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## Contemporary British satire and the problem of Jonathan Swift's personae

### 1 Introduction

In a compelling recent criminological study, Vincenzo Ruggiero placed *A Modest Proposal* by Jonathan Swift alongside the works of Thomas Malthus and Adam Smith. Ruggiero's concern was to discuss an intellectual tradition that advocated treating poverty with calculated indifference. Accordingly, he allots Swift's essay to a movement progressing, as he puts it, 'from a 'modest proposal to eugenics' (Ruggiero, 2013, 67).

The signal difference, of course, between Swift's contribution and those of Smith and Malthus is that Swift argued his case ironically. The *Proposal's* capacity to shock is closely related to its unmediated test of our sympathies and personal morality: there is no hint on its title page that the essay is anything other than a straightforward airing of a sincerely held idea. It comes across in the first instance as an authentic policy document and work of social commentary, an exercise in political philosophy in the tradition later developed by Smith and Malthus. Only when readers reach the pith of the argument, the project for farming the children of the poor as a delicacy for rich households, will most pull back from the text on realizing they have been hoaxed. Not all, however; some may continue to take the idea at face value and splutter in justified outrage. Others, meanwhile, may say the *Proposal* was a realistic response to an exacting time, and contend that similarly difficult measures might be necessary in our own: such are the eugenicists whose thinking Professor Ruggiero goes on to discuss.

However convincing the hoax might be, Swift leaves the reader in little doubt that he is putting on a voice – indeed, impersonating someone whose thinking he abhors. There are many moments in the 'proposal' at which the mask (the original meaning of the word 'persona') drops. 'I grant this food will be somewhat dear,' the proposer concedes, after explaining how a healthy infant might be roasted or boiled; but the cost of the dish will make it 'very proper for landlords, who, as they have already devoured most of the parents, seem to have the best title to the children' (Swift 1955, 112). Professor Ruggiero mentions in his introduction that Swift's *Proposal* is 'sarcastic' (Ruggiero, 4). A sense of Swift's irony, however, seems to be absent from the chapter in which Ruggiero discusses the *Proposal* in relation to Malthus. Swift, as it happened, did have rather severe views on 'sturdy beggars' – paupers who were able to work but unwilling



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to do so. As a writer and churchman, nevertheless, the mature Swift was a fierce campaigner on behalf of the poorest sections of Irish society. In the parlance of our own time, Swift's 'modest proposal' was 'fake news'; indeed, a fabrication performed in the service of a moral truth. That, at least, is a 'liberal' construction of Swift's meaning.

The intention here is not at all to cast any aspersion on Professor Ruggiero's learned and deeply humane critique of 'Malthusian' trends in the history of ideas. Ruggiero's concern is to establish a philosophical context for the concept his book develops of 'economic crime.' The ironic or non-ironic status of Swift's modest proposer is not especially relevant to his purposes. The fact that it is not, however, *is* of interest to the literary historian and cultural theorist. Ruggiero's implication is that by delivering the *Modest Proposal*, satirically or not, Swift merely augmented an ideological trend developed by Smith, Malthus and their intellectual successors. Satirical utterance, that is to say, may simply reinforce the philosophical, political or economic interests it purports to undermine.

I would like to suggest that the case of Swift, to which we shall return in more detail, can be used to illuminate a contemporary debate about the status of satire in British political culture. The following section will try to sound and briefly survey this debate. The discussion will take us from the modest proposer to the public self-ironising persona of Boris Johnson, and via criticism of Swift to a little-discussed passage in the *Institutio Oratoria* of Marcus Fabius Quintilian.

## 2 The status of satire in contemporary British culture

Satire remains a prevalent form of discourse; the point can be supported by a glance at the nightly rants against President Trump, by the host of one or other of the leading evening U.S. chat shows, which find their way quickly on to *Youtube*. A number of articles in the British press in recent years have nevertheless urged the view that satirical culture has lost its bite. Or to be more precise, the case has been made, on the back of theory offered and inspired by the school of Theodor Adorno, that satire in fact supports the very personalities and ideologies it seems to challenge. It does not, and cannot, draw blood. Satire, in short, turns socially destructive figures into objects of fun, makes them seem relatively harmless – and thus dims the outrage of citizens who might otherwise press for reform. At the present time British culture offers what may be a unique phenomenon: a self-satirizing Prime Minister.

