

12-2008

A Mock Rhetoric: The Use of Satire in First-Year Composition

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**A MOCK RHETORIC:
THE USE OF SATIRE IN FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION**

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Michael James Sobiech

December 2008

**A MOCK RHETORIC:
THE USE OF SATIRE IN FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION**

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

“Of the making of books there is no end, and much study is wearisome to the flesh.”

--King Solomon, *Ecclesiastes*

As the number of people who have helped me is great, and since this might be the only “book” I ever publish, this acknowledgement page cannot be brief.

It has been my good fortune to write this thesis with the help of an excellent group of committed scholars, all of whom are great sources of encouragement: Jane Fife, Deborah Logan, Joe Hardin, and Dale Rigby—and a special thanks to Dr. Rigby for all his work as my chair. Thank you all—we’re done!

For my graduate assistantship, I am thankful to Potter College, Karin Schneider, head of the English Department, and Elizabeth Oakes, Graduate Advisor.

Throughout my time as a student, I have been fortunate to learn from first-rate teachers—my thanks to Wes Berry, Niko Endres, Jane Fife, John Hagaman, Joe Hardin, David LeNoir, Deborah Logan, Elizabeth Oakes, Jane Olmsted, Dale Rigby, Walker Rutledge, and Elizabeth Weston. Additionally, several other faculty members have provided valuable help along the way: Fabian Alvarez, Anna Combs, Katherine Green, Marie Guthrie, Ted Hovet, Tom Hunley, Angie Jones, Russell Moore, Alex Poole, and Cathy Ware.

Thank you to Tomitha Blair, Kimberly Boswell, and the constantly changing but always excellent English Department student workers.

Without the resources of the Helms-Craven Library, this thesis could not have been written; and in particular, I would like to thank Selina Langford, for many an interlibrary loan.

I would like to thank the Kentucky Library, the Yeager Scholarship Committee—Nancy Baird, Cindy Jones, Michael Ann Williams—and the College Heights Foundation for their generous underwriting of the research that forms the appendix to this thesis.

(And my thanks to John Milton for the chapter titles.)

For space reasons I will not list them all, but there are several friends that I must thank: Kevin & Lisa Autry, Wes Berry, Todd Chappell, Andrew Crenshaw, Ryan Hall, Daniel Gordon, James Jackson, David Kerr, Tara Koger, the Logans, David & Ann Moses, Brad Pennington, Jeanne Sokolowski, Chuck Williamson, and Dawn Winters.

Finally, I would like to thank my family: Steve, Kathleen, Helen, Joseph, and John Paul Sobiech; Mary Ann, Brad, Drew and Erin Barrett; Paul, Karin (McGowan), Anya, Eli, Ian, and Mila Sobiech. But I would like to especially thank my parents, Andrew and Margaret Sobiech. The last movie that I watched with my dad was a comedy; and even though breathing for him was difficult, he laughed. My life-long thanks to my dad and mom for raising all four of us—Steve, Mary Ann, Paul, and me—in a home filled with faith, love, and laughter.

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December 2008

83 Pages

Directed by: Dale Rigby, Jane Fife, and Deborah Logan

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On the eve of the Second World War, high school English teacher Leon Ormond writes about a minor skirmish he has with a history teacher over the pedagogical usefulness of wit. After telling her about his book, *Laugh and Learn: The Art of Teaching with Humor*, she tells him, “Only morons laugh.” Ormond goes on to describe her as one who exhibits “a countenance curiously reminiscent of an ancient Greek tragic mask”—she was “an exemplary member of the Cult of Pedagogic Pallbearers.”

Although educators, historically, have often frowned upon humor, humorous writing—especially satirical writing—helps students understand the fundamentals of rhetoric and composition in a way that is both engaging and intellectually demanding. While often misunderstood within the larger culture, and perhaps equally underused in academic culture, satiric writing can be a creative and critical heuristic for the learning and practice of various rhetorical principles in the introductory composition classroom, an alternate discourse that can teach fundamental communication concepts while challenging mainstream thinking.

Chapter one explores various historical, theoretical, and pedagogical concerns about the use of humor. Chapter two outlines a positive case for the inclusion of satiric writing in college composition. Chapter three describes my own efforts at teaching satire

in four introductory composition classes at Western Kentucky University. An appendix examines the difficult relationship between the satiric genre and the once dominant school of literary criticism known as New Criticism, focusing on New Critic Robert Penn Warren's work with seventeenth-century satirist, John Marston.

Preface

“Why not let the research material itself help determine the style of its presentation?”

--Winston Weathers

Like other researchers on humor, I face a dilemma: does a work analyzing humor need to be funny? To complicate matters, since I am arguing for including humorous satiric writing in academic composition, should form follow function and this thesis not only be amusing but also satiric? I raise these questions at the beginning because my answers will affect your reading.

Writers about humor are not united about whether their work needs to be amusing. At the beginning of his overview of different academic disciplines' perspectives on humor, *Blind Men and Elephants* (1995), Arthur Asa Berger acknowledges that “[s]ome scholarly work on humor makes a point of not being funny” (xi). Indeed, as some have argued, writers on tragedy are not expected to make their scholarly tomes tragic, so why should those who explore comedy be compelled to make their work comic? However, Berger suggests that an “unfunny book about humor is an oxymoron.” Proponents of both views make valid points, but I have opted to follow in Berger’s path. Since humor can be an intellectually challenging and engaging element of communication, including academic communication, I am including a humorous voice to this thesis.

In considering the possible use of a satiric style in a work on satire, I find it noteworthy that the Wayne C. Booth could not resist incorporating irony when he wrote *A Rhetoric of Irony* (1974). The George M. Pullman Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus in English ends his preface with this “sentence”: “Whatever faults remain can thus be traced, by any diligent reader, to the intervention or oversight of someone without

whose” (xiv). Like Booth, I will at times make use of my subject matter—the creative and critical humor of satire—in my writing.

My decisions to include a humorous and satiric voice are in keeping with the field of rhetoric and composition’s ongoing, evolving conversation about alternate discourse in society and in the academy. “Alternate discourse” is a broad concept, describing a variety of concerns in modern English studies, ranging from the desire to include historically marginalized voices to that of including currently marginalized forms: one who argues for alternate discourse might argue for the inclusion of female voices to a largely male canon, or he or she might argue for the place of personal narrative in traditionally impersonal genres. Since the use of satiric writing in first-year composition is outside the mainstream of typical writing assignments, I am contending in this thesis for an alternate discourse. And as I will be incorporating some less traditional language and styles, such as humor, satire, sarcasm, personal voice, and narrative, this thesis itself will be, on occasion, an example of alternative discourse; in light of how I ask my students to take the risk of learning by writing outside our comfort zone, perhaps it is only fair that I attempt the same.

But I write in an alternative style in favor of an alternative genre not to undercut scholarship but to advance it. As Patricia Bizzell states in explaining the growing appeal and acceptance of alternative discourse, “these new, alternative or mixed discourse forms are gaining ground because they allow their practitioners to do intellectual work in ways they could not if confined to traditional academic discourse” (*Alt Dis* 3). I argue for satiric writing not because all traditional models are inadequate and should be replaced; I argue for this alternative because it provides a useful approach for educators who are

striving to connect 21st century students to the academy. I argue for this alternative because satiric writing can help students become critical and creative thinkers, readers, and writers—goals shared by all, in and out of the mainstream. I argue for humorous satire because humor itself offers a powerful means of examining the belief systems of our world and our selves. And I argue for this alternative because in addition to teaching fundamental rhetorical strategies, satire opens our eyes to significant problems that, through ridicule, we may strive to reform.

**The Tempter, all impassion'd, thus began:
An Introduction**

*There is no more dangerous symptom than a temptation to write about wit and humor.
It indicates the total loss of both.*
--George Bernard Shaw

The email belonged in the trash, but there it lay in my inbox, forwarded to me by an older friend of mine, prone to sending non-scrutinized, non-critiqued email forwards. This one had the non-partisan subject line, “Fwd: Fw: Fwd: Obama Explains National Anthem Stance.” After scrolling down through one set of 20 email addresses, then two “Note: forwarded message attached,” then another set of 34 addresses, followed by one more “Note: forwarded message attached,” then (in a slight change of phrasing to keep things fresh) one “Forwarded Message Attachment,” followed by two more email addresses, came the subtle heading: “NEED I SAY ANYTHING MORE!!!” The long scrolled for—and forwarded—message finally comes into sight. And how did Senator Obama, who was caught in the act (or the non-act), justify his not placing his right hand over his heart while the national anthem was played?

‘As I’ve said about the flag pin, I don’t want to be perceived as taking sides,’ Obama said. ‘There are a lot of people in the world to whom the American flag is a symbol of oppression. And the anthem itself conveys a war-like message. You know, the bombs bursting in air and all. It should be swapped for something less parochial and less bellicose. I like the song ‘I’d Like to Teach the World to Sing.’ If that were our anthem, then I might salute it.’

The originator of this email explanation—who courageously goes by the near anonymous acronym of “JAK”—then eloquently comments, “WHAAAAAAT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” He or she

or they then state, “Yes, ladies and gentlemen, this could possibly be our next president. I, for once, am speechless.” But a quick check at snopes.com, a popular website for debunking a (world wide) web of lies, revealed that the speech for which our unknown defender of truth is speechless turns out to be specious; to use the vernacular, JAK does not know jack about Barack because the quote does not come from the Democratic senator from Illinois but from *The Arizona Conservative* columnist, John Semmens—a satirist.

*Strange! that a Man who has enough wit to write a Satire
should have folly enough to publish it.*
--Benjamin Franklin, *Poor Richard's Almanac*

Take pity on the one who takes pity on none: the satirist. Pity him—and by “him” I do not mean to exclude “her”; I mean to draw attention for a moment to the fact that much of canonical satire was written by him and not by her, and often he wrote at her expense, although hopefully that has changed and is changing for him and her—and with that said, pity him or her, for according to some, he or she is a most contemptible individual. Unlike Virginians or sailors (or insert bumper sticker name of one’s choice here), satirists do not make better lovers; as analyzed by the crime-writing, satirizing, Anglican-then-Catholic priest Ronald A. Knox, “The impulse to write satire usually comes from disappointment – and because many satirists have been disappointed in love, they have satirized women” (qtd. in Feinberg *Satirist* 47). In his nearly encyclopedic *The Satirist: His Temperament, Motivation, and Influence*, Iowa State’s Leonard Feinberg describes a study of satirists by the Dutch scholar, W. A. Pannenburg, who peppers his

Satiric Writers: Character and Temperament with black and white charts measuring the abstract qualities, vices and virtues, of satirists and non-satirists. If the percentages listed on one table are true then a satirist is likely to be hard to reconcile (64%), shy (71%), vehement (71%), sensitive (86%), suspicious (86%), and 100% touchy (59). Although Feinberg himself discounts Pannenberg's charts—"his categories are arbitrary and the statistics questionable"—he will end his own analysis admitting that "[a]ccording to the popular notion, the satirist is a maladjusted, abnormal personality type" (350). Perhaps then we should alter Willie and Waylon's cautionary tale about prospective cowboys: "Mommas, don't let your babies grow up to be satirists."

And yet, if I may make a modest counter proposal, writing satire is good for the soul: it is good for the soul of society, the academy, and it is good for the souls of the nascent rhetoricians and developing authors who compose our first-year writing classes. To state the matter again, and again with great modesty, satire can save rhetoric and composition. In this thesis, I argue for the purposeful inclusion of satire in the first-year writing class. I do not mean that every introductory composition class needs to have it—only the good ones. I will argue that not only should students read satire, they should write satires, and in the process come to understand critical rhetorical and compositional strategies and principles, even potentially challenging their worldviews and that of the culture at large.

But if satirists are viewed so negatively, what possible pedagogical purpose could be served by having our students take on the satiric voice? Am I arguing for a genre that would only add to an already generous lack of civility in a nation deeply divided by partisan polarity? Although a longer defense is needed, for the moment allow Professor

Feinberg to counter the view that he labels the “popular” one. While Feinberg recognizes the prevalent opinion and grants that “[i]n a sense” it is true, he argues that it is true “only in the same sense that other personality types can also be called abnormal or maladjusted. It depends entirely on the standards of ‘normalcy’ that one chooses to apply” (350).

While satire is always critical, its intent is not always destructive nor does it solely originate from a personality that can only with kindness be labeled “deranged.” Rather than being purely destructive, satiric writing can create bridges helping those new to the university to cross the often unfamiliar and dark waters of academia—but let’s cross that divide a little later. In chapter one, we will hear from those who oppose not only satire in the classroom but also its frequent companion: humor.

**Of pleasure not for him ordain'd:
The Unhappy Argument against Satiric Composition**

Chapter the First
*In which the award-winning author
presents his opponents' case with due respect
for their lack of intelligence, intellect, and integrity*

"A humorous rejoinder must always contain something profound."

--Kierkegaard

But who opposes humor? Isn't this like being anti-puppies or being staunchly opposed, on principle, to long walks on the beach at sunset hand in hand with the one you love—while surrounded by frolicking Labrador puppies (while in the background Joe Cocker wails away on "Up Where We Belong")? Is it not a commonplace that a good sense of humor is a cardinal virtue in the land of the red, white, and blue? If it is true that where our treasure is there too will be our heart (Matthew 6:22), then our hearts, minds, and bodies can be found seated on America's other pews, the seats at the metroplex or the lazy boy of the living room, watching a comedy because, while they might not receive Best Picture Oscars (or even nominations), comedies sell. And though our movie choices might turn out to be tragic (one can never regain the time lost nor the brain cells spent watching *Napoleon Dynamite*), comedy not only helps sell movie tickets, it helps elect national tickets. The founding fathers established no such requirement, but no man or woman who juggles his or her life in the political circus can hope to landslide into the White House if the electorate does not perceive him or her as not only substantial but lighthearted; for while politics is serious business, politicians cannot take themselves too seriously—even Richard Nixon went on *Laugh-In*. But even in the most serious moments of life and death, humor can cure all. Norman Cousins, an American magazine editor,

published a bestseller about how through laughter (and vitamin C) he had recovered from *ankylosing spondylitis*, an attack on the spine, which was both “progressive and incurable” (45). But humor books, the Marx Brothers (Groucho, Harpo, and Chico, not Karl and Hermann), and *Candid Camera* (39-40)—along with enough Vitamin C to kill an orange—did what penicillin could not: cure him. And not only can humor get you out of the hospital, it can keep you alive in Dachau. Victor Frankl, psychiatrist, founder of logotherapy, and Holocaust survivor called humor one “of the soul’s weapons in the fight for self-preservation” (68). Humor can not only help you out of the sick bed or the death camp, but more importantly (in American society), wit can make a man a hit with the ladies. According to psychologist and humor researcher (and Canadian) Rod A. Martin,¹ several studies have found that a good sense of humor is a highly preferred trait in the world of dating (134). In other words, humor is hot.

