

Satire

Summary

Although scholars generally agree that satire cannot be defined in a categorical or exhaustive way, there is a consensus regarding its major features: satire is a mode, rather than a genre; it attacks historically specific targets, who are real; it is an intentional and purposeful literary form; its targets deserve ridicule on the basis of their behavior; and satire is both humorous and critical by its nature. The specificity and negativity of satire are what separates it from comedy, which tends to ridicule general types of people in ways that are ultimately redemptive. Satire is also rhetorically complex, and its critiques have a convoluted or indirect relation to the views of the author. Satire's long history, which is not straightforwardly linear, means that it is impossible to catalogue all of the views on it from antiquity through to modernity. Modern criticism on satire, however, is easier to summarize and has often made use of ancient satirical traditions for its own purposes—especially because many early modern theorists of satire were also satirists. In particular, modern satire has generated an internal dichotomy between a rhetorical tradition of satire associated with Juvenal, and an ethical tradition associated with Horace. Most criticism of satire from the 20th century onward repeats and re-inscribes this binary in various ways. The Yale school of critics applied key insights from the New Critics to offer a rhetorical approach to satire. The Chicago school focused on the historical nature of satirical references but still presented a broadly formalist account of satire. Early 21st century criticism has moved between a rhetorical approach inflected by poststructural theory and a historicism grounded in archival research, empiricism, and period studies. Both of these approaches, however, have continued to internally reproduce a division between satire's aesthetic qualities and its ethical or instrumental qualities. Finally, there is also a tradition of Menippean satire that differs

markedly in character from traditional satire studies. While criticism of Menippean satire tends to foreground the aesthetic potential of satire over and above ethics, it also often focuses on many works that are arguably not really satirical in nature.

Keywords

ethics, rhetoric, genre, mode, intentionality, antiquity, modernity, critique, comedy, humor

Defining Satire

If there is one thing that virtually all critics of satire agree on, it is that satire, as a literary form, evades easy definitions. Robert C. Elliot, in his oft-cited essay “The Definition of Satire: A Note on Method” (1962) explicitly states that “there are no properties common to *all* of the uses” of satire, and that any definition of the term would be “so general, as to be useless.”¹ Twenty years later, Alastair Fowler would take a nearly identical position in *Kinds of Literature* (1982), arguing that “satire is the most problematic mode to the taxonomist, since it appears never to have corresponded to any one kind. It can take almost any form, and has clearly been doing so for a very long time.”² Recent historical investigations of satire in periods that appear uniform, such as English satire of the 18th century, have only reinforced the essentially disparate nature of satirical practices; Ashley Marshall’s taxonomic study of a broad range of 18th-century texts newly available to scholars through databases such as Early English Books Online suggests that “the canonical masterpieces are not representative of satiric practice in this period,” which generally does “not seem ‘literary.’”³ And, yet, despite its protean nature, satire is also an ancient form with a classical lineage that is frequently evoked by both modern satirists and critics. Satire is thus simultaneously an undefinable form with virtually endless historical variations *and* a timeless, literary tradition that traces itself back to antiquity.

This article will focus primarily on modern conceptions and how they have repurposed satiric tradition for their own uses in ways that extend rather than resolve this contradiction. Perhaps the key dichotomy for modern theories of satire relates to the opposition between Horace and Juvenal as two different models for satire that are respectively viewed as ethical and rhetorical. Critical views of satire have also been affected by the fact that, at least from the 20th century onward, satire has been a comparatively marginal object of study. Satire has been largely absent from prominent discourse in literary theory, and there has been comparatively little highly conceptual or philosophically oriented research on satire, with the exception of a few works, such as Rose Zimbardo's *At Zero Point* (2014). Theories of satire have orbited these larger debates, responding to new developments in literary scholarship from the safer distance of period-based subfields.

Nonetheless, most 21st-century works on satire do seem to agree on a small set of claims. Ashley Marshall, for example, lists five qualities of satire that are agreed upon by scholars: (1) satire is a "literary art," (2) it "attacks its targets," (3) its targets are "discernible historical particulars," (4) its critiques are "to some extent humorous," and (5) it is an essentially "negative enterprise."⁴ Naomi Milthorpe has offered a slightly different thumbnail sketch of the consensus view, which helpfully supplements Marshall's list: Satire "is a mode that, by necessity, is responsive to the historical, biographical, or literary environments of its creation," and it is an "intentional" form, attacking "specific targets" who are "deserving of censure or praise."⁵ These two definitions taken together present a reasonable description of most contemporary views on satire.

There is a general (though not universal) consensus that satire is a *mode* rather than a genre (to employ Alistair Fowler's terminology), although satire's relationship to genre is more complex than typically acknowledged. At certain times and within certain traditions, satire, or at least significant portions of it, may well have met the criteria for a genre, and, as

scholars such as Leon Guilhamet have argued, satiric works often explicitly inhabit other established genres in ways that seem essential to their being.⁶ The argument for satire as a mode also ignores the fact that modern prose satires, for example, often deploy a series of formal techniques for comic effect, including intentionally “flat” characterization, the use of the Rabelaisian catalogue (in which long lists of disparate objects are reproduced for a comic effect), long dialogues between characters who hold opposing views, and a tendency to resist narrative closure. Verse satires of various eras have also been associated with a variety of formal devices, such as Alexander Pope’s use of the heroic couplet; this form is so commonly associated with 18th-century verse satire that it becomes a feature of later satirical pastiches, such as John Barth’s *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960), which evokes this era. Such features may not be enough to constitute a genre or genres, but they also seem to be more than “just” modal.

