

Verse Satire: Its Form, Genre, and Mode

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My view of genre does not allow me to classify what is often called satire as a genre; rather it is verse satire (or prose satire) that is a genre. Genre implies a form (or structure) in which a work of literature is presented and a set of compositional (or constituent) characteristics which distinguishes it from some other genre.¹ The term “genre” implies both genre and subgenre, the former simply being the bigger umbrella for various kinds of subgenres, though we call them simply genres on occasion. At times, of course, an example of a subgenre may take on some of the characteristics of another subgenre. For example, for Milton’s sonnets to Edward Lawrence and to Cyriack Skinner the genre is lyric, the subgenre is sonnet, and these specific sonnets take on some of the earmarks of the verse epistle, although they should not be classified generically as verse epistles. A pertinent example to clarify these distinctions between the genre verse satire and a poem that is satiric but *not* of the genre verse satire is the beast fable. When we talk of the beast fable, we are implying a narrative of one main episode employing animal characters and pointing a moral; often it is stanzaic. Because of its characters it may impinge upon the supernatural or at least the improbable. The best fable may be satiric, but it is not a verse satire; nothing cited just now applies to verse satire, which is not narrative, does not employ animal characters, does not point a moral although a moral lesson may be inferred, and is usually not stanzaic. The satiric in the beast fable may arise from its use of irony or ridicule, and it probably exhibits a critical attitude on the part of the author. The critical attitude may be directed against a single person, a community of people, a physical action by a person or a community,

an attitude or pattern of thought of some person or some community. Unfortunately, however, the word "satire" has been used for such literary works as the beast epic that are satiric only, becoming, thus, for most literary critics, a generic term. But this label is erroneous as genre if it does not partake of a specific form (and structure) and a specific set of compositional characteristics. It would be less confusing to use the term "verse satire" or "prose satire" for the genre (rather than just "satire"), which as Alastair Fowler has reminded us, is always substantive, and the term "satiric" for the mode, which is always adjectival.²

Something like the beast fable or an epigram is not a verse satire, though they may be satiric, because they do not take a specific form of verse satire, no matter how variously that form may be viewed, and they do not take on its compositional characteristics. Rather the major compositional characteristic of each is not associated with verse satire; that is, the use of animals as characters for the beast fable and the compression of thought into a terse statement for the epigram are not associated with the genre verse satire. While the authorial stance of a verse satire offers a critical attitude, it does not load the poem as *genre* to lead the reader to a predetermined conclusion, as argument (often found in something like the beast fable) does. Rather it may exonerate the recipient of the criticism (person or community), it may condemn the recipient, it may imply desired change (or reform), or it may imply the futility militating against change. The author of a poem that is a verse satire presents substance from a critical, questioning position. Once that author has loaded the poem to create an argument siding one way or the other, a mode has been established. The satiric mode, common but not always in evidence in verse satire, aims at a certain effect from its reader and may define the author's siding with one belief or another. The intention of verse satire is to raise a question from a critical point of view and even at times with a jaundiced point of view, but the poem deals only with issues and offers that substance to be evaluated by the reader. The satirist, like any literary artist, does control and direct that evaluation: while the author may pretend to be

giving objective factual information, what is included and what is not included and the arrangement of contents will always de-objectify and misrepresent that information. Unless the satiric has entered by way of authorial direction by exaggeration, understatement, or distortion, the verse satire has not taken on a satiric mode. None of this is subtle, for the poet and the reader agree that the representation is not factual. There cannot, then, be a moral lesson or a desirable alternative to the condition criticized in the poem inherent in the genre: the moral lesson and the desirable alternative may be inherent in the substance presented, but until the question is skewed—that is, until the modal enters—the poem as verse satire has not forced their acceptance by the reader.

