

Sunday July 8th Elder Hall 5.00pm

You cannot be serious!

Charles Firth, Julian Morrow, Francis Wheen, (Chair: Phillip Adams)

Friend: 'Tis all a libel – Paxton (Sir) will say.

Pope: Not yet my friend! Tomorrow 'faith it may;

And for that cause I print today.

How should I fret, to mangle every line,

In rev'rance to the sins of Thirty-nine!

Vice with such giant strides comes on amain,

Invention strives to be before in vain;

Feign what I will, and paint it e'er so strong,

Some rising genius sins up to my song.

Alexander Pope, *Epilogue to the Satires* (1738)

Pope's proposition here (as elegant as a steel trap once you sort through the ornate language) is that his world is galloping towards corruption at such a pace that today's fantastical satiric exaggeration is next year's news report. No matter how hard he thrashes his 'invention', he is far from stopping any bad conduct with his satirical song. Instead, the rising geniuses of his corrupt world rapidly emulate what he seeks to excoriate. In a paranoid moment, Pope suspects that they are deliberately using his poems as a model. Things have not improved noticeably for the working satirist since 1738.

And yet, we cleave to the belief that laughing at corruption and stupidity is a virtuous as well as a pleasant thing. Why? Laughter can do many things. At its best, it can be a form of lateral intelligence as potent as the most rigorous reasoning. At its worst, it can be destructive vandalism, mere insensitive rock-throwing at the expense of decent people and sensible order. Somewhere in between lie the shifting sands of laughter that consoles us for the absurdities and corruptions of the world, and can too easily feel like an alternative to actually doing anything about them.

Australians are inordinately proud of our larrikin tradition of humour, but is it not possible that laughing more or less equally at all public figures as self-seeking fools only teaches us to expect no better of our civic and corporate leaders? Is the effect of satire more conservative than critical? After all, Pope didn't get rid of Walpole – he was the first and longest-serving British prime minister, and slipped from power in the mid-1740s because of a botched attempt to introduce a new tax. *Yes Minister* has been notoriously popular in Canberra for decades, more as an instruction video than as an encouragement of open government.

So, the big question: Is satire a solution to a ridiculous world, or part of the problem?