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Abstract
How can the woman writer 'write angry', be 'at war with her lot' and not, to borrow from Woolf's consideration of this problem in A Room of One's Own, 'die young, cramped and thwarted'? In 'The Water Element Song For Sylvia' Wakoski is demanding more than mere survival, more than the lonely promenade along an empty beach which is the fate of too many 'liberated heroines' of the neo-feminist novel:
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‘Have you read the one about the angry women who laughed?’

Anger, anger, anger, I say,
rescue me:
let me fight:
...
Here is our problem, Sylvia:
how to feel enough anger to survive
and yet not to spoil one’s ability to love...

(Diane Wakoski, ‘The Water Element Song For Sylvia’ in Greed.)

‘Apple Pies’

To make crust, cut 1 cup shortening into 3 cups flour. Add 1 tsp. salt and ¼ cup cold water, a little at a time. Stir until dough has achieved correct consistency. Chill. Roll out on floured board.

To make filling, peel and core 6 or 7 apples (about 3 cups). Slice into uncooked pie shell. Add ½ cup sugar, ¼ tsp. salt, ½ tsp. cinnamon, ¼ tsp. nutmeg, and ¼ cup lemon juice. Dot with 1 tbsp. butter. Top with piecrust. Set oven at 450 (Regulo 7). Do not light gas.


How can the woman writer ‘write angry’, be ‘at war with her lot’ and not, to borrow from Woolf’s consideration of this problem in A Room of One’s Own, ‘die young, cramped and thwarted’? In ‘The Water Element Song For Sylvia’ Wakoski is demanding more than mere survival, more than the lonely promenade along an empty beach which is the fate of too many ‘liberated heroines’ of the neo-feminist novel:

Some days I feel dead....

I have opened all the doors in my head.
I have opened all the pores in my body.
But only the tide rolls in.

(Marilyn French, The Women’s Room)
How can women not only survive but, phoenix-like, arise newly creative and fertile, working through anger to find not ‘new varieties of defeat’ but patterns of commitment and optimism which celebrate female power?

The search for a different kind of feminist writing, one which is subversive, angry and defiant has been a dominant theme in a little examined area of women’s writing-humour. That the angry woman might use laughter and satire as a weapon has escaped many of us. Should we laugh at something like ‘The Sylvia Plath Cookbook’? I placed it alongside Wakoski’s address to Plath for it seems to me that it is another way of fighting back, and one which might end with a giggle and a defiant survivor rather than a whimper and no bang at all! The very irreverent gesture across to a quite different tradition of feminist writing which ‘The Sylvia Plath Cookbook’ makes also draws our attention to the way that much humorous writing tends to deliberately play itself against the solipsistic and fairly self-destructive patterns which have dominated neo-feminist realist novels in particular. By refusing to put their head in the oven or in the sand, the militant woman humorist is in the odd position of shocking not only men but also many feminists! ‘If it’s okay for women to write poems about menstrual blood, why shouldn’t it be okay for women to make jokes about women who write poems about menstrual blood? Well? Why shouldn’t it?’ (Titters, 1976).

Well, why? One reason supposedly is that women lack whatever it is that makes men in general, and men like Don Anderson in particular, ‘humorous’! As recently as January 1984 Don Anderson used an article on Australian humorous writers (all male) to reassert the proposition that humorous writing is an all-male preserve: ‘In the near Orwellian future we may be prescribed from saying, for example, that a feminist sense of humour is a contradiction in terms. Let’s hope a Barry Humphries will always be there to laugh us out of that authoritarian absurdity’ (National Times, 6-12 January 1984). Anderson is right in focussing as he does elsewhere in this article on humour as disruptive, subversive and ‘the hardest thing in the world to write’. Yet the authoritarian absurdity here is that humour is a male preserve, policed by a male in female Everidge guise. As the editors of Titters assert, ‘who among us will say, «I have no sense of humour. I wouldn’t recognise a joke if I tripped over it»? Nobody. Nobody, that is, except women.’ It is not part of the feminine role-model to be funny.

