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Contemporary Victoriana - Women and Parody

Introduction

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Introduction

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- 1 In a 29 January 1889 letter to Walter Hamilton, editor in the mid-1880s of *Parodies of the Works of English and American Authors*, Oscar Wilde declared that “parody, which is the Muse with her tongue in her cheek, has always amused me; but it requires a light touch, and a fanciful treatment and, oddly enough, a love of the poet whom it caricatures” (390). Despite Wilde’s use of the convention of describing a Muse as female, there were in fact very few women represented in Hamilton’s multi-volume anthology, whether as the objects of parody or as writers of it. This absence did not mean, however, that a tradition of parody by women was lacking, nor did it prove that poetry was the only form that inspired such a response. Among Wilde’s British contemporaries were figures such as Florence Caxton (1838-1920), who was both a writer and an artist, and whose most famous painting—*The Choice of Paris, An Idyll* (1860)—was a visual parody: a watercolour that demolished the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and its ideals (including its vision of the Ideal Woman) and that circulated widely in the form of a wood engraving. How much “love” Claxton bore for the objects of her mockery is open to debate. Most critics, both at the time when it was exhibited and since, have seen this image more as an attack than as a tribute. Its existence, along with its popularity, suggests that women did not have to—nor did they—wait until the twentieth century to engage in parody that was pointed and fierce, and that the stereotype of the Victorian lady as a sweet, gentle creature had little basis in reality.
- 2 Although the history of parody by no means supports the idea that the Muse who spoke to women “with her tongue in her cheek” always did so kindly, there have nonetheless been ample instances of parodies by women that do show just such affection for their objects as Wilde had in mind. Many of those are all around us today in spring 2020. They are being generated at the moment by women writers and artists in the midst of a pandemic that has locked them up in the domestic sphere and away from public life more effectively than any stern Victorian paterfamilias could have done. Parody has become a way to connect with what is otherwise out of reach and greatly missed.
- 3 Thus, the *New York Times* reported on 25 April 2020 that a movement to create visual parodies of canonical works of art, which began in Russia, has spread around the globe,

initiated by Katerina Brudnaya-Chelyadinova. “Reality now is our house, and the internet”, she has said.¹ Using household items such as “a collage of plastic forks” and “strung-together, almost spent toilet paper rolls”, her group’s members have staged and photographed parodic versions of everything from abstract paintings by Kandinsky and Picasso to self-portraits by Frida Kahlo. The intent is not to disparage the originals, but to find humorous methods of evoking what cannot be visited in shuttered museums, while also, as another woman associated with this movement has suggested, of “finding meaning in art during hard times”.²

- 4 Like all great instruments, parody is capable of being played in multiple, almost limitless, ways depending upon the talents and the desires of those who master it. As Alice Ridout has claimed about the function of ironic retelling in women’s fiction, it can even serve as a means to achieve freedom from “social and literary confinement” (4), for parody makes productive use of constraints and turns the tools of oppression into vehicles of liberation. Currently, as a new genre is being born around us—i.e., lockdown parody—women, equally with men, are using comic imitations to exercise cultural power in a time of seeming powerlessness. Through digital transmission, women are sharing texts and images created in isolated domestic spaces almost as widely and quickly as any virus could spread.
- 5 In the past, imitation was always at the core of women’s writing practise, because it is an integral part of literary apprenticeship, and women traditionally were positioned in the role of apprentices. But even in the twenty-first century, when opportunities for literary production have opened so dramatically, comic imitation continues to be a useful strategy for women writers. It is a form of re-vision; it establishes distance from objects under scrutiny and shines new light on them. During a talk delivered at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association of America in 1971, the lesbian feminist poet and essayist Adrienne Rich famously announced, “Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering a text from a new critical direction – is for us” – meaning, specifically for women – “more than a chapter in critical history: it is an act of survival” (18). Countless women writers have indeed gone on since then to find their own voices through the polyphonic form of rewriting, incorporating the old into the new and simultaneously critiquing it. Many, too, have wielded the weapon of parody, which engages formally and ideologically (and often mockingly) with an existing and recognizable object and potentially exposes it to ridicule.
- 6 Some literary parodies composed by British women – including Jane Austen’s juvenilia such as *Love and Friendship*, along with her novel *Northanger Abbey*; Virginia Woolf’s *Flush: A Biography* and *Orlando*; as well as Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber* – have received acclaim and critical attention. The number of parodic works so favored, however, remains relatively small. Broader questions, moreover, of the relationship of gender to authorship and parody remain to be examined. The continued paucity of British women in anthologies of parody, whether as the creators of parody or as the objects of it, is both striking and disturbing. Does this indicate that their place in the canon is still a marginal one? Examinations of women writers’ involvement in parody are, apart from a few specialized case studies (Krueger, Stetz), surprisingly scarce, and they tend to be narrowly focused on a particular historical period or genre. Women are, nonetheless, particularly well represented as theorists of parody, with scholars such as Linda Hutcheon, Margaret Rose, Michele Hannoosh and Beate Müller among the major figures. Parody, revision, and rewriting have also become central terms in feminist

