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Where Parody Meets Satire: Crossing the Line with “Lady Addle”

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Where Parody Meets Satire: Crossing the Line with “Lady Addle”

Quand la parodie rencontre la satire : “Lady Addle” dépasse les limites

Margaret D. Stetz

- 1 For scholars of humour, there is a certain fascination in studying parodies that are now little known, especially if once they were well known. Why, we want to ask, were they popular in an earlier time? To whom did they appeal and why? What might these works say to us today? In the case of a series of four works of fiction produced by Mary Dunn (1900-1958), a British writer for the satirical magazine *Punch*, a second set of questions arises. These same four volumes, each one purporting to be written by a fictional British aristocrat named “Lady Addle”, were published from the mid-1930s through the late 1940s, but were reprinted in the 1980s and enjoyed both a second wave of sales in British bookshops and enthusiastic reviews in British periodicals. What was it that made them popular again, decades later? Did they have the same cultural meaning and perform the same cultural work?
- 2 Each of Dunn’s comic texts took the form of a faux-memoir, mocking the language, the tone, and the social attitudes of actual memoirs that were published by women members of the British nobility. They were, in chronological order:
 - 1) *Lady Addle Remembers: Being the Memoirs of the Lady Addle of Eigg* (1936);
 - 2) *Lady Addle at Home* (1945), which appeared first in serial form in *Punch* magazine as “Lady Addle’s Domestic Front”, during 1944;
 - 3) *The Memoirs of Mipsie* (1947), which was also serialized first in *Punch*, in 1945, and told the story of Lady Addle’s sister;
 - 4) And finally, *Round the Year with Lady Addle* (1948).
- 3 Mary Dunn’s four parodies spanned the pre- and post- Second World War years, a time of tremendous political and social turmoil in Britain, which is crucial to remember, as we try to understand how these works situated themselves in relation to their literary points of origin; how they dealt with their various targets; why, in some instances, they moved from parody into satire; and how they were received at the time of first

publication, along with why they subsequently moved into, out of, and then back into obscurity (which is where they are situated today).

- 4 But first, it may useful to step away from the obscure, away from consideration of these particular parodies, and away from the historical past, to introduce some general questions about comedy that are more immediate—in fact, that are troubling the whole subject of comedy right now. The present-day controversy swirling around these issues will serve as a frame for examining the “Lady Addle” books, as well as the problem to which this essay will return later.
- 5 In a 28 June 2018 article in the *New Yorker* magazine, Moira Donegan reported the announcement by Hannah Gadsby, an Australian-born lesbian standup comic, of her intention to “to quit comedy altogether”. Why? Because, according to Gadsby, comedy “can force the marginalized to partake in their own humiliation”, and Gadsby “can’t bring herself to participate in that humiliation anymore” (Donegan). It is a disturbing conclusion for anyone to reach—though especially for someone who, presumably, had embarked on her profession as a comic with very different aims in mind. Also writing about Gadsby in June 2018 for the *Atlantic* magazine, Sophie Gilbert has praised a filmed recording of her recent performance at the Sydney Opera House, during which “[s]he stops being funny”, deliberately and by design. This has led Gilbert to speak admiringly of “how precise, how surgical Gadsby is as she skewers comedy’s structural inability to make things better” (Gilbert), Gilbert clearly believes, too, that there is validity to this assessment, and that it can justify abandoning comedy as a practice.
- 6 It is a surprising indictment. Indeed, such a negative evaluation of the function and effect of comedy runs counter to the prevailing wisdom, as articulated by generations of literary theorists. Many of these, of course, have been men—and often white men affiliated with elite universities, whose own social locations may be closer to the centre than to the margin. Thus, we have, for instance, the judgement of Glen Cavaliero (born 1927)—a poet, a widely published critic, and a member of the Faculty of English at Cambridge University—in his study *The Alchemy of Laughter: Comedy in English Fiction*, which appeared in the year 2000. There, he talks about comedy in wholly positive terms as a “turning of the tables” that “exposes the fallacy inherent in every monolithic interpretation of human experience: it refutes exclusiveness, points out inconsistencies, and harmonises them in a renewed pattern of relationships. It deconstructs the monolith” (Cavaliero 4). Such dismantling of monoliths is, according to Cavaliero, of great help in furthering the goal of true community: “In personal relationships the monolith may be detected in the self-centeredness that refuses to acknowledge the autonomy of others; in social ones it is evident in the inflexible prejudice [...] [and] the defensive idolisation of the past” (Cavaliero 4). One of the methods by which the “monolith can be analysed” and then broken up is “by presenting it to itself in *parody*, a mirror image which highlights its absurdities” (Cavaliero 5; italics in original). For Cavaliero, therefore, parody is a potentially valuable weapon in comedy’s arsenal, useful in countering “every simplistic and compulsive attitude which inhibits personal, political and social harmony” (Cavaliero 4). Cavaliero does add a proviso about parody, going on to suggest that so sophisticated a “methodology” is “always in danger of backfiring”; for that reason, “it is safer and thus more frequent to confront the monolith openly by means of *satire*”, although he never asserts that the two modes cannot co-exist in a single text (Cavaliero 5; italics in original). On the contrary, comedy can presumably employ both

