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# Hannah Gadsby

## On the Limits of Satire

REBECCA KREFTING

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**ABSTRACT:** Hannah Gadsby's widely viewed stand-up comedy special *Nanette* tackles pressing social justice issues like gender violence, sexual assault, and homophobia. Along the way, she challenges stand-up comedy as a masculinist cultural form and systematically exposes the limitations of satire, speaking the truths we dare not disclose for fear of losing the funny. Satire necessarily requires a play frame and seeks to elicit laughter. Privileging humor as vehicle for serious critique runs the risk of undermining the importance of human rights issues such as those raised by Gadsby. Satire has also proven to be advantageous for some but not others to deploy. Social conditioning informs reception to satire, meaning that certain identities will find it difficult to pull off this comedy style with the same ease and success as others occupying dominant categories of identity.

**KEYWORDS:** satire, Hannah Gadsby, feminist humor, stand-up comedy, *Nanette*

"I don't think I'm very good at gay," says Tasmanian native Hannah Gadsby matter-of-factly in her Netflix special *Nanette* (2018).<sup>1</sup> Later, she quips: "Do you know what I reckon my problem is? I don't lesbian enough." According to fellow lesbians, Gadsby has not included enough "lesbian content" in her show, and she readily admits that she has not read key gay literature, finds the gay flag too busy, and does not fit the party profile associated with LGBTQ folks. Her satiric

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1 *Hannah Gadsby: Nanette*, streaming, directed by John Olb and Madeleine Parry (Netflix, 2018). Unless otherwise noted, the quotes are from her Netflix special.

critique of representations of gay culture and expectations within the lesbian community as well as much of her satire throughout her career has been couched in self-deprecatory humor. As a lesbian, gender “nonnormal,” woman performing comedy, she intentionally devalues her skills as a practitioner, as society has taught her to do in order to command the power that comedy demands. The ensuing, masterfully crafted show described by reviewers as “totally transcendent” and “an angry, risk-taking, painfully personal show of extraordinary wit, breadth and intensity” belies her claims of ineptitude.<sup>2</sup> Gadsby uses comedy to interrogate comedy and the ways production and consumption are gendered, among them the pressure placed on women to self-deprecate in order to satisfy gendered cultural values and expectations of femininity. Her use of self-deprecation in *Nanette* is instructional by highlighting the sacrifices she must make—to her integrity, intelligence, and sense of self-worth—to succeed in comedy. She uses the style to critique the style, citing the toll it has taken on her psyche and she presumes on the psyche of women viewers as well. She no longer wishes to participate for fear of reifying the ideologies that render invisible yet sustaining gender inequality, racism, patriarchy, xenophobia, and heterosexism.

Gadsby surprises her audience by explaining that she plans to “quit comedy.” Although this seems like a “subversive tactic” of the performance, her sincerity emerges over the course of the hour-long monologue.<sup>3</sup> And yet she has since announced that she will tour a show titled “Douglas” in the summer of 2019. In 2017, entertainment critics in Australia and the United Kingdom uniformly praised *Nanette*, and the show garnered honorific nods in the form of the Barry Award for Best Show at the Melbourne International Comedy Festival as well as the Edinburgh Fringe Festival Comedy Award. This comedic opus challenging formal conventions of stand-up comedy landed in the laps of North Americans just over a year after her first performance of the show. The attention the public has given the show in social media and other relevant news outlets situate it as one of the most

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2 Matilda Dixon-Smith, “Hannah Gadsby’s Raved-About Final Show Is Making a Surprise Return,” *Junkee*, June 14, 2017, [junkee.com/hannah-gadsby-nanette-final-shows/108531](http://junkee.com/hannah-gadsby-nanette-final-shows/108531); Dominic Maxwell, “Hannah Gadsby: I’ve Reached the Top. Now I’m Going to Stop,” *Times* (London), [www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/times2/hannah-gadsby-ive-reached-the-top-now-im-going-to-stop-3xppkph59](http://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/times2/hannah-gadsby-ive-reached-the-top-now-im-going-to-stop-3xppkph59).

