INTRODUCTION

On Ludicrous Solemnity

In 2009 a curious study on satire appeared. It was not an analysis of a satirical work, nor a literary history of the form, but rather a psychological study of viewers of *The Colbert Report*, which featured the comedian Stephen Colbert performing a parody of a conservative television personality.[1] The researchers came to what might seem a surprising conclusion: both conservative and liberal viewers believed that the program implicitly supported their viewpoints. The reason for this apparent error was even stranger: conservatives did not, as many might hope, fall into the plight of the apocryphal credulous student reader of *A Modest Proposal* (1729) – they did not, in other words, simply fail to recognize that the show was fictional and ironic. Both groups of viewers fully recognized the comic and satiric features of the program and found it entertaining. They simply believed that the irony functioned in different ways: liberal viewers read the program as a fairly straightforward satire on conservatism's specious reasoning, while conservative viewers read the program as mocking this shopworn liberal caricature of conservatism and ultimately supporting their own views.

It might be tempting to attribute the conservative viewers' response to a simple misreading of satire, and this obviously is happening on some level. However, the researchers also point out that correcting the conservative viewers' interpretation does not seem to address this issue. The viewers may be wrong about their interpretation, but even when the researchers pointed out to them that the program is ironic and that Colbert himself leans liberal, they nonetheless persist in their initial interpretation, citing as justification a different reading of the irony: "conservatives were more likely to report that Colbert only pretends to be joking and genuinely meant what he said."[2]

I want to suggest that this persistence of the conservatives' belief that Colbert secretly shares their views reveals something essential about how irony and satire function. On some level, these viewers are no doubt simply

misreading the show; but they are also, I would claim, trying to articulate a complex insight: irony, including even the most barbed satire, contains earnest moments of genuine affection. By highlighting admirable traits in a dubious, flawed, or even despised object, satire can create cognitive dissonance not just for those who admire the target but also for those who already despise it. While such praise is often muted, it need not be disingenuous: if the praiseworthy traits highlighted genuinely conflict with the target's positions or ideology, the effect can be both earnest and cutting at the same time. Colbert obviously has a genuine affection for the bombast, melodrama, and absurdity of conservative media, and his performance works, in part, by confronting liberal viewers with their own disavowed attraction to aspects of conservatism. Colbert's flippant and mocking interview of liberal congressman Barney Frank – in which channeling conservative incoherence becomes a uniquely effective way of deflating Frank's pomposity – is among his most famous performances.[3]

In literary satire, Jonathan Swift's work represents the locus classicus of earnest identification with a satirized object. The paradigmatic example is the depiction of the Yahoos in Book IV of *Gulliver's Travels* (1726): for all their negative qualities, Swift suggests that the Yahoos are in the end not evil, because they limit themselves merely to their natural vices rather than aggravating them as Europeans do. Notably, such earnestness emerges precisely in the form described by the conservative viewers of *Colbert*: Swift sets a double snare, entrapping not only those who recoil from the harsh satirical portrait of humanity, but also those who too readily accept it and therefore miss the partial vindication Swift offers to Yahoos but not Europeans. While this is no doubt a backhanded compliment to the Yahoos on one level, it is also in another way sincere. The Yahoos become a paradoxical, though still partially genuine, model for Gulliver's final ethical exhortation to avoid pride in vices, a maxim that targets the vicious scoundrel and the sanctimonious misanthrope alike. Introducing a few dystonic notes of muted praise both sharpens and broadens the satire. In *Thoughts on Various Subjects* (1706), Swift writes, "Although men are accused of not knowing their own weakness, yet perhaps as few know their own strength. It is in men as in soils, where sometimes there is a vein of gold which the owner knows not of" (*PW*, 4: 243). Swift does not explicitly extend the thought to claim that it can be just as polemic to highlight hidden strengths as it is to draw into the light disavowed weaknesses, but it is implicit in his maxim.

Kierkegaard was not thinking of Swift when he wrote "From the fact that irony is present, it does not follow that earnestness is excluded. That is

something that only assistant professors assume."[4] Indeed, Swift might seem the last ironist to exemplify this claim, and yet a central thesis of the most prominent Swift critic of recent decades, Claude Rawson, mirrors Kierkegaard's insight: for Rawson, Swift's work does not simply demonstrate the outrage of a horrified moralist; it also "indulges" its material, simultaneously cultivating an "unofficial" yet hyperbolic engagement with imaginative possibilities, intimate scenes, and fantastic worlds.[5] Rawson also predicts the arguments of the conservative viewers of *Colbert*, suggesting that Swift pioneered what he calls satire in the first and second person. This intimate mode of satire recuperates excess vitriol and redirects it toward the satirist and the reader, implicating them for their attempt to exempt themselves from the satirical portraiture.

