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0521563577 - British Satire and the Politics of Style 1789-1832

Gary Dyer

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Introduction

This book explores the verse and prose satires written by British authors between the French Revolution and the Great Reform Bill, roughly the era that later became known as the Romantic period. The bibliography of verse satires that is appended to the present study attests to how vast is this largely unexplored literary territory. By contextualizing both well-known and obscure works, this book reveals unexpected stylistic and ideological crosscurrents in this literature and charts the connections among satirical writing, political ideology, practical politics, and the realities of the literary marketplace.

Instead of a single, overarching argument, this book makes several interrelated claims. Because of acute contemporary political conflicts, the traditional division widened between Juvenalian (harsh, tragic) and Horatian (mild, comic) satiric poetry, and each of these two styles gathered new political connotations that forced reformist writers into a mode that was more intricately ironic than either – the mode I have chosen to term Radical satire. In the process of examining how literary conventions and traditions are transmitted and given new meanings, my analysis illuminates four subjects in particular: (1) the gendering of discursive forms and media; (2) the shifting and highly charged boundaries between the public and private realms; (3) the capacity of puns to detract from a satire's truth-claims by underscoring the materiality and arbitrariness of linguistic signifiers; and, most importantly, (4) the strategies social and political commentary employed to dramatize its need to deflect the ever-present threat of prosecution for sedition or blasphemy. My findings, I believe, suggest new paths for the study of British Romantic poetry and fiction, for the theory of satirical transgression, and for the history of British culture(s) in general in this transitional, decisive period.

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This is the first book to survey and characterize the hundreds of satires published between 1789 and 1832 (hereinafter, “this period” or “the period”). Worthwhile studies exist devoted to the satirical works written by each of a few important figures – Shelley, John Wolcot (“Peter Pindar”), Thomas Love Peacock, and of course Byron. One also discovers valuable material in books that address specific aspects of satires from this period. Recently there has been a wave of interest in populist radical authors like William Hone, and in how their productions relate to canonical Romantic literature; Marcus Wood’s *Radical Satire and Print Culture, 1790–1822* (1994) is a distinguished example. Yet no detailed, book-length overview of the period’s satires has been attempted. Moreover, since the handful of satires critics have preferred to analyze are themselves atypical, earlier studies have failed to interpret material within a context of contemporary satirical traditions. For example, the works of Byron, Shelley, and Thomas Moore, taken in isolation, may suggest that satire in this period becomes more playful or “carnavalesque,” but then one would be mistakenly interpreting as the era’s dominant tendency what was in large part a *reaction* against the dominant trend of the 1790s, exemplified by the efforts of the conservative poets William Gifford and Thomas James Mathias.

The subject of this book does not submit to any single organizing principle, and the rationale on which my argument is laid out is in part historical, in part generic. After surveying the wide range of satirical subgenres and subject-matter in the period, my first chapter inspects contemporary responses to satire and restores to the center of our historical account the authors whom contemporary critics and readers considered most valuable. We then focus on Gifford, Mathias, and Wolcot/“Pindar,” three poets who not only dominated verse satire in the 1790s but also set the standards for this genre in the next few decades. These satirists’ methods and aims are not merely divergent but conflicting, and in fact we find the tensions among their practices being reflected in the techniques used by satires throughout this period. For Gifford and Mathias, the perceived threat of “Jacobinism” in politics and culture demanded monological, unambiguous satire, such as the former’s vitriolic *Baviad* (1791) and *Maeviad* (1795), or the latter’s *Pursuits of Literature* (1794–97), which its author saw as a corrective to “the present change of manners, opinions, government, and learning.” These two poets strike a pose of orthodoxy – a symbolic assertion of

authority capable of transcending any particular set of conservative doctrines.

