Parody and the Popular Cultural Memory in Hellboy
The narrative and mnemonic function of parodied folklore and canonical literature in Mike Mignola’s comics.

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1. Introduction

Comics can tell the weirdest stories. The artists and writers almost always manage to exceed even the wildest expectations with their unending creativity and unbridled imagination. The medium is filled with strange aliens, friendly monsters, interdimensional time travelers, mutants fighting for civil liberties, genetically engineered human weapons, an inconceivable number of gods, a suspiciously large amount of clones, and to top it all off, an immense population of fantastical creatures and wondrous superheroes. Even in such a varied and diverse medium, Mike Mignola’s *Hellboy* stands out as one of the more peculiar series. The series centers around Hellboy, a heroic red demon who fights a variety of monsters. Hellboy made his official debut in 1994 with the miniseries *Seed of Destruction* and the launch was a success. According to the *Encyclopedia of Comic Books and Graphic Novels*, readers were instantly drawn to Mignola’s Lovecraftian tale that combined horror story aesthetics with superhero action and a loyal fanbase was formed (Graham 281). Now, almost 25 years and well over 500 comics later, the *Hellboy* brand is still going strong.

It is not easy to give a straightforward description of Mignola’s signature creation. The *Hellboy* series is a heterogeneous collection of stories. Most of the comics are connected in one way or another but they still remain very distinct from each other. The result is that the tone of the series can vary greatly from issue to issue. The stories can be humorous, melancholic, mysterious, tragic, playful, ominous, irreverent or a mixture of all these elements. The series’s protagonist was born in hell as the son of a mighty demon and a witch. Soon after his birth he was summoned to earth by mysterious forces. He was found by professor Bruttenholm, who raised the young demon as a son. In the following years, Hellboy grew up in a branch of the American military that deals with supernatural threats. He was trained to fight monsters, evildoers and other horrors from a variety of cultures. This is why he is commonly regarded as a superhero. Despite his demonic appearance, he does his best to fight on the side of good as the world’s greatest paranormal detective. Unfortunately for him, Hellboy also happens to be the beast of the apocalypse and is destined to be a key player in the end of the world. This fate hangs over his head like a sword of Damocles until it ultimately becomes too urgent to ignore. Consequently, the *Hellboy* comics are very different from most superhero adventures. The series also seems to have a deep affinity for the horror genre. It contains elements from many horror subgenres: Lovecraftian, pulp, gothic,
supernatural, psychological,… The result is an odd but fascinating mix of horror, fantasy and superhero action.

Hellboy is one of the few recent comic book characters that has managed to gain recognition in the wider popular consciousness. It is easy to forget that the superheroes who are currently dominating the movie box office almost all date back to the Golden and Silver Age of Comic Books. This means that most of those superheroes have been conceived over 50 years ago: Iron man, Black Panther, Batman, Avengers, Suicide Squad… In other words, they partly owe their continued popularity to a time when the medium was one of the pillars of mass media. Since then the comic book market has drastically declined and it is a rare occurrence that a new character gains wider popularity beyond the medium itself.¹ The Hellboy comics have been adapted into two animated movies, two live action movies and a new movie is currently in development. In addition, there are several Hellboy video games and one of the demon’s latest adventures (Return of the Lambton Worm) was even published in Playboy magazine. Hellboy must have a particular appeal to modern audiences.

Perhaps part of Hellboy’s appeal is the rich intertextuality of the comics. Bukatman notes that Hellboy and its spin-off series “form a deeply intertextual enterprise that incorporates a broad range of literary, visual, and cinematic influences, including classic horror fiction, war films, folklore, monster movies, other comics, and even Mexican luchadores” (9). Mignola’s influences are almost innumerable and many of the comics are filled with references to stories from all over the world. It even goes far beyond mere references, as issues openly or more covertly adapt entire parts of well-known and lesser-known stories. Bukatman points out that it is Hellboy’s task “to enter other narratives and reanimate them” (148). According to him, Hellboy becomes the vehicle of a translation from prose or oral tradition to the animated and animating imaginative space of the comic (148). The series seems to have a deep affinity for the art of the past, incorporating imagery and stories from various cultural memories and giving them a new life in the comics medium. But this aspect of the comics has not yet been fully explored.

¹ A couple of the very few other comic book characters who have perhaps managed to do this are the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (1984), The Watchmen (1986) and Todd McFarlane’s Spawn (1992).
between the comics and the movies is big enough that one is not necessarily representative of the other. The comics themselves have also been proven to be a fertile ground for research. Ahmed has examined *Hellboy* to investigate “notions of identity, integration and State security in the American context” (“State Protection” 2). Furthermore, Ahmed and Lund have used the series as an example of how the traditional evil imagery of the antichrist is neutralized in contemporary comic adaptations (“Apocalypse Why?” 1-7). Perhaps the most comprehensive research on Mignola’s signature creation is Bukatman’s *Hellboy’s World Comics and Monsters on the Margin*. His book covers many aspects of Mignola’s work, but it does not extensively focus on the intertextual nature of the series. The most exhaustive overview of the Mignola’s intertextual tendencies can be found in the *Hellboy Companion*, which has an entire chapter dedicated to the literary heritage of the comics. But the *Companion* is strictly speaking not an academic work and only discusses Mignola’s influences in a general sense.

There is one specific area of *Hellboy*’s intertextual network that has received some in-depth academic attention: folklore. Sommers has thoroughly examined the representation of the Melungeon Witches in the series. In his study “Crooked Apalachia” he explores the historical roots of the Melungeon people and their unfair imagery as evil witches in folklore. Sommers argues throughout his article that the *Hellboy* comics liberate the Melungeon “witches” from their unjustified historical representations through Bakhtinian laughter (214-241). Furthermore, O’Connor has examined how an old Irish folktale was adapted in the *Hellboy* comics and how imagery of that tale featured in one of the movies (“The Corpse on Hellboy’s back” 540-563). Devos similarly examines the series’s treatment of the old Irish tale in her article “Storytelling and Folktales: A Graphic Exploration”. But these are only two examples of Mignola’s use of folklore and much of *Hellboy*’s deeply intertextual universe has not yet been examined. This thesis seeks to further explore how the comics engage with a vast amount of stories and texts from cultural memories of different communities. There are many ways in which intertextuality plays a role in the series, but this paper will be limited to one specific way Mignola often threatens his influences: parody.

Sommers notes that “Mignola’s *Hellboy* is couched in a sort of parodic discourse, both valorizing and quietly mocking, of the narratives that inspired it” (224). But this aspect of the comics can be somewhat hard to pinpoint. In his introduction of the first volume of *Hellboy*, Bloch describes the series as having a “sometimes deliberately satirized awareness
of classic modes and content” (Seed of Destruction “Introduction”). Ahmed and Lund have linked the neutralization of the antichrist motive in the comics to Hutcheon’s notion of parody (“Apocalypse Why?” 2). But perhaps Hutcheon’s theory can be extended to Mignola’s use of stories and works of art from the past. In A Theory of Parody, Hutcheon states that the ubiquity of parody in all the arts of this century compelled her to reconsider its nature and its function (1). In her reconsideration of contemporary parody, she postulates that the word no longer just refers to the short satirical jibes of the nineteenth century, but instead refers to familiar extended ironic structures that replay and recontextualize previous works of art (xii). She broadens the scope of parody beyond mere mockery or contempt and defines it as “a form of repetition with ironic critical distance, marking difference rather than similarity” (xii). This approach to parody seems to be very suitable for the Hellboy comics, as Hutcheon’s more nuanced views on parody make it possible to examine the series’s peculiar treatment of its sources without reducing it to mockery.

1.1 Research question

The aim of this paper is to further explore Hellboy’s parodic engagement with stories from the cultural memory and to determine the function of that parody. More specifically, this thesis will focus on the narrative and mnemonic function of parody in the series. For this investigation two large areas from the cultural memory have been selected: folklore and canonical literature.

The link between Hellboy and Hutcheon’s definition of parody does merit further exploration. In A Theory of Parody, Hutcheon states that parody is omnipresent in the art of the late 20th century (29). Even though she provides many examples from written as well as visual art to support this statement, she barely mentions comics. This is not a criticism of Hutcheon’s book, as it was never meant to be an overview of parody in each and every medium. But comics have a long history of being marginalized. Ndalianis summarizes the situation of the medium as follows: “Despite its immense popularity, the public perception for a long time was that comics were a kid's medium -or, more specifically, a young boy's medium. As such, it was generally perceived (in higher circles, of course) as the lowliest of popular culture media” (113). These prejudices still persist to this day. Groensteen notes that legitimizing authorities still regularly charge the medium with being infantile, vulgar, or insignificant (34). However, Ndalianis points out that comic book culture has been on the rise
within the mainstream and within the academy since the late 1980s (114). Nevertheless, the result of that long marginalization is that there are still relatively few comics studies, at least in comparison to other mediums. If it is true that we live in a “pervasively parodic culture” (Hutcheon Theory of Parody xiii), it makes sense to give comic books sincere attention as part of that culture. The Hellboy comics can be a great representative case study, because intertextuality is one of their defining features and because there have been indications that they have an inclination towards parody.

Hutcheon’s theory has previously been used to argue that the comics medium itself seems to have an inherent structural parody. Frahm suggests that “comics parody the very notion of an original and therefore something preceding ‘beyond the signs’” (179). In his view comics are “a parody on the referentiality of signs” (179). The general idea is that the medium is full of repetitions such as panels and the characters in them. Frahm points out that there is a heterogeneous ambivalence in those repetitions: a character can be repeated across panels in slightly different ways, but it is still remains the same character (189). In other words, there is no original of the character, he is continually reconstructed. Frahm further clarifies this by noting: “the parody of comics […] is to be found in the constellation of, on the one hand, the stabilizing of a common object of reference of the signs and, on the other hand, its destabilising character because of the material heterogeneousness of the signs”(189). He adds that “there are no comics without structural parody”(181). However, it should be noted that this sort of structural parody seems different from the parody described in this thesis. The former seems to be an internal characteristic of a comic, while the latter deals specifically with the parodic intertextual relations between texts or works of art.

Hellboy is far from the only series that seems to comply with Hutcheon’s ideas on parody. There is a ubiquity of other comics which ironically engage with story traditions and the works of other artists. The tendency towards parodistic intertextuality in comics seems remarkably common towards the end of 20th century and in the beginning of the 21st. It is a noticeable feature in the works of comic book industry legend Alan Moore, who rose to prominence in the mid-eighties. Di Liddo notes that the presence of intertextuality in his works can come in various forms, including parody (35). When Di Liddo discusses Moore’s use of a Shakespeare quote in V for Vendetta, she writes: “It is impossible not to perceive a touch of irony—if not outright parody—in the choice of this quotation” (38). Her analysis may not specifically use Hutcheon’s definition, but it does illustrate that Moore often treats
sources with a sort of ironic awareness. This ironic intertextuality is also a defining characteristic of DC’s Vertigo imprint. Dony notes that Vertigo’s use of intertexts is “an ironic and indeed postmodern move as the label not only adapts and rewrites allegedly “popular” texts, but also constantly refers to and/or engages with more “classical” or “canonical” stories and myths – works of fictions which, needless to say, are generally considered to be part of a so-called “higher” culture” (20).

It is not hard to find examples of well-regarded series who repeat and imitate stories and art of the past while maintaining a critical distance from the original material. It is an unmistakable characteristic of *Fables* (2002), which was created by Bill Willingham and ran for 150 issues. Zolkover has noted that the series “both aligns itself to other folkloric and literary representations and stands away from them, treating the genre with a subversive, parodic laughter” (40). Harris likewise argues that Willingham is “successful in his parodic challenges of past fairy-tale narratives” (2). *Fables* interprets its own title in the broadest sense of the word and also ironically imitates books, works of art and even entire genres. Another recent series which seems highly compatible with Hutcheon’s ideas is *The Unwritten* (2009). Meyer points out that the character Mr. Bun is poking fun at all kinds of stock characters that have been created throughout literary history (287). She writes that “those parts are filled with visual and verbal cues that open up (parodistic) intertextual avenues to be discovered by the reader and thus serve as postmodern self-reflexive reminders for the reader” (Meyer 287). Furthermore, Eric Powell’s award-winning series *The Goon* (1999) regularly insults and celebrates a wide variety of art, mixing pulp with high literature. These three series all have received high critical acclaim, but similar trends are even noticeable in lesser known series.

Ralph Tedesco’s and Joe Tyler’s *Grimm Fairy tales* (2005) adapts folklore from all over the world. However, readers who expect a straightforward adaptation might be surprised by the frequent ironic twists that are given to the source material. Similarly, *Scooby Apocalypse* (2016) plays with reader expectations of Scooby Doo in a dark and humorous reimagining of the cartoon characters. The premise behind the series is that Velma accidently creates sentient nanobots in a morally questionable experiment. The nanobots promptly transform Earth in an apocalyptic planet of monsters. The comics notably recontextualize a vast amount of famous horror works. Velma quickly realizes that the newly created monsters “appear to mimic the
attitudes and abilities of classic literary and motion picture vampire—just as the creatures [...] at the complex mimicked other creatures of popular lore.” (DeMatteis et.al. *Scooby Apocalypse* 4) It is not the intention of this paper to make an exhaustive list of all series who may engage in parody, but it is useful to keep in mind that *Hellboy* might be part of a wider trend in the medium. Intertextuality has always been a famous trademark of comics as superheroes keep appearing in each other’s stories. However, the tendency to parodically engage with stories and art of the past has become very noticeable in contemporary times. A case study of *Hellboy* may be helpful to further explore this tendency.

But investigating how *Hellboy* parodically incorporates various intertexts can be a bit complicated. The comics recontextualize an enormity of different icons, stories and genres. In addition, all those elements are often fused with one another and form a dense and multifaceted mixture. It would definitely be a valid approach to focus on one specific aspect of that patchwork, but for the purpose of this thesis a wider perspective was taken in order to represent that rich network. Two large areas from a multitude of intertexts have been selected to exemplify the series’s parodic engagement with stories and texts from the cultural memory: folklore and canonical literature. Folklore is a collection of traditional stories and beliefs which are (orally or in writing) passed on from generation to generation. It is often seen as something by and from a group of people. Canonical literature is usually authorized or kept alive by a community’s institutions such as academia, media or state funded archives. In order to represent the variety of folklore that is parodied in Mignola’s comics, three stories from three different cultures have been selected as case studies. In addition, two examples of canonical literature will be used to demonstrate *Hellboy*’s engagement with this area of the cultural memory: a book (Charles Dickens) and a play (Shakespeare).

