

“The Colour of Your Moustache” or Have Feminists Always Been Humourless?¹

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You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing. (Cixous 255)

For many, the feminists of the “Woman Movement” of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries appeared as deadly as a Gorgon. They were “ladies” in hats said Germaine Greer, dismissively (13). “God’s Police” affirmed Anne Summers (301–2, 362). Sexually repressive, decided R. W. Connell and T. H. Irving (203–204). “Old” declared Nancy Cott, asserting the difference of the women of the nineteenth-century Woman Movement from a “new” twentieth-century feminism (15). The women of suffrage-era feminism in Australia, Britain and the United States of America have, almost uniformly, been depicted as fearsomely respectable, socially puritanical, politically limited, sexually repressed, and crushingly earnest. It is an image in urgent need of revision. I endeavoured to do this in relation to suffrage-era feminists and sex in Australia in *Passions of the First Wave Feminists* (2001). I argued there that it was the sexual double-standard that those women objected to. Not sex itself. Indeed, rather than being opposed to sex, they were centrally preoccupied with sex, and with the pleasures as well as the dangers of heterosexual union. In this article, I want to revise a different dimension of the popular image of these women, the image of the feminist of the suffrage era—as of the 1970s–1990s—as humourless.

I am not arguing that suffrage-era feminists were side-splitting wits, you understand. Historical revisionism is not an exercise in fantasy. What I *am* arguing is that if we read what those feminists wrote with attention, we find writers

demonstrating irony, performing parody, ridiculing and deflating pompousness and pretension. They had already, half a century before she wrote it, subscribed to the dictum of late twentieth-century United States' feminist Ruby Rich about women cultivating comedy as a weapon of great political power: with "revolutionary potential as a deflator of the patriarchal order and an extraordinary leveller" (qtd. in Rowe 9–10).

Considering humour in relation to feminism takes us into a field of analysis that is relatively recent. As United States scholar Kathleen Rowe wrote in 1995 in relation to feminist film theory: it is time for analyses based in women's victimisation and tears to allow space also for analyses around women's resistance and laughter, and for analyses that show the power of female laughter to challenge the social and symbolic systems that would keep women in their place (3–4). The mythological stories around the Gorgon, Medusa, have been used to demonstrate the power of the feminine—to castrate the masculine. For French feminist writer, Hélène Cixous, however, Medusa mocks those theories. As Rowe explicates:

As long as men avert their eyes from her [Medusa], fearing the sight of her and her gaze, "woman" can be only a phantasm of castration for them, deadly and grotesque. And more important, as long as women do not look at each other straight on, they can only see distorted reflections of themselves. (10)

If we look at her "straight on," though, Cixous makes claim, then we see a figure that is not horrible but beautiful, one whose laughter mocks those fears. When, to quote another French feminist theorist, "the goods get together" (Irigaray 107)—that is, when women organise collectively—and create humour as well, then we challenge the power that would keep us powerless (Walker qtd. in Stetz 9). "Isn't laughter the first form of liberation from a secular oppression?" asks Luce Irigaray (qtd. in Rowe 1). This appears clearly in the writings in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries of two feminist journalists, the subjects of this article, Australian Louisa Lawson and north American Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

Neither's journalism is a conventional subject of literary analysis. Louisa Lawson is not generally considered a creative writer, though there has been some discussion of the merits of her fiction and poetry by Elaine Zinkhan, Brian Matthews and, briefly, by me; and of her journalism by John Docker, Susan Sheridan and Sharyn Pearce. Literary analysis of the work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman has focussed primarily on *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), a novel that lends itself especially to readings informed by psychoanalytic theory (for example, Jacobus) and on her utopian fiction beginning with *Herland* (1915). My project, here, is not so much to engage in literary analysis as, simply, to demonstrate the existence of strategies of humour in the journalism of these two feminists. It is to this end that I have

chosen to consider journalists, rather than, say, the three "lady novelists" who formed the subject of Susan Sheridan's pioneering and very funny discussion. Other alternatives could have been the two works by Ada Cambridge analysed by Susan Lever, or Tasma's "Monsieur Caloche," wittily brought together with *Such is Life* around the subject of moustaches—a matter to which this article will necessarily return—by Susan K. Martin. However, both Louisa Lawson and Charlotte Perkins Gilman are better known as feminists than Cambridge, Tasma or Praed, and it is *feminism* and humour that I have chosen as my subject.