3 Hannah Gadsby, “*Nanette* Isn’t a Comedy Show. It’s a Sledgehammer,” *Elle*, July 26, 2018, [www.elle.com/culture/movies-tv/a22564399/hannah-gadsby-nanette-netflix](http://www.elle.com/culture/movies-tv/a22564399/hannah-gadsby-nanette-netflix).

discussed stand-up performances in popular entertainment this decade, no doubt shaping our expectations as consumers as well as influencing comedy practitioners who will incorporate stylistic choices and expand on messages embedded in her show.

Gadsby is not a fan of self-deprecatory humor; however, she harbors greater ambivalence toward satire, which she views as both a useful tool and an insufficient weapon. She communicates this ambivalence by using satire in order to cite the limitations of satire. Gadsby's performance raises the following important questions. What are we forced to leave out of satire to satisfy the conditions of the form? What are the risks we run in rendering laughable the very serious critiques or concerns (or the real anger and pain being expressed) raised in the deployment of satire? How does a comic's sex, gender presentation, and race impact the reception of satire? Will our society allow for a woman's anger to double as humor?

Comedy's imperative to generate resolutions leading to laughter or to ease tensions means that it ends up having to ignore the social and political currency of anger. Not to mention that this rhetorical ping-pong of tension relieved by punch lines forces comics to oscillate between two modes of discourse: serious (angry) or humorous (funny). This leaves precious little space for introducing other emotions and limits the ways comics can resolve the tensions they create. Gadsby is frustrated with the form because she cannot tell her story the way it really happened given the limitations of satire; moreover, she knows these limitations are harmful to her, and she fears what they may be doing to listeners occupying marginalized identities. Gadsby's critique undercuts the power of satire even as favorable audience reception for *Nanette* offers a contrasting measure of success for the efficacy of satire. People have not misunderstood the gravity of Gadsby's indictment of homophobia and sexism, though her rule breaking in the stand-up medium has prompted some to question whether *Nanette* counts as comedy at all.

Satire, what Rachel Caulfield calls "*artful* political critique" and James Caron describes as "an act of judgment" couched in humor, is not meant to be taken lightly.<sup>4</sup> "I cook dinner way more than I lesbian. But nobody ever introduces

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4 Rachel Caulfield, "The Influence of 'Infoenterpropagainment': Exploring the Power of Political Satire as a Distinct Form of Political Humor," in *Laughing Matters: Humor and American Politics in the Media Age*, ed. Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan Morris (New York: Routledge, 2008), 3-20; 4; James E. Caron, "The Quantum Paradox of

me as ‘that chef comedian, do they?’” jokes Gadsby. In this bit, she satirically skewers the undue importance society places on her sexuality compared to other aspects of her identity deemed unimportant like culinary, recreational, media, and athletic pursuits. Lesbians are meant to identify with the critique, and she calls attention to this: “Bit of lesbian content there.” But the quip is also intended to satisfy criticism from the lesbian community that her comedy does not have enough lesbian material. In other words, social expectations that she should foreground sexuality are foisted on her by not only the broader public but by the very group limited by such cultural norms. Satire is any type of humor set in a play frame meant to elicit laughter but that also sheds light on perceived societal wrongs; it is characterized by an attack—on wrongs and wrongdoers—and issues a clear judgment on the offending party. Gadsby identifies the infraction here as social conditioning that leads us to prioritize certain aspects of identity and the ways in which we collude in this even when it is not beneficial to do so. Caulfield argues that consumers of satire must have a level of knowledge regarding the subject of the satire so they can engage with and value the critique. In other words, a lack of knowledge renders the attack ineffectual because the joke failed to land. Thus, knowledge is another essential component in the efficacious transmission of satire.<sup>5</sup> For example, Gadsby’s joke about her cooking way more than lesbianing requires a basic knowledge of how society conditions us to prioritize and cite certain identities as seminal to our sense of self. It is even funnier if you are aware of the designation of some lesbians as “clipboard” lesbians—those that organize, prepare lists, and offer feedback . . . on everything.

