1

MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART
NATIONAL BUREAU OF STANDARDS
STANDARD REFERENCE MATERIAL 1010a
(ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)

National Library
of Canada

Bibliothèque nationale
du Canada

Acquisitions and
Bibliographic Services Branch

Direction des acquisitions et
des services bibliographiques

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0N4

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa (Ontario)
K1A 0N4

Votre lieu - Votre référence

Votre lieu - Votre référence

NOTICE

The quality of this microform is heavily dependent upon the quality of the original thesis submitted for microfilming. Every effort has been made to ensure the highest quality of reproduction possible.

If pages are missing, contact the university which granted the degree.

Some pages may have indistinct print especially if the original pages were typed with a poor typewriter ribbon or if the university sent us an inferior photocopy.

Reproduction in full or in part of this microform is governed by the Canadian Copyright Act, R.S.C. 1970, c. C-30, and subsequent amendments.

AVIS

La qualité de cette microforme dépend grandement de la qualité de la thèse soumise au microfilmage. Nous avons tout fait pour assurer une qualité supérieure de reproduction.

S'il manque des pages, veuillez communiquer avec l'université qui a conféré le grade.

La qualité d'impression de certaines pages peut laisser à désirer, surtout si les pages originales ont été dactylographiées à l'aide d'un ruban usé ou si l'université nous a fait parvenir une photocopie de qualité inférieure.

La reproduction, même partielle, de cette microforme est soumise à la Loi canadienne sur le droit d'auteur, SRC 1970, c. C-30, et ses amendements subséquents.

Canada

**AN EXPLORATION OF WOMEN'S HUMOUR
IN THE PLAYS OF ERIKA RITTER**

by

KAREN COLVIN, B.A.

**A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of**

**Master of Arts
in Canadian Studies**

Carleton University

Ottawa, Ontario

© 5 August 1993

1993, Karen Colvin

National Library
of Canada

Acquisitions and
Bibliographic Services Branch

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0N4

Bibliothèque nationale
du Canada

Direction des acquisitions et
des services bibliographiques

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa (Ontario)
K1A 0N4

Your file - Votre référence

Our file - Notre référence

The author has granted an irrevocable non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of his/her thesis by any means and in any form or format, making this thesis available to interested persons.

L'auteur a accordé une licence irrévocable et non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de sa thèse de quelque manière et sous quelque forme que ce soit pour mettre des exemplaires de cette thèse à la disposition des personnes intéressées.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in his/her thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without his/her permission.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège sa thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

ISBN 0-315-89773-2

Canada

Name KAREN COLVIN

Dissertation Abstracts International is arranged by broad, general subject categories. Please select the one subject which most nearly describes the content of your dissertation. Enter the corresponding four-digit code in the spaces provided.

WOMEN'S STUDIES

SUBJECT TERM

0453

SUBJECT CODE

U·M·I

Subject Categories

THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

COMMUNICATIONS AND THE ARTS

Architecture 0729
Art History 0377
Cinema 0900
Dance 0378
Fine Arts 0357
Information Science 0723
Journalism 0391
Library Science 0399
Mass Communications 0708
Music 0413
Speech Communication 0459
Theater 0465

EDUCATION

General 0515
Administration 0514
Adult and Continuing 0516
Agricultural 0517
Art 0273
Bilingual and Multicultural 0282
Business 0688
Community College 0275
Curriculum and Instruction 0727
Early Childhood 0518
Elementary 0524
Finance 0277
Guidance and Counseling 0519
Health 0680
Higher 0745
History of 0520
Home Economics 0278
Industrial 0521
Language and Literature 0279
Mathematics 0280
Music 0522
Philosophy of 0998
Physical 0523

Psychology 0525
Reading 0535
Religious 0527
Sciences 0714
Secondary 0533
Social Sciences 0534
Sociology of 0340
Special 0529
Teacher Training 0530
Technology 0710
Tests and Measurements 0288
Vocational 0747

LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND LINGUISTICS

Language 0679
General 0289
Ancient 0290
Linguistics 0291
Modern 0291
Literature 0401
General 0294
Classical 0295
Comparative 0297
Medieval 0298
Modern 0316
African 0591
American 0305
Asian 0352
Canadian (English) 0355
Canadian (French) 0593
English 0311
Germanic 0312
Latin American 0315
Middle Eastern 0313
Slavic and East European 0314

PHILOSOPHY, RELIGION AND THEOLOGY

Philosophy 0422
Religion 0318
General 0321
Biblical Studies 0319
Clergy 0320
History of 0322
Philosophy of 0409
Theology 0323

SOCIAL SCIENCES

American Studies 0323
Anthropology 0324
Archaeology 0326
Cultural 0327
Physical 0310
Business Administration 0272
General 0770
Accounting 0454
Banking 0338
Management 0385
Marketing 0501
Canadian Studies 0503
Economics 0505
General 0508
Agricultural 0509
Commerce-Business 0510
Finance 0511
History 0358
Labor 0366
Theory 0351
Folklore 0578
Geography 0366
Gerontology 0351
History 0578

Ancient 0579
Medieval 0581
Modern 0582
Black 0328
African 0331
Asia, Australia and Oceania 0332
Canadian 0354
European 0335
Latin American 0336
Middle Eastern 0333
United States 0337
History of Science 0585
Law 0398
Political Science 0615
General 0616
International Law and Relations 0617
Public Administration 0814
Recreation 0452
Social Work 0626
Sociology 0627
Criminology and Penology 0938
Demography 0631
Ethnic and Racial Studies 0628
Individual and Family Studies 0629
Industrial and Labor Relations 0630
Public and Social Welfare 0700
Social Structure and Development 0344
Theory and Methods 0709
Transportation 0999
Urban and Regional Planning 0453
Women's Studies 0453

THE SCIENCES AND ENGINEERING

BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES

Agriculture 0473
General 0285
Agronomy 0475
Animal Culture and Nutrition 0476
Animal Pathology 0359
Food Science and Technology 0479
Forestry and Wildlife 0480
Plant Culture 0817
Plant Pathology 0777
Range Management 0746
Wood Technology 0306
Biology 0287
General 0308
Anatomy 0309
Biostatistics 0379
Botany 0329
Cell 0353
Ecology 0369
Entomology 0793
Genetics 0410
Limnology 0307
Microbiology 0317
Molecular 0416
Neuroscience 0433
Oceanography 0821
Physiology 0778
Radiation 0472
Veterinary Science 0786
Zoology 0760
Biophysics 0425
General 0996
Medical 0575

EARTH SCIENCES

Biogeochemistry 0425
Geochemistry 0996

Geodesy 0370
Geology 0372
Geophysics 0373
Hydrology 0388
Mineralogy 0411
Paleobotany 0345
Paleoecology 0426
Paleontology 0418
Paleozoology 0985
Palynology 0427
Physical Geography 0368
Physical Oceanography 0415

HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES

Environmental Sciences 0768
Health Sciences 0566
General 0300
Audiology 0992
Chemotherapy 0567
Dentistry 0350
Education 0769
Hospital Management 0758
Human Development 0982
Immunology 0564
Medicine and Surgery 0347
Mental Health 0569
Nursing 0570
Nutrition 0380
Obstetrics and Gynecology 0354
Occupational Health and Therapy 0381
Ophthalmology 0571
Pathology 0419
Pharmacology 0572
Pharmacy 0382
Physical Therapy 0573
Public Health 0574
Radiology 0575
Recreation 0575

Speech Pathology 0460
Toxicology 0383
Home Economics 0386

PHYSICAL SCIENCES

Pure Sciences 0485
Chemistry 0749
General 0486
Agricultural 0487
Analytical 0488
Biochemistry 0738
Inorganic 0490
Nuclear 0491
Organic 0494
Pharmaceutical 0495
Physical 0754
Polymer 0405
Radiation 0605
Mathematics 0986
Physics 0606
General 0608
Acoustics 0748
Astronomy and Astrophysics 0607
Atmospheric Science 0798
Atomic 0759
Electronics and Electricity 0609
Elementary Particles and High Energy 0610
Fluid and Plasma 0752
Molecular 0756
Nuclear 0611
Optics 0463
Radiation 0346
Solid State 0984
Statistics 0984
Applied Sciences 0346
Applied Mechanics 0984
Computer Science 0984

Engineering 0537
General 0538
Aerospace 0539
Agricultural 0540
Automotive 0541
Biomedical 0542
Chemical 0543
Civil 0544
Electronics and Electrical 0348
Heat and Thermodynamics 0545
Hydraulic 0546
Industrial 0547
Marine 0794
Materials Science 0548
Mechanical 0743
Metallurgy 0551
Mining 0552
Nuclear 0549
Packaging 0765
Petroleum 0554
Sanitary and Municipal 0790
System Science 0428
Geotechnology 0796
Operations Research 0795
Plastics Technology 0994
Textile Technology 0994

PSYCHOLOGY

General 0621
Behavioral 0384
Clinical 0622
Developmental 0620
Experimental 0623
Industrial 0624
Personality 0625
Physiological 0989
Psychobiology 0349
Psychometrics 0632
Social 0451

The undersigned recommend to the Faculty
of Graduate Studies and Research acceptance of the thesis

"An Exploration of Women's Humour
in the Plays of Erika Ritter"

submitted by Karen Colvin, B.A.
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts

.....
Thesis Supervisor

.....
Director
School of Canadian Studies

Carleton University

Ottawa, Ontario

September 1993

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how and why women use humour in literature by examining the following plays of Erika Ritter: *A Visitor From Charleston* (1974), *The Splits* (1978), *Winter 1671* (1979), *Automatic Pilot* (1980), and *Murder at McQueen* (1986). These represent her published plays. In this thesis I explore Ritter's use of humour as a literary device as well as the use of humour by her female characters. I examine women's humour as expressed in three themes of these plays. First, I investigate women's humour in light of the physical and psychological influence of male power. Second, I discuss connections between women's sense of identity and women's humour. Third, and finally, I examine women's humour as a tool of resistance against patriarchy. Ritter's plays point to a relationship between women's use of humour and their resistance to the status quo.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I express my sincere gratitude to the following people for their assistance during the preparation of this thesis: Dr. Faith Gildenhuys, whose guidance, patience and careful editing made my work much easier; Cathy Schmueck, graduate secretary, whose vigilance over graduate students' well-being can never be fully repaid; the librarians at Inter-Library Loan, Carleton University Library, who could always discern my requests, even when I could not; and Dean Roberts whose humour and support sustained me through this project.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
CHAPTER ONE: An Introduction to Women and Humour	1
Domestic Humour and More	2
Strategies of Humour	12
Retracing Our Steps: The Invisibility of Women's Humour and the Role of the Academy	15
Notes	21
CHAPTER TWO: The Male Presence	22
Introduction	22
<i>Winter 1671</i>	25
<i>A Visitor From Charleston</i>	30
<i>The Splits</i>	37
<i>Automatic Pilot</i>	42
<i>Murder at McQueen</i>	47
Conclusion	51
Notes	54
CHAPTER THREE: Creating Identity	56
<i>Winter 1671</i>	56
<i>A Visitor From Charleston</i>	60
<i>The Splits</i>	69
<i>Automatic Pilot</i>	74
<i>Murder at McQueen</i>	79
Conclusion	85
Notes	86
CHAPTER FOUR: Humour and Resistance	87
Introduction	87
<i>Winter 1671</i>	89
<i>A Visitor From Charleston</i>	92
<i>The Splits</i>	95
<i>Automatic Pilot</i>	99
<i>Murder at McQueen</i>	103
Conclusion	108
Notes	110
BIBLIOGRAPHY	111

CHAPTER ONE

An Introduction to Women and Humour

Listen to this. You'll have to.

- Ellen DeGeneres, *Wisecracks*

Thus begins one female comic's presence in Gail Singer's film *Wisecracks*. As the comedian possessively holds the microphone and stands upon the lighted stage, audiences realize that, as a culture, we feel uneasy with a woman commanding attention and space in the public forum. We wonder which is more daring, her audacity to be here at all or her audacity at pointing out our discomfort. Welcome to the courageous world of female humorists.

***Wisecracks*, a National Film Board production released in 1991, gave prominent media attention to the idea that perhaps women's experience of performing comedy was different from that of men's. Gail Singer, the director of the film, interviewed nearly twenty comedians and comedic ensembles who spoke about their experiences as women on the public comedy stage. Even more women had their talents shown in film clips from their stand-up performances. Despite this film's emphasis on performance comedy, the comedians' insights tell us much about our culture's difficulty with humorous women, regardless of the medium in which they express themselves.**

I. Domestic Humour and More

[B]ecause we have created work that doesn't fit into a mainstream, male idea predominantly, of theatre . . . there's been a diminishing that has gone on, [critics say] its not really theatre In my mind there's absolutely no question if men were doing this, [the critics would say] how innovative, how incredibly interesting, . . . they're furthering the form.

-the Clichettes, *Wisecracks*

The oral culture has not been kind to women in terms of us receiving recognition for our creativity and humour. Many women were not writers in the true sense of the word. They were creators, entertainers, storytellers, but it was left to men to transcribe. The word of women was the private word, the word of the home. As Deborah Cameron says, in *The Feminist Critique of Language*, the private word, for the most part, is not held in esteem in western society:

[I]n the public domain, and especially the domain of culture (by which I mean a society's representation of itself in rituals, institutions, codified knowledge, and creative art), these genres [of private writings] have no currency, let alone value. (4)

In other words, women's language is not important; man's language, the written language, is. Thus women's humour has had difficulty finding ears at home, let alone being heard by a wider audience.

However, these restrictions were those placed on women's writing in general. Humorous writing was merely one area where these barriers existed. Yet humour, for women, experienced added problems. In simple fact, women were not held to be, in fact were not supposed to be, funny.

The humorous woman had to walk a thin tightrope between being "chaste" and being "original," which meant having humour which was at the same time forceful in its originality, yet chaste in its content.¹ The humorous woman also, in many ways, defined the conflict between femininity and intellectuality. In order to be feminine, a woman could not be intelligent, outspoken, or independent. These attributes would bring women power, the power to make decisions for themselves, to live a life without men, to have the courage to criticize men. The concept of power and the idea of femininity were opposites. Yet if a woman were humorous, she would necessarily be outspoken and intelligent. Would this make her powerful? The inherent contradictions in the idea of "a humorous woman" were too much for early twentieth-century society, and, indeed, today's society, to accept:

To be a woman and a humorist is to confront and subvert the very power that keeps women powerless, and to risk alienating those upon whom women are dependant for economic survival.²

That some women managed to publish and survive despite these restrictions is due to the superb quality of their humour. Nancy Walker, in her important and groundbreaking book *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture*, brings to light a number of early twentieth-century women who had successful careers as social satirists and humorists. As elsewhere in the literary world, women started out in the

humour genre within the sphere of what was acceptable. If the private word was the only respectable one for a woman, then these women used the private word to enter into the public world. Diary entries, letters and casual storytelling entered into the domain of literature as "women's writing." Women used this option to get their humour published. The newspaper column has long been the favoured venue for women's humour;³ it is an ideal medium for women who need to steal time away from their households in order to write, it is less of an economic investment for a publisher to put out a weekly serial in the corner of his newspaper than to support a full-fledged venture such as a book, and, historically speaking more so than today, women had more access to newspapers than to books, both in the reading of them and the writing for them. The serialized humorous columns became immensely popular and boosted circulation numbers for newspapers. Eventually, these serialized columns became so popular that they were collected into books; Frances Whitcher, Dorothy Parker, Nora Ephron, Fran Lebowitz and Erma Bombeck are only a few of the women who have turned successful newspaper writing careers into full-fledged publishing careers.⁴

Literature of this genre became known as domestic humour. Widely read and enjoyed by many women (and some men, too, were they to admit it) it nonetheless received little recognition for its comedic or literary value.

Despite lip service paid to the work that women do in the home, domestic service did not, and does not, receive its due respect. The prevalent attitude remains that what is important in the world takes place outside the home; therefore, anything written about the activities taking place inside the home cannot be considered literature of any note:

Women as the primary agents in the domestic realm, a realm decidedly inferior to the public arena -- the business world, the government, and the public museums and concert halls -- have been undervalued; so have their efforts. Therefore, it is entirely logical and consistent to underrate the writings of domestic humorists.⁵

However, what critics were reluctant or unable to recognize was the power of domestic humour to be a subversive literature. Dismissed by the male literary establishment as unimportant, domestic humour was left to women to become a vehicle for social evaluation and analysis.

The use of domestic humour as a viable means for women's comedic expression has waxed and waned along with women's fortunes within the larger cultural situation. Women's expression of humour has largely been a battle between the public and private spheres. The more women were pressed into service in the home, the more domestic humour became an attractive and useful tool. Thus in the 1950's, a time when women's domestic role was strongly reinforced, there was a dramatic increase in the number of women writing domestic humour. The dichotomy between the public sphere of men and the private sphere of women was reinforced as it

hadn't been for many years. The entertainment industry paraded role models like Donna Reed of *Father Knows Best* to remind women where our true vocation lay:

[W]hile the films of the World War II period reflected women's increased participation in the work force, those of the 1950's reinforced the image of woman as the guardian of the domestic comfort and tranquillity that Americans sought after the horrors of international conflict.⁶

Women's humour rose to the occasion and adapted to its new circumstances by revitalizing the tradition of domestic humour. Writers such as Jean Kerr and Shirley Jackson "made comic material of ordinary domestic life."⁷ On the surface, these humorists often appeared to accept the stereotype of the "happy housewife" who was often not very happy and usually quite inept. However, many readers and critics have misunderstood women's humour by mistaking the use of a stereotype as an acceptance of that stereotype.⁸ Many domestic humorists work beneath the surface pointing out the unreal expectations we place upon women for perfect homes, perfect meals, perfect laundry, and perfect children. The inept housewife is not inept because she is bad at what she does, but rather it is the society that places unrealistic expectations on its women that creates the illusion of incompetence. Domestic humour has remained extremely popular, and writers such as Erma Bombeck and Judith Viorst continue the tradition into today.

