

## 25 Good Reasons Why Beer is Better than Women and Other Qualities of the Female: Gender and the Non-Seriousness of Jokes

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Article abstract

Tellings of blonde jokes examined using a discourse analysis sensitive to power dynamics between women and men provide an illustration of patriarchal strategy which parallels that of the xerox-lore “25 Good Reasons Why Beer is Better Than Women”; the advocacy of mutual contradictions in which you must take this seriously, yet you must take this as a joke. Our discussion places discourse analysis in the service of feminist theory by showing how in cross sex joking interactions initiated by men and involving misogynist material like blonde jokes, a woman’s options for responding are limited and fundamentally unsatisfying. Some of the examples of blonde joke tellings show how women employ responsive counter-tactics, but analysis indicates why these strategies are problematic, compelling them to make choices between equally undesirable options, so limited that even making a choice is oppressive.

# **25 GOOD REASONS WHY BEER IS BETTER THAN WOMEN AND OTHER QUALITIES OF THE FEMALE: GENDER AND THE NON-SERIOUSNESS OF JOKES<sup>1</sup>**

**Pauline GREENHILL, Kjerstin BALDWIN, Michelle BLAIS, Angela BROOKS, and Kristen ROSBAK**

Women's Studies

University of Winnipeg

Seminar for Males; once again the female staff will be offering courses to men of all marital status:

## **25 Good Reasons Why Beer is Better than Women**

1. You can enjoy a beer all month long.
2. Beer stains wash out.
3. You don't have to wine and dine beer.
4. Your beer will always wait patiently for you in the car while you play baseball.
5. When your beer goes flat, you toss it out.
6. Beer is never late.
7. A beer doesn't get jealous when you grab another beer.
8. Hangovers go away.
9. Beer labels come off without a fight.
10. When you go to a bar, you know you can always pick up a beer.
11. Beer never has a headache.
12. After you've had a beer, the bottle is still worth a nickel.
13. A beer won't get upset if you come home and have another beer.
14. If you pour a beer right, you'll always get good head.
15. A beer always goes down easy.
16. You can have more than one beer in a night and not feel guilty.
17. You can share a beer with your friends.
18. You always know you're the first one to pop a beer.
19. Beer is always wet.
20. Beer doesn't demand equality.
21. You can have a beer in public.
22. A beer doesn't care when you come.

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1 . I would like to express my appreciation for assistance from Anne Brydon, Isobel MacKay, and Cheryl Osborne. I am also grateful for the financial assistance of a Research Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

23. A frigid beer is a good beer.
24. You don't have to wash a beer before it tastes good.
25. If you change beers, you don't have to pay alimony.<sup>2</sup>

This text is not new. Like other materials of its sort, it periodically experiences some currency and popularity, is photocopied and circulated by people who find it amusing or telling of social concepts of womanhood, passed on to others they assume will share their feelings or be otherwise concerned with or affected by the contents. Like other misogynist texts, such as some graffiti (see Greenhill 1992) and blonde jokes (which we<sup>3</sup> discuss in detail here), it appears to depict women's qualities in limited, limiting, and predictable modes.

A question begged, it seems to me, by its contents is, if a woman wished to develop a strategy for being considered better than beer — instead of vice versa — how would she go about doing so? The text gives no clues. Its emblematic quality is the characterization of women as representing both sides of polar oppositions, yet the devaluation of both options. Thus it shows women as inherently contradictory, equivocal, and/or ambiguous: oversexed (22) yet unenthusiastic about physical intimacy (23); slaves to their biological functions (1) yet culturally overdetermined (4); possessive (7) yet promiscuous (18); ever-present (8) yet judiciously absent (6); polluted (24) and polluting (2); exacting (20) yet unskilled (14); valueless (12) yet expensive (3).

A similar text, implicitly enumerating male rather than female characteristics, circulated almost simultaneously:<sup>4</sup>

1. Combatting stupidity.
2. You can do housework too.
3. PMS—learning when to keep your mouth shut.
4. How to fill an icetray.
5. We do not want sleazy underthings for Christmas. Give us money!
6. Understanding the female response to you coming in at 4 a.m.
7. Wonderful laundry techniques (formerly called — don't wash my silks).
8. Parenting — no it doesn't end with conception.
9. Get a life — learn to cook.
10. How not to act like an asshole when you're obviously wrong.

