Prologue: The Beginning of Political Satire

You are at the Festival of the Lenaea in Ancient Athens, 424 BCE, watching the *Knights*, a new play by Aristophanes. Most of the city's citizens are there in the massive Theatre of Dionysus. Two masked actors come forward and, after some coarse dialogue, Demosthenes holds forth about their master Demos, and then about Paphlagon, a recently purchased slave:

> We two have got a master
> with a countryman's bad temper; he's a peasant, very quick to anger –
> Demos of the Pnyx, an irritable, deaf,
> puny old man. And last new moon
> he bought a slave, the tanner Paphlagon,
> a total scumbag who will slander anyone.

There is already some laughter among a few dozen of the thousands at the theatre. It grows and takes on a harsh edge as Demosthenes continues:

> He quickly worked out what the old man's like,
> and falling at his master's feet he fawned
> and flattered and deceived his boss
> with little scraps of leather, saying things like this –
> 'Oh Demos, only try one case before you have your bath,'
> 'eat this,' 'quaff that,' 'enjoy this sweet,' and 'take these twenty
> bucks.' 'D'you want a late night snack?' And then this Paphlagon
> would grab some food that we'd prepared and give it to
> our master as *his* gift.

People are looking as much towards the best benches in the theatre as at the stage. Why?

> He shuts us out and won't let any other slave
> wait on our master; he has got a leather strap, and when
> Demos is dining he drives all the politicians off.
> He tells the old man oracles – and Demos laps them up.
> He's realized the old man is a fool,
> so this is what he does. He slanders everyone inside the house
> with outright lies; then we get whipped while Paphlagon
> goes round to all the servants, makes demands,
> harasses them, takes bribes, and says:
> 'D'you see Hylas is getting flogged – and all because of me?
> Keep in with me, or you will die this very day.'

Everyone is looking now at Cleon, because those last words were done in a very passable imitation of his public voice. Demosthenes continues, first bitterly then anxiously:

> And so we pay him; if we don't, we will be beaten up
> by the old man and shit ourselves eight times. . . .
> Nothing gets past Paphlagon.
> His eyes are watching everywhere; he's got one foot
> in Pylos, and the other's here, in the Assembly. So
> his arse is gaping wide, his hands are forcing
> people to pay bribes, his mind is bent on theft.[1]
>
> *(Aristophanes, 2011: 94–5)*

Cleon, the most prominent citizen and general in Athens, stands. He takes the applause and the raucous laughter with a big if rather fixed grin and bends over to show that his arse is properly clothed. Then he sits down to watch a play which continues to excoriate him and goes on to win the prize for best comedy in the Festival.

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We can never know if it happened like this, or whether Cleon was there at all, but the play was staged at the Lenaea and did win the prize. Robert Elliott (1960: 15) uses the semi-mythological Archilocus, a bard in Archaic Greece whose invectives are said literally to have killed some of his targets, as 'crucial for an understanding of the image of the satirist'. In a similar spirit, I present this tableau of confrontation between Aristophanes and Cleon as a central trope for political satire, with the force of an originating myth. There, before the *polis* yet licensed by laughter, satire arraigns a powerful demagogue for corruption. Cleon cannot lash out without loss of face, and yet the ridicule in the public laughter channels disgust, anger, and contempt at his work and status. Apparently, Cleon had complained about Aristophanes' earlier (now lost) *Babylonians* (426 BCE) and begun legal proceedings, so he got everything thrown at him at the next opportunity (Robson, 2009: 3). A satirist must take a risk and be sufficiently supported by public acclaim that the authorities or the affronted think twice about repressing the gadfly.

Anyone with an appetite for satire wants this scenario to be true because it is so emotionally satisfying. That, in its simplest form, is why an account of satire involves a history of the public emotions. Within the play-frame of fiction and spectacle, a satirist can attack a public figure with impunity and channel hostility towards him. Aristophanes also indulges in punning scatology on place names that Ewans renders suggestively with 'his arse is gaping wide' while he squeezes bribes from the innocent.[2] It is a carnival of public disgust, exacting condign punishment on the palpably guilty. Or it is seditious libel. Or it is just a joke.

[1] A handful of lines have been omitted for dramatic flow.
[2] Ewans discusses the language play in this passage in his introduction, Aristophanes, 2011: 32–33.

