

Radio's Home Folks, Vic and Sade: A Study in Aural Artistry

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In its essence, radio of the "golden age" is pure oral production designed for pure auditory experience. Most criticism and appreciation for radio drama ignores the aural artistry and tends to be textual, sociological, historical or nostalgic in approach. Certainly each of these is valid, but the more they are intertwined with the essential sound communication, the closer we can come to understanding the total phenomenon. This interdisciplinary "anthropological" approach to the aesthetics of traditional oral literature was proposed to American folklorists in a trend-setting address by William R. Bascom a quarter-century ago,¹ and although some of the factors that the folk-collector was admonished to record are irrelevant to radio drama (gestures, facial expressions, exchanges between artist and audience, etc.), others are significant. For example: What is the character of the audiences? How are they situated? Do they regard the performance as ritual, fact or entertainment? These introductory points may help to explain why I will be relating the art of the radio comedy series *Vic and Sade* (broadcast 1932-1946) to the arts of folk narration, and why the nature of the radio audience will help us to understand the operation of some of the oral-literary techniques in this quarter-hour daytime program whose audience was estimated to be as large as seven million listeners.

The scripts of *Vic and Sade* were all written by one person, Paul Rhymer, and a number of these have been collected by his widow, Mary Frances Rhymer², and published in two volumes with introductory essays by Ray Bradbury³ and Jean Shepherd.⁴ Some of my references are drawn from these collections, others from undated and untitled recordings in my library. Readers are urged to acquaint themselves both with the published scripts and with a sampling of recorded programs, because the art of *Vic and Sade* is inseparable from the voices of the five talented actors who played the roles.⁵ In the meantime, a brief descriptive history of the program is all the necessary background that is needed for understanding my critical remarks. *Vic and Sade* began with two primary characters, but very soon added a third one, an adopted son, Rush, who was apparently Sade's orphaned nephew. Later, Sade's uncle, Fletcher Rush of Dixon, Illinois, joined the program; in World War II, when the actor who played Rush was called into military service, a new boy, Russell, was substituted. Finally, in the last days of the series, it briefly became a half-hour evening show with a number of supporting characters. Essentially, however, *Vic*

and *Sade* was a four-character play—Victor Gook, Sadie and Rush (or Russell) Gook, and Uncle Fletcher.

My analysis of *Vic and Sade* takes four approaches: context, genre, technique and function. In reality, of course, these approaches overlap and are separable only for convenience in understanding. In the most elementary analysis the main function is entertainment, the relevant genre is comedy, and the context is golden age daytime serial radio. But these simple labels lead to simplistic analyses so that we read into them the current nostalgia-cult for escapist soap opera. Certainly *Vic and Sade* shared the context of real soap operas, such as *Young Widder Brown*, *Stella Dallas* and *Pepper Young's Family*. It shared the audience, which was largely married women, and the environment for listening, which was the home, and it shared the soap opera's commercial sponsorship, in this case Proctor and Gamble's products such as Ivory Flakes and Crisco. Like the soap operas, *Vic and Sade* was a weekday phenomenon and flourished during a period that almost perfectly coincided with the presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, containing therefore the revolutionary and traumatic backdrop of the Great Depression and World War II. Like the soap operas, *Vic and Sade* ignored the backdrop, and again like the soap operas it was marked by a continuing cast of characters who never listened to the radio.