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2. I thank Victoria Stone for bringing me a copy of this piece of xerox lore after an Introductory Women's Studies class in April 1992. Her boyfriend had copied it from a paper posted on the wall where he works.

3. "We" refers to all the co-authors collectively; throughout "I" will indicate the principal author, Pauline Greenhill, except in the sections written by Kjerstin Baldwin, Michelle Blais, Angela Brooks, and Kristen Rosbak.

4. I am grateful to Nancy Lehr, administrative assistant to the Anthropology department at the University of Winnipeg, for bringing it to my attention in July 1992.

11. Spelling — even you can get it right.
12. Understanding your financial incompetence.
13. You — the weaker sex.
14. Reasons to give flowers.
15. How to stay awake after sex.
16. Why it's unacceptable to relieve yourself anywhere but the washroom.
17. Garbage — getting it to the curb.
18. You can fall asleep without it — if you really try.
19. The morning dilemma — if it's "awake" take a shower.
20. I'll wear it if I damn well please.
21. How to put the toilet seat down (formerly called — no it's not a bidet).
22. The weekend and sports are not synonymous.
23. Give me a break — why we know your excuses are bullshit.
24. How to go shopping with your mate without getting lost.
25. The remote control — overcoming your dependency.
26. Romanticism — other ideas besides sex.
27. Mother-in-law — they are people too.
28. How not to act younger than your children.
29. You too can be a designated driver.
30. Male bonding — leaving your friends at home.
31. Honest. You don't look like Mel Gibson — especially when naked.
32. Changing your underwear — it really works.
33. Fluffing the blankets after farting is not necessary.

Clearly, this text is not exactly complimentary to men, as "Beer" is unflattering to women. Both indicate clearly and nastily the undesirable qualities of their target groups. Yet "Seminar" is quite unambiguous and unequivocal, suggesting that men are stupid, incompetent, oversexed, thoughtless, and so on; a man wishing to follow its agenda could devise a program with little difficulty.<sup>5</sup>

Like "Beer", and in contrast to "Seminar", tellings of blonde jokes by white anglo-Canadian men to white anglo-Canadian women, examined using a discourse analysis sensitive to power dynamics between women and men, provide illustrations of patriarchal<sup>6</sup> strategies. Specifically, hearers are enjoined simultaneously to take the commentary seriously, and to take it as a joke, thus being placed in an inherently contradictory stance.

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5. I'm not arguing that there are no contradictory, equivocal, and/or ambiguous texts about men. Similarly, women tell hostile and aggressive jokes about and to men (see for example Mitchell 1978).

6. I understand patriarchy as an institution which structures interaction in such a way as to extend disproportionate power to men. It is informed by and informs other social institutions and interactions — prisons, families, and so on — but its operations, like theirs, are often subtle, elusive, and intricate.

Many writers have reflected upon issues of gender with respect to joking, such as differences between women's and men's humour (e.g. Cantor 1976; Chapman and Gadfield 1976; Prerost 1975). Many generalise about their qualities, mainly drawing upon white Euro-American cultures. For example, "Male sexual humour uses the symbolism of domination and power, not seduction and sensuality. Exaggerations of male sexual prowess and/or lack of same, abound, with women almost invariably victims or butts of male sexuality" (Marlowe 1989: 149). Leigh Marlowe, among others, links gender differences in humour to varying conversational strategies: "For women, the primary goal of conversation is intimacy and for men the goal is positive self-presentation" (*Ibid.*: 160). Hence, "women's humor supports a goal of greater intimacy by being supportive and healing, while men's humor reinforces 'performance' goals of competition, the establishment of hierarchical relationships, and self-aggrandizement" (*Ibid.*: 161). But even when women and men enjoy the same humour or jokes, "especially in the case of sexual jokes, men appreciate the joke for one set of reasons and women appreciate the joke for a somewhat different set of reasons" (Mitchell 1977: 305; see also Losco and Epstein 1975).

Experimental studies of humour are popular, yet many researchers would argue, with Leigh Marlowe, that

the validity of studying humour primarily by systematically manipulating variables in laboratory settings is open to question... Over-reliance on the experimental method may also lead to treating interactional phenomena as though they were properties of individuals. Attempts to study humor in terms of individual traits or isolated responses neglect to recognize that humor emerges in a complex social context and may serve many different social functions (Marlowe 1989: 157-158).