parody and satire, in order to promote the same desirable outcome simultaneously in a two-pronged assault on monoliths, using both subtler and more direct means.

- 7 What Glen Cavaliero never doubts, however, is that there is real worth in such attempts. As he decides by the end of *The Alchemy of Laughter*, “[c]omedy is indeed no mere expression of facile optimism” (Cavaliero 245). For him, “[t]he comic sense is the reverse of the satanic. It witnesses to a perennial source [...] of tolerance and hope and an unsentimental delight in each other’s separate identities” (Cavaliero 244). Even as Cavaliero likens the “object of the comedic process” to the upward trajectory of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, leading us all toward a “state of unconditional beatitude”, it is obvious that his faith in the genre is as deeply held as though it were a religion (Cavaliero 244-245).
- 8 Yet against this favorable view of comedy and its methods (including both parody and satire), as outlined by a man who is an academic and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, there stands, in stark contrast, the frustration and despair of a practising queer woman comic, speaking from her own experience onstage in clubs and concert halls in the sphere of the day-to-day. Hannah Gadsby does more than merely doubt that comedy is an expression of hope or an effective force for positive change; she condemns it instead as actively destructive, working against those who do not have access to social power and, as she says, further humiliating them. Comedy turns pain into punchlines and, as Moira Donegan put it in her article about Gadsby, those who have suffered are then “conscripted into laughing” at their “own expense” (Donegan). For Glen Cavaliero, the different genres of laughter all may hold out the promise of transformation, or what he calls “alchemy”; for Hannah Gadsby, there is no such transformation, only the unacceptable reality of coercion. The divide here in perspectives is generational, but it is also gendered and reflective of social identities that are positioned inside in the mainstream, in one case, and outside of it, in the other.
- 9 What these two opposing voices share, nonetheless, is a conviction that the proper way to examine comedy is not in purely aesthetic or formal terms, but within a framework of moral judgement. A moral perspective is, of course, also a highly subjective one. As we see illustrated here, one person’s idea of how laughter represents a benevolent movement toward social harmony can be another person’s notion of how those who are already vulnerable have further silence, invisibility, and reminders of their own unimportance thrust upon them. There is, it seems, no way to reconcile this polarity. But neither can those of us who study comedy afford to ignore it. We should always consider whose interests laughter has served, and whether we, as scholars and critics, are comfortable with the answers to that question, as we go about our analyses of specific texts.
- 10 Keeping this as a problem in the background, my discussion turns to the topic introduced earlier: Mary Dunn’s “Lady Addle” books. First, when Dunn published the initial volume, titled *Lady Addle Remembers*, what was she parodying? Writing about the reissue of this book in 1983, the novelist Isabel Colegate has suggested that there were several contemporary models that might have served as inspiration—mentioning, for instance, Daisy, Princess of Pless’s 1931 book, *From My Private Diary*, and the socialite Florence Hwfa Williams’s 1935 memoir, *It Was Such Fun*. Clearly, there were, in the 1930s, a number of publications promising readers intimate, inside peeks into the lives of wealthy, socially influential and, in some cases, titled ladies of advanced years. The appearance in 1936 of *Lady Addle Remembers* would seem to indicate that its purpose was

to make fun of the popularity of the entire genre, reflecting the jaundiced and ironic perspective on it of middle-class women who, like Dunn herself, enjoyed no such extreme privilege. These autobiographical narratives about the charmed lives of aristocrats were the antitheses of another contemporary success, E. M. Delafield's middlebrow bestseller, *Diary of a Provincial Lady*, which began as a serial in 1930 in the British feminist weekly *Time and Tide*, and which recounted the (lightly fictionalised) comic misadventures of a woman who had no wealth or noble birth to allow her to sail through domestic disasters unscathed.

