

I

THE NATURE OF SATIRE

SATIRE has never received much serious attention from English criticism. For one book on satire there are probably half a dozen on comedy, and perhaps as many more again on tragedy. It is true that in recent years there have been signs of an increased interest in satirical writing, but a good deal of the old Romantic prejudice against satire still remains. The satirist is destructive; he destroys what is already there (and what to many people appears to be functioning quite satisfactorily), and he does not necessarily offer to fill the vacuum that he has created. He is, as Mr Kenneth Tynan remarked recently of Bernard Shaw, 'a demolition expert'. We are being grossly irrelevant, Mr Tynan added, 'if we ask a demolition expert, when his work is done: "But what have you created?"... Shaw's genius was for intellectual slum-clearance, not for town-planning'.¹ If the present age is not unsympathetic to intellectual slum-clearance, the feeling that the satirist is somehow negative, uncreative and irresponsible is still there.

There might, however, be more critical discussion of satire if the satirical could be more easily isolated for analysis. When we think of satire we are not usually bringing our minds to bear on some specific form (the satirical poem, the satirical novel), but on some quality which gives a work its special character. Even if we do go on to consider the satirical poem or play or novel, we are not yet dealing with a form which can be easily defined, or which is much more

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-09175-6 - English Satire
James Sutherland
Excerpt
[More information](#)

ENGLISH SATIRE

than a convenient category for discussing individual works that may vary widely in structure and tone and even intention. *Hudibras*, *The Rape of the Lock*, *The Vicar of Bray*, *The Dunciad*, *Verses on the Death of Dr Swift*, Samuel Wesley's epigram 'On the setting up Mr Butler's monument in Westminster-Abbey', Johnson's verses on Sir John Lade's coming of age, *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, *The Vision of Judgment*, are all satirical poems, but they have little in common apart from the fact that they are all critical, some more, some less, of actual people or of an existing state of affairs. Some works, again, are satirical throughout; in others the satire is only intermittent, one element in a more complex effect. The lines that separate the satirical from the unsatirical are often hard to define, either because the writer shifts easily and rapidly from one mood to another, or because the satirical tone is so rarefied as to be almost imperceptible. In considering English satire I want to be free to discuss it wherever it occurs. If I were to confine myself to works which are professedly and unmistakably satirical from beginning to end, I should have to ignore some of the subtlest and most penetrating satire in English literature.

The main difficulty, I believe, is to distinguish the satirical from the comic. The writer of comedy is usually dealing with the same sort of materials as the writer of satire. Like the satirist, he is very much alive to the follies and imperfections and faults of men and women; he sees us falling short in one way or another of the standards to which he himself consciously or unconsciously subscribes, or notably ignoring or departing from the conventions which he accepts. He perceives, as Bergson put it,¹ certain rigidities,

THE NATURE OF SATIRE

a certain inelasticity of mind or lack of adaptation in men and women, and in his novel or his play (or, it may be, in his essay on Sir Roger de Coverley or the Man in Black) he exposes them in action. But all this he does, as Wordsworth said of the old farmer of Tilsbury Vale, 'in the ease of his heart'. The writer of comedy accepts the natural and acquired folly and extravagance and impudence which a bountiful world provides for his enjoyment; he is a sort of human bird-watcher, detached and attentive, but no more troubled by moral issues than the ordinary bird-watcher is when the starlings swoop down on his bird table and drive away the tits and the nut-hatch. It is surely in this spirit that Shakespeare watches Falstaff and Sir Toby Belch and Bottom and Autolycus, and it is largely because Shakespeare withholds his moral judgment that those characters are allowed to develop so abundantly, to flower into the perfection of irresponsibility, to belong so completely and unquestionably to folly's idle brood, self-pleasing and quite touchingly self-absorbed. This does not mean that the writer of comedy has no standards or norms; he can only be alive to the eccentric, the abnormal, the imperfect if he is aware of the regular, the normal, and so on. But though he is a balanced and integrated person himself, I have never supposed that he has any vested interest in pushing moral standards; and his attitude to those who fall short of them appears to vary from an amused tolerance to a cheerful or even delighted acceptance. So far as human nature is concerned, he is much more likely to appear as Counsel for the Defence than Counsel for the Prosecution, but his normal position is among the spectators in the public gallery. Although he judges what he sees and hears, he has no

ENGLISH SATIRE

great desire to pass judgment, and still less to strip bare and victimise the intellectual and moral imbeciles he has observed.

It is, on the contrary, the mark of the satirist that he cannot accept and refuses to tolerate. Confronted with the same human shortcomings as the writer of comedy (and with others more serious) he is driven to protest. For him those are not matters for pure contemplation; they must be exposed, held up to derision or made to look as hideous as he believes them to be. 'After all,' Shaw once wrote, 'the salvation of the world depends on the men who will not take evil good-humouredly, and whose laughter destroys the fool instead of encouraging him.'¹ Yet if the satirist is sometimes concerned with sins and crimes almost too serious for comedy, the difference between the satirist and the writer of comedy is not the difference between flagrant sins and trivial faults.

