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978-0-521-03409-8 - Eighteenth-Century Satire: Essays on Text and Context from Dryden to Peter Pindar

Howard D. Weinbrot

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

THE ACHIEVEMENT OF DRYDEN'S "DISCOURSE ON SATYR"

LATER SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY SATIRE was an incoherent setting of diamonds and coal. Poets of genius, or less, often lacked design, full awareness of the limits of their art, and modulation of tone. Butler's endless *Hudibrastics* stretch a joke until it breaks; Rochester's "Allusion to Horace" (1680) is written by a brilliant self-destructive solipsist often too intent on savaging his apparent inferiors than convincing us that they are inferiors worth savaging; Robert Gould, and even the more promising John Oldham, are best when shouting with graveled voices. The significant exception to this expandable list of course is John Dryden.

Whether through native gift, experience with dramatic dialogue, breadth of classical and modern reading, or all of the above, Dryden could give satire shape, variety, and appealing public urgency for private concerns. Both in the largely punitive *Mac Flecknoe* (1682, 1684) and the corrective heroic satire *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681), Dryden offers unity of plot, diversity of voice, and community of response between satirist and audience, and at times even between the satirist and the satirized: he teaches the once-profligate David-Charles II to adopt the values of the narrator-Dryden. In Dryden's hands, satire is purged of some of its energetic vulgarity – as evident in peer as in plebeian – and acquires good manners that can easily be rejected when "please" fails. As Dryden says in the preface to *Absalom and Achitophel*, those who wrongly "imagine I have done my Worst, may be Convinc'd, at their own Cost, that I can write Severely, with more ease, than I can Gently."¹ This is a truth seen by any reader of the consequent "Epistle to the Whigs" and *The Medall. A Satyre against Sedition* (1682) in which "English Ideots" run to see "The Polish Medall" of "A Monster" (ll. 2–4). Union of refinement and fatal power is also demonstrated in Dryden's familiar preference in the "Discourse" for "the fineness of a stroak that separates the Head from the Body, and leaves it standing in its place," to "the slovenly Butchering of a Man."² However fine the stroke, the bodyless head will hatch no more plots against its king. Dryden, after all, illustrates his point with the character of the traitor Zimri, the Buckingham in *Absalom and Achitophel*.

Notwithstanding Dryden's, and even Boileau's, practice, by 1692 later seventeenth-century English satire lacked a self-conscious, synthetic, and

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both authoritative and comprehensible history and assessment of the modern satirist's art. The ingredients had long been in place – an ongoing controversy regarding the derivation and corollary nature of formal verse satire; debate regarding the character and merits of Horace, Persius, and Juvenal; translations or imitations of all or significant parts of their respective canons; many satirists practicing varied species of the genre; and the modern example of Boileau, widely seen as the heir of Roman satire under an Augustan Louis XIV. Dryden's role would be to launder the soiled prose of Renaissance Latin by men like Casaubon, Heinsius, Rigaltius, and Scaliger; with apparent impartiality and admission of weakness to state the arguments on each side of each debate; and after his own judgment had played upon the wisdom of the distant past and near present, to transmit a benevolently despotic document that influenced satiric taste, theory, and practice until the decline of formal verse satire in the next century. Dryden dates his "Discourse" on 18 August 1692. He might as well have dated this preface to his English Juvenal and Persius the Year One, for like the Whig revolution to which Dryden objected, it consolidated trends, made a new contribution, and changed the future and the view of the past.



One of his chief tasks would be to make qualitative and personal and political distinctions regarding the three great Roman satirists. The easiest part was the discussion of Persius, for though Casaubon had championed the small body of Persius' crabbed satire, he gained few converts. Dryden nonetheless accepts and seconds both the moral and, we shall see, structural bases of Persius' art, and regards him as "the last of the first Three Worthies" but superior both to the Greek and to modern satirists, "excepting *Boileau* and your Lordship" Dorset, to whom the book is dedicated (p. 76).

Dryden's elegant compliment to Persius the diminished triumvir had at least two functions: one was to reinforce satiric clarity and the pleasure gained from an un-Persian immediacy of apprehension; the other was to offer sufficiently high praise so that his genuine literary virtues remained norms against which his brother-satirists could be judged.

