

**REVIEW OF
ELICES AGUDO, JUAN
FRANCISCO (2004).
*HISTORICAL AND
THEORETICAL
APPROACHES TO
ENGLISH SATIRE.*
MÜNCHEN: LINCOM
STUDIES IN ENGLISH
LINGUISTICS**

*M^a Ángeles Ruiz Moneva
University of Zaragoza*

The origins of satire lead us to the origins of Western civilisation, both in its practice and in its earliest theorisation (Horace, Juvenal)¹. Its complexity has always attracted the interest of criticism. Having this perspective in mind, the author has sought to provide a systematic analysis of satire that covers both aspects of history and theory. The work under analysis has therefore aimed to cope with those aspects which are essential to understand the peculiarities, functioning and implications of satire.

So as to fulfil these purposes, the discussion has been organised into three different chapters. The first of them deals with the historical evolution of the concept, and is subdivided into two different sections, devoted, respectively, to the lapse of time corresponding to the origins of satire until the nineteenth century and to the state of satire in the twentieth century. The second chapter dwells on the epistemology of satire and covers both its definition and the classification into the different 'modes' of satire that can be found. Before drawing to its conclusion, the work approaches in the third chapter the different rhetorical strategies by means of which satire may be conveyed.

¹ Among the critical editions of the complete works of Horace or Juvenal, the following may be mentioned: Brown (1993), Muecke (1993), Guillén Cabañero (1991) or González (1987).

The survey on the history of the practice of satire undertaken in Chapter I, "A Historical Overview", shows that satire has aroused uneven interest: thus, it has been a preferred genre at times. This is linked by the author to the very same unpredictability of satire itself. The historic analysis undertaken by Elices Agudo has been exhaustive enough so as not to restrict the search for the roots of satire in the classical Western tradition of Greece and Rome, which are probably the best known manifestations. Quite on the contrary, the author tracks the traces of satire in the Eskimo, Arab and Irish societies. The author notes that seeking the roots of satire becomes as complex and slippery a task as attempting to define it.

Greek and Roman satire are, then, assessed as being "decisive in the reaffirmation" of satire as a genre (2004: 8). Therefore, these stages are regarded as the first steps into the maturity and consolidation of the genre. Both the balanced position from which the two traditions are examined by the author, as well as their connections with those former, and probably worse known antecedents, are also worth stressing. Among these origins, the main representatives of the Greek tradition are reviewed. Furthermore, the differences between two of the greatest writers of satires of the Roman classical antiquity, namely Horace and Juvenal, who were to be influential throughout history, are adequately covered and also correctly founded upon bibliographic sources.

It is also interesting to note how the author underlines the social nature of these earliest manifestations of satire, a feature that is about to recur in all characterisations of satire, and which for many critics differentiates it from irony (e.g., Frye 1964, 1957, 1944; Meredith 1877, Kierkegaard 1841). Another aspect that recurs in the earliest manifestations of satire in the Arabic, Irish and Eskimo societies has to do with the reliance upon magic. Even though this feature may not recur throughout the history of satire, yet probably it does in one of its effects, namely, the search for an effect upon its addressees.

The approach followed in the book tends to trace what may be called as the historical continuity in the practice of satire, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon world. It dwells overall upon the two 'golden' periods for satire, namely, the classical antiquity and the period corresponding to the English Restoration and the eighteenth century, as well as the renewed contemporary, twentieth-century interest in it. An interesting aspect of the work, therefore, is constituted precisely by the exploration of the satiric authors and works to be located between those periods, particularly within the Anglo-Saxon culture: the contribution of Chaucer, Skelton or Dunbar is analysed. In this way, the understanding of authors such as Fielding, Defoe, Dryden, Dr. Johnson, Pope or Swift may benefit from the acquaintance with the satiric resources employed by Chaucer or Shakespeare, amongst others. Besides, Elices focuses upon the

socio-historical factors leading to the emergence of the genre: thus, the raising of the middle class, and with it, all its conditions of economic development and social organisation make it feasible to develop a literary form which parodied and questioned those old heroic values that the new conditions opposed.

The fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries are approached as representing the formal theorisation of the genre, as well as the recovery of the classics, as in every other field of learning, art and literature. The authors corresponding to the period starting with the Restoration and leading to the eighteenth century, such as Dryden, Pope, Dr. Johnson, Fielding, Defoe Swift or Lawrence Sterne then, are shown to be indebted to this tradition and to recapture the sharpest satires in the style of Juvenal. Satire is also shown to be at its most in Restoration drama, in the works of authors such as John Gay or Sheridan. The works of all these great authors also show that satire may be conveyed through a variety of resources, which even range from the comic to the dramatic or the tragic, and that satire can be present in all literary genres, be they poetic, narrative or dramatic.

As for the nineteenth century, its first part, dominated by Romanticism, a period which exalted values such as freedom or individualism, did not seem to be a favourable context for the practice of a genre usually deeply rooted in society. Yet, it is shown to be present in Byron's works or in certain emerging female authors' literary career, such as Maria Edgeworth, Jane Austen or Frances Burney. Besides, even though in general satire was absent from the production of Romantic authors, yet, on the contrary, it would be hard to understand most of Victorian novels if neglecting resources such as satire or irony. All in all, then, the historical review made by the author demonstrates his wide and comprehensive scope, and his intention to cover both the theory and the practice of satire throughout history.

