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The Destructive Satiric Voice in 17th and 18th Century Satire
Jamie Marie Wagner '10

It is often theorized that the purpose of satire is to expose hypocrisy in normative society in order to elicit reform. According to Felicity Nussbaum, in her 1984 book *The Brick of All We Hate: English Satires on Women*, "It is frequently argued that the negative aspects of satire must be juxtaposed to a positive ideal – that the criticism in satire implies the hope of something better" (4). The possible validity of this interpretation is similarly examined by Brian Connery and Kirk Combe in the introduction to their 1995 book on *Theorizing Satire*, where "high-minded and usually socially oriented moral and intellectual reform" is noted as the ostensible motivation for "virtually all English satirists from the late sixteenth to the late eighteenth century" (2). Robert C. Elliot, in *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art*, attributes a comparable moralizing incentive to the ancient invective of Archilochus, citing a "tone of righteous indignation" which can be "attached to a feeling of moral mission" (11). Most simply, while attempting to identify concisely the "Necessary and Sufficient Conditions" of the satiric genre, Don Nilsen maintains that satire must "ridicule certain aspects of society in order that these aspects can be looked at more critically, perhaps even changed" (4).

John Dryden, however, as described by Kirk Combe in his essay on "Shadwell as Lord of Misrule," cites Cicero as an explanation of Varronian satire, a method he claims to apply to his own work: "You have begun Philosophy in many Places: sufficient to incite us, though too little to instruct us." Dyden describes Varro in a similar way, claiming that "as Learned as he was, his business was more to divert his Reader, than to teach him" (3). Combe goes on to describe Menippean satire in similar terms, noting "the feeling that there is probably no abstract certainty outside of us that we can know." Finding "its philosophical foundations in Cynicism and Pyrrhonism, the most radical forms of ancient skepticism," Menippean satire has "at its heart the potentially distressing notions that ... 'naked, ultimate questions' with an ethical and practical basis are raised, but they are *not* answered" (4). James Noggle, in his book on *The Skeptical Sublime: Aesthetic Ideology in Pope and Tory Satirists*, gives a comparable definition

for Pyrrhonism – a “radical version” of skepticism with “roots in ancient Greek philosophical schools” – and notes its common arguments “that nothing may be known for certain and that we should withhold assent from all propositions” (15). Such a description of satiric purpose quite explicitly contrasts that divulged by modern literary critics who, according to Rose Zimbardo in her essay on “The Semiotics of Restoration Satire,” “cannot see beyond the eighteenth-century binary model for satire, which determines that in order to be satire a text must direct us toward a positive norm, must contain or, at least indirectly, uphold a clear moral satiric antithesis” (23). Although much of the celebrated satire on contemporary culture written in the 17th and 18th centuries profoundly exhibits a spirit of indignant condemnation and harshly destructive criticism, when read in consideration of these two differing systems of satiric theory, it is clear that there is very little in the major works of Dryden, Rochester, Swift, Pope, and Johnson that can be construed as the practical reconstructive or edifying sentiment suggested by Nussbaum, Nilsen, and Elliot.

In this paper, I hope to assert with credibility and persuasion the possibility that the satiric genre may be more hopelessly and harmfully deconstructive than moralizing or reformative. I intend briefly to identify the central criticizing arguments in a number of major satiric works – John Dryden’s *Mac Flecknoe*, Rochester’s *Satire Against Reason and Mankind*, Jonathon Swift’s *Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift*, Alexander Pope’s *Dunciad* and “Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot,” Juvenal’s *Satire X*, and Samuel Johnson’s *Vanity of Human Wishes* – in order to illustrate the use of satire as a rejection of conventional ideologies and cultural behaviors, as well as to expose the ultimately pessimistic and inconclusive ending of each work. More thoroughly, I intend to identify the spiteful accusations against women put forth by Pope in his “Epistle to a Lady,” particularly those that find congruous depictions in the works of his contemporaries – like that of Jonathon Swift in “The Lady’s Dressing Room” – as well as in the works of his ancient predecessors, notably in John Dryden’s 17th century translation of “The Sixth Satyr of Juvenal.” By exploring the debilitating contradictions offered to women in the text as alternatives to their deficient behavior, I intend to establish Pope’s epistle as a particularly destructive and unsympathetic work.

