

Wilde and Continental Satiric Models

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1. Introduction

Oscar Wilde, *L'homme terrible* of the *fin de siècle*, was represented as overly French in the attacks on him following his 1895 trial. Whilst there was certainly a partial intent to feminize him in the eyes of a scandal-loving public, the more significantly-implied Gallic connection was between his behavior and that of the decadence which characterized the Continental literature of the period. This paper shall consider the contention that the output of Oscar Wilde exhibited a series of characteristics more consistent with French satiric models than with English. To consider Wilde as French satirist here is primarily to say that his forms and style tend to evoke the flavor of French satire as opposed to English.

Distinguishing satiric forms through the opaque prism of national boundaries is often difficult, but the traditions do seem to diverge from their classical roots. Wilde's connection with French literature and forms has been well-documented, along with his grasp of the subtleties of the language. In terms of form, for example, *Salomé* is, according to scholars, derived in large part directly from French lyrical drama (Roditi 185). It was also first written and performed in French, of course. Feeling that he had mastered English, Wilde was looking to express something wrought beautifully in another language. He is interesting in that, whilst one can see the influence of earlier French writers, he has much to say about certain of his Continental contemporaries. For example, in "The Critic As Artist," he praises Flaubert somewhat ironically (81), and Marie-Henri Beyle [Stendhal] more concretely (130), referring also to Charles Baudelaire and Théophile Gautier several times as well (e.g. at page 100). In fact, if Richard Gilman (the author of *Decadence:*

The Strange Life of an Epithet) is to be believed, the work of Baudelaire and Wilde often seems to be considering much the same question — that of the function and value of the soul. Edouard Roditi, who argues that the ideas of artists are more important than their forms, notes that, in terms of ideas, Wilde was following the same path as contemporaries such as Rimbaud, Lautréamont and Mallarmé, as well as Proust, in the sense of an aesthetic pursuit (195).

2. French and British satire

At this point, a discussion of the nature of satire in French and British writing is of relevance. Both countries had a strong tendency to rely upon pre-existing ideas to underpin aesthetic models, and appeals to the stylists and critics of antiquity such as Aristotle, Horace, and Longinus were a frequent strategy in defining the boundaries of art. This was especially common in literary circles on both sides of the Channel. The three forms of satire which had currency in France and England from the Early Modern period onwards — Horatian, Juvenalian and Menippean — derive their names from classical styles (De Smet 32). Horatian satire criticises the folly of human nature somewhat more gently than other forms, while Juvenalian mocks vice and the ills of society through caustic ridicule, and Menippean questions the states of mind prevailing in society, usually through prose. This last category is famously difficult to define, and critics such as Mikhail Bakhtin have devoted considerable energy to attempting to explore its boundaries, citing elements such as the ambiguity of the satiric target and “dialogism,” or competing voices within the work (Hirschkop 225). One might, for example, see the best-known works of Jane Austen as Horatian, Swift primarily as Juvenalian and Lewis Carroll as Menippean.

Both British and French writers used all three forms extensively. Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* is arguably Horatian in parts (although one might make the case — as Northrop Frye has opined — that it is at least partly Menippean as well), yet his *A Modest Proposal* is indisputably a masterpiece of the Juvenalian style. Voltaire’s *Candide* might be considered a blend of all three satiric forms in its intent, yet it is of a different stamp from the acerbic tone adopted by Swift. Voltaire maintains a geniality throughout in which the folly of society becomes a kind of insulating layer. The repeated failures of Pangloss, for example, form the centerpiece of the work’s critique of philosophical optimism, but his constant rejection of the ills of the world

somehow leave the reader deceptively cheerful, even upon discovering, in Chapter VI, that he has been hanged — “although this was not customary.” All is indeed for the best in the best of all possible worlds, however, as Pangloss surfaces again due to the fact that the hanging was not carried out efficiently enough.

There thus do seem to exist differences in satiric usage between France and Britain. One cannot suggest something as simplistic as the idea that French satire is gentler and British more pointed, as there are numerous examples — from Jean de la Fontaine to *Charlie Hebdo* — which prove otherwise. Still, the satiric traditions seem to work in different ways. Perhaps the most apparent is that French satire tends to be somewhat more diffuse and subtle in its attacks, and the boundaries between satire and straightforward observation more blurred than in British, where it is generally clear when some type of satiric motivic force is at work, and the borders within which it operates tend to be fairly well-defined.

