

HUDIBRAS AND THE PROBLEM OF SATIRICAL DISTANCE

Samuel Butler's *Hudibras* has had a curious fate with its readers. As James Sutherland has observed, in his own day the poem

was enjoyed by readers who were unlikely to read much else, but if he is read at all today it is probably by those who have read so much that they have also read *Hudibras*. Yet although it is chiefly the learned reader that Butler still attracts, this is the wrong sort of reader for *Hudibras*: the robust parsons and lawyers and country squires who welcomed the poem with bellows of happy laughter were the men who could really appreciate what Butler was doing.¹

Hudibras, one should add, has also survived among those who are not specialists in Restoration literature, as the source of a great number of almost proverbial maxims.²

One reason why *Hudibras* should have fared thus may be obvious: its topicality. When it was first published it was immediately successful because it said 'what large numbers of Englishmen wanted to have said'³ after the Restoration. But the craze seems to have been over soon. In 1674, ten years after the first part had appeared, Butler published the first and second parts together, and added explanatory notes — a sign that he could not reckon anymore with the spontaneous acceptance that his poem had first met. In 1678 the third part followed, and there is no evidence that it caused a great stir: the topical interest of Butler's ridicule of the Puritans had now worn off, eighteen years after the Restoration of the Stuarts to the throne.

But dated topicality is a problem that *Hudibras* shares with many other poems. As the satires of Dryden and Pope, especially *Absalom and Achitophel* and *The Dunciad*,⁴ show, this need not result in their total neglect among the readers of poetry. These poems form, of course, part of the achievements of poets also famous for what they did in other fields of literature. But this cannot be the only reason for their survival; and, as I shall argue, the lack of such a context is not the main reason for the neglect into which *Hudibras* has fallen.

Butler's poem also presents problems of another kind. They concern the

¹ James Sutherland, *English Literature of the Late Seventeenth Century*, The Oxford History of English Literature, vol. VI (Oxford, 1969), p. 158.

² See, for example, J. M. and M. J. Cohen, *The Penguin Dictionary of Quotations* (Harmondsworth, 1960), pp. V, and 86.

³ Sutherland, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

⁴ *The Dunciad* offers an interesting parallel case in that one year after its first publication a Variorum edition appeared, the notes to which serve, among other things, the explanation of allusions.

relationship between the poem and the events and figures it presents, and between the criticism of human behaviour and the sequence of events, in other words: they are problems of satirical and narrative structure. As such they are of particular interest to the literary scholar. A study of Butler's failure to solve them convincingly may help him to define the conditions a poem of this kind has to meet in order to survive.

The confrontation of Dr. Johnson's and Hazlitt's views clearly brings out the problems of *Hudibras*. In his *Lives of the English Poets* Johnson professes himself an admirer of Butler, and deplors that *Hudibras* remained incomplete. But his strictures on the poem, especially its action, are nevertheless severe. Even if *Hudibras* had been completed,

there could only have been a succession of incidents, each of which might have happened without the rest, and which could not all co-operate to a single conclusion.

The discontinuity of the action might however have been easily forgiven if there had been action enough; but I believe every reader regrets the paucity of events, and complains that in the poem of *Hudibras* [...] there is more said than done. The scenes are too seldom changed, and the attention is tired with long conversation.⁵

As to the relationship between *Hudibras* and contemporary events he is doubtful:

If *Hudibras* be considered as the representative of the Presbyterians it is not easy to say why his weapons should be represented as ridiculous or useless, for, whatever judgement might be passed upon their knowledge or their arguments, experience had sufficiently shown that their swords were not to be despised.⁶

Elsewhere, in *The Idler*, Johnson explains why *Hudibras* is 'almost forgotten, however embellished with sentiments and diversified with illusions, however bright with wit, and however solid with truth':

He that writes upon general principles, or delivers universal truths, may hope to be often read, because his work will be equally useful at all times, and in every country, [...]. He that lays out his labours upon temporary subjects, easily finds readers, and quickly loses them; for what should make the book valued when its subject is no more.⁷

Hazlitt, in his *Lectures on the English Comic Writers*, tries to answer Johnson's criticisms. He concedes that there is little narrative in the poem, but, he says, it has an argument:⁸ *Hudibras*

⁵ Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the English Poets*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, 3 vols. (London, 1905), vol. I, p. 209.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

⁷ Samuel Johnson, *The Idler and The Adventurer*, ed. by Walter J. Bate et al., The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, vol. II (New Haven, Conn., 1963), pp. 183-4.