Further, by considering an Australian and a United States feminist together, I want to offer a quiet challenge to the periodisation of first-wave feminism by United States historian Nancy Cott, in particular her depiction of the Woman Movement of the late nineteenth century as "old." Cott clearly considers Gilman one of the women embracing "feminism," "a semantic claim to female modernism," a new word entering popular usage between about 1910 and 1913 (15). Gilman, she tells us, declared "feminism" to be "the social awakening of the women of all the world": "Here she comes," wrote Gilman of the "Feminist," "running, out of prison and off pedestal; chains off, crown off, halo off, just a live woman" (Cott 14, 37). Yet, set beside Gilman's journalism, the journalism that Louisa Lawson was writing in Australia approximately two decades earlier, between 1888 and 1905, would suggest that the Australian pioneer of woman suffrage, member of the "old" Woman Movement, was just as modern, and also just as humorous, as feminist Gilman. It is not a point worth labouring, but I would suggest that the similarities in attack between the two had more to do with their commitment to rights for women being, itself, a force for modernity.

Lawson and Gilman had a few characteristics in common. Both were white women who had a patchy schooling which they made up for with strenuous self-education. Both married and had children. Both had to make their own livings for much of their adult lives. Both had bouts of mental instability. Otherwise, though, they could hardly have been more different.

Louisa Lawson was born in 1848, on Guntawang station near Gulgong in New South Wales, the second of twelve children of Harriet Wynn, needlewoman, and Harry Albury, station hand. She spent the first half of her life in the country, working at rural labour as well as learning to be a skilled seamstress, a postmistress, and, following her marriage to Peter Larsen in 1866, mother of four. "Pete the Swede" (actually a Norwegian, his name "Larsen" translated by usage into "Lawson") was most often away, prospecting for gold. Louisa finally gave up their mullocky selection in the third year of a drought in 1883, and went to live in Sydney. There she earned a living for herself and her children first by taking in boarders in rented houses, and then by taking in sewing, before turning to publishing. She never returned to the countryside; she died in Sydney in 1920 (see Matthews; and Magarey, "Lawson").

Gilman was born Charlotte Anna Perkins on 3 July 1860 in Hartford, Connecticut, a descendant of one of the United States' socially and religiously prominent families, the Beechers. She spent almost all of her life in cities, growing up on the east coast of the United States, moving to California in the wake of her first marriage in 1884 and the birth of her daughter in 1885, both of which left her in profound depression. On the west coast, she began earning her living by writing and speaking. She divorced Charles Stetson in 1894 and scandalised the world by allowing her daughter to go and live with him and his new wife, her best friend Grace Elery Channing. Following her second marriage in 1900, Charlotte lived in New York until 1922, when the couple moved to Norwich Town, Connecticut, until Houghton Gilman died in 1934. Charlotte Perkins Gilman herself died in the west, near her daughter, a year later (see Gilman, *Living*; and Lane).

Gilman gained fame for her writing and speaking throughout the United States, in Britain and its empire, and in Europe as well. Serendipitously, she had help from Australia in founding her trans-Atlantic reputation. Sixty-eight-year-old South Australian Catherine Helen Spence—whom Gilman remembered as a Scot (Gilman, *Living* 169)—visited San Francisco in 1893, on her way to the World Fair in Chicago. In San Francisco, Gilman organised what Spence considered “one of the best women’s meetings I ever addressed” (Spence 70). Gilman’s poems had just been collected together into a small volume published in Oakland with the title *In This Our World*. Spence took this book with her when she travelled on to Britain in 1894 and found it an English publisher (Gilman, *Living* 169–70; Magarey, *Unbridling* 165, 167–8). It was after this success that Gilman visited England, first in 1896 to attend the International Socialist and Labor Congress, and again in 1899 to take part in the International Women’s Congress in London. By this time, though, she was known also as the author of *Women and Economics: The Economic Factor Between Women and Men as a Factor in Social Evolution*, published in 1898. This work chimed exactly with the concept of evolution as inevitable historical progress, bringing with it equality between women and men, current in feminist circles across the world at that time (Magarey, *Passions* 74–80). It was widely read and quoted; Gilman became internationally famous. She toured England, Holland, Germany, Austria and Hungary in 1905, giving lectures, and she attended the International Woman Suffrage Congress in Budapest in 1913.

