Satire as Gateway: 
Introducing Undergraduates to Eighteenth-Century Literature 

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AS SCHOLARS working in the field of eighteenth-century studies, we have likely all heard criticism from our students (and sometimes from colleagues in other specialties) regarding our chosen area of focus. Who among us has not experienced resistance from non-majors due to what some feel is the linguistic oddity of many works of the period, or their apparently occasional nature — the fact that many literary pieces of the time seem to be inextricably bound to the era in which they were written, with too many references to things, people, and events that today are far from familiar. The reading of a forty-line poem, I am often told by a frustrated student, can turn into a two-hour footnote-reading session.

My partial answer to this problem has been persuading the undergraduates to connect in a positive way with eighteenth-century studies through a writing course focused on satire: a literary mode that they already know (or think that they know) and enjoy. Familiarizing students with writers such as Alexander Pope, Jane Collier, and Jonathan Swift through the lens of satire helps them to feel as if they have an entrée into the sometimes strange world of the long eighteenth century.

At Northwestern University’s Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences, where I teach, incoming students do not take a designated freshman writing course as they do at some colleges or universities, but instead fulfill the school writing proficiency requirement by taking two freshman seminars over two quarters during their first year. Beyond the stipulation that professors teaching these seminars include multiple opportunities for students to improve their writing over the course of the quarter, they have a great deal of latitude in subject matter, but must keep in mind that though Northwestern freshmen are generally well-read, they will be coming from different majors, from pre-med to music, and thus their educational backgrounds and interests may vary widely. Topics for these seminars range from “Current Regulatory Issues,”
offered by the Economics department, to “the History of Hell,” offered by who else but the English department.

My freshman seminar, “The Uses of Satire,” taught through the Writing Program, is a genre / mode study that spans the centuries as far as the assigned reading goes, but, given my particular area of interest, our syllabus is naturally centered on the period widely known as the Age of Satire. After soliciting the students’ definitions of the term “satire” on the first day, I tell them about the roots of the word: that it comes from the Latin word *satur* and the later phrase *lanx satura*, which means a “miscellany, mixture or medley,” literally “a full dish of various kinds of fruits.” Students are often surprised that it is not, in fact, directly connected with the Roman god Saturn or with the satyr, two frequent misconceptions that have contributed to the idea that the writing of satire is in some way the sole province of male writers.

After we come to some agreement about our working definition of satire (“a creation that combines a censorious point of view with humor and wit in order to improve humankind or human institutions,” for example) and differentiate it from closely-related terms like *invective* (abusive, vituperative language that polarizes rather than persuades) and *parody* (the humorous imitation of a serious literary or artistic work), we discuss the inextricable link between satire and laughter. Humor is, of course, a crucial element of satire, and the kinds of laughter elicited by it may be very different in quality — the gentle, self-deprecatory laughter evoked by reading Horace, for example, versus the shocked, bitter laughter Juvenal’s writing calls forth. Whatever the nature of the laughter, its power cannot be denied, and to emphasize this idea I refer students to Bakhtin’s commentary on its disruptive, anarchic potential:

> Everything that makes us laugh is close at hand, all comical creativity works in a zone of maximal proximity. Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it. Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world. (23)

We discuss how, as Bakhtin implies, the satirical impulse can seem destructive, but the true satirist cuts in order to heal, engaging in a fundamentally positive, transformative enterprise. I remind the students of Vladimir Nabokov’s optimistic claim that “laughter is the best pesticide,” suggesting that it will inform our evaluation of all the works that we read in the course of the quarter. The students examine each assigned text or film with a series of questions in mind, such as: What is the satirist’s target? Is it clear? Is he or she merely tearing down an existing structure, or consciously attempting to inspire a remodeling?