But it would be insufficient to just observe that the *Hellboy* series parodies all these stories from the past. It is necessary to also consider the functions of that parody. Throughout this thesis the narrative function of parody will be examined. The way in which some comics use intertextuality to tell their stories has been previously examined in Kukkonen’s *Contemporary Comics Storytelling*. In this book Kukkonen describes the way in which *Fables* inscribes itself into the textual tradition of the fairy tale (51-86). Kukkonen notes that the series challenges the fairy tale tradition but at the same time uses it to establish a satisfying and reassuring narrative (52). A similar process is happening in *Hellboy*. Hutcheon views parody as a bitextual synthesis. According to her, it is mostly a conciliatory rhetorical
strategy, building upon more than attacking its other, while still retaining its critical distance (Theory of Parody xiii-xiv). This thesis will illustrate that parodied intertexts in Hellboy are often used for specific narrative purposes. The case studies for folklore and canonical literature are selected in such a way that each chapter will examine three general narrative uses of intertexts. Firstly, there are the parodied intertexts in which Hellboy is a direct participant. This means that the red protagonist takes up the role of one of the characters from the original tale. Secondly, there are the parodied intertexts which feature in some way or another in the comics, but in which the red demon is not a direct participant. Lastly, there are specific parodied characters from folklore or literature who appear in the world of Hellboy. The many intertexts propel the story forward or they can provide the reader with indirect information about the protagonist and his situation. Moreover, the ironic contrast between the intertext and its new context is often specifically created for narrative purposes.

The other function that will be examined is the mnemonic function. Hutcheon claims that parody can have many possible forms of intended effects, including a mnemonic effect (Theory of Parody 77). Mnemonic can mean two things “of or relating to memory” (Oxford English Dictionary) and “designating a pattern of letters, ideas, or associations which assists in remembering something” (Oxford English Dictionary). As this thesis will show, Mignola draws upon stories and imagery from long standing cultural memories of different communities and parodically reconstructs them in the Hellboy universe. The art of the past thus becomes a part of contemporary popular culture. Kukkonen’s concept of the popular cultural memory will be used to explore this process. The reason for this is simple: the sources that are being parodied may belong to widely known areas of cultural memory, but the comics themselves only occupy a limited space in popular culture. As a result, the framework to examine the Hellboy series must be of a smaller scale than the nationwide sites of cultural memory. In her article “Popular Cultural Memory: Comics, Communities and Context Knowledge”, Kukkonen defines the popular cultural memory as a “repository of conventions and imagery that are continually reconstructed in contemporary popular culture” (261). She sees the popular cultural memory as the shared knowledge of an audience community, which is “a group of people who share a particular experience of media texts” (262). This thesis will argue that Mignola’s parodic engagement with elements from old stories keeps their memory alive. On the one hand by making elements of those stories part of the shared memory of contemporary media audiences. On the other hand by encouraging readers to seek out the art of the past.
This thesis will also consider if this mnemonic function of parody in the *Hellboy* comics is intentional. There are indications that Mignola purposefully parodies the art of the past to remember it. A good example of this is the comic “In the Chapel of Moloch”. In this story Hellboy investigates a painter named Jerry who has seemingly gone mad. The comic contains an entire page filled with panels containing close ups of Jerry’s paintings. When Hellboy sees them he immediately states: “He is ripping off Goya” (Mignola et. al. *The Crooked Man and Others*). In the preface to this story it is indeed mentioned that all of Jerry’s paintings are based on prints from Goya’s Los Caprichos series (*The Crooked Man*). Hellboy’s comment is undoubtedly a form of tongue-in-cheek self-awareness by Mignola. But the reply Hellboy gets from Jerry’s friend is remarkable:

“You think today’s audience knows who Goya is? Jerry’s saving Goya’s ass. This series would have made the old boy relevant again, and that would have been Jerry’s statement--using the old to define the modern, to illustrate the relentless and unchangeable nightmare of human existence” (*The Crooked Man*).

“In the Chapel of Moloch” was Mignola’s return to drawing comics after a long hiatus. Perhaps that quote can be seen as indicative of his work as an artist: helping today’s audience remember narratives and works of art by imitating them, but at the same time using these sources for something more than imitation. It is this aspect of his work that this thesis will further explore.
Mignola et. al. *The Crooked Man and Others.*
2. Methodology

This chapter will further clarify Hutcheon’s theory of parody and Kukkonen’s concept of the popular cultural memory. But first the selection of texts will be explained.

2.1 The Hellboy Universe and the Selection of Texts

There are over 500 Hellboy-related comics, which means that selecting material from the series can be a daunting task. The Hellboy universe consists of a main series and several spin-offs. The main series does not have a strict linear narrative. It is more a collection of miniseries and stand-alone comics which all focus on different parts of Hellboy’s life. The spin-offs center around other characters and events from the larger universe. They include series such as B.P.R.D: Hell on Earth, Sir Edward Grey Witchfinder, Abe Sapien and Lobster Johnson. All these series interconnect and intertwine in one form or another. Even though they can technically be read as stand-alone storylines, they all form one remarkable consistent overarching narrative. Reading each series will lead to a better understanding of the others and characters will appear in several different comics.

Such an extensive line up could hardly be the work of only one person. Mignola was both the artist and writer for the early Hellboy comics, but after The Island (2005) he focused more on the scripts. From then on the artwork was provided by various artists such as Richard Corben and Duncan Fegredo. Over the years, Mignola has also chosen a few other writers to help him with the stories: several of the spin-off storylines were produced by other writers like John Arcudi and Scott Allie. It is not uncommon for comics to be a collaborative effort, but what makes Hellboy special is the high degree of control that Mignola has maintained over his universe. Bukatman correctly points out that Mignola has served as either author or co-author on all of Hellboy’s adventures (49). Furthermore, Bukatman notes that Mignola has elaborate coplotting sessions with other writers in which he maps out where the characters and stories need to go over the next few narrative arcs, while still allowing those writers enough flexibility on how to get there (49). In 2012 Mignola himself returned to the drawing table for the Hellboy in Hell miniseries. As a result of Mignola’s control, the Hellboy universe notably has a unique “consistency of voice” (Bukatman 50). Most of the Hellboy-related comics have an inclination towards parodistic intertextuality and Mignola’s influence can be noticed in all of them. Unfortunately, it would be unfeasible to examine all of them in
just one thesis. This study will focus on examples from the main series of Hellboy. The main series contains several miniseries and short stories that were written primarily by Mignola and in which Hellboy is the main character. Different comics have been selected to illustrate that parody is a recurring feature in the series. Considering that this thesis will examine the narrative function of parody, it is necessary to provide a very general overview of Hellboy’s life and his dreaded destiny.

Directly after his birth in hell, Hellboy’s arm was chopped off and replaced by an incredibly powerful artifact called the Right Hand of Doom. This oversized fist not only contains the power to sever the borders between Heaven and Hell, but it is also the key to an ancient cosmic prison. That cage contains the Ogdrul Jahad, a Lovecraftian entity who plans to return the world to endless chaos once more. Generally speaking, that fist is the source of Hellboy’s misery, as it makes him a key player in the end of the world. Throughout his life, there are many creatures who push him to take up his role as the beast of the apocalypse and release the Ogdrul Jahad. Others try to preemptively kill the red protagonist in the hope of averting the world’s end. Hellboy tries to ignore his demonic origins, but this turns out to be impossible. When the red detective eventually discovers his true nature, he does everything in his power to avert his destiny. As Ahmed notes: “Hellboy’s identity is based on negating the demon he was destined to be” (“State protection” 1).

His attempts to prevent his destiny are unfortunately a losing battle. When an old crocodile god tries to kill Hellboy in the hope of averting the apocalypse, another mythical being stops him. He tells the crocodile god that there is no use in killing the red investigator because “It’s already done. […] It has been the beginning of the end of the world since the day he was born. […] We are dust” (Mignola et.al. Hellboy and the B.P.R.D 1952). But he also adds another reason for keeping Hellboy alive: “He is the hope of the world to come” (B.P.R.D 1952). The concept of the apocalypse in the series is partly inspired by Ragnarok. It is slowly revealed that the end of the world will lead to a new beginning. Hellboy is simultaneously the destroyer of the old world and the herald of the new world. Eventually he can no longer outrun his destiny. Hellboy does not want to be responsible for the death of millions of people and refuses to open the cage that contains the embodiment of chaos. But the Ogdrul Jahad sends a fragment of itself to earth and fights the red demon in the form of a dragon. The protagonist wins the battle at the cost of his own life. There is a certain ambiguity in his death. On the one hand, the real Ogdrul Jahad is still unharmed and the
comics strongly suggest that the old world will soon end anyway. On the other hand, a new world tree (similar to Ygdrassil) grows on the place of Hellboy’s heroic death, which is a sign of hope that humanity might have a place in the new world. Hellboy resisted the prophesies by not freeing the Ogdru Jahad, but it cost him his life.

But dead is rarely the end for comic book characters. While the world above keeps on fighting for survival, Hellboy wakes up in hell. This marks the start of the miniseries *Hellboy in Hell*. It is similar to the main series in the sense that Hellboy wanders around and interacts with a plethora of stories, myths and legends. But in other ways it differs from the main series because the grave sense of impending doom is mostly gone. The demonic detective no longer directly influences the events on earth and wanders around in the dreamlike landscape of hell. However, it slowly becomes clear that even death does not free the protagonist from his destiny. Still not released from the forces of fate he is pushed to perform certain tasks, aided by his new immortal friend Edward Grey. After yet another series of struggles, he clears hell from all its demons and indirectly releases a lot of souls from their eternal damnation. The miniseries ends on a melancholic note as Hellboy finds peace in a cozy house in an empty hell.

2.2 Hutcheon and Parody

In the introduction of this thesis it was mentioned that intertextuality is a defining feature of the *Hellboy* comics. It is useful to briefly consider what that term means. Hutcheon herself notes that her theory on parody situates itself in the theories of intertextuality, in particular those of Gérard Genette (*Theory of Parody* 21). In *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, Genette defines intertextuality as “a relationship of copresence between two texts or among several texts: that is to say, eidetically and typically as the actual presence of one text within another” (1-2). Comics are strictly speaking not texts, but rather a form of sequential art (Mccloud 7-9). Even so, the main idea stays the same: the presence of one text within another work of art. Yet in the case of *Hellboy*, there often seems to be something peculiar with the way Mignola uses intertextuality. That is why Hutcheon’s theory of parody has been chosen as a framework for this study.

In *A Theory of Parody*, Hutcheon extensively explains her views on parody. She defines it as follows: “Parody, then, in its ironic “trans-contextualization” and inversion, is
repetition with difference. A critical distance is implied between the backgrounded text being parodied and the new incorporating work, a distance usually signalled by irony” (32). In other words, parody is a form of intertextuality that has to ironically signal difference. A key aspect of Hutcheon’s theory is that parody is no longer equated to just mockery. She writes that the distancing irony “can be playful as well as belittling; it can be critically constructive as well as destructive” (32). In addition, Hutcheon also interprets parody as being something more than just the structural interrelation between two works of art by opening up the pragmatic context. She remarks: “the author’s (or text’s) intent, the effect upon the reader, the competence involved in the encoding and decoding of parody, the contextual elements that mediate or determine the comprehension of parodic modes - all these cannot be ignored” (22). Moreover, Hutcheon poses almost no limitations on the scope of what can be parodied: it can be the conventions of an entire genre, the style of a period or movement, the oeuvre of a specific artist, an entire work of art or just parts of it (18). There are several aspects of her theory that require more clarification.

The first issue is how parody can be separated from similar intertextual forms and genres. Hutcheon clearly distinguishes parody from burlesque, travesty, pastiche, allusion and quotation. Parody differs from them because its intertextual reference must signal difference (cf. allusion, quotation, pastiche) or because its effect is not limited to just ridicule (cf. travesty, burlesque) (Theory of Parody 40-43). It should be emphasized that not every form of intertextuality in Hellboy is necessarily parodic in nature. But this thesis will focus on the intertexts that are. Another process which parody can be confused with is adaptation. In A Theory of Adaptation, Hutcheon notes that “an adaptation is an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works” (7). The parodied narratives in Hellboy are almost never announced. Most of the parodied stories and works of art are only one small part of any given comic. Even more extensive transpositions of storylines usually do not explicitly announce the source material. For example, Mignola’s ironic reworking of the fairy tale The Devil and His Grandmother is titled The Three Gold Whips instead of the original title.

However, announcement is not always a reliable benchmark to make the distinction. A short story in issue 10 of The Goon happily announces its intent to parody with the title “Charles Dickens’ A Christmas Carol: A Complete Bastardization of a Piece of Classic Literature” (Powel et.al.). Moreover, issue 1 of Grimm Fairy tales has the appearance of a
comic book adaptation of Little Red Riding Hood, but readers might be surprised when Red Riding Hood sexually emancipates herself by violently killing both the wolf and the lumberjack who tries to save her (Tedesco et.al.). Hutcheon acknowledges that the distinction may not always be clear and postulates that parody is “an ironic subset of adaptation” (*Theory of Adaptation* 170). Irony clearly is a very important aspect of her theory.

But what exactly is irony? Hutcheon only briefly explains the concept in *A Theory of Parody*. She writes that irony is a “semantic contrast between what is stated and what is meant” (53). But she does not view this as the only role of irony. As mentioned earlier, Hutcheon notably opens up the pragmatic context in her theory. She notes that the pragmatic role of irony is signaling evaluation: irony judges (53). Hutcheon makes her view on irony more clear in her article “The complex functions of irony” and her book *Irony’s Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*. She explains that irony is a “semantically complex process of relating, differentiating, and combining said and unsaid meanings - and doing so with some evaluative edge” (*Irony’s Edge* 85). She sees this evaluative edge as “an affective charge”, which can be inclusionary, elitist, subversive, trivializing, self-deprecating, playful,... (*Complex Functions Irony* 221). The scope of irony is incredibly wide in Hutcheon’s theories.

