



A COMPANION TO
SATIRE
ANCIENT AND MODERN

EDITED BY RUBEN QUINTERO

A COMPANION TO

SATIRE

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藏书章

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Notes on Contributors

Joseph F. Bartolomeo is Professor of English and Chair of the English Department at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He is the author of *A New Species of Criticism: Eighteenth-century Discourse on the Novel* (1994) and *Matched Pairs: Gender and Intertextual Dialogue in Eighteenth-century Fiction* (2002), as well as several articles on eighteenth-century fiction and criticism. He has served as a member of the executive board of the Northeast American Society for Eighteenth-century Studies, and as a field editor for the Twayne English Authors Series.

W. Scott Blanchard is Professor of English Literature at College Misericordia in Pennsylvania. He has published a book on satire in the European Renaissance, *Scholars' Bedlam: Menippean Satire in the Renaissance* (1995), and is the author of numerous articles on both satire and Renaissance humanism. He is currently working on a project involving the satires of the Italian humanist Francesco Filelfo.

Frank Boyle is the author of *Swift as Nemesis: Modernity and its Satirist* (2000). He is Associate Professor of English at Fordham University and chair of the New York Eighteenth Century Seminar.

Peter Brier is Professor Emeritus of English at California State University, Los Angeles. He is the author of *Howard Mumford Jones and the Dynamics of Liberal Humanism* (1994) and co-author (with Anthony Arthur) of a descriptive bibliography, *American Prose and Criticism 1900–1950* (1981). He has published articles on Romantic and modern writers in *The Denver Quarterly*, *The Huntington Quarterly*, and *The Southwest Review*.

Valentine Cunningham is Professor of English Language and Literature at Oxford University and Senior Fellow in English Literature at Corpus Christi College, Oxford. His publications include *Everywhere Spoken Against: Dissent in the Victorian Novel* (1975), *British Writers of the Thirties* (1988), *In The Reading Gaol: Postmodernity, Texts, and History* (1994), and *Reading After Theory* (2002). He has edited *The Penguin Book of Spanish Civil War Verse* (1980), *Spanish Front: Writers on the Civil War* (1986), George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1996), and *The Victorians: An Anthology of Poetry and Poetics* (2000).

Edwin M. Duval is Professor and Chair of French at Yale University. His books include *Poesis and Poetic Tradition in the Early Works of Saint-Amant* (1981) and a three-volume study of form and meaning in the works of Rabelais: *The Design of Rabelais's Pantagruel* (1991), *The Design of Rabelais's Tiers Livre* (1997), and *The Design of Rabelais's Quart Livre* (1998). He has published many articles on Rabelais and other French Renaissance authors, including Marot, Marguerite de Navarre, Scève, Montaigne, and d'Aubigné. His current research is devoted to echoes of Virgil's *Aeneid* in French Renaissance literature.

James Engell has written and edited numerous books and articles on eighteenth-century and Romantic studies. His most recent volume, *Saving Higher Education in the Age of Money* (2005), co-authored with Anthony Dangerfield, examines how colleges and universities – and the humanities in particular – can address the challenges and pressures that have developed in the past four decades. He is co-editor of a forthcoming interdisciplinary reader in environmental studies. Currently, he chairs the Department of English and American Literature and Language at Harvard University.

Alberta Gatti is an Associate Professor of Spanish at Saint Xavier University, Chicago, where she directs the Foreign Languages Program. Originally from Buenos Aires, Argentina, she received a PhD in Hispanic Language and Literature from Boston University. Her research work has focused on Spanish satire of the Golden Age (sixteenth to seventeenth centuries).

Russell Goulbourne is Senior Lecturer in French at the University of Leeds. A specialist in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French literature, he is the author of *Voltaire Comic Dramatist* (2006) and the translator for Oxford World's Classics of Diderot's *The Nun* (2005). He is also a member of the editorial board of *The Complete Works of Voltaire*, published by the Voltaire Foundation in Oxford.

Dustin Griffin is Professor of English at New York University and the author of *Satires against Man: The Poems of Rochester* (1974), *Alexander Pope: The Poet in the Poems* (1978), *Regaining Paradise: Milton and the Eighteenth Century* (1986), *Satire: A Critical Re-introduction* (1994), *Literary Patronage in England, 1650–1800* (1996), and *Patriotism and Poetry in Eighteenth-century Britain* (2002).

