Will I need a true love's kiss?

The Use of Parody and Popular Culture as Social Commentary in New Radio Theatre

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Table of Contents

Abstracts

This final dissertation aims to analyse the use of parody within the context of popular culture in two radio plays as a way to criticise current British culture and trends. The plays were written and produced by the Cambridge University Light Entertainment Society, an amateur comedy group founded within the University of Cambridge, UK, in 1958. The discussion begins with a historical summary of parody as a genre and its theoretical, as well as formal, evolution, from Rose and Bradbury to Hutcheon. It is followed by an in-depth analysis of three aspects of the plays that delve into social commentary: appearance and treatment of female characters, social and political criticism, and LGBTQ+ representation. The inclusion of social and political commentary disguised as mere humoristic parody in ostensibly unpolished young writing reinforces consumer criticism of normative media and the ways in which the younger generation rebels against set standards.

Keywords: parody, popular culture, theatre, social criticism, social commentary

Esta tesis final tiene como objetivo analizar el uso de la parodia en el contexto de la cultura popular a través de dos obras de teatro radiófonicas como forma de criticar la cultura y las modas británicas actuales. Las obras fueron escritas y producidas por la *Cambridge University Light Entertainment Society*, un grupo de comedia amateur fundado en la Universidad de Cambridge, Reino Unido, en 1958. Comienza con un análisis histórico de la parodia como género y su evolución, tanto teórica como formal, desde Rose y Bradbury a Hutcheon. A continuación, se aborda el análisis de tres aspectos de las obras que ahondan en el comentario social: la apariencia y el tratamiento de los personajes femeninos, la crítica social y política, y la representación LGTBQ+. La inclusión de comentarios sociales y políticos disfrazados de mera parodia humorística en obras juveniles refuerza la crítica del consumidor a los medios normativos y la manera en que la generación más joven se rebela contra los estándares establecidos.

Palabras clave: parodia, cultura popular, teatro, crítica social, comentario social

1. Introduction

In today's theatre, ghouls do cucumber face masks and sing Céline Dion to background bat chorus. Welcome to the Cambridge University Light Entertainment Society's radio-only, slightly deranged, musically-addled world of parody.

CULES, as it is popularly known, is a student-run theatre group founded in 1958 and registered within the University of Cambridge's plethora of societies. Its aims, according to its website, are three: to make theatre accessible, to raise money for charity, and to enjoy theatre for its own sake. To these, one could propose a fourth: to use parody, especially that which gravitates around popular culture, as a means of social commentary and, as will be tackled throughout this dissertation, social criticism. It is never easy to mix the serious with the silly; nevertheless, they persist.

Historically, parody has been perceived negatively, as a pejorative imitation, a petty work that exposes flaws or perceived slights, and, overall, a genre much separated from the nobleness of tragedy, as Kiremidjian (1969, p. 232) argues. This perspective began to change in the 19th century, evolved in the 20th, and nowadays it has been almost completely revoked: parody's presence has become more noticeable in all literary and, decisively, most audio-visual platforms. Parody is all around us, from *Barry Trotter* (2001) to *Blarnia* (2005) to CULES' own *The Ghoul of the Music Hall* (2021).

Parody is often, though admittedly not always, employed as a tool for social criticism. It was true in the 20th century (Van O'Connor, 1964; Kiremidjian, 1969; Hutcheon, 1985) and it is true now (Glebova, 2010). At the intersection of parody and satire, social criticism mixes with humour, and humour delivers some of the most biting blows. This is the case of the two works that will be analysed in this dissertation: *Heroics for Beginners* (2021) and the aforementioned *The Ghoul of the Music Hall*, two radio plays that interweave the social, the political, and even the musical to create amateur, but poignant, stories, where puns abound and bad jokes are praised.

The first, released in March 2021 on YouTube, reminds the listener of those highly polished, action-packed Marvel and DC films. The play unveils every possible trope in them: superhero powers, jokes about sidekicks, a character named Token Woman, a cat-adoring (by sheer virtue of being a cat) Evil Mastermind, shark tanks, minions, babies in waiting of a Chosen

One destiny, and even the green-tinted hued of tragedy at the end due to a radioactive pool. In it, a superhero-in-training, his best friend, and his past love interest must stop the Evil Mastermind's Evil Plot, and they race against time before politicians vote it into law.

The second is a three-act musical released in June 2021 also on YouTube, and it is very clearly inspired by Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical *The Phantom of the Opera* (1986)*,* as well as by classic Disney films. Eight, a mechanical automaton, wants nothing more than to be human so her creator, Everett, will fall in love with her. She achieves this via a sorcerer in a travelling circus, joins aspiring singer Colette Thompson to form a double act in the local music hall, and meets the ghoul (and/or vampire) "haunting" said music hall. This creature, as is revealed at the end, is precisely her creator's own sibling, Francis, disgraced and pushed away from the family trade. Eight, now Octavia, needs a true love's kiss not to be turned into stone, and she is convinced it will be Everett's. Everett is, nonetheless, obsessed with Colette, so much so that mechanical Eight was created in Colette's image (and now, human, they look like twins). After several twists and turns, including a masquerade ball where Everett murders one of the singers of the music hall and attempts to blame Francis' ghoul persona, Octavia receives her true love's kiss from Francis, not Everett. Naturally, all is well that ends well.

Though perhaps simplistic in plot, or maybe even because of it, the social commentary throughout both plays is abundant, and a clear reflection of the multiple flaws of current society and culture, viewed from the point of view of those closest to Internet-age popular culture: students themselves.

Popular culture[1] shapes our vision of the world and the way we communicate with each other. Even though it is by no means an Internet-age creation, popular (or "pop") culture has changed rapidly with our ability to communicate with each other via text messages or social media, with its inherent ease for sharing photos, videos or gifs that spread wildly in a matter of days, sometimes even hours. As such, the daily language and ideas of those most in contact with social media, generally the younger population, permeates these popular cultural references, which in turn affect how they interact with and even create cultural products. Drawing on the theoretical background of parody studies, it is the aim of this thesis to delve into and understand how popular culture devolves into parody, and how parody is used as a mechanism of social commentary and criticism in the two plays above mentioned: *Heroics for*

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[1] For the purposes of this dissertation, we understand this concept as Internet memes; references to or parodies of musical, literary, or film works; and other references to life and culture, such as TV shows or famous people.

Beginners and *The Ghoul of the Music Hall*. They are freely available and will provide enough commentary to conduct a thorough analysis, both in their relationship and connection to the overall framework of parody studies, and within themselves, in terms of gender, social class, current political events, and LGBT+ inclusion.

2. Theoretical Framework

Before any analysis of the importance of ghouls, singing duets, superheroes or villainous cats can proceed, it is necessary to define parody, or at least attempt to. Its etymological origins, as Kiremidjian (1969, p. 232) points out, trace back to the Ancient Greek *para* (meaning "beside") plus *ode* ("song"). Parody could, then, be defined as a "beside song", a *contre-chant*, if one speaks French. A song that accompanies the original one and, thus, has elements from it, but is not it. A variation, but a specific one: the first examples were sung beside the principal songs of glory and war, providing its epic harmonies with grotesquely "unharmonious" ones. One of the first known parodies is the *Batrachomyomachia* (6th century BCE), the *Battle of the Frogs and the Mice,* a parodic counterpart to Homer's *Illiad*.

