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DEAD FUNNY

Eaton Stannard Barrett's *The Heroine* as Comic Gothic

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EATON STANNARD BARRETT'S *The Heroine* has traditionally been read as a reactionary text. In problematizing this received status, however, we are not simply aiming to recuperate Barrett's novel into a more politically correct framework by focusing on a potentially subversive subtext. Rather, we seek to raise questions concerning the nature of parody, particularly in relation to three elements: its historical moment of production, its engagement with a particular textual tradition and the way in which different readers construct meaning from a parodic work. Parodic texts tend to have been read as limited in their significance, their very provenance in another work constraining the critic's engagement with wider issues; they are therefore frequently dismissed as low comedy at best or parasitic or reactionary at worst.¹ For example, in his introduction to the 1909 edition of Barrett's novel, Walter Raleigh writes disparagingly of parody; while acknowledging that certain writers transcend their own intention to write parody, he states that in Barrett's case 'it cannot be claimed that he proved superior to the task which he undertook'.² A typically dismissive comment on parody, Raleigh's judgement of Barrett's work fails to acknowledge the complexity of Barrett's engagement with both the social issues of his time and with the wider streams of Romanticism. We wish to argue here, however, that the accomplished parodic text does not merely react to another text or genre (although that may be its starting point); rather, it forms part of a sophisticated cultural dialogue in which humour and wit assert themselves. We would argue that parody, as a complex form of textual response and negotiation, and as a subgenre of comedy, carries a freight of ideological ambivalence which is always as culturally significant as the issues raised by the 'serious' source which it burlesques.

Such an approach to parody is inevitably informed by contemporary theoretical perspectives.³ Linda Hutcheon, for example, links the double-coding characteristic of post-modernism to the double-coding inherent in parody. Hutcheon challenges the assumption that parody's double-coding always results in comic form, preferring to characterise parody as 'repetition with critical difference'.⁴ Rose suggests that Hutcheon's 'virtual elimination of the comic from parody ... may be described ... as a "late-modern" reaction to the modern description of parody as burlesque comedy which has divided parody from the comic rather than reunited the latter with the parody's more intertextual aspects'.⁵ The status of *The Heroine* as a comic text has never been in doubt, nor has its overt and covert debt to other texts. What has not been acknowledged in its critical reception to date is the way in which both of these aspects of the novel create a textual space in which alternative modes of being and thinking are given free rein. The 'critical difference' afforded by Barrett's playful engagement with the popular fiction of his time opens up serious issues relating to national and gendered identities. The post-modern feminist reader may still laugh at Barrett's comedy but it is with the knowledge that beneath the farce and grotesquery lie both poignant truths about the social and economic status of early nineteenth-century women and an emotionally freighted history of women as readers which are not to be dismissed as lightly as the novel's closure seems to suggest.

Published in 1813, *The Heroine* quite clearly draws on the content and conventions of other texts as a way of creating its comic effects. More specifically, the contrivances and contraptions of Gothic novels are much in evidence as the eponymous heroine turns her back on a humdrum rural existence and embarks upon a set of picaresque adventures. While Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818) has long been enjoyed as an entertaining engagement with the Gothic (first as a burlesque and more recently as a subtle appropriation of Gothic conventions for the purpose of exploring dark but

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1. Margaret Rose begins her extensive 1993 study with the following words, 'When I first published on parody some twenty years ago now it was still being treated by many critics as a rather lowly comic form which had been of little real significance in the history of literature or of other arts.' (Margaret Rose, *Parody: Ancient, Modern and Post-Modern* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 1.)
 2. Eaton Stannard Barrett, *The Heroine*, ed. Walter Raleigh (London: Henry Frowde, 1909), p. ix. All subsequent quotations from the novel, hereafter referenced in the text, are from this edition of the novel.
 3. Rose's book offers a useful exposition of contemporary, late-modern and post-modern theories and uses of parody (*Parody*, pp. 193–274).
 4. Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (London, Methuen, 1985), p. 6.
 5. Rose, *Parody*, p. 239.

mundane truths⁶), Barrett's *The Heroine* has fallen into obscurity. Austen's famous novel begins with the words, 'No one who had seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be an heroine'.⁷ Barrett's 'heroine', Cherry Wilkinson, is a similarly unlikely candidate for the role; like Catherine Morland, she is a novel reader but one who wilfully sets out to adopt an identity modelled on the fictional heroines she has encountered. The result is that the story of Cherry's adventures, like those of Catherine Morland, bears a parodic relationship to the novels of her time.

