

Arrested Development: Can Funny Female Characters Survive Script Development Processes?

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THIS ARTICLE IS concerned with the ways in which recurring beliefs around women's 'funniness' are argued and maintained, and how these gendered perceptions might manifest in the writing and production of feature film comedies. As part of my wider research, which explores the notion (or absence) of female perspectives in script development processes, this essay is aware of and speaks to the apparent paradox of being both a feminist and a comedy project. As Deborah Finding puts it, cracking a wry joke of her own, "In the mainstream, at least feminism and humour are rarely mentioned in the same sentence, unless 'humour' is followed with 'less.'"¹ Simultaneously, this research is aware of the growing fatigue around questioning the perceived women/funny binary, both within the industry—"the only disadvantage women have is [to] have to keep fucking answering the question of, 'Is it hard and are women funny?'"²—and in the academy where, as Hannah Ballou asserts, "it is unnecessary [to oppose the stereotypical notion that women are either not funny or not as funny as men] because female comic practitioners, their audiences and funny women

everywhere have and will continue to disprove the notion in both word and deed.”³ However, I argue that the very prevalence of these questions indicates continuing gendered prejudices around humour. I shall discuss these first before arguing that those biases might be practised in the processes of developing and writing screenplays, thus completing a circuit whereby the comic gender divide is perpetuated in popular culture via contemporary feature film comedies.

It is perhaps worth noting that for the purposes of this article my investigations turn to Hollywood, as the behemoth producer of popular film comedies and home of the US studio system from which, as script development consultant Stephen Cleary points out, the dominant screenwriting models arose.⁴ If “Comedy is one of the most important ways a culture talks to itself about itself,”⁵ then I am interested in the different and subtle ways women might be discouraged from, or denied, participation in this mode of transmission. As Helga Kotthoff reminds us,

In sociological and sociolinguistic works, it is frequently emphasized that comedians and humorists are often socially very influential. They define situations, and those who laugh along with them share these definitions. In the professional world, women were rarely allowed to define situations. It is no wonder that they less often created humor in this context.⁶

Being aware of the temptation to conflate ‘humour’ and ‘comedy’, I believe it is useful to briefly discuss those terms. Of humour, Arthur Berger suggests, “it is useful to consider why people laugh, and what our laughter tells us about ourselves and others,”⁷ and offers up four historic schools of thought: superiority, incongruity, the unconscious, and the cognitive and communication theories. But, ultimately, he proposes that it is not possible to know *why* we laugh; it is only possible to know *what makes* us laugh.⁸

Murray Davis agrees in the first instance, suggesting that “humor is too complicated to be comprehended by such single-factor theories, no matter how well they explain one of its aspects.”⁹ Kathryn Schulz, citing Molière, gives another perspective, noting

that the seventeenth-century French playwright believed “the duty of comedy is to correct men by amusing them.”¹⁰ Comparing this with the superiority model—usually credited to Hobbes and Aristotle¹¹—she points out that

As different as they are in outlook, the self-improvement theory of humor and the superiority theory of humor have something in common. Both concern the substance of error: according to them we laugh at specific, recognizable mistakes, whether from a feeling of supremacy or from rueful identification.¹²

This sense of ‘rueful identification’ is of particular interest because of the ways this identification is sought by mainstream comedy films, as I will later explain. And it is in this context of these films that I distinguish comedy from humour, using Geoff King’s explanation, whereby comedy is designed to *provoke* humour.¹³ In other words, one is a conduit of the other, and thus this definition contributes to a discussion that asks why using comedy to create humour (and therefore, as noted by Kotthoff above, “to define situations”) might be complicated by gendered biases. This discussion occurs during a curious climate for professionally funny women. On the one hand, women have filled coveted hosting roles for comedians during Hollywood’s 2013–15 film awards seasons, with US comic Ellen De Generes hosing the 86th Academy Awards, and compatriots Tina Fey and Amy Poehler fronting the Golden Globes for three consecutive years. On the other, Welsh comedian Jennie Collier made headlines when her booked appearance at a comedy event was cancelled to appease a client who did not “want too many women on the bill,”¹⁴ with Collier pointing out that this was indicative of “a widespread issue that many comics have experienced, the only difference in this case being that it was put into writing.”¹⁵ And while UK comedian Bridget Christie won the prestigious Fosters comedy award at the 2013 Edinburgh Fringe for her self-proclaimed feminist stand-up show, in the same year You Tube moderators took it upon themselves to remove a satirical video made by New Zealand law