'Satire props up what it should destroy,' argued Stuart Jeffries at the height of the debate over Brexit in October 2019. He quoted a news presenter, Jon Snow, saying that 'Satire placates the court,' in a recent broadcast (Jeffries, 2019). Jeffries' leading example was the case of the newly appointed British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, the chief Conservative advocate of Brexit. As is widely known, Johnson's political career





began as a journalist and polemicist in the 1990s. He stoked sceptical attitudes to the EU with a series of satirical columns written as Brussels correspondent for the *Daily Telegraph*, and much of his journalism has been collected in book form. Jeffries cites a lengthy discussion of Johnson's early progress by Jonathan Coe in the *London Review of Books*: for Coe, a crucial moment came when Johnson first appeared on a satirical BBC news quiz, *Have I Got News For You?* During the broadcast, Ian Hislop, the editor of the satirical magazine *Private Eye* and one of the show's permanent panel members, 'had Johnson on the ropes' over past misdemeanours. Uncomfortable moments ensued, relieved only when the programme's other chief regular made light of the matter. Jeffries observes how:

For the rest of the episode, he [Boris Johnson] could revert to the role in which he was most comfortable – posh-boy boob channelling Hugh Grant, Billy Bunter and Toad of Toad Hall. In subsequent performances as guest and host on the show, Johnson finessed this persona. "Boris Johnson has become his own satirist," wrote Coe, "safe, above all, in the knowledge that the best way to make sure the satire aimed at you is gentle and unchallenging is to create it yourself." In our cynical age, all politicians come in for derision, but Johnson managed to turn that to his advantage: he made his buffoonish persona charming – to some demographics, at least (Jeffries, 2019).

For Coe, the political triumph of Johnson and his agenda is an indictment of British satirical culture, going back to the 'satire boom' of the early 1960s. Many British intellectuals take great pride in this 'new wave' of satirical comedy; yet most of the leading figures in that movement had 'at least a foothold in the establishment they were criticising' (Coe, 2013).

At issue here is not whether Boris Johnson is charming or buffoonish or not, a question which depends on one's personal tastes and political allegiances, but whether satirical culture really is nothing more than an instrument of establishment forces. As those following British politics at all closely will know, the language of the new Prime Minister's journalism and oratory has echoed in debate. He has been criticised for using racially and ethnically pejorative language. His most publicised – and for some, his gravest – alleged transgression is his comparison of Islamic women in full veil dress to letter boxes (d'Ancona, 2018; Hyde, 2018). The well-established perception of Johnson's 'persona,' if Jeffries' case holds true, automatically excuses his position when he is held to account for such views. He is forgiven for acting 'in character,' for 'just being Boris.' His critics are disarmed from the outset by the accusation that they lack a sense of humour, of irony, or indeed of due proportion (*Telegraph* editorial, 2018). It has sometimes been overlooked that in his offending column Johnson did in fact argue





that Muslim women had the right to wear what they wanted. He led, however, with the idea that in full veil they looked 'ridiculous' (Johnson, 2018).

In a letter published in the London *Times*, the comic actor Rowan Atkinson defended Johnson's joke about the wearing of burqas. Atkinson is best known for his portrayal of the historical rogue, Blackadder, and his mime acting as the hapless Mr Bean. He first made his name, however, as a member of the line-up for the satirical comedy series *Not the Nine O'Clock News* in the early 1980s. The programme is still seen as bringing in 'the second great age of TV satire' (Gilbert, 2019). In his letter, Atkinson claimed that Johnson should only be judged on whether or not the 'letter-box' comparison worked as a joke. Atkinson maintained that it did – 'On that basis, no apology is required' (Atkinson, 2018; Coates, 2018). One could therefore say that Johnson's defence against charges of Islamophobia is similar to the one that might be made on Swift's behalf – against accusations of eugenically genocidal tendencies.

