

## The English Mother-in-Law Joke and its Missing Relatives

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### Abstract

*Mother-in-law jokes, like many other kinds of joke, stem from a male perception of an incongruity in the social order. Where this is absent there are no jokes. Thus they occur in societies such as England with nuclear families and not in those with patrilineal joint families such as India or China, which have much folklore based on a strongly negative stereotype of the wife's mother-in-law but no jokes. Where a country's kinship order changes from the patrilineal joint family to the nuclear family as in Estonia, this folklore fades and the English type mother-in-law jokes about the husband's mother-in-law emerge and flourish. The jokes reflect patterns of avoidance and are distantly related to the joking relationships in simpler societies. Women often resent their mothers-in-law far more fiercely than men do but this does not produce jokes. Jokes are a male phenomenon that is related to men's skill in and interest in systems. Jokes are based on system and do not involve personal feelings or empathy in the way women's humorous tales do. Jokes in general need not be based on hidden transgressive thoughts or feelings. They are funny because they systematically and suddenly break through verbal conventions about mentioning the unmentionable and they evade rules about how something may be spoken about, like mothers-in-law.*

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### Mothers-in-Law in English Jokes

One of the most popular sets of jokes in England concerns mothers-in-law. In the jokes she is always ugly, bossy, interfering and generally unpleasant. Sometimes something unpleasant happens to her in the jokes, even death, but most people laugh harmlessly, much as they would about the death of a lawyer in an American joke about lawyers (Davies 2011, pp. 210–211). The

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jokes are just as popular in other countries where many English people have settled, such as Australia or the United States. English emigrants took their jokes with them and their family life in these new nations was very similar to what it had been in England, so the jokes continued to make sense; those most humorous of peoples, the Americans and the Australians naturally invented new mother-in-law jokes of their own. The English mother-in-law jokes are numerous and have been told for a very long time, certainly from the mid-nineteenth century and probably from a much earlier time. They are still going strong today, as we can see from a recent dispute about them (*Council in Britain bars mother-in-law jokes* 2010, Hastings 2010, Hayes 2010). The nature of the jokes is best indicated by citing some examples:

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A man went into a bar and ordered a mother-in-law. The barman brought him a stout and bitter. [From the author's memory. It is older than the author. A similar joke was cited in the Oxford English dictionary in the nineteenth century (Firth pp. 412–413).]

And there was another nineteenth century version that ended 'old and bitter' (Apter 1986, p. 18).<sup>1</sup>

An Englishman to his friend: "I'm going to see my mother-in-law in New York".

Friend: "I thought she lived in London".

Englishman: "She does, but she looks better from New York".

(MacHale 1987b, no pagination).

"I've just come to tell you that I think you're a great man of medicine", beamed the young man on entering the doctor's surgery. "I've benefited so much from your treatment!"

The doctor was speechless with confusion for a few seconds. "But you're not one of my patients" "No", smiled the young man, "but my mother-in-law was. I've just come from the funeral". (Sheffield 1969, p. 47).

She's a very sporting woman my mother-in-law. She's always in great demand down at the cricket club. As the heavy roller. When she goes along in her white dress they use her as the sight screen. [Parker 1980, p. 37].<sup>2</sup>

Mother-in-law: "I passed your house yesterday".

Charlie: "Thanks very much". (Parker 1980, p. 40).

My mother-in-law has come round to our house at Christmas seven years running. This year we are having a change. We're going to let her in.

(Les Dawson cited in Sullivan 1997, no pagination).

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<sup>1</sup> On the nature of stout and bitter see <http://ask.yahoo.com/20010209.html>

<sup>2</sup> For a picture of a sight screen see <http://www.cricketscreens.co.uk/index.php>

First man: "Why do you call your mother-in-law Camera? Surely that's not her proper name?"

Second man: "I call her camera because she's always snapping at me"  
(Sullivan 1997, no pagination).

My mother-in-law is all right in her place. The truth is she's never in her place. She's always at my place. (Sheffield 1969, p. 19].

Arriving at the church to attend a wedding, the woman was tackled by the usher.  
"Are you a friend of the groom?"  
"Certainly not", she replied. "I'm the bride's mother". (Sheffield 1969, p. 92).

Getting my mother-in-law to accept a free foreign holiday was easy. The hard part was convincing her Dignitas was Swiss for spa.  
(Sean Lindsay, 2010, *Several Thousand Mother-in-Law Jokes*).

We got a new car for the mother-in-law – that government scrappage scheme is great  
(Marc Whiteley, 2011, *Several Thousand Mother-in-Law Jokes*).

All these jokes are told by English men about the wife's mother. Such jokes are very numerous and it is very much a living tradition. Not only are the old jokes still told but new ones are being invented, as we can see from the references to Dignitas (a Swiss assisted dying group only set up in 1998) and the British government scrap page scheme of 2009. By contrast there are very few jokes specifically about the wife's mother-in-law, though some of the men's jokes can in theory be switched, since English kinship terminology uses one word 'mother-in-law' for both wife's mother and husband's mother. However, it is absolutely clear from England's extensive repertoire of comic songs about mothers-in-law (Browne 1914, Herrader 1891, Hunter J. D. 1878, Hunter H. 1899), comediettas (Reeve 1859) and farces (Creel 1948, Pemberton 1879) television comedies such as Jeremy Lloyd and David Croft's 1982–92 BBC series *'Allo, 'Allo* (Haselden 1991), cartoons (Bateman 1920s, see also Chanfrault 1992), and cartoon strips (Smythe 1984) that the butt of the humour is the wife's mother. In the jokes the setting, the content and the language indicate that these are jokes invented by men and told by men, probably in male company about the wife's mother. The jokes have then been taken up by such British male comedians as Les Dawson and Bob Monkhouse and made into an important part of their acts. They are usually not the true begetters of the jokes, for jokes have no authors and are a product of social interaction.

There are very few English jokes about fathers-in-law or sons-in-law and, with one exception to be discussed later, men never tell jokes about mothers, that is the mothers of adult men. It hardly needs to be emphasised that it is only possible to understand the jokes that are commonly told by considering also the jokes that could have been invented but were not and those whose number is trivial (Davies 1998, Davies 2006).