However, parody has evolved and changed over the centuries, and so have its characteristics: the definition of parody currently differs from theorist to theorist. To Van O'Connor (1964, p. 243), parody is imitation, for one of its functions is to make readers experience the nature of a style and subject, and, thus, their excesses. The parodist works on the weaknesses and on the fraudulent, and praises while it condemns. A work being parodied needs to be good enough to be imitated, but its failings, moral or otherwise, are highlighted for everyone to see. Kiremidjian (1969, p. 231), however, points out that parody has its own artistic integrity and autonomy, and can thus stand on its own. Furthermore, by disjoining the union of form and content, it forces us to be aware of the use of form as an artifice: to Aristotle's art imitates life, Kiremidjian (1969, p. 233) parallels that parody imitates art, and in the process reveals something about that art. This same idea is postulated by Rose (as cited in Bradbury, 1987, p. 55), who argues that all writing is rewriting, and, consequently, parody exaggerates the rewriting process by emphasising both the present form and its original artistic redundancy.

Hutcheon (1985, p. 32) puts forward a different theory: that modern parody is, simply, a repetition with a difference. This difference need not be negative, mocking, or even critical, as so many theorists have postulated over the years, because parody has a bi-textual determination: it partakes of the code of a particular text, from which it stresses its differences

(as opposed to its similarities, as pastiche does), and from the parodic generic code. Parody is self-reflexive, and its conscience of form, as argued above, serves as a vehicle for change via its constant form deformation. This change, however, does not always mean an amelioration of the form. Parody is, in many ways, no more, and no less, than a variation.

Even though this all seems quite simple so far, defining this notion is, in fact, further complicated by the general superimposition of similarities among parody, pastiche, travesty, burlesque, and satire. Even though they can be, and frequently are, joined, creating combinations such as satirical parody or burlesque travesty, it is important to distinguish them separately if one wants to conceptualise one of them in particular, and not the others. Parody has already been defined, or at least an attempt has been made, so we shall continue with the rest. In the case of pastiche, Genette (1997, p. 25) contends that it takes place when the relationship between the hypotext (original work) and the hypertext (end result) is that of playful imitation. Completely different, travesty is, for Van O'Connor (1964, p. 243), putting classic characters in prosaic (trivial) situations, while burlesque imitates the original text but only as a device for tackling a new subject; they could be opposite, except that Genette (1997, p. 58) juxtaposes them in what he terms "burlesque travesty": it modifies the style but not the subject, thus transposing a text.

Satire is, however, completely different: it neither imitates nor transforms. Satire, to Hutcheon (1985, p. 110) brings the world into art, and thus makes room for added social dimensions. Satire and parody are, very often, confused, but they should not be: satire criticises the world by mocking it, whereas parody, while it can criticise or mock as well, exclusively deals with already-created works. For instance, satire debunks political speeches because of their content, parody because of their form. Their differences do not make them exclusive: satire and parody can, and certainly do, intermingle. Critical parody is a tool for satire as much as irony is, while parodic satire and satirical parody are a good mixture that often permeates many different media. In fact, this combination is increasingly popular in current parody studies, as noted by Glebova (2010, p. 223): these new 21st century parodies mainly aim at fans of the original works, but they criticise aspects of those works in several different ways by including elements of satire that serve as commentary on an array of socio-political concerns.

Nevertheless, these new parodies are not restricted to literature, and neither is the mixture of satire and parody to reveal the follies of our current world. In an article published in *Humanities*, Schroeder (2016) analysed a YouTube video that parodied four songs from famous

Disney films, *The Little Mermaid* (1990), *Aladdin* (1992), *Beauty and the Beast* (1992), and *Pocahontas* (1995). Said video, entitled "After Ever After" (2013), openly scrutinises Western politics, environmentalism, racism, and colonialism, among other issues, through beloved songs that, while being humorous and recognisable parodies of the originals, are also extremely poignant and powerful in their attacks. Because these songs presuppose a certain knowledge of both the original Disney songs and of the events they are revolving around, Schroeder (2016, p.11) argues that they allow listeners to make several layers of connections, including that of re-creating and re-thinking traditional narratives. Even in non-literary contexts, parody is bound by the text, while satire requires knowledge outside of it, i.e., seeks external sources to validate its criticism.

Perhaps this purely theoretical, mainly historical framework begs the question of where, exactly, this paper is situated, or even on what theory it is mainly sustained. The answer is not clear, due to the ever-changing, fluid nature of parody: several different definitions of parody have been proposed so far, and none of them is less worthy of consideration than the others. However, from a practical perspective, Rose's theory on all writing as rewriting (as cited in Bradbury, 1987, p. 55) and its perspective of parody as a way to emphasise both its present form and its original artistic redundancy seems to be the most helpful to our needs. The reason for this is that both *Heroics for Beginners* and *The Ghoul of the Music Hall*, which are not to be forgotten in the midst of our theoretical musings, show different characteristics: the former parodies an entire genre (that of superhero stories; in particular, films), while the latter focuses on a single work (and, in turn, its several adaptations). Bradbury (1987, p. 56) adds a third type, that of self-parody, and while it is not the aim of either of the plays, one cannot say they are absent from it, since not taking themselves too seriously to the point of joyously mocking their own plots can be considered a joint feature. Even what Genette (1997, p. 36) denominated minimal parody via puns or parodic allusions, such as transforming the work title, can be observed in them: *The Phantom of the Opera* turns into *The Ghoul of the Music Hall*.

However, both plays go beyond the mere rewriting to expose a text and its failures. The nature of parody as criticism is finicky, but it certainly exists, so much so that traditionally, as seen in Kiremidjian (1969, p. 234), critical parody has been thought to have a moral, even ethical, mission of both correcting and commenting. This is not always the case, though critical parody, as discussed before, can be used as one of satire's rhetorical devices in the same way irony can, which would in fact prompt said social commentary. Critical parody, thus, requires

from distance, cold eye, and enough wit to speak it (or write it) into existence, praising while it condemns, showing what is wrong but not necessarily correcting it.

Nevertheless, parody, even critical parody, is not sufficient on its own. Both plays, as will be further discussed later, offer poignant social commentary and even social criticism as a result of the union of parody with satire. Since their combination makes room for added social dimensions, both plays discuss everything from gender to class differences under storylines that concern personal freedom, love, and evil plans to control the townhall organised by a cat. This confluence of satire and parody is further helped by the medium these stories share: the Internet. To quote Schroeder (2016, p. 2): "The unique access and sharing capabilities of YouTube.com allow individuals to create and broadcast their own material to a world-wide audience from the comfort of their own homes", with digital parody aiming to mix beloved stories, popular culture references, and contemporary social criticism in a highly-interactive, current setting. YouTube and, as of late 2021, Spotify, the two platforms chosen for sharing CULES content, are easily accessible and free across the Internet, and allow the use of other functions (such as graphic posters, links to transcripts, or others), as well as likes and comments, to rethink the traditional narrative of literary parody. Even though they are plays, they are not intended to be staged in a conventional way; rather, they follow the current trend of audio-only podcasts. This, in turn, presents a high number of opportunities to mock, reference, criticise and re-think historical ways to parody that, however, draw from the traditional British history of parodists, from Fielding to Thackeray, in a society and a culture where parody is as old as the literary art itself (Glebova, 2010, p. 221).