My remarks will be clearer in looking at some specific examples. The distinction I am advancing may seem oversubtle, but I think it goes to the heart of the problem of how to read and evaluate specific poems and authors and to the heart of the problem of definition, which then becomes the basis for critical evaluation. My remarks agree with Northrop Frye's basic comment on verse satire:

Second-phase satire shows literature assuming a special function of analysis, of breaking up the lumber of stereotypes, fossilized beliefs, superstitious terrors, crank theories, pedantic dogmatisms, oppressive fashions, and all other things that impede the free movement of . . . society.³

But what I am urging is a distinction from what James Sutherland called "satire," by which he clearly meant the genre, and "the satiric," which is what he was actually talking about:

The satirist, for his part, is putting a case, and to put it effectively he magnifies, diminishes, distorts, cheats: the end with him will always justify the means. Satire is not for the literal-minded. It exists on at least two levels, the overt and the implied.⁴

Sir Thomas Wyatt's verse satire, entitled in *Tottel's Miscellany* in 1557, "Of the Courtier's Life Written to John Poin," has no stanzaic divisions in the first printed text.⁵ The issue raised is the difference

between the court life and the country life, an active life with engagement of political matters and a noninvolved sedentary life. It is a very common theme both before and after Wyatt wrote. While the I is Wyatt and the poem would seem to have been written when he was in exile in Kent after having been in prison (perhaps around 1537), it sets forth the two modes of existence without necessarily urging one or the other on Poins, or his reading audience. We may discern regret with his not being able to lead the active courtier's life and thus some forced view of the goods which the country existence can provide, we can interpret a critical stance in the I's unhappiness with what the usual court association entails, but the poem is not loaded to make Poins reject court life for himself, nor to try to persuade him to leave and follow a country life. The relationship of the poem with the *beatus ille* theme (that is, "the happy place") is certain, but it is different from that in a number of ways, in this regard by raising the criticism of the court life. That critical stance is one element that removes this poem from lyric; the I's *sæva indignatio* ("raging indignation" over something) in his epitomes of court life is clear. Wyatt has controlled and directed the reader by his choice of materials and their arrangement, but he has not unbalanced the case in any strong display of satiric mode. We see what is wrong with the courtier's life, but if we take the I's position we would pursue it if these vicious situations were changed or if we are able to sublimate them (as apparently Poins can), or we understand what can be happy in the country life, if we pursue or even are forced to pursue that existence. The poem is not, that is, particularly satiric, even though it is a verse satire.

Its form as a verse satire is a series of terza rima stanzas, which could have ended before they did or which could have continued on with additional stanzas. It proceeds through a relational or logical arrangement of one item (one comment, one point of discussion) following another. It has a linear structure without definitive length. It deserves the label "satire" because it fits the etymological description afforded by *satura*: the basket of fruits or such implies the artifact of the poem which is filled up with a mixture of items, all related by

some category of subject. As genre it does not illustrate Frye's further analysis that two things are essential to satire: wit or humor founded on fantasy or a sense of the grotesque or absurd; and an object of attack. These do not impinge on Wyatt's poem except in what can be inferred as unhappiness with the kind of court life that existed under Henry VIII. What Frye's analysis defines is the satiric, the mode. Nor does it fit Gilbert Highet's comment (better applied to late seventeenth-century examples of the satiric): "Satire becomes the art of finding crushing or piercing antithetical contrasts."⁶ While the antitheses are there in Wyatt's poem, the nature of the treatment of those antitheses avoids the satiric.

Wyatt's poem, as is well known, is a contemporized paraphrase of Luigi Alamanni's tenth satire, "A Thommaso Sertini," written in terza rima. The Italian sixteenth-century authors who wrote verse satires are numerous, and their verse form was usually either terza rima or ottava rima. Alamanni (1495-1556) wrote thirteen satires in terza rima; Lodovico Ariosto (1474-1533), seven satires in terza rima; Francesco Berni (1497?-1535), thirty-two satires (or Capitoli) in terza rima; Lodovico Paterno (perhaps born in 1560), seven satires in terza rima, four in ottava rima, and five in unrhymed alexandrines.⁷ In the poem which Wyatt follows, Alamanni rejects "le gran Corti homai" and "l'alte soglie" with less implication than Wyatt that he feels regret; rather he seems happy to follow "le lunghe uoglie / Con le mie Muse in solitario loco." Only here can he find "pace uera" without "Avaritia, e livor."⁸ While the political and religious life of the world of Rome may offer rewards, avarice and envy are so great that he is glad to be in Provenza where ignorance and fear are held in check. There is criticism here, but there is no attempt at persuasion; there are further illustrations of corruption that could be made, we feel sure, had the author continued, as well as further country joys. The verse satire is satire, but it is not particularly satiric.