Milthorpe’s contention that satire is “intentional” is also particularly significant. Unlike virtually all other literary forms, which have been associated with claims of literary autonomy at different points in time, satire has been almost universally viewed as being an instrumental form by critics (with the lone exception of Wyndham Lewis). The nature of this purpose, however, has been debated since antiquity. Is satire a moral literary art that seeks to improve the world by critiquing vice and folly as a form of ethical instruction? Or is it motivated by the baser natures of the satirist, whose critique always threatens to become a destructive force? Gilbert Highet’s *The Anatomy of Satire* (1962) lists a series of potential motivations, such as “personal grudges,” “sense of inferiority and injustice,” “wish to amend vice and folly,” “desire to make an aesthetic pattern,” and “idealism,” which broadly catalogue the many purposes attributed to satire.⁷

Most scholars also agree that satire is distinguished from comedy by the fact that it seeks to critique or ridicule specific persons or events and that this critique can only be fully

understood within a given historical context; as Leon Guilhamet explains, “If comedy presents its ridiculous objects as things of no importance, the harmlessly ugly or base, satire interprets the ridiculous as harmful or destructive, at least potentially.”⁸ Satire thus differs from comedy in both the specificity and the urgent tone of its critique. Satiric critiques always seek to make their targets ridiculous but can vary dramatically in their intensity. For example, Thomas Love Peacock gently satirizes Coleridge’s love of philosophical abstraction by having his parodic avatar, Flosky, state that “if any person living could . . . say that they had obtained any information on any subject from Ferdinando Flosky, my transcendental reputation would be ruined for ever!”⁹ But Gilbert Sorrentino’s satiric roman-à-clef of Greenwich Village artists in the 1960s employs bitter invective, describing the character Sheila Henry by saying, “While she was, in effect, a modern-day whore, there was none of the whore’s finesse about her.”¹⁰

But this seemingly clear distinction begins to blur with certain forms of comedy. In particular, romantic irony, which counterpoises idealism with its blistering critique, often resembles satire much more closely than is widely acknowledged. A writer such as Thomas Love Peacock presents a good example of this blurry line: his novels clearly satirize real historical persons (such as Samuel Coleridge and Lord Byron) and specific modes of discourse (such as the gothic novel), yet they seem to lack both the program of positive values and the moral certainty that most critics associate with satire. The result is that he has been variously described as both a satirist and a romantic ironist. Works classed as Menippean satires also often seem to occupy an ambiguous zone between satire and comedy.

Finally, there is a general consensus that satire is a rhetorically complex literary form, and that the speaker or so-called satiric persona within a text cannot simply be identified with the author of a satire. The degree to which these figures can be separated, however, remains a point of contention among scholars, many of whom still overwhelmingly attribute

biographical or authorial intentions to satire that would be viewed with greater suspicion in other genres. This remains perhaps both the central and the most vexing conundrum for satiric theory: can satire's instrumental or purposive intervention in contemporary discourses be reconciled with the modern view of art as an object of aesthetic contemplation?

Ancient Satire in Modernity

Satire can claim an ancient lineage across cultures. Examples of satire appear in Ancient Egyptian, Babylonian, Greek, and Roman literature, as well as in the bible.¹¹ The Greek and Roman traditions have remained particularly important for modern satirists, who have often drawn on these traditions to legitimize their own work, as in the case of a writer such as Dryden, whose translations and essays helped to frame his own satirical practice. But despite these frequent classical references, the transmission of ancient satire into the modern world was not linear. Even the most basic issues surrounding ancient satire, such as the provenance of the word, which comes from “satura” (mixture) rather than “satyr,” as many thought, were not always widely understood. Certain ancient satiric traditions have been particularly important in the modern world, while others have been largely overlooked. Despite, say, the importance of Petronius's *Satyricon* as a work, the three most influential traditions of ancient satire for much of modernity have been Horatian, Juvenalian, and Menippean satire. Rather than examining these ancient traditions as they existed, the focus here is on how these terms were interpolated and repurposed by modern satirists. The distinction between Horatian and Juvenalian traditions of satire became particularly important for early modern satirists, and this distinction continues to be re-inscribed in contemporary criticism on satire.

The Horace–Juvenal binary can already be seen in the opening sentence of Isaac Casaubon's *Prolegomena to the Satires of Persius* (1605), which is arguably the first major theorization of satire in modernity: “These two features in particular determine Roman satire:

moral doctrine on the one hand and wit and humor on the other.”¹² Although Casaubon does not directly associate these qualities with Horace and Juvenal, the portraits of each that he conjures up nonetheless reinforce this distinction between morality and rhetorical flair. Whereas Horace is the author of “good-natured jests,” Juvenal possesses a much keener wit, with his critiques being so “humorous that they often display the sharpness, the erudition, and the genius for speaking which was well developed through long use.”¹³ Whereas Horace “was everywhere occupied with the commonest precepts of morality,” Casaubon notes that we “know nothing of the morality of Juvenal.”¹⁴ Juvenal’s satire appears as complexly rhetorical but ambiguous in its larger ethical stance, whereas Horace’s satire is rhetorically much simpler but has a clear ethical orientation.