3. Analysis

3.1. Women for Beginners: Gender Commentary

The first section of this analysis will be devoted to the portrayal of women in various media, and how both *Heroics for Beginners* (*HB* hereafter) and *The Ghoul of the Music Hall* (*GMH* hereafter) draw on irony as well as parodic imitations of already-existing stereotypes to subvert what popular culture and/or mainstream media characterise as "women". As a reminder, *HB* parodies Marvel and DC films via abundant use of tropes (sidekicks, shark tanks, radioactive pools, evil masterminds, even superhero powers and costumes) and follows a superhero-in-training, his best friend, and his past love interest, who race against time before politicians vote the Evil Mastermind's Evil Plot into law. On the other hand, *GMH* is inspired by Andrew Lloyd

Webber's *The Phantom of the Opera* and stars Eight, a mechanical automaton who turns human so her creator, Everett, can fall in love with her. Human Octavia becomes a professional singer and meets Francis, the ghoul (and/or vampire) "haunting" the music hall where she works, who turns out to be her one true love's kiss in the face of Everett's duplicitous behaviour.

Before the analysis commences, it is important to bear in mind that all the female characters appearing here will be cis women (women who were assigned female at birth and agree with that assessment), though transgenderism and non-binarism will be further discussed later with regards to another character.

DEIRDRE: Wow, congratulations on making it, you're a real Token Woman.

(HB, p. 13*)*

Opening with what to Van O'Connor was one of the ways in which parody resembles irony, which is saying one thing and partly meaning another (1964, p. 248), the first woman to be discussed is the aptly-named Token Woman. Token Woman, who is actually named Barbara but is never called such, is Admiral Admirable's sidekick. She trained in the Token Women Academy to be the "defender of men" and the fact that the men in question seem to be actual cis men, as opposed to "the whole of humankind", is but another ironic note to those who are willing to listen. Her fatal weakness, that which would make all her powers disappear, is chocolate chip ice cream. This character, who is "perfect in every way, it's what makes her compelling" (*HB*, p. 56) actively antagonises the other main female protagonist in the show, Deirdre, by remarking several times on her physical appearance and her lack of Token Woman-ness. Deirdre, on her part, was expelled from the Training Academy several years ago for starting a chocolate smuggling ring and is now a mother to a baby in waiting of a Chosen One destiny.

Even though this backstory seems humorous at first glance, it is another subtle reminder of the power dynamics and active competition of the women who are portrayed in media. It is a well-known contrast between the "dream woman", smooth, sleek, physically perfect, and capable of performing daring deeds in high heels (one cannot help but be reminded of Halle Berry's *Catwoman,* 2004); and the "real" woman, the "frumpy" one, who is however on a superior moral stance precisely because of her realness. Deirdre is everything Barbara is not,

because she actively chose to lose her Token Woman status, whereas Barbara considers her position to be the most important thing about her.

Furthermore, the mere naming draws attention: Barbara is a Token Woman. To Genette (1997, p. 36), this would be minimal parody: by playing with words, and refusing to give Barbara a "proper" title, or even allowing her to be called and known by the name she has, the author signals that she has lost her identity and has become just a type, exactly what the Token Women Training Academy wanted. She is devoid of any personality or goals for herself that do not have to do with following what Admiral Admirable tells her, or, indeed, with maintaining her status and her position in society. She is no longer "human", in the whole sense of the word, but an archetype of latex and high heels.

At the same time, *GMH* presents two different types of women who also represent stereotypes in their own right: the Disney princess type, and the mean, popular diva out to hurt the sweet, innocent protagonist. From the beginning, Eight echoes many classic Disney princesses: she lives in a clocktower, and, thus, has been forcefully cut off from the world she longs to be part of (Rapunzel, Ariel, Cinderella), with only the company of an animal sidekick (in her case, a mechanical spider, an interesting choice that seems to have been designed with parody in mind if one takes into account spiders' general bad fame).[2] She is, or believes herself to be, deeply in love with a man, and is willing to change everything about herself, including her biology, to win over that man's love:

> EIGHT: If I was human, he would be able to love me. I know that's what he wishes too! You hear how he talks to me, he calls me "love". My mind is made up. Make me a human.
>
> *(GMH,* Act 1, p. 31)

Once she is turned human by a sorcerer from a travelling circus, her initial main goal is to get her true love's kiss so that she can stay human forever and, of course, takes for granted that it must be from Everett Radford, her creator. She firmly believes that it would be the only

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[2] Rapunzel (*Tangled*, 2010), trapped in a high tower with no stairs so her adoptive mother could make use of her magical hair to never grow old; Ariel (*The Little Mermaid*), isolated from the human world she longs to be part of because she is a mermaid; Cinderella (*Cinderella*, 1950), forced by her stepmother to be a domestic servant and, thus, not allowed to venture outside the house. All these parallel Eight in forceful confinement by the person in power, who could arguably be the parental figure/creator, for the same reasons as these princesses: either the creator's own personal benefit (Rapunzel, Cinderella: so Eight can keep serving him) or due to Eight's non-humanity that makes approaching humans impossible for her (Ariel).

kiss she needs, since she is already in love with him: now she just needs to make Everett fall in love with her, or, in other words, to become worthy of his love. This echoes Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (1989), where the main character abandons everything she has for a man and depends on him to keep her new-found humanity or, else, she would be turned to stone (or similar). Credit must be given to the sorcerer, who, unlike Ursula, gives newly-human Octavia a month to get her kiss, and allows her to keep her singing voice. And everything else, really: Sherry Bourbon is Ursula's direct contrast, parallel and opposite at the same time. Her presence, which is signalled with a glorious background harmony chorus, presupposes knowledge of Ursula's role to be fully understandable, and brings back Hutcheon's theory of parody requiring knowledge of the background to decode the full meaning (1985, p. 34). Ursula is the villain, because she actively looks to put down the protagonist to become triumphant, whereas Sherry is not because she does not benefit in any way from Eight's humanisation. In fact, she was contrary to it, and certainly did not believe she could bring about such a change. But in the face of stubbornness, she tries her best to help, armed with a very strong Northern accent and a course on magic from the community centre down the road.

Unlike Ariel, Eight has everything at her disposal: her full body, her voice, her autonomy, and her friends. A particular highlight of the show is the arrival of Colette and her sister Percy, as well as Percy's wife, Archer: this brings Octavia female friends and, in turn, a new job. Despite their goal of breaking free from their expected roles or living places (Garabedian, 2014, p. 23), none of the second-wave Disney princesses[3], from Ariel to Mulan or even Rapunzel, have any female friends, or indeed any human friends at all, and their circumstances (princess, warrior, escapee turned princess in non-clearly defined historical settings) do not grant them any jobs either. An exception is Tiana (*The Princess and the Frog*, 2009), who does have a professional career in 1920s New Orleans but, as one could reasonably expect, is forced to give it up for most of the film when she is turned into a frog.

