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Ralph M. Rosen
**Efficacy and Meaning
in Ancient and Modern
Political Satire:
Aristophanes, Lenny
Bruce, and Jon Stewart**

I'm not an activist. I'm a comedian.

—Jon Stewart (2011)

If Aristophanes was working for reform, as a long line of learned interpreters of the poet have maintained, the result was lamentably disappointing: he succeeded in effecting not a single change.

—J. W. White (1909)¹

AS LITERARY GENRES AND PERFORMATIVE MODES GO, SATIRE appears to be among the most direct and straightforward. It is broadly accessible, clear in its stated message, and, as it seems, easy enough to identify. Countless examples can be found across history, from antiquity to our own era, and with few exceptions there is never much doubt about what these performers want us to believe they are doing. Angry or annoyed at someone or something, they fire up their sense of indignation, mobilize their verbal or gestural skills, and mock whoever or whatever it is that irritates them. But if satire is easy enough to spot, it is

often far more elusive and unstable than it would ever let on. For satire thrives on a number of paradoxes. On the one hand, the satirist will typically claim to speak “from the heart,” from a sense of acute, unmediated anger; on the other, the satirical work, whatever its exact form, clearly *is* mediated, whether by protocols of genre and style, the desire to please an audience, or other factors extrinsic to the actual content of the work. Satire is crafted, or wrought, in other words, no matter how much the satirist insists that it is not. Adding to the confusion is that satire, as a form of comedy, has its own dynamics that may or may not coincide with what satirists claim they want to achieve. Indeed, it is obvious and commonly pointed out that the comic elements within satire frequently undermine what purports to be its serious import (e.g., Griffin 1994, 37–38). Irony in particular can wreak havoc on any attempt to locate meaning in such works (Hutcheon 1994, 37–56). One moment satirists will assume a self-righteous didactic stance, and the next they suddenly appear to behave no better than the objects of their attack. Such abrupt shifts make us suspicious of a satirist’s didactic seriousness at moments such as these, but if a work can never really offer any consistent perspective, what is the point of its *claims* to meaning in the first place?

In our own era these questions remain very much alive and no less intractable than they have always been. Over the past few years, in fact, there has been a remarkable surge of interest in the nature of satire and its alleged ability to effect social change, largely in response to the immense reach that modern technology and media have afforded a handful of especially skilled performers. If the 1990s were obsessed with the influence of celebrity radio satirists such as Howard Stern or Don Imus, attention has now shifted to television, which has made comics such as Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert ubiquitously celebrities in American culture. Since the 2008 presidential election, for example, there has been a flurry of scholarly activity—not to mention countless nonacademic discussions in blogs and newspapers—trying to assess exactly what, if any, influence Jon Stewart’s *Daily Show* has on audiences (e.g., Pew Research Center 2008). The focus of such studies is, predict-

ably, Stewart's famously vigorous political satire, since if this kind of satire does have any influence over its audiences, as the traditional posturing of the genre implies that it should, such influence could well be highly consequential. Does Jon Stewart, and do satirists like him, actually sway voters from one candidate to another? Do some viewers really get their news from his show? Does he make audiences apathetic and cynical about politics with his relentless antagonistic comedy or is it the reverse: Does he energize the populace and encourage them to pay attention to politics in a way they might not have before? (Cao and Brewer 2008; Cao 2010)

The critical history of satire even up to our own time has tended to oscillate between two polarities. At one extreme lies the temptation to take what the satirist says at face value: satirists claim to have something urgent to say and insist that what they have to say is actually true, so why should we not believe them, at least on some level? (Kernan 1959; Griffin 1993, 35–70) At the other extreme, however, there remains deep suspicion about comedy, the effects of laughter, and the gamesmanship of satire: Where is there a space for truth-telling and moral seriousness when the satirist always has an eye on making the audience laugh? (Griffin 1993, 79–94) Each side of this perennial debate repudiates the other's position with its own: either satire cannot be pure entertainment because it contains too many indications that it is also serious or satire cannot be seriously moralistic, as it purports to be, because its investment in comedy precludes any kind of systematic teaching. Some have wondered whether a middle ground might not solve the problem, a kind of seriousness of purpose that emerges as a function of comedy. The ancient Greeks invented the term *spoudaiogeloion* for this concept, the “serious-funny,” or, as we would say, the “serio-comic” (Giangrande 1972). It was one way by which they tried to resolve the paradoxes of comic poets such as Aristophanes (active at Athens, during the late fifth century BCE and into the fourth), whose language could be scandalously obscene and yet seemed to address many of the pressing issues of the day head on. From this perspective, then, Aristophanes' rambunctious, often obscene attacks—on prominent politicians, for example—

would somehow both make an audience laugh and leave them with a lesson of sorts from the poet-as-pedagogue.

There are problems here, too, however, especially when one considers the actual content of the poet's lesson in such cases and asks who exactly is supposed to learn from it. Once again, we find ourselves circling around the question of meaning: can one ever be certain that satire has, or strives for, actual—as opposed to purported—meaning; and if so, can that meaning ever be of any real consequence for human society? Or would we otherwise simply have to concede that, in the end, satire is in some real sense devoid of meaning, which is to say, incapable of living up to the didactic aims it announces to be a function of its genre? And if satirical teaching amounts to little more than faux moralizing, where exactly does an audience's enjoyment of satirical genres lie? If, as some have held, it is to be found purely in the realm of the aesthetic, what does it mean that this aesthetic has been emptied of truly didactic content? It is curious that critics tend to be satisfied if they can describe and analyze a satirist's didactic posturing without asking whether these postures have any consequences for audiences. Put another way, if satire is supposed to teach but its didactic program is continually compromised or even undermined by the competing demands of comedy, what kind of entertainment is it really?

Such questions have been asked with surprising urgency and consistency throughout history any time satirical entertainers start to push against the status quo, whether taking aim at politicians and celebrities or exposing the hypocrisies, ironies, and corruption of the day. But precisely because satirists deal with such timely, localized topics, the controversies they take such pleasure in stirring up are rarely contextualized outside of the contemporary moment. If we situate satirical forms—even those that seem entirely spontaneous and temporally contingent—within a historical tradition, we will achieve a far deeper and subtler understanding of their meaning and significance for the societies in which they are produced.