While everybody laughs, not everybody finds this fact amusing—many have condemned humor as a vice and not a virtue. Indeed, history is replete with cautions against and even outright prohibitions of humor. According to a snippet preserved by 5th century AD Stobaeus, Socrates warned, “One should use laughter as one uses salt, sparingly” (qtd. in Sanders 87-88). While moderns might imagine only a common condiment in Socrates’ metaphor, others bring a political take to the table. In his history of laughter as a politically and socially subversive act, *Sudden Glory*, Barry Sanders (the Pitzer College English professor and Pulitzer Prize nominated author, not the Detroit

¹ Martin is a past president of the International Society for Humor Studies. Among his many publications is the entry on humor for the American Psychological Association’s eight-volume *Encyclopedia of Psychology*; his *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach* (2007) does an excellent job of collecting and commenting on scientific research and approaches concerning humor.

Lions running back) argues that for Socrates' society, "Salt symbolized status" (88). Sanders brings out possible shades of meaning "or grains of truth" in Socrates' maxim concerning the relationship between wit and community standing: based on "what we know of his rhetorical style," for Socrates, "[a] properly seasoned wit is a matter of decorum and bearing—one must not overdo it and risk becoming salty—unpalatable and so disgusting" (88). Whether Socrates' peppered his salt with that much meaning, his words stand as a caution: humor should be sprinkled not poured.

Socrates' student and biographer (and possible partial creator), Plato, certainly shared his teacher's concerns; he was, so to speak, a chip off the old salt block. According to Steven Sherwood's *Echoes of Cicero's Laughter* (2005),² "Plato takes the power of laughter seriously enough to approve of laws prohibiting comic poets from ridiculing the citizenry and restricting their attacks to one another" (46). For Plato, wit had a limited role in rhetoric, as Sherwood summarizes, "an orator should use wit not for its own sake, but sparingly and modestly, in the service of a serious cause—including the correction of those who are socially or intellectually in error" (46-47). Certainly, Plato does acknowledge that the republic can stand a jester, but "he is a fool who thinks anything ridiculous but that which is evil, and who attempts to raise a laugh by assuming any object to be ridiculous but that which is unwise and evil" (158; *Rep.* V 452). Although with consummate skill he laces the dialogues of Socrates with beguiling, ironic wit, Plato's lack of a platonic relationship with comedy has led scholars to see him as the progenitor of some less than romantic theories concerning the nature of humor. While Dr. Cameron Shelley of the University of Waterloo's Department of Philosophy argues that

² Sherwood's dissertation for Texas Christian University connects the views of ancient rhetoricians to modern composition instruction.

Plato has a more nuanced view about laughter than simply being against it, he acknowledges Plato's historic role in humor studies: "modern scholars have understood Plato to have held an entirely negative view of humor as being always deleterious and never virtuous," a perception that leads them to place Plato as the great forefather on the family tree of modern philosophies that emphasize the negative about humor (352). While Shelley argues that "[w]hen enjoyed moderately, the playful, incongruous quality of humor could benefit a philosophic person like Socrates" (351), he agrees that "Plato was very critical of humor" (365). Sanders, too, does not see Plato as one in love with humor; rather, Plato recognizes its political, disruptive, democratic power and worries about its potential to disrupt the state—Plato uses the Socratic method to "make certain that laughter does not run wild" (89). And with good reason, for long before Kuru Syndrome struck the Papua New Guineans, Plato had witnessed an equally fatal laughing sickness strike ancient Greece: it was Aristophanes' *The Clouds*—a comedy—that in Plato's view had been responsible for Socrates' execution (Shelley 351). For Plato, staged comedy led to real-life tragedy. As with Shakespeare's Danish prince, so with Plato's Greek philosopher, (the) play is the thing.

Aristotle, too, plays a seminal role in the begetting of humor theory. Martin traces the theoretical view of laughter as, in essence, aggression back to Aristotle (22), which perhaps is fitting in light of Aristotle's role as teacher of the conqueror of the world, Alexander the Great. As with Plato, Aristotle leaves behind no extended work on humor. He did write about comic poetry in his *Poetics*, but that has been lost to history, a loss that not everyone, from a murderous, medieval monk in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* to twentieth-century translator L. J. Potts, finds to be all that great of a loss. In his

rendition of the *Poetics*, Potts states, “There is little reason to suppose that much of importance has been lost” (qtd. in Sherwood 63).³ Aristotle himself does mention that the “early stages” of Comedy “passed unnoticed, because it was not as yet taken up in a serious way” (229; *Poetics* Ch. 5). But if those before him did not take comedy seriously, Aristotle did, at least to some extent. He agrees with Plato’s Sophist opponent Gorgias that a speaker should “spoil the opponents’ seriousness with laughter and their laughter with seriousness” (280; *Rhetoric* Bk. 3 Ch. 18.7). And when he describes the amiable, congenial, well-liked man, he describes him as one who is good-humored: “those who are ready to make or receive a joke; [. . .] able to be kidded and to kidding in good sport” (136; Bk. 2 Ch. 4.13). But it is “good” sport that should be emphasized. Wit befits the ideal man; however, going “to excess in raising laughs” suits the “vulgar” buffoon, while he who “never say[s] anything [. . .] to raise a laugh, and even object[s] when other people do” becomes the boor (112; *Ethics* Bk. 4 ch. 8). For Aristotle, humor is less about being funny than it is about being clever. One can imagine aristocratic Aristotle appreciating the clever word play between upper-society Algernon and Jack (or should we call them Ernest and his other brother Ernest) in Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*, but it is more difficult to picture him laughing at the kidnapping of Socrates (and the following, constant mispronunciation of his name [Sew-crates]) in *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure*.

³ As Sherwood points out, Potts, the Cambridge tutor and life-long correspondent of *The Once and Future King*’s T. H. White, “may reflect an historical bias against the humorous as a topic for serious study” (50).

*“[W]e find that our saviour himself wept twice or thrice,
but we never find that he laughed so much as once.”*

--Sir Thomas More

It is not just the Greek founding fathers of Western Civilization who are cautious about humor—the church fathers often condemn humor as largely or wholly unholy. For medieval ministers, like modern Americans, humor was hot, but the heat they felt radiated from eternal flames of brimstone and sulfur wherein the devil got the last laugh. For Saint John Chrysostom, the fourth-century archbishop of the great port city of Constantinople, laughter was a slippery slope: “to laugh, to speak jocosely, does not seem an acknowledged sin, but it leads to acknowledged sin. Thus laughter often gives birth to foul discourse, and foul discourse to actions still more foul” (442; Homily XV). And from here, the golden-mouthed doctor of the Catholic Church lets the dominoes of sin fall: “Often from words and laughter proceed railing and insult; and from railing, and insult, blows and wounds; and from blows and wounds, slaughter and murder.” Perhaps to avoid murder in a cathedral, Saint Benedict, the founder of the monastic movement, commands his not-so-merry monks to speak “gently and without laughter,” to not be “given to ready laughter” (201; RB 7.60); Benedict blesses his unhappy rule with the sanction of (apocryphal) Scripture: “Only a fool raises his voice in laughter”⁴ (201; RB 7.59). The Cappadocian theologian, Saint (and seemingly sour) Basil exhorted Christians to not “engage in repartee, nor laugh, nor tolerate jesters” (56).⁵ And while joy might be “good or evil, depending on its source,” for the medieval mystic Hugh of St. Victor, “laughter is in every respect evil” (qtd. in Sanders 129). It is not that laughter would

⁴ Sirach 21:23

⁵ Letter 22 according to the Benedictine order, 411 according to the older order.

always be wrong, but for the saints it would always be different, as Sanders points out in summing up the views of Pope Gregory, “Even in heaven [. . .] the laughter of the elect will assume special status, radiating from the heart and not from the body. It will be heartfelt and not belly-sounded” (130). Until that time, it was better to cry with the saints than laugh with the sinners, as the eleventh-century Benedictine abbot and theologian Rupert of Deutz taught, only Satan cackles—and only after he has beguiled a believer (134). Truly then one did not want to die laughing, for he who laughs last, laughs worst.

Not to be outdone by papists, the Puritans excelled in their own witch hunt for laughter. As more than one saint had desired to silence the mimes,⁶ so now the Puritans would see to it that the theaters were closed because, as historian Keith Thomas explains, “They held it wrong to portray vice for the sake of entertainment” (qtd. in Sanders 225). According to Puritan pamphleteer William Prynne,⁷ the laughter from a trip to the theater was usually caused by some “obscene, lascivious, sinful passage, gesture, speech or jest (the common object of men’s hellish mirth) which should rather provoke the Actors, the Spectators to penitent sobs, than wanton smiles; to brinish tears than carnal solace” (qtd. in Morreall 87). And the sobriety of the Puritans remains alive among contemporary religious individuals. According to Martin, researchers describe certain types of religious people—those with “conservative and authoritarian personality types”—as “more likely to enjoy humor in which the incongruity is resolved and one can ‘get the joke,’ and to dislike bizarre or zany humor that does not seem to ‘make sense’” (203). If this is true,

⁶ “Tertullian and Saints Cyprian and John Chrysostom all wrote against the idolatry of ancient spectacles, particularly the distortion of mimes in wearing masks and women’s dresses to produce laughter” (Sanders 142).

⁷ Prynne’s attack on the stage, *Histriomastix*, was seen as an attack on the Crown and led to his having his ears cropped; Prynne himself would later not seek to return the favor, arguing against Charles I losing his head (“Prynne” 1342).

then one might say then that the Puritan fathers ate a sour apple and their descendents now frown.

While the Greek philosophers were less than sanguine about humor, and the English Puritans seem positively choleric, all this damning of laughter does not mean that no one was laughing (even among the Puritans); the historical voices are not entirely or consistently anti-hysterical. Some of God's elect were even willing to take up Satan's pitchfork for a heavenly cause. None other than Saint Augustine saw a place for wit in the city of God as a rhetorical weapon for catching a listener's attention. Biographer Garry Wills describes the great doctor of the Catholic Church's use of "puns, wordplay, jingles, [and] all kinds of verbal fireworks, to drive home his point"; in the just war for the souls of men, "We should wake him [the listener] up, mentally, with some catchy witticism" (qtd. in Wills 70). As with all fiction, jokes involved a certain duplicity, but the man from Hippo understood that their dissembling was not dishonesty: "jokes [. . .] have never been accounted lies, seeing they bear with them in the tone of the voice, and in the very mood of the joker a most evident indication that he means no deceit, although the thing he utters be not true" (458; "On Lying" 2). Augustine was not alone in using humor to serve God. The sixteenth-century Carmelite nun and mystic, Saint Teresa of Avila, asked for deliverance from "somber, serious, sullen saints" (qtd. in Hyers 625), and English ministers told stories in their sermons, "exempla," that were often funny and sometimes nearly risqué (Sanders 134). Thomas More, with whose unsmiling words this section began, when not roasting heretics over an open flame, "was a person who all his life loved to goad and tease, like a fool, with his incredibly sharp wit" (Sanders 209-10). More in fact adds to our comic lexicon. In *Utopia*, a work "charged with Socratic irony,

jest, and even outright laughter,” he is “the first English writer to convert the word *geste*, ‘story,’ into the word *jest* in its modern, funny sense” (Sanders 210). But in 1534, when Saint Thomas More wrote about the weeping face of Christ, he was King Henry VIII’s prisoner facing capital charges of treason; and in 1535, More was no more, the beheaded victim of the crown whom he once served as Lord Chancellor. Perhaps for a man on death row, a Christ who weeps has more meaning than a Christ who laughs.

Sanders (who loves a good linguistic adventure) cannot discover an earlier usage of the term “sense of humor” than the late eighteenth century (97); but if he cannot find one prior to then, he certainly can find one now. The modern English world has added to touch, taste, sense, sight, and smell one more sense that can dominate all—the *sense* of humor. And modern English has replaced Hippocrates’ four humours⁸ with one that appeals to our funny bone—the sense of *humor*. Martin⁹ describes not only the development of the phrase but more importantly the change in societal stock indicated by humor becoming a valued, even essential, sense: “from the seventeenth to the twentieth century, popular conceptions of laughter underwent a remarkable transformation, shifting from the aggressive antipathy of superiority theory [. . .] to the notion that sympathy is a necessary condition for laughter” (24). These changes in understanding about the nature of laughter affected how society viewed those who laughed and those who caused

⁸ Martin describes the linguistic and conceptual evolution of “humor.” Initially, “humor” was a fluid (a meaning still seen in the “aqueous humor”); from there it transformed and gained new connotations: a temperament or mood, an eccentric person, an object of ridicule (since the person was odd), and then someone who could imitate the odd, thus causing laughter (20-21).

⁹ Martin’s summary of humor’s developing cultural cachet and history depends on the University of Texas at Dallas historian Daniel Wickberg’s *The Senses of Humor: Self and Laughter in Modern America* (1998).

laughter. Of course, laughter has always been a goal of popular entertainment—Shakespeare, who was not “high literature” when his works were performed at the Globe, down the street from a bear-wrestling auditorium, wrote comedies. But humor as a virtue, and humorists as a socially acceptable, even desirable profession reflect modern values. The humorist—a term that did not develop its modern meaning until the latter half of the 1800s, with Mark Twain considered by “many scholars as one of the first humorists in this modern sense” (21)—becomes a paragon and no longer a pariah.¹⁰ While laughing out loud in Lincoln’s divided America was considered rude, by the time of F. D. R.’s depressed America “a sense of humor was seen by many psychologists as an essential element of mental health” (24, 25). In fact, the absence of a sense of humor has sometimes been diagnosed as indicating the presence of mental illness, in particular schizophrenia (25). A lack of humor then no longer denotes the presence of godliness or a good upbringing; a lack of humor might identify a tumor of the mind.

Moderns may be at ease in the funhouse (and less so in the chapel), but to give the devil—whom in this case wears not a red cape but a clerical collar—his due, humor theory often supports history’s worries. Of course, humor theory cannot be spoken of in the singular for there are multiple views on the nature of humor. While granting that the differences were often slight, one researcher in the 1920s suggested that there were 88 different theories to explain why people laugh (Martin 31). But in considering the

¹⁰ Ron Power’s excellent biography of Twain brings out some of the negative assessment of humor in 19th century America: “‘Humor’ was a curiosity performed by people called ‘humorists,’ a specialized skill roughly equivalent to sawing one’s accomplice in half in a magic show. It was not to be confused with Serious Writing” (276).

possibility that theory might support history's anxieties, let us concentrate on two of the oldest and most prominent philosophies: psychoanalytic and superiority theories.

While sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, according to Freudian theory we laugh at jokes because "they enable us to experience for a moment the illicit pleasure derived from releasing some of our primitive sexual and aggressive impulses" (Martin 33). Jokes allow us to let off some pent up, primal, psychic steam in such a way that we do not feel inwardly guilty nor do we bring down upon ourselves society's shame; the id, the ego, and the superego can belly laugh in peace.¹¹ Martin argues that Freud distinguished between wit, "which he identified primarily with canned jokes," and humor, which is "a benign and sympathetic amusement at the ironical aspects of the misfortunes of life" (34-35). Freudian humor is the "highest of the defense mechanisms" and "a rare and precious gift" (35). Allowing that Freud's work might not have been properly analyzed, in the popular understanding, Freud saw humor as the release of sexual and aggressive energy.

