Historical and Recent Effects Of Censorship On Parody
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Abstract

This work addresses the questions, “What is parody, is it worthy of censor and how does a collection deal with the new cumulative, cultural extremism?” The paper addresses significance and meaning in parody, comparing it by episteme and its social contingency since parody is inevitably a product of the times in which it is written and the work it mirrors. It shows that the term “parody” is sometimes compared, isometrically, to “satire”, but in these instances and in these examinations, refer to empirical entities or events and is conceptualized as having casual powers upon human minds and reaction. It argues that the epistemological assumptions in regard to parody in humor haven’t led to much cultural and social reaction in the past, rather it’s the sexual, scatological and mostly religious that draw condemnation. As Surly and Mopes examine in Pasquinade and Parody, “These assumptions about the grounds of humor -- about how one might begin to understand this archetypal world and communicate this as humor to fellow participants in the work. These assumptions entail ideas, for example, about what forms of humor can be obtained, and how one can sort out what is to be regarded as ‘parody’ from what is to be regarded as ‘satire.’ Indeed, this isomorphic examination of ‘parody’ and ‘satire’ itself, presupposes a certain epistemological stance. It is predicated upon a view of the nature of humor itself: whether, for example, it is possible to identify and communicate the nature of ‘parody’ as being hard, real and capable of being communicated in tangible form, or whether ‘parody’ is a softer, more subjective, spiritual or even complementary kind, based on experience and essential appropriation. The epistemological assumptions in these instances determine extreme positions on the issue of whether parody is something which can be missed on the one hand, or is something which has to be personally experienced on the other after knowing the work appropriated and reacted to with cumulative extremism.”

Question answered. “What is control regarding parody, is it dangerous?”

*Keywords:* parody, censorship, humor, tragedy

The Public speaker who once lampooned in our Bacchic Feasts would,
With heart malign, Keep nibbling away the Comedians’ pay;-  
To these, I utter my warning cry,

The Frogs  – Aristophanes

In becoming ‘post-modern through the rejection and revision of the modern reduction of parody to *either* meta-fiction *or* comedy, and in favour of an understanding of parody as a much more complex combination and development of both the meta-fictional and the comic and their related forms, the parody ‘regained’ in the post-modern depictions of it described might even be said to have ‘double-coded’ the modern with the ancient.

Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-modern - Margaret A. Rose
Introduction

_The Frogs_, by Aristophanes, resides on any well-stocked library’s shelves. In Aristophanes’ play written in 405 B.C., the chorus implores this warning written in the style of Euripides. The chorus is poking fun at that recently deceased poet. _The Frogs_ is one of the first recorded parodies of ancient history. If there were earlier ones, Aristotle says of comedy, “its early stages passed unnoticed because it was not as yet taken up in a serious way.” In parody’s early years, comedy wasn’t taken up in a serious way, but in light of recent events, things have taken a different, darker turn. Will librarians’ choices when building a collection reflect these changes?

The Oxford English Dictionary defines parody as “an imitation of a work more or less closely modeled on the original but so turned as to produce a ridiculous effect.” The word parody is derived from the words “para” which means by the side and “ode”, song. The Fifth Century B.C.E. produced many famous playwrights of comedy such as Aristophanes, Menander, Philemon, Diphilus, and Lucian, all of whom were respected for their talents. When the militaristic Spartans conquered Athens, their newly imposed censorship began to change the political satire of the old Greek comedies. The comedies of the Hellenistic time now lost their political subject matter and were about middle-class concerns of life; love, money, and family. Comedy has been able to dodge serious censorship over the ages precisely because, as Aristotle postulates, it wasn’t taken seriously. No one was required to drink poison for corrupting the Greek youths or acknowledging unorthodox divinities. And when the going got tough back then, the comedic writers didn’t. No heartfelt politics or religion got in the way of belief and subject matter, simply water down the comedy. And parody, a comedic subgenre, is an even harder attack. Parody is a complex dance between the parodist and his subject. The humor must be found between the lines of the work, which makes putting the work before a court for judgment difficult, for a parody gets to the truth by parading the opposite.

Witty or Wicked?

Most Elegiac Comedies of the Middle Ages escaped censor for the same reason, their topics were also about unimportant or low subject matter, whereas science and religious texts, were heavily censored by the Church, as challenges to it. Fiction escaped notice by the church for some time. It wasn’t until Chaucer wrote his _Canterbury Tales_, a collection of fabliau parodies poking fun at courtly love, chivalry and lastly, the church, that a work of fiction received such unwanted attention. Although _The Canterbury Tales_ were censored by the church for pointing out its widespread corruption endemic to the times, the tales received their greatest censor from the United States much, much later.

From Colonial Times until even recently, _The Canterbury Tales_ were censored from classes, not for their challenges to the church but for their sexual content and depiction of rape. Even in 1995, they were banned from a senior prep class in Illinois for being thought obscene. It is unfortunate that _The Canterbury Tales_ are still being censored from some schools, for it closes the window that they offer to see truly into the time of the Middle Ages.

