

Camp and Burlesque: A Study in Contrasts

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The more things change, the more they stay the same. Two decades ago, Susan Sontag wrote an important essay in which she tried to give definition to a phenomenon which she found “named but never before described”: “the sensibility . . . that goes by the cult name of ‘Camp’ ” (275). Since then there has been much discussion of “camp” objects, and the word has passed into common parlance, but the precise meaning of camp still remains elusive. In a recent book, *Camp: The Lie That Tells the Truth*, Philip Core spends two hundred pages cataloguing people and things he considers “camp,” but aside from his cryptic title—drawn from a list of random and equally cryptic aphorisms he calls “Camp Rules” (“Camp is character limited to context”; “Camp is an ephemeral fundamental”; “Camp is gender without genitals” [7])—Core never effectively defines camp or adds to our understanding of what makes something camp. Indeed, the most interesting use he makes of the word in the introduction to his book lies in his references to “the camp,” meaning informed cogniscenti who are aware of the “in” joke, which tends to imply that he uses *camp* as if it were a synonym for *cult*, in both its nominative and adjectival senses.

In the theatre, we use the term *camp* with some frequency. Charles Busch’s current off-Broadway hit, *The Vampire Lesbians of Sodom*, is described as an exercise in camp, as if the term were self-explanatory. A particular production or aspect of a production is described as “campy.” But the specific meaning of such descriptions is not always clear, since some critics use the term *camp* affectionately, while others use it as a pejorative. Does one “sink to the level of camp,” or does one rather achieve a “wonderfully campy style”?

It is not my purpose in this paper to attempt a new definition of camp, but I will attempt to bring a new perspective to the question of camp in theatrical production by comparing camp, in its various manifestations, to another form

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of theatrical mockery, burlesque, and so to define at least the difference between a camp treatment and a burlesque treatment.

The nature of burlesque—in the classic sense—is generally agreed upon. *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* describes it as “a literary or dramatic work that seeks to ridicule by means of grotesque exaggeration or comic imitation,” while the unabridged *Random House Dictionary* declares it “an artistic composition . . . which, for the sake of laughter, vulgarizes lofty material or treats ordinary material with mock dignity.” This sort of burlesque has been popular over the centuries; indeed, a good operative definition was offered by Henry Fielding in his preface to *Joseph Andrews*, wherein he describes burlesque as “what is monstrous and unnatural, and where our delight, if we examine it, arises from the surprising absurdity, as in appropriating the manners of the highest to the lowest, or *e converso*” (I:vii). The goal of burlesque is light-hearted critical laughter directed at a familiar object; its method, variously described in dictionary definitions as “ludicrous representation” and “mock exaggeration,” is generally the depiction of the familiar in an unfamiliar guise, juxtaposing the high and the low, the vulgar and the sublime, the serious and the frivolous. What was serious and pretentious is good-naturedly deflated—made ridiculous—merely “for the fun of it.”

On this level, one might be tempted to think of camp and burlesque as synonyms. There are certainly parallels suggested in the unabridged *Random House Dictionary's* definition of camp as “an ironic or amusing quality present in an extravagant gesture, style, or form, especially when inappropriate or out of proportion to the content that is expressed.” The parameters which Sontag offers for the camp sensibility similarly reflect the burlesque impulse. Early in her essay, she practically echoes Fielding's definition of burlesque when she declares that “the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration” (275) and that camp is “a sensibility that, among other things, converts the serious into the frivolous” (276). Later she expands on this aspect: “The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. More precisely, Camp involves a new, more complex relation to ‘the serious.’ One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious” (288).

Given these parallels, what then separates camp from burlesque? As Sontag makes clear in her essay, camp is, to use her term, a sensibility, a way of looking at things. To take one of her examples, a Tiffany lamp may be viewed as a camp object because its ostentation, its elaborateness—however serious the intent—outstrips its function as a lamp. Thus its “unnaturalness,” its sense of “artifice” and “exaggeration,” its degree of excess leave it open to mockery, to ridicule—albeit affectionate ridicule. “Camp,” she writes, “sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a ‘lamp’ ” (280). Anything carried to excess is liable to become camp. Thus any such example of “flamboyant femaleness” as Jayne Mansfield or any of the “great stylists of temperament and mannerism” like Tallulah Bankhead may become camp objects.

