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Gender and Genre: Knowledge Transformation in Liberal Arts Education

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Abstract

This article explores how liberal arts education leads students to critically examine their everyday experience of mass media and to creatively transform their observation into radical knowledge about social norms, especially gender identities. The first part of this article lays out the shared grounds and connections between genre and gender: both are repetitive performances that reflect cultural rationality and gather people into distinct communities. The second part illustrates the significance of relating genre studies with gender issues in the liberal arts classroom through the example of the genre parody assignment in my Mellon-funded course "Race, Gender and Media." Through showcasing two students' parodic works, my article shows how liberal arts education can cultivate students' genre-gender awareness and transform their experience of mass culture into knowledge about social norms.

Keywords: genre studies, gender, parody, liberal arts education

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As a popular topic of political importance, gender provokes heated debates in today's society. Students in my courses tend to associate gender with women's rights and with power relationships in both the public and private spheres. However, when studying literary texts, films, and other genres of cultural products, such as TikTok videos and news reports, students seldom think of them as heavily gendered. Neither do they detect the ideological and social conflicts embedded in them. Nevertheless, these genres in various media are social products that reflect the relationship between the producer and the consumer, or rather, between the creator and the receiver of knowledge. In today's multimedia world when everyone is able to produce and receive information via a variety of mass culture genres, it is important to critically think about the gender ideologies these genres carry.

In this article, I want to share one major assignment—genre parody—from the Mellon-funded course Gender, Race, and Media taught at a US university, and demonstrate how liberal arts education leads students to transform their lived experience into knowledge about gender issues in society. My article starts with an overview of genre studies and their relationship with gender. Then I use my course assignment to illustrate how in teaching practice we can cultivate students' genre-gender awareness and prompt them to change their experience of mass media into radical knowledge about social norms. By radical knowledge, I mean a critical insight into the underlying assumptions, structures, and power dynamics that shape how established knowledge is produced, validated, and disseminated. Students' parodic work produces such knowledge that exposes and deconstructs the power relationship underlying cultural representations of gender roles.

Genre Studies and Gender Issues: Not Merely Academic Topics

Genre in literary and cultural studies focuses on whether a text belongs to a given genre, how the genre comes into being, and why a genre is of importance to a certain community or situation. Jonathan Crimmins (2009) points out that there are usually two major schools of genre studies—the school of formalism and narratology that focuses on the formal, stylistic features of texts, and the school of speech act and rhetoric that regards genres as social practices in a specific historical and cultural context (p. 45). In "The Law of Genre" (1980), Jacques Derrida suggests the inseparableness of these two schools by tracing the semantic root of genre to

gender. While gender could be seen as an alternative genre that classifies individuals, genre comes into being as a body that is engendered, changed, and marked through interacting with, or in Derrida's words, "coupling" with other bodies (in this case, with other texts, types, or genres) (p. 75). Derrida's connection of genre with gendered bodies stresses not merely the historical development or changes of a given genre but also the connection of one genre with others in different contexts.

Derrida's idea broadens genre studies beyond academic discussion of literary and artistic categories towards social and discursive practices that reflect cultural rationality through classification, description, and definition. Genre is not merely an academic topic but a social act that connects people and establishes discursive norms. They are both repetitive performances that reflect cultural norms, establish social realities, and gather people into distinct groups. Amy Dewitt (2004) argues that "genres have the power to help or hurt human interaction, to ease communication or to deceive, to enable someone to speak or to discourage someone from saying something different" (p. 1). One can advocate for gender equality through changing the visual design of a lipstick commercial or learn about women's rights through a TED talk on YouTube. However, in the process of producing or consuming information through a specific genre, we have to be wary of latent sexism and hidden biases. Rosalind Gill (2007) warns us that while "feminist ideas are increasingly taken for granted across a range of media and genres," sadly "boring and predictable patterns of sexism persist…and newer representation practices are often far from hopeful" (p. 7).