analysis in general, even beyond their importance to literary scholarship, following on the central role that Judith Butler has assigned to parody in the construction of gender itself.

- 7 Most definitions of parody suggest that this kind of imitation is a way to assert one's own presence in relation to an original while, paradoxically, distancing oneself (and the audience) from identification with a pre-existing text; parody foregrounds simultaneously both likeness and unlikeness. Parody is, therefore, a practice closely akin to the process of critical reading, for it problematizes all encounters with the texts with which it engages. Often, especially in the hands of women writers, it participates in the feminist project of political resistance envisaged by Adrienne Rich, because it is, in Linda Hutcheon's terms, an act of "imitation with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity" (Hutcheon 1985, 6). Inquiring more deeply into how control, domination, destruction, legitimation, and in some cases radical activism and visions of renewal have informed parody will be necessary, both now and in the future. This will add to our understanding of how women's comic responses have operated through parody, whether those responses are to texts (literary or otherwise) by men or by women.
- 8 As the visual re-stagings of Frida Kahlo's and Pablo Picasso's masterworks that are being created today by Katerina Brudnaya-Chelyadinova and members of her movement illustrate, parody is also a medium that allows for expressions of reverence – for the "love" that Oscar Wilde saw as intrinsic to the genre. It can function as a tribute, too, by keeping alive what might otherwise be ignored, even when it appears to be laughing at the original. This, of course, is also one of parody's pitfalls: its potential to re-inscribe the cultural importance of the very text that it appears to mock. Parody is, therefore, a complex, multi-dimensional form, and the following essays offer examples of many ways in which criticism, demolition, and homage exist side-by-side in British women's works.
- 9 "Where Parody Meets Satire: Crossing the Line with 'Lady Addle'" by Margaret D. Stetz considers the relationship of parody to satire and questions the effectiveness of comedy in general as a mode of political action. This essay focuses on a set of parodic texts – the "Lady Addle" series first published in the 1930s and 1940s – by Mary Dunn, a British writer associated with *Punch* magazine. Written in imitation of published memoirs by actual women aristocrats, Dunn's works offered scathing lampoons of upper-class narcissists and their world of privilege. When republished in the 1980s, however, these parodies enjoyed new popularity, but were read through the lens of nostalgia for a lost world of fixed social hierarchies. With their satirical edge blunted by time, these same comic texts were now embraced by conservative audiences. Such a reversal raises questions not merely about the role of reception in determining the meaning and effect of parody, but about comic modes themselves, and about whether they can be relied upon to perform political work – questions that have been much debated recently in feminist circles.
- 10 In the years when the Lady Addle memoirs were being published, two women painters, Ithell Colqhoun and Leonora Carrington, engaged in irreverent parody in a less open manner from within the surrealist movement. Surrealism stood for the liberation and rebellion the two aspiring women painters were seeking. However, as Tifaine Bachet demonstrates in her essay "Parody and Femininity in British Surrealism", the reality of life in the surrealist community was at odds with its own ideals and with women's

hopes, because their role division and the group's theories remained palpably patriarchal. Three of Colquhoun's paintings, *Scylla* (1938), *Gouffres amers* (1939) and *The Pine Family* (1940), used the Surrealists' techniques to subvert their erotic imagery. The sexualized female Muse, the androgyne and the male body are revisited in ways that bring out the movement's phallogentrism. Carrington's novels *The Hearing Trumpet* and *Down Below* defuse the glamour associated with insanity and hysteria in surrealist thinking by parodying the surrealist movement as a mental asylum governed by an authoritarian director. Ithell Colquhoun's and Leonora Carrington's marginal positions in the surrealist movement, even in its official history today, originate in their having been forced to negotiate its patriarchal ideology and to approach it from aslant.

