Women Reprimanding Women: The Gothic Parody and its Social Criticism

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1. Introduction: Women, Satire, and Parody in the Long Eighteenth Century

1 The long eighteenth century with its satirists, parodists, and cartoonists is a treasure trove for humor studies, especially when looking at socio-political criticisms presented through humor. Often called the age of satire,[1] the period turned humorous attacks into an art form, engaging in wit and parody to contribute pertinent satire to the public discourse. "Satire," as Paddy Bullard writes, "appeared in an extraordinary variety of shapes and manifestations, spilling out across the media" (7). In fact, by the eighteenth century, satire had become so ingrained in the British mind that Britons had started "to think about satire as a national habit, bound up with their weather, with their constitution and with the humor of the people" (5-6). This "spirit of ridicule" (4) not only found its way into satirical texts—works humorously criticizing content, be that politics, social mores, or individual persons and their habit—but also into parodic texts —works criticizing systems of expression, that is, words (Dane 145).[2] Into the latter category falls the whole genre of the Gothic parody, a derivative genre whose existence is based on the often witty, sometimes drab ridicule of the generic traits of the Gothic novel, its hypogenre.[3] Within the Gothic parody, authors can but need not present their socio-political criticism in the form of satire: they may humorously target politics and mores or they can use their parodic text as a vehicle to voice their rather un-satirical but outspoken conduct-book-style warnings of wrongdoing, as this article will show.

2 While we tend to recognize predominantly men as the great satirists of the eighteenth century—think only of Jonathan Swift or Alexander Pope—women did contribute satirical novels, like Maria Edgeworth's works (Bullard 3), and parodic novels, such as

for example Jane Austen's Gothic parody *Northanger Abbey* (1818) or Mary Charlton's *Rosella; or, Modern Occurrences* (1799), whose clever and funny didacticism will be discussed in this article. Still, despite the clever wit with which women like Austen or Edgeworth suffused their works, women's contribution to humorous literature sat not entirely well with their contemporaries.

3 Women and humor apparently were an undue combination, and "female humor in particular [was] seen as a threat to the foundations of public order and social harmony, partly because sexual freedom was linked to—or even seen as a consequence of—the authority of wit" (Heydt-Stevenson 311). Audrey Bilger points out that the "debate revolved around questions of morality and control: Would women's freedom lead to promiscuous behavior? Would unchecked comedy ridicule improper targets?" (15). Women thus had to be reined in and made to conform, which was done partly through the literary genre of the conduct book:

> Numerous conduct books of the period defined proper feminine behavior for middle-class women largely in terms antithetical to the critical spirit of comedy. The conduct writers contributed to what literary theorist Mary Poovey calls the 'naturalization of the feminine ideal'; that is, they constructed an ideal of femininity and then redefined female nature around the terms of that ideal. (21)

4 This emerging femininity was hence created in an attempt to control women in order to establish a patriarchal form of domestic harmony reliant on female submission described by conduct book writers (24). Importantly, the social strictures that were placed on women were not only enforced on them by men, but also by some women; female homosociality relied on the same understanding of female propriety as Deborah Kaplan traces in her study of letters in Jane Austen's circle of friends and family:

> women tended to remain loyal to the ideology of domesticity even when they were not directly dependent on their male relations. They consented to their own subordination because domestic femininity was inextricably connected to high social status. Had they refused that femininity, they would have been rejecting their community's ideal not only of womanhood but of socially elite womanhood. (Kaplan 51)[4]

5 Despite being discouraged particularly for women, humor could also be used as a tool to enforce this concept of femininity, because laughter fulfilled and still fulfils an important social function. "For Aristotle," as John Morreall writes, "laughter was valuable as a social corrective: by laughing at the person who is out of line, we can humiliate him so that he gets back into line" (56). Applied as a tool, humor can be used "towards either positive or negative ends" (Rossing 7), be they political, personal, or didactic. If we look specifically at the application of humor in narrative texts, it can be a rather useful tool for the novelist to achieve a certain didactic end. I will focus on the social function of humor in narrative literature and look at how humor in the form of parody can be used to imbue a text with "funny" didacticism. Such didactic parodic texts predominantly capitalize on the creation of humor through a character's behavioral incongruity with the reality of the novel and the superiority on the part of the reader who recognizes this incongruity.

