
REVIEWS

Rose A. Zimbardo. *At Zero Point: Discourse, Culture, and Satire in Restoration England*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1998. 203p.

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Rose Zimbardo, a noted Restoration scholar for over forty years, presents a deconstructionist reading of Restoration culture, discourse, and satire in her latest critical study, *At Zero Point*. The book's title refers to Hans Blumenberg's concept of "zero point" — a collapse which occurs when an epistemological system disintegrates because of internal contradictions and a new epistemology begins to evolve. She locates this rupture at the end of the seventeenth century with the implosion of the Renaissance order and the construction of modernism, with its new conceptions of self, nation, gender, language, subjectivity, and reality. In taking this approach, Zimbardo is reacting to scholars who view Restoration literature as a prelude to major eighteenth-century works. Through the investigation of works by Rochester, Oldham, Wycherly, and Swift, she illustrates the collapse of Renaissance epistemology; in the works of Dryden, on the other hand, she finds a constructive satire based on the "I" which projects order onto the external world.

Chapter 1, "From Words to Experimental Philosophy," studies the shift from the medieval/Renaissance semiotic system to "the formation of a new semiotic code, a new system of signification" (17). Zimbardo shows how the new scientists such as Boyle and Sprat demanded a "transparent, mimetic discourse to describe the mechanical operations of nature" (17). With this came a new emphasis on "self" and experience as the sources of truth. The chapter closes with an analysis of the prose satire, *The Whores Rhetoric*, which ridicules both old and new language theories.

Chapter 2 deals with the semiotics of Restoration deconstructive satire. Zimbardo argues "that the eighteenth century binary model of satire, which determines that in order to be satire, a text must direct its reader to a positive norm, or must, at least by implication, uphold a clear alternative to foolish and ridiculous behavior ... is inappropriate" to the writers she discusses (17). She finds that Augustinian semiotics, which allows for the "*real presence* only of language" (44) is helpful in understanding Hobbes and Rochester.

Chapter 3, “No ‘I’ and No Eye,” draws on Zimbardo’s earlier work, *Wycherley’s Drama: A Link in the Development of English Satire* (1965) and provides a brief sketch of the satyr-satirist trope in English literature. She sees Juvenalian satire as the preferred model of Renaissance and Restoration satirists. Particularly useful for scholars is her discussion of Wycherley’s *Plain Dealer* as a satiric discourse which explores cultural institutions and codes while challenging their linguistic integrity. Zimbardo finds that “author,” “character,” and “speaker” are “destagilized and destabilizing tropes” in Restoration deconstructive satire (18). I agree with her conclusion that *The Tale of the Tub* is “a deconstructionist dream, a text that overruns all limits assigned to it” (18). The chapter concludes by examining the satiric approaches of two deconstructionist satires, Mel Brooks’ *Blazing Saddles* and Rochester’s “A Ramble in St. James’s Park.” While both works well exemplify Zimbardo’s methodology, the attention to *Blazing Saddles* seems misplaced in a book devoted to Restoration satire.

Chapter 4 characterizes gender, sexuality, and discourse in the Restoration and describes how economic and nationalistic underpinnings contribute to changing attitudes about homosexuality and libertinism. She argues convincingly that homosexuality is considered new in the 1690s and thought to be a national threat. While Zimbardo says nothing memorable about *The Way of the World*, the deconstruction of the Renaissance heroic “love and honor” code in the mock-heroic satire *Sodom* is outstanding.

Chapter 5 finds that the central construct of the modern age, “Man,” grows out of the late seventeenth-century reformulation of the idea of self and the positing of “Truth” to the inner person. She argues that “when the self becomes discursively central, satire becomes Horatian, mimetic, and binary, an instrument for ordering and amending human behavior” (20). Its principal metaphors become the telescope and the voyage of discovery. One central section shows how Dryden’s *Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire* formulates a constructive and, therefore, anti-Juvenalian theory of satire. She argues further that the discourse of modernism becomes the discourse of empire and colonialism, with the representation of Orientals changing from neutral Renaissance accounts to the Restoration Oriental “Other” as lecherous, cruel and irrational.

In her conclusion, Zimbardo argues that postmodernism points to the arrival of another zero point. “The ideas that language is mimetic, that ‘reality’ is material, that the ‘self’ is a natural entity, that Western hegemony is God-Ordained, are collapsing under the weight of questions” currently being raised (170). Future scholars will need to trace the historical change occurring in our own zero point at the millennium.

Zimbardo brings a wealth of knowledge and critical acumen to her views on Restoration literature. Both students and scholars alike will benefit from her readings of particular poems and plays, particularly less well-read works such as Dryden's *Don Sebastian* (1690). Some of the deconstructionist language can be annoying, such as Zimbardo's discussion of Oldham's "Aude aliquid. Ode (Satire Against Vertue)" in which she finds that the speaker "erases himself into the corner of ME, and at the close of the poem erases that monument to nothingness as well" (75). But on the whole, her writing is vigorous and clear, and her premise concerning deconstructive and constructive satire is convincing and thought-provoking. Only rarely does such a radical reexamination of culture occur, and Zimbardo's *At Zero Point* brings new insights into both Renaissance and Restoration scholarship. *At Zero Point* is the culmination of Zimbardo's impressive career. ❁