

# Parody.

The term “parody” derives from the ancient Greek word *parodia* and has come to include a variety of meanings connected with correlative terms such as “pastiche,” “quotation,” “satire,” and “allusion.” Currently enjoying a postmodern revival and attendant appreciation, the history of parody can be traced from its ancient origins through modern, late modern, and postmodern changes, noting an accumulation of negative associations along the way. At the present time, more than a few commentators are eager to discuss contemporary parody as an art form particularly relevant to our era. Most approaches share a basic foundation that treats parody as a complex multilayered type of imitation (sometimes referred to as intertextuality). Only some theorists, however, include a comic element in the defining character of parody.

Based on evidence from writers of *parodia* in Athenaeus’s *Deipnosophists*, parody was defined as a narrative poem in moderate length, in epic meter, using epic vocabulary, and treating a light, satirical, or mock-heroic subject. An earlier use of the term, *parados* (from *para*, “beside, alongside, from the side of,” plus *ode*, “ode” or “song”) designating “an imitating singer,” gave rise to *parode* (“beside song”: in German, *Beigesang*, and in French, *contre-chant*). In ancient Greece, rhapsodes created the first parodies at the same time as the first great epics of Western literature. A surviving example is Hegemon’s *Batrachomyomachia* (Battle of the Frogs and Mice), a composition once thought to be the work of Homer himself, which reproduces the epic style of the *Iliad* but substitutes frogs and mice for Achaians and Trojans. This incentive to provide “imitations” as counterpoints to the originals continued into the later Greek playwrights who created satyr plays in addition to serious dramas.

According to literary theorist Margaret A. Rose, just a slight change of subject matter is significant for the subsequent development of the term, as it shows that imitation of form was only part of what was essential to a parody from the beginning. In looking at the *Battle of the Frogs and Mice* as well as other similar accounts or fragments of works, she concludes that Greek *parodia* not only imitated the form of heroic epics, but also created humor by “rewriting the plot or characters so that there was some comic contrast with the more ‘serious’ epic form of the work, and/or...by mixing references to the more serious aspects and characters of the epic with comically lowly and inappropriate figures from the everyday or animal world” (Rose, [1979](#)).

Consider this example from Hipponax’s *Hexameters*, which parodies these opening lines of the *Odyssey*: “Tell me, O Muse, of the man of many devices, who wandered full many ways after he had sacked the sacred citadel of Troy.” Hipponax’s parody reads: “Tell me, Muse, of that maelstrom wide as the sea, that belly-knife, son of Eurymedon who eats indecently, how that he, miserable one, shall in miserable doom perish by stoning at the people’s decree by the shore of the unharvested sea.” Unlike the original text’s praise of Odysseus expressed in the epithet “the man of many devices,” the parody injects the comic element of the lowly and everyday world, of creative language to characterize “that belly-knife, son...who eats indecently...miserable one, [who] shall in miserable doom perish by stoning.”

Another type of ancient writing does not depend on the epic form as its model but rather parodies the conventions of Greek tragedy (the *paratragoedia* or “paratragedy”). Aristotle used the term “parody” to refer to the first works of this type written by Hegemon. Like the *Dilead* by Nicochares and other comedies, parodies showed men in a bad light (i.e., worse than they are), in contrast to tragedy, which showed them better than they are. For Aristotle, tragedy always surpassed comedy in its role of education and socialization. Further extension of the term (in usage by the Aristophanic scholiasts) broadened the meaning to “any device for comic quotation,” thus setting the historic precedent for defining parody in terms of a comic element. Even the visual apparatus of the mask used in ancient comedy, with its upturned mouth and smile, seemed to conclusively confirm mirth and laughter as an identifying feature.

According to one theorist, the *Battle of the Frogs and Mice* is an example of a relatively pure or absolute parody in that it does not impute “fundamental imperfections” in the conception or the execution of the *Iliad* and hence is created for the sake of its nonmenacing humor. The parodies of Aristophanes (*The Frogs*) and those following him, however, were not so pure; such authors used parody to launch a “bitterly moral critique” of individual authors, their works, the generalized modes of belief, and the philosophical systems of the times. This satiric trend continued into seventeenth-century France, where parodies such as those by Louis Fuzelier (in the Théâtre Italien) were justified by the claim that parody will strike only at what is degrading and false, so it is not so much a piece of buffoonery as a critical exposition. Meanwhile, negative associations arose in the sixteenth century when Julius Caesar Scaliger introduced the Latin word *ridiculus* to describe the comic aspects of parody. In his widely distributed work of 1711 titled the *Spectator*, Joseph Addison furthered this trend by treating Miguel de Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* as a burlesque and not as a parody. In the eighteenth century, parody was relegated to a subcategory of the burlesque (originating in the Italian *burla*, “a joke or a trick”). By the nineteenth century, the *parodoi* were sometimes defined as “buffoons” that followed the Homeric rhapsodists from town to town, but in other accounts, parody settled down to become a rather “gentlemanly art” in such publications as *Punch*, eventually considered a form of harmless homage to the original.