- 11 Nevertheless, even if Dunn was parodying a whole literary category, one example in particular stands out as its chief target: *My Recollections* by Adeline, Countess of Cardigan and Lancastre (1824-1915), whose double-barrelled name represented the attempt of the former Adeline de Horsey to join together titles acquired from two different marriages, one to an English count and one to a Portuguese nobleman. Here is a typical paragraph from that memoir's opening chapter, describing the author's early childhood:

We were a very united family, as the saying is. My little brothers, William and Algernon, were full of fun and, as I had no sister, I might have developed into something of a tom-boy had it not been that my mother generally took me about with her. Looking back on those days, the inevitable 'I remember' begins as a matter of course and, although my earliest recollections must needs be of the lovely young mother who adored us all, and who was so adored by us, I think my most impressive youthful memory is concerning a children's party given for Princess Victoria at St. James's Palace, by King William IV, and Queen Adelaide. (Cardigan 2)

The mood is nostalgic; the sentiments are hyperbolic; and the name-dropping is copious. Everything combines to present an image of the writer's origins as blessed with a golden aura of happiness.

- 12 And here is the opening of Chapter Two from Mary Dunn's *Lady Addle Remembers*:

We were a happy and devoted family, high spirited and full of fun and yet with deeper feelings underneath and acutely sensitive. I shall never forget how my younger brother Humpo [a footnote here reads "The Hon. Humphrey Coot"] cried when he had pushed a small cousin, who had come to stay, into the lake, and we found out two days later that she couldn't swim. He was inconsolable and it was some time before my dear mother could convince him that he wasn't naughty, only ignorant, and wouldn't be punished for his mistake.

We lived a healthy and homely life, with our games and lessons, riding and picnics, almost as though we were just like other children. My father was a man of great simplicity of tastes and would often accompany us on one of the latter, choosing the spot himself in the morning, with the aid of an estate map and his agent; then later on our dear old butler, Turbot, with one or two footmen at the most, would take the lunch and set it out, seeing first that the chosen spot was thoroughly clean as Mama had a horror of dirt and even when she went to call on neighboring houses always took a little rug to sit on, unless she knew exactly where the chairs had come from. (Dunn 1983, 9-10)

- 13 As for "Mama" herself, Dunn's *Lady Addle* tells the reader,

She was also the possessor of a very beautiful voice and one of my earliest recollections is of stealing down to the drawing-room one night and listening outside the door while my mother sang "O Sole Mio" with scarcely a note out of tune. After the song there was a pause and then Mr. Gladstone's voice said: "Thank you, Lady Coot. That was kind of you." Just those words, no more. It shows how deeply he must have been moved. (Dunn 1983, 4)