Christopher J. Herr is Assistant Professor of Theater at Missouri State University, where he directs the graduate program and teaches theater history, dramatic theory, and modern drama. His book, *Clifford Odets and American Political Theater*, was published in 2003. He has also taught in the English Department at California State University, Los Angeles, and in the Theater Department at Bowling Green State University.

Thomas Jemielity is Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Notre Dame. Besides his *Satire and the Hebrew Prophets* (1992), he has published essays on Alexander Pope's use in satire of biblical material (a technique he calls mock-biblical), on satire and irony in Edward Gibbon, Samuel Johnson, and Evelyn Waugh, and on the Johnson–Boswell tour, in 1773, of the Highlands and Western Islands of Scotland. The Lilly Endowment supported his proposal for introducing a course in comedy at Notre Dame, where he has for more than three decades taught satire as well.

Ejner J. Jensen is Professor Emeritus of English Language and Literature at the University of Michigan, where he taught for over forty years. He has published widely on topics in Renaissance drama and on satire, poetry, and current issues in higher education. He is the

editor of *The Future of Nineteen Eighty-four* (1984) and author of, among other works, *Shakespeare and the Ends of Comedy* (1991).

Steven E. Jones is Professor of English at Loyola University, Chicago. He is the author of a number of articles and books on satire of the Romantic period, including *Shelley's Satire* (1994) and *Satire and Romanticism* (2000), and the editor of *The Satiric Eye: Forms of Satire in the Romantic Period* (2003). He has just completed a book entitled *Against Technology: From the Luddites to Neo-Luddism*.

Claudia Thomas Kairoff is a Professor of English at Wake Forest University. She is the author of *Alexander Pope and his Eighteenth-century Women Readers* (1994) and co-editor, with Catherine Ingrassia, of *"More Solid Learning": New Perspectives on Alexander Pope's Dunciad* (2000). She has also written numerous articles on eighteenth-century women writers and is currently working on a book reappraising the writings of Anna Seward.

Catherine Keane received her PhD in Classical Studies from the University of Pennsylvania and is currently Assistant Professor of Classics at Washington University in St Louis. She is the author of *Figuring Genre in Roman Satire* (2006) and of several articles on ancient Roman satiric poetry and related comic traditions. Her current work in progress is a book on Juvenal's personae and poetics.

Laura Kendrick, Professor at the Université de Versailles, is the author of *Chaucerian Play: Comedy and Control in the Canterbury Tales* (1988) and of several articles on medieval satire and comedy in both verbal and visual forms. She is currently finishing an edition of Eustache Deschamps' late fourteenth-century *Mirror of Marriage*, a text noteworthy for its satire of women.

José Lanters is Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, where she also serves on the Advisory Board of the Center for Celtic Studies. She has written numerous articles on Irish fiction and drama, and she is the author of two books, *Missed Understandings: A Study of Stage Adaptations of the Works of James Joyce* (1988) and *Unauthorized Versions: Irish Menippean Satire, 1919–1952* (2000).

Jean I. Marsden is Professor of English at the University of Connecticut. She is the author of *The Re-imagined Text: Shakespeare, Adaptation, and Eighteenth-century Literary Theory* (1995), *Fatal Desire: Women, Sexuality and the English Stage, 1660–1720* (2006), and of numerous articles on Restoration and eighteenth-century theater.

Linda A. Morris is Professor of English at the University of California, Davis. Her books include *Women Vernacular Humorists in Nineteenth-century America: Ann Stephens, Frances Whitcer, and Marietta Holley* (1988), *Women's Humor in the Age of Gentility: The Life and Works of Frances Miriam Whitcer* (1992), and *American Women's Humor: Critical Essays* (1993). She is currently completing a book entitled *Gender Play in Mark Twain*. She regularly teaches courses in American humor, American satire, and Mark Twain.

Frank Palmeri, Professor of English at the University of Miami, is the author of *Satire in Narrative* (1990) and *Satire, History, Novel: Narrative Forms 1665–1815* (2003), and the editor of *Humans and Other Animals in Eighteenth-century England: Representation, Hybridity, Ethics* (forthcoming). He is currently working on a volume on the eclipse and re-emergence of satire in the long nineteenth century (1790–1910) and writing a book on the afterlife of Enlightenment conjectural history in early anthropology and psychoanalysis.