And the public, Demos, does not escape unscathed. As so often in satire, it is lazy and self-indulgent – too easily seduced by grasping buffoons like Cleon/Paphlagon and their progeny down the centuries. It needs to be prodded and discomforted, to resist populism and rise to the charismatic wisdom required by the satirist. For, in this enthusiastic myth, the satirist is, *pace* John Belushi in *Blues Brothers* (1980), on a mission from God. No one put it higher than Alexander Pope, 'O sacred weapon! Left for Truth's defence, / Sole Dread of Folly, Vice, and Insolence!' (*Epilogue to the Satires*, II, l. 212–13, 1963). In reality, things prove more complex and conflicted than this, of course. Nevertheless, Aristophanes' and Pope's powerful desire to achieve some harsh poetic justice in a world of knaves and fools lies at the root of the satiric mode. Satire is impassioned rhetoric that claims to serve the public good. This Element addresses those broadly political passions and their effects in the world.

Section 1 moves from the myth of impertinent efficacy just outlined to ask more rigorously what functions satires can be seen to serve. The result of this wide survey is not cheering for those who dream of satirists being respected as prophets, but it does suggest that satirical interventions can have an unpredictable range of political and cultural effects. Section 2 drills down into my central theoretical proposition, that a primary function of satires is to mobilise the CAD triad of public emotions – contempt, anger, and disgust. This requires engagement with neuroscientific and philosophical research and raises some essentially ethical questions about the validity of satire as a form of public shaming and rhetorical aggression. Section 3 explores a formative historical case study of British satire in the 1720s and 1730s. It argues that satire played a crucial role in making room for oppositional and intemperate passions in the cultural and political stability that developed during Sir Robert Walpole's long primacy. The presence of more or less tolerated satire is one of the most reliable signs of the freeish public expression experienced by some of the peoples some of the time since the eighteenth century. Finally, in Section 4, I seek to bring these theoretical and historical threads together in a reading of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. I want, above all, to revive a sense of this now canonical satire's volatility in its cultural and political moment, to imagine some of the reactions it provoked when it was still possible that it might be suppressed as sedition.

While *Satire and the Public Emotions* concentrates on 'hyper-canonical' literary British satirists of the early eighteenth century (Greenberg 2018: 18), it is also informed by a parallel body of scholarship on contemporary Australian political cartooning.[3] This work, a collaboration with Haydon Manning from my university's Politics Department, has been crucial for me in shifting

[3] See Phiddian and Manning, 2008, and more than a dozen co-authored articles since 1998.

attention to the effects rather than the meanings of satires. Thus I hope that the argument about satire and its mobilisation of the harsh emotions of contempt, anger, and disgust can be sensibly modified by readers and applied to other contexts than the one I argue it through in detail here. The emotional dynamics of what Swift, Pope and John Gay do with Walpole are, for this project, recognisably similar to Aristophanes' attack on Cleo, or *Saturday Night Live*'s disapprobation of President Trump. There has been a historicist turn in literary studies, especially of the eighteenth century, one that values specificity, difference, and archival discovery. My study of satire is not historicist in that sense; instead, it takes an orientation from the history of emotions which permits some generalisation across time and place concerning rhetorical forms and public passions. The format of this Cambridge Elements series allows me to write this as a long essay rather than a treatise: to propose these ideas and to outline them plausibly but by no means definitively. If readers are provoked to find other contexts where this account of satire works, hits limits, or needs to be contested, the Element will have fulfilled its purpose.

1 The Functions of Satire

Satire and Reception

For a couple of decades now, I have been trying to work out what satire does – not the single essential thing that a text must do to deserve entry to a pure category of 'satire', but the range of things that texts recognised as satirical often enough do. This is a messy, empirical business, rather than *a priori* theorising. It does not belong to any single discipline, which has led me to dissatisfaction with the formal definitions of satire that literary studies developed in the twentieth century. Unless you confine the genre to poems in the manner of Horace, Juvenal, and Pope's 'satires', form is a second-order issue in addressing satire. It is better understood as a mode rather than a genre, an aspect of some texts which allows for the expression of hostile attitudes and emotions towards figures, practices, and institutions of public significance. Indeed, satire is not intrinsically literary at all, and its 'capture' by literary theory was already a problem before the deconstructive doctrine of the 'death of the author' further compounded the situation by making recourse to any projection of intention 'problematic.' Certainly what readers and audiences make of satires is a more important object of study than pure and irretrievable authorial intentions. However, what we make of satirical texts depends on a perception of satirical purpose and deconstructive readings are almost hardwired to refuse to apprehend this.[4]

[4] I argue this case against formalist approaches at length in Phiddian, 2013.

