Laughing towards a better world | an exploration of the transformative power of humor in Irmtraud Morgner's Beatriz

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LAUGHING TOWARDS A BETTER WORLD:  
AN EXPLORATION OF THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF HUMOR  
IN IRMTRAUD MORGNER'S BEATRIZ  

By  
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Laughing towards a better world: An exploration of the transformative power of humor in Irmtraud Morgner’s *Beatriz* (76 pp.)

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Irmtraud Morgner (1933-1990) was an East German writer who employed humor as a literary technique, particularly in her later works. The use of humor in her novel *Leben und Abenteuer der Trobadora Beatriz nach Zeugnissen ihrer Spielfrau Laura* makes it enjoyable to read; at the same time it very effectively promotes Morgner’s goals. Morgner’s ultimate objective was a harmonious world order, devoid of war and inequality in any form. Although Morgner rejected the label "feminist," her works deal mainly with women’s issues, because she considered the absolute equality of women a prerequisite to creating a better world.

Chapter one discusses humor as a unifying strategy that creates solidarity -- among women and between the sexes on a textual level. Morgner also presents a model for human interaction that reaches beyond the text.

In the second chapter I consider the subversive potential of humor which is particularly beneficial to a writer under a repressive government. Through humor, Morgner creates ambiguity, exposes the limits of ideology, and uncovers incongruities between the reality and ideal of the GDR in regard to gender relations.

Finally, chapter three analyzes humor as a survival mechanism -- for the author, the reader, and all of humanity. This chapter establishes the cyclical character of Morgner’s usage of humor, thereby linking survival to the previous chapters.
I developed an interest in medieval literature while enrolled in a class in Germanic mythology. This fascination led me briefly to consider focusing on a topic in medieval literature for my thesis, however, I quickly realized that I lacked the necessary background for such an endeavor. Acquiring the language skills and philosophical and historical frameworks essential to understanding and analyzing medieval themes would have been too time-consuming. A professor suggested that instead, I might research a modern author whose works examine medieval themes. A number of contemporary East German writers have done this, in part to cloak their dissident message in order to evade censorship. The topic fascinated me and when I began reading Irmtraud Morgner’s *Leben und Abenteuer der Trobadora Beatriz*, I approached the novel from this perspective. However, by the time I finished Morgner’s work, I was intrigued at how much it had made me laugh, despite the seriousness of the problems Morgner raises.

Although I was captivated by Morgner’s sense and use of humor, I did not consider it as a thesis topic; humor seemed to be a welcome extra bonus, not the subject of literary criticism. However, upon further reflection and after continued searching for a topic, I began to realize that humor was an essential element of Morgner’s life and work as
well as being a legitimate area of research. Since humor as strategy is so essential to Morgner’s work, I decided to investigate it as the focal point of my thesis.
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INTRODUCTION:

IRMTRAUD MORGNER

Irmtraud Morgner was a private woman who preferred to speak through her work, rather than expose details of her personal life. She was born in 1933 in Chemnitz, renamed Karl-Marx Stadt in 1953. Her mother was a seamstress and her father a train conductor who inspired many of the male characters in her works. Morgner grew up in a relatively uneducated and anti-intellectual family and was not exposed to literature until at age eleven or twelve she discovered a suitcase filled with classical German literature, an event that shaped her life.


Morgner studied German literature in Leipzig from 1952 to 1956 and was the editor of *Neue Deutsche Literatur* until 1958, at which point she became a free-lance writer. She

1
was married to the poet Paul Wien with whom she had a son; very little is known about her family life. She and her husband separated at some point, and Paul Wien died in 1982. Morgner was diagnosed with breast cancer in the late 1980s. She was too ill to participate in any of the events surrounding the fall of the communist regime in the GDR. In her last few interviews she expressed some regret about not having been more outspoken against the abuses of the SED in the past, though she maintained her belief in communism until the end. Irmtraud Morgner died in 1990.

IRMTRAUD MORGNER’S LITERARY CAREER

Morgner’s first novels were written in the style of the then state-supported Socialist Realism, and she later dismissed these works as having little aesthetic value and simply following the official SED literary guidelines. Morgner considers her novel Rumba auf einen Herbst the beginning of her "real" literary career. The novel was written in 1964 but never published because it did not pass the censorship of the GDR. However, Morgner incorporates this work in seven "Intermezzos" in Beatriz. Three of her subsequent novels were published, but Morgner’s big breakthrough occurred with the publication of Beatriz in 1974.²

Morgner rejected the label "feminist" throughout her life, much to the chagrin of many West German feminists who
called her "the feminist of the GDR"\(^3\) and hailed her 
\textbf{Beatriz} novel as the "Bibel der Frauen-Emanzipation." She 
considered herself first and foremost a socialist with a 
special interest in the plight of women. Despite the fact 
that socialism is now passé, both as a form of government 
and as a theory, the works of Irmtraud Morgner are still of 
critical relevance to both the feminist movement and any 
person or group attempting to make sense of and change the 
current world order.\(^4\)

\textbf{Irmtraud Morgner’s Beatriz}

Irmtraud Morgner was an East German writer as well as 
an, albeit not self-described, feminist. She not only 
writes about humor and laughter as theoretical tools, she 
also gives her readers plenty to laugh about. Her works are 
a rare treat for a student of German and feminist 
literatures, which is what first attracted me to her novel 
\textit{Leben und Abenteuer der Trobadora Beatriz nach Zeugnissen 
h ihrer Spielfrau Laura}.\(^5\) I was quite surprised at laughing 
so hard at a novel that contains such serious themes and 
problems. At the same time, I realized how effectively 
Morgner makes her point through humor. The humor in 
\textbf{Beatriz} makes it a highly enjoyable literary work while also 
very effectively promoting Morgner’s goals in the capacity 
of a unifying, a subversive, and a survival strategy.

Prior to introducing the chapters of this thesis, I
would like to offer a very brief synopsis of this 700-page novel and describe the concerns Morgner tackled in her works and her life, aided by her sense of humor. At this point, I would also like to remark that it is extremely difficult to capture Morgner’s sense of humor through the use of isolated quotations. The tone and style of the *Beatriz* novel as a whole creates a synergy, abundantly more humorous than the sum of its parts.

**A BRIEF SYNOPSIS OF BEATRIZ**

Morgner’s lengthy *Beatriz* novel is both pleasurable and demanding of close attention and creative energy from its reader. It is an exceptionally complex work; Morgner calls it an "operativer Montageroman" that consists of short stories, newspaper articles, scientific reports, and, as mentioned earlier, excerpts from her earlier works. Parts of the novel are fantastical, full of legends, myths, and fairytales, while at the same time giving the reader a realistic view of everyday life in the GDR, particularly from a woman’s perspective.

The fragments of the novel evolve around the figure of the Trobadora Beatriz de Dia, a twelfth-century French female troubadour loosely based on a historical figure, who has been a "Sleeping Beauty" for the past 800 years and is reawakened in the revolutionary France of 1968, a few years prematurely, due to the building of a
highway. Having been a female troubadour, Beatriz was far ahead of her times in the twelfth century and was put to sleep by Persephone; in return, she committed herself to working towards the establishment of the matriarchy upon her awakening. During her 800-year slumber, her cousin, "die schöne Melusine," had kept her abreast of current events through hypnosis. In the year 1309, an oppositional group to Persephone decided against the establishment of a matriarchy and rather towards a third order, "eine dritte Ordnung, die weder patriarchalisch noch matriarchalisch sein sollte, sondern menschlich"(27).

Beatriz soon becomes frustrated with the conditions in France because women’s emancipation has still, after 800 years, not been realized, as she had expected upon her reawakening. In Paris, she meets the GDR journalist Uwe Parnitzke, whose revolutionary ideas and tales of his country, "das gelobte Land,"(103) where he claims women’s emancipation has been achieved, intrigue Beatriz. She decides that this must the place for a female troubadour, but upon her arrival she quickly becomes disillusioned, realizing the GDR is a male-dominated society as well.

In the GDR Beatriz meets Laura Salman, who becomes her "Spielfrau" and companion throughout the novel. Laura studied literature and is now a subway-train conductor. She has a small son named Wesselin and raises him as a single mother. During the course of the novel, Beatriz and Laura
share many of their respective duties -- Laura helps with the writing and Beatriz with the housework and childraising. Laura is a pragmatist and a realist who is firmly grounded in the realities of life in the GDR. In contrast, the idealist Beatriz is not grounded, but floats fantastically through history. The relationship between these two women will be discussed in more detail in chapter one.

Beatriz goes on a search for a unicorn because the powder from its horn mixed into the world’s drinking water would liberate "... diese Erde schnell und ohne Blutvergießen von Kapitalismus, Kriegen, Hunger und Patriarchat ... " (244). She returns with a little dog that has horns tied to its head and soon thereafter falls to her death while washing windows.

HUMOR

Humor and laughter are universal traits of the human race that manifest themselves in many different forms with diverse intentions and outcomes. Literary humor has existed throughout history, but has received little critical attention. This trend is beginning to shift, particularly in regard to women writers of humor that are being rediscovered. For the purposes of this thesis, I have concentrated on the works by Frank Palmeri⁶ and Paul Lewis⁷ for a general background on literature and humor and on the works by Nancy Walker⁸ and June Sochen⁹ in the area of
women’s literary humor. I will not focus on any of their particular theories, but rather, specifically, on Irmtraud Morgner’s use of humor in *Beatriz*.