The context is therefore not unique. It is popular culture of a specific historical period. But it does not fall into the same genre as other members of its contextual class. First of all, it is comedy, rather than melodrama. Secondly, it is not a serial and consequently lacks that most common characteristic of a serial, the cliff-hanger ending that sustains a continuing audience. The literary analogue for *Vic and Sade* is therefore the short story rather than the novel. The creative and technical demands upon the author were thus quite different from those of the author of the serials. Suspense is unnecessary, but unity is required. Non-serial drama must have a beginning, a middle and an end for each episode. The eight or nine-minute duration of day-time radio context is too long for gags or extended jokes, but far too brief for any derivation from the theatrical traditions of stage comedy such as is our inheritance from Greek Old Comedy with its sustained topicality and political satire, or Greek-Roman New Comedy, with its boy-meets-girl, boy-wins-girl in opposition to the will of the older generation. The brevity of the episodes is only one reason for this separation from stage comedy; the length of the run is another. Paul Rhymer wrote over two thousand playlets with the same four characters; a standard stageplot will not withstand the audience's incredulity of such a long run. An unending *serial* plot will resist incredulity, and that is the way of the standard soap opera. A detective, legal, medical, adventure or comedy *team* incorporating a regular series of "guest villains," problem cases or irritating intruders will, too, and that is the way of such long runs as *Tarzan*, *Nick Carter*, *Nancy Drew*, *Dick Tracy*, *Perry Mason*, *Gunsmoke*, *I Love Lucy* and *Mary Tyler Moore*.⁶

The search for genre once more brings us back to the daytime serial,

because *Vic and Sade* is like nearly all of the daytime serials in being current domestic drama about ordinary people. But this point of contact is only tangential, because the majority of serials' "ordinary people" operate in a milieu of upwardly-mobile wish-fulfillment figures for trapped and frustrated ordinary women listeners. Both television and radio soap operas abound in doctors, lawyers, architects, artists and actors who are husbands or lovers, or who may even be the main female characters. These are not ordinary people. A comparison of telephone directory Yellow Page listings of those professions with the white pages will provide all the statistical proof of their rarity that we need. The exceptions to the "wish-fulfillment" cast of characters, such as *Pepper Young's Family*, *One Man's Family* and *The Goldbergs* in radio, and *All In The Family* and *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* in television are not exempt from the characteristic of striving for upward mobility. *One Man's Family* and *All in the Family*, like *Vic and Sade*, are not serials, but neither are they daily programs. The long-running radio program *One Man's Family* also shared the characteristic of not having outside or guest characters, but it was a low-keyed melodrama, not a comedy. Norman Lear's television programs are satires of a topical nature, and in spite of all their debts to soap operas and domestic comedy, their overt satirical purpose and their specific allusions to current political, social and economic issues and fashions guarantee that they will be historical period pieces, soon requiring footnotes to explain quips about Watergate, Spiro Agnew, Fidel Castro and Johnny Carson.

Obviously *Vic and Sade* is also an artifact of its time. Radio drama is. Yet, aside from allusions to Mr. Gumpox's horse and wagon (he is the garbage man), the apparent uniqueness of Rush's going to high school (Sadie went only to elementary school), and such now-rare activities as going for a spin in the neighbor's car (the Gooks don't own a car), there is hardly a word to identify the dramas as stories of the 1930s. To the best of my knowledge, there are not allusions to World War II. *Vic and Sade* is timeless. But it has a sense of place more specific than any serial drama or domestic comedy with which I am familiar. The city in which the Gooks live is Crooper, in central Illinois, forty miles from Peoria. (It is undoubtedly patterned after Bloomington, where Paul Rhymer attended Illinois Wesleyan University.) Cities are referred to daily. They are nearly all midwestern, some real, others fictional, like Dismal Seepage, Ohio; Drowsy Ear, Minnesota; and Yellow Jump, North Dakota. Moreover, the Gooks's home on Virginia Avenue has an aura of permanency. The living room easy chairs do not change their positions, the dining-room table and bureau are never replaced, the porch swing only changes with the seasons. Thus, although the geographic location is quite specific, the home and its furnishings have the same timelessness as do those of the comic-strip characters Dagwood and Blondie. Indeed, this may be the genre to which *Vic and Sade* belongs.

Yet this still begs the question, leading us to ask what the genre of *Blondie* may be. Inquiring into the technique of *Vic and Sade* may be of some value here. Structurally the dramas are simple and have few variants.

