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Article in *Studies in American Humor* · March 2023

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“A Punch Back, . . . a Contagious Guffaw”

Feminist Humor in *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* and the Professionalization of the Rebellious Laugh

SHUHITA BHATTACHARJEE

ABSTRACT: In depicting the fraught journey of a woman stand-up comedian in the late 1950s and 1960s, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* portrays stand-up as an ethical medium of truth telling and of sociopolitical protest that challenges systemic hierarchies of gender and sexuality. In this article, I show that stand-up’s foundational subversion is in its professionalism and in its departure from other forms of art. In the show, female stand-up comic Midge Maisel learns to function first as a seasoned professional and then as an ethical crusader who ultimately mounts a two-pronged attack on the sexist underpinnings of American humor and the patriarchal structure of stand-up, substantially influencing the way we receive this liminal genre of cultural expression and reframing it as an empowering vehicle of the marginalized.

KEYWORDS: *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, feminist humor, stand-up comedy, protest comedy, women comics, American comedy

In a mournful rumination over stand-up comedy in episode 3 of season 1 of *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (2017–19) that takes place between the fictionalized version of Lenny Bruce (Luke Kirby), the famous mid-twentieth century American comic, and Miriam “Midge” Maisel (Rachel Brosnahan), an aspiring comic and protagonist, one senses the despair and the determination that surrounds the representation of this profession:

Lenny: I’m tired. I’m getting tired.

Midge: Yeah. I know what you mean.

<https://doi.org/10.5325/studamerhumor.9.1.0032>

Studies in American Humor, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2023

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Lenny: Sometimes I think, “Is it worth it?”

Midge: And sometimes I think, “No.”

Lenny: I’m Sisyphus, without the fabulous hair and the loincloth, pushing that boulder up that hill over and over and over.

Midge: Try it in heels.¹

The three seasons of this show, created by Amy Sherman-Palladino, depict the fraught and fulfilling journey of Midge Maisel’s maturation as a stand-up comic—beginning when she first reckons with the routines and rigorous professional demands of the field to when she gradually awakens to the possibilities of social commentary offered by comedy and finally to when she launches herself fully into the world of 1950s–1960s subversive stand-up where she delivers a mordant critique of contemporary political wrongs and gender injustices.

Stand-up thus emerges in the show as an ethical medium of truth telling and of sociopolitical protest that challenges systemic hierarchies of gender and sexuality. Moreover, stand-up’s foundational subversion is shown to lie in its serious professionalism and in its departure from other forms of art. The protagonist ultimately emerges not only as an idealist, creatively engrossed in the production of original content, but as an apprentice in the trade of stand-up, working her way up to both professional competence and ethical intervention.

In 1958, Midge is a young, upper-class, Jewish American housewife living on the Upper West Side of Manhattan and a natural raconteur, helping her husband Joel (Michael Zegen), a businessman working at a plastics company, moonlight as a stand-up comic at the Gaslight Café, a historic Greenwich Village coffeehouse. However, after Midge learns that Joel has plagiarized his act and after his abysmal failure at stand-up, Joel walks out on her and their two kids. That night, in a fit of rage, Midge takes the stage at the Gaslight and embarks on a career as a comic with the encouragement of Susie Myerson (Alex Borstein), an employee at the Gaslight, who sees Midge’s raw talent as a performer. Midge and her children move in with her parents, and she begins to pursue stand-up secretly while also working days at the high-end department store B. Altman. When Joel approaches her in the hope of reconciliation, Midge says no, refusing to give up her independence. After

¹ *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, created by Amy Sherman-Palladino, produced by Amazon Studios, Dorothy Parker Drank Here Productions, and Picrow, 2017–19.

dating a doctor (Benjamin Ettenberg played by Zachary Levi) and ultimately finalizing her divorce from Joel, she refrains from marriage altogether in order to pursue her comedy ambitions. Her professional evolution is anything but steady. Although Midge is nurtured by Lenny Bruce—a character based on the real-life controversial stand-up comic from the 1960s—who inspires and encourages her, she nearly derails her career by publicly mocking the gimmicks of a fictional female comic icon Sophie Lennon (Jane Lynch). Midge is given a boost by Shy Baldwin (LeRoy McClain), a celebrated R&B crooner, who picks her to open for him on his upcoming tour, only to drop her before the European leg of the tour because she alluded comically on stage to his homosexuality. At the same time she is receiving her professional education and experiencing uneven success, she also tutors and inspires her parents, however confusedly, to surrender their life of privilege and begin protesting structural inequalities.