Those for whom words are 'battlegrounds,' who look for genuine social critique in fiction and polemic, will be inclined to follow the direction set out by Horkheimer and Adorno in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. It should be pointed out, though, that the *Dialectic's* 'fragment' on 'The Culture Industry' (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002, 94-136), discusses popular comedy more generally (in the form of cartoons, and so forth) rather than treating satire in depth. In passing, one might also invoke the argument of Umberto Eco's *Name of the Rose* – that laughter is a crucial positive force, socially and intellectually: Eco's protagonist, William of Baskerville, maintains that comedy invites new perspectives and undermines tyranny (Eco, 1996, 472).

For the cultural theorist, however, the matter is simply one of definition. It may be that satire really is, in itself, a form of discourse which supports existing power structures by merely appearing to undermine them. If that is the case, then satire is alive and well in British political culture, by virtue exactly of the verdict Jeffries and like-minded commentators deliver against it. Satire is merely doing what it has always done, mocking and yet colluding.

Here, of course, a vast academic debate on the nature of the genre looms into view. A full survey of relevant approaches would be impossible here. Nevertheless, a common early modern situation may be used to map the argument. The scenario takes a familiar Foucauldian form: in response to a satire that brought scorn or ridicule, an offended monarch or prominent courtier might have the satirist imprisoned, hurt or even killed. As such, the work of satire raised awareness of the vice of its subject; but also gave the libelled party an opportunity to demonstrate his or her overwhelming power. Whether it is pro- or anti-establishment is somewhat beside the point: satire does not alter the status quo.

Another angle, however, may be opened by returning to the case of Swift. For although he is so often regarded as a father-figure for modern political satire, in both





his practice of and remarks on the genre he is really quite singular. One of his best known statements on the nature of satire can immediately address the frustrations Stuart Jeffries and Jonathan Coe express. 'Satyr is a sort Glass,' begins Swift's preface to the 'Battle of the Books,' 'wherein Beholders do generally discover every Body's Face but their own.' Here Swift openly declared that the satirical mission was a hopeless one. The definition of satire, indeed, is that it completely *misses* its targets. Everyone assumes that satire is about everyone else; futility is thus integral to its nature. Rather than stirring the monarch or magnate to anger, satire as Swift conceived it will go unnoticed by them: 'which is the chief Reason for that kind of reception it meets in the World, and that so very few are offended with it' (Swift 1958, 215). A further level of irony here suggests that those subjects of satire who *are* offended will be upset about something they haven't seen or understood for themselves, or have surmised purely from the laughter of others.

In Swift's mind, then, satire was not so much a tool of established interests as a self-disabling cultural device. In the modern era, the above remark puts him much closer to Samuel Beckett than another writer we might more readily call satirical. The question arises, however, as to how any satirical discourse should be so actively, indeed demonstratively ineffective. I suggest we consider it by returning to the longstanding problem of the Swiftian persona.

### 3 The problem of the persona in Swift

How does the Swiftian mirror of satire manage *not* to provoke a reaction from those it is directed towards? My contention is that it does so by means of a technique that defies rhetorical or critical definition. The following discussion of the persona in Swift will examine how Swift's impersonations have exhausted or evaded classical rhetoric and modern criticism alike.

A great deal if not the majority of Swift's published work is written in the voice of an imagined speaker, or writer. Gulliver of the *Travels* is the most obvious example: but Gulliver himself, rather than being a unitary, 'developing' character, very frequently seems to consist of a number of quite different speakers, with clashing views about topics ranging from the practice of slavery to the virtues of the British people. As such, Gulliver is legion, a collection of voices. (For one gathering of critical arguments on the 'polyphonic' nature of Gulliver's narrative, see Stubbs, 2016, 658, note 101.) The next most notorious case of impersonation in Swift's oeuvre is that of the cheerfully demented social scientist who presented his *Modest Proposal* to the Anglo-Irish public in an anonymous paper of 1729. The modest proposer, it should be noted, was not created *ex nihilo*: the character – if we can call him that – has strong antecedents in Swift's back catalogue, most memorably the 'expert' voice which emerges in *A Tale of a Tub*.





