



The Lost Art of Parody

BY JOHN GOLDSTROM



PARODIES of songs and poems were popular at the turn of the century. Minstrel, musical comedy, vaudeville and burlesque comedians sang them to the delight of audiences unworried by world wars. The late Lew Dockstader, perhaps the best of the blackface comedians of that day, was one of the principal exponents of the topical, and therefore ephemeral, parody.

Like travesty, parody is a lost art. Most parodies, even when exceptionally amusing and popular, lasted about as long as a radio or juke-box song hit of today. Few had any literary merit, but there were exceptions of high distinction. When Dockstader was popularizing his "Everybody Works But Father," which was not a parody but a long-time song hit, its rendition in Pittsburgh inspired his friend, Arthur G. Burgoyne, poetic columnist of the *Chronicle Telegraph*, to parodyize it in classical style.

His parodies on "Everybody

Works But Father" in the manner of Homer, Baudelaire, Longfellow, Whitman, and W. S. Gilbert and others, were published for private circulation by admiring friends and entitled *Stolen Goods*. For the edification of members of the present generation who may not know the original lyrics, they are quoted herewith:

*Everybody works but father;
He sits at home all day,
Feet upon the mantle,
Smoking his pipe of clay.
Mother she takes in washing,
So does Sister Ann;
Everybody works in our house
But our old man.*

Burgoyne wrote in an introduction: "The most popular of American poems is a rank plagiarism . . . The proof is herewith appended. Careful research on the part of the writer has revealed that the theme most beloved of the populace of this broad land has been borrowed, not

once, but over and over again; that it has been bandied about from poet to poet, until finally, with nothing but a change of meter to conceal its identity, it has been unloaded on the trustful American public and accepted as a novelty. Its successive developments, with the names of its various sponsors, are as follows:

HOMER

*Fierce was the wrath of Achilles. He
saw in the family mansion
Mother bent low o'er the tub in
pursuit of her job as a laundress;
Likewise ox-eyed Sister Ann, while the
sire with his feet on the mantel
Blew from a bowl argillaceous a series
of clouds azure-tinted.
Seeing that all were at work but the
languorous masculine parent,
Oh, but the hero waxed hot, and the
phrases profane that he uttered
Rang to the skies overhead and away
o'er the sea hollow-sounding.*

BAUDELAIRE

*I dreamed last night that in a noisome
den
I saw — Oh, soul of me, what saw'st
thou then?
A weird witch, rude and horrible to see.
She mumbled as she washed her lin-
gerie.
I saw — Oh, brain of mine, didst tell
me true? —
A maid that joys of girlhood never
knew.
The rags she squeezed and ironed in
despair —
Mort de ma vie! — were Father's
underwear.
Black night came on me, made my
senses reel.*

*I saw the Father at his all-day spiel.
The brûle-gueule in his mouth, his
feet propped high.
Spectre, avault! — Le vieillard sans
travail.*

LONGFELLOW

*When the warriors of the nations,
Stained with blood, came back from
battle,
Scornfully their way they wended
To the lodge of old Noworkis.
There they threw their shirts of deerskin
To the squaw antique and hideous.
Wearily she took in washing;
So did Sister Anniehaha.
Scornfully they saw the Old Man
With his feet against the smoke-flue,
Blowing clouds from out his smoke-
pipe.
Frowning, ev'ryone departed
Saying, "In that wretched wigwam
All must toil except Noworkis."
"He's a hardnut," said the pine trees.
"He's a loafer," said the water.*

WHITMAN

*Out of the heart of me
Wells this song, the song of the toilers,
Song of the careworn mother, over the
clothes in the washtub bending.
The sight of her fills me with vast
elemental sympathy.
Also, my sister Anna, brought up to
laundry work,
Brought up to patient endurance, to
yielding of life like a martyr.
Also my father, who works not, but
with soul incapable of virile emotion,
Sits with his feet perched high; imper-
turbed, lost, rapt, his clay pipe
luxuriously puffing.
O my song, my plaint! No sunshine is
in it.
Whoever you are — What can I offer*