⁸ William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Comic Writers*, Everyman edition (London, 1910), p. 62.

in its essence is a satire, or didactic poem. It is not virtually dramatic, or narrative. It is composed of digressions by the author. He instantly breaks off in the middle of the story, or incident, to comment upon and turn it into ridicule. He does not give characters but topics, which would just as well do in his own mouth without agents, or machinery of any kind.⁹

Hazlitt answers Johnson's doubts concerning the depiction of historical events with the argument that Butler 'in general ridicules not persons, but things, not a party, but their principles, which may belong, as time and occasion serve, to one set of solemn pretenders or another'.¹⁰ Butler is not on the side of the Stuarts: 'True wit is not a parasite plant. The strokes which it aims at folly and knavery on one side of a question, teel equally home on the other'.¹¹

By reading *Hudibras* as a satire and stressing its expository character, and by severing its dose links with contemporary history, Hazlitt hopes to have refuted Johnson's criticisms. But the conflicts between narrative continuity and satirical exposition, and between topicality and general application have continued to occupy the critics of *Hudibras*.

Before we return to *Hudibras* we have to deal with those general characteristics of satire that concern our discussion of the poem. The true satirist, according to Dryden, seeks 'to correct the vices and follies of his time, and to give the rules of a happy and virtuous life';¹² and among successful examples of satire he also lists *Hudibras*.

There are few successful satires, however, that fulfil the second part of Dryden's definition by explicitly indicating how one should live happily and virtuously. These rules are usually implied as an antitype of the abuses attacked;¹³ and it is the task of the satirist to make sure that his readers always feel its presence. He must see to it that his readers retain a consistent and distanced perspective, from which both the thing satirized and its antitype can be simultaneously perceived, a perspective that also lifts the subject of satire above its immediate historical context. If the reader does not have what we may call 'satirical distance', the poem may at best be able to ridicule its object, to show that it is silly, but not that it is wrong.

The satirist has several methods at his disposal to achieve satirical distance. The four most important, which may be applied in combination, are the following:

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

¹² John Dryden, 'A Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire' (1693), in *Essays of John Dryden*, ed. by W. P. Ker (Oxford, 1900), vol. 2, p. 79.

¹³ Butler's own definition of satire makes this clear: 'A satire is a kind of knight-errant that goes upon adventures to relieve the distressed damsel Virtue, and redeem Honour out of enchanted castles, and oppressed Truth and Reason out of the captivity of giants and magicians' (Samuel Butler, '*Hudibras*' (*Parts I and II*) and *Selected Other Writings*, ed. by John Wilders and Hugh de Quehen [Oxford, 1973], p. 280) — i.e., if only vice, shame, dishonesty, and ignorance can be chased away, their antitypes virtue, honour, truth, and reason will emerge.

1) He may use *allegory*. Here the distance between the phenomenon criticized and its representation serves to ensure the correct response by the reader. Popular forms of this kind are the animal fable, and the use of biblical stories to satirize contemporary events (e.g., in Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel*).

2) The satirist may make sure that he himself has a strong presence in his satire, and cast the reader in the role of a sympathetic listener. His way of looking at things and his comments, even his style, then create the satirical distance between the reader and the world satirized.¹⁴

3) The satirist may introduce a figure into his poem, an eye-witness, who need not share his point of view, but who supports the reader in keeping the correct perspective. Cervantes does this by coupling Don Quixote with a shrewd, down-to-earth fellow, and Swift, too, makes extremely subtle use of this method in *Gulliver's Travels*.

