

Why Societies Need Parody

By Alexandra Petri

- 1 One great thing about being alive right now is that it is very easy to tell parody from reality, which is why it might have escaped your notice that the actual satirical newspaper *The Onion* honestly did file a real amicus brief¹⁾ before the Supreme Court – in defense of a man who got arrested for parody. In the United States! In the present day! I wish I were making that part up.
- 2 The man in question maintained a fake social media page for his local police department and wound up spending four days in jail in 2016 after the page made the department mad and he was charged with “using a computer to disrupt police functions.” The jury found him not guilty, but he subsequently sued, 21.
- 3 *The Onion*, self-styled in the brief as the “single most powerful and influential organization in human history” with a “daily readership of 4.3 trillion,” agrees. As someone else whose job hinges on the ability to write parody without being detained by the state, I also wanted to chime in.
- 4 “Ah,” you are saying. “Thrilling! The only thing better and funnier than actual comedy: people talking earnestly about the social importance of comedy!” You are right. I will try to keep it brief, as *The Onion* did. “Even better,” you are saying, “Puns!” You are saying a lot. If it weren’t for you, I would already have gotten to my thesis.
- 5 As is customary in arguments of this kind, I am now going to quote an ancient writer. I have chosen Horace, the ancient Roman satirist: “When you live in a time like this, it’s impossible *not* to write satire.” The world is so whacky that you wind up writing satire whether you want to or not. One man’s ominously heightened, on-the-nose parody is another man’s straightforward accounting of the news. When the world is continually absurd without being funny, you want to turn to a form that tries to allow other people to recognize the absurdity with you.
- 6 Unfortunately, when you write parody, or try to, people do not usually say, “Ah! Thank you for this vital service! Just like Horace! You are elevating the culture.” Instead, for as long as people have been writing satire, other people have gotten mad about it – both its targets (such as the police department!) and others. Or, sometimes worse, people have been ... not mad. If 17th century satirist Jonathan Swift’s inbox was anything like mine, he had to deal with a few; “Solve the famine



by eating the Irish babies? FINALLY! SOMEONE SAYING WHAT WE'RE ALL THINKING!!!!"

- 7 *The Onion's* motto is "Tu stultus es" – you are dumb. Its filing says the slogan gets to "the very heart of parody: tricking readers into believing that they're seeing a serious rendering of some specific form ... and then allowing them to laugh at their own gullibility when they realize that they've fallen victim to one of the oldest tricks in the history of rhetoric."
- 8 To me, that second piece is even more crucial than the first. It's not actually that the reader is a fool – but that the reader is capable of being fooled, recognizing it and laughing at it.
- 9 Fundamentally, parody is an act of optimism. As *The Onion* says, it depends upon the "reasonable person" standard. Have you met the country, recently? Have you met the world, recently? Only an optimist would look around right now and feel convinced that there existed such a thing as a "reasonable person," let alone one who could be used as a standard in legal cases.
- 10 But if you stop believing in reasonable people – even a person who is occasionally, initially fooled by something parodic – you stop believing that democracy is possible. If you don't believe that most people are ultimately reasonable, why on Earth would you want them to be in charge of everything?
- 11 Democracy, like parody, presumes that people are capable of noticing when someone is trying to dupe them. I have to think this is among the reasons dictators distrust parody; not just because it shows them in a bad light, but because its underlying assumption is that people can see what is in front of them.
- 12 Obviously, bad satire exists. Sometimes, if people don't understand what you're doing, it is not because they are goofs but because you haven't done your job as a satirist correctly. But, broadly, we write parody with the belief that people can laugh, 28. Satire says that deep down, we are reasonable. At its best, it's like the package of art and music and scientific facts we put into the Voyager capsule and sent into space: a vote of confidence that someone out there is capable of understanding what we're putting down. And, we hope, not showing up to arrest us.

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noot 1 amicus brief = een verdediging van een gedagvaarde door een persoon of organisatie die zelf geen partij is in de rechtszaak, maar wel een belang bij de zaak heeft