In his third satire to Annibale Malagucio, Ariosto also explores the courtier's life with Duke Alfonso of Ferrara, but concludes that he is better off here for "life at court . . . is slavery alone," not "something

grand." He does not wish to travel to Scythia or India or Ethiopia; he has been throughout Italy and "Questo mi basta" ("these are enough for me"). He makes clear that were he in Rome the Pope, a former close friend, would advance others, relatives, or would exhibit a short memory or even if the Pope gave him all he has deserved "tanti anni i' sparsi" ("for his many years, spread over time"), would he then be satisfied? The poem is certainly a verse satire, but it is even less modally satiric than Alamanni's: while Ariosto presents contrastive lives, making neither continually attractive, he has offered justification for his decision with vituperation, without raging indignation. The form and structure and critical stance categorize the poem as verse satire, but the satiric element is not strong.

On the other hand Berni's caustic capitoli have brought forth their own adjective, Bernesque, implying anti-Petrarchan verse through their realistic images. Petrarch is also satirized, poked fun at. One of the capitoli to Ieronimo Frascatoro, for instance, parodies Petrarch's lines in *Trionfo d'Amore*—rejoicing in beasts rather than the court, whereas Petrarch rejoices in what he sees; and addressing "il prete grazioso, almo e gentile," and noting that a bedspread makes a tower of another bed, exclaims, "Come fortuna va cangiando stile!" in allusion to Petrarch's poetry.⁹ The ridicule introduced and the parody provide another characteristic often common to the satiric mode, though they are not an element in the verse satire.

Edward Hake's "Newes Out of Powles Churchyarde" is "a dialogue between Bertolph and Paul as they walk in the aisle of the cathedral, overheard by the poet," in eight verse satires. The setting is specific and open to view; the walking down the aisle is in accord with taking up this subject and then that subject, as the verse satire proceeds linearly; the dialogue could have begun before Bertolph and Paul began walking down the aisle, and it could have continued except that they have come to the altar rail. Among the topics pursued (titles of the various individual but continually related poems, which together supply some of the "newes" that people have been gossiping about) are "Tricks and practices of physicians," "Protest against using

Paul's as a place of Assignment," "Against covetousness and usurers." The verse form is poulter's measure, linearly presented as one item leads to another, with the author making remarks and quoting the dialogue. The first satire on "Sir Nummus [who] has taken up with bishops and deans, rather than industrious and conscientious ministers" sets up the frame of location and situation. The subject of the satire is the discrepancy between men of religion, the prelacy engaged in "fraude and filthy wyle," and true ministers of the people, poor but dedicated. This contemporary issue of the reformed church was to continue and be a main cause of its sectarianism; the universal issue of venality is seen not only through the superiors of the church but in the person of Sir Nummus, whose name means a coin or money. "He lodgeth ofte with Marchauntmen / and eke with men of Lawe."¹⁰ The first satire begins:

As late I walked vp and downe,
 in Powles for my repast,
 And then (as many woont to doo)
 About the Church had traste
 Long tyme alone to view the rowte,
 And great confused noyse,
 With pleasaunt chat (a world to see)
 At length I heard a voice.

It ends with Paul speaking:

And thou therefore didst promise mée
 thy silent eare to giue.
 And yet thou interruptst my tale.
 Howe should I thee beleue?
 Of friendly faith attende a while,
 And marke me as the ende:
 Then shalt thou thinke that I disclose
 To thee as to a friende.

And so the second satire starts with Paul continuing, "As promise presseth me to show / my minde to thee at large," and he turns to impugn the corruption and partiality of judges and the cupidity of

attorneys. In all, Hake's satires illustrate well what I describe as verse satire; they also contrast strongly with Wyatt's three satires in their satiric mode. Hake is forcefully indignant about "Abuses of apothecaries and surgeons, etc.," and the effect he wishes from his reader is wariness of apothecaries and surgeons, and recognition of the fraud they may perpetrate on their clients for financial gain. The "newes" from St. Paul's tends toward the sermonic with the last satire in the voice of the author only. It looks back on covetousness and usurers, and warns of the way in which time is infected with sin and "the raumping Serpents guile," "Sathans force." As a marginal gloss contends in a variation of St. Paul's well-known admonition: "the canker of couetousness is cause of all evill."

As Hake says in a preliminary poem on "The Noueltie of this Booke": "now no daye doth passé without / some new devised crime." The underlying sense of what would be praised is the only fictive reform to be drawn from these poems. Peter Medine has shown the rhetorical pattern of *laus* and *vituperatio* that underlies satiric impulses.¹¹ Where Hake stresses *vituperatio*, we infer what is praiseworthy (its opposite). That same kind of *laus* can be drawn from Alamanni's and Wyatt's poems, although their displacement of the vicious life by the good life reduces the kind of satiric invective found in Hake.