Satire points out hypocrisy and functions as cultural and political criticism accessible to the average citizen. Not to be confused with pseudo satire, which is personality driven, mocking appearances and personality quirks, real satire solicits laughter aimed at others and sometimes ourselves (when we are complicit) in order to expose a larger systemic fault or flaw.<sup>6</sup> Caron describes satire as “a particular kind of speech act that signals a particular kind of comic attitude” unwedded to form or genre.<sup>7</sup> His definition calls attention to

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Truthiness: Satire, Activism, and the Postmodern Condition,” *Studies in American Humor*, ser. 4, 2, no. 2 (2016): 153-81; 156.

5 Caron, “The Quantum Paradox of Truthiness,” 156.

6 Russell Peterson, *Strange Bedfellows: How Late Night Comedy Turns Democracy into a Joke* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008).

7 Caron, “The Quantum Paradox of Truthiness,” 155.

intentionality, thereby alluding to satire's potential for eliciting social change. He writes that satire intends to provoke "a change in thinking, perception, or belief, even a repentance of the old way of thinking, perceiving, believing."<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the matter of satire's efficacy is often debated, and scholars have focused on the extent to which satire can and has shaped public opinion and attitudes.<sup>9</sup> Note that this is not a partisan art. Satire can be aimed at liberals or conservatives; however, most notable satirists have been chiefly engaged with advancing progressive ideas and values, and, according to Alison Dagnes, satire "has always been antiestablishmentarian in nature."<sup>10</sup> I agree that satire has the potential to shape beliefs, attitudes, and values; however, like any other rhetorical strategy for persuasion, satire has its complications.

One of the complications is that stand-up comedy delivers its humor through stories, often experiences and observations based on real life. What information and which emotions are omitted from jokes in the service of satire's form? Satire's reliance on a play frame and laughter makes it difficult to include all parts of a story. For years, Hannah Gadsby put listeners in stitches by leaving out mention of a number of experiences, particularly those highlighting abuse, assault, or violence. Throughout *Nanette*, Gadsby revisits earlier jokes. This time, instead of performing them as originally written, she takes her audience on a backstage tour of these omissions. For example, she recalls angering a man for making a pass at his girlfriend. He initially misidentifies her as a "fucking faggot" but then realizes she is a woman and—in the joke at least—apologizes for the misunderstanding. Until *Nanette*, whenever Gadsby told that joke we never knew he violently beat her on the street for her gender transgressions while not a single person intervened. Brian Logan's review of the show best captures the enormity of

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8 Caron, "The Quantum Paradox of Truthiness," 156.

9 Viveca Greene, Ted Gornelios, and contributing authors in the edited collection *A Decade of Dark Humor: How Comedy, Irony, and Satire Shaped Post-9/11 America* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2011) contend that post-9/11 humorous dissent in the form of satire was "pivotal in shaping responses to the events—especially as their practitioners combated the foreclosure and silencing of discourse and (re)opened and reinvigorated an active, contested public sphere" (Greene and Gornelios, "Popular Culture and Post-9/11 Politics," xii).

10 Alison Dagnes, *A Conservative Walks into a Bar: The Politics of Political Humor* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 81.

the consequences for such omissions: “Her show is about the power of stories and how, if the stories we tell ourselves are simplified or smoothed over, we leave unchallenged the wider stories society tells itself (in this case, about gender, sexuality and power).”<sup>11</sup> For instance, it is the collective silence of victims of sexual harassment and gender violence that maintains the culture of complicity around sexual predation. Gadsby condemns offending behaviors and breaks this silence, joining thousands of others doing the same in the #MeToo movement. This is done sans laughter. The apex of her anger disallows laughter, a fact that has not escaped the attention of some fans, who are dubious as to whether *Nanette* counts as comedy, let alone satire.

Satire intends to elicit laughter. This imperative can function to undermine the seriousness of issues of inequality and undermine the legitimacy of the satirical critique. Even as scholars have suggested that satire counts as meaningful humorous discourse, they have also exhibited caution in waxing triumphant about satire’s capabilities, understanding that there are ways that satire, because it bends to the humorous, mitigates personal responsibility. Leonard Feinberg, exploring satire in the 1960s, proposed that the pleasure of satire partly results from the knowledge that one will not be held accountable for failing to change one’s behavior.<sup>12</sup> In her comprehensive exploration of satire, Amber Day observes that the common refrain among scholars studying this comedic style is that “satire is generally removed from the real machinations of the political world and thus has negligible political power.”<sup>13</sup> Like other scholars, Caron does not seek to quantify the power or efficacy of satire—a difficult task—but unlike other scholars, he does the work of clarifying satire’s function as a rhetorical act that traffics in serious content but that is neither a serious speech act nor political action because it yokes the serious with the humorous. For Caron, the political power of satire is not negligible; it is just bounded in particular ways. Humor works to soften the blows of satire’s aggression, but humor simultaneously undermines the gravity of the issues raised. In order to make clear how important