John Dryden’s “A Discourse on the Original and Progress of Satire” (1693) draws heavily on Casaubon’s essay and even more strongly pits Horace against Juvenal. Horace, as a satirist “is the more copious, and profitable in his instructions of humane life,” but “Juvenal is the more delightful author.”¹⁵ Although Dryden signals an express preference for Juvenal’s rhetoric, which “gives me as much pleasure as I can bear,” he also expresses concerns about the potential excesses within Juvenal’s style, which is “sometimes too luxuriant, too redundant.”¹⁶ This concern about the potentially excessive nature of rhetorical satire continues into the 21st century. Ultimately, Dryden states a preference for the more measured “manner of Horace” even if he has not “executed it” as well as Juvenal, because Horace’s tendency towards instruction is socially useful.¹⁷

For Dryden, satire had to be socially beneficial. As he states in what is perhaps the most famous passage of his essay: “The poet is bound, and that *ex Officio*, to give his reader some one precept of moral virtue, and to caution him against some one particular vice or folly.”¹⁸ Here, Dryden underscores that satire must be justified by a specific and clear program of moral instruction, which is linked to the poet’s role within the social order.

Dryden clearly believes that both Horace and Juvenal fulfilled this role, but his concerns about the excesses of Juvenal's rhetorical satire are perpetuated by subsequent theorists who worry about the potential amorality of rhetorical satire. But this dichotomy, as Dustin Griffin has noted, does not correspond to historical reality: Horace's practice of explicating the positive motivations for his satires in a prologue appears to have been a preemptive defense against accusations of libel or malicious intent, rather than a philosophical position.¹⁹ Nonetheless, Dryden's views would strongly influence the major British satirists that followed him, such as Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope.

Satire Criticism in the 20th Century

The next major developments in satiric theory occurred in the second half of the 20th century. Indeed, 20th-century critics typically accuse 19th-century scholarship on satire of a biographical orientation. Such claims certainly ignore the contributions of many satirists, such as Oscar Wilde, and more recent scholarship by Aaron Matz has examined the close relationship between Victorian realism and modal satire.²⁰ But 20th-century criticism does make a series of novel claims about satire, even though these arguments often occurred on the periphery of larger literary debates. As Brian Connery and Kirk Combe have argued, the New Critics can be accused of a "malign neglect of satire" in their work; they list five reasons for this omission: (1) satire's specific historical frames of reference undermined New Critical claims for the "self-containment of literary texts," (2) satiric critique suggests an explicit intentionality at odds with the New Critical notion of the intentional fallacy, (3) satire "tends toward open-endedness, irresolution, and thus chaos," which conflicts with New Critical ideas of aesthetic closure, (4) satire's relentless inhabitation of other forms makes it resistant to easy analysis within a formalist mode, and (5) satire's aesthetic procedures, rather than unifying disparate elements, tends to multiply the disorder within a text, revealing an

“imminent incoherence” not suitable to New Critical aesthetics.²¹ While the New Critics may not have addressed satire at length, however, a new rhetorical school of satire criticism appeared in their wake.

The Yale School, the Chicago School, and the Standard View of Satire

The so-called Yale school of satire critics developed a new rhetorical approach that was influenced by the New Criticism. The first, and perhaps the most significant, of the Yale school’s concepts is that of the satiric persona, first discussed by Maynard Mack in his 1951 essay, “The Muse of Satire.” Mack notes that his own analysis is grounded in the “reemergence of rhetoric” as a field of literary scholarship and criticizes the biographical tendencies of earlier satirical criticism, which conflated satiric critiques directly with the author.²² Instead, Mack grounds his notion of the satiric persona in the repeated invocation of the Muse by neoclassical satirists such as Alexander Pope: “The Muse ought always to be our reminder that it is not the author as man who casts these shadows on our printed page, but the author as poet.”²³

The invocation of the muse, for Mack, constitutes a “symbol of the impersonality of the satiric genre,” which, from a rhetorical perspective, does not simply reflect the beliefs of the satirist but serves as a complex and self-reflexive literary act.²⁴ After noting the prevalence of satires, such as Swift’s “A Modest Proposal” (1729) in which there is an obvious gap between the speaker of the work and the voice of the satirist, Mack then analyzes Pope’s *The Dunciad* (1728–1743) to demonstrate that although the speaker resembles Alexander Pope, he cannot possibly be identical to Alexander Pope; Mack concludes that “the satiric speaker of the poem” is “an assumed identity: a *persona*.”²⁵ The notion of the satiric persona has been widely accepted, though not without critics. Gilbert Highet has argued that the notion of persona makes little sense in analyzing explicitly autobiographical

satires by Horace, Lucilius, Boileau, Pope, and Byron.²⁶ Christopher Nappa has suggested that, for ancient satire, persona theory may be an anachronistic concept that introduces more problems than it solves.²⁷

The rhetorical distance between satirists and their satiric personas was further explored by Robert C. Elliott in *The Power of Satire* (1960), where he analyzed a recurrent satirical trope that he called “the satirist satirized.” In moments where this trope is deployed, satires become self-reflexive, turning their critique inward. A paradigmatic example of this occurs in the final book of Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), when Gulliver’s disgust at the humanoid Yahoos causes him to avoid all human contact: “I began last Week to permit my Wife to sit at Dinner with me, at the furthest End of a long Table; and to answer (but with the utmost Brevity) the few Questions I asked her. Yet the Smell of a *Yahoo* continuing very offensive, I always keep my nose well stopt with Rue, Lavender, or Tobacco-Leaves.”²⁸ Here, Gulliver’s debased view of humanity reflects the potential excesses of the satiric frame of mind, which Dryden first noted in Juvenalian satire: satiric critique has the potential to spill over into a broader misanthropy. As Elliott argues, this produces a “logical paradox” in Swift’s work: “Insofar as Gulliver’s vision of man obtains, Swift is implicated: if all men are Yahoos, the creator of Gulliver is a Yahoo among the rest.”²⁹ But Elliot backs away from the more radical implications of this claim, quickly noting that Swift, unlike Gulliver, “could not accept the total Yahoohood of man” because he was “a humanist and an author.”³⁰ Here, the Juvenalian excesses of satire are recuperated within a Horatian ethical framework.