The show provides a sustained metacommentary on the visible rise of professional stand-up comedy in America, starting with its gradual beginnings in the middle of the twentieth century when the term “stand-up comedy” came into fashion in America and when the “rise of ‘new comedians’—Mort Sahl, Shelley Berman, Dick Gregory, and Lenny Bruce—introduced American audiences to a uniquely rhetorical form of entertainment that was both captivating and provocative.”² The show features glimpses of performances by comic greats such as Red Skelton, Jackie “Moms” Mabley, Jack Parr, and Bob Newhart and dramatizes the controversial gigs of Lenny Bruce. Midge is presented as a parallel to the Jewish female comics who were contemporaries of Bruce such as Belle Barth and Pearl Williams and is portrayed as a controversial female Lenny Bruce herself. As Betsy Borns explains, the show depicts how Bruce crucially transformed not only the language but also the very style of comedy, marking a shift from jokes and one-liners to autobiographical comedy; before this time there was “no real-life, situational or observational comedy,” as the representation of the bits performed by Bruce’s male peers suggests.³

2 Matthew R. Meier and Casey R. Schmitt, “Standing Up, Speaking Out,” in *Standing Up, Speaking Out: Stand-Up Comedy and the Rhetoric of Social Change*, ed. Matthew R. Meier and Casey R. Schmitt (New York: Routledge, 2017), xxi–xxxii; xxii.

3 Betsy Borns, *Comic Lives: Inside the World of American Stand-Up Comedy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 238.

Bruce was “the driving force behind the shift from schpritz to reality” because he “talked about life the way it is” (Borns, *Comic Lives*, 238), an aspect the show highlights by tracing his trajectory of uninhibited truth telling through stand-up. Furthermore, with attention to historical detail, the show delineates the internal transitions within the trade that spanned the “late 50s and early 60s,” when he and other stand-ups “began writing material which expressed their individual viewpoints and opinions” (Borns, *Comic Lives*, 238–39). Before this, comics often lifted lines from other comics’ sets or hired joke writers, and this earlier practice, which comes under criticism in the show, is reflected through Joel Maisel and Herb Smith (Wallace Shawn).

The show also evokes the long tradition of Jewish humor and its popularity in America during these decades. As Paul McDonald observes, the “best known Jewish American humorists to have emerged in the late 1950s and 60s . . . ‘close[d] the gap’ between high and low in post-war culture” and replaced the “traditional stand-up comedy” of the ’50s that was “anodyne and facile.”⁴ Their new Jewish American humor “by contrast was less of a diversion and more of a challenge: it allowed more critical engagement partly because it was open and discursive, rather than formulaic and reductive” (20). Joseph Boskin and Joseph Dorinson trace the emergence of this style of humor to the arrival of Eastern European Jewish immigrants in America between 1880 and 1915. Lawrence Mintz theorizes the subsequent shifts that Jewish humor underwent, from the phase when the Jews were targeted as an out-group to the one during which “the oppressed minority gained revenge by assaulting the majority culture” through humor.⁵ Earl Rovit surmises that the popularity of Yiddish humor in Protestant America derives from two factors, namely, that the comedy industry was largely controlled by Jewish businessmen and, perhaps more importantly, that “a vigorous theoretical ideal of protest” underlies Protestantism, and humor is similarly “by its very nature . . . of the party of the opposition.”⁶

4 Paul McDonald, “They’re Trying to Kill Me’: Jewish American Humor and the War Against Pop Culture,” *Studies in Popular Culture* 28, no. 3 (2006): 19–33; 19, 20.

5 Joseph Boskin and Joseph Dorinson, “Ethnic Humor: Subversion and Survival,” *American Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (1985): 81–97; 88.

6 Earl Rovit, “Jewish Humor and American Life,” *American Scholar* 36, no. 2 (1967): 237–45; 243.

In any case, the suggestive subversion in this new Jewish humor was also qualified. According to Naomi Katz and Eli Katz, the Jewish humor of Eastern Europe in comic stories that told of the “valiant and frequently ingenious attempts of the Jew in Czarist Russia and Poland to get along while trapped in an essentially hostile society” was replicated in the subversive Jewish American humor performed by the second-generation American Jew who “still strongly regarded himself as part of the Jewish community, and was aware of being so regarded by others, but who wished to separate himself sharply from the unassimilated immigrant” in order to gain acceptance by the majority culture.⁷ Midge is located in this watershed cultural moment that witnesses the rise of Jewish American comics on the cusp of rebellion and assimilation.

The popularity of *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* owes in part to the fashionable visibility of stand-up comedy today and especially to the increasing presence of women comics. As Linda Mizejewski and Victoria Sturtevant note, we are currently witnessing “a remarkable moment in the history of American women’s participation in stand-up, television, and film comedy”: female comics are achieving mainstream success, female-authored comedy projects are securing wide audiences on television, and female comic actors are “successfully headlin[ing] comedy films because of the[ir] star power.”⁸ That said, Cynthia Willett and Julie Willett retrace the much longer history of female comedy, demonstrating that female comics go all the way back to the 1920s.⁹

Midge models two of the classic comic personas of the “bawd” (a type played by Eva Tanguay, Sophie Tucker, Mae West, Mabley, Bea Bea Benson, Rusty Warren, Belle Barth, Bette Midler, and La Wanda Page) and “bitch” (as portrayed by Joan Rivers, Wanda Sykes, and Amy Foster), while evoking others like the “kid,” the “whiner,” and the “reporter” that female comics, according to Joanne Gilbert, have historically performed from since the 1950s and

7 Naomi Katz and Eli Katz, “Tradition and Adaptation in American Jewish Humor,” *Journal of American Folklore* 84, no. 332 (1971): 215–20; 219.

