

Review: *Wit's End: Women's Humor as Rhetorical and Performative Strategy*

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A new season of television starring comedic women is upon us. Though women have long held starring roles in comedy television, it appears that the fall television lineup is saturated by a record number of successful comedy television shows with women in starring roles.¹ Although it pleases me that women have claimed primetime comedy television as their own, I often consider the roles women play as well as the shows in which they star as simply perpetuating stereotypical and marginalizing gender roles, which prevents me from appreciating said shows. However, my perception of television's funny women has changed considerably upon reading Sean Zwagerman's book *Wit's End*; I now perceive these women as using humor in complex and purposeful ways.

Although he focuses on women with starring roles in twentieth-century American literature, Zwagerman's analysis of the complexity of women's humor offers implications that far surpass complicating and complimenting our television viewing experiences. Through a feminist approach and with a feminist agenda, using rhetorical theory, speech-act theory, and literary

¹ Three successful shows that premiered last fall are back for second seasons (e.g., NBC's *Whitney*, Fox's *New Girl*, and CBS's *2 Broke Girls*), adding to NBC's *30 Rock* (now in its seventh season and final season), ABC's award-winning *Modern Family* (now in its fourth season) and Fox's *The Mindy Project* (premier season).

and textual analysis, Zwagerman's research allows us to "consider what [humor] does in the hands—or on the lips—of speakers traditionally denied both performative authority and the right to use humor" (4). In his analysis of works by authors James Thurber (Chapter 2); Zora Neale Hurston (Chapters 2 & 5); Dorothy Parker (chapter 2); Edward Albee (Chapter 3); and Louise Erdrich (Chapter 5), Zwagerman uses literary representations in order to showcase "the total speech situation and the 'transideological' potential of humor" (5) because, according to Zwagerman, such has largely been unconsidered by speech-act (which Zwagerman refers to as "performative") and rhetorical theorists.

Zwagerman's work makes many contributions to advancing the study of women in the history of rhetoric, even though the women he studies are fictional. One contribution is the exigency for a broader consideration of how women's humor can "be conservative and stabilizing as radical and 'decentering'" (6). This focus offers those studying women's epistemologies something feminist scholar Linda Gordon once advocated:

...choosing topics or sources of information that allow us to see only domination or only areas of women's autonomy can be illegitimate. Our collective goal ought to be to advance a theoretical framework to our scholarship that transcends... dualism[s] and incorporates the varied experiences of women. We need...work that insists on presenting the complexity of the sources of power and weaknesses in women's lives. (25)

Gordon's standard for scholarship is upheld by Zwagerman in his ability to carefully consider multiple and differing positions; in his ability to collectively synthesize those works in meaningful ways; and in his ability for showing the various roles women using humor have played in American literature. Zwagerman's demonstration of the ways in which humor enacts and prevents women's agency upholds Gordon's standard in providing a more complex understanding of women's multiple roles.

Chapter 1's title and subtitle, "Like a Marriage with a Monkey': An Argument for the Use of Speech-Act Theory in the Analysis of Humor," reveal the chapter's argument. In his examination and support for the work of speech-act theorist J. L. Austin, Zwagerman situates his works in relation to the work of Austin, Jacques Derrida, and John R. Searle in order to claim that every humorous speech act has an intention worthy of attention. Near the end of the chapter, Zwagerman demonstrates the multifaceted nature of humor within a single speech act by focusing on an interaction between a husband and wife, in which the husband pleads, "I was only joking!" Zwagerman supports his argument for the complex intentionality of a given performative, by explaining how a single statement ("I was only joking") can mean one of fifteen different kinds of speech acts (35-9). This section models the kind of feminist critique Gordon advocates, in that it accounts for a multiplicity of meanings. Thus, this section, like the entirety of Zwagerman's book, productively advances research of women in the history of rhetoric and composition, by showcasing a fuller picture of the multiplicity of women's experiences, through a consideration of the various ways humor can be used to enact or limit women's agency.

Chapter 2, "Subversive Potential Meets Social Resistance: Women's Humor in Thurber, Hurston, and Parker," is broken up into the sections, "James Thurber and the fear of the Humorous Women" (42-52); "The Realization of Humor in *Seraph on the Suwanee*" (52-73); and "Dorothy Parker and the Dance of Humor" (73-91). The chapter begins with an examination of Thurber's use of dominant women and submissive men, which "upset roles and expectations" (48-9), demonstrating the complexity, specifically, the possibilities and limitations for women's agency in Thurber's chosen performatives for women's interactions with men. Moving on, Zwagerman compares Zora Neale Hurston's use of humor in *Seraph on the Suwanee* to Thurber, in order to carefully and thoroughly explain the possibilities and constraints of Hurston's

female character Arvay's use of humor as agency enacting. Comparing Thurber's women to Hurston's Arvay, Zwagerman notes that "though humor can be the performative mode of the oppressed, it is not magically effective against that oppression" (71). In the final section of the chapter, Zwagerman examines Dorothy Parker's "The Waltz" to showcase how Parker allowed women to use humor to perform in "a man's world" demonstrating how "humor can critique, reframe, or rename constructed reality (social facts)" (75-76). The comparative analysis Zwagerman undertakes in this chapter upholds Gordon's earlier call for scholarship that accounts for the various degrees of power women hold. Zwagerman's willingness to show the various roles afforded to women using humor in their interactions with men provides a fuller picture of women's agency and how women can use humor to possess various degrees of power.