Louisa Lawson’s—earlier—story offers a marked contrast. She did not gain fame even throughout Australia, much less internationally, except for an interview with her published in the *Boston Women’s Journal* (Docker 5). And she never travelled outside her homeland, even her home colony. Indeed, it could be argued that, rather than fame, what Lawson gained was notoriety. This came from both sides of the political spectrum, as it was firming up in Australia towards the end of the nineteenth century. From the working class, she was subjected to misogynist abuse; from the feminists, she suffered class-based condescension.

The first was a response by a patriarchal union to Lawson setting up a press and employing women on it as compositors. The unionists—men—made two attempts to sabotage Lawson’s endeavour. The first was the incident that historian Jim Hagan has written about (Hagan 19–21), which Lawson herself reported in an article in the *Bulletin* on 24 October 1896. A young journalist from the *Christian World* wandered into Lawson’s office on the pretext of borrowing a print block. When he was told that Mrs Lawson could not afford to buy blocks for other papers to use, he stood about the workroom getting in the way and sneering at the girls locking up the forms. “We were just going to press,” explained Lawson,

And you know how locking up isn’t always an easy matter—particularly for new chums like we were.

Well, he stood there and said nasty things, and poor Miss Grieg—she’s my forewoman—and the girls, they got as white as chalk; the tears were in their eyes. I asked him three times to go, and he wouldn’t, so I took a watering pot full of water that we had for sweeping the floor, and I let him have it. (qtd. in Clarke 164)

Subsequently, in October 1889, the New South Wales Typographical Association declared a boycott of Lawson’s publication, the *Dawn*, not because its wages were low—Lawson claimed to pay the highest wages in Sydney for compositors—but because they objected to the employment of women altogether. Their boycott consisted of union men visiting those who advertised in Lawson’s journal and threatening a union boycott of their businesses unless they withdrew their advertising. A month later, a representative for Mrs Lawson was expelled from a meeting at the Trades Hall where the Tailoresses Union was being established. The reason given was the same: the compositors, who included many of the chief union officials in Sydney, would not tolerate the employment of women in their field of labour. Moreover, they asserted, Lawson was opposed to unionism (Lawson, *Dawn* 5 November 1889, qtd. in Daniels and Murnane 274–5). Lawson fought back with vigour. She appealed to subscribers to her journal to make it clear to their tradespeople that the subscribers dealt with those tradespeople *because* they advertised in the *Dawn*. And she made her support for unionism more than clear at a mass meeting in the Domain, held to express sympathy with the London Dock Strikers: she was the first to contribute toward the funds being collected, and she and her son Henry both gained enthusiastic cheers from the gathering in recognition of their services to the cause of labour (Docker 19).

The second—class condescension—came from the founders of the Womanhood Suffrage League in Sydney and, in particular, from the League’s honorary secretary, a society hostess, Rose Scott (Allen 74, 76–80). Lawson had been ahead of these women in setting up an organisation to foster solidarity among women. In 1889

