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# Satire and definition<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** This paper explores some of the difficulties involved in defining satire.

Neither the formal characteristics of satire nor its informing purposes, including its variable associations with humour and the provocation of amusement allow for a unifying definition over the long term. It considers a range of approaches to and types of definition and takes as a principle example the notion of Menippean satire. It argues that a characterisation in terms of family resemblance is more helpful for a strictly historical understanding than formal definitions and that it is misleading to take satire as a genre, let alone a literary one. Throughout it also suggests that the case of satire tells us something about definition and the often naïve expectations of what definitions can establish.

**Keywords:** definition, dictionaries, genre, history, humor, Menippean, morality, parody, satire

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Plato's early dialogue *Euthyphro* begins with Socrates going to the law courts to be tried for impiety and corrupting the youth of Athens. On his way he meets the young Euthyphro, also bound for court to accuse his father of killing a slave, who was thought to have committed murder. One travels to accuse, the other to be accused: both are in search of justice. Euthyphro is confident he knows what it is, for he can provide examples; but how, asks Socrates, can he be sure unless he already has in mind a *paradeigma*, a pattern of virtue? This is what Socrates demands, an abstract idea by which any matter can be defined and judged (Plato 1969 [c. 380 BCE]: 2a–6d).<sup>2</sup> Conversely, as Plato knew, the question is, how do you

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<sup>1</sup> Part of this paper was first given at The Australasian Humour Studies Network Colloquium, The Women's College, University of Sydney, February 13–14, 2010. My thanks are due to the discussants, but especially to Prof. Robert Phiddian and to Dr. Jessica Milner Davis who additionally read the whole and commented with constructive critical care. I am grateful also to the anonymous readers of *Humor* for their care and insight.

<sup>2</sup> The date of Plato's, *Euthyphro*, is uncertain, circa 390 BCE. Where pre-modern texts are cited I have included the dates of the first, or early edition on which I have relied, as well as the recent imprint or translation used.

discover the *paradeigma* without first working from evidence of conduct? This was an early example of what has been called Meno's paradox (Ibberson 1986: 115–116). And although the theory of forms introduced in this Platonic dialogue was always about more than definition, that theory and that paradox still inform some understandings of what it means to define.

It set on its way the chicken-and-egg problem of priority between *definiens* (abstract definition) and *definiendum* (that which is defined), and established the expectation that a definition at once isolates an essence and provides an idealized form. Because the word *logos* in Greek could refer to word, noun or discourse, it may also have encouraged confusion over what definitions were of, perhaps of things (like tables and chairs) or figures (like triangles), rather than of words. It helped give an urgency and authority for the definitional as a supervening and legislative process. It certainly articulated a long lasting belief that definitions are important, that without them you can hardly get started. Students who routinely begin essays with a dictionary definition, and professors who advise them that first of all they must define their terms, are both the distant progeny of the doomed Socrates and the hapless Euthyphro.

All these expectations of definition, however, can be profoundly misleading when brought to the study of satire. What follows here is neither a catalogue of attempted definitions of satire, nor an exploration of the complexities of definitional theory and formal logic. It concerns the difficulties attendant upon trying to examine satire historically. This is an emphasis to one side of, and largely at odds with literary critics' attempts to provide a definition for what, almost ubiquitously, has been accepted as a body, even a genre of literature, which to be understood requires we pay attention to the best of it, so bringing into alignment definition with supreme exemplification (Highet 1962: 3; see also Rosenheim 1963: 3–34; Feinberg 1968: 31–7; Griffin 1994). Although this paper concerns historiography, it was also partially stimulated by the need to provide working legal definitions to address problems raised by recent Australian legislation designed to protect satire and parody from some of the rigors of copyright law. A common point of departure for that earlier essay and this work is the problematic reliance on the dictionary and the belief that satire is to be defined fundamentally as a literary genre (Condren et al. 2008a, 2008b).<sup>3</sup> But as the argument will cumulatively show, even if in some contexts of study, a definition of satire can be a necessary beginning, for the historian, therein lies an initial problem.

Dictionaries can only do certain sorts of things well, and since lawyers go to them for records of common current usage, it is salutary to note that they are fre-

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**3** In dealing with dictionary definitions, I am indebted to my collaborators.

quently at least a generation out of date, and predictably skewed by the patterns of illustration on which they rely. Until the nineteenth century, dictionaries were highly selective and usually legislative, concentrating on difficult or foreign words, or the argot of society's sub-groups (for example Minsheu 1617; Kersey 1702; Grose 1811). Although there was a progenitor in Bailey's *Universal etymological dictionary* (1735), and more famously in Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* (1755), it was Noah Webster's *American dictionary of the English language* (1828) and then the *OED* that ushered in a far more ambitious enterprise – that of providing lexical definitions of all (most) words in the language. It is inevitable, given the fluidity of language-use and the expansion of English in particular, that there will be a time-lag and that only certain sorts of utterance (for Johnson, those he took to be from the best authors) will be looked to for examples of what is defined (Condren et al. 2008a: 286–292). But lexical definitions of the sort dictionaries offer are themselves of limited value in dealing with the complex intellectual phenomena that can develop through stipulative conceptualization.

So what sorts of definition are relevant to understanding satire, and what might satire illustrate about the process of definition? For initial orientation, here are the definitions from the *OED*. Satire:

1. A poem, or in modern use sometimes a prose composition, in which prevailing vices or follies are held up to ridicule. Sometimes, less correctly, applied to a composition in verse or prose intended to ridicule a particular person or class of persons, a lampoon.
  - b. *transf.* A satirical utterance; a speech or saying in ridicule of some person or thing. *Obs.*
  - c. *fig.* A thing, fact, or circumstance that has the effect of making some person or thing ridiculous.
2.
  - a. The species of literature constituted by satires; satirical composition.
  - b. The employment, in speaking or writing, of sarcasm, irony, ridicule, etc. in exposing, denouncing, deriding, or ridiculing vice, folly, indecorum, abuses, or evils of any kind.
3. Satirical temper, disposition to use “satire”.

