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Comedy, Convention, and Subversion  
During the Romantic Era

by

Pamela Ann Perkins

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

at

Dalhousie University  
Halifax, Nova Scotia  
August, 1991

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ISBN 0-315-71508-1

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## Abstract

This thesis is a study of the use of comic conventions in selected literature of the Romantic period, focusing on techniques by which writers subvert or call attention to the arbitrariness of those conventions even while continuing to draw upon them to structure their work. The study begins with a survey of some of the ideas about comedy underlying the writing of that era, then turns to a close reading of individual works. The first section of my argument looks at novels which stress the limitations imposed by working within established conventions and begins with a discussion of Robert Bage's Hernsprong, a book in which the narrator fails to recognize his own entrapment by the conventions of comic fiction that he mocks. Self-consciousness about that entrapment does not enable a narrator to escape it, however, as I suggest in a chapter focusing on Byron's Don Juan. Instead, the limitations imposed by conventions can become a subject for comedy in their own right. In the last two chapters, I turn to writers with very different techniques for working beyond those limitations--Blake and Austen. By looking at some of Blake's early sketches--particularly the prose fragment "An Island in the Moon"--as well as The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, I attempt to demonstrate that he is parodying and recreating several familiar comic genres in his own idiom. Austen's novels, while much less flamboyant, nonetheless engage in a sustained critical examination of fictional conventions as well, one which suggests the extent to which constrictions are imposed by following any single established pattern of comedy. My discussion of her work begins by looking at the Juvenilia, but concentrates on Mansfield Park and its two opposed and rather unsatisfactory heroines. Yet even while examining and criticizing fictional patterns established by her predecessors, Austen provides a model for future authors, and in my conclusion I discuss the ways in which the literature in this study is related to later comic writing.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Ronald Tetreault, for all of the help that he has given me both while I was writing this thesis and throughout my graduate program. My discussions with him and his extensive comments on successive drafts of my chapters helped me to develop a much clearer idea of my central argument and to turn a collection of essays into a thesis. My readers, Dr. Judith Thompson, Dr. David McNeil, Dr. Victor Li, and Dr. Nina Auerbach, also offered many helpful suggestions when the thesis was in its final stages, and I am grateful for their interest and encouragement.

I would also like to thank the Killam Trust and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for funding my doctoral studies.

## Introduction

### Comedy and the Romantic Canon

We think of the high Romantic years of English literature (1798-1825) as very solemn ones. They appear, as they recede from us, to have been so crowded with the busy recovering of wonder and passion and a number of other earnest legacies as to have left no room for merriment; to have seen, in fact, a kind of atrophy of the humorous sense.<sup>1</sup>

[During the eighteenth century] Laughter becomes less and less important in literature and we may be forgiven for imagining that some of the great Romantic writers, emulating Jesus, never laughed.<sup>2</sup>

After a survey course in the Romantics, many students are left with an impression that for thirty-five or forty years English literature was the domain of six solemn male poets preoccupied with nightingales and mountains. Yet over the last decade or so, a number of scholars have begun to argue that this idea of the Romantic period is a fiction which reveals as much about the ideologies of the critics constructing the canon as it does about the period itself. As Marilyn Butler observes, under the influence of such

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<sup>1</sup>J. R. Caldwell, "The Solemn Romantics" in Studies in the Comic (Berkeley: U of California P, 1941) 112.

<sup>2</sup>David Farley-Hill, The Benevolence of Laughter (London: Macmillan Press, Ltd, 1974) 192.

prominent critics as Harold Bloom, "British romanticism has become more harmonious, syncretizing, responsible, and respectable than at any time since it was written."<sup>3</sup> In promoting the idea of the Romantics as a "visionary company," Bloom and his followers have inevitably excluded or marginalized a vast amount of literature which is not solemnly idealistic. While any attempt to encompass the full range of the era's writing would rapidly collapse into hopeless disunity, it is important to recognize omissions and oversimplifications in literary histories and to realize that the "much simplified and unified romanticism" (Butler 42) presented in any single study of the era is not a complete reflection of the literary life of the period.

Certainly, our view of the Romantic period is markedly different from the way that writers of the time looked at their literature. For example, the existing canon completely excludes writing by women, yet early nineteenth-century critics were struck by the increased prominence of women in the literary world, not just as novelists but as poets, playwrights, and essayists as well.<sup>4</sup> While there is no reason to take the evaluation of the writers' contemporaries at face value--the almost complete neglect of Blake and Keats

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<sup>3</sup>Marilyn Butler, "Against Tradition: The Case for a Particularized Historical Method" in Historical Studies and Literary Criticism, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1985) 43.

<sup>4</sup>For a discussion of women poets in the early nineteenth century, see Stuart Curran, "The I Altered" in Romanticism and Feminism, ed. Anne K. Mellor (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988) 185-207.

in their own day should warn us against basing our opinions entirely on those of contemporary critics--we ought to recognize that our view of the period is far from being the only one possible.

Notably, many recent studies of Romantic literature exclude almost all comic writing, with the important exception of Don Juan. The oversight is surprising, since there is certainly no lack of material, by major writers as well as minor. In the short period between the fall of the Bastille and the death of Byron, England produced a surprisingly large number of comic essayists, poets, and novelists, at least two of whom--Byron and Austen--are now recognized as incontestably important figures. All of the major poets experimented with comic verse at one time or another, even the chronically depressed Coleridge and the supposedly humorless Shelley. Whether or not we choose to accept Peter Bell--or Peter Bell the Third, or The Cap and Bells--into the canon of the authors' great poems is not that important. The significant factor is that these and many other comic works from that era exist, and until we address the question of the role played by comedy in the literature of the period, we are willfully ignoring a major aspect of writing during the Romantic era.

However much comedy was written during the thirty years or so of the Romantic period, very little of it is still familiar to modern audiences. Aside from Austen and Byron, few of the comic authors of the day are still widely read.

If Peacock makes it into courses on Romantic literature, he is usually presented as a friend of Shelley and the inspiration for the Defense of Poetry; Burns and Hogg occasionally slip into discussions of regional or working class writing. Maria Edgeworth's comic novella Castle Rackrent may still have a small audience, but very few readers now know of her much larger output of social comedies, novels written in much the same style--and around the same time--as Austen's. Some critics would probably argue that the reason for this neglect is obvious: the writing simply isn't very good. Yet aside from the number of questions that response begs--such as how one defines good writing--such a sweeping generalization immediately leads one to other problems. Most obviously, a number of these authors have at one time or another been recognized as "good" writers. Burns, for example, tends to slip in and out of the canon. Lamb, now frequently dismissed as a charming but minor figure, was once considered one of the great English essayists. Peacock has always had admirers in the literary world; even F. R. Leavis, briefly turning away from his great tradition, proclaimed that Peacock's novels are "indefinitely re-readable--for minds with mature interests."<sup>5</sup>

One of the reasons for this neglect might be our tendency to study not necessarily what is "good" in an era's writing, but rather what seems interesting or important to

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<sup>5</sup>F.R. Leavis, The Great Tradition (Harmondsworth: Peregrine Books, 1948; republished 1962) 18.

us. As Butler and other recent critics have pointed out, the canon is not an objective presentation of what is great in an era's literature; instead, it is an artificial construction revealing as much about the literary tastes of the society constructing it as it does about those of the society being studied. This contention is best illustrated by the changing reputations of authors generally accepted as major figures. Austen, now firmly entrenched in the canon, was a minor writer until the Leavises discovered that her novels were serious moral studies. The taste for moralizing in literature is less pronounced in the late twentieth century than it was fifty years ago, but Austen has managed to retain her central position in literary studies because she is now read as an astutely ironic social critic. Shelley, admired in the Victorian era for his beautiful and ethereal sentiments, was condemned by the Moderns as a self-absorbed adolescent incapable of serious intellectual work. More recently, however, critics have focused on his tough-minded radical politics and have readmitted him to a central place among nineteenth-century poets.

Quite noticeably, the shifting status of these writers is tied more or less directly to critics' willingness to see a deeply serious intent in their writing. Matthew Arnold's literary opinions might be rather out of fashion today, but his insistence that moral seriousness is the supreme value of literature still has a strong influence upon scholars' judgements. This tendency to privilege solemnity is not

simply a hangover from the Victorian era; Leavis and his followers tended to dislike the Romantics precisely because of their supposed lack of moral weight. When critics such as Bloom and Abrams brought the Romantics back to the centre of the canon, they did so by arguing that the poets were in fact properly solemn rather than by attempting to dispute with Leavis's literary values. As the Romantics came to be valued for the nearly religious intensity of their poetry, their comic works were inevitably dismissed or marginalized. In rescuing the Romantic movement as a whole from charges of frivolity or adolescent self-indulgence, critics overemphasized its solemnity, fostering an impression that the writers of that period were completely incapable of cracking a smile, let alone a joke. Intentionally or not, scholars have let a deeply ingrained assumption that "good literature" is synonymous with "intensely serious literature" shape their perceptions of early nineteenth-century writing. Even Austen, unquestionably comic and unquestionably popular, became a major force in the canon only after the Scrutiny critics insisted that comedy is always properly subservient to moral lessons in her writing. It is no accident that they preferred Mansfield Park, the least obviously funny of her novels, to the more "sparkling" Pride and Prejudice or Emma.

Of course, an unacknowledged privileging of the serious over the comic is not the only reason that comedy of the Romantic period tends to be overlooked; the problem of genre also contributes to the lack of attention given to it. The



Romantic years were undoubtedly a time of remarkable achievement and innovation in poetry, and it is the poetry which tends to be studied. Much of the comedy then being written was in prose--again, with the major and obvious exception of Don Juan. Even the prose is difficult to categorize by genre. DeQuincey mixes essay, fiction, and autobiography in works such as Confessions of an English Opium Eater and Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts. Peacock, though nominally writing novels, was writing them in a manner very different from that of Austen. Northrop Frye, in fact, has argued that Peacock was not actually writing novels at all, but "anatomies." In contrast, serious Romantic poetry--with Don Juan perhaps admitted at its fringes--makes a relatively coherent group of texts for study; one needs to deal only with a single genre and a few authors. It is even possible to trace particular themes running through the central canon of Romantic poetry: the search for political reform, the pursuit of visionary goals, and so forth, according to the emphasis of a given critic.

Ironically, it is the very diversity of the comic texts written during the Romantic period which contributes to the perception that there was little or no comedy written then. The differences among the texts make it difficult to study them as a group and easy to dismiss individual works as anomalies. This fate plagues even the arch-Romantic Byron, who is often left on the margin. Jerome McGann emphasizes

this tendency to differentiate as much as possible between Byron and his contemporaries; he comments that:

My interest in Byron was triggered years ago largely because he seemed so different from the other Romantics. The differences were marked out by criticism itself, which preferred to set Byron aside, or to treat his work as marginal to the central project of Romanticism.<sup>6</sup>

At least part of the reason for this critical uneasiness with Byron probably arises from the fact that most twentieth-century critics have agreed that his masterpiece is not his almost embarrassingly overwrought *Oriental Tales*, or even the phenomenally popular *Childe Harold*, but the comic *Don Juan*. Yet calling one of the most archetypally Romantic poets<sup>7</sup> fundamentally *unromantic* because his greatest work is comedy involves one in some rather difficult critical contortions. Instead of marginalizing Byron because of his interest in comedy, one should examine the question of why writers so very different as Austen, Byron, and all the minor writers

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<sup>6</sup>Jerome J. McGann, The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1983) 137. McGann goes on to say that he does not agree with this critical tendency.

<sup>7</sup>Nineteenth-century European Romanticism was heavily indebted to Byron; even Russian literature of mid-century has a marked element of Byronism. Lermontov, Pushkin, and Tolstoy--in his early writings at least--were all intrigued by the figure of the Byronic outsider who flees society and indulges his melancholia on the primitive fringes of Europe. Butler notes that both Byron and Peacock are marginalized because of their *satiric bent*, "though some unease is often expressed, very reasonably, at the demotion of Byron that this entails." (Butler, "Satire and the Images of Self in the Romantic Period: The Long Tradition of Hazlitt's Liber Amoris" in English Satire and the Satiric Tradition, ed. Claude Rawson [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984] 209.

mentioned above found comedy to be an appealing mode in an age in which it had supposedly died. It might not figure in the canon to any great extent, but comic writing was undoubtedly alive and well in the early nineteenth century, interesting both major and now-forgotten artists.

One of the first questions to be addressed in a study of comedy of the Romantic period is that of whether it can be differentiated from earlier work in any meaningful way. A frequent assumption about the comic writing of this era is that it is merely a throwback to literature of a previous generation. It is a critical commonplace that Byron looks back to Pope, Austen to Richardson and Burney, and Lamb to Addison and Steele. Yet while it is undoubtedly true that these writers expressed admiration for their predecessors, emulation is a somewhat different matter. A more serious objection to seeing the comedy of the era as a definable movement is that the writers themselves often claimed that comedy simply did not exist any longer. "The days of comedy are gone, alas!" Byron proclaims in Don Juan; similarly, Hazlitt complains that "Comedy naturally wears itself out," leaving his generation with nothing to be funny about. Even the delightfully witty Peacock writes that contemporary literature is "a northeast wind" and is in danger of forgetting that "there are any such things as sunshine and music in the world."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>See Don Juan XIII. 94, "On the Comic Writers of the Last Century," and Nightmare Abbey, chapt. V and VI.

Yet one cannot take these statements at face value, however tempting the existing canon of Romantic literature makes it to do so. Peacock's irony is notoriously difficult to pin down, as is Byron's, and there is clearly some deliberate disingenuousness involved in writing comedy which proclaims the mode to be extinct. One might well read these statements as sly self-aggrandizement in which the author tacitly stresses his own talents as he single-handedly resuscitates a dead mode.<sup>9</sup> One can approach these claims from a somewhat different angle as well. Most notably, a conviction that "the days of comedy are gone," when expressed in a comic work, clearly indicates the author's sense of working in a style completely different from that of his predecessors. By proclaiming that the old form of comic expression is dead, Byron is implicitly arguing that he is creating a new one. The tone of his argument is not as optimistic as that of similar statements by earlier writers, such as Fielding's claim that "I am, in reality, the Founder of a new Province of Writing, so I am at liberty to make what Laws I please therein,"<sup>10</sup> but the basic idea is similar.

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<sup>9</sup>Admittedly, Hazlitt's essay is not comic. However, considering the number of comic essays written by him and his friends--notably Lamb and Hunt--his claim that comedy has become impossible to write seems just as odd as Byron's or Peacock's.

<sup>10</sup>Henry Fielding, Tom Jones, Vol. II, Chap. 1. Fielding's claims to originality might have been overstated or tongue-in-cheek, but the simple fact that he makes them suggests that the attitude towards creative originality in his work is very different from that found in the poetry of a later writer such as Byron.

What has changed is the emphasis. Whereas Fielding, seriously or not, stresses his freedom to create whatever he chooses, Byron and his contemporaries stress the inadequacies and inapplicability of the older forms of comedy to the concerns of their era.

Whatever the differences in emphasis however, in both cases we see writers attempting to push beyond the established rules of their genres in order to create a new style of comedy. While one might be tempted, when reading this type of literature, to focus on the violation and to treat the work as a manifestation of exuberant inventiveness--as Fielding certainly invites one to do--the work's grounding in convention is just as vital as is the attempt to escape from it. As Tzvetan Todorov writes,

Que l'oeuvre "désobéisse" à son genre ne rend pas celui-ci inexistant; on est tenté de dire: au contraire. Et ceci pour une double raison. D'abord parce que la transgression, pour exister, a besoin d'une loi--qui sera précisément transgressée. On pourrait aller plus loin: la norme ne devient visible--ne vit--que grâce à ses transgressions. ...Mais il y a plus. Non seulement que, pour être une exception, l'oeuvre présuppose nécessairement une règle; mais aussi que, à peine reconnue dans son statut exceptionnel, cette oeuvre devient à son tour, grâce au succès de librairie et à l'attention des critiques, une règle.

[That a work "disobeys" its genre does not mean that the genre does not exist; quite the contrary, one is tempted to say. There are two reasons for this. First, because in order to occur, transgression requires a law--which is precisely what will be transgressed.

One might go even further: a norm becomes visible--exists--only due to transgressions of it....But there is more. Not only does the work necessarily presuppose a rule in order to be an exception to it; but also, the work is hardly recognized in its status as an exception before, thanks to financial success and critical attention, it becomes a rule in its turn.]<sup>11</sup>

As Todorov also argues elsewhere, an understanding of generic norms is vital even in approaching the most unconventional literary works, since a transgression can never exist in isolation from the rule that it violates.<sup>12</sup>

One can take Todorov's point a step farther and argue that works which seemingly resist conventional rules of their genre are common enough and important enough to constitute a genre in their own right. This is an argument which Jonathan Culler has made in his study of the structure of generic conventions, a study which begins from a position very similar to Todorov's:

The expectations enshrined in the conventions of genre are, of course, often violated. Their function, like that of all constitutive rules, is to make meaning possible by providing terms in which to classify the things one encounters. What is made intelligible by the conventions of genre is often less interesting than that which resists or escapes generic understanding, and so it should be no surprise that there arises, over and against the *vraisemblance* of genre, another level of

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<sup>11</sup>Tzvetan Todorov, "L'origine des genres" in La notion de littérature et autres essais (Paris: Seuil, 1987) 29-30. (my translation)

<sup>12</sup>Tzvetan Todorov, The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre, trans. Richard Howard, (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1975) 7-8.

*vraisemblance* whose fundamental device is to expose the artifice of generic conventions and expectations.<sup>13</sup>

According to Culler, claims that one is escaping convention must inevitably be read as conventions in themselves if the work is to be intelligible. Instead of "naturalizing" the text in a manner that sustains an illusion that one is hearing about real people, the reader naturalizes it so that it becomes a literary game.<sup>14</sup> Quoting Jameson's observation that "Every work is clear, provided that we locate the angle from which the blur becomes so natural as to become unnoticed," Culler argues that

Even the most radical readings of literary works propose a project from whose vantage point the blur becomes clear or natural: the project of illustrating or enacting the practice of writing. In the great Hegelian game of interpretation, where each reader strives to attain the outermost circle that comprehends all else but is not itself comprehended, this level of *vraisemblance* enjoys, at least at our moment in history,

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<sup>13</sup>Jonathan Culler, Structuralist Poetics (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1975) 148.

<sup>14</sup>"Naturalization" is one of Culler's key terms. By it, he means the process through which readers construct a framework of "sets of expectations which...give [a text] a relation to the world" (136). Most basically, this framework consists of the cultural and literary expectations inscribed in the text, many of which are created by generic convention. We will accept and barely notice certain things in one genre which would be wildly out of place in another, even if the two are closely related. We readily accept it when the villain of a work of Gothic horror such as The Monk proves to be the devil, for example, but if Godwin had made Falkland a demon in his psychological thriller Caleb Williams we would have been disappointed and annoyed--much as we are when Radcliffe explains away the supernatural manifestations in her Gothic novels. We do not consciously formulate these expectations as we sit down to read, but they are no less powerful for being silent.

a privileged status because of its ability to assume and transform other levels. But it is none the less a mode of conventional naturalization, and attempts to organize it so that it would lie beyond ideology and convention take us...beyond the bounds of sense altogether. (151-52).

Any attempt to escape convention by breaking beyond it entirely is thus, Culler claims, both a rhetorical and a literal impossibility.

The comedy of the Romantic period certainly resists conventional boundaries in the manner outlined by Todorov and Culler, but one cannot see it as being in any way distinctive simply on that basis. The problem lies in the ubiquity of other types of literature which do precisely the same thing. Culler claims that this practice of resisting generic boundaries constitutes a genre which is "privileged" in twentieth-century writing; Todorov implies that any work, to some extent, questions and rejects the rules of its predecessors. Even a writer like Fielding who vaunts the originality of his foray into the genre of the "comic epic poem in prose"<sup>15</sup> is at most only reacting against rules of earlier comic genres, inventing a new one precisely by

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<sup>15</sup>The line is from the preface to Joseph Andrews. Gerard Genette uses this phrase to illustrate his claim that the basic Aristotelian parameters of genre are subject to almost infinite variations, almost the only limitation being the writer's ingenuity in combining the classical generic elements in his or her work. See Introduction à l'architexte (Paris: Seuil, 1979) 82-83.



transgressing rules of the old.<sup>16</sup> If that is the case, there is nothing particularly interesting in the Romantics' use of the form. I would argue, however, that much of the comedy of the Romantic period merits attention because it gives a rather unusual twist in emphasis to its resistance of convention. After the exuberant inventiveness of eighteenth-century comedy, further innovation might well have seemed as impossible as Hazlitt or Byron claimed it to be; instead of attempting the unenviable task of outdoing Fielding's or Sterne's formal experimentation, writers of the following generation took an opposite approach, writing comedy which made a virtue of its basis in convention. Whereas Fielding vaunted his originality--justly or not--a number of the comic writers who followed him admitted and mocked their own dependence upon forms inherited from earlier literature, thereby breaking away from the more usual tactic of proclaiming the author's power and originality in apparently being able to escape the bonds of convention. Fielding certainly claimed such power; similarly, Culler's example of a work written in this style is Diderot's Jacques le fataliste, in which the narrator implicitly claims that his "freedom is governed only by the limits of language" (Culler 149). Even Pope, a writer usually assumed to epitomize slavish devotion to rules, comments that the laws he

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<sup>16</sup>As mentioned before, Fielding's claims to originality should be treated with caution. To some extent, they were tongue-in-cheek, a "puff" to provoke interest in his work.

promulgates are "discovered, not devised," thereby implying not only that great writers are not bound by artificially imposed laws and limitations but also that great writing is a process of exploration and discovery. In marked contrast, much of the comic writing of the Romantic period habitually, even if only implicitly, admits its dependence upon the conventions that it is questioning or attempting to reject.

Traditional literary histories often present us with a rule-bound eighteenth-century literature gradually smothering under the weight of alexandrines and heroic couplets until the free-spirited iconoclasm of the Romantics revived poetry. It is a common misapprehension that the writers of the Romantic period were radical literary innovators, boldly rejecting all earlier styles of writing in order to reshape literature according to their idiosyncratic visions. The actual process by which literary conventions change is much more complex, since as Culler points out, a completely original text which discards all existing conventions would be impossible to read, even assuming it were possible to write. Undoubtedly innovative in some areas, the Romantics nonetheless remained bound by established literary conventions in others. Even Wordsworth did not reject poetic conventions per se; he merely rejected what he saw as the abandonment of simple, emotive language throughout most of the eighteenth century and turned back to an earlier

tradition.<sup>17</sup> This tendency is even more strongly marked in the comedy, however. In it, writers often admit their debts to convention, whether tacitly or explicitly, in the work itself, no matter how iconoclastic the writing. Blake's "Island in the Moon," for example, presumes a familiarity with an array of popular comic forms, from the domestic novel to improvisational theatre, while The Marriage of Heaven and Hell takes such popular comic and satiric forms as the journey to the underworld and the aphorism as a base. Far from claiming complete originality, Blake demands that his readers know conventions derived from earlier writing, since mockery of those conventions is the source of much of the comedy in these two works.

This type of writing, which stresses its debts to convention even while criticizing the conventions themselves, has attracted the interest of Umberto Eco, who discusses it in a brief but highly provocative article.<sup>18</sup> He calls it

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<sup>17</sup>See, for example, Wordsworth's survey of poetic history in his Essay, Supplementary to the Preface of 1815. In it, he offers what he sees as the true tradition of great poetry and criticizes Johnson's pantheon of the major poets. Marilyn Butler also makes this point in Romantics, Rebels, and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background 1760-1830 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1981) 57.

<sup>18</sup>Umberto Eco, "The Frames of Comic Freedom" in Carnival! ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (New York: Mouton, 1984) 1-8. Eco's terminology is, for my purposes, rather unfortunate, since his concept of "humor" is almost entirely unrelated to both the colloquial usage of the word as a near-synonym of comedy and the eighteenth-century usage, in which it refers to a specialized subgenre of comedy. To try to avoid confusion, I will retain the American spelling used by Eco's translators when referring to his ideas, reserving the Canadian spelling for other uses of the term.

"humor," and defines it through its contrast to Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque.<sup>19</sup> Eco accepts Bakhtin's definition of carnival as a temporary state of release in which all existing laws are inverted and joyfully flouted, but he disagrees strongly about the effect of this carnival inversion, pointing out that

Carnival, in order to be enjoyed, requires that rules and rituals be parodied, and that these rules already be recognized and respected. One must know to what degree certain behaviors are forbidden, and must feel the majesty of the forbidding norm, to appreciate their transgression.... Thus the prerequisites of a "good" carnival are: (i) the law must be so pervasively and profoundly introjected as to be overwhelmingly present at the moment of its violation...(ii) the moment of carnivalization must be very short....an entire year of ritual observance is needed in order to make the transgression enjoyable. (Eco 6)

While Bakhtin sees carnival laughter as a force of genuine liberation, Eco suggests that this apparent freedom is spurious. By providing a temporary escape from regulation and repression, carnival laughter makes that repression more bearable for the large proportion of time that it is enforced. If Bakhtin's theories about the liberating force of carnival were accurate, Eco argues, "it would be

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<sup>19</sup>Bakhtin's ideas are presented in most detail in his introduction to Rabelais and his World, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984) 1-58. There is also a more condensed discussion of carnival, with specific reference to its applicability to a study of the nineteenth-century Russian novel, in Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, trans. by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984) 156-178.

impossible to explain why power...has used *circenses*; why the most repressive dictatorships have always censored parodies and satires but not clowneries" (Eco 3). Ironically, he concludes, "Carnival can exist only as an *authorized transgression*" (Eco 6). In contrast, what Eco calls "humor" involves an attempt "to reestablish and reassert the broken frame [of rules and rituals]. It does not act in order to make us accept that system of values, but at least it obliges us to acknowledge its existence" (Eco 7-8). By reasserting the frame, instead of making it seem less powerful by flouting it for a strictly determined period, as does carnival, humor awakens our discontent with that framing system much more profoundly.

We ought to keep Eco's ideas about framing in mind when we read comedy of the Romantic period; they provide a useful model of the ways in which writers question established conventions even while recognizing the impossibility of escaping them completely. The relationship between earlier and later writers is not simply one of influence in this case--if indeed it ever is--but rather a complex process of simultaneous rejection and dependence. These terms might initially sound more appropriate to a psychoanalytic approach to literature than to the structural methodologies discussed so far, implying as they do a Bloomian struggle with a powerful predecessor. I am certainly not proposing a comic application of Bloom's theory of the "anxiety of influence," however; the relationship that

I am describing is far from being one of attempted defeat and mastery. The dependence is as vital an element as the rejection, since the writing in question recognizes its inability to transcend the conventions which shape it. This approach to literature is not structuralism, narrowly defined, but it is certainly not psychoanalytic criticism either. One might perhaps describe it most effectively as a variation upon what Nina Auerbach calls the double-prison motif.<sup>20</sup> She argues that much Romantic literature is characterized by a movement from one imprisoning system to another; apparent liberation leads only to a deeper--or at least different--form of entanglement. Although she applies this model mainly on the level of plot, it can also usefully be employed in a discussion of the ways in which conventional structures shape a work. Apparent escape from them produces not license but merely another type of convention. One might recall Todorov's comment that any transgression almost immediately ossifies into a new norm. In Auerbach's presentation of the double-prison motif, one sees this highly schematic structuralist approach reworked as narrative.

Of course, as already suggested, any work is to some extent limited or "imprisoned" by the conventions of its genre, but there are several important factors which link the works brought together in this study. First of all, the

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<sup>20</sup>See Nina Auerbach, Romantic Imprisonment: Women and Other Glorified Outcasts (New York: Columbia UP, 1985), especially the introduction and first essay.

writers are all self-conscious about these limitations, often writing about them quite explicitly in the text itself.

Byron is particularly forthright; as he observes in Don Juan,

One system eats another up, and this  
 Much as old Saturn ate his progeny;  
 For when his pious consort gave him stones  
 In lieu of sons, of these he made no bones.

But System doth reverse the Titan's breakfast,  
 And eats her parents, albeit the digestion  
 Is difficult. (XIV. 1-2)

System is inescapable, Byron says; as one seems to replace another, it merely incorporates the old, perhaps without even thoroughly digesting it. Yet this passage is not lamenting this state of affairs--on the contrary, its flippant tone and diction both suggest the narrator's amusement and amuse the reader, and, in doing so, they typify the attitude towards conventional limitations expressed in all of the works in this study. The tone of amused mockery in which these writers explore their "imprisonment" by conventions is a second and more important factor connecting the works which I have brought together here, works which vary considerably in the degree to which they might normally be considered comic. Blake's Marriage of Heaven and Hell, for example, is hardly a poem which makes its readers laugh out loud, while Mansfield Park, Austen's most controversial novel, is prized by many of its admirers precisely because of its moral earnestness. Yet this earnestness is not necessarily at odds with a degree of mockery, and even if the works in this study might not all

seem particularly funny, they all share this mocking edge and are, in that sense, comic.

Admittedly, deciding what is or is not comic might seem to be a rather subjective matter, especially given the fact that "comedy" is a word with such a broad range of meanings that it can mean almost anything that one wants it to. It does not necessarily have to be even remotely funny, as the classic example of The Divine Comedy indicates; it does not have to be genial or uplifting, as one can see from a quick reading of Volpone or Candide; and, if one accepts "black comedies" such as A Handful of Dust as comedy rather than satire, it does not even require a happy ending. Arguments about the purpose and effects of comedy are equally diverse. Bakhtin, one of the most important of the recent theorists of comedy, sees it as a force of liberation, claiming that laughter

presents an element of victory not only over supernatural awe, over the sacred, over death; it also means the defeat of power, of earthly kings, of the earthly upper classes, of all that oppresses and restricts. (Rabelais and his World 92)

Other writers are less enthusiastic. Henri Bergson, whose ideas about comedy are still quite influential, claims that far from arising from any powerful emotion, laughter requires "a momentary anesthesia of the heart."<sup>21</sup> Moreover, in a move directly contrary to Bakhtin, who insists that the purest

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<sup>21</sup>Henri Bergson, "Laughter," in Comedy, ed. Wylie Sypher. (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1964) 64.



form of laughter is a carnivalesque celebration of the body, Bergson argues that comedy arises almost entirely from our awareness of physical limitations and that it begins when we are most aware of the body as a "thing" separate from the mind.

Bergson and Bakhtin might initially seem to represent two extremes of comic theory, but there are almost infinite gradations between their positions, and at some points their ideas actually overlap and complicate each other. As the writers in this study mock the rigid mechanisms of generic convention, they are obviously demonstrating a much closer affinity with the intellectualized laughter of Bergson than with Bakhtin's rollicking carnival; nevertheless, they do approach at least one aspect of carnival laughter. A mockery of the constraints imposed by conventional literary form in some ways "asserts and denies...buries and revives" the system that it is mocking, as Bakhtin claims that carnival does (Rabelais and his World 12). This type of exploration of conventions is, as Byron says at yet another point in Don Juan, "a system coupled with a doubt" (XVI. 9), but that doubt does not arise from the writer's conviction that he or she is above the system in question. Writers of this type of comedy lack the satirist's assumption of moral superiority; to quote Bakhtin once again, "he who is laughing also belongs to" the system that is being laughed at (Rabelais and his World 12). This comedy is much closer to parody or Romantic irony than it is to satire, although it lacks the despairing

edge which one frequently finds in works of Romantic irony, and the parody does not incorporate any suggestion that the system being parodied can or ought to be entirely overthrown.

This discussion of comedy is extremely sketchy; one could, of course, bring in numerous theories other than Bergson's and Bakhtin's to illustrate ways in which these writers could be considered comic according to one system or another. Yet my primary concern in this study lies not in developing my own theory of comedy to link these works but rather in examining the ways in which these authors explore and undermine the theories of comedy which they inherited from their predecessors. The final and most important factor connecting the writers in this study is that they are all engaged in exploring the ways in which the conventions of earlier comedy limit their own work and--particularly in the cases of Blake and Austen--in experimenting with the ways in which those conventions can be twisted or molded to suit their individual purposes. While it is undoubtedly true that writing which demonstrates an interest in earlier comic theory and practice does not necessarily have to be comic itself, in the hands of these writers, comedy itself becomes a primary source for yet more comedy.

Of course, any study of the ways in which writers use established systems of comic conventions must begin with a survey of the literary environment in which the writers in question were working. While a complete knowledge of the issues and ideas about comedy which were circulating in the

late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is impossible, we can and must recover enough information to provide us with an overview of some of the more important assumptions of the period. Doing so is vital; even the basic vocabulary of comedy developed during the eighteenth century differs in subtle but significant ways from our own and affects the ways in which we read literature of the Romantic period. To demonstrate how completely eighteenth-century comic vocabulary shapes the writing of the next generation, one need only turn to a brief passage by a Romantic writer who was not especially interested in comedy. In his Defense of Poetry, Shelley comments that during the Restoration, "wit succeeds to humour; we laugh from self-complacency and triumph instead of pleasure; malignity, sarcasm and contempt succeed to sympathetic merriment; we hardly laugh, but we smile." This sentence is still perfectly intelligible, but a twentieth-century reader will probably miss the subtle polemical elements which would be unmistakable to most educated readers of the early nineteenth century. Shelley's dismay at wit's ascendancy over humour becomes much more forceful when it is placed in the context of over a hundred years of writing which carefully differentiated between wit and humour and generally argued strongly for the superiority of the latter. Similarly, his concern that audiences laugh from "self-complacency and triumph" recalls comments by writers such as Hobbes and Fielding, who argue that laughter in general is suspect because it arises not from the quiet

pleasure evoked by humour but from nothing better than a sense of "sudden glory" at the sight of another person's discomfiture. A distinction between laughing from sarcasm and laughing from the "sympathetic merriment" of humour is also made in a number of eighteenth-century works such as Fielding's "Characters of Men," James Beattie's "On Laughter and Ludicrous Composition," Francis Hutcheson's "Reflections on Laughter," and Addison's and Steele's essays in The Spectator and The Tatler. Finally, the question of the relative value of smiling and laughter was debated by many eighteenth-century writers, although most reversed Shelley's emphasis and praised smiling over laughter.<sup>22</sup>

Starting with vocabulary might seem needlessly pedantic, since this is a study of conventions and transgressions, not an etymological investigation, but looking at the ways in which eighteenth-century writers described comedy and its various subgroups is a necessary initial step, since conventional form was in large part determined by the particular type of comedy being written. Moreover, investigating what a number of different writers have to say about comedy in general is a much more valuable method of recovering conventional ideas than is referring to formal lists of generic rules. After all, a convention of writing or reading is what a culture perceives as the "natural" way

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<sup>22</sup>For a detailed discussion of the subject of smiling versus laughter in eighteenth-century thought, see Stuart Tave, The Amiable Humorist (Chicago: U. of Chicago P., 1960), 43-68.

of doing it; practices which critics think it necessary to explicate and inculcate are obviously not completely natural in that particular society. While I certainly do not intend to ignore critical discussion about how to write comedy, I will not concentrate exclusively on such works either. In addition, while discussing the conventions which determine the shape of later writing, I am not interested in looking only at the great literature of the eighteenth century, or even only at literature, narrowly defined. As Butler observes, the process of the transmission of ideas is more complex than is recognized in criticism which constructs traditions linking the great writers in a neat, evolutionary model. Why, she wonders, is a writer assumed to be

so impressible, receptive, and amazingly attentive to the good books he's supposed to have read...and so amazingly *in*-attentive to other stimuli? For most influence criticism ignores minor writing, reviewing, newspaper articles, the intellectual ambience which is the actual seedbed of intellectual discussion. Scholarly editions of great poetry...pick out similar-sounding lines in previous great poets, and silently block alternative possibilities: that another book, obscure now, was the source; that the phrase was 'in the (nonliterary) air'.... (Butler "Against Tradition" 28-29)

Living conventions are necessarily silent; they are the underlying assumptions current in the literary world at any given time, ideas which are to be found as readily--and perhaps more so--in potboilers and popular literature as in the refined art of high culture.

What I am attempting, then, is not an account of borrowings from and variations upon the work of great eighteenth-century writers. Nor am I interested in a taxonomic list of eighteenth-century comic conventions and the ways in which they are employed and subverted by writers at the turn of the nineteenth century. Even were such a list possible to make, it would merely represent a variation--and not a very interesting one--upon what Butler calls "influence criticism." A list of conventions would rapidly become impossibly long, since writers of the Romantic period inevitably employ an extremely large number of them, varying according to the writers' individual interests and, of course, the genres employed. What I am interested in studying are the responses to those conventions, or, more specifically, the techniques which writers employ to examine and subvert them. On one level, at least, the comedy of this period is about comedy itself; it is writing which does not simply rely on conventions of the comic mode to amuse an audience, but which critically explores those conventions even while employing them to make itself intelligible.

One might still wonder if there is anything particularly valuable about the process of looking at the comedy written during the Romantic period in this manner, treating a number of very different works as part of a relatively cohesive group. One certainly does not alter any of the very real differences in genre or style by doing so. No matter how ingenious a reader is, he or she will not be able to

demonstrate close affinities between Austen and Blake or Byron and Edgeworth. Yet there are important reasons for making such a study. For one thing, comedy provides a way of looking at the major and minor writers--as well as the male and the female writers--of the era in conjunction with one another. Comedy is, in some ways, the great divide between the six major poets and everyone else. A large number of the minor writers, including such relatively important figures as Lamb, Peacock, Edgeworth, Burns, Hunt, and Hogg, are better represented by their comic writing than by their more serious work. By refusing to recognize that comedy was a popular and important mode during the period, one makes it easier to dismiss these writers as anomalies who can be overlooked or quickly dealt with in studies of the age.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, the differences among comic writers are not that much greater than those between the major poets. The homogenizing tendency in Romantic studies which Butler laments makes it fairly easy to forget that "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and Cain or Lyrical Ballads and Milton are works with relatively little in common besides being composed within a decade of each other.<sup>24</sup> They are not even linked by genre.

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<sup>23</sup>Even Austen is plagued by this tendency to dismiss comic writing from the Romantic period. While she receives due recognition in syllabuses based on genre--a study of the nineteenth-century novel, for example--she frequently slips through the cracks in period-based reading lists. She is too late for courses in the eighteenth century, too early for Victorian, and out of place in the canon of the solemn poetry of her contemporaries.

<sup>24</sup>To get a sense of the vast gulfs between the works of the major Romantics, one need only compare studies which

A lyric poem and a tragic drama are at least as different from one another as a long narrative poem and a novel. And, though anthologies which reprint Blake's writing independently of his art tend to make one forget the fact, he was working in a unique and completely idiosyncratic "genre" which combined poetry and prose, words and images. The Romantic canon, constructed from the works of poets who, in some cases, saw their work as antithetical, is now firmly entrenched in our cultural consciousness, but we should not be blinded by its familiarity. Far from being the only coherent way of grouping literary works from the time, it often lacks coherence itself. This is not necessarily a problem, unless the canon's familiarity prevents us from seeing its lack of any real cohesiveness and remembering that it is possible to group and study the texts of the period in other ways.

Finally, studying the comic writing of the period enables us to recognize the technical skill of the authors as they confront the problem of finding their own voices while working within overly-familiar but nonetheless binding conventions, an aspect of their work which is lost unless one places it within a movement instead of treating it as an

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approach the period from different angles, such as Bloom's Visionary Company and Mario Praz's The Romantic Agony. Of course, numerous critics, such as Morse Peckham and Arthur O. Lovejoy, have commented on the heterogeneity of the canon of Romantic poetry and the impossibility of seeing Romanticism as a single, definable movement, but despite their work, the big six now seem at least as firmly welded together as a school as ever.



isolated oddity of literary history. The techniques employed to criticize and subvert those conventions are varied, ranging from the straightforward device of the self-deceived narrator or editor used by Edgeworth and her near-contemporary Robert Bage to Blake's creation of a purely individual mode of expression through the juxtaposition of several conventional genres. Blake's work, much like Byron's, stresses the technical virtuosity which enables him to subvert conventional expectations. In contrast, Austen's mockery of expectations is much more quiet and restrained, though no less devastating for being deployed under the cover of a seemingly graceful allegiance to rules.

Not all writers were equally thorough and inventive in their explorations of the limitations of conventions, of course; Bage and Edgeworth, with their earnestly self-deceiving narrator and editor, create entertaining pieces of writing which play with convention but which do not push experimentation very far. Byron, in Don Juan--and, to a lesser extent, in Beppo--takes this use of a narrator to subvert conventions a step further. His narrators relentlessly interrogate themselves and their work, pick up and discard comic styles in such rapid succession that narrative instability itself becomes the only unifying principle of the poems. Yet even though Byron takes this technique as far as it can go in the brilliant and innovative Don Juan, he does not experiment in any detail with other techniques for criticizing or subverting convention. Perhaps

significantly, his last completed comic work, The Vision of Judgement, is a fairly conventional, albeit extremely entertaining, satire. While retaining the ottava rima stanza which characterizes Beppo and Don Juan, A Vision of Judgement almost completely abandons their obsessive questioning of the comic conventions which give them their structure.

In contrast, both Blake and Austen pursue an examination and criticism of comic conventions over a large portion of their careers, experimenting with a variety of subversive techniques in the process. Unlike Bage, Edgeworth, or Byron, who are mainly interested in demonstrating the limitations of the conventions with which they are working, both Blake and Austen experiment with ways to work beyond those limitations, or at least to create their own idiom within the boundaries imposed upon them. While Blake's later work, from Milton onwards, becomes increasingly serious and obscure, his earlier writing shows a lively and usually overlooked interest in comedy and comic form. In his notebooks, in his fragmentary prose tale "An Island in the Moon," and in his illuminated work up to and culminating in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, he simultaneously criticizes and employs comic conventions, subverting them through incongruous juxtapositions with other literary forms as well as with his own artistic work. Finally, with Austen we see an obvious and career-long interest in literary conventions and burlesque, stretching from "Jack and Alice," one of the very earliest pieces of the Juvenilia, all the way up to Sanditon,

which she was working on in the last few months of her life. Even in Mansfield Park, the most serious of her novels, she explores and criticizes two very different conventional patterns of comedy in the contrasting figures of Fanny and Mary. As Austen was well aware, realistic fiction is no less dependent upon literary convention than the most extravagantly outrageous poetry or gothic fiction of her day, and in her writing, she explores ways in which this dependence limits her own artistic freedom and shapes the direction of her novels.

Some of the claims that I am making about these writers, particularly Blake and Austen, might seem odd, but in fact, they are merely the result of emphasizing elements in their work which have long been recognized but are frequently overlooked. Frye pointed out both comic and satiric elements in Blake's writing in Fearful Symmetry; the surprising point is that so few writers since have chosen to focus on them. Feminist scholars have repeatedly emphasized the subversive elements in Austen's writing. A study of the comic works of any one of these writers, including Blake, would not be particularly surprising; the oddity in this thesis is bringing them together. Yet these writers were all working around the same time and were engaged with many of the same issues. Isolating their work on the basis of genre or gender may make sense on one level, but on another it distorts the literary life of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Women read and wrote poetry; men read and wrote

novels; both read the periodical and critical literature of the day. These authors might not, in all cases, have read each other, but that point is relatively unimportant. What makes them characteristic of their era is not that they knew what we now consider to be the great works of Romanticism--which in some cases, notably Blake's, were virtually unknown during their own day--but that they knew and were engaged with the issues which preoccupied and unified the literary world at the time.

## Chapter One

### Instruction and Delight: Eighteenth-Century Ideas about Comedy

Comedy has been particularly impropitious to definers...they have embarrassed their definitions with the means by which the comic writers attain their end, without considering that the various methods of exhilarating their audience, not being limited by nature, cannot be comprised in precept.

Samuel Johnson,  
The Rambler 125

Despite Johnson's warning, the eighteenth century did not lack writers willing to provide definitions of comedy or to discuss the relative merits of the numerous methods used to "exhilarate" an audience. It was an age of exuberant inventiveness in comedy, one which saw not only a huge amount of comic writing, but also a lively debate on the nature of comedy and its genres.<sup>1</sup> Today, colloquial usage makes a

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<sup>1</sup>So far, I have avoided the troublesome issue of what constitutes a genre. In Frye's terminology, comedy is a mode, not a genre, a distinction which is useful to retain, since one can then use the word "genre" for more precise literary groupings. Yet in referring to the "genres" of comedy, I am influenced more by Stuart Curran's use of the word than by classic literary terminology. While prominent theorists of genre such as Genette use the term in more or less an Aristotelian manner, Curran defines it as "a nexus of conventions and a frame of reference," which guide and limit a writer's choice of form and subject matter. (See Curran, Poetic Form and British Romanticism [Oxford: OUP 1986] 9-11.) If one uses the word "genre" in this manner, it is possible to see the eighteenth-century subdivisions of comedy such as wit and humour as aspects of genre rather than simply as meaninglessly subjective terms describing funniness.

vague differentiation between comedy and satire, assuming the latter to be more pointed and often less funny than the former, but beyond that, the words denoting different aspects of comedy tend to be used more or less synonymously. Few people, except perhaps some crotchety grammarians, now worry about whether raillery can be satirical or if wit is more or less difficult to write than humour. Eighteenth-century writers might not have agreed upon answers to these questions or to others like them, but they debated such issues vociferously, in essays, pamphlets, poems, and even novels. One cannot read Tom Jones, for example, without absorbing a number of Fielding's ideas about the nature of comedy. Other popular reading material was equally concerned with what might now seem to be rather drily theoretical issues. The Spectator essays, popular reading--particularly for young ladies<sup>2</sup>--throughout the eighteenth century, include a number of pieces examining the nature of comedy. Johnson also takes up the issue in several of his Rambler essays, and most of the great comic writers throughout the century wrote on the subject. At the turn of the nineteenth century, a reader

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<sup>2</sup>The Spectator retained its popularity late enough in the century for Austen to lament that a young woman, though ashamed to be caught reading a novel by Edgeworth or Burney, would "proudly" have "produced the book, and told its name" were she reading The Spectator (Northanger Abbey, ch. v). Although Austen considered it badly outdated--she complains that "the substance of its papers... often consist[s] in the statement of improbable circumstances, unnatural characters, and topics of conversations, which no longer concern anyone living"--the fact that she felt impelled to write such an attack indicates that her views were not universally shared.

with even a moderate knowledge of recent literature would have read not only a large amount of comic literature but also a large amount of theorizing about the nature of comedy. To use Butler's phrase, such ideas were very much "in the air."

This debate about comedy was not simply a matter of abstract, academic interest; it was a subject of vital concern. From the beginning, the topic had strong ideological overtones.<sup>3</sup> Comedy was, first of all, a "low" mode of writing, one which lacked the intellectual dignity of tragedy or even satire.<sup>4</sup> In his preface to An Evening's Love, Dryden begins by admitting that the work is, by its nature as comedy, a frivolous piece of writing and by proclaiming that "Neither, indeed, do I value a reputation gained from Comedy." Such writing is, he implies,

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<sup>3</sup>Moralistic attitudes towards comedy were not merely a Puritan reaction to Restoration license, as one might be tempted to think; they survived well into the nineteenth century. DeQuincey, writing in 1840, claimed to be horrified by Wordsworth's taste in fiction: "the novels of Smollett, Fielding, and Le Sage--so disgusting by their moral scenery and the whole state of vicious society in which they keep the reader moving: these, and merely for the ability of the execution, he read and remembered with extreme delight." (In Recollections of the Lakes and the Lake Poets, ed. David Wright [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970] 383.) It is also worth noticing that Wordsworth, according to DeQuincey, vastly preferred these comic novels to the romantic adventures of Scott and Radcliffe.

