PARODY:
ANCIENT,
MODERN,
AND
POST-MODERN

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General review of past theories and uses of parody

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Preceding chapters have shown that while it has been possible to identify several different basic characteristics of parody (see chapters 1 and 2) there have been a variety of modern, late-modern, and post-modern theories and uses of that device.

To summarise the differences between the modern, late-modern, and post-modern theories of parody discussed in the last two chapters it can be said first of all that despite the example of works of general parody such as *Don Quixote* and *Tristram Shandy* in which parody is both comic and meta-fictional, many modern (post-Renaissance to twentieth-century) theories and uses of it have reflected both the post-sixteenth-century definition of it as ridicule and the post-seventeenth-century definition of it as burlesque.

While the nineteenth century was given the title 'the age of parody' from the collections of burlesque verse which flourished during it, it has been seen that more complex works of modern parody such as Cervantes' *Don Quixote* or Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* were not always named parody by modern and 'late-modern' theorists interested in their complex aspects and that some modern and late-modern theorists have discussed the intertextuality of parodic works without acknowledging the importance of their comic elements.

With reference to the post-modern theories of parody discussed in the last chapter, the contemporary late-modern theorists referred to there can also be said to have taken over from the modern and late-modern theories just mentioned a view of parody which is *either* comic *or* meta-fictional, but which is not necessarily both at the same time, and to have sometimes extended the negativity of the modern understanding of comic parody as ridicule.

In contrast to these theorists, several others have been described as developing a 'post-modern' view of parody which goes beyond the modern reduction of it to either the comic or the meta-fictional. Here the ancient parody which was 'lost' to so many modern commentators

through their reduction of it to the burlesque has also been 'regained', and has been combined with the modern in a manner which has created a new and even more complex understanding of parody than was seen in previous centuries.

Despite this post-modern development and restoration to parody of some of the characteristics taken from it by modern and late-modern commentators, parody remains at its most basic a device which, not forgetting its particular characteristics of an ambivalent dual structure and comic character, may be used for several different purposes and in several different ways. Hence, while some post-modern theories and uses of parody have overcome the modern and late-modern reduction of it to *either* the comic *or* the meta-fictional, the 'post-modern' understanding of parody would itself have to be seen to be restricting parody to only some of its aspects if it were ever to reduce the parody to *only* the meta-fictional and the comic, and obscure the fact, already recognised by at least some of the practitioners and theorists of post-modern parody discussed in the conclusion of chapter 4, that parody can be used in a variety of different ways and for both meta-fictional and non-meta-fictional comic purposes.

Because the post-modern uses and descriptions of parody discussed in the final pages of the preceding chapter have both revived and extended the complex and creative aspects of parody, there may be less chance now than in the past that its many different functions will be overlooked or reduced. The continuing use of the word parody by modern and late-modern critics emphasising only one or the other of its critical or meta-fictional aspects means, however, that some awareness of the problems surrounding the definition of parody in the past must still be used in assessing its contemporary uses and definitions.

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Summary of past theories and uses of parody

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The following is a brief summary of the main types of under-standings and uses of parody which have been discussed in previous chapters or mentioned in their notes. (Where one type of understanding or use of parody is repeated in the same period, as, say, burlesque or ridicule, this is not necessarily listed again.)

In addition to listing the uses and understandings of parody under the broad headings of the ancient, modern, and the post-modern which have served as headings for the preceding parts of this book, the following summary will use the category of the 'late-modern' to describe the extension of certain attitudes from the modern uses and understandings of parody. As suggested in earlier chapters, the 'late-modern' extension of the modernist view of parody as *either* meta-fictional *or* comic, and of the modern assessment of the comic as something negative or destructive, may also be found in various forms in the works of some of today's 'late-modern' authors and critics who have been termed 'postmodernist' by either themselves or by others. When such a 'late-modern' view of parody is found, it will, as previously, be classified as 'late-modern' rather than as 'post-modern'.[1]

Contemporary literature and theory have also shown that the late-modern and post-modern views of parody described below are co-existent from at least the 1970s onwards, and that the 'late-modern' may be found in earlier years, from at least the mid-1960s on. This chronology differs slightly from Charles Jencks' chronology of the 'Late-Modern' and the 'Post-Modern' in architecture where the two are seen as running concurrently from the 1960s onwards, but does not exclude the possibility, as suggested in chapter 4, that individual

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1 As suggested previously, some of these 'late-modern' theories may also be questioned as to whether they fully describe parody when they eliminate its comic aspects.

works such as David Lodge's *The British Museum is Falling Down* of 1965 or Malcolm Bradbury's early novels could be described as having been 'proto-post-modern' in their use of parody as a device which is to at least some extent both comic and meta-fictional. (Leslie Fiedler's suggestion of 1969 that parody is re-creative as well as comic has also been described as 'proto-post-modern' in chapter 4, but Fiedler's other comments on parody as destructive have restricted his overall use of the term to the 'late-modern' rather than to the 'post-modern'.)

The existence of both late-modern and post-modern theories and uses of parody, together with continuing modern theories and uses, from at least the 1970s onwards further shows that when a theory comes from the 1970s or after, it will not necessarily mean that it is post-modern rather than late-modern or modern. As suggested previously, it will only be *post*-modern if it both challenges and overcomes the modern and late-modern reduction of parody to *either* meta-fiction *or* the comic, and understands the latter to be something positive.[2]

Ancient uses and definitions

παρῳδία/*parodia* = used by the time of the fourth century BC to describe the comic imitation and transformation of an epic verse work (as applied to Hegemon, fifth century BC, by Aristotle in the fourth), and is then extended to cover further forms of comic quotation or imitation in literature by Aristophanic and other scholiasts and to cover examples in speech by the rhetoricians. (Quintilian's first century AD definition of *parode* as 'a name drawn from songs sung in imitation of others, but employed by an abuse of language to designate imitation in verse or prose' was, however, and despite his association of *parodia* with wit, to lead some other rhetoricians and scholars to misleadingly define parody as being largely a form of imitation.)