8 Linda Mizejewski and Victoria Sturtevant, introduction to *Hysterical! Women in American Comedy*, ed. Linda Mizejewski and Victoria Sturtevant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017), 1–34; 8.

9 Cynthia Willett and Julie Willett, *Uproarious: How Feminists and Other Subversive Comics Speak Truth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 24.

that hark back to the early twentieth century.¹⁰ Through the caustic critique and rebellious sexuality characteristic of these comic types and embodied by Midge, the show unsettles structural injustices and showcases the radical force of stand-up humor.

The Profession of Stand-Up: Seriousness and Practice

To counter the way female comics are undermined as professionals in mainstream culture by being cast, as Mizejewski and Sturtevant note, into the stereotype of the “hysterical woman” and by having their comedy dismissed as “unintentional or artless” (introduction, 1, 5), *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* emphasizes the rigorous and rehearsed craft that underlies stand-up, focusing on its workings as a profession. Midge underscores the difference between a passing hobby and a paying profession to Benjamin in the course of explaining why when Shy Baldwin had offered her a spot on a professional tour, she had abandoned Benjamin and reneged on their engagement without informing him. She confesses that prior to this offer of a contract, discouraged by the lack of professional opportunities, she had considered quitting stand-up altogether, thinking that “maybe comedy was just a phase,” that maybe she “could get married and hop down to the Gaslight Café once or twice a week, do a set, like a bowling league with better shoes.”

But “then Shy Baldwin called. And a lightning bolt went through me. I just . . . knew. This was it for the rest of my life. No turning back.” Midge makes the same point in her first open conversation with her father after he unexpectedly discovers her delivering a stand-up performance in the Catskills one night during their family vacation. When the next morning Abe Weissman (Tony Shalhoub) asks her, shocked and disappointed, if this was “a hobby,” she avers determinedly that “it’s a profession.” The show’s first season highlights the process of professional training and informal apprenticeship that Midge must undergo to prepare herself for a career in stand-up. It begins with her manager Susie taking her to visit a vintage record store (“part store, part museum, part archive,” as Susie remarks) run by Virgil (David Bluvband) and Oz (Patrick Holden O’Neill), where she is introduced

10 Joanne R. Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2004).

to the rare phonograph record collections of celebrated stand-up comics; she selects a Redd Foxx record that she later listens to secretly in her bedroom in enjoyment.

In the same episode, Susie takes Midge to both low-profile comedy clubs where Susie says comics try out their new material and to the high-end destinations that play star comics and that are tracked by “bookers, managers, agents, writers” so that Midge can learn the tricks of the trade. Midge carries her pink notebook everywhere to “tak[e] notes.” They discuss and learn comic techniques from watching the performances of Howard Fawn, a fictional figure, and Red Skelton, inspired by the real-life entertainer, and Midge inadvertently reveals her secret desire when, watching Skelton perform, she gets lost in a dreamy vision of herself regaling a mesmerized audience with jokes. As she says to Susie later that night talking about her professional ambition, “I just, I want to be really, really good at this. I want to be the best.”

Susie further trains Midge by informing her when she flops during a night at the Gaslight: “Everybody bombs.” She explains that famous comics do not have failed performances because “they’ve spent years bombing and honing their act so . . . [we] don’t have to see them bomb.” Susie pushes back on Midge’s claim that her spontaneous talent will help her avert flop gigs in future, advising her to “prepare a little” for her act because “spontaneity works until it doesn’t work” and then one is “stuck.” Midge and Susie plan and hone Midge’s act through multiple parallel performances during which she delivers the same three jokes in different forms and with varying endings until they arrive at the final set for her gigs—what Susie calls “a tight ten” (a compact ten minutes of stand-up performance time). Having trained rigorously in the techniques of the art form and the protocols of show business, Midge emerges as a hardened professional, ready to embark on meaningful journeys of self-discovery.

Stand-Up, Empowerment, and Feminist Awakening

Midge’s professional training in stand-up comedy serves as the avenue for her discovery of her own agentive voice through which she defies the gendered expectations of obedient docility that she had been accustomed to fulfilling. In the first season, Susie educates Midge by loudly debunking the stereotype of the naïve female comic—one who is incapable of functioning as a professional or of producing real mirth because she lacks talent and is innocent to the ways of the world.

This prototype of the female comic finds occasional direct representation in American shows and cinema. For instance, the female stand-up comic is depicted as inexperienced in *Punchline* (1988) and as more generally foolishly maladroit at resolving the personal-professional conflict in *This Is My Life* (1992), *Obvious Child* (2014) and *Lady Dynamite* (2016–17). In *Lady Dynamite*, Maria Bamford—playing a fictionalized version of herself—struggles to negotiate between her bipolar disorder and the requirements of commercialized comedy. In *This Is My Life*, Dottie Ingels who is raising her children as a single mother is abandoned by them due to her unwavering pursuit of her dream of becoming a stand-up comic. And in *Obvious Child*, Donna Stern grapples with the demands of stand-up and the bodily urgencies of pregnancy and planned abortion. However, the severe naivete of the female comic along with the painstaking effort required for women to make it in the field is emphasized best in *Punchline* in which Steven Gold, a talented male comic, trains the uninitiated housewife Lilah in the craft of stand-up.