Hutcheon has received criticism for precisely this reason. Chatman argues that Hutcheon’s replacement of “ridicule” with the broader term “irony” opens floodgates (33). He points out that when the definition of parody is founded upon a problematic term as irony, the results seem too inclusive (34). According to him, Hutcheon’s theory of parody is “simply too broad” (34). Chatman’s concerns are certainly valid. Any intertextual structure in *Hellboy* could theoretically be perceived as parody. Incorporating other literature and work of art in a comic featuring a demon trying to save the world will always signal some degree of difference. Moreover, Hutcheon’s interpretation of irony is so wide that any reader could claim to perceive a playful irony in any use of adaption or brief allusion in Mignola’s comics. However, the vague borders of Hutcheon’s theory do not automatically diminish its usefulness. This thesis will focus on case studies which clearly create ironic contrasts with the original source material. Moreover, the parodic use of these intertexts seems to be very deliberate and intentional. This is actually another controversial aspect of Hutcheon’s theory. Her inclusion of the entire pragmatic context leads to another contested subject: authorial intent.
In *A Theory of Parody*, Hutcheon writes that “even in a theoretical age like our own that has cast deep suspicion on the concept of intentionality, the experience of interpreting parody in practice forces us to acknowledge at least an inference of intention and to theorize that intention” (xiv). According to her, “this does not mean that we have to return to a Romantic interest in the extratextual intention of the god-like creator; it is more a matter of inferring the activities of an encoding agent” (86). This point of view is not accepted by every scholar. In * Literary Intention, Literary Interpretations, and Readers*, Maynard objects to Hutcheon’s ideas and argues that parody lies mostly in the eyes of the beholder (148). To illustrate his idea, he lists many possible interpretations of Duchamps’ parody of the Mona Lisa. He does this to show “how much is left up to the reader [and] how little parody actually works as a puppet show in which the creators jerk us smartly around” (149). In Maynard view, an author’s statement of intention can provide the reader with possible interpretive moves. However, this would only be one possible interpretation and it should not hold more value than other interpretations by readers (150).

Even though these are reasonable objections, this paper on parody in *Hellboy* will follow Hutcheon’s view and take into account the activities of an encoding agent. It is true that the *Hellboy* comics are open to multiple interpretations. As Mignola himself points out in an interview “the beauty of these things being so vague and characters saying vague things: it allows the reader to draw connections that may or may not really be there” (“Mignola Gives a Tour”). Nonetheless, it still remains interesting to consider the intentions Mignola without devaluing other reader interpretations. As will be demonstrated throughout this thesis, the parodic intertextual structures in the comics often have a narrative function. The ironic contrast seem to deliberately create meaning in a way that is unlikely to be coincidental. Moreover, the readers and fans also recognize the importance of the creator, considering that the *Hellboy* universe is commonly called the Mignolaverse. The fact that comics are usually a collaborative effort is also not an insurmountable problem: an encoding agent does not necessarily have to consist of one person. The reason why this thesis will focus mostly on Mignola is the large control he maintains over his universe. In addition, he is the lead writer in all of the selected texts. To gain further insight in parody and its intended functions, this paper will sometimes refer to paratexts by Mignola.
The concept of the paratext was introduced by Genette. In *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Genette notes that a text is rarely presented in an unadorned state (1). Instead, it is commonly accompanied by a certain number of verbal or other productions, such as author's name, a title, a preface or additional notes. Those accompanying productions, which vary in extent and appearance, constitute the paratext (1). Genette adds that the paratext is some sort of undefined zone between the inside and outside of a text. It does not have any hard and fast boundary between either the inward side (turned toward the text) or the outward side (turned toward the world's discourse about the text) (2). According to him, this zone is a privileged place of pragmatics and strategy (2). It has an influence on the public that “is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it” (2). Given that Hutcheon’s definition notably includes pragmatics and intentionality, the concept of the paratext will be helpful to examine the functions of parody in *Hellboy*.

The pragmatic context of Hutcheon’s theory does not only include the author, but also the audience. This means that the following elements have to be taken into account: “the effect upon the reader, the competence involved in the encoding and decoding of parody [and] the contextual elements that mediate or determine the comprehension of parodic modes” (*Theory of Parody* 22). Kukkonen’s concept of the popular cultural memory will be used to appropriately deal with this aspect of *A Theory on parody*. In Kukkonen’s own words:

“Popular cultural memory allows us to combine the social dimension of the audience, the material dimension of media texts and the mental dimension of codes and conventions for a discussion of the workings of context knowledge. It accounts both for the phenomenon of audience communities and for the interaction of texts and contexts in the individual reading process” (‘Popular Cultural Memory’ 271).

The following section will further clarify how this relates to parody and the *Hellboy* comics.

2.3. The Popular Cultural Memory

As the name suggests, Kukkonen’s concept is closely related with the cultural memory. This term was introduced by Jan and Aleida Assmann. They viewed it as a kind of institution: “[Cultural memory] is exteriorized, objectified, and stored away in symbolic forms that, unlike the sounds of words or the sight of gestures, are stable and situation-transcendent: They may be transferred from one situation to another and transmitted from one generation to another” (Assmann, Jan 110-111). In her article “Popular Cultural Memory: Comics,
Communities and Context Knowledge”, Kukkonen points out that the Assmanns’ approach to collective memory is quite one-sided, as they concentrate on phenomena usually classified as “high culture”, such as the literary canon or sites of national remembrance (262). Building upon the Assmanns’s ideas, she introduces the concept of the popular cultural memory. She shifts the attention away from national communities and towards audience communities, which are groups of people who share a particular experience of media texts (262). She argues that “both the national communities of Assmann’s memory cultures and the fan communities of today’s media culture emerge from common reception experiences” (263). She adds: “For the nation, these reception experiences are externalised and structured in remembrance rituals and school education; for the communities of popular media texts, they are implicit and informal” (263).

The general idea is that the shared reception experience of media texts leads to a shared repertoire of knowledge: the popular cultural memory. Kukkonen further notes in her article that this shared context knowledge is created by a continuous process of objectivation and reconstruction (263). Objectivation occurs when certain textual elements are taken out of their immediate surroundings or original social contexts and are subsequently turned into conventions, icons, character types and standard situations of popular media texts (263). The objectivised elements can be reconstructed in their new contexts for a variety of purposes (263-264). This process of objectivation and reconstruction can be used to establish familiarity and to stabilise meaning, but it can also be used to create parody (270). This illustrates how Hutcheon’s theory of parody and Kukkonen’s concept of the popular cultural memory are complementary. Hutcheon notably calls parody a form of ironic “trans-contextualization” (Theory of parody 32). As this paper will illustrate, the Hellboy series appeals to the knowledge of long standing cultural memories and ironically reconstructs elements from them into the new context of the comic. This way, the art of the past becomes part of the ongoing reconstruction process of the popular cultural memory. This can be considered a mnemonic function of parody in Hellboy: the use of elements from these old texts and works of art keeps their memory alive in popular culture. Hutcheon insists that the effects of parody on the reader have to be taken into account (Theory of Parody 22). But knowledge of the parodied narratives can vary from person to person and it is impossible to take each and every reader into account. Kukkonen’s theory is useful to consider the mnemonic effect of parody on an audience community in a very general sense.
3. Parody of folklore

One of the prominent aspects of The Hellboy comics is their interaction with folklore. Gail de Vos points out that “Mignola has continuous references to folklore motifs and tales throughout the entire series, and these references and reworkings embrace folklore from all parts of the globe” (96). There are many popular comics who explicitly draw upon folklore in order to create a compelling fictional world: Sandman, Fables, Grimm fairy Tales, Swamp Thing…. This affection for folklore can also be observed in the superhero genre with comics such as The Mighty Thor. The ubiquity of folklore in the medium has not gone unnoticed. Banks and Wein view comics as a functional equivalent of the folktales and myths of the past in the technological and commercialized world of today (1). They note that by examining the use of traditional and contemporary folklore in the medium it is possible to see how widespread certain folk vocabulary and beliefs are in the contemporary period (2). It can thus be useful to further explore how Mignola integrates folklore into his comics.

This chapter will illustrate Mignola’s parodic engagement with folklore by examining three Hellboy adventures: “The Troll witch”, “The Three Gold Whips” and Krampusnacht. The first two comics feature ironic adaptations of respectively Tatterhood and The Devil and His Grandmother. Krampusnacht will demonstrate that not only stories are parodied, but sometimes specific characters as well.

3.1 Tatterhood

A first interesting example of parody in Hellboy can be found in Mignola’s comic “The Troll Witch”. This 10-page short story prominently features parts of the Norwegian folktale Tatterhood. Because this rather odd fairy tale is not commonly known, it will be necessary to first provide a brief summary. There are several variations of the folktale in circulation, but the comic only parodies the story in a general sense. The exact differences between the versions are therefore not relevant. The following synopsis is made from Asbjørnsen and Moe’s version of the tale published in Popular Tales from the Norse. Tatterhood starts with a queen who is extremely unhappy because she does not have any children. A mysterious woman kindly offers to help the sad regent. She gives the queen two flowers: an ugly one with black petals and a fair one with white petals. The strange woman promises the queen that she will give birth to a child if she eats the beautiful flower. She also specifically warns
the queen not to eat the black one. But the queen wants to have children so badly that she decides to eat both flowers. As a result of her rashness, the regent gives birth to two children: a stunningly beautiful daughter and a disgustingly ugly girl named Tatterhood. The twin sisters quickly become inseparable during their childhood.

One night, a pack of witches and trolls are having a feast outside. Tatterhood decides to scare the creatures away and goes outside to fight with them. She enthusiastically storms into battle riding on a goat and wielding a wooden spoon. Unfortunately, Tatterhood’s beautiful sister cannot contain her curiosity and peeks out of the window. A witch promptly removes the head of the poor girl and replaces it by a cow’s head. The brave Tatterhood immediately travels to the land of the trolls and witches to retrieve it. She manages to recover the severed head after a long battle and puts it back on its original body. As a result, the beautiful sister becomes her normal self again. After several other adventures, Tatterhood gets engaged with a prince in an arranged marriage. Tatterhood’s bethrothed is not very keen on marrying such an ugly girl. In response to his complaints, Tatterhood declares that she is not ugly, but ten times more beautiful than her sister. She inexplicably transforms into a gorgeous woman: her wooden spoon becomes a silver fan, her goat transforms into marvelous horse and her tattered hood turns into a bright golden crown. They happily marry and the tale ends with an enormous wedding celebration (Asbjørnsen and Moe Popular Tales from the Norse).

The short story that parodies this tale is set in the earlier stages of Hellboy’s life. This means that the protagonist is working as a detective for the paranormal branch of the American military. The comic starts with the red detective investigating a series of murders in Norway. The locals tell him that the murders were committed by trolls. They send him to a witch who might have more information. Hellboy goes to the witch’s house and is understandably a bit suspicious of her. To allay the detective’s concerns, the witch explains why the locals thought she could help. She begins to tell the demonic detective a story. Readers familiar with Norwegian folklore will recognize her story as Tatterhood. Hellboy and the witch are temporarily no longer the focal point of the comic and the pages are filled with scenes from the original story. They depict the two flowers, the two sisters, Tatterhood riding on a goat, the trolls, the head-snatching and the rescue mission (Mignola et.al. The Troll Witch and Others). This is one of the major ways in which Mignola uses various intertexts. The original text becomes the main focus and Hellboy is not a direct participant in
the story. Mignola obviously has a deep admiration for the original source, as he allows the fairy tale to take the center stage and lets it carry the story of a *Hellboy* comic. At first glance this appears to be a straightforward case of adaptation. But there is a deep irony to the overall context of these beautiful scenes. The comic completely undermines the traditional happy nature of the original fairy tale.

Mignola et.al. *The Troll Witch and Others*
The witch announces the beginning of her tale with an interesting comment: “It’s a sad story” (Mignola et.al. *The Troll Witch and Others*). This comment will seem very strange to readers who are familiar with the source material. *Tatterhood* is not supposed to be a sad story at all. In the beginning, nothing in the witch’s narration seems to indicate that there is something wrong. However, this changes when the witch reaches the part with Tatterhood’s heroic rescue mission. At this point the world’s greatest detective interrupts her because he actually recognizes the story. He finishes the narrative for her: “and she killed a pile of trolls and got her sister’s head back and her sister turned back into a person and married a prince or something. I have heard that story” (*The Troll Witch*). Hellboy’s familiarity with the story is quite interesting, as it indicates that *Tatterhood* is an existing fairy tale in the *Hellboy* universe. The borders between myth and reality are often blurred in the fictional world of *Hellboy*. But in this case Mignola specifically blurs them to parodically undermine the happy ending of the original fairy tale. The witch rejects Hellboy’s continuation of her story and comments: “A fairy tale. She lived and died a cow…Her bones lie there” (*The Troll Witch*). The witch turns out to be Tatterhood herself. She was able to retrieve her sister’s head but could not turn her back to normal. The comic unmasks the fairy tale for what it is in the *Hellboy* universe: nothing more than a hopeful fantasy. An ironic contrast is created by faithfully conjuring up the images of the original and simultaneously revealing the sad reality beneath them.

Moreover, this ironic contrast is strengthened by framing Tatterhood as witch. Kukkonen has noted that juxtaposing objectivised instances of popular cultural memory, as the text reconstructs them, can create parody (“Popular Cultural Memory” 270). The comic draws upon the shared memory of witches and confronts it with the memory of the heroic fairy tale character Tatterhood. It is important to note that Mignola’s short story was originally published in *The Dark Horse Book of Witchcraft*. Hellboy’s adventure was just one of many other witch-related comics in the volume. In other words, readers would have approached the comic as a witch story and not as an adaptation of *Tatterhood*. Witches are usually perceived as evil in the shared knowledge of readers, especially considering their common role as villains in fairy tales. The opening page of the “The Troll witch” seems to comply with these notions. The comic sets the scene by depicting a typical desolate witch cabin. In addition, several of the panels contain traditional witch imagery: a pestle and mortar, a bird leg, herbs, a fish head, a giant bone and a (supposedly) human skull (Mignola et.al. *The Troll Witch and Others*). Even the opening line of the comic seems to anticipate an
evil witch. Tatterhood asks Hellboy: “Are you here to kill me?” (The Troll Witch). It is a reasonable question to ask, given that it is the half-demon’s job to fight with witches. The comic thus ironically associates Tatterhood with typical evil witch imagery, while she is supposed to be the hero of a fairy tale. Ahmed has previously noted that the Hellboy series can form a fertile plane for adventures along the good-evil axis (“State Protection” 2). Mignola’s “The Troll Witch” seems to reject conventional fairy tale notions of good and evil through the character Tatterhood.

One the one hand, Tatterhood has retained a lot of her heroic qualities in the comic. She still makes an earnest attempt to save her sister. In addition, she is more than willing to help Hellboy solve the case of the murders. The killings were performed by the very same trolls Tatterhood fought many years ago. She gives the red half-demon her wooden spoon to put in front of the troll cave. She gave the trolls such a beating in the past that they are too scared to go back inside. The creatures are trapped outside and consequently become petrified by the sunlight. Hellboy does not even have to fight a single one of them. On the other hand, her willingness to help is diminished by the fact that she genuinely seems to have become a witch. She has kept the severed head of her beautiful sister and uses it to grow new magic flowers. The dried up head is still whispering the word “sister”, which suggests that there may be some evil witchcraft in play (Mignola et.al. The Troll Witch and Others). The comic parodically distances itself from the clear distinction between good and evil in the original fairy tale and makes it a grey area. But in this case, the ironic undermining of the source material is done for a specific narrative purpose.
Mignola et.al. *The Troll Witch and Others*

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**Panel 1:**
- Hellboy: *Creep*
- Man in craggy robe: *Why you going to kill me?*
- Hellboy: *Maybe.