Ironically, it is not a readily accepted part of the feminist role either. For example, Patrick Cook offers the following about Australia’s best known feminist humorist, Robyn Archer:
Humour as a defense is its most important niche. For example, Robyn Archer was being interviewed about ‘Pack of Women’, her new stage show. One of the most boring, usual questions was ‘Do you say feminists have no sense of humour?’ Robyn did the completely wrong thing, backed over it, and stuttered out ‘The main problem is ... ahh ... that so many women come from working-class backgrounds, where things are really rotten and they don’t find life funny’.

She was exactly wrong, because the people who don’t find things funny are the academic bourgeois feminists, and the people who do find life amusing are those who’re having a rotten time. That source of humour is to be found a long way down the social scale — ‘the king is a fink!’ is the oldest standing joke there is!

There are a lot of presumptions here. Most obviously Cook’s reassertion of the ‘humorless feminist’ stereotype and the repugnant labelling of the ‘happy worker’. Yet also interesting is Robyn Archer’s own discomfort with the question of feminism and humour — an issue which seems to give her more difficulty in theory than in practice. What Archer refuses in theory here is the simplistic notion of woman’s life as funny, as the butt of generations of sexist chauvinist jokes women might be excused for failing to recognise many so-called jokes as ‘funny’. Yet, in practice, Archer’s work is a fine local example of the use of humour to explore and subvert conventional notions of women’s experience. In theatre Archer produces effects which a number of literary women — such as June Arnold, Jane Rule, Betty Webb Mace, Fay Weldon, Rita Mae Brown, Margaret Atwood — achieve via the feminist humorous novel.

I want to go on to make my case for the importance of feminist humour here in relation to the novel; however, I see this as only a beginning in producing a more wide-ranging analysis of feminist humour as it is emerging in a number of national and generic contexts.

The fact that we have paid little attention to funny feminists and that, ironically, feminists as much as anyone have been inclined to see ‘feminism’ and ‘humour’ as incongruous, is perhaps a result of our underestimating the deeply subversive potential of the humorous mode. The juxtaposition between the two visions of Plath — the tragic and the conventional and the humorous version with which we began — is useful because it highlights one of the best ways in which we can understand what humour is all about. For humour is the obverse of tragedy, it refuses the tragic ending. In this sense it is perhaps wrong to equate the humorous with simply the laughable, or with ridicule. If we look at feminist humour we see that it is concerned with precisely the same kind of experiences as tragedy — love, sexuality, mothering, etc. — yet turns away from the sense of doom and despair which shapes the tragic vision.
I have chosen to use the word 'humour' rather than comedy because, conventionally, comedy aims primarily to amuse and produce laughter. Although humour can be utilised to produce a comic effect the two are not the same, the comic is more inclined to ridicule and mock. In fact I think that the comic mode has not translated particularly well into the feminist literary tradition. Although Lisa Alther and Erica Jong are the best known 'funny feminists' they write within the comic mode rather than the humorous, and this produces some awkward breaks in their work, spaces where jokes crack and leave a sour legacy.

Certainly novels like *Kinflicks* and *Fear of Flying* represent an alternative to the lonely, self-defeating solipsism of *The Women's Room*. Isadora Wing and Ginny Babcock emerge triumphantly, self-assertive and ready to fight another day, 'patched, retreated and approved for the road'. Throughout *Kinflicks* Alther reminds us of the rules of the comic genre: her protagonist is fated to survive and this is used by Alther as a means of 'writing against' a more conventional ending; in this sense she is commenting upon earlier novels such as *The Women's Room*. Alther refuses to embrace suicide as a conclusion, and also satirises another alternative: the humanist individualist discovery of a deeper meaning and Truth. Throughout the novel all pretensions about Truth and Mankind are lampooned: Ginny's very last lesson is that suicide is a false statement of existential freedom, a false impression of the freedom and significance of the individual. Alther's persistent reminders about the rules of the comic genre — 'Like most of her undertakings, her proposed suicide had degenerated into burlesque. Apparently she was condemned to survival' — prevents any immersion of the reader in the text, that process of reading by identification which was celebrated in early feminist literary criticism. Alther is concerned to show that a social realist technique is not the only avenue open to the feminist novelist and that a more stylised satirical and self-conscious structure can be equally powerful. Jong does not self-consciously explore and respond to feminist literary precedents in this way, but her novels have much in common with Alther's in that they too attempt to use the picaresque, comic mode with a feminist heroine.