The concept of the Swiftian persona is so well-established that some prominent Swiftians are weary of it. Claude Rawson, one of the leading current authorities, has complained that later twentieth-century conceptions of the literary persona led to a 'sanitizing of Swift,' since all of the more extreme positions he assumed in his writings were attributed to an impersonation. Sensitive historical and biographically informed readings of Swift, Rawson argues, reveal that this was not the case. The satirist 'behind' the *Modest Proposal*, for instance, was no liberal academic of the 1960s but an early modern Churchman whose attitudes to society were, in many respects, positively Elizabethan. The persona, Rawson declared, 'is a mechanism for separating an author from the tenor of his work, if you happen not to like it. Its effect is to absolve the critic from engaging with the mercurial indirections of the satirist's voice behind the ironic fiction' (Rawson, 2017).

The exegetic balance is a terribly difficult one to strike. In the case of *Gulliver*, the record of early responses to Swift's masterpiece illustrates how an adoring public closely identified the writer with his protagonist. By 1726, when the work first appeared, Swift was a popular hero in much of England and colonial Ireland for his antagonism towards the corrupt if zestfully resilient ministry of Sir Robert Walpole. Swift had led a successful campaign against a reform of Irish currency in the guise of yet another persona, 'the Drapier,' an eloquent yet supremely practical and fair-minded Dublin tradesman. The *Travels* published in 1726 contained many further barbs against the Walpole government, some of which had to be suppressed to save Swift from reprisals. Although published anonymously, Swift's authorship became common knowledge; and, just as the Drapier was Dean of St Patrick's in Dublin, so *Gulliver* was quickly restyled 'Dean Gulliver' in the press and beyond.<sup>1</sup>

Identifying Swift with some of his more complex personae, notably *Gulliver*, had a corollary. Swift was assumed to have shared the less savoury aspects of their thinking. The fourth book of the *Travels*, with its depiction of a race of 'savage' Yahoos, was notoriously hard for many readers to digest. *Gulliver* infamously voices his support for the plans laid by the Yahoos' masters, the equine Houyhnhnms, to exterminate their ape-like and unmannerly slaves. The result was that many of Swift's most fervent cultivated admirers were appalled with him, more for his depiction of humanity as Yahoos, it must be said, than for the violently eugenic approach he seemed to advance as their remedy. Swift's apparently scatological obsession with the anally expulsive Yahoos led generations of critics to view the satire as the product of a monster. The image of an insanely misanthropic Dean Swift became a critical standby of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The image was extremely convenient, naturally, to parties who

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1 Extensive annotation of biographical sources would be superfluous here. Merely as a starting point, see Ehrenpreis 1983, 264-83, 295-318 (on the Drapier campaign); 497-508 (on the publication of and early responses to *Gulliver*). See also, for a summary view of Swift's fame, (Stubbs, 2016, 471-73).





found his critiques of power and social artifice distasteful (a tradition culminating in Thackeray, 1911, 50-64).

What we have, then, with Swift, is a writer for whom *some* concept of literary or rhetorical persona is absolutely essential for purposes of basic interpretation. Simultaneously, Swift's writing at its most sinuous demands that we acknowledge the moments at which he slips out of character. It truly is a matter, as Claude Rawson puts it, of catching 'mercurial indirections.' Here we might pause to ask whether anything in contemporary satirical culture calls for similar levels of dexterity on the part of readers or audiences; but in any case, it should come as no surprise that such satire will elicit a complex range of responses, rather than have a straightforward political effect. We should also acknowledge the historical difficulty of finding a rhetorical model that can do justice to such 'mercurial' literary practice. This will be the topic of my final section.

#### 4 The Swiftian persona in the light of critical and rhetorical theory

There have been many studies of Jonathan Swift's rhetorical style. In the mid-twentieth century numerous books and articles on other topics in Swift dealt with questions related to rhetoric (eg. Beaumont, 1961; Price, 1953, Bullitt, 1966). Some explicitly approached the problem of his personae (particularly Ewald, 1954; a succinct summary of post-war analyses of the Swiftian persona can be found in Ehrenpreis, 1955). To some extent, this literature fed the 'persona-driven' readings of Swift of which Rawson complained (Rawson, 2017).