This difference in approach can be traced back in large part to the function and dissemination of satiric forms in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Britain’s ruling classes had faced the indignities of deposition and a civil war, and, despite the return of Charles II to the throne in 1660 and the re-establishment of the monarchy, the power gained by the middle classes was never quite relinquished, and these sensibilities defined much of the artistic landscape of the country in the long eighteenth century that began with the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and culminated in the Battle of Waterloo in 1815.

France, on the other hand, was a country dominated by its ruling class. The power of absolute kings meant that the arts were, at least until well into the eighteenth century, aimed at the ruling classes and employed primarily for their support. Rather than the arts being created to meet the tastes of the largest audiences, it was controlled from the top down via institutions such as the *Académie française* and the *Académie royale des inscriptions et belles-lettres*.

For reasons both economic and political, therefore, French and English satirical genres were defined differently by their respective audiences, predicating a key divergence in style, yet English artistic consumption was in turn more directly specifiable to the rapidly expanding economy with which it was connected. That is to say, in England, market forces drove the production of certain types of art. The popularity of satire was a product of the desires of its consumers. As Kevin Sharpe

notes, the genre “emerged from the underground” following the Restoration (214-15). Nobody was safe, even the King himself, and the satires were entertainingly vitriolic and vulgar. This tradition continued into the eighteenth century, where satire was justified as a tool of moral instruction. As Swift wrote in “Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift”:

As with a moral View design'd
To cure the Vices of Mankind:
His vein, ironically grave,
Expos'd the Fool, and lash'd the Knave.

—
Yet, Malice never was his Aim;
He lash'd the Vice but spar'd the Name.
No Individual could resent,
Where Thousands equally were meant.
His Satyr points at no Defect,
But what all Mortals may correct.

(ll. 313-16, 459-64)

Whether or not this may be an extended example of self-irony, as critics such as Marshall Waingrow and others have discussed, the point remains that the instructive nature of satire was enough of a literary truism for these lines to have force. Sir Richard Blackmore's “Satyr against Wit” of 1700 also comes to mind here, with its implied criticism of writers of low character attacking their betters:

Those who by Satyr would reform the Town
Should have some little merit of their own,
And not be Rakes themselves below Lampon.

(Quoted in Milburn 196)

Such historical examples, when set together, allow one to better glimpse the sum of the whole, pointing to an actual industry of satire, where the tastes of the town ruled the genre, and Grub Street writers competed to win the favour of their readers.

In France, the situation was quite different. Whilst street libels and satires certainly existed, elevated literary satire was aimed at an idealized group of readers, and writers were much more under the influence of the ruling class than in England. When Louis the Fourteenth took direct power in 1661, following the death of Cardinal Mazarin, he had the goal of ruling a country in thrall to him as divinely appointed absolute monarch. To this end, the arts — already compromised — were pressed into the service of promoting the King. Literature, naturally, was part of this, and relied upon classical forms for its development. Arguments such as the *querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*, a lengthy debate over the virtues of classical models versus innovation, which began in the last decades of the seventeenth century, were symptomatic of this kind of imposition of structure. This process had begun with Richelieu, been furthered by Fouquet, and then was cemented by Colbert, Minister of Finance from 1665 to 1683. Colbert oversaw the distribution of pensions for which artists competed, and the idea of working in the service of the monarch was entirely natural. Erlanger notes that it was understood that there was “[no] discrepancy between the creations of the spirit and the designs of the monarch” (149) at this time.

One of the major figures in the *Querelle* and, subsequently, in the development of French satiric models, was the seventeenth-century translator of Longinus whose work brought the idea of the sublime back into early modern aesthetic discourse, Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux (1636-1711). His ideas on satire were particularly indebted to Horace, as he was the leading supporter of the *Anciens* faction. His development of the genre is documented by Pierre Des Maizeaux, a contemporary, whose biographical description was translated into English by John Ozell in 1712, just one year after Boileau's death:

There was at that time in France a great number of Poets, who, tho' very indifferent Ones, yet made a great Noise; and even some among 'em were look'd upon as Models. Monsieur Despereaux cou'd not endure to see a wrong Taste prevail, and the Town suffer it self to be Bubbl'd by Authors without Genius, and who seem'd to write in opposition to good Sense and Reason. He thought it his Duty to revenge Both, and thereupon writ some Satires which gain'd him a great Reputation, and at the same time drew upon him the Hatred and resentment of a Legion of Paltry Poets. (Des

Maizeaux ii-iii)

Des Maizeaux goes on to argue that Boileau followed Horace in his satires, noting that he “had no less in View to instruct the Reader, than to divert him, according to the Maxim of Horace: *Et prodesse volunt & delectare Poetae*” (xlv)¹. Thus, in French satiric tradition from the late seventeenth century onwards, it can be argued that the popular reader tended to be bypassed in favour of a Platonic fictionalization of an audience, possessed of style, grace and the desire for learning.

