

CHAPTER ONE



Challenging Humor Theory with the “Humored” Body

It cannot be that [the] laughter . . . is due simply to an irksome attitude of the mind: some other cause must be thought.

Herbert Spencer, “The Physiology of Laughter”

The body has been regarded as a source of interference in, and a danger to, the operations of reason.

Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*

The essence of being radical is physical.

Michel Foucault, *Foucault Live*

In “The Cultural Overseer and the Tragic Hero: Comedic and Feminist Perspectives on the Hubris of Philosophy,” Susan Bordo argues that classical philosophy’s near dismissal of comic discourses can be traced to demonstrable links between the comic, the material body, and women. Although rarely quoted in this context, Bordo’s article constitutes a crucial moment in contemporary humor studies not only because of its contribution to an understanding of the subversive potential of comedic discourses, but also because its argument may well be the first critical attempt to theorize the link between a semiotics of the comic and the materiality of the body from a gendered perspective. One of the earliest attempts to theorize the devaluation of the comic on the grounds of its “feminization,” Bordo’s essay arrives at the startling conclusion that the preference for the tragic over the comic in the history of philosophy may be yet another way in which the early thinkers sought to privilege the masculine ideal of abstraction over female embodiment,

of mind over concrete matter, of generals above particulars. Clearly implicated in Bordo's argument is the contention that Western culture's denigration of comedy is a gendered act, one with obvious repercussions not only for comic genres but for women's bodies.

A detailed account of women's role in the history of humor theory is beyond the scope of this chapter. My more modest aim is to present a brief and selective sketch of some of the important turning points in that history, emphasizing the ways in which these key moments have influenced our conception of different kinds of humor and of women's roles in helping shape the theories or hypotheses that emerged from these. A frequent criticism of comparative and schematic approaches such as the one I attempt in the first part of this chapter¹ is that they tend to reinforce existing assumptions by playing off contrasting but widely held generalizations. Adopting David Damrosch's view of comparative literary projects as following an "inherently elliptical" method, one that can lead to a modified understanding of the different areas under analysis, my aim in examining important turning points in humor theory (and theories of the comic) across national and historical borders is to show how different national, and sometimes transnational, views of humor practices and comic worldviews have echoed or supplemented each other in excluding or censoring women from the production and reception of humor.

"DISAPPEARING ACTS": WOMEN AND BODIES IN HUMOR THEORY

Scholars have speculated that Plato's condemnation of comic laughter probably grew out of his disapproval not only of the viciousness of Attic comedy but also of the pornographic excesses committed by the drunken revelers who engaged in these rituals, rituals that were still practiced during Plato's lifetime.² Relatively recent evidence of the significant role that women played in these ancient festivals and cults, however, makes it all the more plausible to speculate that among Plato's prejudices against Attic comedy and Attic clowning was the suspicion of widespread female participation in these practices. In "The Maculate Muse: Obscene Language and the Development of Attic Comedy," classicist Jeffrey Henderson claims that the practice of obscene humor and joking in Attic Greece can be traced back to the cults associated with fertility rites, many of which were ostensibly performed by women.

Writing specifically about the festivals of Demeter, Erica Simon speculates that the jesting and "scoffing" said to be typical of these ancient fertility

rites may have been an attempt on the part of the celebrating women to distract the goddess Demeter away from her grief over her daughter's loss. Simon's speculations as to the possible function of humor in ancient rituals are of particular interest when viewed in the context of the classical condemnations of comic genres. Most classical philosophical treatises assume all expressions of humor to be a form of ridicule and hence to stem from a sense of malice. Yet in the largely female rituals described by Simon, the humorous jests and the ludic aspect of obscene bodily gestures and sexual play appear to perform a healing social as well as a religious function: ritual laughter as early female bonding. Given this scenario it is tempting to speculate that, by affirming a space for women's laughter and for female unruliness, these early women comic "performers" posed a subversive threat to men intent on waging wars and building orderly republics.³ Moreover, given their largely physical and possibly orgiastic nature, it is entirely plausible to assume that these examples of joking and obscene women in early cultic rituals may have contributed to the growing condemnation not just of comic practices by women, but of the practice of humor *tout court*.

Following a line of thought that began with Hippocrates and was later developed by Galen, theories linking bodily fluids with psychic temperament were the foundation of medieval as well as early modern medicine. According to Harry Levin, Juan Huarte's *Examen de ingenios para las ciencias* (1575) might well have served as the immediate source of inspiration for Ben Jonson's modern coinage of the term "humor" in English.⁴ Building on "established" medical lore about bodily fluids, Huarte's work concluded that corporeal "humors" marked a child from birth as sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric, bilious, or melancholy. Accordingly, he proposed that the Church and the State devise an educational program for boys and young men based on the child's "humor" type. Suspecting such a recommendation might run counter to the doctrine of free will, the Inquisition came down hard on Huarte. But neither the Church nor the Crown had any objections to his view of girls and women as creatures made up largely of blood and tears, and hence incapable of any kind of "ingenio." Like Huarte contemporaries Fray Luis de León and Juan Luis Vives left little doubt about the lowly rank of women's humor, and of their "humors," in their writings.