Nonetheless, the research I have conducted on the topic of literary humor and humor in general, emphasizes that humor and laughter can be used as extremely positive textual and life strategies, with enormous transformative potential; humor is often used to imagine an alternative to the status quo, as a vehicle for change, and to create an utopian vision. At the same time, humor also gives us hope and courage to pursue the envisioned changes. Paul Lewis writes:

> Humor marks the boundaries of our sense of the real, reveals our values, solidifies our social and psychological identities, supports our maturation and enables us to learn - serving as a weapon, an embrace, an evasion, a lesson, a puzzle, and a game.¹⁰

Humor questions the status quo and official ideology. Through the use of humor, inherent inconsistencies become apparent, while at the same time it becomes clear that there is not one truth; the alternatives do not become the new dominant orders, but rather remain possibilities. Writers of humorous literature are rarely dogmatic, rather they set the ground for a dialogue of a multitude of voices. Most often, these writers make as much fun of the alternative
voice(s) as they do the official one. As Frank Palmeri notes in *Satire in Narrative*,

...[I]f a satire's implied utopian vision looks forward to necessary changes in the future, and if it parodies a long-standing, well-established institution, set of beliefs, or practice, then the work defines its perspective as subversive or progressive. ... Narrative satire parodies both the official voice of established beliefs and the discourse of its opponents.11

Parodying an alternative as well as an established voice not only calls for openness and a rejection of the idea that there is one truth, it also gives the person some distance from what he or she is attempting to achieve, while knowing that the achievement of their vision is far in the distance or might never transpire. This distance is an essential survival mechanism to anyone attempting to affect change in a deeply ingrained order that at times seems impossible to surmount. Matthew Hodgart substantiates this point:

I would suggest that true satire demands a high degree of commitment to and involvement with the painful problems of the world, and simultaneously a high degree of abstraction from the world. The criticism of the world is abstracted from its ordinary setting, the setting of, say, political
oratory and journalism, and transformed into a high form of "play," which gives us both the recognition of our responsibilities and the irresponsible joy of make-believe.\textsuperscript{12}

It is important to bear in mind that although humor in literature is generally directed at serious issues and that it is an effective way of exposing them, the funniness should not get lost in the process of reading and writing, because just as humor helps to raise these issues, it also helps to cope with them.

Humor and laughter are a way of dealing with problems that do not lend themselves to easy, or possibly, to any resolutions. An alternative to laughing at them would be repression or silence. Laughter is a life-affirming expression of the self that manages conflict in a healthier and more productive manner. In Kritik der zynischen Vernunft, Peter Sloterdijk notes the following about laughter:

Im positiven ekstatischen Lachen ... spielt die Energie einer fassungslosen Bejahung, es klingt bei aller Wildheit kontemplativ, zelebrativ. ... Die Teufelsenergie ist diejenige, die den anderen totlacht. ... Dazu gehört natürlich ein großes Maul, das sich ohne Hemmungen sperrangelweit öffnen läßt, nicht für große Sprüche, sondern für eine starke Lebendigkeit. In dieser steckt mehr
WOMEN’S HUMOR

Until recently, most literary humor research has focused on male humorists, such as Mark Twain. It has been said that women have no sense of humor, and indeed there have been very few female humorist writers. That trend is beginning to change dramatically -- not only are more women beginning to employ humor as a literary technique, but there has also been substantial research into women humor writers of the past that have been ignored, forgotten, or were never discovered. Researchers of women’s humor -- past and present -- have reached at least one common conclusion: women’s humor differs greatly from men’s in style, content, and intent. It also differs from the humor of other marginalized groups, for example, African-American humor.

In order to be able to laugh at oneself/one’s self or at others, one needs a solid sense of self, and in order to laugh as a group, a sense of solidarity and common experience is necessary. Much of feminist theory asserts that many women have historically lacked both, so traditionally women more often have been in the position of being laughed at, rather than doing the laughing. Sigrid Weigel accentuates this point:

In der Geschichte sind die Frauen denn auch eher
in der Rolle der Verlachten als der Lachenden
vorzufinden; eher sind sie Objekt von Spott,
Witzen, Zoten und Gelächter, als daß sie selbst
etwas zu lachen hätten. Obwohl es andererseits
nicht Weniges gäbe, was ihnen lächerlich vorkommen
könnte im Angesicht des herrschenden
Männlichkeitswahns und all seiner Rituale.¹⁵

Men have used women (as well as other non-dominant
members of society) as the butt of their humor to preserve
the gender hierarchy and maintain their superiority. As the
dominant group of society, men traditionally have had a
stronger sense of self and solidarity, with the common
interest of maintaining their position. In the introduction
to their anthology Lachen - Gelächter - Lächeln: Reflexionen
in 3 Spiegeln, Dietmar Kamper and Christoph Wulf write:

Stellt das Lachen einen Angriff auf die
sozialen und kulturellen Hierarchien. Die oben
Stehenden verlachen die unten; sie erhöhen sich
auf Kosten der Erniedrigten. Ihr Lachen bestätigt
die Unterwerfung; es schafft Distanz und
domestiziert; es sichert Privilegien, läßt keinen
Ausgleich zu; es strafft die Verstöße gegen
geltende Werte; unerbitterlich setzt es die
Unterlegenen der Lächerlichkeit aus und stärkt das
Überlegenheitsgefühl des Lachenden.¹⁶

Since women approach humor from an inferior social
position, they do not use humor to maintain their position, but to change it. One way of doing this is to point out incongruities in the existing order through the use of humor. Perhaps one reason men often do not think women are funny is because they do not recognize the same inconsistencies from their social standpoint.

With the exception of some radical feminist humor that often simply turns male humor on its head, women’s humor is less aggressive and hostile than men’s. As Nancy Walker points out, "[p]erhaps because women have had a history of coping with powerlessness, lowering their sights, modifying their needs, and compromising their desires, their humor has been less volatile and nihilistic than men’s." 17 Women’s humor seeks to change the existing conditions, not to solidify them, by creating a sense of solidarity among women and by exposing and overcoming the roles they have traditionally been assigned in the gender hierarchy and the myths upon which those are based.

**MORGNER’S HUMANIST GOALS**

Morgner rejected the term feminist because she advocated "Menschwerden," not a reversal of the patriarchy to a matriarchy. In an interview with Karin Huffzky, she demonstrates how convinced she was that this process required women and men:

Das Wort "Feministin" gefällt mir nicht, weil es
einen modischen, unpolitischen Zug hat für mich, weil es die Vermutung provoziert, daß die Menschwerdung der Frau nur eine Frauensache sein könnte. Da wird aber ein Menschheitsproblem aufgeworfen. Emanzipation der Frauen ist ohne Emanzipation der Männer unerreichbar und umgekehrt.\footnote{18}

Morgner was alarmed at the state of the world; her concerns were wars, especially the threat of nuclear war; the exploitation of people, especially under capitalism; the degradation of the environment, and many others of problems threatening the earth. Morgner told Klara Obermüller:

... [W]as ich möchte - eine friedliche Welt, das Ende des Kriegs der Geschlechter, die Chance für wirkliche Partnerschaft, für Liebe überhaupt - ist natürlich noch sehr weit weg. Und je weiter etwas weg ist, desto schwieriger ist es zu beschreiben, es sei denn durch Bilder.\footnote{19}

The creation of "Bilder" is accomplished through humorous depictions that present either a problem or a solution very graphically.

Morgner believed the way to begin to tackle these problems was not only through the participation of women, but also through the incorporation of traditionally female values and attributes into the collective human consciousness. Morgner did not assert that women could
change the world, if only they held the power positions, but that an integration of what have been female and male roles would be a necessary step to creating harmony on a small and a large scale.

Morgner considered the emancipation of women as the first step towards a common humanity, and what she calls the "entering of women into history". Women have to gain a sense of their own history, not the history of men written by men, and a sense of self-confidence and solidarity to get beyond thousands of years of patriarchal domination. Men already possess self-confidence and a sense of solidarity, because they have tradition and a sense of history. Women have tradition and history too, but it has not been documented in the same way as men's, and they are not as aware and in touch with them as men are.

Morgner assigns very little blame to men, conceding that they are just as trapped in their social roles as women, and that they have partly been victimized by their roles as well. It is also not easy for men to escape the roles they have played for so long, even for those who are willing to attempt this, as Morgner told Alice Schwarzer in an interview:

Es ist ja klar, daß Männer Probleme haben, mit ihrer Geschlechterrolle klarzukommen, die sie verpflichtet, überlegen zu sein. So eine Pflicht überfordert jeden Menschen. Und ein Mann, der
Morgner exhibits a surprising sensitivity towards men that is an essential component of her quest for "Menschwerden."

Morgner's hopes for humanity are high, and she knew that their realization would take time and patience, and would not be realized within her lifetime, if ever. Yet she remained optimistic and kept working towards a better world, aided by her sense of humor. Morgner asserted again and again that humor was an essential element in her life. "Humor...ist für mich eine Form der Lebensbewältigung. Er gehört zu meiner Seinsweise. Mithin auch zu meiner Literatur." Humor shaped Morgner's life and her literature. Her use of humor in Beatriz makes it a pleasure to read, as well as a productive textual and political strategy that advances her ideas. Sheila Johnson notes that "... it is a quality of her style and a vehicle for her thought, not a gratuitously inserted element."

OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTERS

In this thesis, I will focus on three areas in which I find Morgner's use of humor to be especially valuable in promoting her goals. Chapter one considers how humor develops unity and solidarity in social groups (i.e. among women). The relationship between Beatriz and Laura illustrates how humor can unite two very different people...
with very different viewpoints in a harmonious and productive manner. The solidarity created between them stems from accepting difference and from the realization that different ideas do not have to be mutually exclusive, but can be combined into a harmonious whole.

The main protagonists in Beatriz are women, but humor also allows a greater understanding between the sexes. Incongruities are pointed out to men in a non-hostile and non-threatening manner, thereby possibly endowing men with greater empathy towards the concerns of women. Humor also allows women a greater understanding of the male perspective and lets them approach the opposite sex with greater flexibility and less anger.

The use of humor to create unity also operates beyond the textual level. I believe Morgner’s work is of great relevance to the women’s movement, marginalized groups, and society as a whole. As mentioned earlier, many women have little sense of shared experiences and solidarity. Most women are so overburdened that they have little time to get together, to get to know each other, to support each other, and to realize their commonalities. Many women are also wary of the feminist movement, viewing it as too radical and academic and having no bearing on their lives. Humor makes feminist goals more accessible to a broader range of women because it eradicates some of the bitterness and seriousness of radical feminism, and it also allows women to identify
with other women. Because humor is a more picturesque way of describing a problem than an academic, political manifesto, it is easier for women to identify with the problems described; humor enables them to recognize that they are in a similar position and face the same problems.

In chapter two, I introduce humor as a subversive strategy. Humor creates ambiguity, which is especially useful under a totalitarian system of government such as the one under which Morgner was living and writing. It is far more difficult for a government to punish laughter and humorous writing than direct political protest or an anti-government manifesto. Though Morgner was a firm believer in socialism, she was extremely critical of the conditions in the then-GDR. However, Beatriz did pass the SED censorship process because her critique of the system was not straightforward. Morgner's use of humor allowed her to show the limits of official GDR ideology with little risk of punishment, which many other GDR writers faced. Many GDR writers left their country, choosing to fight the system from outside. When Synnöve Clason asked Morgner if she ever considered leaving the GDR, she replied: "Ja, nicht nur einmal. Wenn ich ein Mann wäre, hätte ich es vielleicht getan. Aber von einer Männergesellschaft in eine andere zu gehen hat wenig Sinn." Morgner decided to remain in her country to attempt to affect change from within. She displayed little anger towards men or toward her government,
instead she chose to chip away at their domination through her sense and use of humor. Although humor is subversive, it expresses anger and resentment in a non-aggressive and nonviolent way.

Humor points to the limits of ideology. In *Beatriz*, Morgner does an excellent job of presenting various ideologies and parodying all of them. The reader gains an understanding that there is not one truth, not one right way of doing things. By pointing to the absurdity of official ideology, Morgner undercuts its authority. At the same time, the realization of the limits of ideology allows writer and reader to imagine alternative orders. They may also be absurd, but only through a multiplicity of voices, ideas, and visions can change progress.

Finally, humor exposes inconsistencies and incongruities. Humor theorists agree that jokes rely on a basic incompatibility, which makes them funny. However, the recognition of incongruity is highly subjective, depending on a person’s gender, social standpoint, generation, culture, etc. Morgner’s use of humor in *Beatriz* is most effectual in pointing out incongruities in both-gender relations as well as in the relation between reality and ideal in the GDR.

Chapter three discusses humor as a survival strategy. Since humor arises out of an incongruity or incompatibility, approaching this inconsistency with humor allows one to
laugh at it, rather than become consumed by it because there is no resolution. Morgner repeatedly referred to her sense of humor as "Lebensbewältigung" that kept her going and enabled her to overcome the many obstacles she faced. Humor serves as a survival mechanism to Morgner as the author, to her characters, and also to the readers of *Beatriz*. It allows one greater flexibility in dealing with negative and painful circumstances, makes one more pragmatic and open to the possibilities of managing and possibly resolving them. The magnitude of the world’s problems seems insurmountable at times, and anyone attempting to affect change has very little power over them. Laughter is a response to or a result of powerlessness, but in the process one also gains a degree of power and control over what cannot be controlled.

Morgner’s use of humor operates in a cyclical process: Her inherent sense of humor gives her the courage to confront the problems she conceives. She then depicts these problems in her literature with humor, which serves as a powerful tool in creating solidarity and subverting the current order. At this point, Morgner, her characters, and her readers again need humor as a survival mechanism to assimilate the sometimes painful new realizations and to carry on in the quest towards "Menschwerden" and a more harmonious world. Morgner presents a model of human interaction that utilizes humor and laughter as a survival
mechanism on an individual as well as a collective level. The ideas she presents in *Beatriz* transcend the pages of this particular novel; they apply to an individual life as well as to all of humanity.
ENDNOTES TO THE INTRODUCTION


2. Beatriz was the first part of a planned trilogy. The second part was Amanda: Ein Hexenroman, which was published in 1982, and Morgner passed away before being able to complete the third part.


4. Morgner spoke of gender in very universalized terms. Although "men" and "women" are no longer categories that feminists today employ in relation to gender, I chose to adapt her language, because it reflects Morgner’s way of thought and because I consider them still to be valid categories.

5. Irmtraud Morgner, Leben und Abenteuer der Trobadora Beatriz nach Zeugnissen ihrer Spielfrau Laura (München: Luchterhand, 1994). Hereafter, I will refer to this work as Beatriz.


10. Lewis 156.


14. Especially June Sochen and Nancy Walker in the U.S.


17. Walker 153.


21. Schwarzer 35.


CHAPTER ONE:
HUMOR AS A UNIFYING STRATEGY THAT PROMOTES SOLIDARITY

INTRODUCTION
Humor can be used to hurt and belittle others, thereby establishing and maintaining one's own superiority, however it can also be used to create solidarity. Humor theorists tend to focus on the solidarity humor creates within a certain group, either a dominant one -- to preserve the status quo, or a marginalized one -- to change it.

"Sociological studies have shown that, because it expresses shared values, humor can be a social lubricant and a tool or force in the exercise of power in social groups."\(^1\) Though Morgner's *Beatrix* and this thesis focus on the creation of solidarity among women, the ultimate goal is the creation of a solidarity that crosses the boundaries of gender, nationality, and ideology. Morgner affirms this point in an interview where she says: "Das Erlebnis der Solidarität ist nämlich nicht nur etwas, worauf eigentlich jeder Mensch ein Recht hat, sondern es stärkt und erhebt auch und hat enorm mit Lebensqualität zu tun."\(^2\)

Morgner's immediate goal was to assimilate women fully into history ("Eintritt der Frau in die Historie") and make them absolutely equal members of society, but only as a necessary prerequisite to creating a harmonious world order.
Taylor points to "...the importance of laughter as value to resisting self-other distinctions with dominance as defining difference." This is an essential element of Morgner's use of humor. She may use humor to point out inconsistency and difference, but only in an attempt to suspend them. The "self-other" distinction in Beatriz always points to acceptance, to the suspension of dualities, and the realization that human relations do not have to be a zero-sum game, but that much is gained from difference -- everybody can win from maintaining and accepting difference. Humor allows one to take oneself and one's way of life and viewpoints less seriously, thereby easing the process of accepting others, without preempting or validating any one person or viewpoint.

BEATRIZ AND LAURA

The relationship between Beatriz and Laura is extremely complex and does not neatly fit into this chapter on unity and solidarity. Nothing in Beatriz allows itself to be easily analyzed and categorized. Morgner makes her readers co-authors of sorts; she does not offer any definite answers, but rather provides her readers with a "Denkanstoß," from which to write their own stories (not in a literal sense) and draw their own conclusions. She wants her readers to be active, creative readers, to prompt them to reflect upon their own lives and relationships.
Some critics, such as Biddy Martin, view the Beatriz/Laura relationship in a negative light, asserting that the merging of their identities negates Beatriz’s idealistic nature and validates Laura’s pragmatic, realistic nature. The text can certainly be interpreted in this way, but I read the relationship between these two women and the eventual merging of their identities as positive, unifying, though problematic elements of the work.

Upon Beatriz’s arrival in the GDR and her initial meeting with Laura, Laura, attempting to help Beatriz find work as a writer, procures her a job writing a short story for a union meeting. As a "Minnesängerin" from the Middle Ages, Beatriz has difficulty adjusting to this style of writing, so Laura writes it for her. Beatriz loves it and calls Laura "ihre bessere Hälfte"(184). Through the women’s humorous rapport, they experience a merging of their identities, from which each gains a "better half." Their relationship signifies a relationship that demonstrates solidarity and equality as a way of life.

Morgner’s focus on a female pair is unique in the literary tradition, and it also differs from her previous novels, in which the female protagonist defined herself in relationship to a male figure. Eva Kaufmann notes:

So wie in großen Romanen der Vergangenheit männliche Figurenpaare das Werkzentrum bilden ... so nun das weibliche Paar, als es um den Eintritt
der Frau in die Geschichte geht. Beatriz und Laura im Mittelpunkt des Romans bedeuten auch, daß das Verhältnis der Frau zum Mann ... seine Schlüsselstellung verliert. Im Beatriz-Roman erscheint das Verhältnis der Frau zum Mann gleichrangig neben ihren anderen Lebensbeziehungen ... Durch gegenseitigen Beistand wird in vielen Varianten erprobt, wie es Frauen zuwege bringen können, sich ein selbstständiges Verhältnis zum Mann aufzubauen.  

