EVIDENCE OF SUBVERSIVE THEMES IN WOMEN’S COMEDY

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ABSTRACT

On the basis of traditional gender norms, women are assumed to be “unlaughing creatures.” Comedy is inherently aggressive and intellectual, while traditional femininity defines women as gentle, sensitive, and pious rather than rational or intelligent. Standup comedy and comic acting provide the performer with a platform for social critique, and with that platform women are able to subvert the traditional gender norms imposed upon them by the dominant culture. Women as comedienne with a stage and the authority it provides are able to prove that they are rational and intelligent. However, in doing so, they sacrifice their femininity and their self-worth in their performance. Nonetheless, women’s presence on the stage and their access to a previously all-male arena provides comedienne with the power for subversion of both gender and racial biases of mainstream society. By examining the work of four contemporary revolutionaries in women’s comedy – Moms Mabley, Phyllis Diller, Lucille Ball, and Whoopi Goldberg – through a lens carefully crafted by scholarship on American women’s humor provided by Nancy Walker, Zita Dresner, Elsie Williams, and more, this thesis aims to provide evidence of inherent subversion in women’s humor.