In fact, Marlowe suggests that "men's preferred humor is more adaptable to laboratory study since it relies more on non-spontaneous jokes than on material from its immediate social context" (*Ibid.*: 163). She asserts that "an ecologically valid account of women's humour must consider its participants' intentions, its immediate context, and its wider social context. Without this understanding, the magic that is women's humor evaporates" (*Ibid.*: 164).

I would argue that men's humour is equally evocative in performance, and equally in need of the kind of context-based analysis we provide here. Much conventional discourse analysis, however, has avoided gender sensitivity. A classic example is Harvey Sacks' consideration of the telling of a dirty joke (1975; see also Thompson 1984: 113-115), which fails to consider the example text's *actual* context of telling (by a 17 year old boy to two male peers and a male adult), and instead looks analytically at its narrated, ostensible performance by the boy's sister.

In the summer of 1991, blonde jokes were circulating in Waterloo, Ontario. During that time, teaching a course on Canadian Traditional and Popular

Culture, I assigned students to discuss a joke's relation to its context of performance. Of some 16 in the class — 12 women and four men — six chose to discuss examples of tellings of blonde jokes, and an additional two chose other anti-female jokes.<sup>7</sup> We draw upon the four of these assignments, using the student/co-authors' examples and analyses to give a varied series of perspectives on the uses of misogynist jokes. Each involves male tellers whose audience is female and/or mixed, a situation which is relatively unsurprising since "joke-telling is both more characteristic of and more normatively acceptable for males in American culture" (Marlowe 1989: 157). These enactments (see Abrahams 1977) suggest the (re)presentation of patriarchal contradictions in everyday traditional language use. They provide an evocative example of a Foucauldian exercise in capillary power (see below), produced through the operation of everyday spoken discourse.

Power, seriousness and non-seriousness, and conflict are pivotal. In fact, as Carol Mitchell's work suggests, the use of jokes may serve to allow the male tellers to avoid overt hostility:

Most informants are at least partially aware of the hostilities expressed in many of the jokes they tell; however, in many cases they do not wish to admit openly to themselves or discuss with others those hostilities. The hostilities expressed toward men and women... as well as those directed toward various ethnic and racial groups... are the hostilities that most informants do not wish to admit. They are much more willing to admit and discuss hostilities toward authority figures or toward religious groups (Mitchell 1977: 304).<sup>8</sup>

Michel Foucault's work pivotally links power with discourse; "there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterise, and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation, and functioning of a discourse" (1980: 93). Our work here responds to his assertion that

What is needed is a study of power in its external visage, at the point where it is in direct and immediate relationship with that which we can provisionally call its object, its target, its field of application... where it installs itself and produces its real effects... Let us ask... how things work at the level of on-going subjugation, at the level of those continuous and uninterrupted processes which subject our bodies, govern our gestures, dictate our behaviours etc. (*Ibid.*: 97).

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7. The gender composition of the class was not profoundly aberrant, though there was a greater proportion of men and a more vocal feminist contingent than is usual for Canadian Studies classes at Waterloo, as well as an atypical lack of students older than their twenties. Though class evaluations indicated some disgruntlement with the feminist and lesbian issue orientation of discussion, the class as a whole bonded and worked together unusually well.

8. See also Coser (1960).

In addition, Foucault advocates:

One must... conduct an *ascending* analysis of power, starting, that is, from its infinitesimal mechanisms... I believe that the manner in which the phenomena, the techniques and the procedures of power enter into play at the most basic levels must be analyzed, that the way in which these procedures are displaced, extended and altered must certainly be demonstrated (*Ibid.*: 99).

We are by no means the first to link the use of jokes with power (e.g. Bunkers 1985; Janeway 1980; McGhee 1979). The work of Ruth Laub Coser particularly focuses upon power differentials between jokers and their victims. When examining the face to face joking interactions among colleagues in a mental hospital, she noted that “not once was a senior staff member present a target of a junior member’s humor” (emphasis hers; Coser 1960: 85). And, of course, classic anthropological studies by A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1965) link power differentials with “joking relationships.”