One, two or three of the characters are at home, and one other person enters, or there is some other outside intrusion such as a letter, a telephone call, a newspaper article or a passerby in the street or alley. There is never a scene that goes farther than the front porch, attic or cellar. All outside occurrences, even in the alley, are reported from within. There are no place or time transitions, no signals of "meanwhile" or "later." In short, *Vic and Sade* has perfect Aristotelian unities of action, place and time. But their midwestern world is immense, peopled with a large number of ordinary friends and acquaintances with exotic names and weirdly unique pasts and personalities. Rush's friends include Blue-Tooth Johnson, who shares his delight in the unending series of Third-Lieutenant Clinton Stanley books (Third-Lieutenant Stanley's exploits range from playing Yale and Harvard simultaneously to bashing an Arab sheik with a camel wielded by the hind feet); Rotten Davis, a high-school dropout whose grandstanding acts are the talk of the town (Rotten took the blame for the collapse of a porch in the three-hundred block of Center Street, shouting his confession while frantically running about wearing an aviator's helmet and carrying a suitcase); Rooster Davis, who had twenty-five seats at the Bijou Theatre roped off with a sign stating that they were "Reserved for Mr. Davis," and Smelly Clark who had his age changed from sixteen to twenty-one.

Vic's friends include especially his lodge brothers of the Sky Brothers of the Sacred Stars of the Milky Way: Robert and Slobbert Hink of Hoopestown, Y. Y. Flirsch, Homer U. McDancey, H. K. Fleeber and Rishigan Fishigan of Sishigan, Michigan. Sadie's best friend is Ruthie Stembottom, whose husband Fred is a constant irritant to Vic, and among her other acquaintances are Bertha Joiner, who went dotty from reading dime novels (and who only wore one shoe), Francis Kleek (also of Dixon) who always forgot to remove the shoehorns from his shoes, and the members of the Thimble Club, Mis' Husher, Mis' Razorscum, Mis' Applerot and others. Uncle Fletcher's not always clear memory is a teeming jungle of impossibles: Irma Flo Kessy, who was in the habit of slapping her husband's face in public, Henry Fedrock, who invented an electric fingernail file and later died, Walter Hoygawper who married a woman sixteen and three-quarters years old, Charlie Keller, formerly of Sweet Esther, Wisconsin, where he was an armed guard in the Wisconsin State Home for the Obstinate, and others.

This mad roster should not cause us to forget the other realities of *Vic and Sade*. Its primary characters were ordinary people; their homelife was completely unnewsworthy. It was daytime radio with the same audience of housewives who listened to *The Romance of Helen Trent* and *Ma Perkins*. It was low-keyed, without shouting, bickering, slapstick or raucous studio audience. It was regional, and one nods in partial agreement with comparisons to *Penrod*, *Winesburg, Ohio*, and *Dandelion Wine*. Rhymer was from Illinois, the program was broadcast from Chicago, the sponsoring company was in Cincinnati. Yet for thirteen years it drew an immense audience nationwide. We must look deeper, although the explanations already implied are certainly valid. It is non-threatening entertainment. It

is closely related to serial domestic drama. It is middle-class, middle-America in milieu.

Jean Shepherd's explanations for the popular appeal and the artistic quality of *Vic and Sade* are of two sorts. First, he identifies it with Theater of the Absurd. It is surrealistic. Shepherd is quite right about this. The surrealistic painters, the Absurd dramatists, the fantasy novelists all take familiar objects, familiar situations, familiar persons and distort them, much or little, and place them into surprising and disturbing environments and juxtapositions. But *Vic and Sade* neither surprises nor disturbs. It remains familiar and ordinary as neither Dali, Magritte, Beckett nor Ionesco does. And Theatre of the Absurd does not win audiences of millions of "white-pages" housewives.