In this sense, Wilde’s literary mode is French, although without the need to create art in the service of a King. His work is designed for an idealized audience rather than one of consumers, with the intent of offering them art, and thus “mirroring” them (*Dorian Gray* 139). Any popularity his work found was due to audiences fitting themselves to his texts and modes of satire, rather than him aiming to please the masses (Stalheim 2). As he wrote in the Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*:

Diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex, and vital.

When critics disagree the artist is in accord with himself. (139)

3. Wilde’s satire in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

As noted above, there are historically based differences of style in satire between French and British literature, and Wilde’s satire in his works tends towards the French style rather than the British. From here, the discussion shall examine specific examples from his plays and prose, comparing them to those in other French and British literature. Wilde’s satire is complex to classify and define, but the categories of Horatian, Juvenalian and Menippean can be applied.

Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* is regarded as one of his most popular plays because of its sense of comedy and satire. In the play, Wilde deals with many topics such as secret births and marriages, with the story culminating in a happy ending. Such devices are common in the plays in the later part of the nineteenth century. However, Wilde does not just follow such trends but parodies them via the medium of a comedy of manners. This part of the discussion will focus on three plays: Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Richard Brinsley

Sheridan’s *School of Scandal* and Molière’s *Tartuffe*. The common aspect between these works is that they are all comedies satirizing society, and especially that of the upper and the upper middle classes. However, their styles can be divided into Horatian and Juvenalian satire.

A number of interesting comparisons can be drawn between Wilde and Sheridan’s works of satire. As with the works of Goldsmith, in the second half of the eighteenth century, Sheridan’s plays swim against the current of sentimental comedy. He mocks the behavior of the didactic and uses a Juvenalian satiric mode, employing the style of a comedy of manners. Many scholars see an affinity between comedies by Congreve and Sheridan and those of Wilde. For instance, Norbert Kohl argues that *The School for Scandal* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* possess similar wit and satire:

There is ... a certain affinity to the comedies of Congreve and Sheridan in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, though less to those of the early Restoration, such as Etherege’s *The Man of Mode* (1676) and Wycherley’s *The Country Wife* (1673), whose obscenities and loose sexual morality are nowhere to be found in Wilde’s plays. If one compares the latter with Congreve’s *The Way of the World* (1700) and Sheridan’s *The School for Scandal* (1777), one cannot help being struck by the similar wit and satire permeating the dialogue. (252)

As Kohl notes, fundamentally the atmosphere in the plays by Wilde and Sheridan is similar. They caricature the upper and the upper middle classes as a meaningless society, deal with romance and offer unfeasibly happy endings. As for the characters, both plays have similar persona: there is a prodigal, such as Algernon or Charles, and a serious individual, such as Jack or Joseph.

However, Sheridan’s satire of society gossip is more coldly sarcastic in tone. Starting with Lady Sneerwell and Lady Teazle, all the upper class women in the play except Maria create and spread feigned rumours. David Garrick remarks in the prologue that scandal is “modern art” and there is “no gagging” that monster. In the play Sir Peter represents the authorial voice:

SIR PETER. Yes, egad, they are tenacious of Reputation with a vengeance, for they don't chuse anybody should have a Character but themselves! Such a crew! Ah! many a wretch has rid on hurdles who has done less mischief than these utterers of forged Tales, coiners of Scandal, and clippers of Reputation

LADY TEAZLE. What would you restrain the freedom of speech?