Perhaps the chief of these was Horace, whose satire was becoming progressively more popular and threatened to replace the long-standing affection for Juvenalian and Persian roughness. The Francophile, superficially polite court of Charles II had fostered such "Augustan" taste, and any strong king, whether Tory James or Whig William, preferred to be addressed in the respectful Horatian tones of "a Court Satirist" who "comply'd with the Interest of his Master" (pp. 69, 68). For Dryden, Horace was the satirist in the court of a "Conquered People." Here is Dryden the supporter of a banished dynasty, ill at ease with the foreign king and, I suspect, thinking of himself in

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this description of disgruntled Romans under Augustus: "They cou'd not possibly have forgotten the Usurpation of that Prince upon their Freedom, nor the violent Methods which he had us'd, in the compassing of that vast Design" (p. 66). For all Horace's eminence as an instructor, rallier, and splendid poet of varied talents, as a satirist he is second to Juvenal and second in political morality.

Dryden's political and personal logic in the "Discourse" thus virtually dictate his preference for Juvenalian satire and for a modified form of the nation's earlier satiric taste. In Dryden's hands, the harsh cadence of Juvenal's rugged line would be polished while retaining its identity as elevated satire by a moral, perceptive outsider. That outsider, like Dryden himself, preferred an earlier dispensation, and is more serious than his main competitor. He attacks vice not Horatian folly; he is tragic not comic; he is rhetorically sublime and refuses the Horatian garbage of puns. Horace "was dipt in the same [illicit] Actions" of his monarch (p. 69), but Juvenal speaks truth to the corrupt power from which he is dissociated. Hence,

we cannot deny that *Juvenal* was the greater Poet, I mean in Satire. His Thoughts are sharper, his Indignation against Vice is more vehement; his Spirit has more of the Commonwealth Genius; he treats Tyranny, and all the Vices attending it, as they deserve, with the utmost rigour: And consequently, a Noble Soul is better pleas'd with a Zealous Vindicator of *Roman* Liberty; than with a Temporizing Poet, a well Manner'd Court Slave, and a Man who is often afraid of Laughing in the right place: Who is ever decent, because he is naturally servile.

For Juvenal, "*Roman* Liberty was to be asserted"; for Horace, the avaricious and flycatchers were to be scolded in easier times. "This Reflection at the same time excuses *Horace*, but exalts *Juvenal*" (pp. 65–66) and, it would seem, a "noble soul" like Dryden able to appreciate such qualities.

This exaltation takes two other forms – one is the relative manliness Dryden attributes to each satirist. He is not much moved by Horace, whose offered "Delight . . . is but languishing." Though "He may Ravish other Men," Dryden is "too stupid and insensible to be tickl'd" by Horatian "faint" wit and "Salt . . . almost insipid." The sexual imagery is less subdued upon Juvenal's appearance. He is "of a more vigorous and Masculine Wit," gives "as much Pleasure as I can bear" and "fully satisfies my Expectation . . . : His Spleen is rais'd, and he raises mine" (p. 63). No wonder that when Dryden apportions the prizes to these satirists he borrows from *Aeneid* v. 407–11 and awards Juvenal the majestic war horse, and Horace, for all his strength, the arrows of an Amazon probably conquered by a stronger male:

The first of these obtains a stately Steed
Adorn'd with trappings; and the next in Fame,
The Quiver of an *Amazonian* Dame;
With feather'd *Thracian* arrows well supply'd.³ (406–9)

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The other exaltation of Juvenal is generic. Casaubon's *Prolegomena* (1605) to Persius had changed the derivation of satire and thereafter its conception and practice. Hitherto, the ambiguous tortured genealogy of the form rested largely upon either the Greek tragic satyr, or the woodland satyr, half man half goat, who whipped away one's vices. Casaubon, however, argued that satire actually was an adjective, not a noun, and that it was a variant of *satura*, full or abundant, with *lanx*, a plate or charger, understood. Satire would give one a full plate of wickedness to be attacked; it was nevertheless loosely held together by the boundaries of the charger itself, and descended from comedy not tragedy. To be truly satiric one therefore needed to lower one's voice and subject and avoid the heroic path. This view was especially popular in France, and was well promulgated in the several editions of André Dacier's influential translation and commentary on Horace (1681–89).