6 In narrative prose, didacticism tends to be used as a means of educating the reader and impressing upon them certain desired behaviors and social interactions. This is often done by parading socially or morally deficient characters who undergo a *bildungsroman*-esque transformation and eventually emerge reformed. The early English novel counts didacticism among its central characteristics (besides realism and digression, as

Fleming points out). Following the ideas of Samuel Johnson, Patrick C. Fleming shows that "fiction should convince the reader of moral propositions," and that readers are called upon to imitate fiction just as fiction strives at imitating nature (466). Certainly, this would only work within realism and thus preclude the Gothic romances of the late eighteenth century, because romances do not imitate reality but present unusual incidents, partly including supernatural elements, and in general focus on the marvelous instead of the natural. However, precisely this task of imitating fiction might cause confusion and, at worst, lead the undiscerning reader to imitate the wrong material, i.e. romances instead of realistic novels. To show where this can lead and how humor in the form of parody is used as a tool to counteract the detrimental effect of such literary misinterpretation, this article looks specifically at the Gothic parody of the long eighteenth century, a sub-genre of the first wave of the English Gothic novel. Specifically, Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* and Mary Charlton's *Rosella* lend themselves particularly well to examine deluded and quixotic reader figures as well as how they are normativized throughout the narrative. To this end, a brief introduction of the English Gothic novel, especially the Gothic parody is necessary.

2. Parody and the English Gothic Novel

7 The English Gothic novel was "invented" by Horace Walpole's 1764 Gothic "tale" *The Castle of Otranto*, had its heyday in the 1790s, when it was dominated by the Gothic romances of Ann Radcliffe, and sunk into oblivion around 1820. Even before the Gothic novel dominated the literary market in the 1790s (see Miles), Gothic parodies started appearing and would remain part of the genre overall until its decline before rising again with additional generic elements and reacting to the Victorian social and cultural anxieties in the second half of the nineteenth century. The parodists eagerly latched onto the rather formulaic nature and heavy reliance on stock elements and characters of the Gothic. A specific form of Gothic parodies, which I call "didactic parodies," targeted the Gothic readership in particular, or rather those uncritical, deluded readers who failed to differentiate between fiction and reality:

> This form of parody has a clear didactic aspiration in educating the initially deluded reader figure, usually a young middle- or upper-middle-class woman, into a reasonable and especially realistic young woman devoid of Gothic quixotism. As the means of achieving this didactic effect is parodic, seeing that the heroines are mercilessly ridiculed by the other characters and/or the narrator and generally presented as laughable, this term both indicates the aim (didacticism) and the method (parody) of this group of texts. (Münderlein 70)

8 In the didactic Gothic parody, humor and didacticism are closely intertwined to present a gendered middle-class ideology of social conformism that promises its heroines future security and personal happiness in marriage if only adhered to. In so doing, the Gothic parody retrospectively erases some of the subversion the Gothic novel, with its seemingly weak but actually rather independent heroines, negotiated in the late eighteenth century. The Gothic parody thus does away with the self-reliance of the Gothic heroine, who often has to rely on her own devices and judgment to free herself from her oppressor, in favor of a more normative gender identity as inferior to and dependent on a male guardian. The transgressions presented in these texts (as is the case in many didactic Gothic parodies) are used as lessons in how not to behave, and the reader's laughter ensures that they would not fall into the trap of quixotism

themselves. The parody thus has an educative function, and the women writers of the two examples used here indeed reprimand other women—allegedly for their own good.

9 By centralizing a usually female quixotic reader figure in the narrative, who emulates the behavior, dress, and opinions of a typically Gothic heroine, the reader follows the process of undeceiving this character through showing up and ridiculing her reading-induced eccentricities until she quits her quixotism in favor of an "acceptable" disposition. Consequently, these characters are not supposed to serve as role models to be imitated by the reader but as flawed characters to be corrected. By overdoing their flaws and making them comic, the parodies foreground the "wrong" behavior and make it easily recognizable for a contemporary reader. Effectively, readers are supposed to feel superior to the quixotic heroines (or other characters) for educative purposes, which presents humor in keeping with the superiority theory of humor and the eighteenth-century understanding of laughter following Plato and Hobbes. The novels thus aim at self-correction through humor, because "one way to prompt this sort of self-correction would be to induce the sort of embarrassment that humor may arouse in self-aware targets" (Wolf 335).