Shepherd also points to Paul Rhymer's ability to write real dialogue rather than comic one-liners. Rhymer wrote "with an absolutely true ear for the rhythms and inflections of American speech." There is a pattern, rhythm and texture to Rhymer's scripts, whether we read them or hear them, that coincides with the overall unity of these eight-minute interludes. The unities of time, place and action are coupled with a beginning, middle and end that is necessary for non-serial art. In many cases, the *Vic and Sade* dramas end as they began: one opens with Russell reading from Third-Lieutenant Stanley, and ends with his re-reading the same passage. In between, there is a style of presentation that has the same strange unity as a Chekov play—performed in the style of Orson Welles' Mercury Players of the 1930s. In the episode just referred to, Vic, Sade and Russell go their separate oral ways, pursuing their own thoughts. Russell reads from his book, Sade reads the social page of the paper concerning Miss Pom Pom Cordova, and Vic, drowsing in his easy chair, is awakened by Russell's interruptions, and thereupon joins Sade's thoughtline. Vic introduces the information that Miss Pom Pom Cordova was instrumental in helping E.W. Smith break his habit of stealing horses. Sade is skeptical of both Pom Pom and E.W. Smith, but agrees, in a dry tone, to give a going-away party for Miss Pom Pom, who is one of very, very few women ever to have been selected as honorary members of the Sacred Stars of the Milky Way. At the beginning and at the end of this episode the dialogue as performed overlaps; in the middle of the drama, there is a lucid exchange of questions and answers, but throughout there are ironic asides from Sade, and disgruntled murmurings from Russell, whose oral rendition has been ignored by his parents. The recorded performance is marred by an obvious headcold for Bernardine Flynn, the actress who played Sade, and a few flubbed lines by Arthur Van Harvey, who played Vic, and yet it is a perfectly wrought drama, with a unified texture. The announcer's introduction is significant too, as I will explain later. He says: "...the placid tableau argues that our friends are spending a quiet evening at home..." This announcer, as Jean Shepherd says, is somehow part of the drama. Once again, Shepherd is right. Paul Rhymer wrote the introductions and closings (not the commercials), and they do share the same literary word choices that are part of Vic's and Rush's (or Russell's) dialogues. But I wish to take the word



The principal cast of *Vic and Sade*: (left to right) Billy Idelson as Rush, Bernardine Flynn as Sade and Art Van Harvey as Vic.

tableau as a transition to my next point.

The *tableau* is one of the conventions or “laws” of folk narrative identified by the Danish philologist Axel Olrik in 1909.⁷ These epic laws of folk narrative have withstood the test of time, according to such modern folklorists as Alan Dundes and Jan Brunvand. A surprising number of these conventions apply to *Vic and Sade*. My original reason for looking into folk traditions, however, was because of the brevity of these radio dramas. The usual length of a drama (90 to 120 minutes) as we meet it on the stage, in film and on evening television seems to derive from classical tradition. Folk drama, on the other hand, can vary from minor skits to cycles and mummeries that might last a day or more. Frankly, my search for folk drama analogues has been cursory, because I doubted that they would yield demonstrable causal antecedents or a developmental line. That is to say, I doubt that Paul Rhymer, confronted by the problem of writing an eight-minute drama, sandwiched between two commercial messages, performed in a new medium in which the actors were invisible and remote from the audience, pondered whether to draw upon the tradition of the mystery play, the Nigerian skit, the Elizabethan interlude or the burlesque routine. Or that he studied comic strips, Chaplin movies or Grimms’ fairy tales to learn how to write for radio.