Chapter 3, "Generally Unhappy: The Deconstruction of Speech Acts and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*," addresses the limitations of J.L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* before discussing the limitations of Derridian epistemology. The majority of the chapter is an analysis of the humor in the exchanges between characters Martha and George in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* This analysis, according to Zwagerman, provides the best example of "Derrida's theory of speech acts in practice" (102). Thus, this chapter might be of particular importance for those studying Derrida and/or speech-act theory, as Zwagerman does an excellent job breaking down Derrida's complex epistemologies clearly and concretely.

Chapter 4, "Comic Relief: A Stand-up Performance by J.L. Austin and the Consequences of Not Getting It," makes the case for Austin's rhetorical genius by outlining the many mis-readings of Austin by scholars such as Derrida, Felman, Miller, and Sedgwick, thus providing the exigency for a reconsideration of Austin's contributions to the study of rhetoric, speech-acts, and feminisms. Zwagerman claims that Austin used humor to comment on humor

in ways that were overlooked (and looked over) by many scholars. Zwagerman compares Austin to Charlie Chaplin, stating, "neither Chaplin nor Austin is *really*—accidentally or unexpectedly—falling down: it's an act. Austin enacts failure as a form of humor and humor as an epistemology, as not just a saying or a doing, but a way of doing thinking, of calling knowledge into question" (148 emphasis in original). Such a comparison, coupled with his thorough literature review, persuaded me to accept his position of Austin's rhetorical genius.

Chapter 5, "Failure Revisited and Authority Regained: Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*," is a comparative analysis of the ways in which two women from twentieth-century American literature used humor. Zwagerman begins by discussing Hurston's Janie from *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, who goes on trial for killing her husband Tea Cake. He compares Janie's weak use of humor to *Love Medicine*'s Lulu Lamartine use of humor during her trial. This comparative analysis demonstrates the various performative acts available to these female characters. According to Zwagerman, Lulu is able to use humor more authoritatively than Janie. We see Lulu as performing a power usually only afforded to men; her exercise of power makes the men in the courtroom uncomfortable and provides Lulu with a considerable amount of agency. This chapter allows us to see a spectrum of power afforded to women through their intentional uses of humor.

In the final chapter "Sisyphus's Punch Line: Intentionality and Wit as Treatment for Postmodern Depression," Zwagerman argues for the degree of intentionality in a given performative speech act, arguing for humor's importance in language epistemologies. Citing Rollo May, Lloyd Bitzer, Kenneth Burke, Stanley Fish, and of course, J. L. Austin, Zwagerman explains how humor and intention can be used to express sincerity. Near the end of the chapter, Zwagerman states:

there is no better performative strategy than humor. The constructive, destructive, deconstructive, reconstructive

speech-action of humor gives voice to the belief, hope, and desire (not just the intent) that things are not—and need not be in the future—always already what they seem. (207)

Zwagerman sees things as they are: his work thoroughly upholds the standards and agendas of feminist research and accounts for the multiplicity of meanings and experiences in analyzing humor—specifically women's use of humor. Zwagerman's rigorous and integral scholarship advances women's studies by carefully considering many perspectives, effectively upholding Gordon's call for productive feminist scholarship.

If there is a limitation to this text, it may be the many voices Zwagerman considers and the amount of space Zwagerman allows each speaker in a given chapter. Like other feminist scholars who quote their research subjects at length, Zwagerman includes paragraph-length quotations for most theorists and characters. For example, in Chapter 2, it is difficult to follow each speaker and their connection to Zwagerman's claims. Although Zwagerman is careful to synthesize voices and claims, readers must be alert and active readers, as Zwagerman wastes no space in his book frontloading or restating key points. On the other hand, affording multiple speakers ample space promotes equality in the consideration of multiple (and oftentimes) differing perspectives—a rhetorical strategy that upholds Gordon's standard for feminist critique. Thus, this may not be a weakness but a *benefit* of Zwagerman's work.

Another clear benefit of Zwagerman's work is that it offers substantial implications for teacher-scholars in rhetoric, women's studies, and literary and textual analysis. Perhaps the following questions Zwagerman poses are some of the best for providing agency to potential readers:

What interpersonal, social, or political aspects of a particular scene of exigence might make humor seem the most strategic, potentially felicitous form of speech?
Why might certain speakers, particularly those of marginalized status *as* speakers, chose the indirection of

humor, and what does that say about humor's potency that its use by marginalized speakers—women, for instance—is often discouraged as inappropriate?" (31 emphasis in original).

These questions urge teacher-scholars to consider humor more substantially. In addition to the above questions, Zwagerman offers many other important ideas and implications that offer new possibilities, new connections, and new ways of thinking about the intentionality of humorous speech acts giving humor and its ability to foster women's agency. Thus, Zwagerman's work may cause us to more greatly appreciate television's funny women. For, as Zwagerman contends, funny women are much smarter and more powerful than we give them credit for.

Works Cited

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About the Author

Mariana Grohowski is a second-year PhD student. Her research examines the cultural ideologies and literate activities of servicewomen of the U.S. Armed Forces. She has taught courses in first-year writing and service learning, and has worked as a writing consultant in a university writing center. She earned her M.S. in Rhetoric and Technical Communication from Michigan Technological University. Her work has appeared in the *Community Literacy Journal*, *Reflections*, and *Enculturation*.