In order to illustrate both the transhistorical and cross-cultural aspects of satirical meaning, I will focus in this essay on one of the

earliest practitioners of the Western satirical tradition, Aristophanes, and from there move to a comparison with satirists closer to our own time and culture: Lenny Bruce from the 1960's, and then Jon Stewart. This investigation might have included authors or performers of other historical periods as well, but working with an ancient Greek author such as Aristophanes brings particular clarity to the issues that concern us here. For one thing, because he stands at the very beginning of a Western tradition that evolved in complex ways up to the present, it is often easier to analyze the satirical dynamics of his comedy than those of later satirical traditions. Satire is rarely, if ever, "pure" or unmediated by other genres, but Aristophanes maintains a clearer, more focused, satiric voice than many others of later periods. A second reason to concentrate on Aristophanes is because of his remarkable literary and generic self-consciousness: he displays a sustained, often playful, interest in calling attention to his self-appointed role as a satirist and to the purportedly didactic significance of his work in a society in need (as he would claim) of moral guidance.

This self-consciousness offers us the deceptive promise of a window into the satirist's mind. Aristophanes, as we will see, finds occasion in his plays to speak in the first person and to profess his indignation and desire to set things straight, so we are encouraged, at any rate, to take his voice at face value. But we also (all too soon) begin to see the irony that satire is so famous for, the distancing of voice from subjectivity—in short, the comedy—and the tension that results from the clash between the satirist's didactic claims and his need to entertain the very audience he has also charged himself with instructing. In the end, satire cannot exist without some measure of both comedy and didacticism, but its "success"² depends only on the former—comedy, the ultimate *sine qua non* of the genre. Simply put, if satire fails in its comedy, it fails as satire; but if it fails in its didacticism—that is, if it fails to live up to its claim of actual moral instruction—satire's efficacy not only remains intact, but can even be enhanced by the comedy that arises from the irony of a didacticism exposed as a sham.

Aristophanes offers us a spectacular display of these complex dynamics, and has provided perhaps the earliest test case in Western literature for the problem of comic and satiric meaning. Aristophanes wrote comedies for the stage, using fictional characters to dramatize fictional plots, so there exists already a distance between the authorial “I” and the subjectivities of his characters. Much of the satire for which Aristophanes was so famous, therefore, does not come directly from the poet’s voice but rather from these characters; and from this unassuming observation come the first interpretive conundra. It is so easy, after all, to assume that any satire put in the mouths of dramatic characters must reflect the views of its creator—the author himself—especially when the targets of satire are historically verifiable people, or things, familiar to the audience. From that assumption, it is then straightforward enough to conclude that Aristophanes has a point to make: that by raising a laugh with the audience at the expense of his targets, he is attempting to stake out a substantive position on whatever issues he blames his targets for raising.

Examples abound in Aristophanes, but we may begin by examining his first extant play, *Acharnians* (produced 425 BCE), written at a time when Athens was in the throes of its protracted war with Sparta. *Acharnians* is traditionally classed, along with *Peace* and *Lysistrata*, as one of Aristophanes’ great antiwar plays and, as such, the satirical battle lines are felt to be uncomplicated: Aristophanes was no friend of the Peloponnesian War, wanted peace for Athens, and disapproved of the warmongering policies of Athens’ political and military leadership. People and policies on that side of the issue, therefore, were his targets: the general Pericles, for example, who drew the Athenians into the war came under fire in *Acharnians*, as did also the conservative, militaristic, chorus of *Acharnians* (the residents of the Attic deme, Acharnai) and the notoriously hawkish Lamachus (MacDowell 1995, 46–79; Olson 2002, xxxi–lii).

A sophisticated reader might well be inclined at this point to invoke the dangers of reading intentionality into an author’s characters, but even this move is hampered by one of Old Comedy’s singu-

lar features known as the “parabasis”: a point in the play where the dramatic action is suspended, and the chorus leader “steps aside” (the literal meaning of the Greek term *parabasis*) to speak on behalf of the playwright himself (Sifakis 1971; Hubbard 1991). Aristophanic parabases could address a variety of topics, often tangential to the main plot and not always explicitly autobiographical, but when they do claim to represent the views of the poet, they consistently boast of the didactic superiority of comedy and the comic poet’s responsibility to take on the most controversial issues of the day. The underlying pretense of this rhetoric is that this kind of comedy is straightforward and uncomplicated: here the poet can simply look the audience in the eye and tell them “the truth.” There is no need for nuance or refinement; satire is held to be unmediated, reactionary, and righteous. This poet, in short, wants to persuade the audience to take what he says in the parabasis at face value; and this, in turn, encourages the audience to suspect that even the fictional plots in which the parabases are embedded might contain characters that reflect the poet’s own personal or ideological agenda.

Acharnians, in particular, is both a gold mine and a quagmire when it comes to the problem of interpreting the satirical, didactic voice; for here, uniquely in all of Aristophanes, we have not only a parabasis that claims to speak for the poet, but a fictional protagonist with a *redende name* (“telling name”): Dicaeopolis (“Just City”); one who, on two occasions in the play, more or less explicitly ventriloquizes the poet’s own voice. With no concession in either passage to any rupture of dramatic illusion, the character’s “I” becomes fused, or one might say *confused*, with the poet’s (Olson 2002, xlvi, n. 23 with further bibliography). A few words about the plot will clarify why this is such a significant hermeneutic moment in the play. After Dicaeopolis fails to engage the Athenian assembly to discuss peace, he manages (in the fantastic way that only comedy can allow) to arrange for a personal truce that will enable him to return to the pleasures of the agrarian life he so enjoyed before the war. To the chorus of *Acharnians*, Dicaeopolis’ fellow countrymen, negotiating any kind of peace with the Spartans was an act of

treachery (*Ach.* 307–8 tr. Henderson 1998); and so they spar with each other early in the play until he offers to explain himself with his head on a butcher’s block. At 377–84, Dicaeopolis alludes to what at the time had been purported to be an actual historical incident in Aristophanes’ own life, as if it were his own experience, namely when the demagogue Cleon allegedly prosecuted the poet for maligning Athens in his last play (Sommerstein 1980, 2):