Women often question their lives and measure their emancipation vis-à-vis a man. In previous works, Morgner has used humor in a similar way to that in Beatriz, but it was structured around a male/female relationship. Alison Lewis writes that in Beatriz,

Laura seeks to answer the questions about the possibility and impossibility of existence through the exploration of another woman’s life ... . The exploration of questions of female identity via another woman involves a confusion of identities to the extent that it often becomes difficult to discern the separate identities of the various women in the narratives.  

Beatriz’s and Laura’s swapping of roles and identities is eased, if not accomplished, by humor. Their conversations and actions are not necessarily "funny" in a
conventional sense; there is not an endless exchange of jokes and bantering between Laura and Beatriz, but the natural effortlessness of their interaction results from its comical setting and framework. A model for a mutually beneficial relationship of difference arises from Beatriz’s and Laura’s mode of interaction -- devoid of jealousy and competition, and also of passing judgment.

The pragmatic, realistic Laura becomes frustrated with Beatriz’s extreme idealism that Laura fears will lead Beatriz into becoming too radical and pursuing terrorist activities. However, she understands and empathizes with her friend’s impatience and frustration and tries to reconcile them with her own pragmatism and patience in a creative and humorous manner, rather than dismissing Beatriz’s ideas and attempting to convince her of the validity of her own:

Laura suchte nach einer Lösung, die sowohl für ihr Land als auch für Beatriz gut sein sollte. Sie suchte lange. Dann fiel ihr der weiße Hirsch in den ersten Versen des Erec-Romans von Chrétien de Troyes ein. Das Tier, personifizierter Rechtsbrauch (costume), den König Artus als eine Art Beschäftigungstheorie handhabte, brachte Laura schließlich auf die rettende Idee vom Einhorn.

(241)

She sends Beatriz on a tour of Southern Europe in search of
a unicorn. A microscopic amount of the grinded horn of this unicorn, mixed with the world’s drinking water would liberate "... diese Erde schnell und ohne Blutvergießen von Kapitalismus, Kriegen und Patriarchat ..." (244). Laura approaches potential conflict in such a humorous way and with such creative style (the ease with which she incorporates a medieval epic into a contemporary situation strikes me as humorous in itself) that it leads to a harmonious resolution, not an unresolvable stand-off between two conflicting points of view.

Beatrix’s travels and the interim correspondences between her and Laura are humorous and culminate in Beatrix’s return. She claims to have found the unicorn, but instead presents a little lap-dog with horns tied to its head.

Da erblickte [Laura] neben Beatrizens rechtem Hosenbein ein kleines Tier. Das von Laura gleich als Hund erkannt worden wäre, wenn ihm nicht ein korkenzieherähnliches Horn zwischen den Ohren aus dem Kopf geragt hätte. (479)

Laura recognizes the misidentity of the "unicorn" and can accept it without having to impose the realistic view -- that this is just a dog -- onto Beatrix. She does not have to deflate Beatrix’s enthusiasm and excitement in the name of rationality and reality. Instead, she can genuinely partake in her friend’s happiness because her overriding
goal of distracting Beatriz from terrorism has been achieved.

Upon Beatriz’s return from her travels, she and Laura almost completely exchange roles and identities. Laura takes over all of Beatriz’s writing, while Beatriz devotes herself entirely to domestic chores, such as child-rearing and housework. Beatriz seems eerily content and complacent in her new role; soon after her arrival, "... ließ [sie] sich zufrieden in einen Sessel fallen und sprach: 'Zu Hause ist es doch am besten’" (480). She seems to have lost all of her revolutionary zeal and idealism and is perfectly content with her role as a homemaker. Laura becomes alarmed at Beatriz’s behavior: "'Warum dressierst du dich so’, fragte sie erschreckt, 'willst du mich doublen? Willst du dich überflüssig machen?’" (582). Soon thereafter, Beatriz loses her balance while washing windows and falls to her death. Laura, on the other hand, becomes initiated into the Round Table of the Goddesses® and marries Benno Pakulat, the perfect man who displays an ideal balance between male and female characteristics. A perfect "Happy-End" that preempts Beatriz and ultimately validates Laura, the pragmatic and realistic woman? Hardly.

Biddy Martin interprets the ending in the following way:

Beatriz’ death figures significantly in this reading of the text’s reformist limits. ... Once
again, the importance of struggle and active intervention is negated as the potentially radical implications of sexual emancipation are confined and domesticated within the reformed bourgeois happy home.

The extremely ironic note of the last passage of the novel, which I will analyze in detail in chapter two, leads me to disagree strongly with Martin. Beatriz’s death and Laura’s newfound balance and happiness do not lend themselves to any easy resolutions. Through humor, Morgner constructs the ending in such a highly ambiguous manner that the reader is forced to draw his or her own conclusions from the resolution Morgner presents.

I contend the solidarity created between Beatriz and Laura in the course of the novel has resulted, on the one hand, in a balance between extreme idealism that is crucial for looking beyond immediate circumstances and envisioning a better future, and, on the other hand, pragmatism and realism that understands utopian, fantastical visions as playing a necessary part in the very slow, tedious, everyday struggle towards the achievement of this vision that is far in the distance. Beatriz does lose her balance, but she was a fantastical figure, Laura’s "bessere Hälfe"; throughout Beatriz she was Laura’s sounding board, whose idealism and fantastical ideas are of great significance to Laura in maintaining her own utopian visions while living
under the constraints of every-day, real life.

Alice Schwarzer writes:


Laura, as a woman living under the constraints of the then GDR and of being a single mother, or any woman having to deal with the practical demands of real life does not have the ability and luxury to be like Beatriz. However by maintaining a relationship with Beatriz and assimilating her essence into her own identity and reality, Laura gains the self-confidence and strength to believe in wonders and fairytales, in emancipation and equality, and in peaceful relationships between the sexes and among all of humanity, while struggling with the sometimes mundane details of her life without giving up hope for a better world.

SOLIDARITY ACROSS GENDER LINES

The solidarity that precipitates and results from humor in Beatriz focuses mainly on the relationship between Beatriz and Laura. The broader implication is that this is a model for a mode of interaction that could and should be pursued by women and men as groups, but also in inter-group
relationships. The solidarity evident in this novel is an impetus for people to reexamine their relationships and to ponder whether any solidarity exists. The focus on the creation of women's solidarity is only the first step to achieving solidarity across gender lines, and eventually among all people.

Much humor research has focused on the effect of humor on intra-group relations, either a dominant or a marginalized group. The current interest in women's humor focuses on its distinction from men's humor and how to employ it as a feminist strategy. Very little research has been done on the dynamics of humor in regard to bringing together two (or more) traditionally adversary factions. Morgner regards women's problems as men's problems too, although, since men occupy the dominant role in society, they are not as likely or prepared to recognize this fact. In an interview with Eva Kaufmann, Morgner expresses the hope that her book will be valuable to men also: "Ich habe lange gesucht, bis ich eine historisch-legendäre Ergänzfigur für Laura gefunden hatte. Ich hoffe, nicht nur für die Frauen, sondern auch für Männer."³

As I mentioned earlier, Morgner displays no hatred of the opposite sex on an individual basis, even though she and her sex have been oppressed by patriarchal domination collectively. She instead prefers to regard the individual man as trapped in his historical gender role much like the
individual women. Morgner says that she sees, 
... einmal den Mann als soziale Erscheinung, wie 
er historisch geworden ist und die Frau ausbeutet, 
was nicht dem einzelnen Mann anzulasten ist. Zum 
anderen den Mann als unhistorische Erscheinung, 
wie er werden könnte, eine Art Utopie, die uns 
gelegentlich in realen Männern, wenigstens 
zeitweise, entgegentritt. ... Ich hasse 
allerdings die Sitten, die die Männer oft daran 
hindern, sich Frauen gegenüber menschlich zu 
verhalten.  

In several of her interviews and novels, Morgner contends 
that women do not only live in a patriarchy, but that it 
also lives within them. Men and women play societal roles 
that have evolved through centuries, and both sexes are 
imprisoned by their respective roles, though women have 
undoubtedly carried the heavier burden. Sigrid Damm points 
out that men too have become trapped in their gender roles, 
seen in the example of the character Uwe Parnitzke: 

Sein Verhältnis zu Frauen scheitert an dem 
Konflikt zwischen der ererbten, anerzogenen 
Männerrolle einerseits und der Einsicht in die 
Notwendigkeit andererseits, sich aus der seinem 
Naturell ohnehin widerstrebenden Geschlechterrolle 
befreien zu müssen. Gegen seinen Willen ist er in 
der Vergangenheit und deren Sitten, zu denen die
Frauenausbeutung gehört, verankert.  