How then are we to explain the English mother-in-law joke? A key answer lies in the distinctiveness of the long-established English system of kinship (Macfarlane 1978) but it will also be necessary to consider differences in conventional sex roles and patterns of sociability between men and women.

### **Kinship in England**

Long before it became a trading and industrial society, England was a country where for most families the extended kin were relatively unimportant and the law did not recognize them as having powers, rights or claims (Macfarlane 1978, p. 86). English kinship was simple, with shallow genealogical depth and close lateral boundaries. The extended kin lacked the kind of established authority found in other kinship systems – decisions were made within the nuclear family (Firth et al. 1969, p. 450). This was in marked contrast to their Welsh neighbours, whose strong and visible concern with genealogy and kinship became the subject of English jokes (Davies 1985, Davies 1999). Property was owned by individuals not groups of kin and there was testamentary freedom – the individual could, if he or she chose, write a will without reference to kin. Likewise land could be freely sold and bought by the individual because the kin had no stake in it (Macfarlane 1978, p. 92). Couples did not marry until they could form and support an independent household; they rarely lived with their parents (Macfarlane 1978, pp. 138, 155).

Except among the elite or the wealthy, marriages were not arranged and might well be precipitated by the woman's being pregnant. From the early Eighteenth century the ideal for the middle classes was a marriage based on affection and compatibility (Robinson and Smith 1993, p. 2], not arrangement. This is brought out in William Hogarth's (1745) bitterly satirical engravings *Marriage á la mode*, savagely mocking arranged marriages by parents seeking status or money. The conjugal tie had long been central but now it became idealised.

Kinship in England has then long been different in kind from that of other societies such as India or China or the 'peasant' societies of Eastern Europe. The English ideal was a nuclear family of husband, wife and dependent children. This left extended kin in an ambiguous and ambivalent situation. They are friends as well as relatives but optional ones and they have no set roles and no clear rules as to how to behave, for these exist only within the nuclear family. They are both kin and strangers, both inside and outside (Merill 2007, p. 2). Their situation is incongruous and thus they are liable to be the subjects of mirth, for incongruity is the basis of most humour (Oring 1995, 2003).

Yet there are no English sets of jokes about fathers-in-law, sisters-in-law, brothers-in-law, nor about the husband's mother but only about the wife's mother. Why is this? It is because she is the one most likely successfully to intrude herself across the boundaries of the nuclear family and to exercise authority and influence within it. This causes tensions between the husband and his mother-in-law which have to be managed (Young and Willmott 1957, pp. 46–53).

The nuclear family dwelling in its own household and living independent of kin is a cultural ideal but one which may be unattainable for practical reasons. At least since the time of the industrial revolution and notably after the destruction by bombing of houses in World War II, many urban working class young families have not been able to afford a home of their own (Young and Willmott 1957, pp. 16–19) and have been forced to live either in the home of the wife's mother or that of the husband's mother.

There were no kinship based rules and expectations about this but in practice they rarely lived in the household of the husband's parents because of the likelihood of intense conflict between the wife and the husband's mother (Merill 2007, p. 85; Young and Willmott 1957, p. 27), over possession of the son-husband and over who would be boss in the kitchen, a major source of both women's self-esteem. Living with the wife's mother was the lesser of two evils (Apter 1986, p. 124). Thus in practice the husband was the one on whom mother-in-law intrusion had a constructed impact. Even where households were not shared, the younger family tended to be matrilocal; particularly in working-class families they would live closer to the wife's mother's home than the husband's (Young and Willmott 1957, pp. 16–47).

The husband preferred his own parents but understood the nature of the problem and acquiesced (Apter 1986, p. 125). The husband often accepted that his wife's kin had become more important than his own (Merill 2007, p. 149; Young and Willmott 1957, p. 56). From the wife's *Israeli Journal of Humor Research*, 1(2), 2012

point of view it had the advantage of her mother being able to provide help with childcare and she could enjoy continuity in her family life. The children had an indulgent 'grandma' and in hard times the wife could seek economic assistance from her family, something more difficult for the 'breadwinner' to request (Young and Willmott 1957, pp. 22–43).

Men knew that the problem with their mothers-in-law was a structural one which might be best dealt with by avoiding them. It is easier for men to do this than for women, partly because it is easier for them to go out of the house and retreat into male company (club, pub, sport, outside treats for their sons) and partly because men try to avoid the tangles of involvement that the mother-in-law's presence causes. Jokes are an ideal means of avoiding the tensions and ambiguities of a mother-in-law's presence and avoidance also leads to jokes (Goody 1971, p. 99).

The men's jokes are about mothers-in-law in general, not one's own, thus emphasising that it is a structural problem and not one of personalities. The mother-in-law script is known to be fictitious and legendary (Raskin 1985, p. 180) and this makes it unlikely it will be taken seriously. Actual individual mothers-in-law find the jokes so grotesque that they do not take offence, thinking that they cannot personally apply to them (Cotterill 1994, p. 103). The jokes are not seriousness by other means but an alternative to seriousness and joke telling is non-bona-fide communication (Raskin 1985, p. 100). They are not in and of themselves tendentious; tendentiousness is a quality NOT of the content of jokes but of each telling and depends on context, on the added gloss, if any, and on the tone employed (Davies 2011, p. 4). Mother-in-law jokes can be employed for many different purposes but are very appropriate for the preservation of social distance when two persons with conflicting interests in a third party are brought into direct confrontation (Goody 1971, p. 99). They do not express hostility but, if anything, manage it. My thesis receives reinforcement from studies of joking relationships and avoidance in simpler societies where kinship is more elaborate and rule bound.

### The Joking Relationship

The western pattern of avoiding the mother-in-law through jokes has something in common with the joking relationships found in simpler societies with elaborate formal kinship systems. The structural stress of the son-in-law mother-in-law relationship may be so high that "there is actual avoidance of all personal contact" (Firth et al. 1969, p. 413). Here though, it is not the mother-in-law's intrusion into the nuclear family that is the structural problem but her anomalous position in relation to the entire kin of her son-in-law. Where there is potential conflict between relations by marriage who have different interests, then order is maintained and strife is avoided either by extreme respect behaviour (keeps it impersonal) or by joking which takes the seriousness out of the situation. The butt of the humour, the one who is teased and made fun of is required not to take offence (Radcliffe Brown 1971 [1940], p. 101). The problem is not personal but is recognition that the relationship is difficult (Apter 1986, p. 19).