- 14 Virtually every sentence of Dunn's text begins in the realm of literary parody, with an exaggeration of characteristics, in terms of both style and content, that are present in the original—the idealisation of the past, the gushing praise, and the casual reminders of access to the world of the elite. But then, almost every sentence also slips into satire, where the butts of the jokes are the values of the fictional Lady Addle herself, her ridiculously snobbish family, and the social stratum that they represent. They are self-deluded, self-satisfied, pampered, extravagant, untalented yet convinced of their own superiority, and indifferent to the welfare of others, but they are never held accountable for their misdeeds.
- 15 Yet if satire usually implies a desire for correction, at whom exactly was this exposure and criticism in comic form directed? At the time when Mary Dunn composed *Lady Addle Remembers*, the memoir titled *My Recollections* was not a recent work, for it had been issued by the firm of Eveleigh Nash nearly three decades earlier, in 1909. Its author, Adeline, Countess of Cardigan and Lancastre, had died in 1915; so she was not alive either to see her narrative subjected to parody or her approach to life attacked through mockery.
- 16 A more oblique and also a more important target may lie behind *Lady Addle Remembers*, one that was connected to the year in which it was published—that is, 1936. The year 1936 was, of course, a moment of crisis in Britain. King George V had died in January 1936 and was succeeded by his son, who became Edward VIII. Although the details of Edward's continuing romance with the American divorcée Wallis Simpson, who was still married to a second husband, were largely kept from the British public, there was widespread awareness that Edward was, and had been all along, singularly uninterested in his royal duties. He was known to be a self-indulgent playboy, dedicated to his own pleasure, and living in high style. Mary Dunn's impulse to cast a cold eye on the British nobility and to make sometimes rather savage fun of it, by skewering one fictional representative of it through her own words, seems closely aligned with the critical and anti-monarchical mood that was sweeping through the press and through the populace. This culminated, of course, in Edward's abdication at the end of 1936, when he chose Wallis Simpson over the kingdom and the Empire. It is tempting to see the popularity of *Lady Addle Remembers* as driven, in part, by timing—by its willingness, at just such a moment of political crisis, to laugh at how the ruling classes chose to view themselves, versus how they looked to the British people in general.
- 17 Every member of the fictional Lady Addle's family is a fool, or a wastrel, or a cheat, or a tyrant, or some combination of these. And every one is, however, described in language that parodies the glowing terms in which the memoirs of aristocratic ladies—though especially the Countess of Cardigan and Lancastre's *My Recollections*—celebrated the upper classes and the lives they led. Here is a characteristic example from the 1909 original:
- The Duke of Wellington was constantly to our house, and we children were devoted to him. He delighted to see us act little French plays, and what an event those theatricals were! How we revelled in seeing the dining-room turned into a theatre! The folding-doors were opened, curtains and footlights were arranged, and we felt then that life held nothing better for us. (Cardigan 7)
- 18 And this is a typical family entertainment in Mary Dunn's *Lady Addle Remembers*:

It had been an exceptionally gay and brilliant party, I remember. Humpo was at his funniest, while Sippy had been in splendid voice, and would have sung right through the arias of *Athalie* the first evening, had not the Kaiser, with considerate solicitude, begged her to desist for fear of overtiring herself. As for Mipsie and Dotty, they were the life and soul of the party, whether they were helping Humpo with his jokes—the naughty creatures smeared all the whist cards with treacle, and put an under-housemaid in every visitor’s bed one night (what screams of laughter there were afterwards!)—or playfully threading dandelions in the Archbishop of York’s beard... (Dunn 1983, 36)

- 19 Along with prose parody, *Lady Addle Remembers* also contains throughout a smattering of poems that supposedly represent the literary accomplishments of noble ladies. Some are presented as by Lady Addle herself. The first one offered, however, is meant to be a sample of the work of her Victorian mama, “the former Lady Arabella Twynge, daughter of the fifth Duke of Droitwich” (Dunn 1983, 4). As Lady Addle tells her readers, “Among other talents she had a great natural gift for poetry” (Dunn 1983, 6). And so, Lady Addle includes “the little poem which my dear mother wrote on the birth of her eldest child, by brother Crainy” [a footnote identifies him as “Viscount Crainiham”] (Dunn 1983, 8). The “Ode” reads:

Only a bundle of muslin fine,
 Only a swansdown hood,
 But Heaven has made that baby mine,
 And that is what is good.
 Only a cot-ful of tears and joy,
 Only a goffered frill,
 But the angels made him a baby boy,
 And that is better still.
 Only a tiny wayward curl,
 Only a crochet shawl,
 But Father has made him a future Earl,
 And that is best of all. (8).

- 20 The audience, of course, recognizes what Lady Addle, in her effusive praise of everything connected with her family, refuses to see and would never admit—that the poem is not only bad doggerel, but an outrageously laughable expression of sexism and snobbery to boot.
- 21 A third aspect to the comedy that Mary Dunn employed is visual. Included in the 1936 volume *Lady Addle Remembers* are late-Victorian and early-twentieth-century photographs that have been doctored, so that the faces and bodies are hideously unattractive, then labelled as portraits of Lady Addle, her relations, and her friends. In his “Introduction” to the 1985 reissue of another of the “Lady Addle” books, titled *The Memoirs of Mipsie* (1947)—“Mipsie” being the pet name of “Lady Millicent Coot, afterwards Duchess of Brisket, later Lady Millicent Standing, then Princess Fédor Ubetzkoi and lastly Lady Millicent Block” (Dunn 1983, 11)—Simon Hoggart talks about Mary Dunn acquiring the images “from country-house sales, where she would buy boxes and albums full of old family photographs. These were then altered by the publishers, Methuen”, although likely under her own direction (Hoggart xi). The effect is always to undercut the prose and expose to ridicule the judgment of the fictional Lady Addle, for whom everyone and everything belonging to her own exalted sphere in life is not merely lovely, but faultless. Thus, as Hoggart notes, “Mipsie, whose sister constantly describes her as ‘beautiful’, is [...] decorated with hideous buck teeth” (Hoggart xi). This was, in effect, parody by means of publication format. Contemporary