10 In her reading-induced eccentricities, the quixotic reader of the Gothic parody stands in the tradition of Miguel de Cervantes' deluded protagonist Don Quixote, who fancies himself a valiant "hero" in a chivalric romance and sets out to fight imaginary foes and woo his "Dulcinea," a neighboring peasant girl he reconceptualizes as his noble love interest. Don Quixote is thus the quintessential deluded reader whose perception of the world is distorted by his over-consumption of a certain type of literature (the chivalric romance) that represents a world far removed from his own reality. Don Quixote and the host of deluded reader figures following him fail at differentiating between fiction and reality. Instead of perceiving reality for what it is,[5] the deluded reader behaves in accordance with the worldview of their reading material. In consequence, they emulate behaviors adequate to the literary reality of their reading material, which are mostly deemed objectionable in comparison to the reality of the parodic novel. Over the course of the novel, the quixotic reader is shaken out of their delusion and normativized; in other words, they eventually discard their inadequate behavior (or are forced to) and abide by social expectations, which call for them to obediently subject themselves to male guidance and behave in a demure, chaste, and generally unobtrusive and pleasant way.

11 This process of normativizing the deluded reader figure, embarrassing as it might turn out for them, provides a source of didactic humor for the reader. Generally, "[q]uixotic narratives parody the genres the Quixote seeks—and fails—to imitate [... hence,] they both inhabit and mock the genres they respond to" (Dale 15). Moreover, the quixotic reader and their exaggeratedly maladjusted behavior equally parody a certain version of the implied reader, i.e. the actual deluded reader. In so doing, a quixotic reader figure lends itself admirably to a didactic discussion of the potentially detrimental effect of either "reading in general," "reading the wrong material," or "reading too much," a discourse which pervaded the conduct literature of the eighteenth century targeted at female readers (Tague 83). In the following, I will specifically look at the function of the deluded reader in the didactic Gothic parody, which stands more in the tradition of early eighteenth-century conduct literature than the genre it actually parodies, the Gothic novel.

12 Even though male deluded readers were no rarity in eighteenth-century fiction, Amelia Dale points out that "writers increasingly described quixotism itself as female," and that the female quixote had become a recognizable trope even before the appearance of Charlotte Lennox's novel *The Female Quixote* in 1752 (6). Moreover, the association of quixotism with "uncritical overly absorptive novel reading… seems exclusively associated with… the female quixote" (261), as Jodi Wyett writes. Yet, on the other hand, the female quixote, precisely because of her perceived oddity, can and does exceed gender boundaries, as we can see, for example, in Eaton Stannard Barrett's *The Heroine* (1813), which provides a prime example of how unconventional and, consequently, funny a female quixotic protagonist can be. It thus comes as no surprise that the overwhelming majority of quixotes in the didactic Gothic parodies of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries are women. More specifically: young, unmarried women, whose faults are paraded before the reader and often mercilessly commented on by the other characters or the narrator. The reader is both intended to recognize the aberrant behavior of the deluded reader figure as faulty and empathize with her while siding with those characters intent on normativizing the female quixote and welcoming her back into (upper) middle-class society. Both of these points can be observed in very diverse ways in *Northanger Abbey*, featuring Catherine Morland as a female quixote, and *Rosella*, whose eponymous heroine is forced to comply with the demands of two quixotic women. This article therefore examines how the two works present deluded or quixotic reader figures as well as how they are normativized throughout the narrative.

3. Mary Charlton's *Rosella*: Parodying the Quixotic Guardian

13 Despite Mary Charlton's success as a novelist in her own time (Dale 7), her novels are little known today and have rarely been studied. A novelist, translator of novels, and poet, Charlton's career as a professional writer started in 1794, and her early novels quickly became so popular that she earned herself sixth place on Minerva Press owner William Lane's list of "particular and favourite Authors" in 1798 (Bendixen 83). For her financial success as a novelist alone, "Charlton is rightly to be considered to be an important late eighteenth-century author" (Dow 150), yet despite her erstwhile popularity, information about her life is sparse, and even her career can only be traced through her publications (149). In his *Gothic Bibliography*, Montague Summers provides a list of 14 works over a period of 36 years, starting in 1794 with her first work *The Parisian; or, Genuine Anecdotes of Distinguished and Noble Characters* and ending with her last work *Past Events; or, The Treacherous Guide* in 1830 (29-30). Even in the few biographical entries on Charlton, these parameters of her career are not entirely clear. While Summers and Mary Anne Bendixen give 1830 as the date of Charlton's last publication, M.O. Grenby names 1824 as the end of Charlton's career, and Virginia Blain et al.'s *Feminist Companion to Literature in English* peters out with neither including all of Charlton's novels nor determining the end of her career.