Radcliffe Brown (1950, p. 58) saw these patterns of joking to create distance and avoid conflict as "what lies behind the vulgar English jokes about the mother-in-law." He added:

After a lecture given more than thirty years ago, in which this theory was explained, a member of the audience asked "Would it not be a good thing to introduce this custom (the avoidance of the wife's mother) amongst ourselves?" His question aroused a roar of laughter from the audience which I imagine was what he aimed at.

Here we can see the strength of the analogy but also its limitations. It rightly emphasises that this is a structural not a personal problem but in the western system of weak kinship and strong individualism such avoidance is not compulsory, nor is it as extensive or as extreme. The questioner's suggestion implied that extreme mother-in-law avoidance was not practiced in England and the audience's laughter drew not only on a recognition of the English mother-in-law joke and the structural tension behind it but also on the incongruity of placing these phenomena alongside the fixed and elaborate patterns termed 'the joking relationship'. The English mother-in-law situation has some, but by no means all, of the qualities of a joking relationship.

### The Daughter-in-Law's Plight

A further consideration that supports my argument comes from the far more fraught relationship, even in Western societies, between the husband's mother and daughter-in-law than between wife's mother and husband (Apter 2009, p. 71). This is despite the much greater proximity of the wife's mother to the nuclear family. Indeed it is one of the reasons why couples rarely live with the husband's parents. But daughters-in-law do not invent distinctively female jokes about mothers-in-law nor tell them, even though when angry they will directly employ strongly negative stereotypes about mothers-in-law (Merill 2007, p. 133) against their own mother-in-law. They may well illustrate a personal animosity by drawing upon a male joke but they are using it to make a serious point about their own particular mother-in-law (Merill 2007, p. 115 and 18–19; Apter 1986, p. 20). One reason for this is that women do not wish to, and in many cases cannot, use the male strategy of avoidance and joking when conflicts develop. The jokes are used by the women not as general jokes to elicit laughter nor bluffly to deflect or avoid a conflict but as an item to be enlisted in a personal vendetta against a particular named woman.

In any case on the whole women do not 'do' jokes (Kuipers 2006, p. 44). They understand and laugh at them but they do not tell them as often as men or with as much skill (Coates 2007, p. 20; Kuipers 2006, pp. 46, 52, 55) and they rarely invent them. Women's humour generally depends far more on individual personal experience, observation and relationships and not on general comic scripts (Holmes 2006, p. 30; Kuipers 2006, p. 186). Theirs is not a humour of avoidance but of engagement. Each form of humour is in its own way funny and the difference between them is not one of quality but of personal preference. When it comes to humour, men and women are different for both innate and social reasons.

The great intensity of the conflict between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law in those numerous families where there is conflict can be seen in studies of this relationship by social scientists (Apter 2009, Merill 2007). In some cases the daughters-in-law being interviewed in a study became angry and upset just talking about their mother-in-laws to the interviewer (Merill 2007, pp. 179–181]. There exist many websites full of bitter and angry complaints about individual mothers-in-law in which all the postings are by women (*I hate my mother-in-law* 2011; Merill 2007, pp. 13, 18–19; *Mother-in-law stories* 2011; *Mother-in-law hell* 2011; *Mother in law vent* 2007; Netmums Campaigns; Sofeminine.co.uk].



## Posted Daughter-in-law Complaints: A Selection

The following are posted complaints by daughters-in-law.

I have a monster in law as well. i have had zero contact with her for MONTHS because she just infuriates me to homicidal [sic] levels. I just have to pray and pray and pray. and im not even religious. She also cut my sons hair. His first haircut and she did it with no permission. We wanted our sons har long. He also had cute strawberry blond ringlets. And I have heard him call her momma. I really want to choke from how much I hate her. (Steenabeana 2007, *I hate my Mother-in-law*)

owh (sic) god, i can not, can NOT stand my mother in law anymore. I literally do not know what to do anymore. I just want to throw her off the planet. I have so much hate for her it isn't even funny anymore. I wonder why i had to chose my husband who had to have the friggen crazy/psychopath mum. Why me?? (Pinkshoe 2010, *I hate my Mother-in-Law*)

we barely have two nickels to rub together. But has that stopped us from having her for dinner every Sunday night of the year? Does she EVER bring so much as a cheese ball? No. She does not. This Christmas Eve, she showed up with some cr@ppy faux-pepperoni sausages, which she told me had been sent to her by one of my DH's (husband) siblings. She doesn't care for sausage (too salty, not on her restricted sodium diet), so she brought it along for us. Nice.... (Ready to smack the Woman 2009, *Mother-in-Law Stories*)

The following are some of the comments on the complaints from other daughters-in-law.

Oooooooooo! Your story has just made my blood pressure go up! And I thought I had it bad!

Yes! YES! CUT ALL HER FRIGGING FLOWERS! EVERY \*\*\*\*\* ONE OF THEM! And then, CUT HER OUT OF YOUR LIFE! PERMANENTLY!!!!!! Why do you allow this crazy, evil woman into your lives? (Salaciousc 2010, *I hate my Mother-in-Law*)

MIL's [Mothers-in-Law] can be very controlling and overbearing at times, you have every right to put them in their place (so to speak) and stand up for the rights of your family! Children learn by example! It's not ok for grandparents to smoke or drink around a minor! It's unsafe and it sends your child the wrong messages about what's exceptable [sic] and what's not. Ladies, I too have a MIL who plays games and I had it! She has been put in her place by my husband and myself and currently, she's playing "victim" role. I will rant about it later! My hearts are with you all! (TG 2007, *Mother-in-Law Vent*)

On the sites there are humorous as well as serious personal stories about a particular mother-in-law's aberrant behaviour. But there are also links to male joke sites devoted to or containing

mother-in-law jokes which also sell funny hats, T-shirts and mugs labelled 'mother-in-law' (Merill 2007, pp. 18–19) and there may even be a section of men's mother-in-law jokes within the site.<sup>3</sup> The setting up of the links seems to demonstrate that these women have failed to understand the nature of male joking, much as men fail to understand how deeply upset daughters-in-law can be about their relationship with their mother-in-law. It is not that all or even a majority of daughters in law fall out with their mothers-in-law but that a substantial proportion do (Apter 2009, p. 71) and when they do, it can escalate. The intensity of the conflicts also explains why this relationship has been so much more frequently and thoroughly studied than that between the husband and his mother-in-law. When a more general female humour about mothers in law does exist, it does not use script based jokes but takes the form of half-humorous aphorisms which are also meant to be taken half-seriously in a way that jokes are not. The give-away is that they appear in the middle of advice columns written for or by peeved daughters-in-law.

