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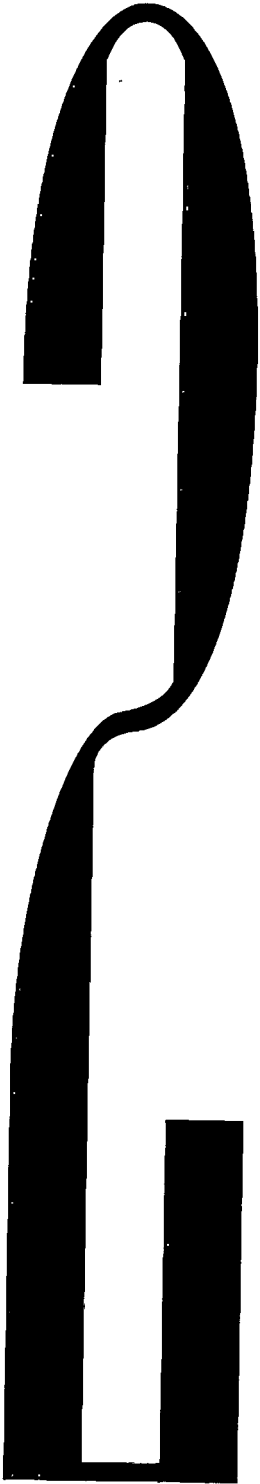
The Unruly Woman

*Gender and the
Genres of Laughter*

BY KATHLEEN ROWE



University of Texas Press, Austin



Roseanne The Unruly Woman as Domestic Goddess

Sometime after I was born in Salt Lake City, Utah, all the little babies were sleeping soundly in the nursery except for me, who would scream at the top of my lungs, trying to shove my whole fist into my mouth, wearing all the skin off on the end of my nose. I was put in a tiny restraining jacket. . . . My mother is fond of this story because to her it illustrates what she regards as my gargantuan appetites and excess anger. I think I was probably just bored.

—ROSEANNE BARR (ARNOLD) (ROSEANNE 3)

Last week, America's patience snapped. With a single voice the nation thundered, "Intolerable!" We are a people slow to anger but fierce when galvanized, as by Pearl Harbor or, as last

television, the theme of which is: *Crude is cute. Up to a point. There are limits.*

—GEORGE WILL
("CITIES GLEAM WITH GUNFIRE")

In July 1990, Roseanne Barr Arnold, star of the top-rated ABC sitcom *Roseanne*, was invited to sing the national anthem at a double-header between the Cincinnati Reds and the San Diego Padres. Tom Werner, co-producer of the TV show and owner of the Padres, thought that the fat and noisy comedian would give a boost to his losing team. It was Working Women's Night at the San Diego stadium, and Arnold was nationally known for her depiction of working-class family life in *Roseanne*. With thirty-thousand fans in the stands, Arnold screeched out the song, grabbed her crotch, spit on the ground, and made an obscene gesture to the booing crowd. Werner had been right; the team won its next two games. But the performance, intended as a parody of baseball rituals, unleashed a firestorm in the press. CNN broadcast the story with interviews of outraged "people on the street." In one segment, baseball fans drove a steamroller over a boom box containing a tape of her voice. Angry calls flooded the switchboards at ABC. On national television, President George Bush

poet Walt Whitman ("I hear American bullets singing"), he then lamented the "alabaster cities" of "America the Beautiful" which no longer "gleam, undimmed by human tears!" (A15).

Obviously Arnold had struck a nerve. Other singers have been criticized for their highly stylized renditions of "The Star Spangled Banner"—among them Jose Feliciano, Bobby McFerrin, Marvin Gaye, and Willie Nelson. And one could argue that Arnold, as a comedian, was doing nothing more than they had, shaping the performance according to her own comedic artistry. But none provoked a reaction comparable to this one. Arnold jested about it—"I must be the greatest singer. My voice can stop a fucking nation." But a year later she said more reflectively:

It's because I'm a woman. And I was making fun of men and, you know, we have to remember, that's really dangerous. It still is. I really thought I was to that point in my career where I had broken all those barriers down, and it served to remind me that it's still dangerous to be a woman who makes fun of men, or a woman who is funny, or a woman who does any social criticism, or a woman who has a brain, or a woman who has anything to say, or, you know, a woman, period. . . . It's dangerous and frightening. (Arnold, Interview)<

the public sphere and appears on the front pages and op-ed pages of newspapers and at the beginning of newscasts. If sports is not exactly hard news, it's not soft either, because of its particular status in masculine culture. When Arnold walked into that stadium, she made herself the subject of hard news, subject to those voices that had never touched her when she was safely contained in a place marked "sitcom" or "HBO Comedy Special," or in the feminized discourse of gossip columns and tabloids.

