

Chapter 1

What Is Satire?

Satire: a poem in which wickedness or folly is censured.

— Dr. Samuel Johnson¹

Satire: the act of being a wise-ass and saying it's for a higher purpose.

— *The Onion Book of Known Knowledge*²

Three Episodes

Sometime in the summer of 1674, John Wilmot, the Earl of Rochester, driven by a malice born of sexual rejection and betrayal, hatched a hasty plan to destroy the friendship of three noblewomen. He visited an old crone reputed for her magical powers, a character straight out of *Macbeth*, and, in exchange for the promise of enshrining her name forever in his poetry, secured from her a magical gift, an enormous dildo “long and large as Hector’s lance” (83.81). Hastening to the resort town of Bath, Rochester presented the oversized sex toy to the three women, with instructions that it should be given “to the Lady most deserving” (83.87), setting off a bitter feud among them. A truce was attained only with the intervention of a clergyman – and then, apparently, only after he himself had sex with all three women.

Such is the raunchy parody of the *Iliad*’s “Judgment of Paris” as told in heroic couplets by a Restoration-era poet, most likely Rochester himself.³ An early example of the mock-epic form, the untitled 154-line poem was, according to the scholar Harold Love, probably written as “an act of revenge” in an ongoing feud between Rochester’s lover, the Duchess of Portsmouth, and Queen Catherine, whose partisans are depicted as insatiable sex fiends; a handwritten copy of the poem may have been delivered to the women along with an actual dildo. This playful take on the erotic practices, real or imagined, of the Carolean court depends upon an old trope: the “tradition of misogynistic dildo” poems goes back at least to the first or second century CE. But Rochester executes the joke deftly, and his opening pair of questions –

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Say Heav'n-born Muse, for only thou canst tell,
 How discord dire, between two Widows fell?
 What made the Fair one, and her well-shaped Mother,
 Duty forget and pious Nature smother? (81.1–4)

– likely served as a model for Alexander Pope in his famous poem *The Rape of the Lock*.⁴ Rochester's poem certainly shares with Pope's mock epic a fusion of classical parody and thinly veiled references to contemporary acquaintances.

Throughout his short career, Rochester's combination of racy material and verbal dexterity, along with his personal reputation as a rake, won him great recognition, and Andrew Marvell is reported to have called him the leading satirist of his age.⁵ But Rochester's penchant for provocation also got him into trouble. The young courtier turned his wit on the king himself, depicting, in another poem, a sovereign in thrall to his sexual cravings:

For princes' pricks, like to buffoons at court,
 Do govern us, because they make us sport.
 His was the sauciest that e'er did swive,
 The proudest, peremptory prick alive:
 Though safety, religion, life lay on't,
 'Twould break through all to make its way to c – t. (86.A14–19)

As a court poet of the Restoration, Rochester did not publish most of his work through the printing press. His poems were copied longhand and intended to be read aloud at court to an audience that was happy or at least willing to be scandalized, provoked, or insulted.⁶ Unfortunately, however, during a party, Rochester – perhaps driven by some self-destructive impulse, perhaps simply drunk – mistakenly placed a copy of this poem in the king's pocket. According to one account (a scenario that could easily belong to a tired sitcom), the king had asked to see a different poem and Rochester confused the two manuscripts. Although the king was known for his good-humored indulgence of the earl's antics, this time the attacks, according to one contemporary observer, “touch[ed] too severely upon the King,”⁷ dangerously equating political and sexual misrule. In the face of Charles's wrath, or perhaps that of his offended mistress, the Duchess of Portsmouth, Rochester was forced to flee the royal court.⁸

On Valentine's Day, 1989, the Booker and Whitbread Prize-winning novelist Salman Rushdie was sentenced to death by Iran's spiritual leader, the Ayatollah Khomeini, for having written a novel that included among its several storylines a fictional speculation on the life of Muhammad. The novel's title, *The Satanic Verses*, refers specifically to a tale from the

“collections of *hadith* or traditions about the life of the Prophet” in which Muhammad, or as Rushdie calls him, Mahound, initially recited certain Qu’ranic verses that accepted the legitimacy of three rival goddesses of Allah, but later recanted these same verses when he recognized them to have been inspired by the devil, Shaitan.⁹ As depicted in Rushdie’s novel, Mahound’s decision is largely a political calculation made to secure an alliance with local non-Muslim authorities. The prophet urges his disciples to accept the three pagan goddesses as a pragmatic concession that will further the growth of his upstart faith:

You all know what has been happening. Our failure to win converts. The people will not give up their gods . . . Angels and devils . . . Shaitan and Gibreel. We all, already, accept their existence, halfway between God and man. Abu Simbel asks that we admit just three more to this great company. Just three, and, he indicates, all Jahilia’s souls will be ours.¹⁰

The novel had originated during Rushdie’s undergraduate years at King’s College, Cambridge, where, inspired by his own father’s speculations on the historicity of the Qu’ran, he delved into Arabic and Western scholarship about the life of the prophet; twenty years later his research gave rise to an exuberant, multilayered, and fantastical work of fiction that offended the devout in many ways. In addition to its speculations on the composition of the satanic verses, the novel represents a scribe named Salman the Persian taking creative license in writing down the prophet’s recitation, the prostitutes of Mecca playfully adopting the names of Muhammad’s twelve wives, and a malignant, turbaned, and Khomeini-esque imam living in exile in Kensington while plotting a return home.

In all likelihood, neither Khomeini nor those who backed his *fatwa* had actually read Rushdie’s book, but their condemnations spurred demonstrations, riots, and violence worldwide, including the murder of the novel’s Japanese translator, and the near-murder of its Norwegian publisher and its Italian translator. Bookstores were firebombed, paperback publication delayed, political debate unleashed. Writers ranging from Jacques Derrida to Bob Woodward to Nuruddin Farah defended Rushdie’s right to free speech and the artistic value of his novel; many upheld what Rushdie later called the great “antireligious literary tradition of Boccaccio, Chaucer, Rabelais, Aretino and Balzac.”¹¹ Yet indignant moralists on both the left (Jimmy Carter, John le Carré) and the right (Kingsley Amis, George Steiner) blamed the victim, scolding Rushdie for exercising his artistic and political freedom in a provocative and offensive manner. Rushdie went into hiding for over a decade as the British government worked to have the edict lifted, and only

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in 2000 was he permitted to relinquish his security detail in the UK. The death threat remains in effect today; state-run Iranian media have recently raised the bounty.

In November 2012, Pete Wells, a *New York Times* restaurant critic, reviewed a new Times Square restaurant called Guy's American Kitchen & Bar, owned and run by Guy Fieri, a popular television chef with platinum-bleached hair, a furry brown goatee, and copious tattooing who had shot to fame after winning a Food Network reality show competition. Wells's review began, innocently but atypically for the genre, by posing questions directly to the restaurateur: "Guy Fieri, have you eaten at your new restaurant in Times Square? Have you pulled up one of the 500 seats at Guy's American Kitchen & Bar and ordered a meal? Did you eat the food? Did it live up to your expectations?"¹² But while the first paragraph displayed a mild insolence restrained by professional decorum, the second threw off any pretense of good manners as it inquired into the state of Fieri's "mind" and "soul":

Did panic grip your soul as you stared into the whirling hypno wheel of the menu, where adjectives and nouns spin in a crazy vortex? When you saw the burger described as "Guy's Pat LaFrieda custom blend, all-natural Creekstone Farm Black Angus beef patty, LTOP (lettuce, tomato, onion + pickle), SMC (super-melty-cheese) and a slathering of Donkey Sauce on garlic-buttered brioche," did your mind touch the void for a minute?

And so the review continued, piling high the rhetorical questions, not only inquiring about the delinquent service and greasy food, but also skewering Fieri the author – attacking his language, the crazy, spinning "adjectives and nouns" of menus and marketing. At the same time Wells conjured comic-grotesque images of bodily functions that rendered the food wholly unappetizing: "When we hear the words Donkey Sauce," he asked, "which part of the donkey are we supposed to think about?"

Within two days, the review had gone viral on the Internet, reaching 45,000 Facebook shares. Fieri took to a morning television show to defend his restaurant and to accuse Wells of snobbery and self-promotion. Fellow TV personalities such as the drawling self-help therapist "Dr. Phil" joined the counter-attack while the *Times's* public editor defended the scathing review. Pundits in print and digital media interpreted the conflict in all kinds of ways: as a culture war flare-up between the reviewer's blue-state elitism and the TV chef's red-state populism; as an emblem of a new digital media world in which "snark" and controversy are rewarded with clicks, hits, tweets, likes, and shares; as a case study in camp aesthetics in which an attack on a cynical

marketing ploy was largely misread as an attack on innocence; even as a sociocultural protest, “a giant fuck you to the whole food network celebrity chef culture.”¹³

A bawdy Restoration poem, a multi-plot postcolonial novel, a snarky restaurant-review-turned-Internet-meme: what do they have in common? All three texts enact some judgment or attack – on the sexual habits of Charles II, on the authority of canonical interpretations of the Qu’ran, on the culinary skills of a popular TV chef. All the texts seem to refer to real-world, historical people, even when those people are disguised or somehow transmuted into fictional entities. All these judgments, moreover, rely upon transgression as well as aggression: Rochester insults the king with vulgar language; Rushdie violates both the religious stricture against questioning the divine authorship of the Qu’ran and the Western liberal one against maligning anyone’s religious beliefs; Wells crosses lines of decency, fair play, or etiquette, exceeding what seems the proper evaluative function of a review.