- 11 Written during the time of Second Wave feminism, Brigid Brophy's novel *In Transit* (1969) uses comic modes to destabilize gender clichés and social constructions, while demonstrating that semantic and formal gender can remain unstable in a fictional text. "Baroque Parody in Brigid Brophy's *In Transit*", by Justine Gonneaud, sheds light on the role played by metafictional parody and sophisticated punning in the process of destabilization at which Brophy aims. The mixture of different literary genres in Brophy's novel allows subversion to undermine a variety of literary conventions and a plurality of forefathers. In the airport connection where the narrator is waiting "in transit", the multiple references start linking up together: "most of the parodies only make sense when read in the light of each other", as Justine Gonneaud notes. With the crisscrossing of literary references, a feminist revolution hatches in the airport lounge. The novel follows the agenda of "undo[ing] the normative conquest" that is presented at the beginning. Its high-flying didacticism is a challenge to readers' knowledge of cultural rules and references, as well as to their willingness to contest gender normativity.
- 12 By accentuating norms and making them even more flagrant, parody can work by exploiting the normative gender system to home in on an individual target. "From Parodies of the Iron Lady to Margaret Thatcher's Political Image", Yves Golder's essay analyses some of the political parodies featuring Margaret Thatcher that circulated in Britain during her premiership, from 1979 to 1990. Yves Golder shows that these take-offs involved tropes of both exaggerated femininity and masculinity, as well as the erasure of gendered features through a process of de-sexualization. It is significant that Thatcher was not only a target of satire but also an agent in the parodic process, as she emphasized some characteristics traditionally linked exclusively either to women or to men in order to shape her own political image. Whether in her public appearances on TV or in her public speeches, Margaret Thatcher played an active and visible role in fashioning her own gender identity, acting out in turn images of the unwavering Iron Lady, the conservative housewife, and the caring mother of the nation, moulding and shifting her own image in response to political situations and media response.
- 13 In her essay "In-Yer-Face Mouths and Immobilisation: Parodies of Samuel Beckett's Theatre by Sarah Kane", Lara Cox focuses on a woman who also became a frequent target of parody, due to the verbal and physical violence in her stageworks. In her plays *Blasted* (1995), *Crave* (1999), and *4.48 Psychosis* (1999), the playwright Sarah Kane, who belonged to the late-1990s theatre movement dubbed "In-Yer-Face", responded to Samuel Beckett's plays through parodies that tested the limits of gender ideology and also addressed contemporary national and global politics. Although the question of how to distinguish tribute from ridicule in Kane's take on Beckett is a knotty one, Lara

Cox helps to unravel it by looking at the textual traces of female oppression, as well as at the performance histories of *Not I* and *Happy Days* following Beckett's attempts to keep these plays under his full control, even posthumously. Cox's essay concludes with Claude Régy's 2005 production of *4.48 Psychosis* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, featuring Isabelle Huppert's chilling performance, which parodied the dehumanizing treatment to which Mouth was subjected in Beckett's *Not I* and which commented on the long history of mistreatment of women in male-dominated psychiatric institutions.

- 14 It is the two editors' hope that this collection of essays will break ground in introducing to the study of parody some new angles on both familiar and unfamiliar parodic texts by British women. At a time when, during the pandemic year of 2020, parody itself has increasing currency as a medium, and when the sharing of parodic works by digital means has brought together global communities of producers and audiences, we believe that scholarship, too, has a place. Along with the authors of these essays, we are, above all, committed to ensuring that British women's historically important roles in the creation and consumption of parody remain visible and not be *masked*.

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NOTES

1. Anton Troianovski, "Bored Russians Posted Silly Art Parodies. The World Has Joined In." *New York Times*, 25 April 2020

[<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/25/world/europe/russia-facebook-art-parodies.html>].

2. *Idem*.

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