14 Her fifth novel *Rosella, or Modern Occurrences* is one of the least researched extant Gothic parodies of the long eighteenth century and has only lately received more scholarly attention;[6] a critical edition of the novel, prepared by Natalie Neill, recently came out in summer 2023.[7] The novel follows the eponymous heroine who appears to be an orphan

under the guardianship and at the mercy of quixotic reader figures Selina Ellinger and her friend Sophia Beauclerc, who turns out to be Rosella's mother. Both women regard Rosella as a "heroine" and are intent on achieving a stereotypically happy ending that befits this role—marriage to (at best) a nobleman—by parading her in front of any gentleman of means who crosses their path. They themselves take up the role of maternal guardians, but their failure to behave in accordance with social expectations and, even worse, the silly behavior they force Rosella to display harms her social prospects and damages her reputation, albeit not permanently. Rosella herself is a most unwilling Gothic heroine as she often blushes at the behavior of her guardians and is shown to be a very modest and unassuming girl forced into a role she is not cut out for.

15 Hence, in this example, the quixotic readers for the most part of the novel are middle-aged women, but the novel starts by briefly summarizing the story of Sophia's short marriage, which ended in her pregnancy and her husband's untimely death. From the moment these two women appear in the novel, they fancy themselves characters in a Gothic romance, or rather: they perceive of the world through the glasses of their preferred reading material. Selina takes up the role of the confidante, who helps Sophia in eloping to marry and later on ascribes the role of the maternal guardian to herself. Sophia starts out as the Gothic heroine, but once widowed and mother of a young girl she passes this role on to her daughter. "Sophia," as Dale writes, "determines that her daughter will become a heroine" (9), and, what is more, Sophia determines Rosella become the heroine she herself could have been, had it not been for the circumstances. Once Rosella is old enough to enact the role of the heroine, Selina and Sophia direct Rosella towards what they perceive the inevitable happy conclusion of a heroine's formative period, i.e., the marriage to a suitable nobleman. Yet, they have a rather roundabout way of doing so and parade Rosella in front of more than one nobleman. Dale concludes that Sophia "instead places Rosella in situations that lead to further 'adventures,' generating yet more 'incidents,'" as if wishing her Gothic journey to never end (10).

16 Over the course of the novel, Sophia takes Rosella for an extended tour of the country, but her inappropriate travel arrangements further expose Rosella to censure. They travel unchaperoned with a man unrelated to them, Rosella's eventual husband Oberne, who takes it unto himself to protect the women from their own (or rather Sophia's) follies. Even before they set out, the narrator makes it abundantly clear that Rosella is "entirely innocent of the forced-meat adventures" (I.105), yet despite her innocence, Rosella is the one to suffer from such impropriety because, by travelling with him, she comes to be regarded as his mistress. Once he no longer accompanies them, she becomes a "free for all," so to speak, and she is accosted by Oberne's distant acquaintances who are looking for a pretty girl to keep as mistress. In volume II, chapter 7, these men corner Rosella on the road, where she is again walking without a proper chaperone. Even though she tries to avoid them and keeps her distance as far as possible, she is grabbed by the drunk men after one of them makes his intentions towards her clear:

> [S]he beheld Mr Estcourt staggering towards her… vociferating her name, to which they tacked the most absurd epithets of childish endearment…. 'What say you my fair one?' resumed Estcourt, seizing the arm of Rosella, who shrunk from him with an expression of terror…. Lesley… now interfered, telling the honourable gentleman that he was not half civilized enough to address a milk maid; and instantly disengaging Rosella from his rude grasp, he walked on with her. But Mr.

> Estcourt was not sufficiently intoxicated to endure this double insult… [and] vehemently demanded a parley[.] (II.120)

17 Rosella, "expecting only indignity at his hands" (II.121), pushes Estcourt away and runs back to the cottage she inhabits with Sophia. In this scene, Rosella is literally and figuratively alone in fighting the adverse effects her guardians' delusions have brought onto her, which, ironically, makes her more of a Gothic heroine than anything the women have previously forced her to do. Left to her own devices, Rosella, like an actual Gothic heroine, finds strength in herself, yet unlike any Radcliffean heroine, Rosella finds bodily strength and pushes her assailant off the road.