Alvin Kernan’s *The Cankered Muse* (1959) sought to move beyond the rhetorical features of satire to discuss its key formal features, which he identifies as “scene,” “satirist,” and “plot.”³¹ For Kernan, the scene of satire is always made up of a “disorderly profusion” that is “choked with things” and the “sheer dirty weight . . . of people and their vulgar

possessions.”³² The “satirist” (which for Kernan means the satiric persona) in a work of satire, however, is defined by a contradictory “public” and “private personality.”³³ The public persona views “the world as a battlefield between a definite, clearly understood good, which he represents, and an equally clear-cut evil” that the satirist differentiates with a “monolithic certainty.”³⁴ But the “private personality” of the satirist always contains a fatal flaw of some kind, whether it is pride or a sadistic enjoyment in criticizing others.³⁵ The satiric persona, thus, always generates a fictive paradox that functions like Elliott’s notion of the satirist-satirized. Finally, Kernan discusses the importance of the “plot” of satire, which differs markedly from a novelistic plot; rather than presenting character development, the plot of satire is a “stasis in which the two opposing forces, the satirist on one hand and the fools on the other” remain locked in an unending duel.³⁶ In identifying these features, Kernan interpolates rhetorical readings of satire into formalist criticism and argues for satire as a “literary genre” with features that find “concrete expression in a wide variety of ways.”³⁷

While the Yale school sought to give coherence to satire by focusing on its rhetorical and formal features, the Chicago school sought to achieve a similar end by looking at satire through a historical perspective. This branch of satire criticism is usually represented through Edward Rosenheim’s argument in *Swift and the Satirist’s Art* (1963) that “satire consists of an attack by means of a manifest fiction upon discernible historic particulars.”³⁸ While the emphasis is often placed on the “discernible historic particulars,” the Chicago school were not historicists in the contemporary sense. Rosenheim’s claim about the “manifest fiction” of satire arises from a belief that there was a historical moment in which writers discarded the “literal argument” of “traditional polemical rhetoric” for fiction as a means of persuasion.³⁹ Here, historical research presents evidence for larger formal or structural changes in societies and cultures.

Sheldon Sacks's *Fiction and the Shape of Belief* (1964) is arguably even more stringent in emphasizing historical particulars over rhetoric. For Sacks, satire is "a work organized so that it ridicules objects external to the fictional world created in it."⁴⁰ Not only does this description constitute one of the strongest claims of satirical mimesis, but also it clearly subordinates the "fictional world" of satire to the real, external objects of its satiric critique. Sacks counterpoises his account of satire against two other forms: the "apologue" and the "action" (which is another term for the novel) in order to generate a "grammar" of types of fiction.⁴¹ While Sacks is attendant, then, to the use of history and the importance of external references within a text, these historical particulars of satire generate a larger typology of fictional forms. While he is anti-rhetorical in his definition of satire, his historical analysis ultimately returns to a kind of formalism.

Although associated with neither the Yale or Chicago school, Northrop Frye's *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) presented a contemporaneous and equally influential view of satire. Like other theorists, Frye was keen to separate satire from comedy and also viewed satire not as a genre but as a mythos, which is to say an archetypal "structural principle or attitude" that is inhabited by various specific genres in different ways over time.⁴² Frye delineates three kinds of satires: (1) the satire of the "low norm" which presents a debased world, (2) the picaresque novel, whose "central theme" is the satiric critique of intellectualized "theories and dogmas over against the life they are supposed to explain," and (3) the satire of the "high norm," which seeks to render all human behavior ridiculous, as in the final section of *Gulliver's Travels*.⁴³ Like Robert C. Elliott, Frye is also keen to note "the constant tendency to self-parody in satiric rhetoric" that prevents the establishment of clear or simplistic satiric norms.⁴⁴ Frye made one other significant contribution to satiric theory—his analysis of Menippean satire. Frye's conception of satire as a mythos has not been broadly

accepted, but it is an approach that arguably sits between the rhetorical and historical tendencies of the Yale and Chicago schools.

The work of the Yale and Chicago schools alongside Frye, although they differed in their emphasis and in many particulars, nonetheless produced what could be called a new “standard view” of satire. James A. Nicholls provides an excellent overview of this standard view, which incorporates a variety of the key arguments made by scholars in the 1950s and 1960s: satire is a literary form of “indirect aggression” mediated through a satiric persona that critiques specific historical targets; the satiric targets, moreover, are “blameworthy” as a result of vices or follies deemed anti-normative “within a given context.”⁴⁵ The key presumption underlying these claims, however, is that satire always possesses an implicit ethical function. Its critiques are unpinned by a set of “satiric norms”—the presumed, though notoriously difficult to locate, positive values that regulate the satirist’s critique. As Ruben Quintero states, “Satire cannot function without a standard against which readers can compare its subject.”⁴⁶

Satire, under this view, becomes an apophatic means of articulating this positive program, as well as something like a literary object lesson, in which the wrong kinds of behavior are ridiculed for their foolishness and lack of virtue. The ethical function of satire justifies its tendencies toward negativity, anger, ridicule, and so forth. Despite the rhetorical investments of the Yale school, which seem Juvenalian in orientation, the standard view’s valorization of satire’s ethical program is broadly Horatian. For all of the complex theorizing involved, these critics largely end up reproducing Dryden’s conclusions. Satire should be a rhetorically complex literary art, but it must be regulated by clear ethical principles.