<sup>4</sup>Comedy and satire are related, of course, but there are very important differences between them. Unlike wit, humour, or farce, satire cannot be seen as a type of comedy, but rather exists as a mode in its own right. The differences between the two will be discussed at greater length later, particularly in reference to Byron, whose writing often straddles the two.

potentially contaminating to its author, since it "especially requires, on the writer's part, much of conversation with the vulgar, and much of ill nature in the observation of their follies." Moreover, it is far less important than tragedy, according to Dryden, since its chief end is not instruction, but merely the frivolous purpose of "delight."<sup>5</sup>

This idea was by no means universally shared. In particular Jeremy Collier, a clergyman appalled by the degeneracy of drama, took specific issue with Dryden's definition of comedy, blaming many of the evils of contemporary society on it. He wonders:

...is there no Diversion to be had unless Vice appears prosperous, and rides at the Head of Success. One would think such a preposterous distribution of Rewards, should rather shock the Reason, and raise the Indignation of the Audience. To laugh without reason is the Pleasure of Fools, and against it, of something worse. The exposing of Knavery, and making *Lewdness* ridiculous, is a much better occasion for Laughter. And this with submission I take to be the end of *Comedy*. And therefore it does not differ from *Tragedy* in the End, but in the Means. Instruction is the principal Design of both. The one works by Terror, the other by

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<sup>5</sup>John Dryden, "Preface to An Evening's Love" in Essays of John Dryden, Vol I, ed. W.P. Ker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926) 134-147. In Discoveries, Ben Jonson argues somewhat differently from either Dryden or Jeremy Collier, claiming that tragedy and comedy are both supposed to delight as well as instruct. (In Ben Jonson, Vol VIII, ed. C.H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947] 643).



Infamy. 'Tis true, they don't move in the same Line,  
but they meet in the same point at last.<sup>6</sup>

Collier claimed that he had no particular objection to comedy in the abstract, merely to what he saw as the dangerous manner in which it was being misshapen by assumptions that it should "delight" and amuse:

Indeed to make *Delight* the main business of *Comedy* is an unreasonable and dangerous Principle. It opens the way to all Licentiousness, and Confounds the distinction between Mirth, and Madness. For if Diversion is the *Chief End*, it must be had at any Price....Yes, if the Palate is pleas'd, no matter tho' the Body is Poyson'd. For can one die of an easier Disease than Diversion? But Raillery apart, certainly Mirth and Laughing, without respect to the Cause, are not such supreme Satisfactions! (161-62)

By frequently indulging in such rallying or satirical asides, Collier attempts to demonstrate, even if without a great deal of conviction, that at least some comic exchanges might "please the palate" without fatally poisoning the mind.

Of course, few writers went so far as Collier and made a blanket condemnation of comedy which merely entertains; most were more concerned with the questions of what different types of comedy should do, and which were superior. By the end of the seventeenth century, it was already a commonplace that comedy fell, very broadly speaking, into two major and

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<sup>6</sup>Jeremy Collier, A Short View of the Immorality, and Profaneness of the English Stage (London: S. Keble, 1698) 156-7. I am focusing on comments about drama in the early part of this discussion because in the first part of the eighteenth century, "comedy" referred almost by definition to drama.

opposed categories, wit and humour. Dryden was able to take it for granted that his audience would understand him when he wrote that "I will not deny, but that I approve most the mixed way of Comedy; that which is neither all wit nor all humour, but the result of both" ("Preface to An Evening's Love" 140). Yet the distinction between these two main types of comedy was never hard and fast. They could overlap; as Congreve wrote to John Dennis, a humorous character could easily be a wit, as long as the writer took care that:

the manner of *Wit* should be adapted to the *Humour*. As for instance, a Character of a Splenetick and Peevish *Humour* should have a Satyrical Wit. A Jolly and Sanguine *Humour* should have a Facetious Wit....<sup>7</sup>

Congreve is clearly using "humour" in the Jonsonian sense; that is also what Dryden means when he refers to humour (which he claims that nobody except Jonson has ever written properly). At that time, the word "humour" itself was still relatively new to literature; throughout the middle ages and the Renaissance, it was a medical term, referring to the four bodily fluids--blood, choler, phlegm, and bile--which were thought to determine a person's emotional makeup. Jonson's comedy of humours, which contributed to the shift in meaning, was based on the belief that if a particular humour predominated, it could lead to eccentric behaviour.<sup>8</sup> This

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<sup>7</sup>William Congreve, Letters and Documents, ed. John C. Hodges (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1964) 178.

<sup>8</sup>The entry for "humour" in the Oxford English Dictionary of course provides a brief history of the word. For a detailed account of its literary usage up to the eighteenth-

physiological sense remained latent in the word throughout the eighteenth century, but the concept of humour rapidly became more complex and subtle as it gained currency as a purely literary term. As early as 1695, Congreve felt it necessary to distinguish comedy produced by humours from that arising merely from habits or affectations.

By the first decades of the eighteenth century, the term had become so freighted with connotations beyond the purely physiological that Addison devoted a number of Spectator papers to the subjects of wit, humour, laughter, and the subtle differences between such near-synonyms. Although he claims that "It is much easier to describe what is not humour than what is," he does not hesitate to provide his readers with a description of it, using a genealogical metaphor:

Truth was the founder of the family and the father of Good Sense. Good Sense was the father of Wit, who married a lady of a collateral line, called Mirth, by whom he had issue Humour. Humour....descended from parents of such different disposition, is very various and unequal in his temper; sometimes you see him putting on grave looks and a solemn habit, sometimes airy in his behaviour and fantastic in his dress; insomuch that at different times he appears as serious as a judge, and as jocular as a merry-andrew.<sup>9</sup>

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century, see Louis Cazamian's Development of English Humour (Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 1952).

<sup>9</sup>Joseph Addison, The Spectator, No. 35, in Addison's Works, Vol. II, ed. Henry S. Bohn, (London: George Bell & Sons, 1878), 297. This use of a mock genealogy in place of a definition of an abstract term was a popular form. See also Johnson's definition of Wit and Learning in The Rambler 22.

Addison is moving away from a strictly physiological concept of humour, but he retains a number of seventeenth-century assumptions about it. Notably, according to him, humour is not necessarily funny. It is a technique which can be used in comedy, but which is by no means necessarily laughable. Rather, it is unselfconscious oddity, behaviour which, however amusing to us, is part of the humorous individual's character. Oddities of behaviour assumed in order to amuse are characteristic only of False Humour, who

descends originally from Falsehood, who was the mother of Nonsense, who was brought to bed of a son called Frenzy, who married one of the daughters of Folly, commonly known by the name of Laughter, on whom he begot that monstrous infant. (Spectator 35)

As Addison concludes, the real test of true versus false Humour is to see if he "remains serious while all about him laugh." The amusement provoked by Humour is purely sympathetic, not ill-natured or riotous.

This basic idea of humour remained fairly consistent throughout the century. In 1744, Corbyn Morris writes in his ambitiously-titled "Essay Towards Fixing the True Standards of Wit, Humour, Raillery, Satire, and Ridicule" that

HUMOUR extensively and fully understood, is *any remarkable Oddity or Foible belonging to a Person in real Life; whether this Foible be constitutional, Habitual, or only affected; whether partial in one or two Circumstances; or tinging the whole Temper and conduct of the Person.*<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Corbyn Morris, "An Essay Towards Fixing the True Standards of Wit, Humour, Raillery, Satire and Ridicule" in

Still later, in 1764, the moral philosopher James Beattie refers to "that comic exhibition of singular characters, sentiments, and imagery, which is denominated *Humour*."<sup>11</sup> One can even find "humour" being used in this specialized sense into the nineteenth century, alongside of its more modern use as a synonym for comedy. When Jane Austen praises novels for their "liveliest effusions of wit and humour" in Northanger Abbey, she is using the two terms more or less synonymously. Yet when Mrs. Elton refers to Mr. Knightley as a "humourist" in the later novel Emma, she is calling him an amusing eccentric, not complimenting him on his witty conversation, and in doing so, she looks back to the older usage of the term.

In its original usage, "humour" was a neutral term, but as the century advanced, it rapidly acquired a cluster of ideological connotations. Writers even took a nationalistic pride in it as a peculiarly English style of writing. Congreve saw it as a genre "almost of English Growth" (Letters and Documents 185); a century later, Mme. de Staël went even further, describing it as a peculiarly English mode of expression, "une gaîté qui est une disposition du sang

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The Augustan Reprint Society Series One, No. 4 (Nov. 1947) , (reprinted New York: Kraus Reprint Corporation 1967) 23. Morris has been almost entirely forgotten by literary history; aside from this essay, his only claim to fame is his friendship with Johnson. According to Boswell, Johnson's last words were a blessing on Morris's daughter.

<sup>11</sup>James Beattie, "An Essay on Laughter and Ludicrous Composition" in James Beattie: Philosophical and Critical Works, Vol. 1 (New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1975), 587.

presque autant que l'esprit."<sup>12</sup> She describes it in some detail, observing that:

Il y a de la morosité, je dirais presque de la tristesse, dans cette gaieté; celui qui vous fait rire n'éprouve pas le plaisir qu'il cause. L'on voit qu'il écrit dans une disposition sombre, et qu'il serait presque irrité contre vous de ce qu'il vous amuse. Comme les formes brusques donnent quelquefois plus de piquant à la louange, la gaieté de la plaisanterie ressort par la gravité de son auteur. (217)

(There is a certain moroseness, I would almost say sadness, in this merriment; he who makes you laugh does not feel the pleasure that he creates. One sees that he is writing in a sombre mood, and that he would almost be irritated with you because he amuses you. Just as a rough manner sometimes gives more piquancy to praise, the merriness of this jest is thrown into relief by the gravity of its author.)

Blaming this oddly "morose" style of comedy on both English misanthropy and English weather, de Staël comments that nobody but the British are capable of creating it.

More important than the nationalistic connotations of humour, however, were the overtones of sympathy and good-heartedness which the word acquired, connotations which increased its distance from the opposing quality of wit. While humour was, implicitly or explicitly, defined as an

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<sup>12</sup>Mme. de Staël (Anne Louise Germaine Necker, Baronne de Staël), "De la plaisanterie anglaise" in De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales, Vol. II, ed. Paul Van Tieghem (Paris: M.J. Minard, 1959; orig. pub. 1800) 216. De Staël uses the English word "humour" in her essay, apparently considering it so peculiarly British that there is no French equivalent. (My translation)

attitude arising from a person's emotional and psychological makeup, wit was perceived as being fundamentally a matter of the intellect. Especially during the first half of the century, writers looked back to Locke's definition of wit as the ability to find striking similarities between seemingly dissimilar things or ideas. Morris is deriving his ideas directly from Locke-- although he plays down the degree of his indebtedness--when he writes that:

WIT is the LUSTRE resulting from the quick ELUCIDATION of one subject by a just and unexpected ARRANGEMENT of it with another subject....

It is the Province of WIT to elucidate, or enlighten a subject, not by reasoning upon that Subject, but by a just and unexpected Introduction of another *similar*, or *opposite* Subject; whereby, upon their Arrangement together, the *original* Subject may be set off, and more clearly enlighten'd, by their obvious Comparison. (Morris 1)

Perhaps inevitably, given this head/heart dichotomy, distinctions between wit and humour were often framed in moral terms. Humour, as Stuart Tave argues throughout The Amiable Humorist, was seen as being fundamentally benevolent, arousing human sympathies. In contrast, wit was perceived as being faintly dangerous and destructive; many of the metaphors applied to and by witty writers hint at this perception of implicit danger. As early as the late seventeenth century, Dryden admired the "fineness" of raillery--which was considered a form of wit--which "separates the head from the body and leaves it standing in

its place."<sup>13</sup> Well over a hundred years later, Shelley praised Peacock with the rather ambivalent lines "his fine wit/Makes such a wound the knife is lost in it" (Letter to Maria Gisborne 240-41). Wit was a corrective rather than a mere amusement, and as such, some writers were uncertain about its value. After all, laughing at somebody else's follies may make the victim wiser, but it is hardly likely to be conducive to either humility or kindness on the part of the wit. Even when wit was not wounding, writers tended to mistrust it. As Morris points out, and as Addison and many others had pointed out before him, wit is frequently used to show off the speaker's cleverness rather than to amuse the listener. Writers who approved of wit tended to do so because they used the word "wit" to mean what others called "humour." For example, in 1784 an anonymous writer praises what he calls "true wit," which he defines by reference to Addison's genealogical description of humour. In contrast, he condemns the type of wit which is a "friend to personal satire, ridicule, or contumely."<sup>14</sup> Similarly, in a poem called "The Decline of Wit," Thomas Holcroft laments that true wit, which was gentle and cheering, is no longer appreciated:

Wit once was known a blithsome boy,  
A rosy youth right full of glee;

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<sup>13</sup>John Dryden, A Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire in Essays ed. Ker 93.

<sup>14</sup>The Wit's Magazine, or, The Library of Momus, Vol. I [ed. Thomas Holcroft], (London, 1784) 106.



The cot or palace was his own,  
 Where none so welcome was as he....[but now]  
 In some poor hut he's forc'd to dwell  
 While Impudence usurps his name;  
 Writes rhyme and paragraph, and pun  
 Intrigues, and puffs himself to fame.<sup>15</sup>

(The Wit's Magazine I, 71)

"Comedy" thus separates into two major strands, and at one extreme presents an audience with psychological oddities and at the other, a surgically precise analysis of flaws and errors. Neither type might sound particularly funny to a twentieth-century reader, but as a number of eighteenth-century writers from Collier on argued, neither wit nor humour necessarily were nor had to be laughable. As James Beattie says:

To provoke Laughter, is not essential either to Wit or to Humour. For though that unexpected discovery of resemblance between ideas supposed dissimilar, which is called *Wit*, and that comic exhibition of singular characters, sentiments, and imagery, which is denominated *Humour*, do frequently raise laughter, they do not raise it always....Wit, when the subject is grave, and the allusion sublime, raises admiration instead of laughter, and if the comic singularities of a good man appear in circumstances of real distress, the imitation of those singularities...if it should force a smile, will draw forth a tear at the same time.

("Laughter and Ludicrous Composition," 586)

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<sup>15</sup>This poem, which twentieth-century readers would probably consider a fairly dull piece of eighteenth-century popular verse, was itself heralded as an exemplary piece of wit in a later issue of the magazine: "Wit was neglected..../Because a rarity it grew/ But now once more it claims regard/Since it appears so bright in you" (I. 116).

Or, to phrase Beattie's arguments in Addisonian terms, Laughter is the offspring of Folly, not Wit or Humour. Distinguishing between the laughable and the witty on one hand or the laughable and the humorous on the other was not unusual at the time; many eighteenth-century writers of all ideological camps tended to share Collier's suspicions of laughter. Anticipating Bakhtin's ideas of the carnivalesque, a number of authors of that era saw laughter as an expression of lower class energies and destructive impulses. The difference between eighteenth-century and Bakhtinian thought is, of course, that while Bakhtin celebrates the power of laughter, earlier writers tended to distrust it. When Chesterfield made his famous observation that a well-bred, civilized man smiles but rarely laughs, he was expressing an idea which had been a commonplace for nearly a century.

Other writers reveal an even deeper suspicion of laughter. Fielding, in a very Hobbesian essay, sees it as an expression of malice rather than of cheerfulness. He goes so far in his condemnation as to wonder severely "what indeed hath Good-Nature to do with a smiling Countenance?"<sup>16</sup> At its best, laughter is merely an

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<sup>16</sup>Henry Fielding, "An Essay on the Knowledge of the Characters of Men" in Miscellanies, Vol. I, ed. Henry Knight Miller (Oxford: Wesleyan UP, 1972) 159. In one of his letters, Fielding expands on this point: "[I] am in doubt Whether that Laughter which entitles one to the general character of Good Humour, be not rather a Sign of an evil than a good Mind. Is it not indeed that *Solutus Risus* an endeavour to raise which Horace makes an Ingredient in his *black Man* and Homer attributes to Thersites? Is it not this of which Solomon says *That it is mad*, and lastly which hath

honest, hearty, loud Chuckle, which shakes the Sides of Aldermen and 'Squires, without the least Provocation of a Jest; proceeding chiefly from a full Belly; and is a Symptom (however strange it may seem) of a very gentle and inoffensive Quality, called Dulness. ("Characters" 161).

At its worst, it is a "convulsive Extasy, occasioned by the Contemplation of our own Happiness, compared with [an] unfortunate Person's" ("Characters" 160). Fielding incorporates both extremes of the reaction against laughter into these observations: if it is not vulgar, it is cruel. He even dismisses the old justification of satirical and witty laughter, that it is a way to "laugh Mankind out of their favourite Follies and Vices,"<sup>17</sup> by arguing that such laughter arises from a dangerous sense of superiority to fools and knaves rather than from justifiable disapprobation of them.

Such strictures against laughter by a comic writer reflects the deeply ambivalent attitude towards comedy held by many eighteenth-century thinkers. On the one hand, it could be pleasant and cheerful, and even, at times, good fun. One suspects that, whatever Fielding's suspicions about laughter, he did not expect his readers to remain entirely

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been observed to be never recorded of Jesus Christ?" However, he goes on to say "...do not imagine me excluding all laughter...." (Quoted in Henry Fielding: A Life, Martin C. Battestin, with Ruth R. Battestin [London: Routledge, 1989] 314.

<sup>17</sup>Ironically, these are Fielding's words, from the dedication to Tom Jones; he also makes a claim for the value of therapeutic laughter in the preface of Joseph Andrews.

calm and composed in their reactions to Tom Jones--or even to the "Essay...on the Characters of Men." On the other hand, laughter could be a sign of an almost anarchic abandonment of reason. "Arbitrary Pleasure," Collier argued, "is more dangerous than Arbitrary Power" (43).<sup>18</sup> It is not a coincidence that the Marxist Bakhtin admired precisely the aspect of comedy which most dismayed these upper-middle class English gentlemen. Of course, it was not armed class rebellion that these gentlemen feared might be caused by laughter, but the more typically eighteenth-century nightmare of social collapse caused by widespread moral decay. As early as Addison's day, writers were looking back to the best-known comedy of the previous age--Restoration drama--with a shudder. Not only did it encourage ill-nature by inviting one to laugh derisively at folly and misfortune, but also it encouraged audiences to sympathize with heroes and heroines whose morals were questionable. It seems to be such sympathy that Addison has in mind when he writes that "little cracklings of mirth" are much "apter to betray virtue than support it" (Spectator 381). It is not until near the end of

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<sup>18</sup>Disapproval of laughter for its own sake persisted for a long time. Hazlitt commented in 1819 that "there is nothing more ridiculous than laughter without a cause....To be struck with incongruity in whatever comes before us, does not argue great comprehension or refinement of perception, but rather a looseness and flippancy of mind and temper, which prevents the individual from connecting any two ideas steadily or consistently together. It is owing to a natural crudity and precipitateness of the imagination...." ("On Wit and Humour" in Lectures on the English Comic Writers [London: J.M. Dent, 1903] 38-39.)

the century--and then in the rather jacobinical Wit's Magazine--that one begins to hear laughter praised unproblematically, without any consideration of what provokes it:

Laugh then, and heartily, ye cold, sallow-faced, gloomy, and churlish mortals, if ye wish to feel the genial glow of health: relax the formal rigidity of your melancholy muscles; nor--

Lose that tide, in the affairs of laughter,  
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to health--  
by a cold, critical, and minute consideration, of what claims the exercise of your risible faculties.

(The Wit's Magazine II 85)

Unsurprisingly, this uneasiness about laughter accompanies a deep ambivalence about comedy as a mode, an ambivalence which becomes strikingly apparent if one attempts to look for any consistency in what individual writers say on the subject. I have already mentioned the contradiction between what Fielding says about laughter in "Characters of Men" and in the dedication to Tom Jones. Addison is even more unsystematic in his writing about comedy. He is suspicious of the morality of mirth in one essay; similarly, in another he agrees with Hobbes that man's "pride of heart, which is generally called laughter, arises in him from his comparing himself with an object below him" (Spectator 47). Yet in still another essay, in which he contrasts laughter and ridicule, he writes that "the metaphor of laughter, applied to trees or meadows when they are in flower...shows that we naturally regard laughter, as what is in itself both

amiable and beautiful" (Spectator 249). One senses from the very beginning of the eighteenth century a dualistic attitude towards comic writing, as writers attempted to distance themselves from witty, cynical comedy while praising that which promoted warm benevolence.

As Stuart Tave points out, this gulf between benevolent and corrective comedy became even more pronounced as the century progressed (Amiable Humorist 43). Few writers seemed content any longer to remain as cheerfully and unselfconsciously contradictory as Addison had been. Writing in 1750, Francis Hutcheson summarizes and angrily attacks Hobbesian ideas about derisive laughter, then goes on to proclaim the benefits of benevolent laughter, which, he argues, "tends to dispel fretfulness, anxiety, or sorrow, and to reduce the mind to an easy, happy state."<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Beattie distinguishes between the ludicrous and the ridiculous, attacking the ridiculous, which is essentially derisive laughter. Such laughter, he argues, reduces man's sympathetic capacities instead of enlarging them, as does the ludicrous, which promotes benevolence. He opens his argument by stating that:

Some authors have treated of Ridicule, without marking the distinction between *Ridiculous* and *Ludicrous* ideas. But I presume the natural order of proceeding in this Inquiry, is to begin with ascertaining the nature

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<sup>19</sup>Francis Hutcheson, "Reflections Upon Laughter," appendix to Francis Hutcheson: An Inquiry Concerning Beauty, Order, Harmony, Design, ed. Peter Kivy (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973) 113.

of what is *purely Ludicrous*. Things *ludicrous* and things *ridiculous* have this in common, that both excite laughter; but the former excite pure laughter, the latter excite laughter mixed with disapprobation or contempt. ("Laughter and Ludicrous Composition 587)

With Beattie's arguments and those of his followers, one sees the vocabulary of comedy becoming more and more refined, moving away from the relatively simple wit/humour dichotomy and towards a considerable degree of intricacy.

This process of refinement was not simply an eighteenth-century preoccupation; it continued well into the Romantic period. Leigh Hunt and William Hazlitt, two of that era's most prominent writers about comedy, continue to explore the issue and to reinforce the hierarchical nature of the vocabulary of comedy implicit in many eighteenth-century discussions of the subject. Hunt discusses wit and humour in terms of the Romantic catchwords "fancy" and "imagination," thereby placing discussion of comedy at the heart of one of his era's major intellectual debates.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Hazlitt comments that wit is the "fancy inverted and so applied to given objects as to make the little look less" while humour is "the growth of nature" ("On Wit and Humour" 17, 18). Far from abandoning eighteenth-century ideas, these writers merely give them a slight twist to update them and frame them in the terms of the central preoccupations of their age.

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<sup>20</sup>See particularly the title essay in Hunt's Wit and Humour.

One might wonder whether this interest in vocabulary and the subtle variations upon meanings of comic terms had much influence upon the literature, of course; certainly in the case of Fielding there is a vast dichotomy between theory and practice. Yet while it is obvious that the writers of the time did not simply apply their definitions to their work in any dry, direct manner, there is no question that the theoretical debate about the nature of comedy did have an impact upon the period's literature. Most directly, a growing interest in the benevolent implications of humour--implications which were almost completely absent in the original Jonsonian conception of it--and a corresponding worry about amoral Restoration wit manifest themselves in the vogue for what became known as sentimental comedy. The popularity of this genre began quite early in the century; in Richard Steele's play The Conscious Lovers (1722), we see an early and decisive turn away from the risqué and cynical wit of Restoration drama. Steele uses a prologue which explicitly attacks the comic writer who "smuts his scene...Sure of the Rakes and of the Wenches Favour," and exhorts the audience to

No more let Ribaldry, with Licence writ,  
Usurp the Name of Eloquence or Wit;  
No more let lawless Farce uncensur'd go,  
The lewd dull Gleanings of a *Smithfield* Show.  
'Tis yours, with Breeding to refine the Age,  
To Chasten Wit, and Moralize the Stage....



Redeem from long Contempt the Comic Name.<sup>21</sup>

Steele is not entirely abandoning wit in his writing, but the "chastened" comedy he practiced is often comic only in the rather technical, unfunny sense upheld by the proponents of benevolence over wit.

Sentimental comedy was by no means universally popular, of course, especially after mid-century, when it had become mainstream enough to provoke vigorous attacks.<sup>22</sup> Goldsmith and Sheridan, the best-known playwrights of the late eighteenth century, explicitly condemned it. In 1773, Goldsmith scoffed at the genre, complaining that it features neither wit nor humour nor provokes laughter, but merely indulges in easy displays of sensibility. He is far from agreeing with Beattie's contention that humour and laughter can be separated from one another, and suggests that once "we have banished humour from the stage, we...[might] ourselves be deprived of the art of laughing."<sup>23</sup> Goldsmith is here

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<sup>21</sup>Richard Steele, The Plays of Richard Steele, ed Shirley Strum Kenny (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971) 303-4.

<sup>22</sup>The place occupied by sentimentalism in eighteenth-century stage comedy is debatable. R.W. Bevis has argued that it was always more typical of fiction than drama, and that on the stage sentimentalism never achieved more than brief, rather faddish popularity, primarily in the 1720's and again in the 1760's and 70's. See Bevis, The Laughing Tradition: Stage Comedy in Garrick's Day (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1980).

<sup>23</sup>Oliver Goldsmith, "An Essay on the Theatre, or A Comparison between Laughing and Sentimental Comedy" in Collected Works, Vol. III ed. Arthur Friedman (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1966) 213. Goldsmith also uses an attack on sentimental comedy written by Garrick as the prologue of She Stoops to Conquer, yet both the prologue and the Essay should be read with some caution. As with Fielding's claims to originality, these were to some extent "puffs" to promote

attempting to reclaim the word "humour" from the benevolent and rather unfunny connotations which had become attached to it by attacking sentimentalism. In a similar manner, Sheridan contrasts sentimental comedy unfavourably with "laughing" comedy in one of his prologues to The Rivals.

First, he describes Comedy, whose

humour quaint and sly,  
Dimples the cheek, and points the beaming eye;  
Where gay invention seems to boast its wiles  
In amorous hint, and half-triumphant smiles;  
While her light masks or covers satire's strokes,  
All hide the conscious blush, her wit provokes.

He contrasts this vision with one of

The goddess of the woeful countenance--  
The sentimental muse! Her emblems view  
The Pilgrim's Progress, and a sprig of rue!  
View her--too chaste to look like flesh and blood  
Primly portrayed on emblematic wood!<sup>24</sup>

Sheridan also pokes fun at the fad for strictly benevolent and moral comedy in The Critic when a character describes a new play:

[it's] a comedy, on a very new plan; replete with wit and mirth, yet of a most serious moral! You see it is called "The Reformed Housebreaker;" where, by the mere

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Goldsmith's work. As Bevis observes, the essay features "a number of rather vague and subjective criticisms which look like advertisements for She Stoops to Conquer." (Bevis 82).

<sup>24</sup>Richard Brinsley Sheridan, The Rivals in The Dramatic Works of Richard Brinsley Sheridan, ed. Cecil Price (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973) 74. There are a couple of textual cruxes in the first section of the speech; Price suggests that the second line quoted was meant to read "paints the beaming eye" and that the second last line should read "o'er covers satire's strokes."

force of humour, Housebreaking is put into so ridiculous a light, that if the piece has its proper run, I have no doubt that bolts and bars will be entirely useless by the end of the season. (Sheridan, Plays II 502)

Though obviously parodic, this speech is not wildly exaggerated; the didactic intent of "The Reformed Housebreaker" is not too far removed from Steele's desire "to moralize the stage" or Collier's insistence that comedy teach a lesson.

Despite such mockery of it, sentimental comedy did play an important role in both the fiction and the drama of the time, and one must be careful not to oversimplify the reaction against it. Goldsmith, after all, wrote the extremely sentimental novel The Vicar of Wakefield and included a sentimental subplot in She Stoops to Conquer, as did Sheridan in The Rivals. While some of these claims about the moral value of comedy seem more self-serving than earnest, the simple fact that so many writers at least paid lip service to it underlines its importance. One of the probable reasons for this concern about comedy and the increasing interest in sentimental and benevolent laughter was an awareness of comedy's potentially powerful effect on its audiences. Comedy, some writers implied, could be a weapon. Collier uses war imagery when he discusses the dangers of comedy employed by the wrong hands:

Force and Motion are Things indifferent, and the Use lies chiefly in the Application. These Advantages are now, in the Enemies Hand, and under a very dangerous Management. Like cannon seized they are pointed the

wrong way, and by the Strength of the Defence the Mischief is made the greater. (2)

Instead of providing an escape from the heavier cares of life, comedy would, Collier feared, contribute to them.

This concern lingered throughout the century. Thomas Gisborne, who, like Collier a century earlier, was particularly worried about the effect of comic theatre, believed that its potential for good was too great for it to be renounced altogether by moral and sober-minded people. Yet any comic piece must, he insists, be subject to the most rigorous scrutiny:

it is necessary that the general effect of the piece should be unequivocally virtuous. It is necessary that mirth and wit should neither directly nor indirectly, openly or covertly, be polluted with the smallest tincture of indelicacy. It is necessary that vice be not clothed in amiable colours; in colours which may disguise its deformity from the spectator, or tempt him to pardon, perhaps to imitate it, for the sake of the engaging qualities with which it is surrounded.<sup>25</sup>

Gisborne's contemporary and fellow moralist Hannah More expresses a similarly qualified approval of comic theatre, although her reasons for doing so are somewhat different from Gisborne's. While he fears that vice will become impervious to attack from virtue if it alone makes use of comedy, More suggests that stage comedy is uniquely useful in that it can

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<sup>25</sup>Thomas Gisborne, An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex, (London: T. Cadell & W. Davies, 1797) 171.

provide the benefits of derisive laughter without the dangers attending it:

We there see the world as it is, and we are taught how to act in the common occurrences of ordinary life. These are scenes in which every one must bear his part; and if we learn from the theatre to despise folly and affectation, and to avoid all the lesser follies which destroy the pleasure of society, we acquire a very useful lesson; and here...we acquire the lesson without the dangers which attend it in real life.<sup>26</sup>

As More goes on to specify, this danger is that by laughing at follies in real life, one learns to despise not only the follies but the people possessing them as well. One thereby corrects one's behaviour, but hopelessly compromises one's good nature. More is quite aware of the inescapable dualism of comedy and does not insist on excising the witty altogether; instead, she resigns herself to insisting that comedies must "exhibit what is amiable; as well as what is ridiculous" ("Theatrical Representations" 14). To be proper, she argues, comedy ought to unite the sympathetic qualities of benevolent laughter, or humour, with the corrective aspects of wit--without any of the negative effects of the latter--in a single evening's entertainment.

It may seem rather odd to a twentieth-century reader that comic theatre was such a serious matter. Of course, not all eighteenth-century thinkers took stage comedy quite this

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<sup>26</sup>[Hannah More], "Observations on the Effect of Theatrical Representations With Respect to Religion and Morals" (Bath: J. Hume, 1804) 13.

seriously; if they had, there would have been no need for More's and Gisborne's strictures. On the other hand, such ideas were not completely idiosyncratic. Fanny Burney's *Evelina* is quite affected when she goes to see Love for Love, commenting that

tho' it is fraught with wit and entertainment, I hope I shall never see it represented again; for it is so extremely indelicate,--to use the softest word I can,--that Miss Mirvan and I were perpetually out of countenance, and could neither make any observations ourselves, not venture to listen to those of others.<sup>27</sup>

As late as the eighteen-twenties, Charles Lamb was reproving his readers for taking the amorality in Restoration drama too seriously and urging them not to fall into the common error of mistaking the world of plays for a faithful representation of the world in which they lived.<sup>28</sup>

Such comments by nineteenth-century writers indicate that they continued to take eighteenth-century definitions of and concerns about comedy seriously. After all, even if

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<sup>27</sup>Fanny Burney, *Evelina* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984) 78. One of Collier's chief complaints about comic drama was that it was such a complete affront to the modesty of the ladies in the audience that "They can't discover their disgust without disadvantage, nor Blush without disservice to their modesty" (8). Nearly a century later, John Gregory expressed similar concerns about comic drama, commenting that "I am sorry to say, there are few English comedies a lady can see, without a shock to delicacy....she feels her modesty hurt in the most sensible manner, and at the same time is ashamed of appearing conscious of the injury." (John Gregory, *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters* (1774), in *Women in the Eighteenth Century: Constructions of Femininity*, ed. Vivien Jones (London: Routledge, 1990) 48.)

<sup>28</sup>Charles Lamb, "On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century" in *Essays of Elia and Last Essays of Elia* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987) 161-68.

Collier's fulminations were written more than a century before Austen's and Byron's time, such ideas lingered, expressed in the works of later authors such as More and Gisborne. Reiteration over the course of a century or more must have given them considerable force by the turn of the nineteenth century. Writers of the Romantic generation might scoff at them, but they had to contend with them nonetheless, and recognizing that fact affects the ways in which we read the Romantics' work. Byron's contention that Don Juan had no intent but "to giggle and make giggle," for example, sounds a little less like an evasion of responsibility and more like an statement of defiance when placed in the context of more than a century of writing which insisted upon the didactic responsibilities of the comic writer and the irresponsibility of making "Delight the main business of comedy." However often such ideas were disputed during their own day--and Collier and his followers were often attacked--their recurrence indicates that they continued to exert power.

This is not to say that there was no shift whatsoever in attitudes towards comedy throughout the century. Despite all of these worries about comedy and its effects, the status of comic literature shifted dramatically during the eighteenth century. At the inception of that period, Dryden was wondering whether or not a gentleman might contaminate himself by writing in the comic mode; yet within a very few years comedy was, subtly or overtly, being treated as a gentleman's game. One of the stock figures of mid and late

eighteenth-century comedy was the respectable middle class merchant who wastes money and becomes a laughing stock by setting himself up as a wit. Johnson writes about such a figure in a cautionary manner<sup>29</sup>; the first act of The Critic focuses on the antics its eponymous anti-hero, a merchant who foolishly fancies himself a connoisseur of theatre. By 1784, the author of an anonymous comic essay opens with the observation "That a tradesman has no business with humour, unless, perhaps, in the way of his dealing...is a truth which I believe nobody will dispute with me." The writer then goes on to tell the sad tale of his nephew, an ardent play-goer and would-be writer, who "is in danger of absolute ruin by his ambition of being a Wit" (The Wit's Magazine, Vol I 65).<sup>30</sup>

Certainly, the intellectual game of wit--as opposed to the presumably gentler amusement offered by humour--often seems intended to reinforce class distinctions; it frequently addresses an audience with the money and leisure to acquire a classical education. Pope's Rape of the Lock requires a knowledge of epic conventions and--perhaps even more esoterically--of aristocratic amusements to be properly

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<sup>29</sup>See, for example, The Idler 47 and The Rambler 123.

<sup>30</sup>The Wit's Magazine features a number of essays of this type. Since its founding editor, Thomas Holcroft, was an enterprising member of the lower middle classes, the inclusion of such comedy is rather surprising. Apparently, the figure of the foolish bourgeois-wit was so popular that even members of the class being mocked by it were amused--or at least were willing to exploit a rather unflattering comic stereotype in order to attract an audience.



appreciated; The Dunciad requires an equally recondite knowledge of both the ancient and the modern literary world. The same is true of Swift's witty Battle of the Books. The Wit's Magazine, despite its often pronounced jacobinical sympathies, blatantly appeals to its readers' snobbish instincts in its prospectus by mentioning that it has included witty writing only for the discerning few, since "witty allusions, which convey such exquisite sensations to certain minds, are to the multitudes like sunshine to the blind....Wit, like ghosts of old, is only visible to a few individuals" (iii). The prospectus then apologizes for its humorous material, observing that since:

humour in it's [sic] very nature is more liable to strong and glaring strokes than any other description of writing, we hope the man of refined taste, and the classical reader will remember the many we have to please, and not call that an assassination which is but a sacrifice. (v)

Even when writers uphold wit for qualities other than its intellectual appeal, they still tend to see it as an upper-class prerogative. For example, Shaftesbury argues that wit, ridicule, and raillery are effective means of testing the validity of received ideas about such important subjects as religion and government. However, he qualifies this observation by stating that such wittiness is appropriate only when used in "private Society" and "select

Company's."<sup>31</sup> As Tave observes, Shaftesbury's wit and raillery are of "a decidedly aristocratic variety" (The Amiable Humorist 36). This tendency to write wit for the educated elite and humour for everyone else continued well into the nineteenth century. Peacock was certainly not writing with an eye on the masses when his characters indulge in bilingual Greek-English or Latin-English puns in Gryll Grange (1860). In contrast, when Dickens set out deliberately to win a large audience, he created humorous characters--his books are full of Wemmicks, Micawbers, and Cheerybles, not cultivated clerics and lively young intellectuals.

Yet even as comedy gained respectability, it remained a gentleman's domain. Women were never entirely welcome as participants in the field of comic literature; even the much-loved and bestselling author Fanny Burney had to be careful about the way in which she expressed her comic vision. Her close friend Samuel Crisp wrote that he would never "allow [her] to sacrifice a grain of female delicacy for all the wit of Congreve and Vanbrugh put together--the sacrifice would be too dear."<sup>32</sup> Burney was, of course, notoriously shy, so one

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<sup>31</sup>Lord Shaftesbury [Anthony Ashley Cooper] An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour (London, 1709; reprinted in facsimile New York: Garland Publishing, 1971) 26.

<sup>32</sup>In Diary and Letters of Madame D'Arblay 1778-1840 Vol I, ed. Charlotte Barrett, preface and notes by Austin Dobson (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1904) 164. Crisp goes on to describe metaphorically the constraints imposed upon a woman who wants to write comedy: "Do you remember about a dozen years ago, how you used to dance Nancy Dawson on the grass plot with your cap on the ground, and your long hair

might argue that Crisp's concerns about her work were personal, not general, but other women writers faced similarly repressive attitudes. Henry Austen's posthumous Biographical Notice of his sister observes that Austen had "the keenest relish for wit," and that "the frailties, foibles, and follies of others could not escape her immediate detection, yet even on their vices did she never trust herself to comment with unkindness." She hated comedy such as Fielding's, he continues, because "Neither nature, wit, nor humour, could make her amends for so very low a scale of morals" (Chapman, Vol.V 6-7). Feminist scholars have disputed the accuracy of Henry Austen's comments about his sister, but they are nonetheless an important indication of what society at that time expected--or claimed to expect--of comedy by women.<sup>33</sup> It was supposed to be both gentle and genteel, without the slightest tincture of coarseness to lower its moral tone. Dryden's observation that a gentleman risked contamination by writing comedy might have been long since forgotten, but concerns that it would contaminate a gentlewoman, whether she were the creator or the consumer of

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streaming down your back, and one shoe off, and throwing about your head like a mad thing? Now you are to dance Nancy Dawson with fetters on; there is the difference: yet there is certainly a nameless grace and charm in giving a loose to that wildness and friskiness sometimes."

<sup>33</sup>These expectations remained basically the same throughout the nineteenth century. James Edward Austen-Leigh, the nephew who published the first full-length biography of Austen in 1870, stated flatly that his aunt's writing "was as far as possible from being either censorious or satirical" (Austen-Leigh, A Memoir of Jane Austen [London: Richard Bentley, 1870] 115).

the literature in question, survived well into the nineteenth century.<sup>34</sup>

These definitions of and ideas and concerns about comedy are diverse, and it is probably neither possible nor particularly interesting to trace specific ways in which individual writers of the Romantic era respond to all of the issues raised in this chapter. Yet this background provides a vital starting point for looking at the specific conventions that the authors whom I am studying were exploring and subverting. Eighteenth-century assumptions that there is a great deal more involved in comedy than a simple attempt to amuse are far from being universally held today, but such ideas continued to be expressed directly well into the nineteenth century and, more importantly, to shape comic practice. In some cases, the response to such ideas and assumptions is obvious. For example, Austen's characteristic use of a quietly ironic narrative voice whose perspective is difficult to pin down seems a fairly straightforward tactic for dealing with the demands imposed upon her as a woman writing comedy.<sup>35</sup> In other cases, the

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<sup>34</sup>Seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century women writers such as Behn, Haywood, and Manley certainly wrote comedy which was far from genteel, but they were both censured and censored with increasing frequency as the eighteenth century progressed. See Jane Spencer, The Rise of the Woman Novelist from Aphra Behn to Jane Austen (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986) 75-80.

<sup>35</sup>This question of how women writers managed to work within a literary tradition which excluded them is of course itself a very large and important issue, one which has attracted the interest of a number of feminist scholars. Mary Poovey's The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer includes a

influence of such ideas is more subtle. Questions of what different types of comedy should achieve, which are superior, and who should write what also shape comic literature around the turn of the nineteenth century, although their effects might not be immediately evident. Inheriting a large number of often contradictory ideas about comedy from their predecessors, writers of this period were forced to confront the problem of how--or whether--these ideas could be used to express their own social or literary visions. Many of the concepts of comedy outlined in this chapter are challenged by the writers whom I will discuss, but the challenges are made within the boundaries of their art rather than in polemical statements of their own. At base, these writers all share the belief that writing comedy involves more than simply making an audience laugh, and in their comic practice one can trace an ongoing engagement with the eighteenth-century preoccupation with what comedy can or ought to achieve as a mode.

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detailed study of Austen's strategies for dealing with the constraints imposed upon her as a "proper lady" attempting the rather improper art of novel writing.

## Chapter Two

### Playfulness of the Pen: Bage and Edgeworth

your playfulness, I know, is only of the pen,--for  
your heart is good....

Hernsprong, chapt. IX

The shift from eighteenth-century to Romantic literature was not a sudden one; the cultural and artistic mood of the nation did not undergo a massive change in 1789, or 1798--or whatever other date that one chooses to mark the inception of Romanticism. Even though a number of writers we now consider Romantic in mood--most notably Blake--had been working throughout the 1780's, the spirit of the Enlightenment continued to influence writers well into the 1790's and beyond. Yet whether conventionally "Romantic" or not, a number of comic works from the tail end of the eighteenth century manifest an interest in questioning and subverting established ideas about comedy. Far from displaying either the certitude which supposedly marks enlightenment thought or the overt rebellion which is usually thought to typify Romanticism, writers such as Robert Bage and Maria Edgeworth question the structuring assumptions which underlie their art in a genially self-deprecating manner which anticipates the more profound artistic uncertainties of their younger contemporary Byron.

Neither Bage nor Edgeworth is a writer now likely to be known to general readers. Undeservedly forgotten by all but specialists in the Jacobin novel, Bage has completely slipped out of the canon, while Edgeworth receives more attention as a forerunner of Austen than as an author in her own right. Moreover, few scholars would consider either Bage or Edgeworth Romantic writers, even though Edgeworth's most enduringly popular work, the novella Castle Rackrent, was published in 1800 and Bage's last and probably best novel, Hermesprong, first appeared in 1796. Both writers were products of radical Enlightenment thought, even though Bage was a full generation older than Edgeworth.<sup>1</sup> Yet in their work, informed as it is by the assumptions of a "pre-Romantic" generation, one can see many of the concerns about conventional patterns which mark the comic work of their younger contemporaries.

Admittedly, their questioning of convention is less central to their work than that of the other writers in this study. In both Castle Rackrent and Hermesprong, the subversion of convention is almost entirely tied to the use of a supposedly reliable framing narrator or editor whose

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<sup>1</sup>Edgeworth spent most of her adult life with her father in Ireland, isolated from the main intellectual currents of her day. As a result, her thinking was much more closely aligned with her father's, who had moved in the same pre-revolutionary radical circles as Godwin, Holcroft, and Bage, than it was with the reactionary ideas of the early nineteenth century when she was writing. Marilyn Butler, author of the standard biography of Edgeworth, stresses the influence of R.L. Edgeworth on his daughter's thought throughout her book.

assumptions are subtly undermined by the story that he is telling. In the process, readers begin to see the limitations of these assumptions and to realize the ways in which the version of events that they are receiving is determined not by objective truth but by the unadmitted and even unrecognized dependence of the framing voice upon conventional structuring devices. Yet in both novels this realization remains unaccompanied by any real sense of the extent of such dependence, a sense which permeates Don Juan, or any serious critical examination of the conventions themselves, such as one can see in Austen's work. Both Bage and Edgeworth seem to be aware of the limitations imposed upon their work by conventional patterns of comedy, but that awareness gives rise to little more than clever play. Aware of their dependence upon literary rules, but apparently undisturbed by it, they create elaborately delightful games in which literary practices often become the butt of a good-natured joke.

This exploration of convention is more obvious in Hernsprong than in Castle Rackrent. A failed paper manufacturer, Bage came late to writing, yet in Hernsprong he is directly engaged with exploring and exploding many of the stereotypes of comic and romantic fiction familiar from his day to our own. His plot is almost outrageously conventional: a beautiful young woman, about to be dashed over a cliff by a runaway horse, is rescued by a handsome stranger. Her tyrannical father, enraged by his daughter's



refusal to marry a rich but foolish suitor, imprisons her and attempts to force her to the altar. Persecuted by the heroine's father, a wicked baron, the handsome, mysterious rescuer is finally revealed to be the long-lost rightful heir to his estates. Standard melodrama--except that the heroine has a taste for debating the rights of women, the forced marriage is halted when the secondary heroine pulls a pistol on the father and would-be bridegroom, and the new lord of the manor is a democrat who disapproves of the entire aristocratic system. Far from being the tired romance that one might expect from the plot outline, Hernsprong simultaneously employs and mocks popular styles of melodramatic entertainment. The few critics who have written about the book invariably comment on its clever subversion of melodramatic conventions; Marilyn Butler, in a brief but very helpful discussion of Hernsprong, observes that Bage mimicked the stale conventions of eighteenth-century fiction in such a manner that he criticized its underlying assumptions, while at the same time availing himself of the popular novelist's power to create an attractive, autonomous world.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, Gary Kelly has observed that one of Bage's characteristic techniques is to "retain enough of [a] convention to keep his story moving"<sup>3</sup> while cheerfully mocking the rest. The result is a novel which reads like a

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<sup>2</sup>Marilyn Butler, Jane Austen and the War of Ideas (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975) 86.

<sup>3</sup>Gary Kelly, The English Jacobin Novel 1780-1805 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976) 43.

cross between Godwin's Political Justice and a sentimental romance.