18 This scene is not the only example of the danger young men pose to unattached and "friendless" young women, and the novel manages to present two sources of "evil": the delusions of the quixotic readers Selina and Sophia, which expose Rosella to shame and danger, and the misbehavior of young gentlemen, who are moreover usually drunk and prey on the friendless girl. However, what I want to focus on specifically is the use of parody as a normativizing tool in correcting socially unacceptable behavior in women, because it is the women who are enticed to alter their behavior while the young men are simply introduced as dangers to be avoided.

19 Another poignant example that combines the dangers of feminine misbehavior (enforced upon Rosella by the older women) and of young, drunk men is provided at Selina Ellinger's daughter's birthday ball in volume I, chapter 9, which is crashed by a group of gentlemen. Instead of showing them the door, Selina turns from affronted to hospitable when she learns that the unwanted guests are not "vulgar fellows" but "a young man of fashion, a Baronet, and the brother of a Nobleman," which "entirely changed the face of affairs" as Selina is "now very well disposed to think the frolic that introduced them under [her husband's] roof, a very harmless and agreeable one" (I. 145). Rosella is made to dance with Mr Lesley and is later discussed by the new arrivals who remember her from a chance meeting before where she presented as a peasant girl:

> '[D]on't you remember that fine girl digging potatoes at Hampton-wick, with flowing locks and rent garments?' 'Loose were her tresses seen, her zone unbound!' exclaimed Mr. Lesley, in an heroic accent; and staggering to Rosella, who had run to Mrs. Ellinger, to beg that she might be permitted to sit down, he seized her hand, swearing that she was a divine creature, and deserved a civic crown for her achievements. (I.147)

20 In keeping with contemporary ideas of novels as women's reading, the novel thus seems to address a female implied reader and warns her of the dangers of misbehavior caused by a misinterpretation of her reality based on romances. Because of Rosella's outfit when they first saw her, they judge her to be a loose girl, an image Rosella cannot shed until her marriage at the end of the novel. The dangers of misinterpreting reality are particularly evident in Selina Ellinger's misreading of the ballroom situation: Despite their high social status, these men are no desirable matches for proper girls and should not be forced on them; there is nothing romantic in dancing with a highly intoxicated man regardless of his rank. Instead of protecting her daughter and her charge from the men, she allows their improper conduct towards the girls and exposes the girls—specifically Rosella—to groping, gossip, and censure. Through the parodic inversion of roles with the girl Rosella acting as the sensible adult and the middle-aged Selina acting as the silly quixote, the reader cannot read this scene as a romantic encounter but rather as the dangerous situation it is. In both cases, Rosella's dignity

and her bodily integrity are violated, and it is quixotism that is shown to lie at the root of this evil. The failure to live in the "real world" by imitating the fictional world, as demonstrated by Selina and Sophia, will certainly have real repercussions that can affect oneself and others and, as shown in this novel, even put them in danger.

21 Despite the bleak undertones of the novel, it still is a funny parody that aptly comments on the generically Gothic heroine. In keeping with their assumed roles, Sophia and Selina engage in a most ludicrous imitation of generically Gothic behavior, that is, a parodic emulation of the roles they play in their own narrative. Besides criticizing quixotism and its adverse effects, the descriptions of the women's quixotism are highly entertaining and make for good reading. One such example is provided by Selina when she reveals Rosella's true parentage to her and, in true Gothic fashion, uses a highly melodramatic style of expression in words and gestures:

> 'I would have you prepare,' resumed Mrs. Ellinger, pressing her hand upon her heart, as if to still its emotions, 'for a discovery I am sorry it is my lot to impart to you, ever beloved Rosella;—know then, that you are—oh, Heaven! The daughter of —Miss Beauclerc!'
> 'Is this *all* you would tell me?' asked Rosella.
> 'God of the universe!' exclaimed the poor lady, 'what have I done?—Oh child of my dearest hopes, give way to your distraction, tear your hair, rend your bosom—any thing but this calm settled despair.' (III.10, 330; original emphasis)

22 Such idiosyncrasies provide most of the humor of the novel, but they also visibly contrast with the much more serious criticism of the dangers they entail and thus fulfill a didactic function particularly through being funny. Selina and Sophia are funny, but they are also dangerous, and the laughter their effusions elicit helps the reader to dissociate themselves even more from these two non-normative women. Their position as social oddities based on their behavior, specifically their enactment of a Gothic romance, contrasts with the overall realism of the novel. Both their overdone speeches and their unreasonable behavior are out of place in the novel's reality and set them apart from the other characters and thus mark them as targets of criticism.

4. Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*: Parodying the Quixotic Teenager

23 Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* radically differs from *Rosella* in its presentation of the quixotic reader figure. Catherine Morland does not actively imitate a specific role as Selina and Sophia do, but she fashions her understanding of the world based on the Gothic novels she has read. Catherine lacks worldly sophistication because of her sheltered upbringing, which failed to provide her with a broader knowledge of the class of society into which she belongs. Because of this paucity of information, which becomes acute when Catherine needs to interact with fashionable society in Bath while under the tutelage of a very inept guardian, Mrs Allen, she turns to the only information readily available to her and that is her reading material. While Mrs Allen keeps obtusely reiterating "how pleasant [Bath] would be if [they] had any acquaintance here" (23), without doing anything to remedy the situation, Catherine experiences the first pangs of affection for Mr Tilney. After not having seen him anywhere for a few days and in the absence of anyone competent (or even interested) to talk to, her mind is fuelled by novelistic fantasies of literary heroes: "He must be gone from Bath.... This sort of mysteriousness, which is always so becoming in a hero,

threw a fresh grace in Catherine's imagination around his person and manners, and increased her anxiety to know more of him" (28).

24 Wyett points out a similar problem but claims that throughout Catherine's entire life a proper tutor instructing her in the ways of the world has been absent: "[B]y providing Catherine Morland with no entirely adequate mentors—Henry is too smugly satirical, her parents are too provincial, Mrs. Allen is too concerned with muslin—Austen positions Catherine's quixotism as the only means by which she comes to know and understand her social world and the motives of those within it" (268). Instead of choosing fiction over fact, Catherine tries to make sense of fact through fiction for lack of another form of guidance. For a brief time, Catherine seemingly finds a guardian in the worldly Isabella Thorpe, but even here their relationship is determined by Isabella's duplicity and their shared habit of "read[ing] novels together" (30) if there is nothing else to do in Bath. As we learn early in volume II, Isabella is even less qualified as a guide than Mrs Allen is because of her manipulative and deceitful character—a fact the reader has so far already gleaned from her egotistical behavior that Catherine fails to interpret correctly.

25 Still, Catherine's inability to navigate the depths of English society and find meaning in people's behavior results in some very entertaining moments throughout the novel, when Catherine's expectations are so obviously coined by her reading material that the reader can again dissociate themselves from her and laugh about her misconceptions from the secure position of the better informed.

26 The infamous laundry list incident during Catherine's first night at Northanger is a case in point. Frightened by the thunderstorm, Catherine perceives the abbey as something out of her novels despite its modern amenities General Tilney has proudly shown off to her only hours before. Conditioned by the Gothic romances of Ann Radcliffe and others —Catherine has just read Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*—she expects (and hopes) to unearth something dreadful hidden within the walls of the abbey, for example in the black cabinet in her room: "With a cheek flushed by hope, and an eye straining with curiosity, her fingers grasped the handle of a drawer and drew it forth. It was entirely empty. With less alarm and greater eagerness she seized a second, a third, a fourth; each was equally empty" (173). Without being deterred by her lack of success or the feeling of embarrassment at indulging in Gothic suspension that is immediately thwarted—a feeling the reader might experience here—Catherine continues to examine the cabinet: eventually, "her quick eyes directly fell on a roll of paper pushed back into the further part of the cavity, apparently for concealment," but before she can peruse the scroll, her candle goes out, and a "violent gust of wind, rising with sudden fury, add[s] fresh horror to the moment" (174) and makes her hide under her bedclothes until the morning.

27 The situation in this scene is close enough to a Radcliffean novel for her to read the situation from within the frame of the Gothic novel, and while the reader might be dampened in their experience by the first part of the exploration ("each was equally empty"), Catherine retains her situational frame until the next day, while the reader is potentially already conditioned to expect another rendition of the empty drawer. And indeed, upon discovering the notes to be merely a laundry list the next morning, Catherine is ashamed of her own fear and recognizes her delusions as such. The reader, on the other hand, is potentially validated and thus superior to naïve Catherine as they

have spotted the clues Austen leaves right from the beginning and abandons the Gothic frame in favor of a realistic reading of the setting before Catherine does.