Overall, the *OED* definitions are evidently made both with reference to the rationale or point of satire and to its formal content, and these *definienda* lead in differing directions (Condren et al. 2008a: 288–290).<sup>4</sup> In definition 1, ridicule is an essential feature, but if that is not exclusive to satire, we need more than this for a definition to do what is usually required of it, to distinguish from something

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<sup>4</sup> The following comments on the dictionary definitions of satire elaborate on points made in Condren et al. (2008a: 288–290).

else (Rosenheim 1963: 10). A little puzzling for a lexical definition is the reference to a less correct usage that by implication should be reserved for the word “lampoon”. In fact, such less correct use corresponds to Alexander Pope’s notion of “personal satire”, as opposed to the general satire earlier advocated by Erasmus and of which Pope was dismissive (Pope 1956 [1735]: 3.423). This suggests that the relationships between lampoon and satire are historically variable.<sup>5</sup> Further, the ridicule central to definition 1 becomes contingent in definition 2b. Of course, lexical definitions typical of dictionaries like the *OED* need to embrace contradictory patterns of use, but the contrast forewarns of difficulties ahead: 2a is circular, effectively stating that satire is made up of satires. In adding “etc.” to the possible features of satire 2b, the dictionary would seem to abandon any attempt at definition by reference to formal content.

What all these specifications of satire do share, however, is an element of censoriousness. I shall return to this later, but meanwhile note that if some sort of ethically critical edge is characteristic of satire, this is unlikely to be a uniquely defining feature or to provide an exclusive purpose, unless all instances of such criticism are tautologically deemed to be satire. Consider the following: remarks on a student’s plagiarized essay, a judge’s comments at the end of a competition, a mediator’s assessment of a contentious mechanical repair, or a dispute between a married couple, an appeal court judgment on the handling of a case from a lower court. All these can have a strongly moral force. But without something additional, say an element of ridicule or irony (recognized by the *OED*), or humor (which seems not to be), to call them satiric would take us a long way from predominant patterns of word-use, past or present. Another consequence would be to make a notion of satire so accommodating as to be valueless. Yet, Bailey’s *Universal Dictionary* of 1735 gives just such a definition: “all manner of Discourse wherein any Person is sharply reproved”. On the basis of *OED* definition 1, this is a definition in need of correction, and wanting any specific recognition that humor is important. Finally, note the *OED*’s Johnsonian emphasis on the works we now style literature. This is quite inadequate for modern usage (Condren et al. 2008a: 290–291; Simpson 2003; Morreall 2005: 337–339). More significantly in this context it is additionally anachronistic for an historian, as the very notion of literature is a relatively modern invention; and once carried back into the distant past to help organize a history of satire, a narrowing distortion will be evident. It would certainly jar with Bailey’s recognition that satire is not necessarily tied to good authors.

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<sup>5</sup> Rosenheim (1963: 28–31) comes close to regarding personal attack on a specific victim as a defining feature of satire. He does not discuss lampoon.

Since it is closely related to the informing purpose suggested by definition 1c, we might start again with definition by function. This may well work for many things, not least physical objects such as chairs, but it is meaningless in dealing with those paradigmatic examples of Platonic definition, geometric figures. Just what is the function of a circle? Equally, complex intellectual phenomena such as satire carry and can be used for differing overall purposes. Dictionary definitions lead us to expect that the principal function is the exposure of stupidity or wrongdoing, but as Rosenheim argues, some satire is intended not to expose, but punish (Rosenheim 1963: 13–17). The punitive exploits some shared affront to propriety and helps explain how easily satire, assuming a fit object of condemnation, can have a further propagandistic end in group edification and consolidation. Moreover, the provocation of amusement and laughter, although not referred to in the definitions, has been a commonplace purpose for satire, a rare consummation which brings together academic with popular usage (Highet 1962: 22; Sutherland 1962: 2–7).

A form of definition particularly relevant to the history of satire is by origin. It is a longstanding notion that an original use carries authority in and for the present: Jacques Derrida was subject to its attractions in *White mythology*, arguing that in philosophical concepts lurked an incubus of an original, often metaphorical use that continued to entrap and mislead philosophers who thought themselves in command of their own language (Derrida 1974; see also Rorty 1979: 137–148). It is a point of relevance especially to Renaissance attempts to understand satire. To give an indication of the issues involved in determining origination will help further illustrate problems of definition.

A putative origin in the Greek satyr plays that accompanied early tragedy and then developed into Attic comedy was questioned by Julius Caesar Scaliger (1484–1558) and seemingly disproved by Isaac Casaubon (1559–1614). He effectively supported the claim by the Roman rhetorician Quintilian (AD 35–c.100), that satire was a Roman invention (Casaubon 1605; Quintilian 1920–1922: 10.1.93). Casaubon argued that the word satire derived from the Latin, *satura*, medley or stew; and something of this etymology survived in English with “satira” being a broad platter (Bailey 1735; Facciolatus and Forcellinus 1828).<sup>6</sup> Casaubon’s case has largely been accepted from John Dryden to the twentieth century (Dryden 1693; Highet 1962).

Just what was understood by Roman satire, however, is not altogether clear. The very term connotes a richness and variety that even defies specific expressive

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<sup>6</sup> Facciolatus and Forcellinus, in *Totius latinitatis lexicon*, cite *satura/satira* as a platter for varieties of food, noting the Greek spelling σατυρα as an older form (1828: vol. 2, 487). A large number of the Latin *sat* terms concern food, saity, sufficiency, gluttony, others seed-sowing.

forms; and from the surviving evidence, there was little attempt to impose a theoretical shape or disclose an essence that might establish a clear definition. C. J. Classon even suggests that this helps explain why satirists so frequently justify what they are doing, as otherwise the reader might not know (Classon 1998: 98). Satire was less associated with Roman comedy, which today we might see as satiric, than with a particular style of morally critical poetry exemplified most obviously by Juvenal (c.60–c.130) and Horace (65–8 BCE). The force of Quintilian's claim was to sever a general dependence on what was seen as Greek cultural domination, irrespective of what the Romans had more precisely done for satire. It might seem then that, at most, Roman origins circumscribed the terrain on which a definition could be carved out and weakened associations with comedy. But the matter was not straightforward and etymological scholarship by no means extinguished the notion that satire extended to, or came from the Greek. Petrus Nannius (1500–1557) in an argument that substantially pre-dated Casaubon's but was not published until 1608, suggested a dual origin from “*sat*” (a rarer root in Greek than Latin); and the Dutch scholar Daniel Heinsius (1580–1655) claimed that the bowl called a *satira lanx* and carried by Greek satyrs evidenced a Greek origin (de Smet 1996: 35–36, 49).