Rawson's insights, staunch in their insistence on Swift's conservatism, suggest that satire has a cousin in its contentiousness: it is not simply negative gestures such as denigration that are combative; positive ones like panegyric, imaginative indulgence, and even empathy are also potentially charged or aggressive in their own right. Contentiousness, then, is a more expansive category than satire, and encompasses modes of writing beyond satiric attack, even as the two have obvious points of convergence. By the same token, irony and even satire contain moments of celebration and affirmation. It is not negativity per se that is the index of contentiousness: even slight disagreements about positive commitments in an otherwise neutral atmosphere can yield the most contentious rifts. Sympathy and praise are just as potentially charged and combative as denigration and mockery, as suggested when Pamela makes it a rule to "never make a compliment to any body" at Mr. B's expense.[6] Genuine and sincere praise in itself, apart from its role as an adjunct to more traditionally recognizable polemic, can have contentious impact, because distributing praise is just as charged and fraught with controversy as assigning blame. At the same time, irony and satire can activate this aggressive dimension without undermining the sincerity.

Earnestness, Irony, and Contention

The primary goal of this book is to explore the close connection between irony and earnestness in the literature of the great age of satire. Irony, I want to suggest, does not primarily function to undermine earnest commitments; rather, it often works to clarify, reorient, and intensify them. Thus, irony and earnestness are not so much binary opposites as they are supplementary modes that exist in a kind of symbiotic tension. Irony's task is ultimately quite delicate: it subtly renders legible various

commitments that more earnest modes keep in reserve, teasing out judgments that remain dormant or even disavowed. Earnestness and irony exist along a continuum that runs from latent to implicit, unconscious to subtly articulated. Irony functions by slyly activating and cultivating uncertain, incomplete, or problematic judgments that hibernate in more official pronouncements: it seeks out disavowed or unofficial moments of both sincere attraction and genuine repulsion, complicating public commitments by teasing out their unstated implications.

The relationship between the two terms is therefore irreducible to other binary oppositions such as celebration/denigration, solemnity/frivolity, or consensus/contention. Irony functions, I suggest, precisely by cultivating and developing latent contradictory tendencies within earnest commitments that cut across such divides. Earnestness is frequently contentious or critical, and this provides it with a natural point of convergence with irony; at the same time, irony's duplicity and deceptions give it a sophistication and credibility that allows it to celebrate and affirm where earnest modes would lack standing. Earnest works are often contentious even if they are not avowedly polemic, because they contain latent critical or negative assessments, which buttress their sincere commitments. Earnest commitments are not a spontaneous and nonpolitical product of nature – they are always the result of political and social contention.

Irony works precisely by activating latent contradictions and tensions within existing earnest commitments: it awakens critique while preserving the veneer of congeniality, and it reveals how contentiousness and polemic positions ultimately rely on a set of genuine, if unstated, positive commitments to sharpen and define their bite. Tobias Smollett's phrase "ludicrous solemnity," used in his translator's introduction to *Don Quixote*, aims to capture how irony functions to highlight the stylized, absurd, and contradictory tendencies always at work in earnest discourse.[7] Texts that strike the reader as natural, immediate, or otherwise authentic are, in fact, just as mediated and unnatural as irony and satire. As such, they retain the potential for ambiguity inherent in all language and discourse, and they always play a role, at least to some extent, in the political gambits, rhetorical ploys, ironic games, and deceptive traps that more seemingly duplicitous modes of writing demonstrate.[8] Earnest representation thus constitutes the first or introductory mode of irony, one in which a thing ironically coincides with what it appears to be. As Alenka Zupančič notes, citing a classic Groucho Marx joke, part of such unassuming self-identity is the transparent demonstration of faults and failings: "this man may look like an idiot and talk like an idiot, but don't let that fool you. He really is an idiot."[9]

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Despite this symbiosis, many of the pairs of terms used to understand and organize thinking about eighteenth-century literature and culture rely on constructing a master opposition between earnestness and irony for their coherence. The pair novel/satire is obviously the major one, but the polarities of Whig/Tory, sentiment/satire, literature/journalism, feeling/moralism, private conduct/public life, and serious literature/hack writing also to some extent rely on it for their cohesion. While the opposition between earnestness and irony is not inherently a problem, and can even be useful for didactic purposes – hence its popularity as an organizational model in undergraduate period surveys and their attendant anthologies – it introduces distortions to the extent that it suggests that emotion, empathy, and sincerity exist in a realm above or beyond irony and, by extension, the politics, polemic, and satire more frequently associated with it.