Implicit in the unruly woman's heightened visibility is her potential to bring about a process Erving Goffman describes as "breaking frame." Goffman suggests that social life is an "endless negotiation" about which cultural frame should surround, and thereby give meaning to, various events and bits of behavior. He argues that the meaning of a social situation can be radically altered by changing the frame in which it is perceived and that frames are most vulnerable at their margins. Because she is dangerously situated in the margins of social life, the unruly woman enjoys heightened "frame-busting" power.

Arnold entered a space that day already defined as liminal or sacred in patriarchal culture. Baseball is not merely a game, something that is played, but a collective, public, and masculine ritual, a quasi-religious reaffirmation of patriarchy, patriotism, and the myth of our nation's Edenic history. Unlike football

Congress for a constitutional ban against it. Arnold's performance made her vulnerable to the official voices of masculine authority, the voices of news and government from George Will to George Bush, which projected onto her all perceived threats to the dominant culture. Indeed, Will's near loss of control over his own rhetoric exposed his column's subtext—the range of repressed fears this disorderly fat woman released about racial threats to the nation's “alabaster” cities, about mass culture with its “slob” values encroaching on the tidy domain of those who know Walt Whitman's poetry well enough to paraphrase it.²

Not only in this incident but throughout her career Arnold has used the semiotics of unruliness to break frame, to disrupt, to expose the gap between, on the one hand, the New Left and the women's movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and on the other, the realities of working-class family life two decades later. On one level, of course, Arnold's joke backfired. On another and more important one, however, it succeeded as a powerful demonstration of the disruptive power of the unruly woman. Even as fans were booing her in the stadium, others were cheering.³ As Arnold's career has unfolded, her

HER HUSBAND—AND HAD AFFAIRS WITH SIX MEN (She often ignored her children, leaving it up to Bill to fix the youngsters' meals and wash their clothes)." "ROSEANNE INVESTIGATED FOR CHILD ABUSE." "STAR-SPANGLED SICKO ROSEANNE: 'DON'T SEND ME BACK TO THE PSYCHO WARD'." "ROSEANNE'S DISGRACE! THE REAL REASON TV'S STAR IS MAKING AMERICA HATE HER." "ONE OF THE MOST HATED WOMEN IN AMERICA." "BEFORE, HER ADVISERS WOULDN'T LET HER GO OVER THE BORDER OF DECENCY, BUT WITH TOM THERE ARE NO BORDERS!"

It is hard not to see much of Arnold's treatment by the tabloids as tongue-in-cheek, as in the remarkable list of taboos called up by the description of her "wedding from hell," or the inversion of the classical wife-beating story that elicits sympathy for her husband as victim (for having to "fix the youngsters' meals and wash their clothes"). However, that tone often conveys a scarcely concealed condescension. Granted that the tabloids are *about* excess and about showing celebrities in revealing or compromising poses, there is an edge of cruelty to their treatment of Arnold, especially in photographs that exaggerate her fatness and her willingness to show her anger or to ignore the

aggressive, stubborn, wealthy person who happens to be a woman. If Donald Trump behaved in the same way, people would overlook it or might even admire it" (51).

In Arnold's case, especially in the early years of her career, the tabloids displayed an effort to wrest her definition of herself from comedy—where she asserts her power to be the subject of laughter—and transfer it to melodrama, where she becomes an object, a victim. When Tom Arnold gets the "credit" for Roseanne's transgressions, she becomes a victim of her own powerlessness, simply a woman out of control. Melodrama, unlike much comedy, punishes the unruly woman for asserting her desire. Such parodies of melodrama make the unruly woman the target of our laughter, while denying her the power and pleasure of her own.

Arnold hardly fared better among more sophisticated commentators. In an early review of *Roseanne*, Elvis Mitchell noted in the *Village Voice* how "startled" he was to see "this kind of arrogance so early in the run of a TV series" (47). He criticized the general lack of "class" or "taste" in television viewers and reviewers, describing her show as the "1040 EZ, low-income, no deductions" version of *The Cosby Show*. And according to Joyce May

Such an explanation, I believe, would locate Arnold in the historical and theoretical context of female unruliness. In an article on the op-ed page of the *New York Times* ("What Am I, a Zoo?"), Arnold describes her own awareness of the carnivalesque heterogeneity of her image by enumerating the groups she has been associated with—the regular housewife, the mother, the postfeminist, the "Little Guy," fat people, the "Queen of Tabloid America," the "body politic," sex, "angry womankind herself," "the notorious and sensationalistic La Luna madness of an ovulating Abzugian woman run wild"—and so on. All are valid, she believes, although many people insist on reducing this multivalence to a single truth:

Some people, they look at me, and they'll see a real person that's "down," you know, earthy or (what are some of the nasty things they say about me?) "crude." They'll say that. And it is there. And then other people will see that there's some spiritual or deeper meaning, and they'll see that. Some people will just see one and then other people will see both of them, because I think that what I'm really trying to do is project both of them at the same time, because I think they are equally here and equally valid and equally human. (Arnold, Interview)

She projects both