Just as the humorous rapport between Beatriz and Laura contributes to a greater understanding and acceptance of one another, it would be an equally effective tool for crossing gender lines and unifying the better halves of both male and female gender characteristics. Morgner does not attempt to discredit the attributes and character traits traditionally associated with the male sex, such as rationality, strength, reason, and intelligence, nor does she want to exalt the female ones, such as nurture, love, and emotionality. Both sets of characteristics are needed in her effort of "Menschwerden." Yet, the male traits have been favored in the public sphere, and the women’s have been confined to the private, domestic sphere. Most men would probably agree that women’s characteristics have flourished in the private, family arena, but that they do not belong in the public sphere of politics and business. However, men and women have to combine the best of their roles and allow both to operate in the private and the public sphere. Since women have been excluded from the public sphere, it is especially crucial that they and their traditional gender attributes are incorporated into it.

Creating solidarity between the sexes is on some levels a far greater challenge than creating solidarity among women. This is where humor plays a critical role in initiating dialogue between men and women. Humor is a way
for women to voice their frustration and anger at men, but also allows them to do so in a non-hostile and less threatening manner. Pointing out problems and inconsistencies to men in a humorous fashion enables them to understand and realize the problem because humor can be very graphic and makes them less defensive and more open to listening to a problem and trying to resolve it in solidarity with women, because it has been presented in a way that does not require an either-or solution, a winner and a loser.

Men have a great deal to gain through the incorporation of female values, but women can also gain valuable insights from the male perspective. One of the female characters in *Beatriz*, Valeska Kantus, reflects upon friendship and solidarity among men:

> Denn sie hatte einst mit Neid von historischen Männerfreundschaften gelesen, die, ohne schwul zu sein, von schöner Heftigkeit waren: ein gemeinsames Unternehmen befestigte sie. Bestenfalls eine Idee. Sie auszubauen und zu verteidigen band... . Freundschaften unter Frauen aber waren noch seltener als Solidarität. (649)

Men and women must become aware of the roles they play, individually and as a gender, and realize that these roles are fluid and interchangeable. A conversation between Beatriz and Lutz Pakulat on the occasion of their initial
meeting illustrates this point: "Lutz lachte herzlich. Versicherte Beatriz jedoch abermals, eine hübsche junge Frau zu sein. Beatriz versicherte Lutz, ein hübscher junger Mann zu sein. Er lächelte geziert" (197). The male role puts Lutz in the position of doling out compliments to the woman, whose role it is tacitly to acknowledge them. However, Beatriz breaks out of her gender role and adopts a male one, returning the compliment. This dialogue is humorous to the reader, because her response is unexpected. Initially, Lutz seems taken aback by Beatriz’s reply, but it is the beginning of a humorous rapport that develops between two people and leads to a relationship where gender lines become blurred, where roles are not static and fixed, but open and flexible. When gender roles are mutable, neither sex becomes trapped in its roles. Humor serves as an excellent vehicle for breaking open gender roles and allowing men and women to adopt parts of different roles beneficial to both sexes. As Benno Pakulat remarks in Beatriz:

„Uns steht kein langweiliges Leben bevor, wenn die Weiber erst tun wollen, was sie tun wollen, nicht, was sie tun sollen. Was werden sie als Menschen sagen über die Männer, nicht als Bilder, die sich die Männer von ihnen gemacht haben?“ (398)

This can also be an area of reflection for women about men and their gender roles.

In one of the most humorous scenes in Beatriz, Valeska
Kantus undergoes a sex change, which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter. What is applicable to this examination of solidarity across gender lines, however, is how she integrates characteristics of both male and female roles, with the result of creating a better relationship with her husband, while satisfying her personal needs. During sex, Valeska changes back into the body of a woman, for convenience and erotic appeal, without having lost the self-confidence and benefits she has gained as a man during the day. Surprisingly, her husband can accept that she is a man and realizes the advantages it has brought her. Both of them are now able to achieve real solidarity because they are no longer trapped in their gender roles, but can roam through them freely, taking the best of what each has to offer. They realize, "... daß sie notfalls die Bilder entbehren konnten, die sie sich voneinander und die andere für sich gemacht hatten. Da wußten sie, daß sie einander liebten" (652). Valeska and her husband have truly become "human" in the Morgnerian sense. Morgner paints this ideal with a great deal of irony, especially since its realization is thinkable only far in the future, yet without humor this scenario of inter-gender solidarity could not be envisioned; neither Valeska and her husband nor the reader of Beatriz could embrace it without a sense of humor.
As I already discussed in the introduction to this chapter, humor is an especially effective tool for creating solidarity among a marginalized group. People express and discover shared values and are able to gain a degree of control over an oppressor or oppressive situation by laughing at them collectively. Women do lack solidarity and many of the foundations on which it is built, but at the same time, I believe this emphasis discounts many of the enormous inroads that the women’s and feminist movements have made in the twentieth century. Women have come together to fight against injustice and inequality; they are aware of their shared values and struggles, and as a result have made tremendous progress on the road to equality. The magnitude of the injustices against women, resulting from thousands of years of patriarchal domination, has made this a slow and difficult road, which has made many women approach it very seriously and with varying degrees of bitterness.

Though bitterness and hatred towards an oppressor are natural and understandable, they are not productive assets to the struggle against oppression. They waste valuable time and energy, create friction, and draw the lines of battle even tighter. Irmtraud Morgner utilized the power of humor in her struggle to overcome the hierarchy of gender.
She did not want to be labeled a "feminist," partly because she was a devout socialist, but also in part, I believe, because she rejected the bitterness and man-hating that she perceived in West German feminism.

Still, the creation of solidarity is of particular importance to women, and Morgner's use of humor to overcome boundaries and unify different people and ideas is what makes Beatriz just as relevant to women's emancipation twenty years after as it was at the time of its publication. Morgner's ability to transcend boundaries and roles manifests itself clearly in her longtime friendship with the West German feminist Alice Schwarzer. They were close friends who also had many fierce public debates. Schwarzer relentlessly badgered Morgner about calling herself a socialist instead of completely identifying herself with the feminist movement, while Morgner could not understand Schwarzer's refusal to acknowledge the prerequisite of a socialist revolution to the full emancipation of women. Neither woman ever converted to the other's point of view, still they kept the lines of communication open, maintaining a dialogue that thrived on humor. Without humor, it is unlikely that these two very different women could have remained friends, accepted each other, and kept debating their differences over the course of years. Morgner's real-life friendship with Alice Schwarzer is evidence that the model of interaction she creates in Beatriz functions in the
real world. Different opinions are not mutually exclusive; one can learn from others without abandoning one’s own belief system. Alice Schwarzer and Gerhard Wolf delivered the eulogies at Morgner’s funeral, in accordance with her wishes. It is interesting to note that Morgner identified so strongly with a West German feminist and a member of the opposite sex. Alice Schwarzer had the following to say about her friend:

Ich persönlich verliere mit Irmtraud Morgner eine wirkliche Freundin. Sie hat mich in den letzten 15 Jahren immer wieder zum Weiterdenken ermutigt und dabei begleitet. Sie hatte, trotz allem, einen unbändigen Spaß am Leben. Sie konnte so umwerfend komisch sein! Ich glaube, die meiste gemeinsame Zeit haben wir, auch in dunklen Momenten, voller Lebenslust verbracht.\textsuperscript{12}
1. Paul Lewis 36.
2. Schwarzer, Jetzt oder nie 36.
6. See Beatriz 654-5.
INTRODUCTION

To introduce the subversive potential of humor after elaborating on its unifying effects and its creation of solidarity might seem contradictory. I have discussed how Morgner’s intent was not to reverse patriarchy, yet she did want to subvert it. To subvert something does not mean to completely destroy it; it does imply the fundamental overturning of its principles. Palmeri defines subversive literature in the following way:

... [I]f a satire’s implied utopian vision looks forward to necessary changes in the future, and if it parodies a long-standing, well-established institution, set of beliefs, or practice, then the work defines its perspective as subversive or progressive.¹

The phrase "subversion of the patriarchy" has overtones of radical feminism and sounds threatening to men -- and also to some women. However, I will discuss the concept of subversion in a way that is congruous with the concept of solidarity as developed in chapter one. Unity and solidarity among women and across gender lines are imperative to the subversion of the current order. Morgner’s sense of subversion does not involve demolishing
the social order, but subverting it subtly and slowly, with a sense of humor, retaining useful elements and adding useful elements, in a process towards establishing a balance that incorporates the old and the new into a harmonious whole. The ambiguity her humor creates allows Morgner to escape punishment, to voice dissent in a positive manner, and to resist preaching at her readers -- thereby subverting official doctrine.

THE CREATION OF AMBIGUITY

Humor creates and is in part created by ambiguity. The subversive potential of ambiguity is immense, particularly for dissent within a totalitarian regime. Irmtraud Morgner believed in the ideals upon which the GDR was founded while becoming increasingly more critical of the evolution of the socialist revolution there. Her use of humor in Beatriz aids her in criticizing her government and societal order, with little risk of punishment. The ambiguity in which she cloaks her dissension makes it difficult to squelch her voice of protest. Morgner’s awareness of this is evident in an interview with Schwarzer:

Though Morgner was never at risk of being jailed or exiled, she nevertheless faced continuous scrutiny from the SED censorship process. Morgner found a way to even use censorship to her advantage, as she told Clason, "[d]ie Zensur macht einen sensibel, scharf auf das Spiel der Nuancen."^3

While ambiguity in protest lessens the risk of punishment from the government, as well as from private sources, it is also a more amicable and fruitful avenue of complaint. Paul Lewis notes that, "[a]n individual who can joke instead of fighting will be less offensive and destructive; a society composed of such individuals will run smoothly."^4 Morgner is an expert at expressing her criticisms in a humorous, ambiguous manner that is inoffensive, though not ineffective. The ambiguity her use of humor creates in *Beatriz* has great potential for subversion, more subtle and less aggressive than direct attack.