To begin with, in *Mac Flecknoe*, Dryden completely chastises the bad poetry and common art of his contemporaries, equating “Heywood,

Shirley” and “Ogilby” – notoriously incompetent writers – with “loads of Sh----” (102-103). These verses particularly serve as both a specific blow against Shadwell and as a statement on the quality of his work. Later, Dryden makes use of the convention of a satiric mask as a means of criticizing in a way that can elicit no defense – a convention he presents in his “Art of Satire” as a fundamental feature of the genre. In the words of Dryden, a satirist must “make a man appear a fool, a blockhead, or a knave without using any of those opprobrious terms” (2131). Similarly, he asserts, although “the occasion of an offence may possibly be given” – as it is undeniably in the extremely local and personal satires of the 17th century – “a witty man... cannot take it” (2131), and the poet is absolved from taking responsibility for his words. By framing his criticism as Flecknoe’s praise, Dryden is able to explicitly identify Shadwell’s inefficiencies, the “mild anagram” (204) and “inoffensive satires” (200) which fail to express the “gall” (201) and “venom” of his “felonious heart” (202). In the end, however, although Flecknoe is defeated – “his last words... scarcely heard / For Bruce and Longville had a trap prepared, / And down they sent the yet declaiming bard” (211-213) – instead of reconstructing a world of literature that Dryden would deem more adequate and appropriate, the incompetence and inanity of Flecknoe is passed on to Shadwell: “The mantle fell to the young prophet’s part/ With double portion of his father’s art” (216-217). In such a way, Dryden leaves his reader with no indication of an optimistic future – no reasonable or acceptable alternative to the “misrule” of bad poets.

The very lifestyle and ideology of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester – as a libertine, a hedonist, an epicurean, a nihilist, a skeptic, and a democritean satirist – depends on the deconstruction of conventional society. In his *Satire Against Reason and Mankind*, Rochester disassembles what Marianne Thormahlen describes in her book *Rochester: The Poems in Context* as all “essential components in the religious and philosophical developments and controversies of the seventeenth century” (163), attributing nearly every immoral or illogical proclivity of man to his “wrong reason” – the truth constructed by church and government based on the theological assumption of human divinity. “’Tis this very reason I despise,” he writes, “This supernatural gift, that makes a mite / Think he’s the image of the infinite” (75-77). These institutions, he claims, “swollen with selfish vanity,” “devise / False freedoms, holy cheats and formal lies” which they

use “to tyrannize” “their fellow slaves” (176-179). This perception of authority as a perpetuation of “False freedoms” and “formal lies” pointedly recalls a 1977 interview with critical theorist Michel Foucault titled “Truth and Power,” wherein Foucault defines truth as a mechanistic function of power, claiming that the dominant authority in society creates a “discourse which it accepts and makes function as true” (1144), a conventional episteme perpetuated by those in power for the sake of remaining in control. As a result, according to Rochester, nothing understood and accepted by man can be depended upon as stable or as stably virtuous. In the words of Kirk Combe in his 1998 book on *Rochester's Critique of Polity, Sexuality and Society*, the “late seventeenth-century Englishman” is confronted by the poet with an “intolerable choice”: “either impose spurious, ludicrous, and destructive order on the world via the misapplication of reason, or cope with earthly chaos” (71). Rochester stands by this pessimistic perception in his “Addition,” where he denies the existence of any “upright... statesman” (185), any “churchman who on God relies” (191), or any “meek humble man of honest sense” (216). What’s even more telling is that, while the “wrong reason” of church and government are rejected, the poet’s own “true reason” (111), “that reason which distinguishes by sense, / And gives us rules of good and ill from thence” (100-101), is never thoroughly or practically defined beyond this vague discussion – one noted by Combe for its resemblance of “prevailing libertine freethinking and extreme skepticism.” He even goes on to undercut right reason as “a workable countersolution to contemporary paranoia and will-to-power” (Combe 71) with the declaration: “Thus I think reason righted, but for man, / I’ll ne’er recant, defend him if you can” (112-113). In such a way, after completely dismantling the institutions which form the foundation of his society, Rochester affords his reader no pragmatic reconstruction.

Interestingly, Jonathon Swift, in his *Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift*, makes the same accusations against the developing Whig party that Rochester makes against conservative political and religious institutions. He believes that the priority of the government is self-interest – advising his readership to “never put thy trust” “in princes” (342) – and he reveals the falseness of the social structure developed and perpetuated by the Whigs, who “turn religion to a fable / And make the government a Babel / Pervert the laws” and “disgrace the crown” (384-386). Just as Foucault describes the often inaccurate episteme created by those in power, the “discourse...