she founded the Dawn Club, a social reform club for women, “for mutual development, mutual aid and for consideration of various questions of importance to the sex” (Lawson, *Dawn* 1 July 1889, qtd. in Oldfield 77). By September of that year, some fifty women—among them press, shorthand and type-writers, and schoolteachers and nurses—were attending the fortnightly meetings held in the tea-rooms of philanthropist Quong Tart. Eighteen months later, in March 1891, a gathering of socially elite women at the house of Dora Montefiore decided to form an organisation to campaign for votes for women (Allen 124–6; Oldfield 78–80). Shortly before their third meeting, still by invitation only, one of the men about to join their council urged them to invite Mrs Lawson to become a member. They did, and elected her to their council. In return, she lent the council her office for meetings, did printing for the league at no cost, and, it seems, allowed the Dawn Club to fade out of existence. Yet, in spite of her continuing friendship with Mary, Lady Windeyer, and her daughter Margaret, Louisa Lawson may well have found the ranks of the Womanhood Suffrage League less than congenial. Rose Scott took it upon herself to apologise to the premier, Sir Henry Parkes, for Lawson’s language at the first public woman suffrage deputation in 1891: “unwise,” she deemed it (Scott 680). By the end of 1893, Lawson had resigned from the League’s council and “no longer found it convenient” for them to meet at her offices (Womanhood, *Annual Report*). She was quick to join the Women’s Progressive Association—a rival to the Womanhood Suffrage League, with a stronger commitment to the labour movement—when it was formed in 1901.

Neither fame nor notoriety seems to have brought happiness to these two women. The well-spring for their sense of humour lies somewhere else. From the beginning of her first marriage, Gilman suffered frequent periods of depression. In 1887, while still married to Charles Stetson, she went to Philadelphia to Weir Mitchell, the pre-eminent “nerve specialist” of her time, but after a month in his sanatorium, she fled, reporting that his treatment had almost made her lose her mind. Her novella, *The Yellow Wall-Paper*, resulted. Like Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* published only three years later, it is a searing indictment of the condition of middle-class women in the late nineteenth century, confined to the domestic realm and forbidden any intellectual engagement or meaningful work. Even after she had divorced Stetson, Gilman continued to be afflicted by bouts of depression and lethargy for the remainder of her days. She took her own life in 1935, having learned three years earlier that she had cancer (Gilman, *Living* 334–35; Lane 350, 359–60).

Working-class Louisa Lawson had no grounds on which to protest the lack of occupation allowed to women, but she had other grounds for distress, both generally as a woman, and personally. During her years as a young wife and mother, she not only took responsibility for farming the selection, running the post office and earning an income with her needle, but she also began a campaign to petition the authorities to establish a school in her district to which she could send her children.

A building committee was set up among the local community, but, because she was a woman, Louisa Lawson was not allowed to be a member. She could not even attend their meetings. She had to listen to its deliberations through a crack in the back wall of the bar of the old inn where the committee met. To such systemic disadvantage, she added her own individual difficulties. During her third pregnancy she had a complete breakdown, then years later, in 1900, an accident at Circular Quay left her with severe spinal injury and concussion. After that there were, it seems, questions about her mental health. Peter Lawson had her committed to the Gladesville Hospital for the Insane in January 1920, and she died there in August that year (see Matthews).

These are grim stories, hardly a good way in which to launch an account of feminist humour. Yet, the grimness is no doubt a major element for each in their determination, energy, commitment—and humour. For both of them, a sense of personal disadvantage and injustice was integral to their analysis of the condition of women in general. Their humour, then, was one of their principal weapons against sex-based systemic injustice, the chief target of their journalism. And that draws these two stories together, for one of the major productions of each was a journal: one called the *Dawn* which Lawson wrote, published and printed each month for seventeen years, from May 1888 until the middle of 1905, and another called the *Forerunner* that Gilman wrote and published each month for seven years, from November 1909 until December 1916. Both would repay a closer examination and comparison than I am going to give them here, for each represents different strands in the feminism of this era, even though each is chronologically part of the run-up to the achievement of women's suffrage in the political cultures of each—1902 for Australia, 1920 for the United States of America. But my subject is humour, so that is what I will turn to now.

Here is Lawson on the men who penned advice columns for women in the mainstream press. "Suppose" she wrote, "a column were set aside for the instruction of men; for instance, 'Hints to decrepit men,' [. . .] 'The new pad for weak-chested men,' or 'patent boots for small men'" (*Dawn* March 1897, qtd. in Sheridan 79). Another time, in the October 1893 edition of *Dawn*, she provided just such a column of advice:

Husbands ought always to wear a smiling and happy countenance. Should the care of providing the raw material to make a home weigh you down, never mind. Husbands have often lost the affection of their wives by looking careworn.

