

## Book review

**Massih Zekavat (2017). *Satire, Humour, and the Construction of Identities*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.**

Massih Zekavat's recent monograph makes a significant contribution to functional interpretations of satire. Zekavat's book is one of the few explicit treatments of the relationship between satire, as a genre, and identity formation. Chapter 1, the Introduction, provides an overview of the book's theoretical framework and objectives. Building on the work of Frederic Bogel (2001), Zekavat explores how satire relies on an oppositional dynamic between centres of power and marginalised entities. A Foucauldian understanding of power as discourse underpins the author's analysis of the interplay between social centres and peripheries in satiric texts from both the British and Persian traditions. As Zekavat notes, satire functions both as a means for hegemonic structures to "Other" minorities, while at the same time empowering marginalised entities to engage in acts of resistance against forces of oppression (p. 6). Herein lies the discursive power of the satiric genre. Zekavat advances this well-known model of "power as discourse" a step further, however, as he notes that the oppositional discursive process is more than a rhetorical tool; the same process is also central to social identity formation. In other words, the difference between "us and them" does not merely provide material for satire; it also actively constitutes the reader as a social subject – a member either of the dominant or marginalised population. Thus, as the author argues, satire does not merely describe social identities in a static way, but rather participates in social identity formation of various kinds – sexual, racial, national, and religious (p. 4). Zekavat concludes his Introduction by providing a clear and ambitious statement of purpose. He argues that understanding social identity is one of the central challenges of the humanities in the contemporary globalised world. He further speculates that an appreciation for the dynamic construction of identity may yield an important key for the promotion of "mutual understanding, tolerance, and... peace" (p. 10).

Chapter 2, "Otherness and identity construction," provides a thorough and engaging critical survey of the theoretical literature on the role of otherness in identity formation. The author traces key philosophical, post-structural, psychological, and sociological approaches to otherness. As the reader may suspect, Hegel's (1977) master-slave dialectic plays a central role in the chapter, as the author explores how the opposition between self and other, combined with their mutual interdependence, is crucial for understanding identity as a social phenomenon (pp. 18–19). The full significance of Hegel's (1977) theory of identity and difference becomes most apparent later in Chapter 8 in the author's discussion of gender in satiric texts. Here in Chapter 2, Zekavat emphasises the Hegelian premises that underpin

Lacan's (2006) account of ego formation (p. 25). Deconstructionist approaches to identity and otherness earn a brief discussion but, as Zekavat argues, Derrida's (1982) insistence on the primacy of language and text over individual agency make his theory less applicable to satire, a genre in which the text is not an end in itself, but rather is only a beginning for political activism (p. 20). In short, Chapter 2 is a powerful tour de force through the intellectual history of self and identity. The clarity and concision of the chapter are noteworthy.

Chapter 3, "Otherness, humour, and satire," complements the previous chapter by providing a critical overview of theories of humour. The author covers a wide range of humour theories, from Bergson's (1917) theory of laughter (pp. 34–35) to John Morreall's (2009a; 2009b) cognitive shift theory (pp. 35–37), to Raskin's (1985) Semantic Script Theory (SSTH), Attardo & Raskin's (1991) General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH) (pp. 39–42), Veale's (2004) version of Incongruity Theory (pp. 43–44), and more. In each case, Zekavat shows how incongruity, opposition, and issues of identity lie at the heart of nearly every major philosophical approach. For example, arguing alongside Lefcourt (2001), Zekavat demonstrates that even Freud's (1964; 2010) classic Relief Theory ultimately relies on opposition and an emergent sense of identity (pp. 32–34). For readers well versed in the theories of humour, Zekavat's interpretation is compelling. That said, some readers may be put off by the way the author initially elides some important distinctions between humour and satire and between theories of laughter and theories of humour. By the end of the chapter, however, his rationale is clear as he argues that the hallmark oppositions of humour – reinforcement vs. subversion, higher vs. lower strata, inclusion vs. exclusion – are also essential to satire (p. 42).

In Chapter 4, "Humour, satire, and identity construction," the author explores how satire actively constructs identities through narrative. He argues that identity formation is a dialectical process wherein the subject both constructs his/her own identity even as s/he creates and represents the identity of others (p. 51). Here Zekavat finds much common ground with sociological approaches to humour (e.g. Bing 2004; Martin 2007; Davis 2008; Habib 2008; Ruch 2008), which have demonstrated how group solidarity, group identity, and in/out group exclusion are among humour's central functions. Whereas many sociological approaches tend to view identity as static self-representation, Zekavat again emphasises the interdependent and dialectical nature of identity formation (pp. 56–57).