And in my case, I know what Cleon did to me because of last year’s comedy. He hauled me before Council, and slandered me, and tongue-lashed me with lies, and roared like the Cycloborus, and soaked me in abuse, so that I nearly died in a mephitic miasma of misadventure (*Ach.* 377–82 tr. Henderson 1998).³

Dicaeopolis complains about Cleon in these lines, mocking him as if the poet himself were speaking rather than merely a character named Dicaeopolis on stage. The stance is typical of what we expect from any satirist: the speaker *reacts* to a perceived affront from a position of practical inferiority (he has less power and agency than his target) but moral superiority (he claims the high ground and tries to expose his target’s wrongful behavior). In fact, to begin with, Dicaeopolis mentions Cleon here in order to exaggerate his abjection and to buy some time to prepare for his speech. Cleon was so mean to him, in other words, that he needs the extra time to dress himself up to look “most piteous” (384). This is clearly a “punch line” and the chorus is wise to his temporizing: “Why this dodging and scheming and contriving delays . . .?” (389) they ask; and the chorus leader chimes in to demand that Dicaeopolis “disclose his Sisyphean ruses” (391). We can sense the growing confusion here, playful as it obviously is: Who after all is really speaking to the chorus? To the audience? And what is the point of the allusion to Cleon? For Dicaeopolis, it affords him a joke that leads into the next episode, where he dashes off to visit Euripides and ask if he may borrow

from him some especially “pitiable” tragic costumes. For Aristophanes, though, the passage suggests that any time Cleon’s name comes up in the play, the audience should be reminded of their quarrel the previous year. How seriously, then, must the audience take the complaint about Cleon in this passage?

When Dicaeopolis returns from Euripides’ house (l. 480), decked out now in the beggar’s rags that Euripides’s tragic character Telephus had worn in his eponymous play of 438 BCE,⁴ he once again speaks as if he were channeling the poet himself:

Do not be aggrieved with me, gentlemen spectators, if, though a beggar, I am ready to address the Athenians about the city while making comedy [*trygôidian poiôn*]. For even comedy [*trygôidia*] knows about what’s right [*dikaion*]; and what I say will be shocking [*deina*], but right [*dikaion*]. This time Cleon will not accuse me of defaming the city in the presence of foreigners; for we are by ourselves; it’s the Lenaeon competition, and no foreigners are here yet; neither tribute nor troops have arrived from the allied cities (497–506).

The opening of Dicaeopolis’ speech before the Acharnians is, in fact, striking as a programmatic commentary on the practice of satire, both in terms of how satirists perform and what their goals are claimed to be. In this regard, Aristophanes’ decision to have Dicaeopolis dress up as the downtrodden Telephus is a brilliant stroke, since Telephus embodies the kinds of contradictions and paradoxes that satirists routinely cultivate; he adopts, that is, an outward posture of physical and material abjection, but he is actually a king, and he speaks here from a (self-appointed) position of intellectual and moral superiority.⁵ When Dicaeopolis mentions that he will be addressing “the Athenians,” even though technically he is speaking to the chorus of Acharnians, and that he is “making comedy,”⁶ there can be little question that

Dicaeopolis is functioning as a cipher for the poet himself. The allusion to Cleon in l. 502 confirms that the speech the audience is about to hear is supposed to be coming from the poet, not from a fictional character. The comic poet, in short, insinuates himself into the plot of the play, calls attention to the mechanics of comedy, and grandiosely proclaims its didactic force: “For even comedy knows about what’s right” (Taplin 1986; Mastronarde 1999–2000; Olson 2002, 202, l. 500).

This theme of comic didacticism recurs even more explicitly in the parabasis proper of *Acharnians*, immediately following Dicaeopolis’ speech. This section opens at l. 626 with the chorus leader announcing the shift (“Let’s doff our cloaks and essay the anapests,” 627),⁷ and proceeding to speak of “our producer” (628) and “our poet” (633). Here again we find a blending of voices, with the chorus leader speaking, but leaving no doubt that we are *supposed* to be hearing Aristophanes himself:

Never yet, since our producer first directed comic choruses, has he come forward to tell the audience he is clever [*dexios*]. But since he has been accused by his enemies before the Athenians, who are quick to make up their minds, as one who makes comedy [*kômôidei*] of our city and outrages [*kathubrizei*]⁸ the people, he now asks to defend himself before the Athenians, who are just as quick to change their minds. Our poet says that he deserves rich rewards from you, since he has stopped you from being deceived over much by foreigners’ speeches, from being cajoled by flattery, from being citizens of Simpletonia . . . so far has the renown of his boldness already spread that even the King [of Persia] in questioning the envoys from Sparta asked them first which side was stronger in ships, and then which side this poet profusely abused:⁹ because those folks, he said, have become far better and far likelier to win the war, with him as an adviser. . . . But listen,

don't you ever let him go, for he'll keep on making comedy of what's right [*komôidêsei ta dikaia*]. He promises to teach you many good things [*polla didaxein agatha*], so that you'll enjoy good fortune, and not to flatter or dangle bribes or bamboozle you, nor play the villain or butter you up, but to teach you only the best things [*ta beltista didaskôn*]. That said, let Cleon hatch his plots and build his traps against me¹⁰ to his utmost, for Good [*to eu*] and Right [*to dikaion*] will be my allies, and never will I be caught behaving toward the city as he does, a coward and a punk-ass (628–664 tr. Henderson 1998).

What are we to make of this? It is so easy and uncomplicated to take such a passage at face value; and, indeed, this is by and large how it has been read over the centuries (Olson 2002, xlvii and 236, ll. 628–29, offers a judicious discussion of the problems of a purely straightforward reading). I have underlined the phrases that to date have led readers to suppose that this in reality is the poet speaking directly to us, orchestrating a specific, straightforward response from the audience. We could summarize the position Aristophanes wants us to believe as follows: he is writing not just a comedy but satire—that is, comedy that relies on mockery and abuse of “real” (not just fictional) targets; he appears abject, like a Telephus-figure, but he is actually clever and intelligent; unlike the adversaries he attacks, this poet is daring and courageous; he possesses an almost heroic moral perspicacity and writes comedy, despite all the risks, in order to advise, in fact to teach, his audience. These are bombastic claims by any measure, suffused with obvious irony and self-mockery. But how does this affect the alleged didacticism of the passage? Does irony moot all seriousness of purpose here? The poet's exaggerated claims make the listener laugh because they obviously cannot be true; but if they are not true, what becomes of the didactic earnestness that is supposed to motivate the passage to begin with?