Be careful about your personal appearance; much depends upon that. Be sure that your hair is smoothly arranged and your collar spotless before presenting yourself at the breakfast table. It is by

attention to such little things that you may be able to retain the affection of your wife.

Don't complain if you are sick. A complaining husband often drives a woman to seek more congenial society. If you have the toothache—smile.

If you are embarrassed for want of funds to meet the necessary expenses of the household, always bear it with a cheerful and happy expression—always smile; your wife may be driven to spend her evenings elsewhere than at home if you complain.

Keep up with the times. Your wife, having the care of the education of the children, naturally reads more than you. Don't let her. After you have worked twelve or fourteen hours a day, devote the remainder to keeping your mind in good trim, so that your wife may not find a more congenial spirit elsewhere.

Should your wife smoke or use tobacco in any form, it isn't best to object. Smiles will do more than frowns. Encourage her to smoke or chew, as the case may be, at home, or she may be driven to stay away from home. Personal liberty is always sacred.

By always paying strict attention to the above rules and smiling continually, you will probably be able to retain the affections of your wife for a considerable time. (Olive Lawson 187)

Gilman employed the same rhetorical strategy in her comment on an editorial in the *New York Times* for 24 June 1910:

The gentlemen of France are distressed about the birthrate. It appears that the men of that country do not bear enough children to keep up the population as they desire. Therefore serious measures are proposed "to stimulate the birthrate." They are these:

Additional military service to be imposed on bachelors over twenty-nine.

Marriage to be made obligatory on gentlemen employed by the state, at the age of twenty-five, with supplementary salaries and pension allowances for more than three children.

The law requiring equal distribution of estates among children to be repealed. The dislike of Frenchmen to dividing their property is a frequent cause of restricted families, we are told.

We trust that the gentlemen of France, spurred and encouraged by these incentives, will now produce more children than they have hitherto. (*Forerunner* August 1910: 21)

She goes on to suggest that an analogy with a shortage in the milk supply being considered by a convocation of bulls might make her point even more forcefully.

Masculine pronouncements on the birthrate were, perhaps, an especially ready target. In "Experts" in 1915, she made the same point in a similar manner:

Professor Johnson bids us tax
 Our married men and fathers.
 Theodore Roosevelt thinks him wrong
 And quite unwise—one gathers.
 There's Malthus thought we came too fast;
 Advised "Restrict the babies!"
 But Roosevelt talks "race-suicide"
 As fierce as one with rabies.
 Grave legislators add
 Their voices to the others;
 One wonders if these gentlemen
 Never consult The Mothers.

(*Forerunner* December 1915: 313)

In each instance, it is incongruity that points up the absurdity of the object of criticism.

Here is Lawson deploying the same device in November 1890. All of Australia was preoccupied with industrial strife. The *Dawn* appeared with a headline which read:

THE STRIKE QUESTION/10,000 WIVES TO BE CALLED
 OUT!!/MASS MEETING OF THE AMALGAMATED
 WIVES' ASSOCIATION!! DEMANDS OF THE WOMEN!!
 DOMESTIC LIFE PARALYSED!!

But this time the article goes on very seriously to draw an extended analogy between wives and workers: "just as under the wealthy there is the less powerful class of labour, so, subject to the social predominance of men, there are the women, weak, unorganised, and isolated" (Olive Lawson 71–2). It is a telling analogy, one

which also, incidentally, anticipates the analysis of political theorist Carole Pateman by a century or so.