The Heroine is a novel in the form of letters from a young woman to her governess. Cherry is the rosy-cheeked daughter of Gregory Wilkinson, a farmer; her head turned by her reading of Gothic and sentimental literature, she misconstrues a 'frightful fragment' of a copy of a lease as proof that she is descended from the Willoughbys of nearby Gwyn Castle. Changing her name to Cherubina de Willoughby, she therefore leaves home (thereby causing her father great distress) and sets off to claim her inheritance on a journey which initially takes her, a country innocent, into the less than respectable echelons of London society and into the company of disreputable theatre folk. Various masquerades and deceptions on the part of her new companions ensue, including one of them presenting himself, in cod middle English, as Wylome Eftsoones, an 'ancient and loyal vassal' (p. 142) of the Willoughby family, and thus furthering Cherry's delusions of nobility. Followed by this train of fortune-seekers and by genuine admirers, she fails in her aim to 'reclaim' Gwyn Castle, but does manage to 'capture' Monkton Castle, which is not much more than a ruin and which (strongly influenced by her reading) she decks out as a Gothic abode. In short, she acts out the role of a heroine. After many adventures, she is brought to her senses, re-united with her father and is 're-educated' by 'an exemplary pastor' and by one Robert Stuart. The latter, formerly her father's ward and a sensible man of property, eventually rewards her 'conversion' back to reality with a proposal of marriage.

Late twentieth-century readers find the witty one-liners and what Emma Clery and Robert Miles have described as 'the delirious silliness' of Cherry's adventures very entertaining;⁸ it was also greatly admired as a comic work by Barrett's contemporaries. Hugely popular in the decade after it was published, *The Heroine* has been undeservedly out of print since 1927. It was described in *The Biographical Dictionary of the Living Authors of Great Britain and Ireland* (1816) as 'not inferior in wit and humour to *Tristram Shandy*, and in point of plot and interest infinitely beyond *Don Quixote*'.⁹ Jane Austen, in a letter dated 2 March 1814, comments: 'I finished *The Heroine* last night and was very much amused by it ... It diverted me exceedingly ... I have torn through the third volume ... I do not think it falls off. It is a delightful burlesque particularly on the Radcliffe style'.¹⁰ An essay on *The Heroine*, published in the *Southern Literary Messenger* in 1835, and thought to have been written by Edgar Allan Poe, describes Barrett's novel as never having had 'attracted half that notice on the part of the critical press, which is undoubtedly its due'.¹¹ Devendra Varma claims to admire the novel but almost damns it with faint praise by describing it as 'perhaps the best work of the reactionary school'.¹² It would seem, then, that nineteenth-century readers were more open to the delights and significance of parody than early twentieth-century critics who tended to dismiss it as a parasitic and inferior literary form. However, for the late twentieth-century reader, schooled in post-modern irony and aware that

6. For an example of the latter sort of reading, see Claudia Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics and the Novel* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

7. Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, ed. Anne Henry Ehrenpreis (1818; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 1.

8. E. J. Clery and Robert Miles (eds.), *Gothic Documents: A Sourcebook 1700–1820* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 204.

9. Cited in Devendra P. Varma, *The Gothic Flame: Being a History of the Gothic Novel in England: Its Origins, Efflorescence, Disintegration and Residuary Influences* (1957; Metuchen, NJ and London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1987), p. 181.

10. *The Letters of Jane Austen*, ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 376–7. Cited in *Romantic Reassessment: Vol. 3 'Collateral Gothic 1'*, ed. by Thomas Meade Harwell (Salzburg: Salzburg Studies in English Literature, 1986), p. 178.

11. [Edgar Allan Poe?], Review of *The Heroine* from *Southern Literary Messenger* 1835 (pp. 41–3). Online: Internet (13 June 1999) <www.eapoe.org/works/criticism/slm35b04>.

12. Varma, *Gothic Flame*, p. 181.

meaning is created by the reader's interaction with the text, *The Heroine* can present itself as a work that moves skilfully between the discourses of Romanticism, sensibility and the Gothic in order to produce a witty and penetrating analysis of the literature and culture of its time. In so doing, it foregrounds the problematic nature of the relationship between the text and the reader, the fictional and the 'real', and the interchange between literary constructs and social behaviour.

It is easy to see, though, why *The Heroine* might be read as a conservative or even reactionary text. It is clear, even from our brief plot description, that it can be placed in the tradition of novels such as Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote or The Adventures of Arabella* (1752) which burlesque the romance. Lennox's novel manifests a very English anxiety about the romance genre and its effects on female readers, for eighteenth-century middle-class English women were, as Margaret Anne Doody has noted, to 'have neither history nor adventures' if they were to remain proper ladies.¹³ Despite Jane Austen's sophisticated exploration of the relationship between romance and the 'real' world in *Northanger Abbey*, such ideas about female decorum influenced reader reception of such texts right into the mid-twentieth century. As late as 1967 the aim of Lennox's novel was being described as a 'desire to ridicule the French heroic romances, and to point out their potentially harmful effects on the minds of inexperienced readers'.¹⁴ The reception of *The Heroine* has been similarly influenced, with Walter Raleigh describing the novel in his 1909 introduction as simply reflecting the 'middle-class code of (Barrett's) own time' and as a work which was written to warn the heroine 'against the extravagances that so easily beset her'.¹⁵ The critic here aligns himself with the mentoring male in such novels in that he focuses on what is seen as a female tendency to be deluded by romance fictions, thereby emphasizing his own sophistication and worldliness. The fact that the author of *The Heroine* was a man has provided further confirmation, for many readers, that the novel set out to educate silly women readers into a more 'mature' state of mind. Indeed, Gary Kelly's description of Barrett as 'a Tory professional man and ... an anti-Whig, Anti-Jacobin, anti-Sentimentalist, antifeminist writer' underpins his reading of *The Heroine* as part of the institutionalization of a 'professional middle-class culture and hegemony' which wished to see the middle-class woman safely constrained within the home.¹⁶