In each of the following four chapters (Chapters 5–8), Zekavat discusses a particular type of group identity (racial/ethnic, national, religious, and gender, respectively) alongside representative literary examples. In each case, Zekavat first provides a detailed account of the theoretical background and then proceeds to his literary analysis. Chapter 5, which concerns the construction of racial and ethnic identities, sets out a view of racial otherness that is informed by Hegel as well as by post-colonialist theorists, such as Fanon (2008), Said (1979; 1993), Bhabha (2007; 2008), and Spivak (1990), as well as their critics. Whereas Fanon and

Said emphasise the one-way process of “othering” as a force exerted by the coloniser on the colonised other, Bhabha and Spivak understand the dialectical nature of binary model. Zekavat also elaborates Bhabha’s ideas about the “Third Space” and “hybridity,” which add a layer of complexity to the relationship between self and other, showing that it is not merely binary, nor purely hierarchical (pp. 70–71). Zekavat presents both Bhabha’s notions of hybridity and relevant critiques (pp. 74–75). He ends the theoretical portion of the chapter with a discussion of several key critics of post-colonialism including Benita Parry (2004a; 2004b) and Aijaz Ahmad (2000) (pp. 83–86) alongside alternative approaches from the field of critical race theory (pp. 87–88). The reader may easily become lost amid the theoretical parry and riposte, as the author’s own voice fades into the background leaving the reader to wonder which interpretive threads will be most germane to his treatment of ‘Ubayd-ī Zākānī’s (1999; 2008) *Ethics of the Aristocrats*, his literary example for this chapter. In his reading of the satiric text, Zekavat demonstrates how Arab ethnic minorities are stereotyped as cuckolds, fools, and religious hypocrites (pp. 89–90). Other groups such as the Turks are singled out for their violence, homosexuality, and lying (pp. 90–91), and Qazvinis, the group to which Zākānī himself belongs, for their stupidity and lack of judgment (pp. 91–93). Zekavat emphasises the social identity of the groups and some incongruities that give rise to humour, but Zekavat’s textual reading is not as robust as one might hope. The reader will not find, for example, a deeply articulated connection between the theoretical aspects of “othering” discussed in the early part of the chapter and this particular literary text. Most notably, one would like to see some additional discussion of Zākānī’s dual status as both a Shirazi and Qazvini; Zekavat’s treatment is *suggestive* of the dialectical nature of identity formation but is too brief (pp. 94–96) to be persuasive.

In Chapter 6, “Construction of national identities,” the author explores how otherness or incongruity is central to national identity. He chooses Swift’s *Drapier’s Letters* (1965b) to show how dialectical oppositions contribute to the construction of national identities. Zekavat understands “nations” as Said (1979), Anderson (2006), and Bhabha (1995) and many others do, i.e. as products of a colonialist imagination, predicated on a rhetoric of otherness and difference. Zekavat follows Bhabha (1995), Brennan (1995), and Nayar (2010) in linking the construction of national identity to literature and to the process of narration (pp. 98–104). And satire occupies a particularly central role (pp. 106–107), especially in 18<sup>th</sup> century Great Britain where both external othering (British vs. French) and internal othering (English vs. Scottish, Welsh, Irish) provided rich material for the so-called “golden age” of English satire. Zekavat demonstrates the power of satire to shape national identity with *Drapier’s Letters*, Jonathan Swift’s series of pamphlets written to stir sentiment against the use of debased copper coinage during an incident that became known as Wood’s Copper Coinage scandal. Zekavat shows how Swift’s satire uses otherness to create and consolidate both English and Irish identities. He further suggests that Swift’s own position as an Irish immigrant, who

advocated for the Irish, even as he ridiculed them and profited from their oppression, demonstrates how identity is complicated and may be shaped by mutual interdependencies (pp. 119–122).

In Chapter 7, “Construction of religious identities via satire,” Zekavat uses both Swift’s *A Tale of a Tub* (1965a) and Zākānī’s *Persian Anecdotes* (1999; 2008) to establish how satiric discourse can contribute to the construction of identity both within and across religious boundaries (p. 145). Zekavat’s discussion of Swift’s *Tale of a Tub* contains a great deal of narrative summary as well as a number of lengthy quoted passages. The reader who is unfamiliar with Swift’s difficult work may struggle to follow Zekavat’s summaries and the points he is trying to adduce. For example, on p. 136 the author describes a digression in the *Tale of a Tub* and quotes a passage containing a (not-entirely-transparent) punch line aimed at the Reformation theologian John Calvin. Zekavat’s explanation of the humour and the religious tensions it reveals is not especially clear. After quoting the passage, he comments briefly and ambiguously saying, “So, here again another controversial issue between Calvinism and Anglicanism, namely inspiration, coincides with the incongruities that are the causes of satire in this section” (p. 136). When he turns to Zākānī’s *Persian Anecdotes*, the author’s interpretation is more clearly articulated. He discusses a number of inter-religious oppositions: Islam vs. Christianity, Islam vs. Zarathustranism, *et al.* (pp. 140–141), as well as intra-religious oppositions within Islam (true believers vs. unbelievers, Shia vs. Sunni sects, Sufi practices vs. their espoused beliefs, pp. 141–144).