These mothers-in-law share the following characteristics

They don't respect the laws of time and space

Therefore, they offer their advice anywhere: In your home, in their home, at family gatherings, shopping malls, political rallies -- you name it.

Their voices usually carry from here to Guam. They like to give everyone the benefit of their unsolicited advice.

They usually have a need to control. Sort of like a combination of Catherine the Great, Atilla the Hun, and Roseanne (*Dealing with Mother-in-Law Conflicts* 2011)

Yet in general the women see their own mother-in-law problem not in structural but in personal terms and the situation in terms of the personalities of particular individuals. To Merill's (2007, p. 18) comment that "we can easily imagine women talking with their friends about their mothers-in-law but have great difficulty imagining men doing the same thing", I would add that 'we can easily imagine men getting together in a group and exchanging guffaws over mother-in-law jokes but have great difficulty in imagining women doing so.' The nature of the interactions is quite different. The women are seeking interpersonal intimacy through sharing feelings. The men are creating solidarity and a clubbiness among a group of mates, a much desired collective good feeling which is not about the relationships between particular individuals (Kuipers 2006, pp. 179–180; Oxley 1978; Willmott 1963, p. 61).

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.motherinlawstories.com/mother-in-law\\_jokes\\_page.htm](http://www.motherinlawstories.com/mother-in-law_jokes_page.htm)  
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There may be a good deal of aggressive, though good humoured, competition among the men (Holmes 2006, p. 30; Kuipers 2006, p. 65) to tell the best joke or even the first one. Yet this does not disturb the good feeling within the group and although the jokes play with aggression, convention demands that it is not targeted against a particular individual (Kuipers 2006, pp. 191–192). It would be considered unmanly and unworthy to allow personal emotion into such an occasion. Women have intimates. Men have pals. Social convention decrees this and particularly in working class company.

In addition to the women's websites,<sup>4</sup> some of which are outlets for schmerz, spite and spleen, there are entire published collections of women's "real stories about real mothers-in-law" with titles like *Mother-in-law Hell* (Bachkoff 2000) and *Horror Mothers in Law* (Bryan 2008). Unlike men's joke books, many of these 'true' mother-in-law stories reek of real nastiness and are quite unlike the unreal world of the jokes. There are no corresponding websites or collections of complaints from mothers-in-law (Merill 2007, p. 183) or indeed from sons-in-law. Even the websites for women that offer advice, offer it to daughters-in-law, not mothers-in-law, telling them how to handle "a difficult person" (Merill 2007, pp. 18–19) or an interfering mother-in-law (*The Mother-in-laws we love to hate*). These large collections of complaint construct a stereotype of husband's mothers and stigmatize mothers-in-law in a way that male jokes about mothers-in-law do not and probably cannot do. It never seems to cross the minds of the daughter-in-laws whose bitter complaints fill their websites that an innocuous mother-in-law, perhaps grieving for the son she has lost (Wong 2008, p. 49), perhaps a grand-mother who has no access to her grandchildren, may come across these websites and feel deeply hurt by the aggregate of threatening rage and venom they then read. She may feel – 'Are we all hated?' 'Am I perceived like that?' (see Bachkoff 2000, p.134). She would not have experienced these sad and negative feelings if she happened upon a website of mother-in-law jokes by and for men for she would know that jokes are absurd inventions that do not apply to individuals.

In the light of these phenomena, to accuse of misogyny comedians or groups of men who revel in mother-in-law jokes is absurd, unfair and hypocritical and merely reveals the dubious prejudices of those who make such accusations.

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<sup>4</sup> Such as <http://motherinlawstories.com> or [http://motherinlawvent.typepad.com/motherinlaw\\_vent/](http://motherinlawvent.typepad.com/motherinlaw_vent/)  
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Men make jokes about certain sets of women such as mothers-in-law or blondes but they are equally likely to tell jokes about sets of (or predominantly of) men such as drunks, NCOs, dictators, gangsters, engineers, carabinieri, football players, or cuckolds (Davies 2011). Sets of women are not singled out to be the butts of sets of jokes. It only looks that way because women do not create the sets of jokes. Also there are some sets of women about whom men do not tell jokes.

Men do not tell jokes about the mothers of adult men. Mothers are the subject of sentimental songs and saccharine tales in which they are revered for the sacrifices they make for their children and for providing unconditional affection. It is a powerful cultural myth (Cotterill 1994, p. 97) that it is more potent in some cultures, such as India (Narain 1957) than others. But it has a real basis in the sheer strength of the mother's wish to protect her children. That some mothers are indifferent, neglectful, resentful or cruel does not deny the reality of the enduring strength of the tie between mother and child.

The mother-in-law and son-in-law relation can be seen as farce but that of the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law can be tragedy. The mother of a daughter in a matrilineal Western society retains close contact with her and with the grandchildren but the mother of a son is vulnerable and may lose everything. When the father of the bride makes his speech at a wedding he may well use the cliché "I have not lost a daughter but gained a son"; the groom's mother may well be thinking the opposite. Hence the saying:

A son is a son till he gets him a wife  
A daughter's a daughter for the whole of your life.

See another version in Firth et al. (1969, p. 412).