Wyndham Lewis’s Non-Moral Satire

Wyndham Lewis's notion of "non-moral satire" appeared long before the "standard view," but it is perhaps best understood as a counterpoint to it. Lewis first articulated his theory of satire in *Satire and Fiction* (1930), a seventy-page pamphlet that was motivated by the poor reviews of his novel *The Apes of God* (1929) and was then revised for inclusion in the nonfiction work *Men Without Art* (1934). Lewis openly proclaimed that the "the greatest satire is non-moral" and argued for a non-mimetic practice of "'satire' for its own sake."⁴⁷ Lewis sought to create a modernist version of satire that is as autonomous as any other literary form; in order to do this, he argued for satire as an aesthetic method rather than an ethically grounded form.

Lewis redescribes satire as "the method of external approach," which relies "upon the evidence of the eye" in a way that can render any object "grotesque."⁴⁸ This method is explicitly contrasted with the "internal method of approach in literature" that Lewis associates with modernists such as James Joyce and Gertrude Stein.⁴⁹ For Lewis, satire would no longer be based on vices or virtues but rather on this method of intentionally grotesque external presentation. As the character Horace Zagreus argues in *The Apes of God*, "Were we mercilessly transposed into Fiction, by the eye of a Swift, for instance, the picture would be intolerable. . . . Every individual without exception is in that sense objectively unbearable."⁵⁰ For Lewis, satire is elevated to an aesthetico-philosophical principle, instead of a form of literary ethical instruction.

Lewis's account of satire, though obviously both polemical and self-interested in various ways, has received a great deal of attention from theorists of satire. Robert C. Elliott devotes an entire section of *The Power of Satire* to it, and theorists after the standard view, who are more skeptical of satire's ethical basis, often refer to him. With that said, most critics have noted the obvious inconsistencies between Lewis's theory of satire and his practice: in particular, Lewis's selection of satirical targets (largely artists and writers associated with the

Bloomsbury Group) seems very similar to attacks on the vicious in traditional satire. This is not necessarily a problem, since Lewis frequently deployed intentional inconsistencies within his work. But, as Nathan Waddell has pointed out, even Lewis himself began to argue that there was an educative function to satire later in his career.⁵¹ Regardless, in its insistence on the aesthetic value of satire, Lewis's theory remains the most radical argument within the Juvenalian tradition of rhetorical satire.

After the Standard View

After the creation of the standard view, satire criticism has largely moved in two directions. The first is influenced by the rhetorical tradition but absorbs key elements and ideas from poststructural and postmodern theory. The second is a more empirical and archival version of historicism, which increasingly sets aside formal or thematic questions about satire to examine its specific, period-based manifestations. Arguably the most significant and frequently cited of these rhetorically influenced works is Michael Seidel's *The Satiric Inheritance* (1979). Although the book makes a larger argument about the ways that various historical satires deal with notions of lineage and genetic inheritance, its key contribution to satiric theory lies in the claim that satire—rather than being an explicitly ethical form that supports existing social orders—is, in fact, a perverse and degenerative mode that “is a negation of true histories or at least a negation of that phase of narrative that counts on making such things as saga, legend, myth, fable, and determinative allegory *seem* legitimate or authoritative.”⁵² Here, satiric critique becomes implicitly linked with political notions of critique, insofar as both seek to reveal the false or deceptive nature of narratives that support existing social orders. As Seidel argues, satire is “universally subversive” and therefore not, as most accounts have it, a conservative form but a radical one.⁵³

Seidel foregrounds the aesthetic possibilities of satire, arguing that satire's rhetorical excesses completely overwhelm its alleged ethical benefits: "In satiric invective the urge to reform is literally overwhelmed by the urge to annihilate. The satirist rhymes rats to death, beats to bits with little sticks, strips, whips, mortifies, vexes."⁵⁴ In these moments, Seidel's debts to poststructural critique reveal themselves, since he shows how texts' explicit meanings are undermined by inherent structural ambiguities. Rather than establishing norms for behavior, satire, from Seidel's perspective, undermines the very order that it is meant to protect. But Seidel's conception of satire remains instrumental, which suggests a repressed debt to the Horatian view of satire's utility. Not only does he argue that satiric rhetoric responds to real-world discourses, but also he reasserts the close association between the satirical work and the author. For Seidel, the satirist is almost a figure of abjection, since he "is implicated in the debasing form of his action—he is beside himself and beneath himself, something of a beast."⁵⁵ Although the figure of the author returns, satire cannot simply be viewed as the enacting of authorial intention, because of the inherent perversity of satiric critique.

Leon Guilhamet further explores the degenerative nature of satire in *Satire and the Transformation of Genre* (1987) but with the key difference that he argues for the importance of satire as genre. Guilhamet contends that "although modal satire, which can be found in virtually any genre, is a necessary condition for satire, it is not a sufficient one."⁵⁶ For Guilhamet, genre is a key component of satire but not in a simple or straightforward way; satire is generic insofar as it inhabits "variable rhetorical and generic structures which are borrowed and de-formed" and then "transforms these components into a new generic identity."⁵⁷ From this perspective, it is not that satire is a genre on its own, or even that all satires belong to a stable genre of satire; rather satire is generic in the sense that it parasitically invades a generic host and uses it to form a new kind of organism altogether.

Here, again, satire is cast not as a conservative mode but a radical and transgressive anti-genre that subverts norms rather than reinforcing them.

On the one hand, this appears to be yet another intensification of arguments for satire as an aesthetic form in its own right, which is associated with the Juvenalian tradition. Indeed, Guilhamet explicitly states that he is “interested in satire primarily as an art form,” rather than in terms of its historical contexts or real-world effects and explicitly labels his approach as “synchronic.”⁵⁸ On the other hand, Guilhamet’s account of satire remains instrumental, since it intervenes not in other discourses or historical disputes but in other literary genres. Literary transformations are always purposive for Guilhamet, since he “regard[s] imaginative or creative literature as mimetic.”⁵⁹ In this sense, Guilhamet’s account is formalist but retains the view of satire as an instrumental discourse.

