

Oh! Sophonisba, Sophonisba, oh!
Oh! Narva, Narva, oh!

"Bombast" originally meant "cotton stuffing," and in Elizabethan times came to be used as a metaphor for an over-elaborate style.

Bowlerize. To delete from an edition of a literary work passages considered by the editor to be indecent or indelicate. The word derives from the Reverend Thomas Bowdler, who tidied up his *Family Shakespeare* in 1818 by omitting, as he put it, "whatever is unfit to be read by a gentleman in a company of ladies." Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), Shakespeare's plays, and *The Arabian Nights* are often bowdlerized in editions intended for the young; and until the 1920s, at which time the standards of propriety were drastically liberalized, some compilers of anthologies for college students availed themselves of Bowdler's prerogative in editing Chaucer.

Burlesque has been succinctly defined as "an incongruous imitation"; that is, it imitates the manner (the form and style) or else the subject matter of a serious literary work or a literary genre, in verse or in prose, but makes the imitation amusing by a ridiculous disparity between the manner and the matter. The burlesque may be written for the sheer fun of it; usually, however, it is a form of *satire*. The butt of the satiric ridicule may be the particular work or the genre that is being imitated, or else the subject matter to which the imitation is incongruously applied, or (often) both of these together.

"Burlesque," "parody," and "travesty" are sometimes applied interchangeably; simply to equate these terms, however, is to surrender useful critical distinctions. It is better to follow the critics who use "burlesque" as the generic name and use the other terms to discriminate species of burlesque; we must keep in mind, however, that a single instance of burlesque may exploit a variety of techniques. The application of these terms will be clearer if we make two preliminary distinctions: (1) In a burlesque imitation, the form and style may be either lower or higher in level and dignity than the subject to which it is incongruously applied. (See the discussion of levels under *style*.) If the form and style are high and dignified but the subject is low or trivial, we have "high burlesque"; if the subject is high in status and dignity but the style and manner of treatment are low and undignified, we have "low burlesque." (2) A burlesque may also be distinguished according to whether it imitates a general literary type or genre, or else a particular work or author. Applying these two distinctions, we get the following species of burlesque.

I Varieties of high burlesque:

(1) A **parody** imitates the serious manner and characteristic features of a particular literary work, or the distinctive style of a particular author, or the typical stylistic and other features of a serious literary genre, and deflates the original by applying the imitation to a lowly or comically inappropriate subject. John Phillips' "The Splendid Shilling" (1705) parodied the epic style of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) by

exaggerating its high formality and applying it to the description of a tattered poet composing in a drafty attic. Henry Fielding in *Joseph Andrews* (1742) parodied Samuel Richardson's novel *Pamela* (1740–41) by putting a hearty male hero in place of Richardson's sexually beleaguered heroine, and later on Jane Austen poked good-natured fun at the genre of the *gothic novel* in *Northanger Abbey* (1818). Here is Hartley Coleridge's parody of the first stanza of William Wordsworth's "She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways," which he applies to Wordsworth himself:

He lived amidst th' untrodden ways
To Rydal Lake that lead,
A bard whom there were none to praise,
And very few to read.

From the early nineteenth century to the present, parody has been the favorite form of burlesque. Among the gifted parodists of the present century have been Max Beerbohm in England (see his *A Christmas Garland*, 1912) and Stella Gibbons (*Cold Comfort Farm*, 1936), and the American writers James Thurber, Phyllis McGinley, and E. B. White. The novel *Possession* (1990), by the English writer A. S. Byatt, exemplifies a serious literary form which includes straight-faced parodies of Victorian poetry and prose, as well as of academic scholarly writings.

(2) A **mock epic** or **mock-heroic** poem is distinguished as that type of parody which imitates, in a sustained way, both the elaborate form and the ceremonious style of the *epic* genre, but applies it to narrate at length a commonplace or trivial subject matter. In a masterpiece of this type, *The Rape of the Lock* (1714), Alexander Pope views through the grandiose epic perspective a quarrel between the belles and elegants of his day over the theft of a lady's curl. The story includes such elements of traditional epic protocol as supernatural *machinery*, a voyage on board ship, a visit to the underworld, and a heroically scaled battle between the sexes—although with metaphors, hatpins, and snuff for weapons. The term *mock-heroic* is often applied to other dignified poetic forms which are purposely mismatched to a lowly subject; for example, to Thomas Gray's comic "Ode on the Death of a Favorite Cat" (1748); see under *bathos* and *antitlimax*.

II Varieties of low burlesque:

(1) The **Hudibrastic poem** takes its name from Samuel Butler's *Hudibras* (1663), which satirized rigid Puritanism by describing the adventures of a Puritan knight, Sir Hudibras. Instead of the doughty deeds and dignified style of the traditional genre of the *chivalric romance*, however, we find the knightly hero experiencing mundane and humiliating misadventures which are described in *doggerel* verses and a ludicrously colloquial idiom.