In contrast is the work of Thomas Lodge. In *A Fig for Momus*, published in 1595, he offers five satires in the Horatian manner, but with content and detail drawn from Juvenal and occasionally from Persius. He was one of the first to use the Latin satirists as models, although Thomas Drant had written about Horace and employed him in *A Medicinable Morall* in 1566,¹² and Wyatt had employed Horace's sixth satire from the second book in "Of the meane and sure estate written to John Pains" and perhaps the fifth satire from the second book in "How to use the court and him selfe therin, written to syr Frannces Bryan." Lodge's poems rest on observation. He observes folly but without *sæva indignatio*; though he gives words of counsel, they are not didactic, but forensic.¹³ They set up a dialogue of one, an I, but he

is not Thomas Lodge and his addressees are really fictions. Further, he employs the iambic pentameter couplet as form. The form becomes the standard for such satirists as John Donne, Joseph Hall, Everard Guilpin, John Marston, and thus their descendents in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In his first satire, "To Master E. Dig" (that is, Digbie), Lodge opens with:

Digbie whence comes it that the world begins,
To winke at follies, and to sooth vp sinnes?
Can other reason be alleadged then this,
The world sooths sinne, because it sinfull is?

The I of the poem is not reacting to some personal situation that has touched him: he is observing only that "wicked men repine their sinnes to hear, / And folly flings, if counsaile tuch him neare." The author's lack of directing his audience and ignoring of reform are seen in lines near the close:

What ere men doe, let them not reprehend:
For cunning knaves, will cunning knaves defend.

His fourth satire to a "deere friend lately given over to couetousnesse" is also not personal, citing such reports as "They say one horse may beare thy household stuffe, / Where for thy coyne three carts are not enough" or "They say thy wives cast kertle is become / A paire of breeches to enskonce thy bum." Lodge moves to direct counsel ("If these be true, reforme them; if vntrue, / Take them for warnings what thou shouldst eschue"), but the aim and expectation is not reform. He has left "decision" up to his reader-jury. His satires are devoted to their existence as artifacts, not as indictments. They offer jaundiced observations of life, which can be balanced by "A lowlie life" and "A mind that dreads no fal, nor craues no crowne."

Formal verse satire, then, has a form—in Italian of the sixteenth century it is usually *terza rima*, in English of the later sixteenth century it is usually the heroic couplet; a structure—a linear progression of items presented *seriatim* with loical or topical relationship, although

is concerned with the evaluation of the verse satire against the work of others on the basis of the first four suggestions for an aesthetics noted just before, primarily the fourth; the craft. When the displacement between the poet and the poem is lessened, as in John Donne's fifth satire, the result may be less successful and less satiric. When the critic expects a dominance of the satiric to imbalance the poem and lead to a clearly didactic moral statement (a false expectation), the verse satire may be judged inept, as Donne's first satire has been—although I emphatically disagree about the interpretation of that poem.¹⁴ It is manifest that I am in total disagreement with such a statement as Wesley Milgate's "The great defect of so-called formal satire is that it is not a form at all, but a mode of approach; the satirist is encouraged to stray at random from one topic to another."¹⁵ The correction of such misguided statements lies in recognizing the form, genre, and mode of Renaissance (as well as later) "verse satire."¹⁶ The slant on satire presented in this discussion—the generic and the modal—should lead to rereadings and reevaluations of such as Donne's second satire, which is not bifurcated into two topics; such as his third satire, which should not have the couplet (96-97) concerning four people important to religious affairs of the sixteenth century pulled out of position to epitomize the whole; and such as his fourth satire, which, while long, is not disorganized.¹⁷ At the same time, this differentiation of generic and modal indicates that Donne's "Upon Mr. Thomas Coryats Crudities" is satiric but not a verse satire, even though it is written in heroic couplets: here we have wit and humor and an object of attack.

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NOTES

¹See John T. Shawcross, *Intentionality and the New Traditionalism: Some Liminal Means to Literary Revisionism* (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1991) esp. 26-31, 57, 148-49.

²See Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1982).

³Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957) 233.

⁴James Sutherland, *English Satire* (Cambridge: CUP, 1958) 20.

⁵*Tottel's Miscellany (1557-1587)*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, revised ed. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1966), vol. 1.