According to Margaret Rose, parody’s association with a modern notion of the burlesque as ridicule left it condemned to a status of triviality in the early to mid-twentieth century; late modern commentators have “denied the importance of its comic effect or structure altogether in order both to save parody from such denigration and to stretch its meaning and function to cover other fashionable meta-fictional and ‘intertextual’ forms.” In its defense, Rose defines parody as intertextual: a work of fiction that comments or reflects on another text by re-presenting the words, passages, or messages of the original. This notion of intertextuality comes from Julia Kristeva, who coined the term to capture a reader’s experience of a text: the decoding of the author’s encoded meaning based on the three elements of author, reader, and other exterior texts (in the case of parody, the original text). A similar notion is that of dual coding or double hybridization, a form of textual dialogism, as advanced by Mikhail Bakhtin, who also wrote accounts of the origins of comedy within the carnivalesque and Mardi Gras.

In Rose’s account, the comic plays a crucial role. Parody can be “ambivalent” toward its target and can involve—in its creative re-presenting of the original—a mixture of criticism and sympathy for the parodied text. It is defined, however, as “the comic refunctioning of preformed

linguistic or artistic material,” where the comic element involves the creation of incongruity between the original and the parody traceable to the way the parodist “foregrounds” the original in the parodied work: by highlighting it, complicating it, or confusing it. Such incongruity stems from the effect on the reader of shock or surprise arising from a conflict (or clash) between one’s expectations about the text parodied and what one actually encounters. Unlike forms of satire or burlesque that do not make their target a significant part of themselves, parody allows for comedy that laughs “both at and with its target.” Rose believes this definition is consistent with the history and origin of the term. Her choice of paradigms includes *Don Quixote*, Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Malcolm Bradbury’s *Who Do You Think You Are?*, and David Lodge’s *The British Museum Is Falling Down, Changing Places, and Small World*.

In contrast to the mode of theorizing advanced by Rose that stipulates humor as necessary to the genre, Linda Hutcheon ([1985](#)) defines parody as “repetition with critical [ironic] distance, which marks difference rather than similarity.” Following Gilles Deleuze, where parody was defined in 1968 as “repetition that includes difference,” she severs its connection to the comic, reserving the comic or ridiculous element for only burlesque and travesty. Thus, she denies the association of humor with the classical meaning of the term, and her definition comes to depend entirely on an explanation of the crucial phrase “critical ironic distance.”

Hutcheon agrees with Rose that, in contrast to pastiche, which is considered a simple borrowing or imitating of material allowing for very little variation, parody seeks to do something more than just imitate the original. (Pastiche has gained in popularity, however, following Fredric Jameson’s claim, originally published in 1983, that pastiche is “blank parody,” i.e., imitation “amputated of the satiric impulse” (Jameson, [1991](#)). The connection between the original and the parody that is deeper than surface repetition, which Rose called “intertextuality,” is recast by Hutcheon as imitation plus “ironic inversion”:

When we speak of parody, we do not just mean two texts that interrelate in a certain way. We also imply an intention to parody another work (or set of conventions) and both a recognition of that intent and an ability to find and interpret the backgrounded text in its relation to the parody.

The inversion takes place when there is a change or alteration in the imitation as compared with its original, for instance, when Max Ernst parodies Michelangelo’s *Pietà* by replacing the living mother and her dead son, Christ, with a petrified father holding a living son in his arms. Another example is Euripides’s play, *Medea*, which inverts the convention followed in plays by Aeschylus and Sophocles of a male protagonist who is a member of a Greek family of renown who is saved by the gods. In *Medea*, the protagonist is female, an outsider to the established Greek families of renown, and the male hero turns out to be hypocritical and shallow. The difference in critical ironic distance appears to result from the process of “revising, replaying, inverting, and ‘transcontextualizing’ previous works of art.”

Another example is Larry Rivers’s painting of Napoleon Bonaparte, based on a work by Jacques-Louis David, ironically titled *The Greatest Homosexual*. In addition to Rivers parodying David’s compositional elements (the stance of Napoleon, the right hand hidden in his vest, even the artist’s obvious signature), his title playfully judges the content of the image as it critically inverts or transcontextualizes the revered statesman by focusing on his sexual orientation.

Such irony is “playful” and can range from scornful ridicule to reverential homage. It constitutes the central paradox of parody, that “its transgression is always authorized”; that in spite of its critical difference—its tendency to critique the original—“parody reinforces.” (Recall the historical moment of the nineteenth century in which parody was theorized as paying homage to the original.) In other words, “irony judges,” but it need not be humorous or comic. Other theorists concur. J. D. Kiremidjian (1969), for instance, defines parody as “a work which retains the form but alters the contents of the work or tradition of works it imitates.” Humor is not even mentioned.