Dryden offered dual responses to this trend. On the one hand he declared a truce and discriminated between satiric modes and their respective best models: "what disreputation is it to *Horace*, that *Juvenal* Excels in the Tragical Satyre, as *Horace* does in the Comical?" (pp. 73–74). On the other, he preferred to praise Juvenal as the best satirist because associated with the best species of the genre. This goes far towards explaining Dryden's apparent digression on epic poetry, which he thinks superior even to tragedy, and which still can be written in a Christian nation. By establishing the transcendence of the heroic genre, he also establishes the transcendence of Juvenal's heroic (or sometimes "tragic") satire. The vices he lashes are among "the most enormous that can be imagin'd"; they also are "Tragical Vices" (p. 62) that evoke "Elevated . . . Sonorous . . . Noble . . . sublime and lofty" thoughts (p. 63). In contrast, Horace wrote on subjects "of a lower" and, we have seen, of a more compromising, "nature than those of which *Juvenal* has written" (p. 69). Heinsius thus wrongly confuses the part with the whole and claims that satire proceeds "in a low familiar way, chiefly in a sharp and pungent manner of speech." This confused description, Dryden observes, "is wholly accommodated to the *Horatian* way," and excludes "the Works of *Juvenal* and *Persius*, as foreign from that kind of Poem" (p. 77). Dryden's metaphors, again drawn from the sexual and equestrian, demonstrate his impatience with Horace and his apologists:

But how come Lowness of Style, and the Familiarity of Words is to be so much the Propriety of Satire, that without them, a Poet can be no more a Satirist, than without Risibility he can be a Man? Is the fault of *Horace* to be made the Virtue, and Standing Rule of this Poem? Is the *Grande Sophos* of *Persius*, and the Sublimity of *Juvenal*, to be circumscrib'd, with the meanness of words and vulgarity of expression? If *Horace* refus'd the pains of Numbers, and the loftiness of Figures, are they bound to follow so ill a Precedent? Let him walk a Foot with his Pad in his Hand, for his own pleasure; but let them not be accounted no Poets who choose to mount, and shew their Horsemanship. (p. 78)

That elevation so appealed to Dryden that he extended it to the serious genre of the mock-heroic. Though Virgil's fourth Georgic speaks about bees,

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for example, he "raises the Lowness of his Subject by the Loftiness of his Words; and ennobles it by Comparisons drawn from Empires, and from Monarchs" (p. 83). The *Lutrin* successfully learned from Virgil, to whom Boileau "scarcely" yields. Such a form is in fact "the most Beautiful and most Noble kind of Satire. Here is the Majesty of the Heroique, finely mix'd with the Venom of the other; and raising the Delight which otherwise wou'd be flat and vulgar, by the Sublimity of the Expression." Satire is "undoubtedly a Species" of "Heroique Poetry" (p. 84) with which it shares several traits of style and subject – as the author of *Mac Flecknoe* and *Absalom and Achitophel* well knew.

Dryden's penultimate contribution to the craft of formal verse satire also elevates Juvenal at the expense of Horace. Now, though, Dryden allies his genre with the dramatic, and returns to the tactfully treated Casaubon and Persius as norms. That great scholar preferred Persius because of his coherence and unity of design, which Dryden also accepts as the way in which "a Modern Satire shou'd be made" (p. 78). Horace often engaged in two or more arguments, "and the second without dependence on the first." Persius knew that "a perfect Satire . . . ought only to treat of one Subject" or theme. "As in a Play of the *English* Fashion, which we call a *Tragedy*, there is to be but one main Design: And tho' there be an Under-plot, or Second Walk of Comical Characters and Adventures, yet they are subservient to the Chief Fable, carry'd along under it, and helping to it; so that the Drama may not seem a Monster with two Heads" (p. 79). This coherence requires the poet to attack one vice that is the opposite of the virtue praised. Horace chose to ignore this precept of his art, whereas Juvenal "has chosen to follow the same Method of *Persius*, and not of *Horace*. And *Boileau*, whose Example alone is sufficient Authority, has wholly confin'd himself, in all his Satires, to this Unity of Design" (p. 80).

In stressing Juvenal's freedom of choice within a growing literary tradition, Dryden suggests perhaps his final, and overlooked, achievement. For all his essay's deserved respect for ancient masters, it is a "modern" cannonade in the battle between the ancients and moderns. The full title offers a revealing code word: "A Discourse concerning the Original and Progress of Satyr." The term "progress" was anathema to advocates of the ancients, for whom the world was in decline from approximately its Homeric past, when heroes, nature, and poets were at their untarnished golden apex. On this scheme, even civilized silver Virgil could but adapt his more glorious ancestor. Dryden inverts such assumptions. He chronicles the early, crude, Graeco-Roman satiric modes, sees them begin to mature in the Roman Lucilius, advance to Horace, add unity of design in Persius, meet full potential in Juvenal, and, though this never is quite clear, perhaps even fuller potential in the "living *Horace* and a *Juvenal*" of Boileau: "What he borrows from the Ancients, he repays with Usury of his own: in Coin as good, and almost as Universally valuable" (p. 12).