[they accept] and [make] function as true,” Swift accuses the liberal British of debasing “old England’s glory” with fabricated truth, making “her infamous in story” (387-388). Ironically, while Swift establishes the Whig party and those that echo their ideologies as a “destructive scene” (392), he offers no constructive advice as an alternative, despite explicitly claiming this purpose: ‘The Dean did, by his pen, defeat / An infamous destructive cheat; / Taught fools their interest how to know, / And gave them arms to ward the blow” (407-410). The particularity of these “arms,” however, aside from a largely detrimental awareness of the hypocrisy and inefficiency of the enemy, is never actually divulged in the poem as a means of guiding the reader to virtue. Similarly, he claims that “his satire points at no defect/ But what all mortals may correct” (463-464) without instructing his audience on how these corrections can possibly be achieved.

Even more startling is the shear devastation of Alexander Pope’s *Dunciad* - his scathing invalidation of the entire foundation of contemporary ideology. Under the rule of the prevailing “Dulness” (19) of normative society, Pope finds that “Science groans in chains,” that “Wit dreads exile,” that “Logic” has been “gagged and bound,” and that “fair Rhetoric,” “stripped,” lies “languished on the ground” (21-24). He attributes such systematic degeneration of intellect to institutions such as “Westminster” (145), where critical thinking is replaced – and “thought” “confine[d] – by mindless recitation – the “breath” “exercise[d]” (161). Rather than encouraging students “to ask, to guess,” or “to know” (155), these Foucauldian perpetuators of oppressive ideological conventions work to “ply the memory,” to “load the brain,” to “bind rebel wit, and double chain on chain” (157-158). What’s more, he charges the meticulous triviality of “Physic” (645) and “Mathematics” (647) with the demystification and the dehumanization of “Philosophy” (643) and “Religion” (649), a paradigm shift which results in the “expir[ation]” of “Morality” (650). Pope ends his seething assault on society apocalyptically, where, contrary to the light of God’s creation, the goddess of Dulness “restore[s]” “CHAOS!” and “buries All” in “Universal Darkness” (652-656). His readers, then, have no path to take but that of Dulness, who advises them to “be proud, be selfish, and be dull” (582). Furthermore, in his “Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot,” Pope blames bad taste in contemporary art and poetry for the decline of state and culture in eighteenth-century England – as, with “Fire in each eye, and papers in each hand” poor writers and

common people “rave, recite, and madden round the land” (5-6). Similar to Swift’s rather self-righteous declaration of satiric purpose in *Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift* – the identification of the “defects” of “mortals” in order that they may be reformed – Pope reserves his praise for the poet who has “moralized his song,” “not for fame, but virtue’s better end” (341-342). Notably, he goes on to condemn his inefficient contemporaries as “damning critic[s]” (344) – an ironic choice of words for a satirist who, in *The Dunciad*, has damned all of humanity to “Universal Darkness” through relentless criticism and a refusal to suggest acceptable alternatives to what he declares to be reprehensible behavior.

Connery and Combe, in the introduction to *Theorizing Satire*, go on to note that, although 18th century satiric writers often feign the “high-minded” purpose of “moral and intellectual reform,” they actually “engage in something quite different, namely, mercilessly savage attack on some person or thing that, frequently for private reasons, displeases them” (2). This somewhat underhanded application of satire as pointed personal incrimination is apparent in Dryden’s attack on Shadwell, as well as in the religious and political satires of Rochester and Swift. For many men, however, in the words of Connery and Combe, “satire, as a literature of... attack,” was used as “a form of power exerted frequently against women” (11-12). In reading Pope’s epistle “To a Lady,” for example, one can easily identify Nussbaum’s “criticism,” Elliott’s “righteous indignation,” and Nilsen’s “ridicule.” Clearly, the speaker’s misogynistic tirade is meant to “exhibit” the “universal characteristics of inconstancy, pride, and self-love” accepted as the principle degenerative qualities of women in the period (Nussbaum 137). What fails again to appear in the poem, however, is the moralizing intention hypothesized by satiric theorists. In fact, after viciously deconstructing the deplorable behavior – and, thereby, the very nature – of women, Pope leaves his female readership with little hope for self-improvement. While Nussbaum would argue that the character of Martha Blount is presented “as an ideal for her sex, a norm against which we measure... highly entertaining but woefully deficient women” (154), closer examination reveals that Blount is a completely paradoxical embodiment of the same conflicting qualities that Pope purports to ridicule. In such a way, “To a Lady” is not a means of inducing societal reform, but a perpetuation of entrenching misogynistic conventions, a depiction of women specifically

that remains to be as bleak and incriminating as his depiction of human nature in *The Dunciad*.

