BOOK REVIEWS

FEMINISM AS RADICAL HUMANISM

Pauline Johnson. Boulder and San Francisco: Westview Press, 1994.

by Kathleen O'Grady

Are the '90s to be a decade marked by the return of *humanism* into feminist theory? So it seems with the emergence of books like Judith Grant's *Fundamental Feminism,* Julia Kristeva's invocation of Montesquieu in her *Nations Without Nationalism,* and frequent feminist use of the Habermasian *oeuvre,* reclaiming humanist aims from a normative subjectivity. Pauline Johnson adds to this growing movement with *Feminism as Radical Humanism.* While tracing the foundations of contemporary feminist thought, Johnson does not so much advocate a reversion-to, but a recognition-of, the lasting influences of post-Enlightenment humanism on feminist theory.

A clearly written and systematically constructed text, *Feminism as Radical Humanism* provides the groundwork for a detailed understanding of contemporary feminist theory, contributing a careful examination of humanism, while labouring to link humanist value commitments to the tenets of the current feminist project. Johnson rejects the assumption that a radical division between the two movements has ever existed, indicating that the reactionary stance embraced by many feminist thinkers is not only historically erroneous, but detrimental to the durability of feminist theory. For too long, Johnson claims, feminism has denied its lineage to humanist thought. Feminist and humanist aspirations are not incompatible, but complementary; in her own words, "feminism *is* a humanism."

At first glance, Johnson's thesis seems to border on the absurd. After all, have not some of the greatest feminist theorists struggled to repudiate any possible link with the Enlightenment era? But Johnson's understanding of humanism tempers any initial rejection of her thesis. She defines humanism as the first movement to put forth the universal principles of individual freedom, equality, and self-determination, all of which have been adopted by current feminist thinkers. Furthermore, *contemporary humanism* encompasses notions of freedom, rationality, and equality as fundamental aims, but these aspirations are now mitigated by a postmodern, processual subject, replacing the unified Cartesian *cogito* of earlier humanism; humankind is still defined in universal terms, but individual difference (religion, ethnicity, gender) is now honoured, as the normative subject is displaced. Framed by Johnson's paradigm of humanism, feminism is delineated as only one more understanding of the humanist project, an elaboration of its principles and aspirations.

Placing itself in opposition to humanism—an unvanquished rival—feminism fails to acknowledge that it is, in fact, the product, perhaps the progeny, of its opponent. Often uncritically embodying humanist universalizing tendencies, feminism is threatened precisely because of its refusal to acknowledge its post-Enlightenment roots. Johnson understands the polemic between *feminists of equality* and *feminists of difference* as a controversy based on a misreading of the foundations of feminist theory. She somewhat optimistically contends that a new understanding of feminist history, based on humanist ideals, will erase the possibility for debate.

Feminism's adoption of humanist principles, however, has not been entirely uncritical. Feminists, like contemporary humanists, have correctly rejected the Enlightenment normative subject that erased diversity and plurality, constructing in its place a subject of difference that takes into account ethnicity and gender. A return to pragmatic humanist goals, coupled with this feminist subject of difference, will remove feminism from overly abstract, aesthetic, and textual debates and place it once again on the path of exploring and understanding the lived experiences of everyday women. With this goal in mind, Johnson calls for a "post-metaphysical," *radical humanism:* a movement that can affirm the history of feminism, allowing it to move forward imaginatively, rather than stagnate in its current reactionary position. In Johnson's vision, feminism becomes the positive realization of the objectives of post-Enlightenment humanism.

While Johnson correctly indicates that it is important for feminist theorists to acknowledge their humanist roots, it remains unclear why humanism should now appropriate, even subsume, feminist interests. Why is it necessary to set feminism within an established structure? Is humanism, even in its radical form, seen as a more appropriate (less intimidating?) framework than feminism? Will radical humanism be incorporated smoothly into the philosophical canon where feminism has been denied membership? Would this name change, perhaps unwittingly, serve another agenda? Furthermore, Johnson's critical understanding of humanism has transformed the original Enlightenment project to such a degree that it is almost unrecognizable in its new form. Her detailed and exhaustive revaluation of humanist precepts makes it even more difficult to comprehend the need for a return to this specific, historical movement, one that she has already critiqued so

well. Is it not time for women to face the future rather than gaze back in time, and create a specifically *feminist* theory, indebted to, but not fettered by its lineage?