**Panel 2:**
- Woman in bed: *I wonder why?*
- Man: *Do you think she saw in them this thing that was monstrous in herself?*
- Woman: *Who can say. Only that she was enraged with them and fought them like a bear.*

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Mignola et.al. *The Troll Witch and Others*
The comic invites the reader to reflect on the similarities between Hellboy and the troll witch. When Tatterhood tells the red detective she went outside in her youth to battle with the trolls and witches, she stops her tale and reflects on that event. She asks the red detective: “I wonder why? Do you think she saw in them the thing that was monstrous in herself?” (Mignola et.al. *The Troll Witch and Others*). The text is spread across two panels: one has just Tatterhood in it, the other only has Hellboy standing in it. The panel placement subtly implies that her comment not only applies to herself, but also to the half-demon. Hellboy has a freakish appearance just like her and it is his job to fight things that can be eerily similar to himself. Ahmed has pointed out that Hellboy’s “very existence as simultaneously monstrous and human unsettles the traditional notions of good and bad” (State Protection 11). Tatterhood and the red protagonist were born with an appearance that generally contradicts their good hearted nature. But at the same time, Tatterhood is currently living like a witch and Hellboy still remains the beast of the apocalypse. Mignola’s short story purposefully parodies the original fairy tale to bring the reader’s attention to this dual nature of Hellboy. Tatterhood’s strong desire to fight is brought up to suggest that a part of Hellboy may be taking pleasure in general bloodshed. The comic ends with Tatterhood commenting on the fact that Hellboy can simply use her wooden spoon to defeat the trolls. She says: “No blow struck…No drop of blood spilled…and I wonder…How will you feel about that?” (Mignola et.al. *The Troll Witch and Others*). The short story does not provide an answer to this question, but leaves the reader wondering if Hellboy might one day succumb to his demonic nature.

This theme is of course intrinsically related to Hellboy’s destiny. The comic explicitly draws attention to his role as the potential destroyer of the world. Soon after meeting the red demon, the troll witch tells him: “I know who you are” (Mignola et.al. *The Troll Witch and Others*). Her statement is followed by a panel depicting Hellboy with the crown of the apocalypse on his head (*The Troll Witch*). With this in mind the narrative function of the parodic structures becomes more clear. Ingwersen has noted that the Tatterhood "is a plucky, smart, humorous woman who is deemed ugly by others but who takes charge of her own destiny and, after repeatedly proving her mettle, wins the happiness that is expected in the magic tale” (351). Yet in the comic she is ironically presented as still a troll. Her transformation to beauty never took place and she never did regain control over her destiny. It is foreshadowing that Hellboy may also never truly regain control over his destiny, no matter
how many times he proves his mettle by fighting monsters. “The Troll Witch” is one of
Hellboy’s earlier adventures. The parodic treatment of Tatterhood implies that the bright red
protagonist should not expect a happy ending to his own magic tale. Considering that he
eventually ends up in hell, that implication does end up being true.

“The Troll Witch” illustrates the benefit of Hutcheon’s views on parody. She has
noted that parody does not always have to be ridiculing, but can also be reverential in nature
(Theory of Parody 57). Mignola’s short story maintains an ironic distance from the happy
ending and clear moral boundaries of the source material. Yet at the same time, the comics
also seem to respect the original. Tatterhood’s narration of the original tale is beautifully
presented to the reader without any indications of contempt. The next section will illustrate
that this kind of parody is a returning characteristic of the series. Moreover, the parodic use of
folklore in the next example will also have a clear narrative function.

3.2. The Devil and his Grandmother

This section will examine issue 5 of the miniseries Hellboy in Hell. Mignola has mentioned in
an interview that this comic adapts one of Grimm’s lesser known Fairy tales (“Mignola Gives
a Tour”). The parodied folktale is specifically Grimm’s The Devil and his Grandmother.
Considering that this is a relatively unknown fairy tale, a brief synopsis might be helpful. The
following summary has been made from Grimm’s Household Tales (Grimm et.al.). The story
starts with three soldiers who desert an army because they are unable to live of their abysmal
pay. They must avoid getting caught at all cost, as the penalty for desertion is death. Their
plans do not go well and they soon find themselves in a position where they are unable to
escape unseen. In their hour of need a mysterious dragon suddenly appears and offers to take
them to safety. But there is a caveat: in return the deserters must serve the dragon for seven
years. The desperate soldiers willingly accept this proposal. The dragon then reveals that he is
actually the devil himself. He gives each of the soldiers a whip that can produce an infinite
amount of gold. The three soldiers may use the whip for seven years, but afterwards their
souls will be dragged to hell. However, they are given a chance to avert their fate. When their
time is up they must solve an impossibly difficult riddle: they have to guess what meal they
will be given in hell.
For seven years, the soldiers live like wealthy kings, but they never use their whips for evil. As the deadline approaches, two of the soldiers begin to worry. But the third one remains remarkably cheerful and he assures the others that he will solve the riddle. He goes to a cabin deep in the woods where the devil’s grandmother lives. The grandmother takes pity on the happy-go-lucky soldier and she lets him eavesdrop on a conversation between her and the devil. The hidden soldier learns the answer to the riddle and swiftly returns to his companions. When the devil comes for their souls, they are able to answer the riddle correctly. Their souls are saved and they are allowed to keep the whips forever. The tale ends with a traditional “and [they] lived happily to their end” (Grimm et.al.125).

The ironic adaption of this fairy tale spans the entirety of issue 5 of the miniseries *Hellboy in Hell*. However, it is important to keep in mind that the comic is first and foremost a *Hellboy* adventure and not an announced adaptation. While *Hellboy* is loitering in Hell, a former captain of an army greets the red demon and asks him for help. Seven years ago, the captain and two others deserted the army after a particularly gruesome battle. They made a deal with a demon and today is the day that the debt will be collected. The captain was temporarily brought to hell by a snake so he could have the opportunity to avert his fate. The story follows in broad strokes the original: *Hellboy* and the captain meet the grandmother in hell and learn the answer to the riddle that will free the captain’s soul from the devil’s influence. This adventure is a good example of a general narrative use of parodied intertexts in *Hellboy*. The original fairy tale is retold and *Hellboy* becomes a direct participant in the story. The comic can easily be enjoyed without any knowledge of the source material. But readers familiar with the fairy tale will notice key differences that purposefully undermine the happy nature of the original story. Just like in “The Troll Witch”, the tragic events in the comic stand in strong contrast with the traditional joyful ending of the fairy tale.

To begin with, an ironic distance is created by framing the tale as if it actually happened. Like many other fairy tales, *The Devil and His Grandmother* does not have a specific time or location. Conversely, the comic is set in a specific point in history. The captain mentions that he deserted during the battle of Smolensk (Mignola et.al. *Hellboy in Hell* 113). This is a reference to a battle that took place during the French invasion of Russia under Napoleon’s reign. There have been several other armed conflicts at Smolensk during the second world war. But it can be deducted that it is specifically the French-Russian battle in two ways. Firstly, a battlefield is briefly visualized in two panels and it contains canons,
swords and uniforms from that period (107). Secondly, the last panel of the comic ends with a time reference. After his adventure in hell, the body of the captain is found in Paris in the year 1819 (126). This is exactly seven years after the battle of Smolensk in 1812. The fact that the fairy tale is embedded in real history is a first clue that the tale is something more than just an adaptation. The comic uses the historic context to create an ironic distance from the original by revealing the grim reality beneath the happy tale.

Most notably, the framing of the three deserters as victims of circumstance is significantly lessened. The comic reveals that the soldiers deserted after the gruesome battle of Smolensk. The horror of the battle is aptly visualized by a hill of corpses with the vague silhouettes of the tired soldiers in the background (Mignola et.al. *Hellboy in Hell* 107). Being tired of the violence is an understandable reason for running away, especially because the reader is given a visualization of the horrifying battle. And yet the desertion is not presented as an innocent act either. The battle itself may not have been important in the vague setting of the original fairy tale, but this is very different in the comic. When Hellboy and the French captain pass through a massive graveyard in the search for the grandmother, two damned souls suddenly rise from their graves. They immediately recognize the surprised captain (112). It turns out that they are two soldiers from the French army he has abandoned. By rooting the battle with the three deserters in history, the comics draws attention to the actual consequences of their actions.

![Comic panel from *Hellboy in Hell* showing a hill of corpses and a deserting soldier](image)

*Mignola et.al. *Hellboy in Hell* 107*
This is most likely the reason why Mignola has turned one of the deserters from the orginal into a captain. The abandoned soldiers openly chastise their captain for not recognizing them. One soldiers asks “He’s a captain, and what are we?” (112). The other soldier sarcastically replies “It’s true. It’s true. Nothing of consequence” (112). In addition, they wonder where their captain was in their hour of need: “We missed you, captain, at Beresina. We were all there” (113). The comic never explains what exactly happened at Beresina, but it is a significant reference. The infamous battle of Beresina was an absolute disaster for Napoleon’s forces and thousands of soldiers died. In other words, it is precisely the kind of battle where a leading figure might have helped the soldiers. However understandable his desertion may have been, the captain still abandoned his responsibilities. In the original tale fleeing the army was presented as morally justified. The three soldiers were not really at fault because the king paid them too little. In contrast, the comic turns their desertion into morally grey area.

Furthermore, the devil-may-care attitude of the soldier in the original fairy tale is completely gone. And with good reason: the comic reflects on the possible results of the captain’s actions, more specifically the effect the desertion will have on his soul. When the captain admits his desertion to the damned souls in hell, they immediately respond with: “Poor man. You will have to make peace with your own soul for that, captain” (Mignola et.al. Hellboy in Hell 113). The “poor man” comment can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand it is a sarcastic remark, indicating that the lost souls think it is a poor excuse. On the other hand it can also be a genuine expression of empathy, indicating that the captain could truly be damned for his desertion. More importantly, it is left ambiguous whether or not the captain himself eventually does end up in hell. The last panel of the story is the captain lying dead in Paris with the accompanying caption: “his soul, his own” (126). It is stated nowhere that he avoided hell, although it is made clear that he escaped the devil’s influence. In other words, the comic subtly raises the question if the captain has lived a virtuous enough life to save his soul, yet never truly answers it. As is stated in an earlier storyline from Hellboy in Hell: “Each man’s soul is his own. How he chooses to spend it…that is for each man to decide for himself” (46).

Moreover, this notion is strengthened by the fact that Hellboy only meets one of the three soldiers who ran at Smolensk. The comic is ostensibly titled “The Three Gold Whips”, but the two other whip owners are conspicuously absent. The captain explains that he does
not know what became of the others because they went their separate ways (Mignola et.al. *Hellboy in Hell* 109). It is likely that their souls were not worth saving from the devil in the first place. There are a couple of reasons that make this interpretation possible. Firstly, dabbling with occult forces tends to backfire spectacularly on the people who attempt it in the *Hellboy* universe. Secondly, there is a suspicious circumstance regarding the deal with the devil. In the original fairy tale the soldiers make a deal with a random dragon because they are trapped. The devil only reveals himself after the deal has been made. In addition, the story makes it very clear that the three soldiers never used their whips for evil, even though they technically served the devil. In the comic, however, the deserters are not in any immediate danger of getting caught. The devil directly offers them the golden whips in exchange for their souls and they knowingly accept the deal. The captain even admits to Hellboy: “I’m ashamed to say that just then we did think it was fair” (109). The deal with the devil was entirely their own fault. Mignola’s adaptation of *The Devil and his Grandmother* ironically distances itself from the clear boundaries between good and evil. Instead it makes the actions of the characters a morally grey area. Furthermore, the traditional happy ending of the fairy tale is parodied just like in “The Troll Witch”. The captain dies upon returning to earth and the souls of the other deserters were likely not worth saving to begin with. The ending of the comic stands in strong contrast with the more conventional happily-ever-after.

Once again, the parodic structures seem to have a specific narrative purpose. Mignola said in an interview that the tale does have some relevance for Hellboy’s situation: “I like to not overanalyze that stuff but [I like] to just feel on some level that this seems to relate to this and fit with this piece, not in a perfect way, but there’s something that can be gotten by putting this story next to that story” (“Mignola Gives a Tour”). “The Three Whips” invites the reader to compare Hellboy’s situation with the captain’s current problem. From the beginning the story is drawing similarities between the soldier and the red protagonist. Soon after meeting demonic detective, the captain asks him if he was a soldier too (Mignola et.al. *Hellboy in Hell* 106). The red protagonist replies “Something like that, I guess. I was” (107). In response, the captain emphatically notes: “So was I. It leaves a mark, doesn’t it?”(107). Mignola seems to have deliberately turned the happy-go-lucky soldier from the original into the morally grey French captain to make him more similar to Hellboy. Both characters were part of horrifying battles and their morally grey journey led them both to hell: the captain because of his desertion and Hellboy because of his very nature as a half-demon.
The comparison between the two characters reveals the bigger irony of the comic. The captain voluntarily chose to accept an occult object (the gold whip). He presumably did not use it for evil and at the end of the tale he is given back control over his soul as a reward. Conversely, Hellboy was involuntarily given an artifact (the right hand of doom) that cemented his fate as the destroyer of the world. Despite this, the world’s greatest paranormal investigator fought his entire life on the side of good. He even died attempting to save humanity from its inevitable demise. And yet, somehow, he is the one that ends up stuck in hell. The idea of good people ending up in hell was already brought up elsewhere in *Hellboy in Hell*. Most notably in a conversation between the red protagonist and his new friend Edward Grey:

Hellboy: “Jeez. I always heard you were a good guy, Ed. How did you end up here?”
Edward: “It’s not always fair, how things happen. You know that better than most”

(Mignola et.al. *Hellboy in Hell* 85).

Mignola uses his parody of *The Devil and his Grandmother* to focus on the unfairness of Hellboy’s situation. the closing line of the fifth issue, “His soul, his own” (126), has a melancholic tone to it. While it does hold true for the captain, it implicitly emphasizes Hellboy’s tragic fate: his soul is not truly his own to dispose. This theme is further strengthened by making Hellboy a direct participant in the original story. The demonic detective makes the same journey to the grandmother as the captain did, but does not get the expected fairy tale reward for his effort. A happily-ever-after to the red demon’s own story remains an impossibility.