While Freud's theory of humor "was by far the most influential theory in psychological humor research during the first half of the twentieth century" (Martin 33), the eminently well-known superiority theory can be traced back to Aristotle and Plato. Whether we label it superiority theory, disparagement theory, aggression theory, or degradation theory, this unhappy family of hypotheses focuses not on the sexual but the aggressive nature of humor. Through humor we aggressively assert our superiority over each other. Philosopher Thomas Hobbes memorably described "the passion of laughter"

¹¹ While Freud allowed for the possible existence of innocent jokes, he could not provide any examples (Martin 34-35) leading this author to wonder what he would have done with the classic knock-knock joke involving an "interrupting cow" who breaks up the stereotypical ending question, "Who's there," with the plaintive, yet intrusive cry of cows everywhere: "moo." Perhaps he would have seen in it the opportunity to break the social taboo against interrupting, especially interrupting one's superior.

as “nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly”; for the writer of *Leviathan*, it was no surprise that people “take heinously” being the objects of laughter or ridicule for in those moments they are “triumphed over” (qtd. in Martin 44). Interestingly, our lexicon of humorous words and phrases overflows with aggressive terminology. Contemporary humor researchers Alleen Pace Nilsen and Don L. F. Nilsen remind us that jokes have *punch* lines, satires can be *biting*, wits are *sharp-tongued*, things *strike* us as funny, and you can be the *target* of a joke (39). Additionally, one can *die* laughing from *gallows* humor; when a joke does not work it *bombs*; people can *howl*, *shriek*, *roar*, or be *convulsed* in laughter; if something is really funny it *slays* us; and perhaps this overlaps with Freud, but the victim of an ugly verbal prank is the *butt* of the joke.

Humor theory casts light on ludic history, particularly the history of hostility toward humor: if the comic finds its heart in sexual promiscuity or hostile superiority, then perhaps it is understandable how a faith like Christianity that encourages monogamy and charity would often play the role of the jester’s foe. Indeed, humorists often returned the favor. For instance, the courtiers of James I—the James of the King James Version of the Bible—one time “tried to cheer up the king by staging a mock christening with a courtier dressed up as a bishop, the marquis of Buckingham playing the godfather, and a pig standing in for the baby” (Sanders 205). While the joke “misfired,” an attempt years later by the marquis’ son to amuse Charles II by delivering a mock and ribald homily based on the ‘Song of Songs’ had a better outcome; perhaps this should be expected since the restored king was also the “merry monarch.” But superiority and psychoanalytic

theories about humor raise a serious question for saint and sinner alike: if humor itself is inherently, essentially sexual and hostile, then what is its place in society? And for the purposes of this work, what is its place in the classroom? By encouraging the writing of satire, am I urging on seduction and destruction? While I am not arguing for either prudishness or pacifism, if this truly is the (sexy) nature of the beast then—dare we say it—did the Puritans have a point?

Before we gather our hammers, nails, and 2 by 4s to go board up the local Blockbusters, we should note that the theories themselves have been evaluated and found wanting. Martin helpfully reviews the research that has been done on both psychoanalytic and superiority theories of humor, beginning by acknowledging that “most of the general theories of humor” do not meet various “stringent criteria,” such as being “clearly defined,” “well specified,” and “potentially falsifiable,” which does not mean that they should just be disregarded because each theory helps piece together some part of humor’s puzzle (31-32). While various assessments such as Walter O’Connell’s WHAT (Wit and Humor Appreciation Test) and Redlich, Levine, and Sohler’s Mirth Response Test have been used to examine Freudian theory, the research so far has “produced limited and inconsistent supportive evidence” (41). And perhaps even more damning, Freud’s release of energy, by which laughter is “a way of ‘burning off’ excess tension,” contradicts the current understanding of how the nervous system works (42). While a great deal of the research has concerned itself with Freud’s views on jokes and not his view on humor as a defense mechanism, which does have some support, “the psychoanalytic theory of humor (like Freudian theory in general) has been largely abandoned by empirical researchers

since the 1980s.” In other words, Freudianism has slipped.¹² And with the evolution of the acceptability of humor, its mutation into one of our senses, superiority theory no longer thrives as the fittest view to explain our changing understanding of humor: “Consistent with favorable views of humor in contemporary culture as a whole, the extreme view that all humor involves aggression has generally fallen into disfavor among humor researchers. Superiority theories have largely been replaced by cognitive incongruity theories”¹³ (55). In light of current research trends, superiority theory has been humbled and psychoanalytic theory has been effectively castrated.

And yet both theories, though neutered, remain useful for students and teachers of humor. While neither can fully explain the complexity of humor, at the very least, they call attention to the frequently sexual and aggressive nature of humor, which can help serve as a check on the kind of humor employed in the classroom. But more importantly, these theories can serve as heuristics about sexual, gender, and political norms—for instance, what does laughter at misogynistic or racist jokes say about patriarchal political structures? In fact, these theories can serve as heuristics concerning the place of humor in society itself. Martin correctly states that “[a]lthough humor and laughter are universal in humans [. . .], the way people use and express them in a given time and place is strongly influenced by cultural norms, beliefs, attitudes, and values” (26). After reminding us of the relatively recent and swift change in fortunes for wit, he cautions that “[i]f we wish to take a scientific approach to the study of humor, we need to be conscious of the

¹² Psychologists continue to research humor using other theoretical constructs. For instance, Martin speaks of the psychobiological approach to laughter and mirth, which includes looking at evolutionary theory: “Several lines of evidence indicate that humor, mirth, and laughter are likely a product of natural selection” (185).

¹³ Incongruity theories posit that we laugh because of a surprising, shocking, or clever combination.

assumptions and biases that we ourselves have absorbed from our culture and that may color our own thinking” (26). While we view a person with a good sense of humor as a cultural paragon, other cultures not so far removed in time and whose heritage we share have seen him or her as a cultural pariah. Were they wrong? Are we right? Or, as in *The X Files*, is the truth (still) out there?

While we have not yet come to any conclusions concerning which view is correct, we have seen the inadequacies of essentializing humor as sex or violence. Not that sexuality or even hostility are inherently wrong—the Puritans themselves loved to have babies and throw people into the stocks (and throwing a baby into the stocks must have been high entertainment). But while comedy’s content is frequently risqué or rough, humor itself is too complex to be basically equivalent to either. And so you may now return—guilt free—to watching your favorite sitcom, and I may return—guilt free—to my study and teaching of humor in composition. I would say that I feel relieved, but that sounds awfully Freudian.

“Only a person to whom it is a source of never ceasing voluptuous pleasure to inflict pain and discomfort upon his fellow-beings will continue to compose satirical works”
 --Johannes Prinz, seventeenth-century satirist John Wilmot scholar

If humor has often been derided as foul so too has its frequent friend, satire.¹⁴ And as was the case with humor, we run into difficulties right at the start because satire’s exact meaning, like humor’s (or to strain a pun, like the aqueous humor), is quite fluid. Or course, it is not that the challenge of defining satire delineates all its difficulties, but

¹⁴ For a discussion about New Criticism’s attitude toward satire see appendix: “A Critical Look at Robert Penn Warren’s New (and old) Criticism on Satire.”

the complexity involved in answering so seemingly simple a question as, What is it? gives a reader a taste of tests to come. What is satire? Although the *Oxford English Dictionary*¹⁵ seems to have no such problems, summing up satire and its related words in roughly 1½ pages, the encyclopedia speaks more to satire's complexity. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* opens its four-page entry on satire's place in the art of literature, with a simple, five-word long sentence that brings out one measure of its lack of simplicity: "'Satire' is a protean term" ("Art" 173). If others wish to capture this shape-shifter, the encyclopedia admits defeat: "No strict definition can encompass the complexity of a word that signifies [. . .] a kind of literature," while also covering "a mocking spirit or tone that manifests itself in many literary genres but can also enter into almost any kind of human communication." But if a "strict definition" will not do, can a broad one work? In their anthology of critical essays, *Theorizing Satire* (1995), Brian A. Connery and Kirk Combe quote with approval University of Birmingham's Thomas Lockwood's specific objection to general definitions: "the more general and therefore satisfying definitions are least useful when most needed" (9). After briefly describing the history of satire criticism, Connery and Combe call the attempt to classify satire one of the "fundamental issues [that] remain unresolved" (8). Alastair Fowler, the University of Edinburgh's Professor Emeritus of Rhetoric and English Literature, calls it "the most problematic mode to the taxonomist, since it appears never to have corresponded to any one kind" (qtd. in Griffin 3). And in his erudite *Introduction to Satire*, Feinberg also grants that satire is a "protean species of art" (vii) and an "amorphous genre" (18); it is a

¹⁵ Definition I.2.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" (501).

word for which “no two scholars use the same definition or the same outline of ingredients” (vii). And yet where angels (or Greek water gods) might fear to tread (or tread water) Feinberg goes—he defines satire.

Perhaps showing himself to be a bit of a satirist, definitely showing himself to be a deconstructionist, Feinberg catalogs and critiques standard concepts used to pen up satire in a tidy little definition—before he himself sums it up in an admittedly “working” definition. Is satire humorous?¹⁶ Is satire critical? While it frequently contains both, “[i]n Juvenalian satire there is likely to be a minimum of humor, and in Horatian satire a minimum of criticism” (4). Is satire candy for the mind? Is it aimed primarily at the intellect? Then why are “most of the great satirists,” think here of Swift’s attacks on the academy, “anti-intellectual, distrustful of logically reached generalizations, and skeptical about all dogmas about men and institutions” (5)? Is a satirist a moralist? Is the pleasure of satire “a moral one, the identification of a ‘good’ reader with a ‘good’ satirist, both of whom are indignant at a miscarriage of justice” (7)? But if satire is difficult to define, how much more so is morality: “Many satirists consider their works moral even when it contradicts the satire of other writers who also call themselves moralists” (9). Does satire cause reform? But satire is no didactic homily. One of the reasons we enjoy satires more than sermons, even when both take the same position, “is that we have an uncomfortable feeling that the minister expects us to do something about it”; in contrast, we prefer the satirist to the priest because with satires “we know that nobody really expects us to do anything about it, and that we have no real intention of ever doing anything about it” (7).

¹⁶ While I recognize that not all satire is humorous, this thesis is based in part on an introductory English composition class that focused on humor; and so while there is a distinction between satire and humor, this thesis will focus on those satires that are humorous in intent.

Satire is derisive and unfair; it ridicules, distorts, and exaggerates, criticizing what exists without even trying to offer an alternative. But what is this genre/mode/tone/other that usually cannot push anyone into taking “any action on behalf of truth” and yet can “prod men into an awareness of truth” (17)? For Feinberg, for now, the best definition he can give, one for which he will not pass judgment if others choose differently, and one for which he hopes for an equal generosity of spirit, is that “[s]atire is a playfully critical distortion of the familiar” (19). “Satire,” as Feinberg admits, “is not the greatest form of literature”; and yet “it is a necessary one” (17). Satire lives “because men appreciate a refreshing stimulus, an irreverent reminder that they live in a world of platitudinous thinking, cheap moralizing, and foolish philosophy” (16-17). Although Feinberg seems to have imbibed the spirit of pessimism that stereotypes the critical wits he studies, perhaps, as we shall see, there is room for greater, while be it cautious, optimism.

“*[W]e do not see a college textbook as a comic book.*”
--David Krech, psychologist and textbook author

Before we can end on a note of optimism, joined together, hand in hand, with one heart (surrounded by frolicking puppies?), we must consider one more opponent of satirical composition in the first-year English class; however, this opponent differs from the rest in that he or she is no antagonist. As we have seen, humor and satire has had its share of naysayers. In his 1941 book, *Laugh and Learn: The Art of Teaching with Humor*, high school English teacher Leon Ormond mentions the response of one history teacher when he told her about his book: “Only morons laugh.” He then describes her as exhibiting “a countenance curiously reminiscent of an ancient Greek tragic mask,” and that she is “an exemplary member of the Cult of Pedagogic Pallbearers.” His corpse-

bearing acquaintance marches not alone. Researchers Bryant, Comisky, and Zillman describe the advocacy of laughter in education as an innovation that began in the mid-twentieth century: “For centuries most college educators apparently shunned the use of humor” (110). And even in the latter part of the twentieth century some educators have continued to turn their smiles upside down in order to make frowns. Claudia Cornett, a former education professor, maintains that “many educators still think laughter and humor are frivolous and obstruct serious scholarly pursuits” (46). But this last adversary is not one of the non-laughing dead for he or she does not fight either humor or satire, nor label them dirty, degrading, or damning. In the tolerant spirit of the times, reading, analyzing, and writing satire are all fine activities—for someone else’s class. While true naysayers probably exist somewhere, the greatest opposition facing the use of satiric writing in first-year composition (FYC) is not principled or passionate disagreement; satire’s greatest foe is not abuse but nonuse.

Certainly satire’s place in the literary canon secures it a safe home in the literature classroom; but while there is room for it in *Introduction to Literature*, is there room for it in first-year writing? It is not that satiric writing in first-year composition does not exist—it is not the Abominable Snowman of composition. But it does appear to be rare, perhaps more like a California Condor than a Himalayan Yeti. Let me admit that this is difficult to prove for there is no rhet/comp equivalent of the Patriot Act or the Department of Homeland Security to keep track on what everyone everywhere is teaching (or is there?).¹⁷ Lacking extensive data, I can only illustrate a possible or

¹⁷ In his recent (June 2005) survey on the state of composition at the beginning of the twenty-first century for *College Composition and Communication*, Richard Fulkerson acknowledges the same problem: “There is no available and current synthetic account of

probable dearth. For example, Sherwood remarks that “only a few contemporary rhetorical theorists explore the connections between wit and rhetoric” (192), which he finds surprising in light of “the many potential applications to writing instruction of classical and modern theories of humor” (130). Or consider that the 2007 convention of the Conference on College Composition and Communication in New York featured one lecture¹⁸ on humor and the writing-intensive classroom and one panel¹⁹ on parody and pedagogy (299, 79), the 2008 convention has no comparable listings. Furthermore, a search for “satire” on CompPile, an online “inventory of publications in post-secondary composition, rhetoric, technical writing, ESL, and discourse studies,” results in twenty possibilities, of which two focus on student satirists, both of which refer to the same source: Butler University’s Carol Reeves’ “Students as satirists: Encouraging critique and comic release” (Reeves’ article is an ERIC document and a *College Teaching* article). And perhaps most tellingly, if textbook manufacturers are aiming their works at teachers, then it appears that neither humor or satire are not much of a current pedagogical concern. While Bedford St. Martin’s *Everything’s an Argument* contains one chapter devoted to humor, including a description of satire and parody, the equally prominent *Norton Field Guide* says nothing. And some authors, when they do mention humor, emphasize caution. In *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, Edward P. J. Corbett and Robert J. Connor warn that “[h]umor is an extremely difficult art, and if students do not have a natural gift or an acquired skill for humor, they would do best to avoid the use

what goes on in college writing classrooms in the United States” (682). His argument is “necessarily [. . .] based on indirect evidence: published scholarship, textbooks, a few organizational documents, and personal discussions.”