Frederic Bogel’s *The Difference Satire Makes* (2001) draws on both Seidel and Guilhamet’s work and includes aspects of poststructuralism and psychoanalytic theory. Bogel’s main argument is that “satirists identify in the world something or someone that is both unattractive and curiously or dangerously like them . . . something, then, that is *not alien enough*” and then create their satire “as a textual mechanism for producing difference.”⁶⁰ Here, Bogel appears to extrapolate on Seidel’s earlier claim that “Satirists generate their own insecurities and then elaborate a fable in which they attempt to displace themselves from what they have generated.”⁶¹ The difference is that, for Bogel, the entire purpose of satire becomes neither aesthetic or social but inherently psychological: satire functions as a textual means of differentiating the satirist from the vices that he depicts. This claim undermines both moral theories of satire and the notion that satires have a set of positive satiric norms. The basis of satire is not a positive ethical program but a hysterical desire for the satirist to ward off a too-close evil. For Bogel, the distinction between Horatian and Juvenalian satire

collapses, because both tendencies are essentially denials of satire's true function. Satire is essentially a textual means for shoring up the satirist's own anxieties.

Bogel makes one other particularly significant contribution to satiric theory, which lies in his acknowledgment of the double and essentially ambiguous nature of much satiric critique. Again, drawing on Seidel's claim that "satiric action is always double action, a regress in the form of progress, a presentation in the form of violation,"⁶² Bogel notes that satire always conveys two contradictory meanings.⁶³ Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal*, for example, literally proposes eating Irish children, including recommended portion sizes: "A child will make two dishes at an entertainment for friends, and when the family dines alone, the fore or hind quarter will make a reasonable dish, and seasoned with a little pepper or salt, will be very good boiled on the fourth day, especially in winter."⁶⁴ Its subtextual claim, however, is that the Irish are so ill treated by the English that they might as well be eating their children. While the latter reading may be preferable, it does not cancel out the former. Thus, rather than "saying one thing and meaning another," satire might be better described as "saying one thing and meaning two."⁶⁵ Satire is always a double-voiced literary form with far more inherent ambiguity to its utterances than the standard view of satire allows. This argument, which underscores the Juvenalian rhetorical possibilities of satire, however, is still counterpoised with the Horatian claim of satire's utility (although, for Bogel, this utility is a personal one for the satirist rather than a social value).

Arguably, the most significant recent body of literary critical work on satire has been historical, and much of it has taken place within various period-based subfields. While there are too many such works to analyze them all, it is worth discussing a few particularly important interventions in passing. Ashley Marshall's *The Practice of Satire in England, 1658–1770* surveys newly available contemporary texts to argue that the most famous satires of the 18th century and Restoration periods—usually seen as the high point of modern

satire—differed greatly from the popular satire that circulated more widely at the time.

Rather than being exemplary, most canonical works are exceptional in their deployment of complex, high rhetoric toward satiric ends.⁶⁶ Not only does this claim emphasize that literary traditions are highly selective rather than representative, but also it undermines the historical distinction between Juvenal and Horace that Dryden establishes. In a sense, all of the canonical, neoclassic satires are highly rhetorical in comparison to more popular instances.

A wide variety of other works have sought to bring to light the rich varieties of satire published in periods not usually associated with satiric practice. Steven E. Jones, for example, has written extensively on satire during Romanticism—a period usually seen as marking the moment when satire’s literary dominance was overshadowed by the lyric poem and the novel. But as he demonstrates both in *Satire and Romanticism* (2000) and the five-volume sourcebook of satire collected in *British Satire: 1785–1840* (2003), a voluminous amount of satire was produced during the Romantic period, and much of it continued to draw on the various traditions associated with neoclassical satire. Aaron Matz’s *Satire in an Age of Realism* (2010) examines how Victorian realist novels drew on a wide variety of satiric traditions and frequently deployed aspects of modal satire. Similarly, Jonathan Greenberg’s *Satire, Modernism and the Novel* (2011) draws attention to the wide array of satirical practices during the ascendancy of modernism, with a particular focus on the imbrication of satire with novelistic forms. In *Satirizing Modernism* (2017), Emmett Stinson identifies a subgenre of the modernist novel that sought to establish a self-reflexive, aesthetic tradition of satire that would be autonomous rather than ethical or instrumental.⁶⁷

In general, this historical turn, which probably could be said to be the dominant mode of scholarly work on satire in the early 21st century, has moved scholars away from questions of definition in relation to satire. There has also been a concomitant move away from prescriptivist claims about satire, in general, and its moral valence, in particular. Jonathan

Greenberg, for example, argues that satirists, instead of desiring to reform vicious behaviour, could just as easily be motivated by cruelty, ill temper, misanthropy, or sadism.⁶⁸ Instead of reinscribing the Juvenalian-Horatian binary, he follows Bogel in arguing for a “double movement of satire” in which the satirist both seeks to reform others’ behavior through critique, while also savoring “the cruelty he enacts” through satiric rhetoric.⁶⁹ In this sense, historical approaches have been useful for broadening the understanding of what satire is and how it has manifested in different historical periods.