Of course, *The Heroine* mocks the Gothic novel as well as the romance genre. From yet another perspective, then, it may be read conservatively. Many of the themes and tropes of eighteenth-century Gothic writing—for example, the restoration of lineage and property, the moving picture, the old servant who knows a family secret, the Gothic building—are parodied in Barrett's novel. Traditionally it has been assumed that the tide of such parodies, which appeared between 1790 and 1820, was a reaction to the excesses of horror and terror that characterised the Gothic text of the same period.¹⁷ Until recently, the general critical assumption was that the aim of such parodies was to entertain and to educate; Devendra Varma describes their authors as 'teachers of moral prudence whose influence had been impaired by the flood, but not destroyed'.¹⁸ In other words, comic Gothic at the opening of the nineteenth century has frequently been seen as a reinstatement of Enlightenment values in the face of Romantic ideals: rationality, common sense and the importance of the social fabric were to be valued above the thoughts and feelings, passions and emotions, of the individual. Accordingly, what we might call the comic Gothic novel was often read as conservative in its recuperation of the individual into the

13. Charlotte Lennox, *The Female Quixote or The Adventures of Arabella*, ed. Margaret Dalziel and introd. by Margaret Anne Doody (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) p. xi.

14. Duncan Isles, 'Johnson and Charlotte Lennox', *The New Rambler* (June 1967), 41–2.

15. Walter Raleigh, 'Introduction' to Barrett, *Heroine*, pp. iii–iv.

16. Gary Kelly, 'Unbecoming a Heroine: Novel Reading, Romanticism, and Barrett's *The Heroine*', *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 45:2 (Sep 1990), 220–41 (pp. 226, 227, and 241).

17. Varma, for example, notes in *Gothic Flame* that during this period, 'The frequent parodies and satires are symptomatic of the new sensibility which was manifesting itself in English prose fiction as the Gothic manner became exhausted'. Marilyn Butler, whilst seeing the Gothic novel as 'a product of the three decades of quickening pulse, the revolutionary era from about 1760 to about 1797', a product which came to full fruition in England in the work of Ann Radcliffe, also notes that after about 1797, all self-respecting novelists steered clear of the Gothic for about two decades unless it was to parody it (*Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background 1760–1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 156 and 157).

18. Varma, *Gothic Flame*, p. 180.

social fabric—and, indeed, endings such as Catherine Morland's engagement in Austen's *Northanger Abbey* and Scythrop's choice of a glass of Madeira sherry over death by pistol shot in Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey* do seem to dissolve darker questions raised earlier. In similar vein, even more recent critical readings of *The Heroine* present, with varying degrees of sophistication, both the work and its author as reactionary. Paul Lewis, whilst giving credit to the power of the novel's humour, sees 'beneath the apparently harmless, even delightful, literary thesis an unquestioning faith in patriarchy and repression'.¹⁹ As we have noted, Gary Kelly, whilst grounding the novel far more securely in contemporary culture and politics than Lewis, nevertheless sees it as the product of historical forces which were 'pressing hard for professionalization and the conservative values of emergent professional middle-class ideology'.²⁰ Jacqueline Howard refuses to find any subtlety in the novel, arguing that Barrett 'trivializes' Cherry 'to such a degree that she becomes a tedious character with whom we can have little sympathy'; she also claims that in *The Heroine* '(w)e find none of the ambiguity which Hutcheon sees as characteristic of the ironic inversion constituting parody'.²¹ Both Lewis and Howard seem to assume that only serious Gothic can raise serious questions in the mind of the reader. For example, Lewis states:

In the hands of sophisticated writers (for example, Godwin, Brown, Poe, Hogg, Hawthorne, Melville, James and others), mystery has the potential for raising important theological, epistemological, psychological, and social questions ... (whereas) ... Barrett misses the very human sense of doubt and fear, the adventurous exploration of the fantastic at the center of the Gothic.²²

In a similar vein, Howard argues that Cherry's "slavish adherence" to purely literary conventions so thoroughly pre-empts any raising of the epistemological, psychological, and theological questions found in the Gothic that it trivializes the genre'.²³ This approach affords comedy a very limited role and ignores the changing nature of the contract between the author and the reader. We would suggest, instead, that as well as illustrating 'with unusual clarity the interrelationship of social, cultural, and political issues during the Romantic social and cultural revolution',²⁴ *The Heroine* can also be read as comically negotiating contemporary anxieties—for example, those concerning women and property—in such a way as to raise serious questions in the mind of the reader.