Having established a definition of satire and worked through theories of
laughter that illuminate satirical works, the class then turns to a series of authors who have mastered the satirical mode. We begin with the most famous progenitors of the genre, Horace and Juvenal, and read in translation selected satires on social corruption, greed, women, writing, and foreigners, comparing how each satirist handles his subject. Over the course of the quarter, the students come to use the gentle, urbane, Horace and the indignant, angry Juvenal as the two yardsticks against which they measure the satires we read and view. Students usually identify Swift’s *Modest Proposal* as well as his poems “The Progress of Beauty,” “The Furniture of a Woman’s Mind” and “A Lady’s Dressing Room” as Juvenalian — as they do Lady Mary Montagu’s harsh, *ad hominem* response to the latter poem — while they classify Pope’s *Rape of the Lock* and his “Epistle to Burlington” as Horatian. They find that works such as Jane Collier’s *Essay on the Art of Ingeniously Tormenting* defy easy categorization, representing a combination of the Horatian and Juvenalian satirical modes.

Despite my inclusion of Collier, Montagu, and later satirists such as Fay Weldon and Amanda Craig on our syllabus, students are often surprised that so few famous women openly chose to write satire, and this surprise leads to a fruitful discussion on gender and the satirical mode. Indeed, given the substance of most modern anthologies (perhaps with the notable exception of Pickering and Chatto’s five-volume *British Satire 1785–1840*), one could easily come to the mistaken conclusion that women did not write satire at all before the modern era.

The young women who generally make up about half of my class are frequently put off by satire’s traditional association with masculinity, and the fact that many of the famous satires of the eighteenth century take women as their subject does not help matters. Rather than allow this fact to alienate my female students, distancing them even further from eighteenth-century literature, I attempt to provide a historical perspective. I suggest to them that considering the ancient roots of satire, its connections with its most famous forefathers, and the often openly aggressive strategies used by the earliest male satirists and their descendants, it is perhaps to be expected that an intelligent, market-savvy female writer would hesitate to avow her satirical roots.

After all, though the satiric muse is traditionally gendered as female, scholars like Felicity Nussbaum attest to the fact that the satirist’s position — that of a “moral, perceptive outsider possessed of manly vigor and violence” — was one that an eighteenth-century woman was likely never to achieve (81). Even canonical modern criticism has customarily perpetuated the assumption that satire is a masculine genre, often erroneously connecting it with the satyr, a “male mythical creature whose aggressive sexuality frightens the feminine delicacy of the nymphae and dryads” (Rabb 127). Little wonder that sharply witty and bitingly satirical writers like Maria Edgeworth, Frances Burney and even Jane Austen have been denied their due as satirists when the perception of satire as a masculine genre is so deeply entrenched.
Nor were women helped by the general lack of a classical education that prevented them from composing traditional works of satire, since male satirists often imitated or cited Latin originals, while women were forced to work from French or English translations. As Claudia Thomas Kairoff notes, this state of affairs compromised women’s authority in this literary tradition “from the outset” (277). In addition to opening herself up to ridicule for her lack of a classical education, any woman who assumed the satirist’s mantle was risking even harsher consequences. Students are often shocked by the cautionary example of Delarivier Manley, whose incisive satire on the Whigs in *The New Atalantis* (1709) actually resulted in her imprisonment. Even the well-established woman of letters Anna Barbauld, writing more than 100 years after *The New Atalantis* appeared, faced abuse for daring to employ her pen to criticize the bellicose nature of English and European leaders in her dark, Juvenalian poem “Eighteen hundred and eleven.” Infamously-vitriolic reviewer John Wilson Croker attacked “[o]ur old acquaintance Mrs. Barbauld turned satirist! The last thing we should have expected, and now that we have seen her satire the last thing that we could have desired” (Looser 309). Although “1811” is now acknowledged by scholars to be “one of the most powerful political satires of the early nineteenth century” (Mason 119), contemporary critics were anything but positive. Exposure to the satirical prose and poetry of Manley and Barbauld often sparks further in-class discussion of the intersection of genre and gender. The students usually remark about how much, in their opinions, this state of affairs has changed, citing modern female satirists such as Fay Weldon, Margaret Atwood, and even Tina Fey as examples of women who are out of the satirical closet and do not appear to have suffered unduly as a result.