The perspective taken in the book on the twentieth century stands out from the rest in that it is not only synthetic or historical, but it also adopts an analytical standpoint. Thus, the author has also set out to trace the ways in which twentieth-century satire may be said to have been original, and have thus departed from the models and conventions established in preceding periods. The author's central thesis is that in the analysis of twentieth-century satire there emerges a complex, if not inconsistent, panorama, in which the traditional moral scope of the genre coexists with an authentic departure from it. Thus, side by side with traditional satire, a form of "non-moral satire" can be found, which is seen to stand for an authentic ontological transformation of the genre. A reason is sought by Elices for such a situation, which for the author accurately lies in the complex context of the period, which makes it hard if not impossible to teach moral lessons any longer. This is enhanced through the analysis of the

most important theorists on satire, as well as of the most outstanding works. It is shown how works such as Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) or Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1948) renewed both the genre and the interest in it.

The overview of the historical panorama closes with a section devoted to the period starting with the sixties and coming up to our days. In the sixties, satire devolves to non-literary works, and is shown in genres such as stand-up comedy. Nowadays, the ongoing discussion dwells on whether satire, a genre whose limits often blur, is not perhaps best reflected in general post-modern aspects such as subversion, transgression or parody.

The historical survey is followed by the consideration of more theoretical aspects. In the second chapter, the author has intended to propose a definition of satire, no matter if its very same multifaceted nature makes it escape a univocal definition, just as its generic ascription has also been problematic. For doing so, first of all, he has relied upon the etymological meaning of the term. Afterwards, a review of the main critical standpoints of the most significant authors has been explored so as to trace the recurrent traits that may be used to define and characterise satire. Eventually, though, Elices bases his pinpointing of these elements upon Frye (1957), and those are an object of attack, wit and humour, as well as fantasy. In any case, the author also notes that the borderlines between satire and other related figures have not always been unanimously traced, as the distinction between satire and invective. Thus, not all authors agree that the latter involves necessarily a personal attack, and some authors just use both indistinctively.

Anyhow, the author also draws on other elements of satire, already noted by other critics, such as the connection of satire, or more concretely of the target of its attack, with the external reality, that is, with a recognisable socio-political and historical context. In relation with this, the views on satire of two of the most influential critical schools, mainly, Yale and Chicago are assessed. In contrast to the more formalist approach of the former, the Chicago school stressed the connection of satire and of literature in general with history and reality.

Other aspects explored concern the connection of satire with humour, irony and parody. As for humour, the author concludes that the relationship between the two can neither be sufficient nor necessary. Irony helps satire to become more detached and indirect, two aspects which make it more effective. With regard to parody, there are for the author similar problems to those found in connection with humour: that is, parody may be satiric, but need not be so.

Whether satire entails a definite moral stance is also addressed. In a sense, this has also been tackled with in the first chapter, where the view that the twentieth century stands for a kind of rupture with all the previous tradition has been sustained.

The chapter also dwells on a proposal of taxonomy of the modes of satire, no matter if this is regarded as a further consequence of satire's escaping any definition whatsoever. The classification proposed is above all thematic, based upon the targets of attack focused upon the satiric writer. Thus, it speaks of political, religious and social satire, on account of the three uppermost dealt with topics by satirists. This part of the essay is noteworthy for its exhaustive analysis and for the detailed account of the conditions where each of these forms has usually appeared, as well as of the sort of resources employed in each kind.

After having focused on what is satire, the third part of the work covers the aspects related to the modes of expression of satire, or, as the chapter is entitled, its rhetorical strategies. The author focuses quite rightly the discussion of these sources from the standpoint of the effects that they help the satirist to convey. It may thus be argued that it is the how the main case in point of this third chapter, which is perhaps the most explanatory of the whole book.

It may be argued that not always has it been easy to actually differentiate between all these strategies, as all of them rely some way or another upon some sort of discrepancy between what is actually uttered and the intention towards it, or to put it in Gricean terms, between what is "said" and what is "meant" (Grice, 1957). The author himself draws attention to this problem, as he notes that the relationship between these resources and satire is neither universal nor necessary: that is to say, the former may be used for purposes other than satire, and, on the other hand, satire may be constructed on the basis of other different resources, no matter how often these may contribute to its conveyance. In our view, the author quite rightly links this to the essential problem of the elusiveness of the concept of satire itself.

In this chapter, therefore, the author focuses upon how satire nourishes from irony, parody, and also wit, fantasy and animal imagery. It is shown that all these resources contribute to the conveyance of the speaker's attitude that often combines the sharpest attack with a certain detachment from the target of satire. Perhaps the most outstanding trait of the third part is the three general aspects that may be said to underlie the discussion of these resources: first, the balanced approach to their individual features; second, the drawing of their distinctive traits and how they can be differentiated from satire and finally, the ways in which they contribute to the conveyance and reinforcement of the satiric

message. Besides, the author's knowledge of the essential sources upon which his comments are based is also notorious. In any case, it is here that perhaps a suggestion may be made: we wonder whether perhaps an aspect that could be further discussed by the author –and which the reader might have found useful– might have been to define and distinguish among some of the forms typically associated with satire, such as lampoon, invective or libel. Those are indeed referred to when dealing with the origins of satire, but perhaps it would have been worth covering them with greater detail.

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