In the November 1889 edition of *Dawn*, irony in Lawson's defence of men being offensive to suffragists emerges from the title of her piece. "Of course," she wrote:

the behaviour of men towards a recognised champion of "women's rights" does not come within the scope of our comments, because it is understood that such a creature is little more than a perambulating vinegar-bottle armed with an umbrella, and she, being ready to eject acidulous language against any male creature of differing views, must expect an occasional exhibition of venom in return. (Olive Lawson 47)

Her title is "Modern Chivalry." It is a piece which also uses exaggeration to make its point, a strategy that appears in Gilman's response to an observation by one Sir Almroth Wright, M.D. that, "No doctor can lose sight of the fact that the mind of woman is always threatened with danger from the reverberations of her physiological emergencies":

"No doctor can ever lose sight,"
Says the solemn Sir Almroth Wright, M.D.,
"Of the fact that each woman's mind
In danger we always find."
(It is never safe, saith he;
From what? What dread creations?)
"From the Reverberations"
(These are the risks he sees;
Definite, chronological,)
"Of her Physiological Emergencies!"
This thought is a terrible blow,
No matter how much we know, and do,
Over each woman's head
Hangs ever that daily dread—
Over me, my sister, and you;
In spite of our education,
Out pops a Reverberation—
And the poor brain turns and flees!
Thus does the medicological
Mind see our Physiological Emergencies.

(*Forerunner* June 1912: 152–53)

Gilman took to verse often, and the verses were often quoted; feminist periodicals of the period in Australia are littered with her verses. Here are some more, provoked by Rudyard Kipling's decision that "the female of the species is deadlier than the male":

Lay your money on the hen-fight! On the dog fight fought by shes!
On the gory Ladies Prize fight—there are none so fierce as these!
See small girls each other pounding while their peaceful brothers
wail—

For the female of the species is more deadly than the male.
So in history they tell us how all China shrieked and ran
Before the wholesale slaughter dealt by Mrs. Genghis Kahn.
And Attila, the scourge of God, who made all Europe quail,
Was a female of her species and more deadly than the male.
Red war with all its million dead is due to female rage,
The names of women murderers monopolize the page,
The pranks of a Napoleon are nothing to the tale
Of destruction wrought by females, far more deadly than the male.
In the baleful female infant this ferocity we spy;
It glares in bloodshot fury from the maiden's dewy eye.
But the really deadly female, when you see her at her best,
Has two babies at her petticoat and a suckling at her breast.
Yet hold—there is Another! A Monster even worse!
The Terror of Humanity! Creation's direst curse!
Before whom men in thousands must tremble, shrink, and fail—
A Sanguinary Grandma—more deadly than the male!

(*Forerunner* December 1911: 318)

There is a different kind of mockery, too, this time of women. It appears in a moment taken from the first of no fewer than seven full-length novels which Gilman wrote and serialised in her journal. This novel is called *What Diantha Did*, and its pedagogic purpose is to demonstrate the cash-value of domestic labour, the importance of women's economic independence, and the social and economic benefits of industrialising housework and food-preparation, to say nothing of child-care. It is still a radical proposal, a century later. The theme is to be set out as a lecture by the heroine, Diantha Bell, in an early chapter of the novel. She is to speak at a meeting of the Home and Culture Club in a town called Orchardina in California, and her subject has provoked such interest that the club has taken a downtown hall to accommodate the numbers wishing to hear her. In the audience are representatives of the range of opinion that Diantha Bell is to persuade. They are:

Mrs. Thaddler, conscious of her New York millions, and Madam Weatherstone, conscious of her Philadelphia lineage, with Mrs Johnston A. Marrow (“one of the Boston Marrows!” was awesomely whispered of her), were the heads of what may be called “the conservative party” in this small parliament; while Miss Miranda L. Eagerson, describing herself as “a journalist,” who held her place in local society largely by virtue of the tacit dread of what she might do if offended—led the more radical element. (*Forerunner* May 1910: 12)

None of this is absolutely hilarious, and as a strategy it is certainly not new. But it is amusing, whether as sarcasm, mockery, or ridicule; whether by making fun of a subject by substituting an alternative subject (bulls for men), or simply by spelling out social pretension (the “Boston Marrows!”). Further, it works well in provoking attention to the argument being advanced, thence contributing to campaigns for change in the conditions which are the subject of critique.