memoirs by titled British ladies, along with earlier examples, such as the Countess of Cardigan and Lancastre’s, often did contain photographic illustrations. (So, too, of course, did Virginia Woolf’s 1928 *Orlando: A Biography*, her comic paean to the aristocratic Vita Sackville-West. To place a copy of *Lady Addle Remembers* alongside the volume *My Recollections* would make this resemblance in physical layout clear. But in rendering each selfish, cruel, and insular figure ugly, Mary Dunn’s parody also slides into the realm of satire and into the related category of burlesque, where moral flaws are writ large on the body as disfigurement, in order to emphasise that those who think of themselves as high should be seen by others as low.

- 22 Midway through *Lady Addle Remembers*, though, a shift in the target of the ridicule occurs. Lady Addle and her husband travel abroad and, in India at the end of the nineteenth century, encounter a passionate lady reformer named Agatha Slubb-Repp. Her grand project is “the emancipation of women”, and her plan for achieving this is an absurd “scheme for teaching knitting to the Zenanas”—meaning to the women secluded in Indian households—through her “Society for the Promotion of Purdah Hobbies” (Dunn 1983, 67-68; 69). Up until this point, the linguistic parody frequently has been time-bound, in that it has referred specifically to a work such as the Countess of Cardigan and Lancastre’s *My Recollections*, which employs an extravagance of language that marks it as Victorian. But the objects of satire have, in effect, been transhistorical ones—namely, the heedless self-importance and self-absorption of the upper classes, which are displayed just as much by the wealthy and well-born of the 1930s as by those of an earlier day.
- 23 With the introduction of Agatha Slubb-Repp, however, Mary Dunn takes aim specifically at turn-of-the-century feminism, particularly in its intersection with Imperialism, and laughs pointedly at her Victorian predecessors. Even as, in 1936, Mahatma Gandhi was leading the movement for independence from Britain, Dunn was directing her laughter at the late Victorians, including culturally boorish English ladies, who had patronized Indians and smugly assumed that they knew what was best for them. Such an attack would have appealed to readers at the conservative end of the political spectrum, for it implied that, if Britain now was losing control over India, it was partly the fault of an earlier generation of meddling women.
- 24 But the historically specific ridicule does not end there. Dunn also mocks the “Women’s Suffrage Movement” by means of Agatha Slubb-Repp, who enlists Lady Addle “in the summer of 1908 as a militant for the cause of Women’s Enfranchisement” (Dunn 1983, 99). The notion of women’s rights and their fitness for full citizenship is skewered first through Lady Addle’s own pronouncements:
- I used to note how my dear mother, without losing any of her womanly charm, would make even the butler quake by a few well-chosen words and could control my father by a mere look. If this failed, she could get anything she wanted by bursting into tears, a talent she cultivated and developed to such perfection, that it used to strike me—child as I was—that such capabilities deserved a larger sphere. (Dunn 1983, 99)
- 25 Agatha Slubb-Repp—who disguises herself as a pillar-box on the pavement and shouts “Votes for Women” from it, and then, following her arrest and imprisonment, assaults a prison wardress with a toothbrush—soon channels Lady Addle’s sympathies into escalating comic adventures. Eventually, the pair disrupt the cricket match at Lord’s by hiding on the pitch under a tarpaulin, leaping out, shouting “Votes for Women”, and defiling the wicket by pouring a small bottle of water on it—a burlesque allusion to the

famous sacrifice of her life by Emily Davison on the racetrack at Epsom (Dunn 1983, 105). In the mid-1930s, a time when feminist activism was in abeyance, and there was little support for it among the middle-class British reading public, such mockery of past campaigns for women’s equality smacks again of an underlying conservative impulse in Mary Dunn’s work.