The fundamental instability of meaning at play here, so characteristic of satire,¹¹ has always troubled audiences and critics, who often go to great lengths to find seriousness in the satirist's claims despite their own awareness of the many literary forces that confound any kind of straightforward reading. This has been a particular problem in the history of scholarship on Aristophanes, especially because he is the only comic poet to survive in complete works from the most fetishized period of Greek history, known as the Classical period of the fifth century BCE, and because he refers so explicitly to historical events, contemporary politics, and real people. Even in more recent years, when scholars have been willing to concede that one can find little in the way of specific policy recommendations in Aristophanes' political satire, they have been reluctant (e.g., Olson 2002, xlix), nevertheless, to jettison entirely the notion that Aristophanes took himself seriously as a didactic force in Athens (see Foley 1988; Henderson 1990; Carey 1994). In virtually every case, however, little, if any, consideration is given to the fact that a didactic stance comes prepackaged, as it were, in satirical genres, and that before we draw conclusions about the veridical truth of statements made by the satirist's "I," we should first consider how such statements abet the *literary* goals of the work (Rosen 1988, 59–82, on Aristophanes' *Knights*).

To address this issue, we must return to the two basic questions we posed earlier for satire broadly conceived—the question of didactic content and the question of its effect on an audience—and see how they can be answered specifically in the case of *Acharnians*. The two questions seem simple enough, but are in fact implicated in each other in complex ways that go right to the heart of satiric meaning. Teaching, after all, implies some degree of ignorance on the part of the person who is supposed to be taught. Is the audience that the satirist attempts to instruct the same audience that he also wants to amuse? Is it this group that is ignorant *and* in need of the satirist's enlightenment? If not, then who? Or is his "real" audience—the one that is supposed to learn something from him—some other group than the one actually present

for his performance? But then, how could that group ever really learn anything from the satirist if they are not even present, and even less likely to be amused at anything he says if what is uttered is intended to censure them for ignorance or moral failings?¹² Or perhaps there is a middle ground, where the satirist takes to task the audience in front of him, but in such a way that no individual member will believe that he or she is the one being attacked or accused of ignorance, especially when the heavy substance of what the poet has to offer as instruction so often dissolves into “mere” light comedy. Another glance at our passages from *Acharnians* with these questions in mind will help us sort through some of these questions and reach a fuller understanding of a satirist’s didactic claims.

In particular, it will be useful to examine what the point of Dicaeopolis’ speech over the chopping block actually is. As we will recall, he begins this speech by assimilating the abject stance of a tragic hero (Telephus in rags) with the poet’s own voice and prepares his audience (the fictional audience of *Acharnians*, who make up the chorus, and the Athenians watching the play) by announcing that comedy speaks of justice and truth. Why did Aristophanes feel the need to make Dicaeopolis jump through so many hoops before finally making his point? The simple reason is because Dicaeopolis wants to advocate peace at a time when official policy was to prosecute a war; his plan to negotiate a truce with Sparta would obviously not be popular in such a political climate, as is borne out by the initial hostility he encounters from the chorus. But there are other reasons as well, not the least of which is that the great hostility that Aristophanes has stage-managed against Cleon allows him the comic pretense for sending Dicaeopolis on a visit to Euripides so he can borrow some of the latter’s tragic costumes. Several forces are at play here: first, Dicaeopolis, within the fiction of the plot, presents himself as having a serious case to plead, and goes to Euripides with this pretense of seriousness intact. It is *Aristophanes*, however, who is orchestrating this grand comic feat, where Dicaeopolis speaks seriously to a stern internal audience (the

chorus of Acharnians, portrayed as gullible and ignorant), yet at the same time (from Aristophanes' perspective) also comically to an external audience, that is, his Athenian spectators. But even this is not straightforward: for despite the ludicrous image of Dicaeopolis, dressed in rags, head on a chopping block, when he takes on the voice of the poet at the opening of his speech, even this external audience is being urged to assimilate itself to the internal audience, that is, by listening to Dicaeopolis, as if he had something substantive to say. Differently put, if Dicaeopolis is to be taken seriously by his audience within the parameters of the play's fiction, it is because when Aristophanes melds his own voice with Dicaeopolis', he is also fusing the two imagined audiences into one for the purposes of the speech.

The effect of this artifice is to urge the Athenian spectators to "take seriously," at least momentarily, the didacticism of the speech Dicaeopolis is about to make: "Dicaeopolis is serious; I am Dicaeopolis; therefore, you should heed what we both (character *and* poet) say" (Foley 1988; Olson 2002, xlvi). But here is the problem: How seriously can we even take the very notion of Aristophanes urging his audience to take "him" seriously when the notion itself derives from the conventional rhetoric of satire? For better or worse, no one can answer this question, since satire never allows an audience to penetrate fully its ironizing, to segregate the laughter it strives for from the truth it lays claims to. We see this problem even in our own time when we have fuller access to the nonliterary, nonaestheticized aspects of a satirist's life than we do for an ancient satirist. But not even the "candid interview" with a satirist conducted today by a probing interlocutor (as we will discuss in a moment with Jon Stewart) will ever really clarify what is pretense and what is truth, or what meaning, in the end, an audience is supposed to take away from a satirical performance. Satirists may make all sorts of claims about what they are up to, and even try to lay out a specific didactic program or agenda for their work, insisting, even, that they are *this time* representing truthfully—"cross my heart"—nothing but what is really behind their work. Yet as soon as we are back in the performa-

tive world of the satirist, we find ourselves viewing a face-off between the performative “I” and the “I” of the satirist “off-camera,” as it were: both “I”s insisting in unison that each is telling the “real” truth. We are left with no criteria by which to judge between them. I would liken this dynamic, in fact, to a Möbius strip: what looks like a strip with two sides in fact has only one, moving around and around perpetually with no boundary. Truth blends into fiction blends into truth; the humorous blends into the serious blends into the humorous. The two sides of the strip can never be distinguished from, or compared to, one another, at any particular point.