The popularity of domestic humour in North America, both in the reading and writing of it, is indicative of the circuitous means by which women must attempt social criticism in our culture. Despite the denigration domestic humour receives from "the male interpreters of acceptable and respectable literature,"⁹ it is still considered an appropriate vehicle for women's talents:

[T]he social sanctions against women's political humor, especially when that humor concerns women's own political agenda, have been far stronger than those governing the expression of humor about the domestic setting that has been considered woman's "proper sphere."¹⁰

So women use the available resources and subvert the meanings in order to communicate to each other their frustrations and concerns about being a woman in our society. Domestic humour has been able to continue because, as a genre, it is not seen as a threat to male authority or to the sway male authors hold over the public forum of literature. However, critics have not given domestic humour the attention it deserves. The appeal of domestic humour, its long history and continued popularity to this day, indicates its success in speaking the truths of women's lives.

However, women have expressed themselves in ways other than through domestic humour. Before the First World War, an active suffragist movement gave women an opportunity to speak in public and it also gave women plenty of material with which to work. Though perhaps many of

these women were not specifically humorists, their humour was put to use actively in their work and lives in hopes of achieving their goals. The obtuseness of men, and their sense of the righteousness of their cause gave many women wonderful opportunities for humour. Nellie McClung, in her drive to obtain the vote for women and her complete certainty of the moral character of women, gave full reign to her satiric humour in many of her books, such as *In Times Like These* (1915).

Not fully expressed yet as a feminist movement, the social reform movement of these early years was led by women, like McClung, who not only fought for votes for women and other rights, but also led temperance movements, union movements, and farm movements. It was a reform program firmly led by women whose moral vision of the world could not be tainted. Despite their fervour, these women believed in the usefulness of a well-placed joke or barb, as McClung's description of voting illustrates:

If you had never heard that you had done an unladylike thing you would not know it. It all felt solemn, and serious, and very respectable to you, something like a Sunday-school convention. Then, too, you are surprised at what a short time you have been away from home. You put the potatoes on when you left home, and now you are back in time to strain them.¹¹

The use of humour as social conscience was well employed by these women. The power of morality and courage was on their side.

Again during World War II, women were allowed wider involvement in the public sphere. With men overseas, women were moving into the public

sphere in large numbers. By working in factories and running businesses women kept nations running both at home and abroad. Though the times were serious, keeping morale up for both soldiers and civilians became a war-time industry. Organizations like the U.S.O. hired men and women alike to entertain the troops overseas and the people at home. As Robin Tyler states in *Wisecracks*, "Women, because it was during the war, had to be shown in an aggressive position, taking over, being able to do things, having humour." Women stepped in, as they had in all other facets of public life, and made people smile when there was not much to smile about.

The inter-war years, conversely, were a time of giddy abandonment. The debate around women's sense of humour was particularly lively, as were debates around all things considered "unimportant." The image of the "flapper" has stayed with us, the picture of a woman completely free from cares or conventions. Everyone was relaxing during these years; women were especially pushing the boundaries of what was acceptable to do, wear, and say. Witty and bawdy women like Mae West and Dorothy Parker characterized this era. Women were exercising the humorous sides of ourselves, testing the waters. It was during these years that Mary Ritter Beard and Martha Bensley Bruere published *Laughing Their Way: Women's Humor in America* (1934), the first modern anthology of women's humour. The editors acknowledged the old refrain of women having no sense of

humour and stated that their collection would refute that claim, once and for all. However, the freedom allowed women during the inter-war years which seemed practically endless was not to last. The end of the Second World War, as we have mentioned, brought about a return to the home and the kitchen for many women.

The arrival in the 1960's of the second wave of the women's liberation movement spearheaded a revival, after the domesticity of the fifties, of more overtly political humour. Women were finding their voices to speak about many different issues. Learning to break that silence without letting the rage completely overwhelm our lives has led many feminists to humour. Second-wave feminism has given women new opportunities and choices in our lives as well as a critique of society. Neither literature nor cartoon art nor stand-up comedy is beyond the reach of the courageous woman who wants to prove herself. Feminist theory has given us a way to look at ourselves and understand who it was we are and how we can change. The "new breed" of woman humorist the second wave has produced (as in a woman whose voice, by sheer power, is a voice that must be reckoned with) is a growing one. Comic collections, including everything from poems to graffiti art have been published at a fast and furious pace: Deanne Stillman and Anne Beatts' *Titters: The First Collection of Humor by Women* (1976), Gloria Kaufman's *Pulling Our Own Strings* (1980) and its

sequel *In Stitches: A Patchwork of Feminist Humor and Satire* (1991), and Rosalind Warren's *Women's Glib* and *Women's Glibber: State-of-the-Art Women's Humor* (1991 and 1992 respectively). This is only a smattering of anthologies amidst a publishing explosion in the field of women's humour.

Erika Ritter, a Canadian humorist, is among the group of women who began writing during this time. Graduating from university fresh from the radicalism of the sixties, Ritter's writing epitomizes the dilemmas of the "modern woman." Savvy and witty on the outside, Ritter's heroines are often unsure of their place in the new era of equality, freedom and opportunity. Not writing within a domestic humour tradition, but not yet fully politicized, Ritter examines the intersection of domestic and political life and what it means for women. Though Ritter's themes are thoroughly modern, the contradictions her heroines deal with are not: the struggle between intellectuality and femininity, between resistance against society and acceptance of its standards, between traditional marriage and independence; these are all historic concerns for women. Ritter's use of humour in examining these themes creates an opportunity to explore how and why women use humour in their literature and in their lives.

Both domestic humour and more overtly political humour have been used throughout women's humorous tradition to reflect the reality of our lives. Though domestic humour has a long history, and though its popularity

continues today, we must not ignore women's history of feminist and overt political humour. Though it may not have had as wide a readership, or as long a lifespan, it was important as a cultural index of the times. For instance, the existence today of "feminist" comedians, those whose humour analyzes women's disadvantaged situation in society, indicates our society's preoccupation with the problem of human rights and equality. We must examine women's humour as a combination of all genres in order to understand how and why women use humour.

II. Strategies of Humour

I started with an all male comedy group, except for me. . . . The men were astronauts, the men were cowboys, the men were businessmen, the men were troubadours, and I was always THE GIRL. . . . Men think their version of reality is THE reality. . . . I like MY version of reality to be the dominant one, so when I walk on stage, I know that I have to find a way to make my version of reality accessible to, palatable to [the audience] . . . or challenge them to come to my [reality].

- Emily Levine, *Wisecracks*

Women's humour stems from a drive to have women's lives reflected in society, whether that be through domestic, political, feminine or feminist humour. Each of these approaches challenges us as a society to accept female reality as equally truthful to male reality.

The way in which humour is approached is an important clue as to the relationship between female humorists and the culture in which they live.

Critics who study humour have traditionally dealt with "great" literary humorists, satirists such as Mark Twain, Jonathan Swift, or Thomas Chandler Haliburton. Satire, a talent both highly regarded and feared in our society, is not an aptitude for which women have been known or have apparently wanted to be known. To write satire, especially with its political dimension, is to openly criticize, to publicly humiliate, to make enemies; ultimately to be "unladylike." With no satiric tradition to look back upon, women have turned to other possibilities, and satire remains largely to this day a male domain.

Irony, on the other hand, has become the tool of the female humorist. Turning away from satire, physical comedy or buffoonery, or the purely absurd, women have seen that irony can express the incongruities that fill their lives. Cultural stereotypes have denied women an opportunity to create humour which openly deals with the oppression and alienation they feel as women in a society that at one and the same time hails them as the image of Mary, and deplores them as the descendants of Eve. Domestic humour begins with the irony of these conflicting images. While on the outside telling tales of inept housewives and misbehaving children, women were really writing beneath the surface, criticizing a society that sets impossibly high standards for women. They proclaimed that it is not the

housewife that is a failure, but the society that puts such impossible pressures on women.

Irony, obviously, is suited to the plight of women in western culture. Allowing them creative expression of their humour, it is an illustration of true subversion, subversion that tries to overthrow the status quo, not simply change the colour on the surface. Irony is using

words to mean something different from what they seem to say on the surface. . . . [I]rony may range from a complete reversal of meaning to a subtle qualification of the surface meaning. Irony surprises and makes its point with the greatest emphasis because it forces us to contemplate two incongruous things.¹²

Irony is a perfect mode of expression for women for two reasons: first, women's position in society makes them especially sensitive to the incongruities of life, which irony makes clear. Women's lives are defined by irony; women's humour becomes an illustration of that irony. The myriad of double standards women must negotiate in their lives becomes a strong theme in their humour: to be virginal, yet sexually alluring; to be organized and capable, but not overly successful. We live our lives mediating between these contradictions, and our lives become the ironic material we use in our humour. Second, because of irony's subtle capabilities, and its abilities to make readers believe they are the ones who have made the connection and seen the incongruities, the expression of irony leaves women safe in their economic and personal dependence on men; irony leaves women protected

from the consequences of their subversion. As we will see in Erika Ritter's dramas, irony becomes a valuable tool in the hands of women trying to reject patriarchal control.

Comedy, throughout time, has been linked with social criticism. Humour theorists state that one of its functions is to analyze the society in which we live. Regina Barreca, in her book *Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy*, writes that despite the appearance of promoting change, satire as males have exercised it has not run so very deep:

Comedy has often been linked to man's [sic] ability to transcend his oppression by laughing at his chains, linked to his satiric facility which enables him to suggest changes for his society, and related to his natural cycles of regeneration and renewal. It is of paramount importance to note that these linkings are well within the boundaries of the established literary and social laws, for all their trafficking with subversion.¹³

Men have been too deeply enmeshed within patriarchal culture to view it with objective eyes. Women, on the other hand, are in a position to suggest true change, to communicate in true subversion.

III. Retracing Our Steps: The Invisibility of Women's Humour and the Role of the Academy

"They are the unofficial discussing the insignificant"¹⁴

This quotation from Barreca's book is a statement of the difficulty in getting humour accepted as a legitimate undertaking, either in its performance or study. The title of Deanne Stillman and Anne Beatts'

collection of humour, *Titters: The First Collection of Humor by Women*, illustrates the perennial problem in the area of women's humour. Far from being the "first" collection of humour by women, it is merely one in a tradition of humour that dates back, in terms of published collections, nearly one hundred years. Why did this invisibility of women's humour persist?

According to Nancy Walker, it is due to such factors as

sociological realities such as the emergence of a middle-class, genteel culture in the early nineteenth century and mass migration to the suburbs in the fifties; political issues such as the prohibition of female suffrage until 1920 and the exclusion of women from most of the professions until very recently; male hegemony in publishing and education; and assumptions about the nature and purpose of humor and the nature and abilities of women.¹⁵

Most of these factors point to the split between the public and private spheres that have been central concerns for feminists, and it has important implications for the development, appreciation, and participation of women's humour in larger society. Women's relegation to the home has denied them access to the public sphere where our humour could be heard, appreciated and passed on. While men have their histories written down and studied, women have had no histories of our own to learn. Each generation of women is cut off from the one before, and each seemingly must reinvent the wheel. Without histories, female humorists must assume they are atypical, perhaps perverse.

Academic interest in the field of women's humour has grown steadily, and with it has come new insight into women's complicated relationship to humour and its expression, as well as continuing discoveries of long forgotten female humorists. Academic work is nearly evenly split between these two endeavours, and each pursuit relies upon and enhances the other. Nancy Walker has led the academic interest in both areas. Her work *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture* not only introduced female humorists long hidden between the pages of forgotten newspapers and magazines, but it also began a new examination of women's humour and its place in society. Indeed, Walker's career is an indication of the two paths the study of women's humour is taking. On the one hand, Walker published books like *The Tradition of Women's Humor in America* (1984) and *Redressing the Balance: American Women's Humor from the Colonies to the 1980's* (1988), written and edited with Zita Dresner, which uncover many forgotten women humorists from earlier times. However, Walker also published many articles, such as "Do Feminists Ever Laugh? Women's Humor and Women's Rights" (1981) in *International Journal of Women's Studies* and "Women's Humor as Catharsis and Protest" (1990) in *Women of Power: A Magazine of Feminism, Spirituality, and Politics* in addition to her book, *Feminist Alternatives: Irony and Fantasy in the Contemporary Novel by Women* (1990). Her work started an explosion of critical analysis

that examines how women are funny, what subjects they are being funny about and, more importantly, how women are using their humour to initiate change. Without the discovery of a tradition of women's humour, an analysis of its role in women's lives would have been groundless.

Conversely, without analysis, the rediscovery of women's humour would lose its important meaning for women's lives.

Even academic study, however, is subject to political pressure.

Studies of female authors continue to examine comic elements in texts of major authors, while ignoring the works of acknowledged humorists because of their seeming insignificance as well as the unimportance of the content of the work. Cathy Davidson's "Canadian Wry: Comic Vision in Atwood's *Lady Oracle* and Laurence's *The Diviners*" (1977) published in *Regionalism and the Female Imagination*, and Judy Little's book *Comedy and the Woman Writer: Woolf, Spark, and Feminism* study works from the established canon. This means that critics are studying comic elements in largely non-comedic works. What needs to be done is a study of how female humorists and their comedic works fit into the tradition of women's humour.

Davidson's and Little's critical work is understandable, especially in the early stages of analysis. As Barreca says:

Feminist criticism has generally avoided the discussion of comedy, perhaps in order to be accepted by conservative critics who found feminist theory comic in and of itself.¹⁶

However, more recently, women are braving these negative forces to write analytically and with insight on women and comedy in a direct way. June Sochen's *Women's Comic Visions* (1991) and Susan Carlson's *Women and Comedy: Rewriting the British Theatrical Tradition* (1991) both attempt to address the world of women humorists. Carlson's book is an analysis of both male and female authors in British theatre, while Sochen's work is an interdisciplinary one which includes criticism on literary figures, stand-up comics, and cartoonists. It is an academic work that moves the study of women and humour into the interdisciplinary realm where it can best flourish.

Largely, Canadian women still lack the tradition and knowledge of the humour of our forefathers. While this study is not about to address the history of women's humour in Canada, such a study is desperately needed. A glimpse at a few reference materials will confirm this fact. Theses written on Canadian literature and humour in the last fifty years show three written specifically on women alone: two on Sara Jeanette Duncan and one on Nellie McClung.¹⁷ The issue of *Thalia: Studies in Literary Humour* (Fall and Winter 1980-1981) devoted to Canadian humour contains no articles discussing female humorists or their works. It is here that Erika Ritter becomes an important figure.

This study of Erika Ritter, I hope, will begin an awakening in the academy to the important contributions women's humour has made to the Canadian landscape in theatre, literature, and popular culture. As Canada's most prominent female humorist, Ritter seems an obvious place to begin. Her five published plays discussed in this study, her four as yet unpublished plays (*Moving Pictures*, 1976; *The Girl I Left Behind Me*, 1977; *The Passing Scene*, 1982; and *The Road to Hell*, 1993), as well as her two books of humorous essays, *Urban Scrawl: The World as Seen Through the Bemused Eyes of Erika Ritter* (1984) and *Ritter in Residence: A Comic Collection* (1987), should make her a major force in the area of Canadian humour. In addition, her numerous radio plays, her work on CBC radio and her incidental writings give academics a vast body of work to study. Add to that her 1980 Chalmer's Award for Best Play and her 1982 ACTRA award for Best Radio Drama Writer, and the critical silence surrounding her work is mystifying. It is time we examined the unique contribution female humorists like Erika Ritter make to Canadian literature and society.

We all laugh and we all find something humorous. To study humour means we study ourselves and our culture, and what could be more worthy than the pursuit of self-knowledge? We must all begin to understand the origins of our discomfort when a woman with a microphone tells us: "Listen to this. You'll have to."

NOTES

1. Nancy Walker, *A Very Serious Thing*, p. 15.
2. Ibid., p. 9.
3. Ibid., pp. 6-7.
4. Ibid., p. 7.
5. June Sochen, ed., *Women's Comic Visions*, p. 11.
6. Nancy Walker, "Humor and Gender Roles," *American Quarterly*: p. 99.
7. Ibid.
8. Walker, *A Very Serious Thing*, p. 20.
9. Sochen, p. 10.
10. Nancy Walker, "Toward Solidarity: Women's Humor and Group Identity," in Sochen, *Women's Comic Visions*, p. 60.
11. Nellie McClung, *In Times Like These*, pp. 50-51.
12. Thomas S. Kane, Leonard J. Peters, David Jackel, and Maurice R. Legris, *Writing Prose*, p. 706.
13. Regina Barreca, ed., *Last Laughs*, p. 11.
14. Quoted in Barreca, *Last Laughs*, p. 6.
15. Walker, *A Very Serious Thing*, p. 8.
16. Barreca, *Last Laughs*, p. 4.
17. Michael Gnarowski, *Theses and Dissertations in Canadian Literature*, pp. 230-232.