In *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, Natalie Zemon Davis explains that the viciousness with which many early modern physicians, clerics, and writers targeted "laughing" or loud women can be explained, in part, by the appearance of a few famously loud, boisterous, and bawdy women in late medieval and early modern literature. Davis points out that early European models of vocal and lewd women had a precursor in the likes of Chaucer's Wife of Bath and later reached a kind of apotheosis in Rabelais's Gargamelle.

Kathleen Rowe traces the figure of the “unruly woman” in medieval carnival both to “the various Mrs. Noahs of medieval plays” and to the “enormous, greasy Ursula the Pig Woman” in Jonson’s 1614 play *Bartholomew Fair* (36, 37). Like Davis, Rowe insists on noting that the social chaos unleashed by the carnivalesque antics of these early bawdy and burlesque women would have threatened conventionality and orthodox civility.

The first of these female carnivalesque models of women who relish making spectacles of themselves in Spanish literature appears in Arcipreste de Hita’s fourteenth-century comic-erotic *Libro del Buen Amor* [*Book of Good Love*], in the guise of Trotaconventos. A Wife of Bath type, Trotaconventos is a foul-mouthed and lecherous prostitute who makes her living in the convents to and from which she “trots” (hence her name). But the most memorable archetype of an early modern Spanish carnivalesque woman is Fernando de Rojas’s *Celestina*, the witch/procuress responsible for the eponymous lovers’ death in Rojas’s late fifteenth-century *Tragicomedia de Calixto and Melibea*. Known to students of Spanish literature as *La Celestina*, Rojas’s tragicomedy was soon read and studied in the tradition of the emerging picaresque, largely because the old bawd who acts as go-between between the lovers soon takes over in the imagination of readers and critics, reducing the lovers to the status of a supporting cast. The obscene, loud *Celestina* is all for the body, all for gossip, and all for (dark and nasty) laughter. Once a prostitute, she now makes a living out of pimping and prostituting other women, threatening to stain bloodlines and disrupt class barriers all over Castille.

As the best known female archetype in Hispanic literature, Rojas’s *Celestina* is the model for the whole army of comic and lawless female bodies that populate the Spanish picaresque novel. Appearing mostly as traveling prostitutes, female *Pícaras* live off their bodies and their verbal skills at conning, cheating, and lying. Almost without exception, these overtly sexual and overtly vocal women are made to pay a heavy price for flaunting their bodies and their laughter, as they usually end in silence, hunger, and death. Behind the misogyny of these early modern works lurks the fear that, if allowed to break into uncensored speech and fleshy laughter, carnivalesque women’s “corrosive laughter” (to return to Rosario Castellanos’s image) could eat at and through the foundations of family, morals, and culture at large.

A student of Juan Huarte, Cervantes borrowed his tutor’s double-coded notion of *ingenio* (wit and cleverness but also dominant body-”humor” for Huarte) when giving his knight the appropriately ambiguous descriptive adjective of *ingenioso*. Unlike Huarte’s, however, Cervantes’s humor is broad and urbane enough to imagine witty women and to have men listen to them with curiosity bordering on admiration. In their respective and well-known treatises of late Renaissance humor, both Louis Cazamian and Ernst Cassirer agree that Cervantes was the perfect expositor of a new comic sensibility (as

was Shakespeare), one that reflected important changes in the humor *gestalt* of the era. In Cassirer's words, the new brand of humor is characterized by "a strange mixture of gentleness and energy, of cautious skepticism and of fiery reforming enthusiasm" (177). Given that "gentleness," caution, and a certain degree of "reforming enthusiasm" typically have been the province of "good" women, it is easy to see how this change in comic taste (within high culture, of course) might have played an important part in opening a door through which women could gain official admittance into the Renaissance world of the comic. Significantly, however, save for the obviously important exception of Rabelais's work, women's presence in Renaissance comedies and narratives tends to be marked by the ethereal quality of their verbal or mental wit rather than by the concrete physicality of their bodies or bodily antics. Thus, women's entry into the world of Renaissance humor at a time when the carnivalesque is on the way out, or with the ostracized Rabelais (whose portrayal of voracious and grotesque women's bodies is doused in misogyny), only works to confirm the hypothesis outlined at the beginning of this chapter: the acceptance or repudiation of certain kinds of humor implies an acceptance or rejection of certain kinds of female bodies. As countless comedies from the period make clear, when women do make their presence felt on the Renaissance comic stage, or on the comic page, as subjects or agents of humor rather than as objects of ridicule, they do so as disembodied wits rather than as grounded bodies. In many Renaissance comedies, *comedias*, or *comédies*, regardless of culture or nationality, the female wits are either *mignone* enough to disappear behind their mental wit. Or they are disguised as men.

In any event, the appearance of a few clever women on the Renaissance stage did not cancel the entrenched prejudices against women's laughter or wit. As Molière's late seventeenth-century memorably *précieuses* made clear, a shrewd woman was a double-edged threat to a duller, or merely older, man. Finding them irresistible yet fully aware of the danger posed by smart, quick-witted women, the author of *The School for Wives* turned women who could outsmart men into objects of satire. Significantly, however, future playwrights and theorists of humor would seek inspiration not only in Molière's finely tuned depictions of female wit but in his realistic portrayal of funny, fast, and furious dialogues between men and women.