students as a parody of the sexist double standards in pop star Robin Thicke's music video *Blurred Lines*. And as Sony's co-chairman Amy Pascal has noted in reference to the optimism around *Bridesmaids* (2011) and female-centered film comedies produced around that time, "You're talking about a dozen or so female-driven comedies that get made over a dozen years, a period when *hundreds* of male-driven comedies got made."¹⁶

But what remains consistent through this uneven terrain of apparent advances and regressions, is the assumption that a woman's ability to be funny is, in fact, still up for debate. As New Zealand comedian and journalist Michele A'Court reveals,

I'm regularly interviewed for print, radio and television and asked whether I think women are funny. Or whether they're as funny as men. Or whether it is harder to do comedy if you're a woman. Or why there are fewer women than men in the industry. Or some other gender-angled query about the work I do... Comedy still seems to be a place where we're regularly made to feel "other," where we're asked the kind of questions that make you wonder if maybe you weren't supposed to turn up.¹⁷

With arguably most feminisms also concerned with the perception of women as 'other' and, as Chris Beasley proposes, the notion that "Mainstream political thought offers a conceptual schema in which viewpoints associated with men are taken as the view, the standard or rational/sensible/proper universally applicable view,"¹⁸ it would follow that women's marginalised (or, at least, consistently interrogated) place in comedy directly reflects our place in mainstream political thought. With Beasley then turning to Greek philosophy and, in particular, Aristotle as a source of the perspectives influencing present-day Western politics and culture,¹⁹ it is interesting to note also his centrality to theories of comedy, as previously mentioned. By way of demonstrating the possible reach of these culturally entrenched beliefs, it is worth remembering that Christopher Hitchens told us "Why Women Aren't Funny" in *Vanity Fair* as late as 2007, and the assumed veracity in the essay's title points to ingrained, essentialist beliefs around gendered 'funniness.'²⁰ As

Linda Mizejewski points out, Hitchens's controversial rationale is paradoxically useful for a feminist reading of humour given "the gist of his argument—that women are rewarded for what they look like and not for what they say—is one of feminism's most basic cultural critiques."²¹

When examining historical and present-day sit-com casting—underlining the prevalence of "the funny-looking husband and his requisitely lovely wife"²²—Mizejewski also notes that

In films the same dynamic allows comical bodies Seth Rogan and Jack Black to be coupled with the likes of Katherine Heigl (*Knocked Up*, 2007) and Kate Winslet (*The Holiday*, 2006) respectively.²³

It follows, then, that female protagonists in comedy films are not necessarily required to make us laugh. As Tad Friend writes, "Being funny is the first criterion for comic actors, and somewhere down the list for comic actresses."²⁴ In case we might be in any doubt about what some of the more leading criteria might be, Friend goes on to explain that "A leading agent told me, 'What Anna has going for her, to be crass, is that guys want to nail her.'"²⁵ As well as this apparently crucial 'nailability,' something else to be considered as a potential obstacle to a female character's comic agency is the issue of 'likeability': a word that I can attest from experience appears with alarming regularity in script development processes—that is, processes whereby teams (made up of, for example, producers, executives and consultants) work with writer/s to develop their stories and/or scripts. The issue of 'likeability' is especially prevalent, I would argue, when the central protagonist of the script or story in question is a woman. As Helen Jacey points out, "Everyone in the creative process of developing a heroine is going to be concerned about her audience appeal."²⁶ Hadley Freeman, interviewing Diablo Cody about developing her screenplay for *Young Adult* (2011), reveals that even Cody's long-time collaborator, director/executive producer Jason Reitman, had his doubts about the lead (female) character's likeability.²⁷ Cody herself points out the contradiction:

There are so many comedies in which a guy plays a man-child and that's seen as funny... Also, women are always supposed to be likable in movies, it's men who get the juicy parts. I wanted to make a female character who was unlikable but also interesting.²⁸