Fearful of this loss, the mother may well try to retain some hold on and over the son after he marries. Sons retain good relations with their mothers after marriage but the daughter-in-law may see them as too close (Merill 2007, p. 111). The closeness may be fiercely resisted by the daughter-in-law, who interprets it as part of a struggle over the ownership and control of her husband and, if it is very strong, as threatening to undermine the conjugal bond. In Italy the husband's continuing strong tie to his mother is often a cause of separation and divorce (Di Giovanni 2007; DWordDiva 2007). More immediately, it may lead to emotional confrontations. Sons and husbands try to keep out of it. The son-husband will not take sides, nor take a stand,

nor confront his mother (see Wong 2008, p. 8). Sometimes neither he nor his father-in-law is aware of the intensity of the simmering conflict. If he is aware he will tell his wife to disregard and ignore the conflict and just live with it (Merill 2007, pp. 120, 154) and say 'don't take any notice of my mother'. Men distance themselves from such disputes because strong displays of emotion are unseemly and embarrassing and so they do and say nothing hoping the women can resolve matters peacefully between themselves (Cotterill 1994, pp. 74–75) The wife doesn't like this. She wants to "have it out" with her mother-in-law with a frank and perhaps too frank, exchange of feelings (Cotterill 1994, p. 74). It is again consistent with the general male strategy of avoidance into which the mother-in-law jokes fit very well. The son's mother remains his revered mater and he does not wish to see her driven out and the daughter-in-law may expect from her the same kind of affection and acceptance she gets from her own mother, which is then disappointed. Mothers-in-law are liable to be joked about by sons-in-law but risk being hated by daughters-in-law.

### **The Jewish Mother Joke**

The Jewish mother joke<sup>5</sup> (Raskin 1985, pp. 217–218) may seem to be an exception but the Jewish mother of the jokes is not hateful, and not unmotherly, rather she is smotheringly motherly. The jokes, told by Jewish men, depend on a contrast between a supposed unyielding Jewish maternal possessiveness and the imagined more relaxed relations of the families out there in the world of the majority. Jewish jokers set this latter world up as 'normality' and then construct a humour about 'Jewish difference' in regard to the society within which they live (Davies 1991). The best illustration of this point is the equivalent gentile joke, a meta-joke.

A gentile was due to have dinner that evening at his mother's house but then an urgent piece of work arrived in his office. He phoned his mother and said "I'm sorry to miss dinner, Mom but there's a lot on at work".

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<sup>5</sup> [Note by Ephraim Nissan:] Jokes about mothers appear to be a class of jokes current among modern Jews of Eastern European background. Present-day Jews from other backgrounds gained exposure to both "Jewish mother jokes" and mother-in-law jokes either by Western globalisation, or through contact with their local environment, non-Jewish or possibly Jewish. The stereotypes about too motherly mothers, and especially about sons' excessive attachment to their mothers, exist in Italian general culture (the son, treated as a *cocco di mamma*, becoming a *mammista*); this does not appear to have resulted in a class of jokes.

Mother: "That's alright, son. Some other time".

Should the jokes be based on the real existence of a very strong continuing tie between a Jewish mother and a son after his marriage, there may well be an enhanced likelihood of conflict between Jewish mothers and their daughters-in-law, particularly if the son has married out, but there are no jokes and either the men do not notice the conflict or else avoid it. Here is a section of an interview from Firth et al. (1969, p. 365).

Jewish husband: "My mother was very much against it (The marriage) but there were no rows".

The wife commented: "I wouldn't say that".

Husband admitted: "Well there were tremendously long arguments".

Wife added: "She had one or two goes at me".

The background is unimportant. What is telling is the husband's downplaying the incident and using passive verbs that avoid attribution and blame and the wife's disagreement and use of direct speech that blames his mother. Avoid versus involve. Arguments, a rather neutral term versus emotional rows and the aggression of having a 'go' at some one. It is no coincidence, as the Marxists say, that the only case of a mother-in-law taking a comedian to court for defamation involved a Jewish mother suing her gentile daughter-in-law, not about standard script-based jokes but about direct personal references to her in the female comedian's act (Ami 2009, Gottlieb 2009). Jokes about the wife's mother with a Jewish setting do exist (Minkoff 2008, pp. 108–109] but they are not Jewish jokes (Raskin 1985, pp. 206–207). They are merely mother-in-law jokes.

### **Mothers-in-Law in India and China: Conflict and Stereotypes but no Jokes**

India and China are two ancient civilisations that have always lacked jokes about mothers-in-law. The reason lies in the classical joint family structure that characterises these countries which is, in a sense, the opposite of England's traditional nuclear family and individualism. In the culturally ideal family (which is not necessarily achieved) all sons remain in their father's household and, when they marry, their wives also join the household and are incorporated in it. Thus the husband has very little contact with his mother-in-law and the wife is taken away from

her own home and mother, often at a very young age, and placed under the authority of her mother-in-law, the husband's mother. The husband's position in the structure does not change on marriage and the ambiguities and ambivalences, the structural stresses and tensions that lie behind the English mother-in-law joke do not exist for him. There is nothing to joke about. Occasionally jokes about the wife's mother do occur in Indian joke books and websites, but they are either very clearly labelled as Western jokes or else are fakes, i.e. jokes into which Indian names have been inserted but whose setting and language clearly reveal them to be of British or American origin (Lakhotia 1959). These jokes are funny to Indians but only in the sense that those living in liberal capitalist democracies could laugh at Soviet political jokes invented under a tyranny they had never experienced. Also educated Indians usually have a good knowledge and understanding of the, from an Indian point of view, odd and attenuated English system of kinship.

The situation of the Indian daughter-in-law in these societies vis-à-vis her mother-in-law is a far more difficult one than that of those British and American daughters-in-law who wrote such very hostile accounts of their experiences for websites and anthologies. They were angry because of the husband's mother's intrusion into their family and space, thus illicitly challenging their position as the key person in the life of the husband. In India the daughter-in-law is under the complete and legitimate control of her mother-in-law who runs the household (Gough 1993) and who may well treat her harshly (Kosambi 1996, p. 271; Poonacha 1996, p. 47). The daughter-in-law has on her marriage left behind the kind home of her mother, where she may have been indulged as a kind of guest because everyone knew that soon she was going to leave for good (Kakar 1981, p. 73]. On marriage she enters the household of what is her pre-ordained 'real' family, where she is a stranger and where the family customs and mores may differ greatly from those of her natal family. Her harsh treatment by the mother-in-law is a means of forcing her to adapt to the loyalties and ways of her husband's joint household. It is the unity and integrity of the household unit alone that count, not individual discontents (Uberoi 2009, p. 32).

