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Comediennes and Femininity in Silent Film Comedy

The beginning of the twentieth century was a transformative time for women in many ways, within the film world as well as outside of it. With the emergence of the 'new woman' ideals replacing those of the 'true woman,' what was considered 'appropriate' behavior for women was constantly being called into question. For female comedians in film, this topic was especially relevant. Slapstick was the most prominent form of film comedy at the time, and was largely deemed inappropriate for women due to its aggressive and indelicate nature. Nevertheless, many women performed in slapstick films, and had successful careers doing slapstick comedy. Actresses such as Mabel Normand proved that being funny and being feminine were not mutually exclusive, while others such as Marie Dressler, showed that a woman didn't have to fit into society's ideal stereotypes at all, proving that it was possible for a woman to make a successful career out of being completely 'unladylike.' Through the lens of comedy, women were able to defy usual constructs of femininity and the expectation for how a woman should act. Performing slapstick comedy allowed female actors in the 1910s and 1920s to act outside the constraints of the patriarchal norms brought upon them by society. They became a visible example of women defying gender norms and class norms, proving that there

are many ways to be a comedian, many ways to be a woman, and that the two are certainly not mutually exclusive.

Since comedy first came into existence, people have been arguing over whether or not women can be successful in such a male dominated area. In the early twentieth century, the concept of womanhood as a whole was being largely debated. The outdated concepts of the 'true woman' were fading out of existence, and being replaced by the concept of the 'new woman.' The "true woman" can be defined as "innocent, helpless, eager to please, morally strong but physically weak, displaying her virtue in willing self sacrifice and ready acceptance of suffering…" (Schneider, 16), in other words, how society tries to paint women, or the box it tries to put them in. The 'New Woman' on the other hand, contradicted many aspects of how the public understood femininity, and forced many people to open their eyes and accept a broader scope of acceptable womanhood. By being outspoken, independent, and strong minded, female comedians consistently acted as open portrayals of the 'new woman.' Comedy films, specifically slapstick, gave female comedians a space to defy gender norms, where they wouldn't normally have one. Performing in slapstick also contradicted the idea and presumption that women were supposed to be perfect examples of morality.

Due to its aggressive nature, slapstick comedy was typically considered a predominantly masculine area of film. The nature of slapstick comedies contradicts how a woman was expected to act, and was "diametrically opposed to the cultural idea of femininity as defined at the turn of the twentieth century, with its emphasis on submissiveness, deference, and passivity" (Wagner, 37). Slapstick comedy was loud, violent, ungraceful, lowbrow, and 'unfeminine,'

however despite the argument of it being unsuitable for women, many women had successful careers as female comedians in the 1910s and 1920s. Through the lens of comedy performance, these films allowed women to step outside the boundaries of socially accepted femininity. Women were able to portray characters as independent, ridiculous and silly, and act in ways that they couldn't in the outside world, and in doing so, became visible examples of 'new womanhood', as well as "defying expectations regarding ladylike behavior and proper femininity, contradicting notions of how women should behave, and proving that they were capable of succeeding in a 'masculine' genre" (Wagner, 35). Slapstick's lack of boundaries allowed them to create their own versions of femininity that didn't need to fit into the boundaries of society.

Although many believed that women needed to sacrifice their femininity in order to succeed in comedy, this wasn't always the case. Women were able to succeed in slapstick through being both feminine and unfeminine, and all of those women were able to defy norms and break barriers. In abandoning their traditional roles of femininity, comediennes drew attention to the ridiculousness of these gender norms. In the essay "Have Women a Sense of Humor?" Kristen Anderson Wagner states, "when comediennes created characters who were loud, brash, ungraceful and unrefined, they were exposing the artificial and constructed nature of femininity. Furthermore, as unruly women, these comediennes could revel in excessiveness, disruptiveness, and unapologetic spectacle, challenging and upsetting gender positions and posting an alternative, transgressive model of femininity" (Wagner, 38). By creating characters who stand out as being unladylike, it not only normalizes this behavior, but draws attention to the

artificiality of the ideals of femininity imposed on women by the patriarchy. By showing a character act outside of traditional gender roles, it pulls the gender role out of context, flipping it on its head. Furthermore, when comediennes unapologetically, proudly and publicly display this lack of femininity, it shows pride for a femininity that differs from the societal standard, proving that there is more than one way to be feminine, and more than one way to be a woman.