Jacey identifies two factors for the enduring existence of screen clichés for female characters: traditional notions of how women should be, and, which is useful when considering script development processes, “the tricky business of writing a heroine and pleasing the many people you write for.”²⁹ Citing Lizzie Francke’s *Script Girls*, which contains an in-depth exploration of how scriptwriters “were pressured by producers and executives to tone down strength and complexity in their female characters,”³⁰ Jacey points out that although Francke’s book was written in 1994, one can still “feel under pressure to make [your heroine] softer, warmer or nicer.”³¹ Thus with mainstream script development processes potentially so insistent upon these various levels of audience appeal in female characters, perhaps as a result of how gendered cultural biases might be practised in the processes of script development, it is useful to explore how screenwriting is another area grounded in Aristotelian influence.

In his preface to Ari Hiltunen’s *Aristotle in Hollywood*, Christopher Vogler writes that the author “shows how Aristotle’s profound observations on human nature and the effect of drama on an audience can still inform the work of modern writers.”³² However, and crucially for the women in these stories, Aristotle’s ‘observations on human nature’ include, as Beasley notes, the argument that

while the ‘rational soul’ is ‘not present at all in a slave, in a female it is inoperative, [and] in a child underdeveloped.’ Aristotle linked ‘rationality’ to ethical values (moral qualities) and self-control.³³

I propose that while scholars, analysts and teachers of storytelling, including comedy, continue reaching to ancient philosophies, women’s subordinate status is likely to be carried over into these contemporary models. An example comes from Hiltunen, who

explains that he has “taken Aristotle’s idea of the correspondence of storytelling technique and emotional experience at face value simply because it seems totally rational: a good story brings about pleasure.”³⁴ This rational thinking, which, lest we forget, is inoperative in women according to Aristotle, quickly leads to an exploration of pleasure (in preparation for an analysis of Aristotle’s *oikeia hedone* or ‘proper pleasure’):

The audience experience the pleasure of a good story communally but, when asked individually, they name different things as the cause of the pleasure. One person thinks it’s the good acting, another thinks it’s the attractive women, a third says it must be the beautiful scenery, and a fourth person says it’s the genre.³⁵

The inclusion of attractive women amidst other pleasures, including scenery, recalls Beasley’s assessment that “women are defined in terms of men’s needs regarding pleasure, provision of services, children and so on.”³⁶ In other words, the status of women as agents of our own stories, funny or not, has a long history of culturally entrenched beliefs to overcome—beliefs that are perhaps then doubly rooted in Aristotelian models of screenwriting.

The three-act structure, for instance, “which is claimed to be the basis for every mainstream American screenplay... is derived from Aristotle’s broad notion that all dramas have a beginning, a middle, and an end.”³⁷ Discussing the “hierarchical organization reflected in classic storytelling’s privileging of one character and his point of view,”³⁸ Christina Kallas is conclusive: “In screenwriting, of course, it all goes back to Aristotle.”³⁹ Perhaps this is why, as Jacey points out,

none of the screenwriting guides have paid much attention to the differences between men’s and women’s lives and to what happens if the hero is a heroine. None of them have seriously worked out what happens to the rules and conventions if a heroine leads the action.⁴⁰

This default male perspective in screenwriting discourse might then be manifested in how stories are transmitted and received in a

culture already steeped in gendered mainstream political thought. Previewing a handful of female-centred films released in 2013 for *Variety*, Pat Saperstein identifies a small window of time within which these films get their US releases. He suggests we should call this period “the kitchen and bitchin’ weekend” and notes that “For the past four years, the studios have let the blockbusters play themselves out in May, June and July, reserving the first or second weekend in August for femme-targeted pix.”⁴² From this analysis it would appear that ‘blockbusters’ and ‘femme-targeted pix’ are mutually exclusive categories, and that it is more than enough that only one weekend a year be reserved for the opening of films like *Austenland* (2013), which, according to Sony Picture’s Michael Barker, has “a real female perspective.”⁴³ In other words, female centered narratives are the exception to the rule. And so too, as I argue, is the female comic protagonist. If comedy is a departure from what we understand as ‘normal,’⁴⁴ then what gendered expectations are being brought to the development process when, as Beasley argues, woman is already defined negatively in relation to the standard model, or the ‘norm’ that is man?⁴⁵