This prototype is evoked when Susie discovers that under the influence of a male comic (Randall), Midge has been performing free stand-up gigs informally at private parties as part of a duo set with him and even met with his agent to consider the possibility of going public as a performing duo. Infuriated, Susie begins by reminding Midge that comedy is ultimately a commercial product—that her “party circuit thing” is “not stand-up . . . [but] a party” because she was “not getting paid, . . . not getting booked.”¹¹ She then goes on to admonish Midge for playing the gender-submissive part of the professionally inept woman:

Just drop this doe-eyed Bambi thing right now. Okay, I’m so sick of you acting all innocent: “Oh, I don’t know how the world works ’cause I’m a housewife, and I wear four layers of petticoats.” It is tired, and it is weak, and you are not tired, and you are not fucking weak. And if you wanna be a comic, you are gonna have to grow the fuck up right now!

11 As Nick Marx and Matt Sienkiewicz observe in “Comedy as Theory, Industry, and Academic Discipline,” comedy has always been a commercial/industrial product, begotten by uncertain moments of technological transition in media (*The Comedy Studies Reader*, ed. Nick Marx and Matt Sienkiewicz [Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018]: 6-15).

Earlier in the show, Midge herself briefly questions such stereotypes of the innocent or callow female comic. Midge's defiant rejoinder when Howard Fawn sees her taking notes during his stand-up set and accuses her of stealing his act on behalf of one of his contemporary male comics that she could be poaching for herself is meant as a reproach of Fawn's stereotypical assumption that women lack the shrewdness necessary for professional success in comedy. In the second season, Midge directly challenges the idea that women suffer from crippling workplace naiveté when she responds to Benjamin's fears that Declan Howell (Rufus Sewell)—a famous painter who had invited her to his studio—may be planning to sexually proposition her by bluntly telling Benjamin that sexual harassment is her everyday professional reality: "I know how to handle guys like that. I work comedy clubs. . . . Declan Howell would be the best-behaved audience member at a comedy club." Crucially, Midge asserts her ability to negotiate these hurdles on her way to professional success: "Trust me, I know how to handle drunk, handsy guys. There's no part of this body that hasn't been groped, or poked or pinched or patted. . . . Trust me, I take very good care of myself."

The bleakness of the workplace situation for a female professional (comic), as well as her jaded experience and tested expertise at handling these workplace challenges, also becomes clear when she explains how wearing girdles helps the performer: "In a girdle you can't feel a damn thing. These guys might as well be groping a parking meter. So even if one does get through, how the hell would I know." Prompted by Susie's professional assistance and jaded by compromising experience of her own, Midge awakens to the possibility of professional authority that she had earlier been unaccustomed to rightfully claim.

Serving Humor and Powering Protest

As Midge discovers her feminist agency in her role as a performer, she also comes to see the ethical power of stand-up to challenge unjust power structures in society, to awaken to the potential of this cultural form as a rigorous, committed, and structural rather than idiosyncratic or incidental form of critique central to the comic's professional practice. From the very start, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* enshrines the ethical underpinnings of humor, both in its revelatory and expository modes and its rebellious and defiant mode, a moral framing of humor that is likewise reflected in comedy studies.

For example, Judith Yaross Lee notes that “truth-telling” happens through “comic forms” and that humor functions as “the advance guard” and “rhetoric of . . . social change,” “mocking values in flux,” while Matthew Meier and Casey Schmitt observe in “Standing Up, Speaking Out” that stand-up comedy is a “unique rhetorical form in terms of its ability to facilitate social change,” something it achieves “by providing an alternative mode of expression while operating outside of the rules of serious discourse” (xxii).¹² Willett and Willett for their part argue in *Uproarious* that “by the early twentieth-first century across the U.S. cultural and political landscape,” the comic “buil[t] on a rich legacy” and became the community’s “truth teller” (1). They identify the “political force” of “humor from below” (2) and explain how it can serve as “a source of empowerment, a strategy for outrage and truth telling, a counter to fear” (13) and a “cathartic, biosocial catalyst”—one that does not just provide a medium for relief but for real political change by reclaiming “energy and power . . . from repressive and authoritarian climates” (13), “turn[ing] mockery around from victims to the oppressors” (18).

Midge’s first foray into stand-up is an enraged impromptu truth telling about her marriage. This ethical and performative connection between comedy and expository truth telling is evoked multiple times in the show. One of the most noteworthy examples is in the outrage that is expressed by Midge when she discovers how the famous comic Sophie Lennon adopts a persona—the poor and crass “Sophie from Queens”—in her onstage comedy, producing profitable humor at the expense of the working classes, while relishing and boasting about her own upper-class privileges in private.