In the past thirty years, accounts of Swift's rhetoric have become less common. The last comprehensive treatment was Rambret, 1988. Rhetorical topics, however, and the more specific question of the persona, remain unavoidable for Swiftians, not least of all Rawson himself: he gives a characteristically robust yet sensitive account of 'Swift's I Narrators' in a recent monograph (Rawson, 2014, 132-149). Leo Damrosch approached Swift's impersonations with a similarly light touch, via changing biographical contexts (Damrosch, 2013, 152-3, 213, 437-38).

Studies of Swift encounter the subject of rhetoric so frequently because it was a discipline in which Swift was rigorously brought up, at school and university, as part of the classical curriculum. On Swift's education, we are still guided best by Ehrenpreis, 1962, in particular 34-42 and 57-77. For a still-definitive study of the manifestation of Swift's studies in his mature work, Crane, 1962, remains indispensable. Given his upbringing, few would seriously challenge the idea that rhetorical devices and motives are as such inseparable from the substance of Swift's writing. The *usefulness* of rhetorical theory, though, presents another question altogether.







Doubts have been voiced quite often as to what studying Swift's rhetoric really adds to an understanding of his meaning or technique. Damrosch's recent account of Swift's education, for instance, says little about the disciplines in which Swift was schooled (Damrosch, 2013, 17-29). The implication is that the seam has been mined out, and the ore graded dubious. Rhetoric studies in short beg the sort of question asked by one reviewer of *Swift's Classical Rhetoric* by Charles Allen Beaumont: 'It was inevitable that somebody should trace Swift's rhetoric back to its classical forebears. The disadvantage is that such a study must emphasize the least original or interesting part of Swift's performance' (Paulson, 1962, 648-9). The reviewer is rather impatient with a learned, lucid and useful book; but the history of responses to Swift does indicate that we lack an adequate theoretical taxonomy for the *more* original and interesting parts of his 'performance,' which would surely include the problem of the personae.

Did the theory and practice of early modern rhetoric, then, in any way prepare Swift's contemporaries for the disorienting *alter egos* that he was to launch on them? The simple answer yielded by criticism to date would be no, it did not. For a more precise idea of how it does not, it is worth reflecting on a paragraph in the canon which comes close.

In book IX of the *Institutio Oratoria*, a work admired for centuries as one of the chief treatises on rhetoric, Marcus Fabius Quintilianus discusses the techniques required for successful impersonation, which he classifies as a 'figure of invention.' Quintilian's Latin gloss ('fictiones personarum') departs from the sense the Greek *prosopopoeia* acquired in other discussions. *Prosopopoeia* usually denotes 'personification,' and is more readily associated with anthropomorphic and apostrophic poetic topoi. For Quintilian, the 'making of a person' here involves dramatic mimicry of another speaker in the course of an oration:

A bolder form of figure, which in Cicero's opinion demands greater effort, is impersonation, or προσωποποιᾶ (*prosopopeia*). This is a device which lends wonderful variety and animation to oratory. By this means we display the inner thoughts of our adversaries as though they were talking with themselves (but we shall only carry conviction if we represent them as uttering what they may reasonably be supposed to have had in their minds) (Quintilian IX.ii.29-30, III, 391).

The above entry has featured in the background of other discussions of Swift (eg. Ehrenpreis, 1978, 72), but has largely been neglected on its own terms. (For more detailed commentary in scriptural contexts which certainly would have interested Swift, see Dyer, 2016, 188-89, and Mortensen, 2018, 179-91). Quintilian clearly carries us at least part of the way towards Swift's mode. The Swiftian expert, the modest proposer,







reveals his moral limitations with all the devastating candour required by Quintilian. Swift's period supplies instances of similar mischief: the act of imitation Quintilian has in mind resembles the often quite risky performances given by undergraduates during 'lord of misrule' festivities (Ehrenpreis, 1962, 65-68).