As this description implies, Hernsprong is not an easy novel to categorize. Attempts to do so are further complicated by Bage's audacious combination not only of politics and melodrama but also of several different but familiar comic plots. The book opens, for example, in a manner reminiscent of Smollet's novels, with a wry first-person account of the conception, birth, and upbringing of the scapegrace narrator, Gregory Glen. Yet Glen has withdrawn from the centre of attention by the fourth chapter, and in chapter ten he announces that he has decided to start referring to himself in the third person and almost completely effaces himself from the novel. Later in the book, Bage again moves away from the main romance plot and dabbles in domestic comedy in his amusing accounts of the homelife of the witty banker Mr. Sumelin and his foolish wife and daughter.<sup>4</sup> These characters are connected to the main plot only by what Butler calls one of Bage's "unashamed coincidences": Mr. Sumelin happens to be both Hernsprong's banker and Miss Fluart's guardian. Finally, at intervals Bage seems to anticipate Peacock's comedy of philosophical

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<sup>4</sup>Dorothy Blakey sees these scenes as a delightful anticipation of Pride and Prejudice (Blakey, The Minerva Press, 1790-1820 [Oxford: The Bibliographical Society, 1939] 64). However, the motif of the foolish wife and long-suffering husband is a familiar one in eighteenth-century comedy--Cibber, for example, employs it in The Provok'd Husband; Goldsmith uses it in The Vicar of Wakefield, Sheridan in The School for Scandal, and so on.

debate;<sup>5</sup> he does not hesitate to stop the action of the story from time to time throughout the novel to throw in leisurely but amusing debates on topics such as Mary Wollstonecraft's ideas about female liberty and the relative nature of happiness in civilized and savage societies. The result is a book which lurches from one type of comic plot to another, rather than following the pattern established by the innumerable burlesques of romance novels which preceded and obviously influenced it.<sup>6</sup>

These sudden shifts from one type of plot to another might be rather clumsy artistically, but there can be no doubt that they call attention to the artificiality of these conventional patterns and invite a critical response from the audience. By refusing to write the picaresque novel which

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<sup>5</sup>Critics such as J.M.S Tompkins, Allan Rodway, and Peter Faulkner have drawn parallels between Bage and Peacock. See Tompkins, The Popular Novel in England 1770-1800 (London: Constable & Co, 1932) 194; Rodway, English Comedy (London: Chatto & Windus, 1975) 191-93; Faulkner, Robert Bage (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979) 154.

<sup>6</sup>Bage, a radical who sympathized with Godwin and Wollstonecraft, might have avoided writing a straightforward burlesque of his own because of the burlesque's frequent implicit acceptance of the social status quo. The standard version of the burlesque involves a character who is so badly misled by her exposure to bad fiction--the character in question is almost invariably female--that she rejects society around her and attempts to live according to her idealized world view until a series of comic and often humiliating disillusionments teaches her that if properly followed the existing social order is not so bad. Examples of this genre include Lennox's Female Quixote, Edgeworth's Angelina or L'Amie Inconnue, Barrett's Heroine and, of course, Austen's Northanger Abbey. One can find a similar plot developed in a less funny and more overtly cautionary manner in Jane West's Gossip's Story and Austen's Sense and Sensibility.

the opening account of Glen's adventures seems to promise, Bage encourages his readers to confront some of their own expectations about literary form. As he switches directions so abruptly, he surprises readers into recognizing how conditioned they are by conventional comic fiction. After all, it is completely reasonable for Glen to settle near his friends in a beautiful and inexpensive district of the country. Only previous experience with literary wanderers from Moll Flanders and Roderick Random on down would make us expect that a penniless young adventurer like Glen should keep moving and settle down only on the last page of the novel. Similarly, by making Glen, the hero of the opening chapter, disappear from the novel so suddenly Bage subtly encourages his readers to recognize the limitations of his own main plot. Glen has a story of his own, just as amusing as Hermsprong's, which he refuses to continue telling or even to complete. His unnamed editor, and his coyness about this mysterious figure, are clear reminders to the reader that Glen continues to have a full and active life beyond his self-imposed function as Hermsprong's biographer. Similarly, Mr. Sumelin's anecdote about the grand signior and his wives suggests the comic potential of *his* life and reflections. Instead of creating an illusion of comprehensiveness, Bage reminds us of the arbitrariness and limitations of the story that he is telling. Somewhat paradoxically, by incorporating several different comic plots into the main narrative, Bage undermines any sense of inclusiveness in his novel.

Yet by calling attention to the limitations of his story in this manner, Bage is not making a radical critique of the conventions of the picaresque--or of domestic comedy, or of philosophical debates, or of those of any of the other forms that he dabbles in. Suggesting that any particular style of writing has its limitations and that turning to one excludes the particular virtues of other types of comedy is an obvious point, even if it is not one that is often made in comic works themselves. The more interesting aspect of Bage's play with conventions is his implicit suggestion that the use of some conventional elements, however hackneyed and limiting they might be, is necessary to attract and retain an audience. Glen's role in the story is not necessarily the result of artistic ineptitude; it might well be Bage's genially tongue-in-cheek method of drawing an audience into his odd novel, lulling them with an initial appearance of comfortable familiarity.

Yet Glen's significance is far from limited to his role as the charming picaro who draws us into the first chapter. Although reading his voice as that of a fully developed character is difficult in the latter half of the novel, doing so is extremely important. However much one might be tempted to assume that Glen's witty perspective on events provides us with a completely self-aware and objective account of the incidents in the novel, there are clear indications of self-deception in his narrative, a fact which fundamentally alters the way in which the reader approaches the text. Glen wants

to persuade us of his freedom, a freedom to relate his story independently of any reliance upon the confining laws of fiction. Yet by his very attempts to demonstrate independence from conventions, Glen reveals that he is bound far more tightly by them than he wants to believe. Through Glen's inability to recognize his own contradictions, Bage manages the rather difficult task of amusing his readers by calling their attention to the silliness of several conventions while continuing to draw upon those conventions to increase the appeal of his novel.

One of Glen's characteristic attributes throughout the novel is an amused, rather contemptuous attitude towards the stale and manipulative devices of popular fiction. At several points, Glen openly discusses the way in which novels shape--or rather distort--readers' expectations. For example, when Miss Fluart and Miss Campinet set out on a brief journey, he observes,

All ladies know--for all ladies read novels--how extremely dangerous the roads of England are for female travellers who happen to be young and handsome....lords, knights, and gentle squires [make it] their cruel practice to seize and carry away *vi et armis*, that is, in chaises drawn by flying horses, that distinguished part of the fair sex called heroines, and confine them in very elegant prisons....Surely, I did not consider these things, when I turned my two lovely girls into this wide world of danger, with no other guide but their own discretion.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Robert Bage, Hernsprong, ed. Peter Faulkner (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985), 122. All further references to Hernsprong

He then suggests that he is immune to reliance upon this particular device of conventional plotting by informing us that the two young women arrive without incident. Similarly, near the end of the book, he comments:

If the careless writer of a novel closes his book without marrying, or putting to death, or somehow disposing not only of his principal personages, but of all who have acted a part in the drama above the degree of a candle snuffer, he creates an unsatisfied want in the minds of his readers, especially his fair ones, and they hardly part friends. (246)

Once again, Glen implies his own freedom from the bonds of convention, since his means of satisfying this "want" is to inform us that with the exceptions of Hermsprong and Miss Campinet, who predictably get married, almost all of the major characters continue in exactly the same manner as they did throughout the novel.

Yet inevitably, by the very act of mentioning conventions, Glen indicates a certain reliance upon them. He may begrudge us the information that Hermsprong and Miss Campinet get married, and he may not be particularly

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will be from this edition. Austen and Edgeworth also play with this convention, suggesting its pervasiveness. Austen writes in Northanger Abbey: "[Catherine's journey] was performed with suitable quietness and uneventful safety. Neither robbers nor tempests befriended them, nor one lucky overturn to introduce them to the hero" (Chapman ed., Vol V 43). Similarly, Edgeworth writes in her novella Angelina: "[Angelina] had the misfortune--and it is a great misfortune to a young lady of her way of thinking--to meet with no difficulties or adventures, nothing interesting upon her journey. She arrived, with inglorious safety, at Cardiff" (in Tales and Novels Vol. I (reprint of The Longford Edition, 1893) 229.

informative concerning the specific fates of the rest of the characters, but he nonetheless observes the convention that some allusion to those fates must be made. Similarly, he provokes momentary interest in an otherwise very brief and very mundane journey to Falmouth only by the expedient of reminding the reader that heroines' journeys are habitually fraught with danger. Contrary to his claims, Glen does not break the conventional rules of comic narrative; he merely gives the illusion of doing so by employing those conventions openly and self-consciously. Glen himself apparently never notices this unacknowledged dependence upon convention; he appears to be taken in by the illusion of himself as a successful literary iconoclast. He is able to tell the story, he informs us, only because he is reined in by a practical-minded editor. Otherwise, the plot would remain static as he spun out his own ideas (see pp. 15, 58). It is his editor who insists on plot and plausibility, Glen implies; he, being a free-thinker, is interested in neither.

Of course, such "unconventionality" is flawed whichever way one chooses to interpret it. First of all, Glen submits to his editor's observations, despite his show of resistance. Moreover, and far more devastatingly to his position, his supposedly unconventional inability to tell a straightforward story in a straightforward manner is itself a convention by 1796, derived most obviously from Sterne.<sup>8</sup> Finally, he is

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<sup>8</sup>See Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1983), 234-40, for a discussion of Sterne



far from invariably self-conscious about all conventions. In both of the speeches quoted, and at many other points in the novel, he reveals that his own expectations of women--both as characters and as readers--are shaped by the popular images of them in fiction and conduct guides. Unlike Hermsprong, Miss Fluart, or even Miss Campinet, he remains untouched by Wollstonecraft's ideas and deeply influenced by, presumably, his own novel reading. I do not mean to suggest that Glen is a conscious hypocrite, but rather that conventional literary structures and assumptions are not quite as easy to escape as he rather naïvely assumes them to be. Despite his amusing assumption of the role of iconoclast, he remains trapped by his own comic plot.

Hermsprong is not primarily literary criticism, of course; Bage is arguing for the birth of a new social order, not the death of an old form of literature. Yet the book's implicit claim that it is impossible to escape the limitations of convention no matter how self-consciously aware of those conventions one might be, is both reflected and reinforced by the actions and assumptions of the characters in the novel. As they try to escape the social codes binding them, they, much like Glen, discover that these conventions are not very easy to discard entirely, no matter how thoroughly one is aware of their artificiality.

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imitations in eighteenth-century literature. Booth sees Bage as one of the few successful imitators of Sterne's narrative method, and Faulkner also points out examples of Bage's debt to Sterne in his edition of Hermsprong.

Hernsprong himself, the embodiment of freethinking iconoclasm, is fully aware that he is incapable of practicing all that he preaches. A radical and independent thinker, who has no difficulty in telling Dr. Blick that he does not respect the clergy or in informing Lord Grondale that "he did not mind [his] rank" (22), Hernsprong also quotes Wollstonecraft and reads Paine, certain indications of a freethinker in eighteenth-century terms. Yet he sees nothing wrong in addressing women with elaborate and conventional gallantry, an incongruity which both Miss Campinet and Miss Fluart point out. Miss Campinet, in fact, reveals her own familiarity with Wollstonecraft's ideas when she reproves Hernsprong for his flattery:

[Miss Campinet said] "...I am sorry you have learned to flatter."

"To flatter! Nay, at most it is only truth a little heightened. In praise of beauty one becomes poetical. Are young ladies pleased to be praised with cold and exact precision?"

"It would be better, perhaps, if they were."

"Possibly so; but since that is not their taste, what can poor young men do?"

"I am sorry our sex should lay yours under the necessity of estimating female merit by a false scale....I could have wished your extravagance in that particular, Mr. Hernsprong, had been less." (72)

Hernsprong's belief that "the homage men pay to youth and beauty is insidious" (136) is softened and made less outrageous to eighteenth-century tastes by the fact that Hernsprong himself pays this homage. A willing outcast from

Lord Grondale's aristocratic but rigidly closed-minded circles because of his views, Hermsprong is not willing to risk exile from society altogether by breaking through the elaborately polite behaviour that he assumes is expected by most ladies. Even knowing that such behaviour is a mere social convention, and a potentially deforming one at that, he is still unable to free himself from its confines.

It is clear that this inconsistency is not just hypocrisy on Hermsprong's part or carelessness on Bage's. Hermsprong admits his contradictory behaviour and gives two reasons for it. First, despite his egalitarian theory, he is "destined to be an adorer of women" (136) and so cannot help being elaborately flattering when he addresses them. More significantly, he has learned "that in very, very civilized countries, no man [can] hold up the mirror of truth to a lady's face without ill manners" (139). Just as Glen proclaims his freedom from comic conventions but then retreats and charms his readers by employing them, Hermsprong proclaims his unconventionality even as he makes himself charming through the elaborate politeness of conventional discourse. Recognizing arbitrary rules of behaviour, he tacitly admits, does not necessarily mean that one can escape them with impunity.

Bage further suggests the impossibility of escaping social--and by extension any--convention entirely by quietly showing that Hermsprong, the mouthpiece of most of the novel's radical politics, qualifies his political ideas in

theory as well as in practice. For example, he repeatedly encourages Miss Campinet to disobey her father's tyrannical orders despite her sense of filial duty because "there [are no] obligations binding on one party only" (172). Yet he quickly retreats from the full implications of this point when Miss Fluart proposes a test case:

"Let us try now," said Miss Fluart. "Here am I now, your wife, the most charming creature in the universe; in two years you begin to wonder what made you think so. You find another quite as much to your taste. You play the false. Am I at liberty to return the favour?"

"Yes, my most charming creature in the universe, yes, as far as respects myself. But, in this case, you have contracted an obligation with society also. Society does not think itself so much injured by the lapse of the male. In short, you bear the children. To you I need not point out the important deductions from this single circumstance." (172-3)

Here, Hermsprong sounds more like a jocular version of the stern moralist Johnson than like the radical Wollstonecraft.<sup>9</sup>

This play with social ideology does not remain independent of the subversion of literary convention--the two are in fact inextricably combined. At times, as one can see by looking at some of Miss Fluart's speeches, Bage simultaneously twists conventional comic form by making it deal with radical ideas and damps down that radicalism by

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<sup>9</sup>See, for example, The Life of Johnson (ed. Chapman, London: Oxford UP) 1035: "Boswell. 'To be sure there is a great difference between the offense of infidelity in a man and that of his wife.' Johnson. 'The difference is boundless. The man imposes no bastards upon his wife.'"

associating it with conventional literary forms. Miss Fluart's ideas are as radical as Hermsprong's, but she does not express them in his polemical manner. Instead, she employs playful debate, as in the passage cited earlier, or charmingly witty epigrams. "Our obligations to men are infinite," she tells a would-be suitor, "Under the name of father, or brother, or guardian, or husband, they are always protecting us from liberty" (191). The statement is quite as radical as any of Wollstonecraft's but given its amusingly epigrammatic form, one laughs at it instead of being roused to an angry sense of injustice. Bage also diffuses some of Miss Fluart's more extreme radicalism through its context. In the case of the epigram just cited, the reader's attention is diverted not just by the cleverness of the statement itself and by the charm of its phrasing, but also by the comic folly of Sir Philip, whose response to it is a dark suspicion that "she don't think women have any obligations to men at all" (191). The dull-witted and conventional-minded Sir Philip both provokes laughter and deflects the reader's own suspicions about the very unfunny implications of Miss Fluart's observation. (Notably, the more intelligent Sir John, to whom the speech is addressed, is reduced to temporary silence by it.) Similarly, Lord Grondale's bewildered or fatuous responses to Miss Fluart's sharp comments increase the emphasis on the conventional comic motif of a foolish old suitor pursuing a rich young woman and

decrease the obvious radicalism of the sentiments expressed during the courtship scenes.

This fact that the novel's literary iconoclasm does not necessarily reinforce its attack on social custom, even though at first it might seem logical that it do so, is significant. While linked in obvious and important ways, Bage's mixture of literary subversion and social radicalism is not entirely cohesive. At times, in fact, the two aspects of the novel seem to cancel each other out. For example, Bage may be levelling a political attack on the corrupt aristocracy in his treatment of the wicked Lord Grondale, but as Kelly points out, in literature the figure of both the Bad Baron and the tyrannical father are so commonplace that the political commentary is muted (English Jacobin Novel 45). Similarly, even though the witty and sexually appealing Miss Fluart is precisely the sort of radical, avant-garde woman who horrified the conduct writers and conservative novelists of the time<sup>10</sup>, she has clear antecedents in dramatic literature, even if not in novels: she is a character very much in the line of Beatrice, Millamant, and Kate Hardcastle. This sleight-of-hand, which makes the same figure both

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<sup>10</sup>As mentioned in the previous chapter, witty women were anathema to conservatives. Popular conduct book writers such as More, Fordyce, and Gregory, cautioned women who possess that "dangerous quality" to hide or at least chasten it. See, for example, More, "On Conversation," in Essays on Various Subjects, Principally Designed for Young Women; Fordyce, Sermons to Young Women (London, 1767) 117; and Gisborne, An Inquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex (London: Cadell, 1797) 263.

conventional and unorthodox, according to how one looks at him or her, certainly contributes to the charm of the novel: through it, Bage manages to violate readers' expectations without alienating his audience, because he makes sure that the violation occurs on only one level of the narrative and is counteracted on another. J.M.S. Tompkins suggests that Bage's books were full of "shocks for the conventional" anyway, because of innovations such as "Militant Clarissas [who] defend themselves with sarcastic and resolved vigour" (202), but those shocks were certainly not as extreme as they could have been if Beatrice, as well as Clarissa, did not stand behind young women such as Miss Fluart. The simple fact that one can trace such direct forerunners of the characters indicates that Bage's challenge to the literary status quo is far from being as extensive as is his attack on the established social order.

As one recognizes the priority given to political and social issues in the novel, however, one must also account for an oddity in the book's reception. An explicit attack on the social status quo, Hermsprong belongs among a group of radical novels published in the last decade of the eighteenth century. Yet unlike other radical novels of that era, such as Mary Hay's Emma Courtney, Wollstonecraft's Mary, or Godwin's St. Leon, Hermsprong did not provoke furious responses from those opposed to all or part of the novelists' agenda. On the contrary, Bage's books in general, and Hermsprong in particular, received generous reviews. Even

the conservative British Critic, though disapproving of the "pernicious" principles, admired the novel as a whole and singled out the "sprightly and most agreeable Miss Fluart" for particular praise.<sup>11</sup> The Critical Review, less troubled by Bage's philosophy, went so far as to claim that a reader might well grow "wiser and better by a perusal of this work."<sup>12</sup> The only negative comment on Hermesprong published during Bage's lifetime is in a brief note to a review of St. Leon, which appeared, predictably enough, in the Anti-jacobin Review (August, 1800). Not until the book was reissued--in a bowdlerized version--in the reactionary England of 1824, do critics start making uneasy apologies for his licentiousness and unconventionality. Tompkins suggests, plausibly enough, that Bage's surprisingly favourable reception owes more to the flaws of his competitors than to his own merits (194).<sup>13</sup> Even so, given the importance attached to the moral qualities of novels at the time, an importance which Tompkins herself

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<sup>11</sup>The British Critic 7 (1796) 430.

<sup>12</sup>The Critical Review, second series, 23 (1798), 234. Mary Wollstonecraft also reviewed Hermesprong very favourably, but given Bage's sympathy with her politics, this is not particularly surprising.

<sup>13</sup>The two reviews immediately following Hermesprong in the Critical Review suggest the quality of the reception of the more typical novel of the day: "Geraldine, a Novel founded on a recent Event: We are sorry that any person could be so destitute of delicacy as to make the event to which the title alludes the subject of a novel. There must have been an equal want of genius, or the author would not have produced a piece which has so little merit. Laura, or the Orphan. A Novel. By Mrs. Burton: A rapid succession of improbabilities."



stresses,<sup>14</sup> it is clear that early reviewers could not have found Bage's radical perspective particularly offensive. In the eyes of eighteenth-century reviewers, an amusing plot was no excuse for a corrupt moral.

The major difference between Bage's work and that of his fellow radicals lies of course in the book's wit. Hermesprong's disarming comedy in fact seems to be achieving precisely the end feared by writers such as Collier: making what they would consider to be a dangerous principle appealing because it is presented in an amusing manner. Bage, it would seem, makes comedy a very effective weapon in his war against political reaction. This point is complicated, however, by the novel's questioning of not only aristocratic privilege but also literary convention. As suggested earlier, the amusement created by questioning literary structure at times seems to soften or undercut radical political statements. The construction of the novel as a whole mirrors the practice of both Glen and Hermesprong as they question conventions even while charming an audience by fulfilling its expectations and employing them. As Bage uses comedy to make his politics more palatable, he risks distorting his message by inextricably confusing his starkly didactic political argument and his far more playful commentary on literary practices.

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<sup>14</sup>See, in particular, chapter III of The Popular Novel in England.

The point of these observations is certainly not to imply that Hernspong has a reactionary subtext or even that Bage was too nervous or too confused to be consistent in his pro-feminist, pro-democratic, and anti-aristocratic stance. After all, what one remembers after reading the novel is not Hernspong's inconsistencies and qualifications but his and Miss Fluart's delightfully bold refusal to play the conventional roles of hero and heroine which the plot forces them into. Moreover, these inconsistencies cut both ways. Miss Campinet, who is in most respects a very proper and orthodox heroine, displays a most unorthodox taste in reading when she alludes to Mary Wollstonecraft in her criticism of Hernspong's flattery. The unorthodox hero's deviation from his radical principles is balanced by the very conventional heroine's quiet adherence to at least some of them. Bage may in fact have made his point about the value of these ideas slightly more convincing for his original readers by demonstrating that a man who believes in them does not necessarily have to be rude or uncouth nor a woman who observes them an unprincipled hoyden. One could even argue that by showing the limits of his hero's radicalism and his heroine's orthodoxy, Bage is undermining the convention of purity of action and purpose so dear to polemical writers of all political persuasions. In doing so, of course, he does no more than any author whose work rises above caricature,

but since Bage himself has been accused of creating nothing more than caricature, the point is worth making.<sup>15</sup>

Yet even if Bage is not being hopelessly self-contradictory in his examination of conventional standards and practices, one must remember that, as both Glen and Hermsprong inadvertently demonstrate, questioning the limitations imposed by an existing structure--social or literary--is a very different matter from escaping them. In fact, such questioning might merely involve recognizing the extent to which one is rule-bound. This point becomes particularly evident at the conclusion of the novel, which most critics have found a resounding disappointment. Butler is representative when she dismisses it as a retreat into "the worst manner of conventional plotting" (Jane Austen and the War of Ideas 84). Instead of discarding the existing social order entirely--perhaps by having the courage to let Hermsprong remain a nameless wanderer and still marry a baron's daughter, as Butler suggests, or perhaps by setting up the vaguely pantisocratic society which Hermsprong proposes near the end of the novel--Bage makes his democratic-minded hero turn out to be none other than Sir Charles Campinet, Lord Grondale's long-lost nephew and the rightful owner of all of the baron's land. Even with Glen's insistence that Sir Charles is a model landlord, the

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<sup>15</sup>See Foster, 239, and Harrison R. Steeves, Before Jane Austen (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1965) 289.

political orthodoxy involved in making the jacobin Hermsprong turn out to be a member of the landed gentry is discomfiting.

The literary conventionality of the ending is even more marked than the political. The deathbed repentance of Lord Grondale, the revelation of Hermsprong's identity, and the happily-ever after life at Grondale Hall are part of a fairy-tale ending which undercuts at least some of what is argued in the book about social relations. For example, even as romantic love is being criticized by Miss Fluart's acerbic refusal to marry and "buy herself a master," the concluding image of Miss Campinet being led to the altar "dressed in love and innocence" and "a white polonese" (247-48) affirms precisely what Miss Fluart is so amusingly denying.<sup>16</sup> Glen's self-conscious mockery of conventional fiction does not change the fact that that is, on the most basic level, precisely what he is offering his audience. His claim that he "live[s] but to love and oblige these charming critics [female readers]...and give them all the satisfaction I can" (246) is obviously meant to be read ironically, but there is

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<sup>16</sup>The delayed revelation that Miss Campinet and Hermsprong are first cousins reinforces the too-neatly coincidental nature of the conclusion and further undermines the radical argument made throughout. While the fresh perspective offered by Hermsprong might initially seem to represent an attempt to revitalize a moribund class from outside, the endogamous marriage in fact implies how tightly closed that class is. Even change must come from those born within its ranks. One can compare the notoriously troublesome conclusion of Mansfield Park, in which actual outsiders, the Crawfords, are firmly rejected and the infusion of "new" blood comes from Fanny, like Hermsprong a cousin of the family that she marries into and revitalizes.

a measure of literal truth in it as well. However much Glen laughs at these readers, his audience, female or otherwise, determines the shape of his story from beginning to end. It is his editor--a reader, speaking for other readers--who initially halts Glen in the middle of his character sketches and starts him on the plot. By the end of the story, Glen no longer needs any such external pressures and is able to decide for himself that it is necessary for him to provide a fittingly happy ending, since readers do not like being left "at liberty to suppose which [they] please" (248). Boasts that he is free from any dependence upon convention have been replaced by an ironic admission that he must indeed draw upon them. Twentieth-century critics might be disappointed, but as Glen protests, he has little choice in the matter.

The extreme conventionality of the ending and recent disappointment with it is--at least in part--a reflection of the difficulty of Bage's project. Writing a novel which questions and subverts conventional attitudes about both literature and politics even while it continues to employ a conventional frame requires, as Glen claims, a great deal of careful balancing if the author and the reader are indeed "to part friends." Inevitably, Bage makes some compromises in his work, and to a certain extent he must sacrifice his radicalism to the demands of his comic plot. Glen's ongoing mockery of audience expectations saves the ending from turning into an abject retreat, but no amount of self-consciousness about following conventions can change the fact

that they are conventional. It is important to reiterate that Hernsprong is neither hypocritical nor the work of a closet conservative, but there are nonetheless some problems with methodology which Bage does not seem to be entirely successful in working out. Yet it is probably inevitable that the radicalism of a text which exists within a conventional framework would be more or less compromised. Some such compromise was perhaps unavoidable in any case if a radical work published at that time were to be disseminated at all. Lord Grondale's assumption that he can successfully prosecute Hernsprong for the possession of The Rights of Man is wishful thinking, but it does suggest an awareness on Bage's part of the very real possibility that extreme radicalism on all levels of his novel might simply result in a writer's being censored and his ideas unheard. Given that some toning down was quite probably necessary, the muting of the radical politics through the conventional comic frame--and in particular, the conclusion--probably resulted in less distortion than the recantations employed by some other radical writers.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>One can contrast Hernsprong's compromises with those in Elizabeth Inchbald's A Simple Story (1791) to illustrate this point. Inchbald's witty, unconventional heroine, Miss Milner, anticipates Miss Fluart in her charm and freedom of manner. Yet Miss Milner's charm leads her to sexual misconduct, shame, and premature death. The second part of the novel then atones for her unconventionality through the pattern-perfect behaviour of her daughter, a model of feminine discretion. Kelly has argued very persuasively that the parallels between the two halves of the novel are far too carefully developed to permit a reading which sees the second half as a simple recantation of the first (The English

In Hermesprong, one can see the problems involved in employing a complex structure of the kind that Bage does, one which attempts to persuade its readers of a particular point even while amusing them by self-consciously calling attention to the novel's structuring conventions. The critical unhappiness with the ending is probably an indication that it is impossible for the novel to remain entirely true to its subversive intent. Certainly, the happy ending is an almost inescapable trap in a comic novel which sets out to examine conventions; as Bage observes, failure to provide one alienates rather than amuses readers. More importantly, comedy by definition requires a happy ending--despite the eighteenth-century vogue for *comédie larmoyante*, an unhappy comedy is an oxymoron--and so attempts to subvert the conventions which demand that happy ending might, quite possibly, mean abandoning comedy altogether. Yet even had he chosen to break with the whole movement of his novel by not providing a comic ending, Bage still would have been hard pressed to avoid a conventional conclusion; as mentioned earlier, one of the literary forms to which he was indebted is the minor but popular Enlightenment genre of the philosophical debate.<sup>18</sup> Had Bage chosen the obvious alternative to the conclusion as it stands and shown

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Jacobin Novel 88-91) but nonetheless, one is left with the impression of a far more subdued radicalism in A Simple Story than in Hermesprong.

<sup>18</sup>In particular, almost all of Bage's critics have pointed out close parallels between Hermesprong and Voltaire's philosophical fable L'Ingénue.

Hernsprong defeated by the artificial civilization that he rejects, he would merely have been following the pattern of another, related genre, not necessarily examining the conventions of his own.

The difficulties of closing an exploration of comic conventions are very real; Bage is not alone among the comic writers of his era in having trouble concluding his work. Don Juan is unfinished and probably unfinishable; even the much slighter Beppo stops rather than concludes. Similarly, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell ends only with a promise of more of the same sort of writing to follow. Even Mansfield Park, undoubtedly a far greater piece of writing than Hernsprong, exhibits similar tensions in its conclusion. These writers were well aware of the problems they faced in concluding a work which questions conventional patterns of fiction. Maria Edgeworth's Belinda, a novel which is extremely critical of behaviour taught by popular writing, ends with a gracefully witty debate among the characters themselves about how their story should end:

"I hope you will remember, dear Lady Delacour," said Belinda, "that there is nothing in which novelists are so apt to err as in hurrying things toward the conclusion; in not allowing *time* for that change of feeling, which change of situation cannot instantly produce."

"That's right, my dear Belinda; true to your principles to the last gasp. Fear nothing--you shall have *time* enough to become accustomed to Clarence. Would you choose that I should draw out the story to



five volumes more? With your advice and assistance, I can with the greatest ease...there may be blushes, and sighs, and doubts, and fears, and misunderstandings without end or common sense....[but] I might conclude the business in two lines."<sup>19</sup>

In fact, the novel ends on the next page, as Lady Delacour stage-manages a tableau of the characters, drawing upon almost every imaginable cliché of popular fiction in the process--hands clasped in joy, a young couple kneeling for a blessing, a feuding husband and wife embracing to mark their reconciliation, and so forth.

Belinda's concerns about literary conventions focus mainly on the effects that literature has on readers who are not able to distinguish fact from fiction. The central complication separating the hero and heroine is that the hero, taking his Rousseau a little too seriously, has raised and educated a beautiful orphan to be his wife.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, the secondary heroine, Lady Delacour, models herself on the figure of the brittle, witty Restoration belle and nearly loses both health and happiness by foregoing common sense. Belinda is thus in part at least a criticism of foolish readers; Edgeworth looks more closely at conventions themselves, as opposed to readers' reactions to those

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<sup>19</sup>Maria Edgeworth, Belinda (London: Pandora Press, 1986) 432.

<sup>20</sup>Admittedly, Edgeworth was probably not drawing entirely from literature in her treatment of Clarence's predicament. Her father's good friend Thomas Day had raised two orphans, planning to marry the more tractable. Like Clarence, he was far from satisfied with the results and married neither.

conventions, in her much briefer but better-known Castle Rackrent. In it, she examines and subverts conventions of her genre in much the same manner as Bage does in Hermesprong.

Edgeworth's main device for questioning conventions is, as in Hermesprong, the use of a framing narrative voice which sets the scene and then withdraws. In Castle Rackrent, Edgeworth's framing voice, that of the "Editor," speaks only in the introduction and the notes, leaving the main narrative entirely to Thady Quirk, a garrulous Irish peasant. The novella is known mainly for Thady's blindly loyal account of his feckless--or downright criminal--masters; the introductory editorial commentary tends to be overlooked or treated as a straightforward, reliable commentary on the main narrative. Very few readers have observed that the Editor's narrative is unstable in much the same manner as Thady's, perhaps because until quite recently Castle Rackrent has tended to receive enthusiastically uncritical readings which implicitly deny that Edgeworth was using conscious thought, much less deliberate irony. P.H. Newby, for example, informs us that Castle Rackrent is "a joy to read because it was written in a spirit of unreflecting pleasure."<sup>21</sup> James Newcomer goes even farther, gushing that "[Castle Rackrent] has the value of the coin newly minted out of the pure ore. It has the richness of economy only possible to the well-

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<sup>21</sup>P.H. Newby, Maria Edgeworth (London: Arthur Barker Ltd, 1980) 43.

endowed. It mines veins not before explored."<sup>22</sup> Admittedly, these discussions of Castle Rackrent are in critical biographies of Edgeworth, not in scholarly studies of her writing, but there are only a few critics who have challenged these appreciative but uncritical readings with more scholarly ones. Even the few serious critical readings of Castle Rackrent tend to be handicapped by a misreading or oversimplification of the novella's sophisticated use of limited point-of-view in both the main narrative and the framing commentary. One can see this problem most clearly by looking at Gilbert and Gubar's reading of Castle Rackrent. Predictably enough, they see the novella as a covert attack on the patriarchy, in which Thady's praise of the Rackrents is sharply undercut by his obliviousness to the damagingly patriarchal assumptions of the family and the social system which produced them. They are correct in pointing out that Thady's point of view is obviously and ludicrously biased, but in seeing only a single, relatively simple point to be drawn from his narrative, their reading drastically oversimplifies the text. For one thing, it requires them to focus on the imprisonment of Sir Kit's wife to the almost complete exclusion of every other incident in the novel. Even more damagingly, to support their thesis they distort Thady's role from that of the loyal retainer to that of the clever servant who displaces his masters. Far from

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<sup>22</sup>James Newcomer, Maria Edgeworth (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1973)

"manag[ing] to get the big house"<sup>23</sup> when his son Jason buys out Sir Condry, Thady is clearly heartbroken by what he regards as Jason's treachery and chooses to follow Sir Condry into exile in his lodge. Moreover, Jason, whom they uphold as an opponent to the patriarchal order of the gentry, is the villain of the piece, resented by Thady, the Rackrents, and the tenants alike--hardly a satisfactory figure to turn into a subversive hero.

It is easy to see how Gilbert and Gubar went wrong in their discussion of Castle Rackrent; Thady is so obviously at odds with the reader in his estimation of the Rackrents that it is tempting to assume that one can uncover the book's "meaning" simply by reversing what he says and seeing his ostensible praise as craftily disguised criticism. Doing so is particularly tempting because it is exactly what Edgeworth's Editor encourages us to do. Thady, the Editor tells us, is an ideal narrator because we can "see and despise [his] vulgar errors" (3) in judging the Rackrents, a statement which ought to give us a tip that the Editor himself is not entirely the clear, rational thinker that he believes himself to be. To use a limited narrator *despite* his limitations is a common enough device; to use him *because* of them is a little odd, despite the Editor's lengthy attempt to explain away this oddity:

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<sup>23</sup>Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979) 151

Some may perhaps imagine, that the value of biography depends upon the judgment and taste of the biographer; but on the contrary it may be maintained, that the merits of a biographer are inversely as the extent of his intellectual powers and of his literary talents. A plain unvarnished tale is preferable to the most highly ornamented narrative. Where we see that a man has the power, we naturally suspect that he has the will to deceive us, and those who are used to literary manufacture know how much is often sacrificed to the rounding of a period or the pointing an antithesis.<sup>24</sup>

Interestingly enough, in telling us to question Thady's narrative, the Editor encourages us to suspect his own. Clearly, he has the power to deceive us through his nicely rounded and carefully pointed sentences; by his own standards, we are encouraged to suspect the will.

One of the problems in most criticism of Castle Rackrent is that it treats the Editor as a straightforward stand-in for Edgeworth. Yet if we read his voice as Edgeworth's, then Thady's tale becomes little more than an amusing but simplistic joke at the expense of both the naïve Irish peasantry and their feckless masters. Admittedly, there are connections between Edgeworth and her Editor which make it tempting to read the book in this unambiguous manner. We know that the Editor is from the well-educated class of Anglo-Irish landowners, the class to which Edgeworth herself belonged; he reveals his social standing as he casually drops

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<sup>24</sup>Maria Edgeworth, Castle Rackrent, ed. George Watson (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980) 2-3. All further citations will be from this edition.

references to his acquaintances among the justices of the peace and other such "learned friends." We also learn that he has some decidedly English tastes. Even though he admires his countrymen for their good-nature and shrewdness, he also condescends to them, hinting that he finds them rather backward compared to the English--who are, of course, his intended audience.<sup>25</sup> Also, like Edgeworth, he has antiquarian interests, as we learn from his decision to provide us with notes full of extended descriptions of Irish customs and beliefs. The only obvious difference between Edgeworth and her editor is that of sex. I have used the pronoun "he" deliberately, since Edgeworth is clearly creating a male persona. Not only does she use the masculine pronoun herself in the footnotes; in addition, she gives deliberately misleading information in the notes. The Editor is able to provide information about "a raking pot of tea," for example, only because "now and then it has happened that some of the male species, who were either more audacious or more highly favored than the rest of their sex, have been admitted by stealth to these orgies" (112). Similarly, all the legal references in the notes strongly imply a masculine voice, since Edgeworth's society did not permit women to study for the profession.

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<sup>25</sup>In his brief afterword, the Editor says directly that "He lays [his tale] before the English reader as a specimen of manners and characters which are perhaps unknown in England."

Despite these similarities, it would be a serious mistake to read the Editor as a very slightly disguised version of Edgeworth. Precisely because we know so much about him and can deduce his particular interests and biases, we must treat him as a character rather than as the masked but nonetheless omniscient voice of the author. His limitations are inscribed in the text of the novella in a way that the author's are not, and as one recognizes these limitations, one begins to shift from a straightforward reading of the text's comedy to one complicated by a new and slightly skewed perspective on the story that Thady tells. The Editor's subtle flattery of his English audience, as he quietly reassures them that they are indeed superior to the charming but feckless Irish, is merely one among many indications of his lack of objective reliability in the brief introduction. Instead of taking his information about the text as a clear guide as to how to read it, one must evaluate his comments at least as carefully as Thady's, and perhaps even more carefully, since his biases are far from being as readily evident as the old steward's.

Edgeworth uses this destabilization of the Editor's voice and the resulting clash between the assumptions of the introductory material and those of the main narrative to call attention to the ways in which the Editor, in his attempts to guide the reader, reveals his own inconsistencies and self-contradictions. Like Glen, though in a somewhat less explicit manner, Edgeworth's Editor claims to be above any

reliance upon literary convention. His characters are drawn from life, he brags, as opposed, presumably, to being based on literary models. In fact, he claims that they are so idiosyncratic that,

[although] Those who were acquainted with the manners of a certain class of the gentry of Ireland some years ago, will want no evidence of the truth of honest Thady's narrative: to those who are totally unacquainted with Ireland, the following Memoirs will perhaps be scarcely intelligible. (4)

Despite this claim, it is very unlikely that readers will be bewildered by anything other than one or two peculiarities of dialect. The characters are familiar types disguised beneath a veneer of Irish eccentricity--which is of course a stereotype in itself. The Editor even implies, in a direct contradiction of his boasts of originality, that part of Thady's effectiveness as a narrator lies in the fact that his audience will have had previous literary experience with characters of his type. Readers "often," he informs us, "judiciously countenance [narratives by] those...without sagacity to discriminate character, without elegance of style to relieve the tediousness of narrative, without enlargement of mind to draw any conclusions from the facts they relate" (3). The figure of the garrulous but loyal servant was certainly popular and familiar in the comedy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. One might recall Fielding's Partridge, Smollett's Strap and Win Jenkins, or,



after Edgeworth, Collins' Gabriel Betteridge. One cannot take such parallels too far, but Thady's stubborn loyalty to his masters is made more plausible, even if not necessarily more reasonable, by the long literary tradition of devoted servants.

Admittedly, the Editor might seem to gain some support for his claims of unconventionality from the reactions of Edgeworth's original readers. Her contemporaries praised her very specifically for her innovations, as one can see from looking at testimony such as Scott's postscript to Waverley. Yet it was not the innovation alone which readers such as Scott enjoyed; to be more accurate, they admired the ways in which Edgeworth gave a new twist to a familiar theme. Scott makes this point very clearly when he praises Edgeworth's "admirable Irish portraits" which are "so different from the Teagues and 'dear joys' who so long...occupied the drama and the novel."<sup>26</sup> He admires Edgeworth for her ability to bring new life to stock figures, rather than for her development of a completely new form of literature. At least part of Scott's enjoyment seems to arise from contrasting Edgeworth's Irish with his past experiences with the more obviously stereotypical "Teagues and 'dear joys.'"

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<sup>26</sup>Butler argues convincingly that Scott was thinking primarily of The Absentee when he made this comment (Maria Edgeworth 394), but it seems unlikely that he would have meant to exclude Castle Rackrent entirely from such a judgement.

This reworking of Irish stereotypes is the most obvious of Edgeworth's innovations upon conventional forms, even though it may not seem particularly striking to a twentieth-century reader. Generations of imitators have made Edgeworth's Irish seem no less clichéd than figures such as Sheridan's Sir Lucius O'Trigger and Farquhar's Foigard must have seemed to Scott. It is only by looking at the typical stage Irishman of the eighteenth century--a blustering coward with a thick accent, an exaggerated sense of his own worth and an underdeveloped sense of morality--that we can appreciate the degree of Edgeworth's shift within the conventional form.<sup>27</sup> Her Irish are no less feckless than those of her forerunners, but they are presented with considerably more individuality and charm. In particular, Sir Condy's charm wins him sympathy from the reader despite his drinking, gambling, and general self-destructiveness. Sir Kit and Sir Murtagh are less likely to impress an audience, but even they are less completely contemptible--

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<sup>27</sup>A piece in The Wit's Magazine titled "Letter from an Irish Gentlewoman to her son in London" employs many popular anti-Irish clichés, including peculiarities of dialect, faulty logic, greed, and general folly: "[your sister was] violently ill of a fit of sickness, and is dead; therefore we have small or no hopes of her gitting bitter. Your dear modther constantly prayed for a long and speedy recovery...I have made a prisent of your sister's diamond-ring to Mr. O'Hara, the great small-beer brewer, for three guineas....Dirict for me nixt door to the Bible and Moon, in Copper Alley, Dublin, for there I am now; but I shall remove tomorrow....P.S. I did not sale this litter, to prevint it from being broke open; therefore sind word if it miscarries. Your cousin-in-law Thady O'Dogherty is gone for a light-horseman among the marines" (Vol. I, 149).

because they are more interesting--than caricatures such as Foigard. The effect is obvious. Edgeworth amuses her English readers by drawing upon their expectations of Irish behaviour and to a certain extent fulfilling them, yet at the same time, she elicits sympathy for her Irish characters rather than the simple contempt for and derisive laughter at them invited by writers such as Farquhar. Butler agrees that "it is impossible not to sympathize with Sir Condry" (Maria Edgeworth, 358), even though she sees that sympathy as a flaw which sets the second half of the book at odds with the first. While she is undoubtedly correct in arguing that the treatment of Sir Condry changes the tone of the novel, that change itself fits in nicely with the increasing fullness and sympathy with which the successive squires are treated.<sup>28</sup> The question of artistic unity that Butler raises might in any case be subservient to that of the political messages conveyed by our rather unlikely sympathy for these flawed characters. Whatever reservations one might have about Edgeworth's Irish, at least in them one can see an attempt to take characterization beyond the caricature which had often previously sufficed to denote Irishness.

There are a number of other conventions which Edgeworth draws upon but which the Editor refuses to acknowledge

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<sup>28</sup>The first squire, Sir Tallyhoo, is dismissed in two sentences; Sir Patrick gets two pages. Sir Kit occupies the bulk of the first half of the book, getting about twice as much space as Sir Patrick and Sir Murtagh combined, while Sir Condry gets all of the second half.

explicitly; perhaps the most important of them is that of the bluff and hearty country squire. The Editor might believe the Rackrents to be peculiarly Irish in most of their values and vices, but they actually have a number of very English and very literary models. The Editor rather disingenuously suggests these links with familiar English types when, emphasizing that his story is set in the past, he claims that his Sir Kit and Sir Condy "could no more be met with at present in Ireland, than Squire Western or Parson Trulliber in England" (5). As this comparison hints, the Rackrents are in some ways strikingly similar to figures whom English readers have encountered many times before in comedy; their foreignness is built upon a base of familiarity. By deliberately linking her hard-drinking, gambling squires with Fielding's, Edgeworth once again suggests that despite the Editor's boasts of truth to life and freedom from convention, her characters are indebted to stock figures from earlier literature. The joke is double-edged. Instead of laughing simply at Thady's inadequate judgement and naïve charm, we are also invited to laugh at the Editor's blindly smug prejudices which prevent him from seeing his own tangled logic. By evoking comparisons with Squire Western and his ilk, the Editor is implicitly admitting that the Irish squires are not necessarily a species completely apart from the English.<sup>29</sup> Admittedly, the Englishmen to whom he

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<sup>29</sup>In light of this idea, it is interesting to note that Oxford Press uses Rowlandson's Hunt Supper--a satire on

compares the Rackrents are far from the most admirable of their countrymen, but that may be part of Edgeworth's joke. Her Editor's glib comment that Sir Kit and Sir Condy are no more to be found now in Ireland than Squire Western is in contemporary England cuts two ways. Besides the obvious meaning, there is an implication that as there undoubtedly still are drunken, belligerent men in England, the Irish should not be singled out for particular abuse. By making her version of the bluff squire who was so popular in English comedy an Irishman, Edgeworth hints not only that perhaps the Irish may be the victims of exaggeration and cliché as much as are country gentlemen stereotyped by the Squire Western image, but also that the Irish have no monopoly on drunken boorishness.

Edgeworth's Editor is thus even less aware of his dependence upon familiar literary formulas than is Glen; moreover, he seems completely oblivious to the ways in which the implications of his story undercut many of the arguments that he is making. The extent of his insensitivity to the material at hand is most clearly revealed not by contradictions within his own commentary however, but in the vast gap between his and Thady's understanding of the story being told. The Editor expects Thady's tale will amuse because of its quirky Irishness--and, as suggested earlier, the oddities of the Irish were almost automatically

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*English* squires--for the cover of its paperback edition of Castle Rackrent.

considered to be funny.<sup>30</sup> Yet Thady himself does not intend to entertain. In his view, his story is a serious, even tragic, account of the fall of a dynasty, a tragedy to which he is a sympathetic but helpless onlooker.<sup>31</sup> The events are certainly grim enough out of context: alcoholism, accidental death, extortion, marital cruelty, and an inexorable slide into poverty. While the Editor sees the negative side of the Rackrents' story very clearly, he remains undisturbed by their self-destructiveness, merely commenting that the family's extinction will contribute to the "amelioration of this country [Ireland]" (97). Unlike Thady, he seems to have no sense of tragedy in the bleak story recounted. The discerning reader, he implies, will see through Thady's account of the fall of a noble family, correctly perceiving, as does the Editor, that it is in fact a story of the comic comeuppance of a parcel of rascals. Drawn into his perspective by his seeming reasonableness and by our own conventionally-shaped expectations of Irish tales, readers are, at least initially, likely to agree with the Editor and simply be amused by Thady's story.

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<sup>30</sup>In the "Letter from an Irish Gentlewoman..." cited earlier, it is worth noticing that a large part of the "comedy" arises from a very unfunny incident---the death of the narrator's daughter.

<sup>31</sup>George Watson claims that this technique of using a narrator who is an onlooker to the story he tells is "impossible to parallel in English before 1800" (Introduction to Castle Rackrent, xvi). As shown above, however, this is precisely the technique which Bage employs in Hernsprong.