At the same time, this increasing contextual knowledge has arguably made attempts to define satire even more complicated, and it may well be that the sense of what satire *is* becomes increasingly divided across subfields of period studies. While focusing on particular historical instances of satiric practice enables researchers to sidestep definitional questions, it also ignores fundamental questions about the field. Is there some coherence to satire over time that links together the practices of disparate periods? Or can satire only be fully understood within the confines of specific historical contexts? Many historicists’ accounts seem to articulate the latter claim, which has the advantage of being more readily supportable, but this also seems like a retreat from the ambitions of the satiric theory of the mid-20th century, which desired to discover some transhistorical features of satire as a literary form.

Menippean Satire

Although Menippean satire was a significant form of ancient satire, it had largely fallen into obscurity by the 20th century. The critical recuperation of this genre can be directly traced to Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism*. As Howard D. Weinbrot recounts, Frye himself once wrote that “there was not one in a thousand university English teachers of *Gulliver’s Travels* who knew what Menippean satire was: now there must be two or three.”⁷⁰ Frye identifies Menippean

satire as a genre of prose fiction that includes works such as *Gulliver's Travels*, which are "fiction but not a novel" and also not a romance; he identifies a wide array of similar works including Voltaire's *Candide* (1759), Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh* (1903) and *Erewhon* (1872), and Aldous Huxley's *Point Counterpoint* (1928) and *Brave New World* (1932).⁷¹ For Frye, Menippean satire differs from traditional satire in that it "deals less with people as such than with mental attitudes" seeking to ridicule "pedants, bigots, cranks, parvenus, virtuosi, enthusiasts" and "rapacious and incompetent professional men of all kinds."⁷² In other words, Menippean satires have general, rather than specific, satiric targets.

Although Menippean satires might resemble novels, they differ at the level of characterization. Menippean characters are not naturalistic but fictionalized "mouthpieces of the ideas they represent"⁷³ as in the case of Pangloss from *Candide*, who could be seen as satirizing idealist philosophy:

All events are interconnected in this best of all possible worlds, for if you hadn't been driven from a beautiful castle with hard kicks in the behinds because of your love for Lady Cunegonde, if you hadn't been seized by the Inquisition, if you hadn't wandered over America on foot, if you hadn't thrust your sword through the baron, and if you hadn't lost all your sheep from the land of Eldorado, you wouldn't be here eating candied citrons and pistachio nuts.⁷⁴

Here, the critique is still arguably satiric rather than comic, since it is directed at a specific historical philosopher (Leibniz) and critiques his philosophy through standard satirical trope of *reductio ad absurdum*. Menippean satires such as *Candide* are governed by an "intellectual structure" that disrupts the "customary logic of narrative" that readers expect in the novel, and formally speaking these satires frequently take the form of a "dialogue or colloquy" between different characters who represent different ideas, as in the case of Thomas Love Peacock's novels, for example.⁷⁵ The second, and arguably more influential theorist of

Menippean satire is Mikhail Bakhtin. But a note of caution needs to be sounded here from the outset. In *Rabelais and His World* (1965), Bakhtin outlines a theory of the carnivalesque that has subsequently been associated with Menippean satire, but he only briefly discusses the influence of Menippus on Rabelais and never employs the term “Menippean satire” in this context. Nonetheless, Bakhtin does characterize the “carnival-grotesque” as a novelistic tradition that seeks “to consecrate inventive freedom,” to combine “a variety of different elements and their rapprochement,” and to undermine the “prevailing point of view of the world” and its accompanying “established truths” and “clichés.”⁷⁶ In *The Dialogic Imagination* (1975), Bakhtin explicitly discusses Menippean satire as a “serial-comico” genre of the novel, which shares historical roots with Socratic dialogue and employs “fantastic plots” (although, again, he never explicitly associates it with the carnivalesque).⁷⁷ Like Frye, Bakhtin argues that Menippean satire seeks to “expose ideas and ideologies” to ridicule, but without necessarily including specific historical references.⁷⁸

Both Frye and Bakhtin’s definitions of Menippean satire have rightly been challenged. Alistair Fowler, for example, argues that “so many forms are united” in Frye’s conception of Menippean satire that it “threatens to prove a baggier monster than the novel.”⁷⁹ Howard Weinbrot argues that Bakhtin “even surpasses Frye in creating a baggy genre into which almost any work can be made to fit” because his “synchronic” method “forces him into generalizations regarding Menippean satire that are impossible to verify.”⁸⁰ The result of the ambiguity generated by these claims, as David Musgrave notes, is that “the term ‘Menippean’” is “bandied about and applied almost willy-nilly to many works which are clearly not Menippean satires.”⁸¹ While it is clear that there was a distinct tradition of classical Menippean satire, the direct influence of this body of literature on many alleged Menippean satires of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance is hard to establish.⁸²

The main problem, however, is that many works that are regularly classified as Menippean satires could not meaningfully be described as satires. There are many “carnavalesque” works that employ categories of the grotesque and occasional moments of modal satire but are also largely devoid of either satiric critique or references to specific persons or events. For example, writers such as Joyce and Pynchon could reasonably be classed as Menippean satirists, who occasionally employ aspects of modal satire, but they clearly seem not to be satirists in the way that such writers as Wyndham Lewis, Evelyn Waugh, and William Gaddis are, since these latter authors’ target specific historical persons, movement, and events. While there is a non-linear tradition of Menippean satire in both ancient and modern times, scholarship on this form too frequently confuses the comic (which attacks general targets) with the satirical (which attacks historically specific targets). Nonetheless, the tradition of criticism on Menippean satire arguably presents a much stronger tendency to valorize the aesthetic possibilities of satire than even the Juvenalian tradition. Rather than worrying about the excesses of Menippean satire, critics have generally praised the excessiveness inherent within it, arguing that its subversion of norms is the locus of its value—a stark difference from most claims about other traditions of satire.