Folklorist Carol A. Mitchell suggests that we need “to learn how the joke tellers and their audiences react to any given joke” (1977: 303). Since the co-authors are both audience and analyst, we have a unique opportunity to do just this. Issues of power are manifest in their understandings; women discern patriarchal power dynamics in joking, and in the everyday intimidation they face.<sup>9</sup> For example, several of Carol Mitchell’s female informants clearly identified with the quick-witted woman portrayed in one joke,

whom they admired for her calmness and quick wit. One woman said “I could not think of anything to say in a situation like this, so I admire the stewardess who can effectively put this exhibitionist in his place without being flustered. Exhibitionism may be an expression of mental instability, but it is also a mean men use to embarrass and frighten women in our society... I would rather make fun of these people because I dislike being intimidated” (Mitchell 1977: 311).

### Kjerstin Baldwin’s case

The first analysis is by Kjerstin Baldwin, who was in her final term of Applied Studies/ Psychology:

Last Saturday evening I was in a crowded, noisy bar in Kingston with my boyfriend and another couple. We had been enjoying a night out of dinner, ice cream, and a few drinks. The two men in the group worked together and were good

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9 . Foucault goes on to advocate a linkage of the everyday operations of power with those in a global context. I see Robin Morgan’s discussion of “the normalization of terror” (1989), and other work on everyday misogyny (e.g. Stanley and Wise 1979), as a step in making the linkage between the kinds of materials I discuss here and their extensive repercussions.

friends, and I had met the other woman on several previous occasions. We were in the bar before it became too busy, and had managed to get a table in one corner. The place soon filled with people, and a group of young women crowded into our little corner.

Because of the large number of people in the bar, we quickly became aware of this group behind us. They were in their early twenties, and were obviously out to enjoy themselves. Whenever a particularly fun song was played, they sang and danced along, like everybody else in the bar. At one point in the evening, my friend leaned over so that our entire group could hear him and said, "How do you know a blonde has been using a word processor? There's white-out on the screen."

Our group immediately knew that he was referring to the women behind us, even though nothing specifically was said. It was an inside joke shared by the four of us, based on our mutual experience of the women's teased hair held together by banana clips, huge purses that could fit everything but the kitchen sink, extremely thick eyeliner and mascara, and short tight skirts as typical of the stereotyped "blonde" appearance. It was also ironic that the teller himself had blond hair, yet nobody in the group behind us was blonde.

Since Kjerstin Baldwin does not consider the denouement, or the reactions to the joke, we cannot evaluate the interactions involved. However, the joke contains the internal disparity that blonde does not equal blonde, but instead equals female. Her discussion clearly illustrates the deployment of a blonde joke in which the male speaker's reference to the group of women was absolutely clear, despite the fact that none actually had the requisite hair colour, and he did. Blonde jokes are so clearly about (all) women, not references to the colour of a person's hair, that the teller did not in any way risk any damage to his own "face"<sup>10</sup> despite his own hair colour. His telling was highly successful, in that the joker was able to convey his message — a judgement about the women's seriousness/intelligence — subtly, indirectly, and artistically.

Further evidence for this association, blonde equals woman, comes from a textual relationship between two jokes. I was told "What's the difference between an intelligent woman and a sasquatch? There have been sightings of sasquatch" in Waterloo in 1989, about a year before blonde jokes began to circulate, when I heard instead "What's the difference between an intelligent blonde and a sasquatch?" The strategic replacement is, to alter a Levi-Straussian idea, a difference that *doesn't* make a difference.<sup>11</sup> The variation is significant mainly because it updates the joke and the teller's persona, not because it makes a semantic alteration.

10. I use the term as Brown and Levinson do in their discussion of politeness (1987).

11. Anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss defines symbolism in terms of differences that make a difference (see for example 1962).



## Angela Brooks' case

The next example is from Angela Brooks. Though not the most vocally feminist member of the class, she was in her fourth year of Economics, a field not traditionally dominated by women:

This joke was told at a barbecue on a rainy Saturday in Ottawa in spring 1991. The participants were between 15 and 20 people who either knew or knew of each other to varying degrees through their two hosts, one of whom was my boyfriend. All came either from the west end of Montreal, Toronto, or Ottawa. Since they knew their hosts primarily from high school in Montreal, University in Kingston, or work in Ottawa, they were a fairly homogenous group — mid to late twenties, with University education. An approximately equal number of men and women, some of whom were in couples, attended.

All in all, it was a typical barbecue for this type of crowd. I've seen many just like it. One person was in charge of the barbecue, another in charge of music. It was BYOB, and there was lots of mingling with light conversation on a variety of subjects between pockets of four or five people. Though it was ostensibly arranged to celebrate the hockey playoffs, that was really just an excuse to have a party.