The dour, sarcastic condemnation of laughter in the mouths of the British *agelasts* in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century targeted laughing women as brutally as it targeted the poor, the indigent, the infirm, and all types of "churlish" humor. Literally "against laughter," as their self-appointed label confirmed, this group of writers, philosophers, and social critics "pickled" humor and women indiscriminately in the acid vinegar of the one comic genre they allowed: social satire.⁷ Dryden and Pope were merciless in their tirades, and the younger Swift, who prided himself on having laughed

only twice in his life, wrote some of his most acerbic satires against painted Jezebels. Masked and made-up, women sometimes appear as masquerading tricksters in Swift's work, but once undressed and unmasked, they quickly become the object of the writer's vicious mockery. Half a century earlier and on the other side of the English Channel, Francisco de Quevedo had favored naked women's bodies, but like Swift he wanted none of their humor. "I don't want women as mentors (*consejeras*) or entertainers (*bufonas*)," he wrote, concluding that good wits turned women into bad lovers (My translation, 241).

Although they voiced their concerns from a strictly moral, rather than an aesthetic, point of view, eighteenth-century social and moral reformers throughout Europe took turns in warning women against the evils not just of light laughter but of comic wit as well. In late seventeenth-century France, Bishop Bossuet's erudite work on biblical and ecclesiastical dogma about comedic practices had already illustrated the need to keep women off the stage, and as far away from it as possible. As the number of women wits continued to grow, however, so did the number of treatises warning readers, and women readers in particular, of the real and potential evils that wit and humor could bring to women. In eighteenth-century Britain, moralist John Gregory worried that young women's laughter, however innocent, at risqué jokes or sexual innuendoes would compromise their "virtuous ignorance," as their laughter would reveal an understanding of sexual matters that they could not possibly possess (30); John Fordyce consequently advised *polite ladies* who had the "misfortune" of being witty to "conceal it as much as possible" (96). British women writers and reformers shared the same sentiments. Explicitly noting what others generally implied, Elizabeth Montagu ventured that "the generality of women who have excelled in wit have failed in chastity" (471–472). In all these moralists' condemnation of women's humor lurked the fear that, if allowed to run free, women's wit (a secretion of the mind, but a secretion all the same) would jeopardize the purity of their bodies.

The new nations of the American continent proved no exception to this seemingly global crusade against women's wit. During the second half of the eighteenth century and a good part of the nineteenth, male writers and statesmen north and south of the equator took it upon themselves to teach republican women how to become either enlightened matrons or gentle nurses—wholly serious, in either case. The sweeping lure of virile patriotism unleashed by the wars of Independence and the need to legislate the private and public "constitutions" of the emerging republics left little time for ludic play anywhere, much less among women. Not surprisingly, given the historical and social demands of their eras, women journalists and writers like Rosa Guerra, Clorinda Matto de Turner, Juana Manuela Gorriti, Flora Tristán, Juana Manso, or Eduarda Mansilla adopted a restrained sense of indignation or a submissive sense of feminine wit when writing public editorials or short

articles for the national or regional press. As crusaders or moralists, they were too embattled and too dependent on masculine favors to resort to something as easily misunderstood as ironic double-voicedness or as divisive as satire. Even when they were known to have admirable wit in social situations and a marked independent streak in their private lives (as was the case with Gorriti and Matto de Turner, for example), for their more public and "scripted" *personae* these women opted for common sense sobriety and moderation rather than for resistant wit or subversive humor.⁸

Nineteenth-century European Romantic poets and philosophers sought to wrest laughter out of the comic altogether, in part by discrediting whole areas of humor, in part by deflecting all wit toward the more serious intellectualizing work of (noncomic) irony. They succeeded in elevating humor to the realm of the transcendent and transcendental, but did so by severing it altogether from any "body" that might act as a reminder of humor's connection to a physical world. Hegel feared the disintegrating potential and anarchic force of comic genres. While his comment apropos comic characters as "entirely without substance and contradictory" may reflect the thinker's general dyspeptic disposition and lack of comic subtlety, his observation regarding comic characters' potential to "dissolve everything, including themselves" (1200, 1199), acutely reflects the philosopher's realization that the comic (or comedy as genre) was a loose rhetorical canon, one that could plant the seeds of incongruity into the most solid of systems.⁹ Schiller spoke about the notion of inventive play as the ultimate form of aesthetic freedom, making it nearly impossible to distinguish the playful from the purely aesthetic in his meditations, but his notion of play lacks almost all trace of humor. Kierkegaard gradually abandoned the realm of humor to devote himself to a view of irony that was much more Socratic than comic. Schlegel's definition of irony as an "endless succession of mirrors" is highly poetic, but there is little question that humor, and certainly laughter, gets lost in the reflection. Important exceptions to the image of the tormented or melancholy Romantic archetype inevitably come to mind, but they confirm rather than invalidate the observations made earlier. Lord Byron's *Don Juan* is a masterful social satire, yet partly for this reason the work's mood is less in tune with the Romantic ethos than is Byron's own *Manfred*, for example.