*you but ashes — no joy, no music;
Only a house, poverty-stricken, where
all hands work but the Father.
Into the street I rush, and shout in the
madness of sorrow.*

W. S. GILBERT

*If ever round our domicile you chance
to be a-wandering
You'll probably find Mother in the
poignant throes of laundering.
Along with Sister Anna, she does up
the household lincery,
Not seeming to experience the faintest
sense of injury.
Meanwhile the Aged Person who looks
after us paternally
With feet upon the mantel sits and puffs
his clay infernally.
And since, while others toil, he puts all
thoughts of labor far aside,
Don't blame us if we meditate a mild
attempt at parricide.*

"Out of which has been generated," wrote Burgoyne, "the great American lyric, made illustrious by Lew Dockstader, 'Everybody Works But Father.'"

AROUND 1908, about the time when Burgoyne wrote those parodies, Parisian fashion dictated that ladies dye their hair the color of their evening gowns. Parodying "Darling, I am growing old/Silver hairs among the gold," the "Prof" wrote in his column —

*Darling, I am on the blink;
Purple hairs among the pink.*

Once, moved by a rising suicide rate in Allegheny, which is now

Pittsburgh's North Side, the "Prof" wrote a sympathetic soliloquy about it:

*Short is the span of human life,
In Allegheny.
Brightly gleams the butcher knife,
In Allegheny.
Filled with remorse and beer,
Another citizen — dear, dear! —
Has slit himself from ear to ear,
In Allegheny.
Who speaks of Love, or Life, or Hope,
In Allegheny?
What's this? — another dangling rope,
In Allegheny.
Another brother, bowed with toil,
And grief upon earth's sordid soil,
Has shuffled off this Mortal Coil,
In Allegheny.
Convenient is the poison store,
In Allegheny.
Wide open stands the druggist's door,
In Allegheny.
Brawls and rude domestic spats,
And jim-jams bred of frequent bats,
Lead oftentimes to Rough-on-Rats,
In Allegheny.
Deep are the sorrows of the soul,
In Allegheny.
And dark and deep the river's roll,
In Allegheny.
Filled with penitence and booze,
Off come hat, coat, vest and shoes,
And one more citizen we lose,
In Allegheny.*

But somehow with the death of Burgoyne in 1913, the gentle art began to decline. No new masters of parody appeared, and with the chaos of social change following World War I, the parody was all but forgotten.

Letter from Tahiti

By WILLIAM HORNBERG

I HAD BEEN in Tahiti six months when a well-meaning acquaintance lent me half a dozen books describing the place. Having absorbed all the small-town gossip which seems to be the national pastime there, I thought I knew all that was worth knowing about anybody, how much every pretender owed rather than possessed, how he lived and with whom, et cetera. But believing that every book deserves at least a casual perusal, I tried to interest myself in those of my friend's choice.

They were all written by Americans. They were all grander ballyhoo of an over-rated resort than even paid copywriters in the employ of travel promoters could have disgorged. Some were lavishly illustrated with posed photographs of girls in a state of undress that has not been permitted since missionaries started to Christianize the South Seas. Papeete was called "the emotional capital of the Pacific," whatever that means. I showed this to a Frenchman long since disillusioned about his country's colony. "*Capital de crasse!*" was his indignant reply. "Capital of filth, that is what it is."



One writer must have had a natural instinct for the obvious. He only mentioned those of his compatriots resident on the island by whom he had been well entertained. The reader was given the impression that they were all great and outstanding in their particular fields of endeavor; that the honky-tonk musician who had probably starved in America was a virtuoso; that his bar with the most shopworn of ladies of professional unchastity was on a plane with the Stork Club; and that the signwriter with no freehand-drawing ability whatever, who did a lucrative business selling paintings copied from photographs with the aid of a projector, was a fine artist.

All the books made much of the glowing sunsets and exotic sunrises. Not one mentioned the far too numerous elephantiasis sufferers one sees trudging along the streets, the impecunious ones who cannot afford a journey to cooler climes for six months in order to be cured, and have to be satisfied with treatment in the city clinic where their monstrously swollen limbs are bandaged regularly. Nor did any of the authors