



That's Not Funny: The Ethics of Satire

Professor Judith Hawley

Thursday 26 February 2026

Plan of Lecture:

1. The problem: the backlash against satire
2. The context: debates about free speech
3. The question: is satire a form of hate speech?
4. The turn: a defence of satire
5. A way forwards: reading in context
6. Conclusion: a plea for critical understanding

Opening remarks

The poet Byron called the laughter of satire: 'Savage mirth'. It is not the sympathetic laughter of comedy (laughing *with*); satire encourages us to laugh *at* the target. Yet satire is supposed to do more than mock. Many critics argue that satirists do (or should) write from noble motives or a position of moral superiority to the target. Moreover, the intention is to reform the target or promote a change of behaviour.

However, in recent years, the role of satire has been challenged and satirists themselves have quite literally come under attack. In the 1960s, Peter Cook used to say, 'The heyday of satire was Weimar Germany – and see how that prevented the rise of Adolf Hitler!' The example of Germany raises important questions about whether satire has any effect on its audience.

The last few decades have produced compelling evidence that satire does have an effect but not always the one its makers intended. Three notorious instances of

satires on Islam have had fatal consequences. These shocking incidents have prompted serious debate about the relations between free speech and hate speech. This lecture will consider the rights and wrongs of satire in a historical context and in the light of our present situation.

Is satire ethical?

I was taught as a student that satirists operate from a higher moral plane; they exposed wrong doings with the aim of reforming them; and that they had a positive moral norm which they were implicitly recommending even as they were pulling down the pants to expose the private parts of their targets.

I no longer believe that.

In Shakespeare's *As you Like It*, the melancholy Jaques has ambitions to be a satirist:

He tells Duke Senior:

Give me leave

To speak my mind, and I will through and through
Cleanse the foul body of th' infected world,
If they will patiently receive my medicine.

But Duke Senior calls him out and calls his methods vicious in themselves and accuses Jaques of hypocrisy:

Most mischievous foul sin in chiding sin;
For thou thyself hast been a libertine,
As sensual as the brutish sting itself,
And all th' embossèd sores and headed evils
That thou with license of free foot hast caught
Wouldst thou disgorge into the general world.

The phrase 'Most mischievous foul sin in chiding sin' introduces the question I want to address in my lecture: What is the relationship between free speech, hate speech and satire?

1. The problem: the backlash against satire

The critical laughter of satire has met resistance from a number of quarters in recent years. The influential social scientist Michael Billig uses the term 'unlaughter' to refer to the deliberate choice not to laugh. Not laughing is not simply an absence of laughter; it is a refusal to be a party to the joke.

Several anti-Islamic satires have provoked the most striking instances of unlaughter.

I will discuss these notorious cases:

1988: Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*

2005: the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons.

2011: *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons

2. The context: debates about free speech

One way of viewing the violent reprisals to these three instances of satire is to see them as related examples of an intolerant religion violently trying to suppress freedom of expression and perhaps even as part of an Islamist attempt to vanquish Western liberalism. However, we need to consider that free speech is a subject with a morally and politically inflected history. The First Amendment to the constitution of the United States is not a universal law. Taking Fara Dabhoiwala's recent critique of free speech as a starting point, I will discuss the relation between free speech, power and hate speech.

3. The question: is satire a form of hate speech?

On the face of it, satire meets the standards of hate speech as defined by a number of legal bodies. It frequently targets the protected characteristics of individuals and groups. Satire has the power to wound as well as reform.

4. The turn: a defence of satire

I suggest we need to recognise the specific nature of satirical laughter. While not all humour is purely comic and benign, satire is a specific category of humour that is intended to ridicule; it has a critical point. Billig treats laughter as a social science problem but satire is an aesthetic category which also has certain social functions. This is not to say that satirist's have the right to utter hate speech but that a satirical utterance is rhetorical not declarative. The involvement of artistry puts it at some

distance from everyday utterance and often, but not always, the use of such techniques such as distortion and irony lifts its attack above mere insult and libel.

Moreover, satirists might occupy the privileged position of the *parrhesiastes* who speaks truth for the good of society even at the risk of their own safety.

We need to clarify the definition of satire in order to appreciate its social, moral and aesthetic functions. I propose four defining characteristics:

1. It is a form of critique
2. It has a real-world target
3. It employs artistry, often some form of distortion
4. It brings some kind of satisfaction

5. A way forward: reading in context

To get away from the limitations of the free speech /hate speech argument, I suggest that we pay more attention to those defining characteristics rather than isolating individual insulting statements.

I examine in detail an example of satire from an earlier era which might look like egregious hate speech directed at someone because of their perceived sexual orientation: an extract from Alexander Pope's *Epistle to Arbuthnot*. First published in 1735, the poem mounts an extended defence of Pope's career as a satirist addressed to a sympathetic audience, his friend, Dr John Arbuthnot. I focus on one passage: a poison pen portrait of Lord John Hervey under the guise of Sporus and argue that by attending to the context and to Pope's artistry, we can recognise the moral force of his apparent nastiness.

6. Conclusion: a plea for critical understanding

In many cultures, satirists occupy a privileged position from which to mount their attacks. Some critics use the term *parrhesiastes* (frank speaker or truth teller) for satirists who speak truth to power. Derived from the Greek, where it referred to the kind of freedom of speech allowed to satirists and comic writers, it implies speaking from a particular position or platform, often outside the centre of power, which itself licensed hard talk. But according to this model, the *parrhesiastes* has to speak

honestly, morally, to be critical of themselves and to accept the risks. Moreover, audiences need to rise to the challenge of exercising their critical judgement.

© Professor Judith Hawley 2026

References and Further Reading

Billig, M. (2005). *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards A Social Critique of Humour*. Sage.

Dabhoiwala, F. (2025). *What is Free Speech? The History of a Dangerous Idea*. Allen Lane.

Elliott, R. C. (1960). *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art*. Princeton University Press.

Garton Ash, T. (2016). *Free Speech: Ten Principles for a Connected World*. Yale University Press.

[Gordon, T. and Trenchard, J.]. (1720-23). *Cato's Letters*, 1st pub. in *London Journal*.

Greenberg, J. (2019). *The Cambridge Introduction to Satire*. Cambridge University Press.

Hawley, J. (2026 forthcoming). *Satire: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press.

[Hervey, Lord J. and Wortley Montagu, Lady M.] (1733). *Verses Addressed to the Imitator of the First Satire of the Second Book of Horace*. A. Dodd.

Jameson, A. (1832). *Characteristics of Women: Moral, Poetical and Historical*. Saunders and Otley.

Juvenal (2004). *Satires*, I.30, in *Juvenal and Persius*, ed. and trans. by S. Morton Braund. Loeb Classical Library 91. Harvard University Press.

Meijer Drees, M. and de Leeuw, S. eds. (2015). *The Power of Satire*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Pope, A. (1993). 'Epistle to Arbuthnot' (1735), in *A Critical Edition of the Major Works*, ed. P. Rogers. Oxford University Press.

Quintero, R., ed. (2011). *A Companion to Satire: Ancient and Modern*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Rolfe, M. J. (2021). 'The Danish Cartoons, *Charlie Hebdo* and the Culture Wars: Satiric Limits in Comparative National and Transnational Perspectives', *The European Journal of Humour Research*, 9: 92-112.

Schama, S. 'Liberty and Laughter will Live on'. *Financial Times*, 8 January 2015.

Whyte, J. (2021). *Why Free Speech Matters*. London Publishing Partnership.