Cast as ethereal angels or dark but beautiful demons, early Romantic heroines were too weighted down with their own and their authors' exaggerated sense of feminine sensibility to share in ironic games. Concerning their role in Romantic fiction, Siriol Hugh-Jones concludes that "by refusing to look at [women] square in the eye," Romanticism "dealt [them] a mortal blow" (21). It could be argued that the Romantic penchant for disembodied, playful, or Socratic irony was symptomatic both of a de-genre-ing and a de-gendering of humor in

general and comic genres in particular. It is little wonder that Jane Austen found so much readily available material for parody, or that Mary Wollestonecraft Shelley resorted to futuristic science fiction to escape the morbidity of her environment

Sensing the need to put some flesh and blood into an aesthetic sensibility that he saw as too “sublime” and too entrenched in the pastoral, Charles Baudelaire played an important hand in reversing the heavily transcendental trend that the early Romantics had made so furiously popular. Intent on pulling humor back down into the satanic depths that the ancients once denounced as the source of the malicious pride they associated with laughter, Baudelaire wrote at length about the subject in his 1855 essay “Of the essence of laughter, and, in General, on the Comic in the Plastic Arts.” As he took pains to distinguish between the circumstantially comic and the “absolute comic” (*le comic absolu*), the author of *Flowers of Evil* insisted that serious laughter, or the “absolutely comic,” was both *cosmic* and anarchic, and so had more than a trace of the demonic (311–323). As he anchored humor down to the bowels of the city, Baudelaire sought to rescue women from the solemn and sanctified morbidity in which many of the Romantics had framed them. But he brought them back to earth only to make them walk the streets in lascivious, but humorless, squalor. As vampires and prostitutes, Baudelaire’s female “grotesques” are a long way from being active agents of humor: they are not even allowed to adopt self-knowing ironic poses in the course of their lyric degradation.¹⁰

A notable exception to the enervating and disembodiment tendencies in both German Romantic theories of laughter and Baudelaire’s darkly comic guffaw can be found in the late eighteenth-century work of George Meredith, a novelist and critic who devoted most of his professional life to exploring the intricacies of the comic spirit. Although greatly influenced by Baudelaire’s essay on the comic, Meredith looked backward to French and English neo-classical comedies and to the English eighteenth-century novel for more vigorous models of comic exchanges. In his 1877 “An Essay on Comedy: On the Idea of Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit,” Meredith argued that good comedy required the equality of the sexes (at least on stage). Advising women to eschew the sentimental in favor of the comic, he urges them to see the direct connection between a culture’s comic “evolution,” and the relative freedom of its women: “Let them look with their clearest vision abroad and at home. They will see that, where they have no social freedom, comedy is absent; where they are household drudges, the form of comedy is primitive; where they are tolerably independent, but uncultivated, exciting melodrama takes its place, and a sentimental version of them. . . . But where women are on the road to an equal footing with men, in attainments and in liberty. . . there . . . pure comedy flourishes” (32). Although they were argued

persuasively and passionately, Meredith's views were soon overshadowed by Darwinian and Spencerian evolutionary explanations of laughter. Although neither devoted too much time to laughter, both Darwin and Spencer looked at laughter as an instinctive survival mechanism, one more developed in the male than in the female of the species.

Bergson and Freud, whose seminal new theories of humor at the beginning of the twentieth century would also focus—albeit from very different perspectives—on the importance of laughter as a defense mechanism, but neither paid much attention to women as subjects of humor. Preoccupied with the growing threat of technology, the author of *Le Rire* [*Laughter*] managed to write an entire treatise on the *mechanicity* of bodily movement without, however, positing the body as an active agent of humor. One laughs at cripples, or at people falling down the stairs, says Bergson, because at those times their bodies remind us of automatons rather than living organisms. That he did not focus on ridiculous or comic female bodies in his treatise may indeed be proof of his liberality. More likely, he found it impossible to imagine that women might be as capable as men of performing Chaplinesque antics. Yet Bergson's observation that the production and reception of humor require an indifference (*insensibilité*) to the target of laughter serves as an important reminder for women writers and artists who insist on provoking harsh and caustic laughter rather than hiding behind the tearful smiles of sentimental humor.¹¹

Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious (1905), Freud's most detailed treatise on humor, joke-work, and laughter, reflects many of the prejudices I have been tracing. Arguing that aggressive wit is socially and psychically useful (because it allows for the psychic release of bad "humors"), Freud finds it necessary to insist that women lack a sufficiently developed superego to produce or appreciate more aggressive forms of humor or humor-proving jokes. Stressing the value of aggression in the practice of "real" humor, Freud observes in a later essay ("Humor," 1927) that "humor is not resigned; it is rebellious" (162). In the same essay he also describes humor as the "triumph of narcissism" (162). Significantly, in his 1915 essay "On Narcissism," Freud had made the case that only "women, criminals and humorists" are likely to maintain an attitude of "primary narcissism" well into adulthood. Looking at the essays side by side, a reader may well ask if there might not be an inherent contradiction in Freud's humor theory. Ordinary logic might dictate that if laughter is the privileged terrain of the narcissistic personality, and if women are natural-born narcissists, then women might end up with the last laugh—or at least a good laugh. Freud's conclusion, however, is that socially adept women learn to sublimate their instinctive narcissism through the serious business of motherhood. Becoming fit mothers, it appears, makes women unfit for good humor.¹² Although Freud's biological and historical prejudices

keep him from making more of the potentially liberating ways in which humor might free women from their anxieties and repressions, his theories linking aggression to humor, and humor with social transgression and psychic release, have provided many women theorists and critics with an important basis for recognizing women's more hostile and less easily identifiable expressions of humor.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Mikhael Bakhtin played a crucial role in humor theory when he noted the need to give the body its due in the production of humor. The author of *Rabelais and His World* posits the carnival as a site for social revolt, arguing that physical forms of jesting in medieval popular feasts constituted an unofficial counter-discourse to the hegemony of Church and State (285–297). Carnavalesque laughter, a laughter made vital and full-throated through bodily jesting, lower bodily functions, and bawdy gestures, “purifies from dogmatism, from fanaticism . . . from didacticism . . . from sentimentality” (123). Bakhtin does indeed associate women with the lower bodily stratum, and as such makes them active participants in carnival. “The popular tradition is in no way hostile to woman and does not approach her negatively,” writes the Russian critic in the treatise cited earlier (240). Yet, as Mary Russo and other critics of Bakhtin have rightly noted, despite his claims about the gender inclusiveness of the popular tradition, the Russian critic ultimately reduces women to their “lower stratum,” and thus to an essentially visceral nature. By doing so, he “buries” women in the “muck” of the carnival as ready objects of the laughter he celebrates but without allowing them to laugh their way in or through it. Yet, as my own reliance on Bakhtin's theories of the carnivalesque shows, despite the critic's disinterest in gender's role in the production of humor and despite his problematic treatment of the female grotesque, his concepts of polyphony, heteroglossia, and dialogism, and his conceptualization of popular feasts as a site of subversion have been powerfully influential and useful to discussions of embodied and gendered humor.

“DISAPPEARING ACTS” II: WOMEN AND HUMOR IN THE LATIN AMERICAN CANON

There is no systematic theorizing of humor in colonial nineteenth-century or even twentieth-century Latin American letters, but the attitudes I have summarized are dramatized, often in paradigmatic fashion, in some of the most representative works of period literature. The Latin American canon is replete with works that read like a convincing illustration of the argument made in the first part of this chapter. For brevity's sake, I limit my discussion to three

works by male authors that emphasize conflicting but often parallel desires to wrest humor out of women or women out of humor.

The first of these is Fernández de Lizardi's *La educación de las mujeres o La Quixotita y su prima* [*The Education of Women, or Quixotita and Her Cousin*] (1818–1819), a novel that incorporates many of the ethical tensions and moral agendas of the late colonial and early republican period. *La educación de las mujeres*, a late picaresque novel, is intended as a lesson and a warning for women who would be *pícaras*. The eponymous Quixotita is neither quixotic nor celestinesque. Instead, she is a mostly naive blunderer whose simple dream is to marry into the nobility. Her mother, the more openly comic Doña Eufrosina, is a good early Latin American version of the laughable female grotesque.¹³ Older, aggressive, and outspoken, Eufrosina poses a serious threat to public and private morality. She is a bad mother because she is a bad model of femininity. A profligate, wasteful, and, worse, politically liberal woman, Eufrosina is depicted as the antithesis of the civic model as defined by the Age of Enlightenment. To the examples of the bad mother and the misguided daughter, Lizardi opposes those of the virtuous Doña Matilde and her daughter Prudenciana (Prudence, of course). His transparently Manichean novel demonstrates the need for women to remain within their boundaries, to recognize and accept their intellectual inferiority, and to repress any desires that might match or mirror the liberal fervor of their fathers, husbands, or sons. Although Eufrosina's voice occasionally manages, or almost manages, to subvert the narrative's condemnations of bad feminine models by sounding convincingly articulate in her tirades, the authorial voice ultimately defeats her, and soundly so. The novel ends up extolling the feminine virtues of sobriety, thriftiness, and decorum against those of excess, garrulousness, and pleasure. It is ironic but not surprising that Lizardi should avail himself of the comic figure of a would-be *pícaro* (Quixotita) to boost his book's popularity even while condemning comic women as misguided at best and immoral at worst.

