and psychological worlds are very different'. (1985, p.181). This

theory supports the common belief that women can not tell jokes and are not brought up to perform in public. Comedy writer Anne Beatts (1979) found that schoolboys were expected to show a sense of humour, whereas girls were not, girls who were funny were tough, fat, 'cutups'. Sheppard supports this, she says that from very early on, acting "silly" and "clowning around" were judged to be inappropriate and unfeminine, but were acceptable forms of behaviour from boys. She also says that boys make more attempts at humour than girls do at pre-school level. She says that these factors leading to sex typing in humour from a very early age and so leading to differences in gender between men and women.

Wagg (1998) says that controlling an audience is associated with being masculine, like being a lion-tamer. Joan Rivers said 'the minute a lady is in any form of power they (the public) totally strip away your femininity'. (Sheppard, 1985, p.11). As inequalities have been reduced for women, Wagg argues that masculinity was threatened due to a shift in economic and political gender relations, threatening traditional roles of men. As inequalities have disappeared, women can laugh as loudly and freely as men do, get drunk and can shout and joke at men; they can express sexual desire. Humour and comedy is based on taboo subjects such as sex. According to Freud 'jokes are the sublimated outlets of the expression of both hostility and sexual desire'. (Gindele, 1994, p.140). Women are the butt of men's dirty jokes and become 'objects'. Finney (1994) argues that its evident from men's dirty jokes that women are shown to be inadequate by referring to the sexual and domestic services they offer for men. 'They become objects designed to cater for the needs of men'.(Legman, 1968, p.136). Jo Brand (1998) feels that men don't have any respect for women. Legman says that this is clear in jokes, which are about humorous

definitions of womanhood or female roles. Jokes are perceived to be merely a vehicle for expressing views about women. Chapman and Gadfield (1976) found that this objectification of women made them feel less threatened by women as their social status rose.

Although theorists such as McGhee and Wagg prove that women are the butt of the joke, Plamer (1994) argues that women prefer the butt of a joke to be female, regardless of the theme. This is supported by Zillman and Stocking's (1976) finding that 'women prefer self-disparaging humour regardless of whether the self mocker is male or female, whereas men prefer humour that mocks somebody else, especially when the other is female'. (Palmer, 1976, p.69). McGhee says that the role of self-disparagement can be seen in the routines of professional comedians. Jo Brand is a female comedian who self-disparages herself; she constantly refers to body size and eating. She says that lots of comedians have very little self confidence maybe because they had felt alienated from society and that being a comedian is perhaps a way of getting attention and feeling loved. She also says that women self-disparage themselves because they know that men are constantly judging them on their appearance.

I've always felt that the putting yourself down stuff did give you a ticket to lay into someone else. Also, it gets it out of the way. Because, as a woman, you know when you come on stage the first thing you're judged on is your appearance. (Jo Brand, 1998, p.134).

Wagg (1998) found that other women laugh at such self-disparaging comments. According to Cantor (1976) women find greater enjoyment from jokes which men victimise women, thus supporting that there are gender differences in humour and comedy. Palmer (1994) says women tend to see the light side of a joke more than

men, they tend to have a better sense of humour. He says this is because they are used to occupying the lower status roles and so are freer to laugh at their own expense. In the 1960's and early 70's, women were accused of losing their sense of humour, but Palmer argues that their humour was just becoming more like men's. As McGhee argues, women's humour tends to differ from that of men. Palmer agrees that men and women do have differences in their humour and that these differences are to be found where jokes are about sex and aggression. He says that women's humour reflects inequalities that are still present in gender, in the techniques used, the social setting, the audience that appreciates it. Apte (1985) says that marriage advanced age and greater freedom for women balance out any inequalities, reducing the differences between men and women's humour.

We will look at the consumption of humour and comedy starting with Palmer, 'the nature of the occasions when humour is possible or permissible vary - among other ways according to the gender or who is present'. (1994, p.72). Sheppard (1985) found in her research that men and women showed enhanced appreciation for comedians of their own gender and that women have been received more favourably by female audiences. Although there are no grounds that men respond to sexual humour any more than women, McGhee (1979) argues that women find jokes funnier when men are the butt of the joke and men find jokes funnier when women are the butt of the joke. Theorists, such as Bluemel (1994) say we laugh at others expense, although in a guilty way. Gindele says 'we take pleasure in and laugh at nonsense as an activity in which we do not have to exercise rational criticism'. (1994), p.125). McGhee found that men do not laugh at a joke they do not find funny whereas women may use laughter as a 'social lubricant', they will laugh at a joke they do not find funny to

relieve tension and appear 'charming' to others. He also said that girls and women generally have a higher need for social approval and so they just do what they think is required in a particular situation. Men use jokes and laughter to dominate women, Palmer says ' male attempts to monopolise the right to be funny are part of the male power in the public domain'. (1994, p.72). Wagg says that mocking a woman is a way of making her less threatening, to control her. So women laugh at jokes to achieve social approval whilst men laugh to dominate women and achieve more control.

In conclusion, this essay has demonstrated the differences gender makes to humour and comedy by looking at the changes it has gone through and examining the production and consumption of humour and comedy in contemporary British culture. When we look at early humour and comedy, theorists such as Wagg and Porter show that there were very few female humorists and comedians. Differences in humour appear to start from a very early age, as Sheppard found that humour is not an appropriate form of behaviour from young girls whilst it is from boys. McGhee found that women were brought up to act in the correct way in public and so this is why they laugh at jokes which are not funny, as it is the right thing to do in a particular situation. Jo brand says that men do not respect women and so they are treated as objects, this is why men laugh at women and women self-disparage themselves, as they know that men are viewing them as objects. According to Wagg men feel under threat from women as their social status has risen. So although inequalities are lessening, women will always be 'joked' about by men because it makes men feel that they are still in control of women. The main difference that gender makes to humour and comedy is that women feel the need to self-disparage themselves whilst men joke

about women and sex. Today there are many more female humorists and comedians and, as inequalities decrease, the differences in humour decrease and women can laugh and joke about men, but they will always self-disparage themselves.