It might be concluded that although the Romans invented the *term* to be defined, the *concept* itself was originally Greek. This is superficially appealing and has encouraged at least one modern scholar to deepen and broaden the origins of satire to include ritualized invective found in Hellenic and other cultures (Elliott 1960). It involves, however, presupposing a highly questionable separation between concepts and the very words that provide the evidence for them. It is nearer the truth to say that our later strong associations of satire with humor encourage extending the range of the satiric back to embrace the Greek rhetorical and comedic notion that laughter was ridicule of folly and wrongdoing. Aristotle's important reflections on laughter and ridicule, from *The Rhetoric* and *Poetics* were assimilated to satire only through later translation. Thus in ridicule and tropes adjacent to it, we have something that helps hold together the varying rationalities for a general conception of satire, not just in “literature” but across rhetoric, drama and poetics. But this does not make definition of the word satire any easier; as Feinberg notes, even if one recognizes a compound rationale for satire, not all that is deemed satiric neatly complies (Feinberg 1963: 6; see also Rosenheim 1963: 2–9).

What also was understood in the Renaissance was that definition concerned not a thing (something encouraged by the definitional function of the Platonic forms that were of things as well as concepts), but rather that the emphasis was on a word, its origins and its range, and indeed its suggestive metaphorical migration from objects like food and pottery to an elaborate variegated intellectual

activity. People writing in the sixteenth century had available austere and demanding notions of what a definition could do and what was needed for one. For the Sorbonne logician George Lokert (d.1547), for example, a good definition required symmetry of terms, explanatory power and economy (Brodie 1983: 33–4; Lokert [1523?], text in Brodie: 192–193).<sup>7</sup> Lokert and his contemporaries were also legatees of an important logical distinction between real and nominal definitions, established probably by William of Ockham in the fourteenth century, whose *Summa* remains one of the landmarks of formal philosophy (Ockham 1957–1962). Real definitions attempted to encompass the whole nature of something existing, they were descriptions; nominal definitions referred to word use. Although it remains possible to talk casually of defining things, a definition more rigorously understood in nominal terms establishes protocols for word use, encourages the precision of special meanings and so leads to stipulative definitions, often limited to a given theory or field of discourse (see generally Henry 1972: 30–42; Ashworth 1988: 143–172; Jardine 1988: 173–198). It is not unrelated to the broader (Ockhamist) philosophical point (to become important in the post-Renaissance world) that truth is not a thing outside discourse to be discovered (again something encouraged by Plato’s metaphors of intellection). It is, rather, recognition of propositional coherence, an argument strongly associated with writers like Hobbes and Descartes. Certainly it would now be accepted that we do not define a chair but only how the word “chair” can be used in what sorts of semantic relationships and circumstances. The notion of a real definition has changed to being an indication that definitions can have a non-verbal reference function. These diverging understandings are captured in just one of the succinct abridgments of the word definition (note they do not all agree) in Bailey’s *Universal Etymological Dictionary*: “Definition, a short and plain Declaration or Description of the Meaning of a Word, or the essential Attributes of a Thing”.<sup>8</sup>

At this stage, the issue of definitional implication arises and thus the range of a term defined. Definition works precisely because it is exclusive, and so there is the question whether exclusivity or economy has been too abruptly circumscribed. This suggests the direct relevance of a notion of definition strongly associated with C. S. Peirce, that the meaning of a concept is the sum of its implications (e.g. Peirce 1960: para 18).<sup>9</sup> This is important, but not all implications are necessarily definitionally decisive. Satire, for example, entails recognition of

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<sup>7</sup> The full text of Lokert’s *De terminis* is reprinted in Brodie (1983).

<sup>8</sup> The *OED* has a separate entry for definition in mathematics and includes explanation, determination and decision-making under the verb *to define*.

<sup>9</sup> Peirce’s various formulations of this principle occurred over many years in both popular and technical writings and helped define “pragmatism”.

human agency and intentionality, but the relationship is asymmetrical. Intentionality may be an aspect of much beyond satire. *A fortiori* with respect to humor, even if it were true that all satire sought to be humorous, humor extends so far beyond satire that reference to it can only provide the incomplete beginnings of a definition. If implication is taken strictly, a definition that overlooks some implications will, through logical incoherence alone, be under extreme pressure to be expanded. Thus, as Nannius realized, aside from its hexametric poetic form and the trivial fact that the language was Latin, it was difficult to treat Roman satire as insulated from Greek theatre (de Smet: 1996: 35–36). Rome was, after all, profoundly indebted to Hellenic culture. Again, Rosenheim distinguishes persuasive from punitive satire, associating only the former with rhetoric, the latter with principles and perceptions the satirist already shares with an audience. But persuasion depends upon the exploitation of shared communal expectations and prejudices. For Aristotle, for example, one would have been unintelligible without recognizing the other as a strict implication; that is, accepted truths, prior judgments, and prejudices are the resources needed for suasive acts. Rhetoric, then, cannot operate to delineate one type of satire from another. Yet, insofar as notions of implication and consequence are taken loosely, the scope of many a concept is likely to be uncertain and its nature open to dispute. Peirce's emphasis was on the logic of conceptual relationships, though he also insisted on the direct relevance, the "conceivable bearing" a concept might have on conduct (Peirce 1960 [1905]: para 412). Through writers such as William James (see, for example, Peirce 1960 [1903]: para 2), conceivable bearing came increasingly to subsume more contingent patterns of association and practical effect, the consequence of which is close to deferring the meaning of any defined concept. Ferdinand Schiller even appeared to entertain the self-defeating belief that a definition embraces its context (Schiller 1929).

With satire, there has always been continuing pressure for the sort of conceptual expansion illustrated by the widening meanings of pragmatism and pragmatic conceptual definition. This potential is effectively signaled in the early Greco-Roman problem of origination touched on above; for this was itself an implication of the accommodating notion of satire as a medley, a mixed mode of writing, as in the prosimetric satires of Varro (116–27 BCE). But the written word itself may provide an undue restriction if we accept that the visual arts may be symbolically meaningful, and so may be used to express critical humor. The Cerne Abbas giant etched into the chalk hills of Dorset may not, as is commonly believed, be a relic of a Romano-British fertility cult, but a mid-seventeenth-century satiric graffito (Darvill et al. 1999). Many of the woodcuts that came with the printing press can be considered satiric, and so too the cartoons popular from the eighteenth century, although these also have often had a linguistic dimen-



sion. The contemporary imperative might be the need to add a greater diversity of non-verbal media to the satira-dish (Condren et al. 2008a: 291–292; 2008b: 412–415). In a word, satire illustrates a frequent tension between *definiens* and *definiendum* that threatens either to over-extend any definition or, conversely, to make a definition so narrow as to exclude much of what cannot escape direct consideration.

These general comments can be given more substance with reference to what is called Menippean satire.<sup>10</sup> Superficially, this should seem easier to define because it is only a sub-set of a more nebulous identity and, moreover, is a form of satire firmly tied to humor. Yet, in fact it provides a microcosm of the wider definitional difficulties, clarifying a stark opposition between definitional preconceptions about satire as such.