Written over a century after Lizardi's didactic picaresque, Rómulo Gallegos's *Doña Bárbara* (1929), a novel about the tensions between rural passions and urban civilization, expresses a similar mistrust of women's laughter. In Gallegos's famous narrative, the hero's arch-nemesis is the barbarous but seductive "pa(ma)trona" from whom the novel takes its title. Bárbara's androgynous eroticism, combined with a keen if power-hungry mind and an irascible personality, make her a malevolent force, all the more so because so many men fall under her erotic spell. Despite the character's hyperbolic traits, there is no comic flavor whatsoever to Gallegos's depiction of the novel's powerful matron. On the contrary, associated with thwarted nature rather than with crooked humanity, Bárbara is outside the realm of the comic.¹⁴

Comic relief enters Gallegos's novel, however, through Bárbara's abandoned daughter Marisela. In her incarnation as an untamed and primitive creature at the beginning of the novel, the "wild" girl is responsible for most of the humor in the first half of the narrative. Initially the object of the hero's laughter, she is mocked and taunted by him for her flawed (ungrammatical) Spanish as well as her for her untidy appearance. Yet she is also an active agent of humor for the young women and the farmhands who befriend her. Her humor is naive and unsophisticated, but has enough traces of witty malice to give the hero a glimpse of Marisela's keen intelligence. But the young woman's humorous streak is short-lived. As she gradually matures into a sensible and sensitive woman, her once naive but independent sense of humor disappears. In its place the more mature Marisela begins to show a streak of melancholy and compassion. It is thus that Gallego can return her to her "proper" place as a neo-Romantic heroine. Under the civilizing influence of the man who will become her husband at the end of the novel, Marisela not only gains a moral education but develops a civilized sensibility. The underlying thesis is, that under the tutelage of upright, cultured older men wild women can lose their traces of barbarism, and the fact that she loses her tendency to semi-"barbaric" laughter is solid proof of it.¹⁵ In *Doña Bárbara*, as in the Romantic and *modernista* models that precede it, wit and humor are traits women must outgrow if they are to occupy a seriously protagonic role, both in the evolving novel and in the new nations. I do not mean to imply that Gallego had this dichotomy in mind when he wrote the novel. Rather, to observe that the loss of Marisela's laughter in the course of her civilizing transformation in this novel reflects the prejudices I have been tracing even when the thematic concerns of the fictional text deal with solemn issues of nation, ethnicity, and gender.

Another half a century later, the novels of the Latin American Boom will present women as capable of moderate laughter but incapable of serious wit. In these narratives women's humor is not so much morally suspect as constantly questioned. Julio Cortázar's Morelli—the writer's alter ego in *Hopscotch* [*Rayuela*] (1963)—joins his literary precursors in insisting that women are generically incapable of appreciating good wit. In a passage as infamous as it is famous, Morelli warns that a *lector hembra* [female reader] will lack the mental agility to keep up with the *roman comique* that he has been struggling to write. Bound to judge the book by its cover and to look for mostly moral melodrama, this "female reader" will inevitably miss the complex and complicated dark humor of the novel-cum-game that Morelli, and Cortázar, envision as their magnum opus. Cortázar clearly meant to use *hembra* ("female," no way around it) qualitatively rather than generically in this passage: a short-hand way of dismissing the passive reception of any witless reader.¹⁶ Yet the description of the *lector hembra* as a reader who prefers "pretty book covers"

and the false comfort of "moral comedies and tragedies" is yet another illustration of the prejudices I have been tracing. In a novel that presents itself as a complicated game, the dismissal of a "feminine" or feminoïd" reader as one who lacks the mental agility to come out and play hard (like a man, if you will) with the artists and intellectuals who invent the games' rules, is a hard blow not just for women, but indeed for anyone who does not fit the category of *macho*.¹⁷ In fact, the identification of a passive, humorless reading with the female gender in a discussion of the *novela cómica*, defined here as a genre that assumes the reader's full range of comic-ironic and thus sophisticated sensibilities, echoes the same insidious and entrenched prejudice that I discuss in the first part of this chapter. Equally problematic is the fact that Cortázar's memorable *magas* (the "magical" Lucías and the Talitas and the Polas that fire the author's—and his male characters'—imagination) are seldom the producers of the superb humor or the darkly comic wit that punctuate his meganovel. The one character who might at first prove the exception to the rule (of humorless women) in Cortázar's fiction is the intriguingly playful Polaquita in his later and more openly political *Libro de Manuel*. Yet even the clever Ludmilla/ Polaquita is incapable of matching the quick wit or smart jests of her male friends in this novel. It is worth noting, too, that in what is surely Cortázar's funniest book, *Historia de Cronopios y de famas*, the irrepressibly playful and prankish *cronopios* (a neologism that might be rendered as "chronopians" in English) are male, whereas their humorless, hopeful, yet passive antagonists, the *esperanzas* [the plural for "hope"], are represented and vocalized as female.

What should be evident from this brief sketch of humor theories and even briefer selection of works from the Latin American canon is that, whether as targets of didactic moralists who rage about women's laughter, or as the frequent object of male comic barbs, women have been "trapped" by, or caught within the margins of, the frames of the comic, in theory as well as in literary practice from the start. The constant shifts between the denials of the existence of women's humor and the many censoring mechanisms targeted at women who might dare show a sense of it (humor or wit) loudly announce the potential transgressiveness of women's humor. They also foreground the aggressive and transgressive role of women's bodies as metabolizing agents in the production of this humor.