Midge is outraged at Sophie’s ostentatious upper-class establishment, the affluence underlying her condescending ways, the pretentious sophistication of her manners, the fat suit she sports during performances, and the reality of working-class suffering that she caricatures and markets unfeelingly for profit. Moreover, incensed by Sophie’s professional advice to her as a female comic that she adopt a gimmick, a persona, to cater to the masculinist audience view of women as sexual objects, Midge bulldozes Sophie’s image that night at the Gaslight Café by launching a devastating critique of her approach to comedy. She criticizes Sophie for telling her to pick “some big, whackadoodle character”

12 Judith Yaross Lee, “Stand-Up Comedy, Social Change, and (American) Culture,” in *Standing Up, Speaking Out*, xv–xx; xv.

for her gigs, lambasts women's gendered choice to conceal/pretend in life and on stage—a choice that arises from feelings of inadequacy and shame women experience as a result of misogyny—and asks rhetorically why women have to pretend to be “stupid,” “helpless,” or “sorry” when they are not. Midge is also encouraged in her truthful stand-up comedy when Joel suddenly discovers her secret life as a comic; though he is unable to confront the staged representations of his real-life personal situations in the acerbic honesty of her stand-up, he encourages her to continue, since she is exactly what a good comic is supposed to be—authentic and truthful.

The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel depicts her stand-up trajectory as beginning with bouts of enraged, witty, and personal truth-telling before it gradually transitions to a more mature phase of social commentary. As the show progresses, we see Midge discover not only the expository role of stand-up comedy but also its potential as a force against systemic wrongs, both in the realm of mainstream politics and in the social domain of patriarchy. This determined subversion of injustices, founded on a deeper acknowledgment of sociopolitical agendas and hypocrisies, underlies the kind of humor that is typically staged through female (stand-up) comedy. Rebecca Krefting observes that female comics engage in what she calls “charged humor”—a brand of humor that “challenge[s] the myths we sustain about how fair and democratic our society is” and exposes discriminatory practices that have “become normalized and compulsory.”¹³ By adopting this approach, they brave unpopularity for their social criticism and become typecast as less funny than male comics who produce more crowd-pleasing humor. Umberto Eco similarly notes that the potential for real radical subversion lies in *humor*, which, as opposed to Bakhtin's carnivalesque, is an “avant-garde” entertainment that “does not fish for an impossible freedom” but still “undermines limits from inside” and “remind[s] us of the presence of a law that we no longer have reason to obey.”¹⁴

Midge's charged comedy and her defiance regarding her choice of stand-up leaves her open to attack, such as when a judge accuses her of using “foul” language and endangering the “moral health” of a society that was

13 Rebecca Krefting, *All Joking Aside: American Humor and Its Discontents* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 2.

14 Umberto Eco, “The Frames of Comic ‘Freedom,’” in *The Comedy Studies Reader*, 25–33; 33.

slipping from the “Shirley Temple” era in her hearing for violating “1140A of the penal law” by “present[ing] and participat[ing] in an obscene, indecent tableau” while “performing in a licensed venue.” In response, Midge defends stand-up’s right to defy artificially imposed limits of language and content, offering a biting dissent that addresses contemporary political controversies such as the racist Jim Crow laws of the segregation era that were at the center of protests in the 1960s and the infamous case of the Rosenbergs, who were executed in 1953 on charges of Russian espionage.

This larger sociopolitical critique that she connects to the radical mission of stand-up is furthered and her social consciousness is widened when she runs into a women’s civil demonstration in a community park. She joins the gathering out of curiosity as activist and urban planner Jane Jacobs (Allison Smith) arrives to speak in protest of the city council’s decision to construct a road through the middle of the park. She decides to support their inspiring social activism by addressing the crowd through the rhetoric of stand-up, using this mode directly to expose the strategies of the powerful who preempt and eliminate opposition by excluding women from active political participation. Shocked out of her cushioned complacency by the sight of the agitating women, Midge denounces her ignorant “Upper West Side” moorings in her address to the crowd:

I’m trying to read more papers lately. It’s interesting—my father pointed out that my favorite part about a newspaper is the ads for shoes. And I felt bad about that but now I think maybe they just put those ads in newspapers to distract us. Because if women don’t realize what’s going on in the world, they won’t step in and fix it. . . . Because they will fix it. And accessorize it.

Midge’s further growth as a stand-up comic through her increasingly expert fusion of humor with social commentary becomes evident when she weaves into her act an oblique denouncement of the contemporary Cold War situation and the persistent game of political one-upmanship between global superpowers. She jokingly offers a deterrent to nuclear war—the postapocalyptic prospect of extended families coexisting in fallout shelters after Soviet nuclear bombing: “Nuclear war. The nightmare, the horror. Oh, now, I’m not talking about dying in one. I’m talking about surviving and living in an underground bunker with your extended family until the radiation disperses. . . . If that’s not a deterrent for nuclear war, I don’t know what is.”