This analogy returns us to the relationship between content and audience in Dicaeopolis’ speech, where the various audiences we have identified also blend into one another, and the content oscillates throughout between the serious and humorous. The thrust of Dicaeopolis’ speech is that the Spartans should not be blamed for the start of the Peloponnesian war, when it was the Athenians who started it all, by enacting the so-called Megarian decree (432 BCE), thereby inflicting economic sanctions against Megara, a Spartan ally.¹³ Dicaeopolis brings up this topic soberly enough:

Why do we blame the Spartans for [the start of the war]?
For it was men of ours—I do not say the city, remember
that, I do not say the city—but some trouble-making excuses
for men, misminted, worthless, brummagem, and foreign-
made, who began denouncing the Megarians’ little cloaks. . .
(514–19 tr. Henderson 1998).

But the narrative immediately transforms itself into a picaresque tale of drunken parties and interstate abduction:

But then some tipsy cottabus-playing [a drinking-game]
youths went to Megara and kidnapped the whore Simaetha.
And then the Megarians, garlic-stung by their distress, in

retaliation stole a couple of Aspasia's whores, and from that the onset of war broke forth upon all the Greeks: from three sluts! And then in wrath Pericles, that Olympian, did lighten and thunder and stir up Greece, and started making laws worded like drinking songs. . . (524–33 tr. Henderson 1998).

The comic aspects of this passage are obvious, of course, and often discussed,¹⁴ but does it, or rather, *must* it, have any purpose beyond that? Dicaeopolis/Aristophanes here is the bold comic poet, telling it like it is, setting the record straight—and yet, does he enlighten anyone here about anything? If we imagine someone in the audience who refused to laugh at this passage, then Aristophanes has failed in that instance—both as a comic poet and as a teacher. And what of the alternative: the audience member who laughs away at this little flight of fancy? He knows it is all made up, but does it reflect some deeper, hidden truth? Does Aristophanes expect this spectator to change his opinion about politics, about Spartans, about the actual, historical causes of the war? In short, what does the audience *know* after Dicaeopolis' speech that they did not know before?

Once again, we are confronted with another of the great paradoxes of satire that professes to enlighten an audience, namely, an inherent ambiguity, even confusion, about the identity of the satirist's intended audience. Satirists can never really be successful at censuring, entertaining, and instructing—the three defining pretenses of satire—the *same* group of people. Satirical targets implicitly need to be taught, after all, but they will not relish being attacked, and so will not be amused, nor will they likely appreciate the satirist's art. It is also quite unlikely that they would change their mind or behavior as a result of the satirist's censure. Those who take pleasure in the comedy of a satirical performance, even if in fact they deserve the satirist's censure, will never admit as much, and by definition (that is, insofar as they are sympathetic to the satirist's performance) will remove them-

selves from the crosshairs of the satirist's telescopic aim. Satirists often complain that people in the audience are reluctant to see themselves as targets deserving of blame (Elliot 1962, 255) but the complaint in itself is a paradox, since anyone who *did* see themselves as being seriously attacked by the satirist would no longer will be among those "enjoying" the satirist's antics. The satirist would, in this case, lose his audience. Aristophanes shrewdly deploys Dicaeopolis' speech in *Acharnians* in a manner that suggests he was fully aware of all these paradoxes, judging from the way he creates two actual audiences to play the different roles we have articulated. The internal audience of *Acharnians* is imagined to be the one who should benefit from Dicaeopolis' instruction, but it is not necessary for that audience to see Dicaeopolis as artist or comedian. Of course, Aristophanes himself is playing not to the Acharnians but to the Athenian spectators, the audience in the theater, made up of real people who *are* expected to admire his censure of the Acharnians. Implicit in the satire of the hot-headed Acharnians is the remote possibility that there are at least some Athenians who may consider themselves to be as benighted as the Acharnians are supposed to be in the play. But those Athenians are only imaginary, only hypothetically lurking in the background as citizens who, like the chorus of Acharnians, need also to be taught "what is right." Yet, *those* Athenians would be *antagonists*, not fans, of satire—hardly a group that Aristophanes could have hoped to charm with his comedy.¹⁵

We have focused so far on the problem of satiric "teaching" in an exemplary author who stands at the very beginning of a long tradition of comedy and satire that could take many forms in many literary genres and performative contexts. Even within Greco-Roman culture, there were dozens of other authors who either conceptualized themselves as satirists¹⁶ or incorporated satirical elements into their works (Rosen 2007, 3–42). Because satire is by nature so tied to historical and personal particularities, and because, as we have seen, satirists must always act as if they were responding to the world with an urgency genuine enough to bypass the demands of the genre, every satirical

work is at some level *sui generis*, different from every other one of its kind, in detail as also in the *raison d'être* offered by the author. Despite all these idiosyncrasies and contingencies, however, there remains—across all genres and periods—the singular and persistent conundrum posed by the satire's didactic premise, compounded by all the problems of meaning that flow from this: the inscrutability of authorial claims; the constant tension between postures of sincerity and comedy; and the fundamental impossibility, in the end, of anything resembling actual instruction for the people who are supposed by the satirist to need it most. To these dilemmas I would add another, rarely articulated, but one that suffuses our responses to satire even today—namely, the fear of admitting that satire may teach nothing, and the corresponding guilt over the possibility that all we are left with is malicious, utterly “unedi-fying” laughter.

WE MAY GET A SENSE OF JUST HOW PERSISTENT—AND CONSISTENT—such issues are by moving from antiquity to our own time, to some examples of satire strikingly similar in their dynamics to Aristophanes' *Acharnians*. We begin with a passage from Lenny Bruce, whose reputation as one of the twentieth century's most noteworthy satirists has been well established. Bruce was active in America in the 1950s and 1960s, mostly as a stand-up comic, who quickly became a weath-ervane for many of the social controversies that characterized this period, including, above all in his case, questions of free speech. Not only did Bruce freely incorporate obscenity into his act, but he often combined his then-scandalous language with equally sensitive topics, such as sex and religion. The combination was more than mainstream America at the time could bear, and his arrest in 1961 in San Francisco on obscenity charges was the first in a series of legal skirmishes that came to preoccupy his life and his act (Kaufman 1997, 98; Collins and Skover 2002, 317–49; Nachman 2003, 412–13). As a satirist, Bruce's act was implicitly, and occasionally explicitly, didactic;¹⁷ but, like most satirists, he was also cagey and ironic about the relationship between

his moral stances and his craft as a comedian. Two of his most famous bon mots sum this up: “The role of a comedian is to make the audience laugh, at a minimum of once every fifteen seconds”; and “The ‘what should be’ never did exist, but people keep trying to live up to it. There is no ‘what should be,’ there is only what is.” Sentiments of the sort, which in isolation might suggest a disavowal of a satirist’s didactic intentions or efficacy,¹⁸ must be juxtaposed with the didactic, self-righteous tone of his acts, however and, in his final years, with his often tediously pedagogical rants about his legal troubles as well.