The motives that lead to satire are varied, but there is one motive that may almost be called a constant: the satirist is nearly always a man who is abnormally sensitive to the gap between what might be and what is. Just as some people feel a sort of compulsion, when they see a picture hanging crooked, to walk up to it and straighten it, so the satirist feels driven to draw attention to any departure from what he believes to be the truth, or honesty, or justice. He wishes to restore the balance, to correct the error; and often, it must be admitted, to correct or punish the wrongdoer. We need not take Persius too literally when he says that he must speak out or burst; but much of the world's satire is undoubtedly the result of a spontaneous, or self-induced, overflow of powerful indignation, and acts as a catharsis for such emo-

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-09175-6 - English Satire
James Sutherland
Excerpt
[More information](#)

THE NATURE OF SATIRE

tions. What, however, distinguishes the satirist from most other creative writers is the extent to which he is dependent on the agreement or approval of his readers. If he is to achieve this catharsis for himself, he must compel his readers to agree with him; he must persuade them to accept his judgment of good and bad, right and wrong; he must somehow inoculate them with his own virus. In actual practice, a minority of his readers probably agree with him already; the great majority are either quite indifferent and must be aroused, or they are actively hostile and must be converted.

The art of the satirist, then, is an art of persuasion, and persuasion is the chief function of rhetoric; indeed, the first definition that the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives of rhetoric is 'the art of using language so as to persuade or influence others'. I take satire, therefore, to be a department of rhetoric. Where the writer of comedy is content to interest and amuse, and to fashion delightful patterns out of human character and action, the writer of satire is trying to persuade men to admire or despise, to examine their habitual assumptions, to face ugly facts, to look beneath the surface of things, to change sides in politics or religion, to return to the old and true, to abandon the old and outworn, to do this or to do the exact opposite—in short, to see, or think, or believe whatever seems good to the writer of satire. It is, then, the satirist's *intention* that differentiates him from most other writers; and though individual satirists vary greatly from one another in temperament, and so may be quite unlike in their method and approach, they have in common the practical intention of working upon the mind of the reader so as to influence his attitudes and beliefs, and ultimately, it may be, his actions. No wonder the satirist is unpopular

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-09175-6 - English Satire
 James Sutherland
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

ENGLISH SATIRE

in many quarters; he comes round knocking us up from a comfortable sleep to face hard and uncomfortable facts. Later, we shall have to distinguish the satirist from other writers who set out to persuade us, such as preachers, the author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, political journalists, and so on; and again we may find the precise dividing line between one kind and another rather hard to draw.

How important the intention is when we are trying to discriminate between comedy and satire may be illustrated by a news item that appeared recently in a London newspaper, the *Daily Express*:

Forty-three year old Mrs M— H—, fined £5 at Lambeth yesterday for stealing a 6s. 6d. slice of veal from a Brixton self-service store, said: 'The public should be protected from this kind of shop. They put temptation in your way, then the blame is put on you, and not the shop.'

That, I submit, is comic. We admit the moral eccentricity, but we recognise the psychology, and we salute the resurgence of the human spirit in difficulties. I could easily imagine Falstaff protesting in very similar terms to the Lord Chief Justice if he had been caught lifting a sirloin from a butcher's stall. Yet when this news item was reprinted where in fact I found it, in the well-known column called 'This England' in the *New Statesman*, the effect was somewhat different. The account of the Brixton woman had now become satire, or something like it. It had become satire because we were being invited to read the passage as yet another exposure of the English character; our laughter was being solicited, and we were expected to laugh with the critical condescension of a good *New Statesman* reader. In any case we had come already prepared to scoff, for as

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-09175-6 - English Satire
 James Sutherland
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

THE NATURE OF SATIRE

habitual readers of 'This England' we turn to each week's instalment with our minds primed for the sort of thing we are to expect.

If we can agree that it is the satirist's intention—to expose, or deride, or condemn—that distinguishes him from the writer of comedy, then we shall probably find that much of what has conventionally been referred to as comedy should more properly be called satire. If we seek help from the literary critics, we shall find many of them making claims for comedy which seem to be more appropriate to satire. Not to go further back than the Italian critics of the Renaissance, Trissino assures us that tragedy and comedy both aim at teaching, and that comedy teaches 'by deriding and censuring things ugly and vile'.¹ To our own Sir Thomas Elyot the purpose of comedies is to lay bare evil, 'to the intent that men beholdynge the promptnes of youth unto vice, the snares of harlotts and bauds laide for yonge myndes, the disceipte of servantes, the chaunces of fortune contrary to mennes expectation, they beinge therof warned may prepare them selfe to resist or prevente occasion'.² Human nature is infinitely various, and there may have been young men in the reign of Henry VIII who rose from their reading of Plautus and Terence with their eyes opened to the snares of harlots and bawds, and who walked more warily in consequence. I cannot believe that they were numerous, or that they learnt much. Fifty years later, Sir Philip Sidney, who must have known Elyot's *Governour*, and who had certainly read the Italian critics with close attention, came to the defence of comedy in very similar terms. The comic poet, he tells us, deals with 'the common errors of our life, which he representeth in the most ridicu-