Midge powerfully argues for the role of stand-up in political dissent when she witnesses her parents disagreeing about the potential of protest. After Abe is fired from Bell Labs, he declares his wish to return to his old unmaterialistic ways and overthrow capitalist politico-technoscientific lobbies. Rose (Marin Hinckle) ridicules his pretentious aspirations, which she argues are supported only by the assurance of affluence. In response to this argument about the hypocrisies, desirability, and sustainability of rebellion, Midge intervenes to explain that stand-up offers an alternate avenue for protest. She says to Abe: "You don't even know who Lenny Bruce is. You blather on and on about free speech. He's out there getting arrested in the name of free speech. He's talking about things no one has the balls to talk about. You put down comedy and what I do. . . . You are ignorant." This exhortation about the transformative potential and political value of uncensored comedy inspires her dad to become a protester. Abe proves his conviction by subsequently attending Bruce's performance and objecting when Bruce is arrested for flouting the obscenity law in his monologue—an episode that lands them both in jail.

Midge's humor in the show also aims at overturning gender hierarchies in the *social* realm, critiquing the structural limitations that women in comedy confront. In *Uproarious*, Willett and Willett note that "women and others who are socially disempowered are viewed as closer to animals and ruled by emotion," and because humor is most valued by the intellectual elite as a "cerebral game and an elevated skill of true wit that rational minds play" (2), they are not considered capable of being funny, much less of producing "true humor" and are therefore typically relegated by an "oppressive culture" to "mockery's natural targets" (2–3). This mainstream reinforcement of humor as masculinist gender privilege "mitigates laughter's radical potential" by neutering it, "leaving a measured enjoyment of humor as at best a cerebral interlude amid serious matters" (4). However, at the same time, this suppression opens up a space in which humor can be used as instrument of subversion by the "socially disempowered"—"women, animals, and other subversive creatures" generally reduced to being comedy's "targets"—who have "historically found humor to be a tool of resistance in hidden (and not so hidden) transcripts that recharge the social atmosphere and body politics" (2). Ultimately, Willett and Willett deliver a "feminist account of transformative strains in humor," explaining that what feminist comedy introduces is a "utopic vision" that reimagines ethics by "challeng[ing] conventional

morality and the underlying codes of normalization, patriarchal oppression, and social exclusion” (35–36).

Mizejewski and Sturtevant also explore this potential of humor as “a key political weapon”—one that allows a (female) comic “to explore otherwise transgressive or taboo topics”—observing that there is a vast difference between the “social meanings” of a female comic, typically the “unruly woman,” and a male comic (introduction, 4, 2). This is because female unruliness has always been pathologized as hysterical, and a female comic is thus considered pathological and unnatural. Mizejewski and Sturtevant explain that this perception has “long worked against women’s participation in comedy,” which is why the sight or notion of women performing comedy fundamentally destabilizes the social boundary that is supposed to exist between genders (introduction, 2–3).

Reiterating these gendered political aspects of humor, the show consistently emphasizes the struggle of female comics to be taken seriously as authors and performers of humor. In one of these instances of feminist protest, Midge launches a devastating attack on the socially valorized institution of motherhood, hinting that it conflicts with professional success (as a comic): “What if I wasn’t supposed to be a mother? What if I picked the wrong profession? If you are afraid of blood you don’t become a surgeon. If you don’t like to fly, you don’t join Pan Am. . . . I mean, women are *supposed* to be mothers. It’s *supposed* to be natural. It comes with the tits, right? The equipment is pre-installed. I mean, are there exceptions?”

Another recurrent theme is her disillusionment with the stereotypical hierarchy of heterosexual coupling that idealizes the husband as protector of his vulnerable and intellectually inferior wife—a type that her awakened comedic consciousness cannot abide. Midge’s resistance to this formulaic role, satirized in her stage name of Mrs. Maisel, places her in the tradition of “the bitch” female comics who, as Gilbert notes, “frequently make jabs at couples or other women,” “ridiculing both . . . [the] libido-driven boyfriend and the stereotypical ‘dumb blonde’ ‘bimbo’” (*Performing Marginality*, 110). In a similar vein, a livid Midge performs to the tumultuous applause of the audience when she critiques the glorified female prototype of the delicate and dependent weakling. She marks her departure from this mold with brutal sarcasm and comedic perspective: “I-I used to be delicate. I was delightful. I was a goddamn flower. I smelled like roses and sunshine shone out of my ass.” And yet, she says, she was betrayed by her husband, and was transformed into the person she is today—“a bit angry and deranged.”

Midge's critique of conventional gender roles also extends to a critique of social heteronormativity. In the second season, she applauds the feminine beauty (a small waist, attractive lipstick, nice "tits" and "ass") of the cross-dressing dancers on the stage of a Paris nightclub. During her stand-up performance at the Apollo, her truth telling about gender freedom puts her at odds with soul crooner Baldwin. Midge delivers a gender-transgressive narrative of his talent, beauty, and predilections—his "Ava Gardner cheekbones," "Judy Garland shoes," and unique ability to "play Romeo *and* Juliet"—that emerges as a critique of heteronormativity and a kernel of revolutionary feminist social change. This moment, like others, such as when Midge performs as a noticeably white comic among a sea of Black audience and performers (including Mabley), is charged with racial tensions.