Much has been published on the relationship between the Romantic and the Gothic; far less energy has been devoted to that between Romanticism and the comic. Even less work, however, has been done on the links to be made between Romantic critical thought and the parodic, perhaps because of what, in Howard's words, appears to be the 'trivializing' nature of parody. Of course, parody can be seen as its own worst enemy: in making obvious its own highly intertextual nature, it frequently draws the accusation that it is merely derivative. Moreover, what Linda Hutcheon has defined as 'the continuing strength of a Romantic aesthetic that values genius, originality and individuality' has worked against a more positive reception of the parodic. As Hutcheon notes,

Michel Foucault (1977) has argued that the entire concept of the artist or author as an original instigator of meaning is only a privileged moment of individualization in the history of art. In that light, it is likely that the Romantic rejection of parodic forms as parasitic reflected a growing capitalist ethic that made literature into a commodity to be owned by an individual.²⁵

Yet there *was* Romantic interest in the comic and the parodic although it blossomed relatively late. As Thomas H. Schmid has pointed out, a look at the chronology is revealing:

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19. Paul Lewis, 'Gothic and Mock Gothic: The Repudiation of Fantasy in Barrett's *Heroine*', *English Language Notes* 21:1 (Sep 1983), 45–52 (p. 45).
 20. Kelly, 'Unbecoming a Heroine', 221.
 21. Jacqueline Howard, *Reading Gothic Fiction: A Bakhtinian Approach* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 155.
 22. Lewis, 'Gothic and Mock Gothic', 52.
 23. Howard, *Reading Gothic Fiction*, pp. 159–60.
 24. Kelly, 'Unbecoming a Heroine', 227.
 25. Hutcheon, *Theory of Parody*, p. 4.

Between 1817 and 1822 *Melincourt*, *Beppo*, *Nightmare Abbey*, *Witch of Atlas*, *Swellfoot the Tyrant* and *Peter Bell the Third* are published. Throughout this period as well, Coleridge, Hazlitt, Lamb and even Shelley (to a minor degree) wrote critically on the comic. What interest the comic has for Romanticism seems to burgeon during this period, when humour can be seen as a challenge to Romanticism's apparent seriousness or even 'farce of ... tragic nostalgia' as Jerome McGann puts it.²⁶

More recently, Gary Dyer's attempt to reappraise the role of romantic satire has revealed the strong seam of comic writing which runs through Romanticism.²⁷ As David Kent has pointed out, however, 'Dyer's ascription of the comic with the parodic misrepresents the fierce ideological battleground parody frequently embodied'.²⁸ However, so far, little critical attention has been paid to contemporary Romantic theorisation of the comic and/or parodic. In our attempt to define the complex cultural role played by parody, we turn now to Jean Paul Richter's *Vorschule der Aesthetik* (*School for Aesthetics*) which was published in 1804. In defining the value of humour (which he describes as the Romantic comic) as an aspect of the imagination, Richter offers an exposition of it as 'inverse sublime', a concept which perhaps derives from eighteenth-century appropriations of Longinus's theories of the sublime. This is clearly an attempt to bring humour into the legitimising embrace of Romantic aesthetics. For Richter, whereas the sublime evokes terror, awe and fear, the 'inverse sublime' invites an ironic detachment from the world. This results from the juxtaposition of the details of a finite world against the idea of the infinite: we thus become aware of the world's folly and detached from 'both great and small, because before infinity everything is equal and nothing'.²⁹ Arguably, this could be read as a variation on the Romantic withdrawal from the social, but Richter's insistence that humour encourages sympathy rather than condemnation prevents his ideas on the comic from embracing misanthropy. In laughing at humanity rather than at individuals, we rise above the finite and so experience a sense of the 'inverse sublime'. In Schmid's words,

the experience of humor as adumbrated by Romantic theorists is subjective, imaginative and liberating. Because humor 'annihilates' finite categories of the understanding and levels all before the 'infinite', it subverts the moral certitude of forms like satire, and encourages sympathy rather than ethereal withdrawal ...³⁰

At the same time, however, the text will have thrown the frames of social reference into doubt and will have made moral judgement appear a matter of relativity: it is in this sense that the comic can function as intellectually liberating and provocative. 'Humor', writes Richter, 'is a raving Socrates, as the ancients called Diogenes'.³¹ In similar spirit, Barrett notes in his preface to *The Heroine* that making 'the world laugh ... is the gravest occupation an author can chuse' (p. 6). In choosing parody as his comic vehicle, Barrett, we argue, embraces what Linda Hutcheon sees as one of its key functions:

I see parody as operating as a method of inscribing continuity while permitting critical distance. It can indeed function as a conservative force in both retaining and mocking other aesthetic forms; but it is also capable of transformative power in creating new syntheses, as the Russian formalists argued.³²

In similar spirit, Glen Cavaliero has recently suggested that:

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26. Thomas A. Schmid, *Humour and Transgression in Peacock, Shelley, and Byron: A Cold Carnival* (Edwin Mellen Press: Lewiston, Queenston and Lampeter, 1991), p. 30.
27. Gary Dyer, *British Satire and the Politics of Style, 1789–1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997; Cambridge Studies in Romanticism 23).
28. David A. Kent, 'On Gary Dyer's *British Satire and the Politics of Style, 1789–1832*', *Romantic Circles: Reviews* <www.rc.umd.edu/reviews/dyer>.
29. Jean Paul Richter, *Horn of Oberon: Jean Paul Richter's 'School for Aesthetics'*, introd. and trans. by Margaret R. Hale (1804; Detroit: Wayne State University, 1973), pp. 88–9.
30. Schmid, *Humour and Transgression*, p. 15.
31. Hale, *Horn of Oberon*, p. 99.
32. Hutcheon, *Theory of Parody*, p. 26.