In considering comedy protagonists, a notable perspective is that explained by UK writer, director, and comedian Ricky Gervais:

Nobody wants to see unfeasibly handsome, clever people do brilliant things brilliantly. Who wants to see that? You want to see a putz having a go and failing and then coming through at the end.⁴⁶

I would suggest that this role of the ‘putz,’ with whom, to recall Schulz’s previous observation, we can ‘ruefully identify,’ is almost exclusive to male comic protagonists. The only discernible female equivalent is that of the ‘klutz,’ as described by US writer and comedian Mandy Kaling:

When a beautiful actress is cast in a movie, executives rack their brains to find some kind of flaw in the character she plays that will still allow her to be palatable. She can’t be overweight or not perfect-looking, because who would pay to see that? A female who is not one hundred per cent perfect-looking in

every way? You might as well film a dead squid decaying on a beach somewhere for two hours.

So they make her a Klutz.

The hundred-per-cent-perfect-looking female is perfect in every way except that she constantly bonks her head on things. She trips and falls and spills soup on her affable date... Despite being five feet nine and weighing a hundred and ten pounds, she is basically like a drunk buffalo who has never been a part of human society.⁴⁷

The klutz is usually, if not always, a romantic comedy protagonist, but being the female protagonist in a romantic comedy is no guarantee of being a comic character and especially, perhaps, not a ‘putz.’ Steve Kaplan describes the very essence of the ‘putz’ character when, in his master class, *Steve Kaplan’s Comedy Intensive*, he provides his formula for what he names the essential comedy protagonist—the ‘non-hero.’ This figure is “an ordinary guy, struggling against insurmountable odds, without many of the required skills and tools with which to win; yet never giving up hope.”⁴⁸

David Shumway puts another name to this specific type of comic protagonist when he identifies him as either the ‘Schlemiel,’ or the ‘Nebbish.’⁴⁹ With overlapping definitions and connotations, the Schlemiel and the Nebbish are described variously as bunglers, inept or ineffectual persons, blunderers, dopes, nerds, and drips.⁵⁰ Keith Giglio similarly writes of this character when, having diligently varied his use of pronouns for the first 129 pages of his comedy screenwriting guide, he also begins to default to the masculine pronoun:

We want to laugh at characters. We want to see the flaws... Your comedic hero was going through life as best he could. He had flaws he was dealing with, but for the most part he was *resigned to be who he was*.⁵¹

There are exceptions to this almost exclusively-male figure; I would argue that Toulia in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002), Liz Lemon in *30 Rock* (2006), and Hannah Horvath in *Girls* (2012) all qualify as ‘the putz’ within their narratives. These examples have perhaps appeared

more often, however, in television shows other than films, as in the case of the latter two texts. But significantly for this discussion they have all proved to be comically successful. While acknowledging that “successful” is a difficult and relative term, it is notable that Tina Fey and Lena Dunham have both won major industry awards for the characters they have created and portrayed. In the case of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, the film broke box office records despite the fact “[Nia] Vardalos stuck to her guns” in the face of “pressure to... conform to Hollywood romantic comedy standards.”⁵² Despite these putative successes, and despite that *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* remains one of the most profitable movies of all time (“It’s 4000% return ranks it with *Star Wars* and *Gone With the Wind*”⁵³), the ‘putz’ continues to be a male-dominated category in mainstream comedy films. The heteronormative standards of the Hollywood romantic comedy, such as those to which *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*’s writer and star Nia Vardalos famously refused to conform, remain, it seems, steadfastly in play.

As previously suggested, I propose that these standards persist because women’s lead roles in comedies are most often conceived of in the context of romantic comedies—a genre with its own tropes, rules, and implications for women. The first thing to consider is how the notion of ‘comedy’ is to be understood in this context. King suggests the term ‘romantic’ should be understood as a simple description of the sub-type of comedy that the film constitutes:

In its use as a noun, comedy seems to suggest the relatively more solid object of a genre. ‘Romantic comedy’, for example, suggests a particular adjectival take (romantic) on the noun-object, comedy.⁵⁴

