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Locating Satire in Literature

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ABSTRACT

Satire, down the ages, has been considered as a powerful form of art by a great many writers, critics, academicians, scholars and literature aficionados. It remains a constant topic of discussion and a subject of selective erudition for researchers within the realm of literature. It is not an easy task to club together the techniques and characteristics of satire under a unified field of theory or genre as it covers a wide range of subject and what makes it more interesting is the fact that it cannot be restricted or limited to any specific morality or political boundary. Satire can also be considered as a sensitive subject and requires to be handled with careful practice from all angles as its result may end up undesirable. "A satire is a work of literature or graphic art that uses humor for the purpose of censure or ridicule. Describing, dissecting, and discrediting behavior of which the satirist disapproves, satire can be expressed in many tones, from harsh and bitter to mild and gentle." (Keyishian: 528)) Through recorded history and writings from the past to the present, it can be clearly identified that satire is an useful form of literature and its subject matter ranges from individual to individual as well as one place to another, basing its theme from society to a great length of politics. Today, satire has deeply rooted itself not only within the realm of literature, but also occupies an important place in television shows, comics and cartoons across the globe.

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Leonard Feignberg has observed and commented that "Satire is such an amorphous genre that no two scholars define it in the

same words... Professor Robert C. Elliott comes to the reluctant conclusion that no satisfactory definition is possible. The best we can do, he suggests, is to look at a number of works traditionally accepted as satires and compare the new work with these examples" (Feignberg: 18). It is a commonly accepted notion that the term "satire" is derived from Latin *satura*, which means "a mixture of food" and the Romans were believed to be the first to define the literary genre of *satura* through the works of Horace and Juvenal. The question as to whether the manner in which satire is practiced today and the manner in which it is envisioned has a connection with the Latin term *satura* and how it has been practiced by the Romans is still unclear. In short, satire in literature is a form of art which aims at attacking human foibles, shortcomings or negative qualities by using various modes of literary devices. Satire is closely related to irony and are deeply interlinked, whose main intention is to express the discrepancies or contrasts between apparent and intended meaning. Harry Keyishian has noted:

Satirists especially like to attack unwarranted pride, particularly when someone demands more respect than he or she should. They will pursue the pompous and the parvenu, the hypocrite and the fool, and even tyrants—if they dare—but off limits are the cripple and the victim, who did not choose their circumstances or create their misfortune. A satirist will certainly attack the fake warrior who claims more honors than he is entitled to, but not the military hero who earned the medals he wears—that is, unless he tries to exploit them in appropriate ways (Keyishian: 529)

Therefore, satirists frequently employ irony to create a playful thinking in the minds of the readers so as to realize the difference between what is said and what is accepted which will eventually yields to the successful use of irony in relation to satire. Through the employment of irony as the main device of expressing satire, it makes it more comprehensive to understand the incongruities between what a particular thing should be and what actually occurs. While it is said that satire and irony are

interlinked, it should also be noted that “they are not exclusive to each other. Irony occurs not just in satire but in dramatic and comedic art as well. Likewise, satire also uses many other rhetorical and comedic techniques, such as ridicule, to accomplish its goal” (Singh: 70). Oftentimes, satire is expected to be funny, to evoke laughter and to amuse, but its resulting effect is not always so. Like humor, satire can appear in two forms: “pure” comedy, which aims only to amuse and has no moral intention, and pure denunciation, which has only a moral or didactic purpose and need not make us laugh” (Keyishian: 529). It must be clearly noted that laughter alone is not a manifestation of satire nor is all works of satire humorous, but indeed satirists borrows all the comic devices for the purpose of criticism. Thus, the amalgamation of criticism and humor often brings out the effective essence of satire in literature.

