FOREWORD

"LAUGHTER THAT DOES NOT STOP is hysterical." This straightforward but evocative statement from the introduction to this book brings to mind the rich tangle of judgments and metaphors commonly associated with laughter. We imagine laughter as waves or ripples spreading across the surface of water, expanding in space while diminishing in time. We speak of laughter as an explosive force that bursts forth or erupts from the body. Laughter can peal or ring like bells, or it can echo after encountering a surface that absorbs its energy, only to bounce it back again and again to its source. Laughter is infectious or contagious, with uneasy suggestions of disease, something we can "catch" as easily as the common cold when our defenses are down and the right bug strikes. At the same time, that infectiousness makes laughter inevitably social, a means of connecting those who share it. These connections—ripples, echoes, felicitous contagions—are at the heart of *Hysterical!* and my enthusiasm for it.

Laughter, like hysteria, lends itself to metaphor because it touches on the ineffable, that which escapes our efforts to pin it down or tame it with reason. That ineffability first lured me to the study of women and comedy some years ago. I was riveted by the laughter that would not stop at the end of Marleen Gorris's fiercely feminist film *A Question of Silence* (1982)—laughter that appeared both hysterical and utterly rational. I was seduced by comedian Roseanne's claiming the last word in the opening credits of her sitcom (1988–1997) with laughter that continued after the images faded, refusing to end on cue. I was tickled by Miss Piggy's grotesque play with the conventions of femininity and captivated by the witty, glamorous women of romantic comedy in Hollywood's Golden Age. I wanted the emotions I felt from all of these instances of laughter: power, pleasure, renewal, release, and often simply delight.

Seeking to understand anything, including laughter, brings us into the realm of the rational, to the explorations and conversations that take place in the critical discourse on a subject. And if the notion of laughter's infectiousness speaks to its inherently social nature, the same is true of scholarly discourse. *Hysterical!* marks a milestone in this discourse. As its introduction notes, scholarship on women and comedy has typically lagged behind the reality of women's pres-

ence in the genres of laughter. Yet in the past few decades, that scholarship has expanded like waves of laughter, gathering momentum rather than losing it as it has traveled along the axis of time. The editors of this collection have led the way with their own work and with the contributions they have gathered here. Some scholars in this volume have long been interested in outrageous, “hysterical” women, while others are newer to this topic. Together, they move our collective thinking into new territory by looking back to recover lost histories of women in comedy and forward to new generations of female comic auteurs and performers.

Hysterical! is also a timely response to a moment in our cultural history when, as its introduction notes, “women comedians have achieved an unprecedented level of visibility as performers, writers, and producers.” Female-authored comedy now abounds in film and television and on the internet, which has opened vast new possibilities for women drawn to comedy as a means of self-expression, artistic creation, and political work. Both in mainstream venues and on the fringes of culture, funny women are making themselves seen and heard more than ever, defying expectations that women cannot or should not be outspoken, angry, vulgar, and funny—hysterically funny.

In response to this surge of female laughter, a panel of feminist scholars at a recent international conference took up the question of whether unruliness, or the transgressiveness associated with women in comedy, has become the “new normal” in our post-Roseanne, post-feminist world. The question is provocative. On July 25, 1990, Roseanne unleashed a firestorm when she combined a screeching performance of the national anthem with a parody of male gestures associated with baseball. Today such a performance—or at least the vulgar aspects of it—might elicit only a shrug. For me, this is not a sign that female comedy has lost its disruptive power, but of the reverse. Women’s laughter has altered what we consider normal, and for the better.

This book was being written while Hillary Clinton was the first woman to be a serious contender for the most powerful political office in our country. However, she and other prominent women in the campaign endured repugnant expressions of misogyny, in addition to the other toxic forces that often accompany sexism. They found themselves reduced to their bodies, their voices judged as shrill and their laughter as excessive. Yet those judgments have been increas-

ingly challenged and recognized for what they are: tired efforts to protect male power by demeaning and intimidating women with the familiar suggestion that they are hysterical, crazy.

In my most recent work, I have wanted to better understand the ruptures among women across time, especially in the context of the mother/daughter relation. I've felt that girls and women of all ages can only benefit from resisting cultural forces that would separate us from each other and the commitments we share. In the classroom, teaching comedy has allowed me to bring a light touch to heavy subjects and to open conversations with my students on ideas that matter to me. Spanning generations of performers and scholars, *Hysterical!* testifies to the power of comedy to stimulate incisive conversations and build connections across the boundaries of time.

As time passes, I've also become increasingly interested in the unacknowledged personal forces that nudge us toward one research project rather than another. I've come to understand that I wanted to work on comedy because of my yearnings to laugh at the absurdities of life, to celebrate its simple pleasures, and above all to discover and connect with kindred spirits. Studying comedy has allowed me to spend time in the company of others, both real and imaginary, whose work has enriched my own and whose presence in my life has made it better. May *Hysterical!* bring similar connections and rewards to you.

Kathleen Rowe Karlyn

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