



SATIRICAL REVIEW

Poking fun at the high and mighty

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Published online: 22 June 2017
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Making fun of the powerful, and thereby sending a powerful message, has been part and parcel of human society since at least Roman times. In the Middle Ages, court jesters, besides entertaining the diverse monarchs, could also make fun of them, and in some cases, provided strategic advice too. They were often the only ones allowed to give the bad news that no one else dared to deliver. After France lost a naval battle against the English in 1340, Philippe VI's jester told him that 'English sailors don't even have the guts to jump into the water like our brave French' (Wikipedia 2017).

In modern times, making fun of those in power by impersonating them has become an increasingly perfected art. Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* is an early example of this, at least when it comes to motion pictures. Very much in tune with the sentimentality of those days, however, Chaplin's Hitler converts to the good side at the end of the film.

No such sentimentality has survived in the post-millennial West. Happy endings do not fit into the acerbic world of satirical impersonation today. Instead, what makes a

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successful YouTube clip that pokes fun at a modern dictator is, above all, a staccato succession of allusions to history, culture and clichés, together with accented English. An extremely successful example is Slovene Internet comedian Klemen Slakonja's impersonation of Vladimir Putin in 'Putin, Putout' (YouTube 2016b).

But democratic leaders can also be worthy objects of satire, as British comedian Tracey Ullmann showed in her portrayal of Angela Merkel in the legendary 'Sexbomb Cardiff' piece (YouTube 2016a). In this sketch Ullman masterfully plays on British clichés about Germany as well as on Germanness itself—not to mention other features of the EU and its various nations. 'Merkel's' facial expressions, body language and accent are practically perfect here, so Ullman's fame is well-deserved.

Of course, the ultimate satirical impersonation of famous and powerful people is done by themselves. Barack Obama made fun of his opponents as well as of himself at several White House correspondents' dinners. In 2016, his last year as president, he outdid himself with a clip about his job search after leaving the White House (YouTube 2016c).

In 2017, comedians and actors across the world can agree that the election of Donald Trump as the forty-fifth president of the US is a divine gift to their trade. Arguably the best impersonation of Trump so far was produced by Alec Baldwin on Saturday Night Live (YouTube 2017b). Some even argue that after Baldwin began his act, Donald Trump started to sound increasingly like this parody (YouTube 2017c). Memes such as 'America First' (most prominently pronounced during the historically short and decidedly ominous inauguration speech on 21 January 2017) spawned a whole series of viral responses from Europe, beginning with 'Netherlands second' (YouTube 2017d), and shortly followed by the Martens Centre's own version for the whole of Europe: in a way 'Europe second' (YouTube 2017a). Most of the other European spinoffs, from Denmark, Germany, Slovenia and other countries, came later. This seems to be a good year for jesters.

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