As mentioned earlier, Morgner leaves her work wide open to interpretation. She does not dictate to her reader any ready-made, easy, dogmatic conclusions, but forces the reader to draw his or her own from a multiplicity of viewpoints, none of which are favored, all of which are parodied. Palmeri underscores this by pointing
out that, "[t]he resulting multivoicedness, the unresolved clash of multiple alternatives, gives narrative satire the possibility of formulating distinctive and novel critical perspectives." Beatriz subverts the current order by presenting alternate visions of the way things could and maybe should be, by giving readers the impetus to imagine their own alternatives without dictating what these should be, without endorsing anything, except the process of imagining.

Humorous writing is often associated with an unresolved ending that gives the reader no sense of closure or resolution. The ending of Morgner’s Beatriz is extremely ironic and ambiguous, leaving the reader with a sort of uneasiness because a definite ending is lacking. Palmeri substantiates this by noting that open-endedness leaves "... meaning indefinite and [suspends] the reader uncomfortably between alternate and opposed interpretations of the work." The real work for a critical reader of Beatriz begins only after devoting a good deal of time to reading this lengthy novel.

The opening sentence of Beatriz reads: "Natürlich ist das Land ein Ort des Wunderbaren," (9) begging the question of whether the reference is to a fantasy land or a real country where miracles can happen. Throughout the novel there is a tension between these alternatives that are not reconciled at the end. The novel concludes with the
following sentence: "Denn natürlich war das Land ein Ort des Wunderbaren"(657). Morgner leaves the task of deciphering what is fantasy and what is possible in real life to her readers. She writes:

Das Entwerfen von Utopien ist ganz wichtig. Aber gleichzeitig muß man wissen, was ist im Moment das mögliche Machbare. Wer ohne diese Seite Utopien entwirft, ist nicht einer, den man ernst nehmen kann ....

The reader must determine what is possible and what is not in any particular situation.

Beatriz’s return from her quest for the unicorn, her subsequent domestic complacency, and Laura’s perfect life following Beatriz’s death are highly ironic and ambiguous -- culminating in the last paragraph of the novel:

Beflügelt von den Liedern der Beatriz de Dia, erfüllte und überfüllte der VEB Hochbau seine Produktionspläne. Der Wohnungsmangel in der Hauptstadt Berlin schwand. Sonnabends ermannten und erweiblichten sich die Mieter ab und zu und rafften Unkraut und Unrat von den Plätzen vor ihren Haustüren. Sonntags versprühten Flugzeuge der Interflug goldene Worte der Trobadora über die Spaziergänger. Da überwand die proletarische Solidarität ihrer Bewohner, international bewährt, sogar die Barriere der Familie. Denn natürlich
war das Land ein Ort des Wunderbaren" (657).

Biddy Martin’s assertion that Morgner abandons the revolutionary potential of her novel at the end, and instead exults Laura’s newfound bourgeois bliss cannot be substantiated by the text. The ambiguity and open-endedness do not lend themselves to her conclusion. Anneliese Stawström, for example, is surprised by this type of conclusion:

Umso bemerkenswerter ist, daß die ironische Ausmalung dieser krankhafte Passivität von Kritikern als "Harmonie" aufgefasst wurde. Die Selbstdressur zur angepassten Hausfrau und bescheidenen Botengängerin nach dem Verlust der dichterischen Fähigkeiten und der schöpferischen Phantasie überhaupt kann ja nur als Zeichen von "Disharmonie" verstanden werden.®

Whatever conclusions a reader might derive from Beatrix, they are not pre-formulated by Morgner who maintains ambiguity throughout her novel, forcing her readers to accept it as a way of writing and life and to make as much sense and derive as much meaning for themselves from ambiguity as they possibly can.
THE LIMITS OF IDEOLOGY

Morgner draws attention to the limits of the official ideology of the GDR and of gender ideology; in the process she establishes the limits of any ideology -- with humor. Kamper and Wulf note the following about humor and its subversive effect on ideology:

Es ist nicht verwunderlich, daß die Neuzeit und besonders die Moderne ein negatives Verhältnis zum Lachen haben. Lachen ist gefährlich; es hat eine subversive Potenz. Wer lacht, glaubt nicht an die Unterscheidung zwischen Richtig und Falsch, zwischen Wahr und Unwahr, zwischen Gut und Böse und gefährdet die Wahrheit.9

It is interesting to note that while Morgner was not subjected to punishment from the SED, due to the ambiguity of her subversive writing, her works also received very little attention from GDR literary critics (perhaps an indirect form of punishment). In contrast, Beatriz and Amanda received a tremendous amount of attention and praise in West Germany and among western feminists, where her works were considered a breakthrough in women’s writing.

Beatriz presents a multitude of ideologies through quotes from different historical eras, political systems, and people, none of which are favored or validated; Morgner parodies all of them. Again, it is up to the reader to assess which to accept and which to dismiss, but through
this process the message that there is no ONE, no right ideology emerges. Doris Jahnsen and Monika Meier point out that:

Die Sprengkraft des Romans liegt in einem Verfahren der steten Re-vision des einmal Bedeuteten, das fortwährend neuen Perspektiven ausgesetzt und damit vervielfältigt wird. Auf diese Weise widersetzt sich der Text jener vermeintlich endgültigen Wahrheit, die auch und vor allem die realsozialistische Rhetorik auszeichnet.¹⁰

Reading *Beatriz* is a process of balancing a multitude of ideas, with no teleological direction. Balance is a recurring theme in Morgner’s writings. Beatriz dies because she loses her balance while washing windows. In "The Tightrope Story"(569-77), Vera Hill, a physicist, walks to work on electric lines in order to save time. As a woman, she needs more time than the male physicist, because she also has household and childraising duties to contend with. She considers this a pragmatic solution to managing her time and responsibilities, until her boss confronts her about her mode of transportation, of which he does not approve. He tells her it makes the institute look bad, that it is simply an unrealistic mode of transportation. The next day, "... verlor Vera Hill auf dem Heimweg die Balance"(577). An external influence makes Vera Hill lose the balance that she
had created for herself -- and that worked for her. This incident points to the absurdity of a country where women are equal by law, but still carry a double or triple burden. No one ever wondered how Vera managed all of her responsibilities. It was simply expected of her.

Everyone must find and maintain his or her own balance; it cannot be dictated by another person or group, and it is a never-ending process that applies both to individuals and societies. The GDR did not achieve a balance between, on the one hand, the rights it granted women, and on the other, what was still expected of them in the private sphere.

It takes humor to maintain balance because when the limits of an ideology are exposed, the results can be rather shocking. Morgner believes in initiating change in this way:

Man kann die Sitten nur ändern, indem man sie als seltsam und unangemessen ins Bewußtsein hebt, zum Beispiel mit Literatur, indem man Leser anregt zu einem schöpferischen Prozeß des Nachdenken und der Verwunderung über sich selbst.  

The story about Valeska Kantus’s sex change suggests that the ideology of gender roles is highly unstable. This is a perfect illustration of Morgner’s humor: her point is made very graphically -- readily comprehensible to any reader. Morgner also presents her message in a way that is non-threatening to men, despite the fact that she is ridiculing
the phallus, thus her argument that gender roles are social constructs, not innate gender characteristics, is presented very effectually.

Valeska Kantus twice utters "Man müßte ein Mann sein" (621, 625) before, when she makes the wish a third time, it becomes fulfilled. When she inspects her new body and discovers her penis:


Valeska laughs at her penis, because she does not possess the male gender identity to go along with it. She realizes: "Das Mannsein nützt mir ohnehin wenig, wenn mir nicht auch meine Vergangenheit samt Rollenerziehung weggezaubert ist" (650).

Morgner uses humor in this episode to create solidarity between the genders, as discussed in chapter one, yet it is also a vehicle for deconstructing and thereby subverting gender ideology. Judy Little asserts that "... cultural (and gender) institutions are in large part language,
deployment, strategy. The language of authority preserves the social and psychological deployment of the male’s power."¹² Gender roles develop through the acquisition of the language and symbols of our society, in which male and female gender identity is inscribed. Along with acquiring gender identity comes an association of male traits as positive and strong, and female traits as negative and weak. Female qualities are held in high regard in the private sphere, but male qualities rule the public sphere.