CHAPTER TWO

The Male Presence

I think of the relationships in my plays as being kind of political. Not in a party politics way but in the sense of power and control, and who controls what and how, and how control is maintained.

- Erika Ritter¹

I. Introduction

Power and control are central concerns of all feminist critics. How do power and control affect women in our society, and who wields them? These are the essential questions one must ask to understand what living in a male-dominated culture entails.

Women's lack of participation in the determination of their future creates a world where only half the reality is represented, the male half. Women's experience of their own lives is invalidated and ridiculed because it does not fit with the norm, a "norm" that, through association with and definition by males, has become male. Thus, ideas, actions and feelings that become affiliated with the female are devalued, and, as is often the case in Erika Ritter's works, the women are labelled insane.

Ritter has made her reputation through what many critics have defined as modern, urban, relationship comedies. According to Martin Knelman, Ritter's favourite subject is "the dilemma of the modern woman

whose twentieth-century political programmes and mastery of power dressing keep bumping against her nineteenth-century psyche."² Yet despite "chronicling the plight of the beleaguered urban woman,"³ Ritter's works are filled with men and the thought of men. What roles do men perform within the structure of the play, and what is the significance of those roles?

The men in each drama establish the terms of the plot. They determine the action and, ultimately, men induce the crises in the women's lives which bring about the climax of the play. This corresponds to male power over women in society at large. Ritter uses this connection to introduce the power patriarchy holds over women. In rejecting male determination of the action, the heroine is also rejecting patriarchal power in society. Rather than simply rejecting men, the heroine is rejecting what they stand for in her life. She is rejecting the male presence that has controlled her destiny and specified the limits of her life. In the case of *Murder at McQueen*, male control of plot action is perpetuated by an internalized acceptance of patriarchy in each of the women.

The men in Ritter's plays are good students of the culture from which they spring. They are standard-bearers of the status quo and easily recognize what is acceptable behaviour and what is not. In the patriarchal culture in which Ritter's men and women live, both sexes consider men and

their thoughts to be the norm. Women, by virtue of their gender, will always be abnormal. Ritter's male characters wield their cultural power over women by controlling the heroine's actions, thoughts and feelings, by defining what her role should be within the personal relationship they share, and by specifying how she should lead her life as a whole. Ritter's plays are a struggle between men and women for the power to govern the woman's life.

Ritter begins her plays within the "blissful" state of marriage, then deconstructs that bliss with ironic humour. At one and the same time Ritter's women are trying to break free from cultural myths that no longer have meaning for them, while recognizing that they have been raised on these myths and, destructive as they are, find them hard to abandon. Our laughter arises from an acknowledgement of this conundrum at work in our own lives. But often Ritter's women seem harsh and bitter; their humour is tinged with the weight of a culture that has let them down when the traditional plot did not result in the expected happy ending.

However, more than simply a vent for frustrations, the protagonists' humour cracks open the veneer of the traditional romantic myth to help the reader^{*} see the discrepancy between the world as women have lived it, and

^{*} Because I have not seen Ritter's plays produced on stage, and because my analysis of them is from a literary, not theatrical, standpoint, I will refer to "readers" rather than "audience" throughout the thesis.

the world as men wish to order it. Ritter's humour, rather than underscoring the failure on the part of the women for not living up to the romantic myth, points to the basic flaw in the myth itself, that it was constructed by men:

In humor we smile because of the contradiction between the character and the frame the character cannot comply with. But we are no longer sure that it is the character who is at fault. Maybe the frame is wrong.⁴

More often than not in Ritter's dramas, the refusal or inability of the female protagonist to acquiesce to the male frame results in her being labelled "crazy." The male frame, the male world, is the norm. In our culture, the society of Ritter's plays, women are not allowed to define meaning for themselves. How they must live their lives, what constitutes "proper" behaviour, what it means to be a woman is inscribed in our culture by a male tradition. Humour becomes a way that language challenges the male determination of women's lives without the risk of direct insubordination.

II. *Winter 1671*

Winter 1671 is Ritter's only attempt at a historical drama and as such strays from the modern dilemmas of male-female relationships. The historical perspective of this play, however, allows us to see that the conflict between men and women for women's self-determination and control is certainly not a recent phenomenon. But the struggle in *Winter 1671* has different tones than it does in Ritter's other plays. Renee's

attachment to her husband is only a legal one, while in most of Ritter's other plays, the absent (or nearly absent) husband looms large not only legally, but physically, psychologically, and most importantly, emotionally. Renee's emotional detachment from her past provides her with a clearer vision of what she wants for her future.

Renee Chauvreur is a *filles du roi*, a woman brought over from France in order to supply New France with eligible wives for the male settlers. Readers discover in the course of the play that Renee was in fact married in Normandy but accepted the King's offer to escape an arranged marriage that had become abusive. Renee falls in love with Philippe Rigault, a man of some standing in the community. When Philippe discovers Renee's secret, he wishes to make things right by offering Renee's husband money, despite an offer from an official in New France to falsify Renee's death certificate and send it to France. Renee wants no part of being "bought off" as she was in her first marriage. She flees to freedom, or to death, through the snow -- we never know her fate.

Ritter has said of her characterization of Renee, "I just couldn't see her dithering over issues. I just assumed it was a kind of Hobbesian world and people had to be hard, clear and sure."⁵ Renee's character and the world in which she lives, as Ritter has written it, leaves little room for the type of humour Ritter uses in her other plays. That humour is a means of

communication, a negotiation tool between the sexes. Ritter says, "My characters tend to do a lot of wistful wandering; they tend to be indecisive people because they live in an indecisive age."⁶ Renee, on the other hand, remains decisive throughout, challenging the same patriarchal assumptions about the need to control women in her world with courageous action as later protagonists will with humour in their modern world.

There is no doubt that the two women in *Winter 1671* who attempt to break the barriers of conformity, Renee and Esperance, are witty women. Renee's refusal of Philippe at the dock, and Esperance's bawdy repartee illustrate this fact. Despite the humour of these women, a wit that both characterizes their desire to be outside patriarchal definitions and puts them outside those definitions, *Winter 1671* is not primarily a humorous drama, and the women in this play, unlike those in the bulk of Ritter's work, escape the control of men through their courage and strength. Why do these women feel the need to escape? What do we mean when we discuss the defining and controlling role men play in the lives of women?

The patriarchal culture of *Winter 1671* demands that women be defined in order that they may be understood and controlled. A woman who is defined as a housewife has an expected role to play within her home and within the community. So too the nun, the chaperon, and the prostitute. Each of these functions has been adopted by a culture that wishes to

understand women through their function, not through their individual personalities. For women to be defined through their function makes it easy to see when they are not performing their role adequately. Esperance is a fille du roi, but also a prostitute. Under which definition should she be judged? She lives out her life in New France somehow defying men's attempts to define her; she is neither prostitute nor fille du roi, and she is both. Because she cannot be defined, she is made invisible. Men attempt to control Esperance by moulding her to their definitions of who she should be. When she refuses, they attempt to control her by taking advantage of her body while at the same time granting her existence invisibility.

Not only do the men need to be able to define a woman's role, they need to keep the world they live in a place of order and decisiveness. There is only one way to accomplish a task; subtleties escape them. The men in *Winter 1671* have been allowed to define what freedom and justice should mean; the women have had to live under the rule of these controls which were neither made with their consultation nor their experience in mind. Justice and freedom are, quite literally, male justice and male freedom. The final conflict between Renee and Philippe illustrates this timeless problem.

While Jean-Guy Talon is finally convinced by Esperance and Renee that justice, in its purest, and perhaps female, sense, would not be served by sending Renee back to her husband, Philippe is harder to persuade. It is

he, despite his love for Renee, who remains tied to patriarchal-inspired notions of absolute right and wrong. In his own zeal to feel what he is doing is right, Philippe disregards Renee's experience:

PHILIPPE: Listen to me. We must see this finished in an open-handed way. This Bedard must let you go.
RENEE: Let me go? I ran away.
PHILIPPE: (to DUMAS) There are ways to bring about annulment, aren't there?
RENEE: I say I ran away. That's annulment enough.⁷

Not only does he follow his own sense of morality, he must impose it upon the woman he loves. Philippe must feel he has control of events, that nothing will happen without his determining it so.

He treats Renee no better than the townsmen treat Esperance, as property without the respect that should be granted another human being. Although Renee is willing to falsify her own death in order to marry Philippe, his philosophy does not allow for that kind of interpretation of morality. Renee's understanding of freedom is based upon her own life, not a vague principle gleaned from ancient rites of revenge, vindication, and ownership. In many ways, Renee has more freedom than Philippe, who lives his life by a code which no longer has relevance to his life, but is defined by external and patriarchal philosophies of justice and which has come to control his life. He uses this code to deal with the people he meets, but it loses its power when it meets a woman who refuses to accept Philippe's will as her own. At last he has run up against a woman who refuses to be bound by his ideas.

Renee walks off into the March snowstorm to retain a freedom defined by her own standards.

Like most of Ritter's characters, Renee shuns connection with a man in order to regain control of her own life and give herself an opportunity to define for herself who she can be and what her role within society will be. Male determination of the plot has been replaced by woman's independent action. The traditional romance, with which *Winter 1671* has many similarities, is deconstructed to show its fundamental flaws. The final act does not end in marital bliss but in uncertainty. We realize, however, that regardless of Renee's fate, it was not a choice determined by a man, but a fate she chose for herself.

Winter 1671 is Ritter's most unusual play. The fact that it was not meant to be a comedy, but nonetheless deals with the theme of male-female relationships, makes it an interesting comparison to her ironic treatment of the same idea.

III. *A Visitor From Charleston*

A Visitor From Charleston, Erika Ritter's first play, is more in keeping with the majority of her work. It is a story, as she has said, about "indecisive people" who are that way "because they live in an indecisive age."⁶ Eva, the female protagonist of *Charleston*, is the least indecisive of

Ritter's modern women, but she is also a far cry from the silent strength of Renee Chauvieux. Interestingly, Eva is matched with the salesman, the most indecisive of Ritter's male characters, who are generally speaking very self-assured. Despite his uncertainty, however, the salesman still attempts to regulate the action of the play.

Eva has recently separated from her husband of five years, and on the day the play takes place, is about to see *Gone With the Wind* for the forty-ninth time. A salesman for Instant Fantasy cosmetics interrupts her plans when he comes to her door to give her a free demonstration.

Eva is a funny woman. Her humour is an ironic one; her speech is filled with the seeming acceptance of the failures of her life, but the subversive tone of a woman determined to prove herself. Eva's humour points out the inconsistencies and ironies of life, for she has learned to recognize them. In the beginning, readers align themselves with the philosophy of the salesman. However, as the play progresses, alliances undergo a shift. Readers and Eva begin to understand that the salesman is deluding himself; his wife is not the woman he would have chosen, his career is not the one he wanted. His world is as full of the Instant Fantasy cosmetics he sells as if he himself used them. Humour arises from the chafing between the frames of meaning Eva and the salesman have constructed. Eva is playing with those meanings and deconstructing notions

of truth, fixed meaning, and each person's own ideas of fantasy and reality. While Renee, in *Winter 1671*, is not as concerned with the control of meaning, only her life, Eva is not only trying to control her life but to validate it as well. Ritter, however, while choosing action as Renee's vehicle, has chosen humour as Eva's method of showing us the conflict between men and women over the power to control meaning.

In *Charleston*, Ritter begins to examine the possibility of humour as a way to deconstruct meanings and assumptions created by those in power to perpetuate that power. Although the salesman tries to control the action in the play, Eva's humour is ironic and subtle and allows her to create uncertainty in the world the salesman is trying to determine. Through Eva, Ritter begins to plant the seeds of doubt in readers' minds about the fixedness of meaning in our language. One of the main tools Ritter uses to achieve this humorous uncertainty is the element of fantasy.

Walker remarks that "theorists note the function of fantasy as a critique of existing norms and structures, challenging not merely facts, but also assumptions."⁹ Ritter is, indeed, introducing a critique of those patriarchal structures within society that allow men to define women's roles in a relationship through the introduction of another world:

Fantasy -- in the forms of dreams and daydreams, madness and utopian vision -- is a way of fashioning an alternative reality, of subverting the social order of the marriage plot and imagining power outside of it.¹⁰

Eva's fantasy world of *Gone With the Wind* allows her a world where the unexpected does not happen. Her sense of frustration at the uncertainty of her daily world is alleviated by her fantasy.

However, "escaping" into fantasy is not considered a sane reaction to stressful problems in our society. At the beginning of the play Eva's obsession with *Gone With the Wind* seems simply "crazy," while the salesman's Instant Fantasy cosmetics, and acceptance of the advertising notions that come with them, are normal. The fantasy element in *Charleston* presents two alternative realities to the everyday world: one that is tolerated in our society, deluding oneself that cosmetics will change the course of one's life, and one that is not, living within the world of film can give one that same happiness. The ironic elements in Ritter's play call into question the definitions of what is considered "insanity" in our patriarchal culture.

Ritter plays Eva's fantasy against the salesman's fantasies throughout the work. The salesman represents the most pervasive and enduring fantasy of our culture, of love and desirability. Eva's scepticism about the truth of what the salesman is trying to sell sets up the incongruities between the salesman's advertising slogans, the realities of his life, and Eva's own solution to life's hardships.

Eva's use of irony reveals the salesman's fantasies he both lives and tries to sell. Eva's discovery of his fantasies is both a triumph and a disappointment. She has been proven right and her compromises vindicated, but it is not a victory for society. Both Eva and the salesman are victims of a culture that denies people the right to control their own lives, and to make their own meanings from the experiences they have. Eva has rejected society's role for her; the salesman has conformed and intends to make others do the same.

Who is really "insane" in this play? Who is really living in a fantasy world? And whose fantasy is truly most destructive? Society, represented by the salesman, tries to make Eva conform to its version of normality and its idea of reality. The salesman tries to fashion Eva into his vision of a woman who simply needs cosmetic help to make her dreams come true. He is unaware of the fantasy world that lingers behind his facade and more truthfully fuels his actions. When Eva dares to confront him with his own fantasies, she has broken the code; she has shown she is no longer willing to play the game that society would have women play. In retaliation, the salesman (or society) does what little he can to salvage the situation. He labels Eva "insane" and therefore her credibility as a social critic is no longer valid.

From another angle, however, Eva is the most sane character of the play because she is fully aware of her fantasy film world and what it achieves for her: "Frankly, I've got enough fantasy in my life as it is -- instant or otherwise. Why else do you suppose I go to the movies all the time?."11 The lightheartedness of this line belies the recognition with which Eva views her own fantasy life. Eva knows what *Gone With the Wind* can do for her that nothing else can:

[B]y God, it was real! No disappointments there, no false promises, no wasted tears. And right then and there, I realized that I needed that film. Because it was the only thing available to me that wasn't . . . shabby and false and second-rate. (25)

How can *Gone With the Wind* be more real than our daily world to Eva? Because she has been taught that the role for women is certain; the myths she has assimilated about her place in society tell her that there are unshakable truths in life: women marry, have children, and live happily ever after. For Eva, it is the failure of these myths to materialize for her that illustrates illusion and fiction. The life Eva was promised as a young girl was certain, with no disappointments and no unexpected changes. What her own life could not give her, Eva found in the seats of a theatre. There the certainty, the predictability, and the reality of what had been promised her was finally available.

To the salesman, and to our society generally, this type of obsession indicates madness. But this definition of madness is very rigid:

[W]hat the dominant culture considers madness may in fact be the obverse; an acceptable fantasy that reveals a transcendent reality. In contrast to the limiting or misleading fantasies fostered by mass culture, which have the potential to trap women in socially constructed selves, the violence of metaphoric madness, like the sword of the woman warrior, may provide the dislocation necessary for the ultimate empowering vision to emerge.¹²

While *Gone With the Wind* is a far cry from "the sword of the woman warrior," this quotation illustrates that madness and acceptable fantasy are not so clearly defined. Eva may not ever be able to leave behind the world of *Gone With the Wind*. Her inability to survive in a realistic world would ultimately be a failure for her journey towards self-hood. We can never forget that the world into which Eva retreats is, of itself, patriarchal. But perhaps this is an interim measure that will allow "the ultimate empowering vision to emerge." We know she has used humour to reject a life controlled by the fantasies of a male-dominated culture; we can hope she can move beyond into self-actualization.

The relationship between men and women in this culture has been based on the fantasies created, defined, and controlled by men. The fantasy of achieving ideal beauty through cosmetics, the fantasy of desirability, the fantasy of marriage itself as an institution that treats women well, each of these Eva discovers to be "a trick done with mirrors" (26, 34). It is a definition of women's role seen in our society as natural, but it reveals itself to be a problematic myth. Eva's humour and her fantasy life is her way of

"fashioning an alternative reality, of subverting the social order of the marriage plot and imagining power outside of it."¹³ The traditional myth in our society of love and marriage no longer holds sway with her. The salesman has tried to sell her the myth. Eva's experience has shown her the darker side beneath the advertising sparkle, and she recognizes the reality behind the product: her culture has created these myths not to suit her, but to suit people whose power and control in society make her needs invisible. "It is the purpose of irony to cast doubt on assumed meaning and of fantasy to reformulate meaning in accordance with a new reality."¹⁴ Perhaps Eva's alternative reality, the celluloid film she has finally melted into at the close of the play, will provide her with the comfort she needs to renew her fight in the real world.