4) The satirical distance between the reader and the phenomena satirized may also be indicated with the help of form: for example, by presenting trivial events in heroic form, as, for example, in Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*.¹⁵

In all these cases the maintenance of satirical distance also has consequences for the narrative: as the events illustrate and criticize attitudes, they will be typical of the character and institutions presented and therefore relatively simple. Their sequence must always remain within the bounds of human judgement. It cannot serve to show the limitations of human judgement, as it does in both comedy and tragedy. The events are always described for a particular reason — and the point is that, given the virtue and reason implied as antitypes, these events would be different. As their sequence is guided by the intention of the satirist to show different aspects of the attitudes satirized, it will follow the progression of an exposition rather than that of a narrative. It is this phenomenon that Hazlitt alludes to in saying that *Hudibras* has no narrative, but an argument.

If the reader is aware of the satirical intention of the author, he will accept this expository sequence of events as a characteristic trait of the genre. If, however, he is not, the sequence of events will look rather random to him. It will lack consistency and not be able to satirize, but only to ridicule its object. We might distinguish this type of narrative from that of satire by calling it burlesque ridicule. It is this type that seems to be at the back of Johnson's opinion of *Hudibras*.

In order to do justice to the views of Johnson and Hazlitt then, we have to answer the question of what role satirical distance plays in *Hudibras*. In doing this we can draw on the list of four methods to create it, that has been sketched above.

¹⁴ In formal satire this arrangement is strengthened by presenting the satire as a dialogue between the author, or his persona, and a friend of his. We find this method in Roman satire, and, of course, in Pope's imitations of it.

¹⁵ However, the ability of form to create satirical distance is restricted; it will itself be affected by the trivial contents.

1) *Allegory*. Allegorical readings of *Hudibras* have been attempted several times in our century, although Butler's own opinion about allegory makes its use highly improbable.¹⁶ These readings also seem to solve the problem of narrative sequence: the continuity missing in the narrative may be perceived on the level of the phenomena represented, in the sequence of historical events.

Hardin Craig has linked the bear-baiting of the First Part with the political events of 1647, the bear representing King Charles, Hudibras the Presbyterians, and the mob the independent party. But Craig is aware that he runs into difficulties with some of the figures, and he hesitates to take his allegorical interpretation beyond the second canto of the First Part."

If the allegory is to accommodate all the figures and events in the poem, there is no end to speculation about who or what they might represent. But the clinching argument against any allegorical interpretation of *Hudibras* is the proximity of the planes of reality and representation in the poem, as Ellen Douglas Leyburn has observed. 'The world of the surface narrative is part of the same world which Presbyterians and Independents would inhabit if they were portrayed directly'.¹⁸ This makes it extremely difficult for the reader to keep the two levels apart, i.e. to maintain satirical distance.

2) *Auctorial presence*. Butler does with relatively little direct auctorial commentary, except for the introduction and description of figures. As debates and dialogues between the figures play such a dominant role in the poem, he has little scope to interfere as a commentator. Nevertheless, his presence should not be underrated. It is particularly strong in the striking combination of ingenuity and heavy directness in his language and verse. But this presence is not so much that of a judge who invites the reader to share his views as that of a brilliant and indefatigable wit: most of those lines that have become proverbial, come from passages where the narrator is speaking himself, or where we hear Butler's voice in the words of one of the figures (a phenomenon to which I shall return).

3) *Use of an eye-witness*. Butler does not introduce the figure of a neutral eye-witness. All his figures are criticized: Hudibras, Ralpho, the astrologer, the widow, are all examples of some kind of unreasonable behaviour. But the conversation between two madmen can hardly ridicule or satirize

¹⁶ 'Allegories are only useful when they serve as instances to illustrate some obscure truth. But when a truth, plain enough, is forced to serve an allegory, it is a preposterous mistake of the end of it — which is to make obscure things plain, not plain things obscure' (Wilders and de Quehen, *op. cit.*, p. 279).