Wolcot, on the other hand, makes himself the quintessential poet of opposition, not least by refusing to treat satire, in Neo-Juvenalian fashion, as a duty in a time of crisis. Instead, his poems on the king and other luminaries revel in their own cleverness. Wolcot addressed and reached a wider audience than Gifford or Mathias; his popularity reflects his populism. Although Wolcot often leaves obscure the precise political basis of his critique, the fire he drew makes us aware of the transgressive connotations not only of his poetry's content – frequently satirizing George III and his ministers – but also of its form: its shunning the heroic couplet, its colloquial diction and tone. When the king is his subject, Wolcot makes certain that enough ambiguity veils his meaning to protect him from prosecution for seditious libel – as well as, naturally enough, to keep his readership broad and his income steady. This rhetorical indirectness turns out to be his foremost legacy to later reformist satirists.

The second and third chapters examine in turn three kinds of satirical poetry being published in the years from 1800 to 1832. The taxonomy I put forward ultimately serves historical purposes: “Neo-Juvenalian,” “Neo-Horatian,” and “Radical” satirical verse are not merely categories – compartments into which we can toss a work when it displays certain attributes – but *classes*, interpretable only in relation to one another. The three terms enable us to map out contemporary discursive possibilities. Many poems partake of both the Juvenalian and Horatian traditions; Radical satires like Moore's *The Fudge Family in Paris* (1818) and Sir Charles and Lady Morgan's *The Mohawks* (1822) make a point of doing so.

Chapter Two explains how the Juvenalian and Horatian poles of verse satire gained specific political resonances during this period. Neo-Juvenalian satirists like Gifford, Mathias, George Daniel, and Charles Caleb Colton relied on formal, intimidating, “manly” rhetoric in heroic couplets. They generally came from privileged backgrounds and aligned themselves with such conservative interests as the Anglican establishment and the Pittite ministries who governed the nation almost continuously from 1782 to 1830. Neo-Horatian works of this time tended to avoid clear political implications, but in effect were comparably conservative. The benignly tolerant tone and frivolous-sounding rhythms and rhymes characteristic of John Cam Hobhouse's *The Wonders of a Week at Bath* (1811), N. T. H. Bayly's

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Parliamentary Letters (1818), and Henry Luttrell's *Advice to Julia* (1820) and *Crockford-House* (1827) encouraged quiescence, and in practical terms they thereby supported the status quo as completely as *The Pursuits of Literature* did. The evidence of satires from the 1820s indicates that the various poets who took the Juvenalian or Horatian style to extremes undermined and even explicitly renounced their works' critical force in the process.

In Chapter Three the example of what I call Radical satires suggests how satire flourishes when it must censor itself, as it tries to challenge orthodoxy while deflecting prosecution for seditious or blasphemous libel. Although the five poems I analyze by Shelley, Byron, Moore, Leigh Hunt, and the Morgans resemble Horatian ones in their informal diction and playful tone, the anger implicit within their playfulness reflects their commitment to political and social reform. Essentially parodic, Radical satire usually appropriates and juxtaposes elements of the two traditional satiric styles, often in unexpected ways. In Moore's epistolary *Fudge Family in Paris*, for instance, the letters authored by one character indict Britain's Tory ministry and the Holy Alliance with Juvenalian moral indignation, while those written by others display the "light" tone typical of contemporary Horatian satire.

These reformist authors, we can infer, employ this hybrid Radical style for a number of reasons. The Neo-Horatian tradition was far too equivocal for their purposes. Although these writers at times required Juvenalian vigor, they were wary of adopting a style most often practiced by Tories, and, furthermore, the univocal form of the Neo-Juvenalian style encoded authoritarian meanings. Most importantly, in the decades after the French Revolution the constant threat of prosecution for sedition or blasphemy ruled out unqualified attacks on the government or the royal family. Radical satires not only make their assault indirect, but, in addition, dramatize the necessity to do so. The Morgans in their satire *The Mohawks* indicate that writers who propose to attack the powerful can do so only obliquely; in fact, given how in practice the line between the permissible and impermissible wandered, an author could never be certain he or she had been discreet enough. Instead of simply dedicating itself to either Horatian humor or Juvenalian oratory, *The Mohawks* brings together elements of each in such a way as to make manifest that the authors intend its usual jocular tone to help fend off harassment. Much of the criticism they direct at the current govern-