Yet reading Castle Rackrent does not involve a simple process of looking at the novella and choosing one story over another, as would happen if the Editor were omniscient and reliable. The choice between the two perspectives is complicated by the fact that the Editor not only gives conflicting motives for telling his story, but also calls into question his ability to fulfill either of these motives, as he unconsciously reveals his own limitations. While Thady's reasons for telling his story are obvious-- "his feelings for '*the honor of the family* '...prevailed over his habitual laziness" (4, Edgeworth's italics)--the Editor's are not quite so clear. On the one hand, he says that he wants to illustrate for his English readers "that mixture of quickness, simplicity, cunning, carelessness, dissipation, disinterestedness, shrewdness and blunder" (97) which he believes characterizes the Irish. On the other, he stresses throughout the book "that the manners depicted in the following pages are not those of the present age" (4). Despite his cool assumption of objectivity and control, the Editor seems rather unsure of whether to present Thady's story as a means of introducing the English to their Irish neighbours or as a historical curiosity. The result is a considerable degree of uncertainty about what exactly is going on in the book, uncertainty which one can begin to resolve only by imagining possible audience responses. The Editor, it seems, is carefully hedging his bets: if the English find Thady's tale appealing, then it is an account of

Irish manners. On the other hand, if the Irish find it offensive, then it is a historical record of their ancestors, with no bearing on their lives. The delicacy of this balance between two purposes is best revealed in the footnotes to the main text, in which the Editor repeatedly asserts that the Irish *used* to behave in a particular manner or that a given custom was *formerly* observed. (See pp. 18, 20, 53, 103, for example). The words themselves suggest that the Editor is merely giving historical information, but the italics make the ostensible claim that he is discussing the past more than a little suspect, simply because it is being stressed so heavily. The Editor encourages us not to trust Thady's version of events--which we would not even if the story were unframed--but his own uncertainty about how to respond to it complicates our reading. Since the Editor is not quite sure whether we should learn about the Irish from observing Thady's odd manners, or laugh at his and his masters' behaviour as a historical curiosity, or do both, neither are we. As a result, we are left with a story which bewilders as much as it charms and delights. Several critics have responded to this ambiguity. Emily Lawless, Edgeworth's first twentieth-century biographer, took issue with admiring readers in 1904 and asserted that Castle Rackrent is not the charming moral tale about the fall of a degenerate family which the Editor at some points claims it to be. Instead,



she argues that it is a completely amoral story which undermines any attempts to impose values upon it.<sup>32</sup> Lawless does not analyse the way in which Edgeworth achieves this effect; in fact, she seems to disapprove of it. Yet unlike literal-minded readers who see the Editor's overt proclamations at the beginning and end of the novella as absolute guides to approaching Thady's tale, Lawless does seem to recognize the shakiness of his hold over the material.

One simply cannot make a straightforward morality tale out of Castle Rackrent, no matter how subversive the moral one chooses. Even Butler, who presents a very convincing argument that the novella makes a plea for sympathy with the richness of Irish culture and individuality in the face of forced union with England, has to qualify this opinion considerably. As it stands, she says, the novel bears traces of the entertainment that it began as; its serious purposes were grafted on to the final version, not altogether successfully. Butler may well be correct in her account of the genesis of Castle Rackrent, but her analysis of the structure of the novella does not explain why the book has attracted and continues to attract such admiration despite its manifest structural flaws. Certainly, readers such as Newcomer and Newby do not find that the awkward plea for

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<sup>32</sup>Emily Lawless, Maria Edgeworth, (London: Macmillan & Co., 1904) 87.

sympathy with the Irish interferes with their enjoyment of the novel.

As with Hermesprong, it is Castle Rackrent's comic charm which seems to save it from hopelessly alienating or bewildering its audience. And, as the testimony of readers from Scott to Newcomer and Newby suggests, that charm is powerful indeed. Yet it is precisely through this successful attempt to delight an audience that Edgeworth hopelessly confuses her attempt to instruct it. The Editor's complete lack of awareness of the ways in which his reading of Thady's story is shaped by literary stereotypes enables Edgeworth to make some shrewdly amusing points about the limitations imposed by blindly following such conventions. Yet his lack of self-awareness also impairs the effectiveness of the novel as either a history lesson or a social commentary. The Editor's confusion about his motives begins to undermine his credibility as an instructor; his inability to recognize his own limitations as a reader of the story that he is framing erodes that credibility a great deal farther. Edgeworth's displacement of any uncertainty about the direction the narrative is taking onto her Editor is a clever ploy; it makes her hesitancy about the nature of the main text appear to be irony on the author's part, directed against the rather smug Editor, rather than an indication of lack of control of her own material.<sup>33</sup> Yet by shaking confidence in the Editor

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<sup>33</sup>The uncertainty about whether the novel is a history lesson or a contemporary social comedy does in fact seem to

and making readers laugh at him, Edgeworth inevitably shakes confidence in the message that he is attempting to impart as well. O. Elizabeth McWhorter Harden has commented on the duality of the characters in Castle Rackrent; they are, she says, figures used to make either an historical or an artistic point, according to the perspective from which one studies them.<sup>34</sup> One could say the same of the novel as a whole, as it exhibits a similar dualism in the gap between its experimentation with comic form and its presentation of an historical or sociological lesson.

Like Hermesprong, Castle Rackrent remains, to a certain extent, trapped by a dependence upon the conventions which it is mocking. While Edgeworth does not depend upon established plot structure nearly as extensively as Bage does, she charms and amuses her readers by drawing upon the familiar Irish stereotypes that the novel attempts to discredit, much as Bage draws upon familiar plots. The two novels are also similar in that their examinations of literary convention remain secondary to their attempts to make a particular didactic point. Bage is writing social criticism; Edgeworth is examining Irish manners, whether one chooses to see that examination as satirical or sympathetic. The result is novels which are clever and amusing, but which nonetheless seem to pull in two different directions. As they mock and

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originate with Edgeworth's own confusion about what she was attempting to do. See Butler, Maria Edgeworth 359-60.

<sup>34</sup>Maria Edgeworth's Art of Prose Fiction (The Hague: Mouton, 1971) 48.

draw our attention to the artificiality of the conventions by which we construct meaning from literature, they simultaneously attempt to impose meanings of their own, undercutting their messages as they reveal the limitations of their methodologies. In neither case is the reader offered a sustained critique of or alternative to the conventions being subverted; play with them remains on the level of a literary joke designed to amuse an audience while it is being offered instruction on another level of the novel.

Whatever the problems with structure in these two novels, however, they provide a very useful introduction to the more radically subversive comedy of this era. Both narrators attempt, not unreasonably, to combine instruction and "delight." Yet they are defeated, at least in part, by their self-consciousness about their medium. One of the major techniques by which they attempt to delight is by displaying their awareness of the artificial and arbitrary nature of their generic structure, but as they do so, they interfere with the clarity of their instruction. As the example of these two novels should suggest, questioning established patterns of comedy involves foregoing at least some of its established ends.

### Chapter Three

#### The Insufficiency of Genre: Lamb, Byron, and the Limits of Self-Consciousness

As the narrators in the novels discussed in the previous chapter attempt to instruct their audience, they also reveal their own sense of superiority to the average reader. Glen mocks what he presumes to be the naïve audience of most fiction throughout his narrative, suggesting that it is formed by passive consumers so thoroughly moulded by their previous experience with literature that they are incapable of accepting writing which does not fit their conventionally-shaped expectations. While flattering his own readers with the tacit assumption that they, like him, are sophisticated enough to see through these conventions, he nonetheless attempts to create a gulf between himself, the creator of literature, and the audience which enjoys it. Similarly, Edgeworth's editor flatters his audience by creating an image of them and him as cultivated critics rather than simple, passive consumers. He and like-minded people do not merely read and absorb, he suggests in his preface, they sift and weigh the material in front of them to arrive at a "just estimate" of its truth. The implicit assumption made by the narrator in both of these novels is that he can somehow remain detached from the literary culture which forms the context of the work, laughing at it without being shaped by it. Other comic writers of the Romantic period seem less

optimistic about the possibility of critiquing their genres without being caught by the rules of the system that they are examining. The narrators of a number of early nineteenth-century works recognize, either implicitly or explicitly, that they are readers too, consumers as well as creators of literary "meaning," and as such are implicated in the system that they are trying to examine and criticize. The result is writing in which, unlike Hermesprong or Castle Rackrent, readers are confronted by narrators who are also readers and who, as such, are unable to assume an objective stance on their material. Shaped by other literature, they seem far more wary than either Glen or Edgeworth's editor about trying to manipulate their medium either to instruct an audience or to formulate an objective criticism of its conventions.

This concept of the narrator as a reader whose narrative is shaped and limited by his own previous experience with literature can be illustrated briefly by turning to a work which is not particularly comic--William Hazlitt's bitterly, blackly self-parodic Liber Amoris. This work, which is partly essay and partly fiction, is ostensibly a simple tale about a love affair that goes badly awry. Its main source of interest lies not in the plot, however, but in the narrator's complete inability to understand his love affair except in terms of fictional patterns. He falls in love almost literally by the book, misreading his infatuation with a coquette as an example of the ever-popular story of the innately noble working class girl beloved by a gentleman

perceptive enough to strip away class prejudices and discern her true worth.<sup>1</sup> The bitter joke is that while the narrator seems to be oblivious to the fact that he is casting himself as the hero of an almost tiresomely familiar story, Sarah recognizes the plot and picks up her cues flawlessly; as Butler says, she "seems to be waiting, like an actress, for her part" ("Hazlitt's Liber Amoris and Romantic Satire" 216.)<sup>2</sup> Her "prior attachment," her "sincere friendship" for the narrator and her protestations of her own unworthiness are elements to be found in almost any pulp romance of the day. The characters' dialogues are a pastiche of romantic clichés:

H. ...you have sometimes spoken of any serious attachment as a tie upon you. Is it not that you prefer flirting with 'gay young men' to becoming a mere dull domestic wife?

S. You have no right to throw out such insinuations:

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<sup>1</sup>Pamela is, of course, the classic example of this plot, particularly in the second part, in which attention shifts from Pamela's travails to her apotheosis as the epitome of the gentlewoman. Holcroft's Anna St. Ives is a male version of the same story, in which a high-born young lady realizes that a gardener's son, not her aristocratic suitor, embodies true nobility. Finally, the Romantics were enthralled by the "true" story of the Maid of Buttermere, which had a tragic twist--the "gentleman" proved to be a swindler and bigamist. Although based on an actual incident (Wordsworth knew the young woman involved) this story quickly became fictionalized into popular melodrama.

<sup>2</sup>Butler also sees the narrator casting himself in the role of a number of familiar fictional types--Young Werther, Hamlet, Othello, Iago, and Lovelace--but argues that he does so quite deliberately (215). If one reads the essay according to Hazlitt's autobiography, that self-consciousness is indisputable, but if the piece is read as fiction, independently of Hazlitt's other records of the affair, the narrator comes across as singularly naïve and self-deceived.

for though I am but a tradesman's daughter, I have as nice a sense of honour as anyone can have.

H. Talk of a tradesman's daughter! you would ennoble any family, thou glorious girl, by true nobility of mind.

S. Oh! Sir, you flatter me. I know my own inferiority to most.

H. To none; there is no one above thee, man nor woman either. You are above your situation, which is not fit for you.<sup>3</sup>

Sarah, a remarkably skilled flirt, knows the falseness of her words; the reader, tipped off by both the extravagance and the familiarity of this exchange and others like it, sees its hollowness. Only the narrator, blinded by his own desires, fails to recognize that he is wooing by convention and winning nothing but meaninglessly conventional responses in return.

In Liber Amoris, we see the narrator trapped by his inability to realize that in reading his own experiences according to conventions learned from fiction, he is seriously limiting them, cutting away any of the complexities in the actual Sarah's character. Indeed, when finally convinced that she is not the pure, modest girl he thought her, he is left completely baffled and is only able to explain her behaviour by recourse to a new set of plots. "I had embraced the false Florimel instead of the true;" he says, "or was like the man in the Arabian Nights who had

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<sup>3</sup>William Hazlitt, Liber Amoris in Selected Writings, ed. Ronald Blythe (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970) 308.



married a *goul*" (372). Behavior that does not fit one set of conventional expectations is incomprehensible--or, more precisely, quite literally unreadable--unless cast in terms of another. The result is not so much a gentle mockery of the ways in which our expectations are shaped by conventional patterns, but a subtle and bitter attack on the ways in which we are limited by them.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, in Liber Amoris there is no self-consciousness about the way in which the narrator's experiences as a reader shape his story. The narrator's double imprisonment by conventional structures, which leads him to construe his experiences as Spenserian romance when Richardsonian intrigue will no longer work, is made doubly ironic by the fact that he entirely fails to recognize the way that his perspective is limited by these conventions. Any conclusions about the ways in which conventional structures limit possibilities for telling--or living--a story are left for the reader to draw. We may see how the dual status of Hazlitt's narrator as both a reader and a teller of stories affects the story that he tells us, but the

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<sup>4</sup>The problem of what is being attacked in Liber Amoris is actually considerably more complicated than I have suggested in this brief discussion. The work is, after all, not fiction but barely disguised autobiography. The result is that the tone of the piece is more bitter than mocking and that the distance between the self-deceived narrator and the knowledgeable author is often very difficult to gauge. Yet even though it is a very difficult--and not particularly funny--piece of work, it deserves some attention in this study because of its implicit attack on the way that an overreliance on conventional patterns limits our ability to interpret the world around us.

narrator himself remains oblivious to the constraints upon him.

Other narrators are more direct in confronting the ways in which their own experience as readers shaped by their literary culture affects their work as writers. Lamb's Elia essays, for example, frequently explore the question of how previous literary experience shapes a writer's work. Elia has no hesitation in frankly and happily admitting such influence. "Books think for me," he says in "Detached Thoughts on Books and Reading"; "I love to lose myself in other men's minds."<sup>5</sup> In fact, his absorption in literature is so great that he is willing not only to have books think for him but also to instruct him in how to dream. In "Witches and Other Night Fears" he claims to be both disappointed and embarrassed by his inability to dream properly:

The poverty of my dreams mortifies me. There is Coleridge, at his will can conjure up icy domes, and pleasure-houses for Kubla Khan, and Abyssinian maids, and songs of Abara [sic], and caverns,

Where Alph, the sacred river, runs,  
to solace his night solitudes--when I cannot muster a fiddle. Barry Cornwall has his tritons and his nereids gamboling before him in nocturnal visions, and proclaiming sons born to Neptune--when my stretch of imaginative activity can hardly, in the night season, raise up the ghost of a fish-wife. (79)

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<sup>5</sup>Charles Lamb, Elia and the Last Essays of Elia, ed. Jonathan Bate (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987) 195. All further citations from the Elia essays will be from this edition.

Of course, the mockery in this passage is directed as much against Coleridge's and Cornwall's extravagance as it is against the "poverty" of Elia's dreams. Yet without the unabashed exoticism of the other two dreamers, the narrator's mournful admission that his dream of presiding over "sea nuptials" ended with him floating up the Thames to Lambeth would be neither amusing nor interesting. In effect, as he lightly suggests at the end of the essay, his dreams are a prose rereading of others' poetry, a response to existing literature which mocks its conventions but which draws upon them nonetheless so that the mockery itself is subtly undermined.

In other essays, Elia is even more direct about ways in which his experience as a reader shapes his practice as a writer. "Christ's Hospital Five and Thirty Years Ago," one of the most familiar essays in the collection, is ostensibly autobiography, but it starts out quite literally as a rereading of an earlier work. Elia is, he tells us, determined to correct the false account of the school which he has read "in Mr. Lamb's 'Works.'" The joke is obvious, and to make it even clearer, Elia takes some pains to explain that the memoirs in the "Works" are inaccurate because the young Lamb received shockingly and unfairly indulgent treatment:

His friends lived in town, and were near at hand; and he had the privilege of going to see them, almost as often as he wished, through some invidious distinction, which was denied to us....He had his tea and hot rolls in a

morning, while we were battenning upon our quarter of a penny loaf....In lieu of our *half-pickled* Sundays, or quite *fresh* boiled beef on Thursdays (strong as *caro equina*), with detestable marigolds floating in the pail to poison the broth...he had his hot plate of roast veal, or the more tempting griskin (exotics unknown to our palates), cooked in the paternal kitchen (a great thing), and brought to him daily by his maid or aunt! (14-15)

Lamb the author is rereading and rewriting his own past through the supposed experiences of his narrator.<sup>6</sup> The story that we are given is not the memoir that it claims to be, but rather a piece of fictionalizing which takes earlier writing as its point of departure. That earlier writing is not simply Lamb's original memoir either; the figure of the woefully mistreated schoolboy may be most familiar to us from Dickens, but the abused child and his unfairly indulged rival were staples in literature long before *SMike* or David Copperfield made their appearances. Smollett's Roderick Random runs away from school because he is so badly treated; Peacock's Scythrop Glowery "was sent, as usual, to a public school, where a little learning was painfully beaten into him" (*Nightmare Abbey*, ch. 1). Lamb/Elia is giving us, in miniature, a familiar plot, letting fiction masquerade as autobiography in a quiet joke on the reader.

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<sup>6</sup>In his preface to *The Last Essays of Elia*, Lamb hints that Elia's schooldays were actually based on Coleridge's experiences. Yet the elements of fictionalizing according to conventions remain even if that is true; in fact, Lamb himself goes on to compare his process of composition in that essay to that employed by a novelist.

"Autobiography," in this case, is not simply a matter of recalling the past, but of rereading and rewriting other literature. Even the act of constructing one's own past, seemingly the most personal and individualistic of actions, becomes infused with ideas and practices learned from the narrator's experiences as a reader.

Lamb's exploration of conventions is qualitatively different from Hazlitt's in that he seems to be undisturbed by the impossibility of escaping established literary structures. Unlike Hazlitt's narrator, who is painfully and unconsciously trapped by them, Elia seems to delight in working within traditional structures. In this respect, he is much like his creator; as Hazlitt observes, "Mr. Lamb has a distaste to new faces, to new books, to new buildings, to new customs....He evades the present; he mocks the future."<sup>7</sup> Elia, like his author, attempts to rewrite the past in and as the present. Yet even in these essays, with their charming evocation of archaic writing and ideas, there is some awareness of ways in which a lack of self-consciousness about the conventional and artificial nature of literary structures can be damaging. This damage is very different from that done to Hazlitt's narrator, however; rather than lying in an inability to "read" behaviour which does not fit familiar patterns, it involves a loss of one's ability to escape from the constrictions of the external world by finding pleasure

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<sup>7</sup>William Hazlitt, The Spirit of the Age, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1983) 338-39.

within the boundaries of literature--however artificial those boundaries might be. "On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century" is a reproach directed against people foolish enough to misread the conventions of stage comedy as an attempt to mirror actual behaviour in the real world. As Elia argues, avoiding such comedy because it is immoral indicates that one is missing its point altogether:

We dare not dally with images, or names, of wrong. We bark like foolish dogs at shadows. We dread infection from the scenic representation of disorder; and fear a painted pustule. In our anxiety that our morality should not take cold, we wrap it up in a great blanket surtout of precaution against the breeze and sunshine.  
(162)

Lamb reverses the implicit suggestion in Liber Amoris that reading life according to literary patterns is a dangerous trap; he argues that by accepting the conventions of literature and recognizing their evident fictionality, he is able to respire "the breath of an imaginary freedom" (162) from the constraints of daily life. As in Liber Amoris, one moves from one form of imprisonment to another, but Elia, the enthusiastic reader, suggests that by recognizing and accepting the artificiality of literary conventions, one actually "imprisons" oneself within an illusion of freedom. A writer quite willingly "imprisoned" by conventional assumptions formed through his own reading, Elia simultaneously calls attention to these conventions and stresses their arbitrary, artificial nature.

Discussing the Elia essays is of course a rather problematic endeavor, since they differ so much among themselves in tone and subject matter. Elia espouses no single, consistent position throughout all of them; interpretation is made particularly difficult by the fact that, as Lamb says in his mock eulogy of Elia, "Few understood him; and I am not certain that at all times he quite understood himself. He too much affected that dangerous figure--irony" (172). Yet in Elia's voice, we can often hear Lamb exploring the potential offered by a narrator who is self-conscious about the ways in which he is shaped by his reading. The quaint archaisms which have charmed so many of Lamb's readers and which Hazlitt saw as one of his friend's ruling characteristics are in themselves a technique for revealing--indeed, emphasizing--this self-consciousness. As Elia stresses his own status as a reader, quite deliberately rewriting earlier literary structures in his idiom, he is encouraging his audience to be aware of the artificiality of not just the stage comedy that he discusses explicitly but of his own writing as well.

This figure of the narrator as a self-conscious reader and rewriter of earlier literature differs significantly from Bage's and Edgeworth's self-conscious narrative voices. Elia is quite happy to admit his own dependence upon earlier literature. He is implicated in the conventions that he is examining and is thus unable to lay claim to the objective, critical stance on his material which the other narrators

attempt to stake out for themselves. Their pose of neutral detachment is replaced in Elia by an elaborate, even exaggerated, subjectivity, in which any consistent critical position becomes impossible. A speaker who admits that his or her consciousness has been shaped by the literary system being examined or subverted must also deny the possibility of formulating an "objective" criticism of it. That self-consciousness about one's own limitations as a critic would, if taken to its logical extreme, require a continual re-evaluation of every statement or judgement made. Lamb never carries his play with conventions far enough to make this point explicitly, but with Elia and his affection for "that dangerous figure--irony" he begins to move in that direction.

If, however, one turns away from Lamb and begins to examine the work of his more famous contemporary Byron, one encounters writing which takes this sort of play with convention a considerable distance--perhaps farther than does the work of any other writer of that era. Byron's Don Juan and--to a lesser extent--Beppo are works which are marked by the presence of a narrative voice which stresses its own dependence upon literary convention and its inability to escape from those conventions even when most critical of them. In both poems, the narrator spends far more time discussing how he is approaching his material and why he has chosen to do so in that manner than he does in telling a story. Beppo, by far the slighter of the two works, is in many ways simply a charming *jeu d'esprit* in which the



narrative commentary and the playful verse form in which the story is couched is far more important than the story couched in them. Byron suggests as much when, in a letter to John Murray, he comments that "I have...written a poem (of 84 octave stanzas) humorous, in or after the excellent manner of Mr. Whistlecraft (whom I take to be Frere), on a Venetian anecdote--which amused me."<sup>8</sup> The anecdote itself is extremely slight:

A Turk...asked to speak to the mistress of the inn a buxom lady of 40 in keeping with certain children & who had lost her husband many years before at sea--after some preliminaries my hostess went to the Turk who immediately shut the door & began questioning her about her family & her late husband--She told her loss--when the Turk asked if her husband had any particular mark about him she said--yes he had a scar on his shoulder. Something like this said the Turk pulling down his robe--I am your husband--I have been to Turkey--I have made a large fortune and I make you three offers--either to quit your amoroso and come with me--or to stay with your amoroso or to accept a pension and live alone.<sup>9</sup>

In Byron's retelling of this anecdote, the focus shifts from

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<sup>8</sup>George Gordon, Lord Byron Letters and Journals, ed. Leslie A. Marchand (London: John Murray, Ltd., 1973-80) Vol. V 267. All further references to the letters will be from this edition.

<sup>9</sup>Quoted in Byron The Complete Poetical Works, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986) Vol IV 484. The story was told to Byron and his mistress Marianna Segati by her husband, and the interest for Hobhouse, who recorded it in his journal, seemed to lie more in Marianna's reaction than in the anecdote itself: "M<sup>e</sup> Zagati [sic] said I'm sure I would not leave my amoroso for any husband--looking at B. this is too gross even for me." The obvious pointedness of the story in this context makes Byron's decision to rework it as an ostentatiously pointless story particularly outrageous.

the climactic reunion of husband and wife to the narrator's accounts of the carnival, his memories of England, and his digressions on almost any imaginable subject. Telling the story becomes an excuse for writing, not the goal. The question that Glen imagines will be posed by his readers if he fails to satisfy them--"For what END then did you write your book?" (248)--becomes meaningless if asked of Beppo. There is no "end," and in fact cannot be, as the narrator spends so much effort in pointing out the frailty of his medium that no message conveyed by it would carry any conviction.

It is, of course, the narrator himself who is the main subject of interest in the poem. Laura's adventures matter only insofar as they provide him with an opening to talk; the world of the poem is entirely filtered through and shaped by his consciousness. As with Elia's essays, though in a very different style, what we have is a work in which the narrator's consciousness of himself as both a reader and a writer becomes more important than anything else. Byron's narrator refuses to conceal his own role to create an illusion of realism or of autonomy in his characters; instead, he writes an anti-story in which the heroine is not even introduced until the twenty-first stanza (of ninety-nine) and which ends not with a resolution but merely because the narrator's "pen is at the bottom of a page" (789). There is even a rebuke directed against readers

who may wax unkind,

And caring little for the author's ease,  
 Insist on knowing what he means, a hard  
 And hapless situation for a bard. (396-400)

The poem becomes an implicit joke on its readers, in which the narrator shrugs, metaphorically speaking, and says that he is incapable of giving them anything that is not influenced by their expectations and his experience of literature. He is a poet not because of any "romantic" inspiration or belief in the transcendent powers of poetry, but merely because "verse is more in fashion" than prose (416). Far from telling a story in a given manner because form fits content or because of the dictates of inspiration, Byron suggests that he is controlled entirely by the impetus of the literary culture around him. Of course, by making such a jocularly elaborate concession to the demands of fashion, by regretting his inability to write a *really* fashionable "tale of the finest orientalism," Byron's narrator is very obviously mocking the conventions that he claims to be working within even as he stresses his reliance upon them.

In Beppo, we have a work which, unlike Hernsprong or Castle Rackrent, is not claiming to evade dependence on the conventions it mocks. The narrator is quite willing to admit that he cannot escape being implicated in the conventional demands of his medium, however conscious he may be of them. Yet this consciousness is accompanied neither by the the painful sense of imprisonment which marks Liber Amoris nor by

the false sense of liberation which Elia finds in escaping from the bonds of social convention to those of literature. Somewhat paradoxically, the result of the narrator's insistence upon his willingness--indeed, his desire--to tell a conventional story is a far more radically unconventional narrative than any discussed so far. Glen has a story to tell and does so, despite his mockery of readers' expectations of what that story should be like; Edgeworth's editor, despite his conventional and barely-hidden scorn for the stereotypical Irish, has no doubt that the reader will glean a coherent message from Thady's story. Both he and Glen, moreover, seem to feel that the stories that they are presenting or telling have, at base, a large degree of importance and seriousness. In contrast, Byron's narrator goes out of his way to call attention to the fundamental frivolity of the story that he claims to be taking such pains to tell. The climactic moment, when Beppo reveals himself to his wife and her lover, is not accompanied by any burst of emotion from either the characters or the reader. Instead, the Count calmly invites his rival in for coffee, and Laura, completely unabashed, peppers him with a series of disconnected and rather inappropriate questions:

are you *really*, *truly*, now a Turk?  
 with any other women did you wive?  
 Is't true they use their fingers for a fork?  
 Well, that's the prettiest shawl--as I'm alive!  
 You'll give it me? They say you eat no pork.  
 And how so many years did you contrive

To--Bless me! did I ever? No, I never  
 Saw a man grown so yellow! How's your liver?  
 Beppo! that beard of yours becomes you not;  
 It shall be shaved before you're a day older;  
 Why do you wear it? Oh! I had forgot--  
 Pray don't you think the weather here is colder...?  
 (729--740)

None of these questions receives an answer; in the last fifty lines of the poem, the narrator merely informs us that all three of his characters remain on friendly terms. The point of the story is that there is no point. Disconnected from the social context that gave the original anecdote its meaning, the story becomes an elaborate joke about the act of writing poetry.

This poetic game, amusing as it is, would be of comparatively little importance to Byron's career were it not for Don Juan, which pushes much farther in the direction begun with Beppo. Probably not surprisingly, both poems were controversial in their day; Southey, a longtime enemy, exemplifies the negative reaction to these works:

Lord Byron immediately followed [John Hookham Frere's model], first with his 'Beppo,' which implied the profligacy of the writer, and lastly with his 'Don Juan,' which is a foul blot on the literature of his country, an act of high treason on English poetry.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Quoted in The Collected Works of the Right Honourable John Hookham Frere (London: Basil Montagu Pickering, 1874) Vol I 165. Southey would have had even more reason to be upset by Byron's third and final foray into ottava rima, The Vision of Judgement, which is a direct, concentrated attack on Southey himself.

Southey doubtless felt that the "high treason" of Don Juan lay in its unabashed and frequent use of sexual innuendo or its occasional outright bawdiness.<sup>11</sup> Yet a reader such as Southey, who by 1820 had hardened into outright reaction in his attitudes towards both poetry and social issues, would have had reason to see "treason" towards English poetry in Don Juan for other reasons as well. In this work, Byron is very openly calling into question the conventions which shaped most English poetry of his day. As Wordsworth--and Southey--were trying to revivify the epic, Byron was mocking the genre and its pretensions, and doing so in a very complex and sophisticated manner. Moreover, in addition to the poem's play with the conventions of the epic, it undercuts the conventions of many other important poetic forms as well. As Stuart Curran observes, in a very perceptive reading of Don Juan,

Canto XVI deliberately enacts a generic standoff, as romance is at once demystified and reified. In this process the canto typifies the entire poem, which realigns itself according to the conventions of one genre after another, analytically deconstructing each as to sufficiency or even adequacy, yet always, if obliquely, reinforcing them.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Byron did not hesitate to admit that the poem was far from decorous. "You talk of 'approximations of indelicacy' [in Don Juan]," he wrote to John Murray in 1821. "This reminds me of George Lamb's quarrel at Cambridge with Scrope Davies--"Sir--said George--he *hinted at my illegitimacy*, 'Yes,' said Scrope--'I called him a damned adulterous bastard'--the approximation and the hint are not unlike" (L&J VI 208).

<sup>12</sup>Curran, Poetic Form and British Romanticism 192.

The poem is, on one level at least, about the conventions of genre and the limitations imposed by them. Curran goes on to comment that the poem is "a generic impasse of remarkable complexity....Byron enforces an insistent relativism that questions the sufficiency, even the efficacy" of any single literary model (195). In Beppo, the narrator's adherence to a fashion that he mocks is a joke; in Don Juan, that jocular element is certainly still present, but it is accompanied by a very serious awareness of the ways in which poetic meaning is inevitably determined at least in part by the expectations created by both narrator's and audience's experience with previous examples of work done within a particular genre. Even in "demystifying" a genre, one must work within its limitations to be comprehensible, thereby, as Curran says, reifying it on at least one level.

The most obvious method by which Byron calls attention to generic categories and rules is by juxtaposing a number of diverse genres and modes.<sup>13</sup> As almost all of its readers have observed, Don Juan is a poem which resists easy classification. The question of length alone makes it difficult to categorize; a fragment of more than 17,000 lines, the poem obviously contains a number of different

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<sup>13</sup>Strictly speaking, comedy and satire are modes, while the epic is a genre and as such does not necessarily exclude either the comic or the satiric--as Byron implies when he calls his poem an epic satire. Yet most contemporary critics have argued that the poem is predominantly epic or satiric or comic (or even tragic). I am assuming, on the contrary, that describing the poem as an epic means something qualitatively different from describing it as a comedy or a satire.

moods and styles of writing. Yet the immense amount of critical attention devoted to the basic question of what sort of poem Byron wrote suggests that the problem of categorizing it by mode and genre involves much more than simply determining whether--for example--satiric or epic elements predominate in it. One might quite easily argue that what we have is not in fact representative of *any* single type of writing. Rather, the poem is an ongoing exploration by the narrator of a number of different conventional styles of poetry, an exploration which ultimately mocks them all and suggests that they are all seriously limited in one way or another.

Byron himself had no hesitation in changing his claims about what sort of poem he was writing, shifting his statements in reaction to differing responses from its readers. Initially, under attack for immorality, he protested that critics had misunderstood his writing and were "too earnest and eager about a work never intended to be serious"; after all, he had no "intention but to giggle and make giggle" (*L&J* VI 138). Later, with the harsh account of Ismail behind him, he made more grandiose claims for the poem. It is, he proclaimed, "a *satire* on *abuses* of the present *states* of Society--and not an eulogy of vice" (*L&J*, X 68). Still later, Byron's friend Thomas Medwin recorded a conversation in which Byron made at least half-serious claims--as opposed to the usually jocular ones in the poem itself--for Don Juan's status as an epic:



If you must have an epic there's Don Juan for you. I call that an epic: it is an epic as much in the spirit of our day as the Iliad was in Homer's. Love, religion, and politics form the argument, and are as much the cause of quarrels now as they were then. There is no want of Parises and Menelauses, and of Crim.-cons into the bargain. In the very first Canto you have a Helen. Then, I shall make my hero a modern Achilles for fighting,--a man who can snuff a candle three successive turns with a pistol-ball: and, depend upon it, my moral will be a good one; not even a Dr. Johnson would be able to find a flaw in it!<sup>14</sup>

Comic exaggeration aside, this comment indicates that Byron was quite willing to think of Don Juan in epic terms.<sup>15</sup> Yet even the epic, as vast a category as it is, cannot encompass the variety and complexity of Don Juan. To quote Curran once again:

The insufficiency of pastoral, romance, and satire almost by default lend force to Byron's epic claims in Don Juan. But he does not shift his strategy in turning to the most encompassing generic conception. Rather, as [Brian] Wilkie has perceptively shown, he deconstructs the genre mercilessly, intermixing mock-epic and epic themes, casting contemporary meanness against older models of heroism, but then suggesting how equally unattractive are the classical models and how much more

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<sup>14</sup>Thomas Medwin, Conversations of Lord Byron, ed. Ernest J. Lovell Jr. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1966) 164.

<sup>15</sup>For a definition of the word "epic" as the Romantics understood it, see Donald H. Reiman, "Don Juan in an Epic Context," Studies in Romanticism 16: iv (1977) 587-94. Reiman argues that Don Juan is an epic according to this definition, disputing Jerome McGann's claim in the first chapter of his Don Juan in Context (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1976) that the poem's epic status is merely a matter of semantics and critical habit.

extensive are the possibilities for heroism in the modern world. He openly admits to inserting epic conventions, like the shipwreck or the Siege of Ismail, as set pieces to prove his mettle....At times, Don Juan seems to be more a recipe for concocting an epic than the thing itself. (197)

What Byron is doing, Curran implies, is writing a poem which is, as much as anything, about the way that convention tells him he *ought* to write a poem.

The competing claims of satire and epic--or comedy, or tragedy<sup>16</sup>--keep the reader off-balance, forcing active and attentive reading. Yet in achieving this desirable state,<sup>17</sup> Byron manages to avoid the danger of reducing his work to the level of an often unreadable experiment. The fact that his writing observes the letter of the laws of convention is just as significant as is his cheerful violation of their spirit. The point is not just, as Curran says, that Byron shows the insufficiency of a variety of generic conventions, but also that even while stressing this insufficiency, he freely admits dependence upon them. The extent to which Byron does observe these rules ought to be clear from the sophistication with which critics are able to argue that the work, or rather individual sections of it, are categorizable as

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<sup>16</sup>Alvin Kernan, who analyzes Don Juan in turn as a comedy, a tragedy, and a satire, makes a convincing argument that Haidée is a tragic heroine. See The Plot of Satire (New Haven: Yale UP, 1965) 214-220.

<sup>17</sup>Coleridge's famous statement that "poetry brings the whole soul of man into activity" is representative of the tendency of Romantic thought to privilege such active participation in the work by the reader.

representative of one genre or another. Similarly, the extent of disagreement about what genre that might be suggests how far Byron is from employing any particular set of conventions in a straightforward, uncritical manner. The English cantos, for example, might seem on a cursory reading to be a reasonably simple satire of English society, but in fact they contain within themselves many of the switches of direction and mood characteristic of the poem as a whole. A glance at the critical literature confirms this view, showing as it does a singular lack of consensus about what sort of poetry Byron is writing in the last third of his poem.<sup>18</sup>

Although Brian Wilkie claims that critics are "often irritated, bored, or puzzled" by the English cantos,<sup>19</sup> he does not mention any names to illustrate this contention. Doing so would probably be difficult; if anything, critics seem more intrigued by this section of the poem than bored or irritated. A large number of them have in fact concentrated on the final third of the poem, with or without providing an

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<sup>18</sup>Because of the length and complexity of Don Juan, any study of it short of book-length must pick and choose examples. In the following discussion I have chosen to concentrate on the English cantos in part because disagreement about their genre is even more pronounced than is that about other sections of the poem and in part because in them one finds Byron's most fully developed and sophisticated comic writing. Most of the other sections, including the famous first canto, tend to be anecdotal in structure. Byron is obviously not concerned with plot or plausibility when, for example, for the sake of his joke he has Julia change practically overnight from a well-meaning and extremely naïve young woman to a quick-witted and witty shrew.

<sup>19</sup>Brian Wilkie, Romantic Poets and the Epic Tradition (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1965) 219.

explanation for their emphasis. George Ridenour argues that at this point Byron "seems to be making his most earnest attempt" at writing a "real Epic"; Andrew Rutherford disagrees strongly, even if implicitly, arguing that the poem's "formal and architectural weaknesses" are most marked in those cantos. Furthermore, he sees in them "a reduction of the poem's satiric force." Claude M. Fuess, one of the earliest writers on Don Juan, directly inverts that claim, commenting that the poem's "most effective satire" occurs in the account of the house party at Norman Abbey. Still other critics, such as Frederick Beaty, take a middle approach, seeing satire there and considering it effective but "mellowed."<sup>20</sup> Other writers play down both the satiric and epic elements of the English cantos in favour of their comedy. Chief among them is Kernan, who sees the poem ending with a ringing affirmation "of the comic triumph of life over death" (199)<sup>21</sup> Others, notably Elizabeth Boyd, have argued that the material is comic, but in the very specific manner

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<sup>20</sup>George Ridenour, The Style of Don Juan (New Haven: Yale UP, 1960) 111; Andrew Rutherford, Byron: A Critical Study (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1961) 199; Claude M. Fuess, Lord Byron as a Satirist in Verse (New York: Russell & Russell Inc., 1969) 172 (orig. pub. 1912); Frederick Beaty, Byron the Satirist (DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois UP, 1985) 163.

<sup>21</sup>Bernard Beatty disputes this point, stating that the satiric connection "between social vitality and death" is most marked in the Norman Abbey section (Beatty, Byron's Don Juan [Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes and Noble Books, 1985] 68). While he believes that Don Juan is fundamentally comic (173), he seems to define the term much more broadly than does Kernan.

of the eighteenth-century picaresque novel.<sup>22</sup> Karl Kroeber and Brian Wilkie both agree with Boyd's contention that the final cantos are increasingly novelized, but Wilkie finds the tone more "neutral" than either comic or satiric, while Kroeber sees it as being novelistic in a fundamentally un-Augustan manner, a manner that is, surprisingly enough, closer to that of Northanger Abbey than Tom Jones.<sup>23</sup> Even granting that the diversity of subject matter in the English cantos is much greater than in previous episodes, the range of opinion about what Jerome McGann considers to be "one coherent...unit" is striking.<sup>24</sup>

This summary of the variety of ideas about the poem suggests the extent to which Byron manages to disrupt conventional expectations. The fact that he includes elements of several genres does not mean that one has to

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<sup>22</sup>Elizabeth French Boyd, Byron's Don Juan: A Critical Study (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1945) 54-57, 59. András Horn (Byron's Don Juan and the Eighteenth-Century English Novel [The Folcroft Press, Inc., 1969]) argues that the entire poem has marked similarities to the comic novel. A.B. England also devotes a chapter of his Byron's Don Juan and Eighteenth-Century Literature (Cranbury, N.J.: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1975) to a comparison of Don Juan and Tom Jones. However, he finds little but surface resemblances between the two works, ultimately arguing that Fielding's digressive narrator is far more ordered and presents a much more coherent world view than Byron's.

<sup>23</sup>Wilkie 219; Karl Kroeber, Romantic Narrative Art (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1966) 148-50. Kroeber's argument is that unlike picaresque heroes, both Catherine and Juan "move from naturalness toward a sophistication that enables them to retain and to express natural feelings within the restrictions of a necessarily artificial society" (150).

<sup>24</sup>McGann, Don Juan in Context 128. McGann of course admits and indeed stresses the complexity of this "unit."

predominate over the other; on the contrary, the dispute about what direction the poem is taking suggests that none of them do. The connection of this vacillation among styles of writing and the narrative play with conventions discussed in other works might not be immediately apparent, but in fact one can argue that Byron's narrator is engaging in much the same type of examination of conventions as do the narrators previously discussed, albeit in a much more detailed and sophisticated manner. He is, deliberately and self-consciously, rereading and rewriting earlier literature, exploiting expectations shaped by readers' previous experience in order to explore the limitations involved in simply following established rules.

One of the most obvious devices by which Byron subverts the smooth development of his poem is, as in Beppo--or in Hernspong for that matter--that of constant digressions by his narrator. Such digressions occur throughout the poem, of course, but they become particularly marked in the English cantos--so much so, in fact, that at least one major critic has commented on the weakening of the storyline at this point.<sup>25</sup> These digressions often take the form of a self-

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<sup>25</sup>See Rutherford 199. In fact, as suggested earlier, the storyline is probably more coherent at this point than at most other sections of the poem. At times in the earlier cantos, Byron seems to lose interest in his plot and abandon it altogether. The Gulbeyaz episode, for example, breaks off with Juan and Dudù about to be executed; we next see Juan outside the Russian camp at Ismail with Johnson, Baba, and two unidentified women (one is presumably Dudù). Neither Baba nor the women are ever mentioned again, nor are the details of Juan's rather improbable escape ever provided.

parodic commentary by the narrator on the conventional patterns which he either feels obliged to use or unthinkingly falls into. For example, in describing Adeline, the narrator slips into a familiar and obvious simile, comparing her to a volcano. Yet he immediately interrupts himself, deciding that the simile is too trite and that readers can easily complete the comparison themselves:

Shall I go on?--No!  
I hate to hunt down a tired metaphor  
So let the often-used volcano go.  
Poor thing! How frequently, by me and others,  
It hath been stirred up.... (XIII. 36)

At times, he tacitly assumes readers' familiarity with his subject matter will mean that he does not have to elaborate on a point. The "Duke of Dash, who was a--duke" (XIII. 85) is never described further; the narrator appears to take it for granted that experience with fictional aristocrats will enable the reader to deduce all that is necessary about this character. Admittedly, part of the reason for this refusal to complete certain thoughts or images seems to be the narrator's laziness; he makes a point of claiming that he does not want to work very hard to tell this story. His writing, he says, is merely a sort of "conversational facility" and he then adds that far from being a careful artist, "I rattle on exactly as I'd talk/With anybody in a ride or walk" (XV. 19, 20). The underlying implication of this image of the poem as conversation is that readers must contribute a share to it as well, a task the narrator makes

relatively easy by pointing out the predictable familiarity of his minor characters and figures of speech. Yet beyond this apparent desire to make the reader share the work lies a sense that the narrator is not really able to avoid some degree of predictability even if he wanted to. He and his audience share similar experiences of literature; the narrator is as thoroughly conditioned by conventional literary types and figures as his readers. In effect, the narrator is playing games with his audience by calling attention to the conventional elements of his writing. His readers know conventions as well as he does, he implies, so if he merely wants to fulfill their expectations, there is no need for him to do more than provide a sketch which they can then complete.

Much more important than this willingness to cooperate with readers' expectations on some levels, however, is the narrator's implicit refusal to fulfill other, larger expectations created by his seeming allegiance to a given mode or genre. In particular, the English cantos are marked by a quiet refusal to carry through on what seems to be a build-up towards a devastatingly satiric denunciation of British aristocrats and aristocratic society. This backing away occurs in both large matters and small. The brief account of "drapery misses" (XI.49), for example, might seem condemnatory, but it is difficult to read the stanza as an attack on either the young women who gamble on their looks or the young men foolish enough to be taken in by the ploy.



Certainly, we feel more sympathy with than scorn for the prospective bridegroom who, discovering his fiancée's debt, "swore, and sighed, and paid it" (XI. 49). And, as Byron suggests elsewhere, when the only socially acceptable option for women is to "form good housekeepers" (XIV. 24), they must use any means available to gain a husband.<sup>26</sup> The targets that are unequivocally attacked tend to be offstage, identified rather vaguely as part of a class of fools. The bluestockings who, unlike Lady Adeline, are unable to conceal their wit under a mask of languid gracefulness receive no mercy; neither do the society wits "who have studied their bon mots" (XIII. 97) for hours before going into company. Overall, it is neither society as an entity nor the main representatives of that society which receive the harshest treatment in these cantos, but rather a few minor subgroups or individuals within it.

This pattern of backing away from satiric denunciation of society is perhaps most marked near the conclusion of the eleventh canto. There, the narrator seems about to formulate a comprehensive attack on the aristocracy by showing how it enables--indeed, connives at--the destruction of its own younger generation:

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<sup>26</sup>Admittedly, there is a very direct attack on the unscrupulous milliners who enrich themselves by preying on naïve young men. Yet they are, in a sense, invisible targets, since they are not part of the society the poem is portraying. Byron is not attacking high society for greed or wickedness but is rather exposing its folly in allowing itself to be preyed upon, a much gentler operation.

They are young, but know not Youth--it is anticipated;  
 Handsome, but wasted, rich without a sou;  
 Their vigour in a thousand arms is dissipated;  
 Their cash comes *from*, their wealth goes to a Jew;  
 Both senates see their nightly vote participated  
 Between the Tyrant's and the Tribune's crew;  
 And having voted, dined, drunk, gamed and whored,  
 The family vault receives another Lord. (XI. 75)

Yet this dark moment, powerful and striking as it is, is qualified by its placement immediately before Byron's famous lament for the disappearance of the world that he had known himself as a young aristocrat eight years before. Instead of following up the savage *précis* of the career of modern noblemen with a more comprehensive attack on the society that destroys them, the passage is suffused with regret for the loss of youth and pleasure. There is a marked sense of nostalgic sympathy, rather than of satiric satisfaction, in the thoughts of "the Lady Carolines and Franceses" who are now "divorced or doing thereanent" and whose world has "Cracked, shivered, vanished, scarcely gazed on" (XI. 80, 76).<sup>27</sup> The society which has just been portrayed as busily destroying itself might be *ormolu*, not the genuine gold that it fancies itself, but it is nonetheless an "earthly paradise of *Or Molu*" (XI. 48).

This complex awareness of both positive and negative aspects of the poem's targets, which defeats readers'

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<sup>27</sup>Rutherford discusses these stanzas at length, focusing particularly on the complex shift of tone and attitude within them. See pp. 206-209.

expectations of straightforward satiric denunciation, is also present in the treatment of its main characters. Even Lord Henry, the dull, self-important politician who treats the beautiful and passionate Adeline "Less like a young wife than an aged sister" (XIV. 69) receives some sympathy. Although his electioneering speech is no more than a collection of platitudes, we are informed that Henry honestly believes what he is saying (XVI. 77). His mind may be commonplace, but at least he is no hypocrite. While making it clear that Henry is one of the tribe of the bores, Byron is careful to give credit to the man's rather ponderous virtues as well as to poke fun at his follies and eccentricities, which never quite reach the level of vices. Edward Bostetter in fact goes so far as to claim that Byron's sympathy for both of the Amundevilles removes them from the world of satire and places them in that of tragicomedy.<sup>28</sup> While it is difficult, if not impossible, to make such a claim on the behalf of Henry alone, it is clear that even he is far from being treated as harshly as earlier foolish husbands such as Alfonso and the Sultan. While he is undoubtedly a dull pedant who treats a badly-battered muffin and his wife's growing interest in Juan with approximately equal levels of interest and concern, he is neither malicious nor cruel.

