Verse Satire

by David Hamilton (October 2014)

T.S. Eliot's inspiration, John Donne, was very influential in Verse Satire as Ben Jonson was in poetry. Verse Satire began as a poetic form in the 1590s, spread and influenced dramatists. This is a literary tradition, which far from being outdated shows continuity through time, and like a thread holds literary change together. It is rooted deep in our cultural origins. Culturally it is another example of the need to encourage the teaching of Latin and Greek in the schools.

The Nature of Satire

Doctor Johnson defined satire as, "*A poem in which wickedness or folly is censured*." Now we would substitute literature as the field of satire not just poetry with the use of "irony" and "Wit." Satire is a way of responding to society whereas Pastoral is a way of looking at the world as well as a style and conventions. Pastoral grew out of nostalgia for a bygone golden age and a sense of disparity between the cities and courts, the corruption, artificiality and the idealised notion of how it once was, whether in childhood, a distant past, or far-away arcadia. The satirical vision is in human nature like Pastoral and gives expression to the disillusioned realisation of the gulf between the way the world is and how it ought to be. It is a mood and a style of writing in a tradition rather than a genre. It is expressed in various generic forms, but we can isolate the essence by comparing examples from different periods.

The reign of Domitian in Rome, the end of the Elizabethan era in England and the early 18c are notable periods of satire. This is from "Juvenal" translated by John Dryden:

> *What indignation boils within my veins,*
> *When perjured guardians, proud with impious gains,*
> *Choke up the streets, too narrow for their trains!*
> *Whose wards, by want betray'd, to crimes are led*
> *Too foul to name, too fulsome to be read!*
> *When he who pill'd his province scapes the laws,*
> *And keeps his money, though he lost his cause:*
> *His fine begg'd off, contemns his infamy,*
> *Can rise at twelve, and get him drunk ere three;*
> *Enjoys his exile, and, condemn'd in vain,*

Leaves thee, prevailing province, to complain!

When he sees the way guardians abuse their power over their wards and the consequent vice the impoverished wards descend into, Juvenal's blood boils with indignation and he protests in a satiric poem. The topic is "indignation," and a powerful need to protest. This same topic recurs centuries later in an outburst from Jonson's authorial voice Asper in a debate about satire in an introduction to *Every Man out Of His Humour* (1599):

Away! Who is so patient of this impious world,
That he can check his spirit, or rein his tongue?
Or who hath such a dead unfeeling sense,
That heaven's horrid thunders cannot wake?
To see the earth crack'd with the weight of sin,
Hell gaping under us, and o'er our heads
Black, ravenous ruin, with her sail-stretch'd wings,
Ready to sink us down, and cover us.
Who can behold such prodigies as these,
And have his lips seal'd up? Not I: my soul
Was never ground into such oily colours,
To flatter vice, and daub iniquity:
But, with an armed and resolved hand,
I'll strip the ragged follies of the time
Naked as at their birth –

Another satirist driven by love of truth and common sense cannot behold the folly and vice around him and not speak out. These human flaws are to be lampooned and larked in the public interest.

Asper:

Tut, these are so innate and popular,

That drunken custom would not shame to laugh,

In scorn, at him, that should but dare to tax 'em:

And yet, not one of these, but knows his works,

Knows what damnation is, the devil, and hell;

Yet hourly they persist, grow rank in sin,

Puffing their souls away in perjurous air,

To cherish their extortion, pride, or lusts.

Ridicule in comedy originates in Aristotle's *Poetics.* In the eighteenth century it is associated with Henry Fielding who, in his Preface to *Joseph Andrews,* states "*The content of all comedy (at least if it is to distinguish itself from the burlesque) should be based upon what is "light and ridiculou*s."

Vices, and all those who exhibit them, deserve to be ridiculed and laughter is the necessary instrument to expose folly and encourage reformation. Alexander Pope, in the second of two dialogues "Epilogue to the Satires" II, 208–1 appended to his satires in 1738, raises the explanation of the satirical imperative to a higher level, *"O sacred weapon! Left for truth's defence, Sole dread of folly, vice and insolence!"*

For Pope the weapon to attack the vices and follies of society was satire. Oliver Goldsmith and his contemporaries softened the harsh connotations of "satire" by naming it "ridicule." The satirist censures from a zealous concern not spite or malice, for the good of his society. The sacred weapon of ridicule is a gift from God to purge vice and stir the consciousness of those in hall and stall, state and church who should guard public morality. In these examples the satirists indignation and zeal is presented as a passion borne of a personal imperative to speak protestingly when all about condone or tolerate vice. Pope would say it's sanctioned by right standards and decent values.