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-09175-6 - English Satire
 James Sutherland
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

ENGLISH SATIRE

lous and scornfull sort that may be, so as it is impossible that any beholder can be content to be such a one'.¹ Sidney did not live long enough to see that antinomian old scamp Falstaff pursuing his career of triumphant roguery on the London stage; but if he had, it is hardly to be believed that he would have found the only enjoyable moment to be the one in which Prince Hal denies his old companion with the icy words:

I know thee not, old man: Fall to thy prayers:
 How ill white hairs become a fool and jester.

Indeed, the very indignation which this speech has aroused in generations of readers and playgoers is some measure of the extent to which the common reader does *not* share Sidney's view of comedy. The rejection of Falstaff comes as a shock because we feel it as a rebuke to ourselves. For ten acts we have been delighting in the adventures of the old libertine; and if we have not actually identified ourselves with him, and might not on reflection be altogether 'content to be such a one', we are certainly content enough that Falstaff himself should. But if Shakespeare's plays would rarely have furnished Sidney with the sort of satisfaction he expected from comedy, the plays of Ben Jonson undoubtedly would. In Jonson's plays the satirical purpose is never forgotten.

For a final example of the critic who assumes that the business of comedy is to satirise vice and folly, we may turn to the Rev. Jeremy Collier, whose *Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage* was published in 1698. Collier, a classical scholar, lost no time in making clear the grounds on which he was going to attack the contemporary drama. 'The business of plays', he insisted

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-09175-6 - English Satire
 James Sutherland
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

THE NATURE OF SATIRE

firmly, 'is to recommend virtue and discountenance vice. 'Tis to expose the singularities of pride and fancy, to make folly and falsehood contemptible, and to bring everything that is ill under infamy and neglect.'¹ Proceeding upon that assumption, Collier has only to quote to prove his case, and he goes on to compile an exhaustive collection of bawdy and profane passages which must have had a good deal to do with the brisk sale of his book. It is well known that both Congreve and Vanbrugh published replies to Collier, and the significant thing is that both of those dramatists accepted Collier's critical position. 'Men', Congreve agreed, 'are to be laugh'd out of their Vices in Comedy. . . As vicious People are made asham'd of their Follies or Faults, by seeing them expos'd in a ridiculous manner, so are good People at once both warn'd and diverted at their Expence.'² 'What I have done', Vanbrugh claimed, 'is in general a discouragement to vice and folly.'³ The truth is surely different: neither Congreve nor Vanbrugh had given serious thought to discouraging vice (folly is perhaps a different matter) until Collier had put it into their heads; and then, in the same sort of way as M. Jourdain suddenly realised that he had been talking prose for over forty years without knowing it, they discovered that they had been writing satires. Undoubtedly we should have heard much less about the corrective aims of comedy if the comic drama in England had not been under constant attack, and some sort of prestige advertising had not been required to justify it.

There is not much difficulty in distinguishing comedy from satire so long as we stick to theory. It is when we come to consider individual works that the trouble begins. Wycherley's *Plain Dealer* seems to be more satire than comedy, and

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-09175-6 - English Satire
 James Sutherland
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

ENGLISH SATIRE

The Country Wife more comedy than satire. But which is *The Way of the World*? Again, Meredith calls *The Egoist* a comedy; but many readers would prefer to call it a satire. *Don Juan* must obviously be classed among the satires, but it is also from time to time pure comedy. We must be prepared to find the writer of comedy losing his moral neutrality and slipping into satire, and the satirist occasionally loosening his control over the reader and relaxing into comedy.

Quite apart from comedy, it may sometimes be difficult to tell whether a writer is being satirical or merely recording the facts as he sees them. When we read Halifax's remarkable character of Charles II, we may not find it easy to decide just how satirical the intention is; the level, disenchanted tone, the implied contrast between what kings might be—and what indeed some kings have been—and what this very human and imperfect king is, rather suggest satire. But can we be sure? Occasionally, it is true, the satirical intention is quite unmistakable. When Halifax comes to deal with Charles II's amours and mistresses, he opens with a devastating sentence:

It may be said that his Inclinations to Love were the Effects of Health, and a good Constitution, with as little mixture of the *Seraphick* part as ever Man had: And though from that Foundation Men often raise their Passions, I am apt to think his stayed as much as any Man's ever did in the *lower Region*.¹

We know where we are here; Halifax is inviting us to share in his attitude of fastidious disapproval. But when he goes on to tell us that one of the clues to the character of the King was an 'aversion to bear uneasiness', and that

this made that he had as little Eagerness to oblige, as he had to hurt Men; the Motive of his giving Bounties was rather to make