Blanford Parker teaches Restoration and eighteenth-century poetry, philosophical prose, and the history of literary criticism at The College of Staten Island and The CUNY Graduate Center. He has previously taught at Iowa, NYU, and the Claremont Graduate School. His book, *The Triumph of Augustan Poetics* (1998), maps the intellectual and cultural changes from the Baroque period to the eighteenth century that made Augustan poetry possible. He is now completing a book on the European genre system.

Ronald Paulson is Professor Emeritus of English at The Johns Hopkins University. He is author of *The Fictions of Satire* (1967) and *Satire and the Novel in Eighteenth-century England* (1967), and editor of *Satire: Modern Critical Essays* (1971). His major work is a series of books on William Hogarth and English art, including *Hogarth's Graphic Works* (1965; 3rd edn, 1989) and the three-volume *Hogarth* (1991–3), *Emblem and Expression: Meaning in English Art of the Eighteenth Century* (1975), *Literary Landscape: Turner and Constable* (1982), *Representations of Revolution, 1789–1820* (1983), *Breaking and Remaking: Aesthetic Practice in England: 1700–1800* (1989), *The Beautiful, Novel, and Strange: Aesthetics and Heterodoxy* (1996), *Don Quixote in England: The Aesthetics of Laughter* (1998), and *Hogarth's Harlot: Sacred Parody in Enlightenment England* (2003).

Zoja Pavlovskis-Petit is Professor of Comparative Literature and Classics at Binghamton University. Her research is mainly concerned with irony and with Latin poetry of the late Roman empire, and her main publications on irony are *The Praise of Folly: Structure and Irony* (1983), "Aristotle, Horace, and the Ironic Man," *Classical Philology* 63 (1968), 22–41; and "The Voice of the Actor in Greek Tragedy," *Classical World* 71 (1977), 113–23. She is currently working on the uses of irony in Nabokov.

Ruben Quintero is Professor of English at California State University, Los Angeles, and teaches Restoration and eighteenth-century literature. His book *Literate Culture: Pope's Rhetorical Art* (1992) received a University of Delaware Press Manuscript Award.

Melinda Alliker Rabb is an Associate Professor of English at Brown University. She has published on a wide range of Restoration and eighteenth-century writers and topics, including Swift, Pope, Manley, Sterne, Richardson, Fielding, Scott, Godwin, satire, the canon, and women writers. Currently, she is completing a book on satire and secrecy from the Restoration to the postmodern era.

Timothy Steele is the author of several collections of verse, including *Sapphics against Anger and Other Poems* (1986), *The Color Wheel* (1994), *Sapphics and Uncertainties: Poems 1970–1986* (1995), and *Toward the Winter Solstice* (2006). He has also published two books of literary criticism – *Missing Measures: Modern Poetry and the Revolt against Meter* (1990) and *All the Fun's in How You Say a Thing: An Explanation of Meter and Versification* (1999) – and has edited *The Poems of J. V. Cunningham* (1997). He is a Professor of English at California State University, Los Angeles.

Michael F. Suarez, SJ teaches English literature, bibliography, and book history at Fordham University in New York and at Campion Hall and the Faculty of English at Oxford. His current projects include work as co-general editor of *The Oxford Companion to the Book* (forthcoming 2009) and *The Collected Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (2005–11). A Jesuit priest, he enjoys combining his literary and theological training to write about scriptural satires: the first volume of *The Mock Biblical: A Study in English Satire, 1660–1830* is due to be published in 2007.

David F. Venturo, Associate Professor of English at the College of New Jersey, is author of *Johnson the Poet: The Poetic Career of Samuel Johnson* (1999) and editor of *The School of the Eucharist with a Preface Concerning the Testimony of Miracles* (forthcoming), and has written extensively on British literature and culture, 1640–1830. He helps edit *ECCB: The Eighteenth Century: A Current Bibliography* and *The Scriblerian*, and is writing a book, *Fall'n on Evil Days: Alienation and Protest in Milton, Dryden, and Swift*.