¹⁸ “Humor and the Rhetorical Properties in the Writing Emphasis Classroom.”

¹⁹ “Parody and Pedagogy: Encouraging the Playful Power of Oppositional Identity in Critical Writing.”

of this available means of persuasion” (283). It is not that satires have disappeared from English studies—they are frequently anthologized and often read (or at least assigned to be read). But how often are they written?

In our brief stroll through a marathon of history, we have found that humor and its frequent bosom companion, satire, do not always lead to amusement. The Greek philosophers are less than sanguine and the church fathers often choleric, and perhaps modern pedagogues are phlegmatic. I have argued that the main, contemporary, academic opposition is a lack of use; and since this opposition lacks any true antagonism, then perhaps “opposition” is too strong a term. But some scholars do suggest that a bit of animus continues against the study of humor. Rufus Browning surveyed the authors of psychology textbooks about why they included or did not include humor. Of the twenty-six authors who responded to his questionnaire, while sixteen utilized humor in some form (witty statements, cartoons), “only four [. . .] said they presented some theory, explanation or other discussion of the psychology of wit, humor or laughter” (1). David Krech, a psychologist at the University of California (Berkeley), belittled the idea, stating, “we do not see a college textbook as a comic book,” while another author, who remains anonymous, states, “I don’t think of psychology as a joke” (32). Browning’s study was in the latter 1970s, but perhaps things have not changed that much in the field of psychology. Martin’s 2007 work expresses surprise that despite humor’s “relevance to all branches of psychology, mainstream psychology has paid surprisingly little attention to this subject up till now. Humor research typically receives scant mention, if any at all, in undergraduate psychology texts or scholarly books” (2). Martin suggests two possible reasons for this “neglect,” with one being the understandable “sheer elusiveness of the

phenomena under investigation” (28), but the other goes to a less objective reason: “given its essentially non-serious nature association with fun and mirth, some researchers may have seen it as too frivolous and unimportant a subject for serious academic study” (27). And while he does not see this as the entire reason for the lack of humor in contemporary rhetorical theory, Sherwood does allow that “those who teach and practice rhetoric and composition,” in their desire to build their discipline, might avoid humor lest they “appear to take themselves or their professions lightly” (132).

But perhaps a dominant, understandable concern, one more pragmatic and practical, and totally unconcerned with matters of scholastic prestige is that except for those hardy few who will go on to study “creative” writing, when will one of our FYC students ever write a satire again? Granted, they might analyze one or two for a history or literature class, but when will they ever need to write one again? What class will request it? What job will demand it? “Please have a satire of the proposed Brooks Subdivision on my desk by Monday.” Isn’t the writing of humorous satire an inherently frivolous, pointless exercise?

The brief answer is no—a longer reply awaits you on the next page.

**With words clothed in reasons's garb:
A Logical Argument in Satire's Favor**

Chapter the Second

*“[It will] remove out of their Minds all Bigotry
contracted by ignorance and an evil Education.”*

--Anthony Collins, English philosopher,
on the impact of reading Erasmus' satiric *The Praise of Folly*

In Laugh and Learn: The Art of Teaching with Humor (1941), high school

English teacher Leon Ormond writes about a conversation he overheard between two college juniors. The upperclassmen, one of whom feels compelled to pepper his speech with mild profanities, are discussing two different classes and the approaches taken by their respective teachers.²⁰ The first student (the one with the potty mouth), states that “Professor X²¹ is a riot; funny as h[*]ll. Took his course in French classic drama—you know, Racine, Corneille, Moliere? We didn’t learn a d[*]mn thing about French classic drama, but we sure had a cockeyed time. It was better than a show.” Fortunately for us, the readers, and perhaps for Ormond, the eavesdropper, the language now cleans up as the second fellow wisely retorts, “Aw, if I took a course I’d rather learn something about it” (241). In this chapter, I will argue that these two, unknown (probably) soldiers of the greatest generation are dead wrong. Laughter need not hinder learning—laughter can help learning. In the last chapter, we were forced to dwell with a gaggle of nattering naybobs of negativism. But now we may fill ourselves up with feel-good, self-help clichés—“Take a chance. Columbus did.”—and pursue the positive argument for the place of

²⁰ To keep my tome G-rated, I shall minimize the offensiveness of the profanities used by replacing their offensive vowels with asterisks; and to keep my paper MLA-rated, I shall place these *sterisks within brackets.

²¹ I doubt that the professor’s name is actually “X.” I assume that Ormond has changed the name without alerting the audience. This goes against MLA form and should be avoided. All hail the MLA!

satiric writing in introductory composition. And in good freshperson comp style, allow me to state my thesis in this the last sentence of my opening paragraph: while often misunderstood within the larger culture, and perhaps equally underused in academic culture, satiric writing can be a creative and critical heuristic for the learning and practice of various rhetorical principles in the introductory composition classroom, an alternate discourse that can teach fundamental communication concepts while challenging mainstream thinking.

As much as I wish to transition from the negative to the positive, I need to start this chapter with an admission: call a doctor for there are problems in the lab. The literature on humor comes replete with cautions that the research is incomplete. While respectful of various philosophical approaches that have dominated the field, in his scientific investigation of the phenomenon of laughter, University of Maryland (Baltimore) neuroscientist Robert R. Provine marks much of the discourse taking place about laughter as still being “mired” in a “prescientific phase where logic and anecdote, not empirical data, reign” (11).²² Ronald Berk, the Assistant Dean for Teaching at the John Hopkins school of nursing and a staunch proponent of the use of humor in college teaching, concurs: “the enthusiastic claims about some of the physiological benefits of laughter” have been “premature and exaggerated” (48). And specifically concerning the effects of humor on learning, Sam Houston State University’s R. L. Garner admits that “[m]uch of the reported literature in this area suffers from a number of problems such as: (1) a limited number of participants; (2) a weak methodology; (3) primarily limited to

²² “[T]he history of empirically based laughter and humor science is little more than 100 years old” (Provinces 18).

elementary-aged children; or (4) is anecdotal in nature” (178). Problems exist even when experiments performed upon human subjects occur under the critical, clinical eyes of men and women in white (lab) coats. For instance, Martin mentions the inadequacies of current humor research’s over-reliance on jokes as a measurement tool: “until quite recently, most of the psychological research on humor has focused largely on jokes and cartoons” (14). Of course, it makes sense for scientists to limit themselves to these types of humor: their “self-contained and context-free nature [. . .] makes them very easy to transport into a laboratory setting.” But herein is the problem: reading a joke by oneself in a laboratory hardly fits the typical reality of how people experience humor.²³ In pointing to these deficiencies, scientists expose the banana peels that lie on the path to understanding humor, reminding us of the intrinsic, hard to nail down complexity²⁴ of the comic. Additionally complicating my efforts to show the value of satiric writing, at least from the standpoint of clinical evidence, is that writing itself is equally unwilling to easily unveil its mysteries to the cold, latex-gloved hands of experimental researchers. Dr. Erika Lindemann, the prominent University of North Carolina compositionist, reminds us that most writing processes “seem to be mental and consequently difficult for researchers to reconstruct” (22). And writing and rhetoric historian, James J. Murphy, acknowledges that while “thousands of articles and book chapters” have been produced on writing instruction, “the field still lacks some of the basic research tools common in almost every other area of study” (292). In light of these realities, I want to be careful to

²³ “[H]umor in these sorts of studies is removed from its natural social context” (Martin 15).

²⁴ Martin lists several of wit’s complicating factors: “The diversity of stimuli and situations that evoke mirth, the lack of a precise definition of the concept, the multiplicity of theories that have been proposed to account for it, and the difficulties [. . .] in trying to capture and study it in controlled experiments in the laboratory” (28).

not overstate my case. There is no study from MIT that proves the connection between satiric writing and an increase in writing proficiency or critical thinking skills; and there is no empirical research sponsored by the NEH, which I'm aware of, that explicitly proves the benefits of humorous writing for either the author or the audience. Honesty demands that I be more candid than I wish: what I'm arguing for has not been proven.

But how much proof do we need? And what kind of evidence will do? Should we dismiss all anecdotal evidence as being equivalent to proving the existence of aliens by dim, collective memories of anal probes?²⁵ Although I will answer these queries rhetorically, they are not mere rhetorical questions: lacking absolute, clear-cut, black-and-white-lab-coated, scientific evidence, what proof and what type of proof do we need before we can proceed with the use of satire in composition? It is here that rhetoricians, from classic to modern to postmodern times, remind us that our decisions are by necessity not based on absolute demonstrability but more often by plausibility and probability. While the Sophists' historical reputation has largely been formed by their then contemporary opponents—we evoke their name every time we accuse someone of engaging in “sophistry,” a pejorative label eventually created in their honor as a result of the philosophical landslide win of their chief foe, Plato—the Sophists of ancient Greece remind us that the gray matter of our brain often sees gray in our lives. The Sophists believed that absolute certainty and truth were not accessible to people (Bizzell 22). And others knew that the Sophists were, at least in part, right. Pragmatic Isocrates, for example, thought that the long view took too long to view; Bizzell summarizes the Attic orator's view that since “public business won't wait while the philosopher pursues

²⁵ Proof through hindsight.

abstruse studies,” it is incumbent for philosophers “to educate men for their current affairs, to help them learn to make wise decisions in the face of limited knowledge” (26). Aristotle himself, Plato’s pupil and rhetoric’s father, discussed at length the rhetorical syllogism, the enthymeme, and while there are disagreements among scholars about what exactly makes an enthymeme distinct from other syllogisms, a widespread view holds that the “first premise is based on probable, not certain, knowledge” (171).²⁶ While Aristotle recognized absolutes, he also absolutely recognized that not everything can be demonstrated through science or formal logic; and for areas where knowledge of an absolute nature is not obtainable, there are the disciplines of dialectic and rhetoric (170).

Between the ancient Greeks and (Francis) Bacon, there are only seven degrees of separation: for Bacon, a person’s perceptions are not foolproof, nor are the goings-on of the mind a mental Switzerland of neutrality (Bizzell 737). According to Bizzell, in his attack on the “Idols” of his day, Bacon “maintains that reason and the senses are warped by common preconceptions, personal predilections, the ambiguities of language, and the misrepresentation of philosophical truths. There may be objective truth in the world, but knowing is subjective.” And the problems with perception affect even those squinting through a microscope. Thomas Kuhn, a philosopher of science, made an influential if controversial argument about how science advances. Rather than moving forward after finding new facts whose meanings are obviously clear, a conversation, or a “communal argument” as Bizzell puts it (1196), takes place within the scientific community about the meaning of the facts. And of course the very nature of language further complicates the

²⁶ Bizzell points out that while this characteristic is “typical,” it does not necessarily define it: “Aristotle does not forbid [. . .] a train of reasoning that begins from certain knowledge” (172).

process of communication about scientific facts and theories. As Bizzell points out per Kuhn's paradigm-shifting views, "[I]anguage is not a clear medium for the exchange of information, but opaque, resistant, and imbued with cultural bias," with the result being that men and women of science "cannot simply present new information or demonstrate new findings but must argue for new meanings and create a new community that shares them." For any then who would denigrate all non-scientifically proven truth while simultaneously elevating scientific proof to the height of absolute certainty, they need to see that their Emperor is not wearing any smock. While the Sophist's view was "highly controversial in its own day"—Plato would have disparaged them as cave dwellers—today "many contemporary theorists [. . .] believe that only provisional or probable knowledge is available to human beings" (22, 24). In spite of the dominance of Plato or empiricism, with the passage of time, the Sophistic view has come to be seen as quite sophisticated.

I am not saying this to demonize either science or scientists; I am not suggesting that we replace the "o" in the second syllable of "evolution" with an "i." Personally, I am glad that the Tylenol in my mouth has been tested in a lab; the lithium battery in my MacBook, which rests upon my lap, has been through a battery of controlled tests; and that some crash-test dummy has taken one for the human team. For that matter, when talking with a grammarista, who bewails the current crop of student writing skills as being, to quote the vernacular, crap, and only getting crappier with the passing of years, I appreciate being able to point to the research by Robert J. Connors and Andrea A. Lunsford which shows that the number of formal errors per college papers remained basically constant from the early 1900s to the late 1980s: "college students are not

making more formal errors in writing than they used to” (301). I appreciate research. But is the beaker, the Bunsen burner, and [the name of thingy that moves quickly in a circle] the only way to establish truth? Scientific proof is subject to scientists’ humanity, including the limitations of the current accepted ways of viewing reality and the shortcomings of human language. Does this then mean that we stay home until the chemists and biologists and physicists signal the “All clear!”? Classical rhetoric reminds us that there is more than one way to establish if not certainty at least validity. Sometimes the “best” we can do is to prove plausibility. Of course, this is not only true in the field of composition pedagogy—this is true in life. But in cases where certainty does not exist, we can move ahead, however tentatively, on the basis of reasonable possibility. And from this point on I would like to flesh out some possibilities for humorous writing, making what I hope will be a plausible case for the usefulness of satiric writing in the introductory composition class.

Despite problems with what the microscope can reveal, there is empirical research supporting the view that humor is pedagogically advantageous. Research does point to certain benefits in general for humor, some of which may play a positive role in writing, teaching, and learning, especially by dealing with the common writing anxieties and positively affecting classroom dynamics. Although some have overplayed the general benefits,²⁷ especially those for physical health, research does bear out some health dividends: “[o]f all the health benefits claimed for humor and laughter, the most

²⁷ Martin cautions that those who advocate for humor “as a pathway to better [physical] health seem to have moved too quickly to promote their views on the basis of rather flimsy research evidence” (331).

consistent research support has been found for the hypothesized analgesic effects. After watching humorous films in the laboratory, individuals tend to be able to tolerate increased levels of pain” (331).²⁸ Though Martin concludes that humor, from a psychological perspective, is not innately healthy or unhealthy (306), he recognizes that “[e]xperimental laboratory research has provided a considerable amount of support for the view of humor as an emotion-regulation mechanism” (305). And while the effect may only be short-term, “humor produces an increase in positive feelings of exhilaration and well-being, along with perceptions of mastery and control, and a reduction in negative feelings such as anxiety, depression, and anger.” If previous generations cast humor as a demon, and contemporary zealots have fashioned it into a god, current researchers reminds us that humor may not cure all that ails us, but it can be a part of a healthy lifestyle, along with exercise and a diet rich in vegetables and fruits, full of whole grains.