Most explicitly, in his poem, Pope condemns women for their flagrant changeability. He begins by imploring the artist of a woman’s portrait to “Catch, ere she changes, the Cynthia of this minute” (20), and he reproaches “Narcissa” (53), who fluctuates spontaneously between “conscience” and “passion,” “atheism and religion” (65-66). He also notes “Soft Silia, fearful to offend” (33), who, without warning, “storms!” and “raves!” (33) upon finding “a pimple on her nose” (36). Such an enlivened response to a trivial inconvenience represents a lack of discretion and a distortion of priorities which were wildly criticized in satiric literature against women. In Canto 2 of his *Rape of the Lock*, for example, Pope describes several possible disasters that plague Belinda’s consciousness:

Whether the nymph shall break Diana’s law,
Or some frail china jar receive a flaw,
Or stain her honor, or her new brocade,
Forget her prayers, or miss a masquerade,
Or lose her heart, or necklace, at a ball
Or whether Heaven has doomed that Shock must fall. (105-

110)

By juxtaposing a number of trivial mishaps, a missed masquerade or a lost necklace, with more poignant and emotional traumas, stained honor or a lost heart, the poet highlights the inability of the woman to distinguish the truly significant aspects of her existence. Most significantly, Pope does not limit his description of the naïveté of women to young aristocrats, but expands his illustration, in Canto 3, to include Queen Anne herself, with the biting suggestion that she cannot differentiate between base practices and the politics of court: “Here thou, great Anne! whom three realms obey/ Dost sometimes counsel take – and sometimes tea” (7-8). Juvenal’s Sixth Satire, as translated by John Dryden, identifies a similar misplaced priority in women who, having “Read th’ Example of a Pious Wife, / Redeeming, with her own, her Husband’s Life,” “Wou’d save their Lapdog sooner than their Lord” (853). Similarly, in “To a Lady,” Pope recalls Juvenal’s reproach for both the chastising wife – “the She-Tyrant” (316) – and the insufferable female scholar, whose “Wit” becomes “a burthen, when it talks too long” (573). To Pope, such a woman appears “Less wit than mimic” and “more a wit than wise” (48).

Significantly, Pope relies on the conventional perception that "Every woman is at heart a rake" (216), a pleasure-seeker and an uncontrollable sexual force. As a result of this compulsive lust, the sanctity of marriage can never be maintained, and although appearing "chaste to her husband," Pope asserts, a woman will be "frank to all besides" (71). Juvenal echoes this position as well, in writing of the woman who "duely, once a Month, renews her Face" for her "Husband's Nights," while "to the Lov'd Adult'rer," at any other moment, "appears" "in brightness" (593-398). This systematic promiscuity leads inevitably to an interesting, unfortunate circumstance – where the "Legacy" (Dryden 302) of a man will be left to the children of "Her Ruffians, Drudges, and Adulterers," unknowingly adopted as his "Hiers" (306-307). Pope explores this idea as well, as "Atossa" allows "the unguarded store" to descend "to heirs unknown" (147-149).

Lastly, Pope considers the superficial pretense of women, the quality that really facilitates men's susceptibility to their manipulations. About a "Queen" (182), Pope observes that her "robe of quality so struts and swells" that "None see what parts of Nature it conceals" (189-190). These suspected parts inevitably recall "Those secrets of the hoary deep" discovered by Strephon in "Celia's chamber" of Jonathon Swift's "Lady's Dressing Room" (96-98). Similarly, Pope notes that the public persona adopted by a woman allows "none" to "distinguish 'twixt" her "shame or pride, / Weakness or delicacy" (204-205).

Pope's condemnation of a woman's artificiality also presents a significant first example of his largely contradictory and inconclusive presentation of Martha Blount as "an ideal for her sex," glorified, according to Nussbaum, for her "sense," "good humor" and "virtue" (154). By soliciting the female to hold her "temper" (257) and, "if she rules" her husband, to "never show she rules" (262), Pope entreats her to develop a public persona in the same capacity that he afore rejects. As Nussbaum reasonably notes, in the "final series of paradoxes" offered by the poet, "the woman to whom the poem is addressed resembles the Queen [of line 182] in that we are only allowed to know her general qualities – to know her exterior rather than her hidden core" (156). The other virtues of his female companion that Pope extols in his poem comprise a further perpetuation of the conventional misogynistic ideology of the period, described by Nussbaum as "a chaste companion... even-tempered, patient, modest, and