Ben Jonson’s parodies of the Jacobean Era were the cause of his brief imprisonment under the accusation of sedition and for mocking the king. But his punishment was light since Jonson had been
appointed the court poet of King James and it was assumed that his works were looked upon as the
calming a jester might give his king. But being a writer of parody doesn’t protect a writer from being the
subject of parody. In 1601 writers Dekker and Marston wrote, *Satiromastix*, a work mocking Ben
Johnson himself, Cervantes parodied the chivalric romance in *Don Quixote*, Rabelais did the same to the
Scholastics in *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*, and Shakespeare mimicked Christopher Marlowe’s high style
and was in turn parodied.

It was in *Candide*, inspired by Fenelon’s *Les Adventures De Telmarque*, that Voltaire used the
style of the bildungsroman coming of age story, taking aim at churches, armies, philosophers and
especially popular at that time, leibnizian optimism. The book’s protagonist, a hopeful optimist,
encounters the worst kind of tragedies that could be offered, one after another, all describing them in the
most matter-of-fact way. When the work was released, under a pseudonym in 1759, it was banned both by
the Grand Council of Geneva and administrators of Paris. Shortly after, and possibly because of this, the
book sold 20,000 to 30,000 copies, making it a huge best seller for its time. Voltaire writes about
censorship in a letter saying, “I implore you not to clip the wings of our writers so closely, nor to turn
into barn fowls those who, allowed a start might become eagles; reasonable liberty permits the mind to
soar – slavery makes it creep”. *Candide* has continued to be revered or reviled for centuries after. Even
up to the 1930’s when, destined for a Harvard University French class, it was barred from entering the
United States, not for sedition or mocking the church, but for America’s continuing bugaboo, obscenity.
Although, *Candide* is now being taught in most colleges as a literary masterpiece.

Honoring Parody’s Edge

In England, during the 19th Century, the art of parody rose to new heights, buoyed by such writers
as Thackery, Calverley, Swinburne, Kipling, Carroll and Wilde, who was himself famously parodied by
Gilbert and Sullivan in “Patience”. It was to his detriment that Oscar Wilde chose to shine this light upon
himself in “The Importance of Being Earnest”. All these writers but he escaped approbation for their
parodies for Wilde’s “Importance of Being Earnest” was quickly censored for it’s double entendres. At
the time, in 19th Century England, the term *earnestness* denoted the quality of moral integrity in the
British ideal of Manhood. W.H. Auden remarked in the trial of Wilde, “it was difficult to ignore Wilde’s
homosexuality when reading the play: now one always knows what Algernon means when he says he is
going Bunburying.” In 1895, after an incredible opening, the play was banned from the stage and Oscar
Wilde was imprisoned for indecency. Wilde wasn’t imprisoned for his play per se, but the play brought
attention to Wilde’s homosexual, and at the time illegal, relationship with a marquise’s son. Now, more
than a hundred years from his death, Wilde’s plays, and this one, in particular, are amongst the most
popular in the world. In the panoply of humorous writers, none died or were punished much for their use
of humor and parody in their writing. Some did spend time in jail, for reasons having nothing to do with
their craft, and many of them are famously known for their last words, uttered in their old age.
Early Parody Across the Pond

Early America humor was still suffering the effects of the long puritan hangover but the art of parody was still being exercised unchecked. Benjamin Franklin wrote a parody of a congressman’s vociferous defense of slavery but died shortly after it was published. Not from the parody, but instead, his old age and emphysema. This, unfortunately, denied America one of their best humorists and also a respected voice debating the merits of slavery in a way that could be heard by many. Bret Harte was a well known humorist of his time, skewering with parody Charles Dickens, Fennimore Cooper, and Victor Hugo. He first employed Mark Twain to write humorous pieces for *The Californian*, a West Coast paper, and collaborated on a play with him as well. Mark Twain, in turn, wrote several parodies, his best, “A Double Barrel Detective Story” was a parody of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s detective series, “Sherlock Holmes”. He also penned a bawdy parody of Elizabethan manners and a “treatise” on the Science of Onanism, (masturbation). Twain was never pilloried for his humor, for upon his death at 74, he was honored by President Taft, saying "Mark Twain gave pleasure – real intellectual enjoyment – to millions, and his works will continue to give such pleasure to millions yet to come ... His humor was American, but he was nearly as much appreciated by Englishmen and people of other countries as by his own countrymen. He has made an enduring part of American Literature.”