The mother-in-law may even deliberately inhibit and prevent public displays of affection between son and daughter-in-law because these might weaken his loyalty to the total household (Kakar 1981, p. 74). The couple can only be intimate at night and even then the mother-in-law in a small dwelling with little privacy may organize sleeping arrangements to restrict this to a few occasions. The daughter-in-law's status only improves when she has a son, on whom she

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will lavish the affection that the family discourages in the conjugal relationship. This new mother-son tie is congruent with the loyalties of the patrilineal, patrilocal household but it also means that in time she too will become the ultra-possessive mother of an adult son and when he marries she will resent his wife for this reason, as well as in fulfilment of her expected loyalties to the total patrilineal household.

The conjugal relationship can develop only at the expense of the solidarity of the joint family and the bride is structurally pitted against the mother-in-law for control of the son-husband (Uberoi 2009, p. 224). Duty (*dharma*) comes first in family life, then procreation (*praja*), with pleasure and fulfilment (*rati*) a bad third (Uberoi 2009, p. 121). The mother is not only powerful but revered in India. Even the sacredness of the cow, 'holy mother cow' depends on its being the symbol of motherhood. The mother-son tie is lifelong and arguably more important than the conjugal relationship (Uberoi 2009, pp. 188–189, 241).

The whole system is also underpinned by property relations, since the family property is owned and worked collectively and the brothers will not divide it and detach their own families until their father has died, perhaps not even then. The daughter-in-law arrives with a dowry but in practice this can exacerbate the situation, and if it is not paid in full and on time, can be an excuse for treating her even more badly (Das 1993; Narain 1957, p. 139; Sharma 1993, p. 356). Mothers-in-law beat their daughters-in-law and it is not unknown for a mother-in-law to kill her daughter-in-law.

There is a great deal of Indian folklore about the plight of the daughters-in-law, the trauma of the transition to a new, initially suspicious household (Uberoi 2009, p. 224) and the nastiness of the mother-in-law. There are folksongs about the bride's grief at leaving her mother and her antagonism to her mother-in-law (Kakar 1981, p. 72).

My mother-in-law expired in the morning. If I find time in the afternoon,  
After eating lunch,  
I will weep for her (Kakar 1981, p. 73).

Consciously irreverent and bawdy songs are sung by women at wedding time (Uberoi 2009, pp. 146, 241). Some songs tell of the mother-in-law preventing the bride from going to her husband



at night (Kakar 1981, p. 74). Some anthropological studies seem to confirm this (cited in Uberoi 2009, p. 219). One such study of a group of Brahmans records that the couple only had sex on Fridays. On other nights the wife slept alongside her mother-in-law and her husband on the veranda (Gough 1993, p. 162).<sup>6</sup> The same theme of the mother-in-law disturbing and inhibiting the young couple's sex life occurs in British mother-in-law jokes but here it is the wife's mother who interferes and the English mother-in-law's behaviour is clearly deviant and is treated as farce, not as a lament about a legitimised reality as in India.

Now take my mother-in-law. She's alright. Not the usual type. Don't mind having her round a bit. Always knocks before she comes in – To our bedroom – On Sunday morning – Gives us a cup of tea too. Nothing like a cup of tea to help start the day ... (pause) ... But four o'clock in the morning is a bit early on Sunday. "Angie", she shrieks, "you've got two backs." (Apter 1986, p. 123)

Perhaps the most numerous comments on the difficulty of the mother-in-law, daughter-in-law relationship are in the relevant proverbs which exist in many Indian languages. Again they are best illustrated by providing examples.

Happy is the wife who is married to a motherless son.  
(Carr 1986 [1922], p. 6, number 51).

The pot broken by the mother-in-law was a cracked pot; the pot broken by the daughter-in-law was a new pot.  
(Carr 1986 [1922], p. 5, number 42. Also Jensen 1897 number 3645, cited in Narain 1957, p. 162).

There is no goodness in a mother-in-law nor sweetness in Margosa trees.  
(Carr 1986 [1922], p. 5, no. 48).

I am glad mother-in-law is dead, the butter pot has come into my charge.  
(Manwaring 1899, p. 175, no. 1363).

<sup>6</sup> [Note by Ephraim Nissan:] In Baghdad, where among the various faith communities there has long been a custom of sleeping in summer on the flat roof, a couple of child-bearing age may be secluded in a roofless hut on top of the flat roof. Among Jews, during those periods when the couple is ritually required to avoid intimacy, notably when the wife is *niddah* (menstrual or post-menstrual), the husband's bed would be outside that hut; likewise his bed would be set outside his wife's bedroom on the first floor of a multiple patriarchal courtyard house (see house plans and explanations in Nissan, in press). There is a proverb (included and explained in Hakham 1993), about a daughter-in-law complaining: "How can it be too hot on one side of the roof, and too cold on the other side!" This is the ending of an anecdote about the husband's mother approaching, while on the flat roof, her son and his wife, telling them that it is too hot, so they should sleep apart; she then approaches her daughter and her son-in-law, finds them sleeping apart, and tells them to stay closer, as it's a cold night.

She walks on thorns to her mother-in-law's but she feels delight in coming to her mother's house.

(Manwaring 1899, p. 175, no. 13621).

There is no softness in a sword nor goodness in a mother-in-law.

(Jensen 1897, p. 41, no. 406).

When the daughter-in-law said she was hungry, her mother-in-law told her to swallow the pestle.

(Jensen 1897, p. 13, no. 126).

Crocodile Tears: Like the daughter-in-law lamenting the death of her mother-in-law.

(Carr 1896 [1922], p. 5, no. 45).

The traditional proverbs show that there is a strong stereotype of the bad mother-in-law and today this finds expression in films and television soap operas but there are no jokes and no scripts for mother-in-law jokes.