Adeline presents us with an even more difficult question of attitude. On the one hand, she is presented as an

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<sup>28</sup>Edward E. Bostetter, The Romantic Ventriloquists (Seattle: U of Washington P, 1963) 249.

intelligent, attractive, and engaging woman "who in her way...was a heroine" (XIV. 90) and with whom we are invited to sympathize. (See XIV. 54-57, 85-87). On the other, we are told that she is a dangerous trap for Juan, "the fair most fatal" (XIII. 13) that he ever met<sup>29</sup>, and that she is a perfect embodiment of the social values that the English cantos as a whole claim to satirize. A few critics tend to stress these negative qualities at the expense of her more attractive ones, using passages such as the one in which Juan, watching Adeline's "mobility," begins to wonder "how much of [her] was *real*" (XVI. 96) to support this reaction. Yet in quoting this passage as an example of satiric treatment of Adeline, critics must overlook both the irony of having this observation filtered through Juan, the epitome of social adaptability (we are told that, in particular, "with Women [he]...was what/They pleased to make or take him for" [XV. 16]) and Byron's note on the passage:

I am not sure that mobility is English; but it is expressive of a quality which rather belongs to other climates, though it is sometimes seen to a great extent in our own. It may be defined as an excessive susceptibility of immediate impressions--at the same time without *losing* the past: and is, though sometimes apparently useful to the possessor, a most painful and unhappy attribute.

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<sup>29</sup>M.K Joseph, partly on the basis of this passage, suggests that had the poem continued, Adeline would have involved Juan in the scandal of a divorce, causing him to lose both Aurora and his final chance of redemption. See Byron the Poet (London: Victor Gollancz, 1964) 186.

This note asks us to ignore Juan's censorious judgement and to see Adeline's behaviour not as an indication of shallowness or hypocrisy but rather as an innate character trait for which she is more to be pitied than blamed.

Misreadings of Adeline's role are easy, however, and it is often tempting to see her merely as a slightly more elaborate reworking of Julia.<sup>30</sup> Yet even though there are important similarities between the two women, and in fact the parallels among the various women that Juan meets is one of the strands unifying the poem, it is clear that one cannot stretch the resemblance too far; the differences between Adeline and Julia are at least as important as the similarities. Julia is initially naïve almost to the point of stupidity. She is constantly deceiving herself, and the reader, when shown her thought processes, is invited to laugh at rather than sympathize with her blindness. Up to the very last moments before succumbing, she insists upon seeing the relationship with Juan as being entirely under her control; when she takes his hand,

she only meant to clasp  
His fingers with a pure Platonic squeeze;  
She would have shrunk as from a toad, or asp,  
Had she imagined such a thing could rouse  
A feeling dangerous to a prudent spouse. (I. 111)

Later, when Julia turns into a scolding shrew, our sympathies for her are further alienated even as our amusement at her

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<sup>30</sup>Beatty goes a step farther, seeing her as a *less* interesting reworking of Julia.

wit increases, and not even her final pathetic letter redeems her completely. As many readers have observed, the details of the gilt-edged paper and the "superfine" sealing wax detract a bit from her pose of being utterly consumed by love, grief, and despair.

In contrast, our sympathies for Adeline are developed in a different manner and never completely attenuated. Despite the superficial similarities of situation, the two women are treated very differently by the narrator. When Adeline, apparently in love with Juan but unaware of the fact herself, becomes jealous of Aurora and Fitz-Fulke, we do not laugh as heartily at her self-deception as we do at Julia's. For one thing, while we see all of Julia's uncertainties, we see none of Adeline's and get, instead, the narrator's. He deflects our satiric laughter by his deliberate coyness, refusing to speculate about motives and stating explicitly at the end of the fourteenth canto that "It is not clear that Adeline and Juan/Will fall" (XIV. 99), implicitly rebuking readers who assume that Adeline will, following Julia's model, naïvely stumble into adultery. In fact, the one direct statement he makes about Adeline's state of mind underlines her difference from Julia: "I do not think that she was then in love with Juan:/If so, she would have had the strength to fly/The wild sensation" (XIV. 91; Byron's italics). One inevitably recalls, in contrast, Julia's weak-willed attempts to flee from Juan's presence: her efforts are confined to prayers to the Virgin, which are promptly abandoned when they seem to be

efficacious (I. 76). Clearly, any satire at Adeline's expense is different in kind from that directed against Julia, and so one must be careful to avoid the temptation to oversimplify her role so that it becomes a mere reworking of the opening episode. As Bostetter astutely observes, Adeline is treated with far too much sympathy by the narrator to be an unambiguous butt of satiric laughter.

Conversely, Aurora, whom many readers see as an incarnation of a Byronic ideal,<sup>31</sup> is not entirely immune to criticism, despite the narrator's obvious admiration for her and her undoubted function as a foil to the worldliness of both Adeline and Fitz-Fulke. First of all, as almost all of the poem's critics have pointed out, the comment that the difference between Haidée and Aurora "was such as lies

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<sup>31</sup>See Mark Storey, Byron and the Eye of Appetite (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986) 223-34; E.D. Hirsch Jr., "Byron and the Terrestrial Paradise" in From Sensibility to Romanticism, ed. Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom (New York: Oxford UP, 1965) 467-87; and, in particular, Beatty's final chapter, in which he argues that Aurora's purity concludes the poem by offering the possibility of redemption. On the other side of the debate, T.G. Steffan, who also speculates about Aurora's role in purifying Juan, states that it is impossible to know exactly what her role would have been and observes that she is "not exempt from a few good-natured smiles, a few amused strokes" (The Making of a Masterpiece [Austin: U of Texas P, 1957] 280). England agrees, commenting that at times Byron's descriptions of Aurora seem a bit tongue-in-cheek (173). In a rather unusual biographical reading, Cecil Y. Lang suggests that Aurora is, far from being an ideal, a portrait of Annabella Milbanke as she appeared to Byron when he first knew her. ("Narcissus Jilted: Byron, Don Juan, and the Biographical Imperative," in Historical Studies and Literary Criticism 169-76.) Finally, Rutherford believes that in Aurora Byron was attempting to create a "religious-moral" ideal, but that he fails and merely sentimentalizes her (202-3).

between a flower and a gem" (XV. 58) does not work entirely in Aurora's favour. Beatty comments with some asperity on earlier critics' "peculiar hostility to gems," stressing ways in which the image works to Aurora's credit, but even he admits that "their radiance may appear cold and hard" (185). The negative implications of the image--a gemstone is artificially polished, designed solely to ornament and to elicit admiration--would not be lost on an audience trained by two generations of Romantic writers to value the natural over the artificial. As attractive as she undoubtedly is, Aurora is prevented from being the perfect standard by which the other characters are judged and satirically found wanting by her polished, impenetrable calm, which at times edges nearer to a phlegmatic imperturbability than the contemplative piety which Beatty admires. It might be significant that one of Aurora's most attractive moments comes when her lofty abstraction fails her and, like all other women, she makes Juan into what she is "pleased to make or take him for," mistaking his silence following the election dinner for charity.

Aurora's failure to provide a satiric norm is worth stressing, since there is nobody else in that section of the poem--or, in fact, in any other section--who could remotely be considered to do so. (Leila, who seems to do so at some points, appears too infrequently to fill the role adequately.) Arguments that the poem becomes a form of Popean satire, albeit in a Byronic idiom, thus become very



difficult to defend.<sup>32</sup> Despite the Pope-like elements in the attack on the superficialities of British high society, we are given none of Pope's moral edge. The narrator, openly nostalgic at times for the world that he claims to condemn,<sup>33</sup> utterly lacks the consistent moral vision of the narrator of The Rape of the Lock, and, as already seen, is just as ambivalent about many of the characters who make up society as he is about society itself. As Frederick W. Shilstone observes, in Don Juan, "The 'fiction world' that is Pope, that is satire...is to be embraced so that it might be superseded."<sup>34</sup>

Of course, by "embracing" then "superseding" the world of moral satire, Byron raises a number of expectations in his audience which are left pointedly unfulfilled. Even though the narrator opens the English cantos by dropping hints of scathing attacks to come, informing readers that "You are not a moral people, and you know it" (XI. 87) and telling them to "Ne'er doubt/*This*--when I speak, I don't hint, but speak out" (XI. 88), there is actually very little speaking out for all

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<sup>32</sup>See particularly England, "The Style of Don Juan and Augustan Poetry" in Byron: A Symposium, ed. John D. Jump (London: The Macmillan Press, Ltd., 1975) 94-112 and Byron's Don Juan and Eighteenth-Century Literature, chap. 1, in which he expands the argument in his article. However, in both cases, he readily admits that the Popean elements of Don Juan by no means dominate the poem.

<sup>33</sup>In addition to the "ubi sunt" stanzas, see the half-sardonic, half-lyric account of the aristocrat's autumn (XIII. 75-77) and the loving description of Norman Abbey (XIII. 55-67).

<sup>34</sup>Frederick W. Shilstone, Byron and the Myth of Tradition (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1988) 242.

the bluster. It is precisely this refusal to meet our expectations that has led to some of the sharpest criticism of Don Juan. Peter Porter accuses Byron of approaching "connivance" in the social vices that he is supposedly condemning;<sup>35</sup> Ridenour comments disapprovingly on both the lack of certainty as to the poet's point-of-view and the poem's lack "of a generally accepted (or in any case familiar) system of norms, principles, and attitudes" (19). While he does believe that ultimately one can trace some consistency in the attitudes underlying the poem, Ridenour remains convinced that the work as a whole is basically decadent. Yet there is no reason to assume that in refusing to meet readers' expectations Byron is playing pointless games with his audience or being artistically irresponsible. It is significant that he is disappointing not only the expectations but also the desire of readers to find a consistency in satirical attitudes that is simply not there. After all, satire can and often does provide a pleasantly smug sense of virtue among those not being satirized, and the majority of Byron's readers, both then and now, are not among "The twice two thousand, for whom Earth was made" (XIII. 94). Writing a scathing denunciation of the vices of a class whose pleasures the audience cannot share is a risk-free, almost reflexive move. In refusing to make that move, Byron, deliberately or not, risks alienating the sympathies of his

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<sup>35</sup>Peter Porter, "Byron and the Moral North" Encounter 43:ii, 71.

readers as well as of his supposed targets.<sup>36</sup> In one sense, then, he was writing in what Blake would call the voice of the Devil, avoiding the predictable, "angelic" route of meeting his audience's expectations and pandering to its sensibilities. The alternative to "conniving" with the aristocracy is not simply that of wholeheartedly attacking them, but rather that of conniving with an audience which enjoys seeing the aristocracy attacked.

In rewriting, or "superseding," moral satire in this manner, Byron is far from conniving with anybody; rather, he is suggesting that such writing is no longer an appropriate or sufficient response to a society which leaves no moral high ground from which to make such an attack. Society has adopted and co-opted the artists who ought to scourge it, implicating them so thoroughly in its failings that any satire loses the sting of objectivity. That this state is not limited to our world-weary narrator is suggested by the cases of the "trimmer poet" who entertains Juan and Haidée; the "eighty greatest living poets" (XI. 54) who have been adopted by society and are paraded before Juan in London; and the Lake poets, who are attacked repeatedly throughout the poem for preferring pensions and social prestige to an untainted conscience. One here sees the point hinted at in Lamb's essays--that complete self-consciousness about the

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<sup>36</sup>There is good reason to assume that Byron knew precisely what he was risking; as he says at one point in the poem, "being of no party/I shall offend all parties" (IX. 26).

limitations of one's medium excludes the possibility of employing it to convey a forceful message--made much more explicitly. Satire is turned against itself, so that readers are left with poetry which criticizes its own ability to judge its targets effectively. As Michael Cooke says, Byron "forgoes the satirist's traditional readiness, and responsibility, to speak with authority," and "instead accepts alike the limitations of satire and of judgement."<sup>37</sup> Unlike Glen, Byron's narrator seems aware that one cannot satisfy a reader's "wants" while mocking the conventions that created them. By refusing to fulfill his audience's expectations, Byron is taking his examination of literary patterns to its inevitable--even if not entirely satisfactory--conclusion.

Popean satire is not the only genre that Byron "rewrites" and then reveals to be incapable of meeting the exigencies created by his social world. He explicitly compares his poem to the comic drama of the seventeenth century and explains at some length why it is no longer possible to write such comedy effectively. At one point, the narrator flatly and directly denies that the Restoration manner of dissecting society is still an appropriate technique:

The days of comedy are gone, alas!

When Congreve's fool could vie with Molière's *bête*:

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<sup>37</sup>Michael Cooke, The Blind Man Traces the Circle (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1969) 142.

Society is smoothed to that excess,  
 That manners hardly differ more than dress.  
 (XIII. 94)<sup>38</sup>

A comedy of humours, which Byron initially seems to be attempting in his description of the various eccentric and affected guests gathered at the Abbey, and which Steffan claims that he has provided (270), is, he regretfully informs us, impossible precisely because the eccentricities which writers such as Congreve considered a necessary element of humour have become mere affectations, and society has been smoothed into a "polished horde."<sup>39</sup> Although Byron does not make the allusion explicit, one might recall A Sentimental Journey and Yorick's deprecating comparison of the French to a coin worn smooth and characterless by use. The fine old British tradition of humour has become outmoded, Byron implies, because even if morals have not improved, more uniform manners have made behaviour of the innocent and guilty indistinguishable.

There is, admittedly, one apparent exception to this rule--the Duchess of Fitz-Fulke, an updated Lady Wishfort who

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<sup>38</sup>Compare XIII. 110 for a similar comment on the eighteenth-century comic novel:

But all was gentle and aristocratic  
 In this our party; polished, smooth, and cold  
 As Phidian forms cut out of marble Attic.  
 There now are no Squire Westerns, as of old  
 And our Sophias are not so emphatic,  
 But fair as then, or fairer to behold:  
 We have no accomplished blackguards like Tom Jones  
 But gentlemen in stays, as stiff as stones.

<sup>39</sup>The repeated negative implications of social polish might also make one uneasy about the comparison of Aurora to a gemstone--a highly polished piece of nature.

is even more direct than her predecessor in pursuing her sexual goals. After making "a dead set/At Lord Augustus Fitz-Plantagenet" (XIV. 42) she turns to Juan with sufficient openness and determination to alarm Lady Adeline and annoy Lord Augustus. Yet even she is not drawn completely in the lost comic mode which Byron claims to mourn. We see her only by glimpses; though her physical presence is strongly evoked (we are told that she is "a fine and somewhat full-blown blonde" [XIV. 94] who appears to Juan "In full, voluptuous, but *not* o'ergrown bulk" [XVI. 123]), we have no sense of her beyond that. In a very striking departure from her Restoration models, she almost never speaks in the poem. On the very few occasions that she does, the subject is trivial--such as her polite response to Lord Henry's question about her husband's gout (XVI. 34). The narrator informs us that her "mind/If she had any, was upon her face" (XVI. 94) and shows her seducing Juan in complete silence, in her disguise as the black friar. In Byron's world, the sharp-tongued seductresses of the Restoration are reduced to the silent and purely physical amorality of the Duchess.

Society's increasing "polish" is not the only reason that Byron gives for the failure of his conventional comic models. In an extended reference to Cervantes, he suggests another, even more devastating reason for his abandonment of the spirit of older comedy:

I am but a mere spectator  
And gaze where'er the palace or the hovel is,

Much in the mode of Goethe's Mephistopheles;  
But neither love nor hate in much excess;

Though 't was not once so. If I sneer sometimes,  
It is because I cannot well do less,  
And now and then it also suits my rhyme.  
I should be very willing to redress  
Men's wrongs, and rather check than punish crimes,  
Had not Cervantes, in that too true tale  
Of Quixote, shown how all such efforts fail.

.. ..  
Cervantes smiled Spain's chivalry away;  
A single laugh demolished the right arm  
Of his own country;--seldom since that day  
Has Spain had heroes. While Romance could charm,  
The World gave ground before her bright array;  
And therefore have his volumes done such harm,  
That all their glory, as a composition,  
Was dearly purchased by his land's perdition.  
(XIII. 7-8, 11)

Here, Byron is suggesting that by mocking a system of conventions, comedy risks replacing that system with something worse instead of reforming it. This belief, which is also implicit in his later complaint that since Congreve's day society has been smoothed into boring uniformity, seems to have been reasonably commonplace during his day. Hazlitt explains the reasons for what he sees as his era's dearth of comedy in terms very similar to those of Byron's lament that the "polished horde" of society has made comedy in Congreve's manner impossible:

[it is] because so many excellent comedies have been written that there are none written at present. Comedy

naturally wears itself out--destroys the very food on which it lives; and by constantly and successfully exposing the follies and weakness of mankind to ridicule in the end leaves itself nothing worth laughing at....men seeing their most striking peculiarities and defects, pass in gay review before them learn either to avoid or conceal them....We are drilled into a sort of stupid decorum, and forced to wear the same dull uniform of outward appearance" ("On the Comic Writers of the Last Century").

Lamb also agrees with Byron that the "Comedy of manners is quite extinct," and in "On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century" argues that his generation's avoidance of earlier drama is an unfortunate concomitant of its outward moral improvement.

This worry about the dangerous ramifications of comedy is very close to Eco's argument that humorous writing starkly reveals both its own pointless dependence upon arbitrary framing systems and the hollowness of those frames--except, of course, that Eco sees these subversive effects of humor as being positive, while Byron's narrator claims to be frightened by their cost. It is precisely because Cervantes "makes us smile" at his hero's attempt "'gainst odds to fight his guerdon" (XIII. 9) and to observe the laws of Romance that those laws crumbled. Unlike more traditional comedy, where we laugh at an individual's attempts to break social rules before he or she finally becomes a participant in an ongoing social order or the harbinger of a new one, in Don Quixote, according to both Eco and Byron, we laugh at an



individual vainly trying to observe social laws which no longer have--and perhaps never had--a justification for existing. As an author demonstrates the pointlessness of observing certain laws by showing characters foolishly or pointlessly observing them to the letter, the society or segment of society which those laws justified erodes, the good along with the bad. Then, when there is "nothing worth laughing at" in society, comedy must turn upon itself for material, mocking literature, not life, and, presumably, eventually undermining and eroding its own laws just as it did those of the social codes it previously mocked. The result is that comedy eventually becomes impossible to write. Unlimited subversion of conventions will never bring freedom from all conventional structures or demands, Byron implies in this rather pessimistic passage; if ever all arbitrary codes and systems were mocked and exposed, comedy would only leave for itself a still worse prison--that of silence, once there is nothing left to write about.

Yet despite Byron's alleged concern about the dangerously subversive potential of comedy and his arguments that comedy is outmoded in any case, he *is* writing a comic poem. Don Juan is not an act of wanton literary destruction; despite a number of critical arguments that the poem is fundamentally nihilistic, many readers have seen in it a movement towards affirmation--however subdued that

affirmation might be.<sup>40</sup> Byron himself denies nihilism--admittedly in a characteristically ambiguous manner--at at least one point in the poem, observing that "He who doubts all things nothing can deny" (XV. 88). The important question to answer, then, becomes that of what remains after the poem has subsumed--or shown the insufficiency of--the generic models which it is using to structure itself. One can begin to answer that question by returning briefly to Curran, who opens his discussion of Don Juan by quoting Byron's description of Norman Abbey:

Huge halls, long galleries, spacious chambers, joined  
By no quite lawful marriage of the arts,  
Might shock a connoisseur; but when combined,  
Formed a whole, which, irregular in parts,  
Yet left a grand impression on the mind,  
At least of those whose eyes are in their hearts:  
We gaze upon a giant for his stature,  
Nor judge at first if all be true to nature. (XIII. 67)

Curran, seeing this stanza as a metaphoric description of the poem itself, picks up on its imagery to explain his conception of how Don Juan works:

...this stanza emphasizes...Byron's equal awareness of generic mixture: if his epic is unique, he suggests, it is largely because of its spurning of the normal

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<sup>40</sup>Wilkie, who calls Don Juan Byron's "epic of negation," and Ridenour are among the most prominent of the critics who argue that the poem is nihilistic. Kernan and Beatty have, as mentioned above, both argued that the poem ends on a note of affirmation; similarly, Helen Gardner argues that all of the more serious elements of Don Juan are subsumed under its overriding comic vision (The London Magazine 58:vii (1958) 64).

conventions of literary wedlock. Love and matrimony, as Byron never ceases to say, are incompatible, and his poem, to preserve its liberty--to see with its heart--will witness 'no quite lawful marriage of the arts.'  
(191)

It is the energy of the "grand impression" left by Don Juan which makes the poem attractive despite its ongoing examination and rejection of existing comic models. Other critics have commented on this aspect of the poem; Anne Mellor, for example, observes that it is unified by a continual process of falling and rising, one in which people or things continually "fall to rise again--in a never-ending phoenix motion."<sup>41</sup> It is through this "phoenix-like" motion, Mellor suggests, that the poem avoids both despair and nihilism, constructing new visions out of the remnants of the old.

It is, of course, the narrator who provides this movement, and it is to the narrator that one must return at this point. He is, like Elia and the narrator of Liber Amoris, a writer who is also a reader and who shapes his narrative according to his own past experience of fiction and literature. The poem is an act of exploration, not just of destruction. Michael Cooke argues that Byron's poetry does not merely attack previous styles of comic writing but rather stakes out territory for itself somewhere between the Restoration fascination with manners ("what we do") and the

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<sup>41</sup>Anne K. Mellor, English Romantic Irony (Cambridge: U of Harvard P, 1979) 64.

Augustan preoccupation with morals ("what we are"). Ultimately, he suggests, Byron's concern in the English cantos in particular is epistemological ("what we know") (Cooke, 138-39). This argument suggests that there is something of positive value going on in the poem--that far from being a "satire manqué" (to use Cooke's phrase), Don Juan is a work which, in the English cantos at least, deliberately explores the reasons that older comic forms no longer work and sets out to discover what can be salvaged from them.

For Byron, the salvageable elements of comedy seem to be its verve and energy, qualities which remain attractive and viable in their own right, even if comedy's traditional "ends"--which Glen assumes readers both expect and demand--have become untenable. The narrator makes a virtue of his unflagging energy and resulting inability to concentrate on any one target; he claims that his inconsistency is a positive quality, since "If a writer should be quite consistent/How could he possibly show things existent?" (XV. 87). Far from writing a poem which simply denies the value of the conventions that it draws upon, Byron demonstrates that some degree of vigour and attraction still survives in comic verse. Admittedly, this demonstration is not altogether satisfactory; for all the appeal of its energy and the resulting "grand impression" left by it, Don Juan does not give a truly satisfactory response to the very large question of where other comic writers of the era can take

comedy, once the insufficiency of its traditional techniques have been revealed. Verve and the energy of inconsistency can only be taken so far, and in Don Juan, Byron seems to move as far in that direction as it is possible for a writer to go. There is, beneath the surface of the poem, a tacit agreement with Hazlitt that "comedy wears itself out," since Don Juan, splendid as it is in its own right, undermines past styles of comedy without providing any hints of a new direction that the genre can take. A massive tour de force, Don Juan is ultimately inimitable--an exploration which discards, rather than simply displays what it discovers, leaving little if any safe ground from which other writers could launch further explorations. The energy that carries Don Juan itself beyond nihilism, powerful as it is, is not sufficient to reclaim comedy in general from the limitations which Byron so relentlessly explores and exposes throughout his poem.

## Chapter Four

### Framing and Freedom: Blake's Experimental Vision

Many anecdotes could be related in which there is sufficient evidence to prove that many of his [Blake's] Eccentric speeches, were thrown forth more as a piece of sarcasm, upon the Enquirer, than from his real opinion....if [a] question were put for idle curiosity, he retaliated by such an Eccentric answer, as left the Enquirer more afield than Ever.

Frederick Tatham,  
Life of Blake

Fun I love but too much Fun is of all things the most loathsom. Mirth is better than Fun & Happiness is better than Mirth.

William Blake,  
Letter to Dr. Trusler,  
August 23, 1799

I hate scarce smiles    I love laughing

William Blake,  
. Annotations to Lavater

The leap from Byron to Blake is undoubtedly a large one. Byron, an urbanely skeptical aristocrat, was shaped by a very different cultural and social milieu than Blake, a middle-class artisan and self-proclaimed prophet. The poets' undeniable differences in background and outlook are, if anything, exaggerated by critical tendencies to weigh down

Blake's work with volumes of learned commentary. The later prophecies are among the most difficult and obscure poetry in the English language, explicable only in terms of Blake's esoteric system of personal mythology. While the earlier work presents far fewer difficulties, most studies of Blake tend to look at it retrospectively, in terms of the elaborate mythic structure of the long prophecies.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, Byron's poetry seems almost overly accessible--rather a display of the author's "conversational facility" than an exploration of serious philosophical concepts. Yet for all the major and incontestable differences between the two poets, at least some of their work shares an interest in comedy. In particular, Blake's early, unpublished notebook pieces display a strong interest in comic form, an interest revealed in their trenchant mockery of what Blake apparently perceives as the frivolity and emptiness of earlier styles of comic poetry. Yet Blake, unlike his younger contemporary, is not content to reveal the "insufficiency" or limitations of conventional comic form and then stop; as one turns from his unpublished works to his early published writing, up to and culminating in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, one finds him experimenting with new methods of expressing his comic

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<sup>1</sup>This tendency is a result of earlier studies of Blake, notably Frye's Fearful Symmetry, which argue that Blake's mythic structure was fully worked out and substantially unchanged from the beginning of his career. More recent studies have debated this conclusion, however; in particular, Anne Mellor argues as one of the main theses of her Blake's Human Form Divine that Blake's mythology was in a state of evolution throughout his career.

vision, ones which draw upon and juxtapose elements of numerous existing genres of comedy and satire within a frame which questions and ultimately subverts them. The results might be no less idiosyncratic and inimitable than Don Juan, but they are at least an attempt to create a new comic idiom, an idiom which, unlike Byron's, does more than relentlessly unveil the limitations of the old.

Of course, before moving on to discuss Blake's use of comedy, one needs to do more than simply assert its existence. Blake the comic writer has been submerged by Blake the Mystic, Blake the Revolutionary, Blake the Artist, and even Blake the Unreadable Crank. The man who loved fun and who delighted in leading people astray with deliberately assumed eccentricity has been lost beneath the received notion of Blake as an often incomprehensible visionary. Readings which stress his Romantic affinities are especially likely to understate comic aspects of his work,<sup>2</sup> which were profoundly shaped by eighteenth-century ideas. Even though Blake read (and expressed somewhat ambivalent admiration for) Wordsworth, he was a full generation older; it is worth remembering that Lyrical Ballads appeared several years after Blake had completed what is now his most familiar work.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Critics interested in establishing Blake's work as a self-contained philosophical corpus, such as Frye and Bloom, and critics who approach Blake from a historical angle--most notably Erdman--almost invariably comment on his satiric content, and sometimes on comic aspects of his work.

<sup>3</sup>Milton (c. 1810) and Jerusalem (c. 1815-20) are his most important post-Wordsworthian works.



While Wordsworth and Coleridge, accurately or not, were claiming to make a sharp break with earlier literature, Blake seems more content to employ the framework of inherited forms and experiment within its limits. In this respect, it is helpful to read him in the context of his forerunners as well as of his followers, even though his canonization as a Romantic writer encourages one to do only the latter.

Reading Blake's work as a reflection of eighteenth-century ideas and values is not a new idea, of course; David Erdman and Mark Schorer are among the most important critics who have done so, and their books on the subject are still standards of Blake scholarship.<sup>4</sup> Yet this approach tends to be neglected in favour of ones which, deliberately or not, present Blake's work as an idiosyncratic and almost completely self-referential system. As Erdman observed in 1974, "not merely the difficulty of the task [reading Blake historically], but the sophisticated tradition through which Blake has come to us and which still directs one's attention largely another way, have thus far prevented its being attempted in any thorough fashion."<sup>5</sup> Of course, Erdman's concern is Blake's use of historical material as subject matter, not his use of eighteenth-century literary form, but

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<sup>4</sup>See David V. Erdman, William Blake: Prophet Against Empire, (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1954, rev. ed. 1967) and Mark Schorer, William Blake: The Politics of Vision (New York: Vintage Books, 1959).

<sup>5</sup>David Erdman, "Blake: The Historical Approach," in English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. M.H. Abrams, (New York: Oxford UP, 1975) 75.

his remarks do remind us that Blake was a man of the late eighteenth-century as well as of the early nineteenth, one who was very much engaged with the issues, literary and otherwise, of his day.

Other critics have explored Blake's literary debts to the eighteenth century in some detail. Josephine Miles and Alicia Ostriker have provided us with close studies of Blake's language and prosody and both have concluded that particularly in his early work Blake was deeply influenced by the poetic styles of his predecessors. Miles, who has made detailed studies of Blake's vocabulary, argues that rather than being like that of the later Romantic poets,

Blake's language [was] not only the common language of eighteenth-century religious song, pastoral, and panegyric, but also the rough and "particular" language of social satire....he faithfully used its vigor and scope of scene and anatomy, its sublimely vast, yet satirically particular emotional survey.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, Ostriker observes that Blake's metre and prosody are indebted to the pre-Romantic poets and comments that:

he extrapolated from what he encountered. However great his isolation in later years, the attractive legend of a Blake who sprang full blown from a one hundred percent Philistine eighteenth-century brow cannot too often be countered. Blake's sources of inspiration must be admitted, and his debts and similarities to others acknowledged.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Josephine Miles, "The Sublimity of William Blake," in Eras and Modes in English Poetry (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1964; reprinted 1976) 96.

<sup>7</sup>Alicia Ostriker, Vision and Verse in William Blake

Since Ostriker is primarily interested in demonstrating Blake's originality and his ability to transform source material, her stress on the importance of his eighteenth-century influences is particularly striking.

None of this commentary on Blake's debts to his predecessors ties him directly to a comic sensibility, but it does provide a starting point for a study of his comedy and the way in which he uses established comic forms. At the very least, placing Blake in his eighteenth-century context helps us to realize that turning to Blake in a study of comic writers is not as odd a move as it might initially seem. He was shaped by the literary culture which Byron looks back to in his comedy; moreover, Blake was much closer politically and socially to Bage and to Richard Lovell Edgeworth--who seems to have entirely shaped his daughter's thinking--than he was to any of the Romantic poets with whom he is usually grouped. They moved in the same middle class radical circles and shared many acquaintances, even if they did not know one another personally. Bage certainly knew some, and possibly many, members of the Birmingham Lunar Society, an organization which included Erasmus Darwin, Thomas Day, Joseph Priestley, and R.L. Edgeworth. Blake knew Darwin, admired Day, whom he might also have known personally, and probably knew Priestley. Blake also seems to have known the radical novelist Thomas Holcroft (who reviewed Bage very

favourably) fairly well, as he engraved the illustrations for The Wit's Magazine while Holcroft was its editor.<sup>8</sup>

This association with The Wit's Magazine is itself interesting, since it provides us with a direct tie between Blake and late eighteenth-century popular comedy--even if one can argue about how close that tie actually was. Blake's connection with the magazine was professional, and it is conceivable, though very unlikely, that he merely engraved designs to order and never so much as saw the finished product.<sup>9</sup> Yet we know from the comments on fashion in An Island in the Moon that Blake paid fairly close attention to the fashion magazines that he was making engravings for around the same time, and there is no reason to suppose that he was less interested in comic literature than women's fashion. Moreover, the frontispiece--a depiction of the Temple of Mirth--was designed by Thomas Stothard, a long-time associate and frequent collaborator of Blake's, so we can speculate that Blake may have had some say in the design, or, at the very least, did not strongly disapprove of it.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>For much more detailed information on Blake's connection with the radical élite of the time, see Schorer 133-166 and Erdman, Prophet Against Empire 33-55.

<sup>9</sup>Like so much else about Blake's life, little but the bare fact of his connection with The Wit's Magazine is known. Yet as Schorer suggests (139), the fact that Blake ceased working for the magazine the month after Holcroft did hints at some personal involvement with the project through Holcroft.

<sup>10</sup>Again, there is no conclusive evidence one way or another. Blake did turn against Stothard later, but there is no indication that their relationship was anything but amicable in 1784.

Whether or not Blake approved of the frontispiece that he engraved, the plate is a useful indication of which writers were considered, at that time and in that milieu, to embody the comic spirit. The engraving shows the goddess Mirth seated on a dais, which is surrounded by enshrined busts of Sterne, Swift, Voltaire, Rabelais, and Fielding. Behind her are pictures of Falstaff and of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. Mirth is not the comparatively grave figure that Addison uses as a counterbalance to laughter, either; she is laughing heartily at a book which she is reading, and there is a man seated at her feet who has apparently collapsed from laughter. Behind him is a group of men laughing uproariously and holding their sides, while in the foreground, a woman demurely hides her amusement behind her fan. This engraving does not prove that Blake knew or admired any or all of the writers mentioned in it; in fact, we know from other writings that he strongly disapproved of Voltaire's skepticism. However, it does demonstrate that Blake's radical circle had a clear sense of working within a comic tradition, one which was somewhat different from that of more "refined" circles. The conservative Augustans Dryden and Pope are notably absent from the temple, as are the genteel Addison and Steele. Moreover, the engraving reminds us that when Blake places Mirth above Fun in his letter to Trusler, he may well have a much more rollicking concept in mind than that developed by the periodical writers early in the century. The vocabulary is the same, but the meaning has

quite probably shifted.

Speculating about Blake's attitude towards and use of comedy on the basis of the work of his fellow radicals is not, on its own, particularly fruitful. There is also evidence of such interest in his own work, however, most clearly in the sketches in his Notebook, produced sporadically from 1787 to about 1818. The comic pieces in the Notebook, brief and rough as they are, suggest that like Byron after him, Blake had an acute sense that popular, established genres of comic verse had serious limitations. A brief parody of Pope, for example, suggests Blake's impatience with what he seems to have considered the superficiality of both style and content in the polite comic writing of the previous generation:

Imitation of Pope A Compliment to the Ladies  
Wondrous the Gods more wondrous are the Men  
More Wondrous Wondrous still the Cock & Hen  
More wondrous still the Table Stool & Chair  
But Ah More wondrous still the Charming Fair<sup>11</sup>

The verse is not great parody--in fact, we would probably not guess that Pope was its object if Blake had not announced the fact--but it does hint that Blake thought that one of the

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<sup>11</sup>William Blake, Blake's Complete Poetry and Prose, ed. David Erdman, commentary by Harold Bloom (New York: Anchor Books, rev. ed., 1982) 506; see also Blake's Notebook, ed. David Erdman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973) 37. All further references to the Notebook will be indicated in the text by an N followed by a page number, and all further references to Erdman's edition of the poetry will be indicated by an E followed by a page number. The quotations will follow Blake's highly eccentric use of capitals and punctuation.

major strands of Augustan comic poetry was irretrievably banal. Other comic genres popular in the earlier years of the eighteenth century receive similar treatment as Blake draws upon them while writing poetry with deliberately flat diction, plodding metre, and frivolous subject matter. For example, the Notebook opens with the scatological verses "When Klopstock England Defied," (E500-501, N1) a brief mock-heroic poem in which the mockery far outweighs the almost non-existent heroism. The opening lines raise expectations of a literary "battle" between Blake and an upstart pretender ("When Klopstock England defied/Uprose terrible Blake in his pride"), but Blake swiftly and amusingly dashes them in the grotesque account that follows.<sup>12</sup> Other verses in the Notebook comically subvert more obscure genres of eighteenth-century poetry, such as epigrams and epitaphs. While no longer familiar as comic writing, these genres were then popular as displays of wit; notably, The Wit's Magazine had regular columns of both while Blake was working for it.<sup>13</sup> The conventional epitaph could be either serious or comic;

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<sup>12</sup>Of course, Blake's scatological humour is not particularly innovative. At least two of the writers enshrined in the Temple of Mirth--Swift and Rabelais--are noted for the scatological emphasis of their work. One here sees Blake placing himself firmly in their tradition even as he mangles the more refined mock-heroic style of Dryden and Pope.

<sup>13</sup>To a twentieth-century reader, epitaphs may seem an odd and esoteric form, but they attracted a great deal of interest in the eighteenth century. Pope is probably the best-known practitioner of the genre; Johnson wrote an essay on epitaphs in general and another on Pope's in particular. As late as 1810-12, Wordsworth wrote a series of three essays on the subject.

The Wit's Magazine seemed to be particularly delighted by punning ones, such as one in the first issue for a Mrs. Elizabeth Not: "Not born, Not Dead, Not Christen'd, Not begot:/Lo, here she lies, that was, and that was Not...." Later issues feature similar epitaphs for people named Jack Sullen and Richard Quick. Blake's epitaphs, in contrast to the elaborate wit or playfulness more typical of the comic examples of the genre, are bluntly straightforward: "Come knock your heads against this stone/For sorrow that poor John Thompson's gone," or "I was buried near this dike/That my friends may weep as much as they like" (E503, N37). Here we see Blake taking a form which had been elaborately formalized and calling attention to the laboured artificiality by reducing it to its essentials. Ironically, his epitaphs are comic precisely because they tell people to be sorrowful, instead of artfully attempting to evoke sorrow, sympathy, or admiration for the dead. The deceased themselves become negligible. Blake tells us nothing about them, not even providing a name in the second example, which, according to Johnson, violates the cardinal principle of the genre: "An epitaph, and a history of a nameless hero, are equally absurd," he proclaims; "the virtues and qualities so recounted in either are scattered at the mercy of fortune to be appropriated by guess."<sup>14</sup> In Blake's hands, these virtues

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<sup>14</sup>See Samuel Johnson, "Pope," in Lives of the English Poets: Prior, Congreve, Blackmore, Pope, (London: Cassell & Company, Limited, 1889) 180.



and qualities are hopelessly scattered. The epitaphs become mere excuses for the indulgence of easy displays of sensibility, and are sardonically stripped of any of the individualizing content that is at the heart of most examples of the genre, comic or serious.

Blake's treatment of epigrams is similarly critical. In one of its most familiar forms, the epigram is used to express an idea in a manner that is simultaneously concise and roundabout. Language conceals as much as it reveals, at least on first reading. If the epigram is a compliment, it disguises itself as abuse; if it is an attack, it clothes itself in the language of seeming praise. In this respect, the epigram is a more formal version of the deceptively casual art of raillery, which was a popular and much-analyzed form of wit at the time.<sup>15</sup> Even those epigrams designed for a popular audience use the veil of elaborately conventional language, as one can see by turning again to The Wit's Magazine and taking a typical example from the first issue:

Belinda has such wond'rous charms  
'Tis heaven to lie within her arms;  
And she's so charitably given  
She wishes all mankind in heaven

Blake's epigrams, in contrast, are as direct and blunt as his epitaphs. At most, he employs simple paradox, such as when he writes of his sometime friend and patron Hayley, "Thy

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<sup>15</sup>For a discussion of the theory and practice of raillery in the eighteenth century, see John M. Bullitt, "Swift's Rules of Raillery," in Veins of Humor, ed. Harry Levin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1972) 93-108.

friendship oft has made my heart to ake/Do be my Enemy for  
 Friendship's sake" (E506, N37). Other epigrams are more  
 direct, scurrilous, and even potentially libelous. (For  
 example, "The Sussex Men are Noted Fools/And weak is their  
 brain pan/I wonder if H[aines?] the painter/Is not a Sussex  
 Man" [E506, N24].) Many of them are direct attacks on a  
 number of Blake's friends and associates, such as Hayley,  
 Flaxman, Stothard, and Cromek; any praise is faint indeed:

The only man that eer [sic] I knew  
 Who did not make me almost spew  
 Was Fuseli he was both Turk & Jew  
 And so dear Christian Friends how do you do

(E507, N50)

These brief verses are amusing because of the shock of their  
 unabashed vitriol, if for nothing else. Yet for a reader  
 familiar with the polished phrasing of more traditional  
 epigrams, their comedy also lies in their cavalier dismissal  
 of the niceties of form, and in Blake's disruption of one's  
 expectations of subtle, delicate wit.

Of course, these epigrams are from a private notebook,  
 roughly written, and clearly never intended for publication.  
 One cannot use them to draw any large conclusions about the  
 direction of Blake's art. Yet such ephemera, trivial as they  
 are in themselves, do provide valuable evidence of Blake's  
 interest in the limitations of individual genres within the  
 larger field of comedy. Yet his interest in this writing was  
 not confined to the brief notebook parodies of it; in the  
 longer--but still fragmentary--Island in the Moon Blake goes

a step farther in his exploration of comic writing. The work is an odd little piece, one which juxtaposes a number of different styles of comedy in such a way that it resists definition according to any traditional system of categorization. Although it has often been described as a piece of satiric prose, the precise style and direction of that satire has proved singularly difficult to define. Northrop Frye, perhaps the first critic to give it serious attention, sees it as being of the same kind as Tristram Shandy and Ulysses, commenting that "Slight as it is, the Island in the Moon is one of the few connecting links between these two works." Yet Bloom, even though he accords An Island in the Moon only a passing glance, implies that it has a more comic than satiric tone by categorizing it with Peacock and Sterne. Martha England turns from literature to popular theatre in her study of the work, and makes a convincing argument that Blake was strongly influenced by Samuel Foote's parodic improvisational theatre. Finally, in a full-length article about possible sources for the piece, Robert Gleckner expands the range of both comic and satiric models for it by pointing to Butler, Prior, Churchill, and Carey as significant influences.<sup>16</sup> This varied list of

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<sup>16</sup>Northrop Frye, Fearful Symmetry (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1947) 193; Harold Bloom, Blake's Apocalypse (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1963) 23; Martha England, "Apprenticeship at the Haymarket?" in Blake's Visionary Forms Dramatic, eds. David V. Erdman and John E. Grant (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1970) 3-29; Robert Gleckner, "Blake and Satire," in The Wordsworth Circle VIII (Autumn, 1977) 311-326.

possible sources and influences, which could probably be considerably lengthened, is significant, simply because it is so extensive. The Island is a short work--in Erdman's edition it runs just over fifteen pages--and an admittedly minor one. Bringing the names of so many very important--and very different--writers into the reading of a fragmentary draft suggests the impossibility of assuming that because the work is brief and contains some satire, its form is unproblematically satiric.

The Island is very much a pastiche; its strength lies in its resistance to traditional categories of comedy and satire. When Stanley Gardner criticizes the work because its "satire is neither totally destructive...nor creative in its effect"<sup>17</sup> he is missing the point by reading the work as a singleminded criticism of a few individuals located in a very specific time and place. If the piece has a point at all--and the question is debatable--it clearly does not lie in a straightforward satiric denunciation of Blake's circle under assumed names.<sup>18</sup> Rather, it lies in Blake's comic juxtaposition of incompatible attitudes and characters. The Island's similarities to Peacock's comedy, rather than to the work of a more typically satiric writer, become apparent in

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<sup>17</sup>Stanley Gardener, Blake (New York: Arco Publishing Company, Inc., 1969) 62.

<sup>18</sup>Critics generally assume that the characters in An Island in the Moon are based on members of Blake's circle, but positive identification is a matter of guesswork. See Erdman, Prophet Against Empire 93-98, 123-4, for tentative identifications of most of them.

the first paragraph, as Blake describes the initial gathering of characters:

[Mrs Gimblet was] seated & seemd to listen with great attention while the Antiquarian seemd to be talking of virtuous cats, but it was not so. she was thinking of the shape of her eyes & mouth & he was thinking of his eternal fame the three Philosophers at this time were each endeavouring to conceal his laughter, (not at them but) at his own imaginations this was the situation of this improving company....(449)<sup>19</sup>

As in Peacock's works, we are presented with a number of characters, each happily oblivious to all of the others but maintaining his or her part in the illusion that they are gathered together for the sake of "improving ccompany." Far from providing a satiric norm, as someone must if the work is to be read as satire, the Philosophers are guilty of precisely the same sort of self-absorption as everyone else.

The illusion that the Island is a satire of the pseudo-intellectualism of bluestocking circles is thus quickly dispelled, since Blake provides no indication that in this world there is any "genuine" intelligentsia to show up the pretensions of the characters. If anything, the piece is a parody of bluestocking society, one in which we are amused by all characters and angered or disturbed by none. Moreover, the characters themselves are too hazily drawn to be effective satiric portraits; with the exceptions of Quid the

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<sup>19</sup>All references to An Island in the Moon are from Erdman's edition of Blake's works. Again, the lack of punctuation and capitalization follows Blake's practice.

Cynic, Inflammable Gass, and Steelyard, most of them are virtually indistinguishable from one another on a first or even second reading. We laugh not at the follies or vanities of individualized characters, but at the antic conversation, which wheels off from one direction to another with no apparent connection.

In addition to its use of parody, the Island is also notable for its playful games with language, as Blake, with a Lewis Carroll-like energy, creates elaborate chains of nonsense in passages such as Obtuse Angle's list of Apollo's attributes:

He was the God of Physic, Painting Perspective Geometry  
Geography Astronomy, Cookery, Chymistry Mechanics,  
Tactics Pathology Phraseology Theolog[y] Mythology  
Astrology Osteology, Somatology in short every art &  
science....(451)

Blake then sinks this passage a step deeper into meaninglessness when, a short while later, Aradobo transforms the list into a catalogue of Chatterton's accomplishments:

"Fissic Follogy, Pistinology, Aridology, Arography, Transmography, Phizography, Hogamy, HAtomy [sic], & hall that" (453). In a similarly comic misconstruction of language, Blake has Scopprell misread the title of one of Steelyard's books as "An Easy of Huming Understanding by John Lookye Gent." (456). One here laughs more at the clever punning than at the implicit but entirely undeveloped attack on Empirical philosophy. Blake thus presents us with several different types of comedy within a single frame; at one

point, the Island even slips from punning, parody, and satire to a brief evocation of social comedy, as Miss Gittipin contrasts herself with her friend, Miss Fillagreework,

[who] goes out in her coaches & her footman & her maids  
& Stormonts & Balloon hats & a pair of Gloves everyday &  
the sorrows of Werther & Robinsons & the Queen of  
Frances Puss colour & my cousin Gibble Gabble says  
that...I might as well be in a nunnery. (457)<sup>20</sup>

Here, Miss Gittipin sounds more like Burney's Miss Branghtons and other would-be fashion plates of society novels than she does like any of Sterne's or Peacock's characters.

As An Island in the Moon jumps unpredictably from one type of comedy to another, Blake creates a highly unstable and completely uncategorizable piece of writing. What one has in the Island is not a coherent satire even in the seemingly incoherent manner of Sterne. There is no controlling, unifying voice such as that of Tristram or Yorick; Quid the Cynic, usually read as a caricature of Blake himself, is as subject to comic attack as any of the other characters, and comes across as an amusingly gruff but somewhat self-important figure who is far from being completely admirable or even likeable. Even the narrative voice does not win any high degree of confidence, since it is at least once clearly and deliberately unreliable. After describing how Inflammable Gass deliberately sets his own

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<sup>20</sup>Sorrows of Werther hats, balloon hats, and Robinson gowns were all fashionable in late 1784, as was Marie Antoinette's favourite shade of puce. See Erdman, Prophet Against Empire 95-96.

hair on fire and runs about the room, the narrator retracts his claim and announces "No No he did not I was only making a fool of you" (453). Having been made a fool of once, the reader is understandably wary of accepting the narrator's more extreme claims in the future.