IV. *The Splits*

Like Eva, *The Splits'* protagonist, Megan, is struggling to be able to define herself by her own standards. Megan is more naïve than Eva and lacks Eva's experience or suspicion. Therefore, Megan's humour is not so tinged with bitterness. Eva's humour convinces both Eva and readers of her victory, philosophically, over the salesman. Because Eva is determined to prove her point to someone else, her humour seems more public, its meaning created, and shared, between Eva and the reader. Megan's humour, on the

other hand, seems more private at the start of the play because it is humour used in communication only with herself. Although readers come to understand how and why Megan uses humour, there is a feeling we are only observers in Megan's struggle, not part of it as we are with Eva. Later in the play, Megan's humour becomes more similar to Eva's, used to communicate a message to someone other than herself. It is at that moment that men no longer determine the action of the plot; Megan has wrested control from them. The movement of the play is one from the use of humour as a survival tool to the use of humour as a recognition of her own power to control and define her life without men.

Megan is a writer for television who, recently separated from her husband Joe, is having an affair with Hal, a married man. Before she realizes it, Megan has reconciled with her husband and is making future plans with him. She discovers, however, that his penchant for unfaithfulness has not changed, and that her agent, David, and Hal have also both betrayed her, though in different ways. Megan turns her back on each of these men to begin the task of managing her own life.

Humour is one of the few devices Megan uses to create a space for herself in a world otherwise ordered by men who govern her life. Megan treats many things with a lightheartedness that belies a more significant purpose. Her easy jokes are the only conversational gambits she is allowed

in a language taken over by the control and power of men. She couches her own opinions, seemingly insignificant or "silly" to Hal, in a tone which will not threaten male power:

- HAL:** It's quite a thing she and Mike have got going. I'm very proud of her.
- MEGAN:** You should be. You taught her everything she knows about adultery.
- HAL:** Come on, Meg. You know adultery went out with the Old Testament.
- MEGAN:** I know. Besides, as the concubine, I'm in no position to make judgements.
- HAL:** Concubine. I think you really believe that.¹⁵

Megan's desire to define herself differently than Hal does is disregarded. His definitions are so absolute that a serious conversation about her concerns cannot take place, masked as they are in playful banter. That playful banter, however, allows Megan to exercise the small amount of power she has: to protect her own opinions from criticism by keeping the tone of the conversation light. In many ways, Megan's humorous responses allow her to rehearse her honest thoughts, and to discover how they will be received without risking her relationships. Humour is an emergency measure enacted to save herself from succumbing to the influences of Hal, Joe, David, or her psychiatrist, Dr. Gilbert.

The turning point comes for Megan when she discovers the myriad of infidelities that have been perpetrated by the men she trusted. The male control of her life has brought on a crisis for Megan. Joe has, once again,

had an affair. David has not stood up for her work to media powers and it is about to be turned into something she never intended. And, finally, Hal has let exterminators into her apartment to kill her mice:

MEGAN: (her anger rising) Miffed? Oh, I'd say you were more than a little miffed, Hal.
 HAL: Get over it! Sometimes things have to die.
 MEGAN: And sometimes they don't!
 HAL: I thought you wanted to stop being the way you are. Goddamn it, when does it stop?
 MEGAN: Now! (slaps him sharply across the face) It stops now. (67)

Hal's anger arises from Megan's defiance of him, and her ability, finally, to stand up to him. Her decision to make her own choices is, like Eva's in *Charleston*, defined as "crazy"; Hal says to David as he walks out of Megan's apartment, "Her psychiatrist's name is Gilbert. It's probably in her book. Maybe you should give him a call" (67). But Megan is fully in control now, and knows what she wants.

Interestingly, at the climax of the story when Megan learns to transform her subversive language into action, her humour disappears. Once Megan has shifted to assume an active role in her own life, the dependence on humour is no longer necessary for the slim survival of her self-hood. The only power Megan had over her life was the power to use humour to avoid complete subordination beneath the influence of the men in her life. Now, that same power has expanded. She rejects any external, male control of her life. The power needed for that independence is not fuelled by humour

any more, but by her own sense of self, her self-respect. The final scene shows a hint of the old humour returning when Megan states to a disgusted and rejected David, "I've had all the help I need. What about you?" (70). Humour is now a characteristic of the power she possesses; it no longer is the power itself.

Megan's self-deprecatory humour also is transformed. Megan's conversations are filled with remarks which may seem lighthearted, but point toward underlying self-doubt: "A cute crank. The world's full of cute cranks, and some of them can cook" (6), and, in speaking of herself, Megan says, "It's not good policy to criticize crazy people, you know. It sets them off" (3). This use of humour seems to contradict any theory that states humour could be an empowering tool. We have seen how Megan's use of humour to empower herself changed from a way to implement power, to simply a characteristic of the power she possessed in her own sense of identity. It is a similar case with her self-deprecatory humour. It is a symptom, a characteristic, of the power she has lost over her own life. The jokes she makes at her own expense are an indication of the low respect she grants herself; they are an internalized part of the male control exerted over her life. This self-destructive tendency struggles against Megan's use of humour as a means of protecting her sense of self. Megan's triumph at the

close of the action is testimony to the power of her humour to overcome negative emotion.

The ending to *The Splits* remains one of Ritter's most positive and unambiguous endings: a rejection of external powers that have controlled Megan's life and defined for her the type of woman she should be. Megan has achieved a control of her own destiny that is both purely positive and healthy.

V. *Automatic Pilot*

Some critics and reviewers have suggested that Erika Ritter's *Automatic Pilot* "represents an extension of *The Splits* in terms of its concerns."¹⁶ *Automatic Pilot*'s protagonist, Charlie, however, is a more complicated character than Megan, and so are the interpersonal relationships with her lovers. What readers find in *Automatic Pilot* is a woman whose choices remain ambiguous; we cannot know, as we do with Megan, if they will lead her to happiness. The doubts readers feel regarding Charlie's life are the same doubts she feels herself. They result from conflicting messages regarding Charlie's role in her own life: is she supposed to devote her life to a successful stand-up career or is she obligated to remain, primarily, a lover, a domestic companion, a wife? These conflicting emotions result in conflicting uses of humour. She belittles her own work as

a stand-up comic at The Canada Goose and "rather than selling herself as a talented comic she negates that aspect and comes on to men either on a sexual level or as a refrigerator cleaner."¹⁷ Yet it is her stand-up (public) humour that provides Charlie with an analysis of her life she desperately needs. It also provides her with a space where she is independent, in control, and fully herself. It is only on stage where Charlie can escape the controlling influence men exert over her. The resolution of these two forces in her life remains far more ambiguous in *Automatic Pilot* than in *The Splits*.

Charlie is a soap opera writer who has recently begun a part time career as a stand-up comedian at a comedy club called The Canada Goose. She juggles her emotional allegiances among Alan, her ex-husband who left her for another man; Nick, her lover at the beginning of the play; and Gene, Nick's younger brother and also Charlie's lover. At the close of the play, Charlie rejects these men and chooses a life of independence.

Charlie's humour, like Megan's, is filled with self-deprecation. Charlie's opening monologue of the play is almost an apology for her presence on the stage: "at my age, it's an accomplishment to appear as new anything" and "I'm accustomed to making a fool of myself."¹⁸ This lack of self-respect stems from her failure in the areas in her life where she has been taught to obtain her self-worth: being a woman with sexual and domestic talents. Though she may be a successful comedian, this

achievement doesn't count because success outside of her relationship to a man is not what Charlie has been taught by society to value.

Ironically, the men in Charlie's life criticize her for this expression of traditional femininity. While they continue to determine the course of Charlie's life, the men refuse to realize their part in undermining her self respect. For instance, throughout the play, men try to define what happiness should be for Charlie:

GENE: She's better off with me, Nick. Better off than she's been in her whole life. And she knows it.
NICK: I don't deny it for a second. Anybody who can't be happy with you ought to have her head read.
GENE: (laughing weakly) Yeah. That's what I think, too. (86)

There is something of the absurd, not to say arrogant, in this scene as two men discuss how happy a woman should be with them. But to Charlie, who has absorbed the patriarchal teachings of her society, these men speak the truth. Charlie attempts marriage, but chooses the wrong man. She tries to be a homemaker for Nick, but he finds it intimidating. She even tries to be happy in the companionship with Gene. Each attempt to conform to the woman's mould returns to the same truth. While men believe Charlie is self-destructive, the reality is she is only fulfilled when she can express herself through her humour.

It is Charlie's humour that breaks through her own self-deprecation and the attempts by her lovers to control her ambitions and her humour.

Her private wit is biting and sarcastic, keeping her at arms length from possible intrusions into the world of her thoughts. Like Megan in *The Splits*, Charlie's humour provides a non-threatening way to enter a conversation using her own voice and opinion. Humour becomes a way of manipulating language, to undercut the rigidities of thought and allow for a clearer vision of the truth. This exchange between Charlie and her ex-husband Alan illustrates the discrepancy between how Charlie and Alan view their marriage. He feels she owes him; she feels the balance was paid long ago:

ALAN: After eight years of marriage, this is what I get?
CHARLIE: (*quiz show voice*) This, Alan, and much more!
During your marriage, you received: four million loads of clean laundry; the keys to a car your wife never got to drive; leftovers no more than twice a week; plus sex available at several convenient locations in your own home! Yes, Alan, these are only some of the prizes you won playing Eight Years of Marriage! (26-27)

Though Alan defines this as "bitterness," Charlie's humour expresses her "truth" about their marriage. Through humour, Charlie refuses to let Alan influence her feelings about their marriage. She knows the truth; she expresses it in order that it not be lost. In doing so she has refuted Alan's control over her.

Her public comedy is fuelled by her life. According to Ritter, "Charlie's mechanisms for dealing with her personal unhappiness turned into her art . . . the mechanism becomes an insatiable machine that has to be fed

with her own unhappiness."¹⁹ But Ritter does not ask, as the play does, which is the greater unhappiness, to have a successful career as an independent, witty woman who has chosen to live her life alone, or to be locked into a life, defined simply by your gender, that has no relevance to your ambitions and no hope for happiness. Narrow patriarchal definitions of who a woman like Charlie should be leave no room for her to define her own happiness. On stage, she is appreciated for the talent she displays as an individual, rather than as part of a couple, or as a nameless writer of a soap opera.

Despite her own uncertainties, Charlie chooses to define her own life. In turning away from Gene she has turned away from a role that society would have her play. It is a conflicting choice; her own doubts, her lovers, and society have all conspired to make her feel as though she has made the wrong decision. Readers are left to wonder whether Charlie is conscious of the choice she has made; she says to Gene, "you'll be better off without me" (91). Does she believe this statement or is she only saying it to appease her guilt? Charlie's choice of work over the traditional romance myth questions the belief that women need men. A woman like Charlie, without connection to a man, successful, biting satiric in her work, is a dangerous woman, a woman to be feared. It is precisely this kind of dangerous independence men attempt to avoid by controlling Charlie and the

humour she employs. Society encourages us to see Charlie as a pathetic figure, unable to make a success of her life and unable to form a meaningful bond within a male-female relationship. However, if we look beyond the obvious, we can see another story, one that casts Charlie as a courageous heroine who chooses for herself a life defined by what she considers important, her work, and not by what society would define for her as important, her man. Like Renee from *Winter 1671*, we may not know Charlie's ultimate fate, but we know it is a fate she chose for herself.

It is Charlie's public humour that allows her to break free from male determination and learn to control her own meanings and define for herself who she wants to be. Charlie emerges from *Automatic Pilot* standing on stage, the centre of attention giving voice to her experience and making people listen to her life, her opinions, her independent nature.

VI. *Murder at McQueen*

Murder at McQueen is about the lives of four women: Norah, an outspoken lawyer, Blythe, a soft-spoken mystery writer, Hilary, a journalist, and Mitzi, the owner of The McQueen Club, an upscale women's restaurant and fitness centre. The main story revolves around the deceit involved in keeping secret who is sleeping with whom. The fire that damages The McQueen Club brings to light the crumbling infrastructure of these women's

lives. The duplicity they build their lives upon is not as strong as they led themselves to believe. The fire, however, does not act as a catalyst to change; the McQueen women return to their destructive ways, leaving readers to wonder if anything has been learned.

This play illustrates the struggle for control between the male and female roles within each individual as well as between male and female characters. As much as the women from the McQueen Club vie against men for the ability to define who they are and who controls their lives, they are also being controlled by the "male role" they have internalized. At one and the same time they are fighting the enemy within as well as the enemy without. However, not only have the McQueen women internalized cultural expectations of what it means to be a successful man, learned in order to "play the game" and be successful in the public world, they have also absorbed the traditional expectations of woman's role in society. These three roles, modern woman, successful businessman, and traditional woman, exist simultaneously and subconsciously within each of the women.

The McQueen women still use humour, however, to avoid the external attempt to control their actions. Norah is a good illustration of this use of humour. Although she is attracted to Rex, the usual manipulative control Rex tries to use over women does not work with her. Through humour, Norah has the control:

NORAH: Look, you got a ride home and a kiss from the cabbie. Quit while you're ahead. (MOVES TO THE DOOR)
REX: (follows) Are you seeing someone?
NORAH: It's a little late in the evening to be double-booked.
REX: You know what I mean.
NORAH: Come on, you know we angry types don't date. We get our kicks driving them home, drinking their Scotch, then walking off with all the cigarettes.²⁰

Unfortunately, the way Norah achieves control of the situation is by imitating the male model, Rex's model. The sarcastic humour she uses does not distance her from male control to survive, but hides an uncertain woman whose own emotions are foreign to her. Humour is not anger or truth for the McQueen women. Humour is blustering self-presentation, a sparkling show to hide the doubts beneath.

Not only does the McQueen women's humour foster dishonesty with men, but it is also a way to avoid honesty with other women. The club, though it seems to foster an air of intimacy and Blythe tells us it is "[a] place, in short, to be uniquely themselves" (4), it is really a place of angst, guilt and circuitous lies. The women's witty humour often belies another story that they do not wish to tell. When Hilary does not want to reveal she is sleeping with Mitzi's ex-husband, she not only uses humour to allow her the role of modern woman, but humour also allows her the escape route when the conversation turns to circumstances she may not want to reveal.

Her feelings of betraying Mitzi leave her no choice but to lie to her. Humour as lies and concealment in fact leads to a loss of control.

It is Norah who understands how the McQueen Club women have internalized the male control of their lives. She encourages a rejection of this male way of dealing with the world, yet her own tactics do not change. When last we see her, she tells Rex she is seeing a married man, as it avoids the question of commitment. Despite learning that playing the patriarchal way, Rex's way, leaves no winners, male or female, she has not spurned the deceit, nor has she resolved the conflicting internal pressures, one of which tells her she must be in a relationship with a man, the other which tells her she must be independent.

Norah says that institutions like the Club "only encourage us to imitate corrupt male attitudes" (111). Rather than male characters controlling action in this play, it is male attitudes which permeate the very fabric of how the McQueen women interact. The traditional pressures these women feel convince them they need to be in a relationship to a man. The male perspective, gleaned from the atmosphere of the patriarchal public world, insists that they treat each other with deceit and lack of respect. They sleep with each other's partners, doubt each other's word, and lie to conceal the evidence. The modern woman is the part of their personality which comes to their rescue. It keeps the package together with bawdy

humour and witty lines that give to the women the appearance of full confidence. Unlike Megan, Eva, or Charlie, this swaggering exterior does not hide a new, improved self waiting to declare its independence; rather it conceals a confused and uncertain self who is ashamed and embarrassed of its "old-fashioned" emotions, like jealousy, love, and tenderness. Modern women, because they have become trapped in the traditional male role, aren't supposed to experience those emotions.

Despite their convincing act of being in control of their own lives, the McQueen women are merely under the control and definition of the male model yet again. They have not determined for themselves what they want or who they are. Their humour only hides confusion, not independence. Humour in *Murder* takes the women further away from being able to reject the male definitions and control they have grown up with. The women of the McQueen Club are fighting a deadlier enemy than any other of Ritter's heroines, the demon within.

VII. Conclusion

In each of these five plays, humour's main function has been in helping to produce "women's full participation in the determination of meaning."²¹ Meaning is constructed in our society by those who hold power, historically men. In Ritter's plays, men determine the action of the

plot. Women use subversive methods to overturn that control, and humour is one of those means.

The traditional marriage plot is one of the most enduring definitions our society has for women. Ritter deconstructs the "bliss" of the marriage plot and the philosophy that the story line ends once the princess has found her prince. The real story only starts when the marriage plot, inevitably, begins to break down. Critic Martin Knelman has said, "It's implicit in Ritter's way of seeing things that in order to be free, a woman has to live without sexual excitement."²² Knelman misses the subtlety, however, that it is not sexual excitement that produces the conflicts in Ritter's plays. Knelman mistakes a gender and power conflict for a simple sexual conflict. Women must live their lives without men because they cannot survive with them.

Rota Herzberg Lister, in her article "Erika Ritter and the Comedy of Self-Actualization," uses Northrop Frye's theory of humour to suggest that Ritter's plays do not have the traditional "blocking members" or an "obstructing character" in charge of the play's society. Rather "the conflicts and battles which the heroines must fight through occur between female and male peers."²³ Power, however, does not necessarily have anything to do with age, and the power to obstruct can be placed as easily in a peer as

it is in an elder. Society has given men power, and that power threatens Ritter's protagonists.