This prompts Octavia to experience personal growth in a way former Disney princesses have not been allowed to, and changes her once main life goal, something Ariel is never able to achieve. Of course, part of this is due to the setting: Ariel had three days and no voice to get

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[3] Both Stover (2013) and Garabedian (2014) parallel the three waves of feminism with Disney Princess films to show Disney endlessly renovating the princess standards to maintain social relevance both in actions and characteristics: first wave coincides with *Snow White, Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty* (voiceless heroines shown as caretakers); second wave follows (not in time, since the second wave of feminism ended in the 1970s, but thematically, i.e, fighting against oppressive backgrounds) from *The Little Mermaid* to *Tangled*; and third wave (post-transition, since Disney did not break "the princess pattern" until 2012) frames *Frozen*, *Brave*, and, afterwards, *Moana*.

her prince to kiss her, while Octavia has a whole month at her disposal, full autonomy, and just needed "a true love's kiss". She assumes her true love is Everett, but, in a *Frozen* (2012) parallelism, it is not: it is Francis, Everett's disgraced sibling, whom she has been befriending over the last month. It is worth noting, as well, that Octavia, who has broken free of societal expectations and bounds, and is now allowed to keep her human shape, proceeds to go one step further by keeping her job. As Stover (2013, p. 4) notes, second-wave Disney princess (Belle, Jasmine, Pocahontas, Mulan, and Tiana), to which Garabedian (2014, p. 23) adds Ariel and Rapunzel, have narratives that revolve around the idea of escaping from their oppressive environment, as well as to choose their suitors. However, once their heroic actions are performed and their suitors have been chosen, they are content to marry their princes and settle down.[4] By contrast, Octavia's role is ultimately not to marry, or merely to marry. Or even to marry at all.

> OCTAVIA: Assistant? I think you'll find the Thompson Twins are a good enough act in their own right, thank you very much!

> (*GMH*, Act 3, p.43)

Octavia, accompanied by Colette, continues to pursue her career as a singer, and will not be relegated to a secondary position beside her love interest, Francis, who changes "careers" from haunting presence at a music hall to circus magician. She will accompany them, as well as her friends Archer and Percy, on her own terms and with her own means. Her narrative has not concluded upon finding love: it has just begun.

By contrast, someone else's narrative concludes in the third act of the same play: Parmesan Feta's, nicknamed Jharn. Jharn, a clear parody of Heather Chandler (from *Heathers: The Musical*, 1989) is a Queen Bee akin to *Mean Girls*' (2004) Regina George: her reign is not a U.S. high school, but a Parisian music hall. She has two "friends" (servants, bodyguards, or adoring fans would perhaps be more precise words), Emmie (parallels Heather Duke) and Brie (Heather McNamara), and is ambitious, ruthless, explicitly feminine in her appearance and care of her looks, and, without a doubt, mean. Except that she, too, subverts stereotypes, and not only in the direct mocking of her and her friends' having cheese names (though, of course, there too).

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[4] Sequel films such as *Pocahontas 2* or *Mulan 2* are not being taken into account, neither by Stover (2013), Garabedian (2014), nor this final dissertation.

In their[5] essay "Mean Girls End Up Dead", Day (2017) ponders over the fate of popular culture's mean girls, or Queen Bees. From *Carrie*'s Chris to Heather Chandler, to *Pretty Little Liars'* Alison DiLaurentis, to name a few, the past sixty years have witnessed a trend where the popular, mean girl gets her comeuppance at the hands of the girl she victimised. The reason for said victimisation, which often, if not always, occurs in high school settings, is nothing other than ill-intentioned ways to remain in "power" and continue being popular, equally feared and adored. Queen Bee behaviours fall under what Day (2017, p. 137) refers to be "relational aggression": spreading rumours, harmful gossip, and manipulating relationships. This prompts a complicated framework of ideas about gender and empowerment, misuse of power, and rejection of traditional feminine stereotypes of behaviour, while at the same time presenting an overtly physical hyperfeminity.

Jharn, while certainly not kind or gracious, is not a bully to Octavia and Colette. She does not spread, or believe, rumours of any kind (much less about the ghoul haunting the theatre), and what she has to say, she says to people's faces. Her song "Prima Donna", which is based on *Heathers'* "Candy Store" and includes lyrics such as "Remember, it's me they adore" and "You are both prosecco and I'm champagne", is a clear example of that. Her behaviour towards her minions revolves around the expectation of unconditional obedience, just as Heather Chandler and Regina George did, and even copies the mythical "Shut up, Heather!" for a "Shut up, Emmie!"

Furthermore, Octavia counts on her new friendship with Francis, which allows her to play pranks on Jharn with no retribution and complete secrecy:

> COLETTE: You think they'd [The Fetas] just leave the theatre already. The Hall Ghoul won't leave Jharn alone! Why is a complete mystery. I would be worried I'd be offed if I was being targeted like that; take the next train out of the city and never look back!
>
> OCTAVIA: Yes (guilty laugh), it really is a mystery
>
> (*GMH*, Act 3, p. 4)

These pranks, as described in several events and even in the song "Metaphorical Afterlife", mainly revolve around dirtying Jharn's collection of dresses (for instance, with paint). On one occasion, however, in the Masquerade Ball, Francis performs ventriloquy on one of Jharn's

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[5] It might be noted to the reader that third person singular, gender-neutral pronoun "they" will be used when referring to authors.

performances, in a song aptly titled "Branching Out into Comedy", thus changing its lyrics to verses like "I go out to the park and I honk like a goose" or "Instead I go out and start chasing raccoons!" It might be noted that Jharn storms out, while managers Aubert and Fabian sell her new comedy vein to the delighted audience.

So, unlike the Queen Bees and mean girls Day refers to in their paper, Jharn does not victimise anyone other than the long-suffering theatre managers and her own supportive friends, and her mean-spirited comments get her less (or more, depending on how much one values one's dresses) mean-spirited pranks back. This breaks the implicit link between general mean girl behaviour and much more extensive aggression, and it, too, breaks the pattern of the mean girl being killed by her victims. The mean girl is killed, yes, but not by Octavia or Colette. It is Everett, in a power struggle, the one who kills her, and he is not in the least a victim of any type.

It has been mentioned above that one of the traits of mean girls is, precisely, their ambition for more social power over their high school peers. In Jharn's case, her ambition gravitates specifically around her and her future: she wants to be a big singer and move to an actual opera house in a big city, instead of being stuck in her current position in the music hall. She is willing to do whatever it takes to get it, including blackmailing. That brings her to her final demise: she attempts to blackmail Everett, whom she saw murdering the theatre stagehand, to get him to pay her a cheque big enough to travel the world, but is, in turn, murdered by him.

A final note: Day (2107) notes that Queen Bee's murders usually are surrounded by violence and gore. Jharn's is not: Jharn is poisoned, and only survives enough time to call Everett "nuts"; a parallelism with the original Heather Chandler, whose last words were this and who also died by poison. Dark parody, perhaps, but parody nonetheless.

3.1.1 The Ghoul of the Music(al) Romance: Gender and Relationships Portrayal

GMH is not, at its core, a romantic story, or a story merely about romance, but it does have an important romantic subplot that literally transforms the protagonist's life from automaton to human. It would make sense, then, to compare Octavia's two relationship prospects: Everett and Francis Radford. Parody-wise, it might be worth noting that it seems as if the original Phantom got split into the two siblings, with Octavia taking up the position of Christine. This brings to mind how Hutcheon locates modern parody at the intersection of creation and re-creation, of invention and critique, of old and new (1985, p. 101).