The previous examples may give the impression that *Hellboy in Hell* solely has a dark and solemn tone. But the gravity of the situation is also subverted through more light-hearted and humorous moments. Gary Gianni has described Mignola’s overall modus operandi as follows: “He takes his work seriously, and yet he is acutely aware of the absurdity of the proceedings” (*Strange Places*, Introduction). Whenever a sequence threatens to be grave for too long, it will often be undercut by a quip or an unexpected moment. When the devil enters the house of his grandmother in his dragon form and greets her, the old lady pretends she does not know him. It is not until he takes his more humanlike form that she welcomes him with the words “My favorite boy” (Mignola et.al. *Hellboy in Hell* 119). The supposedly menacing image of the soul collecting demon from the fairy tale is severely crippled by the fact that even he has to properly behave in front of his grandmother. Furthermore, in the original folktale the grandmother tells the soldier to simply hide in the cellar to eavesdrop on
the conversation. In the comic the events take an unexpected turn. Before Hellboy can finish the question where they are supposed to hide, the grandmother abruptly shrinks them without a warning and stows them away in a skull (118). Even Hellboy with years of experience humorously adds that he “didn’t see that coming” (118). Moreover, after they learn the answer to the riddle, the grandmother abruptly throws them out and slams the door in their faces. The captain had thanked her by saying “god bless you, madame” (123), which is an extremely poor choice of words to express gratitude to a demon in hell.
These light hearted moments are also created by Hellboy’s personality. The red detective is more than willing to earnestly help the unfortunate captain, but he approaches the situation with an amusing worry-free attitude. When the captain sees an enormous monster in the distance, he exclaims that hell “is an endless parade of horrors” (Mignola et.al. *Hellboy in Hell* 114). Hellboy’s only reply is “Pretty much” (114). The demonic investigator remains completely unimpressed and casually lights a cigarette (114). In the *Hellboy Companion* it is noted that one of the most charming and distinctive traits of Mignola’s work is a tendency towards understatement (Weiner et. al. 10). This is very noticeable in this comic. When the paranormal investigator has to convey the captain’s grave predicament to the grandmother, his laconic description comes across as almost comical: “Ma’am? My friend here has a problem. Apparently he traded his soul to your grandson for a magic whip, and unless he can guess what’s for dinner he’s gonna be screwed” (Mignola et.al. *Hellboy in Hell* 116). The comic playfully refuses to take the developments of the plot entirely serious.

This is also a form parody in “The Three Gold Whips”. Mignola threatens the source material with a playful irony by making the events from the *Devil and his Grandmother* a bit sillier. Yet in a way this treatment makes the overall experience of the comic also faithful to the original fairy tale. For example, the happy-go-lucky soldier from the original has been turned into the morally grey captain. The captain is completely overwhelmed by what he sees in hell and starts to wonder if visiting the grandmother is a good idea. But an unfazed Hellboy casually takes control over the situation and tells the captain: “It’s all right” (Mignola et.al. *Hellboy in Hell* 115). Hellboy’s attitude gives him the role of the carefree person in the story. The previous paragraph have shown that the comic maintains an ironic distance from the happy ending of its source material. However, all of the lighthearted and playful moments act as a counterweight to the grim reality underneath the tale. This illustrates that Mignola still treats the source material with respect. He critically evaluates the happy fantasy of the Grimm’s fairy tale, but he also preserves the joyful nature of the folktale. The result is that the comic still feels like a fairy tale and not like a mocking deconstruction of the genre. Furthermore, this strengthens the idea that there is an intentionality in the way the original fairy tale is undermined. Mignola does not make his story a contemptuous attack on *The Devil and his Grandmother*, instead he deliberately creates ironic contrasts with the original for narrative purposes.
The previous sections have shown Mignola’s parodic engagement with folklore in two of his comics: “The Troll Witch” and “The Three Gold Whips”. These ironic adaptations incorporate the source material in their narrative in two different ways. One comic uses the Norwegian folktale without making Hellboy participant in it and the other comic gives the red demon a direct role in the original fairy tale. In both cases the parodic structures had deliberate narrative purposes. The next section will briefly discuss a somewhat special case: a parody of a folkloric character instead of tale.

3.3. Krampus

Mignola’s Christmas special *Krampusnacht* prominently features the folkloric character Krampus. Babb has described the character as follows:

“Krampus is a mythical, horned, goat-like creature that derives from a European Alpine legend. In dark contrast to Saint Nicolas- who travels around the world on Christmas eve to give gifts to good children- Krampus (the Christmas demon) accompanies Saint Nicolas in order to warn and punish children who misbehave” (161).

In other words, Krampus is a fictional monster used to scare misbehaving children. The severity of his punishments can vary in different interpretations: they can range from innocently giving the children coal to actually kidnapping them to hell (Babb 161-162). Of course, in the world of Hellboy the supposedly fictional character turns out to be very real. The events in *Krampusnacht* take place when Hellboy is still working for the American military. The comic starts with the demonic protagonist investigating strange events in Austria. During the investigation, the red detective is invited to the home of a kind old man who claims to be Krampus. After a brief conversation, the old man reveals his true form: a goatlike demon. He consequently attacks Hellboy and an intense fight to the death ensues. But the fact that Krampus has a human appearance at first provides Hellboy with the opportunity to interrogate him. The comic remarkably uses this premise to directly confront the *Hellboy* version of Krampus with the cultural memory surrounding the folkloric creature.

More specifically, Hellboy has brought a “Krampuskart” with him. This postcard contains an image of Krampus accompanied by the words “Gruss vom Krampus” (Mignola et.al. *Krampusnacht*). Hellboy’s postcard is inspired by a real life custom. Babb notes that “similar to the Valentine’s day tradition of exchanging cards, Europeans have been exchanging Gruss vom Krampus (Greetings from the Krampus) cards featuring the hairy
beast since the 1800s” (163). According to Babb, the cards range from being stoically serious to crudely humorous (163). The drawing on Hellboy’s card seems to be an innocently humorous portrayal of the character. It also contains typical Krampus imagery: a bundle of sticks, chains around the arms and a basket to put children in (Mignola et.al. Krampusnacht). Hellboy doubts that the kind old man actually is Krampus. The world’s greatest paranormal detective has done his research and confronts Krampus in human form with the conventional views of him: “Krampus--That’s you--hits the bad kids with sticks and rides them around in a basket. I guess so they’ll be good next year” (Krampusnacht). Mignola explicitly evokes this rather playful memory of Krampus to parody it in two significant ways.
Firstly, the Krampus in *Hellboy* turns out to be a truly horrifying creature. The old man closely views Hellboy’s postcard and comments: “It’s not a very good likeness” (Mignola et.al. *Krampusnacht*). At first the comment seems to mean that the old man does not have the comical monstrous characteristics of the drawing. However, in the next panel the old man surprisingly adds: “there should be more blood” (*Krampusnacht*). In addition, he tells the paranormal detective that the kids he punishes never see another year once he gets his hands on them (*Krampusnacht*). It is revealed that his house is filled with the trapped souls of the children he has killed over the years. At that instant, the old man assumes his true Krampus form: an enormous blood-curdling demon with bright red eyes. The contrast between him and the cartoonish postcard could not be bigger. The comic parodies the folkloric character by contrasting the common views of him with the horrifying truth beneath them.

Secondly, in this case the series also refuses to take the folkloric character seriously. The premise of the comic is that Krampus wants to be killed by Hellboy. Krampus believes himself to be a demon who was trapped on earth. He thinks that he was forced into his role as a Christmas fiend. He comments: “Krampus they named me, and Krampus I have been” (Mignola et.al. *Krampusnacht*). He desperately wants to be free from his punishment and hopes to finally return to pandemonium by dying. But when Hellboy finally strikes the killing blow, Krampus utters the words: “Something’s wrong” (*Krampusnacht*). The impressive demon turns into a small goat upon his death. At the end of the comic Hellboy theorizes that Krampus was merely a magic talking goat. The detective speculates that the goat forgot he was an animal and started to wrongfully believe he was a prince of hell (*Krampusnacht*). The ridiculousness of the situation is amplified by the comments from Professor Bruttenholm, an expert on folklore in the *Hellboy* series. Bruttenholm notes that he had a long standing debate with a colleague whether Krampus was “the demon goat of the witches’ Sabbath” or “the pre-Christian goat-man version of Father Christmas” (*Krampusnacht*). But the events of the comic seems to imply that it was merely a magic goat. The scary Krampus and the scientific theories surrounding him are in the end parodically reduced to a magic goat with delusions of grandeur.

Krampus in folklore is a creature with a dual nature: on the one hand he is supposed to be a bit scary, but on the other hand his imagery is often aimed at children, which is an indication that it is also not supposed to be taken seriously. Mignola simultaneously has made
his version of Krampus both scarier and sillier than his common representations in the cultural memory. Just like in the previous case studies, this is done for a specific narrative purpose: to reflect on Hellboy’s nature as the destroyer of the world. The red detective’s dreaded destiny is a recurring theme in the Hellboy comics. Bukatman has pointed out that the protagonist’s apocalyptic potential is an example of nature versus nurture (81-82). Hellboy first appeared on earth in the form of a small demon and Professor Bruttenholm raised him as a little boy. According to Bukatman, this human upbringing (nurture) trumps the half-demon’s innate potential for evil (nature) (82). In the specific case of Krampusnacht, Hellboy’s encounter with Krampus serves as a reminder for what the red detective could still become under the wrong circumstances.

In ironic contrast to the scary-but-playful image on the postcard, Mignola has turned Krampus into a child murdering monster. However, the comic also suggests that Krampus might not actually be a demon, but simply a misguided goat. This sillier interpretation of Krampus is very significant. It gives Krampus’s words a tragic dimension: “Krampus they named me, and Krampus I have been” (Mignola et.al. Krampusnacht). Krampus believes that the role of Christmas fiend is humiliating for a mighty demon such as himself. But if he was originally a magic goat, the quote strongly suggests that he has simply internalized the more terrifying interpretations of himself. In other words, he was nurtured towards evil by the people’s perceptions of him. This notion is further strengthened by the fact that Krampus is saved by the souls of the children he murdered. When Hellboy starts to lose the chaotic battle with the creature, one of the children hands him a magic knife. The trapped soul asks Hellboy to kill Krampus with the words: “He’s just so tired. Help him” (Krampusnacht). Hellboy plunges the knife into the Christmas fiend and the battle is over. The fact that the trapped children provide the knife is symbolic. The children are associated with the more innocent and playful representations of the creature. In the end, the more playful imagery surrounding Krampus (the children) has to free the creature from the horrible monster he has become.

The multifaceted parody of Krampus directly reflects on Hellboy’s own situation. In this case the connection between the characters is almost too obvious. Krampus asks Hellboy if he remembers pandemonium and even addresses the demonic investigator as “brother” (Krampusnacht). Furthermore, Hellboy has a dual nature just like the Krampus: on the one hand he is the beast of the apocalypse, on the other hand his human upbringing has made him a force of good. Throughout the series Hellboy is frequently confronted with people’s
perception of him. Some people try to convince the half-demon to destroy the world, while others try to kill him for what he could become. Krampus is a reminder of what could happen when Hellboy gives in to these negative views of him. The magic goat Krampus failed this struggle and became a blood-curdling demon. He is only belatedly freed from his fate by the children, who are symbolic for the more innocent interpretation of him. In comparison, Hellboy had someone who believed from the very beginning in his innocence. As Bukatman points out, Hellboy’s rejection of his destiny is stimulated by Brutenholm’s treatment of the young red demon as an innocent little boy (81-82). The confrontation with Krampus is a harsh reminder of why the red half-demon’s continued defiance of his nature is important. Hellboy will ultimately keep fighting his demonic nature until his heroic death.

This chapter has investigated Mignola’s ironic engagement with folklore. Each case study used the parodic structures in a different way. To begin with, “The Troll Witch” retold the original folktale as background story within the general story of the comic. Tatterhood narrated it herself and the intertext temporarily became the center of attention. Secondly, “The Three Gold Whips” made Hellboy an active participant in the events of the parodied fairy tale. Hellboy helps one of the unlucky deserters and even takes the lead in parts of the narrative. Lastly, Krampusnacht was a special case, as the comic parodies a specific character instead of a tale. The encounter between the Christmas fiend and Hellboy is used to create a compelling narrative. In all of these case studies the parodic structures had specific narrative purposes. They purposely convey additional meanings concerning Hellboy’s demonic nature, his destiny or his current predicaments. The next chapter will illustrate that Mignola not only parodies folklore, but canonical literature as well.
4. Parody of Canonical Literature

The dense intertextual network of the *Hellboy* series is filled with countless references to canonical literature. The literary canon is a collection of texts that are considered to be important for a particular culture or a specific time period. Their memory is therefore preserved through various institutions such as academia or the government. This chapter will further explore Mignola’s parodic engagement with this area from the cultural memory. The *Hellboy* comics notably parody a multitude of texts from the British-American canon. Mignola often ironically adapts entire sequences from famous literature or uses quotes from these works in a variety of ways. This chapter will examine two different forms of literature: a book (*A Christmas Carol*) and a play (*Macbeth*). Each of the selected case studies will also illustrate how these texts are used for narrative purposes.

4.1 A Christmas Carol

The miniseries *Hellboy in Hell* parodies one of the most famous books in the world: *A Christmas Carol*. Dickens’s story centers around the miser Scrooge. One night Scrooge is visited by the damned spirit of his former associate Marley. The spirit warns Scrooge that he too will suffer damnation if he does not mend his ways. The miser is then visited by three Christmas ghosts who confront him with scenes from the present, past and future. Scrooge realizes the errors of his ways and becomes a more agreeable and charitable person (Dickens *A Christmas Carol*). Davis notes that the story has been “adapted, revised, condensed, retold, re-originated and modernized more than any other work of English literature” (110). Mignola contributes to this tradition by incorporating parts of this world renowned novel in the first four issues of *Hellboy in Hell*. Davis points out that *A Christmas Carol* exists in two versions as a result of its countless adaptations: the text as it was written by Dickens and the “culture text” (110). The “culture text” is the collective memory of the story. That memory is continuously recreated and reshaped through the many retellings of the tale (Davis 110). Davis’s analysis was primarily made with announced adaptations in mind. Mignola’s use of the tale is strictly speaking not a full adaptation, as only parts of the original text are ironically recontextualized. In addition, the comics remain first and foremost *Hellboy* adventures. However, parts of Mignola’s parody of *A Christmas Carol* are so faithful that the comic could easily contribute to the continuous recreation process of the “culture text”. The
following case study will once again illustrate the benefit of Hutcheon’s wide interpretation of parody. Even if the comics keep the source material at an ironic distance, they can also closely align themselves to the original text at times.