So let us return to the questions asked at the start of this chapter. What does the male presence mean in Ritter's plays? What roles do they perform within the structure of the play, and what is the significance of those roles? By now, we can recognize that men are members of the privileged class in society, and their presence in Ritter's plays, with their need to define and control the role of women, is representative of the institutions in society that do the same thing; the myth of the blissful marriage plot, the philosophies of freedom, the importance of work are all defined differently for men than for women. Renee, Eva, Megan, Charlie, and, to a certain extent, the McQueen women all use humour to investigate the rigidity of the boundaries being set for them without directly defying those definitions. As Herzberg Lister says, these plays

show women characters who have moved beyond the customary concluding comic marriage, exploring or explaining the possibilities of marriage and its contemporary alternatives. At the end of these plays, the . . . heroines confirm their choice of something other than marriage.²⁴

For the McQueen women, humour is still only a tool to conceal honest feelings, but for the rest of Ritter's heroines, humour becomes a negotiating tool used to carve out a spot for themselves in the male-defined, male-controlled world.

NOTES

1. Cynthia Zimmerman and Robert Wallace, "Erika Ritter," *The Work*, p. 281.
2. Martin Knelman, "Urban Lady," *Saturday Night*: p. 62.
3. Ibid., p. 61.
4. Umberto Eco, "The frames of comic 'freedom'," *Carnivall*, p. 8.
5. Zimmerman and Wallace, p. 280.
6. Ibid.
7. Erika Ritter, *Winter 1671*, p. 74. Further references to this work will be identified by page number directly after the quotation.
8. Zimmerman and Wallace, p. 280.
9. Nancy Walker, *Feminist Alternatives*, p. 55.
10. Ibid., p. 29.
11. Erika Ritter, *A Visitor From Charleston*, p. 9. Further references to this work will be identified by page number directly after the quotation.
12. Walker, *Feminist Alternatives*, p. 144.
13. Ibid., p. 29.
14. Ibid., p. 190.
15. Erika Ritter, *The Splits*, p. 4. Further references to this work will be identified by page number directly after the quotation.
16. Zimmerman and Wallace, p. 287.
17. Constance Brissenden, "Erika Ritter: 'The very fact that I survive is encouraging'," *Fireweed*: p. 69.
18. Erika Ritter, *Automatic Pilot*, p. 7. Further references to this work will be identified by page number directly after the quotation.
19. Brissenden, p. 68.

20. Erika Ritter, *Murder at McQueen*, p. 43. Further references to this work will be identified by page number directly after the quotation.
21. Walker, *Feminist Alternatives*, p. 190.
22. Martin Knelman, "The playwright as star of the play," *Saturday Night*: p. 60.
23. Rota Herzberg Lister, "Erika Ritter and the Comedy of Self-Actualization," *Gynocritics*, p. 148.
24. Herzberg Lister, p. 148.

CHAPTER THREE

Creating Identity

Because women and other minorities are systematically discouraged from thinking of themselves as unique and autonomous, their relationship to selfhood must be approached in a different way.

- Nancy Walker¹

In the second chapter we examined women's humour as a means to escape the external control and power men have. In this chapter we will explore how humour also helps women build a sense of identity and autonomy, separate from the influence of male authority.

I. *Winter 1671*

In *Winter 1671*, Renee is unwilling to negotiate her need for independence, which she has achieved by dangerous subversion and deceit. Despite the fact that Renee's sense of self is fully developed, her fight with society is far from over. She must defend her right to own and use that identity over and over again. Identities are created through connection with other people, but also by separation. It is this separation that Renee is denied. Ritter identifies women's difficulties in creating their own identities as this struggle between connection and separation. It is interesting to note that the comic distance that Ritter's other heroines establish to make room for the formation of their identities is paralleled in *Winter 1671* by a physical

distance Renee keeps from others: from her husband in France by coming to New France, from Philippe by staying in his guest house, and finally from society by fleeing into the March snow. She must remain apart in order to preserve what is most precious, the woman she has made of herself.

Renee's expectation that she should be met on her own terms as an independent woman constantly meets with opposition. Even for Philippe, who claims to love her, accepting Renee as an individual with hopes, dreams, and experiences is nearly impossible. He cannot imagine that she is anything more than what she appears. To him, she is simply the woman he wishes to claim as his own. When Philippe asks Renee what she wants, she replies that she has never been asked, so how could she know. Since Renee has never been asked what she wants, she has gone out to get it on her own. To be asked what she wants is a new experience, and the fact that she cannot answer perhaps indicates the extent to which her desires are nearly inexpressible. Philippe is looking for a simple wish which he could fulfil for Renee. Unknown to Philippe, however, Renee's dreams contain deeper and more complicated ambitions than he can imagine. As if to prove this, when she finally presents him with what she wants, to be married to him without involving her first husband, he cannot comply. Philippe refuses to understand that the craving for freedom that has left him paying bachelor fines, the craving for individuality and a sense of self that drives the

ambitions of many men, can also exist in the heart of a woman. Gilles makes the same mistake:

GILLES: (earnestly) I have such dreams, sometimes I feel my blood pounding and all I can hear is: "Get free. Get free." It sounds foolish to women maybe.
ESPER: (quietly) Foolish? (21)

Gilles and Philippe are only expressing the philosophies of a culture that expects women to have a nesting instinct and men to have a wish to roam.

The character of Renee makes clear that the distinctions made between men and women in terms of their identities are not necessarily accurate, nor is Renee without contradictions within the identity she has created for herself. Her identity has been created partly in connection with others; her love for Philippe is enough to want to marry him. However, her principles and what is most precious to her, her sense of self and her freedom, will not allow her to be bartered as a commodity among men. Her dignity as a human being is more important to her than love. It is a lesson that Renee's friend, Madeleine, learns in a painful way, when she realizes how fleeting friendship is, and that the only person you can truly count on is yourself. She is transformed when she decides to run her farm herself and, like Renee, to choose dignity and self-determination over mere survival. Even Madeleine's definition of what it means to be alone has changed. As we will see in many of Ritter's women, the part of her life that gives her a sense of self is her work, not her relationships: "My cousin told me I could

never run this place -- a woman alone," Madeleine says. "I said, "Yes, I'm a woman, but not alone. I'm a woman with a farm" (73).

Ritter is concerned with the ways in which women achieve the creation of their own identities in a society that does not encourage it, and how those identities are preserved in the face of great cultural opposition. Renee's strength of spirit is the only thing that allows her to survive with her sense of self intact. Ritter's comedies use humour to replace that determination. Humour allows characters to appear more human, filled with the doubts and unhealthy desires we all have. Ritter has made her comedic characters more uncertain, and her humour illustrates the more subtle machinations of how patriarchy reinforces itself. Because humour, especially irony, creates a double vision (two apparently competing views of the world), it can illustrate both the struggle to connect and to separate within women. For Ritter's heroines, humour is a way of reaching out to other women, perhaps even to us as readers, to find some connection with similar souls. It also provides a separation of oneself from the life and dreams of other, more powerful people. By avoiding the discussion of serious topics and thus preventing domination by authoritative influences, humour protects women in their private lives. In short, humour becomes both a therapeutic and revolutionary tool.

II. *A Visitor From Charleston*

Eva, unlike Renee, is insecure about the conclusions she has drawn from her life; she hides this uncertainty behind a veil of sarcasm and humour. Yet it is also this humour that gives her practice in becoming the assertive self she wants to be. The public Eva is witty and self-assured; the private Eva is filled with doubts about her place in the world. As Ritter says, Eva's speech is "laden with a tone of self-parody, as if she is amused by the fact that she takes herself seriously" (1). This self-parody illustrates the irony with which she views her life. While aware of her failures and the fantasy life she has created to survive them, she is also a fighter who is unwilling to let go of her dreams to build a life or an identity for herself. For now, she "uses humour and irony to express her pain" (1) because the expression of her real emotion would be too painful to admit to and dangerous to deal with.

The compromises Eva has made in her life and the uncertainties she lives with are protected from the judgemental light of reality by her humorous, sometimes satiric, exterior. She builds a wall of humour to protect her fragile inner world from invasion:

[W]henver my life fouls up one way or another, I just put on my coat -- or not, depending on the weather, of course -- and trot along to Gone With the Wind. It's practically always playing somewhere. Maybe you've noticed. In fact, as I tell myself -- frequently aloud -- it's lucky for me I latched onto that particular cinematic life-raft, instead of Lad, a Dog or

something. Because this one . . . is usually around when I need it. And then, after I've seen it, I save the stub and write the date on it as a kind of emblem of another disaster survived.
(12)

The light-hearted tone of this admission disguises the pain Eva has suffered; beneath this facade is a woman who is trying to survive and discover who she really is. Why this film? What does *Gone With the Wind* mean to Eva?

It is the only thing in Eva's life that has remained constant.

Disappointed by the betrayal of the myth of "happy endings" at every turn, Eva is comforted by a story that she can be certain of, a story whose twists and turns can be predicted and whose ending never surprises. She can be sure of *Gone With the Wind*. Unlike Everett, who could not be there for her once the stage lights had turned off, or Ray, who would never fulfil his own dreams of being a writer and who also tainted Eva's ambitions, *Gone With the Wind* exactly meets Eva's expectations every time. What does it say about Eva, then, if her expectations are fulfilled by a film which reflects the most patriarchal attitudes towards women and their roles?

It is not illogical to find Eva searching for a fantasy life that fulfils the expectations of success her real life could not. Eva has used as her fantasy life a script that reflects the attitudes she was raised with. However, the heroine of *Gone With the Wind* exhibits similarities to Eva. Both Eva and Scarlett have discovered that the happiness that is supposed to come from the fulfilment of the cultural roles they have been taught is simply a myth.

The woman does not always get her man, and life can take many a disappointing twist and turn. But the frustrations Scarlett experiences, and the disappointments she endures are those Eva can relate to; *Gone With the Wind* speaks to Eva's experience by reflecting the traditional role expectations for women that she has absorbed, but also the way those expectations let women down.

Eva's goals are simple ones of self-preservation. Her humour allows her an excuse, a getaway plan of "just kidding," in case she feels her protective wall being compromised. Humour leaves everyone feeling comfortable, as if nothing extraordinary, nothing hurtful, has ever happened. Glossing over any situation with lightheartedness obscures the failures and uncertainties of Eva's life. She hides beneath this veneer, and unlike the adventurous Eva of her memories, attempts nothing that will bring the false Eva failure or disappointment. But humour has its dangers in the alienation from herself it has brought about, but she considers it an act of survival:

So the real Eva, the impractical Eva, went off on a convenient extended holiday and her stand-in, a tweedy drudge, enrolled [sic] in the School of Library Science and loathed it, in her insipid tweedy way. (49)

The tweedy Eva only extends herself to go to the movies, where she knows what will happen and there are no uncertainties. The tweedy Eva must prove to the salesman that he is as false as she in order to validate the compromises she has made.

On a larger scale, of course, the absurdity of Eva's situation masks a deeper and more widespread societal problem. The salesman tells Eva that Instant Fantasy can change her life. She has discovered that the fantasies society tries to sell her are more than fantasies, they are lies. Each disappointment, each failure, each compromise, and each fantasy constructed to survive the demolition of another cultural myth moves one farther away from their authentic self. The myths the characters construct about their lives allow them to survive in a society that does not deal well with failure or with individuality. However, these fantasies do not bring one any closer to finding one's true identity. The absurdity of a cosmetic salesman entering a woman's apartment and preventing her from seeing *Gone With the Wind* for the forty-ninth time almost overshadows these more sinister messages about alienation.

This estrangement from one's sense of self occurs because of the ironic distance between the ideal, that which we expect to happen because of what society has taught us, and the real, that which really happens, in society. Eva has absorbed the cultural myths that were to be her life story: the handsome prince, the suburban house, the fulfilling marriage, the happy career. None of these things happened to her. The men of the play survive the failure of the cultural myth by trading it in for a new one created by the same patriarchal culture. Eva survives by rejecting all of society as a

constructed myth and instead choosing a fantasy she knows is false but is far more predictable. Eva's experience with the salesman confirms her opinion that people tell themselves elaborate stories in order to survive in a culture that does not tolerate failure. These myths are invisible; like the salesman we try to deny their existence. Yet they fuel our actions and obscure our thoughts. Unrecognized myths have led Eva astray many times; she distrusts them. To Eva's thinking, it is far wiser to live one's life ruled by an obvious myth, rather than hiding one's fantasy beneath a veneer of reality. She knows the ending to her fantasy and knows the action that will get her there. There are no uncertainties or unexpected changes in the myth Eva lives.

By living within this celluloid myth, however, she risks her position within society. Labelled as "crazy," she is forced to defend her choice to the salesman. In order to legitimize her own choice to live within the world of the film, she must reveal that the salesman's myths are as crazy as her own. Only then can she regain her position as social critic. Otherwise, she is merely dismissed.

By exposing the salesman as a fake, Eva reaffirms her own suspicions and validates the choices she has made. The humour involved in the illustration of the discrepancy between the ideal everyone hopes to achieve and the reality of people's lives becomes more significant than simply a

series of witty remarks. The situation Eva finds herself in, explaining her life to a travelling cosmetic salesman, asking him for cosmetic help to heal her shattered soul, is funny in its absurdity; it is also tragic. Ritter's depiction of a society which has no room for this diverse group of people is saddening. The woman who seems to have the most ludicrous fantasy life is, in fact, being the most truthful with herself, yet it is also true that she cannot live her life without her fantasy. Ritter forces us to ask ourselves what fantasies we are telling ourselves.

Eva's sense of irony is amusing simply because of her reaction to the salesman's pitch, but beneath her humour lies a deeper irony of the real fantasy the salesman is selling:

[I]n precisely what inspirational terms do you characterize your mission -- forestalling world collapse by moisturizing the wrinkles of the female populous? (Shakes her head) I must say, I'm disappointed in you. You asked me for -- what was it? -- the "Half hour that was going to make all the difference". [sic] Well, I gave you my time and now you can't even tell me why I shouldn't be at the movies. (27)

The truth remains that the salesman can't give women what they want, so he tries to sell them what he has, and markets it as what they need. She doesn't fall for his line, and her tenacity in trying to get the salesman to realize he is nothing but a charlatan is nearly carnivalesque.

Ultimately, humour becomes a question of control in *A Visitor From Charleston*. Whoever can wield humour most accurately and coolly is given

the power to control the situation. Largely it is Eva who controls the exchange; it is a small degree of control she enjoys in her life. When Eva exchanges the subtle power of irony for more direct and hostile sarcasm, the salesman attempts to take revenge for using power over him. Humour allows Eva to practice the role of a woman who has control of her life and what happens in it. It is in the salesman's self-interest to ensure that Eva does not succeed in developing a sense of self. His vision of reality depends upon it. Humour as an agent of power becomes a site of struggle between Eva and the salesman.

Eva's prank to mislead the salesman into thinking that she has overdosed allows her to keep control of the situation and keep the salesman off balance. Eva continually pushes the salesman, making him finish his demonstration, bluffing him into returning to her apartment because she needs, as we all do in our lives, to feel in control. As long as she commands the emotions of the salesman, she has power over him. What does this control mean to Eva?

She needs the salesman to validate the compromises she has made in her life. In order to justify herself in this way, Eva must point out to the salesman what he does not want to see about himself. Once the salesman's concessions come to light, Eva is no longer alone, and her own fantasy world that she has chosen does not seem so strange. In the end we feel

more pity for the salesman than for Eva, because, despite being shown the myths he has fabricated about his own life, he still refuses to see how he is fooling himself. Eva, on the other hand, has decided the "usual" myths people tell themselves to survive in our culture are not as harmless as people suppose. She concludes that only real fantasy, *Gone With the Wind*, can supply her with the certainty she needs.

The dynamics change when control shifts to the salesman. The safety Eva feels by being able to control the situation and by using humour to camouflage her insecurities is destroyed. He begins to challenge her and the criticisms she has made of him and of her husband. Speaking of Ray, the salesman says: "Aw, come on, now. Don't tell me your bust-up was all his fault. I've spent enough time with you to have a fair idea of what you must of put him through" (48). The salesman confronts Eva directly with his assessment of who she is:

Christ, with your help who could get ahead? Knowing you'd pack up the first time things didn't go your way . . . (Almost brokenly, as if he were discussing himself, but keeping an eye on her to watch her reaction) Christ, nobody can win with you. No matter how hard they try. Because trying doesn't count in your book. Bad breaks, bad luck -- they just don't count. (64)

The salesman has turned the tables and revealed Eva's fantasy: that the man should be strong and complete. Her insecurities and failures revealed, Eva loses control of the situation. All traces of humour vanish and she is left bare, an insecure woman who has yet to deal with the doubts of her

past. The command she once had of the conversation kept it steered away from her follies and focused on the salesman's failings. Now she has lost that advantage and her confidence and humour have both been swept away.

Like Renee, Eva has melted into a mythical world where we cannot follow her. Through the use of ironic humour, Ritter has managed to make Eva's choice seem plausible. While we may not agree with the action, we cannot fault the logic, illustrated to the reader through Eva's ironical humour, that brought her to her conclusion. The subtle irony which revealed the myths the salesman tells himself vindicated Eva's seemingly insane behaviour. Renee, though escaping into a physical unknown, was suffering from a more straightforward dilemma. It is credit to Ritter's mastery of the ironic statement that Eva's situation could be legitimized despite our culture's dislike of anything we cannot understand.