Since I am one of the key players in the joke, let me clarify my position. I was somewhat of an outsider, only being acquainted with perhaps half of the people, and knowing only three or four very well. However, due to circumstances — mainly the rain which forced us to retreat into the small apartment — after five hours I was on first name, joking, teasing basis with all of them.

Later in the evening, a pocket of four people had gathered for more serious discussion — the Canadian economy. The group consisted of myself (female, early twenties, economics major, earnest, brunette, feminist, average looking), the performer (male, mid twenties, good looking, not in economics, socially adept), the graduate student (male, mid twenties, economics major, earnest, talkative), and the blonde (female, mid twenties, relatively untalkative, gorgeous, very socially at ease). As often occurs, the graduate student and myself had conflicting viewpoints on the issue. Conversation which for this type of social gathering should have remained fairly innocuous was instead becoming somewhat heated; he and I were monopolising the conversation.

During a pause after I had posed a question to the graduate student, the performer — perhaps a little bored with the area of conversation and lack of attention he was receiving — asked in a deadpan manner, “What did the brunette between the two blondes say?” It took the audience a moment to realise that they were being told a joke. When no answer was offered, he said, “What brunette?”

The response was uproarious laughter, and the performer was entreated to retell the joke to other pockets of conversation that had not heard it. But what did the joke mean?

I believe it was partially a subtle hint from the performer that the rules of the social gathering were being broken and that the graduate student and myself should lighten up. The performer used it as means of changing the topic and of gaining the floor himself. But parallels between the joke's content and context show that it was directed more at me than at the graduate student. The speakers in both situations were brunette, and I had just finished posing a question. The joke was used to suggest that I was stepping out of my place, and that no-one was paying any attention to what I was saying in any case. Nothing I said would make anyone notice me, particularly since there was an attractive blonde woman present who was, appropriately, silent. The joke was a successful ploy to silence me. I joined in with the laughter and entreaties of the others; I didn't get mad because the message was sufficiently ambiguous that I was not absolutely sure I hadn't read more into the joke than there was. Besides, I had breached social convention, and was willing on that account to have the more unambiguous part of the joke be "on" me.

In Kjerstin Baldwin's example, almost any blonde joke would have made the point. Here, however, the specific joke's "fit" with the situation indicates the teller's purposed choice of his text. Angela Brooks' comments about her own reaction show just how successful the joke-telling was; not only was the teller able to make his point, suggesting both that she should be quiet and that the others were not listening to her, but his use of a joke made a retort difficult. In fact, Angela Brooks was unable to uncover the resources to counter the joke, and was even uncertain as to whether she was over-reacting to it.

In this example, the use of a joke text clearly makes problematic the issue of seriousness. Many jokes obviously are considered very serious in content and/or implication, and can be successfully deployed only in limited circumstances. For example, politicians might tell their family members an ethnic joke, but to do so within earshot of the public — particularly the media — is extremely dangerous professionally. Other genres of text do not similarly carry implications of seriousness/literalness. A male performer can sing an anti-woman blues song with only slight danger of being personally accused of misogyny. Similarly, unlike ethnic jokes, blonde jokes have not yet achieved the status of hate literature in popular understanding.<sup>12</sup> Leigh Marlowe usefully draws attention to the fact that "a difference between women and other minority groups is that women are supposed to acquiesce with good grace to charades enacted at their expense. Women's failure to do so is considered a breach of social etiquette by men, who may allege that this illustrates women's lack of a sense of humour" (Marlowe 1989: 149). The non-seriousness of such jokes, then, is axiomatic.

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12. However, the sexist, racist, misogynist, homophobic material of professional comics like Andrew Dice Clay, Sam Kinison, and Eddie Murphy has been seen as hate literature (see Hirshey 1989).