The comparison with Pastoral is suggested by the violation of values in the contemporary world as they both grow from the perceived gap between reality and an ideal world. Pastoral retreats from the city and its connotations – turmoil, corruption – over complexity; satire looks it in the eye and faces it where the "*Prodigies of vice and folly choke the streets*" of Domitian's Rome. Pastoral is cognisant of the world it leaves for the simpler life in the country; satire depends on an underlying ideal of simplicity, virtue and common sense that are often associated with a rural life even if not explicitly stated in play or poem.

The function and method of satire is to use the horror and absurdity of the negative side of human behaviour that it shows to force the audience back onto right principles and values.

The origins are in the impulse to be indignant, protest and morally criticize imperfect humanity.

The name is from Latin Satura – a mixture of different things. It originally named primitive theatre associated with Harvest Festival. In ancient Roman society these were periods of license when authority was mocked and conventional morality was in abeyance. It's associated also with a mixture so they often do not have the expected artistic form of other literary types. The beginning, middle and end technique of comedy and tragedy has a consistent structure that unconsciously allows the audience to expect certain types of action and length of parts, which if too long, seem drawn out, but if too short, rushed. Satire is pell-mell, it holds a variety of elements together and often stops when it is expected to continue.

The Purpose of Satire

Among the classical poets great exemplars were Horace (65-8 BC) and Juvenal (c60-130AD). They wrote different types of Satire and founded two traditions.

Horace was urbane, witty and dealt with the follies and eccentricities of human society, not the vices. Juvenal was acerbic, with a savage indignation who attacked vices, not aberrations.

Joseph Hall was a leading Elizabethan satirist, a contemporary of Ben Jonson and John Donne, dividing his own work into two types. Toothless, is the category for the after Horatian satires and Biting satires for harsher work, which probably derived from Juvenal.

John Dryden wrote an *Essay on Satire*, which was prefixed to his translation of Juvenal (1693), where he made the distinction between the rallying of Horace and the railing of Juvenal. The word "railing" became a denotative description of the abusive stance and verbal excess of the 1590s. It's a trigger word in the period that denotes Satirists as zeal denoted Puritans.

How dull, and how insensible a beast

Is man, who yet would lord it o'er the rest!

Philosophers and poets vainly strove

In every age the lumpish mass to move:

But those were pedants, when compared with these,

Who know not only to instruct, but please.

Poets alone found the delightful way,

Mysterious morals gently to convey

In charming numbers; so that as men grew

Pleased with their poems, they grew wiser too.

Satire has always shone among the rest,

And is the boldest way, if not the best,

To tell men freely of their foulest faults;

To laugh at their vain deeds, and vainer thoughts.

In satire too the wise took different ways,

To each deserving its peculiar praise.

Some did all folly with just sharpness blame,

Whilst others laugh'd and scorn'd them into shame.

But of these two, the last succeeded best,

As men aim rightest when they shoot in jest.

There is also a distinction between direct satire, and the Mennipean from the Greek writer who practiced it which has a length and structure similar to a novel; and is characterized by attacking mental attitudes rather than individuals. It is written in the third person as a narrative and often allegorical and direct or formal satire, which is written as speech in the first person. Indirect satires are often animal fables, in which tales of animals express lessons and warnings on human behaviour like Edmund Spenser's, "Mother Hubbard's Tale", which satirises abuses in church and court through the behaviour of an ape and a fox; and the cautionary tale of the kid and the fox in his eclogue for May. Jonson's, *Volpone*, derives from animal fables.

Formal verse satires, based on the work of Horace but principally, Juvenal, in which the satirist addresses the reader directly, or, some figure in an imagined situation, were fashionable in the last years of Elizabeth's reign.

Subjects and Literary Devices of Satirists

There are three broad types of subject matter:

1) Particular follies and vices were ridiculed and censured. Common targets were ornate dress, use of cosmetics, foreign affectations of speech and modes of behaviour learned on travels in Europe.

2) Abstract follies were usually personified in representative figures, types and mocked. These include the boastful cowardly soldier, which was derived from the *Miles Gloriosus* of Plautus (C 254–184 B.C.) whose source was a Greek play, now lost, called *The Braggart* or *Alazon*. This became a familiar figure in England in the 1590s as mercenaries were returning from war on the continent. Ben Jonson had been a mercenary. Another subject was the affected man about town who became the "fop" in Restoration Comedy; another is a broad class – women as a class, which derived from Juvenal's attack on women in his sixth satire; this was anti-women satire. Another subject was the abuse of professional callings by ecclesiastics and by lawyers, doctors, poets and poetasters, in the early part of the century.