On the other hand, it's important to acknowledge the women who remained feminine whilst performing slapstick comedy, proving that being pretty and being funny doesn't have to be mutually exclusive. Comedy is an opportunity to act outside the societal boundaries of femininity, but that doesn't mean that traditionally feminine women can't or shouldn't do comedy. You can be pretty, and be hit in the face with a pie. Women maintaining aspects of that femininity proves that it doesn't have to be entirely sacrificed for the sake of comedy, and actually draws more attention to the disregard for gender roles and societal constraints displayed within the comedy. Seeing stereotypically beautiful actresses running around, falling in the mud, diving into rivers and getting hit in the face, is more jarring to audiences than it is with actresses that are already somewhat removed from the typical societal ideals of femininity. As Kristen Anderson Wagner writes in her book, *Comic Venus: Women and Comedy in American Silent Film,* "In order to engage in comic performances, women had to "sacrifice" their feminine qualities... The thinking was that a traditionally feminine woman performing comedy had the potential to create dissonance in the minds of audience members, as they might struggle to reconcile the femininity of the performer with the supposed masculinity of the performance; however a 'mannish' woman performing the same routine could seem less transgressive because

she is already removed from the trappings of femininity" (Wagner, 33). By acting stereotypically feminine while performing a form of comedy that was considered to be so masculine, it creates a more noticeable juxtaposition between the displacement of gender roles.

Marie Dressler is a perfect example of an actress who didn't fit into society's idealized form of femininity, and used it to her advantage. "Hardly a beauty by conventional standards, Dressler openly exploited her self-confessed 'homely' appearance in her stage performances, soliciting laughter with displays of grotesque, ungainly physicality that contradicted traditional assumptions of feminine grace" (King, 119). Dressler used her body and her facial expressions to create comedy on screen, twitching her face and careening herself across the set. Her performance makes her impossible to ignore, directly contradicting the ideals that a woman should be timid and submissive, and acting outside the societal constraints of gender. Fan magazines playfully poked fun at her lack of traditional femininity in her performances, showing public acceptance of these behaviors under the safety of the confines of comedy. In a review for *Tillie's Punctured Romance* (Sennett, 1914) in *Motography* publication, the reviewer, Charles Condon, describes the opening of the film, saying, "delicate little Tillie is seen heaving large blocks of wood out into the country road for her dog to retrieve them" (Condon, 657). This description playfully calls out Dressler's portrayal of Tillie, sarcastically calling her 'delicate' when we know this is not the case. By sarcastically placing Tillie as conventionally feminine, the review draws attention to the lack of femininity in her performance, and affirms that Marie Dressler's anti-feminine portrayal of her character not only works for the comedy, but it also accepts this break of gender boundaries on screen.

In contrast of Marie Dressler, actress and director Mabel Normand did not 'sacrifice' her femininity in her slapstick comedy performances. She appeared on screen as pretty and funny at the same time, subverting the idea that you had to be one or the other, and was considered to be "one of the first comediennes allowed to appear both pin-up-girl beautiful and funny" (Weinert, 1). She was even acknowledged in fan magazines for doing her own stunts. Mabel Normand also demonstrates the 'new woman' in many of her films, with comedy as the vehicle that allowed those portrayals to happen.

In *Mabel At The Wheel* (Normand, 1914), she plays a character based on herself, who, when her boyfriend is sabotaged during an automobile race, takes his place and completes the race for him, dressing in his racing clothes and having the time of her life as she wins the race. The film portrays Mabel as independent, capable, and athletic, as she defends herself against Charlie Chaplin's villain character, and wins an automobile race. To portray a woman successfully not only winning against a man, but also having a wonderful time doing it, showed that women were so much more than what society expected of them, and society's portrayal of them. They were not only able to do these traditionally masculine things, but to enjoy them. The fact that the film is a comedy allows this open display of female independence to occur, permitting the lighthearted subverting of gender norms and boundaries. At the end of the film, Mabel is celebrated by a crowd that is mostly male spectators, showing support of women's liberation, and allowing the breaking of gender norms. The film concludes with the gender norms still broken, and there is no 'resolution' where she gets back together with a romantic interest, or where the traditional gender norms are reestablished, leaving the end of the film as

simply a celebration of (the character) Mabel's bravery and achievements. Whether or not Mabel intended to make these statements with this film at the time, the film acts as an active portrayal of female independence and the breaking of societal gender norms.