Menippean satire can initially be taken as satire using the figure of the Greek cynic philosopher, Menippus of Gadera, (third century BCE), irascible and given to direct, even brutal honesty or *parrhesia*. Nothing by Menippus is known and only fragments and indirect accounts of Varro's *Saturae Menippeae* survive. Since these were apparently in imitation of Menippus, they add a further complication to the issue of Greek or Roman origins of satire. Perhaps it is fittingly symbolic of a medley of possibilities that a disproportionate amount of what we do have was written by Lucian of Samosata (c.120–180), a Syrian writing in Greek during the Second Sophistic of Rome, who sometimes used Menippus to carry the burden of his humorously critical song (Relihan 1980; Jones 1986; Robinson 1979). His famous boast was to have made the philosophical dialogue laugh.

Yet by no means all of his works use the figure of Menippus, and the issue immediately arises: are they to be excluded on this technicality? In addition, since he is but one voice carrying the same range of Lucianic themes, there is pressure to collapse the Menippean into the broader Lucianic.

Eugene Kirk, following the analysis of Northrop Frye, has written the most compendious account of Menippean satire to date. Kirk lists, as markers of the Menippean and Lucianic, a medley of themes such as travelers' tales, digressions, mock encomia, deliberate incoherences, lies, fantasies and dreams (see, at length, Kirk 1980). Not surprisingly, *parrhesia* or direct honesty may either be present, disingenuously paraded, or absent through indirection and irony. Most of these would become features of the Menippean figure of Hythlodæus in Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516). Especially given the play with internal contradiction and digression, these characteristics cannot, in any Peircian sense, form a

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<sup>10</sup> The brief discussion of Menippean satire and the remarks on genre offered here are developed in more detail elsewhere (see Condren 2011: 19–27).

set of mutual implications. So, how many need to be apparent to warrant using the label “Menippean”, and is this a sufficient basis for a definition?

The butts of the satire are similarly various: priests, philosophers, rhetoricians and grammarians. Superficially, the list gives some initial definitional purchase, because the common, though not exclusive focus is on the delusions of the mind (Sherbert 1996: 1); and so at least excludes those conventional victims of satire, politicians. But seizing on intellectual failings, *pars pro toto*, has led to further definitional confusion. W. Scott Blanchard defines the Menippean as prose that is at once learned and paradoxically anti-intellectual (Blanchard 1995: 14). Yet satire against the misuse of the intellect need hardly be anti-intellectual. Further, as categories like philosopher or rhetorician are themselves unstable and potentially overlapping, the excluded can always slip in by the back door: clerics, for example, were frequently satirized because they could be taken as politicians (Jones 1986: 33–45). Gary Sherbert, who also over-emphasizes the intellectual nature of Menippean satire, is led to refer to it as a self-consciousness of wit satirizing wit (Sherbert 1996: 3). Since wit was, and always has been, a decidedly variable and elusive notion (“*Comely* in a thousand shapes”, “we only can by *Negatives* define”), we are brought no closer to an effective definition (Cowley 1986 [1656]: 1665). Howard Weinbrot has provided the most sophisticated attempt to contain the complexities within a genre, and has identified the defining trait of the Menippean as a fear of orthodoxy (Weinbrot 2005: 1–7, 16–19). But even if this is plausible for texts beyond the many he discusses, that fear extended well beyond the Menippean. A common denominator is not necessarily a discriminator.

This must all seem unsatisfactory: Menippean encompasses what has been done by whomever in the name of Menippus or Lucian; or, without reference to either, what has been done that echoes Lucianic themes and might allude to Menippus, either in prose, in poetry or in a mixture of both. Heterogeneity seems unbounded. In the sixteenth century, Petrus Nannius thought that Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy* (c.524) was close to being Menippean satire because of its composite modal structure (de Smet 1996: 35). This anticipates the overly accommodating notion that the Menippean has become: Swift, More, Rabelais, Beckett, Nabokov, Pynchon and dozens of others, not least Monty Python’s *Holy Grail* and *The Life of Brian*, are, in Kirk’s terms, Menippean. It is little wonder that Bakhtin could also appropriate the term as a festive jest to his questionable notion of the carnivalesque (Bakhtin 1968; for effective critique, see Malcolm 1997: 117–119; Gurevich 1997: 54–60; Weinbrot 2005: 12–15). Recalling Plato’s *Euthyphro*, one can see that Menippean satire means something, but lacks the *paradeigma* to tell us precisely what. As presumably it must come within the larger category of satire, the possibility of a tight definition for satire as such, let alone as a genre, appears to be a dish eaten away from the inside before it reaches the table. The

situation might leave a logician like George Lokert both starved and distracted (Brodie 1983: 33–35; Lokert in Brodie 1983: 192–193).

Arguing against precisely this ecumenical messiness, Ingrid de Smet insists that Menippean should be restricted to its original Renaissance meaning. The satire must be prosimetric and conveyed through a dream motif in which Menippus figures (de Smet 1996: 23–31). De Smet takes as a progenitor the *Apocolocyntosis* (*The Gourdification of the Divine Claudius*) by the philosopher and statesman Seneca (4 BCE–65), a satire of the Emperor Claudius’s failed attempt to get into Heaven. She argues, however, that the foundational, definitive example is Justus Lipsius’ *Somnium* (1581), a fictional dream about the failings of modern scholarship, followed by Petrus Cunaeus’ *Sadi venales*, (1612) in which the dream becomes a nightmare (Lipsius 1980 [1581]; Cunaeus 1980 [1612]).

De Smet, in effect, appeals to the authority of origins, but not without a certain arbitrariness. Erasmus’s *Morae Encomium/Praise of Folly* (1515) was associated strongly enough with the Menippean to be republished with Lipsius’ and Cunaeus’ works in 1617 (Matheussen and Heersekkers 1980: 19). Her focus also excludes More’s *Utopia*, and Richard Pace’s *Julius Exclusus* (1513), a failed attempt by a politician/pope to get into Heaven modeled on Seneca’s ‘Gourdification’ of Claudius. These were all works self-consciously and explicitly written as in some way Menippean (see Curtis 1996: 184–260). Erasmus and More were both translators of Lucian. Thus de Smet privileges a specific dream motif, rather than the functionally very similar ones of, say, a dialogue with the dead, or a council of the gods, over the point of using any of them. The result is a definition so narrow as to be useless unless one is talking about a mere handful of neo-Latin scholars; the problem is the obverse of Kirk’s inclusive generosity. Like many definitions in books, de Smet’s might best be taken as a synoptic description of the scope of the study, rather than as a definition of a phenomenon as a whole (see also Sherbert 1996: 1–3; Rosenheim 1963: 31). Crucially, her argument evidences a shift in definition away from general lexical comprehensiveness to the highly stipulative. Although this is a valuable corrective to lack of discrimination, sometimes, as John Caputo has noted, the very drive to precision can inadvertently create what is not in the evidence (Caputo 2000: 46). Definitional tidying can be a euphemism for invention.