Παρατραγῳδεῖν/*paratragodein* or *paratragoedia* = the parody of dramatic tragedy, used for comic 'meta-fictional' as well as satiric purposes (e.g. Aristophanes).

2 The word 'intertextual' has also been included in the following summary of post-modern uses and theories of parody in order to point to some of the differences between their more advanced theoretical bases and earlier uses and understandings of parody as both a meta-fictional and comic form.

Modern uses and definitions (post-Renaissance onwards)

Parody = the inversion of another song which turns it into the ridiculous (J. C. Scaliger, 1561).

Parody = the 'turning of a verse by altering some words' (John Florio, 1598, following earlier scholars writing after Quintilian).

Parody = meta-fictional, critical, and comic – as practised in works such as *Don Quixote* (1605–15) or *Tristram Shandy* (1759–67). (Both these works suggest that parody may criticise and renew other literary works as well as reflect in comic or ironic fashion on the possibilities and limits of fiction from within a fictional frame, but apart from providing models for other parodists from Fielding to Joyce, do not lead to definitions of parody as both meta-fictional and comic until later. As suggested in chapter 4, they themselves cannot yet be called post-modern because they and their authors do not explicitly challenge the major modern reductions of parody to either the comic or the meta-fictional, and because they contain elements which make them 'modern' rather than post-modern according to other criteria.)

Parody = the imitation of verses which makes them 'more absurd' (Ben Jonson, 1616).

Parody = burlesque (as in Joseph Addison's 1711 discussion of burlesque where *Don Quixote* is taken as an example of one type of burlesque and Lucian's Aristophanic works of another, and in later explicit definitions of parody as such).

Parody = criticism of falsity (Fuzelier, 1738).

Parody = a changing of another work and a method of criticising the false; applications of which range from comic fancy through the satiric to the malignant reduction of an original to the ridiculous (Isaac D'Israeli, 1823).

Parody = lack of originality and its laughter the laughter of despair (Nietzsche, 1886).

Parody = parasitical (Martin, 1896).

Parody = (burlesque) ridicule of a useful, critical kind (Stone, 1914).

Tristram Shandy and *Don Quixote* display discontinuity of plot and character development (Shklovsky, 1921).

Parody = a (sometimes comic) device for 'laying bare the device' (Shklovsky, 1920s).

Parody = double-planed (Tynyanov, 1921).

Parody = double-voiced (Bakhtin, 1929 ff.).

Carnivalistic parody = also comic travesty (Bakhtin, 1929 ff.).

Parody = high burlesque (Bond, 1932, *et al.*).

Parody = artistic imitation *or* critical *or* agitatory (Liede, 1966).

Works such as *Don Quixote* foreground and refunction the 'horizon of expectations' evoked from the reader and changed by an author (Jauss, 1967).

Parody = negative but works such as *Tristram Shandy* foreground the 'implied reader' (Iser, 1972).

·Late-modern uses and definitions (1960s onwards)

Parody = against interpretation (Sontag, 1964).

Don Quixote = the first modern work of literature because in it the certainty of similitude is replaced by difference, and Borges' laughter is a 'laughter that shatters' (Foucault, 1966).

Parody = contestation and distortion (Macherey, 1966).

Parody = comic (and modern parody = 'pseudo-transgression'), but carnival (re Bakhtin) = 'serious' transgression (and contributes to the dialogic or 'intertextual' Menippean and polyphonic traditions) (Kristeva, 1966).

Parody = critical of reality (Foucault, 1971).

Parody = insane (Hassan, 1971).

Parody = lack of power, intentionality, and difference (Baudrillard, 1972 ff.).

Parody = non-mastery (Derrida, 1978).

Parody = intertextual but sometimes also crude (Todorov, following Bakhtin and Kristeva on Bakhtin, 1981).

Parody = a 'minimal transformation of a text' (Genette, 1982).

Parody = modern and. satiric; pastiche ('blank parody') = post-modern and normless (Jameson 1983 ff.).

Parody = repetition with difference but need not also be comic (Hutcheon, 1985 ff.).

Parody = nihilistic (Newman, 1986).

Parody can be used to suggest an insane/discontinuous world (Martin Amis, 1990).

Post-modern uses and definitions (1970s onwards)

Parody = meta-fictional/intertextual + comic (Bradbury, 1970s ff.).

Parody = meta-fictional/intertextual + comic (Lodge, 1970s ff.).

Parody = complex + comic (Jencks, 1977 ff.).

Parody = meta-fictional/intertextual + comic/humorous (Eco, 1980).

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The future of parody: some concluding comments

As suggested in preceding chapters, the variety of different uses and descriptions given parody over the ages – from the ancient, through the modern, to the post-modern – has shown it to be a form rich in complexity as well as in contradiction. That the restriction of parody to the latter more negative term, or to related terms, in some modern and late-modern theories and uses of it has now been superseded by a 'post-modern' understanding of both its complex meta-fictional and comic aspects may mean that it will be given some even more complex and positive functions in the future. If these new and more complex functions can be assessed and extended without distorting the established character or history of parody, then parody should also be able both to maintain a place in the centres of literary awareness from which it was excluded in the past by those who did not, or could not, appreciate either its heritage or potential because of previous distortions or misunderstandings of its history and functions and to assist those centres towards new and interesting developments. That it has already contributed much to the development of modern and post-modern literature and art has been recognised more and more in recent years. That it could make further such contributions should not be denied now that some of the many different and complex reasons for its creative powers can be described and those descriptions used for the development of new creative works and insights.

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