Everett represents the hidden traits of the Phantom in terms of obsessions and ideals of what he is personally owed by sheer virtue of being who he is, as seen in several of his actions throughout the play, but perhaps most clearly in Everett building mechanical Eight in the image of Colette Thompson, who by the time the play starts has already refused him several times. This is an echo of Phantom possessing a model of Christine in a wedding dress in Lloyd Webber's *The Phantom of the Opera*. In a way, it is, as well, a little echo of Pygmalion, except for the fact that Everett does not wish to pursue romantically or even humanise Eight in any way. Eight represents a thing, or a toy, for his own use and economic benefit, since she is the first of the automaton prototypes to work as he intended them to. She is almost completely human, and though he does not view her in that way, he is intelligent enough to realise her affection for him, and does not shy away from emotional manipulation and gaslighting to get her to behave as he intended:

> EVERETT: You need to stop this talk of going outside. You will in time, when you're finished up to spec, but not now. You know I care about you. What if a rival company were to steal your design? Take you away from me. Is that what you want?

> (*GMH*, Act 1, p. 14)

In a way, Everett is similar to Hans in *Frozen*: both Eight and Anna, young women who have been brought up in stories but never allowed to venture outside their walls, fall deeply in love with these men that bring them attention and novelty, all the while never caring anything about them as people. And the audience is perfectly aware of this, which perhaps makes Eight/Anna's final realisation all the sadder. A crucial difference, of course, is that Hans does not actually murder anyone in cold blood.

However, human Octavia, who looks exactly like Colette, tries to make Everett fall in love with her to get her love kiss (even if, as she realises later, it would be a fake kiss). And Everett does not precisely improve as a person with whom he thought to be Colette, to the point that he becomes almost a caricatured character: from "Well, *actually*" (Act 2, p. 17) to "What kind of man would I be if I didn't support your [Octavia playing Colette's] little hobby, hm?" (Act 3, p.14), Everett demonstrates, again and again, his self-importance, while belittling Octavia (Colette)'s intellect, actions, and feelings. He is convinced that Colette has always been in love with him, only she had been playing

"hard to get –

To see if I deserve your heart.

(spoken) And I admire that, Colette. It is only your part – as a girl."

<div align="right">(GMH, Act 2, p. 21, song "A Pleasant Afternoon").</div>

His final act, too, resembles the original Phantom (the novel): Colette/Christine has to choose between marrying him or a terrible alternative, in this case, seeing her friends bombed in front of her eyes. By now, Everett has learnt of the Octavia/Colette deception, and does not care: he will get Colette's hand one way or another. His ending is, perhaps, fitting: Colette herself punches him in the face and makes him unconscious. A true peripety, where he does get her hand, though, admittedly, not in his intended way.

On the other hand, Francis Radford represents the outer traits of the Phantom: they live in a music hall playing pranks on management and blackmailing them to get a sense of peace. A tortured, lonely soul, they fall deeply in love with Octavia… and, surprisingly, proceed to act quite rationally for someone whose career is ghoul impersonation:

> FRANCIS: It's more like an obsession. Just a tad creepy building an automaton to look exactly like the girl he has a crush on. Just imagine! Making a model of the person you fancy! So disturbing.

<div align="right">(GMH, Act 2, p. 39)</div>

Francis is Everett's exact opposite: they represent a healthy romantic relationship built upon friendship, respect, and genuinely mutual care. In fact, it never occurs to them that they would be Octavia's true love kiss, so convinced were they that Octavia never looked at them as anything other than a friend. And even with the possibility of her demise, they do not dream of trying out their hand at kissing her, because she had not stated she wanted their try:

> FRANCIS: No, we can't give up, there must be something we can do!
> OCTAVIA: There's nothing, Francis. The sorcerer said only my true love's kiss could save me.
> COLETTE: Hang on, true love's kiss?
> FRANCIS: So, not Everett's kiss as such?
> OCTAVIA: Uh... I don't think... She didn't say anything about that, actually.

FRANCIS: (Sadly) Oh.

A moment of silence. Colette clears her throat pointedly.

COLETTE: Go on then.

FRANCIS: (Flustered) Wait – me?!

<div align="right">(GMH, Act 3, p. 39)</div>

And it is, in fact, them. Francis never pressured Octavia, supported her dreams and her career, helped her re-construct E2, her robotic spider sidekick, after Everett broke it into pieces, and cheered her on from the sidelines (or, well, the cellars of the theatre). And, most importantly, they never presumed to know what Octavia thought or felt to the point of imposing their feelings on her. But they did not need to impose anything, because it was already there.

3.2 Criminal Unions vs Good-for-Nothing Servants: Social and Political Commentary

3.2.1: If I Could Be a Gentleman: Social Class Portrayal

Hutcheon (1985, p. 111) mentions that any and all forms of media, from literature to films to art, can use parody to comment on the "world" in some way. Moreover, the pleasure that derives from the use of irony in satiric parody comes from the degree of engagement of the audience in the intertextuality, from complicity to distance. This is certainly true in the two plays being analysed, since both *GMH* and *HB* present two different social spheres that reflect the enormous gap in current British society: on the one hand, we have a life of dissipation and luxury; on the other, active pro-workers' rights commentary, even if it is on the ranks of criminals who want to dismantle public health services in the city.

Every single main character in *GMH*, except for Eight and E2, belongs to what could be described as an affluent and powerful socioeconomic background, all of which has been inherited. Mr and Mrs Williams, Mrs and Mrs Hartley, the Radford family (even Francis, from their cellars of the theatre, has access to a not-inconsequential amount of money), and possibly even the Thompsons come from comfortably well-off families, a big contrast with the way of living of the circus artists or, indeed, most of the general population. Some of these choices are, however, clearly parodic:

MRS HARTLEY: It's utter genius! Not to mention money saved on opera tickets! Now the other Mrs Hartley is finally able to build Hartley Hall in Hampshire. She has

promised me the most lovely garden and greenhouses; Kew will not hold a candle to my Hartley Hall Hedges! We shall have the finest bushes in all of southern England!

THE OTHER MRS HARTLEY: Oh, dear wife, you do exaggerate! It will be a small affair, a little country getaway, only 2,000 acres or so.

(*GMH*, Act 1, p. 6)

Little country getaways of 2,000 acres or so do make one question the need of saving money "on opera tickets" thanks to the invention of automatons that sing on their own. This play presents such privileged characters that they become completely out of touch with reality. Furthermore, it is clear that the opening scene, after the prologue, is meant to parody most cliches of British rich families, even if the setting is France-based: from the way of talking ("jolly good old hunt") to their way of acting ("you know I like to look after my pennies"), to their soirées in society. Their way of living contrasts very deeply with their reflection and treatment of those who do not belong to their social sphere:

EVERETT: I'm currently working on a model that requires no winding up at all. That way, you need not worry about constantly restarting them.

MRS WILLIAMS: Oh, that's no worry for us, Everett! We just have good old Geoffrey do it for us, don't we, darling?

MR WILLIAMS: Yes, dear. What else are the help for but winding up?

(*GMH,* Act 1, p.8)

This social class divide is observed at several points throughout the play:

ARCHER: Driver! If you could be a gentleman and take our cases to 17a Cherry Tree Lane that would be excellent, thank you.

DRIVER: If I could be a gentleman, I wouldn't be driving a bloody cab!