Thus it is better to understand satire as a mode that can appear in a wide range of texts, one that generally seeks to evoke hostile laughter for critical purposes. Indeed, the noun 'satire' is really only a descriptive label for a text (novel, chat show, poem, cartoon, painting, and so on) where the satirical mode reaches a critical mass such as to become dominant. Paul Simpson (2003: 51) has argued that 'satire, as an everyday mode of discourse, is more endemic and more outside anything approaching "high culture" than . . . many critics appear to realize.' He concludes his critique of existing scholarship with the proposition that satire

> is a complexly interdiscursive mode of communication. It is also a mode of communication that, frankly, does not sit easily beside forms of literary discourse such as poems, plays or prose, but which nonetheless seems to have been totally appropriated into literary study. The critics thus inherited a term which could only marginally be aligned with literary writing, but aligned it had to be, which may explain the consistent attempts to canonize, subsume and genericize this type of discourse. To some extent, satire needs to be wrested away from 'Literature' and to be put instead in the context of popular and populist discourses. (Simpson, 2003: 62)

The literary-theoretical tendency to 'genericize', to describe satire as an entity, exists despite the fact that very few texts, in whatever media, can usefully be described formally as satires.[5] Where satirical purpose becomes dominant is a judgement that will vary between readers or viewers because it is an emotional as well as a formal judgement, but most people would agree to call *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) a satire and *Bleak House* (1853) a realist novel with satirical elements, not a satire. Simply recalling Evelyn Waugh's *Loved One* (1948) or Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), however, suggests that categorical distinctions in this field will always be rubbery and, I wish to add, finally academic in the negative sense. If a conservative Christian interpreted *The Colbert Report* as unironic public commentary, despite framing as satire that no liberal viewer could miss, that is a fact a scholar has to attend to, not simply an error to be ridiculed. For her, Colbert simply has not worked as satire, but as something else (Baumgartner and Morris, 2008; Lamarre, Landreville, and Beam, 2009).

What makes something satirical 'in the world' is the perception in an audience of satirical purpose. Moreover, there is no guarantee that different spectators will deduce the same purpose from the same text, or the purpose

[5] See Condren, 2012. 'Menippean' is a label applied to many such satires but either it is so capacious a term as to include all things satirical, or it requires a meticulous process of exclusions that create more problems than they solve. It has very limited utility for my argument; see Weinbrot, 2005; Musgrave, 2014; McLuhan, 2015.

consciously intended by the author. Construing the purpose(s) of satirical texts depends on temperamental and ideological predisposition in the spectators; this is politically more important than hermeneutic acumen, as can be seen in the controversies surrounding *causes célèbres* such as *The Satanic Verses* (1988) or the Danish cartoons of Mohammed.[6] The interesting political questions in the analysis of satirical texts concern what spectators make of them, and how they react, not whether they get them 'right'. This is especially the case when satires successfully provoke high levels of controversy. Thus I am interested in the consequences of satirical texts, including the unintended consequences. So, the question for this Element is not what do *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) or the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons mean so much as what do they do? What is the function of these texts in the developing political and press ecology of early Georgian Britain or the twenty-first century's brave new world of digital circulation (so personal and so global)? What emotional work occurs? The overt critical aim of satire is calling out knaves and fools to demand cultural, social, or political change, but history provides few examples of this working in a direct or instrumental way. There has been vastly more satire than there has been change caused by the correct understanding of satire. Consequently, it seems worthwhile to explore what other cultural and emotional work satire and the types of laughter it licenses do.

Satire and Emotion

One of the things satires nearly always do is express, evoke, and provoke indignation. This works for the authors, no doubt, but the more significant expression of indignation occurs in the audience, where different expressions of public indignation are mobilised or performed. 'Indignation' is a convenient umbrella word because it can be traced back as far as Swift's credo of *saeva indignatio* (savage indignation) expressed in his epitaph (Phiddian, 2016), and it is as current as the post–financial crisis phenomenon of Stéphane Hessel's *Indignez-vous* (2010) and protests by the *Indignados* in Spain. Among modern psychological studies of the emotions, however, it is not a term in common use, and the words it maps most closely onto are the CAD triad of negative emotions: contempt, anger, and disgust.[7] The satirical and the purely comic elements of texts can share tropes and techniques such as caricature, incongruity, and irony, but the main, transhistorical difference between them is the engagement of these visceral emotions in satire. Indeed, a novel like Orwell's *1984* (1949) or the haunting critique of globalisation from the 1990s by John Spooner (1999;

[6] See Appignanesi and Maitland, 1990; Ruthven, 1990; Klausen, 2009.
[7] See Rozin et al., 1999 and Section 2.