*Hellboy in Hell* incorporates parts of Dickens’s book in the overarching narrative in two major ways: on the one hand Hellboy takes up a role as a character in the events of the original story, on the other hand a sequence from the novel is presented to the reader without Hellboy being a direct participant. What makes this particular example interesting is how the comic seamlessly lets these two ways flow into one another. This narrative maneuvering starts at the end of issue one of *Hellboy in Hell*. Soon after his arrival in hell, Hellboy encounters a mysterious puppet theatre. Two puppets suddenly start performing one of the most captivating scenes from *A Christmas Carol*: the confrontation between Scrooge and Marley. The comic clearly respects the atmosphere, tone and reputation from the original passage. In an interview Mignola noted: “It was my favorite sequence in literature, and I thought it was appropriate to the tone of the book” (“Mignola Gives a Tour”). Just like in “The Troll Witch”, the sequence temporarily becomes the center of attention in the comic. The page gradually zooms in on the scene until the panels contain nothing more than the puppet performance (Mignola et. al. *Hellboy in Hell* 29). The interaction is faithfully adapted, albeit in shortened form. The sequence even uses several direct lines from the original book such as “I wear the chain I forged in life” and “Speak comfort to me, Jacob” (Dickens 31-32, quoted in *Hellboy in Hell* 30). The comic thus aligns itself closely with the source material.
Mignola et. al. *Hellboy in Hell* 30

MAN OF THE WORLD! MIND, DO YOU BELIEVE IN ME OR NOT?

I DO.

BUT WHY DO YOU STRUGGLE WITH THE CHAIN?

AND I SAID THAT YOU ARE FRIGHTENED—TELL ME WHY?

I MADE IT LINK BY LINK AND WOUND IT AROUND ME.

SPEAK, WORMS, BEFORE YOU DISAPPEAR.

I HAVE NOSE TO SHOW.

IS THE HISTORY STRANGE TO YOU?

OR WOULD YOU KNOW THE WEIGHT, AND LENGTH OF THE CHAIN YOU REAPED IT ON A FINE FINE CHAIN.

Mignola et. al. *Hellboy in Hell* 31

BONG

LOOK TO SEE AND NO MORE.

IT IS.

I THINK I’D RATHER NOT.

EXPECTED THE PAIN ONCE THE CLOCK STOPS TAKING.

"But look..."
But at the same time it keeps Dickens’s book at a distance. The new context of the conversation between Marley and Scrooge creates a feeling of uneasiness. The puppet theatre is standing in a crooked corner of a decayed city in hell. Its only audience member is the demonic protagonist himself. More importantly, it is never shown who is controlling the puppets. The sequence is clearly framed as a performance and yet there do not seem to be any performers except the puppets themselves. They are not hand puppets and they have no visible strings either. Bukatman has previously examined how puppets take on an animistic force of their own in one of Mignola’s novels (78). He uses this idea to exemplify how many of Mignola’s works are about bringing something to life or to light (78). He writes: “Puppets come to life, Hellboy is brought into life, texts are brought to life, and, of course, readers are brought to life through their engagement with the dense network of the comics” (79). *Hellboy in Hell* brings the scene from *A Christmas Carol* alive, but simultaneously gives the sequence a haunting quality. The puppets in this particular scene do no really seem to have come to life like in Bukatman’s example. They simply appear, slavishly perform a part of Dickens’s book, and suddenly disappear once more. The puppets are more ephemeral specters than beings with an own will. In a similar vein the entire scene is given a ghostlike quality. Dickens’s book is inextricably linked with the common Christmas cheer. Even if the novel contains several ghastly scenes it ultimately ends with a reassuring happy ending: Scrooge realizes the error of his ways and joins the common holiday cheer. The desolate performance in the comic evidently cannot have a similar resolution, because Hell and its inhabitants were devoid of joy to begin with. A scene from a world-famous Christmas story appearing to Hellboy only emphasizes his tragic fate: he is trapped in the cheerless word of hell. In the same way Marley is haunting Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*, the entire scene from the novel comes to haunt Hellboy in the form of a puppet show.

The parodic structures have an interesting narrative function. Mignola himself has commented on the sequence: “The things that were spoken of in that puppet show, they had some resonance with what was going on” (“Mignola Gives a Tour”). The comic uses the scene as the starting point for a more general parody of Dickens’s book with Hellboy as an active participant. In *A Christmas Carol* the encounter between Scrooge and Marley is the beginning of the miser’s road to redemption. Mignola purposefully incorporates the sequence into his comic to take Hellboy on a similar path. The puppet show ends by explicitly positioning the red protagonist in the roll of Scrooge. It does so in two ways. Firstly, the puppet theatre ends with the sound of a bell tolling one (Mignola et. al. *Hellboy in Hell* 31).
In the novel this indicated that the first ghost would appear before Scrooge. But in this case the “bong” is also significant for Hellboy. Several pages earlier Mignola had already started including panels with only ticking sounds in them (25). For the reader the noise would at first seem to have no function at all, but this ticking ultimately culminate in the “bong” which both the Scrooge puppet and Hellboy hear. Secondly, the panels constantly alternate between puppet Scrooge and puppet Marley during their performance. However, the last panel of this interaction just shows the red detective. He stands in an extremely similar pose to Scrooge in the panel above (32). The panels are placed in such a way that the final words of Marley seem to be directed towards Hellboy: “I am here to warn you that you have yet a chance and hope of escaping my fate” (31). The next page reveals the first of three ghosts who will take the red investigator on a journey through hell. Just like Marley was the catalyst for Scrooge’s redemption, the entire scene from the novel suggests the start of a possible redemption for Hellboy.

In the following comics, *Hellboy in Hell* borrows the narrative structures of *A Christmas Carol* in a very general sense. In a way this is a sign of respect towards the original novel, as the literary device of the three ghosts was directly used in the miniseries. But there is also an immediate irony in giving Hellboy the role of Scrooge. The red investigator seems to have more in common with the damned Marley than the miser. Scrooge went through a journey which made him realize the error of his ways. But Hellboy already chose the path of good and still ended up in the same place as Marley. The demonic detective was damned to hell despite fighting his entire life on the side of good. In addition, the red protagonist still has his big hand of doom, which means that even in hell he is not yet completely free from his destiny as destroyer. Nevertheless, by positioning the protagonist in the role of Scrooge the comic indicates that Hellboy may perhaps be able to escape his doomed fate. Unfortunately for hell’s greatest paranormal detective, the comic almost immediately distances itself from an straightforward road to redemption.

When Hellboy meets the first ghost he asks: “Ghost of Christmas Past?” (Mignola et. al. *Hellboy in Hell* 32). It is a reasonable assumption, especially considering that the puppet scene has just subtly placed Hellboy in the role of Scrooge. Moreover, the spirit in front of Hellboy is visually similar to the first ghost of *A Christmas Carol*. Dickens described the Ghost of Christmas Past as follows: “It wore a tunic of the purest white [...] from the crown of its head there sprung a bright clear jet of light” (44). The ghost in the comic is similarly
dressed in white and also has light floating above his head. However, the reply Hellboy gets to his question is almost too symbolic for the way Mignola often parodically treats his inspirations: “Not Hardly” (Mignola et. al. *Hellboy in Hell* 32). The three ghost guiding the red detective through hell are not the same ones from Dickens’s novel. They do not show the half-demon scenes from the past, future and present. In parodic contrast with the original novel, the three ghosts appear to damn the protagonist even further.

The first ghost takes Hellboy to the palace of Satan himself. The spirit hands the detective a knife and encourages him to “like Macbeth, steal into the chamber of his sleeping king to cut his throat” (Mignola et. al. *Hellboy in Hell* 43). Hellboy was born in hell so in a way Satan can indeed be considered the detective’s rightful king, but the ghost’s overt reference to *Macbeth* seems odd. Shakespeare’s play is a tragedy: Macbeth starts out as the hero of the tale but tragically dooms himself by murdering King Duncan. The ghost encouraging Hellboy to take a similar accursed path as Macbeth is a very strange way to begin the half-demon’s potential path of redemption. Remarkably, the demonic investigator takes the advice of the ghost and murders Satan. This scene is a good example of Kukkonen’s idea that objectified instances of memory can be juxtaposed to create parody (“Popular Cultural Memory” 270). Mignola draws upon the memories of *A Christmas Carol* and *Macbeth* and mixes parts of the two texts together. The two works are fundamentally each other’s opposite: in Shakespeare’s plays the protagonist is a hero who turns evil; in Dickens’s novel the protagonist is moderately evil and slowly becomes a better person. The evocation
of *Macbeth* completely undermines Hellboy’s possible redemption. Throughout *Hellboy in Hell* the murder of Satan is treated as a grave crime for which the investigator needs to be punished. This will be discussed further in the next section of this this, which specifically deals with Mignola’s parodic use of *Macbeth*. For now, it suffices to say that the first spirit appears to doom the protagonist even further instead of helping him.

The situation does not improve with the other two ghosts. The second ghost guides Hellboy towards a place where a blacksmith is converting damned souls into statues. The spirit explains to the protagonist that he can use his Right Hand of Doom to breathe life into the statues. Hellboy could command this army to start the apocalypse by shattering the walls between Heaven and Hell (Mignola et. al. *Hellboy in Hell* 48-49). This time the half-demon refuses the suggestion and the third ghost enters the scene. This final spirit guides Hellboy towards his birth place, where he is confronted with his biological family of demons. His family members are not happy that the protagonist keeps refusing to take up his role as beast of the apocalypse and a fight to the death ensues (61-69). At the end of the whole ordeal, the encounter with the three ghosts does not seem to have improved Hellboy’s situation. He is still stuck in hell and he has not been released of his burden as the potential destroyer of the world. In parodic contrast with *A Christmas Carol*, the cheerful ending of a Christmas story remains unattainable for hell’s greatest investigator.

Just like in the folklore case studies, the comics undermine the happy nature of Dickens’s text. However, *Hellboy in Hell* similarly remains very respectful to the source material. The encounter between Marley and Scrooge is almost reverentially incorporated in Hellboy’s storyline and the comics notably borrow the literary device of the three ghosts. Moreover, the spirits may at first seem to damn Hellboy even further, but this is not entirely the case. The two other ghosts directly confront the protagonist with his destiny. While these are extremely unpleasant experiences for Hellboy, he may have had to deal with his family and his potential army sooner or later. In a way the two spirits help the red protagonist grow as a person by encouraging him to face his demonic nature. A part of Dickens’s tale is therefore still preserved, as Scrooge likewise became a better person through the visions of his guiding spirits. Only the murder of Satan remains the odd one out. The next section will discuss how the comic parodically inverts the events of *Macbeth*. 
4.2 Macbeth

In order to further illustrate the parodic use of canonical literature in Mignola’s work, this section will investigate the presence of Shakespeare in *Hellboy*. Mignola is not the only comic book author who ironically engages with the works of the Elizabethan playwright. Wetmore points out that comics like “*V for Vendetta*, *Badger*, and *Flaming Carrot* all reference Shakespeare in order to be taken seriously by intelligent fans and also hold him at an ironic, hip-critical distance for their own purposes” (186). Even though there are several references to Shakespeare in Mignola’s work, this thesis will focus on one particular example: the presence of *Macbeth* in *Hellboy in Hell*. Shakespeare’s play revolves around the heroic Macbeth, a loyal vassal to king Duncan. One day three witches promise him that he will become king. Driven by his own ambition, his wife’s lust for power and the witches’ prophesy, Macbeth eventually sneaks into the chamber of his sleeping king and murders him. He consequently becomes the new ruler of Scotland. However, the act of regicide is the beginning of his downfall. Macbeth seems cursed and he is haunted by the severity of his deeds. He becomes a tyrant and nothing of his heroic nature remains. The play tragically ends with the deaths of him and his complicit wife (Shakespeare *Macbeth*).

This particular example has been chosen for three reasons. Firstly, the intertexts in previous case studies were mostly limited to one or two comics. But in this case the parodic structures are woven throughout the entire miniseries *Hellboy in Hell*. Secondly, this case study will illustrate three of the narrative ways in which Mignola parodically incorporates intertexts in his comics. The earlier case studies were mostly limited to one narrative way per comic, but in this case the miniseries features all of them: parts of the play are showcased without any interaction from the protagonist, Hellboy is given the role of a character from the original and a specific character from *Macbeth* is parodied. Lastly, in the previous case studies the comics held the source material at an ironic distance by severely diminishing their hopeful nature and happy ending. But this example will show that the opposite can be true as well. The miniseries creates the atmosphere of a tragedy, but will ultimately ironically invert the expected tragic ending.

The first example of *Macbeth* in the comics occurs in the encounter between Hellboy and the first ghost. This scene explicitly puts the demonic detective in the role of Macbeth. The spirit hands the red protagonist a dagger and encourages him to commit regicide just like
Macbeth did. What makes this scene interesting is the fact that so much information is conveyed by quoting just two lines from Macbeth. The panels do not reveal Hellboy’s answer to the ghost’s suggestion. They simply show the protagonist staring at the dagger. One of the panels is accompanied by a caption that quotes a line from the original play “Is this a dagger which I see before me, the handle toward my hand?” (Mignola et.al. Hellboy in Hell 43). In Shakespeare’s tragedy this line occurs when Macbeth is internally debating whether or not he should actually kill his king. He sees an imaginary dagger floating before his eyes, reflecting his doubts and fears (Shakespeare 155). The comic clearly respects the imagery of this scene. The dagger even crosses the panel borders to make it seem as if it is floating before Hellboy (Mignola et. al. Hellboy in Hell 43). The next panel is entirely black with another line from Shakespeare’s tragedy: “Who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?” (43). The comic never actually shows Hellboy going into the chamber of Satan to murder him. It only ominously depicts a bloodied dagger. The lines from Shakespeare’s plays and the image of the dagger were considered to be powerful enough to implicitly tell the events of the story.
Mignola invokes Shakespeare’s play to give *Hellboy in Hell* the atmosphere of a tragedy. Similarly to Macbeth, the red detective’s murderous act seems to set him on a cursed path. Greenblatt has pointed out that in Shakespeare’s play regicide is “close to the ultimate crime, a demonic assault not simply on an individual and a community but on the fundamental order of the universe (2710). Mignola seems to treat Hellboy’s act in the same way. Hellboy’s soul is slowly hollowed out throughout the miniseries. This is due to the magic of the Furies, who according to the comic are invoked “to see justice done when some criminal has escaped the common law of men and gods” (Mignola et.al. *Hellboy in Hell* 189). Even Hellboy himself believes he is guilty of a grave crime. When the half-demon eventually must stand trial before the Furies, the panels depict the dagger and the sliced throat of Satan (190). Hellboy does not even try to deny the charges of murder and tells his diligent lawyer to “let it go” (190). Mignola used the dagger scene from Shakespeare’s play to draw similarities between Hellboy and Macbeth: it implies that both characters are propelled towards their inevitable demise after the murder of their king.