For instance, today's romantic movies, like *The Idea of You* (2024), appear to represent women's experience but fail to expose and criticize gender stereotypes. The protagonist Solène (played by Anne Hathaway), a divorced woman with a teenage daughter, starts a secret romance with a band's lead singer, Hayes (played by Nicholas Galitzine), who is 16 years her junior. Solène seems to have more self-agency over her relationship with him. Nevertheless, she has very little of her own life except dealing with her ex-husband and secretly developing the love affair with Hayes. The scene where Solène feels embarrassed about her own body in front of younger women at the swimming pool still pits women against one another, as she becomes the object of ridicule for her age and for having a teenage daughter (Showalter, 2024, 01:58:52). The film editing constantly juxtaposes Hayes' concert tours with his intimate moments with Solène as

if these are the only measurement of women's value, i.e. she becomes an attachment to his professional achievements. While the film claims to represent a new type of romance, its storytelling and technical design reinforce the stereotypical imagination of a forty-year-old woman, who needs a younger, attractive man to prove her value. The promised critique of conventional gendered roles becomes a mere token or rather a superficial selling point for the film.

Along with such tokenistic representation of women's experience comes a tendency to completely reject cultural products that may have expressed misogynist ideas explicitly or implicitly. In his New Yorker article "The End of the English Major", Nathan Heller (2023) associates this tendency with tokenism as he refers to a Harvard literature professor's comment:

> It had become more publicly rewarding for students to critique something as 'problematic' than to grapple with what the problems might be; they seemed to have found that merely naming concerns had more value, in today's cultural marketplace, than curiosity about what underlay them.

Students make hasty decisions to dismiss cultural products with problematic ideologies without sufficient knowledge about their historical circumstances and their effects on different reader communities. The Petrarchan sonnet, for instance, used to be regarded as a male-dominant genre, as it usually presents heterosexual love as both a trope and a structuring principle to explore a modern selfhood that is in constant conflict with social obligations. Through uttering and sublimating a desire for an unapproachable, silent female figure, the usually male-identified speaker acquires an autonomous individuality. Nevertheless, female poets, such as Christina Rossetti and Edna St. Vincent Millay, appropriated the patriarchal structure of desire to embody women's experience and to expose the underlying gender ideologies. While their parody of the male-identified speaker unsettles the gender norms in both literary and social practices, the formal regularity of a sonnet helps them embody social and aesthetic restraints imposed on the female body and mind. If one dismisses these women's works as merely repetitive of misogynist traditions, one ignores their contribution to the sonnet genre and overlooks their attempt to participate in social reforms of gender relationships.

In today's world when both mass media genres and gender concepts experience important changes, we are expected to examine such changes more closely and more critically. While newly developed genres such as romance films can still be prob-

lematic in their gender representation, a time-honoured genre like the sonnet can be used to provoke social reform and reflect historical circumstances. Carolyn Miller (1984) argues that

> As a recurrent, significant action, a genre embodies an aspect of cultural rationality. For the critic, genres can serve both as an index to cultural patterns and as tools for exploring the achievements of particular speakers and writers; for the student, genres serve as keys to understanding how to participate in the actions of a community (p. 165).

To study the relationship between gender and genre is to fulfill one goal of a liberal arts education: i.e. to turn students into critical readers of their culture and, consequently, responsible participants in their society.

Genre Parody: A Case Study

To teach students how to think critically about the relationship between genre and gender, I have found one course assignment particularly useful—parodic adaptation. Parodic recreation prompts students to engage closely with a variety of genres across media and forms. In her brilliant study of parodic arts, Linda Hutcheon (2000) argues for the doubleness and neutral definition of parody: "There is nothing in parodia that necessitates the inclusion of a concept of ridicule, as there is, for instance, in the joke or burla of burlesque. Parody, then, in its ironic 'trans-contextualization' and inversion, is repetition with difference" (p. 32). Parody both respects and plays with established traditions and norms. In the process of parodying a given genre in a specific form, students would be motivated to critically study cultural traditions carried by a certain genre so that they can generate something new and insightful out of the old forms. This practice also renders historical biases and cultural limitations more tangible to students when they acquire a first-hand experience of revising old rules or recreating established forms.