Morgner draws attention to the actual basis of this gender ideology: "... [E]twas Fleisch mit blutgeblähter Haut"(629). Valeska -- and through her story, the reader -- realizes,

... daß die physischen Unterschiede zwischen Mann und Frau gegenüber den kulturellen gering waren. Valeska hatte das geahnt. Aber sie hatte das nicht genau wissen wollen. Manchmal empfindet man Wahrheiten als zu wahr.(629)

People may have some awareness of the limits of gender ideology and any ideology, as Valeska did, but do not want to confront them because, when lines are blurred, life becomes disorderly and one has to think independently instead of following prescribed doctrines. Morgner’s Beatriz is an uncomfortable piece of literature that can be unsettling. Her humor however, eases the tension, acting as a tool of survival that will be examined in chapter three.
THE EXPOSITION OF INCONGRUITY

In using humor Morgner points to inherent incongruities between the ideals upon which the GDR was founded, and specifically to incongruities between the status of women as equal and the reality of their lives. Establishing the basic incompatibility of ideal and reality reinforces the notion that there are no stable, fixed ideologies. I have mentioned before that the recognition of incongruity depends in large part on shared beliefs and experiences, and that humor derived from incongruity is dependent upon one’s status in society. Yet, I believe Morgner’s humor once again eases the process of recognition because of its picturesque nature. By presenting incongruity so vividly, she forces the reader, who may not immediately recognize the incongruity, to at least consider it. Through her humorous depiction of various incongruities, Morgner exposes the rift between the ideal and reality in the GDR, thereby ultimately subverting its patriarchal social system.

In Paris, Beatriz is told about the GDR and cannot wait to get to this country where exploitation and inequality have been abolished. Uwe Parnitzke told her about the egalitarian ideals upon which the GDR had been founded, but failed to mention its reality. Beatriz’s enthusiasm is curbed before she even reaches her destination -- at the border. When the border guard inquires about the purpose of her trip, Beatriz replies:
"Ansiedlung im Paradies", ... . Die Antwort weckte sein Mißtrauen erneut. Er mahnte Beatrix, dem Ernst des Vorgangs entsprechende präzise Antworten zu erteilen, die Deutsche Demokratische Republik wäre kein Paradies, sondern ein sozialisitscher Staat.(132)

This initial, ironic deflation of her high hopes continues to be reinforced throughout the novel.

Western feminists incessantly harped on the incompatibility between the official status of women in the GDR and their practical reality. Women were rarely found in the top echelons of government and business, and even if they were, they were burdened with housework and childrearing in their "spare" time. The laws of the country and its official ideology had changed, but gender roles remained constant. Just as Valeska did not know what to do with her male body, because she lacked the corresponding male identity, men did not begin cleaning, cooking, and changing diapers simply because the laws had changed. This reinforces the limits of an overarching ideology. People do not live their lives on ideological fronts, but in their own little world, based on routine and tradition. Real change must be initiated on that level; it cannot be dictated from above.

Mörgner recognized and criticized the prevailing incompatibilities between reality and ideal, but she still
supported the GDR’s equality legislation, saying: "... [I]ch wäre ja dumm, täte ich das nicht." The positive achievements in the arena of gender equality in the GDR, as opposed to capitalist countries are considerable, and Morgner recognizes and applauds this progress. However, she maintains that this transformation has not been made on an individual level and in the private sphere, where traditional gender roles are still very much dominant.

Morgner also considers GDR official ideology from a completely different angle by letting the laws concerning women’s equality point out their incompatibility with women’s reality, letting the official ideology parody itself. She writes: "Diese Gesetze garantieren nicht nur Rechte, sondern stacheln auch die Unzufriedenheit der Frauen an, ermutigen ihre Unzufriedenheit." Morgner dissent was built on a balance of subverting the social order and its institutions while preserving positive elements of the old system, in this case, the real progress that had been made in the GDR and other socialist countries towards the emancipation of women.

Along with demonstrating the incompatibility between official GDR policies and their actual outcomes, Morgner specifically targets gender relations as discrepant. Her stories serve to highlight the incongruities between gender roles that are impeding women’s emancipation and full participation in society. Morgner’s humorous "Kaffee
verkehrt" and an episode between Valeska and Rudolf expose social relations as patriarchal and force the reader to confront this incongruity -- and possibly to imagine alternatives scenarios.

In "Kaffee verkehrt," a young woman enters a coffee-shop, sees a man she finds attractive, and proceeds to pursue (or harass) him in a typically male fashion. She whistles at him, makes comments to her girlfriends, buys him a drink, casually touches his behind, and finally asks him to a movie. Upon recovering from his shock, the man charges: "'Hören Sie mal, Sie haben ja unerhörte Umgangsformen.' - 'Gewöhnliche', entgegnete ich, 'Sie sind nur nichts Gutes gewöhnt, weil Sie keine Dame sind'"(163). Monika Meier notes that, "... [i]ndem eine weibliche Figur 'typisch männlich' agiert, werden scheinbar selbstverständliche Verhaltensweisen als besondere kenntlich."15 The humor of this story accentuates the discrepancy between socially acceptable and accepted modes of behavior for men and women. The underlying incongruity becomes easily apparent through this story -- to men and women -- and forces both sexes to consider and possibly alter their gender behavior and accept a change in that of the opposite sex.

Valeska Kantus was only too aware of the incongruity between the female and male role, as she recounts in her "Gute Botschaft."16 Before her sex change, which united
her and her husband Rudolf, as discussed in chapter one, the couple did not live together as harmoniously. Valeska relates the following scene:


As in "Kaffee verkehrt," a man considers a woman’s behavior strange, weird, completely out of line, and certainly not funny, when she turns gender roles on their heads. Just as Morgner uses the official GDR laws to subvert themselves, she lets the male gender role expose its own absurdity. Through humor, Morgner presents incongruities so vividly and forcefully that everyone is forced to recognize them. It may, however, depend upon gender and social position to what extent, if any, people comprehend this information and ultimately assimilate it into their lives and relationships.
ENDNOTES TO CHAPTER TWO


2. Schwarzer, _Jetzt_ 35.

3. Clason, _Ende_ 381.


5. Palmeri 8.

6. Palmeri 5.


11. Huffzky 5.


15. Meier 245.

16. The twelfth book of _Beatriz_ is called "Gute Botschaft, die Laura am Begräbnistag der Trobadora als Offenbarung liest." It recounts various stories of her life, including her sex change and is found on pp. 617-53.
CHAPTER THREE:
HUMOR AS SURVIVAL

OBJECTIVITY/DISTANCE

The research I have conducted suggests that humor and laughter are such universal human traits that they must be a survival mechanism of the species. Humor creates distance and objectivity in the face of a situation where one has little or no control, but in the process of laughing at powerlessness, one becomes empowered and thereby gains a degree of control. People who can laugh in the face of conflict, instead of refusing to acknowledge it or instead of becoming silent, will be healthier and have a greater possibility of managing that conflict, even if it cannot be resolved.

Some things cannot be changed, or will not be changed in the foreseeable future, which is difficult and uncomfortable to accept. By approaching what cannot be changed with laughter, one gains distance and objectivity. Kamper and Wulf note:

Lachen ist eine mächtig-ohnmächtige Reaktion des Menschen auf das ihn ereilende Schicksal.
Vielleicht schützt es manchmal vor der Erkenntnis der Ausweglosigkeit und der damit verbundenen Angst, oder aber es stellt den Versuch dar, das was nicht bewältigt werden kann, dennoch zu
There are certain aspects of life that human beings have no control over, for example, death. Others, like imagining a harmonious world order based on equality and justice, certainly seem beyond individual and even collective human control. Humor and laughter allow for a coming-to-terms with these aspects of life. Robin Haig, approaching humor from a bio-psychological perspective, writes that,

... [h]umor, among other things, can provide perspective. ... Humor refers to an overall attitude toward the human condition, in which a perspective broader than the circumstances is brought to bear.

EMPOWERMENT/CONTROL

The distance and objectivity gained from approaching an obstacle with humor is a basic survival mechanism that prevents people from becoming engulfed in and obsessed with powerlessness. However, in the process of laughing, of admitting powerlessness, an individual becomes empowered because the resulting objectivity creates power. Haig substantiates this idea by pointing out that

... [l]aughing at an absurd side of whatever is making us angry or anxious also provides us a chance for a little more objectivity, and objectivity allows us to feel some intellectual
freedom from what is "swallowing" us emotionally. It is this brief insight and increased objectivity which gives us a sense of being back in control to some extent, ... .

The control and power thus gained helps, not only to put a situation in perspective, but also to imagine different situations. Humor makes one more flexible and open; as Paul Lewis comments, "... it should contribute to growth by allowing us to bend rather than break." "Bending" involves being able to adjust to adversity and looking for possible ways around it rather than resigning oneself to living with it or despairing over it.

As mentioned before, using humor to describe a problem makes it more graphic at the same time that it protects the reader (and writer) from the horrors of real life by offering an escape from the problem while describing it. Irmtraud Morgner directs her reader's attention to gender inequity, while simultaneously making her disturbing revelations bearable by her usage of humor "LEBENSBEWÄLTIGUNG"

Morgner called her sense of humor "Lebensbewältigung" that she naturally incorporated into her literature. In several interviews she mentioned that the amount of her joking and laughter is a direct measure of how she feels. The more and harder she laughs indicates how bad she feels
and the magnitude of the problem with which she is struggling. Morgner tells Kaufmann:


It is perhaps humor as a survival mechanism that prompts Morgner to use it as a strategy for unifying marginal groups and for subversion of social norms. Her humor empowered her to take on the issues she did. The three aspects of humor discussed in this thesis work together in a never-ending cycle. The humor contained in *Beatriz* is a continuation of Morgner’s personal sense of humor. This humor turns out to be an effective strategy in illuminating the problems that Morgner examines. It is difficult to determine whether humor as a survival mechanism produces humor as a unifying and subversive strategy, or vice versa. I would argue that humor works bi-directionally: whatever is effectually uncovered through humor is easier to digest because of it, but will in turn require humor to endure what has been uncovered. Humor is a way of life for Morgner, a perpetual
cycle that protects her from despair and resignation, but that also forces her to keep pushing ahead, to keep on going.