⁶Gilbert Highet, *The Classical Tradition* (New York: OUP, 1949) 317.

⁷See Luigi Alamanni, *Versi e prose*, ed. P. Raffaelli (Firenze: le Monnier, 1889); Ludovico Ariosto, *Opere Minorie*, ed. Cesare Segre (Milano: Riccardo Ricciardi, 1954); *Opere di Francesco Berni, Nuova edizione riveduta e corretta* (Milano: Edoardo Sonzogno, 1877); *Rime di M. Lodovico Paterno, Distinte in quattro parti* (Venetia: Appresso Giovan' Andrea Valuassori, 1560).

⁸Rough translations of the Italian: "he great courtier's life," "the eminent court," "the distant longing in solitude with only my Muse," "true peace," "avarice and envy."

⁹Rough translations of the Italian: "the charming priest, kindly and noble," "just so does fortune accompany changing writing style!" For Francesco Petrarca, see *Rime, Trionfi e Poesie Latine*, ed. F. Neri, G. Martellotti, E. Bianchi, N. Sapegno (Milano: Riccardo Ricciardi, 1951).

¹⁰This is the fourth satire; lines 2 and 7 accuse them directly of "hooking" Nummus, who appears also in the sixth poem, to their hands. But Paul, as the poem ends, is clear that "protesting styll / I touch no good man héere, / . . . For sure I am that many just, / and men upright remaine." See *Newes out of Powles Churchyarde. Now newly renued* (London: [1579]).

¹¹Peter Medine, "Praise and Blame in Renaissance Verse Satire," *Pacific Coast Philology* 7 (1972): 49-53.

¹²*The Complete Works of Thomas Lodge* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), vol. 3, reprint of *A fig for Momus* (London, 1595), and Thomas Drant, *A Medicinable Morall, That is, the Two Books of Horace his satyres, Englyshed* (London, 1566), reprinted by Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints (Delmar, NY, 1972). For Horace, see *The Complete Odes and Satires of Horace*, ed. Sidney Alexander (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999). See also Drant's *Horace His arte of Poetrie, pistles, and Satyres Englyshed* (London: 1567). In "Priscus Grammaticus de Satyra," he writes: "A Satyre is a tarte, and carping kinde of verse, / An instrument to pynche the pranks of men, / And for as much as pynching instruments do perce, / Yclept it was full well a Satyre then. / . . . The Satyryst loues Truth, none more then he, / An vtter foe to fraude in ech degree." Drant's translations of Horace's satires are in poulter's measure (fourteeners).

¹³By “forensic” I mean a case is presented against a person or idea (persons or ideas) for the reader-jury to adjudge favorably or disfavorably. Action is past and is to be weighed by the evidence presented (that is, each item presented seriatim); future action (such as reform) is not its aim.

¹⁴It involves a *débat* between body and soul, pleasure principles and serious intellectualism; see “All Attest His Writs Canonical: The Texts, Meaning and Evaluation of Donne’s Satires,” 245-72 in *Just So Much Honor*, ed. Peter A. Fiore (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1972).

¹⁵*John Donne: The Satires, Epigrams and Verse Letters*, ed. W. Milgate (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967) xxiii-xxiv.

¹⁶Comparison, for example, of E. E. Cummings’s satiric sonnet “Next to of course God America” (which lampoons politicians on the stump seeking election) and his verse satire “Poem, or Beauty Hurt Mr. Vinal” manifests the significance of differentiating verse satire and the satiric, and recognizing the form and linear progression of items presented one after the other (emphatically *not* randomly) in the latter poem. It shows *sæva indignatio* towards the kind of effete poetry and poetical aesthetic that Harold Vinal represented in the 1920s in his own poetry and especially in his moribund anthologies. The truly “beautiful” in poetry is rejected, Cummings is accusing Vinal and his ilk of doing, because “according / to such supposedly indigenous / throistles Art is O World O Life / a formula.” Cummings’s scatological labeling of such formula-ridden verse underscores his aesthetic evaluation but allows the reader to decide whether *his* poetry (even in its “vulgar” images—in both meanings) deserves poetic consideration. See E. E. Cummings, *Complete Poems 1904-1962*, ed. George J. Firmage (New York: Liveright, 1991) 228-29.

¹⁷It is based on Horace’s “*Tbam forte Via Sacra,*” *Satires* I, 9: 1.