The comic then uses another scene from *Macbeth* to strengthen the idea that Hellboy is heading towards a tragic ending. The scene in question shows three witches preparing a cauldron while chanting the ingredients. In the original play this event takes place after Macbeth has already killed King Duncan. The former hero is becoming more and more evil and visits the witches one more time to receive another prophesy. Just before he enters their lair the witches finish the incantation with the famous words “By the prickling of my thumbs, Something wicked this way comes” (Shakespeare 208). In the comic the scene occurs when an almost hollowed out Hellboy is preparing to fight a monster. While Hellboy is waiting for the creature to arrive, a puppet theatre starts to perform the incantation of the witches. This is actually the same puppet theatre that performed the scenes with Marley and Scrooge. Just like in the previous case study, the original scene is treated with respect. Lines from the Shakespeare’s tragedy are directly borrowed and the entire sequence takes up a prominent place on the pages of the comic (Mignola et.al. *Hellboy in Hell* 172-173). The placement of this scene in the miniseries seems to further cement Hellboy in the role of Macbeth. The heroic red detective is slowly becoming hollow after murdering Satan. The puppet performance seems to suggest that Hellboy will take a similar path as Macbeth towards a tragic ending. However, there are subtle clues that this is not actually the case.
Mignola et.al. *Hellboy in Hell* 172
The comic ironically inverts the suspected outcome of the play. The story only made it appear as if the red detective was going to be doomed like Macbeth. When Hellboy’s lawyer asks the Furies to specify the murder charges, it is revealed that they are not actually accusing the protagonist of murdering Satan. It turns out that Hellboy was wrongfully being punished for a murder he had nothing to do with. He is consequently declared innocent. It was already hinted at in the previous scenes that the demonic detective was not committing an unforgivable crime. The parodic juxtaposition of Macbeth and A Christmas Carol makes the dagger scene ambiguous. Hellboy is guided by the Ghost who is supposed to be the first step of a road towards redemption. The fact that this spirit hands him the knife is an important detail. In the original the dagger was the product of Macbeth’s own imagination and a reflection of his internal struggle. Greenblatt has noted that “Macbeth is tormented by the awareness of the wickedness of what he is doing. Endowed with a clear-eyed grasp of the difference between good and evil, he chooses evil, even though the choice mystifies and sickens him” (2710). In his moments of doubt Macbeth still had a choice, but he chose to do the wrong thing. In contrast, Hellboy is offered a very real dagger by the spirits that are guiding him. In other words, he is being directly manipulated by mysterious forces. Furthermore, attentive readers will notice that there is a subtle contrast in the puppet scene as well. On the surface it may appear as if the protagonist is viewing the scene, but the red detective and the puppet theatre are actually in two different places. In the previous case study the words of the puppets were directly aimed at the demonic investigator, but in this case the witches’ incantation is just announcing the arrival of the monster Hellboy has to fight. When the incantation reaches its crescendo with the expected “something wicked this way comes”, it is the red detective’s opponent who enters the scene (Mignola et.al. Hellboy in Hell 174). The spirit may have encouraged Hellboy to murder Satan “like Macbeth” (43). But unlike Macbeth, the red detective does not actually visit the witches and has not become wicked.

This parodic inversion is further emphasized by the inclusion of an ironic version of a character from Shakespeare’s play. Towards the end of Hellboy in Hell the red protagonist unexpectedly encounters his wife. A long time ago, the detective accidentally married a demon from hell after a long drunken night in Mexico. In the miniseries his wife is ironically cast in the role of Lady Macbeth. Hellboy does not remember it, but she was present in Satan’s chamber. She admits that she pressured the protagonist into murdering the king, just like the
ambition driven Lady Macbeth did in the original play (Mignola et.al. Hellboy in Hell 217). She even directly quotes a line from Lady Macbeth’s dialogue in the original play: “Who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?” (218). It is the same line that appeared in Hellboy’s dagger scene. It further emphasizes that Hellboy was being directly manipulated into killing Lucifer. Moreover, Mignola’s interpretation of Lady Macbeth is accompanied with critical differences. Hellboy’s wife lacks the wild ambitions of Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare’s tragedy. When the demonic detective asks her if she manipulated him in order to become the queen of hell, she answers in the negative (218). She does not push a hesitating Hellboy to commit regicide for nefarious purposes, but rather to help him do the things he had to do anyway (218-219). In addition, the parodic inversion of Lady Macbeth is strengthened by the visual representation of her. Hellboy’s wife is a demon and she is depicted accordingly. In Shakespeare’s play Lady Macbeth is a human with a monstrous personality; in Hellboy in Hell the character is a monster with a relatively kind heart.

Furthermore, Hellboy in Hell does not only parody Shakespeare’s tragedy in a serious way. Mignola occasionally treats the Shakespearian atmosphere of the comic with a parodic laughter. This is noticeable when the third Christmas spirit takes Hellboy to his demonic family. His uncle and his two brothers are waiting for the protagonist at the place of his birth. The uncle encourages Hellboy’s brothers to murder the red detective. Whichever of the two succeeds may take the Right Hand of Doom and will be in possession of immense power. The scheming uncle is planning to become the advisor of the victor (Mignola et.al. Hellboy in Hell 67). An intense fight ensues between the red detective and his brothers. The power struggles of the family have a very Shakespearean feel to them, especially considering the comic just invoked Macbeth a few moments earlier. Mignola has noted in an interview that the scene was inspired by “the Shakespearen idea of how families function” (“Mignola gives a tour”). But just as the family struggles seem to be reaching their climax, the loftiness of the scene is completely undermined. It starts with a simple sound effect: “Boom” (Mignola et.al. Hellboy in Hell 69). When the reader turns the page he or she will be greeted with the image of Leviathan. The hellish monster comes literally out of nowhere and eats Hellboy’s family. The red protagonist’s reaction perfectly represents the surprise of the reader: “Holy crap. Didn’t see that coming” (70). The atmosphere of the tragedy is playfully undercut by an unexpected event.
This section has shown how Mignola parodically engages with Shakespeare. Once again the source material is treated almost reverentially. But at the same time, the comic creates a distance from the original by inverting the tragic outcome of the play. Hellboy is not doomed like Macbeth and his wife is a somewhat kind demon instead of an overly ambitious manipulator. The parodied intertexts have various narrative purposes. Scenes and characters from Shakespeare are woven throughout the miniseries to create a compelling narrative with the atmosphere of a tragedy, which is very appropriate for Hell. Moreover, the mixture of *A Christmas Carol* and *Macbeth* reflects the ambiguous nature of Hellboy himself: on the one hand a satisfying happy ending remains an impossibility for the demon, on the other hand he is not evil and does not deserve to be damned. The inversion of Shakespeare’s play suggests that even in hell there is a bit of hope for the protagonist.

Hellboy’s wife / Lady Macbeth

Mignola et.al.

*Hellboy in Hell* 217
5. A Parodic Mix of Memories

It should be clear from the examples in this thesis that intertextuality is an important aspect of the *Hellboy* series. Bukatman has noted that a huge variety of texts are reanimated through the imaginative space of the *Hellboy* comics (148). The *Hellboy Companion* similarly points out that Mignola gives literary works a new dimension and lends half-remembered folk tales a new life (Weiner et.al. 216). The previous two chapters have extensively illustrated how Mignola parodically engages with a multitude of texts from canonical literature and folklore. The case studies in this thesis show that Mignola seamlessly incorporates the art of the past into his work. The comics explicitly call upon elements from various cultural memories in order to create a compelling narrative. The staggering diversity of these elements is particularly noteworthy. *Hellboy* is an American series, but it does not limit itself to the texts and traditions from one specific culture or time period. This can easily be noticed in the selected case studies from this thesis: a Norwegian folktale, a German fairy tale, a goat-demon from the central European mountain regions, a Victorian novel and a Jacobean play. These are only a few examples of Mignola’s wide-reaching engagement with cultural memories. The *Hellboy* series is filled with many other characters and storylines from canonical literature and folkloric traditions: Russian, Asian, African, Irish, South-American.…

Moreover, the comics regularly blend all those different elements together. A good example of this is the fusion between Dickens’s joyful Christmas story with Shakespeare’s tragedy. But it is also noticeable in the case study of *The Devil and his Grandmother*. “The Three Gold Whips” does not only parody the Grimm Fairy tale, but uses imagery from Russian folklore as well. It is no coincidence that the three deserters meet the devil near Smolensk, a Russian town. The devil is planning to give one of the three souls to his grandmother, who will use it to light her empty skull lamp. Regular *Hellboy* readers will immediately be reminded of volume 8 of the series. In this comic the Baba Yaga is shown to have an immense collection of skull lamps. The famous Russian witch uses the souls within those lamps for various nefarious purposes (Mignola et.al. *Darkness Calls*). Mignola has borrowed the imagery of the skull lamps from the Russian fairy tale “Vasilisa the Beautiful”. In this fairy tale the young Vasilisa is given a talking skull lamp after she helped the Baba Yaga (Afanas’ev *Russian Fairy Tales*). “The Three Gold Whips” thus incorporates Russian imagery into a German fairy tale. This kind of mixing is a recurring aspect of the series.
Ahmed has noted that *Hellboy* is “a fusion of popular Western and Eastern myths reflecting the interaction, coexistence and even homogenization of diverse cultures facilitated by globalization (“State protection” 5). *Hellboy* may be an American comic, but it draws upon cultural memories from all over the globe and even blends them together. As mentioned earlier, *Hellboy* is far from the only popular comic series who parodically engages with the art of the past.

Perhaps the appeal of those comics can partly be explained through Kukkonen’s theory of popular cultural memory. Kukkonen has noted that the nation state as platform for collective memory is losing its relevance due to globalizing phenomena (“Popular Cultural Memory” 265). As a result memory is once again called upon to create a community and mass media take on a central role in responding to this call (265). Communities of media recipients emerge, created by the socialization process of media consumption (265). According to Kukkonen, consumption of the same media is no longer necessarily equivalent to living in the same culture anymore as mass media and their contents become globalized themselves (265). The *Hellboy* series does have a global appeal: the comics were translated in different languages and the protagonist has become well-known in popular culture. It is therefore not inconceivable that the *Hellboy* comics contribute to the creation of these audience communities. Banks and Wein have previously argued that the use of folklore in comics can lead to a strong sense of community:

“The use of folklore in popular literature provides an arena where the reader connects with the writer. Here they can experience together a sense of community through shared beliefs and history, thereby creating a community of the comic world. Familiarity with this community creates a particularly strong feeling of membership in a culturally specific reference group and feelings of shared knowledge and empowerment as participants in a moving and continuous history” (Banks and Wein 1).

There is no reason to apply their ideas to folklore only. Readers could easily feel a sense of community through a comic’s use of canonical literature. Banks and Wein’s observations illustrate that audience communities can be formed around popular media texts, just like Kukkonen suggested. Comics may even be particularly suitable for this process, as Kukkonen believes that “images are one of the main modes through which popular cultural memory is elicited and around which communities of recipients form” (“Popular Cultural Memory”
Furthermore, Mignola’s parodic use of stories and imagery from all parts of the globe has a mnemonic function. This function may not be self-evident. Hutcheon views parody as repetition with ironic critical distance (Theory of Parody 32). Parts of the intertexts may be repeated, but their context and overall message will often differ from the original. In addition, the comics do not openly announce their source materials. It remains doubtful that the average reader will recognize the folkloric intertexts. There will certainly be fans who are already familiar with The Devil and His Grandmother, Tatterhood and Krampus. But most modern audiences will only have knowledge of conventions and characters from folktales that were adapted in Disney movies and other popular media. The Devil and His Grandmother is far removed from the popularity of other famous Grimm tales. Moreover, while Grimm may have a worldwide presence, the same cannot be said about a typical Norwegian folktale. Sehmsdorf has pointed out that Tatterhood is not a common fairy tale. She notes that although variations of the tale have been reported in European and Anglo-American traditions, it is predominantly known in Norway (339). Similar remarks can be made regarding the use of canonical literature. Dickens and Shakespeare may be world famous authors, but that does not automatically mean that readers will recognize scenes from their works in a new context. As David and Gillooly have pointed out, Dickens “is known to millions who have never read a word he penned” (1). The question remains: how can parody have a mnemonic function if the readers do not recognize the source material in the first place? In the case of Hellboy, the mnemonic function has two complementary aspects.

Firstly, the many intertexts may not be remembered in their exact original form, but Mignola keeps their memory alive by ironically incorporating parts of them in his comics. Hutcheon has noted that parody is “very much an inscription of the past in the present” (Theory of Parody xii). This is complementary with Kukkonen’s views on the popular cultural memory. Kukkonen points out that “cultural memory remembers textual elements in the abstracted or “objectivised” forms of codes and conventions, which are then reconstructed in specific contemporary contexts” (“Popular Cultural memory” 262). Mignola parodically draws upon old cultural memories from folklore and literature and integrates them in his comics. By doing this, the art of the past becomes part of the popular cultural memory from the Hellboy audience. The idea that Mignola’s work can bring old works back into the mind
of contemporary audiences is not entirely new. O’Connor has previously discussed how an old Irish folktale (Teig O’Kane and the Corpse) was reconstructed in a comic and subsequently in a *Hellboy* movie. She notes that the fabula presents an exemplary instance of translating obscure folk material into popular consciousness (542). O’Connor observes:

“Against the odds, the pointing-corpse fabula was transmitted and translated from a nineteenth-century Gaelic ballad with a ‘‘wild’’ air to a cameo appearance in a twenty-first-century movie. Its survival is testament to the uncanniness and allegorical richness of the tale, and to the memorable iconicity of its presiding graphic image” (557).

The presiding image she refers to is not a literal drawing, but the abstract folklore motif of carrying a corpse on one’s back. O’Connor’s observations are an example of the abstraction and reconstruction process of the popular cultural memory. It does not matter if the readers do not recognize each and every intertext in the comic. The audience will become familiar with the iconic scenes and memorable characters from those texts in an abstract sense.