An Island in the Moon is not simply satire, or parody, or any other specific type of comic writing; rather, it is a work which comically juxtaposes several different types of writing in a manner that defamiliarizes and in some ways undermines them. For example, Aradobo's malapropisms do not make us laugh at him and his pretensions but rather at the nonsense language itself. We see too little of him to have any interest in him as a character, and so his word games exist purely as games, divorced from their possible use as and roots in satire. The instability of the work as a whole alters the way we read the more specialized comic forms such as satire or parody which appear within it. Blake here moves beyond the simple play with form exhibited in the Notebook pieces; instead of simply mocking his literary models, he experiments with ways in which they can be distorted or altered by the context in which they appear.

In An Island, Blake is experimenting with a technique for drawing attention to the conventions of comic writing which differs markedly from any employed by the writers already discussed. Instead of having a self-conscious narrator comment on his own stylistic devices, Blake jars the reader into an awareness of the artificiality of those



devices by juxtaposing several styles of writing within a discordant framing story. This technique is most evident in the songs that the Islanders sing, since they, more than the individual speeches, can be detached from their context. Of course, some of the songs, such as the amusing but unambitious "Little Phebus" are completely appropriate to their context, but most of them are not comic in the same way that their frame--the Island as a whole--is. The frame disrupts our reading of those individual sections, flattening out satire, making banality amusing, or distorting the object of irony. The nursery rhyme "The Frog he would a-wooing ride," for example, is neither particularly amusing nor interesting, but it is made comic by Miss Gittipin's garbling of it and, more importantly, by its context, as we laugh at Scopprell's naive admiration. Obtuse Angle's song about the benevolent Dr. Sutton, which is ostensibly a serious paean to charity, provides a more complex example of Blake's use of this technique. The song is made appropriately comic not only by its inappropriately parodic opening lines ("To be, or not to be/Of great capacity/Like Sir Isaac Newton/ Or Locke, or Dr. South") but also by its context. While the praise of Sutton's benevolence may be as complex and ironic as the praise of the "wise guardians of the poor" in "Holy Thursday" if one looks at the song on its own, (See Erdman, Prophet Against Empire 120-21), the light-hearted framing stanzas disguise that complexity and its uncomfortable implications. Moreover, as with most of the other songs, the Islanders'

reaction guides the reader's. Steelyard, delighted with it, has it sung over and over, much to the annoyance of everyone else, who finally shout him down and insist upon hearing something different. Amused by the raucous behaviour of the Islanders, readers are encouraged to forget the serious implications of the song itself. Similarly, the irony in Steelyard's sentimental and reactionary verses praising "Good English Hospitality," which follow this uproar, is undermined by the song's placement at the end of a chapter.<sup>21</sup> Instead of being given time to reflect upon it, the reader is whirled directly into the story of Inflammable Gass' mishap with Flogiston.

One can see a somewhat different interaction between the comic frame and the material within it in the overtly satirical songs sung by Quid. These songs are intended to be amusing but they are certainly not comic in the way that many of the others are. Quid's ideas are neither gentle nor laughably eccentric, as are those of the other characters, but are rather, as his name implies, cynical. "Hail Matrimony" is a caustic reply to the syrupy romance of

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<sup>21</sup>This song also has strong parodic elements, since the lament for vanished English hospitality was a recurrent motif in eighteenth-century literature. Most critics cite Fielding's "Roast Beef of Old England" as a source for the song, but one finds other examples of the form in Humphry Clinker and--closer to home for Blake--The Wit's Magazine. The April 1784 issue includes an account of an old-fashioned host who entertains with "a joint of meat and a pudding" followed by "a glass of good ale"; the December issue praises what it says is the outmoded tradition of beef-and-ale Christmas hospitality.

Steelyard's "As I Walked forth one May Morning"; "Old Corruption" is a hit at Sipsop's naïve praise of Jack Tearguts' surgical skill. Yet these songs do not make the work into a satire; one does not come away from the Island horrified by "Matrimony's Golden cage" or angered by the somewhat incoherent link that Quid draws between political reaction and surgical cruelty. Precisely because Quid's logic is incoherent, he cannot provide the normative voice required by satire. His speeches thus remain on the level of all the other songs or speeches in the piece--material to be laughed at, whatever the speaker's ostensible intent. His satire is disconnected from the rest of the work so that its function as satire is, to a great extent, nullified. Moreover, as with Obtuse Angle's unconscious irony in "To be, or not to be," Quid's very deliberate satire is further undermined by the raucous disputes which frame the songs. "Hail Matrimony," for example, is introduced by Quid's impatient dismissal of Sipsop's "Italian" song and followed by an indignant discussion:

Go & be hanged said Scopprell how can you have the face  
to make a game of Matrimony--[What you skipping flea how  
dare ye? Ill dash you through your chair says the Cynic  
This Quid (cries out Miss Gittipin) always spoils good  
company in this manner & its a shame] (460)<sup>22</sup>

This comically exaggerated argument, which blows over immediately, distracts the reader further from the cynical

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<sup>22</sup>The lines in brackets are cancelled in Blake's manuscript, but editors of An Island in the Moon invariably include them.

social commentary of the song itself.

These observations about the way that the frame shapes our response to the material help to explain what is probably the most interesting and notorious moment in the work--the point at which Obtuse Angle sings an early version of "Holy Thursday" and reduces the Islanders to a full fifteen minutes of silence. The traditional explanation, that the Islanders are stunned by their recognition and appreciation of great literature is not entirely plausible, since after "Holy Thursday" and two other songs from Innocence have been sung, the audience listens to Tilly Lally's coarse song about cricket with no apparent diminution of their enjoyment. The silence can more constructively be read as uncertainty about how one *should* react, a response which reinforces the reader's confusion. Readers are left off-balance, since up to this point context has encouraged them to read a number of heterogeneous works as comedy. When the Islanders make no attempt to "naturalize" "Holy Thursday" or the other Songs of Innocence so that they will fit in with the rest of their discourse--possibly, but not certainly, because they are unable to do so--we are left with nothing to guide our responses.<sup>23</sup> This hiatus does not negate the power of the

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<sup>23</sup>A reader approaching An Island in the Moon today will also be thrown off by the familiarity of the songs. Allowing for this reaction is unhistorical, but there is little reason to pretend that a reader can have an innocent reaction to "Holy Thursday." Interestingly, the familiarity of this poem produces the unintended result that the reader's surprise and uncertainty when suddenly confronted with "Holy Thursday" is at least as marked as is the Islanders'.

comic frame but rather emphasizes its strength. The bewilderment produced by not subduing the material to its frame is sufficient to disrupt the movement of the entire work, and so one is forced to recognize that one's reading of the individual poems in the Island is determined more by the material around them than the material in them. It is because of the context rather than any of the difficulties in the poems themselves that we are perplexed by them when they appear in the Island. The ironies of "Holy Thursday," which seem very evident when it is read as part of Songs of Innocence and Experience, become much more problematic when the song appears in: An Island in the Moon. Since we are unsure whether to take the song itself as a lyric rebuke to the often coarse comedy which has preceded it, or as a comic example of unconscious irony in the manner of Obtuse Angle's earlier "To be, or not to be," its subtlety collapses into ambiguity. As Mark Storey observes, "Holy Thursday" "stand[s] out so starkly against the prevailing tone of absurdity that [it] acquire[s] a strange resonance which Blake deliberately leaves hanging in the air" He adds:

characteristic of the piece as a whole, and of the songs within it, is the general lack of knowledge we have as to an appropriate response. We are subjected to a process of total disorientation. This is a technique Blake later tones down but never entirely discards....Irreverent humour can frame beautiful lyric utterances, simultaneously authenticating and

questioning that very lyricism.<sup>24</sup>

As we have seen, that "irreverent humour" also calls into question the various comic forms which Blake employs. Not only the lyricism of the Songs of Innocence but also their elements of irony--and the satire and parody of the other songs in the Island--are impossible to read simply as "straight" examples of that particular genre. Through his unexpected juxtapositions and use of inappropriate contexts, Blake disorients readers and frustrates their attempts to read the songs in a manner appropriate to the particular style of comic writing used in them. While one can identify several distinct types of comic and satiric writing in the Island, the work as a whole is a tacit exploration of the limitations of those individual genres rather than a reification of their distinctiveness.

While the works discussed in earlier chapters have tended to imply that an imprisoning rigidity characterizes the conventions of various genres of comedy, An Island in the Moon takes a somewhat different angle and suggests the malleability of those conventions. Even as one draws upon them, Blake implies, one can alter audience response to them by juxtaposing them with other, incompatible, types of comic writing. This "framing" technique calls attention to the structuring conventions just as effectively as do Bage's or Byron's self-conscious narrators, but gives a different

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<sup>24</sup>Mark Storey, Poetry and Humour from Cowper to Clough (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1979) 26.

emphasis to the procedure. Blake is interested not only in showing the limitations of the comic traditions which he has inherited, as is Byron, but also in finding methods of working beyond those limitations.

This discussion of Blake has focused so far on very minor works; as mentioned earlier, the notebook poems are mere sketches, certainly not intended to bear the weight of serious critical analysis. An Island in the Moon, provocative and entertaining as it may be, is a draft which Blake never completed and never revised, so one clearly cannot make extravagant claims about the tone and tenor of his work based solely on it. Yet looking at these early and minor works is useful, in that it reminds us of Blake's interest in comedy and helps us to hear the innovatively comic voice which gets lost in so much Blake criticism. His major works are either deceptively simple, as are Songs of Innocence and Experience, or tough and obscure philosophical statements, as are the later prophecies. In either case, one does not scrutinize them for latent traces of comedy; simple explication is a complex enough task, as the numerous books devoted to the subject indicate. Yet even though most critics ignore Blake's early interest in comic form, tacitly seeming to assume that it disappeared as he turned to the creation of his illuminated books, or at best look at his irony, there are some important continuities between his comic sketches and his finished poems. Frye, still one of the very few critics to stress the importance of Blake's

early works, comments that

The glint in the eye of the poet who wrote this [An Island in the Moon] never, of course, faded out; it is still there in The Everlasting Gospels and in the series of sketches called "Visionary Heads," both quite late. One may wonder, in fact, whether Blake's sense of the grotesque, of broad caricature and ribald parody, was really a minor quality, and good only for an occasional *tour de force*. (Frye, 193)

In fact, Frye suggests, Blake might actually be best classified not as a lyricist but as one of "the race of Rabelais and Apuleius."

Certainly, Blake's interest in the effects made possible by a deliberate disjunction between a frame and the material framed within it continues in his early illuminated works. The poetry in these books, beginning with Songs of Innocence and Experience, has a very literal, clearly definable frame--that of the illustrations surrounding the text. Not all of these illustrations are disorienting, of course; in many--perhaps most--of the plates of Innocence, the delicately pretty illustrations reinforce the childlike charm of the poetry. The deliberate simplicity of poems such as "Infant Joy," "Laughing Song," or "The Ecchoing Green" is emphasized by the pastel, pastoral images on the plates on which they appear.<sup>25</sup> At most, the plates will stress the "innocent" over the ironic reading of such complex poems as "Holy

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<sup>25</sup>The precise coloring varies from copy to copy; I have used the Dover edition facsimile of Copy B. (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1971).



Thursday" or "The Chimney Sweep," supporting the speakers' attempts to find beauty in their world and undercutting more sophisticated readers' attempts to discover irony. Both little Tom Dacre's visions of playing in angelic fields and the perception of the children in "Holy Thursday" as a powerful force of innocence are reinforced by the designs around them. Yet there is at least one very famous disjunction between poem and frame in these books; Experience's "Tyger," a grim evocation of horror and evil, is framed not by a drawing of a ravening beast but rather by a placid, innocuous-looking tiger which in some versions actually seems to have a rather lopsided grin on its face. Critics have argued about reasons for this incongruity at length, but one point seems incontestable. Blake could draw terrifying pictures if he wanted to, so a failure of draughtsmanship is not an adequate explanation. Whether we want to see the gulf between words and illustration as an indication of the fundamental innocence in all things, as Anne Mellor suggests,<sup>26</sup> or simply as irony directed against the poem's speaker, it seems clear that Blake is, in this plate at least, continuing to explore the effects made possible by a disjunction between a frame and the material being framed.

The Songs of Innocence and Experience, however interesting in themselves, do not represent a significant

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<sup>26</sup> Anne Mellor, Blake's Human Form Divine (Berkeley: U of California P, 1974) 65-66.

step in Blake's play with comic form. This play is far more marked--indeed it culminates in--the slightly later Marriage of Heaven and Hell, an odd work in which we find neither the deliberate simplicity of the Songs nor the deliberate obscurity of the major prophecies. Turning from An Island in the Moon to the Marriage is instructive, since there are some important similarities between the two works, despite their many obvious differences. Most importantly, as with the Island, critics have always conceded that The Marriage of Heaven and Hell has strong satiric elements but have been rather hazy about defining precisely what those elements are and their relationship to the work as a whole. Perhaps as a result, it has proved difficult to assign the Marriage to a particular genre. Frye, for example, calls it a modification of eighteenth-century satire (see pp. 193, 201), but he does not explain exactly how that satire has been modified. Bloom, taking a slightly different direction, uses one of Frye's terms and calls the work an "Anatomy," or, using more traditional nomenclature, a "Menippean satire." More recently, Leslie Tannenbaum has argued that the work is part of a genre which Benjamin Boyce called the "News from Hell" tradition.<sup>27</sup> A specialized form of satire, that genre

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<sup>27</sup>See Leslie Tannenbaum, "Blake's News from Hell: The Marriage of Heaven and Hell and the Lucianic Tradition," ELH 43 (1976) 74-99, and Benjamin Boyce, "News from Hell: Satiric Communications with the Nether World in English Writing of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," PMLA 58 (1943) 402-37. Boyce includes a bibliography of approximately two hundred works in the tradition.

features a narrator who goes to the underworld and relays back the usually caustic observations of its inhabitants on the state of affairs in the mortal world. Tannenbaum accordingly places The Marriage of Heaven and Hell in the school of Lucianic rather than Menippean satire.<sup>28</sup> These readings are not totally divergent from one another, but they are different enough to make it impossible to reconcile them completely. Since they are all reasoned and convincing, one can begin to see the difficulties which arise from any attempt to classify the work simply as a satire, difficulties much like those facing a reader of the Island. A satirist whose object of satire is impossible to pin down with any accuracy and whose style of satire is so allusive that careful and reliable readers classify it very differently is clearly a writer whose work is at least as complex in form as in subject matter. Like Blake's early, unfinished, or unpolished works, the Marriage is, among other things, a comic exploration of the limits of conventional generic forms.

There are several reasons that The Marriage of Heaven and Hell resists readings as any type of conventional satire, some obvious, some more subtle. First of all, and most obviously, like Blake's other major works, it is almost unique in English literature in that it is a mixture of

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<sup>28</sup>Of course, these two forms of satire are not entirely distinct from one another. Bakhtin states that one aspect of the Menippea grows out of what he calls Dialogues of the Dead (See Problems with Dostoyevsky's Poetics 116).

painting and writing, neither element of which can be divorced from the other without diminishing the work as a whole. This statement is not incontestable, of course; critics inevitably give more attention to one aspect of the work than the other, and some, such as Gardner, entirely deny the importance of the illustrations to the poetry (Gardner 6). Yet the trend recently has been to consider the work as a linked phenomenon, a type of "composite" art in which the illustrations are not mere extraneous designs but an integral part of the work which frames, enhances, or--in many cases--ironically undercuts the text itself.<sup>29</sup> Like Sterne, although in a very different manner, Blake experiments with the appearance of the text on the page to unsettle the reader. Admittedly, this "unsettling" occurs only if one reads The Marriage of Heaven and Hell in the original or in a complete reproduction, and most of the recent editions of Blake feature, at best, one or two colour reproductions of the more elaborate plates. Yet while it is undeniable that The Marriage is a great poem even when it appears in typescript with no illustrations, it is equally undeniable that the experience of reading it as typescript is very different from that of reading it in the form in which Blake originally printed it.<sup>30</sup> As it originally appeared, the

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<sup>29</sup>See in particular Mellor, Blake's Human Form Divine and W.J.T. Mitchell, Blake's Composite Art (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978).

<sup>30</sup>Of course, analysis of the effect of the Marriage's art is tricky, since the complete poem exists in nine versions, no two of which are identical, and some of which

Marriage is an extremely complex work of art, in which the illustrations at some times complement and at others undermine the more obvious satiric elements of the written text.

The subversive aspects of Blake's work go beyond the simple fact that he makes the illustrations an integral part of the text, however. In fact, calling the drawings on his plates "illustrations" is somewhat misleading, since they do not invariably--or even often--reflect what is going on in the text on that particular plate. In some cases, the artwork may refer to a passage that appears earlier or later in the work. The painting of Leviathan on Plate 20, for example, illustrates a passage on Plate 18. In other cases, the illustration may have only a symbolic connection with anything on the plate or in the book itself. The book's final illustration, that of Nebuchadnezzar, may suggest, as Sir Geoffrey Keynes observes, the degradation involved in clinging to the world of mere materialism and tyrannic law, a theme which runs throughout the poem, but which is not the explicit subject of that plate.<sup>31</sup> At the other extreme,

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are very different from one another; one must recognize that any conclusions about them are tentative, open to revision on the basis of variations in other books. My base text is Keynes' edition of copy H, which is the only generally available colour reproduction of the entire book, but where there are significant differences, I will refer to other copies. There is also a Trianon press facsimile of copy D, which was released in a limited edition, but it is now out of print and fairly difficult to find.

<sup>31</sup>Sir Geoffrey Keynes, ed. The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (Oxford: Oxford UP in association with the Trianon Press, 1975) commentary, Plate 24. References to this

there are illustrations that seem parodically obvious. Plate 11, which opens with the statement "The ancient Poets animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses" is illustrated with a picture of an island (or a cave, in copies G and I) on which we see the face of an old man in a tree, a sun god rising out of the ground (or water, in some copies), and a naked woman stretching out from the sea towards a child who is springing out of a flower. After the complex interrelation between art and poetry in the other plates, the straightforward correspondence in this one might invite the reader to treat it as a tongue-in-cheek concession to conventional expectations of illustrations, one which ironically underlines Blake's complete refusal to meet or fulfill those expectations in most of the rest of the work.

Another reason that The Marriage of Heaven and Hell breaks down any attempt to read it as a coherent and consistent piece of satire is that the satiric material often seems more a side issue than a central part of the poem, much in the way that the satire in Quid's songs is neither reinforced nor endorsed by the rest of An Island in the Moon. The satire directed against Swedenborg, for example, is clearly important, but it is not so vital to the work that one can simply state, as Bloom does, that the poem is a satire of Swedenborg's ideas (Blake's Apocalypse 70).

Clearly, the poem is intelligible to and even enjoyable for

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edition and to Keynes' commentary will hereafter be by plate number in the text.

those readers--possibly in the majority among those who encounter it in a survey course of the Romantics--who have heard of Swedenborg only through Blake's references to him. Bloom tries to evade this difficulty by admitting that while "much of the direct satirical basis" of the poem has "lost its point" (70), its poetic power enables it to transcend the limits of its satiric purpose. Yet by making that argument, Bloom tacitly admits that that purpose was relatively unimportant to begin with, since the poem survives it so easily. The fact that Swedenborg is of interest to many of the Marriage's readers only because Blake refers to him suggests that the satire of him cannot be, in itself, the central issue of the poem.

Yet if the treatment of Swedenborg does not justify us in categorizing the Marriage as a satire, it is difficult to see what does. Most other elements of the work, when examined in terms of genre, show a similarly problematic relationship to the poem as a whole. For example, the most famous section of it, the Proverbs of Hell, differs markedly in form from the rest of the book. More parodic than satiric, the Proverbs can be read as a take-off on the aphoristic style popular at the time,<sup>32</sup> or, more basically,

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<sup>32</sup>The aphorism flourished in seventeenth-century France in the work of writers such as LaRouchefoucauld and Pascal, but it continued to attract interest during the next century as well. Most critics suggest that Lavater's work was the immediate inspiration for the Proverbs of Hell; these aphorisms were translated into English by Blake's friend Fuseli, giving them particular relevance to Blake's work.

as parodies of the Biblical book of Proverbs. Thematically, of course, the proverbs are a vital aspect of the book, but formally, as parodies, they are not. Just as one can read the plates dealing with Swedenborg while knowing nothing of him other than what editors mention in footnotes, one can read and enjoy the Proverbs without ever having heard of Lavater's aphorisms or read the Biblical proverbs. One cannot say on the basis of the satire of Swedenborg that The Marriage of Heaven and Hell is itself a satire nor on the basis of the parodic aspect of the Proverbs that the work as a whole is a parody.

This difficulty in classifying the poem is further complicated by its unstable, romantic irony.<sup>33</sup> It is obvious that much of the material in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell is ironic, but it is difficult to determine exactly how to read that irony, as one can see clearly by looking at the Proverbs of Hell, which seem to be neither entirely ironic nor entirely "straight." Some of them, such as "To create a little flower is the labour of ages" or "The busy bee has no time for sorrow" sound like conventional eighteenth-century pieties of the sort which the work as a whole subverts, yet

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<sup>33</sup>I am aware that identifying "Romantic irony" in Blake's work is itself a problematic move, since the term is complex and its precise meaning is a matter of considerable debate. My understanding of it is derived primarily from Anne Mellor's English Romantic Irony (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1980). Mellor identifies a playful challenge of limits as one of the primary qualities of Romantic irony (see pp. 4-5); as is obvious from this discussion, I see such playfulness as one of the foundations of the Marriage.



it is still difficult to read them as examples of straightforward, stable irony. Blake's other work gives ample evidence that the complexity of Innocence was an idea which he took quite seriously, and that he saw labour as a vital aspect of salvation.<sup>34</sup> Conversely, other proverbs seem ironic when read apart from Blake's work but can be read "straight" in the context of the main themes of the book. "The tygers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction" is a proverb of this type, emphasizing as it does the importance of energy over system, a concern of the Marriage as a whole. Similarly, and perhaps even more obviously, the statement "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom" could be taken as a motto for the work in its entirety, as outrageous as it might sound out of context. Still other proverbs, which contain ideas that seem self-evident or conventionally proverbial ("The best wine is the oldest, the best water the newest"; "The fox condemns the trap, not himself"), invite ironic readings by their very blandness. Yet that irony takes us nowhere, since its seemingly obvious target--the banality of proverbial wisdom--is undermined by Blake's own ambiguous use of the proverb as a literary form. Finally, the extremely shocking proverbs which taken literally offend any sense of values--most notoriously "Sooner murder an Infant in its cradle than nurse

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<sup>34</sup>Consider, for example, the symbolic importance of Los' constant labour in building up Golganooza in Book I of Jerusalem.

unacted desires"--make readers want to treat them as irony, but do not provide any real clues as to how they can be "naturalized" and the ironic point uncovered. Critics have provided explanations of this proverb which attempt to make it fit into an acceptably humanistic philosophy, but those explanations of it tend to be rather strained and over-ingenious. The outrageousness of the statement is what one remembers, not the uneasy attempts to demonstrate that Blake is not really being as unsettling as he appears to be. By making it impossible to devise a system according to which even a single section of The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, such as the Proverbs of Hell, can be read consistently, Blake further undermines our attempts to classify the work as a whole according to a given structure. Yet perhaps more importantly, as Blake evades the limitations imposed by writing his poem according to the rules of any single genre, he demonstrates that it is possible to do more than comically explore the insufficiency of traditional forms. Unlike Don Juan, in which exuberance skirts the borders of nihilism, the Marriage makes a tacit argument that comic creativity is still eminently possible.

In the Marriage, Blake has given us a work which is, if possible, even more resistant to literary classification than Don Juan. It is a poem which, while generally considered a satire, fails to attach due importance to its main satiric object; a poem which includes parody which can be enjoyed without any real knowledge of what is being parodied, and

irony which seems to have no particular ironic point. Yet far from being a failure because its satire is incoherent or its irony undirected, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell intentionally blurs and confuses its targets, breaking down the boundaries of simple satiric, parodic, or ironic form. In this respect, the genre-breaking, dialectic form of the Menippean satire comes closest to describing what is going on in the Marriage. Even that, however, does not entirely sum up the complexity of the work. Bakhtin, in his discussion of Menippean satire, comments that one of its vital functions is "the testing of an *idea*, of a *truth*....one can say that the content of the menippea is the adventure of an *idea* or a *truth* in the world" (Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics 114-15, Bakhtin's italics). In one sense, this is exactly what Blake is doing: if one reduces the Marriage to its barest bones, one can say that it is about the truth that energy and conflict are necessary, and about the ways in which that truth is received.

Yet exploring this idea is not all that Blake is doing. In addition, he is unmasking an untruth--the myth of the necessity of writing within established generic limits. The Marriage of Heaven and Hell is as much an active exploration of literary form as it is a presentation of any particular intellectual idea. What Blake gives us in the Marriage is a comic exploration of the limits of satire, parody, and irony, much as in An Island in the Moon he presents us with satire and irony complicated and undermined by the broadly comic

frame in which they are presented. Of course, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell is a far more complex and sophisticated piece of work than An Island in the Moon, which is content to let its comic subversion rest in the incongruity produced by the juxtaposition of the harsh or lyric songs and their genially amusing setting. The Marriage goes several steps farther, using that juxtaposition to suggest the energetic and creative possibilities opened by an attempt to break down the boundaries of form. It does so in a manner that is comic in the broadest sense; the Marriage might not make one laugh aloud, as An Island in the Moon can, but its testing of generic limits is done in a spirit of play rather than in the spirit of hopeless irony which looks at boundaries and limits as a restraint rather than as an occasion for playful challenge. Frye's summarizing statement about The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, even though it does not speak specifically of the breakdown and testing of satiric limits supports this idea that the work is fundamentally playful, rather than angry or gloomy:

The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, with its blistering ridicule of the wisdom that dwells with prudence, with its rowdy guffaws at the doctrines of a torturing hell and a boring heaven which are taught by cowards to dupes, is perhaps the epilogue to the golden age of English satire. It has been said that in Blake's "To the Muses," the eighteenth century dies to music. The eighteenth century was a little too healthy to expire in any such trifle and perhaps it would be better to say that in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell the age of Swift

and Sterne and Fielding and Hogarth plunges into a vigorous Beethovenish coda which, though organically related to what has gone before, contains much new material and is big with portents of the movements to follow. (Frye 201)

It is precisely by showing the limitations of the old comic and satiric forms in this rowdy and rollicking manner that Blake energetically anticipates the new.

Blake's interest in testing and exploring the limits of form through these framing techniques has not gone unnoticed.<sup>35</sup> Most critics, however, tend to focus on Songs of Innocence and Experience and the way in which the literal "frames" of the illustrations affect our reading of the poems. Anne Mellor, for example, devotes a large section of Blake's Human Form Divine to discussing the "closed" visual form of Blake's "innocent" books (a category in which she includes Thel and Tiriel) versus the open, energetic form of his works exploring experience. The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, however, does not seem to fit easily into either of these two categories despite Mellor's treatment of it as an "open" work of energy (Blake's Human Form Divine 41). Of course, the energetic elements of the poetry are obvious and vital, but the book's designs are far from being uniformly open, or, to use Mellor's term, atectonic. Often, they are

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<sup>35</sup>See, in particular, Edward Larrisey, William Blake, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Ltd., 1985). Stephen Cox also comments on Blake's resistance to set rules; see "Methods and Limitations" in Critical Paths: Blake and the Argument of Method, eds. Dan Miller, Mark Bracher, and Donald Ault (Durham: Duke UP, 1987).

limiting, bordering and framing the picture in a very pronounced manner,<sup>36</sup> which according to Mellor's system, is more typical of the closed world of Innocence.

By framing his material in this manner, Blake complicates his profoundly anti-generic reading of the genres of eighteenth-century comedy in a way that one does not find in the Island. Unlike the earlier work, the Marriage contains a tacit recognition that despite its celebration of energy and unconventionality, it does not and cannot escape boundaries altogether. Completely formless literature is impossible in practice; if one wishes to communicate a mistrust of conventional form, one must somehow do so within a conventionally determined medium, or else the message will be unintelligible.<sup>37</sup> Yet this recognition of some boundaries does not invalidate the interest or effectiveness of the poem's exploration of the limits of genre. On the contrary, by demonstrating the inescapable power of frames or boundaries and the impossibility of subverting them entirely, Blake stresses the importance of being aware of their existence. He demonstrates that our reading is profoundly

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<sup>36</sup>See, for example, Plate 2, in which the tree on the right and the band of colour on the left (in copies H and I) frame both the poem and individual stanzas in it. Copies H and I also usually have borders of colour around and between lines of text on the plates without major illustrations.

<sup>37</sup>As pointed out in the introduction, this paradoxical interrelation of convention and subversion has interested a number of structuralists. For a more detailed discussion of the point, see Chapter 7, "Convention and Naturalization," in Culler's Structuralist Poetics and Todorov's "L'origine des genres" in La notion de littérature et autres essais.

shaped by them and so suggests that by ignoring them, we distort our experience of the work. One can therefore make a further division in Blake's work. In addition to "open" and "closed" writing, one can also distinguish between "open" work which plays down its framing devices, and work which, like the Marriage, ironically calls attention to its own inability to embody completely the values of freedom and energy that it proclaims.

At this point, it is probably necessary to clarify the concept of framing, since my discussion so far might seem to imply a split between the "frame" and the work being framed, a split which of course does not exist in practice.

Larrisey's discussion of Blake's frames is useful here, because he explains his own use of the term in some detail, beginning with a quotation from Derrida's definition of a literary frame:

It is...a composite of inside and outside, but a composite which is not an amalgam or half-and-half, an outside which is called inside the inside to constitute it as inside. (Larrisey 24)

Larrisey then develops this concept in a manner which he argues is particularly applicable to Blake's work:

Let us be clear: the frame is not the literal frame of a picture. The frame is the set of presuppositions, conventions and items of supposedly permitted knowledge about the work of art and its 'contents'. These things are not the work. But they constitute it. They are literally absent, but present in their effects. The point about the frame of a picture is that it is closely bound up with these facts: the frame is not the

picture, but everything in the picture is composed in relation to it. It is therefore part of the composition of the picture, and is implicated in the aesthetic norms to which the picture adheres. Apparently outside the frame, the observer brings the supposedly external to bear on the picture. But this 'external' has already constituted the picture, and thus the observer is implicated in the action of the literal frame, as well as in what he or she brings to it. (Larrisey 24)

Framing, therefore, is not and cannot be a neutral, objective process by which components of a work are presented to the reader. It involves a knowledge of the conventions which lie behind a work, the expectations that we bring to it, and the interrelation of individual sections within it. The frame, more or less subtly, shapes rather than simply demarcates what we perceive in the poem. The way that we read the Marriage's parody, irony, or satire is thus fundamentally affected by the way in which we react to the rest of the work, all of which is ultimately part of its frame. Because the Proverbs of Hell keep us off-balance and force active reading, for example, we are more likely to look for complexities in sections of the poem that are seemingly more straight-forward, such as the account of the dinner with Isaiah and Ezekiel. The temptation to treat this Memorable Fancy as a simple inversion of values, in which a "firm persuasion" becomes more important than the voice of God, is undermined by the memory of the complex and multi-directional irony of the Proverbs. Similarly, Blake's assertion that the Prolific and the Devouring are necessary to one another



(Plate 16) frames and complicates readings of passages which seem to assert the simple ironic superiority of the Prolific, passages such as the Memorable Fancy on Plates 17-20. One cannot isolate a rigid, unchangeable frame for close study; rather, what one must do is discuss the frame in terms of the effects that it produces, as one obtains very different readings of a particular passage when one looks at it both in and out of the context of the work as a whole.

This discussion of frames began with reference to the illustrations and it is necessary to return to them to examine fully the ways in which Blake questions the Marriage's ostensible celebration of openendedness. One of the most complex uses of the illustrations to explore the interaction of framing and freedom occurs on the frontispiece, the first and perhaps the best-known of the Marriage's plates. At first glance, the design might seem to be simply a celebration of license and energy. The lower two thirds of the plate is filled with flame, which arches upwards from the lower left, and overwhelms the clouds (which in some copies look more like rocks) that appear on the lower right. A female devil stretches out of the flames to embrace a male, presumably an angel, who is reclining on the clouds, and the energy of the flames seems to be pulling them upwards, towards a number of other embracing couples who dance or float in the flames. Yet this vision of energy and action is ironically undermined in several ways. Most obviously, it flows into and helps shape an opposing image of

constraint and restriction. The tips of the flame merge into the roots of two trees in the upper third of the plate,<sup>38</sup> and the branches of those trees loop together over the top of the illustration, completely enclosing the words "The Marriage of" as well as two more couples. Unlike the manic couples dancing in the flames beneath, these upper figures are stiff and static; their passivity is emphasized by the way in which they are boxed in, by both the branches of the trees and the curve of the letters of the title.<sup>39</sup> They are frozen, enclosed by the frame, while the lower figures move freely in the active flow of the flame. Yet this framing calls attention to the figures, a fact which might initially seem odd, since there is little to see in them; in particular, the figures on the right are difficult to interpret with any degree of certainty. Although at first glance they might appear to be quite obviously a courting couple, closer examination reveals that there are no details in the drawing itself which support that impression. Yet critics have not hesitated to "read" the sketch in a very unambiguous manner. In his commentary on the plate, Keynes describes them as "a man playing a musical instrument--that is, an Orphic or erotic figure, who kneels before a woman reclining at the

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<sup>38</sup>In some copies, such as G and I, the flames are much smaller and do not reach all the way up to the trees. In those versions, the embracing couples are dancing above, not in, the fire.

<sup>39</sup>The curve of the "g" and the "e" in "Marriage" and of the "f" in "of" invert and mirror the curves of nearby branches, reinforcing the link between the lines of printing and the lines of drawing in Blake's work.

foot of a tree." Mellor's description of them is equally assured: she sees a couple "assum[ing] a variation of the courtly love position...; the lady lying on the ground, the imploring lover kneeling before her" (Mellor 48). In fact, if one looks at the drawing in isolation from everything else on the plate, it is impossible to discern what the kneeling figure has in its hands, what its attitude towards the reclining figure is, or the sex of either. What the framing branches actually enclose is minimal: two stick figures frozen in a pose familiar from romantic tales. We are therefore left with a dainty, evocative sketch, which shows us very little, but which we nonetheless "read" in a precise and predictable manner simply because of the way that it is framed.

Ironically, then, it is this seemingly static, enclosed sketch that is most open and unfixable. It is given meaning only by its frame, which is of course the plate as a whole, not just the enclosing leaves and branches. Somewhat paradoxically, we can "read" the concept of license and energy in the lower section of the plate without difficulty because the figures are clearly and unambiguously drawn. In contrast, we are manipulated by frames into reading the figures that are actually loose and undefined as being static and rigid. Without its iconographic frames, the illustration implies, licence merely becomes illegible; the "open" celebration of energy is communicated only by imposing a

degree of artistic closure on the images in question.<sup>40</sup>

As with the literary components of the Marriage, these illustrations are molded and shaped by the context in which they appear, so that Blake's play with his visual imagery complements and reinforces his literary games. Admittedly, there is nothing particularly comic about the effect of the visual and iconographic frames just discussed, despite the complex irony in the way that they are used. Yet an awareness of the irony in Blake's use of visual frames in the frontispiece helps alert us to the sly comedy also implicit in them on some of the other plates. In those cases, the illustration usually encloses part of the text in a manner that is amusingly as well as ironically inappropriate--much like the disjunction between words and image in "The Tyger." On Plate 4, for example, the heading "The Voice of the Devil" is surrounded on either side by the upward-curving bodies of figures with trumpets, which are more reminiscent of conventional representations of angels than devils. Through this illustration and the associations conveyed by it, Blake very obviously inverts what most readers would assume to be the distinct categories of the angelic and the diabolic, a practice consistent with the main theme of the work. More

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<sup>40</sup>For a very different interpretation of this plate, see Mark Bracher, "Rouzing the Faculties: Lacanian Psychoanalysis and the marriage of Heaven and Hell in the Reader," in Critical Paths 171-73. Bracher stresses the openness and sense of process in the design. Yet even deciding that the plate is a completely open work involves framing it on some level--in this case, with the assumptions of Lacanian thought.

subtly, however, the conventionality of the drawing also wittily questions the radicalism of the text. The voice of the devil, promulgated by trumpets and choirs, might not be that different in tone and style from the voice of God, the illustration dryly suggests. This framing illustration might even imply, in a visual undermining of the verbal claim on Plates 16-17, that the two classes of existence can be reconciled on some level.

One can find innumerable other examples of such witty irony, both in the tiny interlinear designs and in the major illustrations. To choose just one example of the many possible from the interlinear drawings, the words "improvement of sensual enjoyment" on Plate 14 are followed by a series of leaves. The first two are living and a vibrant green; the third is withered, looking dark and unhealthy, and the fourth drawing merely shows burrs. The level of "sensual enjoyment" offered by the leaves seems to decline markedly rather than improve. The major illustrations, of course, offer much more complex irony. Plate 10, for example, concludes the Proverbs of Hell with an illustration of a winged devil pointing out something on a scroll to a copyist, while another copyist leans over to see what his companion is writing. Keynes comments that the scroll presumably contains the Proverbs and that the devil "is pointing impatiently to the first lines to instruct a slow-witted angel industriously writing them down...while probably misunderstanding them." He concludes that the

design "impl[ies] that the stupid Angel must receive and understand the Devil's Proverbs if he is to be saved" (commentary, Plate 10).

Even following Keynes' very serious and subjective interpretation, one sees elements which subvert the text in the illustration. Instead of being merely interesting examples of diabolical philosophy, as the narrator claims that they are on Plate 6, the Proverbs become a necessary path to salvation, which are just as impervious to rational understanding as the angelic one they supposedly replace. Certainly, if failure to comprehend the Proverbs makes one stupid, most readers would have to lump themselves in with the Angel that Keynes derides. Yet the design can be read even more profitably as a parody of the model of instruction which Keynes sees in it. The Proverbs, with their complex and sometimes impenetrable irony actively resist the sort of instructive reading suggested in the illustration, an image which Erdman suggests "vaguely parodies the orthodox picture of God on Judgement Day."<sup>41</sup> This image of instruction and testing runs exactly counter to the concept of imaginative freedom which the Proverbs proclaim is the result of diabolical energy. The illustration thus directly undermines the main point of the Proverbs, and becomes a sly joke at the

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<sup>41</sup>David Erdman, with Tom Dargan and Marlene Deverell-Van Meter, "Reading the Illuminations of Blake's Marriage of Heaven and Hell," in William Blake: Essays in Honour of Sir Geoffrey Keynes, eds. Morton D. Paley and Michael Phillips (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973) 182.

expense of readers who attempt to understand and codify diabolical energy in a manner more suited to angelic instruction.

One could do similar analyses of the subversive effect of many of the designs--such as that of the gorgeously coloured Leviathan on Plate 20, which illustrates what both the narrator and the angel agree is the horrific vision of Plate 18, or the falling figure on Plate 5, which many readers interpret as a Satanic figure,<sup>42</sup> but which the text clearly states must be the Messiah if one is reading diabolically. Once again, one can argue that Blake is using his illustrations to trap unwary readers into easy, "angelic," and completely inappropriate responses to the text. Yet a point-by-point "reading" of the illustrations would be a massive task, and in some ways not a very useful one. No two critics seem to "read" a plate in exactly the same way, and in some cases, the interpretations can vary wildly. This inconsistency does not mean that one should ignore the illustrations or that it is impossible to affix any meaning to them. Rather, it reinforces our sense of the complexity of Blake's meanings--and the word must be used in the plural. One should be aware of the complexity of the illustrations and their potential effect on any reading of the text, but one should also be aware that part of their

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<sup>42</sup>See Keynes, commentary Plate 5. Erdman suggests a more complicated reading, in which the figure represents Reason, who is hurled into the abyss after trying to chain and drive Energy ("Reading the Illuminations" 174).

subversiveness lies in the fact that they are impervious to attempts to draw objective, invariably true conclusions about them and their relationship to the text.

Of course, while this discussion of the framing illustrations establishes clearly that they can be read ironically, it is probably still not completely obvious that that irony is necessarily comic. The illustrations do not merely frame the text, however; they are also framed by it, so that the exuberantly iconoclastic tone of the text influences our response to them. Blake is not using his irony to convey a bitter sense of entrapment at the impossibility of escaping frames and boundaries altogether, an entrapment like that which critics such as Wilkie and Ridenour see behind the exuberance of Don Juan. Rather, he is playfully exploring the paradox that the illusion of transgression can itself be constructed from those very frames which impel one to transgress in the first place. The playfulness of the text encourages us to read the illustrations in a similarly lighthearted manner. Moreover, even though we tend to limit our notion of comic art to cartoons, it is clear that Blake, who knew the work of his predecessor Hogarth and his contemporaries Gillray and Rowlandson,<sup>43</sup> was well aware of the more complex

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<sup>43</sup>Blake sneered at Trusler's fondness for Rowlandson in a letter to George Cumberland (Aug. 26, 1799), but in doing so he implied his own sense of working in competition with the other artist. He never mentioned Gillray, but Erdman argues that Blake is directly indebted to some of the themes and images in Gillray's political drawings. See "The



possibilities offered by such art. Usually, we approach drawing with the assumption that if it is not obviously caricature, it is serious. Yet given the comic tendencies of Blake's writing, and his awareness of working within a tradition of comic visual art, we ought to be willing to entertain the possibility, at least, that his own art was not entirely solemn.

It is this exploration of frames and the way in which they structure a work ostensibly dedicated to breaking apart boundaries and conventional form which ties Blake most directly to the writers discussed in previous chapters. Like Don Juan, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell is engaged on at least one level with the problem of how one can write comedy even while believing that traditional comic genres are inadequate. Blake's solution to this problem, as exemplified in the Marriage, is no less inimitable than Byron's in Don Juan, but its tone is considerably more optimistic. Unlike the self-conscious, world-weary narrator of Don Juan--or even of Hermesprong--the narrator of The Marriage of Heaven and Hell seems to believe quite firmly that creativity is an option even within the boundaries of convention. Far from suggesting that he is hopelessly imprisoned by them, Blake's narrator demonstrates that the limitations imposed by conventional frames can be stretched and molded into a new medium for the expression of an artistic vision. The sense

of entrapment by literary rules expressed either implicitly or explicitly by the self-conscious narrators of the three works discussed earlier is replaced, in Blake, by an apparent conviction that laws and license are not inevitably mutually exclusive. On the contrary, the example provided by the Marriage suggests that the tension between them can produce not just nihilism but also an exuberantly creative comic vision.

## Chapter Five

### Striking a Balance: Jane Austen and Mansfield Park

Although Jane Austen is the only canonical writer of her era remembered solely for her comedy, she is in many ways the anomalous figure in this study, and appears almost ludicrously out of place in the company of Blake, Byron, or Bage. The writing discussed so far has been self-consciously literary comedy, work which defines itself through its relationship to other literature. In order to break conventions, or attempt to push beyond them, the writers have inevitably recalled them, paradoxically placing their work within the boundaries of the traditions that they claim to be resisting. Austen, at least initially, appears to escape this odd pattern of overt resistance and subtle conformity. The smoothly realistic surface of her novels seems to be a reflection of life, not literature, creating an illusion that her work is free from any dependence upon the literary formulas which mark so many of the now almost-forgotten comic novels of her day. Yet a close reading of Austen's novels reveals a reliance upon and questioning of the conventions of her genre similar in effect if not in technique to that of the more overtly literary and subversive work discussed in previous chapters. Like the authors already discussed, Austen inevitably works within the boundaries of literary

convention; also like them, she implies within her novels the limitations of those conventions. The difference is that the obvious strengths of Austen's work--depth of characterization, mimetic representation of a social world and so on--are values which tend to direct readers' attention away from questions of technical innovation and experimentation. Austen's quietly realistic novels differ markedly in tone and style from the uncategorizable Don Juan and The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, but her seamless artistry does not mean that the novels lack any concern with convention or literary form. On the contrary, as Gary Kelly argues, "Austen's 'realism' is...a by-product of enforced critical reading through fictional conventions of the day."<sup>1</sup> Her exploration of the insufficiency of certain conventional models imposed upon her by her genre might lack the flamboyant innovations of Blake's and Byron's, but it is no less incisively critical of those conventions because of its restraint.

There are, of course, very real differences between Austen's work and that of her contemporaries, but her biographical isolation might exaggerate the extent to which her writing was atypical of her era. As a woman, as a

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<sup>1</sup>Gary Kelly, "The Limits of Genre and the Institution of Literature: Romanticism between Fact and Fiction" in Romantic Revolutions: Criticism and Theory, eds. Kenneth R. Johnston, Gilbert Chaitin, Karen Hanson, and Herbert Marks (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990) 170.

novelist, and as a member of the rural élite<sup>2</sup>--as opposed to either the professional middle classes or the aristocracy--she stands apart from her famous contemporaries. This isolation is reinforced by the fact that she often seems contentedly oblivious to the literature of her time, at least in her novels and surviving letters. Byron is the only one of the major poets whom she mentions, flippantly in her correspondence ("I have read the Corsair, mended my petticoat, & have nothing else to do"<sup>3</sup>) and somewhat ambivalently in Persuasion, in which Anne and Captain Benwick discuss the relative merits of The Giaour and The Bride of Abydos as they while away an evening.<sup>4</sup> Any discussion of points at which her writing resembles that of other major writers of her day must therefore rest purely on internal evidence. Looking at Austen in the context of her contemporaries is also made more difficult by her own frequently reiterated admiration for earlier writers, especially Johnson and Richardson and by recent tendencies, particularly prevalent in feminist criticism, to place her as either the culminating figure in a long line of eighteenth-

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<sup>2</sup>For a discussion of Austen's precise class standing, see David Spring, "Interpreters of Jane Austen's Social World" in Jane Austen: New Perspectives ed. Janet Todd (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1983) 55-61.

<sup>3</sup>Jane Austen, Letters to her Sister Cassandra and Others, ed. Chapman (Oxford: OUP, 1952) letter #93. All further references to the letters will be by letter number in the text.

<sup>4</sup>Jane Austen, The Novels of Jane Austen, ed. Chapman (Oxford: OUP, 1953, 3rd ed.) V, 100. All references to Austen's works will be from this edition.

century women writers, or the forerunner of the distinguished tradition of nineteenth-century female novelists. There seems to be a tacit assumption among critics that if her own allegiance is to earlier writers, there is little point in attempting to find ways that her comedy is typical of the Romantic era in which she lived, rather than that of the Johnsonian years to which she looks back.