COMEDY: THE MASTERY OF DISCOURSE

Susan Purdie. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993.

by Susan Holbrook

The juxtaposition of the title, *Comedy: The Mastery of Discourse*, alongside a photograph of feminist performance artist Bobby Baker on the cover of Susan Purdie's book suggests that we are about to be offered, at least in part, an examination of how women negotiate and subvert the traditionally androcentric mode of comedy. This promise, however, proves false, as is illustrated most tellingly by the fact that Baker, while taking up a quarter of the space on the front cover, is relegated to a footnote in the text. I was heartened (though, at first, perplexed) to learn that Purdie herself suggested featuring the Baker photograph; if a cover, for an author participating in its design, marks a kind of end to a book's argument, then this first work's "last word" (or, in this case, last laugh) points perhaps to future work by Purdie that will involve a more thorough investigation of the practice and potential of feminist comedy.

Theorizations of the comic have traditionally emerged from the margins of a variety of disciplines, notably literary criticism and psychology, and previous attempts to synthesize these works manifest themselves in the compartmentalized form of anthologies such as Robert Corrigan's popular *Comedy: Meaning and Form*, which offers selections by people like Susanne Langer, Sigmund Freud, and Charles Baudelaire. I commend Purdie's ambitious move to offer a new theory which is both substantially informed by these diverse texts and distinct from them, in its emphasis on the "discursive exchange at the heart of joking." Similarly ambitious is her announcement, in the introduction, that she is "seeking a unifying threat that can be recognized, to some extent, whenever any element of funniness is identifiable in our response to anything." Puns, social exchanges, comic drama, physical comedy—all these are subsumed under Purdie's definition of "joking"; but while this radical "unifying" gesture is initially attractive, it precludes any focus on comic transgressions, which would threaten to rupture the norm Purdie seeks to define.

Purdie draws on the theories of Saussure, Lévi-Strauss and, particularly, Lacan, to formulate a thesis which links joking, characterized as the successful operation of the "Law" of language, with the experience of full human agency. Jokes, she argues, in their performance of a "*marked* transgression" of the Symbolic Law, simultaneously perform its observance. Purdie sets up a model of comedy as political conservatism, positing that "the formal confirmation of accepted discursive proprieties will tend to reinforce existing structures of exaltation and abjection." It is around the issue of the "abject," people disciminated against on the basis of race, gender, class, and sexuality, that I find some problems in Purdie's argument. She asserts that "all joking objects, the apparently 'low' as well as the evidently 'high,' are perceived as holding a power of some kind over the jokers, and it is funny when they are suddenly perceived as not having it." What are we to make, then, of Purdie's subsequent statement that the power of the black maid in a *Tom and Jerry* cartoon is "inherently comic [because] it does not frighten *us*, so it is funny that the cat has to be afraid of her"? This example would seem to suggest that it is the production of threat, not its mitigation, which renders the woman of colour humorous. Such contradictions in Purdie's thesis locate the issues that beg more questioning and examination: how does comedy operate differently when the audience member or the butt of the joke is not a white male?

Furthermore, how do the "abject" joke? The word "transgression" recurs in this book, but it is always clipped to the qualifier, "marked," so that Purdie presents transgression as necessarily translating into maintenance of the status quo. She invokes the Stallybrass and White text, *Transgression*, in order to align the political (non)effects of joking with those of carnival; both acts can be viewed as reinstating, through sanctioned inversion, the laws they breach. *Transgression*, however, ultimately details the real political efficacy of carnival, its tendency to incite riots, for example. Acknowledging subversive potential in carnival, Purdie ends her comparative argument with the assertion that carnival and the comic diverge in this regard. Just when comedy was getting interesting, Purdie takes the carnival out of it, ignoring Bakhtin's significant identification of "the basis of laughter which gives form to carnival."

If Purdie were correct in her assumption that comedy tends to reinscribe existing power structures, then it would be in feminists' own interest to live out our mythical humourlessness. While I value her investigation of comedy's perils, she neglects to address the comics currently forging alternatives to conservative humour; what about American Kate Clinton, who, along with her primarily lesbian audience, reaffirms a different world-view? The footnote opening with a reference to Bobby Baker does go on to posit performance art as an alternative avenue, and Purdie notes that feminists have chosen to use it, though, she says, "not necessarily comically." Similarly, Purdie argues that a discourse of unmarked transgressions, as celebrated by Luce Irigiray and feminist theorist Regina Barreca, "would have nothing to do with definable 'comedy.'" It becomes clear, in reading Purdie's book, that in order to allow for politically transgressive comedy, we must allow for this mode's redefinition.

Strangely, Purdie illustrates her