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Boileau's presence helps to justify Dorset's, with whom he is coupled as a model of satiric greatness (p. 76). Dorset surely is overpraised because he was a generous patron; but he also had claims to be a modern satirist and the heir of a great tradition enriched by its latest practitioners as the genre improved. Dorset, for instance, can excel Horace by adding "that pointedness of Thought, which is visibly wanting in" him. Dorset also has more numbers, versification, and dignity than Donne (p. 6). Dorset thus exemplifies Donne's Renaissance Juvenalianism polished with Horatian elegance, and Horatian lowness raised by Juvenalian dignity and point. In the *Essay of Dramatick Poesy* (1668) Dorset was Eugenius, an advocate of the superiority of the modern English dramatist; here he is an example of the superiority of the modern English satirist.

Horace, on the other hand, had only the meager inheritance of Lucilius whom he "resolv'd to surpass . . . in his own Manner," a humble, low way that is a "dead Weight." Horace indeed won that race, but "limiting his desires only to the Conquest of *Lucilius*, he had his Ends of his Rival, who liv'd before him; but made way for a new Conquest over himself, by *Juvenal*, his Successor." Horace "cou'd not give an equal pleasure to his Reader, because he us'd not equal Instruments" (p. 64), one of which was Horace's own model of the limits of low satire. Dryden offers a central statement of Juvenalian progress and a modernism that, however offensive to Swift, combined the ancient and modern worlds in an improving tradition.

Anyone offended by Horace's second-place finish, Dryden says, should consider that Juvenal was talented, diligent, and studious. Moreover,

coming after him, and Building upon his Foundations might [he] not probably, with all these helps, surpass him? And whether it be any dishonour to *Horace*, to be thus surpass'd; since no Art, or Science, is at once begun and perfected, but that it must pass first through many hands, and even through several Ages? If *Lucilius* cou'd add to *Ennius*, and *Horace* to *Lucilius*, why, without any diminution to the Fame of *Horace*, might not *Juvenal* give the last perfection to that Work? (p. 73)

As Dryden also says, following Barten Holyday, Persius and Juvenal "chang'd Satire, . . . but they chang'd it for the better" (p. 70); and, Dryden adds in his own voice, "Why shou'd we offer to confine free Spirits to one Form, when we cannot so much as confine our Bodies to one Fashion of Apparel?" (p. 78). Any such offer would not be accepted by John Dryden who believed that cultures and the genres that express them improve through competition and available examples.

Dryden's manifold achievements in the "Discourse," then, include propagation and assessment of Continental Latin and French learning adapted to contemporary English needs; he places Horace, Persius, and Juvenal in their proper ranks in a satiric hierarchy, thereby slowing, but not stopping, the popularity of low comic Horatian satire adapted to the court, in favor of Juvenalian, political, opposition satire of the elevated tragic or epic kind. He

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also establishes the choice of satiric models as a form of political expression; at the best, he restores Juvenal's splendor, and at the least he establishes separate but equal comic and tragic satiric modes; he urges the pattern of coherent praise and blame as necessary in formal verse satire; and he insists on a modern progress through a limited but great past that grows greater as its satiric options increase.



In preparing this collection of essays, I realized that these extraordinary achievements inform much eighteenth-century satiric practice and theory and significant aspects of the essays reprinted within. Though this is not a book with a unified thesis, it nonetheless offers a movement through time and satiric accomplishments from Dryden to Peter Pindar, from the solidification to the collapse of the greatest years of English verse satire that is not subsumed within another form – as it is in Byron's *Don Juan*.

These essays are divided into two sometimes overlapping classes. In "Contexts" the "Pattern of Formal Verse Satire" examines the knowledge of Dryden's design of a "perfect satire" throughout much of the eighteenth century. "History, Horace, and Augustus Caesar" amplifies Dryden's anti-Augustanism and examines the implications for so-called "Augustan" satire. "Masked Men and Satire and Pope" considers the persona in eighteenth-century satire and, implicitly, some of Dryden's view of how satirists "have prosecuted their intention" (p. 55) and communicated a sense of personal presence, whether positive or negative.