In some ways both Alther and Jong do make the comic mode work well. The comic traditionally stresses incongruity in language and appearance; this allows them to lampoon pretension and hypocrisy and the norms of patriarchal dominance. The comic pornography, which can be traced back to conventions which traditionally make fun of bodily functions and animal nature, translate into a female world to produce such non-traditional absurdities as the unexpected arrival of a period — a female equivalent of the male fart perhaps in terms of raising a laugh. In
In this sense the ability of the comic to mock weakness and excess, the gap between appearance and reality, ideals and experience allows Jong and Alther to break new ground in what female protagonists can think and do. Ginny and Isadora are frequently witty and outrageous, like all picaresque hero(in)es they glide across the surface of life from one adventure to another, unscathed.

Yet in other ways these comic conventions have not translated into the feminist literary tradition well. What price some of the laughs and optimism? In *How To Save Your Own Life* for example the traditional happy ending arrives with the discovery of Self in the Ultimate Fuck, and this is merely the tip of a rather phallic orientation in much of this writing. Too often Alther and Jong take what has always been the easy way of gaining a laugh: at the expense of women. Both, for example, send up lovemaking between women — Isadora resorting to a women’s commune in which the women are stereotypically unworldly and ill-equipped for survival, where the electricity bill is enormous due to the incessant use of vibrators. The hedonism, youth and self-display of both of these heroines does little to challenge the conventions of male mythologies about women, sexuality and the fetishisation of the phallus and physical attractiveness. Both Ginny and Isadora are very conventional women in some senses, simply joining the ranks which have previously been manned by the likes of Roth and Mailer. From this point of view the widespread popularity and acceptance of these novels should not surprise us; they do little to contradict traditional norms and, in fact, refurbish and reassert them under the banner of feminism. It has been suggested that the adventures of Ginny and Isadora take place in a social and political vacuum; perhaps their effect has not been so innocent.

The comic mode as practised by Alther and Jong does not, to my mind, work well from a feminist point of view (one can, of course, already hear Don Anderson finding this judgement ‘absurdly authoritarian’). This is not to say that the comic cannot work here but simply that as yet it has not done so, neither Jong nor Alther have managed to translate comic conventions into a feminist framework without also bringing some of the patriarchal and heterosexist trappings. More successful perhaps is Rita Mae Brown’s *Rubyfruit Jungle*. Here Brown uses the comic to present a picaresque lesbian heroine, Molly Bolt. I shall return to this novel later, however suffice to say that here too a lack of emotional depth and a romp from bed to bed works against some of the things which Brown wanted to say about woman-centred relationships.

On the other hand, the conventions of humour have translated into a feminist framework well, so much so that it has become a major part of
much lesbian or woman-centred writing. Separating comedy from humour is not easy, yet it is useful to realise that the word ‘humour’ was not originally associated with laughter and even now humorous writing is far more sympathetic, tolerant and emotionally complex than the comic. Humorous characters have a depth beyond that of Isadora or Molly Bolt; for these reasons it seems to suit the concerns of woman-centred writers such as June Arnold. George Saintsbury’s standard trope runs ‘Humour laughs, however deeply it feels, and sometimes chuckles; but it never sniggers’; it is these qualities of seriousness and emotional depth which bring us back to the exploration of deep and sometimes destructive emotions which has been an important part of neo-feminist writing. In the writing of women such as Arnold and Piercy humour is used to tap anger, but in a different key, leading towards compromise and survival. This is not the kind of ‘survival according to the rules of the genre’ which we find at the end of *Kinflicks*; it is a resolution which is reached by working through issues, relationships and emotions.