At this juncture, the stage comes alive with the conjunction of Jewish and Black American humor—both typically varieties of American "humor of the oppressed" and both "inwardly masochistic, . . . tragic, externally aggressive, even acrimonious," as Boskin and Dorinson note ("Ethnic Humor," 90–91). However, they add that the two communities have historically "responded differently to the stresses affecting them" in their humor (90) and argue this charged moment in the show depicts a racialized power play in which a rich white female comic (Midge) displaces the Black celebrity comic (Mabley) and feels desperate and entitled enough to expose her gay black coperformer (Baldwin) onstage. Despite this tension, both kinds of liminal humor—the Jewish humor of the comic and the Black humor of the audience—join to express an appreciation of nonheteronormative beauty and practice.

The show also portrays Midge drawing on the potency of the body to launch its gender critique. Humor studies has repeatedly focused on the body's centrality in comic subversion, emphasizing how comedy is often able to facilitate sociopolitical critique through its origins in gut-level bodily laughter—a variety that overturns bodily, and by extension sociopolitical, hierarchies. Willett and Willett note the potential of "belly laughs" to overturn the "cerebral turn" of comedy, arguing that instead of "cultivating mind-body separations," feminist laughs in the hands of female comics "offer the chance to process injuries and punch back the patriarch not by detaching but by reconnecting the head with the belly" (*Uproarious*, 14). Related to belly laughs and gut humor is the variety of humor that incorporates the body in the production of humor—a type particularly empowering for female comics because it is through this template that they are able to inscribe

the polemical, stereotyped, censored, and stigmatized female body within humor. Mizejewski and Sturtevant observe that feminist theorists of comedy have found Bakhtin's ideas most productive because he "acknowledges how comedy can work as a subversive force by discussing the 'messiness' of the lower female body" (introduction, 10). Speaking of the need to publicly represent women's bodies through comedy, they remark that "unless and until women's full range of experiences, including medical, scatological, and gynecological ones, are represented in popular entertainment," just as "male equivalents have been," their "bodies will remain fertile terrain for projected anxieties" (introduction, 6).

Hannah Ballou also suggests the possibility of a "sexy scatology" exemplified by female comics like Ursula Martinez who correctly perform a heteronormatively sexy female comic body while also exploiting the comic (scatological) possibilities of the situation.¹⁵ As if in response to this, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* inscribes the messy and exposed body, and particularly the female body, within the space of performed comedy that otherwise often denies female comics access to bodily and gut humor. Challenging the idea that only men can discuss their bodies, Midge claims the right to narrativize hers through stand-up, to deliver, as Willet and Willet put it, "a punch back from the fomenting nether regions of society, a contagious guffaw from the bottom up," (*Uproarious*, 102–3). In one scene, for example, Midge is removed abruptly from the stage by the club manager as she attempts to comically narrate the raw realities of pregnancy. The manager calls her insane for daring to articulate the "foul" word that "nobody wants to hear"—"pregnant." He announces that this is "female stuff . . . [and therefore] private" and must be discussed with her "obstetrician—ob—whatever the fuck." Establishing her own unwavering resolve to speak about the female body in all of its viscerality, Midge declares, "It's real. It's life. Literally."

Humor studies has emphasized the spectacular excess and the strategic deployment of the female body in the process of achieving the desired subversive intervention. Kathleen Rowe Karlyn observes that while "early feminist film theory" understood the woman's position of being a spectacle as necessarily a position of weakness in which she is objectified and

15 Hannah Ballou, "Pretty Funny: Manifesting a Normatively Sexy Female Comic Body," *Comedy Studies* 4, no. 2 (2013): 179–86.

diminished by the male gaze, the figure of the “unruly woman”—“woman as rule-breaker, joke-maker, and public, bodily spectacle”—offers women “new ways of thinking about visibility as power” and “claiming the pleasure and power of making spectacles of . . . [themselves].”¹⁶ Mizejewski similarly suggests the visible centrality and charged versatility of the female comic’s body by emphasizing its “leakiness” (as in the case of Ellen DeGeneres)—“a function of the disruptiveness and disorder of comedy, its basic thrust of anti-authoritarianism”—and observing how this “comic body” is able to make space for subversions, “defy[ing] categories and stereotypes.”¹⁷

During her gigs, Midge repeatedly evokes the critical fluidity and spectacularity of her body. A few examples among many others are her jokes about the sexual acts that she had deigned to perform for her husband that would merit a mention in the conversation of “French whores” (episode 1, season 1), her references to the sexiness of the female body during her performance at the army base (episode 1, season 3), and her jokes at the Concord Hotel about “let[ting] a boy go Christopher Columbus on [her] . . . nether regions” for the first time (episode 5, season 2). Most overtly, during Midge’s very first gig in the show’s opening episode, she ends up flashing her audience in a spontaneous overflow of uncontrollable rage. She tells the audience as she pulls up her top to expose her breasts that her husband cheated on her despite having an extremely attractive and sexually adventurous wife to come home to, causing the audience to erupt with clamorous applause both at her wild abandon and at her expertly delivered comic monologue.