(*GMH,* Act 1, p. 18)

Another moment to note is when Percy, after Colette is once again rejected from the Music Hall, says she is too good for it and perhaps she should try the opera. The opera has, and still is, traditionally been considered a music genre reserved for wealthy people, mainly because of the knowledge and education it requires to understand it. This way, Percy, a trapeze artist, inherently shows her classism. Colette must aim higher, because she is worthy of more, and a mere Music Hall will not be enough. The moment is cut short by Archer, Percy's wife, immediately laughing out loud, as a way of reinforcing the feeling that actually Colette is not "good enough" to try this musical genre.

By contrast, *HB* offers active pro-workers rights commentary through the character of Minion. Minion's name, as much as Token Woman's, and even Evil Mastermind's, has been chosen with more care than it appears at first glance: Minion represents the archetype of a character, and all evil minions are concentrated in him, especially since Minion is, according to the badge Deirdre reads out loud, "Evil Minion in Chief". However, this character is also where parody and satire intermix at their best: an active criminal following the orders of the Evil Mastermind is the only character in the whole play to defend his rights as a worker:

> MINION: Well Your Evilness, I reckoned, since I'd been on duty for fifteen hours, it might… maybe… be time for me to take a teeny, tiny little-
>
> MASTERMIND: I do hope you are not about to say *break*, Minion.
>
> MINION: No, sir – Your Evilness – I –
>
> MASTERMIND: We talked about this earlier. You, and I, can take a break, when THE FORCES OF GOOD ARE OBLITERATED AND THE WORLD RESTS BENEATH THE AEGIS OF DOMINATION CORPORATION!
>
> MINION: I was going to say sip of water, Your Evilness. I haven't drunk a drop all day.
>
> *(HB,* p. 17*)*

This becomes a recurring gag throughout the rest of the play: the Evil Mastermind, of course, does not believe in any kind of workers' rights, including breaks. As he ironically points out, there is no Criminals' Union to protect anyone, and Domination Corporation Inc. must triumph before anyone is allowed even a minimal break of any kind. Of course, the first time we meet

Evil Mastermind, he is receiving a massage. The contrast is, certainly, not unheard of in our era of millionaire CEOs and minimal-wage workers.

Meanwhile, Minion's plight becomes better known among friends and foes alike, in what Hutcheon (1985, p. 109) describes as inward self-referencing. This reaches a comical peak when our three heroes (Tod, Deirdre, and Steve) are trapped in the Evil Mastermind's Evil Lair, about to be thrown to a pool shark, and Deirdre rebukes Minion for not defending his working rights. Going from subtlety to a screamed "TAKE A BREAK!" (p. 30), Deirdre's call for working rights, or at least working breaks, so dazes Minion that he immediately takes off running to take advantage of his right to break time. Unfortunately, the Mastermind does not care much about regulations, much less when his prisoners escape due to Minion's absence.

> MINION: Under the Working Time Regulations Act of 1998 I am legally entitled to a
> break of-
>
> MASTERMIND: Legal? Legal?? You are an employee of the Criminal Underground,
> Minion, and your contract states that you should be grovelingly merciful for every
> precious moment your skin isn't flayed for insubordination!
>
> (*HB*, p. 43)

But such is the fight for working rights.

3.2.2: I AM THE LAW: Police, Politics, and Power Portrayal

As Glebova (2010, p. 224) points out, the new "trend" of modern parodies includes, almost by definition, elements of political satire that serve as elements of political and social commentary on current concerns. This is especially true in *HB*. To begin with, the play tackles the issue of corruption: Admiral Admirable is "gifted" £22 million by the Evil Mastermind, which he justifies as a way to pay for the modern lifestyle, since product placement deals are, apparently, not excessively lucrative. Regardless, Admiral Admirable now follows the orders of the Mastermind and convinces most of the city's politicians to follow and listen to him as well, on top of fighting who and what the Mastermind deems to be appropriate. And the Mastermind's Evil Plan? Controlling the city. His main aim is to privatise social services, as well as to launch a scheme of community reform. His motivation for becoming evil was precisely the knowledge

that due to the political system's current set-up, he either controlled the city by mastering both the forces of good (superheroes, police forces, politicians) and of evil (criminal network), or nothing would get ever discussed at a council meeting, which meant no reforms could be implemented. The fruitlessness of politics, as well as other public services, is a fact mentioned more than once:

> DEIRDRE: I was so sure the police would be helpful this time.
> STEVE: I suppose we'll have to take matters into our own hands.
> TOD: You mean-!
> STEVE: Yes, Tod.
> TOD: -Write to the council!
> STEVE: …No.

> (*HB*, p. 37)

Furthermore, the police forces mentioned by Deirdre get very special attention in the play. Traditionally, the presence of superheroes has been due to the lack of competent armed forces (*Batman*) or as a power-infused complement to them (*Captain America*). In our current era of BLM, the police forces in the play are especially satirised, thoroughly mocked, and generally not presented in the best of lights through the character of Officer (no first name, no last name): he is presented as overbearing, authoritarian, disrespectful, and derelict. When Steve, Tod, and Deirdre first discover Admiral Admirable's corruption, their first action is to report it to the police, and Officer does not take them seriously for, as he states, three reasons: word of mouth happens to be an unreliable source; the money could come from a lucrative product placement deal; and the Evil Mastermind was, certainly, a law-abiding citizen who had even made a generous donation to that very police station. And not only that:

> OFFICER: MOREOVER, if Admiral Admirable was, in fact, less than the admirable Admiral we all admire him to be, then the complete overdependency of this police force on vigilante justice would be entirely called into question. I don't want to hear another word against him. Capit-che?

> (*HB*, p. 37)

Throughout the entire meeting with Officer, he proves to be unreasonable and bad-tempered: when his assistant brings him a coffee without milk, he proceeds to destroy his entire office in a fit of rage. He laughs at Steve's name, belittles their intention in coming to say anything, and all but physically pushes them out of the place. Officer is more a bully than a policeman, as is demonstrated later, in the fight between Admiral Admirable, Evil Mastermind, and Steve:

> OFFICER: They're getting away, stop them!
> DEIRDRE: You're the police!
> OFFICER: I am off-duty!

(*HB*, p. 57)

This off-duty police officer, however, was ready and present to give his vote to the Evil Mastermind just minutes before, in a top-secret political meeting where he wondered whether abolishing the National Orphanage for the Blind and Deaf to install instead a drive-thru would mean Sunday discounts. And he is, as well, ready and willing to suddenly be on-duty at the end, when the evil forces are vanquished and he can proceed to arrest the relevant people (or cats, as it were). However, Officer, despite lamenting the fact that vigilante justice is not as reliable as he thought, is still more than willing to let Steve, Tod, and Deirdre take over to defeat the evils of the city, while he keeps abusing his power and his position in a not-too-distant future.

3.3 That's a Lot of Variety in our Tapas of Talent: LGBTQ+ Inclusion

This section will be entirely devoted to *GMH*, where LGBTQ+ inclusion is remarkably important and decidedly a clear social mark of today's times: both Disney films and *The Phantom of the Opera* are heterosexually normative, so a parody of both choosing to include several, if not most, LGBTQ+ characters, shows the importance of representation for current generations of younger people. It is not enough with verbalising support towards the queer community, one must show it, and the only way to do it is to include historically non-normative characters in completely normal and unassuming ways.

In fact, Harris (2017, p.2) argues on the importance of not only representation, but also of *positive* representation: queer representation needs to, first and foremost, exist, but also be

diverse, inclusive and, most importantly, alive. This evolves from a trend in media known as "Bury Your Gays", which consists of killing queer characters in an unexpected and usually accidental manner, usually for shock value and with no significant impact on the plot. Thus, by killing already underrepresented characters, the validating power of representation is negated off; heteronormativity is not only maintained, but also reinforced.