In the early 20th century, back in the United Kingdom, parody continued unchecked. Evelyn Waugh was a popular parodist and never censored. James Joyce employed parody frequently in his works but it was only in “Ulysses” that his book was banned for obscenity in its frank descriptions of sex. Ten years after the ban, Judge Woolsey decided that, in a literary work, if offensive language or sexual subjects do not promote lust, then a work can’t be deemed obscene. This court opinion opened the door to importation and publication of works of literature, with subjects that some might find offensive, and is often cited as an affirmation of a writer’s guarantee to literary free expression. Despite this benchmark case, which supported the First Amendment rights of writers, parody played a part in none of it since parody was still sneaking by without penalty. It was during this time that Max Beerbohm rose to the pinnacle of parody, skewering several generations of royalty with his wit and was knighted for it before he died at 83.

Parody’s Protection On Paper

In America, parodies are protected as a form of free speech under the First Amendment written in December of 1791. The First Amendment protects freedom of religion, speech and the press. When royalty ruled most nations, and the United States was ruled by Great Britain, its colonists could not gather to discuss or disagree with rules and laws forced upon them by the British crown. Parody falls under this First Amendment’s protection, saying, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press…”.

But what do “Where the Wild Things Are”, “Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone”, “Are you there God, It’s Me Margaret”, and “The Bible” have in common? The answer is that they all have, at some time, been banned books. Many past banned books have then become best sellers or classics. Often the subjects they speak of are controversial at the time, or cause consternation in parents or political parties but are then, soon enough, seen as necessary or groundbreaking.
Although freedom of press and speech are protected by our constitution, it seems that there is a different criterion for freedom of press and speech in the school environment. In 1974 “Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee” was banned by a school district. It was a book depicting the exploration and growth of America through the eyes of a Native American. A Wisconsin school official succinctly, yet inadvertently, stated why this book and most books in the school system are banned. He said, “If there’s a possibility that something might be controversial, then why not eliminate it?” School officials, teachers, and librarians seem to feel that removing a book from the shelves of a children’s library is not censorship. Librarian, Sharon Coatney, confessed to this when she wrote for Time Magazine stating, “That is my job, but we call what I do "selection," not "censorship." The hardest part of the job is to constantly keep in balance all viewpoints, not push my own agenda and remember that the education and safety of all of the students are my top priority. The exercise of the right to know must be tempered by a child's need for physical and emotional well-being.” Does the First Amendment not apply to children as well, or must they be of voting age? The American Library Association does not condone the “selection” of books from library shelves whether to avoid controversy or to temper children’s right to know saying “A challenge is an attempt to remove or restrict materials, based upon the objections of a person or group. A banning is the removal of those materials. Challenges do not simply involve a person expressing a point of view; rather, they are an attempt to remove material from the curriculum or library, thereby restricting the access of others. As such, they are the threat to freedom of speech and choice.” But the continuation of censorship in school libraries continues. A separate paper could be written on the rights infringed upon by parents, teachers, and officials. But this paper is about parody and censorship and parody is something that is generally allowed to continue unhindered. Like a jester dressed in motley, the parodist, like the Fool, is granted freedom to chide the king and court, since it is expected of him.

Censorship or Protection Now?

Parody has continued on through the years, coming from writers as surprising as Vladimir Nabakov, sources of juvenalia from Mad Magazine and journalistic offerings from The Onion, to Jon Stewarts’ parody of American history and Steven Colbert’s news reports. All have continued to mock and ridicule, for the most part unchecked, until the 21st Century.

And then, on January 7th, 2015, the first blow came to writers in a country that was the first to declare freedom of speech as an unalienable right. These writers were not given the jester’s rights to chide. In France, in the offices of Charlie Hebdo, a newspaper known for skewering with their humor the Far Right, politicians, culture, and most religions, their offices were visited by two gunmen who broke in. While shouting “God is great”, the gunmen open fired, killing twelve and wounding eleven. Years before this horrible event occurred, Charlie Hebdo had been in the news protecting its right to freedom of speech in court. Jacques Chirac, president at the time, said, “Anything that can hurt the convictions of someone else, in particular religious convictions, should be avoided.” Sarkozy, president in 2006 when the offices of the newspaper were later firebombed, expressed support for the venerable tradition of satire and parody by defending the right to “smile at everything” saying that he preferred “the excess of caricatures to the absence of caricature.” After the events of January 7th, it is hard to smile at everything and many think that perhaps the absence of caricature is preferable to death. There are others that disagree and show their solidarity with the right to write by saying “Je suis Charlie” (I am Charlie). But, Voltaire protested,
“This is not a time for laughter,” when he was appalled at the Church’s intolerance, ignorance, and persecution. How do we continue to laugh?

Time has finally answered the question, “What is control regarding parody, is it dangerous?” Right now, parody, amazingly, can be dangerous. Do we chose to stand up with the ALA and support their guiding principles or do we acquiesce to Chiraq’s recommendation in order to protect our library and its users? With these changing times, how will libraries, as an institution, address extreme reactions to work in collections? How do we address the danger in these changing times that could come from cultural extremists that wish to silence our laughter?
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