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Dorothy Jones

University of Wollongong, djones@uow.edu.au

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Edgy laughter: Women and Australian humour

Abstract

Offers a look on how Australian humor describes the status of women in several literary works. Women writers' treatment of their marginalization in society; Creation of a world where gender power relations are reversed; Description of male myths of nationhood; Satirical presentation of gender bias..

Keywords

australian, women, laughter, edgy, humour

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For many nineteenth-century British migrants, Australia was not only a geographical antipodes, it turned their lives topsy turvey. Like the process of carnival which, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, generates laughter through a 'suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions', the experience of emigration can create the sense of a world upside down (10). John Docker has argued that Australian culture contains a carnivalesque element which involves the overturning or inversion of usual relationships in society and family of power, authority and class (30). Certainly there are many Australian jokes which exploit such situations. Humphrey McQueen cites the following exchange, recorded in an English journal in 1852, as typical of life in the colonies where gold discoveries had altered so many people's material expectations:

"My good fellow," said a spruce newcomer to a rough looking fellow, "carry this bag and you shall have a shilling." The other coolly transferred a quid of tobacco from one cheek to the other, as he placed a cow-hide-shod boot on a convenient stone with the words, "Here my fine lad, tie my shoe and here's half a crown for you." (144)

Images of the world upside down have traditionally reinforced satiric comment on social injustice and inequality, as when King Lear exclaims in his madness:

A man may see how this world goes with no eyes. look with thine ears: see how yon justice rails upon yond simple thief. Hark, in thine ear: change places; and, handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief?. [IV, 6, 151-56]

Similarly, Australian jokes which employ this type of reversal suggest that those designated as social inferiors, through their status as mere colonials, are in reality far more competent and better able to cope than the English who look down their noses at them. New-chum jokes, used to test and reject newcomers (often portrayed as upper class Englishmen) for their inexperience and assumptions of social superiority, expressed the tensions of class conflict while reinforcing group solidarity among the old hands. They also helped foster a sense of national consciousness and identity. In one of his anthologies of Australian humour, Bill Wannan includes a Boer War anecdote of a very new British army lieutenant, all spit and polish, complete with monocle and swagger stick, who halted a very dirty, obviously very experienced, Australian Light Horseman, with a saddle slung over one arm, saying: "You, my good man, what regiment do you belong to?"

The Aussie spat his cigarette on to the road and eyed the young officer up and down. "The Queensland Bushrangers," he answered casually. Then he lifted a saddle stirrup to one eye in imitation of a monocle, and said with a forced accent, "And you, my good man -- what bloody regiment, may I ask, do you belong to?" (183)

That many Australians still respond strongly to images of the tough, irreverent digger contending with the snobbery and incompetence of commanding British officers is indicated by the comparatively recent success of such films as Gallipoli and Breaker Morant.

If a nation, in Benedict Anderson's definition, is an 'imagined political community', then traditional Australian humour -- strongly linked to national myths developed by the Bulletin writers in the 1890s -- has greatly contributed to imaginings of nationhood. It draws on historical experiences of convictism, pioneering and the bush and is bound up with perceptions of the Australian character as egalitarian, anti-authoritarian and irreverent towards social pretension, for, as Anderson indicates, nations are conceived 'as a deep, horizontal comradeship' despite actual inequalities and exploitation prevailing within them (15-16). This traditional humour which employs irony and laconic wit to undercut assumptions of social superiority is also characterised by wry fatalism, sometimes offset by

riotousness, expressed in outbursts of anarchic disorder where, as in Henry Lawson's story 'The Loaded Dog', events assume a carnivalesque absurdity.

But traditional Australian humour, in addition to mocking the class system and challenging British hegemony, also reveals a strain of exclusiveness and xenophobia, for the myth of nationhood which it helps constitute depends upon exclusion and elision for its very existence. Nations as imagined political communities define themselves both in terms of their differentness to what lies beyond their borders, that is other nations, and in terms of differences within, so that certain groups, distinguished, say, by racial background, are perceived to exist as separate enclaves which not only mark them out from the dominant group, but, by their very existence, contribute to an illusion of unity and homogeneity within that group. Aborigines and Asians -- particularly the Chinese who emigrated here in large numbers during the gold rushes -- have been the butt of many racist jokes, and one reason why the Australian national myth now looks a little tatty around the edges is that public attention has increasingly been drawn to its omissions, particularly in regard to Aboriginal people. Sally Morgan recounts how, as a child, her schoolmates kept asking where she came from: 'This puzzled me because, up until then, I'd thought we were the same as them. If we insisted we came from Australia, they'd reply, "Yeah, but what about ya parents, bet they didn't come from Australia." ' On her mother's advice she tells them she is Indian. 'It was good to finally have an answer and it satisfied our playmates. They could quite believe we were Indian, they just didn't want us pretending we were Aussies when we weren't' (38-39). Ania Walwicz also mocks Australian hostility to otherness in her poem 'Wogs':

. . . you don't know what they think you don't know what they can do here they change us
they paint their houses blue green have you seen blue houses who ever heard of that they
live too many together they're too noisy they chatter you don't know what they say they smell
funny there's something strange not like you or me i don't want to see asian tram conductors
(133).