The result is an odd ahistoricity in Austen studies, one which places her in a literary equivalent of the social golden age that the "Janeites" of the first half of the twentieth century insisted upon seeing in her novels. As a number of critics have established, the idea that Austen's characters inhabit a world immune to the social pressures building during the early nineteenth century is simply mistaken.<sup>5</sup> Yet the idea of an Austen aware of her era's experimentation with changing literary tastes and styles has not, surprisingly enough, gone hand in hand with the increasing recognition of her social awareness. In fact, some of the critics who are most interested in studying the pressures that ideological factors exert upon Romantic literature are also the most resistant to the idea that in

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<sup>5</sup>In the last twenty years, there have been a number of very important books arguing that Austen was deeply engaged with social and ideological issues of the day. See, in particular, Alastair Duckworth, The Improvement of the Estate (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1971); Marilyn Butler, Jane Austen and the War of Ideas (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975); Gilbert and Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic; Margaret Kirkham, Jane Austen, Feminism, and Fiction (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1983); and Mary Evans, Jane Austen and the State (London: Tavistock Publications 1987).

literary technique Austen was also a child of her time. Jerome McGann, for example, scathingly dismisses Nina Auerbach's discussion of Romantic imprisonment as a controlling metaphor in Austen's work and argues that Auerbach's entire project, that of exploring the Romantic aspects of Austen's writing, is "thoroughly misguided." As he observes, "Not every artistic production in the Romantic period is a Romantic one...indeed, the greatest artists in any period often depart from their age's dominant ideological commitments."<sup>6</sup>

McGann's objection is in the main true, but he slides over the fact that "often depart[ing]" from an ideology is a very different matter from being entirely un'influenced by it. While there is no doubt that Austen's concerns are very different from those of most Romantics and that her literary practice is obviously in no way identical to that of the poets Blake or Byron--or even that of the novelists discussed in the first chapter--there can also be no doubt that she is a writer of the Romantic era, not of the Enlightenment, or of the Victorian period, or of some imaginary point outside literary history. As such, it is necessary to include her in any study of the comedy of her era, even if, at first glance, she might not seem to employ any of the techniques of resistance to and exploration of comic conventions which mark the works of the other comic writers that I have discussed.

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<sup>6</sup>The Romantic Ideology 19.

Of course, some work has been done towards establishing the fact that Austen responded to some of the literary concerns of her contemporaries. Stuart Tave has pointed out strong Wordsworthian elements in some of Austen's work; Nina Auerbach, taking a broader focus, has argued that the motif of the double prison--or "Romantic imprisonment"--provides a valuable way of discussing Austen's often-observed treatment of social restraint. Mary Poovey, focusing on women's writing of the Romantic period, has discovered that Austen and her near-contemporaries Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley all have similar techniques for dealing with the contradictions forced upon them by society as women writing.<sup>7</sup> Yet perhaps because Austen's contemporaries often seem so relentlessly unfunny, there has been little, if any, attempt to look at her comic practice, one of the most basic aspects of her work, in terms of that of other writers of her era.

Austen's work in fact demonstrates a concern with the limitations imposed by genre similar to that displayed by Blake, Byron, and the novelists discussed in the first chapter, even though her emphasis is different from theirs. Whereas the two poets stress their play with received form, suggesting that their visions cannot be expressed within or contained by the limits of traditional comic genres, Austen,

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<sup>7</sup>See Stuart Tave, "Jane Austen and One of her Contemporaries," in Bicentenary Essays, ed. John Halperin (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1975) 61-74; Auerbach, Romantic Imprisonment, chaps. 1-3; and Mary Poovey, The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984).



at least initially, seems to offer us a model of graceful, neo-classical acceptance of rules and established limits. Blake and Byron leave tacit their admissions that in order to be intelligible they must draw upon the very rules that they seem to resist, whereas Austen stresses her willingness to accept those rules. Yet a careful reading of her novels reveals beneath their smooth surface a constantly reiterated awareness of just how arbitrary the demands of a comic plot actually are. Austen's overt allegiance to rules of comic form does not mean that she is immune to the playful experimentation with it which characterizes the work of her contemporaries. Despite her marked difference in emphasis, it is possible to trace even in her novels some of the formal tensions and experimentation so marked in other comic writing of her era.

In order to study this experimentation, it is necessary to recognize that far from being solely a realistic or an idealized reflection of her society, Austen's work is insistently and self-consciously literary. One can see this point most clearly if one begins by looking at her *Juvenilia*, which very obviously depends upon a knowledge of the literature--in the broadest sense of the word--of its own day for its comic appeal. It is a commonplace in the study of these works that they play parodically with the conventions familiar to readers of the time, though critics disagree whether that play is good-natured or scathing. The sources of these conventions are diverse, ranging from writing as

great as Johnson's to work as ephemeral as the pot-boiler fiction in journals such as The Lady's Magazine.<sup>8</sup> Austen is not simply attacking the silly conventions of gothic and sentimental fiction; if she were, her *Juvenilia* would be of little importance to this study. Making fun of a particular style of writing in order to distance oneself from it and discredit it is very different from the playful challenge to conventions offered by Blake and Byron, and in the *Juvenilia*, we have clear indications that Austen is experimenting with conventional comic form as well as attacking sentimental folly. To take just one incident of the many possible as an example, Juliet McMaster, discussing the recognition scene in "Love and Friendship," cites not sentimental fiction as its antecedent, but rather Joseph Andrews, Humphry Clinker, The Critic, and Evelina.<sup>9</sup>

The fact that Austen is reacting to some of the best comic writing produced in the second half of the eighteenth century in addition to the ephemeral literature of sentimentalism has not received the attention that it deserves. After all, deploying a familiar comic trope is a very different matter from parodying naïve conventionalism.

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<sup>8</sup>See Edward Copeland, "Jane Austen and the Lady's Magazine" in Jane Austen's Beginnings: The Juvenilia and Lady Susan, ed. J. David Grey (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989) 153-171.

<sup>9</sup>Juliet McMaster, "Teaching 'Love and Freindship'" in Jane Austen's Beginnings 138. I am following B.C. Southam in preferring "friendship" over the more traditional "freindship" which McMaster uses. As Southam points out in his edition of Volume the Second, Austen herself emended her original misspelling.

This point is often overlooked by critics of Austen's early work, who see in it only "detachment" and "a cold-blooded assessment of aesthetic and moral values."<sup>10</sup> Austen undoubtedly begins her career with a rejection of sentimentalism, but she also simultaneously aligns herself with an ongoing comic tradition. The fact that conventions such as the recognition and reunion of long-lost family members were taken from comedy rather than from sentimental romance does not make them any less conventional, of course, but it does make a difference in the way in which we read Austen's use of them. We cannot say that she is simply attacking them for an intrinsic silliness which other authors failed to recognize; certainly, as McMaster suggests, Sir John Belmont's dry response to his ever-growing family in Evelina implies that Burney was quite as aware of the artificiality of the device as Austen could be. Instead, it seems likely that Austen was experimenting with them precisely as rather tired comic conventions, stressing their artificiality not to attack them but rather to put new life into them, instead of following the long-established practice

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<sup>10</sup>John Halperin, "Unengaged Laughter: Jane Austen's Juvenilia," Jane Austen's Beginnings 30. See also Julia Prewitt Brown, Jane Austen's Novels: Social Change and Literary Form (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1979) 50 and Paul Pickrel, "'The Watsons' and the Other Jane Austen" ELH 55:2 (Summer 1988) 443-64. Brown endorses Q.D. Leavis's comment that in the Juvenilia Austen defines herself "through what she rejected," while Pickrel, in a psychoanalytic reading, suggests that Austen's early use of parody was a defense mechanism to deflect laughter from her to the writer being parodied (456).

of writers such as Fielding, Smollett, and Burney by trying to naturalize them so that they could fit more or less easily into their comic but still comparatively realistic worlds.

It is precisely by stressing the complete artificiality of comic conventions used in earlier writing that Austen revivifies them, making the old jokes funny all over again. This is exactly the opposite of the practice that it is normally assumed she is following in the *Juvenilia*, that of killing conventions used seriously in bad sentimental fiction by ridiculing them. While there is undoubtedly a certain measure of that going on in the *Juvenilia*, it is difficult to overstate the importance of the debt to earlier comedy--and particularly burlesque--in the work. For example, the stock request that heroines relate their "Life & adventures," which recurs continually in "Jack and Alice" and which sets "Love and Friendship" in motion, probably owes much more to Charlotte Lennox's burlesque *The Female Quixote* (1752)<sup>11</sup> than it does to the seventeenth-century French romances in which such requests were a standard--and quite serious--feature.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Austen was rereading *The Female Quixote* with great enjoyment in 1807 (*Letters* 48). She does not say how long ago she had first read it, but John McAleer argues that internal evidence in the *Juvenilia* indicates that at the time she wrote it, she was already familiar with Lennox's novel. See McAleer, "What a Biographer Can Learn about Jane Austen," *Jane Austen's Beginnings* 9. Austen's enjoyment of literary burlesque continued throughout her life; in 1814 she reports having "torn through" *The Heroine*, E.S. Barrett's recently-published burlesque (*Letters* 92).

<sup>12</sup>For a discussion of these romances and their relationship to the British sentimental novel, see Jane Spencer, *The Rise of the Woman Novelist from Aphra Behn to*

The romances themselves were apparently old-fashioned by 1752; not only does Lennox feel obliged to explain their characteristic plots to the reader in some detail, but also Lady Arabella, the heroine who is led astray by them, encounters them only in her mother's generation-old library, and none of the characters with whom she discusses them has the faintest idea of what she is talking about. Presumably, they were even less familiar forty years later, and so it is quite probable that Jane Austen took her details from the popular burlesque rather than from the obscure and old-fashioned originals.

Instead of ruthlessly attacking bad writing, Austen in this case is actually staking out a claim in the territory of successful comic writers whom she admired. The problem that she, like any young writer, had to face is that of how to follow in an earlier writer's path without being simply a copyist. Her answer in the *Juvenilia* seems to be to take the joke even farther than in the original, stretching the convention to its limits. Lennox's Arabella is herself a very conventional heroine in many ways; she is a beautiful, charming and intelligent aristocrat whose only flaw is the solipsism which prevents her from seeing that the world around her does not live up to the rules of chivalry and high romance to which she wants to adhere. She may be misguided,

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Jane Austen (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986) 181-187. Spencer points out that several of the romances' conventions were imported into the sentimental novel, but never without some mockery of their excesses.

but she follows the conventions in good faith, believing that she is behaving in the manner demanded by society in doing so. In her *Juvenilia*, Austen does not merely repeat Arabella's honest misappropriation of literary romance but rather takes it a step farther into ridiculousness. Her romantic young ladies are, despite their airs and graces, quite ruthless social climbers from the lower middle class who use the solipsistic preoccupations of romance merely to obtain their invariably selfish desires. Lucy, the "fair nymph" who is one of the heroines of "Jack and Alice," is the daughter of "one of the most capital Taylors" in North Wales (VI. 20). Raised in her aunt's alehouse, she leaves her home in pursuit of a handsome and wealthy landowner, and when her hopes of winning him are shattered, "tho' possessed of Youth, Beauty, Wit & Merit, & tho' the probable Heiress of my Aunts House & business" (VI. 21) she captivates an elderly duke. Unfortunately, she is murdered by an equally Romantic and even more ruthless rival before she can marry him.

This comic misuse of the conventionally aristocratic concerns of even Lennox's burlesque romance is more strongly marked in "Love and Friendship." Laura, the penniless heroine, is the child of "the natural daughter of a Scotch Peer by an Italian Opera-girl" and is raised in a "rustic cot" in Wales (VI. 77, 79). She speedily improves herself, however, by meeting and marrying the heir to a baronetcy, whose father provides her with an allowance of four hundred

pounds a year when she is left a widow.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, she remains unsatisfied since "the unsympathetic [sic] Baronet" fails to recognize her intrinsic worth and provides the allowance "more on account of my being the Widow of Edward than in being the refined and Amiable Laura" (108). Her virtues, Laura implies, ought to win her not just the adoration which Arabella demands, but a substantial income as well.

Austen's heroine also goes a step beyond her predecessor in that most of her associates, unlike Arabella's, seem quite content to live in her world of romance, high adventure, and complete selfishness. In particular, the hero shares all her standards; the two meet when he is fleeing from his father who, as he explains,

"...seduced by the false glare of Fortune and the Deluding Pomp of Title, insisted on my giving my hand to Lady Dorothea. No never exclaimed I. Lady Dorothea is lovely and Engaging; I prefer no woman to her; but know Sir, that I scorn to marry her in compliance with your wishes. No! Never shall it be said that I obliged my Father" (VI. 81)

Laura can only admire the "noble Manliness of his reply," but Sir Edward's response to his son is an impatient dismissal: "You have been studying Novels I suspect." While Arabella's father is mystified and enraged by his daughter's behaviour,

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<sup>13</sup>Though not an excessive sum, this was quite enough for Laura to maintain a place among the gentry. For a discussion of income and social standing, see G.E. Mingay, English Landed Society in the Eighteenth-Century (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963) 26.

Sir Edward seems annoyed but unsurprised by his son's reaction to his proposals. In "Love and Friendship," Austen gives us a world in which even "realistic" behaviour actually becomes somewhat abnormal because of its willingness to recognize and accept, albeit grudgingly, a completely foreign standard of conduct learned solely from novels. Moving even farther into burlesque than Lennox, Austen amuses her readers by showing us not just the familiar havoc produced by a character who attempts to live according to literary rules, but the chaos of a world in which characters who follow those rules and characters who don't live in absurd proximity.

The early *Juvenilia* provides an obvious case for a study of Austen's debts to and departures from comic literature of her day, but it is by no means the only work which can be read in that manner. The puzzling Lady Susan, which was probably written a short time before the earliest version of Northanger Abbey, not only repays reading as an experiment with comic conventions, but may actually be most fully comprehensible only in those terms. Lady Susan, the eponymous anti-heroine, is a woman unlike any other Austen ever wrote about, either in her *Juvenilia* or in her mature work. Though ruthlessly amoral, she wins sympathy through her charm and quick wit, and troubled critics have never quite decided whether Austen slipped and failed to make a satiric intent clear or whether she genuinely intended to



endorse wit over morality.<sup>14</sup> (The problem is complicated by readings which see the novella as disguised biography, and which therefore have to insist that Austen is trying, and failing, to make Susan into a realistic villainess.<sup>15</sup>) Recognition that Austen is again playing with comic conventions can help to clarify our responses to the story, however. As critics such as Barbara Horwitz and J.A. Levine have suggested, the character of Lady Susan is indebted to comic literature, specifically to the Restoration and eighteenth-century treatment of what Levine calls the "Merry Widow" figure.<sup>16</sup> Levine cites Fielding's Lady Booby and Lady Bellaston, Smollett's Lady Grisken, and even Sterne's Widow Wadman as examples of some of the more familiar presentations of or variations upon this figure, thereby placing Susan in a long tradition of older women whose sexual desires or ludicrous attempts to compete with a young protégé for the hero make them laughable. As such, he concludes, Lady Susan

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<sup>14</sup>Deborah J. Knuth and Hugh McKellar provide examples of pro-Susan arguments in "Friendship in Jane Austen's Juvenilia and Lady Susan" and "Lady Susan: Sport or Cinderella?" in Jane Austen's Beginnings 95-106, 205-214. Halperin takes the opposite side of the question, calling Susan "one of Jane Austen's most disagreeable, unpleasant creations" ("Unengaged Laughter" 40). Finally, for more balanced views, see Barbara Horwitz, "Lady Susan: The Wicked Mother in Jane Austen's Work" and the debate in "A Panel of Experts," in Jane Austen's Beginnings 181-191 and 225-241.

<sup>15</sup>Q.D. Leavis was the first and perhaps most influential critic to espouse this view, in "Lady Susan into Mansfield Park" Scrutiny 10 (1941-42) 114-142 and 272-294.

<sup>16</sup>Horwitz, "Lady Susan: The Wicked Mother in Jane Austen's Work" 183; J.A. Levine, "Lady Susan: Jane Austen's Character of the Merry Widow," Studies in English Literature 1500-1900 1:4 (1961) 23-34.

must be seen as parody "proceeding from a distinctly literary impulse" (33). Yet as with the earlier *Juvenilia*, it is important to recognize that this "impulse" is not one which sets out simply to reject or destroy an existing conventional figure; as in her preceding work, Austen instead stretches a stock comic situation--or, in this case, character--to give a tired convention new life.

The most important way in which Austen gives her use of the conventional Merry Widow motif a new twist is by letting Susan's point-of-view dominate the action. Instead of making her widow the butt of straightforward and rather cruel laughter, as does a writer such as Fielding, Austen presents her as a more complex and even faintly threatening figure. She encourages us to be wary of Susan rather than merely amused by her, by showing us how her heroine is able to manipulate language so that her completely inappropriate behaviour is disguised under names which make it acceptable to the larger world around her. Susan is not simply amoral; she claims to observe a very strict moral standard but redefines the vocabulary of that morality so that it suits her own purposes. She informs her friend Mrs. Johnson that, on visiting some friends,

I was determined to be discreet, to bear in mind my being only four months a widow, & to be as quiet as possible,--& I have been so; My dear Creature, I have admitted no one's attentions but Manwaring's, I have avoided all general flirtation whatever, I have distinguished no Creature besides of all the Numbers

resorting hither, except Sir James Martin, on whom I bestowed a little notice in order to detach him from Miss Manwaring. But if the World could know my motive *there*, they would honour me....it was the sacred impulse of maternal affection, it was the advantage of my Daughter that led me on... (VI. 244-5)

In Lady Susan's world, open flirtation with the husband of one's hostess becomes discreet behaviour appropriate to a recent widow, and the wrecking of a young woman's matrimonial hopes arises from "sacred" maternal instinct. Immediately afterwards, she redefines "romance" to mean the inability to tolerate a man's utter stupidity in return for his wealth. If Sir James were "but one degree less contemptibly weak," she comments, she would marry him herself, but she "must own [her]self rather romantic in that respect, & that Riches only, will not satisfy [her]" (VI. 245). Since these comments come in a letter to Mrs. Johnson, the confidante to whom Lady Susan openly expresses all her rage and disappointment when her plots temporarily go awry or collapse completely, there is no reason to assume that Susan is being deliberately disingenuous. Austen takes us inside a conventional figure, complicating, even redefining, a familiar stereotype. Susan is no less sexually predatory than the one-dimensional predecessors cited by Levine, but because we see her through her own attempts at self-definition, rather than as a caricature obviously manipulated by an omniscient author, we must approach her with more

caution than normally accompanies our recognition of that familiar literary type.

The freshness of perspective granted by presenting a familiar figure from an unfamiliar angle is interesting in itself, but Austen's technique also allows her to shock readers into questioning their own stock responses. Our uneasiness at Susan's behavior--and few, if any, readers are entirely comfortable with it--forces us to question our tendency to suspend moral judgement as we read about other characters of her sort. In a move exactly contrary to Lamb's response to amoral Restoration drama, Austen suggests through Susan that the amorality of such comedy is not entirely foreign to us but can be imported into a world much like ours through the simple process of redefining behaviour and paying lip service to acceptable social mores. Lady Susan is dangerous precisely because she tries to transport the amusing amorality of Restoration comedy from its obviously imaginary setting into a relatively realistic social world--and almost gets away with it.

Of course, this reading works only if we accept Levine's contention that Austen is drawing upon the figure of the Merry Widow of Restoration drama and other eighteenth-century comedy in her portrayal of Lady Susan, and while his argument is convincing, it is by no means self-evident. Yet if we are willing to accept it, the very fact that most readers do not immediately recognize Lady Susan as a representative of that tradition might explain the difficulty that critics have had

in reading the novella. Austen might well be attempting to parlay the comic disapproval which conventionally accompanies the sexually predatory widow into a more serious examination of the amoral behaviour which provokes our amusement, but she stretches the convention so far that we lose whatever disapproval is implicit in the more traditional presentations of the Merry Widow, and she does not replace it with any overt authorial guidance as to how we are to respond to the material. We are made uncomfortable by Susan's actions, but if we do not recognize her as a conventional figure, with an accompanying set of conventional responses implied, our discomfort is left undirected. As a result, Lady Susan collapses into indecipherable ambiguity, which can be resolved only by positing a basis in convention which is not immediately obvious in itself.

In Lady Susan, Austen actually strays somewhat closer to the edge of complete collapse of conventional form than Blake or Byron ever do in their works; whatever their technical idiosyncrasies, both Don Juan and The Marriage of Heaven and Hell always remain intelligible. Certainly, the novella goes far beyond the relatively simple play with the conventions of the burlesque in the Juvenilia. Yet in her mature work, Austen seems to pull back from the radical reworking of conventional form which characterizes Lady Susan and contributes to its ultimate lack of success. This pulling back is only partial, however; her interest in exploring the limitations of conventions did not end as she moved beyond

the straightforward experimentation with burlesque which marks her earliest writing and the near-formlessness of Lady Susan.

Of her novels, both Northanger Abbey and Sense and Sensibility show an obvious concern with literary conventions; in fact, Northanger Abbey is the most famous example of the full-blown literary burlesque so popular in its day. The book's obvious debt to The Mysteries of Udolpho and other popular Gothic novels should not blind readers to the fact that it actually belongs to the same genre as The Female Quixote, Angelina, and The Heroine--which Austen read not long before her brother Henry recovered the copyright of Susan, the original version of Northanger Abbey, for her. One should read it with an awareness of the ways in which Austen was reworking the comic form she had inherited from writers such as Lennox, Edgeworth, and E.S. Barrett as well as with a knowledge of the Gothic conventions that she, like her fellow burlesque writers, was travestying. Sense and Sensibility can also be read as a version of the burlesque genre of the heroine led astray by her reading of popular sentimental literature. Marianne Dashwood, as surely as Catherine Morland, imbibes false standards of judgement and behaviour from her beloved books, even if her taste in literature is more sophisticated than Catherine's. Also like Catherine, she must learn that the world around her is considerably more petty and mundane than she initially wants to believe. Admittedly, Sense and Sensibility is far more

realistic in its treatment of Marianne's misconceptions than is Northanger Abbey's presentation of Catherine's, but such realism merely shows Austen experimenting with the degree of sophistication to which the convention of the comically misled heroine can be taken, rather than indicating that Austen is turning away from that particular conventional form.

Of course, both Northanger Abbey and Sense and Sensibility are very early works, written in their original forms between 1797 and 1799, according to Cassandra. As such, they are only a few years away from the last of the Juvenilia and Lady Susan, which Southam dates 1793-4. It is not particularly surprising that Austen would, at twenty-one or twenty-two, continue to play with generic form in much the same manner as she did at eighteen. Any argument that Austen continued to be interested in exploring and subverting established conventions of literary comedy in her mature, and seemingly very realistic, work must therefore turn to the later novels for support, not to the ones developed in the 1790's.

The most obvious choice for any study of Austen's comedy is of course Pride and Prejudice; Emma would probably be a close second. In both of these novels, one finds Austen playing with the then-conventional story of a mentor-hero and a charming but flawed heroine who is reformed by the love of a good man. Of course, we don't get the story "straight" in either book, since in Pride and Prejudice Darcy is at least

as much in need of reform as is Elizabeth, and Emma's charm is closely interwoven with her flaws. The obvious play with convention in these two novels is certainly very appealing and deserves attention, but in this study I intend to concentrate on Austen's much more subtle mockery of convention in the apparently earnest Mansfield Park.

Precisely because of their subtlety, the comic elements of Mansfield Park are much more likely to be overlooked than those of Pride and Prejudice and Emma, the novels which immediately preceded and followed it, and so require more explicit attention and analysis.

Of all the four later works, Mansfield Park (1814) might initially seem to be the least promising for a study of comic conventions. It is the "problem" work in the Austen canon, and, as both the first novel entirely conceived and written after 1800<sup>17</sup> and the darkest, most sombre of the six mature works, it is often seen as marking a turning point in Austen's career. It is also very likely the work with the least agreement about it. Critics who see Austen as a conservative place it at the centre of her achievement; critics who argue that she is a progressive thinker at best

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<sup>17</sup>Q.D. Leavis believes that Lady Susan is an early draft of Mansfield Park, but her argument is based on the entirely hypothetical existence of a lost epistolary novel midway between the two works. Given the lack of any solid evidence to the contrary, there is no reason to assume that Austen had worked on any version of Mansfield Park before 1811, the date Cassandra gives as its inception.



damn it with faint praise.<sup>18</sup> While the novel has undergone a considerable shift in reputation since the beginning of the twentieth century,<sup>19</sup> when most readers reacted to it with some distaste, even today, a number of critics who respect its artistic achievement continue to dislike it. It is a novel that "has always been more respected than loved," Marilyn Butler admits in her introduction to the most recent edition of the book.<sup>20</sup> Precisely because of the controversial nature of the book, it is necessary to come to terms with it in some way or another if one is to make any claims about the body of Austen's work.

On first reading, the novel may seem offputting to readers familiar with Austen's other work simply because it is not that funny. Unlike the "light, bright, and sparkling" Pride and Prejudice (Letters 77), this novel at least

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<sup>18</sup>For the best presentations of the conservative argument, see Alistair Duckworth, The Improvement of the Estate (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1971); Butler, Jane Austen and the War of Ideas; and Tony Tanner, Jane Austen (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1986). Both Duckworth and Tanner see Mansfield Park as Austen's masterpiece; Butler, arguing for the brilliance of the first half, nonetheless agrees with Q.D. Leavis in ranking it second to Emma overall. More troubled readings of Mansfield Park are provided by many critics, including Marvin Mudrick, Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1952); Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic; and Claudia Johnson, Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986).

<sup>19</sup>The shift in critical opinion started with Lionel Trilling's enormously influential essay on Mansfield Park in The Opposing Self (New York: Viking Press, 1955); reprinted in Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays ed. Ian Watt (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963).

<sup>20</sup>Marilyn Butler, "Introduction" in Mansfield Park (Oxford: OUP 1990) vii.

initially seems to be "something unromantic as Monday morning." The phrase is Charlotte Brontë's, from the first chapter of Shirley, but despite the differences between most of the two writers' work, Brontë's description of her problem novel gives some insight into Austen's. Readers object to the lack of romance in Mansfield Park and to the mundane, "Monday morning" virtues of its hero and heroine. Both Edmund and Fanny are, in the most favorable light, quiet and rather dull; their goodness may shine in daily life, but it is certainly not calculated to appeal to readers looking for wit and romance. Of course, some readers--notably Virginia Woolf--have praised Mansfield Park for precisely this quality, valuing the skill which can make high art from simple domesticity. Yet Woolf was an uncommon reader. Most readers, even while admitting that the book is a tour de force, continue to prefer the more charming type of good writing which provides us with the wittiness of an Elizabeth Bennet or Emma Woodhouse.

Yet the interest of Mansfield Park does not lie only in Austen's ability to transform rather dull and undemonstrative goodness into great art. Like Austen's earlier writing, the novel is a self-consciously literary book, in which the author continues to experiment with the limitations of particular literary constructs. The conventions that she examines may be naturalized to fit in with a more realistic world than that shown in the Juvenilia--or even in Northanger Abbey--but they are no less literary in origin because of

their use in a realistic context. In particular, it is possible, among the many ways of looking at Fanny and Mary, to see them as being drawn from two standard but very different types of literary heroines, and to argue that by juxtaposing and opposing them, Austen is exploring the limitations implicit in two strands of writing popular among comic novelists of her day.

Admittedly, there are some critics, notably Gilbert and Gubar, who argue against readings which stress a polarization of the two heroines, suggesting instead that the two women are closely linked figures who in fact complete each other. As tempting as it is to accede to the feminist point that Gilbert and Gubar develop from this argument,<sup>21</sup> the assumption that the two heroines are cast in deliberately oppositional roles is, if anything, strengthened by the thinness of the evidence amassed to connect them. For example, Gilbert and Gubar claim that both Fanny and Mary are "relatively poor, dependent on male relatives for financial security" (164). It is certainly true that Fanny is penniless, but Mary, although she has less money than Henry, owns twenty thousand pounds, which provides her with a sum nearly half again as large as Edmund's "very pretty income" (III. 226). After Emma, she is by far the richest of Austen's major female characters. Even more weakly, Gilbert

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<sup>21</sup>Gilbert and Gubar argue that by subtly aligning her good heroine and witty anti-heroine, Austen can amuse readers through that wit even while claiming to reject it (168).

and Gubar argue that the two women are linked because "Fanny loves to hear Mary's music, [and] Mary consistently seeks out Fanny's advice" (164). In fact, much like Edmund, Mary turns to Fanny only to confirm her own opinions, and even then it is only in default of having anyone else to turn to. Fanny, while charmed by the harp when she first hears it, is continually pained by Edmund's delight in the music. Mary's performances are, at best, a mixed pleasure for her.

Attempts to link the two heroines must thus be based on extremely scanty evidence, while there are ample reasons to argue that the two are derived from opposing comic traditions. Fanny is a Burneyesque heroine; her roots lie in the domestic and often sentimental comedy of female development which reached the height of its popularity in the last quarter of the eighteenth century.<sup>22</sup> Mary, on the other hand, looks back to a much older form of comic expression; she, somewhat like Lady Susan, is the witty, amoral temptress of the Restoration and early eighteenth century, toned down enough to make her piquante but not unduly outrageous by the standards of an early nineteenth-century country parish. In juxtaposing her two heroines, Austen is setting the values and weaknesses of two very different types of comedy against one another, and, in doing so, playfully exposing the limitations of both.

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<sup>22</sup>For an account of the rise in popularity of the novel of female development, see "Reformed Heroines" in Spencer's The Rise of the Woman Novelist.

Of course, Fanny is usually seen as a relentlessly unfunny heroine rather than as the representative of a particular comic tradition. Yet she is, very clearly, a figure drawn in the tradition of the rather naïve, often sentimental young heroine of domestic comedy. Critics have not often noted this indebtedness, perhaps because the burlesque of Marianne Dashwood's sensibility has made them wary of identifying places in which Austen treats sentiment favourably.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, Fanny certainly has far more in common with Marianne than she does with Mary. Like Marianne, she is a strong believer in the enduring nature of a first love. Unlike the far more cynical--or realistic--narrator, who assures us on several occasions that Fanny would have eventually fallen in love with Henry had he persisted and had Mary married Edmund, Fanny is convinced of the undying nature of her own love. Moreover, the alternative conclusion to Mansfield Park provided by the narrator is couched in terms remarkably similar to the conclusion of Sense and Sensibility. Marianne, we are told, "voluntarily" became "the reward of all" Colonel Brandon's patience (I. 378);

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<sup>23</sup>Calling Fanny sentimental does not necessarily mean that she possesses undue sensibility in any case. As Janet Todd points out in her Sensibility: An Introduction (London: Methuen, 1986), "sentiment" and "sensibility" were not always synonymous during the eighteenth century. She argues that Sterne's use of the word "sentimental" helped to push the use of the two words closer together, but states that even though "After Sterne's novels, [the word "sentiment"] frequently takes the meaning of refined and tender emotion...the denotation of moral reflection also continues" (7). Fanny, who is both emotional and moralistic, is clearly sentimental in this eighteenth-century sense of the word.

likewise, the narrator tells us that had Henry persevered, "Fanny must have been his reward--and a reward very voluntarily bestowed" (III. 467). Fanny may be a far more complex--even if less likeable--character than Marianne, but in their strength of romantic feeling, the two women are remarkably alike.

There are other similarities as well. Fanny and Marianne are both atypical Austen heroines in that they prefer landscape to people; the fact that the narrator endorses Fanny's love of nature and pokes fun at Marianne's does not make their tastes dissimilar. Fanny might not go so far as to share Marianne's notorious love of dead leaves, but she does mourn the probable loss of an avenue of trees which she has never seen. One might recall Elinor's thankfulness that Marianne did not hear of the loss of walnut trees at Norland (I. 226). Of course, there are some differences in their attitudes. Marianne, as innumerable readers have pointed out, learns her love of nature from the pre-Romantic poets whom she admires so extravagantly, while Fanny, although fond of Cowper and Crabbe, seems to derive ideas from moralists such as Hannah More, Thomas Gisborne, and Edmund Burke as well.<sup>24</sup> However, this difference merely

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<sup>24</sup>Kenneth Moler first pointed out that Fanny's most rhapsodic descriptions of nature are in fact near-quotations from Hannah More. See Jane Austen's Art of Allusion (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1968) 111-125 and "The Two Voices of Fanny Price" in Jane Austen: Bicentenary Essays 172-79. Duckworth traces Fanny's ideas on nature to Cowper and Burke (44-47).

points to the reason that Fanny's love of nature is more completely endorsed than Marianne's--Austen is demonstrating that far from being a thoughtlessly and selfishly sentimental pose, as conservative novelists of her day tended to assert, love of nature can also be grounded in a responsible, Christian morality. The distinction does not make Fanny's love of nature less Romantic or deeply-rooted than Marianne's; on the contrary, it merely shows Austen adding a new depth and complexity to the conventional role of the sentimental heroine.

Mary, on the other hand, is anything but sentimental; Avrom Fleishman states unequivocally that "[h]er closest literary relations are with the witty, vamp-like heroines of Restoration comedy."<sup>25</sup> While Fanny worries incessantly about proper behaviour, Mary creates for herself a comic world in which nothing is taken seriously except the ability to amuse and be amused. Her principles may not stand up to Fanny's careful scrutiny, but her cheerful wit makes her an attractive character despite her inability to live up to the standards affirmed by the concluding vision of Mansfield. In many ways, she is also a character in the style of other witty heroines from the Romantic period, such as Bage's Miss Fluart or Byron's Lady Adeline. All three are attractive self-confident women, who are more concerned with making

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<sup>25</sup>Avrom Fleishman, A Reading of Mansfield Park: An Essay in Critical Synthesis (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1967) 31.

themselves agreeable than they are with abstruse moral problems. Significantly, they are all verbally dextrous; Miss Fluart can quash anybody with an epigram, while Lady Adeline is an accomplished amateur poet. One of the most important attributes of the conventional wit is of course her mastery of language. The domestic heroine, in contrast, tends to be silent, expressing herself most effectively through non-verbal signals.<sup>26</sup> Notably, at the end of Mansfield Park, Mary's last attempt to win Edmund is through silence--she invites him back not with her characteristic wit, which has ultimately failed her so badly, but with a smile. Although any interpretation of the scene must be tentative, as it is presented from Edmund's obviously biased perspective, it is quite possible to read it as Mary's attempt to co-opt the silent charm of her rival when her verbal skills have become useless.<sup>27</sup>

The verbal styles of the two heroines are in fact one of the most important marks of the opposing traditions from

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<sup>26</sup>Sometimes, however, silence can backfire even for these heroines. Burney's Evelina initially bores her future husband because he reads her silence as inanity rather than maidenly reserve. More seriously, Camilla, the third Burney heroine, nearly loses her lover when, acting upon the advice of her father and an older woman friend, she attempts to win him through coded behaviour rather than a direct admission of love.

<sup>27</sup>Ruth Bernard Yeazell interprets this scene very differently, arguing that Mary's "equivocal" smile is the "final emblem of her impurity." To support this interpretation, however, she must admit that Mary's actual appearance cannot be distinguished from "how Edmund needed to see her." See "The Boundaries of Mansfield Park" in Representations 7 (1984) 145-46.



which they are drawn and are so dissimilar that one might well hypothesize that Austen was subtly exaggerating to make a point. Fanny is, of course, a notoriously silent heroine-- Tony Tanner calls his chapter on Mansfield Park "The Quiet Thing"--who epitomizes the intelligent silence praised by conservative novelists and conduct writers.<sup>28</sup> Yet at times Fanny speaks as well as observes, and especially at the beginning of the novel, she does so in a manner that is almost comically evocative of the moral guidebooks that Burney's heroines live by and exemplify. One of the first speeches we hear from the adult Fanny has a stilted, exclamatory style, which certainly gives an initial impression of her as being dull and pedantic. Reminded by Edmund of her first riding lessons, she responds not with a casual comment but with a formal speech:

Yes, dear old grey poney. Ah! cousin, when I remember how much I used to dread riding, what terrors it gave me to hear it talked of as likely to do me good;-- (Oh! how I have trembled at my uncle's opening his lips if

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<sup>28</sup>John Gregory instructs his daughters that modesty will "naturally dispose you to be rather silent in company, especially in a large one--People of sense and discernment will never mistake such silence for dullness. One may take a share in conversation without uttering a syllable." (A Father's Legacy to His Daughters, "Conduct and Behavior.") Similarly, Hannah More's Lucilla Stanley, the ideal wife in Coelebs in Search of a Wife is "rather silent...yet it was evidently not the silence of reserve or inattention, but of delicate propriety." (More, Works Vol.II (Philadelphia: J.J. Woodward, 1830) 370. For a discussion of Fanny's debts to the conservative ideals of femininity, see Linda C. Hunt, "A Woman's Portion: Jane Austen and the Female Character" in Fetter'd or Free? British Women Novelists 1670-1815, ed. Mary Anne Schofield and Cecilia Macheski (Athens, Ohio: Ohio UP, 1986) 8-28.

horses were talked of) and then think of the kind pains you took to reason and persuade me out of my fears, and convince me that I should like it after a little while, and feel how right you proved to be, I am inclined to hope you may always prophesy as well (III. 27)

Jane Austen could write better dialogue than that. The style is unnaturally stiff and affected, particularly given the context in which the speech appears. Fanny has just learned that she might have to go live with Mrs. Norris, and given her emotional turmoil, one might be a little surprised at her ability not only to dwell on memories of her "poney," but also to take such care to balance her phrasing. As Kenneth Moler observes,

Fanny is often made to talk in a manner that sounds artificial and out of place in the real-life conversations in which her speeches occur. Her rhetoric sounds stilted and excessively "literary," and she often seems to be echoing uncomfortably closely literature--particularly educational and didactic literature--with which an early nineteenth-century audience would have been familiar. ("The Two Voices" 173)

This speech makes it a little difficult to respond entirely favorably to her earnestness, especially since we know that Austen was capable of creating morally upright heroines who do not talk like Hannah More. Neither Anne Elliot nor Elinor Dashwood ever sound quite so pompous.

Fanny's verbal stiffness is even more pronounced when she is put in direct contrast with Mary. The comic--as opposed to the didactic--side of Austen's juxtaposition of both sets of conventions is at its height in the the scene

when the two heroines sit together in the Parsonage shrubbery. Fanny's idea of light conversation is to muse on the past, present, and future of the shrubbery in which they are sitting, then to segue into a lecture on the nature of memory. When she eventually notices that her companion is "untouched and inattentive," she does make an attempt to shift the conversation, but can only hit upon another subject for a lecture:

The evergreen!--How beautiful, how welcome, how wonderful the evergreen!--When one thinks of it, how astonishing a variety of nature!--In some countries we know the tree that sheds its leaf is the variety, but that does not make it less amazing, that the same soil and the same sun should nurture plants differing in the first rule and law of their existence. (III. 209)

Not only is the tone inappropriate to casual conversation, but also, as Moler points out, the thoughts are commonplace. Fanny may be displaying a genuine love of nature, but she is doing so in a manner which is, at best, unconvincing because it is couched as a moral lecture. At worst, it arouses suspicions--though ultimately unjust ones--that her love of nature is learned from books and repeated by rote rather than from observation. As such, it would differ little from the rote knowledge of history and geography that the narrator condemns at the beginning of the novel. This is not to say that Fanny fakes her Romantic impulses and love of nature; it merely means that initially, at least, she is so dependant upon verbal patterns learned from earlier literature that she

is unable to express them with any real feeling, much less communicate them to her companions.

The limitations of the convention of the silently pure heroine, who speaks only when she has some morally irreproachable reflection to make, and the very real appeal of the less morally sound conventions embodied by Mary are further suggested later in the scene, when Mary finally participates in the conversation. Her contribution, like Fanny's, is a quotation. However, she is able to use it to lighten the oppressive dialogue with a genuinely amusing witticism:

"To say the truth," replied Miss Crawford, "I am something like the famous Doge at the court of Lewis XIV; and may declare that I see no wonder in this shrubbery equal to seeing myself in it." (III. 209-210)

The reference is to an anecdote in Voltaire's Louis XIV, indicating that even though Mary's conversation is frivolous, her reading is not. Voltaire himself might have been a questionable author in the reactionary England of 1814, but history was an unexceptionable pursuit for young ladies. Despite the eminently proper nature of Mary's reading, however, she does not become pedantic, but rather illustrates the ability of "a lively mind" to seize upon "whatever may contribute to its own amusement or that of others" (III. 64). While Fanny's observations undoubtedly have more moral weight, she is unable to adapt them to ordinary social interaction and so is left with principles which can guide

her in large matters but which merely seem comically ponderous in smaller ones. In contrast, Mary takes even matter of instruction and makes it entertaining. As we learn later in the novel, this practice is far from being entirely admirable, but Austen does not attempt to hide that fact that it is much more immediately appealing than Fanny's rather solemn good principles.

The heroines' reading is significant for more than the ways in which they use it in conversation; Austen also links them to their respective literary traditions by associating them with certain books or authors. It is entirely appropriate that the witty, cynical Miss Crawford should quote Voltaire on nature while Fanny quotes Cowper. Similarly, in choosing a play, Mary's tastes, "though politely kept back," (III. 130) incline towards comedies such as The Rivals and The School for Scandal rather than Shakespeare. Fanny, in contrast, is enthralled against her will when Henry reads Henry VIII to her. This type of association is made even more subtly in the chapel at Sotherton. The narrator tells us that Fanny is disappointed by the chapel because she had expected something more "fitted up for the purpose of devotion" (III. 85), but the reasons that Fanny herself gives for her dissatisfaction seem to arise more from her taste for romance than from her piety:

"I am disappointed," said she, in a low voice, to Edmund. "This is not my idea of a chapel. There is nothing awful here, nothing melancholy, nothing grand. Here are no aisles, no arches, no inscriptions, no

banners. No banners, cousin, to be 'blown by the night wind of Heaven.' No signs that a 'Scottish monarch sleeps below.'" (III. 85-86)<sup>29</sup>

Since Sotherton is a comfortably modernized Elizabethan manor, not a gothic castle, Fanny's disappointment is no less unreasonable than Catherine Morland's dismay at the good roads leading up to and the modern comforts in Northanger Abbey and in fact arises from a similar source. Fanny's ideas of a chapel owe as much to Scott as they do to her sense of religious fitness, and in that way she is not entirely different from Mary, whose concept of a chapel seems also to derive from literature, although of a very different sort. Her imaginary belles "with their heads full of something very different" from piety evoke early eighteenth-century comedy at the expense of frivolous ladies of fashion.<sup>30</sup> The choice offered by the two heroines is not simply the easy, obvious one of piety versus cynical amusement, but is also a choice between Romantic and eighteenth-century taste in literary models.

Of course, Fanny and Mary are not simple literary stereotypes; they are complex, realistic characters whose conflicting behavior and principles are not entirely reducible to pre-existing sets of literary rules. Jane Austen is not writing about a one-dimensional conflict,

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<sup>29</sup>The quotations are from Scott's Lay of the Last Minstrel, II. x and xii.

<sup>30</sup>See, for example, The Spectator 53, which describes the tactics of a young lady in church, who was "resolved to bring down my Looks, and fix my Devotion on herself."

something that she avoids even in the far more schematic Sense and Sensibility. Yet she is constructing a work of fiction, not writing biography or social history, and in doing so, she inevitably draws upon familiar literary types and motifs in order to make her work satisfying and intelligible to an audience conditioned by its previous experience of fiction of that type. A more serious objection to a reading of the novel which sees Austen playing with comic conventions by juxtaposing figures drawn from two different traditions is that the grouping of a sweet heroine and a witty friend is itself a convention going back in English literature at least as far as Much Ado About Nothing. Closer to Austen's time, and drawing only from work which we know she read, we can find such examples of paired heroines as Bage's Miss Campinet and Miss Fluart, Edgeworth's Belinda and Lady Delacour, and Burney's Camilla and Mrs. Arlbery.<sup>31</sup> Austen herself provides an exemplary use of this convention in Jane and Elizabeth Bennet--with the important innovation of making the wit the main character and her sweet companion the secondary heroine.

Even if Austen is drawing upon this convention of paired heroines in Mansfield Park, however, she is doing so in a

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<sup>31</sup>The latter two are themselves variations on the convention, since in those cases the sweet heroine is an ingenue, and the wit a somewhat older woman of the world who half-protects, half-endangers her. Another interesting variation on this form occurs in Inchbald's Simple Story (1791), in which the two heroines are of different generations--the wit is the erring mother and the sweet one her impeccable daughter.

manner which distorts it almost out of recognition. For one thing, her paired heroines dislike one another. Or, if dislike is too strong a word for Mary's reaction to Fanny (Mary genuinely welcomes the idea of Fanny as a sister-in-law), there is no doubt that Mary values her supposed friend more for her connection to Edmund than for her intrinsic personal worth. In addition, and more subtly, Austen makes it very clear that the two women do not complement each other, as do Jane and Elizabeth and other examples of this convention, but rather clash sharply. Jane and Elizabeth have the same principles and ideas; their differing temperaments merely lead them to be more or less generous in deciding whether or not others' behaviour lives up to those principles. In contrast, Fanny and Mary have radically opposed principles as well as temperaments. Austen might be playing upon readers' expectations by evoking comparisons with conventional comedy which offers a proper moral exemplar in the main character and amusement from her confidante, but here she twists that convention dramatically and in the process forces us to confront questions of morality in responding to both heroines.

The question of morality is vital in differentiating the two heroines and the comic traditions which they represent. Although Austen amuses us by juxtaposing the incompatible comic styles of Fanny and Mary, there is also a didactic impulse behind her play with the conventions of comic literature. Unlike Byron--and perhaps even Blake--she is



making a very serious point which takes precedence over any delight in technical virtuosity or unease about the limitations of traditional comic form. As a descendent of the eighteenth-century tradition of wit, Mary is a character who takes social advancement and enjoyment as the basis upon which she lives her life. Her refusal to be guided by the moral standards which Mansfield comes to represent is not as blatant as the amorality of the heroines of Restoration drama, but it is no less real. For example, her sense of marriage as a financial, not spiritual, union is deep and unquestioned. Discussing a friend's unhappy marriage, she observes,

...it was a most desirable match for Janet at the time. We were all delighted. She could not do otherwise than accept him, for he was rich, and she had nothing; but he turns out ill-tempered and *exigeant*; and wants a young woman, a beautiful young woman of five-and-twenty, to be as steady as himself....[and yet] She took three days to consider of his proposals; and during those three days asked the advice of every body connected with her, whose opinion was worth having....This seems as if nothing were a security for matrimonial comfort! (III. 361)

"Matrimonial comfort," Mary seems to assume, ought to be guaranteed by the husband's wealth, by the wife's cool indifference to her suitor's personality (after the marriage, Janet is surprised to discover her husband's staidness), and by society's approbation of the match. Notably, it does not even occur to Mary that Janet ought to have considered affection and a similarity of tastes in choosing a husband.

There is no doubt, however, that Mary is at fault in overlooking these matters as a foundation for matrimony; Austen makes it clear through the opposing views of Fanny and Edmund that in her world, unlike that of much Restoration comedy, there are very real values that transcend those of amusing oneself and advancing socially. When Edmund meets Janet Fraser, he tells Fanny that she is

a cold-hearted, vain woman, who has married entirely from convenience, and though evidently unhappy in her marriage, places her disappointment, not to faults of judgment or temper, or disproportion of age, but to her being after all, less affluent than many of her acquaintance, especially her sister, Lady Stornaway, and is the determined supporter of every thing mercenary and ambitious, provided it be only mercenary and ambitious enough. (III. 421)

Edmund's explanation of why Mrs. Fraser is unhappy matches exactly Mary's reasons for thinking that she ought to be happy, highlighting the complete lack of contact between her standards and those of Mansfield, and suggesting the ultimate emptiness of her inability to see beyond her own cool cynicism.