Even when the parody is largely celebratory ... it is also purposeful, its target the tyranny of the monolith, its aim to be liberating and remedial. Both the strength and the weakness of any literary artefact can be illuminated by a parody ...³³

The Heroine certainly retains and mocks 'other aesthetic forms' in that it is an extremely self-conscious text addressed to a well-read reader. The Glossary appended by Michael Sadleir to the 1927 edition lists over thirty novels referred to in the text, including: Mrs. Roche's *Children of the Abbey*, Fanny Burney's *Cecilia* and *Evelina*; Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Italian*; Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, *Clarissa* and *Sir Charles Grandison*; Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse*; Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* and *Corinne* by Madame de Staël.³⁴ As Gary Kelly points out, it also draws on 'Burke's notoriously ornate style in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* ... speeches by Bonaparte, and a speech by the reformer Sir Francis Burdett to the electors of Westminster in 1812'.³⁵ Barrett's text thus rhetorically dissolves the apparent distinction between the worlds of politics and popular fiction. Such a dense fabric of intertextual reference presupposes that the author and the reader share a legacy of cultural codes and experience. Moreover, the 'rules' of both sentimental and gothic writing are frequently made fun of by the author in an acutely self-reflexive manner. For example, the heroine points out early in the text to one of her admirers that 'whoever rescues me now, you know, is destined to marry me hereafter. That is the rule' (p. 63); a few pages later she remarks to another character: 'I give you my word I will reward you at *dénouement* along with the other characters ...' (p. 67). Sometimes this baring of the device results in strangely dislocating moments, as when Cherubina comments that 'Men who converse with a heroine, should talk for the press, or they will cut but a silly figure in her memoirs' (p. 194). But exposure of the rigidity of the rules of fiction is also used to make the reader query the rigidity of the rules and the 'truth' of supposedly objective disciplines such as 'history'. In a passage which is remarkably consonant in tone with the more famous section in Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, in which Catherine Morland queries history as an objective narrative since it contains 'hardly any women at all',³⁶ Cherubina debates the relative merits of history and fiction with a fellow traveller:

'you must confess, that novels are more true than histories, because histories often contradict each other, but novelists never do.'

'Yet do not novelists contradict themselves?' said he.

'Certainly', replied I, 'and there lies the surest proof of their veracity. For as human actions are always contradicting themselves, so those books which faithfully relate them must do the same.'

'Admirable!' exclaimed he. 'And yet what proof have we that such personages as Schedoni, Vivaldi, Camilla, or Cecilia, ever existed?'

'And what proof have we', cried I, 'that such personages as Alfred the Great, Henry the Fifth, Elfrida, or Mary Queen of Scots, ever existed?' (p. 54)

Against the 'common-sense' reading of the novel, then, which sees the *dénouement* as the displacement of fanciful fictions by the concerns of the 'real' world, *The Heroine* seems to tempt us continually to see life and fiction, history and novels, 'truth' and fantasy as not, in fact, easily separable but as part of one continuum. As Margaret Anne Doody notes of *The Female Quixote*'s similar self-reflexiveness, 'To control modes of narration ... is to control the world'.³⁷

Read from a feminist viewpoint, of course, this self-conscious appropriation of narrative control by Cherry/Cherubina has interesting implications. In a preface entitled 'The Heroine to the Reader', Barrett introduces the idea of a parallel imaginary universe created through the act of writing:

33. Glen Cavaliero, *The Alchemy of Laughter: Comedy in English Fiction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), p. 60.

34. A list of other texts drawn upon by Barrett in *The Heroine* is included in the 1927 edition of the novel, introduced by Michael Sadleir, and published in London by Elkin, Mathews, and Marrot, Ltd.

35. Kelly, 'Unbecoming a Heroine', 233.

36. Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, p. 123.

37. Lennox, *The Female Quixote*, p. xxvii.

Know, that the moment a mortal manuscript is written out in a legible hand, and the word End or Finis annexed thereto, whatever characters happen to be sketched in it (whether imaginary, biographical, or historical) acquire the quality of creating and effusing a sentient soul or spirit, which instantly takes flight, and ascends through the regions or air, till it arrives at the MOON; where it is then embodied, and becomes a living creature; the precise counterpart, in mind and person of its literary prototype. (p. 2)