But I do not doubt that there are successful patterns and conventions of oral narrative that storytellers know, *consciously*, *unconsciously*, as the result of indoctrination and apprenticeship, and *subconsciously*, as a part of cultural conditioning and as a genetically-endowed deep structure of archetypes. I realize that I have mixed together the argot of several schools

of anthropology and psychoanalysis, and I realize that I have said *and* rather than *or* or *and/or*. I have also deliberately used the folk-term *storytellers*. Paul Rhymer is a storyteller, working in a new context in which all communication is by means of voice, an art form that had only one predecessor in the strictest sense, this being the phonograph record. Aside from the strictest sense, though, there is the immensely long tradition of story telling. Modern folklorists are now keenly aware of how gestures, facial expressions, movements and audience responses are part of the act of storytelling, but a great deal of storytelling has always had a "radio" quality around dim fires in straw huts, igloos and caves. It does not seem necessary that we must picture blind Homer, or white-suited Mark Twain, or the African Ogotomelli as frenetically performing for their audiences like Jerry Lewis or Danny Kaye. They may have done so, but I still think it safe to speculate that there has always been a tradition of storytelling that is strictly *oral-aural*, with little or no dependence upon visual experience, and that verbal-entertainment radio drew upon that tradition. It may be a partial explanation of why we in radio's golden age so often listened together in the dark.

The two preceding speculative paragraphs are intended to establish some basis for a folk narrative tradition that any artist of the word can draw upon, consciously, unconsciously and subconsciously, regardless of whether the artist is or is not a member of a traditional society, and, concomitantly, that the audience will respond to these traditions with affirmation, if not always with conscious understanding.

The *tableau* (a *visual* formation) is identified by Olrik as one of the common characteristics of folk (*oral*) narrative. Some major participants are held, frozen as it were, in a closely grouped formation while the narrator comments. In highly developed form, this continues in the Japanese *kabuki* (and of course in the woodblock prints deriving from *kabuki*), in the *haiku* poem, in European grand opera, in television drama, and, of course, in comics. In *Vic and Sade*, the announcer often begins with a *tableau*, and it is very rare to have an episode end with action or movement. This leads me to another of Olrik's laws, that of low-keyed, calm openings and closings. To Olrik, it was almost as if the storyteller, bard or singer felt obliged to make the exit from fantasy into reality as easy as the entrance. *Vic and Sade* episodes do not end on a climax, surprise or emotional upbeat. They end flat, and usually are capped by a statement from the announcer, "So ends another brief interlude in the small house half-way up on the next block."

The last phrase was repeated regularly for thirteen years. It is only one example from *Vic and Sade* of Olrik's Law of Repetition. Repetition, Olrik believed, provided emphasis to the narrative, while Claude Levi-Strauss feels that repetition makes the structure of the myth apparent.⁸ In either case, the significant fact is the sensory medium—sound—which is temporal and ephemeral. Spoken sound is capable of many patterns—meter, cadence, loud-and-soft, alliteration, caesura, scales and so on. Verbal repetition, however, is the only one that conveys meaning and is therefore doubly emphatic. The sound-patterning that is achieved in *Vic and Sade* by

repetition is not found in regular serial dramas. It is too stylized for serious dialogue in the naturalistic mode, drawing attention to artifice and texture of composition. In comedy, or in poetic narrative, or in heroic drama, either artifice or art is proper, and the device of repetition is shared with folk narrative. Let us remember, though, that the medium is radio, and comedy or not, there is no other way of producing pattern than by sound. There are few radio programs that were really memorable. I believe that all memorable radio dramas used repetition and patterned speech.

One "law" of Alex Orlik does not apply. This is his law of two characters for a scene. Very likely the reason for this "law" was that storytellers are hard-pressed to perform more than two characters at once. Radio had no such creative limitations (except for ventriloquists) at the production end, but it was soon found that for listeners, more than four voices were a crowd. Even so, it is remarkable how many *Vic and Sade* dramas used only two characters. And (although here I speak from an impression rather than from statistical study) it does appear that repetition increases with the number of characters. Thus, in *Vic and Sade*, two-character episodes are unpatterned dialogue; when another character is introduced, the litany begins. Paul Rhymer seems to have recognized that when more than two characters are used, the device of repetition is needed to maintain unity and to reduce noise.