In order to situate satire within the realm of literature, it is of foremost importance to trace its theoretical backgrounds which will act as a prominent foundation in building up the formation and nature of satire. Satire remains the subject of considerable theoretical examination and series of attempts have been made by numerous theorists from the past to the present age as to clearly define the nature of satiric theory. Typically most of these theorists base their understandings of satire ubiquitously upon two models: Horace and Juvenal. They are of the assumption that all satire follow either the pattern of Horace or Juvenal in order to express its tone or attitude. Satire, John Snyder has strongly claimed, is “a genre that stops itself from becoming a fully distinct alternative to other genres” and to defend his statement he has given two principal reasons:

It is unstable as a genre in that it must detour around its perplexity about human nature by constantly seeking its resolutions outside itself...For in satire there are no built-in, absolute outcomes such as victory, loss, and stalemate in tragedy; no wondrous singularity of outcome as there is in comedy; and no sure teleology such as that prescribed by the novel, which as a form means development instead

of stasis, open-endedness instead of closure, progressive ideology instead of eternal verities...Satire is unstable in yet another sense owing to this suspension between attacking human nature and retreating to human nature. It is unstable as linguistic maneuver, or set of moves, between a constative end—reduction of the already reduced or reducible—and a gesticulative *modus operandi*—irony. (Snyder: 102)

So satire, according to Snyder, is unstable and is liable to change and alteration depending upon the manner in which it is practiced by an individual satirist. Dustin Griffin remarks that “Most satiric theory, at least since the Renaissance, is polemical, ranging itself against some previous practice or claim and attempting to displace it.” (Griffin: 3). In dealing with satire, it is an important task to trace the manner in which satire has evolved and has been passed on from generation to generation.

Although the term “satire” and its literal meaning has not yet been embraced or acknowledged by the ancient Greeks, it can be assumed that they produced a great number of works which can be categorized under satirical work. Outstanding among the ancient writers was the Greek dramatist Aristophanes and his plays can be read as a fine example of satire. He wrote comedies for the ancient Greek competitions in Athens: the City Dionysia and the Leneia. Many of his works survive and have been translated into various languages worldwide; they continued to be read and studied to this day. The plays were famous for making jokes at the expense of particular well-known members of the audience, as well as critiquing Athenian society, government, and foreign policy, especially relating to wars. He made regular use of a character portrayed as an outsider within the context of the play, and who would often be ridiculed by the other characters for his views, but who ultimately displayed noble characteristics which would emphasize the foolishness of the behavior of those around him. (Parker). Themes which are known as commonly presented in satirical writings such as political satire and social satire also constantly recurs in the

works of Aristophanes. His political topic mainly deals with the life-and-death struggle between the Athenian and Spartan leagues but his stance is always to promote peace between the two:

He is the spokesman of the peace party, and four of his plays are passionate and eloquent pleas for peace. No one can doubt their insecurity; but here again we look in vain for any lofty ideal of politics; nor is there any trace of the poet's having felt very deeply the issues at stake in this war, while seldom does he betray any strong sympathies or antipathies as regards the different types of Greek people drawn into this moral conflict. The speech in the *Acharnians*, where he makes Dicaeopolis give serious political advice, minimizes the cause of the war to a quarrel over three harlots; but here he takes care to add that he hates Lacedaemon, and longs for an earthquake to level the proud city with the ground. It is significant that when Peace is drawn up from the pit she is accompanied by Sport and Plenty; all the glories of peace, as painted by Aristophanes, amount to creature comforts and joys, with freedom from the troublesome burdens of war. (Theatre History)

Apart from the political issues that he has plentifully dealt with, Aristophanes also leaves abundant space to caricature the different classes of society and in doing so it seems that the whole panorama of the Greek society passes before the eyes of the readers like a kaleidoscope. It should also be noted that there is always an underlying strand of humor in most of the works of Aristophanes which makes it easier to identify the element of satire that are inherently presented in his works.