Yet none of these writings is *merely* a work of aggression or transgression. They all shape their judgments into an artistic form and blend attack with entertainment. Rochester’s satire on the king is as notable for its playful representation of the monarch’s sex life as for any cogent political critique. As his invocation of medieval and Renaissance satirists suggests, Rushdie’s story of the satanic verses is a rebellious but imaginative exploration of the nature of artistic and spiritual inspiration, and he sets his inquiry within a narrative structure that deliberately confuses present and past, natural and supernatural, consciousness and dream, reality and delusion. Wells’s rant, in its own small way, explodes the genre of the restaurant review, and in its strict adherence to the interrogative mood it joins a tradition of literary forms like the villanelle or lipogram that force creativity upon the author through the imposition of arbitrary constraints.¹⁴ The artistry produces pleasure, even laughter. Imagination and wit render the object of attack amusing or ridiculous.

Finally, all of these works provoke real-world controversy. They intervene in the world’s business. The “incidents” surrounding these texts involve not only the writer and the apparent target, but also other readers, actual and notional. Even the episode about which we know the least – Rochester’s accidental disclosure of his satire to King Charles – likely caused problems for the poet not merely because the king didn’t like to be insulted, but because he didn’t want the insulting poems to circulate at court. The Wells–Fieri fracas, by most measures a trivial event, merited time on a popular morning news show and commentary from the public editor of America’s leading newspaper. The Rushdie controversy – if that word is strong enough to

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describe it – remains, thirty years later, a major cultural and political reference point. The debate that surrounded it has come to represent a fundamental clash of values that, Rushdie has maintained, can now be seen as a prologue to the destruction of the Twin Towers, not to mention the terrorist killings that followed the publication of satirical cartoons in France's *Charlie Hebdo* magazine in 2015. In all these cases, something playful became serious.

Rochester's poems, Rushdie's novel, and Wells's review are all examples of satire. Whether this claim strikes you as obvious or tendentious may depend upon your own experience as a reader and a student of satire – what you think “satire” means. For some scholars, satire is primarily a historical *genre*, narrowly defined, that reached its heights of accomplishment during the early Roman Empire and Enlightenment-era Europe. As Harry Levin has written, “It is generally agreed that English satire enjoyed its heyday during the first half of the eighteenth century; it declined . . . with the emergence of mere sentimental and romantic touchstones.”¹⁵ For much of the last century, this idea of satire prevailed among literary critics, and for some good reasons. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, the lyric emerged as the dominant form of poetry and the novel the dominant form of prose fiction. Few new works of literature today formally resemble the satires of eighteenth-century figures like Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift, and those that do are often relegated to minor status as parodies, entertainments, or light humor. Yet Levin's description of a genre of literature that belongs mainly to the past bears little resemblance to what non-scholars usually mean when they talk about satire. In common usage, people apply the term to a vast range of literature and other kinds of cultural production – music, visual art, journalism, film, video, performance, even customs, rituals, and other activities – that they read, witness, and participate in regularly. Any analysis of satire that ignores this everyday usage of the word will exclude a huge body of material in which satiric attitudes and behaviors survive prominently and vitally in the present. In this wider conception, satire is often referred to as a *mode*, or even, for one recent critic, a *practice* (PSE).

In seeking to outline what satire is and has been, in the rest of this chapter I offer not a narrow definition of satire but a broad discussion. I begin with the “ordinary language” assumption that satire is *whatever it is that we call satire*. Common usage, in other words, should guide us more than the pedantic diktats of critics. I first address the distinctions between satire as genre, mode, and practice. I then describe the still-influential understanding of satire that coalesced in the 1950s and 1960s as morally purposive literature that deploys wit, irony, fantasy, and humor. But as literary studies have changed, this view has been challenged, and I therefore review the major arguments against that

old model. I fill out the analysis with examination of other features often associated with satire, and, finally, I discern some ways that satires can be described or grouped in order to help the reader find new lines of connection.