This book will argue that focusing on the shared characteristics of earnest and ironic literature in the period (roughly 1677–1790) can help to clarify how divergent genres – prose fiction, novels, drama, verse, political essays, journalism, and mercenary hack writing – share a common structure, even when they are opposed to one another on the basis of received dichotomies. As Robert Phiddian puts it in his classic study *Swift's Parody*, not everything in ironic representation is disavowed, and there are "perspectives of authentic utterance, idiolects whose authenticity can at least be *argued* to be exempt from ironic erasure."[10] Indeed, part of the game of irony is figuring out to what extent the earnest poses that it commandeers are genuine: without this ambiguity, irony would lose its edge. In order to create a lasting ruse, it must turn out that some parts of the ruse are not ruses at all.

Furthermore, while it is of course possible to be ironic about earnestness – to appear to be polite and genuine, but to really be subversive and disingenuous – it is also possible to be earnest in a way that creates irony. Tragedy is the paradigmatic case of an earnest experience coinciding with irony, but earnest irony is also not dissimilar from what William Empson termed double irony, in which the ironist seems to balance both readings of a phrase at one and the same time, and perhaps to express sympathy for both. The result is that the implicit meaning of a phrase is both played against but also buttresses, clarifies, and sharpens its explicit meaning. As Empson puts it, echoing the explanations of the conservative respondents in the *Colbert* study:

> For double irony A shows both B and C that he understands both their positions; . . . In real life this is easier than single irony (because people aren't

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> such fools as you think), so that we do not always notice its logical structure. Presumably A hopes that each of B and C will think "He is secretly on my side, and only pretends to sympathize with the other"; but A may hold some wise balanced position between them, or contrariwise may be feeling "a plague on both your houses."[11]

As this quote incisively notes, double irony is in fact the rule rather than the exception, precisely because single irony is both abrasive and simplistic, and too readily exposes the ironist to charges of bias. As the *Colbert* study reveals, double irony is, in fact, far more conducive to a wider audience than single irony, because it broadens the appeal of a work by holding out the possibility that, for all the evidence to the contrary, the ironist is secretly on the reader's side.

Instead of understanding irony as the simple opposite of earnestness, sincerity, or genuineness, I suggest that it represents a mode of playful engagement with the hidden connective tissue that links the various commitments – serious or flippant, affirmative or destructive, quiescent or contentious – of a work, object, or discourse. Irony activates the latent trace of the one in the other, demonstrating how each of these serves ulterior motives beyond their stated purpose. Earnestness in turn can intensify its credibility and seriousness of purpose by confronting and working through the contradictions and tensions that ironic scrutiny exposes. A classic Swiftian example of earnest irony is from *A Modest Proposal*, when Swift writes "I desire those *Politicians*, who dislike my Overture, and may perhaps be so bold as to attempt an Answer, that they will first ask the Parents of these Mortals, whether they would not at this Day think it a great Happiness to have been sold for Food at a Year old" (*MP*, 158–9). Notice that the speaker does not state that he agrees with the plan. He simply suggests that many individuals would prefer this to the current situation, a statement that Swift no doubt genuinely believed. Because of the thread of sincerity that runs throughout the piece, some critics even have suggested that Swift endorses the proposal: "perhaps the speaker is *not* ironic after all. Perhaps he gives voice to Swift's anger and despair. In such a world Swift thinks the unthinkable: maybe it *is* better to kill them young."[12] This is a brilliant insight, but at the same time there is no need to assume that irony and earnestness must exclude one another here: the irony is that even though the plan is not intended literally, it begins to seem sensible and plausible.

