

## THE IMPORTANCE OF SATIRE

THE 2004 Dutch film *Submission* about abused Muslim women offends a Muslim fundamentalist who assassinates its maker. In the same year the British play *Behzti* offends some Sikhs who wreck the theatre and stop the performance. In 2005 the British musical *Jerry Springer - the Opera* offends some Christians and 60,000 of them complain to the BBC. Also in 2005, cartoons of Muhammad in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* offend some Muslims who go on violent rampages throughout the world. Then in 2015 the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* publishes images of Muhammad and 12 people are killed in its offices.

The question has to be asked: can't these faiths control their followers? Imagine atheists, agnostics, freethinkers humanists or sceptics seeking to kill or ban playwrights, film directors or cartoonists! For that is the real sacrilege: the stifling of free speech and creativity in the name of blind and intolerant faith. We seem to live in an age in which rational people are all walking on eggshells, fearful lest they offend some individual or group or other.

The result is that the voices of reason, scepticism and sanity are shouted out by the bigots, the fanatics, the spin doctors, the media manipulators, the soundbite merchants – all seeking instant, sensational, emotive, easily digestible answers to complex realities. J. B. Priestley wrote: "It is no use speaking in soft, gentle tones if everyone else is shouting". In this context, one of the chief weapons of the Humanist is satire, which aims to be both critical and constructive.

Satire is art on the attack: it aims to ridicule and provoke a rational response. But it has a moral purpose: what Swift called a 'public service'. It is a crucial means of resistance to various forms of propaganda and power and attempts to draw attention to things which are often otherwise ignored, underplayed or taken for granted.

*Ferocious Humanism* is an anthology of Irish poets whose title echoes the 'savage indignation' of Swift's epitaph for himself. As its editor W.J. McCormack indicates, moral outrage at the religious, political and social decay, corruption and injustices that distinguish the 'poison vineyard' of Irish society is a constant theme from Gaelic poetry up to the present. Indeed, in such a world, to echo Juvenal, it would be difficult NOT to write satire. Or as Art Buchwald put it, "you can't make up anything anymore. The world itself is a satire. All you're doing is recording it". Satire and humanism are therefore complementary.

As to giving offence, where would art and literature be if it avoided 'offence'? Some of the greatest art is offensive, provocative, challenging. Euripides portrayed the gods as screaming idiots. Michelangelo offended popes by painting God's naked bum pointing down at them in the Sistine Chapel. In Shakespeare, the atheism of *Macbeth* is expressed in powerfully persuasive language: "Life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing". Beethoven's *Eroica* symphony startled its first audience with its dramatic novelty. Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* was met with riots at its premiere. Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* also caused riots at its opening. O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* was yelled from the stage, and Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* was banned in several countries and its author forced into hiding.

And what of Pope and Swift and Voltaire? Didn't they use mockery in order to make serious points? Isn't Swift's *A Modest Proposal* a savage indictment of Britain's role in Ireland and Voltaire's *Candide* a vigorous satire on religious intolerance and superstition?

The truth is that art and literature at their best ask for trouble. For the greatest art shakes us out of our lethargy, certainty and complacency. It inspires us to work for change.

Ridicule is the test of truth. No belief deserves special protection. Nor are we under any obligation to respect beliefs, for this a respect that has to be earned by reason and evidence. Moreover, words and actions are different. Only unfree societies criminalise words. In earlier times, the verbal expression of a deviant opinion was treated as a physical attack and punished with death. Even the 'humanist' Thomas More ordered burnings for 'heresy', as Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* has shown. But surely we no longer live in the Dark Ages. Surely we now know that words and deeds are not the same.

Thomas Carlyle said: "No man lives without jostling and being jostled; in all ways he has to elbow himself through the world, giving and receiving offence". The pomposity of priests, the rantings of demagogues, the meanderings of gurus – none should be beyond the reach of humour, any more than should the spin of politicians. Satire helps to preserve our sanity in a mad world.