These differences become clearer if we compare *Rubyfruit Jungle* with Brown’s second novel, *Six Of One*. In the latter the peripatetic picaresque heroine Molly Bolt is replaced as the centre of interest by a community of women who are observed over a long period of time. The women interact in a number of ways; here lesbian relationships are not the subject of prurient interest but have a fruitfulness and naturalness equivalent to the heterosexual relationships favoured by some of the women. Brown’s protagonist returns to find her place in this community, the act of regaining and refurbishing her grandmother’s house becomes a symbol of continuity across the generations of women. She herself grows, and writes, a far more realistic and natural heroine than Molly. One senses in the contrast that Brown herself may have felt that the comic format of her earlier novel worked against her desire to portray lesbian relationships sympathetically and naturally; Molly’s multiple and short-lived relationships are comic, yet invite the label she despises: ‘just a piece of meat’. Molly’s progress from adventure to adventure and her lack of personal growth are true to the comic tradition rather than the lifestyle which Brown was concerned to depict. The humorous mode of *Six Of One* allows her to develop the more sensitive and sympathetic point of view without abandoning that ability to make the reader laugh, which Brown does so well, and also to sustain the intention to disrupt and subvert which is such an important part of feminist writing.

June Arnold in particular seems concerned to make a space for humorous writing in the feminist tradition; she openly writes against both the comic mode as it is used by Jong and the solipsistic ego portraits
of the biographical novel as it is practised by Oates, French and (early) Lessing. In Arnold’s *Sister Gin*, Su, a successful book reviewer, gradually becomes aware of women’s writing at the urging of an anarchic, disruptive ‘briny bitch’ called Sister Gin who, genie like, mysteriously leaves alternative reviews of women’s writing in her typewriter. Gin’s reviews are quite contrary to the ‘respectful careful summaries’ of praise balanced with a tiny fault or two which are the standard fare of Su’s profession. They clash, for example, over a review of May Sarton’s *As We Are Now*, for which Su writes the standard commentary:

...one of the few serious books about female death in our disposal-obsessed culture. Caro embodies the extraordinary virtues of women who have lived in the real world for eighty years — the ability to size up strange situations, the intellect to uncover truth, the sophistication to be able to make contact with all kinds of people, and, finally, as we watch her being stripped in a literal humiliation by the ‘rest home’ attendant whose envy compels her to make Caro die by small days, the courage to choose death.

Which the ‘briny bitch’ rewrites as follows:

Caro has all the virtues of women including horror that she might be thought a lesbian and you hate the word as much as they do. She may have the courage to choose death but she can’t stand the word queer. Caro found it disgusting that ‘they’ thought her feeling for the one woman who treated her with tenderness might be sexual. You found her disgusting for finding that disgusting. You are disgusted with old women anyway.

Gin retreats only as Su’s own judgements about literature begin to reflect an understanding of not only sexist but also heterosexist bias in much women’s writing. Significantly the rite of passage for Su is a review of Joyce Carol Oates’s *Do With Me What You Will*:

The publisher’s attempt to cash in on feminism with a book which is not even remotely feminist (even in opposition) is standard male commercialism. Oates’s attempt to flatten her women so stringently (to get them beneath her men) that they are no thicker than paint on the floorboards is par for the fifties where busy, productive, educated women wrote novels about idle, passive, ghostlike females as if they, the writers, were not women also.

Busy, productive, educated, and parched and starving readers who were also women knew in their wombs that such writers were pulling a fast straddle and were, in fact, writing male fantasies in a female hand. As Sister Gin, that fearless critic of those who cry ‘woman’ too often to be believed, succinctly puts it: In the new wave of women, everyone tumbles over each other like periwinkles racing to get stranded on the sand.
Su is fired shortly after for tearing *Fear of Flying* apart although its publishers had paid for a large promotion. To *Sister Gin* both Jong and Oates have been elevated by the male literary powers to the position of woman-novelist-to-get-the-praise.

