

Ironic Power:

Analyzing Gender Roles in Transition from Phase I to Phase II of Jewish Comedy

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Introduction

It is easy to see, and commonly accepted, that fear in American-Jewish communities, induced by World War II, instigated a sharp turn from the chaotic energy that had been driving the subversive comedy of most Jewish comics in America. However, the common and blatant sexism of the time affected Jewish male and female comedians in opposite ways: while many male comics transitioned to a calmer and less threatening tone in order to be seen as less threatening, female comics were free from concerned attention of the gentile population and were able to amplify their boisterous comedy to new heights.

This essay will show that under deeper scrutiny, there was not one singular narrative of chaotic subversion; instead, there was a slight difference between male and female comedy styles, brought upon by traditional Jewish values, that contributed to this major split in the post-war era.

Jewish Values in the *Shtetl*

Turning our focus to traditional Jewish life on the *shtetl* in Eastern Europe, it is apparent that gender roles were strictly defined, quite differently from the way Protestant America constructs them. Judaism informs these roles by championing the figure of a man who is religiously studious (and so usually physically weak) while devaluing the brutish man ideal of western society. Thus, the woman is left to be the strong, active doer around the home (and quite probably on the farm). Most households had a matriarchal structure, and the women were decisively the main players in the *shtetl* economy.^[14] This is the contrast we see in *Fiddler on the Roof* between the hard working women and the scholarly men studying the Torah with the Rabbi in the temple. In the song “If I Were a Rich Man,” Tevye sings longingly, “And I’d discuss the holy books with the learned men,

several hours every day. That would be the sweetest thing of all.” It is clear from Golde’s strong interactions with her husband that she runs the house.

Progressive Immigration Leads to a Class Inversion

An intense wave of immigrants was driven from the *shtetl* to the United States starting in the late 1880s and continuing until the late 1910s for a multitude of reasons: due to the assassination of Tsar Alexander II, pogroms and other persecutions of Jews intensified. In addition, new laws introduced in the 1880s restricted Jews’ lifestyles and employment opportunities, resulting in a large turn to the industrial labor force and hefty economic stress. Lastly, as Western European immigration declined, the German passenger boat companies that had brought the first wave of Jewish immigrants to the United States started searching for new patrons, so they looked East. It is important to understand that the immigration from the *shtetl* was gradual: as Deborah Dwork quotes in her essay “Immigrant Jews on the Lower East Side of New York: 1880-1914,” “people who got it good in [the *shtetl*] don’t hunger for the new.”^[2:111] That is, people left because it was hard for them to stay, so the worst off in the *shtetl* were the first to leave, while those most affluent and originally stable in the *shtetl* were the last to leave.

This created an interesting historical artifact of power structure. Newcomers to the States were thrown into “noisy, foul-smelling, diseased, [and] hungry” poverty. A consistent practice of Judaism requires kosher meat, a rabbi, and nine other men to hold a religious service with (a minyan), so Jewish immigrants tended to settle in tight Jewish communities. The availability of industrial work in New York made the Lower East Side of Manhattan an attractive place for immigrant Jews to settle, leading to teeming ghettos of “squalid humans that swarmed about,” the

tenements.^[2:124] Those who settled first had the advantage: they were able to establish themselves and become more adjusted to life in the United States. So, those who had been most disadvantaged in the Old Country suddenly became a higher class of citizen than those who came later, those who were once the high-class members of the *shtetl*. The power structure from the *shtetl* was flipped! Still, all Eastern European Jewish immigrants were low class compared to most of the rest of the United States. We can hypothesize that this inversion led the historically oppressed to seek a reformed power structure: those traditionally on the lower end of society, given a glimpse upward, want more, while those traditionally in power, put to the bottom of society, want their status back. More trivially, most people in harsh living conditions would seek a better life for themselves and their family.

Transition from Jewish to American Values

In order to survive in the new America, immigrant Jews needed to part with some aspects of their Jewish culture and value system. We can see a symbolic occurrence: one of the community figures that occupied a high class in the *shtetl* was the Rabbi, the epitome of Jewish values; the class inversion brought about by the transition to America dropped Rabbis lower on the social scale, interestingly coinciding with the abandonment of many Jewish values. For instance, Jewish men began to take any jobs they could. George Price writes “Today, one can be a shoemaker; tomorrow, a tailor, and the day after tomorrow he is forced to become a farmer; later a bookkeeper and so on ad infinitum.”^[2:130] While the force of Judaism made men inclined to seek a gentler occupation, they were thrust into the harsh workforce.

Women still found their main place at home, but we must consider the difference between

a traditional homestead and a home in the tenements of the Lower East Side: while the leading woman of a house on the *shtetl* would have had a wide range of tasks, the cramped space of the tenements was restricting. Many Jewish women began to exercise a new-found freedom to extend their command from the level of a household to the level of a community. While still housewives, women were the main front of consumerism in the Jewish community, and when injustices emerged, the women drew upon the strong sense of community that was ingrained in them to rise against it. For example, during the Kosher Meat Boycott of 1902, we see many instances of Jewish women pushing back. One of the leaders of the boycott said “Our husbands work hard. They try their best to bring a few cents into the house. We must manage to spend as little as possible.” Another said “They think women aren’t people, that they can bluff us; we’ll show them that we are more people than the fat millionaires who suck our blood.”^[2:159] Ironically, they were pushing against new American issues with what could be considered the *rugged individualism* mostly attributed to American men, all the while motivated by their underlying Jewish history and culture.

