

Gender and Humor in Early America

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Abstract:

This issue of *Studies in American Humor*, focusing on early and antebellum American humor, takes us deep into the archives to explore the complicated relationships between humor and gender identity at different historical moments and in different genres. Taken collectively, the essays in this issue reveal how writers have deployed humor to negotiate cultural conceptions of masculinity and femininity as well as to navigate relations between the sexes.

Article:

In "The Nineteenth-Century Female Humorist as 'Iconoclast in the Temple': Gail Hamilton and the Myth of Reviewer's Disapproval of Women's Comic-Ironic Writings," Erika Kreger explores the largely positive reception history of the humorous periodical sketches of Mary Abigail Dodge (1833-96), who wrote under the pen name and persona Gail Hamilton. Kreger argues that it was not until late in the nineteenth century that critics came to see wit and humor as incompatible with femininity. Hamilton, who began publishing in the 1850s, was widely celebrated early in her career for her wittiness. Deployed in a comic-ironic mode, this wit creates a kind of textual instability in Hamilton's sketches that enabled critics to perceive her as simultaneously radical and orthodox. While this double-voiced strategy undoubtedly contributed to Hamilton's popularity, Kreger concludes that it ultimately limited the range of her social critique, because readers and reviewers could dismiss such critiques as the humorous quirks of Hamilton's persona, as opposed to what they believed was the stable conventionality of the author behind the persona.

Masculinity, rather than femininity, is the focus of Scott Routine's "Playing Like a Man: Noncompetitive Manhood and Frontier Humor," in which he questions why frontier humor so consistently punishes men who seeks to assert excessive masculinity through games and competition. While Dana Nelson argues in *National Manhood* that competition produces masculinity and fraternity, Romine finds that in frontier humor masculinity emerges from fraternity and camaraderie. He suggests that southwest humor's embrace of camaraderie and its celebration of masculine spaces were at least in part a reaction to the economic uncertainty of the antebellum era. Excessive economic or social ambitions—which serve to make visible the class boundaries that these celebrations of masculine camaraderie generally occlude—are consistently punished in this genre through scenes of humiliation and exposure.

Both the *Recovery Room* essays in this issue explore how women writers used satire and wit to gain public forums through which to address social and legal issues of concern to women. In "'Dear Matron—': Constructions of Women in Eighteenth-Century American Periodical Advice Columns," Lisa Logan discusses some of the earliest American periodical advice columns, advice columns authored by women, for women. Logan concludes that the waggish tone of the queries about bigamy and venereal disease likely titillated and amused readers of both sexes, thus enabling their appearance in so public a forum as a literary periodical. At the same time, the content of these columns grappled with legal issues regarding the marriage contract that would be of great interest to women readers.

The matronly wit and wisdom of the eighteenth-century advice columns reappears in the satirical poetry of the nineteenth century, as Paula Bernat Bennett argues in "A Muse of Their Own: The Satirical Poetry of Nineteenth-Century Feminists." Indeed, Bennett argues, satirical feminist poetry forms a kind of counter discourse to the sentimental tradition, a counter discourse sometimes deployed by the very writers—such as Phoebe Cary—whom modern literary critics have tended to pigeonhole as sentimentalists. Humorous poetry about the relations between the sexes, especially in the form of parody, permeates the nineteenth century's books, periodicals, and newspapers.

While readers will find much to ponder in the archival richness of this number of *Studies in American Humor*, I would like to leave readers with some suggestions for avenues for future exploration. The essays in this issue discuss humorous works from a variety of genres: the sketch, periodical advice columns, poetry from periodicals and newspapers, and short stories from the tradition of southwest humor. But humor manifested itself in a plethora of forms in early American writings. For example, while sentimentality is the predominant mode in early American fiction, as in poetry, satire similarly provided a counter discourse in such novels as Tabitha Tenney's *Female Quixotism* (1792) and Hugh Henry Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry* (1792-1815), both of which satirize the sentimental marriage, American social classes, and manners. Satire was not limited to fiction: periodicals are filled at that time with "poetical essays" that humorously explore the relations between the sexes. Further, in the eighteenth century, humor in general and wit specifically were crucial elements in cultivating sociability; humorous language play both entertained and offered competitors the chance to demonstrate their skill in both relatively simple forms such as jests and riddles and in more challenging forms such as enigmas and crambo (Shields 161-68).

The recent debut of electronic versions of such archival databases as *Early American Imprints* (1689-1819), *Early American Newspapers* (1690-1876), and *American Periodicals Series* (1741-1900) offers the tantalizing possibility of making widely available for the first time a vast array of humorous texts, encompassing everything from joke books to local poetry, from the humorous sketch to satirical novels. The search features common to these databases enable readers to search by such familiar categories as author, genre, and publisher, as well as to engage in word and topic-based searches spanning entire databases. The cost of these electronic databases may well be prohibitive to many institutions, but I urge readers to ask their libraries to invest in these databases, as well as seek ways to band together in consortiums to share the cost, so as to enable more scholars and students access to these treasure troves of humor.

Works Cited

- Brackenridge, Hugh Henry. *Modern Chivalry. Containing the Adventures of Captain John Farrago, and Teague O'Regan, His Servant.* 1792-1815. Albany: New College and UP, 1965.
- Nelson, Dana. *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men.* Durham: Duke UP, 1998.
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American humor refers collectively to the conventions and common threads that tie together humor in the United States. It is often defined in comparison to the humor of another country – for example, how it is different from British humor and Canadian humor. It is, however, difficult to say what makes a particular type or subject of humor particularly American. Humor usually concerns aspects of American culture, and depends on the historical and current development of the country's culture. The extent to which an individual will personally find something humorous obviously depends on a host of factors. I discuss how individuals use humor in gendered ways, thereby performing gender, and reproducing the gender system. Finally, I discuss the deconstruction of gender, through humor in the conversational humor of women friends and the political humor of the women's movement.

2. Gender and language research: a brief history.

Within the social sciences generally, research on gender and language has expanded. Its early focus on cataloguing differences. Increasingly, researchers are asking questions grounded in social interactionist and social constructionist stances.