If humor is good for the body and the soul,²⁹ can it also be good for the mind? Berk describes how the brain handles humor in the same way it processes creativity and problem solving (6) and then argues that “[s]ince humor and problem solving involve the same basic cognitive processes, one can prime the other” (7). And according to Martin’s summary of scientific attempts to map out the connections between cognition and humor, “there is considerable evidence that exposure to humor affects [. . .] memory and creativity” (111). For instance, tenth-graders who had heard a popular comic’s act via a recording did appreciably better on two tests measuring verbal creativity than a control group of tenth-graders who had not received the same stimulus: “those in the humor

²⁸ Granted, this thesis is no film and, in general, is not funny, but is it possible that my attempts as an author at incorporating wit have lessened the pain of your perusal?

²⁹ Nineteenth-century minister Henry Ward Beecher preached that “[m]irth is God’s medicine” (qtd. in Shade 33).

condition obtained significantly higher scores on measures of fluency, flexibility, and originality, as well as total creativity” (102). In responding to the “straw man” that humor will detract from the all-important subject at hand, the Nilsens state that they first became interested in humor not to distract from but to enhance education: analyzing “deviant rather than regular sentences” was just more enjoyable, “and the learning was just as effective because students had to understand the expectations in order to recognize the deviations” (35). What is good for the mind is good for the school.

“Comedy is the flip side of culture and society.”
--Murray S. Davis

After church on a recent Sunday evening, I ran into a friend at Kroger; she was purchasing paper plates and plastic cups, while I was buying the necessities: yogurt, wheat thins, bananas, and bread but not beer.³⁰ I told her that I was in a rush to get home in order to watch *The Simpsons*. She then told me with a kind, Christian smile so as to soften her judgment, that her opinion of me had just dropped, to which I returned a similar, brotherly disparagement, informing her that one of our (probably godless) poet laureates, whose name I no longer remember, once said that the only reason he owned a television was to watch *The Simpsons*. Although you, the reader, are probably not entirely sure what this bit of banter proves, except that I’m right and she is wrong (Matthew 7:1), humor does say something about us as individuals—as the godless, Victorian essayist Thomas Carlyle said, laughter is “the cipher-key wherewith we decipher the whole man” (qtd. in Davis 1). But humor not only unveils the individual (and immortal) soul, since it is a social phenomenon comedy also reveals a (frequently sinful) society. And what

³⁰ Beer is Satan’s urine.

humor says about a culture can be an illuminating, important (and holy) quest in the schooling of the (secular) mind.

Humor is a social activity—as it takes a village to raise a child, so also does it take a village to have a village idiot. Martin calls laughter “inherently social,” one that performs such crucial functions for the human community that it “likely contributed to our evolutionary survival” (114). And since most of the subjects dealt with by humor are “inherently social,” sociologist Murray S. Davis argues for humor’s place in sociological studies because “humor laughs at the same phenomena sociology investigates” (150). For one example of “humor’s social nature,” Davis directs us to the theater, quoting the eminent critic Northrop Frye’s observation that unlike tragedy’s focus on the individual, “it is a commonplace of criticism that comedy tends to deal with characters in a social group” (150). But one need not put on his top hat and tails to hear this truth, for in the comfort of pajamas one can sit at home, alone, laughing along with a television sitcom’s laugh track; as former NBC president Sylvester Weaver said in a 1955 *Newsweek* interview, “No one likes to laugh alone, and when you sit in your own living room an honestly made laugh track can project you right into the audience, with the best seat in the house” (qtd. in Provine 143). Provine, who recognizes the inherently relational nature of laughter,³¹ describes a study he conducted utilizing the observations of 72 student volunteers. These undergraduates were to carry a small journal with them—their “laugh-logs”—to record when and under what circumstances they laughed:

³¹ “Laughter is about relationships” (Provine 44).

The *sociality* of laughing was striking. (Sociality refers to the ratio of social to solitary performance of a behavior.) My logbook keepers laughed about *30 times* more when they were around others than when they were alone—laughter almost disappeared among solitary subjects not exposed to media stimulation [such as television]. [emphasis in the original] (45)

Comedy has a communal nature, which is not unexpected in light of wo/mankind's tribal instinct—like a pack of hyenas, we laugh together.

The togetherness of our laughter does not break (us) up even when, on occasion, we laugh alone, by ourselves. Provine's study on "the social setting essential for laughter" had to decide how to treat laughter in response to media: "are you really 'alone' when sitting in your living room watching television, listening to the radio, or reading a book?" (44). Their answer? "Probably not" for the "feelings of fear, loathing, lust, love, and aggression produced by media is not a response to an arbitrary pattern of light, sound, or imagery, but the product of relationships you have formed with the characters and events portrayed." Granted, in this example one is, in effect, playing with imaginary friends, but this perhaps slightly discomfoting realization reminds us of our inability to break from our social character—even alone, we are together. As Davis points out, "most seemingly solitary laughter is actually 'pseudosocial,' requiring a split self or imagined others" (149).³² Physically alone, we laugh remembering a funny story told by a now absent friend, or we giggle anticipating the moment when we can tell the funny line to

³² He adds that "[w]ithout such self-division or self-multiplication, to tell a joke to oneself is ineffective" (149).

someone for jokes must be shared in order to be truly amusing. Although solitary levity is a rarity, its existence does not occur in social vacuum.

Comedy's social nature brings great value to a college classroom by providing a means by which we can explore society's values—an essential exploration to those who would use ridicule in order to effect reform. The former Brandeis University theater arts professor and *Time* magazine critic Louis Kronenberger noted “how frequently a joke can catch, better than a dozen treatises, the essence of a period, an entire civilization” (qtd. in Davis 2). And Joyce Hertzler, a sociologist, joined in singing the anthropological value of wit: “What a people laugh at at any given time can reveal what they perceive socially, what they are interested in, concerned about, amused by, disgusted with, preoccupied with” (qtd. in Davis 2). Using humor to explore cultural norms, while not an original idea, is a different focus than that taken by many pedagogues of humor who focus on making the teacher funny in order to bring about certain dynamics in a class, such as students feeling more comfortable. While an admirable goal, and one that I personally strive after, there are problems with this approach. For instance, not all teachers are funny—in fact, some are still waiting until after some Christmas future to begin smiling. But all teachers can analyze and therefore, to continue the Christmas metaphor, pedagogical Scrooges can maintain their bah-humbugness while still allowing their tiny Tims (and Tinas) the opportunity to examine Victorian culture, for example, through the humor of Dicken's *A Christmas Story*. (As a quick aside: what does it say about you, gentle reader, that you didn't laugh at my Dickensian analogy? Perhaps you're alone; if so, please call a friend and share this paragraph and a good laugh—you deserve it.)

What does someone else's laughter say about them? What does our laughter say about us? For instance, how might one interpret the mirth of one medieval town over the purchase of a neighboring town's criminal "so that they could have the fun of quartering him themselves" (Morreall 8). Or how might one view the age of reason when "it was common for the rich to amuse themselves by taking a carriage to an insane asylum to taunt the inmates" (8-9)? For that matter, what does it say about us that the comics section of our newspapers still feature *Marmaduke*—or worse, *Hi & Lois*? To give a more substantial illustration, consider the dilemma faced by National Book Award winning and Native American author Louise Erdrich who persistently deals with serious issues by means of a comic vision, which causes her to confront two pernicious stereotypes: she is an Indian and therefore solemn, and she is a female and therefore not funny.

When Nancy Walker, a professor of American literature and American studies, began to research the comic writings of American women she discovered that they "were left out or relegated to footnotes" (ix). Initially, she believed that this noticeable lack originated from "the same myopic perspective that had made us think for so long that there had been no female composers or scientists." But while that was a partial explanation for the female absence, Walker argues for "an even more basic reason: women aren't supposed to have a sense of humor." Indeed, if one considers women's humor in relation to humor's superiority theory, one can see the challenge women face in being humorists in patriarchal societies. If by telling jokes or witty stories, a person shows his or her superiority to the person who is the joke's target, then how truly culturally inappropriate it is for a woman, judged inferior by a patriarchy, to assert her

superiority? If a female is inferior, then against whom could she claim to be superior? Walker argues that women's wit contests "the basic assumptions about women that have justified their public and private subordination" (183). Women are supposed to be "passive, emotional beings"; but when they write humor, they "show themselves to be assertive and insightful, alert to the absurdities that affect not only their lives but the values of American culture in a larger sense." And in calling out these absurdities, female humorists of all times have discovered the truth of early-nineteenth century humorist Francis Whitcher's statement: "It is a very serious thing to be a funny woman" (qtd. in Walker 15).

But it is not only as a female author that Erdrich must challenge a ruling paradigm; as a member of the Ojibwa she is also subject to the fictitious image of the stoic squaw. In contrast to the "popular stereotype" of the solemn Indian, Vine Deloria, Jr., former Executive Director of the National Congress of American Indians, wonders "how anything is accomplished by Indians because of the apparent overemphasis on humor within the Indian world" (655). In *The Sacred Hoop*, feminist and American Indian author Paula Gunn Allen undercuts the same somber myth: "Humor is widely used by Indians to deal with life" (158). In light of a picture perhaps formed (as suggested by Gerald Vizenor) more by late-nineteenth century photographic techniques—"camera technology [. . .] required Indian subjects to remain unsmiling so that they could sit as still as possible while the shutter was held open" (Patterson 163)—than one informed by actual experience with Indian culture, it is not surprising that Erdrich's humor has sometimes been misunderstood or missed entirely by those outside the Native American community. As Nancy Patterson points out, "early reviewers of Erdrich's novels missed

the humorous elements”; while “literary critics tended to characterize *Love Medicine* as ‘devastating,’ [. . .] tribal people saw it as ‘funny’” (162). Erdrich’s continued use of humor challenges the stereotyping of both women and American Indians: her comic fiction chops away at the stoic, cigar-holding Indian statue, while also stripping away the image of the always angry, bra-burning, out-to-castrate feminist.

“[M]en have been wise in many different modes,” wrote Dr. Samuel Johnson, “but they have always laughed in the same way” (“Humour” 687). While the biological mechanics of giggling, snickering, and guffawing have remained a constant, the content of their comedy has remained in flux. For the critical, querying, satiric mind this is an exceptional find, for through the changing fates of humor values can be seen and questioned—satiric writing, like all writing, can become a means of inquiring about the world. But in order to see the questioning side of satire, we must first inquire into its rhetoric.

If satire is difficult to define, so, too, is rhetoric. In this political season,³³ the word “rhetoric” seems to drop (like the Dow) into every newscast segment about our national “leaders”—McCain softens his rhetoric, Obama ups his rhetoric. But what is rhetoric? When I tell family and friends that my degree focuses on composition and rhetoric, I always must explain just what it is that I’m studying; and to be candid, I’m not always sure. In fact, to be more candid than any graduate student should be, I “signed on” to rhet/comp as a major when I only understood “comp” and had only an inkling about

³³ The author—me—wrote this section during the days leading up to the election of Senator Obama, or Senator McCain, or Congressman Barr, or Pastor Chuck Baldwin, or Mr. Ralph Nader, or perennial favorite, Write-in.

“rhet.” My widely shared confusion is grounded in rhetoric’s long, complex, and controversial history. In the Genesis Chapter One of my rhetorical bible, *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*, editors Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg admit that “[r]hetoric is a complex discipline” with a “number of overlapping meanings”; they suggest that rather than attempting to confine rhetoric to one description, it is better to “look at the many definitions it has accumulated [. . .] and to attempt to understand how each arose and how each still inhabits and shapes the field” (1)—to which all Aristotle’s children say, Amen. For some, rhetoric is just a book: a required text for a required and uninspiring class. For some, rhetoric is just flim-flam: a manipulative speech devoid of sincerity. For others, rhetoric is just word choice: a synecdoche here, a trope there, and everywhere—like the loamy, clayish dirt and Kentucky blue grass upon which we bipeds take our two steps one step at a time; like the star-pegged, overhanging firmament of the cerulean heavens—a rhetorical flourish. But for others, rhetoric has a broader, more encompassing and positive connotation. For me, rhetoric is about the pursuit, probability, and presentation of ideas.

My broad view of rhetoric comes down to the difficulty—impossibility—of separating the creation of ideas from the formation of language to communicate those ideas. Putting aside but not disregarding “gut feelings” and “intuition,” my mind knows, mediates, ponders, and analyzes ideas, knowledge, and truth through language; at least initially, my thoughts are composed of silent, unseen, unspoken, sometimes complete, sometimes fragmented, but never conforming-to-MLA style sentences. I only know my ideas through language, and I can only communicate those ideas through some form of language. My mind must determine how its ideas can be known to other minds through

its choice of language, knowing the risks involved in “mere” word choice; if connotation is everything, then language choice cannot only succeed or fail to persuade, it can accomplish or flop at communication itself. Thus, even if rhetoric is “reduced” to just being about language choice, it inherently remains a field devoted to ideas, for ideas are formed in and can only be known through language.

I am under no pretense that what I just wrote proves that I am the next Hegel, Kant, or Descartes. The connection between language, ideas, and rhetoric is not earth shattering and perhaps need not even be stated except that at times it seems to be forgotten. For when rhetoric is reduced to a question that you need not even answer—it’s just rhetorical—or the choice by political spin gurus to be nasty or nice, then some defense needs to be made of rhetoric, the now deposed third arm of the medieval trivium, as something greater. Language and knowledge are intertwined in a Gordian knot that cannot be unknotted—and rhetoric seeks both.

If rhetoric concerns itself with inquiry, then so, too, does satire for it is widely acknowledged as a rhetorical art: Huntington Research Scholars Edward A. Bloom and Lillian D. Bloom write, “As a persuasive art, satire reveals essential parallels with the formal rhetoric codified by Aristotle, Quintilian, and Cicero” (20-21). While some works on satiric rhetoric focus largely on its word choices, Dustin Griffin’s *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction* most helpfully does not. Instead, taking a broader view of rhetoric, Griffin looks not only at the display (performance) and play (playfulness) of satire, which is a kind of “rhetorical contest” (71), but also at satiric rhetoric as provocation and inquiry. Griffin questions what he calls the “[c]onventional satiric theory,” established by a

confluence of theorists in the 1960s, which claims that satirists do their work “in a world of clear standards and boundaries” (34). In this view, the ink and page of the satirist is equivalent to their worldview: all is black and white. The satirist is a binary oppositionist, clear in his view that there is right and wrong, truth and error, good and evil. The verbal warrior of wit soldiers in the Lord’s (or for Voltaire, Not-the-Lord’s) army. But Griffin opposes this view as inaccurate and too simplistic: “we should resist reducing the satirist to the kind of single-mindedness and tunnel vision that we expect in no other writer” (39). Instead, we should read the classic satirists again, noticing the questions they often raise, and the answers they frequently do not provide: “satire is often an ‘open’ rather than a ‘closed’ form, [. . .] concerned rather to inquire, explore, or unsettle than to declare, sum up, or conclude” (95). Griffin’s point about the literature of classic satire has great relevance for the composition of modern satire; in fact, I believe his point contradicts the way I have taught satire in the past.³⁴ I tended to emphasize picking a target and then ridiculing it to reform it; unfortunately, I do not recall a similar emphasis on how a student’s satire might easily lead to question marks rather than periods. But satiric writing need not be about resolution—as more than one scholar points out, closure is often difficult for satirists. When satire’s rhetoric is seen as investigation and not just vindication, then our students are freed to pick their targets and take aim while still raising questions, perhaps even questioning their very arrow.

