

THE ART OF ABUSE: SATIRE AND INVECTIVE
IN BYZANTINE LITERATURE
A PRELIMINARY SURVEY*

by

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ABSTRACT: This article discusses the Byzantine understanding of “satire” and “invective”. It argues that it is unwise to impose modern expectations and definitions on what we call Byzantine satire. It also shows that to find a clear-cut definition is simply impossible since Byzantine satire and invective are often interwoven and inseparable. Therefore, the main focus of the paper is on finding a theoretical framework for Byzantine satire and invective which is rooted in Byzantine writings rather than in modern definitions. There does not seem to be one designation which could be used as an “umbrella term” for Byzantine satirical production. Satire could be seen rather as a set of rhetorical strategies regulating tone, making satire more a mode than a firmly defined genre.

WHAT IS SATIRE? MODERN DEFINITIONS
AND A BYZANTINE VARIANT

As defined by the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, satire is an “artistic form, chiefly literary and dramatic, in which human or individual vices, follies, abuses, or shortcomings are held up to censure by means of ridicule, derision, burlesque, irony, parody, caricature, or other methods, sometimes with an intent to inspire social reform”¹. This definition summarises well the intent of texts described as “satirical” – they may mock an individual with a purpose, not just to amuse the audience or to destroy someone’s reputation. Their purpose should be to teach somebody a lesson and ultimately to reform his/her ways. As Ronald PAULSON says: “[Satire] must at the same time make the reader aware of a pointing finger, of an ought or ought not, that refers beyond the page to his own life, or – and this is not always the same thing – take a moral stand, make a judgment, and

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¹ <http://www.britannica.com/art/satire>, accessed on 29 May 2016.