Allowing for broader definitions, there are many well-known examples of works of art considered parodies. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s “A Musical Joke” (also known as the “Village Musician’s Sextet”) parodied certain musical conventions: the unnecessary repetition of banalities, incorrect modulation, disjointed melodic ideas—in other words, incompetent playing. The second movement of Charles Ives’s Fourth Symphony suggests a parody of the music of Mozart and others, also in imitation of the playing of incompetent performers. Franz Liszt’s *Reminiscences de Don Juan* developed certain themes of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*. In the third part of his String Quartet No. 3, George Rochberg combined new atonality with parodied nineteenth-century melodic-harmonic language of the styles of Ludwig van Beethoven and Gustav Mahler. Similarly, Luciano Berio’s *Sinfonia* “transcontextualizes” fragmented quotations of J. S. Bach, Arnold Schoenberg, Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel, Richard Strauss, Johannes Brahms, Hector Berlioz, and others within the context of the third movement of Mahler’s Second Symphony. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century parodies of the most popular operas often appeared on stage contemporaneously with the originals. It is even reported that parodies of Richard Wagner’s *Tannhäuser* and *Tristan und Isolde* were performed before the original operas were staged. Jimi Hendrix’s rock version of “The Star-Spangled Banner” shows that parody need not be restricted to the classical tradition.

In addition, Jane Austen parodied the popular romance fiction of her day in *Love and Friendship* and *Pride and Prejudice*. According to Hutcheon, Austen ended *Northanger Abbey* “parodying gothic conventions while still relying on them for her novel’s shape.” Ironically, her works are now parodied in ways she might never have imagined, as in the series of books under the general title of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*. Mary Shelley, Emily and Charlotte Brontë, and others used parody as an element of social satire, prefiguring numerous women writers of today. Feminist artists have used parody within the visual arts as well. Sylvia Sleigh represented the most noted critics of the art world of the 1970s by picturing them naked in a work parodying Eugène Delacroix’s nineteenth-century harem scenes. Mary Beth Edelson revised Leonardo da Vinci’s *Last Supper* by replacing the central figure of Christ with Georgia O’Keeffe; Judy Chicago portrayed thirty-nine women not invited to the Last Supper in her infamous work, *The Dinner Party*; and Renée Cox risked the ire and censorship of former New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani when she inserted herself—as a nude black woman—in the canonical tableau (Brand, 2006). More recently, Cindy Sherman has photographed herself as a sitter in Renaissance portraiture while Yasumasa Morimura becomes a transgendered female poser (Morimura, 2008) and Kara Walker has challenged racist stereotypes of oppression (Berry et al., 2003). On a lighter note, Sally Swain humorously parodied the entire tradition of the “great masterpieces” of Western art in her series of great housewives of famous artists (Swain, 1989, 1992).

Even filmmakers have used parody to comment on the predominance of men in the field and to communicate uniquely female outlooks on the world; consider director Rachel Talay's parody of Mad Max films, *Tank Girl*, as well as works of the New German Cinema: Wim Wenders's *The State of Things*, which parodies John Ford's classic Western *The Searchers*; Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *The Desire of Veronika Voss*, seen as a "parodic inscription" of Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard*; and feminist filmmakers like Helma Sanders-Brahms, Helke Sanders, and Margerethe von Trotta. According to film theorist Marsha Kinder (1990), von Trotta's films—for example, *Germany Pale Mother*, *Trouble with Love*, and *Sheer Madness*—are multifaceted, parodying "an even wider selection of patriarchal forms, including fairy tales, poems, classical films and genres, and even progressive works by male auteurs in the New German Cinema."

The influx of the digital revolution in the twenty-first century has ushered in a veritable explosion in the creation of (mostly comic, often amateur) parodies in response to popular music, film, video, YouTube, television, and online e-film and e-parody websites, resulting in an accompanying proliferation of theoretical terminology and intellectual property law issues (Schur, 2009; Harries, 2000). Parodies are no longer simply hybrid but compound (Gehring, 1999); they are no longer merely intertextual (Allen, 2011), but also interrelational: examples of intermedia and intermarriage (Klinger, 2006) and of meta-art that function as varieties of comic interpictureality (Rose, 2011). As constant reorientations to master texts, they function as replays, recyclings, re-purposings, re-codings. Still exemplifying the paradox of parody—its inherent ambivalence between homage and satire—sophisticated media fans who are familiar with ubiquitous movies, ads, and texts have constructed a playground of textual and visual revisionings that flaunt the fluidity of intermingled content and style (Klinger, 2006). Fake news (Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert), spoofs of canonical films such as *Star Wars* and *The Blair Witch Project* (*Spaceballs*, *Hardware Wars*; *The Bewitched Project*, *The Oz Witch Project*), and rewritings of literary classics such as *The Wind Done Gone* (Randall, 2002; Gomez-Gailesteo, 2011) has resulted in a postmodern proliferation of adaptations (Hutcheon, 2006), appropriations (Sanders, 2006), and remediations (Bolter and Grusin, 2000). The growing popularity of lowbrow humor in *The Simpsons* and films by Sacha Baron Cohen has led one theorist to ask, "Is nothing sacred?" (Dentith, 2000). Parody, then, is "the art that plays with art" (Chambers, 2010), a self-conscious and self-reflexive activity that creates complicated and multiple meanings through imitation. For some theorists following Jameson's lead, it is a genre that is currently at risk of being supplanted by pastiche in the cultural production of the postmodern era (Collins, 1995).

[See also [Comedy](#); [Irony](#); and [Pastiche](#).]

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