Unlike the salesman, Eva has chosen to reject entirely a culture whose traditional role expectations constructed her ambitions and identity, and which were revealed to be simply myths. Instead of grasping at other cultural myths meant only to obscure the truth, Eva's life will be guided by an honest myth, one that cannot be mistaken for reality. Eva chooses to identify herself with the known and the certain, rather than leaving her life in the hands of doubt, a doubt created by the ever-changing myths others, like the salesman, must tell themselves to survive. Eva's myth will never die,

will never change, and can never be revealed to be false. Eva knows it is false. The state of Eva's identity remains ambiguous, but her rejection of patriarchal culture is perhaps a female cultural myth with which to begin a new world order.

III. *The Splits*

While it is true that comedy can reveal much about ourselves and our culture, Ritter has shown us that humour can also serve the purpose of concealing what we don't want known. For Ritter, it is anger that gives us truth; comedy is what holds the key to survival. For Megan, as for Eva, it is a question of hiding the woman within from failure, scorn, and rejection. Megan uses humour to avoid questions she doesn't want to answer, to protect her own opinions which are as yet too uncertain to survive on their own, and to maintain what little sense of self she may possess. Humour gives her almost enough power to hold her own without being completely swallowed by the culture in which she lives and by the people with whom she associates.

Megan constantly struggles between her desire for autonomy, her desire to conform to society's roles, and her desire to please the people she loves. Repeatedly Megan must defend her autonomy; Joe is convinced she is throwing her life and work away:

MEGAN: I'm not a child, Joe. Nobody has to look out for me.
JOE: Not much. You pass out your integrity to assholes, and your door-key to every dildo in town.
 (30)

Conveniently ignoring his own philandering, he expects Megan's standards of conduct to be different. Hal also considers himself Megan's protector from Joe and, indeed, from herself. Hal's condescension is only a cover for his feelings that Megan is not able to look after her own interests. When Megan more openly makes decisions for herself, Hal becomes more and more angry and defensive as he sees his hold on her disappear. Hal's discovery of the dishevelled state of Megan's apartment after Joe has left allows him to challenge her ability to care for herself. However, when Megan makes a final stand for her own sovereignty, Hal also makes a last attempt to subdue her independent spirit:

HAL: This is not something you can decide about -- like whether to eat a hamburger or not.
MEGAN: In my apartment, I make the choices.
HAL: (his temper going) And you do so well for yourself, don't you? . . . You make such smart choices on your own. (67)

It is on this battlefield that Megan must nurture her own identity and become strong enough to speak her own character.

Megan's humour sustains that fledgling sense of self. She uses quick, snappy comebacks to avoid confrontations or making decisions. It is also a

way to avoid letting people know her own ideas and feelings which she is as yet unsure of:

JOE: Hey, do yourself a favor. Kiss all this crap
goodbye, and leave town with me.

MEGAN: Don't be silly. Who'd feed the mice? (37)

This remark obscures the entire question of her feelings for Joe and her ideas about where their relationship should go. Not only does it avoid the consequences of a direct answer, either Joe's wrath or a rash decision to leave town, it also protects the inner woman. Megan's thoughts about Joe and the place he should have in her life are obviously in flux, witness his eventual return to her life and bed, and his subsequent deposition. However, these embryonic ideas about Joe must be guarded. It is unwise to show uncertainty in front of those with more power. Joe could use Megan's insecurity to manipulate her to a greater extent than he already does. Megan needs time, without external influence, to fully form her ideas of who she is and what she wants from life. Using humour as she does allows her to evade the controlling mechanisms at work against her.

Megan uses the same technique against Hal's emotional and psychological invasions:

HAL: What does Dr. Gilbert have to say about this?
 MEGAN: I don't know that I ought to tell you. Isn't psychotherapy like the seal of the confessional or something?
 HAL: What does Gilbert say?
 MEGAN: He says . . . "We seem to be out of time, Megan. I'll see you next week." (8)

What is private and off-limits, in Megan's terms, is guarded by the humour patrol, the conversation veering off course to distract Hal from the real Megan who lies inside. What Megan feels inside about the animal shelter, about eating meat, and about the mice, is not the Megan that Hal wants to see. She hides as much of herself inside as she can, and the part she cannot or will not hide is left vulnerable to attack from Hal, Joe, and Dr. Gilbert.

This tactic does not go unnoticed and the men try to stop Megan from retreating from them. Joe says to Megan, "Now, spit in my eye or fall gratefully into my arms or something. But don't just pull inside yourself where I can't reach you" (24). Little do they realize that Megan must pull inside, she must be beyond their reach, if she hopes to survive. Inside is the only safe place for her.

We see glimpses of Megan's struggle with herself throughout the play. At one time, she will use humour to avoid the confrontation an expression of her true feelings would elicit. At other times, she is deadly serious about what she believes in. Megan's rejection of Hal's rabbit vest is

an unusually strong and independent move for Megan. In another moment, however, she relents as she detects Hal's disappointment and resentment. Megan's uncertainty is illustrated in these vacillations, until her epiphany:

No. I won't do it. I won't wallow in it with you. (with great feeling) You and I may pay the bills, brother, but there the kinship ends. I am me, David, and I'm not here to be sliced up into pieces at someone else's whim. No, I will not cry about this. (49)

There is a finality and certainty about her statement that makes us believe her. Megan's strong and defiant statement of self, "I am me," and her distinction of that self as being separate from another human being gives us the climax of this play.

The Splits is the story of a woman's journey to the self, and, interestingly, once that journey has taken place, Megan's humour makes a transformation. It no longer hides the self she has created, but defines and illustrates who she is. Humour is given power by the way it is used. Before, humour was the only power Megan had over her own identity. It was her survival tool. Now, humour becomes a secondary characteristic of Megan's power to define and defend her hard-won sense of independence and identity. The power now resides in Megan's sense of herself and her autonomy; humour is simply a mode of expression. Megan's attitude has changed, and so has her humour. It is a more direct humour, used to

communicate her sense of self and her own identity as a woman with inner power.

IV. *Automatic Pilot*

According to Ritter, Charlie is an extension and a more complicated version of Megan. Charlie uses humour to hide her insecurities, but comedy is also her profession. This creates an interesting contradiction; Charlie's humour hides her true identity while also being part of her identity as her job. She is a complicated character whose decisions are based on "best guesses" and instincts, and sometimes those decisions are not entirely in her own best interests. She isn't always honest with herself and certainly not always honest with others. Nonetheless, she is making the same journey as Megan, a journey towards discovery of her own identity.

Humour, as with Eva and Megan, is a coping device for Charlie. She does not want others to know what goes on inside her head. Critics, and indeed Erika Ritter herself, have argued that Charlie is ignorant of what she wants from her own life. Humour is like a drug to Charlie; she relates best to things on a humorous level. When she wakes up in Nick's apartment, Charlie has a hard time with the thought of what she has just done, but she can only deal with it on a comic level:

GENE: How much do you remember about last night?
 CHARLIE: Not much. Pretty funny, eh?
 GENE: I'm not laughing.
 CHARLIE: Neither am I. Say something hilarious. (21)

The tension Charlie encounters in her life can only be alleviated by translating it to comedy. By using humour, Charlie protects herself from Gene's probing interests in an area she may not be willing to share with him, protecting herself, as well, from unpleasant and unsettling emotions which she may not feel ready to deal with.

Uncertainty about her relationships and her place in the world leaves Charlie vulnerable; she covers this vulnerability with humour. Whether it is in order to prevent having to deal with her own questions about her place in the world, or to forestall questions, humour provides a means to avoid answering to her own emotions. In talking to Alan about their marriage, Charlie's bantering tone clearly puts her in the offensive position, leaving little room for her own emotions or feelings to come through. Only lines later, however, a different tone comes into Charlie's conversation, and a different approach is used:

CHARLIE: Oh, I took you seriously, all right. The last two years of our marriage when you said you were working late all those nights. I took you seriously when you told me I was crazy to think anything different. And I took you very seriously indeed when you disappeared into the pages of Christopher Street never to emerge again. Now, I'd say there was a limit to just how long a person

can go on taking you seriously. Or any way at all.
Wouldn't you?
ALAN: If that's how you feel, why do you
keep asking me to come and see you?
CHARLIE: I don't know. (27)

This last exchange is a glimpse of a Charlie we don't see often who admits the uncertainties of her own emotions with honesty. It is through these two dialogues that we see the ability Charlie has of either choosing to avoid intimacy by being flippant or dealing with people honestly. Charlie finds the former style protects her from emotional pain she is unwilling to experience.

Charlie's public humour, on the other hand, is her strength. Charlie translates her pain, bitterness and frustrations into humour and uses it as an empowering strategy in her comedy routine. Alan says to Charlie,

Charlie, it's not easy. For anybody. But as long as you've got the spotlight, you're way ahead. I wish I could do what you do -- dress up in a costume and act out my worst fears about myself. (41)

Alan's comments give us some clues to Charlie's motivations. In the spotlight, Charlie is herself. She is no longer acquiescing to another self, another identity to please someone. Within her routine, Charlie can be all that she wants to be. It is at once exhilarating and frightening. Her identity as a soap opera writer and lover is a safer existence, but also one that leaves her nameless and faceless. Within that identity, she is the voice for a fantasy character on television and one-half of a relationship to a man. Her private humour is only used to protect herself from her culture's intrusions.

On stage, Charlie's comedy allows her to be in control, independent and completely herself.

Charlie's story about the comic from Los Angeles gives us another clue to Charlie's feelings about what it is she wants from life. In comparing herself to the comic, Charlie concludes that perhaps, like the comic, she brings disaster upon herself in order to be funny. In order not to die beneath the weight of the tragedies in her life, she turns them into humour. But one could also read this passage with a different view on the word "die." There are several ways one can die. The human spirit can die long before the corporeal body. In Charlie's case, we can read death to be the death of Charlie's sense of self, her own independent identity. Charlie must be funny to keep a perspective on her own life, or she will lose the thread of who she is. Being pulled in different directions, towards a stable relationship with Gene, towards the still-present attachment to Alan, Charlie easily loses sight of where her true self exists. Comedy gives her the life line she needs. It provides an analysis and an apparent, if not secure, continuity to her experiences.

Choosing an identity associated with one's work, however, is an untraditional option for women. We are identified, by name even, by the man with whom we live our lives. Charlie refuses to live her life in permanent connection to a man. Her identity as Charlie remains in jeopardy

the longer she neglects the comedy that keeps her in touch with her self. Charlie can be in love but cannot do stand-up, or she can do stand-up and not be in love. Her ultimate rejection of Gene makes obvious Charlie's choice. Critics and reviewers have made the assumption that she chooses unhappiness, a loveless life. This is because traditionally women are not defined in terms of their work, but in terms of their relationship to a man. Rather than read Charlie's statement, "It has nothing to do with what I want" (91) as a martyring act in giving Gene up, perhaps it is Charlie's admission that wanting something and needing something are two different things. Charlie needs to feel her work is important and a success.

Erika Ritter has said that work provides "the far greater sustenance to her characters": "'In *Gone With the Wind* days . . . land was what mattered. The only thing that lasts in our society today is work.'² Mitzi, in *Murder at McQueen*, says the same thing. However, to be defined in terms of one's work, rather than in terms of one's men, is a new idea for many women. The pressures to conform to a traditional role are still great and the choice of work over love still yields ambivalence, as Charlie makes clear. Ritter herself feels it important to get over this ambivalence:

That's what annoys me most and what I think is my responsibility and the responsibility of other women: we've got to get over wanting not to be thought of in terms of our work.³

Charlie's choice may seem to be an unconscious one. But nonetheless, it is a choice. As readers, we must beware of tendencies to give characters motivations of which we have no proof. We can speculate, as many have, that Charlie's choice is an unconscious one. However, equally plausible is that Charlie's choice is a conscious, but ambivalent, one. Like many decisions in life, we may never know if ours has been the right one. We can see Charlie's uncertainty in her final monologue:

And when you say, "Hey, wait a minute, sonny --" (*faltering on the name, breaking off for a moment, and then, almost to herself*) Sonny. (*long, baffled pause, then plunging on, almost desperately*) No, no, I prefer to stick to single guys my own age. (93)

The name "sonny" conjures up thoughts of Gene for Charlie, and immediately we are made aware that Charlie is not completely happy or comfortable with the choice she has made. But we cannot presume that Charlie has made a choice oblivious to her own emotions. Perhaps we can give Charlie credit for making a hard, but ultimately more rewarding, decision to put her own sense of self and an identity created by her own work and life ahead of traditional societal values.

V. *Murder at McQueen*

Humour plays a pivotal role in illustrating powerful females. The women in the McQueen Club are independent, witty, intelligent women

whose conversation is laced with caustic humour. That humour serves them in many ways; it can either put people off the trail of their true feelings and identity, or it can give definition to who they are and what they believe in.

In *Murder at McQueen*, Ritter makes humour carry out the forbidding task of giving voice to these women's very nontraditional priorities. They are thoroughly "modern" women in a way new to Ritter, women who have reached for the future and grasped it, but are looking back at what they left behind. These women speak the unspeakable: the ambitions and hopes of women, unbound, they suppose, by patriarchal attitudes. Each, in her own way, is blazing a new and independent trail in the lives of women. A journalist, a mystery writer, a lawyer, and an entrepreneur are all types of the successful, single career woman who has it all. They flaunt their independent thought with humour and shock. Humour, especially sexual humour, is a fully explored arena for these women. Formerly prohibited to women of "good standing" in the community, the humour that the women of the McQueen Club flaunt is their statement of their ability to be powerful and say and do the shocking things their mothers were not allowed. Rebellion against expected roles is a way of expressing who they are and what their priorities are, both for themselves and for those around them.

Ritter has mentioned how in earlier times, land was what mattered because it was what lasted. Today, she says, that kind of assurance comes

from the realm of work. Only recently has the assurance of land and work been granted to women, and the women of the McQueen Club take full advantage of this kind of identity through the traditional male avenue of success. Mitzi mockingly echoes Ritter's sentiments: "Land, Katie Scarlett. It's the only thing worth fightin' for, worth dyin' for. Land's the only thing that lasts" (46). This comment, delivered with humour, parades the new opportunities for women in front of privileged male colleagues. Mitzi uses humour to define her priorities and those things, like the pursuit of land, that make her who she is. Earlier in the play, Mitzi quips, only half jokingly, that "Nothing's bigger than real estate" (6). Humour is also used here as a warning that women are coming into their own in all areas of the corporate, and patriarchal, world. Women are taking the distinctions which characterize male society and turning them on their head.

Besides gaining identity through work and land, another stereotype challenged by these women through humour is that of the chaste single woman, or women's lack of sexual appetite. The women of the McQueen Club, obviously on the prowl, are not necessarily looking for permanent relationships. Their often frank discussions of sexual conquests rival the male "locker-room" stories, and the stories' authenticity comes into question, both in the characters' and readers' minds, more than once simply by virtue of their outrageousness and absurdity. Nonetheless, the voicing of

sexual desire, even sexual ambition, is taken full advantage of. The humour in these situations comes, in many ways, from the shock value of having a woman say the lines generally reserved for men, and secondly in the recognition of ourselves in the characters' desires. Norah's sense of self, her identity, is partially displayed in her comment about her ideal man: "My ideal man flies in for the weekend, doesn't snore or watch sports on TV, fucks like a dream and -- flies out again" (49). Stereotypes about women's fantasies and desires are being turned on their head in this comment. It's very brashness makes it amusing, but its release value, for female readers to have a societally denied fantasy spoken aloud, makes it an even funnier statement. It is humorous because the reader can connect with the image, and elaborate on it in her own imagination. It is in this way that our own identities can be created; if we see alternative ways of addressing our lives and our problems, especially through the medium of humour, problems seem solvable.

Humour is an influential tool of control, and with it the women in this play, especially Norah, assert their own personality as distinct. Mitzi's ambitions about land, Hilary's coy stories about sexual conquests, Norah's militancy regarding pornography: each of these women uses the strength of a newly found societal voice and the fresh opportunity to use humour as a

way of defining the "new woman" and, individually, her own twist on that woman.

The question of control, and the use of humour in that control comes up again and again. Norah uses humour to control her relationship with Rex. She, not Rex, is the one who leaves early, who has all the lines he regularly uses:

REX: What are you doing?
 NORAH: (putting clothes on) I find I attract less attention on the street this way.
 REX: (laughs) Somehow or other, you've got all my lines. Norah, why won't you stay?
 NORAH: You know all the lines. You tell me. (57)

She keeps the upper hand with Rex by manipulating him into the subordinate position, always wondering whether she will stay, whether she will allow her emotions to show.

Mitzi, too, uses humour to assert the strength of her character above traditional authority. In the face of an unhelpful fire inspector, she uses sarcasm to illustrate how ineffectual his line of questioning is:

BUTLER: In this business, we're not big believers in accidents. I'm with Freud on that one.
 MITZI: (caustically) Now, there's a possibility. Did anyone notice a bearded Viennese with a lighted cigar loitering around the night of the fire?
 BUTLER: I appreciate your frustration, Mrs Ford. I am trying to help.
 MITZI: It's Ms Ford if you really want to help, and so far you've ruled out the possibility that the Club was either torched deliberately or burned itself down. That doesn't leave much. (71)

Mitzi and Norah in these exchanges are claiming their right to be independent, to think and act without deference to men. They refuse to be treated like victims.