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ment and its hirelings among the press is couched in ironic praise, and expressed in the comic-sounding *ottava rima* verse form – what they call “[t]he playful muse’s easy slip-shod measure.” Yet for one key passage *The Mohawks* switches into heroic couplets of Juvenalian indignation. The Morgans simultaneously denounce the injustices they see and parody the smugly uncompromising discourse of Tory satire – symbolically reproducing, exploiting, and unraveling it. Their indirect attacks cloak their message enough to impede prosecution, which relied on laws that concentrated on literal meanings, but not enough to mislead their audience. No reader would be so obtuse as to miss the object behind the Morgans’ irony, just as no reader would be baffled when (to note a common occurrence) a Regency poem discusses “the P—e.” In the way that the dash serves to point out that the Prince is being attacked and to trumpet the writer’s daring, the Morgans, by highlighting their use of irony and comic rhythms, underscore their disgust with Lord Castlereagh, Lord Liverpool, and company. Government repression nurtured the Radical mode of satire, yet, paradoxically, it is methods like these that usually make a satire most exciting and memorable, and most cutting.

Chapter Four turns to prose satire, analyzing the narratives of Peacock and the young Benjamin Disraeli, and though by necessity our framework has to change, many of the issues being worked out in satirical poetry resurface here: the tensions between satire and comedy, the uncertainties that were attendant on deploying literary satire to combat current social ills and ideological errors. Peacock’s six satirical narratives that appeared from 1815 to 1831 and Disraeli’s *Voyage of Captain Popanilla* (1828) reflect and thematize the contemporary marginality of their subgenre, the traditional Menippean prose satire, and the narrowing possibilities for satire in general. Peacock’s narratives are best understood in relation to, on the one hand, realistic novels with satiric or comic dimensions, and, on the other, purportedly satirical fiction that claims to reveal secrets about the lives of well-known people. Given the ubiquity of narrowly “personal” satire in the period, it is all the more conspicuous that Peacock’s books concentrate, as if in response, on public and textual forms of opinion. Peacock avoids such personal satire, but in the process he sometimes strays into the antithetical territory, dehistoricizing comedy. While he adopts and develops the methods typical of the Radical verse satires, there is a tension in his books between the

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Radical valorizing of debate and an awareness of how debate is never satisfactorily free or open, and a tension between the Radical embrace of parody and cognizance of parody's limits.

In *The Voyage of Captain Popanilla* the young Disraeli attempts to use an established subgenre, the satirical fantastic journey, to attack Utilitarian reformers, the Corn Laws, popular novels depicting fashionable life among the elite (the "Silver Fork School"), and the rampant stock speculation that brought about the economic crisis of 1825-26. Disraeli's book evokes the economic factors behind the virtual disappearance of verse and prose satires in the late 1820s. This recent panic not only ruined some publishers but also discouraged the others from many literary genres, among them conventional satire, and encouraged, instead, novels that simply retail gossip about the nation's social and political elite. Unfortunately, *Popanilla* fails to provide a viable alternative to these quasi-satirical novels because the attack is too intermittent and too bound by convention; the half-heartedness of the attack shows that this work is for the young writer a mere literary exercise in composing satire. Disraeli's early career reveals him searching for a way to accommodate his satirical leanings to other artistic and commercial imperatives; his mature novels show him continuing to critique public issues, but outside the conventions of satire.

Toward the end of the period we are considering, satire began to disappear as an independent genre because of both intrinsic and extrinsic forces. For one thing, less poetry of any kind was published, due to changes both in the market and in culture broadly. My final chapter explores some of the forces that were restraining satiric attack in the Romantic period, a restraint that was most pronounced in the 1820s and 1830s. Since the late eighteenth century satire had been losing ground to milder, more comic modes of critique. Satire was discouraged in particular by the ideology of the ever-growing middle-class Dissenting and Methodist subculture. As one can infer from Jane Taylor's *Essays in Rhyme, on Morals and Manners* (1816), members of this subculture preferred to avoid "personal" attack because it caused pain and arrogantly usurped God's privileges. Taylor felt distaste for the pose of superiority that satirists strike, and so the character sketches that her poetry contains are meant to help the reader examine his or her own motives. I address here an issue glimpsed in Chapter Two, the way satire gendered itself male and the ramifications this association had for women writers. Whereas

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the formal verse satire and a Juvenalian tone reproduced a masculinist ethos, women were central to the social and religious subculture that frowned on abuse and ridicule. Indeed, that subculture's values were correspondingly seen as "feminine."