³⁴ And by “the past,” I melodramatically mean last semester.

“Isn’t it ironic?”
--Alanis Morissette

When we think of humor, we often think of its potential to miss its mark, making an audience less and not more receptive to a message. When I ask a class for the pros and cons of humor, they do not accentuate the positive. Instead, at first, they delineate the negative: it might not be funny; it might be out of place in a serious essay; it might offend. Indeed, one takes a chance that his or her ethos might be euthanized if a proffered joke does not slay its audience. Nancy Bell, a linguist at Washington State University, found that 44% of people who heard one particular joke responded in an “impolite” manner with “attacks intended to result in the social exclusion or humiliation of the speaker, punctuated on occasion with profanity, a nasty glare or even a solid punch to the arm” (Geranios). And what was this horrible humor? A question about chimneys, “What did the big chimney say to the little chimney?” that has for an answer: “Nothing, chimneys can’t talk.” Humor is risky. But while we may think of the possible negatives, satire’s humor also offers cover; it provides a socially acceptable way of releasing aggression—I’d like to punch you, but I can’t, and so I turn you into a punch line.

Humor’s attack takes place within the subversive—yet safe—atmosphere of carnival. In carnival, roles are changed, power structures are overturned, and life is reversed, and all without any punishment being laid upon the players. In *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin states that “all hierarchical precedence” was suspended during carnival and that “all were considered equal” (10). Carnival was a time when “[t]he utopian ideal and the realistic merged.” These celebrations achieve their equality through an inversion brought about by laughter. Commenting on contemporary Brazil’s

“ritual of reversal,” anthropologist Richard G. Parker calls carnival “a world of laughter, of madness, and of play, in which the established order of daily life dissolves in the face of an almost utopian anarchy” (qtd. in Sanders 155). Carnival, which according to Bakhtin is “organized on the basis of laughter” (8), achieves its societal disruption through comedy, not solemnity. The humbling, equalizing nature of laughter takes away fear. If we have nothing to fear but fear itself, perhaps those in power have everything to fear in laughter itself; as Bakhtin states, “Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it” (*Dialogic* 23). Laughter provides the cover for a very public, joyous, if perhaps only temporary, secret-op mission to change the world. And often the wit that would rule the world is delivered with a straight—and ironic—face.

Not that you even care, but a lot of research has gone into irony (and sarcasm). For instance, doctors have discovered the place in the brain that detects sarcasm, so if you didn’t get my sarcasm in the previous sentence, please consult your family physician. Except if you are a child.³⁵ Children do not have the ability to grasp irony until they are around six years old, and they will not comprehend ironic humor until even later—until around ages eight to nine, the little Einsteins just don’t get it (Martin 246). But they’re not alone. Irony, one of satire’s central tropes, is notoriously difficult to catch or, for that matter, to sing. As several have argued, Allanis Morissette’s hymn to irony, “Ironic,” offers up few to no actual instances of irony. Now, wouldn’t that be ironic.

³⁵ If you are a child, congratulations on your ability to read, and your good taste for choosing this particular tome; now, put the book back on the shelf and run along.

Not all satire is ironic, and not all irony is satiric (or sarcastic, or humorous); but satires so frequently use irony that it is considered one of its standard tropes. In fact, not to be unkind or impolite, but one could make the case that since they so frequently take on an ironic persona, and become whom they are not, that all satirists are liars. Of course, all fiction operates under the conceit of a type of deceit: novelists, too, take on a persona, a person that is not themselves. We may call him Ishmael, but the omnipresent narrator (yet strangely, frequently absent character) no more exists than the book's titled whale: Melville is wearing a mask. All fiction is pretend. And for that matter, so is some "non" fiction, which can assert facts while distorting reality: memoirs can misinform and documentaries deceive while dramas speak truth. The satirist, as Feinberg points out, justifies his tendency to caricaturize on the basis that "[t]he caricature is a more accurate representation of the victim than his actual appearance" (*Introduction* 117). The problem for satire is not that it "lies," for all fiction is pretense; the problem for satire is its frequent misperception—a misunderstanding caused, in part, by its irony. People pick up a novel and understand it to be a novel; people pick up the *New York Times* and understand it to be news; people pick up *The DaVinci Code* by Dan Brown and know that it's craptrap. But when they pick up a satire, they are not entirely sure what to do. Is Swift really calling for a cannibalization of wee Irish lads and lassies? Do the editors of *The New Yorker* actually believe that Senator Obama is a closet Muslim extremist?³⁶ If so, why did they endorse him for president? Did Obama actually say he would "salute" the national anthem if it were Coke's old anthem, "I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing"?

³⁶ See the July 21, 2008 cover by artist Barry Blitt, "The Politics of Fear."

People frequently misread parodic ambiguity. But rather than satiric irony being a weakness, it is a strength.

Satiric irony provides a valuable point of entry into some of the oldest questions of rhetoric, for in asking our students to dissemble, we invite them into an ancient discussion about ethos. Was not Socrates' diatribe against the sophists that they showed no integrity in the positions they took, and that the face they presented to the audience was not theirs but that of the highest bidder or the popular/powerful position? By asking our students to take on the persona of one they are not in order to persuade an audience, we are asking them to play a quite sophisticated role, and yet one whereby they argue for their understanding of truth. In fact, the "dishonest" face the satirist takes is more true than the "honest" face many a politician presents. A satirist lies but tells you through the understood "rules" of the genre he is using that he is lying; a politician lies but tells you he is telling the truth. Who is the real dissembler? Further, the dissembling nature of satiric irony allows students to try on a voice that is not theirs, which is a helpful practice as they begin to take on another voice that is not naturally theirs—the voice(s) of academic discourse(s). The style and format of a formal undergrad literary analysis is not the way they talk; it is not the way they write; instead, they text, IM, or email. In fact, we should be candid—the way we want them to talk or write is not the way many, most, or nearly all of them will walk and write in the future.³⁷ Satiric irony provides a useful workout for a principle that will affect their writing in and out of college. At times in your writing you must take on a persona—it will not be you—in order to achieve your

³⁷ Richard Braddock challenged the hegemony of the necessity of the topic sentence for clarity in writing, by revealing that less than half of 25 non-academic, professionally written works had them, and of them that did, less than half were "simple and direct" (Reynolds 109).

real end. And yet, working within the constraints, you can make it your own. You can learn to code-switch.

By causing our young satirists to take on a mission most covert, irony can provide them with much needed protective cover.³⁸ In an excellent 1996 article for *College Teaching* encouraging satiric writing, Butler University's Carol Reeves praises satire's ability to land its punch in an "indirect" manner (15), thus allowing the author to escape "accusations that she is being unfair because she is 'only joking, after all. And surely you can take a joke.'" When "[c]riticism is combined with humor" our young Jonathan Swift or Tina Fey or Sherman Alexie can experience "an enjoyable release of frustration without the fear of retaliation" that accompanies a more direct attack. Interestingly, some research has found that not only is ironic speech seen as funnier than direct speech, but criticism given via irony tends to be received less negatively (Martin 120): "irony seemed to mute the message contained by literal language," and "ironic criticism was perceived as less aggressive and insulting." Perhaps, the targets just did not get it—but isn't that the point? No, actually, that is not the point. The point is that irony allowed the person to say it—it gave them the cover they needed to make their point. The humor of satire provides cover, and the rhetoric of satire supplies weapons. With their backs covered, and their minds armed, our young satirists can take aim at targets that they perceive as needing reform. And in doing such, they follow an honorable tradition that has the potential to effect positive change. As Vine Deloria, Jr. said concerning the positive impact of humor in the Native American community: "[s]atirical remarks often circumscribe problems so

³⁸ See Linda S. Bergmann's "Funny Papers: Initiation and Subversion in First-Year Writing" (1995) and Lori Chamberlain's "Bombs and Other Exciting Devices, Or The Problem of Teaching Irony" (1989).

that possible solutions are drawn” that would not have made “sense if presented in other than a humorous form.”

In light of my having earlier used Bakhtin, I feel free to bring this chapter to an end with a scatological and grotesque transition: as everyone defecates, so does everyone laugh, and in our shared language of satiric humor, we help our students to share their own voices. As opposed to academic discourse as practiced by jargonistas, satire is not a foreign language to people who have been exposed to it ever since they were first allowed to put *Shrek* in the DVD player, or explore the under-sea world of *Sponge Bob Square Pants* or, for heaven’s sake, watch *Veggie Tales*—on some level, they know the language of parody and satire, which is great because we in the academy speak satire, too, and not just when we discuss the *Rape of the Lock*. Perhaps satiric writing can serve as a bridge between Gerald Graff’s “studentspeak” and the academy’s “arguespeak,” bringing some reform to the academy itself. Since satire is so embedded into our pop, high, low, and sub cultural discourses, our students, while probably never having ever written a satire, bring with them a great deal of exposure to it—it is a part of their language (and of course our language, too, since we share the same macro culture). But since satire is the language of argument and rhetoric and art and literature, it is also a part of academic discourse; hence, given that we both speak satire as an almost second tongue, we have the ability to use it to speak to each other, helping eliminate the divide between us and them, making them and us just us (or them).

Anna Jameson, nineteenth-century writer and feminist, once had a character of hers ask for someone to show her “that one human being who has been made essentially better by satire!” (Bogel 3). But perhaps the person she found elusive is no further away than the nearest writing class. Satiric writing is neither a Pandora’s box of evil nor a panacea for all our ills. But by encouraging students to take risks under the cover of laughter, by helping them understand various rhetorical strategies, and by pointing them in the direction of reform, satire can certainly help teach rhetoric and composition—and thus save not the world, but maybe, just maybe, the universe.

"Delight to reason join'd"

Chapter the Third

A brief, epic narrative in which the hero describes his satirical pedagogy

"Teaching is a compulsion to repeat what one has not yet understood."

--Barbara Johnson, literary critic

"Good morning. It's 9:10, and this is English 100. How many of you are familiar with TS Eliot? What poems of his have you read?"

A few raise their hands. No one can remember any titles.

"Mr. Eliot is considered one of the greatest poets in both American and English literature. He's written a favorite of mine, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." If you've ever endured the musical *Cats*"—a few, mostly males, laugh—"I'm glad to see that you agree with my verb, 'endure.' If you seen *Cats* then you've experienced something to do with T. S. Eliot for it is loosely based on one of his poems.

"We are going to begin by reading part of one of his masterpieces: "The Wasteland." As we read, you will want to consider the poem in light of the postmodernist/modernist divide; does Eliot see or provide any kind of metanarrative? And some theorists attempt a postcolonial reading of this passage, and so you will want to look and see if Eliot ever 'others' a group that has been disenfranchised by the institution of colonial power. Are there subalterns in the text dealing with the hegemony of patriarchy? And, of course, you will want to look for classical allusions—Eliot loves Greek, Roman, and Norse myths—and various rhetorical tropes: irony and the synecdoche are two to keep on an eye out for. All right, let's begin reading.

I fake my way through the pronunciation of the introductory Greek at the beginning and German in the middle of the first paragraph. I look up occasionally to watch their reactions. All their heads are down. No one is looking up. Everyone is reading. Some are worried. No one is smiling.

I come to the end of the section I've copied for them. Mr. Eliot is waxing eloquently in German.

"Okay, can someone translate the German for us?"

Pause. No one.

"Can someone translate the Greek at the beginning?"

A couple of nervous smiles, both shaking their head no.

"Did anyone notice a synecdoche?"

Same few nervous smiles.

"What about the postcolonial reading? Anything?"

Nothing.

"Okay, let me ask you another question: how is class going so far? Are you liking it?" One candid soul apologizes, "I'm sorry, but I have no idea what you said at the beginning; it was like a foreign language."

"How many of the rest of you feel the same?"

Multiple arms go up.

"The good news is that this is not what this class is going to be like. I tried to imagine what a worse case introductory English class would like to you, and that's what we started with."

And now the class laughs.

I let them in on the secrets of my poetic discourse: I have never read more of “The Wasteland” than what I just read for them. I don’t understand it. It’s notoriously difficult—a difficulty intended by the author himself. “Eliot did not wish for a reader to go away saying, ‘I really like how he made everything rhyme.’”

We go over their hopes and fears for the class. I tell them what will and will not take place in the rest of the semester that will be unlike and like the first few minutes of the class: I won’t lecture; our reading, while challenging, will not be impossible; I don’t know your names, but I will learn them; we won’t sit in lines but in a democratically arranged circle where all are equals.

We will study humor, and in particular the type of humor with which I started the class: satire.³⁹

³⁹ Against current MLA conventions, but in honor of footnote-loving, satirical novelist David Foster Wallace, who passed away this fall, and so as to not pull a James Frey and have the integrity of my thesis break apart into a million little pieces, allow me to state that my narrative in this chapter is based on a conflation of four classes spread out over two semesters, solidly configured by an imperfect recollection, and retold in such a way that, at times, I come across as a more skilled and eloquent pedagogue than I really am—my narrative, while truthful, is partially based on the scientific inaccuracy of memory and the sinful pride of vanity. And while I cannot justify my pride, perhaps I am on safer grounds, or at least on grounds shared by many others, in justifying my use of memory, for there are truths that cannot be captured on lie detectors or tape recorders—truths that exist in the mind’s own formation and recollection. Is this narrative fiction? Any memoir is, in part, fiction; but some would say to those sitting in history’s glass house that fully objective history is itself solidly grounded in the ether. What you read here is an honest attempt at thoughtful representation, based on actual events. The goal of this chapter is not a straight, chronological recollection of things done; my goal is to share experiences and potentialities. This is creative non-fiction with emphasis first on “creative,” then on “non,” and only when needed to fill in holes, provide narrative readability, and make me look better than I am, “fiction.” And with that said, let us enter into a reflection on satiric writing in FYC, imperfectly based on a true and a developing story.

The purpose of my Introduction to Composition class is to introduce the students to academic writing: it says so right on the syllabus. With words borrowed straight from the university's course catalog, I tell them that English 100 "[e]mphasizes writing for a variety of rhetorical situations with attention to voice, audience, and purpose"; further, it "[p]rovides practice in development, organization, revision, and editing"; finally, it "[i]ntroduces research skills." And I believe that my class does all that. We talk about grammar and syntax. We have workshops and peer review. We edit. We at least touch on the substance and some of the minutia of MLA.