Genre, Mode, Practice

The first distinction to be made in analyzing satire is between satire as a *genre* and satire as a *mode* – or between the *form* and the *tone* of satire (FS 4). Throughout much of history, the word “satire” referred to a particular kind of *poem*. In his *Dictionary* of 1755, Samuel Johnson defined satire as a “poem in which wickedness or folly is censured.” The ancient Roman poets who wrote satire and the eighteenth-century English writers who took those Roman poets as models used the term explicitly in the titles of their works. Even a later figure such as Thomas Hardy called his 1914 collection of poems *Satires of Circumstance*. Writers may have used different genre names to describe their poems – Horace’s *sermones* or talks, Pope’s epistles and essays – but the resemblances in form, style, content, and tone remain strong enough that scholars classify these poems as satires. These works constitute what George Test has called “a special kind of poetry,” *formal verse satire* (SSA 10). Conventional wisdom holds that in English-language literature the years from John Dryden to Samuel Johnson – or, more liberally, from John Donne to Lord Byron – constitute the era in which formal verse satire attained its greatest cultural centrality and aesthetic achievement.

But in addition to formal verse satire, there exists a second genre of satire, one that has come to be called *Menippean satire*, after the Greek philosopher Menippus of the third century BCE, whose writings are lost but whose influence survives through the work of Marcus Terentius Varro and Lucian of Samosata. Although Menippean satire shares characteristics with verse satire, it is generally understood as a prose form, or a combination of prose and verse, marked by what the ancients called a “seriocomic” tone. Whereas Horace, Juvenal, and Persius are the major figures in Roman verse satire, the classical authors Varro, Lucian, Seneca, Petronius, and Apuleius exemplify the Menippean genre. Like formal verse satire, Menippean satire re-emerges forcefully in early modern Europe; some writers are famous for satires in both prose and verse. Menippean satire has generated its own body of scholarship and debate. Some argue for a wide definition, while others urge restraint, arguing that term has been abused.¹⁶ Some claim that it should be considered discrete from formal verse satire, while others see the genres as overlapping. Some claim that it has been absorbed in modern times by the novel, while

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a few insist that the novel and the Menippean satire must be considered separate genres. In almost all accounts, however, ancient and early modern Menippean satire is recognized as an important precursor to contemporary satiric fiction.

Even when satire is understood as a genre (or two), it is often understood as a genre that resists or complicates the very idea of genre. Satire combines, inhabits, or transforms other genres. It mixes subject matter, linguistic registers, and literary traditions. Satire, moreover, exists in ironic or secondary relation to “higher” genres, and it negates the authority of epic, saga, and myth (SI 63). Some critics go so far as to claim that the “appropriation of other forms is unique to satire and one of its chief identifying characteristics” (STG 13). Satire indeed often appears as a mock form: a mock epic, a mock encomium, a mockumentary. The word *mock* can mean either to imitate or to ridicule via imitation, and both of these connotations adhere to our understanding of satire as a genre that mocks other genres.

For most readers today, however, satire cannot be limited to these genres at all. Much drama is satiric. Whether or not the work of Aristophanes is best described as satire or comedy – scholars call it “Old Comedy” to distinguish it from the later phases of Greek comedy that focus more exclusively on domestic life – it possesses many satiric elements and has deeply influenced satirists ancient and modern. The plays of Ben Jonson and Molière offer early modern examples of satiric drama, and audiences have found satire in Oscar Wilde’s comedies of manners, in the social critiques of Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw, in the ironic method and political purpose of Bertolt Brecht’s “epic theater.” And anyone who sees *The Book of Mormon* on stage, or *Last Week Tonight* on TV, or *Saturday Night Live* on her iPhone will recognize that satire applies meaningfully to a much broader range of culture, performance, and media than even the three major genres of literature. One way to widen our understanding of satire, then, would be to recognize, as I do in this book, the many satiric subgenres: city comedies, mock epics, picaresque novels, mockumentaries, modest proposals, and more.

To appreciate the full range of satiric literature, we need to consider satire not as a *genre* but as a *mode*. A mode, according to Alastair Fowler, is a looser sort of category than a genre, lacking the strong structural and formal markers of a genre but still sending “distinct signals” to a reader.¹⁷ Because it is more nebulous than a genre, we often describe a mode with an adjective rather than a noun: *satiric* rather than *satire*. For Charles Knight, satire is “not a genre” but rather “pre-generic.” It is “an exploiter of other genres,” but also a “frame of mind,” a “skeptical attitude towards life” (LS 4). In a previous book, I have called satire a “sensibility,” since it implies a way of seeing the

world – something short of a fully worked-out philosophical position, but something more than a mere feeling or mood.¹⁸