In tracing the evolution of satire as a genre through history, there are broadly two forms of satire under which almost every satirical writing can be categorised: Horatian satire and Juvenalian satire, the one that makes people laugh and the other that makes them cringe. Horatian satire is termed after the Roman satirist Horace and relies mainly on gentle satire along with lighthearted humor. Like Aristophanes, Horace is another great practitioner of satire and his pronouncements can be

regarded as one of the earliest pronouncements that have been made about the nature of satire. Horatian satire is considered to be a more cheerful form of satire, which aims at attacking human foibles and follies by incorporating humor, wit and ridicule. Hence, a long tradition of Horatian satire evolves from these early practices of gentle satire with a touch of humor. Horace is considered by some scholars as a writer who often draws affinity with his predecessors, especially Lucilius. On the other hand, Dustin Griffin has vehemently argued:

In fact, Horace's own practice is considerably different from that of Lucilius and Aristophanes. He is oblique rather than blunt, smiling and hinting rather than attacking directly. And the theory of moral satire that he advances misrepresents his own range of interests. One would not know from Horace's programmatic satires of his digressiveness, his chattiness, the ironic disparity between moral idea and practice, between spirit and material circumstance...Satire, as Horace practices it, is considerably more diverse than laughter at folly. (Griffin: 8)

As Horatian satire emerges at a time when the genre of satire was still being shaped, the theoretical pronouncements that have been proposed by Horace must be read with careful examination. It cannot simply be assumed that Horace, in honoring his predecessor, Lucilius, has declared a continuity between their work or is representing his predecessor in such a way as to advance his own pronouncements of satire. "It depended on what element the historian thought was most important in satire—its rambling variety, its defamatory invective, its free speaking, its ribald ridicule, or its moral function". (Van Rooy: 137-39). It should also be noted that Horace himself also makes it more difficult to trace the intended pattern of his satirical works:

Thus he at first determined to suppress the idea of his satire as *satura*, since for him the idea was discredited by its associations. In his first book Horace calls his work not *saturae* or *satirae* but *sermones*, "little talks" or "conversations" (another term derived in fact from Lucilius).

It is only in his second book that Horace, having established his identity as an artful satirist, adopts the older term *satura*. (Griffin: 7)

Juvenalian satire is named after the Roman satirist Juvenal and its nature can be distinguished by its resentfulness and harshness in attacking human vices and follies. Some scholars believed that Juvenalian satire is often related by the sixteenth-century English writers on satire with the Greek notion of *satyr*, the half man-half beast. As Kernan has put it: “most of the practicing satirists in England from 1590 to 1620 thought a satire should be rude, derisive, harsh—written in the kind of language one might expect from a woodland satyr” (Griffin: 10). For reasons unknown, Horatian satire is rarely embraced by the sixteenth-century English writers. It can be the resulting effect of lack of knowledge or lack of native satirists in the Horatian tradition or most importantly, as Griffin has argued: “Perhaps the dominant Juvenalian theory prevented the Horatian voice from being heard.” (Griffin: 12). They have little to say about Horace and little does Horatian tradition finds its outlet on literature as most writers preferred Juvenalian satire to Horatian satire. Juvenal, according to them, “unlike Horace, he wrote nothing but satire (and was thus easier to categorize), and his rhetoric, to be sure, answers better to their theory. Even so, they were obliged to imagine a rancorous and savagely indignant Juvenal, not the highly skilled declamatory rhetorician” (Griffin: 11). One fine example is Thomas Lodge’s *Defence of Poetry* (1579) where he discovers the origin of satire in a form of early Greek satyr plays, which “presented the lives of Satyers, so that they might wiselye, under the abuse of that name, discover the follies of many theyrfoolish fellow citesens.” (Smith: 1: 80). Dustin Griffin, on the other hand has strongly argued:

The best of the Elizabethan satirists, by common consent, is John Donne, and the idea that the satirist is a sort of satyr founders when one takes up Donne’s poems, whose rhetoric is derived more from Horace than from Juvenal. Donne’s fawning courtiers (satires 1 and 4) are Horatian, as is the satirist’s presentation of himself as foolish

victim...Oddly enough, Kernan, who among modern critics has most fully surveyed Elizabethan satiric theory, has very little to say about Sir Thomas Wyatt, another important English satirist (perhaps in his century second only to Donne in distinction) in the Horatian tradition. (Griffin: 12)

It was a time when the English writers on satire embraced and employed varying traditions that ranged from Langland and Chaucer to Barclay and Skelton, therefore, it can be assumed that other equally partial theories of satire, apart from Horatian and Juvenalian satire, were also produced.