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Introduction: Understanding Satire

Ruben Quintero

But still, despite our cleverness and love,
Regardless of the past, regardless of
The future on which all our hopes are pinned,
We'll reap the whirlwind, who have sown the wind.
(Timothy Steele, "April 27, 1937")

The Satirist

If, at the end of Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "Young Goodman Brown" (1835), the "darkly meditative," aging, and "distrustful" protagonist, believing he once saw his Salem neighbors and newlywed wife ("Faith") cavorting in a witches' Sabbath one wild night in the forest, had chosen to take up the quill instead of bitterly retreating from life, he would have written satire. For satirists do not wither in despair but, on the contrary, feel compelled to express their dissent. Juvenal is as typical a satirist as he is a great one for being so singularly dissatisfied and wanting to tell others about it. Living in an imperial Rome that has thoroughly surrendered its former republican glory, he tells his readers from the outset that it is difficult for him *not* to write satire (*difficile est saturam non scribere*; *Satires* 1.30). Indignant, he must speak out against the decadence and corruption he sees all about him. Thus satirists write in winters of discontent.

And they write not merely out of personal indignation, but with a sense of moral vocation and with a concern for the public interest. In his second "Epilogue to the Satires" (1738), Alexander Pope's poetic speaker is called "strangely proud" by his adversarial friend, who would have him stop writing satire altogether. The poet agrees that he is "odd" – for "my Country's Ruin makes me grave" – and that he is "proud" – "proud to see / Men not afraid of God, afraid of me: / Safe from the Bar, the Pulpit, and the Throne, / Yet touch'd and sham'd by *Ridicule* alone." The poet's satire is a

“sacred Weapon! Left for Truth’s defence, / Sole Dread of Folly, Vice, and Insolence!” and that prosecutorial weapon of words has been entrusted only to his “Heav’n-directed hands” (*Dialogue II*, 208–15). As in the formative Roman verse satires of Horace and Juvenal, Pope’s poetry creates a people’s court of blame and shame, and his satirist litigates and adjudges misconduct that, though not restrained by legislated law, is subject to the unofficial law of satire (*lex per saturam*).

Such sanction for scorn or ridicule, however, does not mean that the satirist can lash out or laugh at just anything. Not only must a boundary between truth and libel be respected, but also a socio-ethical boundary regarding satirical subject matter. It may be true, as Ronald Paulson observes, that punishment is “the most extreme, and at the same time most common, consequence in satire” and “conveys a definite admonition: this is the consequence of your foolish act, this is the effect of X’s evil act; or, beware! This is what you could look like or what X in fact looks like” (1967: 10, 14). But, in order to be laid bare and satirized, X’s “evil act” must be an evil of error, not pure evil, nor can X be hypothetically incorrigible, that is, beyond punishment. The immutably divine or demonic cannot be made satiric, except through a humanizing or a thoroughly iconoclastic perspective, such as we find, for example, in *Paradise Lost* (1667), in which John Milton ridicules a foolish, despairing Satan by presenting him as a parody of Christ, or in Mel Brooks’s film *The Producers* (1968), in which Hitler indirectly becomes the butt of comedy when a vulgar theater-going public makes a hit of *Springtime for Hitler* – mistaking this tasteless, morally objectionable play, intended as a flop, for a mock-musical satire on the Third Reich. Hitler, *qua* genocidal monster, cannot be dressed down, satirized, though it appeared possible before full disclosure of his atrocities, as in Chaplin’s cinematic satire *The Great Dictator* (1940). As another example of the limits of satire, Joseph Conrad first drafted *Heart of Darkness* (1902) with the expressed intent of writing a political satire of colonial exploitation in the Congo, but when he added and then developed the character Kurtz into an “unlawful soul” who went “beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations,” Conrad’s novel became more of an exploration of the mystery of human evil than a satiric condemnation of institutional misconduct. Similarly in political rhetoric, when one national leader demonizes another, calling him a Hitler or a devil, satire ends and propaganda begins. Satire requires the inclusion, not the exclusion, of human failing.

Not only concerned with what has happened but also with what may happen, the satirist, through an historical logic of inference and extrapolation into the future, may also serve as a cautionary prophet or an idealistic visionary. The satirist is fundamentally *engagé*, as Patricia Meyer Spacks states:

Satire has traditionally had a public function, and its public orientation remains. Although the satirist may arraign God and the universe . . . he usually seems to believe – at least to hope – that change is possible. Personal change, in his view, leads to social change; he insists that bad men make bad societies. He shows us ourselves and our world; he demands that we improve both. And he creates a kind of emotion which moves us toward the desire to change. (1971: 363)