A discourse or ideology is defined not only by what it values but also by what it attacks and rejects, by what it finds beautiful as well as by what it

finds amusing, silly, or ridiculous. Furthermore, there are natural, logical, and customary relationships between all these traits: to believe that one thing is genuinely worthy of earnest praise and celebration is often, even if for reasons of tradition, to believe that something else is subject to scorching blame or contempt. Irony activates, interrogates, and reorganizes the different possible combinations and permutations of commitments that organize any value system. It highlights both latent flaws and latent strengths in despised and cherished objects alike, and it presses these insights in ways that reveal the inherent ambiguity and internal contradictions that constitute any value system. At its best, irony not only confronts enemies; it also challenges allies with their implication in practices and beliefs they claim to despise. Through such rigorous interrogation, it ultimately becomes possible to build a strengthened and more robust set of earnest commitments.

Philosophical and Literary Irony

While the conception of irony I am here advancing may seem strange to literary critics, it is hardly alien to contemporary philosophy of irony. Richard Rorty argues that an ironist is "the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs."[13] Rorty sees irony, in other words, as an ability to maintain a skeptical distance from the commitments of the moment. Jonathan Lear's recent account both builds on and challenges Rorty, suggesting that ironic interrogation and questioning need not be solely negative, but can actually help deepen earnest commitments by strengthening the understanding of those same values.[14] Lear's work recuperates an optimistic potential in Rorty's skeptical philosophy, emphasizing that as metaphysical certainties decline, the inquiry and contestation of irony becomes a basis for a renewed earnestness. In moments when the contingency and fallibility of claims and ideas are obvious, certainty comes not through revelation or tradition, but through interrogation and questioning.

Irony emerges at such historical junctures not only as a means of critique but also as a foundation for new earnest commitments. This contingency and historical conditioning of institutions makes possible the mockery, subversion, and comic denigration of belief, values, and norms; it also, however, makes possible the constant reinvention, recuperation, and reappropriation of these as well. For Lear, Rorty is not radical enough in recognizing the possibility for deepening earnestness that exists within and by virtue of irony's recognition of

contingency: "For Kierkegaard, irony is a way of achieving a deeper understanding of – and ultimately a more earnest commitment to – what comes to emerge as one's final vocabulary."[15] Such recognition of contingency and historical limitations reinvents and founds a new authenticity that was always already there but that never quite existed until the ironist unlocked that potential through contestation and questioning.

Rorty and Lear are here pushing back against a philosophical tradition centered on belief in what Wilfrid Sellars calls "the myth of the given": the notion of a raw, prerepresentational reality that can be accurately or inaccurately captured by language.[16] As Paulson describes this idea, citing Mary McCarthy, it posits an earnest "passion for fact in a raw state."[17] There are, however, no such raw, prerepresentational facts. All representations, including naïvely earnest or realistic ones, are contingent practices, products of the same political, ideological, and factional networks that more duplicitous representations emerge from. This insight, I argue, suggests a new model for understanding the literary history of the eighteenth century, one in which earnest and ironic texts develop and progress together, reinforcing one another. Seeing these as the shared cultural touchstone of the eighteenth century provides a way of bridging many political, religious, and literary divides that use the dichotomy between irony and earnestness as a proxy.

One implication of Rorty and Lear's ideas is that it is reductive to imagine earnest literature as a straightforward realistic picture of reality that is "interested in human experience for its own sake."[18] Smollett's phrase "ludicrous solemnity" suggests a growing recognition in the eighteenth century that earnestness was itself stylized and inauthentic, and that mockery and comedy could create genuine emotional and intellectual commitment. Don Quixote is not simply a ridiculous figure, but a figure of renewal and rebirth at a moment when the old ways no longer seemed tenable. Seen in this light, earnestness represents not a naïve reflection of reality, but rather a hyperbolic or even ridiculous engagement with it, one that aggressively mines and develops new possibilities, rather than passively and uncritically reflecting a reality that already exists out there in the world.