Again students, make SURE you cite all of your sources!" [. . .] [which you must place [. . .] conveniently next to or in the same region, if you will, as the assumed 'STOLEN' information. And DON'T YOU DARE forget to make that extra page to put a full collection of the jumbled mess of letters, placed in order so your teacher can type each and every one of them into her internet explorer to make sure no plagiarizing was present.⁴⁰

We have serious⁴¹ discussions over many of the same issues discussed in other classes: race, politics, religion, abortion. And through it all, we concentrate on writing as a process. At times I show them portions of my thesis, not because it is a work of art, but because it is like their essays: a work in progress. But as others choose cultural studies or

⁴⁰ At appropriate moments, I will be inserting excerpts from student satires. These are used with their permission.

⁴¹ Ron Powers describes how nineteenth-century American book critics, when they encountered the substantive humor of Mark Twain's *The Innocents Abroad*, had to wrestle "with something that few of them had expected between book covers, a kind of literary desegregation: humor released from the ghetto and allotted full citizenship; humor and 'serious' writing living in the same neighborhood" (277).

politics or literature or sentence diagrams around which to frame their classes, I choose humor. And although this is pretentious, allow me to quote myself, again from the syllabus:

This semester we will use humor as the theme for our critical and creative thinking, reading, and writing. While there will be laughs along the way, this will be a serious study that will help introduce various skills and concepts necessary for successful writing in college—we will approach this class as academic writers. But this class will not only prepare you for academic writing—hopefully, it will also spur you on as a writer for other areas of life. (Syllabus for my Fall 2008 E100 class)

This is not a class targeted at making jokes or developing stand-up comics. This is a class, whose theme is humor, but whose aim is to encourage crucial skills to help develop critical and creative writers.

Their first two major papers are fairly standard assignments—write a narrative, write an argumentative essay. In fact, they’re so traditional that they practically drip with the current bane of modern composition, the Scotch philosopher Alexander Bain’s modes of discourse.⁴² But I try to give a slight twist to both projects. While the narrative assignment focuses on typical concerns, such as organization (beginning/middle/end), introductions and conclusions, strong verbs, concrete nouns, and good description, I tell them that their narratives must be humorous: “It can be something funny that actually happened to you or someone you know, or you can make it up, or it can be about how

⁴² Or, according to “suggested” revisions “encouraged” by my thesis director of this sentence: “In fact, they’re so outmoded they kowtow to pre-modern Scotch philosopher Alexander Bain’s dubious modes of discourse.”

someone tried to be funny but failed. Regardless, your basic goal in writing this is to make us laugh.” But I add that even in their self-chosen story topics, several of which focus on public nudity⁴³ or the abuse of alcohol, that there can be matters and issues of substance—Swift loved the scatological, but he was also playing with ideas.

While some find writing a humorous narrative difficult, I do not recall collective groaning as I heard when I later announced the twist for their argumentative paper: “You must argue passionately, eloquently, and intelligently for the opposite of what you actually believe.” If they are pro-life,⁴⁴ they must argue for pro-choice; if they think homosexuals can marry, they must argue that they cannot. To complicate matters further, they must do what so many other successful communicators have done—at some point in their serious argument, they must appeal to their audience with a bit of humor.⁴⁵ The challenge here is that they are telling a joke whose target is themselves. One student asks how he can tell if something is funny since he doesn’t find the opposing view to be amusing; they are wrong, not funny. I suggest that he look for the other side’s bumper stickers, because their appeal is often humorous—“bumper snickers” is what Paul Harvey, I believe, called them (and forgive me for putting that piece of corn in your ears). My hope is that in the process of writing their opposing arguments they will come to understand their opponents better. Although some do alter their views, it does not

⁴³ A group parody paper on the subject of “sagging pants” featured various double-entendre names such as Jims Behind and Semore Hiney; in seeking to determine the purpose for the loose pants the paper asked, “Are you trying to get a little air flow?”

⁴⁴ For his satiric essay, one student took a pro-life view on the partial-birth abortion controversy, satirically arguing that “abortions” should be allowed to take place even later. He contended that since “we are a civilized society” we cannot kill up to any age, just age 10—and that year “that kid better be dam [sic] good.”

⁴⁵ As a minister friend of mine once told me (and perhaps he was quoting someone else): open their mouths with laughter and then cram down some truth.

necessarily convert them to the other side; but it does make them more fair, a vital quality in any persuasive and ethical argument. And it also helps set them up for taking on the ironic persona of a satirist: if they learn to take on the voice of another side in order to argue for it, they now can take on the voice of the other side in order to ridicule it.

How does a person go about teaching satire? I want to be clear in my answer to this question, making sure that it is properly nuanced: I don't know. Like most new teachers, I find myself scrambling to figure out what I'm going to do tomorrow, taking comfort in the old teacher-maxim that one need be but only one day ahead of one's students. In describing my efforts, I am not trying to codify my class as exemplary. I made and make plenty of mistakes. Last semester I taught them about satire without ever going into one of satire's foremost weapons, irony. Now isn't that ironic?⁴⁶ In my defense, I had a whole lesson planned on irony, but something happened, and I went with the flow, and irony got left behind. But this semester is different; this semester is better. They have read about irony (and satire, and parody), and have discussed Ms. Morrisette's song, and now my nascent satirists can let loose not only a dripping of sarcasm but also a tsunami of irony.

“[S]ome say it [global warming] will be the end of life, as we know it; this may not be such a bad thing. I for one am more of a summer guy, and global warming will achieve summer year round with out me having to move to Florida. Why would we want to try and stop a climate change, when that climate change is for the better?”⁴⁷

⁴⁶ A class on satire that does not use even one period to teach irony, yes, that is ironic.

⁴⁷ Student satire.

As I reflect on my teaching, I believe that there are four main questions that my students face as they turn their pens into swords or, since comedy is involved, turn their pens into guns that pop out little flags.

“What is satire?”

I apologize to satire’s protean nature, but at some point in teaching its complexity, I reduce⁴⁸ satire to a one-sentence definition: ridicule to reform. In my English 100 class, I am not speaking to English graduate students or faculty; I am not speaking, with only an occasional exception, to undergraduate English majors. I am speaking, most often, to eighteen- or nineteen-year-old students who, while they love to text (including during class), do not love to write. They have not read everything that I have read on the subject of satire (and I have not read everything that can be read), and I cannot expect them in four weeks to understand what many others and I still do not fully grasp. Like Feinberg, I need a working definition.

“Ridicule to reform” is too simplistic—and I tell them that:

“Not all satires employ humor, and satirists do not always or even typically bring about reform. And unlike other reformers, satirists often offer no alternative to the problem they attack.”

While the definition is inadequate, it is helpful. It does communicate the always critical and often humorous nature of satire—one *ridicules*. And since it targets *reform*, it also brings out the noble aim of satire, which in so doing helps the young writer to take

⁴⁸ I appreciate how Gerald Graff, current president of the MLA, in his *Clueless in Academe* (2004), acknowledges that teaching requires some level of being reductive: “there are legitimate reductions, useful and necessary simplifications that can be distinguished from those that seriously misrepresent and mislead” (137).

on a topic greater than “mean people stink.” By giving them a definition based on intent rather than form, they are challenged to rethink what for many of them is their default approach to scholastic composition; viewing satire as a goal and not a form undercuts the ability to simply fill in the outlined blanks of a five-paragraph essay. A satirist can use the ubiquitous form, but he or she will probably use it only to mock it. And perhaps if enough of them ridicule it, then maybe the 5 paragrapher will expire of old age, which would be worthwhile reform indeed.

One satirist took on ED (electrical device) abuse in her “How to be the most obnoxious student in class”: “[Y]ou should create a bubble for yourself within the classroom. You should be utilizing as many electronic devices which are distracting and mean that you pay as little attention as possible. These items include iPods, cell-phones, laptops, and game-boys (with the sound on). Also important to note, calculators, while they may contain fun time wasters, do not count. You want to look as though you are paying no attention so that everyone knows how obnoxious you are. If it is out of your budget to have as many electronic devices going at once while in class, do not despair there are other options. You can always perform a drum solo on the back of the chair of the person sitting in front of you [. . .]. Another low budget choice is sleeping, but you must not merely fall asleep. You must slump over onto your desk and snore [. . .]. Some pesky student who is ‘there to learn’ may even poke you and try to break you from your R. E. M. cycle but this should be merely taken as a compliment to how obnoxious you are being.”

“How do I write a satire?”

With satire defined as a goal and not a mechanical form, we can go on to play with forms, language, and ideas that will support the writer’s purpose. There is no bullet-pointed, how-to-write a satire handout, but there are examples.⁴⁹ We read classics—A Modest Proposal—and contemporaries—Joel Stein, *The Onion*, and children’s author Jon Scieszka. We watch as well as read—*Shrek*, *Team America*, *The Colbert Report*, *Thank You For Smoking*.

*“I would rather not die from second-hand lung cancer. If I am to get cancer, I would rather get it on my own with no help from some idiot with a death wish. So, how do we stop these people with an obvious reason to want to die a slow and painful death? I propose we go ahead and find a way to give them cancer, speed the process up a little.”*⁵⁰

As they watch and read, they see that satire is not alien. And as we read and watch, we look at comic techniques, false logic, and the need for concrete details. But not only do we look at others, we also write. To encourage some invention and reflection via free-writing, they write journal entries based on their readings, experiences, and class discussions. And in addition to their own individual satirical essays, they also work in small groups writing one essay, as a group, that parodies academic writing in order to learn not only about parody, satire’s cousin, but also to learn about and form a critique of what they understand as the demands of college-level writing.⁵¹

⁴⁹ See also Feinberg’s *Introduction to Satire*, which devotes five chapters to satire’s techniques.

⁵⁰ Student satire.

⁵¹ For one teacher’s use of a parody paper to help students learn academic discourse, see Kevin Boyle’s “Boning Up for the Research Paper: A Mock Trial” (1993).

“And you don’t have to have every question answered when you write a satire. Satirists don’t always provide answers; sometimes they just raise questions. You can do the same. In fact, when you turn these in I’ll want you to tell me the one big question you still have about your topic. Satires need not be old movies—black and white. There can be gray, and blue, and maroon, and yellow because the human condition is too complex for only two colors.”

“What do I write about?”

We go back to what one is attempting to do when he or she composes a satire.

“You’re critiquing something.⁵² You are saying that something just isn’t right. It’s off. It doesn’t work. That means you have to think about what you think and believe and feel. There’s research involved—your opinion needs to be informed, or you’ll be the one who’s getting ridiculed. But this is research about a topic you’re interested in, something that matters to you. So you don’t write something like this: *This guy is stupid. He is stupid because he is dumb. And he makes me laugh because he is so stupid. The end.* That is not satire.

“Or is it? It might be a satire of a really lame student essay. But instead of writing that crap, wipe it from your mind and flush it down a metaphorical toilet, and as it swirls away, stand up refreshed, cleansed, willing to go put something down on paper that’s actually worth reading. With apologies to my vegan friends, you want to pick a topic that’s got some meat. It’s got to be something not only needing but worth reforming.”

⁵² Again Feinberg’s *Introduction to Satire* is useful for it spends three chapters considering the materials from which writers draw their satires.

One time I was behind on a deadline for a paper. I met with my professor. He gave me both extra time to write it and the necessary motivation: “You’ve got to get mad.” I leave for the library, where I set up my computer, put in my earplugs, and watch again and again Toby Keith’s jingoistic, militaristic, (and possibly opportunistic) video for “The Angry American.” Watching Keith wrap himself in the flag while reducing the ideals of the American experiment to an uncomfortable combination of podiatry and proctology—we’ll put a boot where the sun doesn’t shine because “It’s the American way”—I become an angry American, and I write my paper.

“How do you write a satire? First, you’ve got to get mad.”

“There is Nothing Better than Sex,” according to one student’s ironic take on sexual ethics. A sex ed class results in his lothario persona realizing “how ridiculous the argument was to postpone intercourse and save your V-card.” He then goes on to divide and conquer each cautionary position concerning sexual relations. For condoms, they are “100% effective at smelling like lube and lacking the pleasure it claims to provide.” Concerning STDs, he accuses the fact-filled Power Point presenter of leaving out the most important piece of information: “sex feels good, really good.” And what about the possibility of pregnancy? The author recommends “hook ups”: “When hooking up there are no worries of what to do when she gets pregnant, having to call back, or the afterward cuddle (who the hell wants to snuggle? I don’t want to be next to a naked chick, I want to be in one.)” If a child results, don’t take responsibility for “[g]etting a girl pregnant will not ruin your mojo, but raising your kid will.”

“Why should I write a satire?”

I ask my classes how many of them will ever write another one. Only a few in the morning class predict a satire in their future, while a plurality in the mid-day class prophesy a future parody. I personally do not see them doing this again, at least not in college, for a grade from a professor.

“Probably, for most of you, this is your first and last time writing one. But here’s why you should. Satire is a dominant mode of conversation, not only in our society, and not only in our politics, but in history, the arts, literature, movies, books, magazines, television, cartoons, and even at times in personal conversation. It is part of the way that we talk with, near, and about what matters to us. And in the process of not only reading and watching but actually writing a satire, you learn its inner workings. Granted, you may never write another, but in the process you learn a bit about how to write, how to argue, and how humor works. And since humor reveals a society’s mores, what it finds funny, and what it doesn’t, says a lot about what that society values. But in looking at what you laugh at, what you choose as your target, you learn about yourself.”

And maybe, just maybe, they learn that they value something enough to take some risks, to put something out there, to challenge power, in order to try and bring about change that we can believe in.

“That’s why you should write a satire—that, and if you don’t, you’ll flunk.”

**He ends:
An Epilogue**

*This book has extended to a greater length than I expected or desired.
But the reader or hearer who finds pleasure in it will not think it long.
He who thinks it long, but is anxious to know its contents, may read it in parts.
He who does not care to be acquainted with it need not complain of its length.
--Saint Augustine of Hippo, *On Christian Doctrine**

To be candid, I'm rather amazed at the foolish boldness I have shown in making my thoughts public. I have spoken in numerous areas authoritatively, although in truth, the only area about which I can speak with real authority is my abundant ignorance. And as I began this work with gratefulness, so perhaps I should close it with apologies, for I fear that I have been too simplistic in my understanding, let alone discussion of various concepts and characters throughout this book including, but not limited to, the Puritans and Freud—thus proving that satire truly makes for strange bedfellows.

As I come to a close, I realize that my earlier dream of someone actually reading this has now become my nightmare. What if someone for some strange reason finds the singular copy available to the public, the one copy collecting dust somewhere in the stacks of the university library? What if she checks it out? What if she reads it? Although I should have placed this concern in the front matter, I place it here now as a last resort, hoping that the odd soul who actually reads MA theses will also have as another quirk the need to read the end first. If this describes you, then please stop reading here.

Appendix

A Critical Look at Robert Penn Warren's New (and old) Criticism on Satire

"I just don't think of myself as a critic."