But even the idea of satire as a mode has its problems: it can restrict criticism to the formal analysis of a text that is understood to be a self-contained artifact. If, like Ashley Marshall, however, we think of satire as a *practice*, we recognize it as an action or behavior that takes place in a specific historical context. The idea of satire as practice has not been explicitly theorized in the way that satire as a genre or mode has been, but many thinkers point the way to how it might be done. Drawing on speech-act theory, Linda Hutcheon says that “irony happens” – it requires a particular context of expectation and interpretation in order to be received as irony – and the same insight can be extended to satire.¹⁹ Steven Jones notes that because satire is among the most “culturally embedded” kinds of literature, “to read satire” is always “to contextualize” it within specific historical parameters.²⁰ Drawing on theorists such as Jürgen Habermas and Michael Warner, we might further recognize satire as an intervention in a public arena of discourse, an activity that brings people together (and pushes others away) to create a “public” or a dissenting “counterpublic.”²¹ Satire circulates through a culture, accruing new shades of meaning and eliciting new public responses. Finally, satire might be understood as an assertion of what Pierre Bourdieu called cultural capital. By distinguishing good from bad, satire distinguishes *us*: in delineating what we as writers or readers accept and reject, it positions us within a social “field” according to our tastes, judgments, and behaviors.²²

Definition and Its Difficulties

Satire’s ambiguous status as genre, mode, and practice already suggests some of the difficulty that besets any effort at defining it. Even the etymology of the word is duplicitous. It derives from the Latin *satura*, part of the phrase *lanx satura*, meaning a mixed platter of fruit or nuts. It presumably refers to the varied and miscellaneous nature of Roman verse satire. But in part due to a fourth-century work of criticism by the grammarian Diomedes, the word *satire* became confused with the Greek word *satyr*, and a kind of literature became associated with a Greek mythological creature and the ancient Greek “satyr plays” named for it. Rough, crude, and sexually aggressive, the satyr came to seem an apt figure for the rough, crude, and verbally aggressive satirist.²³ Although the false etymology was debunked by Isaac Casaubon in 1605, the erroneous association persisted because its assumptions about satiric aggression seemed logical, and early modern poets often called their verses “satyres.”

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But defining satire risks a greater danger than etymological confusion. It risks pedantry and irrelevance, and can become mired in fussy quibbling. It is therefore not surprising that, as Dustin Griffin observes, “since the 1960s there has been something of a retreat from large-scale theoretical claims about ‘the nature of satire’” (SCR 31). Critics and students alike have put the definitional questions to one side and simply gone ahead with the work of analysis. After all, maybe not all satires in all periods and cultures work the same way or do the same things. Moreover, as Griffin points out, some of the most famous proclamations about satire tend to be quoted out of their original contexts and converted into rules and definitions, even though they originate as specific claims made in response to specific questions (SCR 37–39). Unwittingly, scholars fashion ironbound rules from casual or ironic remarks. For these reasons, a rigid definition of satire may be less useful than the description of a set of what Wittgenstein called “family resemblances.” Kathryn Hume urges scholars to “conceptualize satire and the satiric as a family defined by a bundle of features. No single feature need be present, just a substantial number of them.”²⁴ Such a policy gives up the goal of determining categories once and for all, and allows a flexible treatment attuned to the variety of works that appear to different readers as satire.

Yet even such a flexible approach requires some discernment of family traits. What are the notable family features of satire? Modern critics have generally begun with two basic criteria. In Northrop Frye’s 1957 formulation, “Satire demands at least a token fantasy, a content which the reader recognizes as grotesque, and at least an implicit moral standard” (AC 224).²⁵ Minimally, satire requires a *fantasy* (specified as grotesque), and a *moral standard* (possibly implicit). But Frye’s two-part model easily expands, so that George Test can distinguish four essential elements – *aggression, judgment, play, laughter* – with Test’s first two criteria corresponding roughly to Frye’s moral standard and the second two to Frye’s grotesque fantasy (SSA 15). Another foundational theorist, Gilbert Highet, lists five elements – *topicality, exaggeration, shock, informality, dark or grotesque humor* – and then stipulates that the emotion evoked must be a “blend of amusement and contempt” (AS 21). Edward Rosenheim requires three elements: attack, “a manifest fiction,” and reference to “historical particulars.”²⁶ For Kathryn Hume, the list grows to a clunky and perhaps redundant nine: *attack, humor or wit, self-display, exaggeration, moral or existential truth, mockery, inquiry, a moral ideal, and a reformative aim*.²⁷ Clearly, these terms are heterogeneous, slippery, and prone to multiplication. How can we put them together?