3) They held an assumption of a plain way of speaking, unpolished, straightforward and sometimes coarse and obscene. It was often used by a writer to show he was disinterested and would speak out rather than mince his words before corruption and the contemptible. This appears at the end of Spenser's, "Mother Hubbard Tale," as it is told by a character as in one of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Then Spenser enters and apologises for the deficiency of style of his earthy narrator: "*So Mother Hubbard did her discourse end which, pardon one, if I amiss have it penned. For weak was my remembrance it to hold…*"

4) A blunt style was featured in many satires. The form of the type of satire of the 90s had a dramatic element. There were often two speakers, the satirist and a companion, the Adversarius, who was a foil to the verbal and emotional excesses of satire. The Adversarius had a calmer, less jaundiced view of human behaviour. Their dialogues were held in public places, a crowded street, and were commentaries on the figures they met. Each figure is a type of a social or moral absurdity.

Everard Gilpin's Fifth Satire (1593) provided another expression of suppressed indignation, "*For whose gall is it that would not overflow to meet in every street wherever he should go with folly. The city is the map of vanity.*"

In the streets, even in the middle aisle of old St. Pauls, which was a popular resort for shady characters, he reduces the population to less than human accumulation with less than human deformities of mind and body-it is a reductive form. When this satirist surveys the crowd he sees vanities, fools, gulls, antics, shapes – the apes of this urban jungle.

A few lines later he draws his companion's attention to a figure that would enter the and

become a familiar figure later and in several variations: "*But see, yonder one like the unfrequented theatre, walks in dark silence, suited to those black fancies which intrude upon possession of his troubled breast.*" Hamlet was of that type – the melancholy man, "*But before blacks sake he would look like a jest for he's clean out of fashion. "What he?*" "*I think the genius of antiquity come to complain of our variety of tickle fashion." "I know you jest I see. Would you need to know is he a Malcontent a discarded intelligence*." Flaminco is of this type.

John Marston's *The Scourge of Villainy* (1598) opens with a satirist reducing mankind to the level of beasts. The Adversarius tries to temper his bitter view by saying not everyone is a fit subject for lashes. "*A man, a man, a kingdom for a man. "Why how, how, curish, mad Athenian*" Marston was a follower of Juvenal rather than Horace.

The satirist ignores his temperate companion's objections and reveals the disillusionment that drives his embittered view of human nature as grotesque and distorted. He is distressed that his ideal of human nature has been destroyed by a muddying and staining the intellectual part man was endowed with at the creation by human behaviour. He's deeply disillusioned that all he has now is scornful epithets in a frenzy of disgust, verging on hysteria. As the two observers wander through the streets several typical figures are considered: the fashionable and dissolute man about town looking for a way of extorting money from others by a monopoly a controversial economic abuse of the day: "*A man, a man…...*"

The verbs "*snort*," and "*gape*" reinforce what he earlier described as Circe's charm, the magical transforming of men into beasts. The Adversarius tries again, and lights on a Martialist, a follower of Mars, possibly a former soldier, but probably a suburb captain like Bobadill or Face in his disguise in *The Alchemist*. He's a conman who pretends a military past to con money out of fools.

The Satirist corrects his optimistic friend, "*A man's a man, peace on him. Yon's a man*."

Most verse Satirists use a projection of a persona as a consciousness whence the attacks on the abuses around are directed. Indignation, the need to vent an outraged morality was a feature of the Satirist's persona. Another feature was the adoption of a plain, even coarse, style of speaking, which denoted an honesty and integrity and regard for truth. Sometimes with a scholarly stance.

Donne's speaker in his first satire is reluctant to be drawn from his study, which seems to be a small attic judging by his description of it: "*This standing wooden chest*." His companions are great authors from the past and he lists some of the authors of the books around him. He

does not want to leave this world of study though the importunities of a visitor who exhorts him to “come out and enjoy the bustle of the city streets:

Away thou fondling motley humorist,
Leave mee, and in this standing woodden chest,
Consorted with these few bookes, let me lye
In prison, and here be coffin’d, when I dye;
Here are Gods conduits, grave Divines; and here
Natures Secretary, the Philosopher;
And jolly Statesmen, which teach how to tie
The sinewes of a cities mistique bodie;
Here gathering Chroniclers, and by them stand
Giddie fantastique Poets of each land.
Shall I leave all this constant company,
And follow headlong, wild uncertaine thee?