June Arnold is firmly nailing her colours to the mast here, setting her own perspective apart from the woman-novelist-to-get-the-praise canon and suggesting that Jong, Oates et al. have done little to subvert the patriarchal norms for the presentation of women and female relationships in literature. Arnold pursues this difference further by returning to the ‘on the beach’ metaphor and exploring different connotations; in *Sister Gin* this becomes an image of survival: ‘In the new wave of women, everyone tumbles over each other like periwinkles racing to get stranded on the sand. Us old periwinkles who have been beached before shout with a mouthful of salt. Salt is full of savour here in the breakers...’ Arnold’s women ‘shout in the wave’ exultantly, her ‘old periwinkles’ are not alone on the shore, or transcendent in death but survivors, ‘I ran in and disappeared into the stomach of a wave. The next wave picked me up and deposited me as nice as you please back in the shallow...’ Here she is playing with traditional uses of imagery in women’s writing, translating Mira’s lonely walk on the beach, or Chopin’s death swim, into patterns of survival. On her shores the women discover the ‘salt, and bitter, and good’ — ‘Staring at the crystal green of the winter sea all things seemed possible and spring, for the first time, inevitable’.

In *Sister Gin* spring comes after a long process of relearning and rediscovering women which takes place at a time when women are, traditionally, ‘beached’. Arnold’s women are all middle-aged to say the least; Su is fifty and in menopause, the tradition of the young, attractive heroine is rejected and ‘age’ and ‘menopause’ become metaphors for rebirth and positive change. It is hard to imagine how this could be done in any way other than the humorous mode; to be comic would be to risk superficiality or ridicule of what deserves to be taken compassionately and yet to write realistically would be to invite pathos, which Arnold carefully avoids. As I have suggested, there are a number of ways in which Arnold quite consciously addresses and rewrites other feminist conventions, defining a space for humour. Even after twenty years of neo-feminist writing it is still rare to find writers who do seriously challenge both sexist and heterosexist norms and biases in this way, who are both brave, witty and delicate enough to describe lovemaking and desire amongst older women, when the flesh is no longer taut or the teeth intact.
Such literary interpretation as I have pursued here does little justice to the fun of Arnold’s novel, in which the figure lusted after is a 77-year-old woman whose Tuesday afternoon bridge club doubles as a vigilante gang for punishing local rapists, and in which the grasp of the real is loose enough for a genie-like character to coexist with this community of aging women. These are potentially elements of comedy; yet mixed as they are with complex characterisation and a serious attempt to develop alternatives to some conventions of neo-feminist literature, the novel itself is not comic. Like many of Arnold’s characters and situations it rests on a balance between laughter and tears, a complex mix of emotions. It is significant that the end of Su’s process of relearning is the discovery of anger, that emotion which percolates right through feminist literature, she experiences ‘a full torrent of anger — flowing, pouring, cascading … like a mountain waterfall, sparkling and shimmering and clean as glass, glistening and fresh and pure as spring’. This is part of the process of rebirth which comes as menstruation ceases, a new kind of creative force from the womb which comes with age like oysters ‘slowly growing plump and making pearls’. For Arnold anger is a source of power which can be controlled rather than erupting wildly and self-destructively: ‘Sitting on the spout she could become a steam engine if she could learn to raise up and down in regular squats…’ Here the characters do ‘feel enough anger to survive’ and love.

It seems to me that, for the present at least, some of the most innovative and subversive feminist writing is humorous. Arnold’s novel ends with her characters brought together in laughter, Su and Sister Gin enter ‘the room of female laughter’. This is of course a quite different room to the ‘room of one’s own’, the ‘women’s room’ of Woolf and French. Yet it is no mere annex but a vital and new part of the structure which, at the pens of writers like Arnold, Piercy and Brown, is a space from which some of the most powerful feminist writing will come.