Representation is a matter of social importance that ripples and extends further beyond what one could think. Harris (2017, p. 5) mentions that it changes the way people perceive others, and provides critical validation to those it represents. In 2016, 4.8% of characters in US TV shows and 17.6% in US films were explicitly stated to be LGBTQ+, a 77% of which were gay white (cis)males (Ellis, 2017, as cited in Harris, 2017, p. 3). This shows how general media leaves behind women, non-cis people, and people of colour. Though by virtue of being a radio play characters' appearance can mostly be left to the imagination, *GMH* proudly gives voice to those most ostracised.

First of all, the play begins with a rich and powerful lesbian couple, Mrs and Mrs Hartley. They do not appear again, since they were only secondary characters, but the acceptance and ease with which they integrate into the upper echelons of society evince how gay people are going to be treated throughout the play: their sexuality is just another characteristic of theirs, not anything to remark or comment on and is seen as completely normal and acceptable. Another example would be the Percy and Archer couple: the only remarkable thing about their marriage is that they decided to become trapeze artists together and work in a travelling circus. Their sexuality is never questioned, because it is simply another one of their features, and possibly one less interesting than their stellar singing numbers.

> PERCY: Oh, pardon me, I'm being so rude. I'm Percy, Colette's older sister, and this is my wife Archer.
>
> ARCHER: Hello.
>
> OCTAVIA: It's so lovely to meet you all!
>
> ARCHER: Come to join the party then?
>
> (GHM, Act 1, p.38)

However, it is Francis Radford that deserves special attention. As it was suggested above, transgenderism and non-binarism would find a place in this dissertation as well: Francis Radford is a non-binary person who uses they/them pronouns. This is a well-known and accepted fact and no one, not even Everett, who shows a despicable attitude in a number of ways, misgenders or questions them. Furthermore, they are shown (or, more accurately, spoken about) with mixed physical presentation: at the beginning, they wear masculine-presenting clothes (a dark suit, for instance), but in the Masquerade Ball they arrive wearing a dress. This validates and reinforces the trans community[6], which are affected by what Thompson (2019, parag. 7) describes as the general, societal conception of "androgyny" as being thought of as slightly masculine, and hence equates "lack of gender" or "genderless-ness" with a masculine presentation. This theory is cited by Thompson (idem) to have evolved in feminist circles from de Beauvoir's description of male as "neutral". Presentation is a highly personal choice and reducing non-binarism to vaguely masculine clothes as a way of reinforcing "neutrality" or "genderless-ness" does a disservice to the whole community and the way they express their identity, whether that be through surgical procedures, makeup, clothes, jewellery, or others.

> OCTAVIA: If you're not a vampire, then why are you so pale? **Why is your suit** and gothic style so suspiciously immaculate? And why are you wearing that mask if not to cover your horrific fangs?!
>
> (*GHM*, Act 2, p.38; bold added for emphasis)

> FRANCIS: And besides no one knows it was me, I'm in my best masquerade disguise after all!
>
> OCTAVIA: (*Sighs*) You do look amazing in **that dress**.
>
> (*GHM*, Act 3, p.11; bold added for emphasis)

Furthermore, Francis' storyline is especially important in terms of positive representation because it does not fall under what Thach (2021, p. 20) describes to be the general portrayals of the trans community in film and television, with tropes that include

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[6] An umbrella term that includes those who identify as transgender, non-binary, agender, and genderqueer, just to name a few possibilities (Thach, 2021).

transsness as suffering, placing trans characters or storylines in the margins of the main plot, or using trans individuals as targets of mockery. Francis is not shown as experiencing any dysphoria or physical transition, either: they are an established character with an established identity they feel comfortable in, which is respected by the rest of the characters. Representation is undoubtedly valuable in showing diverse characters that simply exist and have complex personal lives, especially as a means of introducing new ways of seeing, interpreting, and interacting with the world, yet Harris (2017, p. 6) also argues that it is not and should not be defined in relation to the heterosexual. Queer representation should be for, and ideally from, the queer community, simply for the joy of sharing, as much as for validation. This is especially important in the case of the less recognised sectors of the LGBTQ+ community, and *GMH*'s inclusion of a non-binary character as one of the protagonists and as the main love interest functions as a cry for recognition and acceptance.

However, queer representation has to go hand in hand with queer storylines. Harris (2017, p. 7) mentions that having a quota of one queer character per show (and/or film, play, or book) forces said character to shoulder the burden of representing an entire community that is made up of very different people. These characters would be pulled in too many directions at once, and people would expect too much from them. It is crucial, then, for representation to happen in several different ways; for queer audiences who do not know fellow queer people, or who are beginning to question their identity and/or their sexuality, those fictional characters become the source of perceptions of their entire community. *GMH* is, then, popular culture at its best: its main pairing is composed by a non-binary person and a woman, with a secondary lesbian pairing. This forces audiences to re-evaluate romantic love and standards, and connects those who have previously been under-represented with, in what is almost an act of resistance against Disney-fication in stories. Not all love kisses come from princes, after all.

> COLETTE: Oh for goodness sake, don't just stare at each other all enchanted – just kiss her already!

> They kiss. Magical whooshes, triumphant music and the like. Fade.

> (*GMH*, Act 3, p. 40)

4. Conclusion

It was mentioned earlier that Rose's theory on all writing as rewriting (as cited in Bradbury, 1987, p. 55) and its perspective of parody as a way to emphasise both its present form and its original artistic redundancy seems to be the most helpful to our needs. Though not explicitly named since, this theory has not abandoned us yet. Indeed, both *HB* and *GHM* use rewriting freely: the stories, much as they parallel or allude to other pieces of writing, are original in themselves. Their staging, plot, characters, and even songs, in the case of *GHM*, are unique and developed on their own, to the point that one has to wonder, as in the egg-chicken conundrum, what came first; if the story or the parody.

Furthermore, much of what has been discussed above illustrates Rose's perspective of parody to emphasise both its present form (i.e, the actual parody-story we have in our hands) and its original artistic redundancy. Parody emphasising its present form is relatively easy to perceive: from pandemic jokes to a *Cats*-worthy "jellicle ball", *GHM* reminds the listener not to take it too seriously, even in situations of great dramatic peril or murderous intentions; while *HB* openly mocks the British political system, the villain-with-cat trope, and even placement ads. As to using parody to emphasise its "original artistic redundancy", in this case the redundancy is a lack of self- and social-awareness that, in turn, provides these new plays with abundant social criticism.

Throughout the analysis, we have seen criticism addressed at the position of women in stories, and how the tropes of good girl-bad girl, Disney princess-Queen Bee are subverted via the use of stereotypes; how social class portrayal and political commentary are a reflection of British society; and how the explicit and positive inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community serves as a cry for recognition and acceptance. All of this seems so far removed from the original storylines as to make one wonder how they fit in it, but the answer is easier than it looks: all of the self- and social-awareness the original storylines/genres possess has made it possible for authors to include the very opposite. From a dramatic Phantom that prowls the cellars of the theatre and kidnaps Christine, we obtain a no-less-dramatic, if less tortured, Ghoul that sings sadly to organ tunes and saves Christine-Octavia. From stories about the good and the bad, heroism, and special sound effects, we get sidekick jokes, a very robust baby rescued seven times in a week, and, certainly, special sound effects.