Like Chapters 5–7, Chapter 8 begins with a longer theoretical treatment before proceeding to literary examples, this time from Juvenal’s *Satire VI* (2006), Swift’s “The Lady’s Dressing Room” (2006), and two satires from the Persian tradition, the anonymous *Ta’dīb al-Nisvān* (1882–1886; 1896) and Astarābādī’s *Ma’ayib al-Rijāl* (1896; 1898; 2010). The theoretical portion of the chapter is clear and persuasive as Zekavat shows how binary oppositions and an Hegelian dialectic play a central role in constructionist theories of gender ranging from Beauvoir (2011) to Wittig (2007), Irigaray (1985), Spivak (1988), Kristeva (1982), Butler (1987; 2004), and Cixous (in Young 2004) (pp. 148–156). For his literary analysis, Zekavat has selected four highly complementary texts; all employ similar binary oppositions, deeply gendered stereotypes of the other, and implicit or explicit criticisms of marriage. One can clearly see the logic of these choices. Zekavat’s reading of Juvenal *VI* proceeds by broad strokes rather than by detailed close reading. His understanding of the construction of gender roles and man/woman binary polarities in the satire is sound and critically informed, but Zekavat misses several other binary oppositions in Juvenal’s text, likely owing to his choice of a William Pople’s 18<sup>th</sup> century translation, which poetically elides the bawdy and crude details of the Latin. W.R. Johnson’s (1996) constructionist reading of gender in the *Satire* is particularly useful for the author’s interpretation (pp. 167–168). With Swift’s “The Lady’s Dressing Room,” Zekavat’s reading is more substantive. He shows that although the work is

ostensibly misogynistic in its crude scatological humour, interpretations do vary, and one may equally argue that the satire liberates the audience from inherited stereotypes and thereby subverts rather than reinforces patriarchal power structures (pp. 172–177).

Zekavat then turns to *Ta'dīb al-Nisvān*, a polemical treatise on the vices and social failings of women. This treatise contains instructions to husbands for disciplining their wives (pp. 178–179). Astarābādī's *Ma'ayib al-Rijāl* parodies the *Ta'dīb al-Nisvān* through its critique of the vices and social failings of men (pp. 180–181). Zekavat concludes the chapter with an important caveat about the audience's/reader's response to satiric discussions of gender. He argues that satire contributes to gender identity formation in social subjects not because the audience sympathises with either the satirist or his target, but because the satiric discourse itself causes the reader to internalise the oppositions and binary logic of othering (p. 183). To my mind, this thesis provides one of the book's most radical and important contributions to critical work on satire.

Chapter 9 concludes the book. Zekavat begins by tackling a problem that may have troubled the reader from the beginning: how are we to know that satire produces socio-political change by shaping group identities if we have few examples of satire's direct influence over political events? Zekavat concedes that the effect of satire is indirect, but he maintains that historical opposition to the writing of satire, particularly in repressive regimes, speaks to its influence (pp. 186–187). He then reiterates why satire, in his view, has the power to shape social identity – because, as he writes, “satire is a discourse” and “identities are constructed discursively” (p. 189). Zekavat then provides a recap of the various chapters and some possible trajectories for future research before reiterating a sanguine view of satire's potential to create and propagate tolerance (p. 191).

On the whole, Zekavat's work is a major contribution to the fields of humour studies and satire. It is deeply researched, theoretically informed, and for the most part, logically and persuasively argued. It is recommended for all scholars of humour and related literatures. If it fails in any regard, it is in the density, terseness, and frequent awkwardness of the prose. The slim volume might have easily been twice as long and likely would have been more readable as a result. Although literary interpretations are secondary to theory in Zekavat's book, most of his literary exempla support his thesis convincingly.

Some typographical errors noted: Appaih for Appiah (p. 8), identify for identity (p. 28), sin quo non for *sine qua non* (p. 42), otherenss for otherness (pp. 57, 122), otheiring (p. 124), Simon for Simone (p. 196). Errors in syntax and/or phrasing: “It will be conveyed that” (p. 4); “Although humour can bring enjoyment and laughter to the satirist and audience, it cannot guarantee the butt's laughter and enjoyment” (pp. 38–39); “Since everything in history as well as history itself are made...” [S-V agreement] (p. 66); “devoid” used as a verb [obsolete usage] (p. 74); usage errors: plight (p. 170), pestered (p. 178), despite (p. 178). References (p. 40) omitted from Bibliography: Attardo, Salvatore and Victor Raskin. (1991). ‘Script theory

revis(it)ed: Joke similarity and the joke representation model', *Humour: International Journal of Humour Research* 4 (3/4), pp. 293–347; Attardo, Salvatore. (1997). 'The semantic foundations of cognitive theories of humour', *Humour: International Journal of Humour Research* 10 (4), pp. 395–420.

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