Here lies the underlying definitional difference to which a discussion of the Menippean leads us: de Smet is working within the terms of a broadly Platonic ideal, the search for a cohering essence. Kirk has abandoned such an ideal in order to rely more on what W. B. Gallie and William Connolly have called “cluster concepts” (Gallie 1964: 105–110; Connolly 1983: 10–12). This alternative is derived from Wittgenstein’s elliptical but suggestive remarks on “family resemblance” (Wittgenstein 1968: paras 66–67). The proposition runs as follows: we

can identify members of the same family, not necessarily by any shared, essential feature like the famous Hapsburg chin, but by virtue of a contingent range of characteristics, some of which overlap sufficiently between members of the group for a resemblance to be created. On this basis, we can simplify an abstracted image of Menippean satire (MS) as having only a small cluster of characteristics, such as (a) dream motifs, (b) dialogues with the dead, (c) unreliable narration, (d) traveler's tales, (e) inherent contradiction and (f) mock encomia, and initially schematize examples of it thus:

MS1 (a,b,c); MS2 (a,c,f); MS3 (b,d,f); MS3 (b,d,e); MS4 . . .

If applicable to Menippean satire, the designation of a family resemblance may be even more fitting to the broader category of satire; and to accept the point is to move to the very edge of what a definition might be. This is especially the case if these formal features are variably tied to the putative ends of satire (moral criticism E1, amusement E2, and group consolidation E3); and also if they exhibit ridicule, irony, or some form of humor. The matter is complicated further if we drop the pretense, or modeling convenience, that the informing ends provide us with neat exclusive answers as to what a satire is really directed towards, and dispense also with the fiction that the inherent features are all neatly separable components. A traveler's tale can easily enough be contradictory and unreliable; a mock encomium is likely to be so. A more adequate picture of the Menippean may then look like this:

MS1 (a,b,c) E1; MS2 (a,c,f) E1; MS3 (b,d,f) E2; MS4 (a,b,c) E3; MS5 (b,d,a) E1/2 . . .

With few variables, we can have a highly ramified family tree that does go some way towards giving order to what can be a bewildering phenomenon. Understanding by family resemblance is better seen as an argument for stopping short of a definition as traditionally understood, for being satisfied instead with a porous classifier, or what I shall call a characterization. While there are, indeed, a fair number of concepts that might be understood in these terms, the principal consequence of stopping with a characterization is to suggest that such notions are inherently, essentially contestable because they have as intrinsic to them differing criteria of application. Essential contestability is a notion open to abuse, easily dwindling into a euphemism for anything goes (Mason 1993: 47–68); but it has enough validity to help explain some of the differences canvassed above with respect to Menippean satire.

Such a conceptual characterization of satire has one crucial historiographical advantage and a conceptual or theoretical disadvantage. It may capture refer-

ence to the word satire with minimal distortion and with instructive inclusiveness over the whole historical range. Conversely, it may be rejected precisely because it is insufficiently restrictive. If the reason for charting word-use is to circumscribe a specific concept, then exploring full patterns of employment can prove irritatingly beside the point, or open to distracting dispute. What the historian might need to embrace in order to avoid the over-schematized and anachronistic, the lawyer might see as frustrating the present-centered requirements of precedent, the philosopher might find tainted with irrelevance, and the literary critic might conclude is inadequate for isolating great satire (Rosenheim 1963: 7–8).<sup>11</sup> Much ultimately depends on the sort of enquiry to hand.

So a different tack might be tried. Rather than asking what the content of satire is, regardless of whether we can detect in it an essence or single informing purpose, we might ask which neighboring concepts help limit its range, or, to allude to Cowley on wit, help “by *Negatives* [to] define”. Words like lampoon, burlesque and parody can help contextualize the meaning of satire, but to do so, there also needs to be some prior understanding of what they mean. This is another version of Meno’s paradox. Again, analyses of this sort go back to antiquity and were explored in medieval and early modern theories of semantics. It became something of a truism in the early modern world that words take on meaning only in relationship to each other; as John Pym put it (Pym 1999 [1641]: 1.131), everything exists by way of relation. Aristotle’s understanding of definition by mean (*μησον*), to which I shall briefly return, is perhaps the most influential example. Complex moral categories discussed in the *Nichomachean ethics* are posited as existing as means between negative delineating extremes. Thus, generosity lies between parsimony and extravagance, courage between rashness and cowardice (Aristotle 1966: 2.6.1107a–1109b).

Bi-conditional semantic pairings can function in a similar way. Thus husband stands in the bi-conditional relationship with wife, up with down, virtue with vice and so on. Take one away and the other’s meaning must be transformed or destroyed. Yet with satire, definition by mean or bi-conditionality is difficult to achieve because its semantic neighbors are unlikely to be any more stable. If satire is a mean, what are the circumscribing forms of the non-satiric? Perhaps it lies between compliment and invective; but this still does not get us far, for a statement with no satiric intent might also occupy the same semantic space. Conversely, how does satire help define a mean? I cannot think of a reliable way in which it does.

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<sup>11</sup> Unless, however, the cards are going to be stacked, no definition of satire is going to distinguish the good from the bad; this depends upon qualitative criteria brought to bear on what is called satire. I have discussed such matters at length in Condren (1985).

I have already noted the variable relationship satire has with lampoon; others exist with parody, burlesque and allegory.<sup>12</sup> There can be collocations such as satiric parody, and satiric allegory, but there can also be parody or allegory without what we might consider satire and vice versa. These terms too have variable histories. Moreover, if we can be satisfied with a characterization of satire, it is possible to move much closer to a formal definition of parody. For this is always an adaptive descant (not necessarily critical or satiric) on a previous creative artifact (Rose 1979); so parody *of* specifies a formal relationship with something and is a more informative notion than satire *of*, which indicates only a contingent subject matter. Allegory provides a trickier relationship. Ellen Leyburn considers its definition more difficult than that of satire but suggests that the two are easy bedfellows because satire, like allegory, has its essence in indirection (Leyburn 1969: 4–5, 8–9). We might try telling that to aggressive satirists such as Alexander Pope, Auberon Waugh, P. J. O'Rourke, or even the sometimes straight-speaking Menippus. It is discouraging to reflect that the critical term to which detailed attention is given always seems to be perceived as the problematic one, while those to which it is related are held to be more straightforward. Perhaps without such untoward optimism, we would not get far with defining anything.