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11 Brian Logan, “Standups On Why They Quit Comedy: ‘I Have Nightmares About Having to Do It Again,’” *Guardian* (Manchester), August 16, 2017, [www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/aug/16/standups-quit-comedy-edinburgh-hannah-gadsby](http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/aug/16/standups-quit-comedy-edinburgh-hannah-gadsby).

12 Leonard Feinberg, *Introduction to Satire* (Ames: University of Iowa Press, 1967).

13 Amber Day, *Satire and Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 12.

the critiques she proffers against gender violence are, Gadsby believes she must dispense with satire; she fears that otherwise the public will ignore it.

The irony is that Gadsby's refusal to fulfill satire's contract by incorporating laughter and play means that the viewing public does not question the validity of her critiques as much as they question the legitimacy of *Nanette* as comedic performance. Matthew Monagle cites the slew of folks on Twitter and Reddit who liked the show but thought it should be a TED talk (or framed as something analogous) and observes that *Nanette* has elicited "a slight backlash from men who think that the special *just wasn't that funny*."<sup>14</sup> Because she refuses to ease tension with laughter, it would seem that her satire has failed. But has it? Her messages have been widely disseminated. She has made people laugh hard and think harder. To those referring to *Nanette* as a one-woman show, Gadsby counters, saying, "Nobody would ever say that to a man doing a subversive comedy show or showing his vulnerability on stage. He'd be called a genius pushing the genre."<sup>15</sup> She illustrates that satire, because of its relationship to humor, runs the risk of diminishing the heft of the critique. Moreover, the folks clucking that this does not constitute a comedy demonstrate that who you are influences reception of satire.

Deployment and reception of satire is gendered and raced, and, in general, satire is a tool most successfully wielded by the powerful. Day writes that those with the most fame as satirical figures are "overwhelmingly white and male, both hyper-visible and invisible in their material ordinariness."<sup>16</sup> Moreover, Jessyka Finley points out that "comic soapboxing has been, for the most part, unavailable to black women in the mass media and in political discourse."<sup>17</sup> Satire has long been the province of men, and it has been difficult for women, especially women of color, to deploy it without penalty, in part owing to the angry nature of satire. Gadsby says, "People really only feel safe when men do the angry comedy. . . . I do it and I'm just an angry lesbian

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14 Matthew Monagle, "Netflix's 'Nanette' and the Importance of Uncomfortable Conversations," *Film School Rejects*, July 10, 2018, [filmschoolrejects.com/nanette-netflix](https://filmschoolrejects.com/nanette-netflix).

15 Gadsby, "Nanette Isn't a Comedy Show."

16 Day, *Satire and Dissent*, 9.

17 Jessyka Finley, "Black Women's Satire as (Black) Postmodern Performance," *Studies in American Humor*, ser. 4, 2, no. 2 (2016): 236-65; 242.



ruining all the fun and banter.”<sup>18</sup> Comedy functions primarily in a humorous mode of discourse (think: laughter) even as it dips periodically into a serious mode of the same (think: tension). In the serious mode of discourse, anger holds a prized place for its power. Because social constructions of masculinity teach men to express their emotions through anger, male comics can use it with impunity. Ralphie May and James Norton wax angrily about political correctness, Patton Oswalt lobbs rhetorical assaults against social injustices and poorly conceived superheroes, Chris Rock excoriates police officers for pervasive racism—the list goes on.<sup>19</sup> But society seldom welcomes a woman’s anger unless she channels that rage in the service of protecting her family or her honor (better still if she looks good doing it). When women use humor as social critique, it gets labeled as “angry” and “humorless,” which means that men’s anger counts as humor while women’s humor counts as anger.<sup>20</sup>