Bruce’s problems with the law offer an appropriate entrée into the passage (or perhaps we should say schtick) we will examine more closely below, for it is a trope that immediately links him with Aristophanes and highlights the pose of abjection that both satirists share. We will recall that Aristophanes alludes twice in *Acharnians* to a prosecution brought against him by the demagogue Cleon the year before its production. Bruce’s act, published in transcript form as “What is Obscene?” (Cohen 1967, 281–86) addresses, as its title shows, one of his favorite meta-topics ensconced at the root of all his woes: not only, like Aristophanes, does Bruce use obscenity in his act, but he also theorizes it as a necessary ingredient to achieve his satiric goals. Aristophanes claimed he was prosecuted by Cleon for speech that was too frank (if not obscene) in its criticism of Athens, and the charge clearly stung him as much as Bruce was stung by his own arrests. But what is even more interesting than the historical realities of their respective legal troubles is how each of them incorporated the topic into his self-conception as professional comedian. For Aristophanes, Cleon represented an authority wielding power over him, a threat to his freedom of expression (Sommerstein 2004). Comedy, for him, as we saw, sees clearly what is good and right, and the comedian must be bold enough to relate this “truth,” no matter what opposition he imagines mounted against him. Let us compare this attitude to Bruce:

“What Is Obscene?”

Right now there’s some bullshit with obscenity. There’s an obscenity circus that’s been going on now for about five years. And I really can’t believe that it’s not settled.

...

Now, the state really has given me an excellent education—you know, continual prosecution and defense. Now, what is obscene?—I’ll hip you to something—it’s the prurient interest. If I do a show about eating garbage or dead children, or necrophilia and you say “That’s the most disgusting—

No, that’s not obscene. It’s disgusting, distasteful—but not obscene. . . .

The rest of the act plays on this distinction between the disgusting and the obscene in somewhat predictable, but amusing ways—

If I say, “shit in your fist and squeeze it!” Not obscene for two reasons.

One, because of a new ruling in the Supreme Court that if it describes narcotics, the word shit is not obscene. In other words, if you shit in your pants and smoke it—you’re cool. That’s in the picture *The Connection*.

And also, because to be obscene, I must stimulate you sexually. That’s why obscene is the prurient interest. If I get you horny. That’s it.

The obvious point throughout is to expose what Bruce sees as the absurdity and hypocrisy of laws that allow the same words to be deemed legal or illegal according to what seem to be capricious criteria. This is just not clear thinking, Bruce implies—it makes no sense to deem some words acceptable in one context but illegal in another, especially when the acceptable context (“the disgusting”) is perceived

to be as negative as the criminal one (“the obscene”). This is a variation on a theme that he and his supporters repeated time and again in court, one that he then worked into his act, continually playing out a scene not unlike Dicaeopolis’ appeal to the Acharnians to come to their senses, to think rationally about their attitudes and to renounce their hypocrisies, in short, to *learn* from his own character and arguments.

Once again, we find the same confounding of audiences, targets, and authorial posturings that we saw in *Acharnians*. Who, after all, is supposed to benefit from Bruce’s rants? To be sure, not the people who paid to see his act at a comedy club and walked in expecting to be amused. Rather, the beneficiaries of his wit are people who, in their capacity as satirical targets, would never dream of coming to see his act; or if they did, would resist any “instruction” he claimed to be offering them.¹⁹ Just how critical it is for satirists to keep straight the differences between their audiences is revealed by Bruce’s act in his final months, when he seemed to misplace the didactic pretense, treating the audience he wanted to entertain as if they were the ones he felt a need to instruct. Offstage he became increasingly obsessed with US constitutional law and in particular with the First Amendment (on free speech). He brought this obsession to his act. The sad result was an act that came across as self-indulgent, even pitiable, and hardly funny at all (Kaufman 1997, 111–12; Collins and Skover 2002: 333–36). These rants generated a sense that this was not a comedy show, but an excuse for preaching and moralizing by a real human being, made of flesh and blood, working out real problems, with real anger.²⁰ The abjection was no longer ironized; it was real, and desperate; and in the absence of irony, there was little humor and even less pleasure left for the audience who were there to be entertained. In place of satire’s playful faux didacticism, inspired by the usual stance of boldness and superiority, here one found real didacticism driven by the humorless self-pity of despair and defeat.

Perhaps the chief lesson of Lenny Bruce’s artistic decline was that the comedic elements of satire really *do* matter, and far outweigh what

we might call “content.” This may seem an almost self-evident statement, but the fact is that when satirists are performing in full throttle, their position is the opposite: the last thing they are trying to do—and this is especially the case with political satire—is to subordinate content to humor. We are left, then, with an intractably disingenuous stance: satirists will claim that *what* they say matters more than anything else, but tacitly understand that *how* they say it is, in fact, even more critical. Satirical efficacy ends with laughter rather than persuasion or education, even if satirists craft their work as if the opposite is the case.

I BRING THIS ESSAY TO A CONCLUSION BY CIRCLING BACK TO JON Stewart, because the recent controversies surrounding his particular type of political comedy draw together beautifully the various threads we have pulled apart in other satirists. What the various controversies show, in fact, is how political satire never fails to ruffle feathers among those who perceive themselves to be its targets, despite the obvious fact that no one would ever actually mistake a satirist for a serious political analyst. Stewart has blurred this distinction more than most other satirists, making it especially difficult at times for audiences to separate his comedic from his real-life persona. This problem has confounded many of his targets, especially the commentators on the type of “serious” news shows that he mimics in his own, the *Daily Show*. The number of times that Stewart has been called to account for himself as a guest on such news shows is striking, a testament both to Stewart’s success as a satirist—his act really has roused his targets—and to the media’s fascination with his huge popularity. That Stewart seems completely at ease appearing on these shows, out of character and vulnerable to all the forces that he, like all satirists before him, constantly rails against, is perfectly in keeping with his act. He can retain the role of the little guy against the big power and react to what he perceives as unjust or hypocritical positions in his interlocutor.