Finding an antonym for the satiric (analogous to vice for virtue, up for down) is also elusive, as might be expected. Leyburn's implicit reliance on a contrast between direct and indirect is unsatisfactory. The most obvious candidate here, however, is the notion of the serious and non-serious, (e.g. Bateson 1972: 173–192; Grice 1975: 41–59; for discussion see Attardo 1994: 271–292), as exemplified in the contrast between the railway timetable (perhaps not a good example) and the joke (such as the last cheap one). To locate satire in the domain of the serious is to eliminate humor from definitional consideration; to locate it in the non-serious presupposes humor to be essential, and ethical critique superfluous. On either hand, there are problems. Jokes may well violate the conditions of serious, cooperative, or mutually informative discourse, and not all humor can be reduced to joking (Attardo 1994: 271–277). Moreover, a good deal of satire explicitly transgresses any bifurcation between serious and non-serious, drawing its power from shifting between or combining the two. The informing drive behind Lucian's satire was, through the comic, to say what was serious: *serio ludere*. It is for this reason that satire finds a place in that most serious mode of discourse,

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<sup>12</sup> John Jump (1972: 1–2) surveys such conceptual relationships with respect to burlesque, and satire is not amongst them. However, his category of the Hudibrastic could as easily have been discussed as satire, or even Menippean satire (Jump 1972: 12–17).

philosophy.<sup>13</sup> But the counterpoint is also true for some satire, as dictionary definitions clearly indicate. What has been designated satire has not always been intended as in any way humorous or joking. From this flows the notion of ‘comic satire’ to distinguish a less serious kind of satire from works in imitation of Juvenal. There is also the customary designation of Orwell’s *1984* as satire (Leyburn 1969: 125–134). Thus James Sutherland, who writes much good sense on satire as an intentional rhetoric of censorious humor, proceeds to include as an example a discordant *1984* (1949), seemingly on the grounds that about the same time Orwell wrote *Animal Farm* (Sutherland 1962: 21).

It may well be the case that over its long history, the humorous has become increasingly important in satire beyond the Menippean, yet to read humor back as an essential feature of anything called a satire, let alone define satire in terms of it, is bound to distort. When Henry Neville, in the voice of Machiavelli, assured the reader that the *Prince* was a satire, it was to argue only that the work exposed the wicked and had no bearing on a virtuous ruler like Charles II; when Garrett Mattingly revived the thesis of the satiric *Prince*, the meaning of the designation had been augmented. Although noting difficulties of definition, his argument depended in part on Cesare Borjia, a central figure in the work, being a laughing-stock, with the work itself a being a “joke” (Neville 1675 n.p.; Mattingly 1958: 491).

What, then, of satire as the use of ridicule? Once again, this is not essential. Irony stops well short of ridicule but can be sufficient to identify a satiric edge to something, such as the well-known opening sentence of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813): “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife”. Where ridicule is important, its relationship to humor is also slippery. Satire can ridicule, often viciously, but the use of ridicule may not be co-extensive with provoking a sense of the ridiculous. That is, ridicule may either be intrinsic, or it may be a desired response to the satire. Mattingly’s reading of Machiavelli’s *Prince* depends precisely on that easily overlooked distinction: Machiavelli does not ridicule, but for the *Prince* to be satire, he must have intended his audience to laugh at Cesare Borjia. Joseph Hall (1574–1656) wrote *Satires* that are not the slightest bit funny (though I may have missed something); but the targets are presented to the reader as worthy of ridicule, his own tone as harsh or sour (Hall: 1824 [1597]: xciii–xcviii). It is the dyspepsia expressive of moral affront: Hall was a young man in want of ecclesiastical advancement.

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**13** It is possible that if the conventional history of philosophy as studied by philosophers were itself not so propositionally artificial, and hence included satiric philosophy and its humor, the opposition between the serious and the non-serious would not have had so much weight put upon it.

There are an increasing number of terms that have had to be noted here as falling within the ambit of satire and so providing definitional bearings. This suggests the relevance of locating satire within a semantic field of the sort Salvatore Attardo has outlined for humor and in which the word satire itself has a place (Attardo 1994: 7). Such overlapping fields of terms are, of course, abstractions from the play of pragmatic use over time and space, and semantic and associational fields in natural languages are not always mutually equivalent (Eco 2003: 183–93). As Margeurite Wells has shown, in Japanese, comedy (*kigeki*), satire (*fūshi*), farce (*faasu* or *shōgeki*), all terms that may be subsumed under the lone-word humor (*yūmoa*), do not mean the same things as their English counterparts. *Kigeki* is associated so strongly with a specific form of humor that the farcical and sometimes satiric *kyōgen* accompanying the masked *Nō* theatre can be difficult to classify as comedy; above all, satire's range of meanings is greatly diminished, and its presence is often elusive (Wells 2006: 193–197; Davis and Wells 2006: 127–152). In a word, field theory makes a definition that copes with the full vagaries of terminological relationships if anything more, not less, difficult (Ullmann 1972: 243–253; Condren 1994: 2–4). As Attardo remarks of humor, so we might conclude for satire, that any essentialist definition is inadequate to the task (Attardo 1996: 3).

All this convolution is, no doubt, frustrating, for despite all, most of us would be able to identify satire with a fair degree of reliability. We might not have a definitional *paradeigma*, but, like Euthyphro regarding proper conduct, we can point to what can reasonably be taken as examples. His father should not have killed a slave, even one suspected of murder.<sup>14</sup> Throughout this discussion, I have been drawing largely on works that would un-problematically be called satire, and it is easy on that basis to assume fallaciously, after Plato, that to rely on the foremost examples of satire (in one sense of the word paradigmatic) is to rely on those that best fit a definition, a *paradeigma*, as conceptual model for the whole. To expect so much of a definition is bound to lead either to disappointment, or to definitions that best fit a favored author (see, for example, Rosenheim 1963: 8–31).

Here it is important to explicate a common misconception about definitions: often they are not needed, though the demand for them can arise because of the uncertainties over their application. A formal definition of high, for example, is redundant because the word makes sense in its bi-conditional relationship with low. High is not low. I appreciate this sounds a little like Baldrick of the BBC

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<sup>14</sup> This is the dramatic point of Plato's telling us that the slave is probably a villain; it displays Euthyphro's capacity for ethical discrimination. What he lacks is the security of judgment that, according to Plato only a philosophical understanding can provide.



comedy series *Blackadder*, who in trying to re-write Dr. Johnson's *Dictionary* overnight, defined "cat" as "not a dog". The problem, however, lies in how and where to apply a term like "high" (high price, high mountain, high hill). Recognition of this is crucial to Aristotle's definition by mean. For he insists that the mean is not to be taken in an absolute sense but varied according to circumstances. Giving an athlete enough food is a mean between excess and insufficiency; but sufficiency will depend on the person concerned. Thus the mean provides a vocabulary: application is the end or reason for having such a word.