But couldn't Angela Brooks have employed the rebuttal strategy of telling another equally appropriate joke? This tactic could backfire. For example, had she chosen to retort "Why are all blonde jokes one liners? So men can understand them," the original teller need only tell a blonde joke which wasn't a one liner to put her back in her place.<sup>13</sup>

Further, the repertoire of blonde jokes is extensive (e.g. Slywka 1992), that of anti-blonde-jokes tiny (the text above is the only one I have been told in face to face interaction). Jokes about men as a gender are considerably less common than ones about women as a gender.<sup>14</sup> Thus, in a duel, the misogynist joke teller has the considerable advantage of a large textual storehouse, and consistently responding with originality to a variety of jokes indicates proficiency in performance of the genre. Even if Angela Brooks were able to locate another retort, chances are she would lose the confrontation simply because of limited available choices. Few, in any case, are the joke tellers so accomplished that they could come up with a comparably germane text at such short notice — clearly the performer had some time to consider his options and choose the ideal selection.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, even the tacit acknowledgement of the joke's serious content in a joking retort could be problematic; recognising its intent implicitly concedes that it was an attack. And had Angela Brooks acknowledged the underlying purpose of his joke by confronting him seriously on its content, she could be seen as unreasonable (see for example Brooks 1992). After all, the performer could offer, it was only a joke. Had she ignored the joke, she would have again committed a breach of etiquette, particularly considering the reaction of the rest of the group. She was forced, then, to participate in her own oppression by laughing at a joke which was intended to silence and impugn her. Her analysis of her own reaction to being a blonde joke's brunt shows just how successful this telling was in its contradictory play with the seriousness/ nonseriousness issue. Its equivocal and/or ambiguous quality made an articulate, argumentative woman unable to respond either to its manifest or to its latent contents; it silenced her quite successfully, as was the performer's intention.

13. For example, "This blonde girl didn't know what to do one weekend. She was really bored. So she went to the store and bought a puzzle. By the end of the weekend she was exhausted, but proud of herself. She went to work on Monday and told her boss 'It took me all weekend, but I finished a puzzle' 'All weekend?' replied the boss, 'it took you *all weekend* to finish a puzzle?' 'Yeah', the blonde replied. 'Pretty impressive, eh? The box said three to six *years*'" (Fretz 1991).

14. Other anti-male jokes include "What do you call the insensitive skin which surrounds a penis? A man," and xerox-lore, such as the example which illustrates the maxim "Grow your own dope — plant a man." *The Dumb Men Joke Book: 300 Brilliant Put-downs of Your Favorite Species [sic]* promises a useful repertoire, but in fact recycles ethnic jokes, historical women's sayings, and (yes!) misogynist material (e.g. "Why does Dolly Parton resent George Bush and Dan Quayle? Because they are the two biggest boobs in the world" [Nan Tucket (Jim Mullen) 1992:25]). The pseudonym "Nan Tucket" suggests that the author is female; the work is, however, copyrighted by a man.

15. Other strategies to counter blonde jokes are certainly possible. Miriam Unruh, a University of Winnipeg staff member, told me she counters blonde jokes by substitution. If a geographer were to tell her a blonde joke, for example, she would repeat the same joke back as a geographer joke.

## Michelle Blais' case

Michelle Blais had already completed a degree in Physics and Women's Studies, and was taking the course for interest and in preparation to enter a B. Ed. program after the summer. An outspoken lesbian feminist, she was one of the most lively contributors to the class discussions. Her paper considered the generic meaning of blonde jokes, beginning with a specific situation:

Tiffany, a blonde-haired female lab technician and myself, her brown-haired female co-worker, were sitting at computer terminals in the small computer lab at the University of Waterloo where we work, inputting data. Chris, a brown-haired male lab technician came into the room, looked directly at Tiffany and asked, "What do you call a blonde with half a brain?" Tiffany immediately answered "Gifted." They both laughed and Chris left the room. Tiffany then proceeded to relate to me several additional blonde jokes, some of which I had heard previously.<sup>16</sup>

The analogy of a competitive game will help to illustrate the dynamics of this situation. Chris, the offensive player, enters the computer lab with the sole purpose of telling the joke. He delivers the riddle standing, with no preamble, no discussion, and no warning. Still seated at the computer, interrupted from her work, Tiffany takes up the defensive position with a veteran's skill. She adroitly intercepts the attack by beating Chris to the punchline. They laugh, signifying a truce. Meant to be an incidental casualty, I am a silent witness to this confrontation. Failing to recognise me as an ally, Tiffany defensively displays her arsenal in a self-conscious attempt to convince me of her innocence of all accusations stated therein.