Herein lies the problem of defining camp. As it deals with a personal sensibility towards an existing object, camp (like beauty) is in the eye of the beholder. The “ironic or amusing quality present in an extravagant gesture, style, or form” (to cite the dictionary definition)—as well as the “inappropriateness to the content that is expressed”—depends on one's particular

interpretation and one's peculiarities of taste; one man's camp is another man's art. The same Tiffany lamp that strikes one person as camp may strike another as a masterpiece of design. The Tallulah Bankhead mannerisms that seem to some absurd—and thus campy—may seem to others merely components of a consummate artiste.

In sum, the attribution of camp status is not creative but rather interpretive, because we are dealing with a single creative effort. For something to be camp, to be a camp object, it must be a made thing, a work of art (whether of the fine or the practical arts). Camp, as Sontag notes, does not exist in nature. "All Camp objects, and persons, contain a large element of artifice" (279). As the definition of camp implies, it is the excess of artifice, the extent to which style seems inappropriately extravagant in terms of content, that determines camp. In some cases, the excess, the extravagance, may be intentional; more typically, however, it is unintentional. To draw examples from the performing arts, *The Vampire Lesbians of Sodom* on the stage and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* on the screen are deliberately outrageous; they are instances of self-conscious camp—what Sontag calls "Camp which knows itself to be Camp" and what the dictionary definition would designate "high camp." But such hysterical propaganda melodramas of the 1930s as *Sex Madness* or *Reefer Madness* on the screen and Florence Foster Jenkins on the concert stage constitute unintentional camp, because they were motivated by an earnestness, a seriousness, a high-mindedness which simply fails, at least for most of us. But whatever the motive, each of these examples remains a specific artistic entity, proffered for an audience's interpretive judgment. While it is foolish to see self-conscious camp as anything else, any art work undertaken seriously need not necessarily be viewed as camp, no matter how absurd most of us may find it. I'm sure that even today, those suffering from venereal disease do not find *Sex Madness* campy fun and those for whom the use and abuse of marijuana is an extremely serious matter fail to see the humor most of us find in *Reefer Madness*.

This is the key issue in the determination of camp status. While the fact that one views an object as camp does not deny the seriousness behind that object, it does mean that he or she does not feel that the seriousness of the intent justifies the excess in execution. "Camp," to quote Susan Sontag once again, "is art that proposes itself too seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is 'too much'" (284). We do not condemn the things we view as camp; to condemn them would be to imply that they have a real—and probably a threatening—seriousness that would remove them from the realm of camp. Neither camp nor burlesque deals in moral or ethical questions. Indeed, Victor Clinton-Baddeley's claim that burlesque avoids the righteous anger of satire might as easily apply to camp. Burlesque, writes Clinton-Baddeley:

is never angry, because its criticism is directed not against faults of virtue, but against faults of style and humour. It wants to destroy nothing—not even sententiousness, its dearest enemy; for if sententiousness were dead there would be one less joke in the world to laugh at. . . . Satire is the schoolmaster attacking dishonesty with a whip. Burlesque is the rude boy attacking pomposity with a pea-shooter. . . .

[Burlesque] shows the world, not how contemptible it is, but how funny. Satire must laugh not to weep. Burlesque must laugh not to burst—and best of all it likes to laugh among friends, for burlesque finds laughter not in the object of its hatred but rather in the objects of its affection. (1-2)

Camp, too, finds laughter in the objects “not of its hatred . . . but rather of its affection.” The laughter of camp, like that of burlesque, is good-natured. We laugh at the things we view as camp because we are amused by them, because we find them silly, not objectionable.

But as we cannot view as camp an object or a personality which we find seriously objectionable, neither can we view as camp an object or a personality for which we have serious reverence. This is a major point of contrast between camp and burlesque. Because a burlesque of an existing play (or novel or film or opera or whatever) is a separate, albeit parasitic work, it stands apart from the object of its laughter and thus can be considered and evaluated without passing judgment on the original. Burlesque is, as its definitions declare, “a literary or dramatic work,” “an artistic composition” in its own right, and while one may argue that it is a good or a bad burlesque, one cannot argue whether it is or is not a burlesque, as one can argue whether something is or is not camp.

This point becomes clear if we submit the words to a syntactical test. When used as a noun or adjective, burlesque does not easily operate without an object. If we say, “This is a burlesque,” the statement begs the question, “A burlesque of what?” The same situation applies when we use the word as an adjective—“a burlesque treatment of what?” Burlesque in its classic sense always relates to some other object, from which it is a separate entity. It may be a burlesque of a particular work of art (a specific play, say, or film) or of an entire genre (such as melodrama or grand opera), but it remains a thing apart, an intentionally extravagant and silly bastardization of the original, depending for much of its humor on a familiarity with the original, the better to appreciate the humor of the comic distortion.

