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Spenserian Satire

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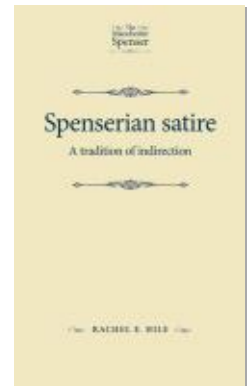
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Conclusion

In Chapter 1, I offered a contemporary theory of how indirect satire works, focusing on the social process of meaning-making required by this type of satirical work with reference to other recent theoretical works that emphasize the social functions of satire. To conclude, I would like to reverse my chronology to consider the theories and values underlying indirect forms of satire in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. In developing this argument, we cannot take satirical poets at their word regarding their intentions or methods because of the repeated assertions during this time period—many of which I have quoted in this book—advising the reader against reading allegorically and claiming that only general criticisms are intended.

Early modern literary theory does not shed much light on indirect satire because the connections that, for example, George Puttenham and Philip Sidney make between satire and comedy thus emphasize more aggressive, direct forms of satire. Sidney's brief description asserts that satire will "make a man laugh at folly, and (at length ashamed) to laugh at himself" and that it "giveth us to feel how many headaches a passionate life bringeth us to" (Sidney, *Defence*, 128). Like Sidney, Puttenham emphasizes what George A. Test would refer to as the "laughter" trait in satire by linking it explicitly to dramatic comedies. In Puttenham's version of the history of generic forms, he claims that satire's "most bitter invective against vice and vicious men" gave way over time to dramatic comedy of two types: the first kind—the so-called Old Comedy of the Greeks—"was somewhat sharp and bitter after the nature of the satire, openly and by express names taxing men more maliciously and impudently than became"; over time, this became the less bitter New Comedy, "more civil and pleasant a great deal and not touching any man by name, but in a certain generality glancing at every abuse" (Puttenham, *Art*, 120, 121, 122). Here Puttenham, although explicitly discussing dramatic comedy,

describes the contrast between what I referred to in Chapter 1 as direct satire and general satire.

Puttenham and Sidney do not discuss what I call “indirect satire” in their passages about satire. Rather, we see this type of writing described in their passages on pastoral, as already quoted in Chapter 2 (in pastoral, Puttenham writes, poets use “rude speeches to insinuate and glance at greater matters”; *Art*, 128; and according to Sidney, poets “under the pretty tales of wolves and sheep” sometimes “include the whole considerations of wrongdoing and patience”; *Defence*, 127). Certainly all of the writers discussed in this book had a clear understanding of how literary works could subversively speak to sensitive political topics, but it was not expedient to analyze this process or to call attention to it in works of literary theory.

Given the emphasis on willful obfuscation and deniability that we find in satiric poetry of this time period, it is not surprising that one of the fullest treatments of what satire is and does appears as an allegory in George Gascoigne’s *Steele Glas* (1576), in which the story of the twins Poesys and Satyra (born to Plain Dealing and Simplicity) follows the plot of the myth of Procne and Philomela, with Satyra the sister raped and disfigured by her sister’s cruel husband, Vain Delight. Gascoigne’s myth of origin explains Satyra’s ability to speak against vice: “the mighty gods” “have ... deigned ... / That with the stumps of my reprovèd tong, / I may sometimes, *Reprovers* deedes reprove, / And sing a verse, to make them see themselves” (*Steele Glas*, lines 132, 135–38). These two sisters, both children of Plain Dealing and Simplicity, represent allegorically the poetry of praise and blame deriving from the theory of epideictic literature (see, e.g., Hardison, *Enduring Monument*). Not surprisingly, both sisters are vulnerable to Vain Delight, but their shared allegorical parentage indicates that both are valuable. Gascoigne presents the remainder of the work, a formal verse satire that castigates various abuses, as the song of the raped and wounded Satyra. Gascoigne’s allegory fits with Spenser’s consistently expressed opinions about poetry, exemplified in *Mother Hubberds Tale* in the statement that poets’ “onely pride / Is virtue to advaunce, and vice deride” (lines 811–12).

Thus, there exists no early modern English theory of indirect satire, and indeed, the theory of satire in general in this time period is confused and incomplete, in part no doubt because of the sense that it was safer not to speak too clearly about the ways that poets could and did criticize those in power. We can see this emphasis on discretion in Thomas Nash’s abuse of Gabriel Harvey for criticizing Spenser’s malcontented-

ness in *Mother Hubberds Tale*: “If any man were vnderesuedly toucht in it, thou hast reuiuied his disgrace that was so toucht in it, by renaming it, when it was worn out of al mens mouths and minds” (Nashe, *Strange Newes*, 282). There is a lack of theory and also a lack of continuity in the tradition, which, as I mentioned in the Introduction, gave way to more direct satire by the eighteenth century, presumably because writers came to feel more safe from censorship and prosecution.

But there is no lack of evidence for a *practice* of indirect satire in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in England, and Edmund Spenser, a towering figure in more canonical genres of poetry by the 1590s, became for English satirists in this time period a touchstone: his personal fame and his well-understood values and political and religious opinions meant that other poets could succinctly telegraph a whole set of values just by alluding to him. His own (in)famous works in the vein of indirect satire built upon previous work by authors such as Chaucer, Skelton, and others to create certain key images and ideas that could signal an oppositional stance or a satirical approach to a topic. Most importantly, his expertise with allegorical meaning-making made him remarkably inventive when using allegorical tools such as allusion, symbol, and analogy to create satirical meanings through allegorical projection, and this clearly inspired some of the inventiveness in others’ satirical poetry analyzed in this book.

Spenser did not invent indirect satire, and the waning of the particular tradition of Spenserian indirect satire in England did not mean the end of indirection in satire. Writers in oppressive cultures with strict censorship will use the same tools—allusion, symbol, and analogy—to prompt their readers to project allegorical meaning from the text to the real world. Within each such culture, though, artists must create a shared set of ideas, images, and symbols in order to develop the kind of linked network of satirical writing that I describe here as a “tradition,” but that I could also call a “system,” in Itamar Even-Zohar’s sense of one coherent part of a literary polysystem (see Chapter 3).

For the writers discussed in this book, Spenser’s supremacy in the overall literary polysystem of late sixteenth-century England enabled the shared ideas signaled by “Spenser” and Spenserianism to provide coherence to a certain approach to politically engaged poetry—Spenserian indirect satire. I hope that other scholars will use these ideas as lenses to explore other works from this tradition and to look at other times and places to see how oppressive conditions result in indirect satire elsewhere. Recent work by satire theorists has focused on the social work

that satire performs; in this book I have aimed to build upon this work to explore the impact of the social world on satire—from the way that social conditions can inhibit or promote certain approaches to satire to the necessity of shared ideas, images, and symbols between author and reader in order for the reader to correctly project allegorical meanings. Most importantly, though, I have argued that for his contemporaries, the name “Spenser” meant more than it does to us now, four hundred years later, when we think of his reputation as resting primarily on his work in epic and pastoral. In Philippe Codde’s terms (see Chapter 3), Spenser in the 1590s was so “canonized” as an author that even his work in noncanonized genres such as satire became “central” and influential for other poets (Codde, “Polysystem theory,” 104n18). He was in his time a complete poet, and his reputation for and influence on satirical poetry should become part of our understanding of what Spenser meant to his contemporaries.