28 With her increasing knowledge of society outside of Fullerton and her own recognition that her actual reality has little in common with the worlds she has read about, Catherine begins to grow out of her quixotism but falls back onto it when dealing with situations for which she has no solution. In particular, the behavior of General Tilney and his family's reaction towards him present such a situation. Catherine notices that there is something wrong with him but is unable to pinpoint what it is. Drawing on the generic knowledge provided by the Gothic romance, Catherine's unease causes her to cast him in the role of the Gothic villain and she pictures him as the oppressor and eventual murderer of his own wife, who hid his deed from his children. Intent on learning the "truth," Catherine seeks out the late wife's bedroom and is caught by Henry, who, in turn, is appalled by Catherine's suspicions. His disappointed scolding of her again serves as a key moment in her development, which helps her reject her quixotism even more than the laundry list scene:

> 'If I understand you rightly, you had formed a surmise of such horror as I have hardly words to —— Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from?.... Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting?'....
> The visions of romance were over. Catherine was completely awakened. Henry's address, short as it had been, had more thoroughly opened her eyes to the extravagance of her late fancies than all their several disappointments had done. (203-204)

29 As her misinterpretation of the familial situation of the Tilneys caused her to insult Henry and his family, it is specifically this romance-induced delusion that threatens her potential future happiness with him. More so, Catherine is in danger of not only losing the prospect of marital bliss but also the economic stability the marriage to Henry could provide. So, while the reader might laugh about her inappropriateness, they also sympathize with her, which is not the case for Sophia or Selina in *Rosella*. Catherine is mainly naïve and does not actively reject reality in favor of fiction, she merely has no other frame of reference and thus uses the one she has to properly participate in society, that is, to behave in accordance with the social rules and roles.

30 Over the course of the novel, the reader follows Catherine's process of normativization as she learns to discard her previous frame of reference, the Gothic romance, in favor of the experiences she makes in her now wider circle of acquaintances and friends. Through Isabella Thorpe, she learns that not all people can be trusted and are what they seem to be; through John Thorpe, she learns to guard herself against the assumptions others make of her; through Eleanor and Henry Tilney, she gains adequate friends who can serve as role models for her own position in society; and through General Tilney, she learns that evil does not necessarily present itself in the form of a murderous Montoni figure to be detrimental to one's happiness.

31 The novel's didacticism, which also works by showing a deluded reader figure misreading the world to the entertainment of the informed reader, is twofold. It entices the reader to let go of the fictional worldview of their adolescent reading in favor of entering the actual world and finding grown-up fulfillment within it, but at the same time it points out that a good-natured young woman like Catherine should trust her instincts and follow her moral compass. Like *Rosella*, *Northanger Abbey* drives this point home by entertaining the reader with a funny woman, Catherine, whose involuntary

and parodic reading of the world through the glasses of the Gothic romance, determined by exemplary heroines with an exemplary moral compass and endowed with exemplary behavior, contrasts with the worldly but much more realistic behavior of the other characters in the book.

5. Conclusion

32 Despite their differences, *Northanger Abbey* and *Rosella* offer a humorous reading of a quixotic reader figure, but they equally present a warning to their readers to not become deluded reader figures because they could harm either themselves or a loved one. Instead of conveying a straightforward warning, the texts here employ humor in the form of literary parody through ridiculing the character fashioning their worldview based on fact instead of fiction and by showing her off as misguided, but neither immoral nor doomed. Rather, both texts show that an erstwhile misjudgment can be corrected if recognized in time, and the reader is enticed to laugh about the antics of the quixotes without damning their personal disposition. Parody thus fulfils the didactic function of educating the implied reader through the deluded heroine and is thus as or even more effective in driving home the point than a straightforward conduct book-approach.

33 By engaging in a narrative, a device many conduct books also utilize in presenting ideal behavior "in action," the reader is taken on a *bildungsroman*-esque journey to adulthood in the sense of perceiving of the world as a grown-up and socially adjusted woman would or should. In opening up a clear hierarchy between the reader and the quixotic character, which casts the reader as the more experienced party able to discern the character's follies, the parody inverts the hierarchy of a conduct book. Instead of presenting a character to imitate, the didactic Gothic parody showcases behavior to be avoided at all costs and marks this behavior as undesirable by making it an overdrawn laughingstock. Combined with the protagonist's narrative journey, the reader follows the protagonist as she outgrows her follies (as Catherine and Sophia do) or sneers at her when she remains ridiculous until the end.[8] While the process of maturation takes rather longer for the older woman Sophia than it does for young Catherine, Selina must be read as a lost cause who by the close of the novel only serves as locus for ridicule without exasperating the reader. After her role as guardian has ended, her delusions no longer affect Rosella, and although she remains outrée, she is no longer dangerous for Rosella. Teaching them to comply while at the same time criticizing dangers to women, such as the drunk men in *Rosella*, combines the humor of the parody with very serious issues of women's roles and places in society. Still, it is humor in the form of parody, that is, of parodying wrong behavior, which leaves a lasting impact on the reader—more so, potentially, than a straightforward conduct novel.