Later in her career, Mabel Normand became the object of a scandal, and a living display of broken class boundaries due to an article for *Photoplay* magazine in 1918, in which the interviewer was shocked at the profoundness of Normand's book collection. The whole article is framed as though it's shocking that a woman, and a comedienne at that, could possibly be interested in such literary and academic works, which were considered to be a part of highbrow culture, heavily contrasting with the lowbrow connotations of slapstick comedy. In the article, the author writes, "When she told me that everything in the apartment belonged to her, I knew that we were going to have more important things to talk about than...whether she could cry real tears when a director asked her, and so on" (Bartlett, 44), In other words, now that he knows that she is intelligent, they can talk about things more important than her comedy work. The article then goes on to describe how despite her reading choices, "Mabel Normand is no highbrow" and makes assumptions that she can not possibly be both smart and funny, trying to paint a picture of her as 'smarter than you would think' and attempts to invalidate her comedy when the author writes, "while she was bumping and splashing her pretty little self all over the landscape of Southern California...in the Fatty and Mabel series of comedies, her mind was developing towards something greater" (Bartlett, 44). This portrayal is likely due to general thinking in the time period, and not an attack on Normand herself, or even an attack at all. It isn't necessarily trying to be critical of Mabel or put her in a box, it is simply a representation of the societal

boundaries that were placed upon women within the time period. One could not be considered both smart and funny, as the two were thought to contradict one another, so the article makes sure to mention that while she was doing her comedy, she was actually also trying to better herself beyond that! Overall however, the article seems to actually be very positive and admiring of Mabel Normand, ending with notes calling her "the most fearless girl in pictures" and praising the fact that she does her own stunts. It then follows up with comments that "with all her slenderness and petite grace, she had the willpower to go through with anything she attempted," which in establishing her strong will also makes sure to mention her conventional femininity, reaffirming the readers that though Mabel Normand is independent and strong willed, she's still a lady (Bartlett, 45). The article finishes with the statement, "no matter what she does… Mabel Normand stands all by herself" (Bartlett, 45), and she certainly does.

The scandal this article was involved in related to the clashing of class norms and the merging of 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' cultures. As Mark Lynn Anderson says, "Normand's library was one of the important targets of those regulatory discourses that sought a continuation of particular cultural distinctions, as well as the maintenance of the class and gender divisions underwritten by those distinctions" (Anderson, 6). When it was revealed to the public during investigation for the Taylor murders that Mabel Normand not only read intellectual books, but that she also was a fan of roasted peanuts, and a reader of the "Police Gazette," the public went wild. The mixing of highbrow and lowbrow culture, with the combination of Freud and the "Police Gazette," was unthinkable for the time. Normand was under scrutiny for this for a long time, and accused of being a liar and claiming false intelligence and highbrow identity with the

exposure of her library, showing a "deep seated uneasiness about the possibility that one might, indeed, read Freud and the Police Gazette as similarly interesting expressions of modern times" (Anderson, 10). Mabel's disregard for class distinctions brought attention to the established societal boundaries between highbrow and lowbrow culture, and by pointing out these distinctions, she made visible the fact that it was possible for a person to be interested in aspects of both of these things, and that one didn't need to be constrained by class and gender boundaries.

In conclusion, slapstick comedy provided women in the early twentieth century with a space to safely break traditional gender norms and boundaries, as well as class boundaries. In comedienne's portrayals of 'new womanhood,' they normalized different versions of femininity, and were able to express themselves in a multitude of ways that they could not in outside society. Comediennes such as Marie Dressler show how acting in comedy allowed women to completely subvert society's ideal stereotypes, while those such as Mabel Normand proved that femininity and comedy were not mutually exclusive, and that femininity was not something that needed to be 'sacrificed' in order to be successful in comedy. Mabel Normand also displayed a crossing of highbrow and lowbrow culture, visibly contradicting society's ideals on class boundaries. Through comedy, and slapstick comedy in particular, female comedians were able to act outside patriarchal constraints, and defy expectations, creating space for different ideas of how women could act, and who they could be.

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