The essays in "Texts" examine specific poems by most of the major eighteenth-century verse satirists. "The Swelling Volume" analyzes Rochester's *Letter from Artemisia* (1679) and considers what the world of satire is like when Dryden's insistence on norms, or a praised and active virtue, is lacking. The study of Rochester's "Allusion to Horace" considers a satire and imitation before Dryden's best practice and "Discourse"; his valid assumption that poets learn from poets is one reason that Pope's imitations are so good, for he saw the imitation insufficiently exploited in Rochester. "'Natures Holy Bands' in *Absalom and Achitophel*" and "*The Rape of the Lock* and the Contexts of Warfare" study different modes of heroic satire and may suggest why Dryden thought so highly of that serious form, still so weighted with distorting modern clichés. The three following essays show how Dryden's view of the political statement inherent in the satiric model, and of the liberating nature of satiric choices, is fully exemplified in Pope. Someone for whom "Horace" is a synonym for "court sycophant" is not likely to use Horace as the impeccable literary, moral, and social norm he is so often mislabeled. The essays on Johnson's *London* (1738) and *The Vanity of Human Wishes* (1749) make plain, in the first case, the need to understand the history

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of interpretation in order to understand Johnson's modern Juvenal; in the second case it makes plain the strength of a better modern Juvenal handsomely elevated but nonetheless – again consistent with Dryden's view – surpassed by a modern competitor. The final essay, in effect, suggests the collapse of Dryden's tradition and the inward turning that renders satire irrelevant as a public act and art; in this new world harsh satirists like Churchill and Wolcot are most concerned with self-expression and regard earlier practitioners, to whom they may be in debt, as statues in a museum rather than part of a living tradition. By then, indeed, many of Wolcot's satires are called odes.

To be sure, these essays do, I very much hope, raise many other problems and aspects of scholarly and critical method. Throughout, for example, I insist on the need to examine eighteenth-century texts with eighteenth-century evidence, the better to see individual achievement within its tradition. Modern literary criticism has much to be said in its favor; that excludes critical imperialism in which vastly different works are colonized and made microcosmic clones of some larger theory more important than the literature itself.⁴ I have assembled these essays on behalf of some eighteenth-century satiric literature, its contexts, and their modern students.

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I · THE PATTERN OF FORMAL VERSE SATIRE IN THE RESTORATION AND THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

THOUGH FORMAL verse satire was a major genre in the Augustan age, students of satire have generally been reluctant to define its essential traits. Perhaps the most illuminating study is Mary Claire Randolph's "The Structural Design of the Formal Verse Satire." She remarks that the satire of Lucilius, Horace, Persius, and Juvenal was "bi-partite in structure," that a particular vice or folly was attacked in "Part A," and its opposite virtue praised in "Part B." There is always more attack than praise in satire "since, paradoxically, in the very act of presenting the negative or destructive side of human behavior the satirist is establishing a positive foundation on which he can base his specific recommendation to virtue."¹ Whether introduced by direct exhortation, implication, or quotable proverb, the "admonition to virtue" is inevitably present in formal verse satire: "it must be there, spoken or unspoken, if the piece is to be more than mere virulence and fleeting invective . . . In any case, whatever the plan, the positive rational mode of procedure advocated or unmistakably implied in a satire will be the precise opposite of the vice or folly ridiculed."²

Though accurate, Miss Randolph's remarks are based on classical Roman precedent, and she offers virtually no evidence about the influence of the structure on Restoration and eighteenth-century theory and practice. Nor does she indicate that any satirist or commentator other than Dryden and possibly Young, discussed the structure of formal verse satire. Dryden, she says, was "the only critic in English literature who has come reasonably close to an apprehension of the basic structure of the genre."³ But Miss Randolph does not believe that Dryden's remarks, which are based on the classical pattern, influenced later satirists, for, she says, his "Discourse concerning the Original and Progress of Satyr" (1693) was overlooked and unappreciated. We must therefore infer that the pattern of satire that she describes was unknown to most English satirists.

Other scholars, applying Miss Randolph's insight regarding the structure of the genre, have found that Pope's satires exhibit the pattern of praise and blame;⁴ but none of them has shown that in using this pattern Pope adheres to the concept of formal verse satire described by Dryden. That is, contrary to Miss Randolph's view, Dryden's concept of the form was well known during