Furthermore, increasingly in the 1820s poetry that exposes human error weakens its critical force by relying on what Hazlitt disparagingly termed the "wit of words." John Hamilton Reynolds and Thomas Hood's popular *Odes and Addresses to Great People* (1825) exemplifies this ascendent mode of light verse. Reynolds and Hood laugh at human pretense or eccentricity, but scarcely imply that it needs correction. Their constant punning draws so much attention to the phonemic raw material of the poetry, and to the arbitrary links that join words to their meanings, that their text undermines its referential and satirical function. By using the conventions of satire *Odes and Addresses to Great People* continually makes us expect satirical attack, but instead the puns merely toy with the prospect of referentiality, as if the actual object of derision is *our expectations*. Sometimes, by gathering examples of how human perception misleads, Reynolds and Hood's poetry implicitly weakens the claims to superior vantage that the satirist traditionally asserted. Whereas generally wit claims superiority in order to discriminate and judge, Reynolds and Hood prefer wit that simply exploits incongruity; moreover, the incongruity they present is not social or moral, as one would expect from satire, but perceptual. Their wit stays neutral.

There are two things my book does *not* attempt. I concentrate on the meaning and significance of contemporary satires, not their excellence. Even though this book may bring to light unjustly neglected literary works, it is not meant as a plea on their behalf. If it were, fewer pages would be devoted to *The Pursuits of Literature*, more would go to the poems of "Peter Pindar," and I would not have left out – to name one title that springs to mind – Moore's "To the Honourable W. R. Spencer, from Buffalo, Upon Lake Erie" (1806). (This last poem is conveniently available in A. D. Godley's Oxford edition of the poet's works; lines 29–58 are particularly noteworthy.) Secondly, the deterioration my last chapter discusses can too easily be given more prominence than it warrants. The premise behind my exploring the period's satires is that they demand more than a chronicle of this genre's "death," and this premise has been borne out by all my research. *The Decline and Fall of British Satire* would be a banal title and a worse book.

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CHAPTER I

The scope of satire, 1789–1832

The writing of satire in Britain was transformed in a number of ways between the French Revolution and the Reform Act of 1832, and these changes belong to a complex history that cannot be reconstructed using only *The Poetry of the Anti-Jacobin*, a few Byron and Thomas Love Peacock works, and Shelley's fragmentary satire against satire. In other words, we can profit from learning to disrespect conventional notions of what is significant in English literature from the decades that have come to be called the Romantic period. As Marilyn Butler points out, "The so-called Romantics did not know at the time that they were supposed to do without satire," even though "future generations have become convinced that the Spirit of the Age was very different."¹ One approach might interpret as satires works by major writers that would not ordinarily be considered satiric, as Butler does with Hazlitt's *Liber Amoris*. A less ambitious method might analyze the texts of major authors that present themselves primarily as satires (Wordsworth's unfinished imitation of Juvenal's eighth satire, Shelley's *Peter Bell the Third* [1819] along with the fragment on satire, Byron's *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* [1809] and his later *ottava rima* poems, and so on), with a few such works by "second-rank" writers like Thomas Moore and Leigh Hunt thrown in to serve as context. A third approach could see satire as an antithesis that Romantic texts pose to their own Romanticism. Yet each of these options is by itself too restrictive, because each takes for granted that criticism has demarcated correctly what writings from this era ought to receive our attention and analysis; none takes into account the bibliographical fact that hundreds upon hundreds of satirical works, in verse and in prose, were published and read between 1789 and 1832. Indeed, not only was satiric writing far more common and more central to literate culture than literary history has acknowledged, but also the handful of moderately well-

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known satires from this time are by no means typical of contemporary satires in either form or approach.