prudent" (5). In the words of Pope, the ideal woman "ne'er answers till a husband cools" (261), "has her humor most, when she obeys" (264), and, paradoxically, can only win control of her self and her household "by submitting" (263). Moreover, Pope's paradoxical conclusions really allow his female readership no opportunity to improve upon their deficiencies, since "woman" is "at best a contradiction" (270). According to Nussbaum, "in the fiction of satire, men describe women as inherently giddy and unstable, while on the other they create an ideal woman, the mirror of their highest expectations, who is to establish order in the domestic sphere" (5). In Foucauldian terms, the perpetuation of these contradictory standards in women affords the satirist – as well as the male authority in society – a dominant position, as the "technologies of power introduced since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries" require that one "grasp... a multiple and differentiated reality" (1141). As a result, Pope's incessant berating in "To a Lady" achieves the critical intention of satire, without offering a realistic or attainable model for reform.

This disparity – Pope's ability to debase half the English population without the justification of a moral mission – is made possible by his adoption of a satiric voice. Exploring the ephemeral quality of beauty, Pope feigns sympathy toward the women who find themselves powerless when youth has passed, entreating his readership to "mark the fate of a whole sex of queens" (229). He undercuts his own sincerity, however, with ironic hyperbole, referring to the aged women as "hags" (239) and "ghosts of beauty" (241), who find themselves "fair to no purpose, artful to no end, / Young without lovers, old without a friend" (245-246). What's more, he ends his poem by praising the discretion of the woman who can appreciate his words, as she has received from a "generous god, who wit and gold refines" (289), "good sense, good humor, and a poet" (292) to direct her to a virtuous life. In the words of Nussbaum, the use of a narrative satiric voice allows the poet and his readers to separate themselves temporarily from identification with his victim, and "he may, for a time, create a rhetorical stance... which absolves him and his readers from the responsibility for all that he finds reprehensible" (3-4). Effectively, as a result, "the reader of 'To a Lady' is led along with Martha Blount to agree that the rest of the sex is contemptible, and... she is entertained at the expense of her sex" (Nussbaum 157).

Similar to the ironic depiction of Martha Blount as an ideal yet ultimately powerless woman, the pattern of criticizing without offering a pragmatic means for reform varies in John Dryden's translation of Juvenal's *Satire X* and Samuel Johnson's adaptation, *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, in that each poem ostensibly offers a reconstructive ending. After dismissing the possibility that any man "can distinguish / A false from a worthwhile objective" (2-3) in order to understand what is good for him – believing human "reason" (5) to be a "[fog] of deception" (4) and a "self-destructive urge" (9) – Juvenal offers the advice to "Let the Gods themselves determine what's most appropriate / For mankind, and what best suits our various circumstances" since 'they'll give us the things we need, not those we want" (347-349). Johnson, condemning the self-righteousness of man's "stubborn choice," "bold hand," and "suppliant voice" (11-12), echoes Juvenal by suggesting that we "leave to Heaven the measure and the choice" (352). However – because neither poet affords his reader any active power in determining his fate, this can hardly be considered a reconstructive ideology. More tellingly, Juvenal offers the observation that "There's one path, and one only, to a life of peace – through virtue." However, just as Rochester never substantially defines his "true reason," Juvenal really divulges nothing as to what this virtue entails. Samuel Johnson does him one better by suggesting a "healthful mind" (359), "love" (361), "patience" (362), and "faith" (363) – but these somewhat arbitrary values cannot possibly provide foundation for a new, more efficient and enlightened society. Finally, according to Johnson, the success of man depends on his "obedient passions, and a will resigned" (360), which is more of a passive acceptance than a epistemological paradigm, and, notably, these same "obedient passions" and "resigned" "will" are what empower the truth-perpetuating power elite suggested by Foucault and rejected by Rochester, Swift, and Pope in their major works.

In this case, the question can be raised as to the actual intended purpose of satire. Obviously, if works that were allegedly written to incite "moral and intellectual reform" ultimately succeed only in devastation of conventional epistemological systems without pragmatic reconstruction and those that are meant to refute social biases by exposing hypocrisies serve instead to perpetuate the oppressive prevailing ideology, there can exist no possibility for Elliot's "feeling of moral mission" or for Nussbaum's "positive ideal" or "hope of something better." What's more, because the

only alternative, according to Juvenal and Samuel Johnson, is a submission to the will of a higher authority, the suspicion can be raised, in consideration of the monarchical absolutism predominantly glorified by these major English poets, that satire may be an inherently conservative genre – one ultimately supportive of the ideologies of normative society.

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