¹⁷ Hardin Craig, 'Hudibras, Part I, and the Politics of 1647', *Manly Anniversary Studies* (Chicago, 1920), 145-55. — Those who followed his line of interpretation have been less cautious. Ward S. Miller, for example, sees Hudibras as standing for the Long Parliament, and the widow in the Second Part as the widow England courted by it ('The Allegory in Part I of *Hudibras*', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 21 [1958], 323-43). As he accepts Craig's identification of the bear with Charles I we have to conclude that the bear was the widow's deceased husband.

¹⁸ Ellen Douglas Leyburn, 'Hudibras Considered as Satiric Allegory', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 16 (1953), 146.

one of them; it will just be confused and bewildering. It is no surprise, therefore, that Butler, although this does not accord with his scheme, tends to get caught in the pattern that Cervantes used when he introduced Sancho Pansa: in scenes that serve to expose the pettiness and cowardice of his master, Ralpho is presented as being sensible, crafty, and difficult to cheat. He takes a position that may be very close to Butler's own.

But Ralpho is not the only figure to be affected by such structural digressions: in the Second Part, in the widow's long debate with Hudibras, which serves to expose his dishonesty and greed, she is not really given enough personal traits for us to imagine her as a figure. She has, above all else, the function of serving as a foil to Hudibras.

In the third canto of Part II, Hudibras consults an astrologer about his prospects in love. As the star-gazers are Butler's favourite bugbears (cp. his satire *The Elephant in the Moon*) we may expect a debate between a madman and a cheat — a confusing exchange of odd and irrelevant arguments. But here Hudibras appears as a champion of common sense, fighting superstition, defending man's free will — and, for the time being, forgetting the Presbyterian Calvinist doctrine of predestination. Here, it is Hudibras who is often difficult to distinguish from Butler the author.

The unity of the figures is therefore strained, and sometimes even lost." They are torn between serving as examples of unreasonable attitudes and functioning as devices to create satirical distance, between being mocked and acting as the mouthpieces of the author.

4) *Form*. We might expect Butler to use heroic couplets, which create satirical distance by contrasting with the despicable and ridiculous behaviour of the figures. Instead, Butler employs the burlesque eight-syllable couplet, a form that had been taken over into English literature from France."

Scarron, who seems to be one of the obvious sources, used it in his *Virgile travesti* (1648-53), which parodies the *Aeneid* by transposing its figures and its action to a lower social level. The eight-syllable couplet is adapted to this purpose: it replaces the traditional French heroic form, the alexandrine.

In English literature the burlesque form may in the same way be related to the heroic couplet.²¹ But Butler uses it with an additional complication. Whereas Scarron mocks the heroic by using a low form, Butler first mockingly elevates his low figures, with the help of heroic language and allusion, before he describes their exploits in a low form. *Hudibras* <simultaneously attacks contemporary follies and the heroic form in which it is cast'.²²

¹⁹ See also Albert H. West, *L'Influence française dans la poésie burlesque en Angleterre entre 1660 et 1700* (Paris, 1930), especially pp. 148-9. ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²¹ The eight-syllable couplet, of course, has also a tradition of its own in English literature. It is the form of the medieval metrical romances, which according to Ian Jack, survived into the seventeenth century among humble readers (*Augustan Satire* [Oxford, 1952], p. 26).

²² Wilders and de Quehen, p. xvi. — Butler's mockery of the heroic poem also

Under these circumstances it is difficult to establish the contrast between the form and the contents that may create satirical distance. Dryden pointed out this problem:

in any other Hand, the shortness of his Verse, and the quick returns of Rhyme, had debas'd the Dignity of Style. And besides, the double Rhyme, (a necessary Companion of Burlesque Writing) is not so proper for Manly Satire, for it turns Earnest too much to Jest, and gives us a Boyish kind of Pleasure.²⁸

Having reviewed the four main methods of creating satirical distance, we are forced to conclude that Butler does not make consistent and convincing use of any of them. He often leaves it to the reader to decide what perspective he should choose in approaching the poem, a decision that we may find exceedingly difficult to make today. We will often find it impossible to make up our minds on whether we should concentrate on the argument or the narrative, whether we should read the poem as a satire or as an example of what I have called burlesque ridicule. As a satire of common human traits, in the way Hazlitt reads it, *Hudibras* is still of great interest to us; as ridicule of a political party in the 17th century we will find it dated; but as a poem that may be read in either way or in both, it will often be confusing, even irritating.