But Tamar Jeffers McDonald’s definition has a different implication, where comedy is not, as King suggests, the ‘relatively more solid object.’ Jeffers McDonald proposes instead that “a romantic comedy is a film which has as its central narrative motor a quest for love,” and a text that “portrays this quest in a light-hearted way and almost always to a successful conclusion.”⁵⁵ Later, she explicitly points out that her definition

does not insist that romcoms are necessarily funny, although this might seem implicit in the term ‘comedy.’ I have used the word ‘light-hearted’ in the definition to signal that, while films of the genre generally end well and may elicit laughs along the way... [it is also possible to highlight] the mixed emotions these films commonly both depict and elicit.⁵⁶

Indeed, contemporary romantic comedies have more than simply laughter to offer to their consumers, but these other pleasures may also be the obstacle to the comic potential of the female protagonist. Such a protagonist may be there, as Jeffers McDonalds implies, simply for commercial reasons:

While most romantic comedies do not want to hint that the whole edifice of true romance might be as mythical as Santa, we as audience members, consumers and film scholars need to remember that big business relies on our urge to make ourselves loveable through the consumption of goods (make-up, shoes, underwear, grooming products...).⁵⁷

Claire Mortimer goes a step further than Jeffers McDonald, suggesting that women are not only excused from comedic duties but are no longer even required at the centre of the narrative. As she writes of the contemporary “male-centered romcom,” a “particularly successful direction taken” by this genre

moves the narrative away from the female perspective to embrace a more male-centred narrative. Films such as *Knocked Up* and *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* have taken the romcom to a male audience... employing gross-out humour, reassuringly imperfect leading men and gorgeous women who fall at their feet.⁵⁸

This notion of the ‘reassuringly imperfect’ recalls the putz/klutz dyad, which I introduced earlier.⁵⁹ As noted by Kaling, this clumsy trait is a contrivance placed upon female romantic comedy protagonists who are otherwise “perfect in every way.” It seems that a female protagonist’s best shot at attaining comic agency is outside of the romantic comedy genre, such as is demonstrated in action and buddy flick *The Heat* (2013), written by Katie Dippold, where two women police officers are tasked with taking down a mobster.⁶⁰ As Jacey notes, “Why are we so reluctant to make com-

edies for heroines that are just funny situations? Maybe we don't always need a man."⁶¹

Perhaps this question reflects an overall reluctance to put women in a position where they, to use an industry expression, can own the 'gag.' Australian television and radio personality Chrissie Swan reports being denied such an opportunity: "One time, early in my radio career, I was told by a male boss that my role was specifically to 'be fun, but never funny.' The funny bits," Swan emphasises, "would be covered off by the man I was working with."⁶² Similarly, in a 1997 *Saturday Night Live* episode starring Sylvester Stallone, cast member Cherie Oteri was not cast as Adrian, the wife of Stallone's famous character, Rocky (from the film of the same name), in a sketch. Instead, Oteri's cast mate, Chris Kattan, played the role in drag, notwithstanding Oteri's desire for the part, her physical similarities to Talia Shire, who originally played Adrian in the *Rocky* movies, and, as Tina Fey indicates, Oteri's expert ability to impersonate the character.⁶³ Of course there is the belief, as expressed by Christopher Hitchens in his previously mentioned *Vanity Fair* article, that women are simply not genetically predisposed to be funny. And although it might be argued that Hitchens' essay was deliberately provocative, his sentiments continue to run through script development practices. As writer-comedian Adam Carolla remarked in a 2012 interview, "Don't hire chicks... They make you hire a certain number of chicks and they're always the least funny on the writing staff."⁶⁴ These two sets of examples reveal a double cultural prejudice: that women either *are not* or *should not be* funny. In other words, there is a contradiction whereby women are repeatedly constructed as 'unfunny' and yet, as in the cases of Swan, Oteri, and undoubtedly many other women in similar roles, women are also specifically excluded or barred from being funny. If this suggests an insidious repression of female comedy, perhaps what advances have occurred for women working in comedy might be less a legacy of progression than a triumph against poor odds.