--Robert Penn Warren

He would go on to win the Pulitzer Prize—three times—and become America's first Poet Laureate, but when he was a Rhodes Scholar pursuing his B.Litt. degree at Oxford, Robert Penn Warren had trouble deciding upon a topic for his thesis. His problems might have begun with the selection of Percy Simpson as his supervisor. Warren biographer Joseph Blotner describes Oxford dons as frequently being "eccentric" and sometimes "witty and generous," but with Simpson, Warren had "no such luck" (88). The erudite, sixty-three-year-old Simpson whose published work included the page-turning *Shakespeares's Punctuation* and the mesmerizing *Proof-Reading in the Sixteenth, Seventeenth, and Eighteenth Centuries*, was, according to Blotner, "a stunningly incompetent thesis supervisor." One of Simpson's first questions for his southern-Kentucky born and raised pupil was "Are you Australian or American?" Upon his answer, Simpson informed the twenty-three-year-old Warren, "No American has ever distinguished himself with us." With this start, it is perhaps not surprising that Simpson rejected Warren's first two topics for his thesis, while Warren rejected Simpson's one suggestion. After these three non-starts, both agreed upon a thesis whose focus would be an Elizabethan playwright and poet John Marston. But it would not be Marston's plays or poems about which Warren would write; instead, his thesis would focus on Marston's satires. Warren ostensibly countermands his later involvement with the formalistic school of literary theory labeled New Criticism, which often held satire in low esteem.

Although its popularity has waned, New Criticism was the leading literary theory in American universities during the middle decades of the twentieth century. The *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (2001) calls New Criticism the “dominant mode of modern criticism against which much later theory typically defines itself” (Leitch 18). The “academic Establishment,” according to Marxist critic Terry Eagleton, so wholeheartedly embraced New Criticism that it came to seem “the most natural thing in the literary critical world; indeed it was difficult to imagine that there had ever been anything else” (49, 50). But there had been something else.⁵³ Prior to New Criticism, literary studies often focused on the history or biography of the writer, sometimes to the neglect of the writing itself. In *Critical Theory Today*, Lois Tyson describes how a former professor of hers illustrated this type of class:

[S]tudents attending a lecture on Wordsworth’s ‘Elegiac Stanzas’ (1805) could expect to hear a description of the poet’s personal and intellectual life: his family, friends, enemies, lovers, habits, education, beliefs, and experiences. “Now you understand the meaning of ‘Elegiac Stanzas,’” they would be told, without anyone in the room, including the lecturer, having opened the book to look at the poem itself. (118)

Begun as a countermovement against a perceived overemphasis on biographical and historical background, New Critics demanded a new, limited focus on a work of literature as a stand-alone item with meaning inherent to itself, a meaning not dependent on knowledge of the author’s life, intent, or time; this is what made New Criticism, which is

⁵³ And there would be something to follow. Eagleton helpfully suggests three general periods in modern literary theory up until the time of his writing (1983): “a preoccupation with the author (Romanticism and the nineteenth century); an exclusive concern with the text (New Criticism); and a marked shift of attention to the reader in recent years” (74).

now old, “new.” Reading outside the text in order to understand the text violates a central tenant of New Criticism: whether it be a play, a poem, or a work of fiction, an interpreter must largely confine him- or herself to the work alone in order to discover its meaning.⁵⁴

And one of the early preachers of this new hermeneutics was Robert Penn Warren who, along with Cleanth Brooks, his collaborator on some of the century’s most influential college textbooks, *Understanding Poetry* and *Understanding Fiction*, was named by an associate from Yale as the “Castor and Pollux of the New Criticism” (qtd. in Grimshaw 8).⁵⁵

But this emphasis on the intrinsic form of the poem, play, or novel, and the corresponding de-emphasis on its extrinsic world, caused tension for New Critics trying to be true to their principles while also facing the often unavoidable historical nature of satires; New Criticism’s dominant approach was not good news for historical satires. According to Connery and Combe, the conflict facing proponents of the (then) new school of literary interpretation of choosing between following or breaking their literary code led to satire being “generally ignored” (4); there was, in effect, a “malign neglect” by mid-twentieth century New Critics of satire. What caused satire’s ill fortunes under New Criticism’s reign? Both satire’s intention and historicity cause problems for those who wish to remain just with the words in black and white: “satire’s insistence upon its historical specificity, its torrential references to the peculiarities of the particular

⁵⁴ New Critical methods worked best with poetry, which, according to Eagleton, “is of all literary genres the one most apparently sealed from history” (51). He adds, “It would be difficult to see *Tristram Shandy* or *War and Peace* as tightly organized structures of symbolic ambivalence.”

⁵⁵ Grimshaw explains this allusion: “In Greek mythology Castor and Polydeuces (Pollus) were twin brothers whose sister was Helen and whose father was Zeus. They were [. . .] deified for their heroism in battle” (205). He adds that “[b]ecause of their textbooks, Brooks and Warren were considered leaders in the New Critical approach to literature.”

individuals in the society that it represents [. . .] worked to exclude it from consideration of those who insisted on the self-containment of literary texts” (4); “satire more than other genres emphasizes—indeed, is defined by—its intention (attack), an intention that again refers the reader to matter outside the text” (5). Satire has a difficult time staying limited to just what is on a page—it tends to leave the text in search of something outside it that needs ridiculing or reforming, and it tends to connect the text to someone outside it in order to hit its target. As a result, satire “suffered at the hands of critics who wished to exclude history from literature” (11), and from those who would label the desire to know that author’s intentions a “fallacy.”⁵⁶

If New Critics tended to ignore satire, almost all critics of Warren have tended to ignore his thesis on Marston’s satires. In “‘A Critical Sense Worthy of Respect’: John Marston and the Early Poetics of Robert Penn Warren” (*Style* 2002), John C. Van Dyke calls the work in Oxford “one of the most obscure moments in Warren’s career” (203), describing Blotner’s very limited references to the thesis as “[t]o my knowledge, [. . .] the first published mention of Warren’s thesis” (219).⁵⁷ Indeed, it is not only critics who overlook it, “[f]or all practical purposes, Warren seems to have forgotten about John Marston” (203). During a lifetime of interviews in which he would be asked about his growth as a critic, “Warren never referred to the thesis nor to Marston and his satires,” this in spite of the fact that he retained an “interest in Elizabethan poetry and metaphysical poetics.” He does not anthologize Marston in his and Brooks’

⁵⁶ “Intentional fallacy” was an expression created by two prominent New Critics, William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, “to refer to the practice of basing interpretations on the expressed or implied intentions of authors, a practice they judged to be erroneous” (Murfin & Ray 218).

⁵⁷ Charlotte Beck describes Van Dyke’s *Style* article as “the only paper yet published on Marston’s thesis” (23).

Understanding Poetry, and according to Van Dyke, Warren “never returned to the subject in any of his subsequent critical writing.” When Warren left Oxford, he appears to have left Marston behind.⁵⁸ And yet Warren’s treatment of Marston’s satires is intriguing for what it reveals about Warren’s development as a New Critic—satire’s twentieth-century opponent through neglect.

To be kind, Warren’s *A Study of John Marston’s Satires* is not his most compelling read. Blotner states that a “sympathetic reader [. . .] would understand why, after five years of graduate study, its author did not relish two more years and another scholarly treatise” (108). In *Robert Penn Warren, Critic* (2006), Maryville College’s Charlotte H. Beck, who praises Warren’s work as a sign of “an erudite scholar who could manipulate sources and painstakingly document them as well as any of his professors” (5), admits that “[c]learly Warren [. . .] would have preferred to study Marston’s drama rather than his satires” (22) and while “he pursued the task competently,” he did so “with less than scholarly enthusiasm” (2).⁵⁹ The thesis has three chapters, stretching over seventy-three pages, and six appendices, covering another thirty-five pages; throughout, it is heavily annotated, with footnotes sometimes taking up over half of the page.⁶⁰ Chapter one situates Marston’s satires in the context of both ancient satiric models and then current didactic pamphlets. Chapter two goes into the quarrelsome relationship between Marston and Anglican bishop and fellow satirist, Joseph Hall. And chapter three

⁵⁸ Although Yale offered him a fellowship, after completing his studies at Oxford Warren decided to become a writer rather than “spending all of his ‘time trying to put salt on the tail of the academic albatross’” (Blotner 107).

⁵⁹ While at Yale, prior to sailing for Oxford, he wrote to a friend, “Of course what I really wanted was to get in an environment where men were actually doing creative writing, but Yale is not the place for that, I learn too late” (qtd. in Blotner 82).

⁶⁰ Chapter one has 130 footnotes over 27 pages; chapter two has 29 footnotes over 16 pages; and chapter three has 57 footnotes over 27 pages.

closes out the main body of the text by describing Marston's view on literature. Warren's own view on Marston's role in the history of literature is one of qualified, cautious, and at times almost-minimal praise. For instance, he allows that Marston's "awkward use of the decasyllabic couplet may have had some slight weight in fixing it as the conventional form for verse satire" (27).⁶¹ When he writes of Marston's depiction of the "Elizabethan street scene," he admits that while it is "blurred and distorted," it "has a few striking portraits which can still engage the attention." The last sentence of his first chapter perhaps captures this near damning-with-faint-praise approach: "Marston's relation to Hall and other contemporaries and his critical opinions have some slight bearing on literary history." While Warren will conclude his thesis arguing that "Marston brought to these matters, as well as to the more specific items of discussion, a real enthusiasm for literature and a critical sense worthy of respect" (72), he admits that Marston's place in English satire is "not a very important one" (27).

Although Warren might not see Marston's satires as truly significant, Van Dyke argues for a new importance to be given Warren's thesis: "What saves Warren's thesis from insignificance is its engagement with the critical and theoretical issues raised by Marston's satires and its indication of the nature and shape of Warren's own poetics" (203). In his forgotten thesis, we get a taste of what will become "new": "It contains in nascent form the central concerns of what became Warren's own theory of poetry, that is, the preference for the psychological rather than the formal difference" (218). But for my

⁶¹ But Warren concerning Marston's foe, Joseph Hall, Warren adds, "Hall's more expert handling of the form and his greater popularity would seem to indicate him as the most considerable contemporary influence in that direction" (27).

purposes, what is striking about his thesis is that at the dawn of New Criticism, Warren does not fit the stereotypical image of a New Critic.

As has already been noted, the fact that he examines instead of ignoring satire is itself contrary to typical formalist concerns. But more than that, throughout his thesis Warren veers away from what will become key emphases of New Critical thought. For instance, on occasion, Warren comes close to committing the intentional fallacy, referring to the author's intention, speaking of how in the pamphlets of the day "[t]he reformatory impulse had discovered [. . .] another and probably more effective expression" (11); additionally, he closes his first chapter with a defense of Marston's motives: "after making certain allowances for the violent exaggeration, there appears to be little reason to doubt the fundamental earnestness of his intention, or to define him as an affected opportunist" (27). In addition to speaking of the author's intentions, Warren also focuses on the satirist's world. While there is very little biographical material—to borrow from Tyson's former professor, we know next to nothing about Marston's "family, friends, enemies, lovers, habits, education, beliefs, and experiences"—the thesis very much leaves the intrinsic text for the external world of historical events, in particular, the Elizabethan world: "the source of his material lay largely in the pamphlet literature" (16). At one point, like any good historian, he locates, with "some degree of certainty," one of the pamphlets used by Marston.⁶² And while Warren may deal with a formalist's typical concern for theme (pages 5-10),⁶³ he relates the satire's inner world to one outside the

⁶² "Lodge's *Wits Miserie and the Worlds Madnesse; Discovering the Deuils Incarnat of this Age*, which was published in 1596" (17).

⁶³ Actually, the unmarried Warren was not impressed by one of Marston's themes: "As has already been said, he usually worked out the theme for a satire by a rather mechanical use of the illustrative method, which lost much of the dramatic effect found in Juvenal's

text: “Classical satire provided a method and in some cases the themes for Marston, but it was the realistic pamphlet literature of the time which chiefly influenced him, as well as the other satirists, in his characters. In a sense it was through this medium that the older satire touched the new” (11). The entire second chapter uses the satires as a means of sifting through Marston’s impolite attack on Hall, attacks that Warren labels “personal” (30, 37-38), “insulting” (38), “obscene”,⁶⁴ and in one place, “disgraceful” (39). Extrinsic history so permeates the work that Marston scholar Enjer Jensen, in an unpublished letter to Blotner, calls Warren, a soon-to-be founder of a movement that supposedly disallows the mixing of history and literary interpretation, someone who “does all the necessary work of a bibliographer and literary historian.”⁶⁵

Warren does not fit my image of a new critic; but perhaps my image is wrong. Beck argues that Warren’s critical views cannot be narrowly pigeonholed to the stereotypical image of a dogmatic Formalist critic. The historical emphasis of his thesis is not an aberration or a quality that he drops once he is an accomplished professor and no longer a struggling student: throughout his career, Warren “was bent toward a permanent and persistent historicism in everything that he wrote” (5). And charges that he treated texts as “verbal icons” simply do not agree with the Warren corpus (6). Any effort to pin down Warren as one who rigidly follows a canon of literary laws will fail for he “was an

or Persius’ more expert handling. The resulting impression of monotony of theme is emphasized by Marston’s preoccupation with the subject of lust: whether the theme of a satire is hypocrisy, procrastination, or advancement by slight, the illustrations are chiefly drawn from that subject” (10).

⁶⁴ Although here Warren admits that this might not be aimed “at Hall himself but at the general class to which he belongs” (39).

⁶⁵ Warren’s thesis “surveys some of the chief problems and issues surrounding the satires without being directed by an overriding thesis or by a sense of Marston as someone who deserves to be rescued from undeserving neglect. At times, this seems like the work of a literary historian rather than a critic” (Jensen, Kentucky Library, Bowling Green).

eclectic critic who subscribed to no orthodoxy but his own.” Additionally, Warren’s unorthodoxy is not peculiar to him. In defining New Criticism, University of North Carolina’s C. Hugh Holman describes it in terms of diversity: “Not even the group to which the term can be applied in its strictest sense has formed a school subscribing to a fixed dogma; [. . .] [it] is really a cluster of attitudes toward literature rather than an organized critical system” (295). Warren himself cautioned the categorizers: “Even the ‘New Critics,’ who are so often referred to as a group, and at least are corralled together with the barbed wire of a label, are more remarkable for differences in fundamental principles than for anything they have in common” (qtd. in Hicks 176). And concerning their stance on satire, New Critics should not be categorized as marching lockstep to a singular, exclusive tune—not even with satire. It is interesting to note that some satire does make it into Brook and Warren’s anthologies: their *Understanding Poetry* (4th ed) contains an appendix of thirteen parodies, while Brook, Purser, and Warren’s *An Approach to Literature* (4th ed.) anthologizes at least one, brief satire.⁶⁶ But while this shows the presence of satire in New Critical work, the fact that it is such a small portion of the whole illustrates the tension that New Critics, including Warren, would face as they worked with a genre that steadfastly resisted being kept to just the page.

⁶⁶ In “Let’s See Who Salutes,” Art Buchwald satirizes “the people in charge in television today,” imagining them in 1776 Philadelphia, meeting with Thomas Jefferson over their concerns about the possible offensiveness of the Declaration of Independence (443).

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