Everard Gilpin expressed similar sentiments, “*Away, I prithee. Let me live alone in this secret cell…*”

Prooemium. I.

As in the greatest of societies,

The first beginners, like good natur’d soules,

Beare with their neighbors poore infirmities:

But after, when ambition controules

Theyr calme proceedings, they imperiously

(As great things still orewhelme the[m]selues with weight)

Envy their countrimens prosperity,

And in contempt of poorer fates delight.

So Englands wits (now mounted the full height,)

Hauing confounded monstrous barbarismes,

Puft vp by conquest, with selfe-wounding spight,

Engraue themselues in ciuill warres Abismes,

Seeking by all meanes to destroy each other,

The vnhappy children of so deere a mother.

Others found their locus of contentment in the countryside. The persona is that of an honest, rustic rather than a scholar. It is one not corrupted by court or city. Edmund Spenser's "Colin Clout's Come Home Again (1595)" has the speaker report on his visit to the Elizabethan court to warn young shepherds, "*Wandering wit not to be tempted by the painted bliss…*"

The Satiric Persona, was the object of interest and moral scrutiny not just a medium through which attacks on abuses passed. The motivation of the Satirist is often debated. What type of personality would be attracted to exposing the behaviour of their fellows to censure? What kind of perverse pleasure do they get from dwelling on the negative side of human nature? They're constantly investigating the depravities that soil the gloss of man's original perfection, the imperfections of fallen humanity, or as Marston put it: "*The muddy dirt of sensuality*."

Donne realises the attraction of the dirt as he makes his first satires persona protest against the temptations of the motley humanist. His satirist gives in and abandons his communion with his books, the reader feels not unwillingly. He follows, "*Headlong, wild, uncertain thee out into the streets*" where a danger is the satirist be fascinated by what he lampoons, another is, that his attraction is not private but a self-righteous aloofness from normal behaviour, a priggishness. Donne created just such a superior a voice in the opening section of his second satire, "*Sire, though I thank God for it…*" He wrote five satires in the 1590s and, more than others, was uneasy with the persona and questioned his own motives and there is a strain from assuming the moral and intellectual superiority of the railing satirist. He shows it when he contemplates the religious anarchy around him – Catholicism, Anglicanism, Lutheranism, Calvinism and myriad developing sects like the Anabaptists, Puritans et al.

The speaker in Satire III starts to question the efficacy and even the moral status of satire as a criticism of society's ills.

Kind pity chokes my spleen; brave scorn forbids

Those tears to issue which swell my eyelids;

I must not laugh, nor weep sins and be wise;

Can railing, then, cure these worn maladies?

Is not our mistress, fair Religion,

As worthy of all our souls' devotion

As virtue was in the first blinded age?

The usual stance is that the spleen, the loathing of vice is choking him but this one reverses it and says that impulse itself is being choked by pity, by kind pity, natural pity. The appropriate approach to the dismemberment of the church should be tears and pity but the satirist says, "*Brave scorn forbids those tears to issue*." "*I must not laugh nor weep sins*." Neither ridicule nor weeping is appropriate to sins, not if you want to be wise.

Can the railing of the satirist cure these worn maladies? Is the quest for true religion or the fragmentation of Christendom a fit subject for mockery, ridicule and scorn? It is too much for them as they can only deal with little people and common foibles. Pity is more fitting and should choke the satirist's spleen. Sins are fundamental to our condition, not so foibles and follies or even vices. They are inherent in human nature through original sin and neither laughter nor tears is a wise response to human sinfulness.

The condition of fallen humanity which is precursor to all aberrations which the satirist uses for correction. How can railing cure fundamental flaws in human nature? "*How can any man presume, as the persona of satire, to hate and judge all this town*" when he too is part of this fallen humanity with its sins, follies, foibles and vices. These ambiguities and moral contradictions made the satirist a suitable subject for the stage.

The Transfer of Satire to the Stage

One event especially seems to have driven satire to the stage. On the 1st of June 1599, the bishops ordered the calling in of some volumes of satire because they were becoming blasphemous and offensively obscene. They also banned further verse satire. It died out until a few appeared in the 17c. Dramatists like John Marston and Thomas Middleton, who had written collections of verse satires, began writing stage satires.