The interaction clearly demonstrates the power imbalance between women and men, revealing the ways in which a superficially innocuous joke is used as a subtle mechanism of sexual oppression. The interrogatory structure of the riddle begins with a power differential; the teller knows the answer and expects that the hearer does not. This power differential can create a context of generous presentation, in which the teller shares something funny, clever, or insightful with the hearer. Enriched with new material, the hearer can become the teller and the cycle is repeated, replicating the gift and its giving. However, the blonde joke also operates in a context in which teller and hearer do not equally identify with the riddle's subject. Thus the joke takes the form of a confrontation rather than an offering. When a man tells a blonde joke to a woman, particularly to a blonde-haired woman, the joke is more of a confrontation than an offering.

16. What do you call three blondes in a row? A wind tunnel. What's the difference between an intelligent blonde and a sasquatch? There have been sightings of sasquatch. What do you call a brunette between two blondes? An interpreter. How can you make a blonde's eyes sparkle? Shine a flashlight in her ear. How do you get a blonde to laugh on Monday? Tell her a joke on Friday. What do you call three blondes in a freezer? Frosted flakes.

Because Tiffany already had the answer to the joke, it could be argued that she was the winner of the encounter, and that the power differential, then, was in her favour. However, they laughed; it was a truce. For him it was a setback; he could try again with a different woman or a different joke. For her it was a fortification; there was no counterattack. Tiffany chose to participate in her own oppression. As a blonde-haired woman, her chosen means of fortification against the assault of blonde jokes was to become an expert in blonde jokes, so that no one could stump her on them.

Anyone daring to take offense at a blonde joke would surely be admonished by apologists of both sexes: "Loosen up. Don't take it personally. Everyone knows it's not true, therefore it's funny." But refusing to call truce and waging a comedic counter-attack often means a woman will again be victimised by derision, scorn, and joking.

Michelle Blais considers the generic meaning of blonde jokes, which affects not only the relationships between women and men, but also those between women and women. Of the former, my first reaction to the scenario Michelle Blais describes followed Sigmund Freud's (1960) discussion of the place of third parties in joke telling. Conceivably, Chris's joke is aimed more at Michelle — a vocal and avowed feminist — than at Tiffany herself. By implication, then, Tiffany participates in the social control function of Chris's joke, giving an example of a blonde woman who doesn't appear to mind blonde jokes.

Yet this example once again demonstrates how blonde joke telling operates in a contradictory, equivocal, and/or ambiguous mode; if Tiffany chooses to deal seriously or jokingly with what the joke is saying about her, she faces the accusations Michelle Blais enumerates. Thus, Tiffany could be more of a contender than Michelle Blais suspects. Rather than seeing confrontation as the option for a woman being victimised by blonde jokes, Tiffany chooses to undermine Chris — and presumably other blonde joke tellers as well — by giving them ultimate put-down: the awareness that their joke isn't original, or new; the audience has heard this one before. She uses a reasoned strategy to deal with her situation.

While some writers appear to agree that "women's use of self-deprecatory humor has arisen from an acculturation to being told 'You're inferior'" (Bunkers 1985: 84), others suggest alternatives: "In evaluating women's humor self-deprecation has perhaps been confused with self-disclosure. A common type of women's humor involves describing one's mistakes or human frailties... This type of humor is problematic only from the male-as-norm perspective, where the humorist's intent should be to show himself off to best advantage. Among women, self-disclosure can contribute to the goal of conversational intimacy."(Marlowe 1989: 162) Similarly, "self-deprecatory humor, when used by women, often functions not to demean a particular woman but to establish a

common ground among women. As women begin to identify with one another, the sense of powerlessness decreases and the use of self-deprecatory humor takes on the function of uniting women and of laying the groundwork for the creation of other, more positive, forms of humor” (Bunkers 1985: 83-85). Suzanne Bunkers’ insights suggest another interpretation of Tiffany’s own joke-telling to Michelle Blais; it may be a first step toward establishing a bond of oppression.

### Kristen Rosbak’s case

Kristen Rosbak, an English student in her fourth year specialising in Rhetoric and Professional Writing, bases her analysis in her own experience as a blonde woman. She suggests that Tiffany’s strategy is not unique:

I have been collecting blonde jokes for about two months now. The collection escalates in leaps and bounds. People don’t just tell one of these things; they tell several at a time. For instance, my roommate and I were out for a walk the other night, and met two of my former floormates. As we walked up one street, one of six guys sitting on the front porch of a house called over one of these women and said:

Why don’t blondes make Koolaid? Because they can’t figure out how to fit two litres of water into that tiny package.