The position of women is less clear-cut. Frequently they are relegated to the margins, unconsidered and inconsiderable, but they may also be elevated to the status of adversary. Just as traditional Australian humour, while ridiculing or ignoring Australians of non-British origin, depends upon a heavily oppositional stance towards the British as imperialists, so it often constructs women as the enemy -- 'God's police' -- relegating them to that region of gentility, the bourgeois sphere, where values are at odds with the freedom, egalitarianism and male camaraderie supposedly experienced in the bush. Australianism may be defined against a perception of Englishness on the one hand, and a particular definition of femininity on the other. Of course, large numbers of middle-class Englishwomen who emigrated to Australia in the nineteenth century were thoroughly complicit in the processes of colonialism, dismayed at discovering how social hierarchies, apparently so fixed and assured in Britain, were destabilised here. Elizabeth Murray notes the permeability of class barriers in her novel *Ella Norman or A Woman's Perils*, published in 1864, as she introduces a character who exemplifies 'the successful Irish immigrant, -- one of the class constantly seen in the States, in Canada, and in Australia, one of a class who, arriving under the most unfavourable auspices, rarely fail to work their way to the top of Fortune's wheel' (32). Rachel Henning, writing to her sister in 1862, is outraged that the colonists of Victoria should assume they could beat an English team at cricket:

It was a most audacious thing of the colonists to challenge the first players in the world, and to imagine that they could teach their respected Grandmother.

Order, however, asserts itself as the English team wins by an innings with ninety-seven runs in hand -- 'This ought to take down the colonial "bounce" a little' (81).

But, regardless of whether they accepted or utterly rejected their imposed role as members of God's police and gatekeepers of the social class structure, women have found that, within the traditions of Australian humour, they are constructed as either marginal or monstrous. In seeking to enter the male world, they are likely to be dismissed as absurd, or cast as termagants who preside over suburbia, like Ginger Meggs's mother in the comic strip or Barry Humphries's creation, Edna Everage. There are many Australian women humorists, of course, who simply ignore nationalist myth and its accompanying style of humour, just as plenty of male comic writers do. But women artists have achieved interesting results through challenging or subverting traditions in which they are either ridiculed or ignored. Creating humour from the edge sharpens one's jokes, as Judy Horacek demonstrates in her collection of cartoons, *Life on the Edge*, which satirises the power imbalance between the sexes. A woman dressed in a business suit and carrying a briefcase farewells her husband as she goes out the door: 'I'm off to my hobby now dear -- see you this evening' (7). A woman broadcaster sitting in front of a microphone replies to her male supervisor's complaint, 'If you could just try to sound less like a woman', with, 'You want me to do animal impersonations?' (9). The Virgin Mary laments to a female interviewer, 'They didn't wait to see if I was fertile or not -- they just put me straight onto the IVF program' (16).

Some women writers have explored the carnivalesque through creating, if briefly, a world where gender power relations are reversed. Julie Truscott, narrator of the novella 'Inventing the Weather' in Thea Astley's *Vanishing Points*, reminisces about her friend Flora who, as a university student, 'theorised about a new culture, a literature that examined the male body with the same offensive precision, inspected their dangling participles and pieces of marginalia with a thesis writer's eye' (189). So she evolves a method:

She began deliberately picking men up outside TAFE colleges after late evening lectures. "Watch me," she challenged. I watched. "Not you," she would say looking a prospective customer over and dismissing. "You". They couldn't believe their luck until she took them home to the flat, flung them into a brisk performance and then threw them out, pressing a dollar, or occasionally two into their hands. When she paid them they became furious. Humiliation, rage, violence to follow. She had her eyes blackened by affronted males and took in a protector, a huge rugby fairy "who has," said Flora, "that very thing about sodomites Freud missed. Vagina envy." His bulk frightened off wounded vanity. (190)

But Flora gives up her crusade quite suddenly, retreating into a relatively conventional marriage. 'There would have to be hundreds of us doing it. Thousands. A global movement. I can't take on the world!' (191-92). There is also comic reversal in a number of Mary Leunig's cartoons. Two careworn housewives, one with an empty sleeve pinned up against her jumper and the other with a chest full of medals, salute a memorial statue (wreaths laid at its base) of a pregnant woman holding a small child in one hand and a broom sloped over her shoulder with the other. In another drawing, the same two women, medals and war wounds prominently displayed, lean against the bar holding beer glasses while an energetic toddler rampages past, causing one veteran to tremble uncontrollably.