One important caveat: to say that earnestness harbors latent irony is not to say that earnestness is always ironic in a significant way. As Wayne C. Booth notes, when discussing irony the convention is to ignore the trivial cases, unless a compelling reason exists to do otherwise. It is

technically correct to say that all literature – and, indeed, all representation – is ironic, but this does not provide much insight in most cases:

> There is no point in denying or trying to correct such usage. I have no quarrel with the many critics who choose to call such effects ironic and who therefore find all literature, or all good literature, ironic. Or rather, I have only a small quarrel, and it is one that we can bypass: such usage would leave us without a term for something quite important and quite precise, the special form of complex verbal reconstruction required by what I am calling stable irony.[19]

In some cases, though, the apparently trivial case of irony in fact becomes quite important and merits extended commentary. Tragedy, for example, represents one of these instances in which the irony of a thing coinciding with itself becomes significant: the same qualities that make a character heroic can also threaten to destroy or corrupt that person. Furthermore, it is when read against the background of a pervasively ironic historical moment or body of work that earnestness's ulterior motives and subversive possibilities become most recognizable. Authors might seek out earnestness as a respite from oversaturation by irony, but the resultant sincerity is not legible apart from the situation that created a need for it: the New Sincerity movement, for example, arose as a response to a climate of pervasive irony, but many of its practitioners remained committed ironists in key respects. Finally, works that do not demonstrate nontrivial irony in a literary sense still could demonstrate irony in Rorty's philosophical sense: because so many authors in the period excelled in an extremely diverse number of genres, even the most straightforward works could have been legible to readers as a manifest part of a wider political or polemic project.

Satire and the Novel, Revisited

More than fifty years ago, Ronald Paulson's *Satire and the Novel in Eighteenth-Century England* argued that while satirists attacked the emerging novel, the novel in turn relied on some of the realistic techniques of satire.[20] One intriguing hint in Paulson's study was the suggestion that the earnest presentation of reality is never a neutral gesture, but one that always potentially involves persuasion, dissension, and disagreement. In Paulson's schema, antiromance is the satiric precursor of realism proper, in a framework that predicts McKeon's dialectical progression of romance

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idealism, naïve empiricism, and extreme skepticism. The difference is that, in Paulson's study, it is satirical skepticism that first attacks romance:

> Although the novel may be ultimately concerned with understanding rather than judging, with comedy rather than satire, the situation was very different in the beginning . . . Satire was naturally most useful during the insurgent phase of a realistic movement, when manifestos were being issued and the strong walls of convention had to be broken through. Satire offered a militancy in the presentation of reality far beyond the reach of comedy. The satirist customarily regards reality as something that the ordinary person can only see if he takes off the glasses of convention.[21]

It is only later, according to Paulson, that a subtler realism proper emerges as both a continuation and a point of contrast with this militantly realistic satirical antiromance.

The only quibble I have with this schema is the teleological tendency in it, in which the forms of satiric realism are held up as flawed, militant, and extremist precursors to a more advanced, subtler, more robust, and politer realism proper that is mostly devoid of polemic and contentious qualities. Indeed, I would contend that just the opposite case is not only plausible but typical: as earnestness and realism become subtler and more nuanced, their contentious potential often increases. In fact, very subtle realistic scrutiny is frequently a key ingredient in some of the most aggressive satire. Swift is as much a practitioner of it as any other writer in his period.

My study picks up on and extends Paulson's hint to focus on earnest, documentary, or realistic genres as inherently charged modes of writing, even and especially when they take the form of a subtle and polite discourse. The eighteenth century was both the great age of English satire and the formative era of the English novel, and yet despite this overlap there has not been any book-length attempt to account for the connection between the two forms since Paulson's classic work. Since that time, scholars have revised the schema in which earnest, progressive, Whiggish writers opposed sardonic, reactionary, Tory-leaning satirists, but a new account of the two that considers evolving views of each has yet to appear.[22] Not only did satire persist and indeed flourish alongside and in concert with the novel and related earnest genres, but many early novelists were also satirists.

Furthermore, the historical record shows that the satirical novel was not simply a reaction against the earnest, Whiggish novel, as many scholars have claimed. Historically, of course, ironic and satiric writing often served

to open the way for a new earnestness.[23] The fiction of, in particular, the late Restoration does not fit the "Whig History" narrative of the novel so dominant since Watt. Eliza Haywood and Delarivier Manley, Behn and Swift, do not represent well the earnest, progressive, Whiggish profile many critics have associated with the early novel. The influence of French fiction is very obvious in this period, and many works demonstrate an aristocratic bent, courting controversy, scandal, and contention.[24] Behn's *Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister* (1684–7), a staunchly Tory and satirical roman à clef, was also one of the first extended epistolary novels in English. It directly engaged the controversies of the politically turbulent decades of the 1670s and 1680s, which saw one of the first sustained outpourings of novels, one that would not be matched again for decades; indeed, it appears that it was precisely the controversies of the 1670s and 1680s which acted as an accelerant of novel production.