Nevertheless, it is worth restating that the sense Quintilian gives *prosopopoeia* in the passage above is idiosyncratic. It would not have formed a part of the standard rhetorical education. He expands drastically on a very brief mention of the figure by Cicero in *Orator* (xxv.85). Quintilian, moreover, had a very limited place in the syllabus from which Swift and his contemporaries were taught the arts of language. Pope, of course, praised Quintilian in his *Essay on Criticism* (ll.669-70); but did so as an auto-didact, an outlier urging contemporaries to recover a neglected authority. Swift makes no mention of Quintilian anywhere in his printed works or correspondence. No copy of the *Institutio* is recorded in the catalogue of his personal library (Williams, 1932). The holdings of Quintilian at Swift's *alma mata*, Trinity College, Dublin, reflect Quintilian's relative obscurity: the collection is comprised mostly of donations and acquisitions made after 1748 (three years after Swift's death) (Todd 1872, Q581).<sup>2</sup> We can, it seems, dismiss thoughts of Swift's early readers knowing much of Quintilian's ideas on rhetorical impersonation. In consequence, Quintilian could not aid the eighteenth-century public in making sense of the *Modest Proposal* or Gulliver's voyage to the Houyhnhnms.

Despite Quintilian's great lucidity, the figure he outlines here frankly falls a long way short of Swift's sophistication. Nothing in the passage on *prosopopoeia* can prepare us for the way Swift's personae float, ripple and melt; how stingingly perceptive and manifestly just sentences, many of the *sententiae* indeed which we regard as essentially 'Swiftian,' emerge in the midst of content that seems absurd or even deranged. Quintilian cannot account for a completely 'fake' speaker, such as the modest proposer, bursting unannounced into a reader's consciousness. Skilful orators may impersonate their adversaries, according to Quintilian, when it is clear to their audience who the adversaries are; which also entails the listeners knowing what the debate is about and indeed that a debate is taking place. Swift deprived his understanders of all such simple but necessary helps.

On reflection, it would after all be rather surprising if students of Swift's period were extensively equipped to deal with inventions as radical as his. The impact his

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2 This is not, naturally, to dismiss in any way the collection's independent bibliographical interest. Two seemingly partial copies of the work (shelfmarks TT.oo.10 and TT.dd.37), issued by two different Parisian publishers in the same year, 1542, were bequeathed to the college by the former Provost, Gladius Gilbert, in 1748, as part of an astonishing collection of some 13,000 books (full references given in Todd 1872, Q581). They reflect as such the distinctly specialist milieu to which interest in Quintilian was probably confined in Swift's day. I am grateful to Simon Lang, of the Department of Early Printed Books and Special Collections at the library of Trinity College for helping with my inquiries on these volumes.





fictions had on his readership testifies, instead, to a state of unpreparedness. The perplexity they evoked, in the midst of delight or outrage, is unlikely to have resulted in direct action. Those who miss Swift's act of impersonation will assume they are reading the words of either a maniac or a 'man of sense,' as their own lights direct them. Those who spot and savour the persona will take it as an exaggeration, an overblown rendition of a view they might recognize in 'real discourse.' But they will fail to see, as Swift predicted, their own face among those displayed in the glass he holds up. And thus the self-disabling nature of satire will again be confirmed.

## 5 Conclusion

The remarks about Swift offered here support Horkheimer and Adorno's theory of 'humorous' cultural productions: unintentionally for the most part, satirists can be seen to aid the interests they supposedly subvert. *A Modest Proposal* can, it seems, legitimately be classified with works which publish in earnest views of the kind it voiced with ironic intent. History, it seems, does not respect ironic intentions. In the context of the recent and ongoing debate about British satire, the *Proposal* is arguably a key example of satire as power speaking to power.