I draw upon my 2022 advanced writing course Gender, Race, and Media at Emory University in the US as an example to demonstrate the effects of genre parody in teaching gender issues and knowledge transformation. This course was funded by the Mellon Humanities Pathway program. My class consisted of students from different disciplines, ranging from film studies to business and computer science. Students also came from different social and ethnic backgrounds, including Chinese, Indians, South Koreans, Canadians, Palestinian British, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Caribbean Americans. It was indeed a global classroom made up of diverse

cultural traditions and inviting the exploration of complex social identity issues. To accommodate the diverse student body and make my class more engaging, I developed the assignment, "Genre Parody." As my course focused on the intersection between mass media and social identities, students were asked to closely analyze the content, form, production, audience, and even social, technological, or cultural context of a mass media genre. Then they would re-create a similar product in a parodic way and write a short reflective essay explaining their design. The goal of this assignment was to both cultivate students' rhetorical awareness of writing for a wider audience and lead them to think critically about the role of mass media in constructing or deconstructing social identities in daily life.

To facilitate students' understanding of genre parody and social identities, I led them to discuss the concept of parodic performance as a theoretical guidance for their assignment. We discussed excerpts from Judith Butler's *Gender trouble* (1990) and Jack Halberstam's *The queer art of failure* (2011). Butler's idea of parodic repetition serves as a theoretical framework for our parody assignment and asserts the power of parody to destabilize socially-constructed identities. Halberstam, on the other hand, shows methods of interpreting works that parodically criticize the heteronormative-capitalist concepts of success, progress, and productivity. More importantly, Halberstam (2011) promotes an interdisciplinary or rather "undisciplined" way of conducting literary and cultural analyses—a way that critiques "the intuitive connections within capitalism between success and profit" (p.12). Both scholars' theories broadened students' vision of liberal arts studies as they demonstrate that parodic or deliberately failed productions could also do valuable, revolutionary, or revisionist cultural work.

Though this parody assignment was popular with students, some of them expressed concerns or doubts about its outcomes. They wrote in their assignment proposals that parody might be "offensive" and "meaningless" when it comes to complex identity issues. Some wanted to play it safe and would not touch upon gender or race problems in their parodies. To help those students better understand the meaningfulness of parody, I led them to share their purposes of parodic design in the peer review session. We also read excerpts from Sara Ahmed's *Queer phenomenology* (2006) so that students could see the paradoxical nature of parody—it is not entirely disrespectful to the parodied work. Instead, it diversifies, examines, and revises established forms that have been repetitively engraved in our mind. To parody is not to betray but to reorient ourselves; indeed,

Ahmed (2006) defines orientation as "line alignment" and body extension, which derives from repetitious movements (p. 58). Genre, like gender, is not a static, fixed term but a repeated performance "gathering together various conventions that mark out and constrain the reader's interpretive decisions and allow the reader to perceive the object to which a genre supposedly refers" (Allen & Felluga 2024, p. 124). Genres draw people together into a specific community and reflect cultural norms. Parody reveals the repetitive nature of the norms we have been trained to follow and offers us an opportunity to try something different. It also calls for a collaboration between creators and audience, who are brought into an active engagement with the parodic work. Parody liberates and reorients people's imagination so that they can start rethinking and recreating their ways of living in the world.

I would like to share two students' parody works on gender issues so as to illustrate the reorienting effects. I want to first declare that I have got permission from these two students to use their works in my teaching and research. Also their works have been published on their WordPress pages. One is from a Korean American student—Sharon Mun, who made an online game based on popular Korean romance dramas. In this role-choice game, the player is asked to choose a female character and develop her story through making choices at critical moments (https://view.genial.ly/6372a2de8556690017dd91ec). The ending, as Mun designs, would always be the same: women will always encounter demanding mothers-in-law and end up getting married to the same type of a guy. In Mun's parodic game, those seemingly brave, independent, and smart female protagonists still rely on a rich, good-looking, and usually powerful man for success. Her work emphasizes the gender stereotypes in Korea, or rather, in most of the male-dominant societies that still see women as dependent on their male counterparts. Mun demonstrates her creativity and meanwhile admits in her reflective essay that her design could have been more inclusive or subtle, as not all video games have to do with romance storylines, and not all relationships have to end up happily forever.

