

## Satire in the 18th Century

NEH Summer Institute  
Curriculum Project  
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### Preface

As an English teacher, I have tried, wherever possible, to include music in my lessons. For example, when my freshmen read Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, I show them the superb film of the Julie Taymor-Seiji Ozawa production of Stravinsky's opera/oratorio. (Most of our students study Latin, so they can also follow along with the text.) When we read Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, and get to the scene where Jim Burden and Lingard attend a performance of *Camille*, accompanied by incidental music from *La Traviata*, I play them excerpts from Verdi's opera. And when we read *Great Expectations*, and Pip's friend Herbert Pocket gives him the nickname Handel (because "there's a charming piece of music by Handel called 'The Harmonious Blacksmith' ... and you have been a blacksmith"), we listen to Handel's *Air and Variations*, from the Suite No. 5 in E major, and discuss how the music reflects Pip's character.

This curriculum unit continues that tradition. Specifically, it grew out of my interest in Bach's Coffee Cantata (*Kaffee-Kantata*, BWV 211), which I was introduced to during the N.E.H. Summer Seminar in July 2012. In asking myself how I might incorporate Bach into my own teaching, I saw that I could approach the Coffee Cantata as part of the literary genre known as satire. This year, all the freshmen at my school read Book IV of *Gulliver's Travels*. Our discussions centered around Swift's satire of human behavior. The students enjoyed Swift's caricature of the human race as depicted in the Yahoos and debated the dark view of humanity

that he presents in his portrayal of them as “vicious,” “odious,” “hateful,” “detestable” and “vile.” Through *Gulliver*, Swift satirizes—indeed, vilifies—many European institutions and professions. While Swift’s satire is far more stinging than the gentle poking fun that Bach and his librettist, Christian Friedrich Henrici (Picander) attempt, nevertheless both works are pieces of satire and date from within ten years of each other: *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726); the *Coffee Cantata* (1734).

As a school with a classical curriculum (all our students take at least two years of Latin or Greek), I also wanted to draw on the students’ knowledge of ancient history and literature. Finally, I wanted to incorporate some visual art into whatever the final curriculum unit would be. The result is this two-week unit on Satire in the Eighteenth Century

### Class 1: What is Satire?

The unit would begin with a class that would consider the genre called satire: What is it? How does it work?

Working Definition: Satire is a literary genre that expresses amusement or disgust at ridiculous, unseemly and/or immoral behavior or culture. Out of a moral concern, the satirist attacks the vice and folly he/she sees around. Satire can be expressed in many artistic media: literature, art, music.

We would then proceed to read an excerpt from a classical satire, Aristophanes’ *The Clouds* (a play BUA freshmen read in their ancient history course). Points to emphasize: The play lampoons the intellectual fashions in classical Athens and caricatures the philosopher Socrates and his teachings. Discussion would center on Aristophanes’ comedy and his burlesque

of philosophers with their “heads in the clouds.” We might draw distinctions between Aristophanes’ gentle ribbing and Swift’s more mordant approach to satire.

Text: *Plato and Aristophanes: Four Texts on Socrates*, trans. Thomas G. West and Grace Starry West (Cornell, 1984; rev. 1998).

## Class 2: Roman Satire

Following up on the previous day’s discussion, introduce the two basic styles of Roman satire:

(1) Horatian: Gentler, involving good-humored ridicule as opposed to vehement denunciation.

(2) Juvenalian: Harsher, more pointed, and often attacks particular people with invective.

Most of the class will be devoted to reading excerpts (or, if there is time, the full text) of a satire by Horace and one by Juvenal. The choice of satires is at the discretion of the teacher. At BUA, the students use *The Norton Book of Classical Literature*, ed. Bernard Knox. That volume includes a satire by Horace (II.6: “This is What I Prayed For” and one by Juvenal (Satire III: “Life in the Big City”). These are excellent examples of their respective types of satire.

Students should be guided toward identifying and discussing (1) what is being satirized in each poem; (2) the relative intensity of the criticism; (3) how the word choice, style, subject matter all contribute to the intensity of the critique. The lesson could continue with a discussion of modern satirists. The teacher could bring in a story by David Sedaris, a poem by Dorothy Parker, a pop song.

Activity: Depending on time, students might be asked to generate a list of modern-day subjects that would lend themselves to satire. Which subjects would be more appropriate to Horatian satire? Which to Juvenalian satire? Again, if time allows, students could be asked to write (either in prose or poetic form) a short modern satire. (This would be in preparation for the end-of-unit project.)