(Act 1 Scene 1, 52)

Lady Teazle's response is funny but absurd. In the last scene, the gossips are rebuked by Sir Peter: "Fiends! Vipers! Furies! Oh that their own venom would choke them!" (Act 5 Scene 2, 182) The audience can see that Sheridan's vituperative denunciations of aristocrats are scattered throughout the play, whilst Wilde and Molière's jabs are more gentle and delivered with humour. It also can be seen in the fact that Sheridan focuses not on the romance between Charles and Maria but on the deception practiced by Joseph and Lady Sneerwell. The audience comes to understand how upper class society is corrupt by seeing what can be considered as their insidious, contemptible trick. The screen scene in Act Four Scene Three, in which Joseph's evil nature is shown, is amusing and comical, but also, more crucially, ends with Lady Teazle's awareness of her husband's genuine love and her own foolishness:

LADY TEAZLE. No, sir; she has recovered her senses and your own arts have furnished her with the means. —Sir Peter, I do not expect you to credit me—but the tenderness you expressed for me, when I am sure you could not think I was a witness to it, has so penetrated to my heart, that had I left the place without the shame of this discovery, my future life should have spoken the sincerity of my gratitude. . . . I behold him now in a light so truly despicable, that I shall never again respect myself for having listened to him.

(Act 4 Scene 3, 158)

Sheridan makes Lady Teazle beg for her husband's forgiveness and repent of her

thoughtless act. In short, she is framed into the role of a good wife "correctly" and her behaviour offers an appropriate moral lesson to the intended middle-class audience.

At the end of the play, the harmful acts of Lady Sneerwell, a social contortionist and expert at putting people down, are disclosed and she loses her reputation. This means that her own social life is brought to an abrupt and terminal conclusion at this moment because of her behaviour, whilst Lady Teazle is not condemned because she is redeemed. The author punishes the sinful character completely; such punishment functioned and served as a moral example to what would have been a largely puritanistic late eighteenth-century audience. This kind of moral sanctimoniousness is consistent with the British middle-class sensibilities of the period. Sheridan's work impeaches such vicious practices in society.

Wilde also satirizes society, especially the thin veneer of sophistication of the upper and the upper middle classes, whilst Swift and Pope satirically describe political issues such as wars. However, in contrast to Sheridan's, Wilde's satire is not based on middle-class morality. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, there are not any sinful characters like Lady Sneerwell. The only person who thwarts the main characters' romance and is described as a "monster" is Lady Bracknell. She, however, is just a character introduced to add interest to the play with her acerbic nature and wit. Therefore, at the end of the play she is not punished, but still has the power to approve of the two couples' marriages as a matriarch of the upper class family. Molière, as Wilde does, criticises the vanity and frivolity of the upper class, making his play a farce.

Structural similarity between *Tartuffe* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* exists in that both employ comedy, ending with denouement, which emphasizes the absurdity of the play. In *Tartuffe*, the patriarch of an upper class family, Orgon, is represented as foolish because he cannot deal with the evil impostor, Tartuffe. By the end, the acuity and clemency of the King resolve the difficulties, however. This kind of ending also can be seen in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Prism's sudden confession and the Army list lead to an unlikely development, that is, that Jack's real name is Ernest and Algernon is his younger brother. Such improbable solutions create a kind of comic dislocation, and, at the same time, help to cover up the bite of satire.

As the audience can see from the title, which comes from the main villain in

the play, Molière seems to caricature a religious charlatan. However, he criticises aristocrats with no understanding of the world as well. Orgon is like Shakespeare's Lear in terms of having no sense of perspective, and his blindness to Tartuffe is both ridiculous and comic, whilst the aristocrats in Sheridan's *School of Scandal* are portrayed as more spiteful and altogether nastier. Orgon's skittishness is rather similar to that of Gwendolen and Cecily. Like the young women in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Orgon makes a *volte-face* when he learns that Tartuffe has seduced his wife. Even though he keeps calling Tartuffe "a poor man" or "a saint," he curses him immediately after he comes to know of the betrayal: "The man's a monster! You've destroyed/ My world! What's left? A gaping void!" (Act 4 Scene 6); "He's a fiend. Straight out of Hell" (Act 4 Scene 6). Orgon goes into a frenzy, forgetting his own earlier fault of blindness to his flaws. His rapid change of heart is one of the essences of this comedy. The audience is given the opportunity to laugh at this representation of the hypocrisy of the patriarch of an upper class family.

When Jack and Algernon reveal to Cecily and Gwendolen that their names are not Ernest, these young women band together suddenly:

Cecily (to Gwendolen). A gross deception has been practiced on both of us.

Gwendolen. My poor wounded Cecily!

Cecily. My sweet wronged Gwendolen!