One claim of my study is that the contentiousness of the early novel was not incidental. Its polemic qualities were inseparable from its creation, reception, currency, appeal, and relationship to the political aims of other genres such as drama, romance, and verse. Indeed, a quick look at the historical record demonstrates that novels did not appear evenly. They tended to coincide with periods of political turmoil and, indeed, of intense faction and polemic. As J. A. Downie notes, "Comparatively few new works of prose fiction were published during the first two decades of the eighteenth century. Considerably more were in fact published in the 1670s and 1680s, a significant number of which were actually called novels on their title pages."[25] This output was not matched until the 1720s and 1740s, decades that also saw significant political turmoil. It is no surprise that the highly charged environment of the 1670s and 1680s would lead to a spurt of novels, including works such as *Love-Letters*: as with Behn's plays and poems, her novels were responsive to, and invested in, political upheaval, scandal, and satire.

Within such a framework, Swift, often taken as unrepresentative of both the satire and the prose fiction of his time, now seems to offer one of the most robust exemplars of the logic of satire in the age of the novel and of the novel in the age of satire. He becomes, to paraphrase Victor Shklovsky's remark on *Tristram Shandy* (1759–67), simply the most typical of early eighteenth-century prose stylists.[26] Swift's ability to inhabit and perhaps even sustain a kind of intimacy with his material provides one of the most forceful, extreme, and vigorous articulations of the logic of the prose of his

era. His work, I argue, is very representative of both the earnestness and the irony of his era.

Outline of the Book

The book aims to follow a roughly chronological trajectory, with digressions from this plan serving to foreground the analysis of key ideas. The book begins with a discussion of popular writers of the late Restoration (Chapters 1 and 2), then examines Swift's writings that respond to this milieu (above all *A Tale of a Tub* [1704]) (Chapter 3), and concludes with a discussion of Swift's later fictions and some analogues for them in Defoe's work (Chapters 4 and 5). The first chapter of the book explores the ironic and contentious potential of sympathy, in particular the manner in which slight differences in earnest commitments can create polemic relationships just as charged as those that stem from deeper ideological rifts. I focus on Swift and his interactions with hack writer John Dunton. The two writers, I argue, do not disagree about what they dislike, but rather have slightly different, though equally genuine, commitments to the same religious and political institutions. Scholars have seen Swift and Dunton as writers who are representative of the ironic and earnest styles, respectively. While Dunton's work often lacks the same level of irony or self-awareness as Swift's, it was still often subversive or duplicitous in a way that was amenable to Swift and that first attracted Swift to his writing.

Furthermore, Dunton also uses satiric techniques, such as attacks on the reader or even the author himself, that are now recognized as staples of Swiftian satire. While scholars have occasionally noted a shared affinity for eccentricity and strangeness, as well as for polemic and contentiousness, in the writing of both, they have generally focused much less on the similarities in their earnest commitments. They held many similar views and values, and it was often the small differences in these earnest commitments, not a large divergence in moral outlook, that accounts for their later differences and clashes. Dunton's earnestness produces its own ironic style that, while distinct from Swift's and demonstrating its own quirks, parallels the mixture of contentiousness and indulgence found in Swift's writing.

Drawing on Adam Smith, I suggest that this relationship reveals how interests and affects are inseparable from communal relationships and social groupings that are inherently factional and fractious. In Smith's account of feeling in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), any affective state is a combination of a judgment and a social identification: it is always

positional and partial. Contentiousness is therefore implicit in the very structure of affect itself, and to a certain extent might even represent the same thing as affect; a figure such as Dunton clearly demonstrates this partial and self-interested nature of earnest affect and the way in which ironists exploit it.

Chapter 2 moves slightly backward in order to examine how Behn's works engage and exploit this tension between affirmation and contention: cultivating slight differences in earnest commitments relative to her (mostly male) political compatriots serves to heighten and refine her more traditional satirical attacks on political enemies. These two forms of contentiousness, I argue, function in tandem in her work and are responsible for its complex and multilayered subversive ironies: it is often Behn's insistence on affirming certain political commitments that endows her work with its acerbic bite.