We are alerted here to the Quixotic notion that an alternative world of romance or fantasy can (like modern science fiction) offer the means whereby the values of this world can be held open to question; that there is, in Jonathan Lamb's words, 'a particular sort of integrity which is defined by literary activity'.³⁸ In this sense, if the fictional world of serious Gothic horror offers the sublimity of horror, then that of comic Gothic offers an inverse sublime of humorous possibility. Similarly, Cherry Wilkinson's deliberate adoption of another persona, the alter ego of Cherubina deWilloughby, can be seen as the creation of a benign *doppelgänger* (a term coined by Richter) which allows the heroine a freedom and power undreamt of in contemporary conduct books or novels of sensibility. The monstrous *doppelgänger* which was to become a familiar figure in later serious Gothic texts of the nineteenth century as a mode of expressing fear of the abject and an anxiety concerning split subjectivity, is allowed in this comic Gothic text a humorous excess within which notions of liberty and the testing of conventional boundaries can be explored. Thus, when quizzed by Cherubina as to how romances and novels 'contaminate the mind', a female fellow-traveller answers tartly: 'by teaching little misses to go gadding, Mem, and to be fond of the men, Mem, and of spangled muslin, Mem' (p. 53). Searching for freedom and adventure, Cherubina decides to play the part of the heroine, since:

The heroine may permit an amorous arm around her waist, disobey her parents, and make assignations, yet be described as the most prudent of human creatures; but the mere Miss must abide by the regular rules of modesty, decorum and filial obedience. In a word, as different classes have distinct privileges, it appears to me, from what I know of the Law National, and the Law Romantic, that the Heroine's prerogative resembles the king's; and that she, like him, can do no wrong. (p. 140)

There is a sharp recognition here that the discourses of the law, class and gender situate the subject and constrain her freedoms as firmly as any set of iron bars. And indeed, as a 'heroine', Cherubina enjoys powers and privileges only dreamt of by Cherry. Not only does she command a train of followers and freely make numerous assignations but she also takes and reigns over her own gothic space, Monkton Castle (even if this is no more than a draughty ruin). Whilst inviting the reader to laugh at such excesses of liberty and their dire consequences, the novel nevertheless reminds the reader that the alternative 'reality' lies in shades of the bourgeois household closing in on the growing girl.³⁹ 'You know that a mere home is my horror' says Cherubina (p. 98). At the same time, however, *The Heroine* undermines this escape fantasy. For we finally see the independent Cherubina recuperated into a Cherry who marries her father's choice of a well-educated middle-class man of property; the novel's implicit critique of the old aristocratic way of life is thereby reaffirmed and it reinforces the model of middle-class domesticity offered by early nineteenth-century conduct books.⁴⁰ *The Heroine* thus has it both ways: it inscribes the values of the aspiring middle-class (as Kelly argues) but simultaneously exposes the constraints they impose on the imaginative young woman. Nor does the answer lie in a compromise between aristocratic ideals and the emergent middle-class management of women, as Barrett's tart rewriting of Fanny Burney's hugely popular *Evelina* reveals. Cherubina hears from one of her London companions masquerading as the fictional character, Sir Charles Grandison, that Lord Orville and his Evelina are not happily married: "'Happy!" cried he, laughing. "Have you really never heard of their notorious miffs? Why it was but yesterday that she flogged him with a boiled leg of mutton, because he had sent home no turnips."' (p. 271). We could, of course, see this as evidence of Barrett's conservatism

38. Jonathan Lamb, 'The Comic Sublime and Sterne's Fiction' in *The English Novel: Smollett to Austen*, ed. Richard Kroll (London and New York: Longman, 1998), p. 148.

39. See Kate Ferguson Ellis, *The Contested Castle; Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989).

40. See Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), esp. Ch. 2.

and of his anti-feminist attitude towards women writers such as Burney and Jacobin thinkers such as Wollstonecraft. An alternative way of reading it, however, is to see it as indicative of the cultural ambivalence characteristic of parody as a genre. Here we should bear in mind Hutcheon's premise that parody is 'fundamentally double and divided' and that 'its ambivalence stems from the dual drives of conservative and revolutionary forces that are inherent in its nature as authorized transgression'.⁴¹

In this respect, the representation of the female body in Barrett's novel, which clearly relates to the legacy of Romanticism and the cult of sensibility, is particularly interesting. The way in which heroines react to moments of crisis in, say, Ann Radcliffe's works—by fainting, blushing or falling into silence—derives, as Daniel Cottom has pointed out, from a body language specific to notions of femininity and sensibility current from the mid-eighteenth century.⁴² Not surprisingly, then, Cherubina defines a heroine in the following terms:

A heroine is a young lady, rather taller than usual, and often an orphan; at all events, with the finest eyes in the world. She blushes to the tips of her fingers, and when mere misses would laugh, she faints. Besides, she has tears, sighs, and half, sighs, always read; can live a month on a mouthful and is addicted to the pale consumption ... to be thin, innocent, and lyrical; to bind and unbind her hair; in a word, to be the most miserable creature that ever augmented a brook with tears, these my friend are the glories of a heroine. (p. 66)