Other Sources: There are excellent essays on Horace, Juvenal, and Roman satire in Gian Biagio Conte, *Latin Literature: A History* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); and Moses Hadas, *A History of Latin Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952). Also useful is John Boardman, et al., *The Oxford History of the Classical World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

### Class 3: Satire in the Eighteenth Century

Depending on what course this unit falls into, the students may or may not need some background information about the eighteenth century: the major political and social movements, Enlightenment philosophy, the “classical” style in music and art. If the unit falls within a course on World History, World Culture, Art History, perhaps less of this background information might be required beforehand.

Whether or not the students have a grounding in the Eighteenth Century, the class could establish some baseline understandings through some short readings: perhaps a short essay from Addison and Steele; Samuel Johnson’s “The Vanity of Human Wishes” (which itself is an imitation of Juvenal’s Tenth Satire); or an excerpt from Pope’s translation of *Iliad* or *Odyssey*.

(At BUA, the students all read Robert Fagles' translations of *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, so they would be able to compare a 20<sup>th</sup>-century style with Pope's eighteenth-century style.)

The purpose of this class would be to highlight critical themes in eighteenth-century aesthetics: reason, decorum, taste, neo-classicism. "Described most simply, [eighteenth-century literature] was a reaction against the intricacy and occasional obscurity, boldness, and extravagance of European literature of the late Renaissance, in favor of greater simplicity, clarity, restraint, regularity, and good sense in all sorts of writing."<sup>1</sup>

#### Classes 4-5: Swift

The next several classes would be devoted to closer examinations of three pieces of eighteenth-century satire in three different genres:

- Literature: Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (1726)
- Visual Art: William Hogarth, *A Rake's Progress* (1732–33; engraved and published 1735)
- Music: J.S. Bach and the Coffee Cantata (1734).

I would begin with Swift, both because the other two genres are less familiar to most high school students; and because I would use this unit in the context of an English course. It is up to the teacher's discretion how many of the four books of *Gulliver's Travels* the students would read. For the purposes of this unit on satire, I would only read Book IV: "A Voyage to the

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<sup>1</sup> *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, vol. 1, 1135.

Country of the Houyhnhnms.” In the Penguin edition, this is 65 pages long, a typical two-night reading assignment at BUA.

The first class might begin with some background on Swift. Below are notes I use:

### Jonathan Swift (1667-1745)

#### Biography:

- English satirist, poet, political writer, and clergyman
- Born in Dublin of English parents
- Educated in Ireland
  - Attended Trinity College, Dublin
  - Undistinguished academic career
  - Obtained degree only “by special grace”
- Age 22, goes to England:
  - becomes secretary to Sir William Temple, distinguished politician
  - had a splendid library
  - there learned to become a scholar & poet
- Ordained in 1695
  - becomes an Anglican priest
- Writes his first satire, *A Tale of a Tub* (1704), about divisions in Christianity
  - becomes established as a major modern “wit”
- Becomes a major political writer (pamphleteer) for the moderate Tories, 1710
- Appointed dean of St., Patrick’s Cathedral (Anglican) by Queen Anne, 1713
- Remains in Ireland, except for brief excursions, for the rest of his life
- A member of the Scriblerus Club

- association of satiric writers
- to combat pedantry and the abuses of learning

### Swift, the Satirist

- Hated Ireland but championed the Irish cause
- *A Modest Proposal* (1729):
  - a masterpiece of bitterness and irony
  - reveals the terrible suffering of the Irish people
  - premise: the Irish should raise children to be sold and eaten
  - Swift gives recipes and six “advantages” of his proposal
- *Gulliver’s Travels* - his greatest and most savage satire (1726)
  - Based on recent vogue for travel narratives, e.g., Wm. Dampier’s *Voyages*
  - intended to “vex the world rather than divert it”
- Called himself a misanthrope, but always wrote for the betterment of mankind

This last point—that Swift “always wrote for the betterment of mankind”—is one we would keep coming back to during the rest of our discussions of *Gulliver’s Travels* and the other pieces of satire in this unit. Does satire help to better mankind? If so, how?

We would then move on to the work itself. Class discussions would focus on the objects of Swift’s satire in *Gulliver*, Swift’s style and effectiveness. I typically give my students a series of discussion prompts. For example:

### Discussion Points on *Gulliver's Travels*, Book IV

1. Yahoos—"deformed," "ugly," "odious," "cursed," "filthy," "hateful," "detestable," "vile." If the Yahoos are meant to portray us humans, is Swift being fair?

2. Whom are the Houyhnhnms meant to portray? Moreover, Gulliver says that he "never had one Hour's Sickness, while I stayed in this Island" (chap. 2). What accounts for the salubrious nature of the Houyhnhnms' land?

3. Gulliver makes an interesting cultural observation: "that the frequent use of Salt among us is an Effect of Luxury" (chap. 2). Are there "necessities" in our lives today that, upon closer examination, we find to be merely luxuries? What products, customs, ideas that we deem absolutely essential could we, in fact, do without?