An emphasis on the politics of satire and the activism of many of its authors also helps to generate student interest. When, for example, they read Swift’s *Modest Proposal* or Collier’s *Essay on the Art of Ingeniously Tormenting* in context, with the knowledge that these authors wrote with the serious and specific aim of improving aspects of society, students seem to feel a greater affinity for the satirical literature of the period. They come to see that just as Swift uses humor to draw attention to the mistreatment and dehumanization of the Irish poor and Collier comically reveals abuses of power in the domestic realm, twenty-first century satirists take on (post)modern ills. For instance, students consider the ways in which Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove* exposes and condemns the senselessness and paranoia of modern warfare and George Orwell’s *1984* challenges unbridled governmental control.

By the end of the seminar, when the students have written on three different satirical works (including one paper on Swift, Collier or Pope and one film review), they are fluent enough to stand in front of their fellow students to give a twenty-minute presentation on a contemporary satirical work of their choice, analyzing it for us, evaluating its merits and weaknesses, and connecting it back to the satires that came before. The material chosen by students has run the gamut from television
shows like *The Simpsons* to films like *The Life of Brian*, to novels like *Thank You for Smoking*, and even to political cartoons by artists such as Mike Luckovich and Gerald Scarfe. I am always happy with the knowledge of previous satires their presentations reveal and the connections the students are able to make between the themes, ideas and styles of eighteenth-century satires and those of their own time.

Overall, I have noticed that my students leave this genre / mode-focused course with much improved critical thinking skills and a greater interest in the literature and history of the eighteenth century. As the satiric enterprise is inherently critical in nature, it is to be expected that after reading some of the best satire of the eighteenth century students should become more adept at the skills of interpretation and evaluation that are necessary parts of the satirist’s (and critic’s) arsenal. The anonymous course evaluations they complete at the end of the course indicate both an enjoyment of the material (“the readings are really interesting and fun to read” and “I’m glad we were able to study works from a range of eras”) and an acknowledgment of the sometimes formidable nature of satire (“the material covered is sometimes challenging”). At the same time, students’ evaluations reflect an awareness of their own development as writers and critical thinkers over the course of the quarter, and they universally find value in our class discussions (labeled alternatively “interesting,” “amazing,” “intelligent,” “free” and “hilarious”), bearing out my own observations that even the most reticent of students ultimately takes on an active role in class discussions when called upon to respond to such provocative works. These comments indicate a degree of comfort with the eighteenth century and the genre of satire that is surprising, given the brevity of the time we spend together (“I came into the class a fan of satire; now I feel that I know how to dissect it and use it to its full extent”). In fact, many of my students have taken it upon themselves to bring in (unsolicited) satirical works of their own to proffer up for their classmates’ delectation (or groans): a dissection of the recent mayoral race in Chicago written in heroic couplets, for example, or one young woman’s own “modest proposal” that we leave our air conditioners on high and open all the windows in order to battle global warming.

Spurred on by such positive reactions, one aspect of the class that I intend to develop further is a service-learning component. I always emphasize that satire has a use — that writers such as Pope and Montagu were actively trying to alter their communities for the better. Swift’s *Modest Proposal* skewered absentee landlordism, among others targets. *The Rape of the Lock* attempted to smooth over a rift between families. The “Epistle to Burlington” was written in part to prevent the gentry from neglecting their duties to the land and to those under their care who worked on it. This notion of satire as a performative “speech act” (Austin 7–13), as capable of acting on the world, is a point of discussion with the students, who often ask how effective satire is in changing society. In response to this question, I frequently begin by quoting the late Peter Cook, British actor and comedian who, when praised by an interviewer for his satirical wit, wryly responded: “Well, the heyday of satire was
Weimar Germany — and look how it stopped Hitler” (74). At the same time, there are obviously some very accomplished writers who still feel that satire is a worthwhile tool for societal change, and to emphasize this we watch selected excerpts from the work of Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, Lewis Black and Tina Fey, as well as attending a show put on by the players of Second City (their recent *Weddings of Mass Destruction*, for example, which skewered the current furor over gay marriage). There is an essential optimism in the work of these writers and performers — what J.L. Austin calls satire’s confidence that “truth exposed is better than truth colored or made bearable” (67). The idea that this revelation of truth can and will move audiences to think critically about the world around them is also optimistic, and my hope is that by the course’s end students — encouraged by the works they have read and viewed — will realize some of the rhetorical possibilities inherent in satire and perhaps choose to wield the weapon themselves.

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WORKS CITED