- 26 And here, this returns us to the dilemma posed by the antithetical views of comedy espoused, on one side, by Glen Cavaliero, and on the other by Hannah Gadsby. Cavaliero is certainly correct, in his *The Alchemy of Laughter*, in defining comedy as the enemy of the “monolith”, for it helps to demolish, as he puts it, “self-centeredness that refuses to acknowledge the autonomy of others [...] inflexible prejudice [...] [and] the defensive idolisation of the past” (Cavaliero 2000, 4). *Lady Addle Remembers* carries this political enterprise forward, so long as it is aiming at the sacrosanct world of the British peerage—a world, it insists, of villains and idiots—and parodying the memoirs that wish to glorify it.
- 27 But Hannah Gadsby is also right. By the 1930s, women who protested the existing gendered social system, along with patriarchy and enforced heteronormativity, were not only a marginal community, but a persecuted minority (as demonstrated by the successful prosecution for obscenity and banning, in 1928, of Radclyffe Hall’s notorious novel about same-sex love, *The Well of Loneliness*). In *Lady Addle Remembers*, as we learn, the newly married Agatha Slubb-Repp uses engagement in feminist activities to drive away the groom before their union can be consummated and, subsequently, she lives in a small flat with another woman. The laughter aimed at this character does indeed smack of the “humiliation” by means of comedy that Hannah Gadsby now decries.
- 28 In terms of reception, moreover, the conservative effects of *Lady Addle Remembers* also overrule the progressive ones. What often happens in literary comedy happens here: the ostensible occasion for laughter in a text—in this case, the figure of Lady Addle herself—is so consistently over-the-top and so outrageous that the character becomes, paradoxically, a source of pleasure for the reader and thus, in a sense, a beloved creation, as opposed to one that inspires disgust. By the end of *Lady Addle Remembers*, the fictional writer of the memoir has turned into just such an enjoyable monster. Evidently, audiences clamoured for more of her. In 1944, Mary Dunn revived her for a serial in *Punch*, a British magazine long known for its espousal of establishment views. In *Lady Addle’s Domestic Front*, which was later issued in book form as *Lady Addle at Home*, the aristocratic lady, impervious to criticism or self-doubt, offered a way to make fun of new targets, such as the domestic advice manuals and articles in magazines that instructed British women in how to prepare meals and produce household goods under the restrictions of wartime rationing. Lady Addle confidently offered one recipe after another for inedible, and sometimes potentially lethal food, as well as designs for useless and ugly crafts. At the same time, this character transformed—as did her irrepressible sister Mipsie, in both a 1945 *Punch* series and a later volume titled *The Memoirs of Mipsie*, which recounted her success in manipulating men to obtain money and jewels—into a kind of laughable, yet somehow admirable, embodiment of resilience. No wartime or postwar crisis fazed Lady Addle. She was indomitable and thus appealed to the British public’s wish to applaud itself for keeping calm and carrying on. Whatever “monolith”, to borrow Glen Cavaliero’s concept, that she was originally designed to shatter, remained intact.