The powerful construct within Western culture which equates femininity with physical delicacy and emotional susceptibility is here exposed as fiction rather than truth, as 'the glories of a heroine'. But the connection between body image and femininity is further quizzed when Cherubina meets someone claiming to be her long lost mother who, she learns, has been confined, in true Gothic spirit, within a subterranean vault of a villa. In a *coup de grâce*, it is revealed at the end of the novel that this has been a fake mother and indeed a fake woman: it was Lady Gwyn's nephew, put up to the charade by his aunt who had taken to excess Robert Stuart's injunction to humour Cherry's 'caprices'. In a passage reminiscent of several in Radcliffe's novels, the heroine is conducted at midnight by two strange men to her 'mother', whom she expects to find in a state of starvation 'stretched on a mattress of straw' (p. 184). Instead, she finds her supposed mother 'suffering under a corpulency unparalleled in the memoirs of human monsters' (p. 186): to be fat is, for the modern woman, a horror of Gothic proportions. Appalled by her size, Cherubina is assured by her 'mother' that 'This deplorable plumpness proceeds from want of exercise' (p. 186) and that at least she has managed to preserve her paleness (an indication of both sensitivity and class). And, anticipating the spirit of Jo Brand, the 'mother' confesses not to dreams of a convent life or restoration to her long-lost husband, but to fantasies of food:

It was but last night, that maddened by hunger, methought I beheld the Genius of dinner in my dreams. His mantle was laced with silver eels, and his locks were dropping with soups. He had a crown of golden fishes upon his head, and pheasants' wings at his shoulders. A flight of little tartlets fluttered around him, and the sky rained down comfits. As I gazed on him, he vanished in a sigh, that was impregnated with the fumes of brandy. (p. 187)

Shuddering at the sight of her obesity, Cherubina finds herself hating her long-lost 'mother' and despising her 'mother's' memoirs (entitled *Il Castello di Grimgothico, or Memoirs of Lady Hysterica Belamour: A Novel by Anna Maria Marianne Matilda Pottingen, Author of the Bloody Bodkin, Sonnets on Most of the Plants, etc. etc. etc.*) But we should not forget, of course, that Cherubina, in all her slim pallor, is the *doppelgänger* of Cherry Wilkinson, the farmer's daughter, brought up, no doubt, on a wholesome diet enriched by butter and cream—and a young woman who is acutely aware of her name as suggestive of an all-too-visible corporeality:

What a name—Cherry! It reminds one so much of plumpness and ruddy health. Cherry—better be called Pine-apple at once. There is a green and yellow melancholy in Pine-apple, that is infinitely preferable. I wonder if Cherry could possibly be an abbreviation of CHERUBINA. (p. 11)

41. Hutcheon, *Theory of Parody*, p. 26.

42. Daniel Cottom, *The Civilized Imagination: A Study of Ann Radcliffe, Jane Austen, and Sir Walter Scott* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

'Cherubina', of course, while suggesting cherubic proportions, also evokes an aerial transcendence of the corporeal. Sliding between these relative images of female corporeality, invited to laugh at them, the reader is offered a position of critical distance from contemporaneous and influential notions of the desirable female body. The 'target' of parody is thus not just other works of fiction: it also engages with subtly influential forms of coded discourse. In this way, parodic writing can offer an intellectual liberation from powerful social constructs.

Similarly, woman's vexed relationship to property rights and the ambiguous nature of her status as a legal subject during the eighteenth century is implicitly questioned through Cherubina's appropriation of Monkton Castle. Energized by her campaign to seize the castle, Cherubina blossoms as leader against the siege to reclaim it. 'I stood, and gloried in my strength' she writes (p. 246). In her rousing speech to her fifty followers, she promises them, should they be victorious, 'all such laws and institutions as shall secure their happiness' (p. 248). In 1813, when *The Heroine* was published, women could hold property legally only if they were over 21 and unmarried. It was not until the Married Woman's Property Act of 1870 that a married woman could legally hold property in her own name; before then the estate of a married woman passed to her husband. Money could be held in trust for a married woman but had to be managed by an independent party, which meant that the woman had no direct access to it. There was also the possibility of the separate maintenance agreement, which allowed the husband and wife to live separately and through which the husband agreed to his wife having direct access to her money.⁴³ Such apparent advances were, however, counterbalanced by severe legal restrictions in other ways: for example, a daughter could not directly inherit her father's property; it could only be left in trust, giving her the right to income deriving from it but no right to sell it. The many changes affecting women's property rights during the eighteenth century suggest at best an equivocal attitude to the female subject. Whereas the legal code during this time clearly indicates that the institution of property is essential to the identity of the legal subject, the lesser privileges accorded to women and the emergence of what Sharpe has called 'the bloody code' (which saw the number of capital offences rise from 50 to 200 during the period⁴⁴) express an acute anxiety about the security of the (masculine) legal subject in the face of the irrational as represented by the feminine and by the mob.⁴⁵ Moreover, Cherubina—as leader of a 'mob' which includes Irishmen and as a 'heroine' who has a devoted Irish follower (Jerry Sullivan)—should be seen in the context of the period 1800–29 which saw a huge rise in the publication of novels featuring Ireland and Irish characters. The most famous of these, Sydney Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806), deals with the condition of Ireland and centres round a beautiful, intelligent Irish girl called Glorvina who is devoted to her father and whose marriage to an English nobleman metaphorically suggests a reconciliation between England and Ireland. Barrett's novel, which reasserts the supremacy of 'Englishness', nevertheless still functions, like Owenson's, as a work in which Ireland becomes 'a privileged site ... for the residual revolutionary romance of sensibility'.⁴⁶ As Jacqueline Belanger has noted, Barrett's portrayal of 'Irishness' in *The Heroine* links the 1798 Rebellion with the French Revolution as potential threats to English society.⁴⁷