Satire and New Media in the 20th and 21st Century

Throughout the 20th century, satire proliferated across an array of new media forms, including radio, television, film, and the Internet. While satire has long been a popular form that has extended beyond the literary to include both the visual and performative arts, specific media forms have nonetheless altered satirical practices in various ways. There is a significant tradition of political satire in films, with works such as *Dr. Strangelove or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), a bleak send-up of Cold War politics, having attained a classic status. Jeff Nillson has also identified a prominent subgenre of

satirical Hollywood films from the 1990s, including such seemingly disparate works as *The Player* (1992), *Bob Roberts* (1992), *Forrest Gump* (1994), *Wag the Dog* (1997), and *Primary Colors* (1998), which emphasizes the enduring popularity of satire.

There are significant traditions of satire in television as well, including the “mockumentary,” sketch-based political satire, such as *Saturday Night Live* (1975–2019), animated shows with satirical content, such as *The Simpsons* (1989–2019) and *South Park* (1997–2019), and satirical news programs, which have proliferated around the world, including such examples as *The Daily Show* (1996–2019) in the United States, *CNNNN* (2002–2003) and *Mad as Hell* (2012–2019) in Australia, and *Mock the Week* (2005–2019) in the United Kingdom.⁸³ While all of these shows undeniably contain satirical content, the force and meaning of this content can differ wildly. For example, animated shows such as *The Simpsons* contain satire, but this satire is often viewed as a “post-ideological” critique associated with a postmodern cynicism rather than with a positive set of satiric values.⁸⁴ By contrast, satirical news programs often have a more explicit educative and ideological component, especially among “the coast, college-educated cadre of young viewers who get much of their political analysis in the form of satire.”⁸⁵ Once again, these two traditions seem to reflect distinct Juvenalian and Horatian tendencies, that tend toward either an aesthetic enjoyment of satirical critique or the use of satire to reinforce moral or ideological instruction.

Satire has also developed in particularly influential ways within Internet culture and has been associated with meme culture and so-called trolling and shitposting in anarcho-libertarian and alt-right message boards such as 4chan. These practices resemble satire in various ways, since they are directed at specific targets and seek to produce a specific form of laughter known as “lulz,” a term that derives from the internet acronym “lol” or “laughing out loud.” But “lulz” typically constitute a “detached and dissociated amusement at others’

distress” in response to memes or troll attacks.⁸⁶ In this sense, they tend to amplify the most sadistic aspects of satirical critique or else employ them for specific ideological ends, usually associated with radical right-wing politics. These online practices also emphasize that the Juvenalian tradition of rhetorically changed satire—which trolling and meme posting seem to inhabit as an extreme form—can absolutely be used for political or practical ends.

Discussion of the Literature

The first major modern theorist of satire is Isaac Casaubon, who argues for the distinct traditions of rhetoric and ethics in ancient satire.⁸⁷ This key distinction is appropriated by John Dryden in his “Discourse Concerning the Original and the Progress of Satire,” where he explicitly associates rhetoric with Juvenal and ethics with Horace.⁸⁸ This distinction between rhetoric and ethics is recapitulated throughout 20th-century criticism on satire. The Yale school of critics in the 1950s takes an explicitly rhetorical approach to satire, which they view as a genre. Maynard Mack argues for the impersonality of satire and the existence of a “satiric persona” that is similar to (but not the same as) the author of the work.⁸⁹ Robert C. Elliott discusses the importance of self-parody in satire as a way of distancing the satiric persona from the author.⁹⁰ Alvin Kernan identifies key formal features of satire, including its deployment of a static plot that differs markedly from novelistic plots.⁹¹ Despite this rhetorical orientation, however, the Yale school insists upon the ethical grounding of satire as a form. The Chicago school of the 1960s focuses on satire’s reference to specific historical figures, debates, and discourses. Edward Rosenheim argues that “satire consists of an attack by means of a manifest fiction upon discernible historic particulars.”⁹² Sheldon Sacks similarly argues that satire is defined by its external references.⁹³ But these historical analyses of satire are still used to generate largely formalist accounts of satire. Subsequent theorists of satire can still largely be split into rhetorical and historicist camps. The new rhetorical

readings draw on aspects of poststructural theory to argue that the structure of satirical works undermines their explicit, ethical or normative claims; scholarly works like Michael Seidel's *Satiric Inheritance*, Leon Guilhamet's *Satire and the Transformation of Genre*, and Fredric Bogel's *The Difference Satire Makes*, all advance claims about satire as a deformative and transgressive literary form. Contemporary historicist criticism of satire typically relies on archival evidence to make claims about satire in specific historical periods; exemplary works in this mode include Ashley Marshall's *Practice of Satire in England*, Steven Jones's *Satire and Romanticism*, and Jonathan Greenberg's *Satire, Modernism, and the Novel*.

Links to Digital Materials

The British Library's [Discovering Literature: Restoration and 18th Century Satire and Humour](#). A useful collection of articles and resources about satire in a key historical period.

Yale University Library's collection of images of [Caricatures and Satires](#) from the 18th century.

[The Wyndham Lewis Society](#). Resources on one of the 20th century's most significant satirists.

[The Jonathan Swift Archive](#) at the University of Oxford.

[Early English Books Online](#). A fantastic resource for accessing the full text of many early modern satirical works in English.

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- ⁹⁰ Elliott, *Power of Satire*, 219.
- ⁹¹ Kernan, *Cankered Muse*, 31.
- ⁹² Rosenheim, *Swift and the Satirist’s Art*, 31.
- ⁹³ Sacks, *Fiction and the Shape of Belief*, 26.

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