RESURFACING: PERFORMING HUMOR WITH THE OUT-OF-BOUNDS-BODY

The previous litany of metaphorical muzzles, girdles, and Houdini-like disappearing tricks begins to explain why, when women respond to their respective censors with their boundless, boisterous, anarchic, or outraged laughter,

they do so by putting forth their material bodies as agents of different types of ludic resistance. In an essay published at about the same time as Hélène Cixous's early theories of Medusan laughter, Jacques Derrida observed that discourses of resistance or deconstruction "borrow(s) from a heritage the resources necessary for the deconstruction of that heritage itself" (252).¹⁷ Looking at selected but representative Spanish American narratives by women, it is possible to see the dramatization of the "humored" female body—as an excessive, uncontainable, degraded, or decomposing material presence—as precisely the kind of deconstructive, transgressive cultural appropriation that Derrida describes.

The resisting, excess-prone bodies I study throughout the rest of this book target historical and cultural restrictions, prohibitions, and prejudices outlined earlier. They can be summarized as follows: (1) the incontinent body as a body that cannot be contained by the rules of etiquette or good manners; (2) the sexually excessive and verbally aggressive body as a body that defends its right to pleasure and vocalization even in the face of bad endings; (3) the torpid body as proof that even from a horizontal position and in a state of semidepression a woman's embodied wit can be powerful enough to return a hysterical nation to its senses; (4) the ill, aged, and oozing body an illustration of how infectious female black bile (or, in this case, female lymph) can be; and (5) the entropic and lawless body as a body that negotiates urban and transnational spaces by "performing" transitive and transitional identities. In writing "with the body" (a command forcefully issued both by Luisa Valenzuela and Hélène Cixous), narrators and other women characters in these narrative discover the liberating and/or transgressive possibilities of writing with the body's humor (and "humors"). I do not wish to imply that all humor in the works examined stems directly from physical actions or bodily functions of their characters, although in some cases it does; rather, that a deep awareness of their fictional works' groundedness in biological as well as sexual and social bodies is somehow inseparable from these authors' highly diverse approaches to humor and comic practices.

The Incontinent Body

Laura Esquivel's *Como agua para chocolate* [*Like Water for Chocolate*] begins with counterimposed images of gushing female bodies: the first is the image of the narrator (Tita's great-niece) unable to hold back her tears while peeling an onion; the second is that of Tita's formidable mother at the point at which her waters have broken and she is about to give birth on the kitchen table. As I argue in chapter three, despite the novel's sentimentality and its orthodox gender ideology, the narrative's dramatization of seeping, sweating, vom-

iting, or burning bodies features ways in which even submissive women can become, at least temporarily, agents of carnivalesque liberation through excess. As the characters in Esquivel's first novel spill their fluids—nursing milk, menstrual blood, sweat, vomit, tears—periodically throughout the novel, the repeated violations of good taste and good manners threaten to topple the traditional Romantic "moral" that parallels the cooking lesson. Thus, despite the novel's efforts to remain on the side of cultural and social moderation, the presence of so many women's bodies at the "boiling point" has the effect of frequently dislodging the narrative from its otherwise banal sentimentality. Because the author herself has denied that she intended the carnivalesque humor of her novel-cum-cookbook to overwhelm the sentimental melodrama of the conventional love story, the transgressive role of uncontainable female bodies in this novel becomes something like a litmus test of the power of embodied humor to introduce disruptive elements even into the most traditionally "feminine" and least aggressive of comic genres.

The Provocative Body

The sexually hungry and verbally daring women characters and narrators in Ana Lydia Vega's story "Pasión de historia" are depicted as bodies-in-heat against a macabre *machista* culture that seduces, traps, and eventually kills them. Caught in a film noir/pulp fiction screen that "frames" her more than once, Vega's narrator plays at being both witness and voyeur of other female characters' "passionate stories." The street-tough vixens she observes have fatal blind spots, but so does the narrator, who is taken for just another femme fatale by her ex-lover. Carnivalesque both in its sexual explicitness and verbal excess, the conflicted, in-your-face humor that emerges from this author's ambivalent celebration of exuberant female bodies and their sexual/verbal humor(s) is unsettling despite the undeniably comic flavor of the verbal puns and the visual close-ups. Noticeably overdetermined by the festive but violent nature of a postcolonial Caribbean reality, the oversexed female bodies depicted in "Red Hot Story" are caught in the comic-ironic bind throughout. Indeed, what is most intriguing about Vega's slippery comic irony is its unstable ambivalence. As a reader, one is never quite certain of whether the gutsy humor is meant to serve as a warning to women who would perform sexual excesses or to signal a comical "j'accuse" to a testosterone-forgiving culture where vengeful men can target sexually adventurous women and get away with murder. Not surprisingly, this ambivalence places the author's deployment of humor and excess on the borderline between a "feminist dialogics" of comic resistance and a postfeminist performance of cynical bravao.¹⁸ As long as the story stays on the side of the former, one can read the

comic irony that sustains the story as an accusatory irony. If one decides that the story's film noir ending overwhelms the story's (and stories') carnivalesque edge, then the narrative irony can be read as a mode of comical cynicism. So poised on the edge is Vega's ironic touch that both readings work their particular brand of seduction depending on one's mood.

