

Verse Satire in the 18th Century

The eighteenth century is remarkable as a period in which the Satiric Spirit reigned supreme. The names of all the important writers are associated with Satire, in fact, their very greatness is due mainly to their greatness as Satirists. The three most important writers of the age were Pope, Swift and Dr. Johnson. Whereas Pope and Dr. Johnson gave the English language some of its best verse Satires, the second named gave it its best prose Satires. But apart from this redoubtable triumvirate, the names of a hundred other lesser Satirists can be mentioned. In addition to the regular Satires, the Satiric Spirit peeps through other modes of writing too. The novel and the periodical paper were the two important gifts of the eighteenth century to English literature.

These new genres, too, are exhibitives of the impact of the Satiric Spirit which was ubiquitous in the age. Some of the most delightful Satire of the age is provided by the periodical papers of Steele, Addison and their followers and the novels of Fielding, Smollett and Sterne. As a genre Satire ruled the roost till roughly the third quarter of the century, when new tendencies appeared to the detriment of the Satiric Spirit. The precursors of Romanticism found Satire incompatible with ~~the~~ their new Sensibility. Satire naturally declined and since then up to the present day very few Satires have appeared which can show the same brilliance as characterised eighteenth century Satires. All Satires arise from the sense of dissatisfaction, despair, amusement, anger or disgust at the departure of things from

their ideals. Satire aimed at pointing out and chastising the falling short of things from their well accepted standards of excellence. It is only when standards get fixed that any departure from them can be measured or appreciated. In the eighteenth century particularly its first half the standards of human conduct were more or less well fixed. This century has been variously called "the age of good sense", "the age of good taste", "the age of reason", etc. Almost all the writers of the age harped upon common sense, good taste and what they called "right reason". Any departure from them real or imaginary, put the whip of the satirist into action. Further the accentuation of the political division of Englishmen into Whigs and Tories also nurtured and provided much material for the satiric spirit. Nearly

every important writer of the first half of the eighteenth century was "employed" by ~~the~~ either the Tory or the Whig party to further its cause and to down its opponents. Pope, Swift, Arbuthnot, Prior, Addison, Steele all were actively aligned with one party or the other, even though they did not write many political satires of the nature of Dryden's 'Absalom and Achitophel' and 'The Medal'. Thirdly, we have to take into account the fierce personal animosities of the writers of the age. It was in the eighteenth century that for the first time in the history of English literature, the vocation of a man of letters, like other professions became a lucrative job. With the unprecedented increase in the number of readers the printed word could sell. Pope and some others depended for their livelihood ~~and~~

entirely upon the patronage of their readers. With the phenomenal rise in the number of readers there was an equally phenomenal rise in the numbers of writers many of whom decorated the garrets of Grub Street. Each of them was necessarily jealous of all the rest as it involved his very livelihood. The whole air was thick with mutual animosities among writers and the personal satires which they gave rise to. Even Pope's 'Dunciad' the most powerful and the best satire of the eighteenth century was expressly written to lash his literary rivals and critics. His translation of Homer and edition of Shakespeare had proved for him the most lucrative assets and when they were attacked, partly justly, by partly unjustly, by ~~critics~~ critics like Bentley and Theobald it was reason enough for

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him to try to satirise them
into silence.

The end.

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