4. Gulliver notes that the Houyhnhnms' "Wants and Passions are fewer than among us" (chap. 4). What would it mean to live with modest wants and passions? Would this make us happier? Better?

5. Swift, through Gulliver, satirizes—indeed, vilifies—many European institutions and professions: sailors (chap. 4), soldiers (chap. 5), lawyers (chap. 5), luxurious living (chap. 6), politicians (chap. 6), the nobility (chap. 6), colonialism (chap. 12). How do you respond to Swift's harsh depiction of European culture?

6. In their language, Houyhnhnm means "the Perfection of Nature." What has been perfected in Houyhnhnm nature? Is perfection possible? Is it worth striving for?

7. The Houyhnhnms' "grand Maxim" is "to cultivate Reason" (chap. 8). Through Reason, they have adopted "two principal Virtues ... *Friendship* and *Benevolence*" (chap. 8). Indeed, the land of the Houyhnhnms seems like a utopia. Does Swift suggest any liabilities in a life governed by pure reason alone?



8. “My principal Design was to inform and not to amuse thee....my sole Intention was the PUBLIC GOOD,” Gulliver tells his Gentle Reader (chap. 12). What good does Swift, through his character Gulliver, intend to effect?

### Class 6: Hogarth

How to make the transition from *Gulliver* to Hogarth, from a literary genre to a visual one?

Perhaps in the previous discussions of *Gulliver* the teacher could show some eighteenth-century illustrations of scenes from Swift’s book. Although I haven’t yet examined this book, see John F. Sena, “*Gulliver’s Travels* and the Genre of the Illustrated Book,” in *The Genres of “Gulliver’s Travels,”* ed. Frederik N. Smith (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press/London: Associated University Presses, 1992 [1990]), 101-38.

Or one could just plunge into Hogarth. (I continually re-learn that high school students need less of a logical link or transition between one lesson and the next than their teachers do!) Again, one could begin with some background information on Hogarth. Good sources of information are:

*Hogarth*, Michael Rosenthal (London: Jupiter Books, 1980)

*Hogarth*, Lawrence Gowing (London: Tate Gallery, 1971)

*Hogarth*, Ronald Paulson, 3 vols. (New Brunswick: Rutgers’s, 1992)

*Hogarth's Graphic Works*, 3rd rev. ed., Ronald Paulson London: The Print Room, 1989)

*Hogarth's Progress*, Peter Quennell (New York: Viking Press, 1955)

*A Rake's Progress* comprises eight paintings, which Hogarth painted in 1732–33, then published as engravings two years later. The series depicts the decline and fall of Tom Rakewell, who, after coming to London, wastes all his money on luxuries, prostitution and gambling. He ends up thrown into the Fleet Prison and ends his life at Bethlem Hospital, or Bedlam. The Wikipedia article on *A Rake's Progress* includes images of all eight paintings (and the eight engravings) and brief descriptions of the content of each. It can be accessed at:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A\\_Rake%27s\\_Progress](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Rake%27s_Progress)

#### Suggested Lessons/Discussion Questions:

1. What is a “rake”? What is the equivalent in today’s society? Pair up students and give each one of the paintings and/or engravings (along with the brief description in Wikipedia) to study. Ask them to make a list of details that are satirical: what is Hogarth poking fun at? And what receives even more scathing condemnation?

2. Alternately, you could give the students the paintings and/or engravings without first giving them the description other than the title and the overall “plot” of the series. What do they see? What is going on in the painting? Then give them the brief description in Wikipedia and continue with #1 above. [It should be noted that the details in the engravings are sharper than in the paintings.]

3. Tom is attracted to the “good life.” Students might be asked to catalog all the examples of 18<sup>th</sup>-century “good life” and good taste depicted in the paintings/engraving (especially the first six. What does Hogarth find in each example to criticize. What are some examples of “the good life” today that might come under a satirist’s scrutiny?

4. Tom's sometime girlfriend, Sarah Young, reappears in several of the paintings. The students might be asked to study these and decide what she comes to stand for in the series.

(There is a good discussion of the role of Sarah Young in the series in Paulson's book, vol. 2.)

5. The students could debate whether *A Rake's Progress* is Horatian or Juvenalian satire.

6. Whom would Hogarth choose to satirize today? What is the equivalent of a rake today?

7. Students talented in art might choose to draw or paint a scene from a modern-day "rake's progress."

8. If there is time and interest, play some of Stravinsky's opera, *The Rake's Progress*, for the class and discuss how the music (and libretto) brings out the satire.

9. Again, if time, bring in other examples of eighteenth-century pictorial satire: other pictures by Hogarth, or by Thomas Rowlandson (1756-1827) or James Gillray (1756-1815).