Nevertheless, I would argue that Mun makes a great point through her exclusive choice of female roles in this game and her exaggeration of the gender stereotypes. In her reflective essay, Mun (2022) states: "By utilizing this parody and exaggerating the inequality in gender representation within the Korean film industry, my hope is to be able to bring this issue to the attention of viewers across the world." (p. 4). Through parodic exaggeration and simplification

of the plot pattern, she reveals the scripted gender roles not merely in romance dramas but also perhaps hidden in the mind of creators of such TV shows. Mun's peer review group members expressed their appreciation of the interactive nature of her parody, which allowed them to have a first-hand experience of such limited storylines and provided an alternative perspective of stereotypical portraits of gender relationships. Through repeating the same plotline, especially the ending, Mun leads readers or players in this case to feel the repressive and constraining effects of such popular cultural products. She made smart use of the multimedia, interactive form so as to fully engage and provoke her readers' thinking.

The other example is from an American student Trey Rielly, who applies his athletic expertise to this project. He parodied sports news post on Instagram through pastiching a news report from ESPN on the NBA player Lebron James (Figure 1). In this ironic, "fake news" post, James is with his children. Beneath the family photo, there is a short comment: he needs a break to take care of his family while his wife focuses on her career. Inspired by Butler's gender performance theory, Rielly switched the gender roles that are emphasized by sports news, especially news on hypermasculine, heteronormative games like the NBA, and exposed the implicit sexism in such media representations that diminish female athletes' professional competence. In his reflective essay, Rielly (2022) does a brilliant job explaining his design and analyzing the gender politics underneath the news report genre:

> Generally, you don't see male athletes being covered as fathers or caretakers. However, it is not surprising to see females characterized in this way—media headlines constantly degrade females' athletic ability and performance by focusing on their feminine and maternal aspects instead. The sports world regularly depicts women athletes as women first, referencing age, appearance, or family life, and then as athletes. Lebron James, on the other hand, is almost always cast as being a dominant, inspiring athlete and then a family man. (p. 1)

Through a parodic recreation of sports news posts, Rielly manages to critique sports media discourses that subtly trivialize women's professional role and implicitly perpetuate the gender inequality in sports. Rielly also successfully incorporated his own professional interest into his learning in this class. It is through reversing the repeated visual and verbal representation of female athletes that he

generates new knowledge for the audience about gender issues in sports news.

Figure 1

The Parody of Instagram Sports News Post, by Trey Rielly, November 2022.

Conclusion: What Does Liberal Arts Education Do?

The success of my students' parodic work in turn has boosted my confidence in what liberal arts education can do: their work demonstrates its capacity to generate new, radical knowledge about the world, its potential to improve both individual lives and social circumstances, and its possibility to counter the problems facing us—climate change, social injustice, and the threat of artificial intelligence. In a *New Yorker* article (2024), the American writer Ted Chiang emphasizes human creativity in any art creations, including writing. Chiang points out that "art requires making choices at every scale; the countless small-scale choices made during implementation are just as important to the final product". In such a process of choosing, creators make something new, as he argues

> What you create doesn't have to be utterly unlike every prior piece of art in human history to be valuable; the fact that you're the one who is saying it, the fact that it derives from your unique life experience and arrives at a particular moment in the life of whoever is seeing your work, is what makes it new. We are all products of what has come before us, but it's by living our lives in interaction with others that we bring meaning into the world.

In other words, it is repetitions with deliberately chosen differences that make meaningful artworks and more importantly, continue making sense of human life. That is the aim of liberal arts education: to transform one's experience—both one's

own lived experience and one's experience of others' creative works—into new, instructive knowledge which in turn would connect one to the larger community and to the entirety of human history. This knowledge transformation cannot be and will not be replaced by emerging AI software that by its very nature cannot make moral, humanistic choices in communicating information or detect complicated ideologies underneath any artistic or social practice.

The parodic assignment in my course can be seen as a way to create new forms of knowledge and to bring about new meaning into students' everyday experience of the world. I want to end my article with excerpts from an email from one student in my Gender, Race, and Media class:

> I just wanted to thank you for an amazing semester! I truly enjoyed this course and the information and writing experience I gained cannot attribute to anyone else. This is why I came to Emory, for liberal arts courses like yours. You really made me think outside the box, and take an analytical angle to my writing, especially in such salient topics like race, media, and gender.

Liberal arts education is not merely about learning the past cultural traditions but also about liberating us from what William Blake calls the "mind-forged manacles", i.e. our biases, limitations, and narrow-minded understanding of the world. It is to make us into truly liberal thinkers and better human beings.

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