Moreover, the notion that the *Hellboy* comics ironically undermine their intertexts does not invalidate this mnemonic process. Hutcheon has noted that “parody always implicitly reinforces even as it ironically debunks”(*Theory of Parody* xii). The way Mignola parodies these various cultural memories is very respectful. A genuine admiration for the source material can be noticed in his work. Several parts of *Tatterhood* were faithfully adapted and the folktale briefly became the focus of attention in the comic. The reader may be confronted with the fact that Tatterhood has become an old witch, but at the same the image of her heroically riding into battle is given a prominent place in the narrative (Mignola et.al. *The Troll Witch and Others*). In addition, large parts of *The Devil and His Grandmother* were preserved and used to tell an interesting story. Several parts of the original happy story were given a grave tone, but the comic still retains a playful atmosphere to make the events feel like a fairy tale. Moreover, the parody of the Krampus is also strangely respectful. The last two panels of *Krampusnacht* show a makeshift memorial for the dead goat-demon. Hellboy has buried the dead character and has nailed his Krampuskart to a wooden grave marker (Mignola et.al. *Krampusnacht*). This seems to send a subtle message: the scary but playful image of the Krampuskart is the way the creature will live on in the memory of people. The comic laughed at the creature by making him simultaneously a blood-curdling demon and a self-deluded goat. But this underlying truth will forever remain buried beneath the conventional circulating imagery of the creature.
This almost reverential treatment of the source materials is also noticeable in Mignola’s parody of canonical literature. Mignola often engages very closely with the original works of art. Scenes from *Macbeth* and *A Christmas Carol* were given prominent places in the narrative. Even if their new context signals an ironic distance, several lines from them were still respectfully borrowed in their entirety. In fact, a lot of readers will probably not even notice that many of the intertexts in *Hellboy* can be considered parodic in nature. Mignola includes the art of the past in the overarching narrative of the series in a very natural way. This is exactly where the mnemonic strength of the comics lies. Contemporary readers who are not interested in reading old plays or novels - no matter how culturally influential - will still encounter iconic scenes and lines from those works in Mignola’s comics. Furthermore, the *Hellboy* series can make readers familiar with folklore from cultures they have no direct affiliation with. Through *Hellboy*’s interactions with the many characters and narratives, the shared context knowledge of the *Hellboy* audience is enriched by elements from many different cultural memories. The *Hellboy* series is a place where the memory of characters and conventions from lesser-known folktales and unread literature is kept alive.

The effect popular culture can have on near-forgotten tales and characters should not be underestimated. One of the case studies in this thesis featured a character who had already gained mass recognition: Krampus. Mignola may explicitly draw upon the older memories of the creature through the Krampuskart, but a lot of readers will undoubtedly have already been familiar with the creature. Krampus had a surge in popularity in the 21st century, particularly in America. The sudden influx of Krampus in popular culture even drew the attention of several news sources. One online article even noted that “If you haven’t heard of Krampus, the demon-like half-goat of Austrian folklore, then you haven’t been paying attention” (Little “how Krampus became cool”). The creature has made his way into movies, comics, TV-shows, animated cartoons and videogames. In addition, a multitude of Krampus-related events are being held all over The United States. Why this Christmas fiend suddenly rose in popularity has not yet been extensively investigated. But in this case the way Krampus became popular is just as interesting. Through a multitude of appearances in popular culture, a strange Austrian demon has managed to nestle himself into the popular consciousness. His appearance in a *Hellboy* comic contributes to this process.

Secondly, the mnemonic function of parody is more than just the ironic use of objectified elements from the art of the past. The comics also compel the readers to go
looking for the original source material. In this way, the memory of the specific original texts is kept alive. Hutcheon has noted that reverential parody of literary and cultural heritage presented in a new and unfamiliar form for most of the contemporary audiences - could be seen as a mark of trust in the reader (Theory of Parody 98). According to Hutcheon, this is a trust in the reader’s competence and willingness to achieve a breadth and depth of culture in order to make the comprehension of a text possible (98). Evidently, the Hellboy comics can easily be enjoyed without any knowledge of the source material. But this thesis has extensively shown how the parodied intertexts in Hellboy have a narrative function. It is precisely because parody is based on ironic structures and unsaid meanings that the audience is compelled to go looking for the original. Knowledge of the intertexts can reveal hidden meanings and themes. In addition, the parodic structures are used to provide extra information about the demonic detective’s dual nature, his situation and his destiny. In other words, readers are compelled to go find the original source material to acquire a better understanding of the Hellboy universe.

This mnemonic effect on the reader does seem to be intentional to a degree, especially if you take the pragmatic context into account. As is often the case with parody, the Hellboy comics do not openly announce that they are using existing storylines and characters from cultural traditions. But Mignola provides information about his inspirations in several different paratexts. A good example of this is the Hellboy Companion, which was specifically made to give readers a better understanding of the Hellboy universe. This paratext even refers to this mnemonic aspect of the series: “[Mignola’s] work invites a new generation of readers on a trip to the past, inspiring them to seek out the same timeless material that Mike Mignola once sought out in the dusty used bookstores around the San Francisco Bay” (Weiner et.al. 221). Moreover, the companion notably includes a “further reading” list, composed by Mignola himself. This list includes a multitude of works that directly inspired the comics. In the Companion it is even mentioned that the list was one of the most requested things by the readers in the letters column² (Weiner et.al. 225). Scott Allie notes: “I’ve always figured that the goal of the requests was either to better understand Mike’s body of work, or since so many of our readers are themselves aspiring or established storytellers, the readers’ desire to give their own work a touch of what they see in Mike’s ”(Weiner et.al. 225). These comments give an indication of the strong involvement the Hellboy community has. Large

² Comic books often print letters and emails by readers at the end of an issue. It is a cherished old fashion way to facilitate the interaction between the producers of the comics and their audience.
parts of the audience have the competence to realize that there is something being parodied. More importantly, they also have the drive to go looking for the original material.

Furthermore, there are often paratexts in the comics themselves as well. The *Hellboy* volumes which collect several comics usually include comments from Mignola between the individual stories. These comments often provide the reader with more information about the many intertexts. These paratexts can be useful even if they do not provide an exact source. For example, volume 3 *The Chained Coffin and Others* includes the short story “A Christmas Underground”, which is filled with religious imagery. Mignola notes in the accompanying comment that the story was inspired by a folktale (*Chained Coffin and Others*). Without any hint, it would have been incredibly difficult to realize that the overall storyline is parodying parts of a specific fairytale. Mignola may not provide the exact source, but curious readers will be able to find the original texts: *The Unseen Bridegroom*. Another form of paratexts in the *Hellboy* series is the inclusion of dedications. For example, the comic *Hellboy: Into the Silent Sea* was inspired by several ship related narratives. The comic opens with a dedication to Ray Bradbury, Gregory Peck, Herman Melville and William Hope Hodgson (Mignola et. al. *Silent Sea*). Readers who enjoyed Hellboy’s misadventures on the sea will thus be able to seek out similar travel related narratives. On top of that, the *Hellboy* series also occasionally include footnotes. For example, the scenes from *A Christmas Carol* and *Macbeth* are each given footnotes in *Hellboy in Hell*. It should be noted that both of these texts are in the public domain, so they were not included for copyright reasons. These footnotes can be easily ignored, but once again curious readers can use the provided information to seek out the texts themselves. Even if the parody is unannounced, the *Hellboy* series often retains a link with the original through various paratexts.

The mnemonic function of parody in *Hellboy* therefore has two complementary aspects. The comics incorporate an enormity of elements from old cultural memories in their narratives. These icons and conventions consequently become part of the popular cultural memory of the *Hellboy* readers. This means that the art from the past is preserved in an abstract sense. Imagery and scenes from the intertexts will become familiar to readers who have never read the source materials. But at the same time, the way these intertexts are parodically incorporated into the overarching Hellboy narrative encourages the readers to become more familiar with the specific source material. It is by no means a necessity to enjoy
the comics, but knowledge of the original intertexts will open up an array of insights into the world of *Hellboy*. The series is a parodic mix of memories.
6. Conclusion

Mike Mignola’s *Hellboy* is a peculiar series. The story about the strange demonic detective has captivated readers from all over the world. Perhaps part of the appeal of the comics lies in their incredibly dense intertextual network. The series is filled with stories, traditions and works of art from a variety of cultures and time periods. The goal of this thesis was to further explore that vast network from the perspective of parody. Because it would be unfeasible to investigate all of the parodied intertexts in the series, two prominent areas of the cultural memory were selected: folklore and canonical literature. Hutcheon’s theory of parody was chosen for this examination. Hutcheon believes that the narrow definition of parody is no longer sufficient to describe its ubiquitous use in the turning of the century. According to her, parody is no longer limited to just mockery, but now stands for the ironic ways in which contemporary authors engage with the art of the past. There seems to be a multitude of comics who have this particular engagement and *Hellboy* is definitely one of them. However, there has not yet been much research about this trend. An examination of *Hellboy* provides further insights into the many possible functions of parody in contemporary comics. This thesis chose to focus on two of those functions: narrative and mnemonic.

The investigation revealed three major ways in which Mignola parodically incorporates the art of the past into his comics. The first way is presenting intertexts in the narrative without any direct interaction from Hellboy. The scenes from the original works become the center of attention and are given a prominent place in the comics. There are several examples of this: Tatterhood riding into battle, the encounter between Scrooge and Marley and the three witches around the cauldron. Mignola clearly has a deep respect for the source material and uses these scenes for their powerful imagery. However, the new context of these sequences creates ironic contrasts with the original. Firstly, Tatterhood’s happily-ever-after turns out to be a fabrication of the fairy tale. She never transformed into a beautiful woman and became an isolated witch. Secondly, Dickens’s famous scene no longer leads to a joyful ending. In the original Marley’s warnings helped Scrooge to avoid damnation. There is a bitter irony in the fact that the entire sequence from the novel comes to haunt Hellboy. The red demon is already stuck in hell despite being a good person. Thirdly, the sequence with the three witches implies that the red investigator is doomed just like Macbeth was. However, the miniseries will ironically invert the expected tragic ending. The witches’ incantation does not actually apply to the demonic detective.
The second way is making Hellboy a direct participant in the story. There were again three examples of this. The protagonist takes the lead in the visit to the grandmother from Grimm’s fairy tale. In addition, the half-demon is given the roles of both Scrooge and Macbeth in *Hellboy in Hell*. Mignola gives his signature creation these roles to draw parallels between Hellboy’s current situation and the events from the original sources. But the similarities often emphasize the ironic contrasts. Hellboy is not given the expected fairy tale reward for the visit to the grandmother. Unlike the unfortunate captain, the half-demon remains stuck in hell despite heroically sacrificing his life to save the world. In a similar fashion, Scrooge’s redemption arc from *A Christmas Carol* remains an impossibility for the demonic detective. Moreover, Hellboy does not go down the same road as Macbeth. The red protagonist has not committed an unforgivable crime an remains a good hearted demon.

The third way is letting Hellboy encounter a parodic version of a specific character. There were two examples of this. Firstly, Krampus is made both sillier and more terrifying that his conventional imagery on the Krampuskart. In the comic he is a magic goat who has internalized evil interpretations of him. He has become a blood-curdling demon who wants nothing more than be released of his suffering on earth. The encounter between Hellboy and the creature is not just used to create a compelling narrative. It is also a reminder of what the red protagonist could become if he stops resisting his nature and prophesied destiny as the beast of the apocalypse. Secondly, Hellboy’s demonic wife is an ironic inversion of Lady Macbeth. Mignola parodically inverts the storyline from Shakespeare’s play. Lady Macbeth is correspondingly no longer a human with a monstrous personality. In the comics her role is given to a somewhat kind hearted demon with a monstrous appearance.

These three ways are examples of how Mignola seamlessly weaves a variety of intertexts throughout Hellboy’s overarching narrative. Ironic contrasts with the original works are deliberately created to convey additional meanings. The parodic structures regularly generate subtle messages and hidden subtexts. In addition, they make the readers reflect on Hellboy’s dual nature and his current predicaments. Mignola thus uses the art of the past to shape the narrative of a contemporary comic book. It is remarkable that an American comic incorporates so many elements from cultural memories from all around the globe. It is the reason why this thesis investigated if the parody in Hellboy had another function: a mnemonic one. The investigation revealed that the mnemonic function had two complementary aspects.
Firstly, the result of Mignola’s parodic engagement with various intertexts is that elements from those texts become part of the popular cultural memory. This concept was developed by Karin Kukkonen. Kukkonen postulates that the nation state is losing its relevance as a platform for collective memory due to globalizing phenomena. She argues that in response communities are formed around popular media texts. *Hellboy* has a global appeal and the contents of the series are a fusion of many different cultures. The comics therefore contribute to the creation of these audience communities. The result is that conventions and imagery from different cultures and time periods become part of the shared context knowledge of the *Hellboy* audience. Mignola parodies his sources in a very respectful manner. It does not matter that the reader will not recognize each and every intertextual reference in his comics. The memory of the parodied texts is indirectly kept alive through the use of their narrative structures, characters and iconic scenes.

This is complementary with the second mnemonic aspect of parody in *Hellboy*. The memory of specific intertexts are kept alive because the comics encourage the readers to go seek out the original source material. It is precisely because parody operates on the basis of said and unsaid meanings that readers are compelled to find out more information about the parodied texts. Hutcheon strongly believes the pragmatic context of parody cannot be ignored. When considering the pragmatic context of the *Hellboy* comics this mnemonic aspect becomes even clearer. Readers are actively requesting more information about the intertexts in the letter columns. Moreover, Mignola intentionally provides links to the original material through various paratexts such as interviews, comments between individual stories, dedications and footnotes. This opens up the possibility that contemporary audiences will start to actively engage with the art of the past themselves.

This thesis focused on just two aspects from Mignola’s parodic engagement with the art and traditions from the past: folklore and canonical literature. Many part of *Hellboy*’s vast intertextual network still remain unexplored. It could be particularly interesting to further investigate the series’s engagement with the history of the comics medium or the tradition of pulp fiction. But one things remains certain, Mike Mignola’s fascinating use of parody will ensure that *Hellboy*’s struggles against the apocalypse are destined to be remembered for a very long time. Perhaps, with a bit of luck and a whole lot of comics, even beyond the end of the actual world.
7. works cited

7.1 Comics cited


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3 Each citation starts with the lead writer of the comic. Editors, colorists and letterists are rarely given the proper acknowledgements in citations, so I have included them if their information could be found.


7.2 Works cited


Meyer, Christina. “Un/Taming the Beast, or Graphic Novels (Re)Considered.” *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels: Contributions to the Theory and History of Graphic Narrative*, edited by Daniel Stein and Jan-Noël Thon. Walter De Gruyter, 2013, pp 271-299.


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“Ahh! Jeez! What the Hell!”

- Hellboy ( Mignola et.al. Hellboy in Hell 20)

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