Why are there are no jokes? It is not just that the daughter-in-law is trapped in the worst place in the grid of kinship or that the situation is too oppressive or tragic to invent and tell jokes about. In Western society disaster jokes inevitably follow after the most horrendous of calamities (Davies 2003) and in the former Soviet Union there were jokes about state murder, terror and the Gulag (Adams 2005). Rather it is that women do not 'do' jokes. There is no shortage in India of indigenous jokes told by, for and about men, such as the 'Sardarji' jokes about Sikhs (Davies 2011). The women's songs display inventiveness and a willingness to transgress the taboos on what may be said but the women do not use these talents to create jokes.

The situation is essentially similar in rural China, where on marriage the daughter-in-law enters her husband's family (Butterfield 1982, p. 167; Wong 2008, p. 8) and is often oppressed by her mother-in-law (Mosher 1984, p. 196). One indication of this is the very high suicide rate among rural women aged 15–25, far higher than for middle-aged women, far higher than among men of the same age (Davies and Neal 2000, pp. 41–45; Pritchard 1993, 1996). Another is that a minority of families will adopt a very young girl and bring her up as a daughter alongside the son of the family whom she will later marry. Her mother-in-law is also her mother so there is harmony at that level but such a marriage is too close to being incestuous for it to succeed sexually (Fox 1980, pp. 45–46). The stereotype of the mean and evil mother-in-law is strong

among the Chinese (Wong 2008, pp. 5–8) but jokes are rare even though it would in principle be easy to invent more like the one below, which has a classic joke structure:

The women in the village were worried because one of their number treated her daughter-in-law with great cruelty. They decided to hold a public meeting to discuss it but did not want to name the cruel one. The woman who took the chair addressed the meeting: "It has come to our attention that there are two mothers-in-law in the village who are treating their daughters-in-law with great cruelty". At this point the cruel mother-in-law stood up and said: "Alright. So who's the other one?" (see Levy 1974)

Such jokes are uncommon.

### European Mother-in-Law Jokes

What I have termed the English kinship model today characterises most of Europe as does the mother-in-law joke which will have evolved independently to fit local conditions. There are jokes in France about *la belle mère* (Chanfrault 1992), in Germany about *die Schwiegermutter*, in Dutch about the *Schoonmoeder* and the mother-in-law joke thrives in Ireland (MacHale 1987a) and in Wales:

In England they make fun of the mother-in-law but in Wales we've put her on our national flag. (The Welsh flag is a red dragon on a white and green background).

The Eastern European countries are the ones where there was a classical peasantry, something England never had (Macfarlane 1978, pp. 18–20), where the wife left home to join her husband's family on the farm. In the nineteenth century this was true of Estonia, a traditional agrarian society then but now a country with an industry and services based economy and a nation of computer users. The traditional anecdotes of the nineteenth century that dealt with the difficult relationship between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law have been replaced by well made jokes about the husband's mother. The earlier tales have been preserved in the folklore archive of the Estonian Literary Museum:

The daughter-in-law and the mother-in-law did not get on well. The daughter-in-law was washing clothes and the mother-in-law gave her her blouse to be washed as well. The daughter-in-law thought "If I cannot beat my mother-in-law I can at least beat her blouse.

She washed her own things softly but beat the mother-in-law's blouse as hard as she could. Afterwards her own things were still dirty but the mother-in-law's blouse was white as snow.

[Sent to me by Dr. Liisi Laineste, Reference to original: Estonian Era II 259, 634 (20) < Koern, Luigvalla v. Rakke alevik – Leve Prik (1930).]

A young man married a nice young girl. She helped her mother-in-law in the house, and did everything diligently, eagerly and quickly. The father-in-law had been blind for some years ... so the mother-in-law was the 'master' in the house and also rationed out the bread. The daughter-in-law wasn't used to going short of bread, as she had been allowed to eat as much as she wanted in her old home, so she decided to bake an extra one for herself. One day when she was alone with the blind father-in-law she made seven loaves and put them in the oven. "They are all in the oven father-in-law", she said, "the five loaves and a small bun". "Why then", said the blind man, "did the bread shovel go 'crump' " seven times?

[Sent to me by Dr. Liisi Laineste. Original Estonian reference: H II 8, 7091, 10 (1a) < Johvi, Vokav., Paite – P. Paurmann (1891).]

It may be noted in passing that in India the mother-in-law often meanly regulates the food intake of the daughter-in-law (Uberoi 1993, p. 402).

Dr. Laineste (personal communication, 2011), one of Estonia's leading experts on jokes, comments on these tales:

Reading them you really have to imagine hard that they were once funny. The common practice then was that the wife was brought to the son's home and that is where the jokes about daughters and mothers-in-law emerge... There are a lot of runic songs from centuries ago retelling the bitter fate of the daughters who are sent away and never will see their families again, a wedding was quite a sad occasion with many lamenting songs by women.

There may be a parallel here with the ceremony of *doli* or *bedai* at the end of an Indian wedding, when the bride takes a tearful farewell of her parents and her natal family (Uberoi 2009, p 154).

The older tales from Estonia are not true mother-in-law jokes but rather are anecdotes in which mother-in-law and daughter-in-law tensions are present but may be rather peripheral to the ending, which can be a moral comment as well as an attempt at humour. As Dr. Laineste has said (personal communication, 2011) it is difficult to see why they should ever have been "classified as jokes" by an archivist.

As the Estonian society and economy evolved, "the habit of marrying a girl to get extra work hands on the farm disappeared and the wife's family members became more important/close/relevant."(Dr. Laineste, personal communication, 2011).

Now English style mother-in-law jokes emerged and became popular in Estonia.

Judge: You were there when the accused threw your mother-in-law on the floor and you did not go to help".

(Witness): "Honorable Judge, it would have looked very ugly to see two men beating up an old woman".

(Estonian Literary Museum Reference # 9762- 08.05 – 1997)

Judge: "Did you see with your own eyes how the accused was strangling your mother-in-law?"

Witness: "Yes I did".

Judge: "So why didn't you go to help?"

Witness: "I saw that he was doing perfectly well on his own".