Orlik also describes the "law of the single strand," that is, unity of plot, and the "law of internal logic," according to which there is an internal validity to the happenings, no matter how fanciful they may seem to the outer reality. This is more akin to the transformations of modern structuralism than simply to Coleridge's "suspension of disbelief." It is not the audience who *permits* the surrealism of *Vic and Sade*, rather, it is the structural consistency or internal logic that makes the plots valid and reasonable.

Earlier in this essay I spoke of *Vic and Sade* Gook as being *ordinary* people. Somewhat later I mentioned some of the extraordinary people and occurrences of pseudo-Bloomington, Illinois. These are in polar opposition, but they are both true. Whenever such a paradox occurs, we may well suspect that myth rather than mere folktale is what we are dealing with. Myth, in the terms of Levi-Strauss, mediates between conflicting opposites. Which brings me finally to the function of *Vic and Sade*.

The audience for *Vic and Sade* was women. Housewives, in a day when *Rosalind Russell* characters and *Rosie the Riveter* were the only models for "career" women. Housewives, in a day when there was no escape from the tedium of housework, and the almost exclusive companionship of other housewives and children. Divorce was not a socially acceptable solution to incompatibility; working wives were frowned upon until war work after 1942; higher education or continuing education was regarded as useless luxury for women; and all this social disapproval was intensified in lower and middle income families, where inachievable escapist popular culture was the only balm. Frothy Hollywood musicals, "silver screen" gossip magazines, true romance pulps, women's formula novels and radio serial

melodrama offered unrealistic patterns for fantasizing. *Vic and Sade* did not belong to this class of entertainment, but as one looks carefully into the episodes, it becomes increasingly clear that Sade is the main character. *Vic and Sade* is about Sade.

Some information that we can learn about the character Sade includes the fact that she did not go beyond elementary school. She is not an intellectual. Her husband and son speak in a language that she does not comprehend. Rush picks up a bookish style of discourse from *Third-Lieutenant Stanley*, and this contributes greatly to the oral texture of the program. Vic is an ironist who gently but humorously satirizes the trivial boyish antics of Rush and the housewifely minor crises of Sade's life by means of hyperbole. A passage from a script entitled "Nicer Scott Has a Ten-Dollar Bill" will illustrate. Rush's friend "Nicer" is confronted by a moral dilemma as a result of his sudden riches:

RUSH: ...They'd (his parents) put it in Nicer's savings account down at the bank. See, that's always been the big *trouble* with sizeable gifts. They're no *good*. Nicer's got a whole slew of uncles an' aunts 'hat send him money every Christmas.... He likes the ones that send him fifty cents up to three dollars because he gets to spend them kind of amounts without anybody interferin'.

VIC: An interesting slant on the financial problems of our very young. Reminds me of the days when I was a coral-lipped baby, my soft blue eyes an' golden hair....

RUSH: Mom, Nicer wants me to stay all night with him. He needs my moral support. After what's happened he's all unstrung. . . . Why, right this minute Nicer Scott's sittin' over on his front steps pale as a ghost. His fingers are twitching an' he's turning alternately hot an' cold. He complains of a buzzin' in his skull an' spots before his eyes. Chilly perspiration beads his forehead an' an occasional convulsive shudder racks his frame. He licks his lips with agitation an' . . .

VIC: You're quotin' word for word from Third-Lieutenant Clinton Stanley.

Sade's speech patterns, on the other hand, are marked by malaprops, distorted proverbs, mixed metaphors and skewed similes. "Every night of the universe," "just as calm as your necktie," "I'd like to have your divided attention," "easy as rolling off a duck's back," "when somebody gets married I get as excited as a horse," "squeeze my pennies 'til the eagle howls," "kick a home run," and so on. But the tone and the context is never degrading to Sade. It is not like Archie Bunker's ignorant use of language, which is designed to place his social and political pronouncements into the mouth of one to whom we will feel superior;⁹ it is not like Richard Brinsley Sheridan's original Mrs. Malaprop, or Shakespeare's pedant Holofernes, whose solecisms are the result of intellectual pretensions. Sade is ignorant, not shallow or pompous. Her unusual speech does not stand out from the stylized, equally unusual diction of the men of her family. The language style of *Vic and Sade* is marked by exaggerated diction applied to realistic dialect, or in linguistic terms, the phonemic and morphemic bases are natural, while the semantic transformations are contrived.