In all, we have almost reached the end. In this dissertation, we have understood what the Cambridge University Light Entertainment Society is and why the analysis of two of their plays, *Heroics for Beginners* and *The Ghoul of the Music Hall*, would bring interesting commentary on the mixture of popular culture and parody employed as social criticism. We have explored the many definitions and uses of parody, its historical evolution, and its social standing, as well as how modern parodies in the last decade or so have been working, and what all this brings to the intersection of parody and satire. Afterwards, we put that theory into practise by analysing the characterisation of women, including romantic relationships, social and political commentary, and the inclusion of the queer community in the plays.

It is clear, then, that parody is a literary mechanism that will always be en vogue, because it keeps changing and evolving: from Greek battles to the global pandemic of 2021, it is in our nature to keep mocking ourselves. Furthermore, the use of popular culture makes that parody accessible and fresh, as well as brings it into contact with the younger generations. It is important to note that, even though parody does not necessarily aim to criticise, in these two specific examples it does: social criticism, or perhaps more accurately, social commentary is poignant and abundant through both plays, a silent revolution against the normative media and the stories we are so used to consuming without thinking. And so, it seems that in today's theatre, ghouls do cucumber face masks and sing Céline Dion to background bat chorus. May they continue.

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Résumé

Cette thèse de fin d'études vise à analyser l'utilisation et le mélange de la parodie et de la culture populaire dans deux pièces de radio-théâtre comme moyen de critiquer la culture et les tendances britanniques actuelles. Les pièces ont été écrites et produites par la Cambridge University Light Entertainment Society, une troupe de comédie amatrice fondée au sein de l'Université de Cambridge, au Royaume-Uni, en 1958. Elles sont intitulées *Heroics for Beginners* (« L'heroisme pour débutants ») et *Le Ghoul of the Music Hall* (« Le ghoul de le music-hall »). La première pièce parodie les films de super-héros, comme ceux de Marvel ou D.C.; tandis que la deuxième est basée sur *Le Fântome de l'Opéra*, plus concrètement sur l'adaptation musicale d'Andrew Lloyd Webber en 1986.

En plus d'une brève mention à l'importance des nouvelles technologies comme YouTube pour le partage des histoires et des mouvements culturels au sein de la culture populaire, cette dissertation commence par un résumé historique de la parodie en tant que genre et de ses aspects théoriques, ainsi que formels, de Rose à Bradbury ou encore à Hutcheon. Ces aspects théoriques analysent aussi bien la fonction et la vérité de la définition de parodie que l'utilisation actuelle de ce genre : des parodies modernes comme *Barry Trotter* (2001) ont presque rien en commun avec l'origine de la parodie chez les Grecs. En outre, on y analyse le mélange de la parodie avec la satire comme méthode de critique sociale.

Ce résumé historique est suivi d'une analyse approfondie de trois aspects des pièces qui plongent dans le commentaire social : l'apparence et le traitement des personnages féminins, la critique sociale et politique, et la représentation LGBTQ+. Dans la première partie, on compare les clichés de caractérisation féminine, comme la super-héroïne belle et capable de tout en talons hauts, la princesse Disney et la perverse « Queen Bee » à la manière de *Mean Girls* (*Lolita malgré moi*) ou *Pretty Little Liars*. Cette partie inclut aussi un petit commentaire sur les relations romantiques. Par la suite, on voit le portrait des classes sociales, le commentaire à faveur des droits de travailleurs, la politique actuelle vue comme une perte de temps qui n'arrive nulle part et les abus de pouvoir de la part de la police. Finalement, on cite l'importance de la représentation positive de la communauté *queer* en tant que manière d'appui et de soutien, particulièrement à ceux qui ne sont pas des hommes blancs gays. *The Ghoul of the Music Hall*, spécialement, fait un appel très important pour l'importance de l'égalité représentative avec l'apparition d'une personne non-binaire comme l'une de ses protagonistes et le principal intérêt romantique.

En guise de conclusion, on arrive à l'inclusion de commentaires sociaux et politiques déguisés en simple parodie humoristique dans des écrits ostensiblement grossiers par des jeunes comme renfort de la critique des consommateurs à l'égard des médias normatifs et la manière dont la jeune génération se rebelle contre les normes établies. La parodie continue à changer et à évoluer, mais son mélange avec la culture populaire comme critique sociale est un pas judicieux et intrépide que, dans ces cas particuliers, apporte de la fraîcheur et des connaissances sur la mentalité actuelle de notre jeunesse.

Dramatis personae in *The Ghoul of the Music Hall*, by Charlotte Vine

Eight / Octavia Graves
Protagonist. A singing automaton who wants nothing more than to be human and gets her wish via a sorcerer in a travelling circus. Once human, she changes her name to Octavia.

E2
Talking robotic spider created to keep Eight company and thus Eight's best friend. Does not support Eight's attempt to become human and in fact warns Everett of this fact. Gets smashed to pieces by Everett and repaired by Francis, after which E2 becomes vocally anti-Everett.

Hall Ghoul / Francis Radford
A regular human being and not, in fact, a supernatural entity haunting the theatre, even though that is the act they choose to keep up. Elder sibling of Everett Radford, disinherited from the family business.

Everett Radford
Younger sibling of Francis Radford, set to inherit the family business "Radford's Robotics" in their absence. Creator of Eight and E2. So in love with Colette, he built Eight in her image.

Colette Thompson
Music Hall star hopeful. Believes Octavia is her long-lost cousin almost until the end of the play, due to them being so similar they could be twins and Octavia using "Graves" as a surname, which was Colette's mother's maiden name. Very vocally anti-Everett, she punches him at the end of the play.

Percy Thompson
Colette's older sister. Trapeze artist in a travelling circus.

Archer
Percy's wife and partner on the trapeze.

Parmesan Feta (Jharn) [pronounced par-mer-jharn]
Resident singer at the Magpie Music Hall, leader of "The Fetas". Murdered by Everett Radford in the third act of the play.

Dramatis personae in *Heroics for Beginners*, by Sarah Nolan

Steve Reave

An adult returning to night school to re-train as a superhero. His chosen super-power is "mobile levitation" (not to be confused with "flight", which is trademarked by Superman).

Tod

Steve's hapless classmate and sidekick. Almost dies at the end of the play by entering a radioactive pool to save Steve but finally recovers. Bites the Evil Mastermind in a panic moment.

Deirdre

An old schoolmate of Steve's, and now a young mother with a son on the waiting list of a Chosen One destiny. Trained to be a Token Woman but was suspended from the school for starting a chocolate smuggling ring.

Evil Mastermind

A white talking cat who was bitten by a radioactive human, now in charge of the criminal underworld. At the end of the play he is once again bitten by a radioactive human (Tod) and returns to normal-cat state.

Minion

Top henchman of the Evil Mastermind, would really like some kind of rights in such a hostile working environment.

Admiral Admirable

The city's old-school heroic type, with perhaps more courage than common sense. Corrupt enough to accept bribes from the Evil Mastermind and obey his orders.

Token Women

The obligatory female superhero of the city. Beautiful, dangerous, and better than everyone else at absolutely everything. Her powers disappear with chocolate chip ice cream.