(Estonian Literary Museum reference: 2207 – 24.01. 1998)

Son-in-law: Doctor, tell me about the health of my mother-in-law".

Doctor: "Are you strong enough to hear the truth?"

Son-in-law: "I am ready for the worst".

Doctor: "OK then, I have to tell you that your mother-in-law will be well in a couple of days".

(Estonian Literary Museum reference 24448 – 2000 – 2001).

These have a proper fully formed joke structure with two overlapping scripts, one of which is hidden, and a sudden and succinct punch line that switches the story from the overt beginning script to the other script which is hidden until the punch line (Raskin 1985). The joke begins as a mundane account of a scene in the criminal courts and in a doctor's surgery and ends as a punch line about a man's indifference to the sufferings or death of his mother-in-law. A hint is given in the first line that this joke may evoke the well-known mother-in-law script and that a surprise will follow but not what the surprise will be. It cannot be accurately predicted what it will be and the surprise is only fully revealed in the punch line. That is the essence of the well made joke.

### Considerations about the Comparative Data

Comparative data are summarised in Table 1. These broad statements about the family structures of each society and the responses to them obviously do not apply to all families in them but they are reasoned generalizations based on the empirical studies of other scholars. Both the serious folklore and the jokes are well attested in every case.

Table 1. Summary of the Comparative Data

	Family Structure and tension	Response	Serious Folklore	Jokes
English Case 1: Wife's mother	Nuclear family, Structural tensions between husband and wife's mother	Avoidance of mother in law by husband	Very limited	Very common. Told by men
English Case 2: Husband's mother	Nuclear family. Personal tension between wife and husband's mother	Intense emotional involvement by wife. Hatred of mother-in-law.	Highly personal stories on internet and in anthologies	None (but women may abduct male jokes)
Indian Case	Joint family where wife goes to live in husband's parents' home. Very strong structural tensions between wife and mother-in-law	Young wife feels bullied and oppressed by mother-in-law and is despondent	Many songs and proverbs	None
Estonian case from old peasant times	Joint family, wife lives in husband's parents' house – structural tension between wife and her mother-in-law	Daughter-in-law is subordinate but has room for manoeuvre.	Songs. Many anecdotal tales, some about daughters-in-law outwitting the son's mother	Not really
Estonian case today	Nuclear family. Structural tension between husband and wife's mother	Probably avoidance	Very limited	Very common. Told by men.

It is clear that the jokes are told by men and arise only when the kinship system produces a structural tension between husband and mother-in-law and the mother-in-law is the intruder.

Where there is structural tension between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law and the daughter-in-law is the intruder into the joint family, there is a serious folklore of resigned sadness, largely produced by women and proverbs to be taken seriously. The husband's mother's power is legitimate, a necessary part of the joint family system, which is the central social and economic unit and the collective owner of property in much of India. There is much folklore but there are no jokes. In England the husband's mother's power is illegitimate in the sense that it is not derived from the standard system of kinship and is not an accepted part of an ideal of family life. There is little folklore and no jokes but many vents for hostility.

### **Why are Jokes Male?**

Women are often the best sources for the collector of serious folklore particularly in rural areas. They will meticulously produce long involved anecdotes from their memories and insist on ensuring that every single detail of the story is correct, even if it is about a long past event or a fiction (Utley 1971–1973). Jokes are not like that. All that is needed is that the joke-teller knows the punch-line and has a very rough idea of the preceding narrative. Jokes are remembered backwards and then told forwards like a reversible machine not a story. A good joke-teller will invent the details as he goes along, adapting it to his audience and adding spontaneous new jab-lines (Attardo 2001) and distractions to the narrative. The essence is timing and surprise. It is a male art form, a systematic little machine.

The difference between the sexes lies not in the appreciation of jokes but in the inventing and telling of them which men are much, much more likely to do (Kuipers 2006, p. 46). It is not an absolute difference, for particular individual women can be good joke tellers and may well invent them and some men are quite unable to do so but on average there is a big gap. The main reason for asking the question, though, is that men produce distinctive large sets of jokes and joke cycles that reflect their position in the social order and their distinctive interests and women do not. This is as true of male jokes about sets of men, such as footballers, marines, or Roman Catholic priests as it is about sets of women such as mothers-in-law. Women do not do this. Why is there this difference? The question has already been partly answered but it remains necessary to examine both differences between the way men and women tend to think and of the different social forces that shape how they behave.

Men strive to do conventional masculine things such as jokes and particularly competitive joke-telling when in a group. A man who is a good joke-teller gains admiration and status for his skill, particularly in male company. There is no such pay-off for women. It is not expected of them and taking part in aggressive competitive joke-telling might be regarded as unseemly in a woman (Kotkoff 2006, p. 14). Women's humour involves stories in which they can identify with or empathise with a character or a situation. The stories may even be told to form closer ties between individuals or to explore the nature of relationships (Coates 2007, p. 30; Kotkoff 2006, p. 15). By contrast jokes create a good collective atmosphere and cement groups. Jokes are in many senses a collective product.

## Conclusion

The comparative and historical analysis that has been employed here shows conclusively that the mother-in-law joke is based on a particular anomaly, a particular incongruity, a particular tension within the social ordering of kinship in nuclear families. The anomaly is the intrusion of the wife's mother into the life of a family supposed to be limited to husband wife and dependant children, the incongruity is that she is both outside and inside the family and the tension is between her and her son-in-law. The jokes do not exist in societies with other kinship structures such as the patrilineal joint family, where the anomalies and tensions are quite different and result in bitter proverbs about mothers in law, in this case the husband's mother, not jokes.

Men respond to situations such as the mother in law's intrusion with jokes about general categories, jokes which establish and maintain social distance, jokes which are told within groups of friendly but uninvolved acquaintances for pure amusement along with other quite disparate jokes. Women do not do this. In regard to the husband's mother women do not invent jokes about mothers in law in general but rather take part in emotionally charged forms of interpersonal communication with other individual women about their own particular mothers in law. The mother in law joke is not a form of misogyny but it is a specifically male creation, one similar to the jokes invented and told by men about many categories of men as well as women.



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