Sexism in the Early 1900s and 1940s

It is crucial to understand the specific sexism of the early 1900s in order to have a complete picture of the context for Jewish comedy of this—Phase I—era. At this time in the United States, women had astonishingly few rights; by law, they were seen as chattel. As Olivia Campbell writes, “Husbands could beat and rape their wives with little worry of recourse; in 1910, the United States Supreme Court denied wives the right to prosecute their husbands for assault.” Laws granting women the right to their own earnings were only beginning to spread across the country. Interest-



Figure 1: 'When You Supervise a Woman'^[12]

ingly, it was also illegal to spread any information about contraception.^[3] This gives us insight into the culture of sexual repression of the early 1900s, following the Victorian era. Banning information about contraception is indicative of a common belief (stemming from a widespread religious commonality) that seeking bodily pleasures is bad and sinful. Since society is dominated by the man's narrative, it is not hard to see how a man's society placed the condemnation onto the women, that is, blamed women for everyone's sexuality and insisted they suppress it.

In short, men are powerful and can do no wrong, while women are 'sinful' and can be blamed for anything. This is by no means a historically original theme.

To no one's surprise, the sexism continued well into the '40s, '50s, and '60s. A pamphlet from the 1940s in Figure 1 depicts the stereotypical incompetent woman and explicitly shows the kind of institutionalized oppression that women had to face. Women were seen as mere children, completely subservient inferiors (see Figure 2), not mature intellectuals.



Figure 2: 1949 Ad for Van Heusen Shirts^[13]

A Rise of Diverging Subversive Comedy

Jewish comedians of the early 1900s, responding to sexism and class struggle, created an interesting artifact. We see that most Jewish comedians at this time used their platform to undermine the structure that was oppressing them. Male and female Jewish comedians responded to the two (similar but) different ways that they were being oppressed in contrasting forms. Jewish men were working harsh jobs for the higher classes of society, and so in their comedy, we see a silly and violent subversion directed at the upper class.

Take, for instance, The Three Stooges. Their comedy is aimed at undermining the upper-echelon society they are not allowed to join. In "A Plumbing We Will Go," we see the Stooges completely destroy a wealthy mansion as they work as plumbers. They act out possible deviant aspirations for other Jewish immigrants working similar blue collar jobs. As immigrants are la-

beled stupid and dumb, they go along with the imposition and ‘stick it to the man’. In “Punch Drunks,” Larry and Curly happen to meet each other in a bar. When Larry plays a nursery rhyme on his violin, Curly becomes very aggressive and violent, but afterwards, he stupidly forgets what happened; this talent helps Curly win boxing matches and become the champ. The metaphor here is that the upper-class society creates an image of the stupid and violent immigrant; the violin is an instrument the high class associates with themselves, and the immigrant class appropriates it for success in fighting, a stereotypical pastime for the ‘violent’ immigrant Jews. The song Larry plays is a nursery rhyme, which enhances the association: immigrant Jews are ‘childlike’ and ‘stupid’.

Jewish women were also oppressed by the upper class, but in contrast, their comedic retaliation was directed more specifically towards men. The theme we see is an attack on the idea that a woman should be reserved and not let her sexuality be public. Many female Jewish comedians play into this ironic subversion: asserting their power over men and society by making themselves into sexual beings. However, this sexuality was outweighed by the then-implied placement of women below men (keep in mind that the comedians catered to a male audience).

Consider a female Jewish comedian from the same period, Fanny Brice. While her comedy is subversive towards a higher class of person, there is a specific focus on sexuality. Recall the “His Love Makes Me Beautiful” song from *Funny Girl*; we see the poised figure of femininity and class that men were used to, but Fanny Brice injects the uncomfortable image of a pregnant bride into the middle of the number. She made the audience think about the raw sexuality they didn’t want to think about. She played the part of a sex symbol ironically; knowing that the audience doesn’t really find her attractive, she made them see her in that way.

Her portrayal of Snooks (a radio character she developed and continued to portray live until 1951) also comes from an attack on rigid sexuality. It is fairly obvious that Fanny Brice created the



Figure 3: Snooks being Spanked^[5]

character to discomfort the audience. She used Snooks to draw similarities between the treatment of women and the treatment of children, so as to bring light to present inequalities (see Figures 3 and 4).