Figure 1 John Spooner, *A Spooner in the works: the art of John Spooner* (Melbourne: Text Publishing 1999), reproduced with permission.

Figure 1) can be satirical without being funny at all. Satirical caricature and distortion are often comical, but they need not be.

While the detailed analysis in this Element is set mainly in the 1720s and 1730s, its resonance need not stop there. I want to map the CAD triad onto satirical texts in a way that respects historical difference in specifics without so making a fetish of historicism as to deny broad similarities of emotional experience across time and place. I certainly do not present twenty-first-century neuroscience as a neat solution to all satirical affect – behavioural psychology can exhibit grandly synchronic ambitions to explain human consciousness scientifically and universally but is only narrowly true of the populations of mostly North American university students who answer ethically cleared surveys and get wired up to functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) machines. This distinctive subject group has snidely but accurately been characterised as WEIRD, that is, Western Educated Industrialised Rich Democratic (Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan, 2010; Haidt, 2012). Their experiences of contempt, anger, and disgust will be culturally inflected in ways different from the original spectators of Swift and his Scriblerian colleagues, but it is extremely probable that there will be broad similarities that we can learn from and extend to other, non-literary satirical phenomena. I am neither

a 'basic emotions' universalist nor a historicist particularist.[8] My ambition is to project an extensive view of satire without attempting the unmanageable (and inevitably tedious) task of being comprehensive across time and place.

Some studies in cognitive psychology, stylistics, and media have begun to explore who gets satires, how, and why.[9] Literary studies of satire have also gestured towards a more transactional view of satire than was evident in the formal concerns of the past, with Charles Knight (2004) talking of 'the satiric frame of mind'; Melinda Rabb (2007: 12) of 'getting irony'; and Ashley Marshall (2013) insisting both that temperament influences satire and that 'tone matters'. However, little will be gained if we leap from the sophisticated cultural constructivism of literary analysis to a reductive scientism that involves wiring a statistically significant number of subjects up to fRMI scanners while watching *The Colbert Report* or reading the *Modest Proposal* to show which parts of the brain fire when satire is received. There is a body of behavioural psychological research of this kind into humour, and it has a degree of validity precisely because the cognitive experience of a joke can be abstracted substantially from cultural context into something approaching pure emotional reaction. Satirical responses are, perforce, much more contextually and historically situated than that. The image of Winnie the Pooh has had widespread humorous import for almost a century in the English-speaking world and beyond. Since 2017 in China, however, these images have been suppressed by the authorities as far as is possible on the Internet because of satirical play on a resemblance between the bear of little brain and supreme leader Xi Jinping. At the moment of writing, an orange hairpiece has almost planet-wide recognition as a satirical marker, but that may not last.

There are, nevertheless, two broad orientations that I want to take from experimental psychology into this account of satirical affect. The first is that emotions, far from being antithetical to thought as the Platonic and Cartesian mind-body dichotomy has it, are a crucial part of how we grasp ideas, impressions, and judgements. We do not think dispassionately, and certainly not when we are engaged in satirical cognition. This is not a novel proposition. It is at the heart, for example, of David Hume's (2011: 266) mid-eighteenth-century theory of passions (which I discuss in Section 3) where he notoriously holds that 'Reason is, and ought only to be the slave to the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to obey them.' But the dream of reason has a habit of carrying us away, and its limits need to be relearnt regularly. The second

[8] See Plamper, 2015, especially chap. 3.
[9] See Pfaff and Gibbs, 1997; Simpson, 2003; Baumgartner and Morris, 2008; Lamarre, Landreville, and Beam, 2009; Refaie, 2009; Zekavat, 2017; this scholarship is further surveyed in Chen, Phiddian, and Stewart 2017.

orientation is that satire might, by the way it harnesses harsh emotions to more or less civil discourse, function in a culturally adaptive way. I mean this as a strong metaphor for the role satire can play in the cultural ecology of a tolerant and relatively free press, but I certainly do not claim the precise Darwinian sense of individual and group adaptation to maximum procreation and survival. Joseph Carroll (2004), Brian Boyd (2009), Denis Dutton (2009), and others have argued that art and narrative are adaptations that provide evolutionary benefit to humans. That may be so, but what I have to say does not depend on it. It depends on the weaker claim that the play of satire is part of the play of public emotions that permits peaceful and complex societies to flourish.