But before the ban on verse satires, the influence was spreading to stage, the content and methods in particular, there was a series of plays using this fashionable humour. In 1595, George Chapman wrote *The Blind Beggar of Alexandria,* which only survives in a mutilated text.

The title page proclaimed that it presents "*variable humours in disguised shapes full of conceit and pleasure.*" It had a romantic plot but the surviving shorter copy is mainly of the farcical humour that was also used. Two years later in 1597 he wrote a pleasant comedy *A Humorous Days Mirth.* In 1598 Ben Jonson published *Every Man in His Humour* and the following year *Every Man out of His Humour.* Humours features were again used by Chapman in *All Fools* (1599) and *Mayday* (1601). It was a vogue word of the 1590s and referred to affectations or eccentricity of behaviour. In slang of the time it might be said to be ones' humour to wear extravagant clothes, swear a lot or be aggressive and look for fights.

The pen-portraits of figures on the streets of London drawn in verse satires like Marston's "A man, a man" of fashionable well-dressed people, the swaggering former soldier or the painted lady in her coach worked well in stage productions and became exemplary humours characters in a scene. *In a Humourous Days Mirth* Chapman parades types of folly with little scenes acted by them with minimal plot to connect them. For example, there's a suspicious father trying to keep his daughter from young men and marry her to a fool; there is an aged and jealous husband of a young wife and an aged and jealous wife of a young husband. Jealousy became a very popular humour on stage.

A prototype for a long series of dramatic humours figures, a lord suffering from acute melancholy. In Jonson's first humours play *Every Man in his Humour* (1598) the most highly developed character was the jealous husband. Shakespeare tragically portrayed the same humour in *Othello*. Among the Fools that Jonson ridicules are a poetaster, whose verse originate mainly with Marlowe; a young heir from the country who is trying to emulate the manners of sophisticated town gallants. After a speech from Stefano, the rustic says: "*I truly sir, I am mightily given…..*"

Later Jonson allows two low-lives to mock the oddities of the well to do. Cob says, "*What is this humour?*" Piero replies: "*I'll tell you what it is.*"

In the induction to his next play *Every Man out of His Humour* (1600*)* Jonson states clearly the Renaissance theory of humours psychology:

> *The humours psychology as its name suggests, has its basis in physiology, and hence we conclude, that whatsoere hath fluctuare and humidity as wanting power to contain itself has humour (He means it as a liquid – it flows) so in every human body, the choler, melancholy, phlegm and blood by reason that they flow so fully in one part and are not continent receive the name of humours*.

In *Every Man in His Humour* he showed one with an excess of choler, a paranoiacally angry man,

who loses his temper over minor things; he presents also one overcome by jealousy of his innocent wife; and a bragging soldier, like the figure satirised by Marston in his verse satire, and several other fools. There is likewise a gallery of affected and obsessive characters in *Every Man out of His Humour.* But in that Jonson began a serious analysis of the nature of the satirist himself as one aspect of stage satire. In this the satirist is Macelenti who is the most interesting character as well as the central character. He first appears dressed in black and reading a book. Macelenti's opening soliloquy, "*Well, I see, I strive in vain to cure my wounded soul, for every cordial...*" He is wondering how others are getting on and he is not.

His embitterment is from neglect causing envy at those who have risen to, as he sees it, undeservedly wealthy positions. His mood is not unlike Hamlet's, who in his first soliloquy wished that this too solid flesh would melt and resolve into a dew. Jonson had begun to motivate the savage indignation of the satirist that bursts forth a few lines later after the first humours character has been displaying his folly, a fop, Mascelenti attacks him: "*Who could endure to see...*" This springs from both his feelings of being neglected, and envy, not noble desire to lash folly, and vice is driving him. That soliloquy is the essence of the style and stance of satirists in the verse satires of Donne, Gilpin and Marston. Now, we see the antics of the fool who prompted the lash and also the attacker's nature.

That year Shakespeare was noting the vogue for satire and humours on the stage and introduced a satirist into the pastoral world of *As You like It*. Shakespeare used romantic to satiric comedy as a method for exploring human nature. Jacques: "*Invest me in my motely, give me the need to speak out.*" This harks back to Juvenal and the need to speak out and the wish to purge the world. Those are their customary justifications for their attitudes to life. Shakespeare used the Duke to expose Jacques self-righteousness. He is tainted with the sinful human nature he presumes to judge and correct.

David Hamilton's latest book is