At this stage, it can be said that all instances of satire to which I have alluded do have one informing characteristic, namely moral seriousness; the *serio* in Lucian's *ludere*; the follies and vices that the *OED* says are ridiculed or ironically underlined. This intentional thread of ethical critique has been pervasive. Although the relationship between censoriousness and satire is asymmetric, satirists have traditionally claimed moral seriousness. It is not necessary for us to believe them all to be sincere, nor to accept their values or their treatment of others, nor to admire any artistry with which they express their putative passion. It is the species of claim that is important. And making some ethical point, or displaying some moral seriousness has indeed been a more reliable guide to satire overall than the exhibition or provocation of humor. This aspect of satire, however, would be more helpful if the content of the moral vocabulary on which satirists can draw were stable. But ethical and intellectual categories and standards – what in practice people have called right and wrong, rational or foolish, admirable or shameful – have varied between societies, over time, and between groups in societies. To recognize this, as an historian must, is not necessarily to embrace a metaphysical doctrine of ethical relativism, but rather to confront a fact about language and its use.

Because of this variation, it is little wonder that satire surviving from different and distant societies can often take some comprehending. Even within a given community, differences in the way in which a shared moral terminology is applied, even differences in the very vocabulary of morality, help explain why satire might have differing thresholds of appreciation, tolerance or recognition. In short, it is clear that once again the problem lies in application, not definition. Consequently, we may anticipate that satire within a society with which we are familiar will be easier to grasp than satire coming from an alien environment. Indeed, it should even be easier to define, if need be. Any simple appeal to the shared senses of rectitude and rationality which give rise to points of critique over the *longue durée*, however, will move us towards a definition so abstract as to include a great deal we would not want to call satiric. Alternatively; it will be naïve and merely pass the definitional buck to the content of morality and sound reasoning.

The historian certainly cannot pre-empt questions of what counts as vice and folly by taking self-proclaiming satirists at their own word, or even by using a definition of satire legislatively, as moral theorists might, to bracket and exclude uses that do not fit. We are not going to understand twentieth-century satire if we isolate that which came from Nazi Germany as just being propaganda.<sup>15</sup> Include it, and we can appreciate that satire can be created and used for clearly propagandistic purposes. Consider the BBC series *Yes Minister* and *Yes Prime Minister*. These very popular television programs rather took for granted stereotypical images of public servants and politicians, and they became of propagandistic value to Margaret Thatcher's drive to reform the British Civil Service. Satires on war such as John Arbuthnot's *History of John Bull*, (1712), the perennially replayed television series *M\*A\*S\*H*, and Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* are predominantly propaganda for peace. Or, again, consider Andrew Marvell's *Last Instructions to a Painter* (1667) a work that needs to be seen simultaneously as parody, propaganda and satire.

An additional complication, I suspect, is the increasing use of the word satire to displace moral seriousness. It maybe that as so much satire has become mainstream, mass entertainment, that the moral edge is blunted, or (to allude again to Alexander Pope's distinction) is being concentrated on acceptably safe targets, and so treads carefully around contemporary patterns of taboo and sensitivity. As a consequence, when satire generates outrage or distaste, we can be told, it was only satire. Thus effectively consigned to the realm of the non-serious, satire can contract into really being only a joke – though how many jokes *are* only that is a moot point. This potential for humor to insulate satire has long been latent. In the sixteenth century, a joke might be argued to come within the range of the non-malicious, ideally, or potentially allowing free speech with some protection from persecution (Curtis 2006: 90–91).<sup>16</sup> Capitalizing on the associations of purely comic satire may intimate a significant shift in the meaning of satire as a whole. If satire as merely joking is to be included in the range of a definition of the satiric, the recent working definition of satire put forward by my colleagues and I might require adjustment, or needs recognizing as weakly stipulative for the purposes of applying copyright law. It reads as follows: “the critical impulse manifesting itself in some degree of denigration, almost invariably through attempted humor”. (Condren et al. 2008b: 413).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Sutherland, (1962: 21) who clearly regards satire and propaganda as simply oppositional.

<sup>16</sup> Griffin has argued that satire is stimulated more by oppressive than by accommodating political regimes (Griffin 1994: 138–40), but the issue of humor's relationship to political toleration is too complex and variable to respond to any dichotomous formulation.

It might, then, be concluded, albeit a little lamely, that satire is a complex, even at times an incoherent genre exhibiting the heterogeneity of Menippean satire augmented; but this consideration directly raises the question of the extent to which the word genre is even appropriate. And its usefulness is more easily questioned if we put to one side the belief that satire is fundamentally a literary phenomenon. The notion of a genre has strongly been associated with literary analysis and leads us to expect the presence of certain general, formal, even required properties, such as those of plot, motif and structure, all susceptible to definition (Classon 1998: 95–121; Weinbrot 2005: 4–7). Such properties can then seem to facilitate what has also been important to literary analysis, the isolation and appraisal of quality and achievement. Any form of creative activity that has more than one salient feature, however, may become an invitation for someone to ignore an aspect of what is expected and replace it with something else; in fact, working within a tradition usually involves exactly this kind of adaptation. The type of Japanese-language poetry called *haiku*, for example, has an exemplary formal rigidity allowing easy definition, but such strict syllabic rules for a genre can spawn the need for different classifications. *Haiku* has given rise to a derivate, often-comic genre, *senryū* (Kobayashi 2006: 164–70; Davis and Wells 2006: 153–77). The thirty-one syllabic *tanka* has similarly produced the parodic, even possibly, mildly satiric *kyōka*:<sup>17</sup> both *senryū* and *kyōka* are now treated as distinct genres (Takanashi 2007: 235–259).