After the Elizabethan Theory of satire, Griffin has classified the next prevailing theory of satire as Casaubon and Renaissance Theory where he has mentioned that "The central text in Renaissance theory of satire, from a modern point of view, is Isaac Casaubon's *De Satyrica Graecorum Poesi et Romanorum Satira* (1605)" (Griffin: 12). This theory is based on the idea that the Greek and the Roman satiric traditions have no relation or interconnection with each other. Casaubon's theory of satire is chiefly distinguished for its appreciation for various forms and styles of satire though his preference was given to Persius, who was "the first of all to enrich, correct, and change for the better Roman satire," Casaubon conveys a clear sense of the particular excellence of Horace and Juvenal as well. Thus Horace's satire is marked by "purity of statement," grace and "simplicity" of narrative, and "a certain inexplicable charm." Juvenal on the other hand displays a richness of invention, a copiousness of example, "the power of forming great conceptions," and "lofty and sublime speech." Because he "scarcely digressed from the thesis proposed at the beginning and certainly never left it entirely," Persius most effectively reproves vice and commends virtue. (Medine: 271-98).

There are scholars who held the view that if Casaubon's work had been translated sooner or more widely, it might have served as an important influence in theorizing about satire.

Casaubon's stance upon satire has created a long dispute between scholars who are on the opposing ends. On one side were Casaubon and his followers Nicolas Rigault and (late in the century) Andre Dacier. On the other were J.C. Scaliger and Daniel Heinsius, who challenged Casaubon, insisting that Greek and Roman satire formed a single tradition and reasserting the older view that satire was essentially a dramatic form, descended from satyr plays. These rival scholars and editors vehemently argued and attacked each other in an attempt to bring down satire to a single tradition. More interesting and noteworthy, perhaps, is the distinguishing fact that the participants in the dispute went on to champion one or another of the classical Roman satirists, each building a conception of what satire is and should be from the practice of his hero. Thus Scaliger, reacting to Casaubon's praise, had preferred Horace and attacked Persius for obscurity, ineptness, and ostentation. Rigault, an editor of Juvenal and Persius, dismissed Horace as concerned with trivia, and Barten Holyday (another editor of Juvenal and Persius) argued that Juvenal's achievement in satire represented the "Perfection" of the form. Heinsius, in turn, declared that Juvenal improperly attacked high crimes and "atrocities" inappropriate for satire—since we do not so much reprehend them as abominate them—and made Horace the model for satire: satirists, he said, ought to excite laughter rather than horror and to employ a "low familiar way of speaking" which is very much in tandem with the Horatian tradition. (Griffin: 13-14)

Dryden is considered as the most important and influential inheritor of Casaubon as he retained most of Casaubon's appreciation for the variety of satire and the different excellences of the chief Roman satirists. "Discourse concerning the Original and Progress of Satire" (1693) is identified as one of the most prominent theoretical document when it comes to satirical writings. Apart from its many deficiencies and limitations, "our reigning notion of satire as a moral art and as a carefully

constructed and unified contrast between vice and virtue finds its fullest and most influential presentation in Dryden's essay". (Griffin: 15). There has been an endless controversies, confusion and disagreement upon the origins of satire. Theorists and editors continually dispute over the pronouncements and the traditions laid down by Horace, Juvenal, and Persius to the extent of their right to be considered true satirists. LeBoeuf has also recently argued:

Many scholars refer to ancient Roman *satura* as satire and treat it as such, but when the ancient Roman Quintilian wrote the famous line, "*saturaquidem tota nostra est*" (Quintilian X, I, 93), generally translated as "satire indeed is entirely ours," he was referring to the Roman genre, not to modern satire. This is an important distinction because not all *satura* is satire; despite the fact that the *saturae* of Horace and Juvenal are often translated as "Satires," they do not qualify as such under our definition. Take, for example, *Satire I* by Horace. The work begins with the statement, "*That all, but especially the covetous, think their own condition the hardest*"...Furthermore, Horace wrote for a small, elite group of his colleagues; the intent to persuade a large audience of the folly of the behavior he criticizes is absent. (LeBoeuf: 4-5)

From the above statement, it can be clearly noted that the origin of satire is an ongoing topic of discussion and confusion among scholars and theorists from the past till the present day. Some of these controversies are also of great concern to Dryden as much as it is to others. As many critics have commented, Dryden is characteristically ambivalent towards the merits of Horace and Juvenal, finding one thing or another to praise in each. In commenting upon the theoretical stance of Dryden, Harry Keyishian has claimed that:

Our modern understanding of satire is shaped by the distinctions the poet and critic Dryden drew in his "Discourse concerning the Original and Progress of Satire" (1693). It was he who differentiated between bitter and genial satire and associated the forms with Juvenal and Horace. He stressed the distinction between formal or "direct" satire, in which a single speaker addresses an audience (or an imagined

friend who “stands in” for the audience), and “indirect” satire, which works through some form of narrative or “fable.” Dryden suggests that the satirist seems most at home expressing an aristocratic viewpoint, though most satirists favor aristocracies of character and values, not birth status. (Keyishian)

In accordance with Keyishian’s claim, it can be identified that Dryden, in his attempt to carefully examine the origin of satire, does not divert a long way from the traditions that has been laid by Horace and Juvenal. Somehow, it can be assumed that Dryden is trying to “lay down some rules, to impose order on the teeming variety of satiric forms, and to redirect energy into a Roman line” (Griffin: 17). No doubt, there is nothing new to gain from his “discourse”, except his classification of the Mennipean (or as he calls it, following Casaubon) or Varronian tradition. According to the explanation of Keyishian, Menippean satire is named after the Greek Cynic philosopher Menippus (c. 225 B.C.E). “As it tends to work through narrative, it uses many voices and situations to produce its critique...This form is also called Varronian satire, after Marcus Terentius Varro (116-27 B.C.E), who adopted the Menippean mode in earthy, loosely structured commentaries on social follies, sectarianism, and modern fashions he thought silly, like the craze for Greek philosophy” (Keyishian: 530). Apart from the Mennipean tradition that he has mentioned, Dryden has done little or nothing in formulating a new line of theory for satire. Griffin has straightly argued:

Dryden’s theory of satire...needs to be situated in its fullest rhetorical context as an attempt to reshape contemporary thinking about satire, to justify Dryden’s own practice (especially in “fine raillery”), and to influence its reception. It remains to note, in summary fashion, that Dryden’s theory is of limited value for present-day theorists seeking any comprehensive account of the genre and of limited value even for explaining the practice of satire in Dryden’s own day. Although it has been shown that Dryden’s “Discourse” was widely known in the eighteenth century and that commentators on satire commonly quote it approvingly, his theory represents not so much what satire was and

had been as what Dryden and his followers wanted it to be. (Griffin: 21)

Thus, Dryden's theory of satire, can be considered as having its own limitations because of its narrow foundation on formal verse satire. However, it is not wise to draw a conclusion that Dryden's theory does not in fact solve all the crucial cases of formal verse satire.

Satire, with all its complex literary and graphic history, has abundantly found its outlet in literature which cannot be overlooked or neglected by readers, scholars, academicians and theorists of all time. It remains a prominent literary genre which served as a continual process and remains as one of the most commonly dealt topic of discussion within the realm of literature from the past to the present.

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