When Butler published the first part of the poem this problem did not exist: the topical interest made the decision between the two ways of reading unimportant. We may readily assume that the immediate success of the poem was due to the brilliant ridicule of the Puritans rather than to its satire of human vice. Pepys, who disliked it, called it a 'book of drollery in verse'.²⁴

We may take our observations one step further: as time wore on and the topical interest of the poem faded, Butler had to find other ways of making it attractive. The notes he added to the 1674 edition may be understood as such an attempt: they explain allusions to uncommon sources of learning and to historical events of the Commonwealth period,²⁵ and thus remove obstacles in the reader's way; but they also introduce new topics of ridicule.²⁶

In the Second Part, published in 1663, Butler already employed other methods of reducing the dependence of his poem on topical interest: he tried to introduce elements safeguarding satirical distance, but the pattern intro-

shows in his introducing the invocation only towards the ending of the first canto (with beer as his muse), and by finishing the canto in the middle of the bear-baiting episode.

²² John Dryden, 'Discourse concerning the Original and Progress of Satire', in *The Works of John Dryden*, ed. H. T. Swedenborg, jr., vol. IV: *Poems 1693-1696* (Berkeley, Cal., 1974), p. 81.

²⁴ See *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, ed. Gregory Smith (London, 1906), p. 168 (26 December, 1662). He goes on: 'it is so silly an abuse of the Presbyterian Knight going to wars, that I am ashamed of it'.

²⁵ In Canto I of Part I, for example, notes to lines 24, 38, 66, 115, 148, 178, 180, 230, 256, 279, etc.

²⁶ E.g., Canto I, Part I, 93, 143, 147, 171, 179, etc.

duced in the First Part made this difficult. His attempt resulted in the structural digressions discussed under 3) above.

For the rest, we can observe how the poem gradually comes apart at its seams. This shows most clearly in its changes of mode. Whereas we have a successful fusion of debate and action in the First Part, in the Second Part debates, which facilitate the introduction of satirical elements, grow more and more central. The narrative that connects them increasingly becomes an excuse to string together certain topics. The beginning of the Third Part, on the other hand, — where Hudibras boasts of his exploits to the widow and is thrashed by the astrologer — is a piece of comedy that has little to offer as satire. The second canto of the Third Part has no connexion with the plot of the narrative at all: here Butler adopts strong auctorial presence in dealing with the political conditions of the Tate Commonwealth. And at the end of the Second Part Butler also begins to introduce new poetic forms, the letters by Hudibras and the widow.

The reason why *Hudibras*, a poem that was once immensely popular, has survived in a number of maxims, but not as a work of literature, is then to be found in the unsolved conflict between satire and burlesque ridicule, between argument and narrative, which becomes increasingly perplexing in the course of the poem. *Hudibras* could only have survived as a work of literature if it were obvious beyond doubt that it satirizes human traits that are not restricted to the epoch in which it is set. As things stand we may indeed share Hazlitt's opinion that it does this. But the poem does not offer much help to the reader in adopting the satirical perspective required. Butler does not employ any of the means that the satirist has at his disposal in a consistent way; but neither does he do without them. The poem therefore lacks unity: the action is not consistent, the figures are not consistent, the way of reading suggested is not consistent. And as there is little chance that the topical matter of the poem will ever be of general interest again, the poem will probably remain unread.

As a subject of study, on the other hand, it should not be neglected. Just because it is only partly successful, it offers fascinating material for the study of satire (in its triumphs and failures), of the role of the reader in a literary text, and of the historical dimensions of a poem.

The student of *Hudibras*, moreover, will not only be enlightened, but also entertained. He will enjoy what the somewhat bewildered reader who has put the book aside will miss: the ingenuity, sharpness, and directness of Butler's wit.