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NOTES

1. For example, by Paddy Bullard in his introductory chapter to *The Oxford Handbook of Eighteenth-Century Satire* (2019).

2. This article follows Joseph A. Dane's division of satire and parody, which basically assumes that "satire refers to things; parody refers to words. The target and referent of satire is a system of content (*res*); that of parody is a system of expression (*signa*)" (145). It must be noted, however, that the term satire has been more prevalent in the study of eighteenth-century humorous texts and that the clear-cut division between satire and parody Dane proposes has very often not been adhered to in scholarly practice. For the purpose of this article, I chose to use the word "parody" when highlighting parody's reference to systems of expression, specifically when referring to the ridicule of the generic markers of the Gothic novel, which in my reading belong into the realm of system of expression and words rather than system of content. Moreover, I also use "parody" to denote the means by which the didactic parodic novel achieves its didactic effect (this will be discussed further down).

3. It should be mentioned at this point that despite the popularity of satire, only a minority of novels published during the heyday of the Gothic novel were actually satirical or parodic and that, moreover, the term "satire" itself was not appended to novels at the time (Dyer 167).

4. While Kaplan's claim certainly cannot be applied to all women, as the existence of women writers criticizing such self-policing imply, this article will show in the following that even transgressive women—read here: women who failed to adhere to the ideal of femininity by being published authors of fiction—used their propensity for humor in their writing to propagate their ideas of proper conduct.

5. It is very necessary to be careful with the word "reality" here, as we are still dealing with a literary representation of a fragment of "reality," usually focusing specifically on those aspects of "reality" the quixotic reader fails at and needs to be shaken out of. Effectively, such novels parodying quixotism use this dichotomy of reality and imagination to show how the deluded reader fails at recognizing their own world and, more importantly, conforming to normativity, thus drawing attention to the fictionality of some literature while making claims at reality at the same time.

6. In 2020, Amelia Dale shed light on the mother figures in her article "The Quixotic Mother, the Female Author, and Mary Charlton's Rosella," while Hannah Doherty Hudson uses Charlton as an example of Ann Radcliffe's imitators published by the Minerva Press in her 2023 monograph *Romantic Fiction and Literary Excess in the Minerva Press Era*. Natalie Neill's critical edition of the novel also provides an introduction about the novel and its central theme of quixotism. Gillian Dow's 2007 chapter on Charlton's French connections and receptions in *British-French Exchanges in*

the Eighteenth Century provides an earlier example of Charlton scholarship and should be named here, too.

7. As the critical edition of *Rosella* came out after this article was finished, I quote from a digitized version of the original edition.

8. Another group of character developments must be added here even though it has not been discussed. Sarah Green's didactic Gothic parody *Romance Readers and Romance Writers* (1810) presents a quixotic character, Margaret Marsham, who fails to amend her ways in time and is left ruined and suicidal.

ABSTRACTS

In the late eighteenth century, the Gothic parody, ridiculing the generic traits of the Gothic novel, often directed their humor at the parody heroine. Specifically, the didactic Gothic parody aimed at educating the heroine into a normative, gender-role conforming young woman who rejects the excesses of the Gothic in favor of an adherence to normative conduct. The use of humor in the Gothic parody serves to "normativize" the heroine of the Gothic parody, which will be exemplified by Mary Charlton's *Rosella* (1799) and Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1817). Despite the similarities in their plots, the novels differ in their application of parody directed at the protagonist. Austen's must reject her overindulged imagination and learn to differentiate reality and fiction; Charlton's needs to endure the overindulged imagination of her guardians, whose penchant for confusing reality and fiction nearly leads to Rosella's downfall. While both novels thus discuss the dangers of confusing reality and fiction, their targets for ridicule, the degree to which the respective characters are affected by their delusions, and the degree of "real" danger these delusions can cause differ significantly.

INDEX

Keywords: Jane Austen, Mary Charlton, parody, didacticism, eighteenth century, normative behavior, quixotism

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