This brings me once more to the paradox of ordinary people and surrealistic exotics existing harmoniously side by side. The difference between Vic, Sade, Rush, Uncle Fletcher and their listening audience is not as it is in escapist romantic melodrama; the uniqueness does not derive from caste, class, money or position; rather, the fantasy of Mr. Gumpox, Chuck

and Dotty Brainfeeble, Smelly Clark and Virgil Dejectedly of Winona, Minnesota, derives from idiosyncratic exaggerations of ordinary people. In short, Paul Rhymer was not so much a satirist as a celebrant. Like Henry David Thoreau, who showed to us the universe in our back yards, Rhymer showed to us humanity in all its variety in our neighborhoods. *Vic and Sade* celebrates the infinite variety of ordinary people. Mrs. Rhymer recalls that her husband's only reference to the burden of his work was a remark that he had written more words than Charles Dickens. Surely his statement was more than quantitative; Dickens' characters, even the fictional Sairy Gamp's fictional friend Mrs. Harris, have more life than all the glamorous heroes and heroines of two millenia of romantic novels.

In all the comedy of *Vic and Sade* there is a core of dignity. Occasionally this is allowed to rise into prominence, as in two of the scripts that have been published. In one Vic and Rush are playing cards—"Rummies," as Sade would term it—and Vic seizes the opportunity to talk to Rush about his mother.

VIC: Seems to me, Sam, I've noticed you're beginning to take your mother kinda *cool*. By that I mean...well, you're apt to be a little careless in what you say to her...in the way you treat her. . . . Bullfrog, little kids stick pretty close to their mother's apron strings till they're your age. When they get around thirteen or fourteen they're liable to let *go* some. That's *natural*. A lad gets to be a dozen years old or so an' he finds new interests away from home an' gets to be a pretty busy guy. That keeps up the older he grows. After he's twenty he's apt to get married any time an' then he's almost *completely* cut off from his parents. That's good, that's fine, that's the way things *are*. RUSH: I don't see what. . .

VIC: Let me say some more here. The upshot of what I'm tryin' to say is, as a boy grows older his mother is gradually going out of business. A woman's business is her family an' she works at it an' enjoys it an' sometimes makes it pay an' sometimes doesn't. . . .

You don't do it *purposely*. You're not *mean* about it. But she'll say a thing that sounds a little. . . *foolish* maybe...an' you'll *rib* her about it.

RUSH: When'd I do that?

. . . .

VIC: Well...the other day Mom said something about New York City being on the shore of the Pacific Ocean. You rode over her pretty rough-shod. *Laughed* kinda nasty.

Other examples are provided, gently, with a few comic asides, and the brief interlude ends, with profounder understanding of the "empty nest" syndrome among millions of listening women.

The other script that probes deeply into the lives of women whose business is that of housewife is different and requires some introduction. Victor Gook is not by any means an oasis of wisdom and sanity in the mad world of *Vic and Sade*. Like Dagwood, he has absurd enthusiasms. His "lodge" is the most obvious, but he also is subject to silly social-climbing (for example, purchasing business cards naming him to all sorts of undeserved titles), he is an overage jock (quarreling with a neighbor about who gets to wear the catcher's mitt in a alley game of catch), and he gets inordinately irritated with Fred Stembottom's idiosyncracies. One night, in bed, Sade wakes Vic to discuss this last foible:

SADE: When you an' Fred have these flare-ups, *naturally* the wife sticks with the husband. I

noticed it tonight. I was peeved when Fred was laughin' at your work, and Ruthie was peeved when you were makin' fun of Fred's baseball players an' his auto. We just couldn't *help* it. We *tried* to, but it was *bound* to show a little. Like I said, Ruthie is my best friend. My *very* best friend. I'm with other ladies a lot, *yes*—Mis' Donahue an' Mis' Harris an' Mis' Brighton an' Mis' Applerot—but it's not the same. Maybe it's because they're a little *older* than I am. Maybe it's because they're a little brighter in the head an' got more education. I don't know what it is. But I'm not the *same* with them as I am with Ruthie. With Ruthie I can laugh an' cry an' fight an' gossip an' get along just marvelous. With other ladies I sort of feel like here I am a woman that ain't a girl any longer an' got a fourteen year old boy to boot. See?

VIC: Um.

SADE: Ruthie an' I get along a lot like *kids* get along. It's hard for married ladies with families to have close friends where you can just take your *hair* down. An' Ruthie's the only close friend like that I *got*. The only one I ever *will* have probably . . . because I'm getting along to an age where women don't make *close* friends.

Sensitive people, and feminists in particular, will recognize the poignant commentary on traditional injustices in the institutions of marriage and womanhood, but these passages transcend mere social commentary. They are applicable to far more fragile and precious relationships that we must all tend, and guard, and balance and adjust. It is about friendship, the marriage of true minds of which Shakespeare writes in Sonnet #116. Love, dignity, forgiveness and restraint are the wages that we must pay to earn joyful friendship. Joy is the end of *Vic and Sade*; comedy, the instrument.

And that is the climax of this essay. But if I am to remain true to Olrik's laws of narration a denouement is called for. To summarize, *Vic and Sade* is closely related to both domestic comedy and serial drama, but its serious purpose is to aid people in coping with life's realities rather than escaping them. It is regional literature of a particular era in America's history but it transcends both place and time, partly because of oral technical artifice that provides delight irrespective of content or meaning, partly because it partakes of the characteristics of the category of folk narration that is designated as myth. As myth, its apparent absurdities mediate between opposites in human affairs; the ordinary and the extraordinary, the local and the universal, the passing of time and the permanence of the structure of family relationships whose transformations admit an infinity of individuals in an endless succession of small houses, half-way up on the next block.

Notes

¹William R. Bascom, "Four Functions of Folklore," in Alan Dundes, *The Study of Folklore* (Englewood Cliff: Prentice-Hall, 1965), pp. 279-298. The article first appeared in the *Journal of American Folklore* in 1954 (67:266, pp. 333-349).

²Mrs. Rhymer has deposited the *Vic and Sade* papers at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin in Madison where they are available for study on a restricted basis.

³*The Small House Half-Way Up in the Next Block* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972).

⁴*Vic and Sade* (New York: Seabury, 1976).

⁵Recordings are available at many libraries having audio collections and may be purchased from dealers in "old time" or "nostalgic" radio.

⁶A fuller treatment of serial techniques can be found in my "Video Aesthetics and Serial Art," published originally in *Western Humanities Review* 24:4 (Autumn, 1973), reprinted in *Television: the Critical View*, ed. Horace Newcomb (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), and in revised form in my *Outlaw Aesthetics. Arts and the Public Mind* (Bowling Green: Popular Press, 1977).

⁷Axel Olrik "Epic Laws of Folk Literature," in Dundes *op. cit.*, pp. 129-141. For a contrasting view of "fine art" dramatic literature, cf. Gilbert Highet, *The Classical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press Galaxy edition, 1957), pp. 127-131.

⁸Claude Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1963) pp. 229-230.

⁹Alfred F. Rosa and Paul A. Escholz, "Bunkerisms: Archie's Suppository Remarks in *All in the Family*," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 6:2 (Fall, 1972), pp. 270-278.

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