Her supposedly conservative fictions antedate, rather than satirically reacting against, the later, more progressive, Whiggish novels, and her works thereby demonstrate the complex symbiotic relationship between irony and earnestness. In her work, satiric attack functions not simply as a way of denigrating enemies, but also as a means of inoculating and immunizing creative energy against possible attack. Such powerful negativity is not just extrinsic to the creative process; it animates and energizes her texts, allowing for a sustained foray into the negative recesses of their satiric targets and for the appropriation of some of their forms and ideas. Such looted material, in turn, reinforces and renews the creative impulse. Behn's satire vindicates and justifies her vulnerable position as a woman writer, protecting it from a censorious gaze, while also creating a space from which she can more effectively militate for Tory politics by inhabiting the mindset of her political enemies.

I will emphasize that her satire on the Whigs also has an earnest dimension, implicitly praising a new model for sovereignty that identifies it closely with women's vulnerable positions in a patriarchal world. Her work, I argue, suggests that this feminine model of sovereignty is implicit in, but often disavowed by, many Tory political critiques. This earnest deployment of satire emerges as Behn engages the problem of actresses and women in the theater more generally to emphasize her subtle differences with some of her male peers and to reimagine Tory politics from their perspective. She does not engage in a wholesale attack on this male culture, but rather undermines some of its more toxic assumptions by engaging with it in ways that subtly but significantly diverge from its dominant features. This delicate subversion reinforces and heightens her more

recognizable ironies and satire. Her revamped Tory politics suggests a parallel between the exclusion of women and political usurpation. Just as women must confront peril in the theater and in the wider world, sovereignty must engage with and thus expose the political usurpations of the Whigs. Tory politics, rather than cynically using women, can sharpen its bite by earnestly embracing the experience of vulnerability that is so central to women's being in the world.

In Chapter 3, I argue that Swiftian irony functions in a way similar to the Whiggish model of political revolution: both function "to preserve and to reform," and both create new commitments based on challenging, revising, and criticizing existing institutions. I show how the most barbed satire can function not simply by highlighting the flaws in the target but by drawing out its admirable qualities as well: this has the effect of implicating even those who already oppose the object of the satire and adopt a sanctimonious attitude toward it. Swift's satire functions first and foremost, of course, to highlight weaknesses, defects, and corruptions in its objects; but, in a gesture reminiscent of Burkean conservatism and Rorty's irony, his parody also serves as a means of preserving while reforming the satirized object, coopting its genuinely admirable qualities and opening up new spaces for indulgence and play.

At the other end of the century, Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) not only features ironic rhetorical flourishes reminiscent of Swift, it also provides a defense of the methodology of Rorty's ironist. Burke looks back to Swift's era for inspiration and precedent and thus offers an illuminating critical assessment, despite working at the other end of the eighteenth century. Burke makes explicit a model of ironic politics implicit in Swift's *Tale*: political institutions are contestable primarily because they are an ongoing, unfinished project. Each generation must recognize this limitation and adapt institutions to their own needs. Such contingent pliability and plasticity do not weaken these institutions, however. On the contrary: this is from whence derives their capacity for renovation, as both the power of irony and the power of politics come from respect for and confrontation with the fallible vulnerability of these institutions. These texts together explore the political implications of the great age of literary irony: radical innovation and a complete revision of existing practices are not necessary, because just as in literary irony, minute changes and differences in outlook can have outsized effects. A small set of changes can not only improve an institution but destroy it as well.

Chapter 4 shows how Swift's darkest satires of his later years blur the boundary between irony and earnestness. Swift's penchant for attacking

and vexing the reader by generalizing and extending the satire to everyone and anyone diminish the focus on a specific target in favor of creating striking representations that provoke and implicate, yet also engage the reader. I argue that Swift's satire aims to vex as much through earnest engagement as through confrontation. What is most troubling about Swift's difficult work is not the contempt, disdain, or disgust for the world he inspires in his readers, but rather the compelling intimacies it sustains with things that are disdainful, disgusting, or otherwise problematic. As Rawson and others have pointed out, there is something deeply serious about Swift's stance in *A Modest Proposal*. This need not mean that he literally endorses the plan, only that the satire takes the form of exploring and developing an object of genuine admiration latent in the thing he satirizes. Swift's famous text functions to locate a kind of purity or principle in the thing satirized.