Satire is not exactly the opposable thumb of public discourse, but, sometimes paradoxically, it helps us avoid Hobbes's (1991: 88) notorious state of nature, 'such a warre as is of every man against every man'. As part of an active press, it provides an outlet for public passions and dispute short of actual violence. I argue these things in greater detail in the following sections, so I will put it here only schematically. The visceral emotions mobilised by satire are anger, or the aggressive desire to attack the object of criticism; disgust, or shocked recoil from the object; and contempt, or cool but harsh rising above the object. Why the satirical exercise of these powerfully negative emotions seems to be such a persistent element of relatively free presses (something nascent in the Scriblerians' time) is apparently paradoxical. How and why should anger, disgust, and contempt expressed in various modes of ridicule contribute to civil discourse? My hypothesis for this is a model of catharsis, whereby potentially disruptive public emotions and ideas can be exercised in public without recourse to violence or oppression.

Satire and Truth

But is not satire the mode of truth militant in a naughty world? Satirists often claim to tell the simple truth, and they very probably believe that is what they do. However, questions must follow: whose truth? what sort of truth? truth to what ends? They present their work as the defence of an underlying moral order that is being traduced, but they do not obviously (or rather, they obviously do not) play by ethical deliberative rules. Anyone who seeks to assess satires by a standard of detachment, balance, sympathy, or complexity of analysis will find little that makes the grade and will tend to the conclusion that satire should be deprecated, perhaps even suppressed, in the pursuit of a rational and sensitive public culture. Martha Nussbaum, whose work on anger I discuss in the next section, takes something like this line in a series of books (Nussbaum 2004, 2016, 2018). She argues powerfully that all interpersonal acts of shaming and

expressions of disgust or anger fall short of the full mutual respect in which human relations should occur. There would be no satire in her *Republic* and she has a point. The central field of satire for the purposes of this study, political satire, is always a risk to the temperate quality of civil discourse. By a standard of rational and sympathetic truthfulness, the obvious public appetite for satire looks like a sociopolitical problem, perhaps akin to appetites for pornography and spectacular violence, which need to be contained by laws as well as cultural and commercial codes.

Even on the memorable occasions when satirists appear to have got the condition of their societies 'right' (e.g. Swift on colonised Ireland, Voltaire on *ancien régime* France, Orwell on twentieth-century totalitarianism), there is little that can be characterised as balance or respectful debate in the way they go about their business. Instead they caricature their targets' positions and physical appearance; they parody their discourses; they ridicule their sacred images. A satirical intervention will always 'other' its targets. So *Animal Farm* (1945) others the leaders of the Soviet revolution by presenting them as pigs and calling up the bestial baggage those animals carry in European literature. Orwell calls up a set of visceral identifications in the audience that is hard to characterise as good civic discursive behaviour. We may applaud him but, rightly, deplore racist depictions of Jews as rats or Africans as monkeys, and there is not much difference at a formal or technical level. Rather than give the meretricious *Der Sturmer* another run, consider the well-known and technically brilliant expression of White Australian xenophobia from the 1880 depicted in Figure 2.

No account of the public emotional effects of satire can dodge the fact that it is a mode that can be used to whip up dark and irrational passions. This cartoon stirs up feelings against what British Australians perceived as the 'Yellow Peril' of Chinese immigration to the young colonies. It now looks morally revolting, but it is an undoubtedly powerful image that only became infamous when the 'White Australia' policy came under concerted attack, after World War II. For decades it looked like plain common sense to most citizens of one of the more democratic countries of the world and may still appeal to some of my more extreme and paranoid compatriots. Should something this forceful be constrained by wise press regulation to limit error and offense?

Fortunately for those of us who enjoy satire and do not want to be locked up as moral perverts, there are at least two robust reasons not to institute such precautionary censorship. The first is that any system of censorship requires great faith in the guardians who choose the censors. History suggests that there is no reliable way of keeping them wise and sensible, or incorrupt. Moreover, the taboos shift. The unspeakable or undrawable changes over