This “obscene” exposure of the body underscores not only that comedy is raunchy and bodily but also that its subversive potential is often routed precisely through this titillating suggestiveness and spectacularity of the body. This comedic format is tied to the two comic personas delineated by Gilbert that Midge closely models—the “bawd” and the “bitch,” both of whom employ an assertive sexuality to challenge their audience and ultimately question social mores. The “bawd” tradition “reached its apex in the climate of ‘sexual liberation’ during the 1960s” (the temporal frame within which Midge is located) and the “bitch” persona evolved out of it. Both

16 Kathleen Rowe Karlyn, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*, in *The Comedy Studies Reader*, 210–16; 210.

17 Linda Mizejewski, *Pretty/Funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics*, in *The Comedy Studies Reader*, 216–22; 222.

personas use their “sexuality as a means of pleasure and control,” portraying themselves “as insatiable and . . . threatening” and overturning sociocultural norms—the latter more fully embracing her harsh intimidatory potential (*Performing Marginality*, 100).

Thus, the overt sexuality of the “bawd” and the “bitch,” along with the sociopolitical critique it implies, is condensed into the figure of Midge, who uses it to barrage and subvert the social laws of propriety and the legal definitions of obscenity. Steering away from conventional rationality or respectability, stand-up in the show fractures established norms by staging the nude female body. The show’s stand-up sequences, both Midge’s and others, evoke the obscene in order to highlight the role politics play in defining what is disrespectful and immoral and how the obscene laughter stemming from the nether regions is harnessed to subvert mainstream hierarchies and hypocrisies.

According to Willett and Willett, the history of feminist humor shows how “both the amusing joke and the shock of the obscene can under certain conditions function within a social movement to effect egalitarian social change” and that humor takes “a more progressive aim precisely when it refuses to sharply distinguish itself from the obscene” (34–35). Meier and Schmitt observe the influence of Lenny Bruce’s comedy in the 1950s and 1960s, remarking that the definition of the word “obscenity”—central to the proceedings of his Cafe au Go Go trial in 1964 for uttering public obscenities during his stand-up—changed “for the generation of stand-up comedians who followed in Bruce’s footsteps” and the culture of stand-up changed as well (“Standing Up, Speaking Out,” xxi). Debra Aarons and Marc Mierowsky note that Bruce’s contemporary Jewish female comics like Belle Barth and Pearl Williams, much like Bruce, constructed a uniquely Jewish notion of obscenity through their stand-up but framed it as “dirty,” comically deflating it as a way of challenging social mores.¹⁸

This rich history of protest against the notion of bodily obscenity is dramatized in the show not just by Midge but by the fictionalized version of Lenny Bruce himself when he is shown lambasting the obscenity laws. Bruce’s character critiques the way mainstream society normalizes the

18 Debra Aarons and Marc Mierowsky, “Obscenity, Dirtiness, and Licence in Jewish Comedy,” *Comedy Studies* 5, no. 2 (2014): 165–77.

cultural depiction of violence and bloodshed while criminalizing depictions or even descriptions of love and sexual intimacy. He derides conventional parental safeguards that prohibit child exposure to obscenity and mimics the way a guardian would typically apologize for exposing a child to a “dirty movie”—a pornographic film—because it is obscene, ignoring the fact that pornography often presents loving intimacy, respects sexual consent, and is free of violence. He explains the hypocrisy of this society that pretends that sexual desire—a natural human proclivity—is deemed obscene while exploiting this obscene instinct and “appeal[ing] to the prurient interest” through the “obscenity law” to draw profits: “Now, if . . . I see that chick there [pointing to an explicit image of the female body in a magazine] . . . across the way, I’m gonna look. . . . But, see, in our society, it’ll pull down the shade and charge two bucks to get in. That’s what repression does.”

In season 1, while defending herself in court against the charge that she had “participated in an obscene, indecent tableau” by performing her gig, Midge herself directly protests the socio-legal notion of obscenity. She contests the judge’s allegation that she had compromised the society’s “moral health” through her use of “foul”/“crude” language, questioning the attribution of criminality to language arbitrarily labeled obscene: “Moral health? . . . [W]hat’s the difference between me saying those words on a stage to an audience that’s there to hear them, and a bunch of guys saying ‘shit’ loud enough for everybody to hear at P. J. Clarke’s?” Upsetting established limits of conversation and imposed standards of censorship, the show centers the spectacularity of the female body and challenges delimiting societal notions like obscenity through the empowered figure of the female comic.

The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel leaves us with an image of the female stand-up comic as an ethical crusader and seasoned professional, roughened and worldly-wise, trained and thorough, idealistic in her subversive intent and conscious of her professional constraints. Interwoven with the entertaining personal arc of Midge’s stand-up journey is the show’s overarching didactic strand that maps protest onto the cultural topography of comic performance and the rich history of female humor, drawing on available comedic formats and popular female comic personas to unsettle sociopolitical hierarchies and overturn systemic injustices. Referencing the historical rise of American stand-up in the 1960s and depicting the celebrated comedians of the era, the show weaves the narrative of a fictional female comic into this cultural tapestry to communicate to us the sociocultural importance of stand-up in the

history of protest and in the professionalization of humor. What the show most impresses on us is the potency of the figure of the female comic who relentlessly negotiates the patriarchal structuring of the field of stand-up as a professional to protest the gendered perception of humor and sexist practice of comedy.

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