The Torpid Body

Satirizing and parodying this provisional acceptance of female wit conditioned on the disappearance or avoidance of the (non-streamlined) female body, Luisa Valenzuela spawns a memorably clever female character who is so "grounded" in her biological and sociological reality that she literally cannot get out of bed. An apparently symptomless *abulia* makes it impossible for "the *señora*" to get up (the protagonist is an allegorical "everywoman," but one in particular sociopolitical circumstances). The mysterious yet evidently nonpathological nature of the condition that keeps the protagonist's body torpid and horizontal for the novel's duration foregrounds the inescapable realization that the uninterrupted wit in the novel spills from an unmovable and very material body, a body that is impossible to ignore qua body. Unlike the wilder, sex-obsessed younger women of Ana Lydia Vega's stories, Valenzuela's middle-aged protagonist is cynical, ambivalent, doubting, and self-doubting, so that her wit, her comic irony, and her frequent but open-ended satire succeed in disrupting everything around her, even those who attempt to lure her or shock her out of her immobility. It is true that she finally manages to get up at the very end of the narrative, but it is her mature body's lethargic condition that remains imprinted in the reader's memory. Her phlegmatic humor(s) eventually spread around her, helping to disintegrate and dissolve the national and political "realities" of the novel's title. Under cover(s), this ambiguously comic skeptic is surprisingly, unexpectedly, subversive.

The Sick Body

In her influential *The Female Grotesque*, Mary Russo notes that the grotesque female body is "open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing"(8). The description fits Armonía Somers's protagonist in *Sólo los elefantes encuentran mandrágora* with uncanny accuracy. A middle-aged woman hospitalized for a mysterious lung disease, the verbose Flores de Medici (Fiorella, for short) is subjected to daily "drainages" during which liters of lymph fluid are sucked out of her infected lungs. Because this image of an ill bodily bilious "humor" is at the forefront of the novel's multigeneric and multivalent

narratives, the tone is decidedly morbid, but all the more corrosive for its acridness. The narratives issuing from the fully functional mouth (and brain) of the ill woman explode with incidents of female madness, ill or misshapen bodies, and abject secretions of all kinds. The novel's somatized body is thus presented a body that produces its own antibodies. While the black humor of this novel provides neither catharsis nor escape, it enacts a rhetoric of destabilization that goes beyond carnivalesque inversions or ironic subversion.

The Mutating Body

While many of the light or dark bodily "humors" mentioned thus far have the effect of exploding some aspects of the Law (the communal law, the law of convention, patriarchal law, and the rules of the comic genres they often parody), it is only when representation (of incontinent or transgressive bodies) yields to camps performativity that the practice of humor (and the dramatization of female bodily humors) unleashes its most entropic energies. In Alicia Borinsky's *Cine continuado*, women are mutating, nomadic con artists who refuse to adopt fixed identities, fixed addresses, or even fixed bodily features. Opting instead for multiple masks (some comic, some cruel), Borinsky's female characters play schizophrenic versions of a Deleuzian "becoming woman." Accordingly, the novel's anarchic and entropic humor wreaks havoc on the communal and urban spaces in which these characters move. Mary Ann Doane has noted that "vamping" and masquerade are strategies that can enable women to avoid the traps and trappings of an essentialist self. In *Cine continuado*, masquerading and mutating women manage to escape, confound, and conflate the categories of victimization and masochism, yet at the same time they consistently resist anything that might resemble a facile ethics of feminist or postcolonial solidarity. At the opposite end of comic reconciliation (Esquivel's *Como agua para chocolate*), Borinsky's comic hostility is aggressive and purposefully anarchic. Affirming the need for hyperbolic performance as a precondition for surviving as female in a global but still largely male world, *Cine continuado* opposes darkly sarcastic laughter both to traditional morality and antiestablishment discourses that promise quick fix-ups under the mask of postcolonial multiculturalism. Offering neither solutions nor compromise, the flashes of humor in *Cine continuado* fade in and out of hallucinated textual and dramatic spaces, encouraging only eccentricity (or the constant avoidance of a center).

"An expenditure without reserve" is how Georges Bataille, a surrealist turned postmodern thinker, describes the experience of laughter. Envisioning it not merely as psychic release but as an antiphilosophical "economy" for exploring

excesses that resists dialectical closure, laughter for Bataille is a model of utter dissipation. Although elsewhere in his work Bataille's thought is too archetypally phallogocentric to serve as a model for a feminist aesthetics of comic resistance, his validation of laughter as a vital strategy for resisting totalizing impulses adds an important footnote to a discussion of humor, women, bodies, and excess. Summarizing and describing strategies that resist closure and totalization in works by contemporary Latin American authors of both genders, Nelly Richard coins the evocative term "refractory aesthetics."¹⁹ Not exempt from the prejudices discussed in this chapter, Richard neglects to include comic resistance as an important "refractory" tactic. As I hope to illustrate in the following chapters, the "unlimited" (or at least multiple) reserves found in the practice of humoring/ed women's bodies should convince us of the need to begin to do so.