Ritter's use of humour as a source of control, however, is also only a facade. She gives her women humour to illustrate their modern actions, but their reactions are steeped in old stereotypes, both of the male and female world. Perhaps more than any other play, *Murder* uses humour with the most contradictory results. Obviously, the ability to use humour to shock and express is one characteristic of the "modern woman" Ritter is trying to illustrate. Yet while these women are trying to be fully actualized, they are still caught by male patterns of deceit. At one and the same time, humour takes them forward, and also holds them back. Their external bravado hides insecurity, and, as Norah points out, it is those feelings of insecurity that hold the revolution back. But Ritter doesn't give readers an easy ending; despite everyone's experiences, including Norah's revelation, the Club has returned, more antiseptic than ever and Norah, despite her speech on air, is still creating for herself situations where guilt and shame can override her emotions, namely having an affair with a married man. *Murder's* ambiguous ending leaves an interesting legacy.

VI. Conclusion

The endings of Ritter's female coming-of-age stories are often more than a little ambivalent and disturbing. The protagonist is often forced to make choices which are perhaps only the best of a limited few: Renee and Eva melt into a world from which we do not know if they ever return; Charlie, Norah, Mitzi, Hilary, and Blythe make choices that are filled with uncertainty; Megan is the only character who appears to come to a healthy realization and take action on her own behalf. The journey these women make is laced with humour used as a tool to distance others from the fledgling sense of self they are trying to preserve, as a small way to regulate the situations they encounter, and as a method to assert one's sense of self, if strong enough, to remain distinct. The expression of humour, in and of itself, is an indication that a woman has refused complete socialization, and humour is a rebellion on its own. Ritter's women use it to make the journey to the self in one piece, regardless of the uncertainty of that journey or its final destination.

NOTES

1. Nancy Walker, *Feminist Alternatives*, pp. 76-77.
2. Judith Timson, "Life in the Afternoon: Erika Ritter's shift to *Dayshift*," *Toronto Life*: p. 19.
3. Constance Brissenden, "Erika Ritter: 'The very fact that I survive is encouraging,'" *Fireweed*: p. 69.

CHAPTER FOUR

Humour and Resistance

Sometimes, humour is the only weapon we have!¹

I. Introduction

Women's reliance on men, as sexual partners, as business associates, as fathers, and as economic supports, makes resistance a difficult and often uncertain enterprise. Women's decisions to fight for equality are often filled with doubt and ambivalence. Rarely have the two "sides" of a conflict been so inexorably intertwined in both personal and business lives. The nature of this feminist resistance cannot be compared with any other revolution, and therefore the traditional thoughts about what constitutes resistance must be re-evaluated.

Ritter has illustrated many ways in which resistance is expressed in women's lives. Women have left the scene of oppression to strike out on their own, as Renee and Megan do; they have escaped into a world of female creation, rejecting patriarchal-inspired notions of reality, as Eva has; they have chosen the need for fulfilling work despite the tide of pressure to conform to traditional relationship roles, as Charlie has; and even Norah has tried to argue the existence of inequality with Rex. What I have been trying

to accomplish in previous chapters is to show how humour becomes an important part of such resistance work.

We have discussed how humour acts as a tool for survival, and as a means to create a space within which women can discover who they are or, perhaps, who they want to be. This use of humour is a response to the oppressive nature of women's lives. If we look at humour as an act of revolution, we must ask ourselves if women's humour is an act of resistance, or a reaction to what is happening to them. What is the difference between the two?

Reaction implies, in subtle ways, that the protagonist is prevented from action in psychological, physical, or emotional ways. Because she can't act, she only reacts. It is passive, and can be understood not as resistance, but as survival. Action, on the other hand, is an independent statement. It comes from understanding the nature of the barriers to action. Action speaks of not only survival, but the desire to change the conditions which inhibit unfettered self-fulfilment. In light of these definitions, where can we put Erika Ritter and her protagonists' use of humour? Is it largely a tool of active resistance or one of passive survival?

The complexity of women's humour arises from their different relationship to authority, decision-making and social change. In turn, these

influence the subject matter, themes, and even the form of women's humour:

[W]omen's humour must be read as having a complexity that many readers, especially editors and critics, have not taken into account. It must be read with a consciousness that women's lives have been radically different from those of men, and with a perception that the mere expression of humour is for women a complicated issue.²

Thus humour, as expressed by a woman, regardless of its content, can be considered an act of resistance. Yet many of Ritter's characters go beyond simple expression of humour to include traditional "action-oriented" displays of resistance: rejections of bad relationships, expression of independent thought, and acceptance of responsibility for one's own happiness and life. We must create a way of understanding resistance that includes both the traditional methods of protest as well as methods used by those who have been marginalized in our society, whose relationship to power has created a very different idea of protest and resistance.

II. *Winter 1671*

Once again, Ritter's *Winter 1671* provides a good example of the complexities involved for women who wish to resist the life dictated to them by a male system of power without the added complexity of humour. Renee's life is characterized by the denial of the opportunities she would have had were she a male. She is denied the opportunity of being a learned

2 of/de 2

MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART
NATIONAL BUREAU OF STANDARDS
STANDARD REFERENCE MATERIAL 1010a
(ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)

woman in France; in Canada, given the joy of love and happiness, she is deprived of this as well, though this time by her "choice." Renee, as we have discussed earlier, uses her humour to identify herself to others, and perhaps to her own sense of self, that she is independent and needs nothing from others. On the other hand, she has taken the King's money to come to New France at least on the pretence of becoming a bride. Eventually, she does fall in love with Philippe. These are actions of a woman accepting of the status quo.

In reality, however, Renee never intended to marry once coming to New France; both her independent humour and her request to work for wages make that quite obvious. The final discovery of Renee's secret life back in France brings into focus that Renee's independence means more to her than creature comforts or love.

However, there is an important part missing to this characterization, and that is her humour. Renee's witty refusal of Philippe, "I tell you, the horse is not for hire" (11), tells us as much about her independence as her advertising for a paid position in the town. Rebuffing Philippe with wit, but also with a little taste of the rudeness with which he has treated her, Renee proves her strength and power. The wit with which Renee treats this situation illustrates how humour becomes an active tool of independence and resistance. In contrast to Renee's decision to leave her husband,

Renee's action on the docks is one of independence without the need for escape. Though both actions are born of resistance to her society, in New France Renee is able to stand her ground with dignity; she does not need to run away as she had in France. She has been able to do this because of humour; it has provided an alternative way of dealing with the pressures to conform.

Renee's use of wit could be interpreted as simply a reaction to her situation. Women are often viewed as reacting because within their societal and cultural constraints they are prevented from acting. However, Renee's use of humour to rebuff Philippe must be taken together with her other acts of rebellion, her escape and her wish to work for wages, to be seen as an independent act of resistance. Humour, as an expression for women, must be seen as an action with power and strength, not as a passive reaction to an unchangeable situation. The simple expression of women's humour is negatively received by society. Thus, in a triple meaning of the word "resistance," Renee is protesting first by the pure expression of humour, second by the asserting of her own independence, and thirdly by the refusal of Philippe's proposal. To think of being humorous means, for a woman, that she has begun to think beyond what society has prescribed for her. For Renee, a character built with inner strength, humour acts more as an illustration of her active resistance rather than being the main component of

the resistance itself. If we compare resistance in *Winter 1671* to Ritter's comedies, however, a picture of how humour contributes to cultural defiance comes into focus.

III. *A Visitor From Charleston*

When Eva melts into the celluloid world of *Gone With the Wind*, the question of whether her sarcastic tenor is a passive survival tool or an active resistance model becomes more difficult to answer. Part of the answer will depend on how viable readers consider Eva's choice to make Rhett and Scarlett's world her world, or whether we consider it simply an escape mechanism employed by a woman frustrated by failure.

In the first chapter we saw that in Ritter's work, women's actions or thoughts are defined by men. When women did not conform, they were often labelled "insane" or "crazy." Furthermore, we postulated that humour, in that situation, played the role of protector, giving the woman the ability to speak her mind without endangering her relationships to the man and his power. Using humour in such a way could be seen as a reaction against the circumscription women find in their lives. Because who they are and what they do is defined for them, women's ability to act in an independent manner is thwarted. Their only choice is to react. Thus Eva's satire is a

reaction to how men have labelled her escape into *Gone With the Wind* as "crazy."

Seeing Eva as only a reactor, however, denies the complexities of her character. In the salesman, Eva sees an opportunity to prove to herself and to the salesman, a man who represents all Eva is fighting against, that her vision of the world is as "sane" as everyone else's. A seemingly insignificant occurrence, a door to door salesman arriving in her home, becomes a chance to vindicate the choices she has made and release herself from the guilt she has carried for so long. She attempts to do this by convincing herself and the salesman that his Instant Fantasy line of cosmetics is at least as much an escape into fantasy as her forays into the movie theatre.

It is Eva's wit that eventually makes the salesman reveal enough that the reader understands how Eva's view of the world could be considered rational. Her manipulation of the situation through humour makes him reveal the accusations against him of sexual assault. Eva, having taken the salesman's order book, brings him back to her apartment to reveal his final betrayal, the fact that he still holds on to his diploma which represents the ambitions he still has, despite the fantasy that he has abandoned his old dreams. Throughout the play, Eva's sarcasm and humorous doubt regarding the salesman's claims and the usefulness of his product lead him to defend

himself and his products to the point of revealing his true nature.

Increasingly, the pitch he gives Eva rings hollow. Once the salesman has been discovered as the charlatan he is, Eva is safe in returning to her own fantasy.

However, is Eva simply escaping from the world, not resisting it? If one followed that line of logic, of course, she would be a woman who merely reacts, not acts. Furthermore, the world Eva escapes into is not constructed by her. However, in *A Visitor From Charleston*, humour becomes an active agent in two ways. First, as I have pointed out, we can view the use of humour by a woman as an active form of resistance in and of itself. Second, Eva's struggle to uncover the salesman's fantasies, thus validating her own, and her refusal to accept the definitions of insanity placed upon her are actions of protest against a culture whose myths have let her down. Eva uses humour to achieve these goals. It is reliance upon the strength and subtlety of humour that allows Eva to reveal these myths for what they are: the lies of a male-dominated culture.

Eva has experienced failure as an actor, as a librarian, and as a woman. To the salesman, she has also failed to handle the stress of society adequately; to him she is insane. Eva's only success has been achieved with her ironic sense of humour which has allowed her to expose the salesman as a fraud. Despite her own inner doubts and anxieties, humour

gives Eva a sense of control over herself that her role as a wife, actor, or librarian could not give her. She tried to live the life she was supposed to live, but trying to fit into a traditional role in society only made Eva feel like a failure. Other modes of expression, for instance through traditional submission, only created more disappointment for Eva; using humour to criticize the mythical happiness achieved by adherence to cultural roles gives Eva the strength that her failures had taken from her.

It is Eva's humour that becomes her resistance tool against the beliefs which construct and inform the society in which she lives. Eva uses humour to deconstruct the male logic that defines her as insane and her choices as failures. She then constructs an alternate reality and defends that reality, in opposition to "normality," with humour. Her acts of resistance are only undercut by the retreat into *Gone With the Wind*. Hopes that Eva can develop a true strength are left in doubt as she melts into the film. While Eva's actions are an expression of resistance, a rejection of society, they are not a revolutionary framework that will bring about societal change.

IV. *The Splits*

Megan illustrates the argument of active resistance through humour best if only because her final triumph is clearly a victory. Eva's escape into the celluloid world is ambivalent; it is not a victory for her or for societal

change, but one does come to believe it to be a viable alternative by the close of the play. Megan's mastery over her environment and the people in it at the close of *The Splits* is more in keeping with the "coming of age" narratives characteristic of the literary tradition. Ritter once again combines within one woman two very different personalities: a woman whose life and identity are controlled by others and a woman whose wit and humour shows her strength of spirit and determination to realize herself fully as a woman.

How does humour contribute as a revolutionary force? It is used as protection against the forces that work to keep Megan alienated from herself. Megan keeps Hal and Joe, men who wish to control her, at bay with humorous and unrevealing responses to invasive questions. Inquiries into her constant addition of door locks, her relationship with her psychiatrist, her smoking, and her writing are all avoided by answering in a lighthearted tone that seemingly ends the conversation with little sense of how Megan truly feels. This technique of avoidance through humour is necessary to the survival of her own opinions. Megan realizes that were she to open herself up to criticism from others, she would not have the strength to hold to her convictions. She does not yet have the strength to reject Hal and Joe, nor does she have the strength to argue effectively against their powerful influence. Humour becomes the only mode of expression able to withstand the pressures Megan feels Hal imposes. Humour is a protective

shield that gives her a different kind of strength. Her humour is the only means Megan has of expressing her thoughts and validating her own sense of herself. It is a survival mechanism. However, this should not be read as a passive reaction on Megan's part. It remains that women are not supposed to be funny, certainly not sarcastic, and definitely not evasive with the men in their lives. Megan's use of humour is an active resistance to the controls Hal is putting on her life. More importantly, her humour keeps alive her hopes of achieving her goals. Through humour, Megan is actively creating a life for herself despite not yet having the strength to choose to live that life.

When Megan loses her sense of humour, she loses a sense of herself. Yielding to Hal, Megan discards her humour and herself and takes up Hal's vision of who she should be:

MEGAN: Hal, you know I really am sorry, don't you?
HAL: It'd look so damn good on you. (putting the vest back in its bag) Even a rabbit would agree with that.
MEGAN: Wait ... maybe you're right. Maybe I should try to get over it. I'm not just saying that. Okay?
HAL: Okay. (hands her the bag) Keep it in case. (as she continues to stare at him anxiously) I said okay. What's the look for?
MEGAN: I'm glad you're back. Let's not end it this way.
(10)

Comparing this dialogue to Megan's evasions of Hal's curiosity about her conversations with Dr. Gilbert, we are made aware of the difference, for

women, between action and reaction. Women's definition of what constitutes "active resistance" may be somewhat more subtle than historical definitions. At stake is more than our sense of freedom; our reliance on men for economic security places women in a precarious position for revolution. For women, decisions whether to resist society's dogma are made not only with a philosophical mind, but with a practical mind as well. Despite these pressures to remain passive, Megan continues to resist. The wit Megan uses is like treading water; one isn't swimming to make good time, only to survive. Yet one is still actively pursuing one's survival, not succumbing with passive acceptance to inevitable death. For Megan, to "survive" means more than simply in body, but in spirit and soul as well.

Megan's resistance early in the play acts as a launching pad for her later independence and strength of action. Interestingly, once Megan's character takes on the role of heroine, discarding the people and actions that have sabotaged her, much of her wit disappears. One method of active resistance is taken over by another. As readers and critics, we must realize that both avenues are valid, and many times interdependent upon each other for survival. Without the resistance of humour, Megan's vision of her own life would not have survived, and without the strength of spirit that allows Megan to break away from Hal, David, and her job, she could not have had the strength to be witty.

V. *Automatic Pilot*

Charlie's journey is one filled with many more uncertainties and conflicts than Megan's. It is these ambiguities, and the critics' general reading of Charlie, that make *Automatic Pilot* an interesting test for the hypothesis that humour is an active resistance tool to patriarchal control.

Charlie is very often read as a passive woman, acted upon rather than acting. In comparing Megan to Charlie, Ritter herself sees Charlie as a victim figure:

In one [play], the woman [Megan] walks out and shuts the door. It's an act of volition. In the other, the woman [Charlie] sits and waits until the man walks out and shuts the door. It's an act of passivity where she is demonstrating her willingness to continue being acted upon.³

Even the title of the play, *Automatic Pilot*, indicates a submissive and compliant nature if not one oblivious to its own needs and desires. And, indeed, Charlie is presented as a woman whose own needs and knowledge of herself elude her:

Charlie's mechanisms for dealing with her personal unhappiness turned into her art . . . the mechanism becomes an insatiable machine that has to be fed with her own unhappiness. . . . Charlie really doesn't have a choice. She's rather unconscious about the mechanism for her creativity. If she knew how she came to write, she might not be able to.⁴

It is difficult to argue with the author's own understanding of her writing, but if we look at Charlie's actions in the same light with which we examined Renee's, Eva's and Megan's, a new interpretation arises. How do we read

Charlie's "choices" if we treat her humour as an active resistance against culturally sanctioned women's roles? What if, as Nancy Walker has stated, Charlie's humour is expressing "outward conformity and inward rebellion?"⁵

As a woman performing comedy in a public forum, Charlie differs from Ritter's other heroines. At the time of the writing of this play (1980), professional female stand-up comedians were still quite rare. Standing at the microphone at the Canada Goose is a courageous thing to do. Despite Charlie's apparently "passive" nature, she has chosen a profession where, as a matter of course, she demands public attention and public space:

[F]or a woman to be a satirist, or a comic, or even to recount the slapstick adventures of a typical day in the life of the homemaker . . . is to step outside woman's "normal" role as passive recipient of cultural expectations and take on the role of truth-teller and gadfly.⁶

Immediately, then, Charlie takes on the characteristic of social analyst. Unlike Ritter's other women, whose use of humour is largely a private action, Charlie's humour is a public performance. This necessitates Charlie making a critique of her own life as well as the society in which she lives. This is not a passive role. It is true, as Ritter says, that Charlie examines everything in her life in order to make it material for her comedy routine, but this examination gives Charlie an analysis of her life that critics have not yet given her credit for. While Charlie's humour may be a catharsis for her, the

twin functions of catharsis and protest are inseparable, because what it expresses is nearly always tied to issues of gender, to the condition of being subordinate, second-class, and essentially powerless.⁷

Charlie's stand-up comedy, in form and content, return to her a sense of power and control over her own life and an understanding of the events occurring in it.