From the satirist's point of view, the thing that is most admirable about the satirized object is the thing that most clearly and honestly represents its corrupted principles to the world. This relationship is visible in a central Swiftian technique, which satirizes the most extreme forms of vice simply by presenting them on their own terms, and this process requires that irony break down the defenses not only of the target but of the reader as well. I examine the points of agreement between Swift's most famous satires and the work of moral sense philosopher Francis Hutcheson, showing that, in works like *A Modest Proposal* and *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift does not simply degrade or denude his satiric target, but indulgently hyperbolizes it, raising it to the impossible standard of what Hutcheson calls "disinterested malice."[27] Hutcheson suggests that this construct, which consists in a deliberate delight in cruelty for its own sake rather than for the sake of any self-interest or gain, is imaginable but not possible: although it is conceivable to choose malicious conduct purely for its own sake, in practice real individuals will always be subject to partial interests, biases, and prejudices. Swift's satire functions by restoring this ethical potential lost in the actualization.

While Swift's intense irony leads to paradoxical effects, allowing him to achieve a kind of hyperbolic earnestness through his irony, Defoe's equally hyperbolic earnestness or naiveté also functions as a potentially satiric technique. Chapter 5 shows that, even before Swift, Defoe's satire employed the strategy of identifying admirable traits in the satirized object, which implicates both the thing itself and those who already see themselves as morally superior to the thing under attack, and the book thus again moves slightly backward to highlight Defoe's somewhat more unusual

instantiation of these ideas at work in Swift. That Defoe's style can also function as a form of irony may seem unlikely, but in fact there was a counterpart to the well-known satirical magazine *The Onion* that operated primarily through an analogue of Defoean irony. This publication, *The Daily Currant*, specialized in works that emulate the style of *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters* (1702), in that they function not through palpable incongruities or exaggerated parodies, but rather through minimizing any outward sign of these comic signals of irony. At the extreme, these satires may appear to simply troll or dupe the reader, and this is no doubt part of the game they play. At their best, however, they more slowly build the ironic tension to the point that a new perspective suddenly and disruptively makes its presence felt; that the ironic status of this presence is also sometimes doubtful, indeterminate, or uncertain simply strengthens its effects.

Defoe's most famous satire, *The Shortest Way*, predicts *A Modest Proposal* not just by using extremist rhetoric, as some have pointed out, but also by suggesting that an earnest engagement can be much more subversive than cynical manipulation. Defoe satirizes the practice of occasional conformity by showing that it engages the Church in a purely cynical way. Like Swift later does, Defoe seriously engages with the ideology of his target, in this case the Tory bigot, whose hostility to Dissenters also leads him to reveal the key insight of the satire: if Dissenters are willing to conform occasionally, there is no reason not to enforce conformity permanently.

In the later part of the chapter, I emphasize that this satire also provides an ethical model of earnest disengagement from political culture while transforming satiric insights into a means of self-examination. The sense of personal improvement and spiritual regeneration often associated with later works like *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) builds on Defoe's earlier polemic and satire and takes on a sharper political edge in light of these satiric works. Defoe explicitly argues that this form of earnestness represents a contentious practice in its own right. The polemic outlook first articulated in *The Shortest Way* resonates throughout Defoe's entire corpus.

The sum total of Defoe's work therefore suggests that he is an ironic renovator of forms as much as a naïve, realistic innovator of them, and I relate his protean qualities as a novelist to the Christian ethical injunction to appropriate sinners while eliminating sin. Defoe reveals elements of this project in his early verse satire *The True-Born Englishman* (1701), in which he satirizes an unusual target: ingratitude. For Defoe, this vice represents an unethical mode of appropriation that exploits its object and engenders dissatisfaction. Much of Defoe's work, including later novels such as

Robinson Crusoe, continues this satire by attempting to mislead the reader into a dismissive or haughty attitude that rejects the work as a silly, deceptive fiction. Defoe's earnestness is thus quite close to an ironic stance, that of mocking cynicism and mockery, tricking readers into judgment and then catching them in a trap by revealing that they have been taken in by the ruse of a ruse. Just as the Calvinist notion of total depravity is optimistic in that it uses negativity to help reveal the superabundance created by grace, I argue that the parodic apparatus in Defoe's work satirizes the reader's dismissive attitudes in order to undermine ingratitude. The optimistic sense of ironic surplus emerges as the corollary of a more traditional denigrating irony that seems to debase its object. Defoe's earnestness, too, is very much a form of ludicrous solemnity.