As Tina Fey writes of Amy Poehler, in a tongue-in-cheek nod to her having overcome these apparently evolutionary odds, “I mean, she’s not Kattan in a dress, but considering the Darwinian limitations on women in comedy, she does well for herself.”⁶⁵

However, it is not just the underrepresentation of female perspectives that is a concern when it comes to women and humour, but also the discourse around the *over*representation of female perspectives in comedies. As Amanda Dunn points out,

There is an entrenched assumption that what men have to say is universal, while what women have to say is largely of interest only to other women. When it comes to comedy women seem to be in an invidious position. If they talk too much about being women, there is the constant eye-rolling about the abundance of period jokes; if they are too “masculine” in their style, that’s supremely unfunny as well.⁶⁶

Thus female perspectives are maligned as sites for humour—and not just by men. In reviewing comedian Whitney Cummings’ eponymous sitcom in 2011, Mary Elizabeth Williams begins with a byline that asks the question, “Who’s ready for more cellulite jokes?”⁶⁷ She continues by starting the article with a joke of her own: “Ladies, don’t you just hate it when you’re ovulating? And guys are, like, not? Am I riiiiiiight?” As the panning draws to an end, Williams offers this overview:

Sunday night’s female Emmy nominees and winners—smart, complicated, breathtakingly goofy women like Melissa McCarthy, Martha Plimpton, Jane Lynch and Tina Fey, among others—prove *that you can be funny and a woman without constantly having to be funny about simply being a woman*.⁶⁹

Despite her positive conclusion, the angle Williams takes when she critiques the narrative choices of female comedy is worth noting—for it is the overrepresentation of a female perspective she perceives as most irritating. These kinds of discourses are prevalent around women in comedy, for example, in *The New York Post*’s scathing review of Fey and Poehler’s Golden Globes hosting (“Too much estrogen!”⁷⁰) and any number of commentaries on Lena Dunham’s *Girls* (2012–).

As Jacey writes of script development processes, and the creation of female characters within them:

It is all too easy to narrow the scope of your story ideas and concepts when you have a heroine in mind. It's as if we still want to give our heroes and heroines very different territory to roam in the worlds of our stories. We are still risk averse in what we allow heroines to do and be.⁷¹

This 'risk-aversion' that Jacey describes is exemplified in Sarah Silverman's acknowledgement of 2007, when she was developing her eponymous sitcom for Comedy Central, that "In theory, at least, it was already risky to center the show on a female."⁷² It might be argued, then, that the disallowing of women to be funny is a significant consequence of that "narrow scope" in female character development to which Jacey refers. Thus, redressing women's status within comedy might mean challenging dominant script development processes.

When Kaplan suggests that "Drama helps us dream who we can be [and] Comedy helps us live with who we are,"⁷³ he makes a strong case for the usefulness of a form that, as King notes, is "rarely one of the more prestigious or award-winning forms," and yet also "often subject to critical neglect."⁷⁴ But I have argued that while this affirming description of the role of comedy is made manifest in male characters—specifically male protagonists in mainstream comedy films—this is not also true of female comic characters. When a twenty-first-century screenwriting guide acknowledges that in mainstream film comedies "the central character is more often male than female," it acknowledges that what has been perpetuated on screens has constituted a range of complicated and culturally entrenched gender assumptions around comedy and humour.⁷⁵ Resisting those same assumptions in script development processes, and broadening the scope of funny female film protagonists within and beyond romantic comedies, might give female characters, and thus women, the cultural capital of using humour to, as Kotthoff writes, better "define situations."⁷⁶ It might also go some way toward inspiring women to live, as Steve Kaplan says, with who we are.⁷⁷

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Notes

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- 51 Keith Giglio, *Writing the Comedy Blockbuster: The Inappropriate Goal* (Studio City, CA: Michael Weise Productions, 2012), 130. Emphasis in original.
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- 55 Tamar Jeffers McDonald, *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre* (New York: Wallflower, 2007), 9.
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- 59 It is worth noting that both of these terms, which are borrowed for my argument from two non-Jewish comedians, come from Jewish comic traditions, as do the aforementioned "Schlemiel" and "Nebbish." And while it is outside the scope of this article to delve further into the ethnology of these terms, I note there is further exploration to be undertaken in this area. This is especially clear in consideration of the fact that Christopher Hitchens attributes masculinity to Jewish comic women, and thus identifies Jewish women as exempt from his claims. See Hitchens, "Why Women Aren't Funny."
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