

GESM 120g: Just Joking?
Ancient Satire and its Modern Reception
Units: 4.0
Spring 2021
Location: Online

Instructor: Dr Hannah Mason
Office: N/A
Office Hours: Monday 11am-12pm, Wednesday 10-11am; Thursday 4-5pm; or by appointment.
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Course Description

This course explores the roots of satire and political comedy in ancient Greek and Roman literature, and the impact that it has had on satire today. We will focus on several broadly defined themes (“Class, Consumption, Cannibalism”, “Utopia”, “Identity: Sexism, Xenophobia, Racism”, and “Language, Discourse, Communication”) and track some of the ways in which they appear in satire of various periods – especially that of the ancient world and its reception in early modern Europe and the 20th-21st Century US. Combining historical sources such as the comedies of Aristophanes and the essays of Jonathan Swift with modern sources such as *The Onion* and *The Daily Show*, we will explore a range of questions, such as: How is satire different from other forms of humour, irony, or invective? In what ways does it manipulate, reinforce, or undercut the tropes and stereotypes of popular culture? What continuities and discontinuities are there between ancient and modern satire? Why is satire so frequently tied to other intellectual currents, such as philosophy, science fiction, and methods of communication? How does comedy contribute to the formation of individual and group identity? And why does satire so rarely seem to have a tangible social or political impact? (A paradox that the satirist Peter Cook hinted at when he joked that his comedy club, *The Establishment*, would be like the Berlin cabaret clubs of the Thirties, “which did so much to stop the rise of Hitler.”)

In the process of examining these themes and questions, students will learn to read, interpret, and analyse literature in its context, to critically engage with texts as historical documents, and to develop their ideas into compelling written arguments. We will address how modern writers both consciously and subconsciously engage with the ancient world, and we will consider the interactions between literature and societies more generally – the ways in which literature is the product of a culture it often seeks to change, and the extent to which it can be a useful source for understanding historical societies and communicating our own experiences. Moreover, students will be encouraged to explore their own interests in assessments and will have the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of course material by producing a creative project that uses satire as a platform to comment on their own lives or the modern world.

Learning Objectives

The learning objectives of the course may be summarised as follows:

- To understand the major tropes and techniques of satire and political comedy, its authors and intended audiences, the role it plays in the formation of identity, and its social and political impact.
- To critically analyse works of literature, especially in relation to each other, and in relation to their social and cultural contexts.

- To read and critically interpret ancient and modern sources of evidence and evaluate the specific benefits and challenges of using comic or satiric literature in the study of history.
- To reflect on the relationship between history and contemporary society, in terms of both continuities and discontinuities in the human experience, and understand some of the key ways that the classical tradition has influenced and structured the modern world.
- To clearly develop independent ideas and perspectives on history and literature into persuasive written and oral arguments.

Content Warning

Many of the themes and texts we will examine in this class are very emotive and controversial – for example, we will discuss dynamics of power that include violence, slavery, sexual assault, sexism, and racism. If you ever feel the need to withdraw from the class discussion you may do so without penalty, although you will be responsible for either covering any material you miss or making other arrangements with the instructor. If you wish to discuss the issues or your personal reaction to them in more depth, please feel free to talk them over with me, either in my office hours or by appointment. Students are also encouraged to utilise support systems such as those included at the end of this syllabus.

Required Readings and Supplementary Materials

Students should acquire the books below (but note that those marked with an asterisk are available online via USC libraries). These are not the only readings for this course, however – additional articles and excerpts from texts and videos will be discussed, but these will be made available by the instructor on Blackboard (and/or are already available online).

Aristophanes. 2009. *Birds and Other Plays*. (Trans. S. Halliwell.) Oxford: Oxford University Press. ISBN-10: 0199555672.

*Critchley, S. 2002. *On Humour*. London and New York: Routledge. ISBN-10: 1848164270.

*Horace. 2011. *Satires and Epistles*. (Trans. J. Davie and R. Cowan.) Oxford: Oxford University Press. ISBN-10: 0199563284.

*Juvenal. 1992. *The Satires*. (Trans. N. Rudd and W. Barr.) Oxford: Oxford University Press. ISBN-10: 0199540667.

More, Thomas. 2003. *Thomas More: Utopia*. (Trans. P. Turner.) London: Penguin Classics. ISBN-10: 0140449105.

Orwell, George. 1996. *Animal Farm*. New York: Signet Classics. ISBN-10: 0451526342.

NB: Description of Assessments and Class Schedule will appear in the full syllabus.

Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

Academic Conduct:

Plagiarism – presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in SCampus in Part B, Section 11, “Behavior Violating University Standards” [SCampus Part B](#). Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in SCampus and university policies on scientific misconduct, [Scientific Misconduct | Policy | USC](#).

Class notes and Zoom recordings – please note that strict rules govern student use of class Zoom recordings. Since other students are personally identifiable in these recordings, they are considered educational records and hence subject to federal privacy laws (FERPA). Responsibilities for permissible use are defined in accordance with existing SCampus policies concerning use of class notes and other materials ([SCampus Part C](#)). Students are not permitted to create their own class recordings. Students violating these policies can face disciplinary sanction.

Support Systems:

Counseling and Mental Health - (213) 740-9355 – 24/7 on call
studenthealth.usc.edu/counseling

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1 (800) 273-8255 – 24/7 on call
suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-9355(WELL), press “0” after hours – 24/7 on call

<https://studenthealth.usc.edu/sexual-assault/>

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm.

Office of Equity and Diversity (OED) - (213) 740-5086 | Title IX – (213) 821-8298
equity.usc.edu, titleix.usc.edu

Information about how to get help or help someone affected by harassment or discrimination, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants.

Reporting Incidents of Bias or Harassment - (213) 740-5086 or (213) 821-8298
https://usc-advocate.symplicity.com/care_report/

Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions to the Office of Equity and Diversity | Title IX for appropriate investigation, supportive measures, and response.

The Office of Disability Services and Programs - (213) 740-0776
dsp.usc.edu

Support and accommodations for students with disabilities. Services include assistance in providing readers/notetakers/interpreters, special accommodations for test taking needs, assistance with architectural barriers, assistive technology, and support for individual needs.

USC Campus Support and Intervention - (213) 821-4710

campussupport.usc.edu

Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

Diversity at USC - (213) 740-2101

diversity.usc.edu

Information on events, programs and training, the Provost's Diversity and Inclusion Council, Diversity Liaisons for each academic school, chronology, participation, and various resources for students.

USC Emergency - UPC: (213) 740-4321, HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24/7 on call

dps.usc.edu, emergency.usc.edu

Emergency assistance and avenue to report a crime. Latest updates regarding safety, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible.

USC Department of Public Safety - UPC: (213) 740-6000, HSC: (323) 442-120 – 24/7 on call

dps.usc.edu

Non-emergency assistance or information.

Office of the Ombuds - (213) 821-9556 (UPC) / (323-442-0382 (HSC)

ombuds.usc.edu

A safe and confidential place to share your USC-related issues with a University Ombuds who will work with you to explore options or paths to manage your concern.