Those wishing to rebut this theory might draw on examples from Swift's lifetime of his satire exposing weakness in powerful interests and forcing real change. Most defending contemporary satire on more general grounds would claim that it fosters a helpful ironic self-awareness within a culture: Richard Rorty commended this 'ironism' as postmodern humanity's best hope (Rorty, 1989, 73-95). Swift himself rejects such optimism. His much humbler expectations manifestly lie elsewhere, with the 'very few' who are thin-skinned (or weak) enough to be upset by satire. At the empirical level of argument, Coe, Jeffries and similar-minded commentators, are palpably right in saying that satire changes nothing. One might add that satire is merely a form of discourse that may be appropriated in the cause of any social or political interest, liberal or conservative.

The criterion of truth, however, might furnish a modest last word. Satire cannot directly alter the existing order; but it can bear witness. Using irony to give a negative image of things as they are, it can expose the idiocy of prevailing intellectual positions. You can put Swift's *Modest Proposal* on the shelf next to Malthus and Smith, and he will make them seem ludicrous. The eighteenth century offers no equivalent demonstration of how upholding the rights of capital could result in genocide; and its cautionary message is equally valid to students of utilitarianism. In its immediate context, satire as Swift conceived it constitutes an engaged and complex expression of helplessness, one that will, moreover, largely baffle the aids readers have at their disposal to make sense of it. It will be, that is to say, challenging, memorable,





original. In the longer term, it will deliver a vindictive and unflinching testimony against injustice. The standard Swift sets contemporary satire involves provoking laughter, but also having the last laugh.<sup>3</sup>

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John Stubbs

## **Contemporary British satire and the problem of Jonathan Swift's *personae***

**Keywords:** Satire, Rhetoric, Persona, Swift, Quintilian, Boris Johnson

This essay brings the example of Jonathan Swift's literary *personae* to bear on current trends in satirical culture. A number of recent commentators have written of a crisis in contemporary British satire. They invoke Horkheimer and Adorno's theory that comedy supports power interests which it purportedly undermines. The present essay maintains that Swift in a sense confirms this theory, but also that he sets another, more exacting standard for satire. Swiftian satire is singular if not unique in that it is openly self-disabling: in its highest form it deploys a persona that exhausts the resources of contemporary and classical theory. In doing so, it confronts its audiences with a complex and engaged expression of political helplessness. But it also uses irony to tell the truth. The standard Swift sets contemporary satire is an exacting one: to deliver an unflinching and, if necessary, vindictive testimony against injustice.

John Stubbs

## **Sodobna britanska satira in problematika *persone* pri Jonathanu Swiftu**

**Ključne besede:** satira, retorika, persona, Swift, Quintilian, Boris Johnson

Članek podaja primer književne *persone* Jonathanu Swiftu v kontekstu moderne satirične kulture. V zadnjem času so številni komentatorji opozarjali na krizo britanske satire. Sklicevali so se na Horkheimerjevo in Adornovo teorijo, ki trdi, da komedija v resnici podpira interese moči, ki jih navidezno spodkopava. Avtor trdi, da Swift to teorijo v določenem pogledu potrjuje, vendar pa postavlja tudi drugačen, zahtevnejši standard za satiro. Swiftova satira je namreč posebna, če ne edinstvena v tem, da se odkrito samoonesposablja: v svoji najvišji obliki uporabi *persono*, ki presega domet sodobne in klasične teorije. S takim načinom bralce sooča s kompleksnim in angažiranim izražanjem politične nemoči, vendar pa uporablja tudi ironijo, da pokaže resnico. Swift torej sodobni satiri postavlja zahtevne standarde: ta naj se zoper nepravilnost bori z neomejenimi in, če je treba, tudi maščevalnimi izrazi.





## O avtorju

**John Stubbs** je bil med letoma 2001 in 2005 doktorski študent na Univerzi v Cambridgeu, kjer je doktoriral z delom *The Rhetoric of the Far-fetched and its Bearing on Shakespeare*. Je avtor monografij *John Donne: The Reformed Soul* (Penguin/Norton, 2006), *Reprobates: The Cavaliers of the English Civil War* (Penguin/Norton, 2006) in *Jonathan Swift: The Reluctant Rebel* (Penguin/Norton, 2016). Trenutno poučuje angleški jezik na Filozofski fakulteti Univerze v Ljubljani.

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