A recent interview with Stewart, conducted by Fox News anchor Chris Wallace in June 2011, illustrates this clearly. Moments such as these are invaluable especially because they allow Stewart to comment

on the *ars satirica* in a way that would be difficult to pull off while in the middle of an act on his show. Throughout the entire interview, Wallace addresses a question that others have posed to Stewart as well: How can he claim not to craft his satire from a position of ideology and partisanship when all indications from the content itself would seem to suggest the opposite? The classic problem rears its head again: surely Aristophanes hated Cleon, hated his policies, and disapproved of the Athenian war “surge” of the 420s. Surely Jon Stewart must be aligning himself with the Democratic party in his relentless attacks on Republican politicians. On the face of it, these are certainly not unreasonable questions to ask. Yet Stewart continually maintains that he is neither partisan nor an ideologue. Consider this selection of exchanges:

WALLACE: Honestly, I think you want to be a political player.

STEWART: You are wrong. You’re dead wrong. I appreciate what you’re saying. Do I want my voice heard? Do I want my voice heard? Absolutely. That’s why I got into comedy. That’s why I do what I do.

...

STEWART: Am I Edward R. Murrow or am I Mark Twain? At my highest aspiration?

WALLACE: Oh, of that, of those two? Mark Twain.

STEWART: Right.

WALLACE: But Mark Twain had a lot of political impact.

STEWART: But was that his main thrust? Am I an activist in your mind, an ideological partisan activist?

WALLACE: Yeah.

STEWART: OK. Then I disagree with you. I absolutely disagree with you that that’s the case.

...

STEWART: You can’t understand, because of the world you live in, that there is not a designed ideological agenda on my part to affect partisan change because that’s the soup

you swim in. And I appreciate that. And I understand it. It reminds me of, you know—you know, in ideological regimes. They can't understand that there is free media other places, because they receive marching orders. . . .

. . .

WALLACE: I think your agenda is more out there, and you're pushing more of an agenda than you pretend to.

STEWART: I disagree with you. I think that I'm pushing comedy and my ideological agenda informs it, at all times. Now, that agenda or my ideology is at times liberal, at times can lean more conservative, but it's about absurdity. It's about absurdity and it's about corruption. And that is the agenda that we push. It is an anti-corruption, anti-lack of authenticity, anti-contrivance, and if I see that more in one area than I do in another, well then I will defend every single thing that we put on that show. And I'm not dodging you in any way by suggesting that our main thrust is comedic.

. . .

STEWART: . . . But I'd like to know what I'm doing that's really different than what you've seen previously from satirical comedians that work in the political milieu. What is different about it that makes you so perplexed?

As this conversation makes clear, both parties end up at an impasse. Stewart correctly emphasizes that what drives him is comedy, and this allows him almost unlimited license when it comes to representational truth. But he waffles on the question of a personal agenda, conceding that his comedy is necessarily informed by his own beliefs and ideologies, and that he does want his "voice to be heard," but then reiterating that this does not add up in his mind to activism or partisanship because he is first and foremost concerned with the success of his work as comedy. The agenda he would claim, "anti-corruption,

anti-lack of authenticity, anti-contrivance,” turns out not really to be an “agenda” in his mind, it seems, because—and here we have another typical satirical stance—*any* sensible person would want a world without corruption and false consciousness! Wallace regards this position as disingenuous, but he also seems unable to find anything funny in the clips from Stewart’s act that Wallace shows throughout the interview. Wallace thus affirms his role as target—mainstream, ideologically rigid, and largely humorless—while Stewart affirms his role as the irritating gadfly. In fact, the last thing anyone would want as a consequence of this interview is a meeting of the minds. For if that were to happen, one of them would have had to relinquish the role for which they have become celebrated, and which audiences watching the interview were expecting them to play. And that would have meant a defeat that neither side is programmed to entertain.

Aristophanes, Lenny Bruce, and, in our own time, Jon Stewart illustrate in exemplary ways that satire is a mode of irresolvable paradoxes and unstable meaning. Many have tried to resolve these paradoxes by explaining a satirist’s self-contradictory or counterintuitive statements as ironic and, thus, humorous. Others regard themselves as part of a knowing audience who believe they can penetrate whatever satirical masks or personae they encounter and somehow make their way to a simple authorial truth. The overarching problem in both instances, however, is that even if we could somehow reach the point where we felt that we had understood what the satirist really means, we can never escape the possibility that the various shifts and parries that at long last take us there exist strictly for their comic effect, and not, in fact, for any didactic purpose that may be claimed by the author. Authors and critics are fond of characterizing satire as a mode that pleasantly tempers the serious and censorious with comedy, and makes palatable what would otherwise be aggressive, confrontational discourse. But we only have the satirist’s word for this, and the satirist, as we have seen, has a job to do—to make an audience laugh—a task that can be carried out easily without recourse to any

kind of truth, veridical or not. Yet at the same time, the satirist wants the audience to think they are getting *only* veridical truth, a final reckoning that sets the world straight; so it is easy to see why most critics and theorists are unwilling to relinquish completely the notion that they have at least *some* access to this “real” satirist, however much lip service they may pay to an appreciation of paradox and elusiveness. The view I have been urging is perhaps bleaker—if one really wants to believe that satire can teach us anything—but liberating nonetheless in its construal of all the moral and didactic claims of satire not merely as tropes and stances, but also puzzles, almost taunts, that can never offer any of the stable meanings satire itself lays claims to. We may well take pleasure in the pure comedy of satire, but whatever meaning we might derive from that pleasure will nearly always be different from the meaning that the satirist insists we should take away from the work.