When camp is used as a noun or an adjective, however, it rarely tolerates an object. When something is designated as camp, no one asks “A camp of what?”; the very phrase is absurd. Similarly, the notion of camp as an adjective (except in such terms as “a camp object”) is somewhat absurd, because when we say that something is camp, we mean it in the appositive rather than the adjectival sense. One doesn’t refer to a camp Tiffany lamp or a camp Tallulah Bankhead; either we see the lamp or Miss Bankhead as camp or we don’t. Camp does not exist apart from the object to which the term is applied; it is merely, to use Sontag’s word, a “sensibility,” not an independent entity.

The distinction becomes blurred only when we use camp in what Sontag terms “the vulgar use of the word” (281)—as a verb—and then only when we use it as a transitive verb. The distinction between camp and burlesque remains clear when we consider the use of the words as intransitive verbs. One cannot burlesque in the intransitive; if one were to announce “I am burlesquing,” we would immediately ask, “Burlesquing what?” As we have noted, burlesque requires an object, and intransitive verbs do not take an

object. But one *can* say, in the intransitive sense, "I am camping," which simply means behaving outrageously. Camping, in the intransitive sense, is the sort of behavior that marks self-conscious camp (or "high camp")—from the stereotypical drag queen to *The Vampire Lesbians of Sodom*—and while Sontag finds it "usually less satisfying" (282) than unintentional camp, it is nonetheless an appropriate manifestation of camp, because it has no object beyond its own outrageousness, its own overbearing artificiality.

When camp assumes the dimensions of a transitive verb, however—when we speak of camping *something*—it surpasses the bounds of true camp and invades the province of burlesque. To camp in this sense is to impose something on an original—or, in the words of the unabridged *Random House Dictionary*, "to perform or imbue (something) with an ostentatious, affected, or heavily ornate manner." To camp in this sense is not merely to interpret something as camp, but to alter it so that it conforms only to the camp interpretation, so that it is no longer open to serious interpretation. It then becomes not camp, but *camped*, made camp whether it might be so viewed or not in its original form. It is an act of mocking distortion, which robs its object of any pretense to seriousness or dignity which it might originally have had.

Such camping is of especial concern to those of us in the performing arts, for one clearly can camp only in performance. One cannot camp a Tiffany lamp, for instance; that could be done only by making an outrageous version of a Tiffany lamp, a caricature—which would then be a burlesque version, because it would exist alongside the original lamp, which would remain unchanged. One might enjoy, be amused by the caricature, yet still view the original as a masterpiece. The same applies to any work which remains solely on the printed page, such as a novel or a poem; these can be burlesqued or parodied or travestied (caricature, parody and travesty are frequently listed as synonyms for burlesque), but they cannot be *camped*. Camping a play or an opera—intentionally performing the actual play or opera in an outrageous, inappropriate manner—supplants the original in a manner wholly inappropriate to burlesque.

It might seem at first glance that camping in this sense merely constitutes a sort of poor man's version of burlesque, since like burlesque it mocks the original by rendering it absurd. Indeed, such confusion has been promulgated with some frequency; in his collection of synopses of American plays, for instance, John Lovell, Jr., informed his readers that *The Drunkard*, that old temperance melodrama from the 1840s, has in recent years been "replayed as *burlesque* melodrama to audiences who found its original purpose most laughable" (56, my italics). But burlesque, we must bear in mind, is "an artistic composition" in its own right, even though it is dependent upon a familiar original. It does not rob the original of its dignity, because it exists apart from the original, and what indignity it generates is ultimately its own. Burlesque is an act of creation; it pays its original a compliment in acknowledging it worthy of the effort to burlesque it, if only in suggesting that it is sufficiently familiar to support burlesquing.