Just as Mary Leunig has appropriated details from male myths of nationhood associated with Anzac Day, so other women humorists have adopted and adapted the larrikin stance so important in Australian male comic tradition. In G.A. Wilkes's definition, the term larrikin denotes 'authentically "Australian" characteristics of non-conformism, irreverence, impudence' (203). Lawlessness and irreverence combined can be an apt way of conveying women's outsider status along with contempt for patriarchal institutions, and larrikinism also provides scope for sexual assertion as in Ania Walwicz's version of Little Red Riding Hood:

I was on the lookout for the wolf. Want some sweeties mister? I bought a red dress myself. I bought the wolf. Want some sweeties, mister? I bought a red dress for myself. I bought a hood for myself. Get me a hood. I bought a knife (Writing 7)

Cartoonist Kaz Cooke invokes the character of Hermoine, the Modern Girl, to instruct us on fashion, drugs, politics, sex and 'true lerv' in *The Modern Girl's Guide to Everything*. In a jaded mood, Hermoine's advice is to 'Treat romance like a cane toad . . . Study it furtively -- then squash it!' (5).

Larrikinism, which also embodies the idea of freedom from domesticity, may be a means through which women seek to appropriate what has traditionally been male territory, the space and freedom symbolised by the land itself. In Joanne Burns's poem 'real land', Cheryl, exiled to the school corridor -- 'might as well be in Siberia' -to draw maps as a punishment for burning down the school dunnies, delivers her dramatic monologue. Maps, a mere abstraction of the world, symbolising the lessons society would force on her, are contemptuously dismissed, 'real land doesn't look like this'. She won't tolerate cooking or sewing classes -- 'all that dumb embroidery. little chickens on aprons for mumsie on Mothers Day.' Determined to avoid her sister's fate -- '20 year old and she looks like a hag with them brats a kids and that slab of a guy she's married to' -- she ends by charting her own version of freedom. Although she has only a slim chance of obtaining it, her monologue reveals a determination and energy which suggests she might succeed.

i'm gonna be free. travel round and see real land. not maps in books, travel round in me own wheels. not gonna have any boss breathin down me neck all day. think i'll be a semi-trailer driver. out on the road with me tranny. ridin high in the cabin wearin what i like. i'll be good. got good eyesight. could drive me brother's Falcon when i was eight. took it out for a spin while he was mowing the lawn one day. dunno what all the fuss was about. i could drive better than all them jerks you see on the road crawlin along like they was sleep walkin. yeah i'll get me licence real easy no risk. then one day i'll have me own truck. Chezza's Transport Company. (182-83)

One of the most interesting comic creations by a woman writer is Lil Singer, heroine of Kate Grenville's novel *Lilian's Story*. Born in the year of Federation to a father named Albion, Lil, strongly identified with Australia itself, develops into a character who is part larrikin, part monster. As a child she deliberately overeats until she is grotesquely fat, and although this fails to protect her from her father's incestuous violence, it partly insulates her from it. Believing that 'Mobility is the key' (189), Lil spends most of her life as a wanderer. When young, she tramps like a swaggie through the bush: 'On my back I carried a blanket, a billy, bush tucker' (127). Later in life, released from Albion's power, she comes into her own, living as a nomad in the urban wilderness of King's Cross, appropriating taxis hired by others and reciting Shakespeare impromptu while thumbing her nose at the great Australian dream of house and garden. Fatness, which had freed her from the traditional feminine role when young, making adolescent courtship rituals seem absurd -- 'I was the fat girl who looked like coconut ice when she blushed' (71) -- also represents self-assertion in an alien, uncomprehending world. With time, Lilian grows into the massive body she herself has created, a symbol, not so much of the nation, as of national potential. Through her eccentricity, she becomes a touchstone to test the adequacy, courage and good will of those who cross her path as she is incorporated into the life of both Sydney and Australia.