NOTES

1. From White’s preface to Croiset (1909, xiii, cited by Olson 2010, 45, n.12), who makes a similar point.
2. By “success” I mean that the author or performer has succeeded specifically in entertaining an audience. The problem with the didactic claims of satire is that success implies that the audience has “learned” that which the work purports to “teach.” But so little actual “teaching” in the end occurs in satire, as we will see in more detail, that it becomes almost meaningless to measure the success of a satirical work by how well it instructs. Even if one takes some solace in the nebulous notion that satire can “raise one’s awareness of the human condition” or the like, this may, indeed, be obliquely “didactic,” but it is not the didaxis that the work itself *claims* to be interested in.
3. Subsequent translations of *Acharnians* in this essay are taken from Henderson (1998), with occasional modifications.
4. Telephus was the king of Mysia, south of ancient Troy. The Greeks attacked Mysia by mistake, thinking it was Troy, and Telephus was

wounded by Achilles during the encounter. When his wound failed to heal, an oracle told him that only the person who had wounded him could also heal him. So he went to Argos, where the Greek leaders had gathered, in order to find Achilles. Achilles healed him, and he subsequently helped the Greeks in their expedition to Troy. Euripides had produced a play called *Telephus* in 438 BCE (which survives only in fragments; details at MacDowell [1995, 53–58; Olson [2002, liv–lxi]), in which Telephus had disguised himself in the rags of a beggar as a safety precaution.

5. With satirists, this outwardly abject self-presentation can take many forms, though usually it implies some sort of physical or material weakness. See, for example, the Roman satirist Juvenal's (first century CE) self-presentation in several satires (e.g., 1, 5, 11), where he complains of poverty while censuring gluttons and misers. Such stances are comical and ironic, of course, since they always imply (like Telephus' royal status) a "true," inwardly superior character (see also Rosen [2007, 243–68]).
6. Dicaeopolis here uses the phrase *trygôidian poiôn*, "making trygedy" a pun on the words "tragedy" (*tragôidia*) and *tryx*, the word for "wine lees"; that is, comedy is like a wine-inflected version of tragedy—clearly a bid (if tongue-in-cheek) for the audience to regard comedy as "seriously" as it would tragedy (Olson 2002, 200–201).
7. Aristophanic parabases were often (though not always—e.g., the parabasis of *Clouds*) delivered in the anapaestic meter, so this line signals that the parabasis is about to begin. (The anapaest is a metrical foot consisting of two short syllables followed by a long).
8. Insofar as the verb *kathubrizei* ("outrage" or "insult") is here linked with the practice of comedy (*kômôidei*), this is a kind of "insult" that comic poets produce, which is to say, what comic writers do when they satirize.
9. I follow Henderson's translation of l. 649, *eipoi kaka polla* (lit., "speak lots of bad things about") here, but the phrase could just as easily be translated as "satirized profusely."

10. Note that the chorus leader by now has given up the pretense that he is speaking “in character” as an actor in a play who advocates on behalf of the poet, and shifts to the first person singular, where “me” means here “me, Aristophanes, who has written this play.”
11. Linda Hutcheon’s remarks about irony in particular (Hutcheon 1994, 56) apply equally well to satire more generally: “it brings people together and drives them apart. Yet, however plural these functions, we still seem to want to call the thing itself by a single name: irony. . . . Retaining this complexity is important because edge is the primary distinguishing feature of irony as a rhetorical and structural strategy, no matter how protean its actual manifestations.” Satire is even more “edgy” than many forms of irony, I would argue, since it so often claims to be striving to be the opposite: clear, truthful, edifying, simple.
12. Freud (1905 [2002], 95) described a similar triangulation at work in the case of what he called “tendentious” jokes, jokes intended to have an effect—usually mocking, satirical, often obscene or bawdy, jokes: “In general the tendentious joke requires three persons: apart from the one who is telling the joke, it needs a second person who is taken as the object of the hostile or sexual aggression, and a third in whom the joke’s intention of producing pleasure is fulfilled. . . . [T]he person who tells the joke is not the one who laughs at it and so enjoys the pleasure it produces, but the inactive listener.”
13. Aristophanes is, in fact, our main historical source for the Megarian decree (Olson 2002, xxxiii–xxxv).
14. The passage combines a parody of Homeric mythologizing about the origins of the Trojan war (the abduction of Helen by Paris) and historiographical parody of Aristophanes’ contemporary, Herodotus (Olson 2002, lii–liv; Wright 2007).
15. It is worth remembering that Aristophanes’ plays were performed as part of a competition at the Athenian dramatic festivals. Each comic poet wanted to win first prize at the event, so it stands to reason that

he would want to impress at least the judges, if not the majority of the other spectators.

16. In some cases, *avant la lettre*, since the term “satire” was not available until the “invention” of Roman satire (Coffey 1976, 11–23).
17. Note his praise for the comedian Steve Allen: “Of all the comedians I have ever met, Steve Allen is not only the most literate, but also the most moral. He not only talks about society’s problems, but he *does* things about them. He’s a good person, without being all sugar and showbiz, and I really dig him for that” (Bruce 1992, 156). It seems reasonable to infer from this statement that Bruce strove to emulate in his own work these qualities that he so admired in Allen.
18. One might say that this statement is either ironic or simply confused. The guiding premise of all satire, as we have seen, is that something is not “as it should be,” and it takes a satirist to set the world straight. To make sense of Bruce’s remark here, we might say that it acknowledges the very argument of this essay: didacticism is what drives satire, both for the satirist and the audience, but in the end, it amounts to little more than wishful thinking.
19. See Limon (2000, 13) speaking of Lenny Bruce’s stand-up act: “It is hard to fathom how a stand-up performance can be outrageous, that is to say etymologically *outré*, outside the circle. In stand-up as opposed to all other modes of entertainment, there is only the circle. . . . Even in the case of Lenny Bruce, the outrageous comedian par excellence, the most that can be granted is that outrage is the aura of the circulating comedy.”
20. Gerald Nachman (2003, 415) writes: “The more he was persecuted, the more . . . he adopted a savior complex. . . . He began to dress the part of the nightclub evangelist. . . . In 1964 the preacher in Bruce had overtaken the comedian, and he was preaching his case to the choir. Any insights got all snarled up in his battles, or in his semantic soliloquies on why *toilet* is thought of as a dirty word when toilets are not living things.”

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