Camping an existing work is, on the other hand, an act of destruction, because instead of creating a parallel tangible artistic work, it alters the form and denies the integrity of the original. Let us take as an example that old

chestnut of a spectral melodrama, the Balderstone/Deane *Dracula*. It was written with the object of sincerely terrifying its audience—with comedy relegated to a few scenes between the servants—and on the whole, it certainly seems to have succeeded, both in its stage version and in its subsequent incarnation on film. Time and taste, however, have evolved since the play's composition, so that there are now many who find its melodramatic excesses and its somewhat tortuous convolutions unbelievably artificial. For such people, the play and/or film have become, *tout à fait*, camp. The film is still widely seen, and there are some who look on it as camp and others who view it as a serious cinematic classic. The same holds true for the play in its written text; whether or not it is a camp object is open to interpretation. Existing alongside the original play and film are several spoofs of the *Dracula* story, of which Ted Tiller's *Count Dracula*, Rick Abbot's *Dracula: The Musical?*, and the film *Love at First Bite* may serve as recent examples. The spoofs are, of course, meant to be played for laughs; they are, after all, burlesques, which do not reflect on the quality or seriousness of the original *Dracula* and which do not constitute camp (unless self-conscious camp) because they were not conceived with any serious intent. But not infrequently, producing organizations ignore the burlesques of *Dracula* and choose to *camp* the original play with the aim of arousing laughter rather than chills by emphasizing its old-fashioned artificialities so as to force them into prominence. Rather than offering a burlesque which would allow the original to retain its dignity, they are offering neither the original in its own right nor a legitimate burlesque, but rather an irreverent convolution of that original which assumes that the camp vision of the play is the only one which the audience need see. They are doing to *Dracula* what Prof. Lovell said that modern companies have done to *The Drunkard*—attempting to “replay” it in a “burlesque” version—but as the original text is being used, it is *not* burlesque, but rather an exercise in camping, in which the serious original is lost. One cannot “replay” an original as burlesque; one can only camp it. The movie version of the original *Dracula*, on the other hand, retains its serious intent, and so we, the audience, are permitted the opportunity to be thrilled or amused by it as our particular sensibilities dictate. It might be burlesqued in another film, or it might be *considered* camp, but it cannot be *camped*.

Is there something inherently *wrong* with camping a preexisting work? That too is probably a matter of taste. It is as presumptuous to damn the enjoyment that some take in camping the artistic efforts of others as it is to determine that a serious work should be presented disrespectfully rather than letting it stand on its own merits. The former, I suppose, smacks as much of critical snobbery as the latter does of artistic narcissism. Actually, the only *harm* that such camping does is in robbing an audience of the opportunity to judge for itself the quality of an unfamiliar work. And in fairness, it must be admitted that one could also argue that if the producing agency were to abjure camping the work, and were to try to present the work with a serious intent to do it justice, but then did it badly, the production would have avoided camping, but would become—camp.

Despite a personal antipathy towards camping (in the transitive sense), my ultimate aim in this article is not to place a value judgment on camping as a

production approach. But I have tried to establish the distinction between burlesque on the one hand and camp—and especially *camping*—on the other. Burlesque and camp are essentially quite different from one another. Burlesque is an artistic *treatment* of a preexisting work of art; it mocks its object, but it stands apart from it, and its mockery is not judgmental. When Carol Burnett offers a ludicrous twenty-minute condensation of *Gone with the Wind* on her television show, she is not impugning the dignity of the classic film, but rather creating an independent burlesque skit which rises and falls on its own merits; the fact that the skit is not remotely serious does not in any way affect the seriousness with which she may view the original. Camp, on the other hand, is an artistic *perception*, a “sensibility” as Sontag would have it, which neither creates an independent work nor transforms its object. Only when camp takes on the sense of a transitive verb does it intrude into the creative process, and then it does not truly create, but rather demeans; it becomes destructive rather than creative. Camp is not, generally speaking, an art; it is a way of seeing art. Burlesque *is* an art, albeit a minor and parasitic one. But burlesque is a parasite that draws life from its host without harming it; when camp becomes a parasite, it saps the very lifeblood of its object.

Several years before Susan Sontag wrote her essay on camp, James Sutherland, in his book *English Satire*, sought to demean burlesque, which he found trivial in comparison with satire. To illustrate his conception of burlesque, he offered the following expression of the burlesque writer’s art:

When we meet with a poster in a London Underground station in which a moustache has been added to the face of some brightly smiling girl, we have the same sort of mentality at work. . . . (43)

I hope that in light of the arguments offered in this paper, the reader will recognize that the poster with the moustache scrawled on it is not an example of burlesque, for it is not an independent artistic effort existing apart from its original. It is not camp, because it is not merely a perception of the poster, but rather an alteration of the original work of art in order to express a single, mocking point of view. The impulse which caused the moustache to be drawn is essentially destructive rather than creative. It does not really reflect a sensibility, because it has altered the object of its attention rather than merely appraising it. It is defacement—and if it is to be seen as representative of any of the phenomena discussed in this paper, it relates most closely to the process not whereby an original is burlesqued, but whereby it is *camped*.

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