Some women writers have chosen as their subject the masculinist myths of nationalism, grappling with them head on, as Thea Astley does in her novel *An Item from the Late News*, set in the outback town of Allbut in Northern Queensland. It is an imprisoning place where those who fail to conform are treated with suspicion and a contempt which flares readily into hatred. Women are precariously situated there. As Gabby, the narrator, reflects: 'I come

from a long line of men. This country tells me this. Rams this home' (133). The Aboriginal, Rosie Wonga, is utterly vulnerable, subjected to whatever indignity any white person in authority imposes on her. Disguising oneself as a man is a possible, though drastic form of self-protection, as in the case of Archie Wetters, who after a lifetime of boundary-riding and boozing with the boys at the local pub, is discovered, on death, to have been a woman. The town passes judgement: 'He wasn't a bad old sod. Not when you consider he was a woman' (18). Thea Astley angrily satirises the male world of outback myth -- 'the basic decency of blokes'; 'the fun in the locker room, the drinks with the boys, the bar dirt, national mateship' -- identifying it with militarism and the threat of nuclear holocaust. 'Manly games', also part of the myth, are similarly derided:

Is there only a choice between crotch sniffers and cricketers with menstruation envy? Those red streaked groins! (26)

As a squatter's daughter who has grown up in the district, the heroine, Gabby, is more of an insider than the other women in the novel, but she is forced to recognise she will never truly belong in this world -- 'women enter into it, but peripherally' (133). Gabby's tragedy is that although she recognises the appalling corruption of her male-dominated society, she is too contaminated by its values to oppose it wholeheartedly.

In her play *The Man From Mukinupin*, Dorothy Hewett suggests how Australian national myth might be redeemed through the efforts of women, especially women artists. As in *An Item from the Late News*, the setting is a tiny outback town, this time in Western Australia where rain is uncertain and the wheat harvest precariously gathered on the edge of the great salt plain, with the action covering a period from just before until just after the First World War. Humour combines with fantasy to undermine some of the crudities of national myth, and our belief in the possibility of its redemption is encouraged through tender mockery. The patriarchal authority which represents the main threat to human values in the play comes not from men bonded together in rituals of mateship and heavy drinking but from a narrowly puritan materialism, endorsed by characters who crave and assert ideals of bourgeois respectability. Such attitudes also give rise to pressures sending young men off to die in the war:

Face the test of nationhood,
Keep Australia free,
England needs you, Jack, to fight
For me, and me, and me.

Your country needs you in the trenches,
Follow your masters into war,
And if you cop it we'll remember
You at the Mukinupin store. (43)

The town is later proud that although 'not the faintest breath of these horrors ravaged our fair young shores . . . we gave our sons to face the test of manhood . . .' (67).

Many of the women characters regard themselves as exiles from a life of hope and creativity. Edie Perkins laments:

I was a city girl. I'd never seen the real country. At first we lived in that tin humpy at the back of the store, and I hung up all the family portraits tinted to kill. They stared down at us, night and day . . . Sometimes I thought, "I'll die of the loneliness" -- but, of course I didn't. They were such long, hot summers; but I must have got used to them. (101)

Even the disreputable Widow Tuesday claims: 'I was a civilised 'human being before Mr Tuesday brought me to this God forsakin' 'ole' (37), while Miss Clemmy Hummer, describes herself and her sister Miss Clarry as 'exiled here like shags on rocks' (61). But, unlike Astley in *An Item from the Late News*, where the heroine, although an artist, is unable to redeem or transform the situation for herself or anyone else, Hewett suggests that healing and reconciliation may be achieved through art, particularly by the agency of women artists, like the touring actress Mercy Montebello and the former tightrope dancer, Miss Clemmy. For Hewett the woman artist is a survivor who generally has to endure injury and hard times. Miss Clemmy reminisces about her career: 'I couldn't dance much, y'know Clarry, I couldn't really hit a high C, and my legs were terrible, but by God . . . I could walk that high wire' (61). The image of exaltedly maintaining a precarious balance sums up the woman artist's predicament:

CLEMMY: . . . I only hung by my teeth from the Big Top in dyed pink, see-through muslin.

CLARRY: You were a marvel, dear. If only you'd used a net.

CLEMMY: I ascended in a balloon above Melbourne, singing tra-la-la-boom-de-ay. (19)

But the heights are dangerous and Miss Clemmy fell from glory, returning crippled to live out the rest of her days in Mukinupin. By the end of the play, however, the former tightrope walker and the faded actress, Mercy Montebello, have restored harmony in Mukinupin and established the possibility of new beginnings through acts of mercy, for Miss Clemmy's name, Clementine, also means mercy. However funny, endearing and even, at times, inspiring Hewett's vision of reconciliation, it is rendered less credible by the air of fantasy which pervades the play than the harsh and bitter image Astley provides.

Australian humour has traditionally defined women as outsiders, at the same time setting them up as markers in opposition to which a particular version of nationalism can be defined. Women humorists have mocked and derided some aspects of this nationalism which set their teeth on edge and appropriated others to create their own source of laughter. By viewing our myths of nationhood from the edge, that is from a female perspective, they overturn them, revealing a dark underside as Thea Astley does, or deconstruct them so they may be reassembled in forms the writer finds more congenial.

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By DOROTHY JONES