In *Nanette*, Hannah Gadsby is angry and not performing in the service of comedy. She intentionally illustrates the power of this emotion by introducing tension in the form of anger and then refusing to assuage it so as not to render sexism or homophobia laughable. “With *Nanette*, she draws a line under that,” writes Brian Logan of the *Guardian*. “No more pretending that queer-bashing is funny. No more defusing tension to put an audience at ease.”<sup>21</sup> Despite satire offering powerful critiques, Gadsby believes that some issues cannot withstand the risk of being framed as humorous. Misinterpretation has too high a cost. Caron grapples with similar questions about satire. He poses a moral question in his investigation of satire, namely to what degree should we expect satire to be ethical? In other words, he addresses the inherent paradox of attacking social and political ills in an effort to create social change and achieve social justice while using ridicule

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18 Jason Zinoman, “Introducing a Major New Voice in Comedy (Who Also Attacks Comedy),” *New York Times*, March 19, 2018, [www.nytimes.com/2018/03/19/arts/hannah-gadsby-comedy-nanette.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/19/arts/hannah-gadsby-comedy-nanette.html).

19 Terrence Tucker, *Furiously Funny: Comic Rage from Ralph Ellison to Chris Rock* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2018).

20 Frances Gray writes of five key ways that women are socialized away from being progenitors of humor, among them that women’s humor is perceived as angry and humorless. For a fuller discussion of this, see *Women and Laughter* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994).

21 Logan, “Standups on Why They Quit Comedy.”

and insult to accomplish those goals.<sup>22</sup> In the live performances I saw in 2017, Gadsby ended the shows with anger, then exited the stage and did not return. But the filmed version is all the more notable because it does *not* end with anger. Gadsby explains this evolution: “When I started performing it, I was a lot angrier. I think it was part of the grieving process, for a while I was genuinely distressed. I think I reached a point of emotional maturity near the end of it.”<sup>23</sup> Her shifting her focus from anger to human connection in the ending of later iterations of *Nanette* highlights Gadsby’s emotional journey: her anger eventually leads to catharsis and growth. Gadsby harnesses the power of anger while recognizing that this is not *the* answer but merely one strategy in the arsenal of tactics aimed at challenging social inequalities. As she puts it: “I don’t want to unite you with laughter or anger. I just needed my story heard.” Gadsby concludes by urging viewers to care about her story, to listen to women, to exercise empathy when confronted with difference, to connect. Yes, she uses anger in her comedy, but in the end her rejection of anger as a preferred rhetorical means to an end doubles as a rejection of satire’s use of anger to achieve a higher social consciousness.

Hannah Gadsby delivers a comedy show that dabbles in the unfunny, unapologetically incorporates anger, and refuses to resolve tension. She deftly illustrates the possibilities for and limitations of satire throughout *Nanette*, echoing Day’s arguments that political satire is not “inherently subversive” but holds sway over the American public now because it “offer[s] a particularly attractive method of communication at this moment.”<sup>24</sup> Gadsby demonstrates that staid comedy formulas do not have to be obeyed; comic performers will continue to play with this cultural form. At times, she suspends play and laughter in favor of aggression and judgment, testing the limits of satire. She includes parts of her story that are not meant to be humorous, she refuses to downplay the seriousness of misogyny, homophobia, and sexual and gender violence, and she strategically refuses to ease the tensions she stokes with her attack by introducing laughter. Gadsby continually points out the shortcomings of comedy even as positive

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22 Caron, “The Quantum Paradox of Truthiness,” 158-59.

23 Jenelle Riley, “Hannah Gadsby on the Real ‘Nanette’ and Whether She’s Really Quitting Comedy After Her Netflix Special,” *Variety*, July 6, 2018, [www.variety.com/2018/tv/features/hannah-gadsby-nanette-quitting-comedy-1202867395](http://www.variety.com/2018/tv/features/hannah-gadsby-nanette-quitting-comedy-1202867395).

24 Day, *Satire and Dissent*, 3.

reception for the show reflects the impact satire can have on a public hungry for moving satirical critique. I realize humor is subjective, but there is one categorically unfunny thing about Gadsby's remonstrations against sexism, gender violence, and homophobia in *Nanette*. That she had to say it at all.

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