Gwendolen (slowly and seriously). You will call me sister, will you not?

They embrace. Jack and Algernon groan and walk up and down

(Act 2 740-45)

Such skittishness, couched as it is in melodramatic language, offers yet another satiric example of the frivolity of the upper and upper middle classes. Five minutes before, they have been fighting over "Ernest": Cecily insinuates that Gwendolen is a girl who employs machinations, while Gwendolen describes Cecily as "false and deceitful" (Act 2 699-700). The sudden change of the girls' behaviour is intended to lead the audience to laughter, just as the French audience likely enjoyed Orgon's foolishness.

When *Tartuffe* was banned from the stage, Molière appealed to Louis the Fourteenth in his "First Petition Presented to the King Concerning the Comedy of Tartuffe" in 1664, saying his attempt to make a comedy was to satirize vice in society.

Here, the literary connection to the absolutism of the King is made explicit:

Since the role of comedy is to correct people at the same time as entertaining them, I thought that, in my position, the best thing I could do was to attack my century's vice by portraying them in a ridiculous light. (Quoted by Goulbourne 145)

Molière offers some foolish characters, especially Tartuffe and Orgon, in order to criticise the religious hypocrisy and blindness of the upper classes via Horatian satiric forms. Gary Jay Williams states that in *Tartuffe* and Molière's other plays there is carnivalesque humour, an idea which Mikhail Bakhtin developed for the analysis of humour in the works of François Rabelais. As Williams says, Molière challenged authority and social norms while somehow still remaining one of King's favourite entertainers at that time. The way he describes vice is neither acrimonious nor serious. Using carnivalesque laughter, he produces a comedy which does not teach a moral lesson but simply mocks the stuffiness and self-assurance of absolutism with a light tone.

As Wilde himself states in a letter to George Alexander, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a farcical comedy. Both *Tartuffe* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* ridicule society, with both employing Horatian satire. On the other hand, *The School for Scandal* criticises the upper levels of society as representing hopelessness via the Juvenalian mode.

4. Wilde's satire in his prose works

Following Walter Pater, who first expressed his understanding of the idea and surrounding concepts in a review of the poetry of William Morris (Faulkner 79), Wilde thought of art in its own terms — "art for art's sake" — and this is a concept that, although frequently traced to Benjamin Constant in 1804 and promulgated by Théophile Gautier and others in the middle of the nineteenth century, one can also find in pre-Enlightenment French philosophical and aesthetic writings such as the 1674 *L'Art poétique* by Boileau-Despreaux (also the translator of *On the Sublime* who was strongly influenced by Horace) and Charles Batteux, in his *Les Beaux Arts* of 1746, which derives a theory of art from Locke through the sensualist lens

of Voltaire and suggests that the fine arts such as poetry and painting (translated as “polite” in the contemporary English version) exist for their own sake, whereas others — “mechanic” arts such as architecture — exist to fulfill a practical function. Wilde articulated this in *De Profundis*, writing that he had “made art a philosophy, and philosophy an art” (95).

Turning briefly to “The Critic as Artist,” this is a work which is not generally considered as one of Wilde’s satires, yet can certainly be understood as such. A point that can be made about the work is that it offers a cross between Horatian and Menippean satiric forms. It begins with an absurd contradiction. Gilbert’s comments in the following passage set up the paradox:

When people talk to us about others they are usually dull. When they talk to us about themselves they are nearly always interesting, and if one could shut them up, when they become wearisome, as easily as one can shut up a book of which one has grown wearied, they would be perfect absolutely. (53)

Gilbert then goes on for the next eighty-five pages to discuss the importance of criticism — for which he uses the examination of others as his primary examples — and argues the exact opposite of his opening sally.

A follower of Bakhtin might argue that this dialogue has Menippean tendencies, as it is more comic than Socratic, follows current ideals and that it tends to flirt with scandal and the violation of social boundaries, with such statements as “Life is terribly deficient in form. Its catastrophes happen in the wrong way and to the wrong people” (95).