(2) The **travesty** mocks a particular work by treating its lofty subject in a grotesquely undignified manner and style. As Boileau put it, describing

a travesty of Virgil's *Aeneid*, "Dido and Aeneas are made to speak like fishwives and ruffians." *The New Yorker* once published a travesty of Ernest Hemingway's novel *Across the River and Into the Trees* (1950) with the title *Across the Street and Into the Bar*, and the film *Young Frankenstein* is a travesty of Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*.

Another form of burlesque is the **lampoon**: a short satirical work, or a passage in a longer work, which describes the appearance and character of a particular person in a way that makes that person ridiculous. It typically employs **caricature**, which in a verbal description (as in graphic art) exaggerates or distorts, for comic effect, a person's distinctive physical features or personality traits. John Dryden's *Abalom and Achitophel* (1681) includes a famed twenty-five-line lampoon of Zimri (Dryden's contemporary the Duke of Buckingham), which begins:

In the first rank of these did Zimri stand;
A man so various, that he seemed to be
Not one, but all mankind's epitome:
Stiff in opinions, always in the wrong;
Was everything by starts, and nothing long. . . .

The modern sense of "burlesque" as a theater form derives, historically, from plays which mocked serious types of drama by an incongruous imitation. John Gay's *Beggars' Opera* (1728)—which in turn became the model for the German *Threepenny Opera* by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill (1928)—was a high burlesque of Italian opera, applying its dignified formulas to a company of beggars and thieves; a number of the musical plays by Gilbert and Sullivan in the Victorian era also burlesqued grand opera.

George Kitchin, *A Survey of Burlesque and Parody in English* (1931); Richmond P. Bond, *English Burlesque Poetry, 1700-1750* (1932); Margaret A. Rose, *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-Modern* (1993). Anthologies: Walter Jerrold and R. M. Leonard, eds., *A Century of Parody and Imitation* (1913); Robert P. Falk, ed., *The Antic Muse: American Writers in Parody* (1955); Dwight MacDonald, ed., *Parodies: An Anthology* (1960).

Canon of Literature. The Greek word "kanon," signifying a measuring rod or a rule, was extended to denote a list or catalogue, then came to be applied to the list of books in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament which were designated by church authorities as the genuine Holy Scriptures. A number of writings related to those in the Scriptures, but not admitted into the authoritative canon, are called **apocrypha**; eleven books which have been included in the Roman Catholic biblical canon are considered apocryphal by Protestants.

The term "canon" was later used in a literary application to signify the list of secular works accepted by experts as genuinely written by a particular author. We speak thus of "the Chaucer canon" and "the Shakespeare canon," and refer to other works that have sometimes been attributed to an author, but on evidence that many editors judge to be inadequate or invalid, as

"apocryphal." In recent decades the phrase **literary canon** has come to designate—in world literature, or in European literature, but most frequently in a national literature—those authors who, by a cumulative consensus of critics, scholars, and teachers, have come to be widely recognized as "major," and to have written works often hailed as literary *classics*. The literary works by canonical authors are the ones which, at a given time, are most kept in print, most frequently and fully discussed by literary critics and historians, and most likely to be included in anthologies and in the syllabi of college courses with titles such as "World Masterpieces," "Major English Authors," or "Great American Writers."

The use of the term "canon" with reference both to the Bible and to secular writings obscures important differences in the two applications. The biblical canon has been established by church authorities vested with the power to make such a decision; is enforced by authorities with the power to impose religious sanctions; is explicit in the books that it lists; and is closed, permitting neither deletions nor additions. (See the entry "Canon" in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, 1993.) The canon of literature, on the other hand, is the product of a wavering and unofficial consensus; it is tacit rather than explicit, loose in its boundaries, and always subject to changes in its inclusions.

The social process by which an author or a literary work comes to be tacitly recognized as canonical has come to be called "canon formation." The factors in this formative process are complex and disputed. It seems clear, however, that the process involves, among other conditions, a broad concurrence of critics, scholars, and authors with diverse viewpoints and sensibilities; the persistent influence of, and reference to, an author in the work of other authors; the frequent reference to an author or work within the discourse of a cultural community; and the widespread assignment of an author or text in school and college curricula. Such factors are of course mutually interactive, and they need to be sustained over a period of time. In his "Preface to Shakespeare" (1765) Samuel Johnson said that a century is "the term commonly fixed as a test of literary merit." It seems, however, that some authors who wrote within the present century such as Marcel Proust, Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann, and James Joyce—perhaps even a writer so recent as Vladimir Nabokov—already have achieved the prestige, influence, assignment in college courses, and persistence of reference in literary discourse to establish them in the European canon; others, including Yeats, T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, and Robert Frost, seem already secure in their national canons, at least.

At any time, the boundaries of a literary canon remain indefinite, while inside those boundaries some authors are central and others more marginal. Occasionally an earlier author who was for long on the fringe of the canon, or even outside it, gets transferred to a position of eminence. A conspicuous example was John Donne, who from the eighteenth century on was regarded mainly as an interestingly eccentric poet. T. S. Eliot, followed by Cleanth Brooks and other *New Critics* in the 1930s and later, made Donne's writings the very paradigm of the self-ironic and paradoxical poetry they most admired, and so helped elevate him to a high place within the English canon.