Though this study focuses on literary form, it is not formalist. It treats satiric works as utterances rather than simply texts, as acts rather than things. Genre is understood as the precedents and conventions that shape utterance – sometimes in accordance with a writer’s conscious will, sometimes not. Precedents of this kind also constitute the reader’s horizon of expectations that determines his or her experience of a text. Like Heraclitus’ river, genres never stop being transformed: as Mikhail Bakhtin observes, “Genre is reborn and renewed at every new stage in the development of literature and in every individual work of a given genre.”² The generic horizon that a literary historian needs to recreate is “the state of the genre at the time when the work was written,” according to Alastair Fowler, who acknowledges that this act of recovery involves deliberate repression as well:

In order to reconstruct the original genre, we have to eliminate from consciousness its subsequent states. For the idea of a genre that informs a reader’s understanding is normally the latest, most inclusive conception of it that he knows. And unless he can unknow this conception, it seems that he cannot recover meanings that relate to the genre’s earlier, “innocent” states.

To do so is challenging, yet the obstacles are “not in principle different from those met in constructing literary works that issue from another cultural context or are written in a foreign language.”³

The generic horizon can be as ideological as any component of the literary experience. The phrase “politics of style” in my title refers to the political meanings borne by specific discursive procedures, either throughout the period or at certain moments within it. These meanings are functions both of authorial intention, conscious and unconscious, and of the expectations and reactions of readers, real and anticipated. And since satiric works *are* intentional symbolic acts, we can only regret that most of the satires under consideration deny us the materials that scholars traditionally have used to recuperate probable authorial intentions: letters and diaries, nonfictional public writings, biographical data. Not only are most of these satires anonymous or pseudonymous, but the real author’s name alone is seldom enough to help clarify ambiguities. As a result, we frequently can infer the authorial viewpoint only in the broadest and most provisional terms.

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In this study satire is defined as sophisticated discursive assault, as that literary mode of expression which, while it can find an outlet in forms like the realistic novel, pervades such distinct genres as the Menippean prose satire (Petronius' *Satyricon*, Voltaire's *Candide*, or Peacock's *Melincourt*) and the formal verse satire (any of Juvenal's or Horace's *sermones*, or Pope's "Epilogue to the Satires" or Byron's *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*). With these distinctions in mind I sometimes use the word adjectivally, referring to "the satiric" rather than to "satire," "a satire," or "the satire," terms that tend to connote a particular form or genre. The satiric is one of the four *mythoi* Northrop Frye identifies as "narrative categories of literature broader than, or logically prior to, the ordinary literary genres," the others being the romantic, the tragic, and the comic; the two elements essential to satire are "an object of attack" and "wit or humor founded on fantasy or a sense of the grotesque or absurd."⁴

However, although I am reconstructing the history of the satiric *mythos*, I do so by concentrating on those discrete literary genres in which the satiric elements predominate and on works that proclaim their satiric intent. They are emphasized because, in fact, two of the key points about satirical writing in this era are the tensions among competing methods that shape texts in the traditional forms and, second, the displacement and, eventually, the near-disappearance of these forms. Because my focus is on the public sphere I disregard unpublished works – with *Peter Bell the Third* being a conspicuous exception – as well as ones that were published unconventionally, such as Blake's prophecies.⁵ For practical reasons I do not discuss either visual art or theater. Unquestionably, both are central to satirical expression in the fullest sense; furthermore, James Gillray's or George Cruikshank's caricatures often share figurative conventions with satiric writing. These media nevertheless demand more specialized analysis.

In attempting to describe forty years of English satiric discourse, one must resist the temptation to treat now-forgotten writers like George Daniel (1789–1864) as simply a background against which to read major ones like Byron. My discussion of canonical authors is selective, examining *The Vision of Judgment* (1822), but not *Don Juan* (1819–24); Shelley's *Peter Bell the Third*, but not Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790–93). (One reason I can be less than exhaustive is the presence of such distinguished studies of individual poets as Frederick L. Beaty's *Byron the Satirist* and Steven E. Jones's *Shelley's*