The current ideals that are criticised are, of course, those of Matthew Arnold and others of his school (particularly Arnold’s 1865 “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time”), as Wilde’s Gilbert seeks to explore the boundaries of the nature of art and compare them to criticism and suggest that its divisions are inverted — that the critic is not merely an arbiter of taste, but a creator of art. This is clearly an absurd contention, with absurd conclusions, such as the value of life consisting in doing nothing, yet it is argued with full seriousness. He even calls Arnold as a witness (70). Such gentle — even genteel — embracing of the subject matter is exactly the

opposite technique from that employed by Pope in *An Essay on Criticism*. Whilst Pope, like Wilde, follows the satiric writer’s technique where one “appears to praise what he censures” (Vieth 105), it is much harder to discern the borders between Wilde’s views and those of the more acerbic Pope. In the case of the latter, one is left in little doubt when faced with such couplets as:

A little learning is a dangerous thing;

Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian Spring.

(note that the Pierian Spring was sacred to the Muses and drunk from to gain inspiration)

The same sort of satiric disambiguity can be seen in Swift. Although it is true of his best-known work, *Gulliver’s Travels*, certainly it is the case that in *A Modest Proposal* Swift’s satiric boundaries are made the most clear. There is no ambiguity about the horror of the proposal itself, for all that paralipsis (the denial of a subject in order to raise it) is employed as a central device. The moral horror of both murder and cannibalism does not allow for any other interpretation of the narrative. The exaggerations are all directed rather than dispersed, as one finds often in French works, and certainly as one finds in Wilde. For Wilde, in “The Critic as Artist,” the soul is wiser than the mind. This is not the case in the work of the majority of British satirists, who, coming from a tradition of Empiricist epistemology, tend to reject much that is fanciful.

It is worth noting at this point a tangentially related aspect regarding Wilde’s “The Decay of Lying,” although the focus of this investigation affords limited scope and space for a lengthy discussion. The title seems to be as satiric and, indeed, absurd, as “The Critic as Artist” itself but what the reader finds him or herself faced with is an elegant, well-argued polemic that is as likely to convince as to evoke laughter. Unlike Swift, or, indeed, Pope, Dryden and Sheridan, Wilde’s boundaries are fuzzy. His satiric mode, which is uncompromisingly elevated, is set towards the idealized reader rather than the popular one.

One can find a strong echo of Voltaire in Wilde’s approach. Voltaire himself was in a conflicted position as a writer, supporting constitutional monarchy yet decrying organized religion and the lack of civil liberties in the France of his day. He

both courted and shunned royal favour in the course of a remarkable life. *Candide* is, of course, roundly satiric and mocking of the philosophy of optimism, which is a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* of the Leibnitzian contention that God's good led to the creation of the best possible world. It is expressed by Pangloss, but followed by Candide, the titular protagonist with whom the reader cannot help but become involved. The borders of the satire and the narrative are blurred. Candide is an innocent, not a fool, and free of malice and worldly vices. Eventually, he develops a new philosophy — that of the “noble savage,” first found in El Dorado and then expressed through his turning to simple horticultural tasks as the path to happiness.

In Chapter 25 of *Candide*, it seems that Voltaire and Wilde touch hands briefly across the centuries. Candide and Martin encounter Signor Pococurante (a humorous name, created from the Italian words for “little” and “caring,” or “indifferent”), who is critical of everything, from music and art to literature. In doing so, he creates a world unique and unto himself, leaving Candide and Martin to debate as to whether he is the happiest or most miserable of men. We are left with the — again absurd — contention that “there is some pleasure in having no pleasure” (98).

As Voltaire does with philosophy, war and the general foolishness of Man, in “The Critic as Artist” Wilde focuses his satiric lens upon more universal issues such as art, criticism, history and the fashionable view of regarding critics as inferior to art.

5. Conclusion

This discussion has attempted to show ways in which Wilde's satire might be considered as following French models rather than English. It is, as noted at the beginning, a difficult contention to defend because of its breadth, but has merit as a way of contextualizing both Wilde's works and the more problematic issue of satiric forms in general. While there is a lot of writing on satire, it is hard to find a direct discussion of this point, and yet it seems to be crucial.

An idealized audience for satire versus one driven by *vox populi* offers a point for departure in further discussions, and perhaps can provide something of a justification for parsing satiric boundaries upon nationalized lines. As the architects of French satiric style, the literati of the *Ancien Régime* saw themselves in service to a monarch mandated by divine right, just as Wilde saw himself in service to Art, his

King, his Queen and, perhaps, even his *vox dei*.

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Notes

1 This is a slight mistranscription of “*Aut prodesse volunt aut delectare poetae*” (“poets desire to instruct or to delight”) from the Epistles of Horace in the *Ars Poetica*.

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