Do Charlie's actions within the play contradict this conclusion? Her confusion regarding her relationship to her ex-husband Alan, her drinking, her sexual exploits and muddled feelings about Gene and Nick all point to a woman who cannot seem to control her life or find what makes her happy. In response to this criticism, I return to Walker's statement about conformity and rebellion. The fact that Charlie is a pioneer in women's humour and that her courage sends her to the stage to recount the details of her life, all the while bucking the values that tell her what she is doing is "unfeminine," does not mean she is not affected by the same pressures all women face to be the wife, mother, lover: the total woman. As a comedian, Charlie is a success; as a "woman" she is a failure. Like Eva, humour has given Charlie the only success she has ever encountered, both professionally as a comedian, and personally. Critics give more emphasis to her failure as a "normal woman" because, traditionally, that would be the goal the female protagonist would hope to achieve. Charlie seems unsure of herself because her life is filled with the contradictory feelings that come from living as a

woman in our society. Her humour acts as a medium of resistance against the forces that would domesticate her, forces that include even her own self on occasion (witness her refrigerator-cleaning frenzy). Her life works at every turn to convince her that she cannot have her humour, her life force and protest agent, and the domestic life as well. Charlie's choice seems very clear at the close of the play. Humour gives her success as an independent comedian; it also prevents her from fulfilling the traditional role of lover and, perhaps, wife. She chooses to remain a pioneer, using her humour to fight the pressures she feels every day to conform to what society would have her do. Charlie does not want the boredom of domesticated bliss; she wants the turmoil of resistance and revolution in humour.

In her public persona, Charlie fights the stereotypes by her mere presence as a comedian. In her private life, humour, as for Megan, is a protection against the intrusions of control and oppression. Charlie avoids questions she does not want to answer, or cannot answer, by exercising a lighthearted tone. In Charlie's case, as opposed to Megan, it is not as clear whether she is avoiding answering certain questions because she doesn't want others to know the answers, or whether she herself refuses to acknowledge the truth. Yet, despite this uncertainty, Charlie's humour gives her a space to recognize her unhappiness with Gene, to admit her confusion

regarding Alan, to finally choose a life that is, first and foremost, for herself. Charlie tries to conform to the expected marriage plot, but it let her down. She tries to live up to the traditional expectations of the domestic woman, but Nick rejects her in that role. She even attempts to balance both career and relationship, but finds she cannot do it. Finally, Charlie chooses the only thing that has allowed her to be herself: humour. It is this bedrock of Charlie's identity and resistance that must not be rejected; rather, she must leave behind those aspects of her life which represent oppression and powerlessness. More than any other of Ritter's plays, *Automatic Pilot* symbolizes the active choice of humour as a revolutionary tool, a revolution for her own life and for society at large.

VI. *Murder at McQueen*

The most cynical of Ritter's plays discussed here, *Murder at McQueen* begins with characterizations of four independent women then carefully deconstructs those portrayals to illustrate the conflicting and contradictory pressures women face in our society. The hopeful message of Ritter's other plays has been replaced by a concern that simply changing the roles of women in our society does not change the mind of the people in that society. How do we reconcile this pessimistic image to the images of the power of humour to revolutionize and rebel?

Each of the women in *Murder* is independent and successful and their speech is flavoured with the spicy humour that characterizes such a stereotype. This humour, as we have discussed previously, is a protection against letting anyone know their true feelings. In the case of the women from the McQueen Club, it is their outer shell that is flaunting independence, and their inner self, the one they wish to protect, that desires relationship, connection to a man, and love. In many ways, Blythe, Hilary, Mitzi, and Norah are opposites of Ritter's other heroines such as Megan and Charlie. Does this mean that the McQueen women's humour is not a revolutionary one?

To answer that question, we must return once again to the assertion that women who find the courage to speak wittily are already speaking in a revolutionary tongue. In utterance and form alone, women's humour is a subversive voice. However, we see an interesting shift in comparing the humour of the McQueen women to Ritter's other protagonists. Nancy Walker states that women are more likely to use humour as a means of communication while men are more likely to use it as self-presentation or posturing.⁸ If we look back at Renee, Eva, Megan, and Charlie, we can see that certainly while each used humour as a protective front, that humour was also being used to assert what little authority they had over their lives; humour communicated opinions and desires in a culture that did not expect

women to have them. For the women in *Murder*, however, there is no attempt to create a small space for themselves in the world through humour. Their double entendres and sexual humour are meant to present to the world women confident and self-assured, a self-presentation largely far from the truth as we discover throughout the course of the play.

Rather than protect their identities through humour, Blythe, Hilary, Mitzi, and Norah are trying to hide their identities. These women have finally succeeded in bringing forth that part of their character that has strength, beauty, intelligence and independence. They are the conclusions to such characters as Megan, who at the close of her play, is moving in this same direction. Humour here is fighting the demons that still attempt to bring women in line with societal expectations. The bravado exterior their sexual humour presents is only hiding a woman beneath who is confused about why she still wants the romantic myth of "happily ever after." To expose their confusion would be to exhibit weakness, and fault is not yet part of the business world. Honesty would set them up for a fall; grim determination would earn them a new stereotype as "humourless feminists." Thus all confusion and uncertainty is obscured by blinding humour. As Megan and Charlie's humour tried to bring forth the independent self, so does the McQueen women's humour attempt to keep repressed the desires of the traditional woman inside each of them.

There is no real murder in *Murder at McQueen*. What is being murdered, for Ritter, is the hope that by the inclusion of women into the world of work and business we would soften the edges, humanize an inhuman world. The betrayals and the conflicting emotion in this play show that humanization has not yet been accomplished. Norah's interview at the close of the play illustrates Ritter's theme:

- REX: How are women supposed to avoid replicating male mistakes?
- NORAH: You mean what other model is there to go by? None. Since today's women are still too emotionally dependent and riddled with guilt. These are not qualities that will help us get ahead.
- REX: If it's just a question of getting ahead, there are plenty of ruthless and guilt-free men you could emulate. But you seem to reject them too. So what's the answer?
- NORAH: Look, rebuilding from the ground up is a tall order. I guess we're all still working on that.
- REX: What I want to know is, when can we expect the revolution?
- NORAH: Not until we stop pinning our hopes on institutions like the Club. Which only encourages us to imitate corrupt male attitudes. (110-111)

All the women from the McQueen Club are still working on ironing out the details of how their personal revolution will be won. They are still unsure of how their new-found independence fits into the world order. Their flings, their betrayals of friends and being betrayed, and of course their bitter-edged humour stems from doubt regarding the choices they have made and what the future holds for them. At the close of the play, Norah has returned to an

affair with a married man, Blythe is considering picking up the phone to resume her affair, and Mitzi has rebuilt The McQueen Club with, according to Blythe, sterile, unemotional decor: "I can't imagine leading a discussion in a room like this. Unless it was a discussion on eugenics" (113). The ambivalence of this ending leaves us with many questions, but the most pressing for us surely must be can humour remain a revolutionary force for these women?

The answer is, "Of course!" But it is this play which shows that the tools women have taken to subvert the patriarchal order such as humour, art, and music, can always be turned against us if we only take the male model without adapting it to our own uses. Blythe, Hilary, Mitzi, and Norah use humour to bolster their own sense of themselves. As women in pioneering roles, they must sustain themselves because no one else will do it for them. How they accomplish that is by denying weakness through the bravado of confident humour. Their wit is another indication of their independence and strength; without a doubt these are courageous and innovative women. But their spirit is caught between moving forward with no mentors save those who exist within the male model, or moving back to the traditional roles of their foremothers. Within this conundrum, humour becomes less a revolutionary tool and more a facade to hold up the status quo, whatever that may be.

VII. Conclusion

Women's use of humour in literature must be re-examined in light of the fact that it is a far more complex issue than has been given credit.

Women's relationship to institutions and people of power is different from that of men, and humour is about power: who has the power to be funny and the power to choose what will be laughed at and what is sacred.

Historically, it has been women who have been laughed at, by men and by ourselves. To turn around and claim that humorous voice for ourselves is a dangerous thing. It is a complicated expression for women:

To be a woman and a humorist is to confront and subvert the very power that keeps women powerless, and to risk alienating those upon whom women are dependent for economic survival.⁹

In and of itself, then, women's expression of humour is by definition revolutionary. It is this complexity of expression that gives us new insight into women's humour in literature. If women's humour is protest, then what does that say about the rest of the work?

In Erika Ritter's case, it sheds new light on her characters. Rather than viewing them as passive recipients of cultural norms, her protagonists become actively involved, through humour, in the construction of an alternate identity for themselves and an alternate view of the world for readers. Rather than passively escaping reality and responsibilities, they are defending their right to establish a sense of self and a new world order.

Tragically, Ritter sees this new world order as already corrupt. The logical sequence from Megan or Charlie to perhaps Mitzi or Norah gives a very pessimistic view of the future. As women, we know humour can be used against us; Ritter shows us we must beware the intoxicating influence of corrupt male power and continue the subversive modes of humour that helped us arrive where we are. Humour can be a revolutionary tool, but it can't be the revolution itself.

NOTES

1. *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, dir. Robert Zemeckis.
2. Nancy Walker, *A Very Serious Thing*, p. 14.
3. Cynthia Zimmerman and Robert Wallace, "Erika Ritter," *The Work*, p. 288.
4. Constance Brissender, "Erika Ritter: 'The very fact that I survive is encouraging,'" *Fireweed*: p. 68.
5. Nancy Walker, "Women's Humor as Catharsis and Protest," *Woman of Power*: p. 76.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Walker, *A Very Serious Thing*, p. xii.
9. Ibid., p. 9.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anonymous. "This Month." *Saturday Night* 94 (December 1979): 11.
- Anonymous. "Scenes from Erika Ritter's Automatic Pilot." *Fireweed: A Feminist Quarterly* 7 (Summer 1980): 60-67.
- Atwood, Margaret. "What's So Funny? Notes on Canadian Humour." *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press Limited, 1982.
- Banks, Morwenna and Amanda Swift. *The Jokes on Us: Women in Comedy from Music Hall to the Present*. London: Pandora, 1987.
- Barreca, Regina. "Bringing Down the House." *Ms.* March/April 1992: 76-77.
- , *They Used to Call Me Snow White . . . But I Drifted: Women's Strategic Use of Humor*. New York: Penguin Books, 1981.
- Barreca, Regina, ed. *Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy*. New York: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, 1988.
- Blain, Virginia, Patricia Clements and Isobel Grundy, eds. "Erica [sic] Ritter." in *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English: Women Writers from the Middle Ages to the Present*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.
- Boskin, Joseph. *Humor and Social Change in Twentieth-Century America*. Boston: Trustees of the Public Library of the City of Boston, 1979.
- Brissenden, Constance. "Erika Ritter: 'The very fact that I survive is encouraging.'" *Fireweed: A Feminist Quarterly* 7 (Summer 1980): 68-70.
- Bruere, Martha Bensley and Mary Ritter Beard, eds. *Laughing Their Way: Women's Humor in America*. New York: Macmillan, 1934.
- Cameron, Deborah, ed. *The Feminist Critique of Language: a reader*. London: Routledge, 1990.
- "Canadian Humour." *Thalia: Studies in Literary Humor* vol. III, no. 2 (Fall and Winter 1980-1981).

- Carlson, Susan. *Women and Comedy: Rewriting the British Theatrical Tradition*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1991.
- Collier, Denise and Kathleen Beckett. *Spare Ribs: Women in the Humor Biz*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980.
- Davidson, Cathy N. "Canadian Wry: Comic Vision in Atwood's *Lady Oracle* and Laurence's *The Diviners*." *Regionalism and the Female Imagination* 3 (Autumn-Winter 1977-78): 50-55.
- Dresner, Zita Z. "Delineating the Norm: Allies and Enemies in the Humor of Judith Viorst and Erma Bombeck." *Thalia: Studies in Literary Humor* 7 (1984): 28-34.
- , "The Housewife as Humorist." *Regionalism and the Female Imagination* 3 (1977/78): 29-38.
- Eco, Umberto. "The frames of comic 'freedom.'" *Carnival!* Thomas A. Sebeok, ed. Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 1984.
- Gnarowski, Michael. *Theses and Dissertations in Canadian Literature; English*. Ottawa: Golden Dog Press, 1975.
- Herzberg Lister, Roza. "Erika Ritter and the Comedy of Self-Actualization." *Gynocritics/La Gynocritique: Feminist Approaches to Writing by Canadian and Quebecoise Women/Approches féministes à l'écriture des canadiennes et québécoises*. Barbara Godard, ed. Toronto: ECW Press, 1987.
- Hutcheon, Linda. "Women's Work: Feminist Ironic Challenges." In Hutcheon's *Splitting Images: Contemporary Canadian Ironies*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Kallen, Horace Meyer. *Liberty, Laughter, and Tears: Reflections on the Relations of Comedy and Tragedy to Human Freedom*. [n.p.]: Northern Illinois University Press, 1968.
- Kane, Thomas S., Leonard J. Peters, David Jackel, and Maurice R. Legris. *Writing Prose: Techniques and Purposes*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987.

Kaufman, Gloria, ed. *In Stitches: A Patchwork of Feminist Humor and Satire*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.

Kaufman, Gloria, and Mary Kay Blakely, eds. *Pulling Our Own Strings: Feminist Humor and Satire*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980.

Knelman, Martin. "The playwright as star of the play." *Saturday Night* 93 (April 1978): 59-62.

----- "Urban Lady." *Saturday Night* 101 (December 1986): 61-63.

Little, Judy. *Comedy and the Woman Writer: Woolf, Spark, and Feminism*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983.

McClung, Nellie. *In Times Like These*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972.

Mintz, Lawrence E. *Humor in America: A Research Guide to Genres and Topics*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1988.

Morrow, Martin. "A Comic Hell?" *Calgary Herald* 4 January 1993: B4.

Playwrights Union of Canada. *Directory of Canadian Plays and Playwrights*. Toronto: Playwrights Canada, 1981.

Randall, Neil. *Humor in All Seriousness: Techniques and Effects of Humour in Six Canadian Novels*. Ph.D. thesis, Toronto: York University, May 1985.

Ritter, Erika. *Automatic Pilot*. Toronto: Playwrights Canada, 1980.

----- Telephone Interview by Karen Colvin: 12 January 1993.

----- "I Only Laugh When It Hurts; That Can't Be Right." *Language in Her Eye: Writing and Gender*. Eds. Libby Scheier, Sarah Sheard and Eleanor Wachtel. Toronto: Coach House Press, 1990.

----- *Murder at McQueen*. Toronto: Playwrights Canada, 1986.

----- *Ritter in Residence: A Comic Collection*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1987.

- *The Splits*. Toronto: Playwrights Canada, 1978.
- *Urban Scrawl: The World as Seen Through the Bemused Eyes of Erika Ritter*. Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1984.
- *A Visitor From Charleston*. Toronto: Playwrights Canada, 1975.
- *Winter 1671*. Toronto: Playwrights Canada, 1979.
- Sanborn, Kate. *The Wit of Women*. New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1885.
- Sochen, June. *Women's Comic Visions*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991.
- Stillman, Deanne and Anne Beatts, eds. *Titters: The First Collection of Humor by Women*. New York: Collier, 1976.
- Timson, Judith. "Life in the Afternoon: Erika Ritter's shift to *Dayshift*." *Toronto Life* 20 (July 1986): 17, 19.
- Trapunski, Edward. "Media mouths put the airwaves to the page." *Quill & Quire* 53 (October 1987): 23.
- Walker, Nancy. *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988.
- "Do Feminists Ever Laugh? Women's Humor and Women's Rights." *International Journal of Women's Studies* 4 (January/February 1981): 1-9.
- *Feminist Alternatives: Irony and Fantasy in the Contemporary Novel by Women*. Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1990.
- "Humor and Gender Roles: The 'Funny' Feminism of the Post-World War II Suburbs." *American Quarterly* 37 (1985): 98-113.
- *The Tradition of Women's Humor in America*. Huntington Beach, Calif.: American Studies Publishing Co., 1984.

- , "Women's Humor as Catharsis and Protest." *Women of Power: A Magazine of Feminism, Spirituality, and Politics* Summer 1990: 75-80.
- Walker, Nancy and Zita Dresner, ed. *Redressing the Balance: American Women's Humor from the Colonies to the 1980s*. Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1988.
- Warren, Rosalind, ed. *Women's Glib: A Collection of Women's Humor*. Freedom, Calif: The Crossing Press, 1991.
- , *Women's Glibber: State-of-the-Art Women's Humor*. Freedom, Calif: The Crossing Press, 1992
- Who Framed Roger Rabbit*. Dir. Robert Zemeckis. Touchstone Pictures, 1987.
- Wisecracks*. Dir. Gail Singer. Studio D, National Film Board, 1991.
- Wright, Jean. "At Chatelaine." *Chatelaine* June 1976: 6.
- Zimmerman, Cynthia, and Robert Wallace. "Erika Ritter." *The Work: Conversations with English-Canadian Playwrights*. Toronto: Coach House Press, 1982.

END

1 9-07-94

FIN