The novel's closure, although apparently comically satisfying and reassuring in its restoration of the status quo, consigns its heroine to a cosy domestic oblivion. We see Cherubina transformed back into Cherry Wilkinson, 'the daughter of an honest squire' (p. 289) rather than into the long-lost offspring of an aristocratic family. We also see her about to marry—an act which will result in her giving up the limited property rights she would have enjoyed as an unmarried woman. In 'educating' her out of reading romances and Gothic fiction, her future husband educates her out of visions of

43. See Susan Staves, *Married Women's Separate Property in England, 1660–1833* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 163–4 and 170–5.

44. J. A. Sharpe, *Crime in Early Modern England 1550–1750* (London: Longman, 1984), p. 145.

45. We would like to record here our gratitude to Sue Chaplin for her helpful comments on this part of the essay.

46. Nicola J. Watson, *Revolution and the Form of the British Novel, 1790–1825: Intercepted Letters, Interrupted Seductions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 112.

47. Jacqueline Belanger, 'Some Preliminary Remarks on the Production and Reception of Fiction Relating to Ireland, 1800–1829', *Cardiff Corvey: Reading the Romantic Text* 4 (May 2000) <www.cf.ac.uk/encap/corvey/articles/cc04_n02.html>.

independence. Indeed, in giving her a copy of *Don Quixote* to read, Robert Stuart draws her attention to the deleterious effect of romances such as 'The Mysteries of Udolpho, The Italian, and the Bravo of Venice' which 'act upon the mind like intoxicating stimulants' (p. 293). This degenerate form of reading he then links to a stage of moral decline, and from there it is only a short step to the 'refined vice' of a 'depraved' France (p. 293) and, presumably, to the turbulence of a 'wild' Ireland. We might remember here Burke's description which, drawing on Milton's *Paradise Lost*, evokes 'the revolutionary harpies of France' as 'sprung from night and Hell, or from that chaotic anarchy which generates equivocally "all monstrous and prodigious things"'.⁴⁸ Cherry is thus directed by her future husband to a 'more rational line of reading' which includes 'morality, history, languages' (p. 294) and is recuperated back into 'Englishness' and a proper femininity underwritten discursively by the law of England in 1813. This construct of femininity is a domestic, sentimentalized one which is easily identified with the emotional and the private world. It is, as Susan Okin has observed, ironic that at the very historical moment when 'the freedom, individuality, and rationality of men was coming to be recognized as the foundation of their political and legal equality', women were being represented as 'creatures of sentiment and love rather than of the rationality that was perceived as necessary for citizenship'.⁴⁹

However, like Lennox's *The Female Quixote*, *The Heroine* 'is full of parodic and self-referential explications of narration itself, and the power that narration provides'.⁵⁰ Whilst it seems, on the one hand, a reactionary text which safely recuperates its transgressive heroine back into middle-class ideology and which defuses both foreign and domestic threats to national identity, the verbal *brio* with which Barrett describes Cherry's adventures imprints quite firmly in the reader's mind an imagined alternative world where women are rabble rousers and property owners and in which Frenchmen and Irishmen represent excitement rather than threat. The tensions within the novel thus perhaps reflect the tensions evident within English law itself as capitalism develops. For while, on the one hand, the law in the eighteenth century was seeking to advance economic freedom through the development of contractarian doctrine, on the other it saw itself as the instrument whereby both aristocratic privilege and the essence of the traditional matrimonial bond could be preserved. It perhaps should not surprise us that Eaton Stannard Barrett was a lawyer before he became a playwright and a satirist. His novel, a best-seller in its own time, deserves more critical attention than it has attracted so far. Certainly, *The Heroine* amply demonstrates Hutcheon's claim that parody is not mere imitation 'but imitation characterized by ironic inversion'; it repeats, but it offers 'repetition with critical difference' (p. 6). Addressing itself to the shared knowledge and values of what Wayne Booth has called 'amicable communities',⁵¹ Barrett's novel, like all good parodies, is hard to pin down. Its 'meaning', which slithers between idylls of conservative cosiness and fantasies of social transformation, is as slippery as the silver eels in the dream narrated by Cherubina's 'mother'.

48. Edmund Burke, *Letter to a Noble Lord* in *The Works of Edmund Burke* (Michigan: Scholars Press, 1965), V, 187.

49. Susan Moller Okin, 'Women and the Making of the Sentimental Family', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 11 (1982), 72.

50. Lennox, *Female Quixote*, p. xxvii.

51. The phrase is taken from his *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1974) and is cited by Hutcheon, *Theory of Parody*, p. 94.

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