Most genres, however, survive with a somewhat spurious unity by giving altogether less guidance as to what might be encompassed by them. The necessary construct becomes necessarily uncertain (Weinbrot 2005: 4). We can make sense of and understand John Gay's play, *The What D'Ye Call It* (1715) but when it was written, Gay knew it did not fit any preconceived mode of writing, and helpfully sub-titled it "A Tragi-Comi-Pastoral Farce". It was also, in fact, satiric parody (Nokes 1995: 180–189). If, as de Smet correctly claimed, the notion of Menippean satire (excepting, of course, her own stipulation) stretches to breaking point the notion of genre, the wider category of satire surely explodes it. Moreover, as Stephen Orgel has argued, our understanding of genre as somehow designating an exclusive form or mode of creativity (e.g. Dutch still life, epic poem, farce etc.) itself departs from older conceptions in which genre was much closer to an aspect of a more complex whole (Orgel 1987: 4–5; 1979: 10–23). Looking at satire as a definable genre over the historical range of its uses becomes fundamentally misleading, especially if we consider its confused and slippery Greco-Roman

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17 For skepticism concerning the satiric in Japanese culture, see Wells (2006); Davis and Wells, (2006: 145–50).

expressions. Definition in terms of genre can run into obfuscatory incoherence by half recognizing the inappropriateness of the concept to satire, yet relying on the word regardless (see, for example, Coombe and Connery 1995: 5). It has been of a piece with the misleading preconception, noted at the outset that in defining satire, one is defining the finest examples of a type of literature.

Such generic expectation is, it seems to me, a further residue of the Platonic project to find forms by which the world can be given coherence. The search is for an abstract noun, *logos*, to encompass the discourse, a *logos* we can call satire. It is a natural feature of European languages that are dependent on a clear distinction between subject and object: we are encouraged to look for something like a thing, and treat concepts like a special class of things. The consequence implicitly is to privilege a noun. If however, we move to an emphasis on the satiric, as Northrop Frye has suggested through his discussions modality and as James Sutherland has illustrated, the adjective becomes primary (Frye 1957; Sutherland 1962: 1–22). However odd this may sound, there is no reason why “the satiric” should not become a predicate variable for a wide diversity of expression. Although this shifts the problem to the definition of an adjective, it does fit with Orgel’s notion of genre as dimension, and it also helps unravel the problem of what sorts of expression might come within the ambit of satire. Some writings certainly announce themselves as satires, but to rely on the satiric will cover much more material that has been associated with some notion of satire without pre-empting questions of form. It makes intelligible, for example, Hayden White’s perceptive characterization of Jacob Burckhardt’s historical vision as satiric because of his recognition of the irony of unintended consequence (White 1974: 244–247). The adjective will also stretch beyond the discursive. There may be a satiric turn, a “moment” (Rosenheim 1963: 9–10) or sub-theme in many works, including for example philosophical treatises, songs, operas, video clips, collages and the visual arts and political speeches. If we exclude these, something is clearly wrong with a definition that moves to arbitrary stipulation. Emphasis on the satiric may help explain how family resemblances can develop, even to the extent that we can stop at what I’ve called a characterization rather than a definition; by virtue of that, however, it also returns us to the differing priorities of historical, theoretical and legal discourse.

One final point: not every statement with the copula “is” pretends to be a definition. “It is a lovely day”, “this is a good place to finish”, and some others only pretend to be definitions. Bismarck’s remark that “Politics is the art of the possible”, or Swift’s assertion that satire is a glass in which we see all faces but our own, are relevant examples. Swift is not attempting to define, but ironically remarking on the popularity of satire by pointing to the interplay of creation and reception among the insufficiently reflective.

The function of some statements maintaining definitional form with its aura of elegance is principally persuasive. To consider such rhetorical definitions as not properly definitional presupposes that definitions only have certain sorts of function and that there is a neat distinction between the descriptive and the normative. Such a firm distinction may be defensible. My point is only to note that to isolate rhetorical definitions as beyond the scope of *proper* definition, presupposes a good deal. In fact, certain rhetorical definitions (such as those above) are generally taken with a seriousness that overlooks their rhetorical nature). Abraham Lincoln's synoptic image of democracy as government of, for and by the people, had its place in a formal exercise in epideictic rhetoric, a funeral oration in the idiom of Pericles' speech on the first Athenian dead in Thucydides' *Peloponnesian wars*. There is something of the rhetorical to be found in books on satire that define it in terms of literature of quality and moral seriousness. We might well want satire to conform to our values, and definition can usefully filter what we don't like (Nazi satire as really propaganda), what we consider inferior, or what we know little about, without the end result appearing too forced, value-laden and almost certainly un-historical.

Given the widely-informing ethos or pretense of critique carried in words deemed to be satirical (whatever the content of morality, however safe or banal the moral posture), it is only to be expected that rhetorical definitions can themselves be satiric, especially when, as Sutherland does, we recognize a persuasive aspect to satire (Sutherland 1962: 5–7). Here we touch on the last aspect of the Platonic definitional legacy: for any general presumption that all definitions supervene on a problematic *definiendum* and somehow come from outside is effectively undone by the satiric definition, something intrinsic to satiric practice. There is, indeed, a tradition of satiric definition. Arbuthnot's *Art of political lying* elaborates on a definition of politics as a rigid, if inventive, economy of mendacity: "*The Art of convincing the People of Salutary Falsehoods, for some good end*". (Arbuthnot 1712: 8). Thomas Sheridan provided moral and physiological definitions of punning in the same idiom (Sheridan: 1719).<sup>18</sup> Ambrose Bierce's *The Devil's Dictionary* (1998 [1911]) is a far more elaborate and sustained example. Although owing something to earlier ad hoc satiric definition, and possibly also to the aphoristic style of La Rochefoucault's *Maxims* (1665), Bierce's work is explicitly an ambitious parodic dictionary, and has remained a fruitful model for satire (see Marks et al. 2006). It provides a fitting point at which to end by returning this essay to its beginning. Backhandedly it tells us something about

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**18** The work was originally attributed to Swift: the men were close friends, and Thomas Sheridan was the grandfather of the playwright Richard Brinsley.

dictionaries, about how to use them and to recognize their limitations: “Dictionary, n. A malevolent literary device for cramping the growth of a language and making it hard and inelastic. This dictionary, however, is a most useful work” (Bierce 1998).

Satire, then, much like the humor with which it has for so long been associated, is unsuitable for an essentialist definition. This is why, in “Defining parody and satire”, my colleagues and I offered only a “working definition”. Our argument was that such a definition ought to be helpful for lawyers dealing with contentious cases of satire under new legal exemptions to Australian copyright law. In the light of what I have argued here, it is possible to go further and to suggest that anything tighter will be essentially misleading, stipulatively narrowing only to a certain sort of satire. For an historian, such an approach can amount to stacking the evidential cards and is precisely why we should not start off by defining our terms. But history is not everything; and for the philosopher, historiographical characterization may be quite unsatisfactory. Do we accept the limitations of definition and embrace philosophy as an abstract activity at some odds with the seething incoherencies of experience? Or in the name of encompassing them, do we stop short of definition? There is not, nor should there be any easy answer.

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