The woman, a blonde, laughed and told a similar joke back. She and I then shared blonde jokes for a while. The nature of blonde jokes is that they are all about women who are dumb. For example, “What do you call a blonde dying her hair brunette? Artificial intelligence.” Many concern sexual promiscuity, such as “What’s the first thing a blonde does in the morning? Goes home.” Some jokes have been adapted into blonde jokes. For example, at my school a popular joke involved a guy putting a dollar bill in his belt buckle and asking “What’s this? All you can eat for under a dollar.” A friend recently asked me, “What’s a blonde with a loonie on her head?”

Telling blonde jokes is a form of teasing, or trying to elicit some form of reaction. I began sharing blonde jokes with one of my co-workers because we work in a computer store. I decided to tell him, “How can you tell when a blonde has been using your computer? There’s liquid paper on the screen;” I have no fear of being construed as that dumb. It prompted a stream of blonde jokes from him which hasn’t stopped yet.

Even as a manifestly intelligent blonde woman, Kristen Rosbak has found it useful to have a stockpile of blonde jokes. But her domination of blonde joke knowledge is not easily won; when she initiates blonde joke telling, her male co-worker one-ups her by telling even more jokes, perhaps stumping her with ones he knows and she doesn’t. Her strategy, like Tiffany’s, could be participation in her own oppression. In addition, it may not succeed if Kristen Rosbak cannot

establish a greater awareness of texts. The competitive quality of the interaction with her co-worker is clearly different from the “sharing” with her blonde female friend, in which each assists the other in bolstering and augmenting her repertoire.

Our discussion places discourse analysis in the service of feminist theory by showing how cross sex joking interactions initiated by men and involving misogynist material like blonde jokes are modes of reinforcing patriarchy. Some of the examples of blonde joke tellings show how women employ responsive counter-tactics (see also Barreca 1991; Brooks 1992), but analysis indicates why these strategies women develop to counter blonde jokes’ misogyny are limited and problematic, compelling them to make choices between equally undesirable options. Exposing the obscured misogynist quality of a blonde joke opens a woman to the charge of not being able to take a joke; even telling the joke back with substitution forces her to play by the teller’s rules — a joke answers a joke. The result is often a kind of communicative paralysis — options are so limited that even making a choice is oppressive. “Male sexual humor and demeaning characterizations of women maintain boundaries between women and men: men may laugh at women; women must laugh at themselves. Such boundaries sustain the social fabric by controlling action and affect toward culturally defined elements and events of the social environment” (Marlowe 1989: 148).

It’s not a new insight that the strategy of patriarchy can be an oppressive damned if you do, damned if you don’t choice between equally unappetising options. For example, a raped woman who fights back and is severely injured can be accused of angering her attacker and thus of justifying his action; a raped woman who didn’t fight back and has no visible injuries can be seen as failing to indicate clearly enough that she did not want to be raped. But patriarchy does not always operate in such obviously coercive domains. Foucault’s analysis of power seems particularly appropriate to this discussion of the everyday operation of patriarchy when he maintains that:

power, if we do not take too distant a view of it, is not that which makes the difference between those who exclusively possess and retain it, and those who do not have it and submit to it. Power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localised here or there, never in anybody’s hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of articulation (Foucault 1980:98).

I suggest that blonde jokes, and the “Beer” text, are fundamentally similar as patriarchal strategies. Where “Beer” advocates contradictory actions, the joke interactions enforce a contradictory stance. In cross sex joking interactions initiated by men and involving misogynist material like blonde jokes, a woman’s

options for responding are limited and fundamentally unsatisfying. Such material is particularly invasive, pervasive, and nearly invisible because its discourse asserts that it should be taken non-seriously. Patriarchal power is recreated primarily, but not exclusively, when men tell these jokes to women, enjoining them to participate according to rules not of their own creation.

Are there alternatives? Perhaps they can be found in women's humour (e.g. Barreca 1991; Kaufman and Blakely 1980; Sochen 1991; Toth 1985; Walker 1988), and particularly in feminist humour (e.g. Walker 1981; Wilt 1980). That is, "*female* humor... may well be self deprecatory while *feminist* humor is sarcastic and assertive. *Female* humor turns inward, back on the joke-teller, while *feminist* humor turns outward, directing itself toward others, encouraging them to share a common disbelief in women's powerlessness and to claim power by reclaiming the language and redefining its use" (Bunkers 1985: 89). In feminist humour, then, women may manipulate not only the rules, but also their deployment.

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