Moreover, Austen is careful to show that, like the amoral heroines she is modelled upon, Mary is profoundly indifferent to others' feelings. Though professing to like Fanny, she encourages Henry's plans to amuse himself by making Fanny "think as I think, be interested in all my possessions and pleasures, try to keep me longer at Mansfield, and feel when I go away that she shall never be

happy again" (III. 231). Even Henry, whom she truly loves, is not exempt from being used in her search to amuse herself. She shows no more regard for his feelings than for Maria's in her desire to bring the pair together in London to see what will happen.<sup>32</sup> Much as in the case of Lady Susan, Austen uses Mary to demonstrate that the amorality of "artificial comedy" can exist quite plausibly in a realistic character and in doing so suggests that, contrary to Lamb's belief, such comedy is as dangerous as it is delightful.

The fact that Mary comes so close to winning her desires, and has won so much sympathy from readers, is thus a subtle comment not just on the dangers of her charm but also on that of the comic tradition in which she is drawn. The harshness of Mary's repudiation at the end of the novel might even be read as a tacit recognition of the strength of the amoral charm which she embodies rather than as a reflection of the seriousness of her moral lapse. It is worth noticing that her absolute dismissal from any participation in the happy ending is a punishment completely disproportionate to the moral seriousness of her "crime." Although she merely refuses to call the elopement of Henry

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<sup>32</sup>One can argue, as does Mudrick (165-67), that Austen betrays Mary and that the character who wishes for Tom's death and entices Edmund with a "prostitute's" smile is not the one we have seen elsewhere in the book. Yet until the end of the novel, Mary's self-interest is never in direct conflict with conventional morality, so she is never forced to betray her true amorality. At most, one can say that Austen reveals Mary's basis in comic convention more nakedly at the end of the book than she does elsewhere.

and Maria anything worse than "folly," she is as a result rejected with horror by Fanny, Edmund, and even the narrator as a completely abandoned woman. In contrast, Maria, who actually does elope, seems to be made into more an object of pity than of horror. Her atonement for her error frequently wins some reader sympathy because of the grimness of the life she faces with Mrs. Norris<sup>33</sup>; Mary, on the other hand, seems to be placed by the narrator beyond the reach of sympathy merely because of her refusal to treat shocking behaviour by others as an irredeemable catastrophe. Admittedly, it is difficult for us as twentieth century readers to comprehend the full extent to which Maria's elopement would horrify her family and friends, but even so, it seems a bit unreasonable to withhold from Mary, who loses a man she genuinely loves merely by speaking lightly about her friend's behaviour, the pity that we grant Maria.

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<sup>33</sup>A number of critics, including Leavis, Mudrick, Brown, and Johnson, have suggested that Sir Thomas's treatment of Maria is unreasonably punitive, comparing it to Mr. Collins' recommendation in Pride and Prejudice that Mr. Bennet forgive Lydia and Wickham "as a christian" but never "admit them in your sight, or allow their names to be mentioned in your hearing" (II. 364). In fact, Mr. Bennet, like Sir Thomas, initially refuses to allow Lydia to visit Longbourn, relenting only when Elizabeth pleads with him to do so. Moreover, Sir Thomas "secured" Maria in "every comfort," acting far more generously than Mr. Bennet was able to do. Finally, Maria's elopement as a married woman is far more disastrous than Lydia's, which could be rectified by a quick wedding. Julia's elopement is a closer parallel to Lydia's, and she is quickly received back in Mansfield. By our standards, Sir Thomas is unpleasantly harsh, but by the standards of his day, by which we must measure him, he was behaving in a relatively enlightened manner, far from the most unchristian behaviour recommended by Mr. Collins.

Despite this unequivocal repudiation of Mary, however, the novel is not simply a moral study wholeheartedly endorsing the type of comic expression represented by Fanny over the more seductive but less wholesome conventions embodied by Mary; the issues raised by a study of both women are too complex to allow us to think that. Certainly, if we allow ourselves to think of the novel in those terms, we have to admit as a concomitant that it is a dismal failure. Few heroines have attracted such intensely vituperative commentary as Fanny, and even her defenders tend to apologize for her. Tony Tanner has observed that "Nobody has ever fallen in love with Fanny Price," but he understates the intensity of the reaction against her. Long before feminist readings began to attack her passivity and prudery, a number of critics reacted against her with a rather excessive degree of distaste. The objections began early. Among the opinions Austen collected on Mansfield Park are a number of complaints about Fanny (admittedly, there are a number of readers who praise her as well), including one from Mrs. Austen, who thought her "insipid" (VI. 431-35). Reginald Farrer, writing early this century, declared that Henry Crawford had had a "lucky miss," since fiction "holds no heroine more repulsive in her cast-iron self-righteousness and steely rigidity of prejudice" than Fanny.<sup>34</sup> Most recently, Nina Auerbach has

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<sup>34</sup>Reginald Farrer, "Jane Austen's Gran Rifiuto" in Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice, and Mansfield Park: A Casebook, ed. B.C. Southam (London: The Macmillan Press, 1976) 211.

argued that Fanny is the archetypal outsider who becomes monster-like in her isolation.<sup>35</sup> Auerbach's argument is notable for its attempt to explain our dislike and to justify it as a necessary element of the book, rather than to merely indulge it as do earlier readings, but it nonetheless takes for granted that Fanny is a completely unlikable figure who therefore cannot represent a straightforward alternative to the values offered by Mary.

If Austen were trying to create a moral study in which Mary Crawford's amoral charm is shown to be hollow by Fanny's quiet piety, then she has failed miserably for a sizeable proportion of her audience. Yet one can certainly raise questions as to whether or not that is actually what Austen is doing. As Martin Price shrewdly observes, a large part of Mansfield Park's appeal lies in our willingness to laugh at Fanny's relentless self-castigation and at her naïve assumption that morality must be purchased at the cost of pleasure. He argues convincingly that Austen might endorse the morality, but not the "inflexible solemnity" with which Fanny pursues it.<sup>36</sup> Certainly, a study of the narrator's comments forces one at least to wonder whether Fanny is being as unproblematically endorsed as many critics--including both those who like and those who dislike her--assume. The famous concluding reference to "my Fanny" (461), for example, might

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<sup>35</sup>Auerbach, Romantic Imprisonments 28-29.

<sup>36</sup>Martin Price, Forms of Life: Character and Moral Imagination in the Novel (New Haven: Yale UP, 1983) 84-87.

certainly be taken to imply affection for the character, as many critics have argued, but one does not have to assume as a concomitant of that affection an uncritical admiration of all of Fanny's attitudes throughout the book. In fact, the reference leads into a rather condescendingly amused account of Fanny's feelings, rather than an endorsement of them:

My Fanny indeed at this very time [after the double elopement Julia and Maria, Tom's near-fatal illness, and the collapse of Edmund's marriage plans], I have the satisfaction of knowing, must have been happy in spite of every thing. She must have been a happy creature in spite of all that she felt or thought she felt, for the distress of those around her....[Edmund] was very far from happy himself. He was suffering from disappointment and regret, grieving over what was, and wishing for what could never be. She knew it was so, and was sorry; but it was with a sorrow so founded on satisfaction, so tending to ease and so much in harmony with every dearest sensation, that there are few who might not have been glad to exchange their greatest gaiety for it. (III. 461)

Austen's notoriously slippery irony is at work here. In this seeming pleasure in Fanny's happiness, we are being told not only that she lacks self-awareness (she only "thought she felt" for her grieving relatives), but also that the narrator, unlike Fanny herself, is fully aware of the incongruity of a "sorrow" which is built on "satisfaction" and produces "ease." This confusion of emotions is perfectly understandable in a shy and repressed eighteen-year-old, but

it is hardly the mark of the paragon of morality that Fanny is often made out to be.

As Mary Lascelles points out, in an argument often overlooked by those who see the narrative as a straightforward endorsement of Fanny, the narrative voice in Mansfield Park is unusually flexible, molding its tone to suit the sensibilities of the characters who dominate a given episode.<sup>37</sup> As such, it cannot be a simple reflection of Fanny's personality, and in fact, at times it approaches considerably closer to Mary's voice than it does to Fanny's. The witticisms at the expense of various characters--that Maria was "prepared for matrimony by an [sic] hatred of home, restraint, and tranquillity; by the misery of disappointed affection, and contempt of the man she was to marry" (202) or that Sir Thomas's reflections that "he had sacrificed the right to the expedient, and been governed by motives of selfishness and worldly wisdom....were reflections that required some time to soften; but time will do almost every thing" (461-2)--have a savagery that goes far beyond anything of which Fanny is capable. The morals might be ones of which she would approve, but the manner of expression would shock her.

It is clear that despite readings of Mansfield Park which make the book into Tory apologetics, it is difficult to see it as an unproblematic endorsement of Fanny's quiet

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<sup>37</sup>Mary Lascelles, Jane Austen and her Art (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1939) 102-3.



virtues. Austen is not simply writing a Burneyesque account of female development through trials, however much the book is indebted to the conventions of that tradition. David Monaghan observes that Fanny's "unadorned virtue" might be admirable, but unless she can attract attention and emulation, it is useless to anybody but her. Only through gaining some of the social graces which Mary so effortlessly commands can she win the attention and respect which she deserves.<sup>38</sup> Neither woman is perfect; each needs to learn something from the other. Fanny triumphs because she learns her lesson faster than Mary, who fails to appreciate until too late the importance to her of the "domestic happiness" which she learned to value at Mansfield. Austen is, very subtly, undermining the convention that modesty and moral virtue alone are sufficient to gain respect and happiness. As Monaghan points out, even though Fanny's principles remain the same throughout the book, nobody except Edmund pays them or her any attention until she starts participating in the society around her and attempting to co-opt some of Mary's charm to further her own ends.

There are other reasons for us to be suspicious of readings which make Fanny into a perfect moral exemplar as well. Not only is Fanny's "perfection" problematic, but also the heroine who improved others around her by her shining

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<sup>38</sup>David Monaghan, Jane Austen: Structure and Social Vision (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1980) 95.

example was, as we know, a figure Austen poked fun at in her Juvenilia and continued to dislike all of her life.

"[P]ictures of perfection as you know make me sick & wicked," she wrote to her niece Fanny Knight a few months before she died (Letters 142).<sup>39</sup> In her burlesque "Plan of a Novel," probably written in 1816 in response to James Stanier Clarke's well-meant but silly suggestions for future work, she mocks the convention at greater length:

Heroine a faultless Character herself--, perfectly good, with much tenderness & sentiment, & not the least Wit--very highly accomplished, understanding modern Languages & (generally speaking) everything that the most accomplished young Women learn, but particularly excelling in Music--her favourite pursuit--& playing equally well on the Piano Forte & Harp--& singing in the first stile [sic]. Her Person, quite beautiful--dark eyes & plump cheeks....The heroine's friendship to be sought after by a young Woman in the same Neighbourhood, of Talents & Shrewdness, with light eyes & a fair skin, but having a considerable degree of Wit, Heroine shall shrink from the acquaintance. (VI. 428-29)

One can see that this mocking catalogue of conventions is not much exaggerated by looking at any of a number of novels from

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<sup>39</sup>Austen also complained that Anne Elliot "is almost too good for me" (Letters 142). Perhaps significantly, she never made any comments about Fanny's excessive goodness. Margaret Kirkham also argues that Austen is poking fun at the conduct book heroine through Fanny, but concludes that Fanny transcends this model, ultimately undermining those "pictures of perfection." See "Feminist Irony and the Priceless Heroine of Mansfield Park" in Jane Austen: New Perspectives 231-47.

the time<sup>40</sup>; Susan Ferrier's very popular Marriage (1818), which Austen could not possibly have known, might almost be taken as the model for her sketch. The heroine, Mary, dances and draws with natural talent; her singing is in "a style full of simplicity and feeling," and "[i]n the modern languages she was perfectly skilled."<sup>41</sup> Though not strictly a beauty, she is "an elegant interesting looking girl" (163). Her friendship is sought by her beautiful, good-natured and intelligent cousin Emily, but Mary, though grateful for Emily's interest, is constantly shocked by her outspoken wit. Though far from dull, in outline Marriage reveals its extreme reliance upon a familiar pattern for the female novel.<sup>42</sup>

Clearly, Austen was well aware of the conventions of the novel centred around a young moral exemplar, and just as

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<sup>40</sup>One can turn also to conduct books, which preached impossible standards of female perfection. In 1779, for example, Vicesimus Knox holds up for our emulation a young lady who reads Greek, Latin, French, and Italian; has a thorough knowledge of English poetry and history; plays harpsichord and dances; and, though not particularly interested in sciences, gains "a superficial knowledge of astronomy, of the solar system, of experimental philosophy, and of geography, mathematical, physical and political. This little was necessary for rational conversation." (Quoted in Women in the Eighteenth Century: Constructions of Femininity 107-8.

<sup>41</sup>Susan Ferrier, Marriage, ed. Herbert Foltinek (Oxford: OUP 1986) 159).

<sup>42</sup>Examples of this pattern in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century fiction could easily be multiplied. Camilla (1796) and Belinda (1801) both feature beautiful, accomplished, and impeccably moral heroines who are befriended, somewhat to their dismay, by charming wits. Mary Brunton's Self-Control (1810-11), which Austen mocked in her letters, features a perfect heroine who sacrifices everything to filial duty, also like the heroine of the Plan.

clearly, her treatment of Fanny mocks and undermines rather than upholds those conventions. Notably, almost all of the elements of the description of the heroine in the burlesque "Plan"--and the serious description of Mary in the otherwise comic Marriage--are present in one way or another in Mansfield Park, but are employed in reference to characters other than Fanny. The Bertram daughters are conventionally accomplished young women, whose schooling, as Austen points out, provides them formal instruction in just about every field except "self-knowledge, generosity, and humility" (III. 19).<sup>43</sup> By pointedly reminding us that the polite education of heroines does not include any moral instruction, and by making the unaccomplished Fanny the only female character with a sense of morality, Austen calls attention to the artificiality of the convention that young women, by the age of seventeen, can be skilled in music, history, languages, art, and literature, and have had time for the serious reflection necessary to be morally self-aware as well. Similarly, she pokes fun at the convention of

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<sup>43</sup>The child (usually a girl) whose mind has been "improved" at the cost of her morals is also a convention in the literature of the time; compare Edgeworth's description of a young woman in her novella The Good French Governess: "Isabella was about fourteen; her countenance was intelligent, but rather too expressive of confidence in her own capacity, for she had, from her infancy, been taught to believe that she was a genius. Her memory had been too much cultivated; she had learned languages with facility, and had been taught to set a very high value upon her knowledge of history and chronology. Her temper had been hurt by flattery, yet she was capable of feeling all the generous passions" (in Tales and Novels Vol. I [The Longford Edition] 284.)

providing both a dark and a fair heroine. The Bertram girls, we learn, are charmed by Mary's "lively dark eye, [and] clear brown complexion," although they might not have looked so kindly upon her had she been "tall, full formed, and fair" (III. 44). The picturesque pairing of blonde and brunette so common in novels occurs mainly for aesthetic effect and to reduce the element of competition among heroines, Austen implies, rather than to symbolize any real differences between them.<sup>44</sup> She returns to this convention at the end of the novel as well, when Edmund learns "to prefer soft light eyes to sparkling dark ones" (470). The deliberate reductiveness of this account of Edmund's shifting love implicitly mocks the conventional differentiation of heroines by colouring rather than character. Only in her suspicion of Mary's wit does Fanny fit the conventional depiction of the moral heroine, and even then, she is right at least partly for the wrong reasons. As Austen makes quite clear, sexual jealousy, as well as moral indignation, fuels Fanny's rejection of Mary.

By drawing upon two different traditions of literary comedy, Austen manages to suggest the limitations and appeal

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<sup>44</sup>This convention, almost obsessively employed by Scott, became even more prominent in the later novels of the nineteenth century, when the blonde heroine's fairness often became a sign of her moral worth. However, it still continued to come under attack. Wilkie Collins pokes fun at it in "A Petition to the Novel Writers," and George Eliot calls attention to it by having Maggie Tulliver refuse to read Corinne because she foresees, as always, that the fair heroine will triumph over her dark, passionate rival.

of both. Mary's charm might be dangerous and amoral, but its attractiveness is very real. On the other hand, Fanny's virtues, wholesome as they undoubtedly are, not only seem rather drily unappealing without some leaven of charm, but also fall far short of the inhuman standards of perfection normally expected of a moral heroine. Far from offering the simple alternative of moral heroism to Mary's amorality, Fanny herself implies some of the limitations of the conventions which lie behind her characterization. The novel is thus not merely an attack on one form of conventional comedy and an endorsement of another; if it were, it would be only a slightly more complicated but otherwise unproblematic example of the conventional Burneyesque comedy of female development. The tensions produced by juxtaposing and questioning both sets of conventions make Mansfield Park into a far more complex and innovative work than are the models which it takes as a point of departure. These tensions are most clearly visible not in our more or less uneasy responses to the two heroines, however, but in the notoriously troublesome conclusion of the novel, which catapults the reader from quiet country life into an almost shockingly melodramatic mixture of adultery, elopements, and broken hearts.

Of course, Mansfield Park is not alone among Austen's novels in having a troublesome conclusion; Sense and Sensibility has proved at least as difficult to deal with, and understanding the reasons for that trouble might help one

in dealing with Mansfield Park. As Tony Tanner has complained, in Sense and Sensibility Austen seems more concerned with providing a conventionally happy ending than she is with maintaining consistency of action or character. In a comedy, heroines get married, and since Marianne is a heroine, her character and energy are ruthlessly sacrificed "to the overriding geometry" of the conventional happy ending which requires that she be married to Brandon (100). This strict observance of conventions, he claims, distorts the novel, leaving only "devitalized symmetry" and falsely avoiding the tragedy implicit in the movement of the book as a whole (101).<sup>45</sup> If, as Tanner claims, Sense and Sensibility privileges symmetry over logic, one must argue as a corollary that the conventions which demand that symmetry cripple her work.

This hobbling by the demands of conventions becomes even more critical in Mansfield Park, when Austen is dealing with two very different conventional patterns. According to one, the wits should triumph, winning their true loves as a reward for amusing us. In her introduction to Mansfield Park, Butler makes this point, suggesting that Austen keeps us aware of an "alternative sphere," a world embodied by Lovers'

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<sup>45</sup>Julia Prewit Brown sharply debates Tanner's conclusion that a truly courageous novelist would have let Marianne die, following the inexorable logic of the plot. However, she sees the ending of Sense and Sensibility as it stands as unhappy, implicitly agreeing with Tanner that the conventional marry-and-live-happily-ever-after ending cannot work in this novel (Brown 62-63).

Vows, in which Mary would have "succeeded in luring Edmund back, might have won him over, married him, taken him to Sloane Street....[in this world] Maria would have been forgiven" (xxvii). By the standards of Fanny's plot, however, what ought to happen is precisely what does. Fanny has been in love with Edmund from the very first pages of the novel; she is the Cinderella heroine and therefore ought to get her heart's desire, while Edmund is the mentor-hero who has left Fanny's mind "in so great a degree formed by his care" (470) that Austen tells us it is natural that he should love her.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, we ought to be accustomed to seeing goodness triumph over the hollow charms of wit, if we are at all familiar with the sentimental fiction of the day, and even the fair heroine triumph over the dark. Notably, even in Hernsprong, which claims to favour wit over conventional morality, it is the sweetly dutiful Miss Campinet who ends up happily married to the hero with whom her witty friend seems more than half in love. (At the end of the novel, Glen tells us that Miss Fluart quarrels with Sir Charles "once a day....calls him savage...then tells her friend, with half a sigh, she will have a savage like himself, or die a maid"

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<sup>46</sup>The mentor-hero is also a convention, which Austen employs again in Emma. She could have encountered it in a number of other novels, including Mary Davys' The Reform'd Coquette (1724), Eliza Haywood's Betsy Thoughtless (1751) and Burney's Camilla. Edgeworth mocks the convention in Belinda, in which the hero raises and educates a wife to his specifications but then discovers, to his dismay, that she bores him precisely because he knows everything that she thinks.



[247-48].) Yet however appropriate the ending is according to these criteria, many readers remain unsatisfied with it. As Austen subtly undermines the conventions of domestic heroism, we are left uncomfortable with a conclusion which unequivocally rewards them. Moreover, by first sketching a plausible alternative ending, in which Fanny reforms and "very voluntarily" marries the "villain," and then baldly rejecting that conclusion, Austen stresses the arbitrariness of the resolution that she actually provides and forces readers out of any uncritical contentment with her allotment of conventional rewards and punishments. Contrary to the assumption of some critics that the conclusion shows a failure of artistry--Pickrel states baldly that it is so badly done that it reveals Austen to be "tired and in uncertain control" (459)--the resolution of Mansfield Park actually shows Austen following the logic of the method that she has employed throughout the book. If neither conventional form of comic writing is entirely satisfactory on its own, neither of the two "appropriate" endings can be either.

Critics who blame Austen for rushing over the process of Edmund's falling out of love with Mary and in love with Fanny are therefore missing an important part of her irony. Her famous refusal to "dwell on guilt and misery" (III. 461) is not the sign of a tired writer taking the easy way out, but the politely obliging response of a writer who knows her readers expect a happy ending and who is willing to provide

it, whatever the strains on probability. As Auerbach has observed about Austen's conclusions in general, the author's "apparent conformity to the norms of her silliest readers frees her to laugh at us all" (Romantic Imprisonment xvii); her adherence to conventions is a joke at the expense of both the conventions themselves and the readers who insist that they be observed. Admittedly, in Mansfield Park the joke turns rather sour. Henry and Mary are left in a limbo of useless regrets; Maria and Mrs. Norris are sent into permanent exile and self-torment; Tom is sobered only by a narrow escape from death; Julia is tied to the foolish Mr. Yates for life; and Sir Thomas and Edmund have their world temporarily shattered. Even the harmless gourmand Dr. Grant is killed off by apoplexy so that Fanny and Edmund can return to the Mansfield parsonage.<sup>47</sup> Yet this ruthlessness is used to highlight the artificiality of the happy ending. Marianne at least marries a suitor who has loved her from first sight and only after she has had half the book to get used to the idea of Willoughby's perfidy. Fanny's and Mary's reversals in fortune come with breathtaking rapidity and only because Tom's illness, Henry's weakness, Maria's discontent, and

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<sup>47</sup>One of Austen's most overlooked ironies is that even though Fanny's values ultimately shape Mansfield, she does not become its mistress, as a number of critics have asserted. Susan has replaced her at the house, and as sister-in-law of the future Sir Thomas and mistress of the parsonage, she actually inherits the position of her old nemesis Mrs. Norris rather than that of Lady Bertram. The despised poor relation ousts not the mistress of the house, but, perhaps even more fittingly, her chief oppressor.

Mary's folly all happen to converge. Austen is quite willing to provide us with a happy ending which meets at least one set of conventional requirements, but only at the price of straining our credulity to its limits.

Of course, the idea that Austen is parodying conventions with her conclusions is not an unfamiliar one,<sup>48</sup> but it has not been applied carefully to Mansfield Park. Ten Harmsel, in fact, says bluntly that the conclusion of the novel does not work because of Austen's uncritical lapse into Richardsonian didacticism (100-102). Lloyd Brown, in an otherwise perceptive discussion of the ending, errs in the opposite direction and concludes that not only is it logically consistent with the rest of the book but also that it privileges realistic experience over conventional expectations. Austen, he says, is describing

everyday experiences in which moral conventions are ignored, both by the individual and his society. Instead, society builds its own set of traditions and these are contrasted here, as they are in Sense and Sensibility, with the conventional morality to which they are ideally expected to adhere. (233)

Yet the swiftness and ruthlessness of the punishments doled out hardly support the idea that Austen is writing a

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<sup>48</sup>See, in addition to Auerbach's comments, Henrietta Ten Harmsel, Jane Austen: A Study in Fictional Conventions (The Hague: Mouton, 1964) 27, and Lloyd W. Brown: Bits of Ivory: Narrative Techniques in Jane Austen's Fiction (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1973) 222-35. Gilbert and Gubar also discuss her conclusions in some detail, but see in them an angry protest against restrictions rather than amused mockery of them.

*realistic* ending to mock the foolish expectations of conventionalism. On the contrary, through the extreme and arbitrary disposal of characters in order to provide Fanny's happy ending, Austen criticizes conventionalism by giving us a ruthlessly conventional ending without any attempt to naturalize it or increase its probability. Austen provides us with the happy ending that we expect--even demand--but we still are not happy. Conventions of her genre demand that characters be neatly accounted for and disposed of, so Austen redirects Edmund's love, silences Mary, and exalts Fanny, treating the characters like puppets and destroying the illusion of them as autonomous beings that she has laboured throughout the novel to create. Her form demands neatness, symmetry, and restriction, so she provides it, but only after stressing precisely how artificial such restriction is and how much we lose by flattening out the complex characters so that they can live happily ever after. Ultimately, what we have in her comic fiction is a subtle commentary on the artificiality of such comedy.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>D.A. Miller argues that any attempt to impose closure upon a novel involves reduction and oversimplification of the elements that have made the story "narratable" up to that point, but suggests that it is Fanny and Edmund, not the narrator, who simplify Mary and her discourse in order to fulfill the demands of comic form and provide closure. Even though Miller is arguing a thesis very different from mine, his view supports my contention that we cannot see the ending as an uncritical rejection of Mary and her conventions by the narrator. See Miller, Narrative and its Discontents (Princeton: Princeton UP 1981) 87-89.

Austen might not be pushing beyond the boundaries of conventions as obviously as are the other writers discussed in this study, but she is clearly aware of the ways they limit her work and interested in exploring the nature of those limitations. Though ultimately she chooses to provide her readers with the conventional entertainment that they want, she emphasizes that what they are getting is a product of literature and not a faithful representation of the world in which they live. Like Bage and Edgeworth, or Byron and Blake, she delights in calling her readers' attention to the artificiality of her own writing. This play with literary convention became, if anything, even more of a preoccupation later in her career, as she moved beyond simply mocking conventional expectations to warning explicitly about the dangers of mistaking literary conventions for a guide to life. Anne Elliot protests vigorously against judging characteristic feminine behaviour by portrayals in literature; books prove nothing, she tells Harville (V. 234). In fact, far from providing a useful guide to life, books can be extremely dangerous if they are abused by being read in the uncritical, self-indulgent manner that Captain Benwick reads Byron's poems. Sanditon seems to be moving towards an even more direct mockery of those who base their actions and ideas on literature, as the passive Charlotte finds herself caught in a world of people who look or act as if they were in a book. When she first sees Clara Brereton, the young women marked out for seduction by the villain, Charlotte

could see in her only the most perfect representation of whatever Heroine might be most beautiful & bewitching, in all the numerous vol:<sup>s</sup> they had left behind them on Mrs Whitby's shelves....she c<sup>d</sup> not separate the idea of a complete Heroine from Clara Brereton. Her situation with Lady Denham so very much in favour of it!--She seemed placed with her on purpose to be ill-used. Such Poverty & Dependance joined to such Beauty & Merit, seemed to leave no choice in the business." (VI. 391)

A sensible young woman "sufficiently well-read in Novels to supply her Imagination with amusement but not at all unreasonably influenced by them" (VI. 392), Charlotte soon dismisses these fancies. The more dangerously misled Sir Edward, however, has "read more sentimental novels than agreed with him" (VI. 404) and believes wholeheartedly that it is both possible and noble for him to model himself on Lovelace, making Clara his Clarissa. Austen sharply blames him for misreading his favourite authors, but nevertheless indicates through him the dangerous possibilities involved in not recognizing the differences between literary conventions and behaviour appropriate in "real life." One must, she implies, recognize the conventions of fiction for what they are: an enjoyable way "to supply [an] Imagination with amusement," but no more than that. As Sir Edward shows, even the conventions of moral literature can be dangerous if they are not recognized as artificial, imaginative structures which make books satisfying but which are, on their own, inadequate representations of the true complexity of life.

The most important difference between Austen's play with conventions and that of her contemporaries lies in this sense that conventions are not only necessary constraints upon authors but also dangerous habits into which readers allow themselves to be drawn. After her *Juvenilia*, Austen seldom indulges in the displays of technical virtuosity which mark the subversion of conventions in the work of the other writers discussed; her mature work involves a more subtle play with conventionalism, one directed towards mocking readers' expectations as much as the convention themselves. Playful literary experimentation is complicated by a clear didactic impulse. Yet this clear-sighted awareness of the dangers of convention does not mean that Austen, unlike her contemporaries, escapes all dependence upon conventional form. It is itself a convention of the didactic novel of the time to warn against excessive conventionalism. As a character in Frances Sheridan's highly successful novel The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph (1761) observes,

We are indeed so much used to what they call poetical justice, that we are disappointed in the catastrophe of a fable, if every body concerned in it be not disposed of according to the sentence of that judge which we have set up in our breasts.

The contrary we know happens in real life; let us not then condemn what is drawn from real life.<sup>50</sup>

She then illustrates her point through the witty but ultimately unhappy memoirs of Sidney Bidulph, whose

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<sup>50</sup>Frances Sheridan, The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph (London: Pandora Press, 1987) 3.

unflagging virtue is rewarded by equally unflagging misfortune. Yet Sheridan too, like Austen, makes her warning against dependence upon convention in a conventional manner. Sidney's story is part of the Richardsonian tradition of the temporal--but not spiritual--triumph of vice over virtue. As Culler argues--and as Blake and Byron demonstrate--it is impossible for a writer to break completely from the conventions which structure his or her thinking and writing. Austen is hedged about by the traditional patterns and forms of her genre, drawing upon them even to warn readers against taking them too seriously. In doing so, she, like the other writers discussed in this study, creates a style of comic expression which paradoxically employs the conventions of her genre only to formulate a sustained critical examination and eventual rejection of them.

As suggested at the beginning of this discussion of Austen, the difference between her experimentation with conventions and that of the other writers in this study is one of technique, rather than degree. She is no less critical than Byron, but her criticism is expressed in a manner which reflects a fundamental belief in the value of her comic vision and in the possibility of establishing new patterns for comic literature. Admittedly, she is notoriously self-deprecating about her own work--one of the most quoted comments from her letters is her claim that she is merely working on "two Inches" of ivory (Letters 134)--but the letters as a whole bear witness to the seriousness with



which she took her writing. While critical of the conventions of her genre, she seems to have no doubt that it is both possible and inevitable that those conventions can and will be refined and redefined so that they can express the cultural and social concerns of her own generation. In fact, in her criticism of readers who allow themselves to be caught up in literary conventions, mistaking them for a reflection of life, she implies that this re-evaluation and reworking of conventions must be a constant, ongoing process which prevents literary patterns from becoming solidified to the point that they can be as badly misconstrued and misused as they are by Sir Edward. As do her contemporaries, Austen suggests that traditional conventions of comic writing have become badly inadequate, but unlike them, she is not content to demonstrate or transcend that inadequacy in a literary tour de force. Instead, she manages to find a way to work beyond it and to establish a pattern for future work in the genre.

## Conclusion

### Romanticism and Comedy

Scholars have long since recognized that the Romantic era was not one in which literature suddenly underwent a complete, radical change in tone and direction. A century's worth of literary assumptions and conventions are not overthrown by a few volumes of poetry; nor is any single writer, however innovative, able to recreate entirely the tastes of his or her generation. "Pre-established codes of decision," affecting as they do both artists and audiences, are impossible to discard entirely. Despite Wordsworth's boasts of establishing a new system of poetry--and despite the jibes of critics who were quite willing to mock both his pretensions and his poems--neither Lyrical Ballads nor any other Romantic document, however important and influential, makes a complete break with past writing.<sup>1</sup> The authors whom I have discussed are thus not necessarily unromantic in their dependence upon previously established conventions; at most, they differ from contemporaries such as Wordsworth in their willingness to admit that dependence within the contexts of their own work. Yet even if the clichéd view of the Romantics as entirely original and innovative artists is no

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<sup>1</sup>For a discussion of Lyrical Ballads' place in a tradition of deliberately simple, ballad-like poetry, see J.R. de J. Jackson, Poetry of the Romantic Period (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980) 1-24.

longer tenable, there are still a number of questions which can be raised about the place that this writing occupies in relation to the major--or at least more familiar--literary developments of its era. First of all, and most basically, one might argue that a study which picks its examples across the boundaries of genre and theme is built upon rather tenuous principles. Certainly, Byron, Blake, and Austen defy comparison in terms of tone or style, while the less canonical Bage, Edgeworth, and Lamb make rather unlikely companions for study with either of the poets. (Of course, Bage and Edgeworth have obvious points of comparison with Austen.) Yet the unfamiliar grouping is part of the point of this study; as we begin to construct a more complex and subtle understanding of the Romantic poets and their place in literary history, we must also start to reconsider our deeply ingrained, rather Arnoldian assumption that between 1789 and 1829 English literature produced a school of six poets and one charmingly anomalous novelist.

My grouping of these disparate texts is actually fairly easy to justify in light of theoretical developments of the last decade or so, which both implicitly and explicitly argue that similarities in the ways in which narratives are structured are as worthy of analysis as similarities in theme or literary style. Auerbach's discussion of Romantic imprisonment, which underlies much of what I have argued in this study, is itself an example of a reading which uses narrative structure to draw links between a number of works

which are superficially very different from one another. While focusing on Austen, Auerbach brings such varied contemporaries as Wordsworth, Byron, Wollstonecraft, and Maturin into the discussion, thereby suggesting that a much broader range of cultural references is relevant to Austen's work than is normally assumed. Of course, the concept of Romantic imprisonment does considerably more than simply provide my justification for linking authors who are not normally studied in conjunction with one another. The "shades of the prison house" which fall literally on the protagonists of so many Romantic poems and novels fall figuratively on Austen's heroines, Auerbach argues; what I have done in this study is taken the metaphor a step farther, making the prison house in question not society but language, and arguing that it falls on Austen herself--and on Blake, Byron, and the other writers whom I have discussed. Doing so is not that large a step to take, since it merely requires one to argue that the "imagination of confinement" (7) which Auerbach suggests is typical of Romanticism is one which not only imagines prisons but which recognizes that it is confined itself by the imprisoning conventions of genre.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>The link between prisons and literary imagination is of course limited neither to the Gothic nor even to the larger field of Romanticism. John Bender, for example, has recently argued a link between the rise of the realistic novel in the eighteenth century and the era's developing notion of the prison as a place of reform rather than simply as a place of detention before transportation or execution (see Imagining the Penitentiary: Fiction and the Architecture of Mind in Eighteenth-Century England [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987]). However, the obsession with prisons as subject matter, both

Admittedly, drawing upon Auerbach's model in this study might initially seem a bit odd, because this is a study of comedy, and prisons, literal or metaphorical, are in no way comic. Being trapped, even by something as abstract as literary conventions, might well sound more painful than funny. In fact, some of the work that I have analyzed does have a distinctly grim edge; as mentioned in the discussion of Don Juan, Byron's comedy edges dangerously close to the bleakness of nihilism. Similarly, critics such as Julia Prewitt Brown and Gilbert and Gubar have seen dark subtexts even in Austen's delightful novels. Several important theorists of literary influence have also tended to stress the negative effects that the consciousness of such influence has on writers. Eco calls the type of literature which exposes its inability to escape conventional laws a "cold carnival" ("Frames of Comic Freedom" 8), while Bloom, in his theory of misprision, dramatizes an almost tragic struggle between writers and their predecessors. Yet as this study has shown, work which suggests the impossibility of entirely escaping conventions does not necessarily have to be bleak. Lamb uses his alter ego Elia both to mock and to be mocked; Austen does not fret over her lack of freedom but rather laughs at the expectations of her readers, expectations which, she implies, imprison them as much as they do her by distorting the quality of the entertainment that they are

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literally and metaphorically, does seem to be particularly marked during the Romantic era.

able to receive or appreciate. As Gary Kelly observes, "the reader well read in 'the trash of the circulating libraries'...will be the reader most qualified to read Austen's novels, but at the same time most susceptible to reading them merely as a superior kind of 'novels of the day,' that is, ephemeral and subliterate" ("The Limits of Genre" 170). Even as she entertains these "qualified" readers, Austen mockingly reveals the limitations of their standards of judgement. Similarly, Blake's mockery of those who passively accept limits and boundaries is far more exuberant than pessimistic. While fully recognizing that such boundaries exist and inevitably shape both his art and his readers' perceptions, Blake, in his early work at least,<sup>3</sup> treats those boundaries as an occasion for enthusiastic challenge rather than as a cause for a grim struggle or a chilling reminder of inevitable restraint. Even Don Juan, despite its repeated twinges of anxiety and despair, celebrates the process of writing as exploration. "I would solicit free discussion/ Upon all points" (XVII. 7) Byron proclaims just before his poem stops; new "truths" are constantly being proposed and debated, and while one might never break entirely beyond the previous era's "obtuseness," Byron suggests that the process of challenge, debate, erosion

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<sup>3</sup>Like Wordsworth, Blake becomes considerably less optimistic as he grows older. His post-1800 work, particularly the immensely long, complex, and rather grim Jerusalem, has little of the exuberance of the illuminated works up to and culminating in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.

and revision is vital. The result, for all of these writers, is a comedy rather than a tragedy of limitations.

Another question implicitly raised by this study grows out of these initial queries about the value of grouping Romantic writers and their supposedly non-Romantic contemporaries--that is, the question of whether or to what extent one can consider this sort of comedy to be a Romantic phenomenon. The Marriage of Heaven and Hell is the only work in this study firmly entrenched in the Romantic canon; even Don Juan is only just edging its way back in after a considerable period of critical indecision about just where it belongs. Although one could easily argue that calling all of this work "Romantic" might not be particularly desirable, since the word already has so many meanings that it can come perilously close to meaninglessness,<sup>4</sup> it is still necessary to point out some ways in which this sort of comedy might be particularly appropriate to the artistic goals of a number of writers shaped by the political and cultural situation at the turn of the nineteenth century. After all, as a glance backwards to Tristram Shandy or forwards to Sartor Resartus will show, comedy which undermines its own structuring

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<sup>4</sup>This point was made more than forty years ago by Arthur O. Lovejoy in "On the Discrimination of Romanticisms," in which he argues that the word has so many distinct meanings that one cannot use it in the singular with any precision (in English Romantic Poets, ed. Abrams 3-24.) Similarly, Jacques Barzun ends his Classic, Romantic, and Modern (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1961) with an amusing list of passages in which the word "romantic" is used in widely varied--and often directly contradictory--senses (155-58).

conventions is by no means unique to this era. If there is no reason that this type of writing might have had particular relevance to the concerns of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century writers, then it would be difficult to justify including only writing from that era in this study, since by doing so one inevitably fosters the impression that it is a "Romantic" phenomenon.

Of course, challenging limits or boundaries is, broadly speaking, one of the defining characteristics of Romanticism, so that one can in certain terms see these writers as sharing at least some of the interests of their contemporaries. Certainly, Wordsworth and the other poets are no less aware of the bonds of convention than are the writers in this study, and some of their writing could easily have been incorporated. Poems such as The Idiot Boy or Lamia are at least as self-conscious and self-mocking as Liber Amoris or Lady Susan. Although I have chosen to look at some less familiar writers and some prose writers rather than focusing exclusively on the six poets, this focus does not mean that the four poets whom I have omitted do not fit in at all. Rather, it indicates that there are other writers of their era, perhaps less immediately familiar, whose work is also worth looking at.

These comments might still seem to be evading the main question about whether or not the comic works in this study are typical of their period or are merely anomalies.

Undoubtedly, if one defines Romanticism as poetic mythmaking



or as a pursuit of the ideal, these works are anomalous, as are works such as Lamia, which are by one of the six major poets but which fit this model. Yet as I said in the introduction, one of the main points of this study is to try to move beyond the almost exclusive emphasis on solemnly high-minded poetry which one finds in most studies of the Romantic movement, an emphasis which limits our understanding of the early nineteenth century literary scene. I am certainly not alone in suggesting that the intense solemnity of Romantic idealism is not the only aspect of the period's literature worth attention; a number of other recent studies of the era have also explored new ways of looking at its literature. One of the most useful of those studies, for my purposes, is Kelly's discussion of what he calls the Romantic "quasi-novel," in which he looks closely at the era's experimentation with genre and connects those experiments with the revolutionary impulse which is usually assumed to typify the Romantic movement. Kelly argues that

Literature was implicated in the Romantic revolutions in two ways. It was a field of struggle for self-definition of the classes who produced and consumed literature, principally the professional middle classes. It was also the major institution available for representing the interests, culture, and values of those classes as the "national" interest, culture, and values while concealing the fact that it did so. For literature to accomplish this, however, its older, class- and gender-based distinctions of genre, fact and fiction, literary and subliterary had to be reconstructed. ("The Limits of Genre" 158)

The "Romantic revolutions" in England were, Kelly suggests, a rebellion against the cultural, rather than the political, hegemony of the court, a rebellion in which writers belonging to a very consciously politicized middle class attempted to "retain the character of the older, genteel, nonprofessional *belles lettres* but avoid their tendency to emulate gentry and even courtly literary culture." (161). Focusing on the transformation of prose fiction at the turn of the nineteenth century, Kelly argues that the primary technique by which writers subverted traditional, courtly values even while retaining the aura of their authority was by importing conventions proper to older, more respectable genres into the realm of prose fiction, creating what he calls the "quasi-novel." This genre, in which Kelly includes works such as Southey's Doctor, Christopher North's serialized Noctes Ambrosianae, and John Thelwall's The Peripatetic, might not initially seem to have much to do with the comic works discussed in this study, but in fact attempting to recreate established literature by mixing elements of old genres in order to develop a new one is precisely what these comic writers are doing. Blake, whose Marriage of Heaven and Hell comes very close to being a poetic version of Kelly's quasi-novel, is quite explicit about his desire to rewrite and recreate earlier literature, including Paradise Lost, the Bible, and Swedenborg's prophecies.

The type of revolution that Kelly describes is of course a rather muted one, one which disguises its innovations under

a cloak of familiarity. Even though Kelly does not explicitly discuss its relevance to comic literature, this type of covert rebellion against a literary establishment, a rebellion which appropriates as much as it rejects, is peculiarly appropriate to comic writing since the mode is generally considered to be conservative. As Robert Corrigan comments,

Because of its concern with society's need and its ability to maintain and preserve itself, comedy is by nature conservative, and Aristophanes and all other writers of comedy tend more or less to be conservatives.<sup>5</sup>

This idea is obviously related to Frye's description of the comic mode, which he defines by its tendency to begin with the main character alienated from the surrounding social order and to end with the reintegration of the character into his or her world. The old order may be overthrown, but invariably order is reestablished.<sup>6</sup> This process does not necessarily present an overtly political message; the comic works in question might well, as Kelly says of his "quasi-novels," attempt to cloak their politics in the guise of pure art, as do at least some of the works discussed in this study. (Hermesprong, which wears its politics on its sleeve, is the obvious exception.) Yet overtly or not, there is a

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<sup>5</sup>Robert Corrigan, Comedy: Meaning and Form 353; quoted in Moelwyn Merchant, Comedy (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1972) 70.

<sup>6</sup>See Frye, An Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957), especially 43-49 and 163-186.

political dimension to all of the writing that I have analyzed, particularly in its complex relationship to previous literature. The writers in this study engage in a process very similar to that which Kelly traces in the prose fiction of their contemporaries--in fact, Austen is one of the writers whom he discusses. As these writers undermine the conventions of their genres by juxtaposing them with those of other, incompatible genres, or by undercutting narrative stability, they too are attempting to reshape older styles of literature to fit the demands of a new ideology. The comedy in this study aligns itself with a much broader movement in prose fiction, a movement which Kelly ties directly to the peculiar political situation of this period.

A final point which one might want to consider, after looking at ways in which this comedy is shaped by its social and cultural environment, is that of how it fits into a larger, transhistorical tradition of literary comedy. One can certainly put it in a minor strain of uncategorizable literary oddities, moving backwards through Sterne and forwards through Carlyle, and obviously, as suggested throughout, it is tied to eighteenth-century comic thought, albeit in a rather antagonistic relationship. Yet its relationship to the Victorian comedy which followed it is rather more problematic. Austen is, of course, a very obvious link between eighteenth-century comedy by writers such as Fanny Burney and Frances Sheridan and the Victorian social comedy of Elizabeth Gaskell, Margaret Oliphant, and

other such writers,<sup>7</sup> but it is her delicate observation of social nuances, not her mockery of literary convention, which is imitated by her followers. Similarly, Byron's Lord Henry and Lady Adeline have descendants in many of the so-called Silver Fork novels of the 1820's and 1830's, and, more importantly, in Trollope's much later political aristocrats, Lady Glencora and Plantagenet Palliser.<sup>8</sup> Yet again, it is character and behavior which is being imitated, not the skeptical, subversive mood of the work in which those characters appear.

Yet tracing specific parallels is not really the issue, however nice such parallels would be for those who write literary histories. Certainly, if one is looking for a bridge between eras, Blake at least is hardly a likely candidate; his eccentric vision and idiosyncratic style remained unparalleled until consciously emulated by Yeats more than a century later. The important point is not to uncover a neatly evolutionary model of comic development but simply to realize that there was a tradition of comedy in

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<sup>7</sup>In particular, critics beginning with Q.D. Leavis have pointed out parallels between Austen's Emma and Oliphant's most enduringly popular novel, Miss Marjoribanks. The important contribution of women writers to social comedy during the Victorian period has tended to be overlooked, but recent editions and studies of these novels has refocused attention on them.

<sup>8</sup>Elizabeth Boyd has also noticed and commented on the resemblance between the Amundevilles and the Pallisers in Byron's Don Juan: A Critical Study. Emily Eden's Lord and Lady Teviot in The Semi-Attached Couple can also be compared to the Amundevilles, although in Eden's novel it is the husband who hides his emotion behind an icy exterior and the wife who prefers politics to passion.

existence between the eighteenth century and the Victorians. The tendency to ignore comedy in the Romantic period immensely oversimplifies not only studies of Romanticism but also studies of comic literature, implying as it does that the exuberant development of comic writing throughout the eighteenth century simply withered away in 1798. Recognizing that writers continued to build upon what had gone before in comic literature is in and of itself an important move, even if we do not discover a smooth link between Fielding and Dickens or Gaskell or Trollope in the process.

This comedy, which recognizes its own imprisonment by the conventions of previous writing but which nonetheless is able to explore the limitations of those conventions, certainly deserves close attention. The comic writing of the Romantic period has been so entirely overlooked in the past that there is a great deal of work to be done on the subject, work which will enable us to increase our understanding of the literary culture of the age, as we look at ties among poetry, novels, and essays, as well as between male and female writers and between the so-called major and minor works. Critics such as Auerbach and Kelly, who are willing to look beyond the traditional literary groupings and to challenge implicit assumptions that literature of the Romantic period is hedged about by strict boundaries of gender and genre, provide very useful models for such a study, reminding us as they do that literature from the turn of the nineteenth century involves more than visionary,

idealistic poetry by men, bad gothic novels by women, and ahistorical idylls by Austen. "I know not whether I shall be laughed at, or heard seriously," Lamb says at the end of his harrowing "Confessions of a Drunkard," and all too often, our inclination when confronted by the works of Lamb's contemporaries has been either to hear them seriously or to move to the other extreme and laugh at what we assume to be their ludicrous self-dramatization. The notion of laughing with them, or the idea that they might even be laughing themselves, seems hardly ever to cross our minds. Yet if we are willing to recognize that sometimes we could actually be distorting their work by hearing it seriously, we are taking a step which might considerably expand our ability to appreciate and understand the literature of this period.

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