- 29 This was not the last of the unsinkable Lady Addle, for even the death in 1958 of her creator, Mary Dunn, did not signal her end. In 1983, the British publisher Robin Clark reissued *Lady Addle Remembers* to, as Simon Hoggart reports, “a few, but highly enthusiastic reviews. The BBC serialised it on Radio 4 in the autumn of 1984, and the book appeared in the best-seller lists” (Hoggart 1983, xiv). By then, there was no question of Dunn’s parody performing any positive cultural work, by lessening the power or influence of a hidebound and parasitical nobility; that class was, like the literary genre of the aristocratic ladies’ gushing reminiscences, largely an anachronism. Perhaps unexpectedly, what this reissued text now evoked was an appreciation not only of its comedy, but of its linkage to the lost world that had generated it. In the rightward-leaning British magazine, the *Spectator*, the novelist Isabel Colegate wrote that *Lady Addle Remembers* “arouses a certain nostalgia for the real thing, those volumes of memoirs and recollections which used to be so prevalent on the shelves of second-hand bookshops but which seem to have disappeared even from there” (Colegate 32). Such a response illustrates what Simon Dentith observed in his study, *Parody* (2000): because parody “creates new utterances out of the utterances that it seeks to mock, [...] it preserves as much as it destroys—or rather, it preserves in the moment that it destroys” (Dentith 189). In this case, what Dunn’s parody preserved, ironically, was, in Glen Cavaliero’s words, “idolisation of the past” (Cavaliero 4), when the voices of actual Lady Addle figures spoke in print, because they still mattered.
- 30 Parody, as Ian Sansom has opined in his review for the *TLS* of two recent books on wit, “is a fine art”, and few would quarrel with that judgement (Sansom 20). It is not, however, a politically neutral or values-free art, nor is any other related form of comedy, such as satire. Recently, in their 2018 edited collection, *Comedy and the Politics of Representation: Mocking the Weak*, Helen Davies and Sarah Ilott, as well as the various contributors to their volume, have brought into the sphere of literary theory the same sorts of doubts that are being articulated by professional comics such as Hannah Gadsby. As Davies and Ilott assert, “all forms of humour” are “unpredictable” in their “consequences and effects” (Davies and Ilott 11). A genre such as parody, moreover, is “forced to reference that which it mocks”, making it difficult (if not impossible) to distinguish between “what is being reiterated”—and, therefore, gaining new life and increased visibility—and what is critiqued by a comic representation” of it (Davies and Ilott 12). The result is an irresolvable tension “between reconsolidation and critique” that seems to make all comic practice and practitioners suspect (Davies and Ilott 12).
- 31 Should comic writers and performers consider abandoning all forms of comedy, including parody? Should critics and scholars do so? If Glen Cavaliero and Hannah Gadsby are accurate in their diagnoses, and if laughter operates both positively and negatively in moral and social terms, then how can anyone decide? An essay such as this cannot answer those questions; it can only raise and leave them with its readers to ponder. Perhaps there is no proper way for such a study to conclude, except with the benevolent—and slightly tipsy—words of Lady Addle, at the end of *Round the Year with Lady Addle*, the final volume in the series: “But what do these small things matter if, as Mipsie describes it, ‘they are all taken with the right spirit?’”—and by that, she means with “just ice, with a little champagne and medicinal brandy”. “And that”, as Lady Addle continues in her state of happy inebriation, “at the conclusion of these memoirs, is my wish for my dear, dear readers for 1949” (Dunn 1948, 106-107).

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ABSTRACTS

This essay considers the relationship of parody to satire and the effectiveness of comedy in general in terms of political action. It focuses on a set of parodic texts—the ‘Lady Addle’ series first published in the 1930s and 1940s—by Mary Dunn, a British writer associated with *Punch* magazine. Written in imitation of published memoirs by actual women aristocrats, Dunn’s works offered scathing lampoons of the upper classes. When republished in the 1980s, these parodies were read nostalgically for a lost world of fixed social hierarchies. Such a reversal raises

questions about the role of reception in determining the meaning and effect of parody, but also whether comic modes can ever be relied upon to perform political work—issues much debated recently in feminist circles.

Cet essai traite des rapports entre parodie et satire, et de la fonction politique de l'humour à partir d'une série de parodies écrites par Mary Dunn, auteure britannique associée au magazine satirique *Punch*. Ces textes publiés dans les années 1930-1940 imitent les véritables mémoires écrits par des femmes de l'aristocratie et ridiculisent leurs auteures et leur classe sociale. Lorsqu'elles furent republiées dans les années 1980, ces parodies furent accueillies avec un plaisir nostalgique par des lecteurs et lectrices qui se délectèrent de ce monde perdu aux hiérarchies bien établies. Un tel renversement conduit à s'interroger sur le rôle de la réception dans la construction du sens d'une parodie et de ses effets, ainsi que sur la capacité de l'humour à accomplir une fonction politique déterminée – autant de questions qui se sont récemment posées dans les cercles féministes.

INDEX

Keywords: parody, satire, political comedy, memoir, autobiography, British aristocracy, feminism, world war II

oeuvre Lady Addle Remembers, Lady Addle at Home, Memoirs of Mipsie (The), Round the Year with Lady Addle

Mots-clés: parodie, satire, comédie politique, mémoires, autobiographie, aristocratie britannique, féminisme, Seconde Guerre mondiale

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