Satire and parody in the fiction of Thomas Love Peacock and the early writings of William Makepeace Thackeray, 1815-1850

Abstract

This thesis examines the works of Peacock and the early periodical contributions of Thackeray in the light of recent twentieth-century critical interpretations of satire. In particular, attention to Peacock's use of elements of the Menippean sub-genre in his satirical fiction offers a reassessment of his place in the literary tradition. While Thackeray's early writings demonstrate some characteristics of Menippean satire, a review of his work from the broader perspective of Bakhtin's exposition of carnival influences in serio-comic literature provides a new understanding of the origins and uses of his narratorial devices. A comparison of the work of the two authors, within the time constraint of the first half of the nineteenth century, illustrates how nineteenth-century publishing innovations shaped literary perception of satire. Although the high status of the genre in the predominant culture of the previous century was challenged by the growth of the reading public, satire found new energy and modes of expression in the popular magazines of the period. In addition, writers facing the increasing heterogeneity of new reading audiences, were forced to reconsider their personal ideals of authorship and literature, while renegotiating their position in the literary marketplace. Organized in six chapters, the discussion opens with an account of traditional interpretations of satire, and goes on to examine recent analyses of the genre. The second chapter focuses on the relevance of these new interpretations to the work of Peacock and Thackeray and the extent to which the use of Menippean forms of satire enabled each to challenge the established opinions of their period. Changes in concepts of reading and writing and innovations in modes of publication form the substance of the third chapter and this is followed by an analysis of the work of both writers, using Bakhtin's interpretation of the Menippean sub-genre in the broader context of serio-comic discourse and the carnival tradition, Chapter five is a comparative study of the attitudes of both writers towards contemporary literature and the final section places their work in the political context of the period. Both Peacock and Thackeray made extensive use of elements of Menippean satire in their fiction. The content of their work, however, and their modes of writing were highly individual, to some extent shaped by the different markets they supplied. Collectively, their writings illustrate two aspects of the cultural watershed of the early nineteenth century, Peacock reflecting traditional notions of authorship and Thackeray representing a new industry, regulated by the commercial considerations of supply and demand. As satirists,each succeeded in adapting the genre to satisfy both his own authorial integrity and the expectations of his readers.
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William Makepeace Thackeray (11px /ˈθækəri/; 18 July 1811 - 24 December 1863) was an English poet and novelist of the 19th century. He was famous for his satirical works, particularly Vanity Fair, a panoramic portrait of English society. Thackeray was the son of Richmond Thackeray, who held various important appointments in the service of the East India Company, and who belonged to an old and respectable Yorkshire family. The son was born at Calcutta, and soon after the death of his father, in 1816 William Makepeace Thackeray was born in the family of a prominent official in Calcutta. In 1817, the boy was sent to England where he went to school and in 1828 entered the Cambridge University. While at the university, Thackeray displayed a talent for drawing and edited a student paper. The stagnant atmosphere of the place irked Thackeray so that finally he left the University. In Thackeray's view, a snob is a person who fawns upon his social superiors and looks down with contempt upon his inferiors. In his book, the author declares war against snobbism, vanity and selfishness. 'The Book of Snobs' may be considered as a kind of prelude to the author's major work 'Vanity Fair'. In the forties, Thackeray's creative method as that of a realistic writer becomes firmly established. Early writings. The 19th century was the age of the magazine, which had been developed to meet the demand for family reading among the growing middle class. In the late 1830s Thackeray became a notable contributor of articles on varied topics to Fraser's Magazine, The New Monthly Magazine, and, later, to Punch. His work was unsigned or written under such pen names as Mr. Michael Angelo Titmarsh, Fitz-Boodle, The Fat Contributor, or Ikey Solomons. He collected the best of these early writings in Miscellanies, 4 vol. (1855-57). These include The Yellowplush