INCORPORATION OF "LEBENSBEWÄLTIGUNG" INTO BEATRIZ

Readers of Beatriz benefit greatly from Morgner’s built-in survival mechanism of humor in a work that exposes issues that are painful to acknowledge and difficult to tackle. Humor as a survival mechanism operates on several levels in the text: Morgner’s own survival that she incorporates into her role as an author; survival on a textual level for her characters; and survival for the reader, who otherwise might not be inclined to pick up a novel of this magnitude.

The funniest segments in Beatriz contain underlying incongruities that are the biggest and most difficult to come to terms with and that require an arduous and prolonged struggle, with little anticipation of resolution in sight. Stawström agrees with this point as seen in her analysis of Beatriz’s return with the unicorn/lapdog: "... [J]e heiterer das Oberflächengeweben des Trobadora-Textes ist, umso ernster sind die Hintergründe."

A detailed analysis of the relationship between the funniness of specific parts of Beatriz and the severity of their underlying problems is beyond the scope of this thesis, however I would like to consider episodes from each
of the previous chapters in order to establish the interrelationship between solidarity/subversion and survival.

Beatriz’s quest for the unicorn and her return with the lap-dog illustrates how using humor as a literary vehicle creates solidarity in chapter one. It is one of the most fantastical and humorous episodes in *Beatriz* and contains a multitude of problems. Morgner, the author, and Laura, the character, both employ humor as a survival mechanism in order to be able to confront and manage problems. The glaring lack of solidarity and the inability to accept difference among woman are what both Morgner and Laura are struggling with. Morgner composes this episode and Laura faces it with humor, creating solidarity in the process. Humor as a survival mechanism has enabled the advancement of solidarity because the interaction between Beatriz and Laura is based on mutual respect of difference in a scenario where there are no winners or losers. However, the previously discussed ambiguous ending suggests that the cycle must continue -- Morgner and Laura will need another dose of humor to adjust to the new "order" they have brought about.

The differences Morgner and Laura overcome is Laura’s pragmatism and Beatriz’s idealism. Impatience with the current order has prompted the idealistic Beatriz to pursue terrorism, but Laura manages to distract her with the unicorn. Morgner has achieved solidarity in the text and
has presented a scenario for how relationships could work. Without the humor inherent in Morgner’s protagonists, solidarity between them would be unlikely, and lacking that, Beatriz presumably would have turned to terrorist means to try to force a change in world order. This potential outcome is closer to reality than the unicorn episode, and the realization that women’s solidarity does not exist is distressing for Morgner and the reader.

The humor with which Morgner attacks the incongruities between ideal and reality in her socialist country which is, despite its official stance, still deeply entrenched in the patriarchal gender hierarchy, confirms the value of humor as a survival mechanism. "Kaffee verkehrt" and Valeska Kantus’s sex change story both point out major discrepancies between reality and official ideology in the GDR. As a firm believer in socialism and a supporter of her country, it must not have been easy for Morgner to admit this to herself and to others. She needed -- and used -- her sense of humor to come to terms with this reality without losing hope; it allowed her to pursue subtle subversion of the current order instead of resorting to terrorism or abandoning her country and beliefs altogether.

Morgner continually prods her readers to examine their own lives and viewpoints in regard to the issues she generates in Beatrix. This also applies to implementing humor as a survival mechanism in one’s own life. Humor gave
Morgner the courage to pursue inconsistencies, even in the system she believed in so strongly, because she could always laugh at what she discovered; humor taught her not to take anything too seriously. That is not to say that I consider Morgner’s sense of humor escapist in any way. She does not laugh to avoid or ignore a problem, but to gain the strength to continue her fight for a better world.

HUMOR AS SURVIVAL FOR HUMANITY

Morgner’s Beatriz depicts the situation of women in the former GDR. Since the fall of communism, this novel may seem outdated, but what makes it still relevant today is that Morgner’s themes and her message transcend the specificity of any category. Morgner crossed the boundaries of a woman, a socialist, and an East German writer. These were the specific confines of her everyday life, but she transcended them in her thinking and writing. This is precisely why Morgner refuses to impart any "truth" upon her readers. Everybody must live with and within their own special set of circumstances, while attempting to look beyond them.

Beatriz was highly regarded in the West upon its publication, but its message is even more significant today. Similar to the division of gender traits into good-male and bad-female or vice versa, the world was divided into two opposing camps during the Cold War; each side assigned
themselves the good traits and the other side the bad ones. It was easy to pick out incongruities and problems only in the Other. The prospect of no longer having an enemy is frightening, because collective animosity created collective identity. Now that the world is no longer divided into two neatly defined categories, a new way of looking at the world order is necessary. To say that capitalism and democracy have triumphed, because socialism has failed is too simplistic. It is similar to viewing the ending of Beatriz as the preemption of Beatriz and the validation of Laura. The validation of the West should be questioned and challenged much like the highly ironic "Happy-End" of Beatriz. The recent electoral results in the former Soviet Union attest to the precariousness of this world view.

The fact that socialism failed as a socio-economic ideology is not so much an indication that capitalism has won, but that the time for any grand ideology is over. Instead of rejoicing over the victory of capitalism and democracy, it is now vital for every individual and society to examine his/her/its own ideologies for inconsistencies and problems. It will take a great deal of humor to no longer have an outside enemy, but to look for the enemy within. Being able to laugh at oneself and one’s way of life is a prerequisite of an honest and critical self-examination. Humor makes potentially painful results more bearable and thereby provides the courage to surmount them.
While certain aspects of existence are completely beyond human control, some are within human reach, but seemingly outside of individual influence. Nuclear war, environmental disaster, and the depletion of natural resources are catastrophes that everyone fears and that have to be prevented if humanity is to survive. Laughter is a first step in confronting these fears and thereby gaining a degree of control over them.

Humor is certainly not the only or even the best way of solving these threats to humanity, but it can create a mode of interaction that is conducive to a collective efforts aimed at eradicating them. The world no longer needs grand ideologies, but the collective effort of individuals who, despite their differences, can agree upon what to be against. Humans will never agree upon what to be for collectively, but will need to decide just what to prevent if humanity literally is going to survive. Preventing nuclear war and environmental disaster warrant immediate attention -- perhaps this model of collective difference can subsequently be applied to solving problems on a smaller scale as well. A society that is willing to confront its problems and fears will be more open and adaptive to change. Humor is an excellent strategy with which to start, because it is inherently egalitarian -- it is an inexhaustible resource that is available to everybody without discrimination.
ENDNOTES TO CHAPTER THREE


3. Haig ix.


5. Kaufmann, Interview 1512.

CONCLUSION

Irmtraud Morgner's use of humor is only a minuscule element of her fascinating and complex *Beatriz* novel. Her treatment of medieval themes, her narrative structure, and her abundant quotations from a myriad of sources are other aspects of this novel that intrigue the reader. However, it was Morgner's humor surprised and captivated me most. I was astonished by the lack of secondary literature on *Beatriz* -- or any of Morgner's works -- that focuses on her use of humor. Some critiques barely touch on humor, while others fail to mention it altogether.

Very little has been written on the subject of humor as a literary technique in general, and much of it is outdated. Many contemporary postmodern theories make mention of the influence of humor, but only as part of a larger project. It is difficult to come upon specific discussions on humor in the midst of the copiousness of postmodern theory. This is an area I would have like to explore further, had I not been confined by time limitations.

Another area that I would have liked to examine in more detail is Morgner's specific usage of different forms of humor and its evolution throughout her literary career. What I broadly refer to as humor encompasses irony, satire, parody, and may other types of humor and wit. I emphasize the overall benign nature of Morgner's humor, while some of
it can be highly satiric and biting. But, due to time and space limitations, I have opted to examine Morgner’s use and application of humor in a larger context and beyond the textual level.

As a student of literature, I have found it unsatisfactory to analyze and interpret one aspect of a work in its insularity. It is important to read critically, which includes examining a work in its gender, cultural, and epochal setting, but I see this only as a first step to incorporating a work into a greater framework. Morgner’s works demand thoughtful reading -- she wanted her readers to respond to her works, rather than to just absorb them. Ultimately, a reader should somehow assimilate a literary work into his or her world view.

Though I have a special interest in both women writers and GDR literature, I place Morgner in the category of my favorite writers, instead of that of a woman, a GDR, or another woman humor writer, and it is of greater interest to me to compare her to them. Morgner was a socialist with a special interest in women’s issues, but her message transcends these boundaries -- they were merely the confines of her life within which she had to live. However, Morgner’s imagination reached beyond those boundaries. Her vision of a better world and model of human relations that sheformulates with humor would still be relevant even if capitalism failed and matriarchy ruled.
In Morgner’s last interview, she said that we should not take what she says in this interview as her last word, but we should look for her message in her books: "Falls dies mein letztes Interview sein sollte, nehmt es nicht als mein letztes Wort: Das steht vielleicht in meinen Büchern."\(^{1}\) Until the very end, Morgner refused to impart her wisdom to others and insisted that there is no prefabricated last word, easy answer, or decisive dogma, but that everyone has to discover "truth" for themselves in a process that benefits greatly from a sense of humor.
1. Schwarzer, Tot 32.
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