### Class 7: The Coffee Cantata

Preliminary steps:

1. Brief outline of Bach's life. Use, for example, James R. Gaines, *Evening in the Palace of Reason: Bach Meets Frederick the Great in the Age of Enlightenment*.

2. Brief introduction to Baroque style. Use, for example, one of the harpsichord concerti (BWV 1052-1065). Discuss style, polyphony, instrumentation.

3. Brief introduction to 18<sup>th</sup>-century coffee house culture. Use Hogarth's engraving *St. John's Coffee House*. (See image below.) The lesson could also start with a discussion of this picture, which would make a nice transition from the previous class on pictorial satire.

There is a good web site, "Coffee House Culture in 18<sup>th</sup>-century London," at:

[http://www.umich.edu/~ece/student\\_projects/coffee/](http://www.umich.edu/~ece/student_projects/coffee/)

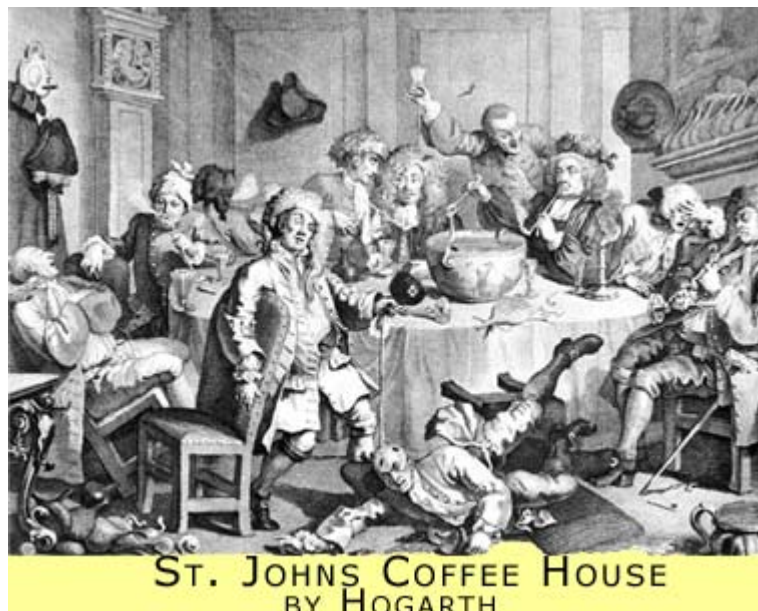
Other sources of information about coffeehouse culture:

Anthony Clayton. *London's Coffee Houses* (London: Historical Press, 2003).

R.O. Bucholz. *London: A Social and Cultural History, 1550-1750* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

The only book I could find on the history of coffee drinking in Germany is:

Robert Lieberles. *Jews Welcome Coffee: Tradition and Innovation in Early Modern Germany*. (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2012)



4. What is a “cantata”? What is the difference between a secular and sacred cantata?

5. I would end this class with a reading of the libretto of the Coffee Cantata. Assign parts to students. Discuss the personalities of Schlendrian (father) and Leischen (daughter). The libretto (in English and German) for the Coffee Cantata is available at:

<http://www.good-music-guide.com/reviews/044lyrics.htm>

#### Class 8: The Coffee Cantata

Now it's time to listen to the music. Before doing so, you might ask the students what the father's music should sound like? What voice part should he be? What would the daughter's music sound like? What voice part would she be? How about the narrator?

A good recording of the Coffee Cantata is *Kaffee-Kantate* with the Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra & Choir conducted by Ton Koopman (Challenge Classics CC72280).

Stop after each major section or aria. Questions to ask:

1. How does the music express, convey, enhance the words? the personalities of each character?

2. How does Bach bring out the satire in Picander's libretto?

3. The texts for movements 9-10 (where the narrator tells us that Leischen “secretly lets it be known that she will accept no suitor who would not let her make coffee whenever she wants” and the trio, “Maidens remain faithful to their coffee”) were not part of the original poem. Apparently, Bach requested that these words be added! Ask the students to speculate about why that might be. What’s gained by the addition of this final joke?

4. Debate: whose side was Bach (and/or Picander) on?

5. What kinds of father-daughter (or son) quarrels occur today?

### Final Project

Ask the students to identify something in their world that outrages, upsets, or annoys, amuses them. Write an essay, story, song, “modest proposal,” spoof, dialogue—or paint or draw a picture; make a collage—that, through wit and exaggeration, informs, exposes, instructs, satirizes that thing. What style will you choose: Horatian or Juvenalian? Keeping in mind that Swift always “wrote for the betterment of mankind,” explain (verbally or in a one-page “artist’s statement”) how your piece of satire is intended for the betterment of mankind.

I would welcome any feedback from teachers who decide to use this unit. I’m aware that it is very ambitious, and might even take longer than 8 class periods. I also think that portions of the unit could be used effectively.

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