

Satire and Sense, Alas

by [Robert Gear](#) (April 2025)



Dance at the Insane Asylum (George Bellows, 1907)

Satire and ridicule used as ideological weapons have a pedigree as venerable as Ancient Greece, reaching another pinnacle in the writings and caricatures of 18th century authors and artists. An excellent more modern example of such lampooning can be viewed in the famous propaganda film released by the UK Ministry of Truth in 1942 lampooning Nazi bigwigs and hordes of goose-stepping Wehrmacht. In recent years the internet has provided a wealth of opportunity for the continuance of this great tradition, although caution is

in order since we can no longer necessarily be sure that a 'performance' is satirically intended or a serious attempt at provocation by a wokist or some such. But laugh we may.

What about the mockery once aimed at inmates of Bedlam mental hospital? That institute, previously known as the Priory of St Mary of Bethlehem, was founded 1247 and devoted to the healing of sick [paupers](#). After relocation and name changes, it became a mental asylum eventually adopting the sobriquet "Bedlam." It is from this term we derive the meaning of "bedlam" as "extreme noisy confusion or uproar."

During more unenlightened days (and who wasn't unenlightened in the past—by our more virtuous standards at least?), Bedlam became a popular tourist attraction. People could visit the institution either to poke fun at the insane and their antics or merely to assuage their curiosity. Guests expected a performance of crazed madness; the patients' suffering was flaunted and their strange conduct gawked at. Visitors were even permitted to bring sticks to poke the inmates and further enrage them. It's nice to know that entry was free on the first Tuesday of the month (discount price for seniors after 5 pm). Apparently in 1814 alone there were 96,000 visits of 'tourists' seeking a holiday from their usual round of more mundane activities.

I cannot of course vouch for the precise details described here, but then wikipedia research can be a notoriously perilous undertaking, especially for the more credulous amongst us.

I mention these historical gleanings to underline a similarity with our own temptations to mock and gawk at contemporary expressions of craziness available for all to appreciate either online or in the streets of many Western cities.

Nowadays we see distempered youth (and a number not so youthful) expressing in the silliest ways feelings and

opinions which only a decade or two ago would have been derided by almost everyone as the utterances of unstable fools. Indeed many of the afflicted have *coiffeurs* calculated to engender envy in Medusa herself. As Pope phrased it in *The Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* when referring to poets and scribblers who gave him no peace:

All *Bedlam*, or *Parnassus*, is let out:
Fire in each eye, and papers in each hand,
They rave, recite, and madden round the land (italics added).

Scattered amongst those who demonstrate such 'useful idiocy,' we do also find persons who can only be classed as active accomplices of evil; many of those (usually, if not quite always, university-educated coxcombs) providing support for Mohammedan terrorists. They do this without shame, egging on the vulgarly credulous and rarely interrupted by sober reflection: a most baffling affliction.

What should be our response to today's social media and street-activist insanity? The following come to mind: curiosity, sympathy, revulsion, nausea, face-palming, hair-pulling, donning of sackcloth and ashes, head-banging-against-the-wall-syndrome, *inter alia*. How else can one respond to folk who believe in something called 'climate goals' (uhhm, what?), or encourage a stone-age standard of living, or *support* the claims and aims of the religion of peace? Is mockery against these uncouth dullards of the same category as that of those gape-mouthed tourists at the erstwhile Bedlam hospital? Of course we deplore the actions of those who once laughed at the truly insane (assuming we would nowadays classify those inmates in this way). But do our consciences permit us to ridicule the ignorance and hateful behavior of such rabidly foolish activists?

Bear in mind that it serves no purpose to wag our fingers as if we are dealing with naughty toddlers (despite the temptation), or to try to rationally discuss their current 'issues.' Such an approach is tantamount to spraying perfume at a skunk.

We are left with ridicule, which if not always fully effective in stopping their rants at least helps us to cope mentally with the flood of nonsense. I think we can agree that derision aimed at our voguish activists is not *ethically* of the same kind as the ridicule of the insane of times gone by—and we should certainly not poke them with sticks, however tempting it might be. Such mockery must form part at least of the attempt to despoil those who would destroy us; in fact such laughter is perhaps a necessary albeit not sufficient condition of *our own sanity*.

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