Both writers often address their readers directly, and in the *Dawn* Lawson’s direct address to her correspondents sometimes crackles with humour. For, as well as providing reading for some thousand readers each month, Louisa Lawson used the *Dawn* as a means of communicating with individual people—over their anxieties about travelling from the country to go shopping in the great city, when she would offer assistance in finding their way about (Olive Lawson 287); over their difficulties with the local post office, when she would offer exasperated understanding and sympathy (285); over their need for something to read to help them in providing sex education for their children, for which she recommended Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell (289); over their worries about why their canary won’t sing, to which she replied: “Cover your canary with a thin net at night. This will prevent the mosquitoes from stinging its feet, and it will sing better by day” (288). It is in these responses to correspondents that one meets the most marked examples of Louisa Lawson’s humour. Here she is being impatient:

Your constitution is evidently much run-down, and you “won’t take change because it costs too much money”. You refuse to rest because it wastes time, and your “lost appetite must come as it went”. Just so; and we should like to add that we hope that your six little ones’ stepmother of the future will have more sense. (Olive Lawson 292)

Here she is being rude:

Never write to the editor of any paper finding fault with an article and at the same time, substituting, as an improvement, an inferior

one. Our readers, as a rule, are not deformed; therefore your dress model would not be of any use to them. (Olive Lawson 290)

Sarcasm is relatively easy. This reply is addressed to "Working Man":

"You did not think women were such delicate creatures?" You have our sympathy. It is hard to think that a woman who leads her husband to believe that she is strong enough to drop a card into the ballot box should break down when only required to walk six miles down a mountain and carry back the week's supply of groceries, and then run down into a wet paddock and pull grass for a hungry cow before taking her bonnet off. We agree with you that it is a most aggravating proceeding on her part to get sick after thirty years' patient wifely service. We have read of parallel cases in other countries but did not expect to find womanly unreasonableness so near our own door. (Olive Lawson 289–90)

Lawson could be funny, even when she was being utterly practical. Replying to a "Perplexed Mother" who was worrying about her sixteen-year-old daughter's idleness and dissatisfaction, she wrote:

Well. Just do as the boys in the back blocks do with horses, dogs, guns, knives etc. that they are tired of. "Swap her" for a time with some other poor mother who has a daughter showing the same symptoms; exchange her for a month. You take the other discontented girl and do by her as you would were she your own—and we will prophesy long-legged Australian lasses will be dying to hug their dear old mothers and sisters and brothers and take up house cleaning in right royal style in less than a month. Your daughter needs a change, and a mother's first duty is to discover how to let her have it. (Olive Lawson 286)

Was she being funny about moustaches, then, the subject of the quotation in the title of this article? Moustaches clearly provoke mirth in Australian literature. But as Sue Martin has shown, they are moustaches attached to female faces. The remarkable feature of the moustache with which Lawson is concerned is that it is not attached to anyone's face at all. "We regret," she wrote, "that we cannot supply you with a false moustache to match enclosed sample of hair, and return remittance; we are quite out of the orange-marmalade shade" (Olive Lawson 296).

These two feminist journalists *were* Gorgons, but only for the objects of their attack. And those objects might well include the "ladies in hats"—Boston

Marrows—with whom Germaine Greer mistakenly identified the feminists themselves. Further, the similarities in object and mode of attack between these two—despite the decades separating them, to say nothing of the Pacific Ocean—testifies to the modernity of Louisa Lawson's feminism, and to the continuity of Gilman's with that of the nineteenth-century Woman Movement. The objects of their indignation and anger, and the kinds of humour that they mobilised against those objects, were very similar. There was, in other words, a far closer association to be made between participants in the "old" Woman Movement of the nineteenth century and those of the "new" Feminist Movement of the twentieth than historian Nancy Cott would allow. And the success of these two publications, the *Dawn* and the *Forerunner*, is an additional testimony—to the pleasure that their readers could take in the challenge that these works offered to patriarchal social and symbolic systems, readers capable of looking at the Medusa straight on, relishing her beauty and her laughter.

Endnote

1. I must thank Susan Sheridan for lending me a number of the books used in this article, and for allowing me to appropriate half of my title from her; and John Docker who first thought to bring Lawson and Gilman together.

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