Another example we see of this style of Jewish female comedian is Sophie Tucker (“The Last of the Red Hot Mamas”). Her comedy is similar to Fanny Brice’s, but she stresses the part of an ironic sex symbol, forcing her audience to see a large “Yiddishe Momme” in a sexual way, contrary to how most upper class gentiles want to see her. Her hit song “Nobody Loves a Fat Girl, But Oh How a Fat Girl Can Love” works most transparently towards this subversive goal. In addition, Sophie Tucker makes it very clear that she is Jewish! She had a background in Burlesque theater and popularized the song “My Yiddishe Mamma” in Vaudeville and in large cities across America. This song was so popular and positive for the image of Jewish women that it was banned by the Hitler Regime. Her ironically blatant sexuality provided the shock to her audience that she intended, subverting the common notions of beauty and class. Interestingly, we see that both male



Figure 4: 1940s Ad for Coffee^[6]

and female comedians diverge from their original Jewish values in creating this subversive comedy.

The Holocaust Reaches America

In June of 1941, the German army invaded the Soviet Union, and in August 1942, Dr. Gerhart Riegner learned of the Holocaust (which the Nazis had up to this point tried to keep secret) from a German source. History.com editors account that "Riegner asked American diplomats in Switzerland to inform Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, one of Americas most prominent Jewish leaders, of the mass murder plan. But the State Department, characteristically insensitive and influenced by anti-Semitism, decided not to inform Wise." When Wise eventually found out about the atrocities from Jewish leaders in Great Britain, the Under Secretary of State, Summer Welles, asked that he not spread the information until the (United States) government had time to verify it, and the news

remained confidential until November 1942. Even then, however, the press conference that Wise gave only made the 10th page of *The New York Times*.

The rampant anti-Semitism in the United States is clear here, even though it never reached the level of Nazism. However, the presence of anti-Semites in influential positions, “including Father Charles E. Coughlin, the charismatic radio priest, and William Dudley Pelley’s Silver Shirts,” was quite threatening to Jews in America.^[7]

A New Jewish Comedy Structure

The strong presence of anti-Semitism, coupled with the stark reality of the Holocaust made the gender roles discussed earlier move in an interesting direction. During and soon after the Holocaust—Phase II—male Jewish comedians transitioned to a meeker style of comedy, while Jewish women became more outrageously loud and outspoken. As Jews in America saw the lack of response to the Holocaust from the gentile population, they began to rethink their ‘undermine the structure’ style of comedy and transitioned to be less aggressive towards the somewhat anti-Semitic population, and had the potential to follow Hitler’s example. Women, on the other hand, were covered by a protective coat of sexism so were able to fill the void left by the male comedians; they continued on an upward trend of ‘power through oppression,’ begun in Phase I. The period’s sexism made women appear weak and harmless, so they could get away with anything on stage.

One example of the meek Jewish male comic is Rodney Dangerfield. Most popular for his “I don’t get no respect” routine, Dangerfield played up the part of the nebbish man, champion of self-deprecating humor.^[8] One of his great one-liners was “My mother never breast fed me. She told me that she only liked me as a friend.” Another was “When I was born the doctor came

out to the waiting room and said to my father, ‘Im very sorry. We did everything we could but he pulled through.’” In comparison, a popular female Jewish comedian of the time, Joan Rivers, takes on a completely different persona; she is controversial and outspoken. In a comedy show with Ben Casey’s Vince Edwards, her loud demeanor comes across loud and clear. She brings up sensitive issues like homosexuality and points and screams at the audience.^[9] She discussed her controversial style years later in an interview with Andy Cohen; she responded to a comment about insulting other celebrities: “I don’t play the game. I say what I think and I insult everyone. It’s never meant to be mean. If you’re making \$25,000 a movie and I don’t like your dress, it’s not a tragedy.”^[10]

The most interesting comparison is actually with Fanny Brice. While she started working before World War 2, her career continued until her death in 1951. Compared to her ironically submissive and powerful comedy before World War 2, after the Holocaust, Fanny Brice makes a sharp turn towards an even stronger style of comedy. In 1946, Brice acted in a skit entitled “A Sweepstakes Ticket.” During the sketch, Brice is definitely the strong one in the relationship: she pushes her husband around and (very aggressively) tries to seduce her landlord in order to steal back a winning lottery ticket. She is playing up the theme that was present before World War 2. Brice is paired on screen with Hume Cronyn, playing her husband, and while he is not Jewish, he is portrayed very meekly, emphasizing her power and control.^[11]

Conclusion

And why is their comedy so funny? Because of the incongruity and irony. Let’s bring it home!

When we looked into traditional Jewish values from the *shtetl*, we saw that women held

great social power. As pogroms and other motivations influenced Jews to move to America, the social hierarchy was inverted, which led to a shift away from some traditional male Jewish stereotypes and to a strengthening of traditional female Jewish stereotypes. Sexism of the early 1900s that continued through the '60s created an interesting dynamic for female Jewish comedians. While the Jewish male comedians were undermining the oppressive economic and social structure, female Jewish comedians undermined the strict and oppressive gender roles and subverted gentile (and some aspects of Jewish) expectations of femininity while bolstering their Jewish culture that produced strong women. After World War 2, due to fears brought on by anti-Semitism, this trend inverted for the men but continued to intensify for the women. This shift in focus on the part of male Jewish comedians produced the amazing comedy we saw in the years after the Holocaust, where female Jewish comedians were able to fill the void left by the male comedians too scared to continue their undermining humor; the women were able to be loud and outspoken, protected by a blanket of sexism.

References

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