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Review of: Charles A. Knight, *The Literature of Satire*

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Bildungsroman as superseding pro- and anti-feminist satire in the first half of the eighteenth century. Overall, the suspicion that the criteria used are too neat and that texts which do not fit the pattern have been elided does not easily die.

Despite these criticisms, Palmeri's study can be recommended as a thought-provoking contribution to the study of eighteenth-century satire outside neo-classical poetry.

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Charles A. Knight. *The Literature of Satire.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. US$75. ix+327pp. ISBN 0-521-83460-0.

When, after many years of reading, thinking, teaching, and writing, a scholar leaves us a handsome record of what he has learned, we ought to be grateful. It is with such gratitude that we should welcome Charles A. Knight's *The Literature of Satire.* Knight has provided us with an elaborate account of the European literature of satire. Of the writers studied here only Nabokov lived for a long time outside Europe. Yet he never ceased to be European. Every work discussed in this book, therefore, is European in provenance or inspiration.

Beginning with a stimulating and comprehensive attempt to define the bases of satire, Knight goes on to chapters on "Satiric Nationalism," where eighteenth-century prose, such as *Gulliver's Travels, The Persian Letters,* and *The Citizen of the World,* are briefly examined, and "Satiric Exile," where *Pale Fire, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting,* and *Shame* receive more detailed analysis. In part 2 of this book, Knight presents a chapter on dramatic satire, in which he examines plays by Jonson, Molière, Ostrovsky, and Brecht. Next, under the chapter heading "Horatian Performances," Knight discusses Horace's satires and a number of works that owe their derivation to Horace, including Rochester's *Artemiza to Chloe,* Marvell's *Last Instructions to a Painter,* Pope's *Dunciad,* Swift's *Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift,* and Byron's *Don Juan.* In chapter 6, "Satire and the Novel," Knight examines *Roderick Random, Bouvard et Pécuchet,* some satires by Lucian, and Machado de Assis's *Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas.*

Although the scope is diverse, the reader should also be prepared for glances at many other books. It is difficult to find a common denominator here beyond Knight's regarding all these works as satires. But an exception to this is chapter 7, which is more a work of historical scholarship than criticism. It details the French failure to demolish Dunkirk as required by treaty obligations. The focus is on Steele's journalism and on the responses of others to this issue. Knight's desire to include journalism as a legitimate form of satire is worthwhile, but this

episode in eighteenth-century history and journalism does not fit comfortably with the other chapters. Even more odd to some readers, I suppose, will be Knight's concluding with a chapter on the German satirist Karl Kraus, who serves as an exemplar of the modern satirist.

As one can see from this list of topics, *The Literature of Satire* encompasses a wide variety of satiric subject matter. Many students of satire will, therefore, find discussions of works and authors that interest them. But Knight's criterion for choosing subjects of discussion is mainly his interest in them (1). There is no suggestion that these works represent an essential pattern in satiric literature.

Knight's discussion of the origins of satire is not merely conventional. His speculations on the ancient commentator Diomedes are original and stimulating. I do, however, object to his description of satire as a proto-genre, especially when his later discussions seem to assume that it is a genre. "Proto-genre" does little to solve a theoretical problem. It simply establishes a category that makes the generically discrete satires of Horace, Juvenal, and Persius something vague and transitional. Despite this uncertainty, Knight is confident and perceptive in his analysis of individual satires. But just what he believes the essence of satire to be remains unclear.

The title of this book is old-fashioned enough to attract a reviewer's attention. This title out of the early years of the twentieth century is slightly pretentious and hardly specific. It promises too much and too little at the same time. Knight's view of satire seems to encompass a wide variety of works, but a more specific argument for regarding those poems, plays, and novels as satires would be welcome. Knight's predilections are of interest, but they do not advance materially our understanding of satire. From another standpoint, however, Knight's work is not an interpretation of satire but an extension of boundaries to many works that are not always considered satires. This is not true of his attention to the work of Karl Kraus, however, whose German is elusive and puzzling, and Knight's decision not only to examine Kraus but also to do so in his concluding chapter is risky, since by his own admission he is overmatched by Kraus's German. Indeed, nearly anyone who seeks to discuss satirists writing in so many different languages can hardly hope to appear professional at every turn. Knight is refreshingly open about his limitations, but reminding us of those limits does not always inspire confidence. The inclusion of Kraus tends to affirm Knight's attraction to satire as a linguistic construct and ultimate mystery, since Kraus is about as odd and eccentric a satirist as one can find. We must finally admit that great as satiric literature is, on the whole satirists are, indeed, an odd lot.

Intrigued by their oddities and eccentricities, Knight goes so far as to suggest that late twentieth-century satire is characterized primarily by fantasy, approaching the absurdist status. My own view is that too much fantasy can destroy satire and that satire can never afford to be entirely absurdist. The

right vein for satire seems to be at some point between fantasy and realism. The greatest satires are always grounded in realism, even when fantastic worlds are in view. A tendency by would-be contemporary satirists to take satire into fantasy has led, I believe, to a decline in satire in our own time.

Another disagreement I have with Knight is his insistence that satire is necessarily a male preserve (6–8). The satire he examines is substantially that, to be sure, but there is a feminist satire that should not be ignored. Feminist satire began to attract notice in the seventeenth century when female writers such as Aphra Behn felt a need to respond in kind to satire directed against their sex. Mary Leapor and Mary Wortley Montagu continued this response in the eighteenth century. Sarah Fielding's *The Adventures of David Simple* (1744) marks a watershed in feminist satire, as recent feminist criticism has begun to reveal. But I suspect Fielding's choice of the novel form also contributed to the confusion about feminist satire that continues today. Jane Collier's *An Essay on the Art of Ingeniously Tormenting* (1753), for example, should not be forgotten, but feminist satire slid gradually into the novel form. Burney and Austen, among others, certainly had the essentials to become great satirists, and are sometimes regarded as such, but their achievements in the novel eclipse and sometimes mask their contributions to satire.

Despite the inevitable flaws in any work as comprehensive and wide-ranging as Knight's manages to be, *The Literature of Satire* contains much that is good: the book will expand the idea of satire for most readers by introducing them to works that stretch the boundaries of satire. Knight has had his say in a handsomely produced volume. Now it will be the task of others to determine whether his analyses improve our understanding of satire. I believe much of this book does precisely that.

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